

## **The politics of expertise: neoliberalism, governance and the practice of politics**

Janet Newman,  
Emeritus Professor, the Open University  
[j.e.newman@open.ac.uk](mailto:j.e.newman@open.ac.uk)

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This chapter concerns neoliberalism and its “others”, and how the relationship between them is mediated through different forms of expertise. In much of the literature expertise is viewed as inherently depoliticizing:

Experts hold out the hope that the problems of regulation can remove themselves from the disputed terrain of politics and relocate onto the tranquil yet seductive terrain of truth (Rose and Miller 1992: 188).

In this chapter my focus is rather different. I want to explore the forms of expertise that are deployed to mediate and contest neoliberal reason: to mitigate its consequences, to manage its contradictions and to prefigure alternative rationalities. Such forms of expertise are not easily codified: they are generated and deployed in multiple spaces of negotiation and contestation, and are affective as much as technical.

The chapter draws on empirical work showing how women have taken social and political commitments gained elsewhere into their work in places characterised by emerging configurations of neoliberal rule. It traces how multiple projects and forms of politics were ambiguously aligned, producing points of appropriation, co-option, and transformation. This focus stems in part from on my own history of work in local government, in public policy and later in the academy. I witnessed – and was perhaps complicit in – many of the changing configurations of power I address in this chapter. But I was also involved in attempts to bring feminist and “community” commitments into my engagements with the organizations I worked in. I sought to transform elements of public policy and later – as an academic - to rethink notions of management and governance and to challenge the reordering of public/private authority.

This was the background to a piece of multi-generational research designed to look back on how feminist politics had helped to shape the reconfigurations of power, expertise and authority in England from the 1960s to the present. In *Working the spaces of power* I report on a 3-year study of the labor of women who had taken activist commitments into their working lives. Those participating in the research (hereafter “participants”) brought very different political identifications: some were very much rooted in the politics of local community, but many drew political experiences and images from beyond Britain – from the radical movements of Latin America, from post-colonial struggles in India and Africa, from the civil rights movements and black struggles in the US, and from transnational political movements: environmental, peace, feminist, anti-capitalist. ‘Notions of ‘here’ and ‘elsewhere’ were constantly reconfigured through social media, through migrant experiences, and through emerging transnational political movements. Participants had a wider range of experiences of both activism and of work (formal and informal). They worked in community politics and campaign groups; in government and local government; in policy and the professions; in the voluntary sector and NGOs; in universities, think-tanks and research organizations. However these categories are fluid; most participants had fractured working lives that traversed different and spheres of action. The research was completed in 2012, and reported in a series of publications (Newman 2012, 2013 a and b, 2014). I have since extended the data through new interviews, workshops and conversational encounters, and by drawing on recent research on responses to austerity.

When I began to write the chapter I proposed to focus on a number of ‘ideal types’ of neoliberal subject: the knowledge worker, the social entrepreneur, the “transformational” manager. But these figures stubbornly refused to emerge. Indeed this was partly the point of the research: what is most interesting, I argued, is what happens on the borders, the edges between different categories, sectors or organizations. This where productive political spaces open up, but also where neoliberal processes of expansion and colonization tend to occur. Rather than focusing on ideal types, then, I begin by outlining brief vignettes from the data. Each shows the paradoxical alignments between neoliberalism and its others. But rather than replicating a power-resistance binary I show how multiple forces shaped those alignments, and how the resulting juxtapositions, entanglements and contradictions could have a *generative* force. I then trace how the vignettes illuminate the reordering of hierarchies of expertise and authority, and finally review the (limited) salience of ‘assemblage’ as a theoretical construct. Extracts from the data are

included in italics, and since presented out of context are, in this chapter, anonymised.

## **ALIGNING: MAKING AND REMAKING POLITICAL PROJECTS**

I begin with the political work of aligning diverse ideologies, actors and technologies in the making of particular political projects. Such projects seek to transform social/ political/ economic relationships, and draw on the expertise of a range of actors – in and beyond the state – to generate solutions to policy problems. This opens up new spaces in which neoliberal projects may be ambiguously aligned to ‘other’ forces and influences. Such alignments may be temporary, unstable and quickly fade from the political lexicon - but they may also mark the emergence of new hegemonic formations.

The vignettes that follow offer snapshots of these processes of alignment. Each is specific to a particular governmental moment, and each reflects the contingent relationships of a particular place (the U.K, more specifically England). The first features socialist feminist women who had, in the 1980s, been active in a series of campaigns and projects on low pay, housing, school meals and trade union rights. Their skills and networks later proved to be of value to local authorities facing the challenge of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) in the 1990s. CCT required local authorities to compete with private sector providers to deliver specified services, initially those provided by manual workers – including cleaners, caterers and school meal providers. Some of the women I interviewed were drawn into local government posts to prepare such services for competition, using their political skills to create new alliances between councilors, trade unions, managers and workers. But this was not just a happy coincidence between organizational needs and the availability of women with the right kind of skills. Political commitments were significant. Feminist agendas (on equal pay) were inscribed into the contracting process, and services were reconfigured:

*We kept a lot of those services in-house, and we did improve them. There was a lot of ducking and diving going on. But there’s a theme about relating, I think – between those who provide the service and those who use them. And both are very often women.*

The significance of feminist politics in this phase of CCT was widely recognized;

*It was a completely female dominated area of local government. Some went on to become directors of DSO's [in house contractors], and some became the first women local authority chief executives. And I still have dinner with them all 20 years on.*

This example was specific to the early 1990s; later waves of reform enabled corporate power to penetrate deep within the state, and processes of marketization and contracting became less vulnerable to influence by politicized actors (including, of course, trades unions). But it generated undercurrents that had long-term consequences: the feminization of many policy roles in local government (especially roles concerned with “cross cutting” agendas); the challenge to the tendency of trades unions to focus on male manual work; and the recognition of the importance of relationships between the providers and users of public services, an idea that prefigured 21<sup>st</sup> notions of a “relational state” (Cook and Muir, 2012)

My second example relates to the policy transformations of what has been termed the ‘social investment state’ (Simon-Kumar, 2011). This generated new alignments between feminist politics and social policy. Long-standing challenges to the maternalism of post-war welfare states were ambiguously aligned with policies that sought to treat women as full worker-citizens, and that brought childcare to the centre of government policy. New programs (such as Sure Start) seemed to address women’s political concerns, and the “mainstreaming” of equality issues suggested the successful recognition of feminist politics in government. But the alignments were problematic from the outset; one participant spoke about the difficulty of reconciling her feminism with the normative concepts of family promulgated in social policy. Another spoke about her attempts to use social policy research to influence policy:

*There were some ministers and civil servants who were happy to use our arguments... we had some successes and the last Labor government finally accepted the value of gender impact statements. However the label comes off [a policy proposal] as soon as it gets into government.*

There is an extensive debate about how far the mainstreaming of feminism in this period served to strip away any vestige of feminist politics (McRobbie, 2009), and about the ways in which feminism was complicit with neoliberalism in its focus on calls for “recognition” at the expense of a more socialist focus on redistribution (Fraser 2009). Certainly my data highlights the paradoxical alignments of feminism and neoliberal governance. Women’s development became a key focus as governments sought to install the worker citizen as a universal subject. But at the

same time feminism did succeed in transforming the state, creating greater concern with care and well being, and authorizing participative and relational skills in ways that challenged bureaucratic masculine hegemony. These paradoxes are not just abstract, but were experienced and felt by those I interviewed.

Throughout the period of my research “community” formed a site of uncomfortable alignments between activist work and governmental power. In the 1970s and 1980s many participants engaged in projects of “community empowerment”; indeed some drew on Frierean notions of concientization to mobilize challenges to dominant rationalities. But following periods of urban unrest in the 1980s a series of governmental programmes designed to engage and manage ‘disaffected’ communities offered new spaces of power:

*I acted as a connector with the rest of the department, bringing civil servants in to meet with them [community forum members], translating what they were saying into documents that were acceptable and understandable to the rest of the Department.*

But more than translation was involved: community programs were spaces of power in which radical projects came to influence subsequent policy on planning, participation and urban poverty.

This influence came to fruition in the New Labour years, where the ethos of “partnership” and “participation” marked a turn to more social paradigms of governance (Newman, 2001). This, like “community”, marked a problematic alignment between neo-conservative ideology (invoking values of reciprocity and responsibility) and the expansion of neoliberal power. Social modalities of governing invoked new forms of citizen subject (the citizen-consumer, the responsible citizen, the participative community). And it sought new governance actors, untainted by the professional and bureaucratic power bases of the public sector, or by the (often antagonistic) power of local politicians.

After the financial and budgetary crises of 2008 and beyond, community was refigured as a resource beyond the (retreating) welfare state. Prime Minister Cameron’s (2010) call for a Big Society (in place of a Big State) was short lived, failing to secure sufficient support within the Conservative party. It also attracted considerable cynicism from those occupying the space from which a Big Society would be crafted (voluntary groups, local authorities, NGOs, civic actors and others).

Nevertheless it offered an alternative vocabulary and set of ethical principles to the consumerist and market rhetoric of the past.

*I think there's a vacuum that opens, I actually think there's a potential here for ... I'm trying to avoid the Big Society rhetoric, sorry, but there is something about if the state is shrinking then it opens up opportunities to renegotiate the social contract, for communities to reclaim some of that.*

As I spoke to women working on food banks, informal services for the homeless, and a range of neighborhood initiatives there was a frequent reference to the Big Society – coupled with at the same time as expressions of despair and dismay about the effects of cuts on vulnerable populations.

A final vignette offers a very different image of community politics. “Citizen assemblies” worked to bring the members of faith based and other community organizations into face-to-face encounters with those holding power (ministers, council leaders, policymakers and others). A key campaign was that of promoting the idea of a “living wage”. This linked ideas of a fairer society (overcoming entrenched pay inequity) and notions of business effectiveness (through the retention and motivation of employees), and had considerable success. There was however no simple alignment of opposing interests and ideas. Citizen assemblies were crafted from alliances between different faith groups, and between faith organizations and political actors unsympathetic to the conservative (and anti-feminist) implications of “faith” as an organizing principle. In 2015 a broader “People’s Movement” for the living wage was launched. But in the same year there was an attempt to co-opt its political success: Chancellor George Osborne’s proposed “national minimum wage” promised pay rises for low paid workers in exchange for the reduction or withdrawal of state benefits for citizens in paid employment (Observer 1/11/15, pp. 28-9). If successful, this would both shift responsibility from state to employers, and radically change the potential social and economic promise of the living wage campaign.

These vignettes show some of the ways in which participants worked to subvert or oppose neoliberal rationalities while forming new accommodations with neoliberal practice. In the process they brought different aspects of feminist politics into new alignments with governmental power. The politics of gender and class equality (evident in the CCT vignette) were “rendered technical” in the specificities of the contract, but were also the basis for “forging new alliances” (two elements of Tania Li’s “analytics of assemblage”: Li, 2007). They also prefigured the later living wage campaigns, invoking new accommodations with antiracist politics and “faith’ groups

(Li's practice of "reassembling'). The feminist politics of community – as a space of women's informal and unwaged labor - was, throughout my period, uncomfortably aligned with a number of governmental projects of development, appropriation and resource mobilization. Yet these also brought issues of central importance to women's lives – housing, poverty, security, care – into public policy-making, and enabled women to participate directly in new democratic spaces. And a feminist politics of equality was, for a time, highly influential in the expansion and renewal of the welfare state. The policies that followed were, as participants noted, stripped of the politics that formed them, but nevertheless generated a new common sense about equality as the marker of the modern (western) state. The final vignette showed how anti-poverty politics became vulnerable to co-option in new governance logics associated with the curtailment of the welfare state.

The work of aligning references a politics of articulation through which neoliberalism confronts, reorders, appropriates and seeks to contain other social forces and movements. But such hegemonic projects are never complete. The vignettes hint at the ways in which contradictory logics were negotiated and new political spaces mobilised. Those participating in the research were able to work the contradictions and forge new alignments precisely because of their own formation through multiple movements, relationships, experiences and forms of (paid and unpaid) work. They drew discourses and repertoires from different worlds, forming new configurations of what "work" meant and how it was to be conducted. Indeed it was this capacity to span different worlds and identities that generated the spaces of power with which I was concerned.

### **CONSTITUTING AND CONTESTING "EXPERTISE"**

In theories of neoliberalism as governmentality, the emphasis tends to be on rationalities, calculations and forms of expertise that cohere in a new formation of power. But if neoliberalism is treated a variable and flexible formation this opens up a different image of expertise; one of forging new alignments and managing the contradictions that these produce. Expertise comes to be understood not as disembodied rationality but as embodied ensembles of political, institutional and relational knowledge. And while technocratic expertise is viewed as a form of neutral disciplinary power that serves to displace politics, here I want to show something of the political ambiguities inherent in shifting hierarchies of expertise and authority. The expertise of participants in the research was highly mobile, being bent and

developed, reconfigured in and perhaps contained – at least for a while – in an individual working life.

Dominant narratives about the reordering of state power under neoliberal rule tend to centre on the fate of the professions and the subordination of bureaucratic power to new organizational rationalities and governing logics (Clarke and Newman 1997). However these are not the only forces at work. The dispersal of state power resulting from both managerialism and marketization created new professional spaces of power; housing associations (McDermont 2010), locally managed schools (Ball 2007), NGOs (Stubbs, 2003) and the “public” experts drawn into transnational corporate consultancies on public-private partnerships. NGOs, in particular, offered spaces of expert power for some of those I interviewed. But under New Labour, the status of expert power became undercut by the valorization of lay knowledge – the experience of “ordinary people” – in many of the initiatives on which participants worked. This was most noticeable in the plethora of community programs, but was also evident in Sure Start, where there were marked conflicts between the authority of health professionals and that of mothers themselves.

This valorization of “ordinary people” (Clarke, 2010) imagined a world untainted by politics and untouched by the interests of state workers hostile to governmental programs. But ‘ordinary people’ had to be summoned, spoken for, represented. This drew many of my participants into roles concerned with summoning disenfranchised populations into new participatory projects, and bringing them to voice. “Hidden” and hitherto unrecognized forms of expertise – those of convening new publics, negotiating conflict, of translation and representation – became newly authorized. These trends brought increasing recognition of the informal knowledge of women whose experience and skills transcended personal, political and organizational roles. Many took up new posts in project development, partnership management, neighborhood governance and participation programs. Such roles tended to be temporary and insecure (programs came and went as policy fashions changed) but enabled such women to take their (considerable) skills from one program to another. They combined high performance demands (working to action plans, meeting targets, securing and combining funding streams) with an extensive reliance on affective forms of labor as governments sought to summon new citizen identities (in what Jupp et al, 2016, term a turn to the governance of emotion).

The women I interviewed can certainly be viewed as complicit in the development of new, neoliberal citizen-subjects. Their critiques of the paternalism of welfare services prepared the way for the rise of the “citizen consumer”, a figure that both symbolically displaced older versions of the rights-bearing citizen and that enabled the marketization of public services. Their feminist values of care, interdependence and solidarity were highly compatible with the figure of the “responsible citizen” providing welfare beyond the welfare state. And the women’s development and “empowerment” projects they worked on helped equip subjects to be effective and flexible worker-citizens. Participants in the research were, then, both complicit in the production of neoliberal subjectivities as well as embodying them in their own developmental paths. But as in the vignette on community as a governable space, they also sought to subvert, appropriate and translate such programs.

The “soft”, relational skills authorized in such programmes can be contrasted with the rise of “knowledge work” in so-called advanced neoliberal regimes of power. The New Labour governments sought to link resource flows to evidence-based policymaking (the ethos of “what matters is what works”). This generated new alignments between research, policy and politics, and the increasing valorization of “scientific” knowledge in the policy process. Many of the women I interviewed were involved in research, training, policy advice work, consultancy and the therapeutic or human development industries. Some set themselves up as small businesses providing training and advice. Others left high-pressure public sector or policy roles to become “consultants” or “policy advisers”, or joined left-leaning think tanks. These were ambiguous spaces: participants spoke of the difficult process of translating their own civic or political values into business rationalities they could sell in the market place for knowledge work. They tended to welcome the new flexibilities and freedoms of their work, while noting the risks and vulnerabilities of insecure labor.

In contrast, knowledge work in universities became subject to new managerial and governing regimes of power. This generated pressure on academics to demonstrate the policy or business relevance of their research, with a strong governmental emphasis on quantitative or experimental evidence of “what works”. However many of those I interviewed developed collaborative and participative forms of research that drew on the experience and knowledge of research subjects (latterly “co-researchers”). Others experimented with ways of linking activist perspectives with engagement practices, generating academic/political networks together with an explosion of political commentary, blogs, publications and creative/artistic

collaborations. These were, of course, not afforded official legitimacy in academic hierarchies of publication and career advancement. My data highlighted the dilemmas for “early career” academics committed to conducting politically informed, collaborative and/or cross-disciplinary research while occupying marginal roles in institutions and working to tight performance criteria. The reordering of hierarchies of knowledge, then, had profound consequences, both for the kind of research that might gain funding and recognition, and for the fate of a generation of young researchers.

Knowledge work came to take on a new importance as networks of academics, think tanks, policy actors and journalists gathered evidence about the impact of austerity and sought to influence political and policy action (e.g. Women’s Budget Group 2015, O’Hara 2014, New Economics Foundation 2015). New groupings within some of the traditional professions emerged, using their reputational capital to combat austerity – ‘Psychiatrists against Austerity’, radical architects and housing professionals, economists, human rights lawyers and others. Those involved in left-leaning policy networks were active in generating new policy rationales such as coproduction and personalization, both associated with a more relational form of the state (Cook and Muir 2012, Needham, 2011, Durose and Richardson 2015). These too were ambiguous – they worked to align the goals of disability and other social movements with innovative governmental practices. But they proved to be highly compatible with practices of state retrenchment.

As austerity curtailed many of the projects and programs on which participants worked, so political experience and expertise took on a new salience. Participants found creative ways of engaging with anti-austerity politics: campaigns against cuts, grassroots struggles, occupations of public space and new kinds of political performance. Those who continued to work in cash-strapped local authority and voluntary organizations spoke about reconfiguring services, reallocating funding, setting up new advice services, challenging landlords, providing premises for food banks, all in an attempt to protect services to the most vulnerable. In related research, Lowndes and McCaughie (2013) describe how severe resource constraints led to a process of “institutional bricolage” that generated new combinations of resources, services, people and programs. And Durose (2011) talks of the work of ‘civic entrepreneurs’: front-line staff brokering new relationships with community and civic actors.

But improvising and brokering are of course not enough. Women were also at the forefront of innovative experiments beyond the state, including new forms of cooperative provision, social enterprises and grassroots initiatives. These are highly diverse, spanning food projects, guerilla gardening, environmental projects, art and curating projects, new forms of youth work, alternative housing schemes, and health and well-being projects. These served not only to fill gaps in state and market provision, but also constituted new kinds of economic and social subjects. Larner (2015) describes a particular project in Bristol [COEXIST] as “constituting partnering subjects who privilege creativity, relationship building, facilitation processes and collaboration” (2015: 202). They served to meet needs *and* to prefigure new worlds. Graham and Cornwall suggest that “we can see the social economy as a space of experimentation, where familiar concepts are redefined and novel visions are enacted”, *and* as a “pool of exemplary resources for communities at every scale”. (2009: 63). These both/*and* formulations suggest that the social economy is an ambiguous space, cross cut by different forms of economic conduct. Those meeting gaps in the retreating welfare state can be charged with deflecting potential sources of opposition to the consequences of neoliberalism. And alternative economic experiments are vulnerable to future cooption by corporations seeking to expand customer bases and profits. But they have a prefigurative force, offering a politics of possibility – and new ways of “being political” - in the present.

Being political carries its own knowledge and truth claims. Those I interviewed offered complex forms of analysis about the changing formations of power they encountered. They spoke of personal, organizational and political dilemmas as they worked between their own truth claims and those of the institutions and projects they worked on. They faced ambiguities and discomforts as different identifications – as insiders and outsiders, as both different from and as part of the dominant order – were lived and performed. Being “inside-outside” – of the nation, the organization, activist networks, the academy – clearly brought feelings of both inclusion and exclusion. Participant accounts frequently referenced *affective* dimensions of their experience: being “shocked” and finding it “difficult”, taking risks and finding things “bizarre” or “weird”; being “proud” and “fulfilled”; not being able to “bear” one sector while feeling “stifled” by another; of being viewed (and perhaps viewing the self) as compromised because of decisions made.

Paying attention to such images suggests some of the forms of self-work at stake. The women perfectly illustrate the newly valorized self-reliant subject, oriented to

continuous self-improvement and the accumulation of skills and resources. They used entrepreneurial skills to overcome the rigidities of institutions and procedures, mobilized new knowledges and served as nodes in networks of translation and adaptation. As such they might be viewed as the ideal neoliberal subjects, untrammelled by embedded institutional forms of power and newly “liberated” from the ties of family and community by the tropes of the universal worker-citizen. This is the paradox at the centre of the research: in contesting and appropriating neoliberalism, participants drew on the very forms of expertise, practices and models of the self it valorizes and seeks to inculcate. It was this that enabled participants to draw discourses and repertoires from different worlds, to shape new configurations and spaces of “work” and to perform multiple identities. And it was these skills and performances that generated the spaces and modalities of power with which I was concerned.

## **ASSEMBLAGE IN QUESTION**

In this chapter I have drawn on a particular research project to trace empirically how neoliberalism is – imperfectly, incompletely and ambiguously – aligned to its others. Brown describes neoliberalism as a “normative order of reason” that “transmogrifies every human domain and endeavour, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic” (2015, 10). However I have tried to depict neoliberalism not as a singular project or thing but as a field of forces whose imperfect articulations create spaces for unexpected and potentially disruptive forms of agency. The vignettes show something of the ideological hybridity of neoliberalism in the UK: the conservatism of community, faith and family as mobilizing forces beyond the state, the invocation of new citizen subjects based on market individualism, consumerism, self development, enterprise and more. These cannot be reduced to a single, coherent program: rather they are selectively sutured into particular projects. Nor can they be organized into a neat temporal sequence (the 1980s roll back moment, the social investment roll-out moment, the austerity moment). The research suggests how residual rationalities supposedly displaced by neoliberalism might be realigned with new emergent forms (“old” professions and “new” austerities) while emergent forms might remain nested within the dominant rather than displacing it. The variability is also spatial (London and the south-east differing substantially from the north, as is England from Scotland or Wales) and scalar (Europe, nation state, local government, neighborhood).

Assemblage offers one way of capturing such variability; it denotes the ways in which diverse elements may be mobilized, combined and made effective - but also the contingency of the formations of power at stake (Latour 2005). It enables an understanding of how different temporalities and scales are overlaid rather than existing in logical progressions. It refuses binaries, whether of context/agency, power/resistance or local/global. And it suggests the generative capacity of new combinations and alignments. However assemblage – as derived from Actor Network Theory [ANT] - has not been the primary conceptual framework for the “spaces of power” project, not least since it offers limited conceptions of both politics and power. What is at stake, rather, is a field of forces, some of which may, in some circumstances, be forged into new hegemonic alignments.

This is a politics of articulation not simply a politics of multiplicity. Hegemonic projects require work to sustain them, and are always incomplete, creating the possibility of new and unpredictable alignments. And where multiple projects or programs intersect, contradictions have to be managed – or indeed used to generate new spaces of power, of agency. Here I have drawn selectively on notions of assemblage drawn from anthropological studies. These foreground the labor of social actors as they forge ideas and practices into new ensembles – at specific times and in specific spaces (Coulter and Schumann, 2012, Li, 2007, 2015, Sharma 2008). I have tried to show the interplay of these practices, and point to how participants sought to use failure and exploit contradictions while actively resisting processes of de-politicization and incorporation. I have shown how participants were implicated in the ‘business’ of state transformation, shifting the focus from government to community, the market, civil society and personal and intimate domains of everyday life. Yet at the same time they shifted the meanings and practices of politics, changing the terrains on which struggles could take place.

Spaces of power are, then, they are spaces of *work* (Clarke, 2012). A focus on rationalities, however sophisticated, can only be part of the analysis:

Understanding how assemblages are pulled together and made to cohere requires attending both to rationalities (what makes it rational to think in this way, to proceed in this manner) and to the work of assemblage, which involves managing fractures, dealing with incoherences, and forging alignments (Li, 2014; 61).

This presents a challenge to governmentality studies in which strategies are assumed to produce effects on the ground while ignoring – and erasing from view –

the labor of those who mediate or translate them. But it also challenges ways in which theories of assemblage drawn from ANT, in highlighting the dynamic coming together of disparate objects and actants, can ignore the labor of stitching them together (however temporarily) and resisting their decomposition.

The labor at stake in such studies is often gendered labor (see also Larner and Craig, 2005). The work of articulation and alignment is of course not necessarily done by women. But gender is relevant to my analysis in a number of ways. First, it symbolically marks spheres of agency and politics that are often overlooked. By decentering the urban (often the central focus of studies of neoliberalism) other forces and movements - grassroots politics, feminist politics, environmental politics - come into view. In particular a focus on gender brings into view the relationships between personal lives and public politics, central to recent grassroots struggles on housing, food poverty and care. Second, it denotes the centrality of women in neoliberal projects of development, whether in the global south or in the post-welfare states of the north. In both, women are discursively positioned as the agents of change; and, as in my study, the process of development tends to be conducted through women's labor. Third, gender itself is a modality of power. Coulter (2012: 138) argues that "gendered processes and effects [in government] are avoided through silences and omissions" that serve to protect what she terms the 'hegemonic masculinity' of governing and political systems. The women participants in the 'spaces of power' project offered forms of direct and indirect challenge to masculinity as a modality of power, but in breaking the silences and omissions by their embodied presence, risked new patterns of bullying, blame and abuse.

Finally the work of translating, negotiating, brokering and forging relationships and so on tend to be regarded as "soft", and therefore symbolically female, skills. As such they tend not to be accorded high value in regimes of power dominated by hegemonic masculinity. Yet they are central to many of the political projects discussed in this chapter, whether the organizational change programs of CCT, the partnership work of the New Labour era, the summoning and mobilizing of 'communities' and 'civil society', or the development of new practices of welfare production beyond the welfare state (co-production, resilience, social entrepreneurship). Such skills are not essentially female; but are developed on the margins and edges of established organizations, and, crucially, through political activism. One of the most exciting aspects of the "spaces of power" project was puzzling about such issues with participants:

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I think what I bring is lateral thinking. I'm a very good lateral thinker, I like making connections. I think quite a lot of women do that, but [laughs] I think that being a socialist feminist – endlessly having to knit things together, to see how they are connected and to make the connections and see how to exploit the connections and work with the contradictions. I'm not sure whether you learn those things from being an activist or whether you become an activist because you've got that kind of brain. END QUOTE

Gender appears and disappears in such accounts. But the position of participants on the margins of institutional life offers a more material and embodied conception of the gendered dynamics of labor markets. Women are invited in as ideal worker citizens, but are at the same time are highly vulnerable to new patterns of exploitation and commodification. Processes of neoliberalization have transformed the meanings and practices of work, intensifying the labor process and introducing new insecurities. New forms of knowledge work are dissolving the boundaries between work and non-work, bringing paid labor into the spaces of intimate life (Gregg, 2011). Neoliberalism also opens up greater mobility of labor (within and between nation states), with women particularly targeted to meet the ever-expanding need for care work and work in other low-paid service industries, including sex work. This intensifies processes of exploitation, but also generates a proliferation of new borders and forms of border work.

### **CONCLUSION: REVISITING “POLITICS”**

This is a particularly challenging moment to try to theorize transformations of power and expertise. Peck argues that the current neoliberal era does not mark a new phase but is characterized by “all manner of short term fixes, band-aids and bromides, complete with their own limits and contradictions” (2012: 629-300). The Greek “debt crisis” and the UK general election of 2015 both show how neoliberalism serves to subordinate democratic institutions to financial expertise (Brown 2015). But both examples also show how the alignment between expertise and democracy remains a matter of contestation rather than of fact.

But this has been a very British – specifically English – account. Many participants in the ‘spaces of power’ spoke of how. But in assessing the likely conflicts and contradictions forces that might shape future political projects, I want to expand the analytical frame beyond that of a particular nation state. One obvious line of fracture is between the neoliberal requirement for open borders (in order to ease the flow of both finance and labor) and the rise of new nationalisms (promoted by the growing strength of parties of the political right). A second is around the concurrence of debt crises in many European nations and the flow of refugees from North Africa to Europe. A third centres on the conflict between the governmental concerns with security and the symbolic – and highly conditional – commitment to human rights as the marker of liberal western states. Each marks the uncertain future of “Europe” as a governing entity and as a governable space. In each there are no easy points of alignment. There are points at which conflicts are temporarily smoothed and contained: for example when, in the autumn of 2015, Germany briefly changed the discourse on the refugee crisis to privilege a discourse of domestic labor market shortages. However the contradictions inherent in each of these lines of fracture remain unsettled, unresolved - and thus the stuff of politics.

But politics is itself changing as new movements and anti-austerity protest proliferate, and as activists develop new repertoires of political performance (Della Porta, 2015). Such phenomena have attracted a great deal of commentary. On the political (and academic) left, much of the “new” politics is dismissed on the grounds that it is not joined up, not organised, not coherent – in short, not proper politics (e.g. Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2015). In this chapter I have offered a rather different conception of the political. For participants in the study, the “new” politics is not so new, though is now enabled by new methods of communication. But the excitement about new social media serves to mask the need for political skills and capacities. I have shown some of the ways in which these are deployed to mediate the consequences of neoliberalism, to manage its contradictions and to prefigure alternative rationalities and practices. Such forms of expertise are not easily codified; they are generated and deployed in multiple, and often unexpected, spaces of negotiation.

The borders and boundaries occupied by participants are now being radically reconfigured. Rather than configurations of state, market and third sector participants are tending to work across changing forms, sites and practices of labor produced at the intersections of “welfare”, “enterprise” and “activism”. They are contesting continuing cycles of cuts while creating new forms of welfare beyond the state. They

are trying to survive in the present order of rule while imagining new ways of living, working and caring. They are combining new entrepreneurial skills with grass-root politics. Each may prefigure new processes of neoliberal appropriation and expansion. But, as I have tried to show, they also generate political images, resources and forms of expertise that have a potentially transformative force.

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