

# The resonance of moderate feminism and the gendered relations of austerity

Budgeon, Shelley

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## **The Resonance of Moderate Feminism and the Gendered Relations of Austerity**

### **ABSTRACT:**

During the tenure of the UK Conservative-led coalition government (2010-15) austerity policy was rolled out in response to the global financial crisis of 2007-08. Principles of Cultural Political Economy (Jessop 2004) are applied in a discourse analysis of mainstream newspaper representations of austerity that appeared throughout this period. Three key questions are posed: 1) How is gender drawn upon to render austerity intelligible? 2) How do these discursive constructions contribute to the reproduction of particular ideas regarding contemporary gender relations? 3) What do the gendered austerity discourses analysed here reveal about the institutionalisation of particular forms of feminism, most notably liberal feminism which some feminists argue has become the dominant approach to gender oppression? A critical gender discourse which emphasised equality alongside constructions of gender that reproduce problematic assumptions was found. Made meaningful in this way, austerity, as a strategy for restoring pre-crash social arrangements, also restored particular aspects of gender relations. This is theorised as the product of the successful institutionalisation of a hegemonic, moderate liberal feminism prior to the financial crash. The findings contribute to debates within feminist scholarship about the dynamics of gender inclusion and extend our understanding of the associated implications for feminist critique.

The contemporary status of feminism is the subject of a long and well-rehearsed debate that has emerged with the ascendancy of a 'postfeminist gender order' [1] (Budgeon, 2011; Dean, 2010). This context is characterised by the belief that feminist agendas, to a large extent, have been institutionalised. As a consequence, the claim that the oppositional, political practice of feminism remains an ongoing concern is placed into doubt (McRobbie, 2009). The socio-economic conditions forged in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008 provide an important context for assessing the status of gender equality and the nature of feminist politics in the UK. During this time the question of who had caused the crash, and who would ultimately bear the costs, were matters of intense contestation, however, it has been argued that in the cycle of events following the initial crash the crisis was discursively reconstructed from being a crisis of private finance to one concerned with fiscal spending. This signalled that a 'return to business as usual' strategy had prevailed over responses that called for a comprehensive overhaul of economic and political systems (Annesley and Scheele, 2011; Hall, 2011; Jessop, 2012). Once gaining power in May 2010 the Conservative-led Coalition Government adopted austerity policy as their strategic response to managing post-crash conditions.

Although rolled out as an economic policy, the significance of austerity stretched beyond this specific meaning ‘into environmental, anti-consumerist, and feminist politics, into the terrain of media, consumer, and popular culture, into people’s everyday lives’ (Bramall, 2013:1). Therefore, in the analysis undertaken here ‘austerity’ also references the cultural politics that emerged around the implementation of a government policy designed to address the effects of what had been discursively constructed as a fiscal spending crisis. In this regard, austerity functioned more widely as an ideological tool for managing social order. The institution of this particular response to the financial crisis provided a hegemonic, although not universally accepted, definition of the situation and shaped a wider set of social conditions. This research is concerned with the features of that wider set of conditions particularly as these impacted upon the social reproduction of gender relations. Extensive feminist research has shown that the adoption of austerity as the ‘necessary’ approach to the financial crisis had significant gendered implications due the fundamentally gendered nature of the spheres of finance, production and reproduction (Annesley and Scheele, 2011; Bargawi et. al. 2017; Brah et. al. 2015; Hozic and True, 2016; Karamessini and Rubery, 2014; Pearson and Elson, 2015). Austerity created a discursive field in which political and socio-economic structures interacted with cultural constructions of gender (Allen et. al. 2015; Bramall, 2013) and it is this gendered aspect of austerity that is of interest in this study. Newspaper stories that reported on austerity in the UK during the parliament of the Conservative-led coalition government (2010-2015) were sampled for articles in which gender featured as an aspect of the story. These articles are discursively analysed in order to understand the role played by gender in making austerity, both the policy and associated conditions created by the policy, intelligible. Three primary questions are posed in this discourse analysis and interpreted using the principles of cultural political economy (Jessop, 2010). Firstly, how is gender drawn upon in newspaper accounts published during the coalition government to make austerity

intelligible? Secondly, how do these discursive constructions contribute to the reproduction of particular ideas regarding contemporary gender relations? Finally, what do these gendered austerity discourses reveal about the institutionalisation of particular forms of feminism, most notably liberal feminism which some feminists argue has become the dominant approach to gender oppression and is now thriving as ‘feminism is walking the halls of corporate and state power’ (Prugl, 2015:614).

### **Feminism Mainstreamed**

Assessments of western feminism demonstrate that far from homogeneity in approaches to the problem of gender oppression, feminism has long exhibited a range of different, and often, conflicting perspectives (Coole, 2000). Currently there are disagreements about whether increased inclusion of feminism in mainstream culture and institutions facilitates an equality agenda or whether mainstreamed engagement of this type unintentionally dilutes the force of feminist politics (Baachi and Eveline, 2004; Griffin, 2015; Prugl, 2011; Squires, 2007). Gender equality ‘is increasingly framed as central to the realization of both modernization and economic efficiency and its achievement presented as a key to good governance. Both rights-based and utility-based arguments have converged to place equality high on the agenda of liberal states and organizations’ (Squires, 2007:1). Through institutionalisation, feminism has gained increased access to state machinery and policy-making processes and a greater range of political opportunities to advance gender equality goals have been created. Gender equality architecture such as women’s policy agencies enables feminism to operate from within key institutions to strategically alter policy and deliver more equitable practices (Walby, 2011: 53). Greater inclusion can, however, significantly shape how feminism functions, for example, in cases where feminist principles are deployed to facilitate the promotion of existing organisational agendas such as increased

economic efficiency or more effective decision making on corporate boards (Eisenstein, 2009, 2017; Prugl, 2012; Roberts, 2015; Rottenberg 2013).

Some feminists argue that the inclusion of feminism and the successful mainstreaming of gender equality into key institutions has inadvertently led to the promotion of an accommodating feminism that is moderate [2] in its demands and, therefore, more amenable to maintaining, rather than challenging, neoliberal norms (Baachi and Eveline, 2004; Evans, 2015; Squires 2007; Prugl, 2011). As a consequence only those expressions of feminism that are consistent with wider social and political agendas profit from institutionalisation (Funk, 2013). Moderate feminism is characterised by a flexibility that enables its co-optation particularly within a climate of postfeminism where claims regarding continued gender oppression are often met with scepticism (Dean, 2010; McRobbie, 2009). According to this position, gender can be acknowledged as relevant to contemporary social relations on the condition that feminism, in the form of a pervasive critique of those relations, is dismissed as outdated. For many, this dynamic contributes to a weakening of the oppositional potential of feminist practice despite the institutionalisation of key feminist principles such as ‘equality’ (Lewis, et. al., 2017; McRobbie, 2009).

Feminist strategies have in some instances become ‘more complicit in the pursuit of neo-liberal agendas’ than is comfortable to admit (Squires, 2007:8). The acceptance of select precepts of second-wave feminism and the ‘success’ of gender equality policy, are at least partly attributable to their compatibility with the interests of capital rather than a commitment to a social justice agenda per se (Eisenstein, 2005, 2009, 2017). Fraser (2013) argues the feminist critique of capitalism’s androcentrism increasingly serves to legitimate a new mode of capital accumulation, heavily dependent on women’s waged labour, while in the face of problems such as declining fertility Repo (2015) contends gender equality work/life balance policy has been deployed ‘as a new modality for the re-optimization of population and

productivity'. Feminist ideals such as self-empowerment and choice have transmuted into an instrumental language that favours empowerment as autonomy in the market (Rottenberg, 2013; Schild, 2015: 14) while 'neoliberalism's intensification of economic inequality is accompanied by discourses that derogate and pathologize complaints against inequality' creating an environment in which victims are blamed for their failures (Stringer, 2014:8). Austerity policy for many feminist critics has signified an 'intensification of previous neoliberal policies, including cutting down welfare services and public sector jobs' (Elomäki and Kantola, 2018:1).

Debates about gender inclusion illustrate a fundamental characteristic of a postfeminist gender regime within which this research is located: 'feminism faces challenges as a result of its successes' (Walby, 2011: 9). Feminist scholarship has yet to fully unpack the significance of the establishment of an institutional base for some forms of feminist discourse. By analysing widely circulating representations of austerity and the role of gender in making austerity intelligible this research contributes to our understanding of the dynamics of gender inclusion at a time when awareness of social inequality was heightened by the economic crisis.

### **From Crisis to Gendered Austerity**

The global financial crisis of 2008 which led to the adoption of austerity in the UK has been narrated as a chain of events set off by the bursting of a housing bubble in the US in 2007, followed by the fall of Lehman brothers in 2008 and a near collapse of the global financial system which subsequently produced a banking crisis, a credit crunch and deleveraging of households resulting in global financial contraction. These factors were accompanied by a financial bail-out of banks by the state, a fall in tax revenues and rises in unemployment benefit expenditure as result of the recession, and the implementation of fiscal stimulus plans which further increased public deficits (Karamessini, 2014). The financialization of

economies leading up to these events involved ‘material processes and structures that are crucially interdependent on the systems of meanings and beliefs which support (or contest) them’ (Happer, 2017:1). Analyses of media discourse uncover such systems of meaning which, in an environment of heightened and complex uncertainty, allowed particular responses to global financial events of 2007-08 to ‘make sense’. In the period leading up to and following the crash ‘increased interest in the economy and financial reporting was paralleled by increased audience exposure to information in the media on the subject’ (Happer, 2017:8). For the general public, the reporting of the crisis played a significant role in building an understanding of the causes of the crisis and the justification for particular responses (Clarke and Newman, 2010).

This process of meaning making was not straightforward. As Poovey observes (2012: 140), ‘even though pundits talked about the “financial crisis” virtually non-stop for the two interminable years when stock markets across the globe seemed to fall everyday...no one seemed able to give a precise definition of what a financial crisis is’. Furthermore, the crisis exhibited a remarkable degree of ‘shape-changing’ until the ‘dominant image of its locus’ shifted away from the financial services industry to public spending and government debt (Clarke and Newman, 2012:300). Media narratives played an influential role in constructing and communicating interpretations of the crisis. Research on media reporting reveals initial representations of the crisis often focused on the instability of the worldwide global financial system but by late 2008 and in the period leading up to the 2010 election ‘the media effectively portrayed Britain as suffering an indigenously generated fiscal crisis, rather than being caught up in the global financial turmoil’ (Pirie, 2012:353). Berry (2016a, 2016b) similarly concludes that austerity swiftly emerged in the UK press as the dominant narrative causing attention to move away from the role of the private finance sector in causing the economic recession. This transmutation was facilitated by an ideological reworking of an

economic problem: ‘how to “rescue” the banks and restore market stability’ to one that is political: ‘how to allocate blame and responsibility for the crisis’ (Clarke and Newman, 2012:300). Happer (2016:10) concludes the media were ‘instrumental in sustaining the material culture of financialisation’ by marginalising the ‘critical analysis required to take a different path in response to it’.

The financial crisis threatened to radically disrupt the normal functioning and reproduction of the social order, therefore, securing a meaning which could define appropriate action was of central importance. Activities through which meanings are generated in response to indeterminacy are highly significant. Semiotic practices allow social action to continue in an orderly and structured way by either reproducing the existing way of doing things or, by affecting a change in direction. Cultural political economy can be used to illuminate the discursive and material factors which jointly order, reproduce and transform capitalist social formations (Jessop, 2004). The processes which contribute to the re-establishment of order when crises create acute uncertainty are of particular interest. From this perspective culture and meaning-making practices are foundational to the social world. Social actors do not ‘encounter the world as pre-interpreted once-and-for-all but engage with and reflect on it in order to make some sense of it’ (Jessop, 2010:338). Social action, therefore, depends upon reducing the complexities of the world so that actors may ‘go on’ within it as active participants (Jessop, 2012:24). Acts of reduction are ‘never wholly innocent: in construing the world, these discourses frame lived experience, limit perceived course of action, and shape forms of social contestation, alliance building and domination’ (Jessop, 2012:24). However, social practices and relations are not reducible to semiotic practices. Emergent, non-discursive features of social structure shape and constrain the production of meaning such that the discursive and material are interdependent features of any social phenomenon [3]. Selection of a particular meaning is furthered by discursive factors such as the degree to



which an interpretation resonates with other institutionalised discourses, and secondly the extent to which an interpretation resonates with material factors such as structurally entrenched power relations. Jessop argues, 'Other things being equal, more resonant interpretations will get selected as the basis for action, whether this takes the form of restoration, piecemeal reform or more radical innovation' (Jessop, 2012:27). Once selected an interpretation may guide action to the extent that it is no longer recognised as an interpretation, but accepted as an unquestioned reality that is retained until a point in time when conditions radically alter and new interpretations are adopted.

The cycle of variation, selection, and retention are illustrated by the extraordinary events associated with the failure of the global financial system and the crash of 2008 (Jessop, 2010). The crisis tendencies of the economic system were intensified to the extent that established forms of management could no longer be relied upon. This created scope for competing interpretations to confer meaning on the crisis and guide action. Crises may be of two different orders (Jessop, 2012:25). A 'crisis in' is perceived as a routine feature of a system and a temporary occurrence that requires restoration of basic features of dominant social arrangements. This is achieved through internal adjustments and the management of potentially destabilising effects. A 'crisis of', which is less commonplace, occurs when former regularities in norms, established authorities, and customary practices are thrown into doubt creating 'profound cognitive and strategic disorientation' and a 'proliferation in interpretations and proposed solutions' (Jessop, 2010: 346). The questioning of formally dominant ways of understanding the social order creates an opening for the emergence of different interpretations which, if selected and taken up, may potentially redirect the course of events away from resuming 'business as usual' (Jessop, 2012:25). The establishment of austerity policy quelled alternative narratives while normalising a return to the pre-crash status quo. The legitimacy of this response depended upon accepting the crisis could be

resolved internally by managing fiscal spending and restoring key features of preceding social arrangements.

CPE highlights the significance of activities that generate meaning in response to indeterminacy. In the UK newspaper stories drew upon existing belief systems and cultural narratives when reporting on the crisis and its aftermath. In so doing, a variety of cultural constructions of gender were circulated. Analysing the gendered construction of austerity policy is not concerned with the question of whether media stories included gender relations as one of the issues relevant to the crisis. Rather, more fundamentally, analysis centres upon the constitutive power of those constructions in structuring social relations. Gender is not an attribute of individuals, but an organizing principle of the social order that is intertwined within and across representational, interactional and social structural practices. When an activity is understood as ‘gendered’ its enactment reveals normative expectations regarding ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness’. These expectations arise in a relationship of power where male attributes have historically been privileged over those associated with the feminine (Eveline and Bacchi, 2005, Sunderland, 2004). Gender discourse is ‘socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people’ while also being conditioned by these (see discussion in Wodak and Meyer, 2016:6).

The analysis undertaken here focuses on whether men and women were positioned within constructions of austerity through a gendered discourse where discourses ‘represent and (re)constitute, maintain, and contest gendered social practices’ (Litosseliti, 2006:58). Media reporting on austerity functioned to reduce complexity surrounding the economic crisis by delineating possible interpretations of social conditions which could then provide guidance on appropriate courses of action. Dominant discourses in circulation had the power to naturalise particular accounts of the social world and, in so doing, sustain specific gendered

social conditions and practices. It was a critical moment for the reproduction of and/or reconstitution of gender relations and the (de)institutionalisation of feminist agendas (MacLeavy, 2011). Understanding these issues involves applying a framework informed by CPE in an assessment of how gender was implicated in rendering austerity policy and associated social conditions meaningful. Moreover, as austerity policy represented a 'return to business as usual' (Jessop, 2012) the gendered constructions of austerity have significance for the practice of feminist politics.

#### **Methodology [4]**

Discursive methods lend insight into the gendered nature of social conditions i.e. that the meanings associated with austerity as a response to the crisis 'have something to do with gender' (Sunderland, 2004:21). To understand the gendering of austerity this research aimed to generate data that demonstrated what could be said about the relationship between gender and austerity and the structure of this expression (Keller, 2013:71). Materialisations of public gender discourse in the media are dialectically related to wider sets of social relations and practices. Analysing the nature of gender discourse which circulated in media reports on austerity, therefore, is central to understanding the social reproduction and/or transformation of gender relations.

The analysis covers 2010-2015 during which the Conservative-led coalition governed the UK and managed post-crash conditions by adopting the policy of austerity. This policy inaugurated a socio-historical period in which the significance and meaning of austerity entered into everyday life. The terms 'gender', 'austerity', 'women' were used in a search of the NEXIS database for articles appearing in mainstream national newspapers during the period which fell between two UK national elections: May 5, 2010-May 7, 2015. The sample included a total of 109 articles (see table 1). The analysis was undertaken in a series of interpretive, conceptual and analytical phases. Firstly, articles in the sample were reviewed in

order to identify individual utterances or references to gender issues. This included both the headlines and the content of the articles as both communicate meaning to the reader. These instances were conceptualised as partial elements of broader gender discourse circulating in the UK before and during the period of crisis. In a second phase, a set of preliminary open codes were developed. These codes summarised key features of the data and began to build up a systematic picture of the gender discourse which was materialising across the sample. Abductive reasoning was used to interpret these codes which were then collated into thematic categories by analysing their interrelationships within and across individual articles. The themes presented here, therefore, represent a set of meaningful and coherent patterns that emerged from the data set. These various patterns, taken collectively, reveal the content of a wider gender discourse situated within the social stock of shared knowledge.

The analysis was conducted in accordance with the precepts of critical discourse analysis (see discussion in Jäger and Maier, 2016:119). The aim was to expose the kinds of evaluations of austerity inherent in the gendered discourse; to reveal contradictions within and between various discourses; to highlight the limits of what can be said, done, and shown, and the means by which the dominant discourse makes particular claims and actions seem reasonable and beyond question [5]. Cultural Political Economy, as a particular theory of discourse, is utilised in the discussion to understand these questions.

**Table 1 Sample Characteristics**

<b>Newspaper<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Political Orientation</b>	<b>Frequency of articles (% of sample)</b>
The Guardian	Left	31%
The Times	Centre Right	17%
The Independent	Centre Left	13%

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<sup>1</sup> The newspapers in the sample are primarily ‘broadsheets’, however, The Daily Mail, The Mirror, The Morning Star and The Express are ‘tabloids’.

The Telegraph	Right	12%
The Daily Mail	Right	8%
The Observer	Left	7%
Morning Star	Left	7%
The Mirror	Left	4%
The Express	Right	1%

### **Findings: Gendered Austerity**

#### *Equality is a duty*

Many stories considered the general state of social equality and assessed measures the government could take in order to ensure social justice would not be compromised by responses to the crisis. Recurrent references were made to the formal institutionalisation of equality through measures such as the UK Equality Act which was passed in April 2010 by the previous Labour government and came into effect in October 2010 under the new coalition government. This law consolidated existing legislation and extended protection in some areas. In the very early days of the coalition the coalition government's emergency budget was challenged because a gender impact assessment had not been properly conducted as required by the Gender Equality Duty (Stephenson, 2016). Critical accounts of the coalition government's failure to comply with the Duty were reported in stories such as the one printed in *The Independent*, August 3, 2010, with the headline 'Budgets should have a published gender-impact assessment' (Himmelweit, 2010).

The coalition government is often portrayed as resistant to fulfilling its obligations to measures that had been agreed prior to the crash. For example, provisions were made in the new Equality Act (2010) for mandatory gender pay reporting, however, this element, along with others, was not implemented by the coalition government when the Act came into force

in October 2010. Similarly, a story in *The Guardian* noted the coalition government, when designing policy, would not enact the duty requiring public bodies to take socioeconomic status into account and assess potential harmful impacts of policy on particular groups. Theresa May, Home Secretary, is reported to have ‘dismissed the legislation as "ridiculous"' and is quoted as saying, "'They thought they could make people's lives better by simply passing a law saying that they should be made better," she said. "That is why I am announcing today that we are scrapping Harman's law for good"' (Gentleman, 2010). This speech is situated within a broader shift in the language used by the government when referring to social inequality and appropriate strategies for achieving it. In some cases, reports suggested this shift represented a strategic move designed to manage the perceived impact of austerity on disadvantaged groups.

May's speech set a very different tone for the government's approach to tackling inequalities, moving away from regulation and towards encouraging organisations to choose to improve their record. She said she favoured a greater focus on "fairness" rather than "equality", arguing that many people felt alienated by the equality agenda. This nuanced shift is likely to make equality campaigners uneasy, on the grounds that "fairness" is a much vaguer and less legally enforceable concept than equality (Gentleman, 2010 *The Guardian*).

By 2011 the government conceded somewhat by deciding companies with 250 or more employees could opt in to carrying out equal-pay reviews and publish information relating to their gender pay gap. Despite this measure, the coalition government often received criticism for doing too little to address concerns about the impact of austerity on social equality. This was reflected in the reporting of findings from the Equality and Human Rights Commission's evaluation of the Treasury's 2010 Spending Review published in May 2012. The EHRC assessed whether the government had properly observed the legal requirements of the Public

Sector Duty and after reviewing nine policies the Commission concluded the Treasury had failed to consider, in a meaningful way, how policies would disproportionately impact upon vulnerable groups. Stories appeared in which the government was depicted as reluctant, and at times, averse to taking social equality seriously. With regards to amendments proposed to the Equality Act (2010) duties a headline declared, 'David Cameron promises to end 'bureaucratic nonsense' over equality. David Cameron has promised to end the "reams of bureaucratic nonsense" forcing civil servants to check every decision to see whether it is fair to women, ethnic minorities and disabled people' (Mason, 2012 *The Telegraph*).

#### *Austerity unfairly impacts women*

Throughout the period from which the sample is drawn the coalition government's economic policies are represented as having a disproportionate impact upon women. Various measures are cited to illustrate the material consequences for women's lives. For example, in the early days of the coalition's time in power, it was predicted that because women are heavily reliant on public services for jobs and child benefit they would bear the brunt of budget cuts. It is noted that this will have a 'savage impact on British women' stalling progress so far made on advancing gender equality (Asthana, 2010 *The Observer*). Later in 2015, just prior to the May general election stories appeared that identified women as hardest hit by welfare cuts.

There's no avoiding the facts: austerity has been gendered. In fact, 74% of the money cut by the coalition via changes to the benefits and tax system has come from women's pockets. Based on the evidence, the coalition has turned a blind eye to the explicitly gendered consequences of austerity. While welfare might be high on the political agenda, its impact on women is discussed far less. We have moved backwards on our path to equality (Oppenheim, 2015 *The Guardian*).

Recurrent references are made to how women, as primary users and employees of public services, are targeted by the cuts. In some stories this is used to critically counter the

language of fairness embodied in the Conservative party slogan, 'we're all in it together' - an expression frequently deployed to promote, legitimate and defend the government's economic policy [6]. In response to the suggestion that women have been hardest hit by public spending cuts, a spokeswoman for the Treasury is quoted in one article saying, 'The government has had to take tough decisions to cut the deficit and put the public finances back on a stable footing. We have taken difficult decisions in the fairest way possible, protecting services for the most vulnerable and focusing resources where they are most needed' (Allen, 2013 *The Guardian*). Throughout the period covered by this study, austerity was made meaningful through denunciations of the coalition's austerity policy and their failure to be more proactive in advancing gender equality.

#### *Cameron's 'woman problem'*

Many representations of gender relations during the tenure of the coalition government focused on the negative view women voters held towards David Cameron with his unpopularity attributed to a range of factors. One headline declared: 'Can Cameron be made to understand what women want?' (Hill, 2012 *The Guardian*). This personalisation of indifference to the gendered impact of policies is striking with Cameron's unpopularity symbolising a wider problem for the coalition. For example,

Mr Cameron's 'woman problem' rears its head again. The undercurrent of sexism (his "calm down, dear" Commons moment), the relative dearth of women ministers, the child benefit cuts: all are trotted out with monotonous regularity as reasons why the PM just can't woo women. Heck, he's even had to appoint a special adviser to come up with female-friendly policies, although some cynical hacks speculated that was simple spin to try and persuade women he cared (Newman, 2013 *The Telegraph*).

Stories depict the problem in terms of 'the female vote' which, it is suggested is under threat and being met with deliberate efforts to mitigate the material and symbolic impact of



austerity on women so that the ‘trust deficit’ might be addressed in time to win the next election. Various stories focus on tactics designed to tackle Cameron’s failure to appeal to female voters such as the appointment of a special gender advisor and a strategic reshuffling of the cabinet to bring more women into key roles. These techniques are often criticised and Cameron’s intent is characterised as superficial. It was reported in numerous stories that the Tories were being urged to pursue more ‘female-friendly policies’ ranging from help for women to set up their own businesses to reducing childcare costs. Cameron’s ‘woman problem’ is not restricted to the impact of austerity policy, although that is a central theme. It is also constructed as part of a systematic effort to modernise the Conservative party. For example, it is noted that while Cameron had supported A-list candidates, the national election in May 2010 returned a Tory party to a parliament of which only 16% were women. It is suggested this was a major missed opportunity and ‘owes much to Cameron's failure to lead on this’ (Ashley, 2011 *The Guardian*).

#### *Women’s presence*

This theme is defined by a critique of the lack of women participating in the higher echelons of political, social and economic decision making bodies in the UK. Key political institutions, in particular, are castigated for being male-dominated as in the characterisation of Westminster as a ‘macho culture’. In stories leading up to the general election of 2015, the increasing public visibility of female politicians which featured in campaigns reflected wider social speculation on whether more women in power would ensure the progression of women’s interests. This theme echoes the reporting of low numbers of women in the parliament which was identified as part of Cameron’s ‘woman problem’. It is claimed had more women been present in key decision-making positions before, during, and after the economic crash, the detrimental impact of cuts on women could have been mitigated. This is

exemplified by an article appearing under the headline 'Women will make numbers count in changing the face of Westminster' (Sherman, 2015 *The Times*).

Belinda Phipps, the [Fawcett] society's chairwoman, said the macho culture of the Commons was likely to change further as more women were elected but she hoped that they would also be able to influence policy. "Over the last five years the austerity programme has hit women the hardest, particularly in benefit cutbacks," Ms Phipps said. "This would not have happened if more women had been influencing policy. We would hope that with a growing proportion of female MPs, many more will make it to the front bench, the shadow front bench and into the Cabinet" (Sherman, 2015 *The Times*).

Stories about the 2015 general election signalled that women would be a key constituency of voters thus highlighting the significance of women's interests. Articles which drew upon a gendered critique of women's low presence in key institutions appeared alongside those stating the counter-argument that the presence of women does not ensure progressive politics, thereby, complicating the constructions of feminist politics that were in circulation. In several articles, the role of women in politics was treated with scepticism. Attention was drawn to the continuing male-dominated nature of political institutions regardless of women's presence.

This is a curious election campaign for a woman. On the one hand, there are more female political leaders playing a more prominent role than ever before...that is a lot of women getting an unusual amount of airtime to talk about politics. But women in politics is not the same as a campaign around women's issues. And of what might be called a women's campaign, there is almost no sign at all (Perkins, 2015 *The Guardian*).

In some stories the issue of women's participation in politics was approached in a much more critical fashion as, for instance where their inclusion in the Cabinet was presented as an instrumental and cynical ploy used by David Cameron, referred to as 'Desperate Dave', to win over women voters. This action is portrayed as a 'cosmetic remodelling of his male-millionaire pals' club, the Cabinet', with the promotion of 'flashy gals so close to the election' as a move that

...won't pull the wool over the eyes of women voters, hit hardest by heartless Tory austerity. The faces round the table in Number 10 may be different. The sex may be different. But the message is the same. More women sacked in the public services.

More job insecurity. More cuts in pay, benefits and pensions. These women Tories are just that. Tories, cut from the cloth of Thatcher's skirts (Routledge, 2014 *The Mirror*).

### *Disrupted Gender Norms*

Representations of post-crash conditions drew upon contradictory constructions of gender relations in which men and women were both represented as more disadvantaged than the other group. This theme has a number of interrelated dimensions that indicate a wider questioning of contemporary gender roles and ambivalence regarding their character. Within this context, austerity was constructed as a causal force in the restructuring of gender work/life settlements. In the first dimension, articles emphasised that in the early days of the recession concerns about its impact were male-oriented. In reference to 2008-09, for example, it was reported that men were most affected by an economy that was in decline due to job losses in manufacturing, the car industry and so forth. The term 'he-cession' was used to describe the gendered characteristics of the economic downturn. In June 2013 it was reported for example, 'Women have fared better at employment than men in the five years since the start of the recession, a report shows on Monday' (Peacock, 2013 *The Telegraph*) while in February 2014 a headline declared that 'Women at work in record numbers; Growth

in full-time Jobs narrows gender gap' and quotes John Philpott, director of the Jobs Economist:

...One of the interesting things about the female employment story has been that austerity was expected to hit them hardest, as two in three public sector workers are women. As it is, women either were hit disproportionately lightly or they have found it easier to move into the private sector (Aldrick and Coates, 2014 *The Times*).

The 'he-cession' discourse is further characterised by a concern regarding the position that men and women occupy as a result of the impact of austerity on employment. A destabilisation of masculinity often featured in these accounts.

Neither breadwinners nor losers: what role do young men play next? The graduate without a future: The end of the domestic patriarch is welcome - but like post-empire Britain, our men struggle with finding a new identity...At a policy level, this should include acknowledging that some of those in greatest need of support are those traditionally considered to be privileged... (Fogg, 2012 *The Guardian*).

Debates about the gendered impact of austerity continued over the five years of the coalition parliament with austerity identified as a key driver of gender norm reorganisation, whether for better or for worse.

In a second variation of this theme, some articles focused on women's increased contribution to household finances as male employment rates slowed – a situation conceptualised as a male breadwinner role reversal. For instance, one headline declared: 'More and more mums bring home the bacon; the number of mothers who are their family's main breadwinner has soared by more than 80 per cent in the past 15 years' (Merrick, 2013 *The Independent*).

Following a different angle, but still focusing on gender role reorganisation, other articles suggested that austerity policies had compromised women's ability to participate in paid work due to cuts in public services jobs and service provision. These were seen to have a net

effect of ‘pushing women back into the household’ and turning the equality ‘clock back’ (Moore, 2011 *Mail on Sunday*). Through welfare reforms and cuts to the public sector jobs market women ‘are being pushed back into the home as carers and we are addressed only as wives or mothers’ (ibid.). Other stories also focused on women’s employment but implied the cuts had driven women out of the domestic sphere and into employment within low paid, part-time, insecure jobs associated with a flexible and precarious workforce. In sum, these stories imply austerity significantly shaped gender norms producing a sense of uncertainty with regards to the nature of the disruption (see Boyer et. al., 2017a, 2017b).

### **The dominant discourse**

While texts are very rarely ‘pure’ (Jaworski and Coupland, 1999:9) the themes found here coalesce as components of a dominant public gender discourse which rendered austerity intelligible. The themes discussed here reveal what could be ‘said’ about gender relations during this time period in the context of re-establishing pre-crash social arrangements. These patterns broadly reflect the materialisation of a moderate, liberal feminist discourse – a finding consistent with current feminist scholarship which notes that while feminism is constituted by multiple forms moderate liberal feminism has become dominant across many Western contexts due to the compatibility of its demands with ‘robust capitalism’ (Funk, 2013:181). Three foundational assumptions of liberal feminism emerge across the findings. Firstly, the aim of feminism is to pursue equal treatment of men and women within social institutions placing emphasis on fairness and equality of opportunity. Secondly, gender is understood as an attribute of individuals and not of institutions. This leads to the proposition that equality can be achieved by the inclusion and integration of women into existing systems rather than requiring a radical overhaul of deep-seated social structures. Thirdly, ‘women’ and ‘men’ represent stable and coherent categories situated in a binary relation. The presumption of biological determinism and/or cultural essentialism underpinning this

framework leads to the belief that women share pre-given interests and that the numerical presence of women within political and economic institutions is crucial to advancing the unified interests of women (Kantola and Lombardo, 2017). These key elements of the discourse will be briefly unpacked.

### 1) Equality

Austerity was repeatedly constructed as an equality issue in these newspaper accounts. This manifest specifically as a concern about the material impact of austerity on women's lives with references to changes to the tax system, benefit cutbacks, public sector job losses, reductions to services used primarily by women, and reduced pay. The privileging of an equality discourse to interpret austerity signifies a high level of resonance of this ideal which may be attributable to its sufficient institutionalisation prior to the financial crisis. This discursive and material base contributed to equality sustaining a high level of currency throughout the coalition parliament. That it had been entrenched in concrete policies and practices prior to the financial crash is reflected in the references made in the accounts analysed here to pre-existing gender equality architecture such as the Gender Equality Duty; the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, and gender policy advisors. This indicates a gender equality discourse materially embedded in structures of governance which, at a minimum, provided a partial base that ultimately lent legitimacy to a critique of austerity as gendered.

### 2) Integration and inclusion

As noted a growing body of literature explores how elements of gender equality have become compatible with late capitalism (Funk, 2013; Prugl, 2011; Roberts, 2012; Rottenberg, 2013). The findings of this study are consistent with these arguments. In the articles analysed here the defence of equality was often framed in economic terms. A *Telegraph* article, for example, criticised David Cameron for not supporting the enforcement of a hiring quota for

women in senior corporate positions despite his earlier claim that the UK was failing to ‘exploit female talent’ which cost the economy £40billion (Pearson, 2012). Similarly, the lack of women sitting on the Bank of England’s Monetary Policy Committee was criticised in *The Times* on the basis that gender diversity would lead to better economic decision making (Hopkins, 2012). Despite sustained feminist critiques of neoliberalism ‘the business case for gender equality continues to hold ideological sway and continues to be growing in strength in the wake of the most recent global financial crisis’ (Roberts 2015:210). Following the global crisis governance institutions such as the World Economic Forum deployed arguments for the advancement of gender stating in their annual Global Gender Gap report they endorse ‘the view that gender equality is compatible with, and indeed enhances, market-led forms of economic growth’ (Griffin, 2015 64). The return to ‘business as usual’ represented by austerity policy both in the UK and elsewhere incorporates gender equality as a significant contributor to societal economic well-being.

### 3) Essentialism

Many of themes rely upon an essentialist positioning of men and women within austerity where each category represents an internally homogenous and undifferentiated grouping in possession of uniform interests. These representations are consistent with feminist scholarship that has demonstrated ‘how “crisis” has been reproduced, and governance enabled, by ideas, assumptions and values that depend...on the positioning of bodies in certain gendered ways...’ (Griffin, 2015: 55). Gendered representations of the crisis played a central role in (re)producing hegemonic gender difference by attributing gender characteristics to key features of the crisis. This is exemplified by suggestions that the crisis could be blamed on ‘macho’ institutional cultures and entrenched masculine norms such as competitiveness; instrumentality and risk-taking (Annesley and Scheele, 2011). Proposed responses similarly expressed normative assumptions about ‘women’s “essential” domesticity

or fiscal prudence, [alongside] prevailing representations of men as public figures of authority and responsibility...’ (Griffin, 2015:55). This construction of gender is repeated throughout the themes analysed here for example in language such as ‘the women’s vote’ or representations of politics as a ‘boys’ club’.

### **Social reproduction and system restoration**

Applying principles of CPE aids our understanding of the multidimensional nature of feminist discourse which circulated in the aftermath of the economic crisis. In post-crash conditions of uncertainty the resonance of different feminist perspectives reflects the uneven assimilation of feminist agendas into existing institutional norms and practices, and a variation of integration into personal identities. Findings presented here are consistent with research on mainstream media which has revealed that ‘in the early years of the twenty-first century, really radical feminist positions rarely get an airing at all, and liberal reformist feminism occupies all the available pro-feminist space’ (Sheridan, Magarey and Lilburn, 2006:35). The privilege granted to moderate liberal feminism can be explained by its greater resonance with existing discourses, social identities and material structures in comparison with other variants of feminist critique. Despite a crisis which led to sustained questioning of the political and economic system, order was ultimately restored. Establishing a hegemonic representation of events as a crisis of public and not private finance was critical for both stabilising and reproducing the system.

This analysis highlights gender relations as central to the restoration of order and social reproduction (Jessop, 2010). The consistency of moderate liberal feminism with the existing norms of late capitalism contributed to its reproduction during the time in which austerity was justified as the correct strategy for managing post-crisis conditions. Once the financial crash had been ideologically managed as a crisis ‘within’ the system a drive to ‘return to business as usual’ post-crisis was pursued. Where gender issues were concerned this involved the



reinstatement of an already endorsed moderate feminism which had been instituted as the dominant form of feminism prior to the crash. In the process, critical voices that sought to challenge the legitimacy of political and economic structures of neoliberal capitalism were managed and many feminist critiques of the fundamental structural failings of capital were ‘contained’ or dismissed (see Hozic and True, 2016). This is not to discount the value of the critiques of gender inequality that ran throughout the accounts analysed here. However, the pursuit of equality, as the end goal for feminist politics, may come at the expense of challenges to current political and economic models and the kinds of transformations such critiques demand. As Griffin (2015:62) notes, ‘Governance actors, institutions, and initiatives have largely ignored feminist critiques of austerity because they challenge the discursive foundations on which neo-liberal policy-making depends...Used as a technique of governance to deepen neo-liberal reform, austerity as a result of ‘crisis’ has enabled interventions, both public and private, to reverse feminist gains’. Similarly, Elomäki and Kantola (2018:1) argue that given the priority of austerity in the EU, feminist analyses ‘have found it difficult to enter the public and political agendas and have an impact on adopted policies’ while conservative and traditional representations of gender relations are privileged. Moreover, while the language of equality was used critically in these media accounts to assess the impact of austerity on women the fact that gender equality *in practice* (e.g. the requirement to undertake equality assessments prior to the passing of the 2010 emergency budget) could be disregarded by the state suggests gender issues can be selectively accommodated or ‘taken into account’ while at the same time ‘containing’ the material force of feminist critique (McRobbie, 2009) [7]. This finding corroborates research by Dean (2010) who found that in mainstream newspapers feminism is an object of discursive contestation with particular forms afforded more space and legitimacy while others are repudiated. The resonance afforded to feminist discourse is a multi-faceted, incomplete and contingent

process. This contingency is structured through a binary relation between a ‘reasonable’ feminism (often characterised as consistent with contemporary gender relations) and one that is excessive or unfeasible. Within public discourses gender equality can resonate with endorsed social norms: gender equality is acceptable while feminism isn’t. Notably, in accounts analysed here, equality is constructed as woman’s issue, not a feminist one. Claims for the right to equality symbolize the acceptable face of feminism and the ‘reasonable’ status granted to women’s demand for inclusion within existing social institutions.

The acceptability of moderate feminism post-crisis may be further explained by the assertion that resonance is affected by the extent to which a particular narrative coalesces with personal identity. Extensive research on postfeminism has established that one of its defining logics is a dis-identification with feminism whereby women are encouraged to identify with femininity while denying affinity with feminism as the former is deemed natural and non-threatening while the latter is often represented as irrational (Budgeon, 2011; Dean, 2010; Scharff, 2012). Despite the credibility equality commands as an institutionalised ideal, in a climate of postfeminism, stereotypes of the unreasonable feminist are readily at hand while a rejection of feminist critique is an ever-present feature of popular culture (Tasker and Negra, 2007).

Finally, as noted by Walby, (2011) amongst the features central to neoliberal capitalism, gender is a fundamental organising principle of the interrelated spheres of production and reproduction. The positioning of men and women within these spheres reflects deep-seated assumptions about gender as a relation believed to express ‘natural’ differences. These cultural assumptions underpin the allocation of roles within the family, the workplace, sexuality and the assignment of attributes, attitudes, skills and so forth. Notably, constructions that locate gender difference within individual biological difference do not define inequality as a structural feature of gendered institutions. Prugl suggests (2012:23)

‘myth always has an intention, a motivation...Dichotomies of gender are reconstructed recalling a presumably categorical difference between men and women’. The uncertainty generated by the financial crisis created the desire for knowable and, therefore, manageable conditions and this included a ‘normal’ gender order. ‘Common sense’ gender norms which conventionally materialise in the modified male breadwinner mode that is dominant in the UK were disrupted hence requiring reinstatement (McKay et al, 2013). The ‘he-cession’ (Maier, 2010; Rodnino-Colocino, 2014) signalled the potential end of male dominance while the collapse of many ‘quintessentially male capitalist institutions’ communicated vulnerability in hegemonic masculinity (Annesley and Scheele, 2011). The tendency to discursively construct gender in highly reductionist ways throughout many of the themes in this research demonstrates how meaning-making acts to reduce complexity by establishing ‘common sense’ understandings of the gendered crisis. Essentialised claims of gender difference functioned as myth in these newspaper accounts to mitigate uncertainty and restore a familiar ‘natural’ order.

## **Conclusion**

The research questions driving this analysis are situated within wider debates about the institutionalisation of feminism and the status of gender equality during a time of economic uncertainty. This analysis reveals austerity was made meaningful through a critical discourse that focused on gender inequality as an important social issue. It has been argued this indicates the successful embedding of particular feminist principles in mainstream institutions – an achievement that should not be underestimated or undervalued. The pre-crash institutional inclusion of moderate liberal feminism facilitated reporting of austerity as a gender issue throughout the tenure of the coalition government and provided the basis for a critical and oppositional discourse that challenged many aspects of the coalition’s handling of public policy. However, in practice, feminist critiques and politics also faced substantial

challenges during and after the crisis. Feminism continues to be defined by a range of perspectives and persuasions (Kantola and Lombardo, 2017). The resonance of these variants is highly contingent and this contributes to the reproduction of a gender order rife with contradictions. For example, headlines that celebrated record numbers of women in employment at the same time obscured the nature of women's positioning within low pay jobs.

The resonance of particular feminist principles is possible on the basis that others are discredited. This dynamic is a central feature of the management of the broader social relations of gender which, with regards to austerity policy, required the 'return to business as usual' (Jessop, 2012). The wider effects of this duality are beyond the scope of this analysis which is limited to the exploration media representations of gendered austerity. However, feminist research would benefit from sustained analyses of how dynamics of feminist inclusion contribute to material practices within organizations where austerity policy has overlapped, and clashed, with the goal of achieving fundamental gender justice. Since the resonance of feminist discourse is not static the nature of its variation remains an important issue for further critical examination. It has been argued here that a better understanding of the conditions which might expand the reach of critical feminist politics beyond the moderate and more accommodating forms of feminism that have established their dominance remains a central question associated with greater levels of gender inclusion.

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### **Endnotes**

1 Postfeminism 'broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the "pastness" of feminism, whether that supposed

pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated' (Tasker and Negra, 2007:1). This gender order is characterised by moments of both dis-identification with feminism and affirmation of feminism relating respectively to radical, 'excessive' forms and more moderate, less 'extreme' expressions (Dean, 2010).

2 Moderate feminism is closely associated with Liberal Feminism which aims to integrate women into existing systems on an equal basis with men rather than challenge the structures which constitute that system. See discussions in Eisenstein (2005) and Kantola and Lombardo (2017).

3 Discursive constructions are shaped, enabled and constrained by the material, therefore, all possible meanings do not equally materialise (Jessop 2004, 164). Those that resonate most strongly are more likely to be selected, guide social action, and thereby, become manifest as enduring constructions. Jessop (2012:347) argues potentially plausible narratives 'will not be equally effective in conveying their messages and securing support for the lessons they hope to draw'. This depends upon amongst other factors, 'the organization and operation of the mass media, the role of intellectuals in public life, and the structural biases and strategically selective operations of various public and private apparatuses of economic, political, and ideological domination' (Jessop, 2010: 347).

4 This methodology is informed by a Sociology of Knowledge approach to discourse analysis which theorises 'everything that we perceive, experience, and sense is mediated through socially constructed and typified knowledge...that is, to varying degrees, recognized as legitimate and "objective"'. See Keller (2013:61) for a full discussion.

5 Given the focus on the study is mainstream press media reporting, the insights yielded by this analysis have to be understood in that limited context. These findings conceptually enrich critical scholarship on moderate feminism by interrogating a specific site and historical context within which public discourses of gender manifest.

6 In George Osborne's 2012 speech to the Conservative Party conference, in which he outlined a series of economic reforms at the heart of the coalition's programme of governance, he reiterated the trope of 'tough but fair' made earlier in his 2010 conference speech. 'On the eve of the election, I told this Conference: we're all in this together. It was more than a slogan. It spoke of our values and of our intent: That there would be sacrifices, and cuts that would be tough to make; that everyone was going to have to play their part' (<http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/politics/2012/10/george-osbornes-speech-conservative-conference-full-text>. Accessed July 27, 2016).

7 The failure to conduct a gender equality impact statement for the June 2010 emergency budget exemplifies the disregard shown towards equality policy by the coalition government in the early days of the economic crisis (Annesley, 2012). Despite being a legal requirement no such audit was conducted. In response, the Women's Budget Group carried out detailed audits that objectively illustrated women would be more negatively impacted by the proposed cuts than men (Stephenson, 2016).

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Author biography – Shelley Budgeon is a sociologist who specialises in the study of gender and feminist theory with a particular interest in how the constitution of gender relations and processes of gender identification are being effected by socio-political change. Her work analyses the formation of contemporary femininity and gendered subjectivities; the constitutive relations between different femininities and feminisms in late modernity; and the dynamics of postfeminist neoliberalism. Her current project examines contemporary gender equality discourses and their specific manifestation in mainstream policies. This project analyses meanings formally associated with the institutionalization of equality and those which emerge through the everyday practices and processes which constitute gendered interactions within organizations and form the basis for understanding how equality is ‘done’ by social actors in everyday life.