

Jack Monroe and the cultural politics of the austerity celebrity

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Jessica Martin** 

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Abstract

This article conceptualises home cook Jack Monroe as an ‘austerity celebrity’, a mediated figure who forged her public persona directly through articulations with austerity culture. Drawing on an intertextual analysis of her blogs, cookbooks, interviews, speeches and representations across the media, I argue that Monroe demonstrates the paradox of anti-austerity celebrity in becoming economically successful as the face of modern poverty. Monroe’s navigation of a dual identity of celebrity and activist manifests in her critique of the government, her middle-class precarity, her status as a mother and her queer identity which requires consistent ‘authenticity labour’. In Monroe’s case, this labour is visible as a constant and politicised struggle over the terms of her ‘authenticity’. While unable to manage her more complex middle-class, queer identity, which confronts the established grounds of ‘feckless mothers’, the UK tabloid media attempts to frame Monroe’s success as a rags-to-riches style narrative reinforcing hegemonic rhetorics of resilience and creativity as routes to overcoming adversity. This analysis of the struggles at work in Monroe’s mediated presence demonstrates how the moral imperatives for women to offer to resourcefully manage the ‘challenges’ of austerity cuts, arguably draws attention away from austerity as structurally and politically motivated.

Keywords

Austerity, authenticity, celebrity, cultural hegemony, domestic cultures, feminism, gender, inequalities, postfeminism

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Introduction

In 2012, Jack Monroe wrote a blogpost entitled 'Hunger Hurts' which went viral, achieving over 16,000 hits, being shared widely through Facebook and Twitter and featuring in national newspapers. The emotional and affective post detailed Monroe's experience of poverty while caring for her young son, relying on housing benefit and child tax credits, and highlighted her difficulties in feeding herself and her son healthy and nutritious food on a budget of £10 a week. She wrote,

Poverty is the sinking feeling when your small boy finishes his one Weetabix and says 'more mummy, bread and jam please mummy' as you're wondering whether to take the TV or the guitar to the pawn shop first, and how to tell him that there is no bread or jam. (cookingonabootstrap.com, 30 July 2012)

Monroe initially set up the blog in response to one of her local councillors referring to 'druggies, drunks and single mothers as the scourge of Southend' (Godwin, 2013). At the time, she was an unemployed single mother, having been forced to leave her job with Essex Fire Brigade as she could not find affordable childcare for her young son (Godwin, 2013). She explained in detail across multiple platforms the lengths she went to in order to retain her job, stating,

I applied for flexible hours under the fire service flexible working policy, I applied for a job share post, I applied for day work roles, other jobs in the fire service closer to home, and was turned down on all counts. (Monroe, 2013a)

All provide an insight into the particularly precarious position of single parents in the labour force during austerity, the overwhelming majority of whom are women. Monroe has since produced multiple cookbooks detailing how she feeds her family on a meagre budget, and has been labelled 'the face of modern poverty' (Butler, 2013) and 'Britain's austerity celebrity' (Bennhold, 2014), which indicates both her cultural impact and her explicit engagement with austerity culture.

This article will focus on Monroe's public position as a blogger, cook, activist and mother who came to prominence in the United Kingdom after this viral blogpost and whose mediated persona is therefore intrinsically linked to austerity culture. The analysis will involve a discourse analysis drawn on intertextual data collected which included 468 posts from Monroe's online blog 'Cooking on a bootstrap', her first three cookbooks, as well as press interviews, speeches in parliament and newspaper articles in which she appears. These articles were collected using LexisNexis and my own removal of irrelevant or very similar articles left a newspaper sample size of 259 articles.

As this research draws on the disciplines of feminist cultural studies and celebrity studies, I have employed an intertextual approach, which allows me to investigate Monroe as an individual case study, while generating cross-case insights and ensuring the analysis is drawn from multi-platform media. As a qualitative research project undertaken from a feminist standpoint I have explored Monroe's own mediated narrative, as well as the narratives from outside sources to provide insight into discrepancies between the ways in which she self-presents within the media and the ways in which she

comes to be represented, with a specific focus on the ideological and political implications that arise. By organising the initial data thematically before conducting closer analysis, I was able to demonstrate the orders of discourse (Fairclough, 1992) that are established and maintained throughout Monroe's star text, and the cultural work that is being done here.

The article will demonstrate how Monroe negotiates a position as an 'austerity celebrity' who specialises in a domesticity-related activity (cooking), but sits outside of the typical domestic femininity narrative, as someone who self-defines as non-binary, does not identify as a particular gender and is a feminist (Monroe, 2015). As Monroe has most recently stated her preferred pronoun remains 'she' (Adams, 2018), I have referred to her as such throughout this article.

Monroe's actively political anti-austerity campaigning will be explored, which I argue represents a re-politicisation of the domestic sphere identifiable across austerity culture, and gives insight into the cultural politics of an anti-austerity celebrity. Her status as an austerity celebrity will be examined to demonstrate the paradox of the authenticity demanded and then undermined by the right-wing tabloid media as she has become more famous and successful. I argue that Monroe demonstrates the particular tensions of an anti-austerity celebrity, including her mediated identity as activist or 'woke' celebrity, while she simultaneously participates in a celebrity culture which is an inherently capitalist construct. This negotiation of the dual identity of celebrity and activist manifests in different ways across the cultural landscape. For Monroe, I argue, her success, her critique of the government, her middle-class precarity, her status as a mother and her queer identity mean she must produce consistent authenticity labour (Genz, 2014), which is necessary for her political critique to be understood as legitimate and therefore effective. In this way, I suggest we can conceptualise Monroe's authenticity labour as political in nature. Despite this, Monroe is often reframed across the UK media landscape as a resilient, resourceful mitigator of austerity in the home, diverting attention from her anti-austerity activism and feminist structural critiques, and instead shifting the focus onto her as an inspirational individual who has overcome adversity. This will support a central argument of the article which suggests that the postfeminist narratives found in austerity culture have adapted during this period to retain their hegemonic hold, even in actively feminist and political case studies such as this one. In addition, I argue that accusations of Monroe as falsely claiming a working-class identity or as a 'phony poor person' deliberately prohibit cross-class solidarities among those punished by austerity.

Jack Monroe as the 'face of modern poverty'

I argue that one of Jack Monroe's most significant contributions as an anti-austerity activist is her challenging of the dominant cultural understanding of welfare recipients as 'shirkers', 'scroungers' or 'skivers' by providing a personal, affective and emotive insight into surviving while depending on an increasingly shrinking welfare state. Howarth (2015) identifies multiple ways in which Monroe disrupts the stigma associated with being a welfare recipient and 'challenges reductionist explanations of poverty' (p. 130). For example, she highlights structural changes to the labour market and employers' pursuit of younger, cheaper labour alongside rising childcare costs which make it

extremely difficult for single mothers to enter the labour market (Monroe, 2012 in Howarth, 2015). Not only does this focus, on the structural obstacles faced by the unemployed, disrupt the narratives of skivers and strivers evident in the neoliberal discourse associated with the Coalition and Conservative governments pursuit of an austerity agenda (Jensen, 2014), it also amplifies the intersection of class, age and gender which have been seen to intensify the effects of austerity for women. By providing a voice for unemployed single mothers which challenges the dominant discourses of feckless parenting and highlights the everyday realities of surviving in a period of austerity, Monroe can be understood as engaging in an actively political, feminist discursive challenge.

One example of Monroe's challenge to the dominant neoliberal discourses of shirkers and workers can be found in her response to TV celebrity chef Jamie Oliver's moralising references when promoting his own budget cookbook. He remarked upon 'a mum and kids eating chips and cheese out of Styrofoam containers, and behind them is a massive TV. It just didn't weigh up' (Jamie Oliver in Monroe, 2013a). In an article penned in response to these comments Monroe (2013b) argued that

Many of today's 13 million people living in poverty in the UK are the 'hard-working', the 'strivers', underemployed and underpaid. But there is a common fantasy among the self-appointed poverty experts such as Oliver that all struggling families are eating chips with cheese on top, reclining in front of their massive television sets.

Here, Monroe is actively disputing the discourse of lazy, neglectful or irresponsible parenting as evoked by Oliver and challenging this with statistical evidence of the working poor in the United Kingdom, who are living in poverty despite participating in the labour market and therefore present a contradiction in the logic of the shirkers versus workers dichotomy. The views espoused by Oliver and challenged by Monroe, complement research on the rhetoric from David Cameron around broken families and single mothers as the cause of the UK riots of 2011 (Jensen, 2018), and a narrative which has become deeply entrenched within the United Kingdom which equates over-consumption with feckless parenting. These views reinforce the subsequent 'narrative of a broken moral compass, caused by and through the poor parenting of the underclass' (Jensen, 2018: 5), which has been pervasive during the current period of austerity and does considerable cultural work in positioning poor parenting as inherent to working-class culture and as responsible for generating inequality. Given that research has identified an intensification of the framing of parents (and particularly single mothers) who receive welfare support as feckless and as responsible for moral and economic decline (Jensen and Tyler, 2012), Monroe represents a challenge to one of the defining narratives utilised by the conservative and coalition government to justify welfare cutbacks and instil 'common-sense anti-welfare discourses' (Jensen and Tyler, 2015). These moralising discourses around the over-consumption of luxury goods are also frequently mobilised to delegitimise claims of poverty, a process which Monroe is subjected to in parts of the UK media throughout her career.

It is clear that Monroe also actively engages with notions of class in her attempt to subvert the dominant narratives around welfare recipients as feckless parents. For example, in one interview she states,

I've not been brought up on benefits and a tracksuit watching Jeremy Kyle. I'm a middleclass, well educated young woman who fell a bit by the way side. You think it doesn't happen to normal people, and you think we are all scumbags, eating burgers and watching day time TV. It can happen to anyone. (Monroe in Butler, 2013)

Here, Monroe is clearly distinguishing herself from the dominant ideas of 'feckless', working-class parents in an attempt to highlight middle-class precarity as a result of austerity policies. The invocations of 'being brought up on benefits and a tracksuit watching Jeremy Kyle' can be said to be intended as cultural coding for working-class preoccupations. In particular, Jeremy Kyle is a daytime television show, and so watching has connotations of not being out and participating in the labour market, and has been identified by Skeggs and Wood (2012) as a moralistic programme whose participants are 'beyond these structures of "good citizenship"' (p. 33). Monroe's invocation of the programme caricatures the dominant understanding of the typical welfare recipient as morally deficient and unemployed. Monroe then positions herself outside of this stereotype and instead emphasises her middle-class identity in an attempt to highlight the far reaching consequences of the government's austerity programme which plunged her into poverty and which she suggests 'can happen to anyone'. Although Monroe is perhaps 'othering' those who are not middle-class and therefore in more precarious financial situations by distinguishing herself as 'normal' and 'well-educated', I argue that she invokes the stereotype of the *Jeremy Kyle* watching working-class person in order to undermine its existence, and in an attempt to reframe the cultural understanding of welfare recipients. By positioning herself publicly as a welfare recipient and being described as 'the face of modern poverty' (Butler, 2013), Monroe challenges the caricature of the feckless parents (Jensen and Tyler, 2012) or the benefit scrounger and instead provides a voice for the working poor, and for those who have been plunged into poverty despite middle-class advantages such as a good education and family support system. This not only emphasises the extent to which austerity policies can erode support systems and push people into poverty, but also highlights the lack of theoretical space for conceptualising middle-class precarity in a cultural and media landscape dominated by binaries of workers and shirkers. This dichotomy 'shows a new willingness to recycle divisive vocabularies of virtue and waste, deserving and undeserving, rather than to examine the common costs of neoliberalism' (Jensen, 2014: 2.5). Monroe's disruption of this dichotomy by emphasising the working poor and those who are simply striving to survive instead refocuses the discussion around the implications of neoliberalism. Despite this, Monroe's representation of middle-class precarity and her Whiteness appear crucial to her visibility and success as a celebrity under austerity, reinforcing the notion that inequalities that have been experienced at the intersections of class, race, gender and disability by minority women only achieve visibility when they begin to impact privileged groups such as the White middle-class in the United Kingdom (Bassel and Emejulu, 2018).

In the same response piece to Jamie Oliver mentioned earlier, Monroe (2013a) asks,

Why aren't we looking at the real issues, such as bedroom tax, subsistence wages, lack of jobs, underemployment, and little cooking education? Why are we being encouraged to measure someone's value by the size of their television and the type of carbs they eat?

Here, she actively encourages the public to shift their focus from moralistic judgements on parent's decisions around spending and cooking, onto the structural issues that leave parents vulnerable including government enforced welfare reforms such as the bedroom tax and wider structural issues such as lack of education which all contribute to poverty. This, I argue, can be read as an act of resistance and also a feminist act, given that the majority of rhetoric and judgement around feckless parenting, including that of Jamie Oliver,¹ tends to be explicitly gendered and focuses specifically on individual mothers and their perceived failings. Monroe's own affective accounts of struggling to survive as a mother under austerity also complicates the implicit heteronormativity in the gendered critiques of mothers here. Her non-binary gender identity and her status as a lesbian position her outside of the traditional heteronormative family unit, and her mediated queer maternity can be said to function as a form of resistance to this. However, this queer maternity also inhibits Monroe's ability to become the accepted face of modern poverty, and, as will be explored further in this article, exposes her to accusations of inauthenticity which I suggest are predicated upon right-wing notions of Whiteness and heterosexuality as central to being understood as 'authentically destitute'.

Jack Monroe as an austerity celebrity

Scholars such as Hannah Hamad (2013) have highlighted the ways in which some celebrity experts have adapted to the cultural implications of austerity. The need for the adaptation of public personas and cultivation of austerity-friendly discourse suggest a cultural moment in which the 'pre-recession celebrity' (Hamad, 2013) is no longer viable. It is this cultural moment in which Jack Monroe achieves success and I argue can be understood as becoming an 'austerity celebrity'.

Existing research has explored the mediated celebrity maternal figures and their relationship to the cultural politics of austerity, highlighting the ways in which 'these celebrity mothers become figurative props in the moral universe of David Cameron's "hard-working" Britain' (Allen et al., 2015: 920). Jack Monroe, however, is an active anti-austerity campaigner who disrupts and challenges the dominant neoliberal discourses found during austere times and therefore can be said to represent a different kind of austerity celebrity.

Another way in which Monroe can be distinguished from the existing mediated austerity celebrities is that her fame and celebrity status are *intrinsically linked* to austerity. She achieved notoriety and was given a public voice as a direct result of suffering under and speaking out against governmental policy. This can have complicated implications; despite Monroe's clear intentions to position herself as an anti-austerity campaigner and consistent critique of the associated governmental cuts, she also represents a rags-to-riches style narrative that is utilised by the UK media to reinforce the hegemonic rhetoric of hard work and creativity as routes to overcoming adversity.

For example, in 2014, Monroe won an 'Enterprise Woman of The Year' award, and the coverage states, 'The Echo columnist was recognised for her creativity and strength of character in feeding herself and her young child when a single mum on only £10 a week' (Echo News, 2014). Here, the press is actively invoking narratives of thrift, resilience and stoicism and applauding Monroe's 'strength of character' in overcoming

adversity. This is reminiscent of the 'blitz spirit' and 'individual resilience' narratives invoked at a time of austerity (Martin, 2020), and also echoes the mumpreneurial narratives, whereby a thrifty, creative mother is seen as able to mitigate the impacts of austerity within the home. By subtly shifting the focus from Monroe's anti-austerity protesting to her 'creativity and strength of character', I argue that the press is reinforcing narratives that have been seen to complement to government's ideological justification for austerity, while simultaneously dismissing Monroe's anti-austerity sentiments.

Similarly, Monroe is praised for honing her 'make-do-and-mend attitude' (Koski, 2014), for having 'good looks and embattled cheer which made her a poster girl for resourceful austerity' (Godwin, 2013) and in a review of one of her cookbooks it was asserted that 'though the book was born out of austerity, it doesn't mean the approach is similarly spartan. On the contrary, it is upbeat and enthusiastic' (Koski, 2014). These are all examples of the reframing of Monroe's celebrity persona which attempt to depoliticise her anti-austerity position and focus instead on her 'embattled cheer' and 'resourceful' approach. This is consistent with Gill and Orgad's (2018) conception of the 'amazing bounce-backable woman', a product of the specifically classed and gendered psychological turn to resilience at a time of increasing structural inequality. This reframing of the cheerful, resilient individual encouraged a media narrative for Monroe which is more consistent with the postfeminist notions of self-surveillance and regulation (Gill, 2007), despite her active, structural critiques. The focus on her 'cheer', in particular, deliberately shifts focus from Monroe's emphasis on the shame, misery and anger she refers to in her personal testimonies. In a continuation of Black feminist thought, scholars such as Boyce-Kay and Banet-Weiser (2019) have recently turned their attention to the galvanising and productive potential of feminist anger. Wood (2019) suggests a turn towards a politically productive irreverent rage, which is executed 'precisely to publicly trouble regulatory power' (p. 611), which can be said to characterise much of Monroe's angry and affective personal testimonies. By reframing this irreverent rage as resourcefulness and instead focusing on her 'cheer', it can be argued that parts of the UK press are undermining the political potential of this anger, and instead reinforcing hegemonic, nostalgic notions of resilience and resourcefulness found during austerity. In addition, the referencing of Monroe's 'make-do-and-mend' attitude emphasises her responsibility as an individual to overcome the adversity she faced, with no reference to her consistent vocalisation of the structural disadvantages she faced alongside the austerity policies that led her into poverty. Finally, the reference to Monroe's 'good looks' as partly responsible for her success betrays the particularly gendered perception of the 'happy, thrifty housewife' and the association of cheerful femininity among domesticity related experts, despite the disadvantageous position of women during austerity. This further reinforces the cultural expectation of the mother as responsible for mitigating austerity in the home.

This, I argue, is an example of the hegemonic discourses of postfeminism and neoliberalism which are circulating within the United Kingdom during austerity. Despite Monroe's consistent, clear and damning critique of the government's austerity policies, she is presented in a way which reinforces the cultural discourses around individualism as found in postfeminist discourse, in meritocracy and in moralistic debates around strivers and skivers that contribute to austerity being understood as 'commonsense'

(Jensen, 2014). It is clear from the ways in which the press attempt to frame Monroe's public persona that the existing maternal femininities, found in celebrity mediations throughout austerity which work to complement to government's austerity position, are entrenched (Allen et al., 2015; Hamad, 2013). When competing narratives such as Monroe's anti-austerity political domesticity emerge, they are reframed by the press into the hegemonic, neoliberal narratives such as the resourceful and entrepreneurial mumpreneur that already dominate (Littler, 2017).

Jack Monroe and celebrity authenticity

Although Monroe's rise to fame and the space she occupies in the public consciousness can be considered unique, there are elements of her mediated public persona that are typical of domesticity celebrity experts, and celebrities in general. The 'illusion of intimacy' (Schickel, 2000) between celebrity and audience can be said to be central to Monroe's personal blog which provides intimate insights into her everyday life in order for the audience to get a sense of who she 'really' is (Dyer, 2003). This cultivated intimacy has persevered and adapted to changing media landscapes (Holmes, 2006), with Monroe's intimacy being forged through articulations with austerity culture. This is consistent with Nunn and Biressi's (2010) conception of the ideology of intimacy, whereby 'the celebrity, along with other public figures and the ordinary person, now labour as emotional subjects in the public arena' (p. 54). I would suggest that what is particular about the intimacy created through Monroe's emotional labour is that it is then utilised by her to engage in political debate and challenge systems of inequality.

Other research has drawn on the idea of the illusion of intimacy to map the increasing importance and demand for authenticity from celebrities as digital and social media has developed, and authenticity has in some cases become entwined with self-branding to encourage consumption in a commodified authenticity (Genz, 2014) as public figures cultivate careers and perform their labour within an 'economy of visibility' (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Particularly useful here is research conducted by Mendick et al. (2018) on young people's engagement with celebrities during austerity, which found that young people took great pleasure in identifying authenticity among celebrities, which, for the research participants, involved 'a constellation of traits: genuineness, ordinariness, relatability and humility' (p. 64). I argue that at a time of economic downturn with austerity policies plunging more people into poverty, traits like relatability and ordinariness, often traits associated with the working class or the 'ordinary people', become crucial for an audience to connect with a celebrity who discusses poverty. In my analysis of Monroe's writing and the coverage surrounding her, it is clear that authenticity is central to her personal brand and the ways in which she presents herself, and this authenticity is inextricably tied up with notions of ordinariness and signifiers of working-class identity. This authenticity is also demanded of her by the right-wing tabloid media in the United Kingdom, who also attempt to undermine her reach with challenges of inauthenticity. This constant reassertion of authenticity resonates with Wood et al.'s (2008) theorising of reality TV participants who perform emotional and affective labour, and are 'located in a circuit of domestic- and ultimately person value'

(p. 148). Monroe must continue to perform affective labour and signal authenticity within the domestic sphere in order to retain her celebrity value.

One of the ways in which some parts of the press and Monroe herself asserts her authenticity is by defining her in contrast to other, established, wealthy and, by implication, inauthentic celebrities. For example, in 2013 the UK supermarket chain Sainsbury's chose Monroe as the new face of the brand, replacing well-known TV chef Jamie Oliver. Much of the press at the time focused on the cultural significance of a large brand replacing an established celebrity with a lesser known, austerity recipe blogger, with *The Guardian* proclaiming 'Celebrity chefs are off the menu for a supermarket which has chosen one of the faces of austerity Britain as its new advertising star' (Smithers, 2013). There is clearly a suggestion from *The Guardian* coverage that Sainsbury's are responding to a changing consumer market during austerity, who may be more able to relate to a public figure understood as authentic with a proven record of understanding the limitations presented by austerity policy.

The suggestion that Monroe's success in securing an advertising deal once held by a more established, wealthy chef is due to her real life experience, perceived ordinariness and authenticity is found across various press outlets, who often perceive the marketability of Monroe as indicative of a cultural shift which is a direct implication of austerity culture. For example, one article titled 'Blog Off Jamie: Sainsbury's ditch Oliver for skint single mum' (Pauley, 2013) suggests that 'Supermarket chiefs believe Monroe, who lives in Southend, Essex, with three-year-old Johnny is more "in tune" with austerity Britain than millionaire telly chefs'. The focus on Monroe being 'skint' and a 'single mum' reinforces a perception of Monroe as working class and is utilised to distinguish her from an unrelatable 'millionaire telly chef'. The suggestion that supermarket executives consider Monroe more in tune with austerity Britain demonstrate how integral notions of ordinariness which come to signify authenticity are to the success of both Monroe's public persona, popularity and professional career.

Other newspapers such as *The Daily Telegraph* suggest Sainsbury's casting of Monroe mark a time when the 'tides turn' (Ruddick, 2013) and quote a retail analyst who suggests that Sainsbury's 'have been focusing on real shoppers over celebrities over a while. They are trying to connect with families who may otherwise have felt that Sainsbury's is too expensive' (Ruddick, 2013). Here, there is a clear dichotomy between 'real shoppers' and 'celebrities' which places Monroe in the 'real shoppers' category, despite her high-profile status. This is a clear example of the paradoxical nature of being an austerity celebrity; the public are encouraged to understand Monroe as 'real' as opposed to a celebrity, while also accept her as an authority able to market products. The commodification of authenticity can be found across celebrity culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012), but can be said to be intensified in cases such as this where a celebrity's brand is built around their 'realness' and their connection to austerity culture. Monroe's perceived authenticity is signalled through markers such as her confessional, biographical testimonies and the mediated intimacy performed throughout her personal blog, as well as in the anecdotal stories found in her cookbooks. It is interesting to note here that the established and framed as inauthentic celebrity which Monroe was replacing at Sainsbury's, Jamie Oliver, is a cultural intermediary whose own perceived normality as an 'ordinary Essex boy', and performative new laddishness was seen as crucial to his initial success

(Hollows, 2003; Hollows and Jones, 2010; Moseley et al., 2001; Piper, 2015). The framing of Oliver here as the inauthentic successful celebrity reveals the limitations in a celebrity career trajectory built on notions of ordinariness and relatability, as well as the distinct representations of ordinariness at play here, with Oliver's performative new laddish persona read as more institutionalised against Monroe's often affective, angry testimonies generated across her social media platforms.

Authenticity labour can be understood as a particular form of labour exercised to cultivate intimacy and 'realness' which public figures must perform as part of postfeminist self-branding culture, and this authenticity labour can be identified in some of Monroe's work. For example, when promoting her new marketing campaign with Sainsbury's, Monroe published a blog entry and an article in *The Guardian* titled 'Why doing a Sainsbury's advert doesn't make me a sellout' (Monroe, 2013a), in an attempt to justify the perceived commodification of her self-brand, and to respond to claims of inauthenticity. In the article, Monroe (2013a) describes her prerequisites for making the advert 'So if I was going to do television, I wanted to do it honestly. With no script and no fed-in lines, just me, cooking, chatting, and ignoring the extremely large crew of cameras, lights, sound booms and runners'. Here, Monroe is clearly positioning herself outside of the realms of typical, polished celebrity. By describing her approach as 'honest' and emphasising her discomfort and unfamiliarity with the set-up necessary to make an advert, Monroe is clearly defining herself outside of the scripted, 'fed-in lines' associated with typical celebrity chefs. Here, Monroe contributes to a framing of herself as amateur in comparison to the polished, celebrity experts, in order to emphasise her ordinariness and reinforce her authenticity. She also often references her lack of formal training or education, describing herself as having 'No degree, no Oxbridge education, no feet on ladders, no family business to inherit – just me and about £5.85 an hour' (Monroe, 2014). Here, Monroe is clearly positioning herself outside of the realms of the upper middle-class backgrounds typically associated with media personalities, and instead emphasises her lack of formal training. This can be understood as part of the wider gendered domesticity discourses and perceptions of what constitutes 'proper' or legitimate domestic activities as explored with Sennett's (2008) work on craftsmanship as masculine and distinct from other domestic activities. Monroe instead embraces the amateur or illegitimacy associated with being a 'home cook', while simultaneously moving the profession into the public sphere and monetising her skill.

This positioning of herself as amateur is reinforced through her philosophy on cooking, which she describes during an interview,

I want to open up cooking, take it away from that aspirational celebrity chef kind of thing, and show that anyone can do it and it doesn't have to be a chore. If someone gave me a £500 gift card for the supermarket, I would struggle to spend it. This way of cooking is my expertise now. (Monroe in McGuinness, 2014)

Monroe negotiates the paradoxical demands of an austerity celebrity domesticity expert in this quote. She clearly positions herself in opposition to 'aspirational celebrity chefs', suggesting her recipes are concerned with meeting basic needs as opposed to the aspirational, lifestyle cooking found throughout popular culture. However, she also recognises

that her frugal approach to cooking is also a form of ‘expertise’ and she should therefore be recognised as an authority on this domestic practice. This paradoxical negotiation of amateur, ordinary and an authentic domesticity expert is crucial to Jack Monroe’s public persona and requires consistent authenticity labour (Genz, 2014) to reinforce this as part of her personal brand. This negotiation of expertise also takes place against the backdrop of hostility towards working-class mothers which has been mobilised in the United Kingdom in media discourses around childhood obesity, whereby mothers are attributed maternal culpability and framed as lacking the expertise or skill required to provide nutritional diet for their children (Friedman, 2015). This same maternal culpability is mobilised when children experience food poverty, demonstrating the pressure for mothers to cultivate their domestic and budgetary skills to ensure their children are not seen to be either over-indulging or being under-fed, despite the escalating food poverty associated with austerity. This recognition of Monroe’s approach as a form of expertise can therefore be understood as the response to the expectation that women should be the mitigators of austerity policy within the home, with the associations of thrift as a maternal obligation becoming part of a moral imperative or ‘austerity ethic’ (Edyvane, 2013).

However, Monroe’s authenticity labour differs from the postfeminist authenticity labour as defined by Genz (2014) as it is not simply performed to allow her personal brand to become more profitable and encourage consumption. Instead, as the next section will explore, Monroe’s authenticity labour is deeply *political*; her authenticity is crucial to her political legitimacy and ability to critique policies from a personal perspective. This is one of the many ways in which the typical postfeminist attributes such as authenticity labour have adapted to a climate of austerity.

Jack Monroe, inauthenticity and political legitimacy

As the previous section detailed, the concept of authenticity is central to Jack Monroe’s public persona and despite her role as a celebrity domesticity expert, she still engages in authenticity labour (Genz, 2014) in order to retain the perception of her as relatable. While this authenticity is clearly seen as commodifiable by brands such as Sainsbury’s, it can also be argued that authenticity is crucial for Jack Monroe’s credibility in public, political debate, and that her authenticity, although mediated, is political in itself. There are clear examples of Monroe having to assert her authenticity and reinforce her credentials as someone who has experienced poverty in response to parts of the UK press, specifically politically right-wing journalists who attempt to delegitimise her activism by framing her as inauthentic.

The attempt by the press to undermine Monroe’s authenticity and delegitimise her campaigning often centres on social class, and indeed the complex representations of Monroe’s class position emphasise the intensifying classificatory struggles whereby cultural figures are often pitted against one another in the media to erode cross-class solidarity in the face of depleting resources (Tyler, 2015). Despite Monroe consistently referring to herself as middle-class and emphasising how quickly her descent into poverty happened despite her social privileges, there is a clear attempt by some parts of the UK press to portray Monroe as falsely claiming a working-class identity. *The Telegraph* describes her as ‘The Guardian’s favourite poor person’ and ‘possibly the most atypical

working-class person in Britain, often coming across more like a Guardian editorial made flesh than a member of Britain's down-at-heel communities' (O'Neill, 2013). This is a clear attempt to undermine Monroe's testimonies of poverty by overemphasising her media credentials and defining her in opposition to the more authentic 'down-at-heel communities', a deliberately divisive media tactic which limits the scope for solidarity and explicitly aims to engineer scepticism. It also speaks to a wider discourse circulating within British media and academia, particularly around the coverage of Brexit, which conceptualises the 'left-behind' working class as almost exclusively White and in binary opposition to the 'liberal elite' (Bhambra, 2017). The suggestion that Monroe is not a reliable narrator of poverty and is deceiving the public with her personal experiences, posing as a member of the working class, is also found in the coverage of the interview she gave for a Labour Party political broadcast in 2013. The broadcast focused on fuel poverty and the impact rising household bills were having in homes across the country. *The Daily Mail* described the interviewees, which included Monroe, as 'phony "ordinary" people' (Martin, 2013) and quoted Conservative member of parliament (MP) Priti Patel, who declared that 'Labour's party political broadcast would be a lot more effective if they used real people rather than their own coterie of left-wing campaigners and champagne socialists' (Martin, 2013). It is clear that the article is directly challenging the legitimacy of Monroe's experiences of poverty by suggesting she is neither ordinary, nor 'real' due to her middle-class background and her visibility in public life after the success of her blog. This framing of Monroe as inauthentic is significant first of all because it highlights the inherent paradox of being an austerity celebrity; the more successful Jack Monroe becomes, the less relatable and ordinary she is said to be. Secondly, it is significant because the attempts to challenge Monroe's authenticity are used as a method to delegitimise her political activism; by suggesting Monroe is 'phony', readers are encouraged to question her claims about living in poverty and subsequently question her active critiques of austerity policies. In this sense, it can be argued that parts of the right-wing tabloid media are attempting to undermine the counter-hegemonic narratives that challenge the government's justification of austerity policies. We can also understand these accusations that Monroe is a 'phony poor person' as a form of boundary policing around who is seen to 'legitimately' represent the working class, or indeed, middle-class precarity.

Another way in which the tabloid media attempt to undermine Monroe's authenticity is by suggesting her experience of poverty was a direct result of lifestyle choices, reinforcing the narratives around strivers and skivers (Jensen, 2014) and 'feckless' parenting explored earlier. In particular, some articles have emphasised Monroe's choice to give up a career in the Fire Service, suggesting she 'quit her job to live on benefits' (Martin, 2013) and claiming that '[r]elieved of the chore of having to turn up for work every day, Jack could concentrate on sitting at her laptop complaining about the "cuts"' (Littlejohn, 2013). By emphasising Monroe's 'choice' to give up a career and 'live on benefits' with no discussion of the structural inequalities such as the rising cost of childcare and lack of flexible working opportunities that Monroe has consistently referenced as determining factors in leaving work, *The Daily Mail* can be said to be erasing Monroe's anti-austerity campaigning and reframing her story in a way which complements dominant austerity narratives around lazy, shirking parents who choose to live in poverty. As Imogen Tyler

notes, there has been a proliferation of middle-class media professionals who secure their own class position and indeed build their careers by reproducing cultural portrayals of the abject working class (Tyler, 2015), or re-classifying the vulnerable as 'revolting' subjects (Tyler, 2013), a process at work in the coverage of Monroe. This reinforces the divisive nature of classificatory politics when it comes to framing Monroe's representation of poverty, and highlights the work these claims of inauthenticity do in eroding cross-class solidarity or collective mobilising of those from different backgrounds who are nonetheless united in their punishment through austerity regimes.

Another way in which the right-wing tabloid media can be seen as trying to frame Jack Monroe as not authentically poor is by repeating dominant narratives of fiscal irresponsibility and bad decision making as the reason for her circumstances. This bears similarity to the narratives of irresponsibility and parental blame espoused by Jamie Oliver which were discussed earlier. For example, Richard Littlejohn (2013) suggests that '[i]n Jack's case, she may have had more money for food and heating if she hadn't spent so much on tattoos. Her arms look like your average professional footballer'. This perception of Monroe as financially irresponsible and as spending money on luxuries such as tattoos rather than utility bills clearly frames the responsibility for her poverty as her own, and encourages readers to attribute blame and judgement onto Monroe. By suggesting that paying for tattoos is the reason Monroe is experiencing poverty, Littlejohn implies that poverty is a choice she has made and therefore cannot be understood as authentically destitute. This reinforces research around austerity narratives in popular culture identified by researchers who found that 'the idea that a poverty of aspiration and the failure of parents to make the "right choices" were to blame for welfare dependence had become established as potent national myths' (Jensen and Tyler, 2012: 1).

The over-emphasis on lifestyle choices and the normative judgements on which are the 'right' choices as found in the coverage of Jack Monroe are reinforced by the Conservative and Coalition governments responsible for implementing austerity, and can be seen in Conservative Party rhetoric, with David Cameron claiming in 2008 that '[s]ocial problems are often the consequence of the choices people make' (in Jensen and Tyler, 2012). In the case of Jack Monroe, the framing of her poverty as a result of bad choices is utilised not only to reinforce this austerity narrative of irresponsible parenting, but also to undermine her authenticity as someone *genuinely* experiencing poverty. This not only undermines her own social and political critique, but restricts the potential for mass mobilisation or class alliances and redraws boundaries around which people Monroe is able to speak for.

Claims of inauthenticity are often aimed 'specifically at female, black or working-class celebrities' (Mendick et al, 2018: 66) and indeed, despite the privileges associated with her Whiteness, Jack Monroe is often targeted specifically because she became representative of the working class after falling into extreme poverty, as well as because of her gender and because she represents a divergence from traditional femininity. Genz (2014) suggests that there are 'deeply biased and normative scripts of neoliberal/post-feminist brand culture that restrict "success" and authenticity to those who can display and perform gender/class/race in highly specific ways' (p. 551), and someone like Jack Monroe (2015), who self-defines as a 'gender-fluid, queer lesbian', clearly sits outside of

the expected traditional femininity, which is particularly intensified for mothers. Monroe's responses to some of the critiques she receives indicate her awareness of the intersection of her gender, sexuality and class in the claims of inauthenticity from the press. For example, in response to some of Richard Littlejohn's assertions earlier, she claimed, 'I am everything the Daily Mail loathes . . . I'm a lefty, liberal, lezzie cook and I talk about it all' (Monroe in Adams, 2014). This quote was given in an interview entitled 'Jack Monroe enjoys the taste of success, but won't let it go to her head' (Monroe, 2014), where she also detailed how she turned down a Hollywood offer to buy the film rights to her story and emphasised her frugality in only paying herself the living wage. The recognition of her gender, sexuality and class as motivators in the press attempts to undermine her authenticity, as well as the authenticity labour demonstrated in emphasising her frugality and ordinariness, suggests Monroe is aware of the importance of authenticity for her political legitimacy and her personal brand. In many ways, her Whiteness has afforded her a level of visibility due to potent myths around the 'left-behind' (Bhambra, 2017) in British society, but this is complicated by both her sexuality and gender identity, which is not consistent with the heteronormativity implicit in accounts of working-class families.

Conclusion

As this article has demonstrated, Jack Monroe occupies a very particular position in popular culture as an 'austerity celebrity', domesticity expert, feminist and anti-austerity activist. This position requires careful negotiation and consistent authenticity labour from Monroe to retain her legitimacy and try to claim control over her public narrative. I demonstrate how Monroe utilises a form of feminist anger, affect and irreverent rage (Wood, 2019) in her personal testimonies which is politically productive and can be understood as having the potential to enact change, or resist dominant narratives about shirkers and workers which have circulated frequently throughout the age of austerity. Monroe's Whiteness and her presentation of middle-class precarity has afforded her a particular form of heightened visibility as the face of modern poverty, but this becomes complicated by her sexuality and gender identity, and demonstrates the lack of theoretical space for complex representations of 'authentic' contemporary poverty, and cross-class solidarity in the UK media landscape. I argue that Monroe's position as a mediated anti-austerity celebrity represents a form of politicised domesticity, using her experiences of poverty in the private sphere as campaigning material in the public sphere. In this way, Monroe demonstrates how the domestic space has become repoliticised; in this case, in direct response to austerity policy. By positioning herself as an anti-austerity activist, Monroe represents a new form of mediated celebrity which is particular to this political and economic climate, and must paradoxically exist as critiquing neoliberal regimes while existing within them.

I argue that she not only represents a challenge to some of these dominant narratives found in popular culture during austerity, but that she also presents a political, feminist counter hegemonic-narrative to challenge the dominance of postfeminism. This is achieved through her explicit engagement with feminist ideas, her acknowledgement of the gendered implications of austerity policy particularly for mothers, and through her

commitment to deconstructing entrenched notions of gender. Although she frequently campaigns explicitly against austerity policies and rejects the romantic and nostalgic discourses that circulate, as discussions of the ways in which Monroe is framed by the press reveal, her narrative is often hijacked. She is often then portrayed as an aspirational, rags-to-riches, make-do-and-mend success story who has overcome adversity through the dominant austerity tropes of individualism and resilience. This hijacking reframes her coping methods as aspirational, erases her structural austerity critiques, depoliticises her public persona and reframes her feminism into an individual, postfeminist sensibility. It is only through consistent campaigning, responding to media attacks and through the cultivation of a personal blog that Monroe is able to continue to challenge these neoliberal, postfeminist narratives and reassert her brand of politicised domesticity and resistance. Again, this is a testament to the enduring nature of postfeminist narratives and the contemporary demand for feminine resilience within austerity culture. Although Monroe frequently engages in feminist, structural critiques, the postfeminist narratives of cheerful resourcefulness prevail.

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Note

1. Oliver's comments here represent a shift in his celebrity star text from culinary celebrity to 'moral entrepreneur' (see Hollows and Jones, 2010), whereby he began to tackle issues like childhood obesity, notably visiting a school in Rotherham in a bid to change perceived problematic eating habits. Mothers in Rotherham responded by passing their children food through the school gates and came to be branded in the media as 'sinner ladies' or 'junk food mums'. These discourses of immorality were particularly focused on working-class mothers and created what Nick Piper characterises as para-social relationships of embarrassment for the residents of Rochdale who imagined themselves to be perceived in proximity to practices of poor eating habits and bad parenting (Piper, 2013).

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