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Spaces of power: feminism, neoliberalism and gendered labour.

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Abstract

This paper offers an intervention into current debates about the demise of feminist politics in neoliberal times. It draws on an empirical study of women working the spaces of power over the last 50 years to trace different mappings of the 'landscapes of antagonism' in which feminism and neoliberalism are entangled. The paper challenges singular conceptions of both feminism and neoliberalism, and seeks to offer a political-cultural analysis that does not erase the possibility of politics.

Keywords: neoliberalism; feminism; social policy; modernisation; landscapes of antagonism.

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a remarkable proliferation of pronouncements about the fate of feminism. A number of leading feminist scholars in the US and UK (Hester Eisenstein, Nancy Fraser, Angela McRobbie) have traced what they view as the erasure of feminist politics in the face of neoliberal rule – a form of rule, it is argued, in which feminism was itself complicit, offering new resources, aspirations and identifications that were all too readily appropriated. In contrast, others have debated how far new forms of gendered governance the UK, New Zealand and Canada in the 1990s represented something 'after' or 'post' neoliberalism (Larner and Craig, 2005), Lister 2006, Simon-Kumar, 2011). At stake in such debates are contested views of both feminism and neoliberalism. This paper seeks to develop a form of political-cultural analysis which foregrounds the multiplicity of ways in which feminist politics is practiced, and which challenges a view of neoliberalism as a singular and all consuming force. It draws on a study of how women have taken activist

commitments into their working lives, in the process negotiating and contesting dominant forms of rule. The aims of the paper are both theoretical and political. Theoretically, it sets out to challenge the seeming coherence of narratives of erasure and incorporation and to reintroduce questions of contradiction and ambivalence. Politically, it seeks to open up a space for a politics of the present; one that does not simply deny the possibilities of political agency by folding the achievements of feminism into accounts of neo-liberalisation.

The study was based on interviews with 56 women across four generational cohorts spanning an age range of 75 to 21. Interviews were conducted between 2008 and 2011, and combined political biography (Mulinari and Rathzel, 2007) with accounts of working lives. Access to participants was gained through a number of different networks; sampling was purposive and iterative, with emerging foci providing the basis for eliciting further interviews that added depth to particular areas of analysis or that extended the profile of those participating around issues of age, class, generation, race and sexuality. The selection of respondents sought to reflect the complex entanglements of different political identifications and commitments; and different patterns of 'work', paid and unpaid, formal and informal. Most had fractured working lives, moving between a succession of different roles, accreting political and organisational skills and networks on the way. Many took considerable risks: working in informal spaces while securing resources for activist projects; leaving 'secure' forms of state work to take up campaigning roles; or moving between professional, NGO and entrepreneurial spaces. All were living in or visiting Britain at the time of the interview, though their accounts suggest the significance of transnational encounters and political formations in nations in the global South, in the Middle East, in South America, the Caribbean and the US: it was not just narrow, 'western feminism' that had shaped personal and political commitments. The accounts of those participating in the research (hereafter 'participants') show how they have helped shape and contest contemporary formations of governance, policy and politics by 'working the spaces of power' – openings in the dominant logics of rule.

The research design and approach were inspired by the institutional ethnography of Dorothy Smith. Smith describes the process as 'mapmaking':

> …a method of enquiry into the social that proposes to enlarge the scope of what becomes visible from that site, mapping the relations that connect one local site to others. Like a map, it aims to be through and through indexical to the local sites of people's experience, making visible how we are connected

into the extended social relations of ruling and economy and their intersections. And though some of the work of enquiry must be technical, as mapmaking is, its product should be ordinarily accessible and usable, just as a well-made map is, to those on the terrain it maps (Smith, 2005: 29).

These ideas of 'making visible' and 'making usable' are integral to my project. The larger study (Newman, 2012) explores four different mappings of the contested alignments of activist struggles to neoliberal logics: community governance; policy engagement; the 'modernisation' of work and organisations; and knowledge work. Each offers an important site in which to test narratives of the incorporation and erasure of feminism; and each offers glimpses of the changing configurations of gendered labour in the shifting governance regimes of the UK. This paper sketches the contours of two of the mappings, then go on to analyse each as a dynamic landscape of contestation. The paper then revisits the thesis of feminist complicity in, or 'elective affinity' with, neoliberalism, and concludes by assessing the contribution of the research approach for an analytics of the present and future.

Feminism and neoliberalism

The coincidence between feminism and global capitalism, or between the empowerment of women and new state forms, has been a central concern of feminist scholarship. Such scholarship offers subtle arguments and analyses that I cannot hope to do justice to here. But I want to draw out two interlinked narratives: one of how neoliberalism has appropriated identity politics, and a second of how processes of 'mainstreaming' have served to both acknowledge and depoliticise feminist claims. These narratives rest on rather different conceptual and political assumptions. Gentz (2006) and McRobbie (2009) view the politics of the Third Way in terms of the erasure of an explicitly feminist politics, producing what Gentz terms a 'post feminist' climate and McRobbie a disarticulation of a particular image of feminism from other struggles and movements: 'the feminism which is then vilified and thrown backwards into a previous era is a truncated and sclerotic anti-male and censorious version of a movement which was much more diverse and open minded' (2009: 9). Such processes herald the displacement of feminist politics: it is rendered 'out of date' and the 'spectre' of feminism is invoked (as anti-male, strident, anti-pleasure) so that it might be undone. Duggan (2006) situates the 'twilight of equality' in the growing dominance of neoliberalism, with a particular focus on the politics of mainstreaming (see Squires, 2005 and Walby, 2009 for counter arguments). Eisenstein recounts how US feminism became complicit in its own undoing, tracing 'the many and varied

struggles of the 1970s have been selectively filtered into a hegemonic, mainstream feminism, of a kind that can be readily used by people whose motives are anything but women friendly' (2009: ix; see also Eisenstein, 2006). Nancy Fraser, in a less conspiratorial tone, draws attention to what she terms the 'elective affinity' between feminism and neoliberalism (Fraser, 2009). In a carefully argued paper she points to how feminist critiques of patriarchy ('anti-androcentrism') opened the way for new forms of capitalist exploitation in which women's emancipation was tied to the engine of capitalist accumulation. At the same time, feminism's critique of welfare state paternalism slid easily into Thatcher's critique of the nanny state and welfare dependence; whilst the feminist critique of bureaucratic paternalism was recuperated by neoliberalism.

Much of this is convincing, but I have several concerns about such accounts. The first is the problem of explanation. Was feminism mainstreamed in order to offer token concessions to a few, thus symbolising women's 'success' and enabling the further exploitation of working class women, women of colour and others whose claims could not so easily be mainstreamed? Or perhaps women were offered limited access to institutional power so that they could challenge the hierarchical forms of authority that were impeding modernisation? Or maybe such concessions be attributed to the expansion of the service economy – an economy in which some categories and classes of women entered a labour market dominated by the painful decline of manufacturing in the heartlands of many western economies? Each of these explanations is plausible, but the relationship between them – and thus the relationship between 'culture', 'economy' and institutional logics – is not explored. Implicitly such accounts tend to collapse the social, political and cultural into the economic, reproducing forms of determinism that feminism, together with Gramscian, Althusserian and other engagements with Marxist theory, rejected decades ago. Indeed this form of 'strong theory' offers a broad reach and a reduced, limited field of meaning: 'Strong theory… affords the pleasures of recognition, of capture, of intellectually subduing that one last thing, [but] it offers no relief or exit to a place beyond' (Gibson-Graham 2006, 4). That is, it tends to erase the possibility of spaces of agency, and of politics.

My second concern centres on what might be termed a politics of blame. Work on the fate of feminism in Australia turned to the figures of the 'femocrat' or 'governance feminist' charged with taking up privileged positions at the expense of solidarity with other women (Yeatman, 1990, Watson 1990). In the US, Eisentstein's 2009 book

(tellingly titled 'Feminism seduced') saw the advancement of women, through federally funded childcare, domestic violence and rape prevention, as responsible for the opening up of domestic and global patterns of inequality and class based exploitation. The politics of blame also assumes that the actors who pursued such politics were seduced or deluded (see also Weeks, 2009 for a telling critique of such accounts in the context of gay and lesbian politics). Furthermore, blaming feminism for its own undoing too easily slides into the continued demonization of feminism and its achievements by the conservative Right, fed by the popular press.

The politics of blame (on earlier generations of feminists) intersects with my third concern: on the narratives of change inherent in depictions about the erasure or depoliticisation of feminism. Here I draw on Claire Hemming's (2005) critique of the story which feminist theory tends to tell about its own development. This story may be one of progress or loss: progress beyond the essentialised categories and identities of the seventies towards the celebration of difference, or loss of a commitment to social and political change. It is a profoundly anglo-american story, and one which oversimplifies different areas of feminist thought and the contests over meaning that have always taken place. Such stories are not exclusive to feminism but pervade accounts of other social and political movements that oscillate between accounts of progress and achievement or of loss, incorporation and depoliticisation. In the UK they intersect with often highly schematic narratives of political-cultural change, told through a series of mythic moments (the sterling crisis, the miners strike, the Falklands War, the death of Princess Diana and so on) or through depictions of highly stereotyped governments (this was Thatcherism, that was New Labour, now we have Coalition government). These characterisations are deeply flawed, and generate a sense of history that is partial and selective. In trying to understand the context surrounding the mappings that follow, I turned, then, to accounts that offer a richer sense of the dynamics of political-cultural change in Britain and that situate Britain in a wider context of colonial and post-colonial struggle (Brah, 1996; Gilroy,1992, 2004; Hall et. al.1978). My particular focus is on feminist accounts of the gendered dynamics of governance in particular periods: Campbell (1987) and MacNeill (1991) on the gender politics of Thatcherism; Lister (2004, 2007) on the emergence of the Social Investment State and gendered formations of citizenship; Cooper (1998) on gendered and sexualized struggles over the boundaries of legitimate governing in the 1990s; McRobbie (2009) on the significance of gender in the thesis of 'reflexive modernisation', and Fraser (2009) on the dynamic intersection of feminism and capitalism.

McRobbie and Fraser both offer important analyses of the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism. McRobbie (2009) argues that the thesis of reflexive modernisation proposed in the sociology of Giddens (1991) and others 'contributes to the eclipsing of feminism as a valid force for social and political change' and has provided 'a rationale for the rise of neoliberalism and the shift to the right in British politics' (2009: 46). She shows how women were losers in this emphasis on reflexivity, becoming disembedded from old institutions (e.g. an equal opportunity based public sector) and set free to take their place in the flexible economy. For Nancy Fraser it was feminism's emphasis on culture (in a politics of recognition rather than redistribution) that generated its 'elective affinity' with the demands of a new phase of post-Fordist, transnational and disorganised capitalism. Feminist anti-economism, she argues, collapsed into a politics of recognition that privileged identity politics over claims for redistribution and economic justice. 'Feminism absolutised the critique of culture at precisely the moment when circumstances required redoubled attention to the critique of political economy' (2009: 109).

My concern here is that these accounts have little regard for political agency, or for how contradictions are lived, managed and produce potential lines of fracture. The agency of capitalism or neoliberalism itself is unquestioned, whether it is depicted as an entity into which social movements are incorporated and assimilated, or seen as a dynamic force that requires the agency of others – including activists – to generate productive mutations and flexings. And while the treatment of feminism is nuanced and subtle, neoliberalism tends to be regarded as an unproblematic category: it is feminism that has to flex, not neoliberalism. Neoliberalism itself is treated as a given; as a self-evident phenomenon that needs little discussion. It is depicted as a global and globalising phenomenon that rolls all before it, operating at a different scale from, and thus subsuming, 'local' and 'particular' struggles.

But neoliberalism itself is a highly contested concept (Barnett 2005, Brown 2005, Ward and England 2007): indeed Clarke (2008) terms it a 'promiscuous' term that is widely overused and notoriously difficult to pin down. One difficulty is that it is more likely to be a term used by its critics than by advocates; and this, Ferguson argues, leaves us 'with a politics largely defined by negation and disdain' (2010: 166). Within political economy, which tends to dominate the field of critical scholarship, David Harvey (2005) views neo-liberalism as a class based political project of creating new means of capital accumulation, while Jessop (2002) and Peck (2004) place more

emphasis on the role of the state in securing political and ideological reform in order to enable the expansion of the scope and reach of corporate capital. Others emphasise the mobility and fluidity of neoliberalism. For example Ong (2007) views neoliberalism as a 'mobile assemblage' comprising technologies, techniques and practices that are selectively appropriated as they come into contact with 'local' politics and cultures, while Li (2007) argues that most of the political work of neoliberalism involves practices of de- and re-articulation of existing elements into new configurations, assemblages or constellations. Such distinctions are important, opening out questions about the coherence of neoliberalism as the singular source of 'all bad things' – an image that potentially undermines the possibility of contestation. Larner argues that 'this delineation of different interpretations of neoliberalism is not simply an academic exercise: our understanding of this phenomenon shapes our readings of the scope and content of possible political interventions' (2000: 5). This is an important point. Theories of neoliberalism seem to fall too often into a form of 'epochal analysis' that treats all particularities as instances of a general phenomenon. But as Larner comments,

> New political configurations are more multi-vocal than we might previously
> have understood. Most immediately, we are alerted to the possibility that
> there are different configurations of neoliberalism, and that close inspection of
> particular neo-liberal political projects is more likely to reveal a complex and
> hybrid political imaginary, rather than the straightforward implementation of a
> unified and coherent political philosophy (Larner, 2000:12)

In what follows I develop these ideas of multiplicity and hybridity to develop different mappings of the political-cultural work of those engaged in 'working the spaces of power'.

Spaces of power

Across the different institutional mappings generated in the research described earlier in this paper it is possible to trace multiple projects of neo-liberalisation, which draw attention to some of the different problematics that neo-liberal governance might seek to address: creating more flexible, educated workers; containing potentially subversive forms of community activism; generating innovation; fostering new policy logics; and constituting new 'empowered' and responsible citizen-subjects. These require different kinds of agent, operate at different temporalities and spatialities, and may not always be coherent. Rather than general questions (is this neoliberal or not? What kind or phase of neoliberalism is this?) the focus shifts to

how multiple projects coexist and how contradictions between them are resolved in *particular* sites at *specific* moments, and what forms of labour are at stake. Such questions are, I want to suggest, empirical as well as theoretical.

In what follows I offer a series of snapshots of women's engagement with British politics and culture from the 1970s to the present. These reflect the changing politics of feminism and its intersection with other axes of struggle, and the relationship between such struggles and shifting political-cultural formations of power. In line with the critiques of oversimplified narratives of change I offered earlier, these are not intended to offer an alternative account but to offer a series of empirical mappings of what was happening in particular spaces of power in a particular political-cultural moment.

One empirical mapping connects feminist inflected activism to the transformation of social policy in the 1970s and beyond. It traces how women came to influence policy in order to expand benefits for women (as independent citizens) and to promote improved provision for children. The following is an extract from an interview with a social policy academic:

> We developed a critique of the male breadwinner model out of our own family experience. We used our professional skills to send evidence off to policy makers, working on issues of taxation, pensions, child benefit, family law, domestic violence and so on. In the 1970s there was a concern to improve the lot of women; and in some ways it was as if we were pushing at an open door. It got harder in the 1980s, it was quite hard to get a handle on Thatcher - the paradigm had shifted, the door had slammed and we had far fewer networks with policymakers. The Y B a Wife campaign and Rights of Women emerged out of the original financial and legal independence campaign, and the Women's Budget group is a continuation of these in some respects. I therefore saw this [involvement in the WBG] as enabling me to do the things I had done in the 1970s again. I worked on issues of childcare and social care, maternity provision, work life balance etc. The WBG always comments on pre-budget reports and writes submissions to the Treasury on their impact on women. There were some ministers and civil servants who were happy to use our arguments but you trained them up and then they moved on to another policy area. We had some successes: the value of gender impact statements was finally accepted by the last New Labour government

However, the label comes off as soon as it gets into government – it's very hard to trace a specific policy back to its origins. You just sow these little seeds and hope that something grows from them.

There are several points that can be drawn from this account: the extent of feminist networks that connected campaigners, academics and policy actors; the breadth and variety of the feminist agenda; patterns of change over time; and the ambivalence of the outcomes. This work can be viewed as complicit with the turn towards a 'social investment state' that constituted women as full worker citizens, and enabled capitalist and state enterprises to access cheaper, more flexible, less unionised workforce, as well as investing in the capacity of future generations to take their part as productive worker citizens in the global economy (Lister, 2004). The selective incorporation of gender agendas here can be viewed as a triumph of neo-liberal forms of appropriation of feminist politics (though as noted earlier, some feminist scholars have argued that it represented something 'after' neoliberalism). In the same period concerns about parenting, family stability and care became amplified. These projects addressed women as citizen-subjects in different ways, the first calling on women to participate in the economy as full adult worker citizens; the second interpellating them as carers, parents and responsible citizens. One might, then, depict feminism as functional to neoliberalism in two different, and contradictory ways. In the first, the expanded role of female labour – more flexible, less unionised and more suited to the service economy – can be viewed as constitutive of a new economic order of flexible accumulation. In the second, women are viewed as integral to advanced neoliberal strategies of governing the social, sustaining the domestic economy that reproduces the conditions of capital accumulation.

However such functionalist readings offer limited purchase on the contradictions at stake in the regendering of the economy and society. In each case neoliberal projects were themselves transformed - in part - through their encounters with feminist and other activist claims. Employers came to bear the 'costs' of equality governance, parental leave and more complex patterns of work demanded by women's entry as full worker citizens. Welfare states, while looking to curb benefits paid to 'dependent' women, had to invest in development, empowerment and training and to launch a multiplicity of 'social' programmes in order to enable women both to contribute to the economy and to manage care work. It is not the case, then, that women were included in policy and economy in ways that left the social order

unchanged (Brodie, 2008): neoliberalism had itself to adapt and flex to take account of feminist projects.

A second mapping emerging from the research is of the relationship between feminism and a series of 'modernising' projects that sought to transform work, organisations and patterns of economic activity. Modernisation is a problematic discourse, lending itself to a number of different ideological and political projects, each of which was distinctively gendered. In the period covered by my study, women's economic and political equality – however partial and conditional - became a marker of the modern British state, contrasted with its less civilized colonial 'others'. The opening up of new employment possibilities for women in the post war years was both good for women (symbolically, if not materially, freeing them from subordinate and dependent status), and good for capitalism, opening up access to new productive workforces, new products that were at the 'leading edge' of an economy to come, and production systems that, in the words of one older participant who had founded a company employing a woman-only workforce, drew on 'wasted talent' and 'fitted with women's lives'. But modernization also signified successive attempts by the state to reform its administrative structures and governance practices (Newman, 2001). Such reforms were not advantageous to women. Access to services and benefits tended to become more conditional and subject to individualizing consumerist logics. Women's groups and community based organizations that had, in the past, been grant aided were drawn into a contractual bidding process that often led to processes of professionalization. Labour conditions, especially for low paid women, worsened as public services became subject to compulsory competitive tendering and outsourcing.

However these reforms also opened up spaces that women could seize, occupy and subvert. The late 1970s and 1980s were a particular interesting moment, with the rise of a more coercive. authoritarian state and growing social and political polarization (Hall et al 1978), increasing racial tensions (Brah, 1996; Gilroy 1992), and, as commentaries on Thatcherism show, the emergence of new state forms based on the introduction of competition for the delivery of public services (Clarke and Newman, 1997). These shifts generated new forms of activism and opened up radical spaces within government and local government, often sustained by an ethos

of working 'in and against the state'[1]. For example, some of the interviews show women who had previously worked in trades union resource centres or women's employment projects entering British local government posts to head up the process of 'compulsory competitive tendering' (CCT) – a process in which state provided services were put out to tender from other providers.

> We did lots of things about improving services in order to make them more defendable through CCT. So I did a big piece of work with school cleaners and school caterers – sort of to work with them to improve the services before they had to be put out to tender. That was interesting, there were big campaigns about school meals, with linked stuff about nutritional issues – this was often the only hot meal kids would have. That was a perfect piece of socialist feminist work, really. And Jamie Oliver has proved us right! (laugh)[2]

> Loads of us went from those [trade union] resource centres, law centres, into local government, either at the GLC or Labour controlled councils. We went and did CCT because we did lateral thinking. There was no local government profession for CCT, it was a completely feminist and women dominated area of local government. And I still have dinner with them all 20 years on. They all came from the Resource Centres, they then did CCT, some of them went on to become directors of DSO [Direct Service Organisations, in house contractors], and several went on to become [local authority] Chief Executives.

We might understand this as local authorities appropriating the experiences, politics and skills of socialist feminists and reworking them to extend market rationalities. But the interviews also show women appropriating local authority spaces to work new articulations between trade union discourses, feminist discourses, and professional/managerial discourses within the local authority. This work of articulation was done 'from below' rather than by dominant actors, subverting – at least for a while - the rationalities of contracting in order to enhance the employment status of

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[1] 'In and against the state' was a political position formed by a group of socialist feminist economists who, after the election of Thatcher, moved 'inside' the state as a conscious political strategy: London to Edinburgh Weekend Return Group 1979, 2011.
[2] Jamie Oliver is a TV cook who led a campaign to improve school dinners, in the process raising issues of the 'deskilling' and declining pay and conditions of the women who worked in school meals services.

working class women. This government-imposed modernisation, which can be understood as the state creating the conditions for the neo-liberal logics to come, opened up spaces for 'other projects': some catering services were modernised in ways that led to a better school meals service, and there was an impetus to build equality provisions into the contracting process. Both of these were, of course, temporary gains. But the first waves of compulsory competitive tendering also brought low paid women's work in cleaning and catering to the fore of local political agendas, leading to a partial modernisation of some trades unions around issues of gender, and prefiguring the later 'equal value' legislation.

A rather different modernisation, becoming more evident through the 1990s, centred on the rise of managerialism. This superimposed economic forms of calculation onto embedded social, professional and public rationalities, and was fundamental to the new 'spirit of capitalism' discussed by Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005 (on which Fraser's 2009 paper drew extensively). Managerialism provided an ideological rhetoric that privileged constant organisational change in the search for flexibility, performance and innovation. Women entering management can thus be viewed as doing important work in softening and humanising organisations in ways that made them fit for service based rather than industrial, fordist processes of capital accumulation. The 'management of change' was the key managerial skill sought out by employers through the 1990s, and who better to help them than those who understood the significance of the personal in organisational life and who could work with the emotional as well as the structural dynamics of change? In the process this not only highlighted the role of women as change agents but also heralded the valorisation of flexibility and reflexivity, both needed for the expansion of new capitalist logics. But it also offers a more ambiguous picture:

> I have been driven by the idea that public management could be more than the tool of the New Right. I've always felt very ambivalent about the term 'new public management', because that was the kind of stereotype, or a kind of impoverished version of what actually was happening. The strands of it, the elements that I thought were important, remained submerged.

This participant – in during her working life a civil servant, an educator, a consultant and policy advisor – viewed the 'submerged strands' as those of creating more humane person centred workplaces and of delivering more democratic, joined up and outcome driven services, often in precisely those areas of most concern to

women. Such elements were promoted, from the 1990s onwards, by a range of policy entrepreneurs, educators, consultants and those engaged in 'partnership' work, and by women who left the public sector to become self employed. The next extract is from a woman who had held equality posts in local government before setting up her own consultancy (with a past colleague): a consultancy, which explicitly brought feminist and antiracist perspectives into its work:

> In terms of being self-employed basically I'm an educator and an enabler. I think that's my core skill really, and I really enjoy that. It felt that I could influence quite a lot of people in a positive way. Being a consultant but working with an academic body and a public sector client, and there was a positive political alignment there. There are horror stories about being self-employed and the number of women who chose to be self-employed, and it had some disadvantages. [But] what was wonderful was we could choose what we worked on. We could choose who we worked with.

The 'positive political alignments' referred to here generated a new discursive repertoire of culture, values, development, empowerment, quality, customer centredness, missions, visions and so on that, although readily appropriated by modernizing logics, provided ample spaces for 'other projects' (e.g. Itzin and Newman, 2005). But those choosing self-employment were highly vulnerable to the economic recession to come. The 'choices' referred to in the extract above were highly constrained by the material conditions of self employment and the vulnerabilities associated with the rise of female entrepreneurship and other forms of 'immaterial' labour' (Gill and Pratt, 2008).

This brief review offers brief glimpses of some of the multiple sites in which neoliberal rationalities were prefigured, inscribed and contested in particular political-cultural moments. As noted earlier, this does not attempt to offer a history of the changing patterns of women's work, care and political activism; rather my aim has been to trace something of women's contested place in neoliberalism. The snapshots offered suggest how neoliberalism drew on alternative and oppositional projects into its ambit in the endless search for innovation and expansion. But they also show how neoliberalism itself was changed in the process of encountering 'other projects'. The different mappings traced earlier show how women's activism helped neoliberalism to adapt and flex, but also how it made new demands on capitalism (including those of equality, rights, welfare benefits, and provision for 'care' as new classes of women were drawn into the labour force).

This is the 'gendered labour' referred to in the title of this paper: the forms of labour at stake as women brought an engagement with feminist, class based, antiracist, LGBT and other forms of politics into mainstream institutional and political practice, negotiating dominant ruling relations and living the contradictions between different governing and political rationalities. While there is a considerable literature on the politics of 'mainstreaming' gender equality (Duggan, 2003, Squires, 2005, Walby 2011), my focus is on how women generated and occupied 'spaces of power' at the intersection between changing political and governmental forms on the one hand and social movement and activist struggles politics on the other. More is at stake, then, than convenient new alignments or elective affinities between neoliberalism and feminism. The spaces of power which women mobilised and occupied were traversed by multiple lines of antagonism: for example between public (state) and private (market) ideologies, or between the ethos of transformations in the name of business efficiency and that oriented towards public purpose or value. We can see patterns in which some of these contestations produced new orderings of dominance, but others remain more ambiguous. How can we make sense of how these changing configurations?

Landscapes of antagonism

The previous section highlighted two mappings – one of policy reform, the other of organizational modernization. Both show how feminist inflected agency was selectively – and contradictorily - appropriated in new logics of rule. Other mappings in the larger study (Newman, 2012) point to the ways in which new governmentalities of empowerment and community were prefigured by feminist activism; the regendering of governance associated with the turn to notions of partnership and participation; and the appropriation of forms of 'knowledge work' that valorized experience and access. In highlighting multiplicity, however, I do not want to suggest that all projects carried equal weight, nor that each was a site in which neoliberal appropriations and erasures was successful. Rather, (dynamic) neoliberal projects and (shifting) feminist politics encountered each other in differently constituted 'landscapes of antagonism'. To explore the maps as dynamic landscapes of antagonism I want to draw on two analytical frameworks. The first is that of Raymond Williams, who, in contesting what he termed 'epochal' forms of analysis, argued that:

> We have certainly still to speak of the 'dominant; and the 'effective', and in these senses of the hegemonic. But we find that we also have to speak, and indeed with further differentiation of each, of the 'residual' and the 'emergent',

> which in any real process, and at any moment in the process, are significant both in themselves and in what they reveal about the character of the 'dominant' (Williams. 1977: 121-2).

Feminism, I want to suggest, was the source of emergent forms of politics and practice which in turn opened up what I term 'prefigurative pathways'. Some such pathways were articulated into would-be hegemonic forms of rule to become a new 'dominant' formation. But in the process neoliberalism itself had to adapt and flex to take account of particular strands of feminism: its claims and demands, and the cultural and politics shifts it had generated. And, as Clarke and Newman (1997), Gilroy (1992, 2004), Hall et al (1978), Weeks (2009), and others show, neoliberalism also encountered other antagonisms generated through the politics of race, class, colonialism, and LGBT struggles, each of which were not containable within the confines of an exclusively British reading of history, nor support narratives of the wholesale erasure of struggle and dissent. Such struggles were often configured with traces of 'residual' formations that continued as effective forces into the present in ways that disrupt readings of 'epochal' change.

This form of analysis problematises concepts of 'after' and 'post' neoliberalism referred to in the Introduction. But the argument I want to develop here is rather different. I want to propose that new orderings of the 'dominant' were most likely to emerge in conditions where counter projects and movements formed a 'perverse alignment' with neo-liberal logics. This concept is inspired by the work of the Brazilian scholar Evelina Dagnino who traced a 'perverse confluence' between the popular participatory project (represented in the success of struggles against the military dictatorship in Brazil) and the neo-liberal conception of a minimal state. The perversity is located in the fact that despite 'pointing in opposite and even antagonistic directions, both projects require an active, proactive civil society' (Dagnino, 2007: 335: see also Newman and Clarke, 2009: 139). This offers a different, but sympathetic, reading of the 'elective affinities' between feminism and neoliberalism referred to by Fraser. I want to use it here to suggest the significance of the different 'perversities' generated in the multiple spaces of power traced in the previous section.

The policy shifts traced in the first mapping suggest a 'perverse alignment' in which both capital and the state sought to mobilise women as reflexive, educated worker citizens as well as cheap and flexible labour. In the affluent west, the dynamics of policy reform privileged the former, using the possibilities of global migration or

outsourcing to the global south to secure access to cheap labour. This mobilisation is a critical point of alignment with liberal feminist claims for economic and political independence. Emergent forces in that period prefigured the phenomena of gender mainstreaming, together with the (partial and conditional) recognition of issues of gender, race and sexuality in public policy, the professions and organisational practice. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s these emergent forces helped reconfigure the dominant orthodoxies of policy, management and business, such that 'diversity' was ideologically and discursively valorised as a source of innovation and a drive to enhanced 'performance'. This can be read as a form of neoliberal 'flexing' to take account of unresolved contradictions, but the reframing of diversity and equality around notions of individualism and choice can be viewed as attempts to smooth increasingly problematic antagonisms. In the process the political dimensions of feminist and other claims became residual; but they did not disappear. They continued as effective forces, persisting precisely because neoliberalism had not flexed sufficiently, had not erased the possibility of a feminist politics. Indeed just as neoliberalism 'stole' some of the discursive repertoires of feminism and other struggles, so activists sought to appropriate neoliberal repertoires (for example those audit and investment). Politics continued through alternative vocabularies of action (LGTB rather than gay, human rights rather than recognition, migration and asylum rather than race). But older vocabularies that had been the focus of cooption – such as equality and fairness - remained as effective forces into the present; indeed they came back into prominence as institutions such as the Fawcett Society and Women's Budget Group contested the UK budget cuts of 2010. The residual, perhaps, can bite back.

Many of the 'modernising' projects evident in the second mapping can also be read as points of potential perverse alignment between feminist claims and capitalist logics. Both feminism and neoliberalism privilege reflexive, flexible forms of subjectivity and 'empowered', information rich actors. This produced what appears to be a new dominant formation characterised by post-fordist organisational forms, 'soft' management skills, person-centred leadership and high levels of investment in the training and development of workforces. But this dominant formation generated new spaces that women could take up: as project workers, consultants, entrepreneurs, trainers, partners and leaders, many of whom levered or bent the dominant in ways that took account of very different projects. Post-fordism also opened up space for the reframing of equality. The bureaucratic systems through which equal opportunities had become inscribed became threatened as bureaucracy itself

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became discredited. But this very process of de-bureaucratisation created new spaces of power in which activists could 'bend' the new logics, taking equality rationales into service provision by resignifying 'quality', inscribing equality into audit and performance management measures, linking 'diversity' to the expansion of participative technologies and so on (Breitenbach et al, 2002). At the same time bureaucracy, rather than being eradicated in the neoliberal search for mobile and flexible ways of organizing, was supplanted by new global imperatives of 'good governance'. These became the focus of contestation (what was to be included), inscription (of feminist and other claims, especially those of 'presence'), and indeed expansion (to accommodate new social justice claims- claims that expanded feminist politics beyond the limits of the nation state).

This analysis has offered a way of reframing narratives of the decline or erasure of feminism through its inscription in policy and in organisational systems. It points to the multiple ways in which feminist and neoliberal projects encounter each other and to the contradictions – for both feminism and neoliberalism – that result. It shows how feminism, as well as neoliberalism, has the capacity to adapt and flex. But in neoliberal times, as Dagnino argued, politics becomes both more difficult and potentially dangerous: there is greater likelihood that ones very words will be stolen, that the language through which politics was conducted will be appropriated, potentially leaving political movements 'lost for words'. Indeed one of the participants in the research spoke angrily about how 'New Labour have stolen our language', while another – a woman who had been promoting active citizenship through women's empowerment projects - spoke of her shock when prime minister Cameron began using the same language, and her feelings at how here words were coming back and 'biting me on the bum'. (Newman, forthcoming a). I do not, then, want to propose an optimistic image of feminist agency in place of the pessimistic image of neoliberal triumph, especially in the current climate of austerity politics and state retrenchment. But I do want to highlight the importance of readings of change that allow for continued points of conflict, disruption and antagonism. The narrative of 'mainstreaming' offers a way of understanding dominant trends and tendencies, but overlooks both 'residual' and 'emergent' forms. It overlooks the continued existence of strong feminist institutions and orientations formed in an earlier political-cultural moment that are still effective in the present - and which can continue to 'speak to power' or to lever open cracks and spaces within the dominant. It also overlooks emergent ways of reframing feminist struggle to address issues that were on the margins of older feminist campaigns – on care work, migration, environmental

degredation, global social justice. The study thus challenges narratives of feminist complicity with neoliberalism, showing how both are multiple formations that became aligned in particular ways in particular places at particular political-cultural moments. Mapping these as temporary and conditional alignments in landscapes of antagonism that are always in motion does not foreclose the possibility of politics.

Feminist futures?

In pointing to the significance of multiplicity and specificity I do not want to propose an optimistic picture that fails to recognise the strength of the dominant, especially in the current climate of austerity politics and state retrenchment. But I do want to highlight the importance of forms of analysis amd storytelling that do not erase the possibility of politics. I want here to trace three strands of such an approach. The first addresses questions of *temporality*. The paper has challenged evolutionary framings of feminism (whether of progress or loss) and has attempted to puncture narrative accounts of the roll out of neoliberalism as a singular force folding feminism and other movements into a new, undifferentiated hegemonic form. I situated the analysis in what I considered to be conjunctural readings that draw attention to how (multiple) forces and possibilities are (unevenly and incompletely) combined in struggles for power and consent. It is the contradictions inherent in such struggles which both open out spaces of power but which also produce their temporal and spatial specificity. The accounts of the lives of the women involved in the research, then, shows something of the ways in which they lived out the contradictions, uncertainties and personal dilemmas through different forms of collective practice. By focusing on the situated agency of participants in different places and moments, we can see ambiguities in neoliberal technologies and practices of rule.

However narratives of change which emphasise ambiguity, while offering richer forms of theory, may not foster *political action*. This takes me to the second strand of my approach. Rather than simply celebrating agency, it is important to ask in what conditions do people come to politics, how that politics is enacted, and how is it sustained through forms of collective belonging and alliances across difference. The research illustrates some of the different formations that drew individuals and groups to become 'political' but also the different meanings and sites of politics itself. These meanings shifted over time but did not displace each other in the kind of evolutionary framing critiqued earlier in this paper. Rather, they were overlaid on each other in complex entanglements of emergent, residual and dominant forms of politics.

Younger activists may not perform politics in the same way as earlier generations (Redfern and Aune, 2010) but are busy creating alternatives, contesting the terrain of the political, opening up new pathways, and engaging in projects of institutional and cultural change. But while considerable attention has been paid recently to the new enactments of politics in the Occupy Movement, Slut Walks, and in the multiple Feminista projects (Banyard, 2010) not all of this is new; the interviews with younger participants in the research suggest complex alignments of the feminisms of older and younger women. Many of those involved in the social policy work described earlier are attempting to reassert equality agendas that are now threatened (Fawcett Society 2011). And emergent attachments – to environmental activism, migration, human rights, antipoverty, and to national and global struggles against oppression – speak to earlier movements in complex ways (as did the feminisms of the 1970s and 1980s to the multiple political movements of those periods).

Issues of temporality and politics are, of course, entangled, and cannot be encompassed in narratives of the fate of a series of distinct and separate movements. Questions about the borders between the feminisms of different politico-cultural moments have to be considered alongside questions of the relationship between gay liberation, LGTB and 'queer' struggles, between a politics of 'race' and a politics shaped by notions of intersectionality, and of the appearance and disappearance of 'class' as a mobilizing concept. These are all currently the focus of important forms of intergenerational border work. Such work confronts a series of myths (for example younger women viewing older feminists as liberal and compromised, or older women viewing younger activists as consumerist and pleasure seeking, ready to sacrifice the gains made by those that came before). These intergenerational myths reconfigure narratives of 'inside' and 'outside' in uncomfortable ways, and inform wider narratives of the fate of feminism and other forms of activism in neo-liberal times.

The third strand of the approach is that of *gendered labour*. I want to distinguish my analysis from general accounts of the gendered division of labour articulated around the relationship between production and reproduction in broad historical periods. My concern has been with the anlaysis of more specific conjunctural alignments in which changing conditions of work (paid and unpaid, concerned with production and reproduction) bring about particular gendered possibilities of agency. Such agency, I suggest is inflected through particular political/cultural resources: in the context of this paper principally those of second wave feminism, but also of the legacies of the

New Left and the rise of antiracist struggles and LGBT movements. My focus has been on the forms of labour at stake as women took activist commitments into their working lives and managed the contradictions between their politics and the governing and organizational rationalities they encountered. Their work can, in part, be understood through feminist accounts of the rise of work-centred identities and cultures which require high levels of emotional resilience and affective labour (Gregg, 2011). Such work has to negotiate the blurring of boundaries between work and non-work, home and office. My study adds a further layer to these negotiations, drawing attention to the labour at stake as 'politics' and 'work' are brought into uneasy alignment. Such labour, I want to suggest, requires considerable self-work to manage the tensions and dilemmas at stake, and can be analysed in part through notions of emotion and affect (Newman, forthcoming b). But the emotion work and self work at stake is centred not on the service relationship but on the reconciliation of identity conflicts and dilemmas. It can fruitfully conceptualized as *'border work'* – a concept which emerged from the interview transcripts, which were peppered with spatial metaphors (being an 'outsider', being 'close to the ground', being 'out there', 'on the other side', being 'Inside-outside', 'meeting in the middle', 'shouting from the sidelines', 'working on the edge', being 'marginal', being 'in and against'). Border work draws heavily on women's capacity to contribute relational skills, to translate between different rationalities, to broker across lines of difference, and to attempt to resolve contradictions (cf Larner and Craig, 2005 on 'strategic brokers'). Straddling borders and working on edges brings distinctive satisfactions and can be highly rewarding, but also brings discomforts and dilemmas, as well as career uncertainty and bulemic patterns of work (Gill and Pratt, 2008).

Many of those I interviewed brought self conscious awareness of the dilemmas and contradictions they negotiated. One spoke about the problems of using current notions of the Big Society to lever resources for local projects that might help met the needs of those reliant on the resources of the retreating welfare state. In deploying the discourse, might she be complicit with a government she despised? And in helping to alleviate the effect of cuts, was she smoothing the way for further state retrenchment? Another participant spoke of the tensions she felt about defending the public sector in the present having been a staunch critic of its ways of operating in the past:

> Being a socialist feminist I think the state has a role, the state has a role in distribution. But this leads you to defend the indefensible. And I wonder – whether public services have contributed to alienation, whether I should have

been more supportive of co-ops, more sympathetic to some of the new hybrid forms of organising. The paradox is – when we said we didn't want the welfare state, or criticized council housing, we didn't mean they should be taken away.

This points to an emergent perverse alignment between the feminist critiques of state practice in the past and current governmental projects of cutting public services and state welfare. It renders problematic a politics of simply calling for the restoration of the state in its previous form. In Dagnino's terms, this makes politics more difficult and dangerous. But it does not erase the possibility of politics: indeed the participant cited here went on to recount how she was taking up some of the current UK policy discourses as a way of making new interventions. However a third, younger participant commented

I think the way that British society is developing in light of the cuts and everything that's happening, it's really, really worrying and I just really kind of despair about what this country is going to look like, and the increasing divide between rich and poor. And I worry about where I position myself in that - how to go on trying to work in a political kind of way.

For this participant and many others the conditions of paid work are becoming more precarious and the risks are higher. At the same time cuts in public and welfare services are intensifying the time pressures on women, making it more difficult to reconcile care work, paid employment, casual work, study, voluntary or charitable contributions and political activity. The politics of austerity (Clarke and Newman, forthcoming) offers an inhospitable climate for progressive feminist projects. Not only have the material conditions of women's paid work worsened, there are increasing pressures on women's informal labour generated by the shrinking of the state, public sector cuts and ideologies promoting active, responsible citizenship. The spaces of power with which I have been concerned are shrinking, the borders tightening and material constraints coupled with more coercive governance regimes make it more difficult for activists to find the time or resources for creative political work. In challenging some of the dominant narratives of the erasure of feminism in the roll out of neoliberalism, then, I do not want to offer an overly optimistic image of feminist futures. But the analysis raises questions about how sectoral, organizational and public/private borders are likely to be re-configured in the economic and governmental shifts to come, and what new spaces of power will be opened up as a result.

Conclusion

What has been the value of this analysis for readings of the present political-cultural moment? In the Introduction I set out the theoretical and political goals of this paper. Theoretically, it has challenged a conception of both Feminism and Neoliberalism as singular entities that can be aligned – stitched together - in an overarching and epochal account of the present. Li (2007) argues that most of the political work of neoliberalism involves practices of de- and re-articulation of existing elements into new configurations, assemblages or constellations. I have found this to be a productive framework for understanding how activist struggles and neoliberal projects encounter each other. Rather than the former being erased, they are *selectively* appropriated into mobile configurations or assemblages that are always incomplete. Each 'mapping' generated from the research shows the coexistence of multiple neo-liberal rationalities and intersecting activist projects, and suggests ways in which the antagonisms are worked, contained or reconfigured through gendered labour. Each also illuminates the current political moment through an understanding of the changes that have taken place over the previous 60 years. The spaces of power that participants in the research generated and occupied, then, were not 'spaces of exception' in a field of power dominated by neoliberalism; they were formed in a *dynamic* field marked by contradictions, strains, antagonisms and ambivalences.

Politically, the term 'spaces of power' opens up the possibility of contingent and temporary forms of intervention through which activist projects can be pursued. The research on which this paper draws shows how women have generated such spaces by working the contradictions inherent in neoliberal projects, and have used them to lever resources and other forms of power in order to pursue activist goals. They have worked with multiple understandings of feminism, and its articulation with other axes of struggle. Their successes may be partial or temporary, but their work attests to the importance of finding alternatives to Ferguson's politics of 'negation and disdain' in which narratives of neoliberal incorporation foreclose the possibility of political agency. As younger women generate new ways of performing feminist politics there is a need for better narratives of the fate of those who came before.

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