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Solidarity under Austerity: Intersectionality in France and the United Kingdom

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In this article, we argue that in order to understand and counter the asymmetrical effects of the current economic crisis, intersectional analyses and coalition building are required. Our research aims to address a tendency in some intersectionality research to underplay or

We are equal coauthors of this paper.

sideline social class and capitalist relations (Anthias 2012, 6, 15; Skeggs 2008). Our goal is to expand intersectionality to questions of political economy that are not typically viewed through this lens (Strolovitch 2013, 168). Sophisticated theorizations of social locations, divisions, processes of differentiation, and systems of domination (Dhamoon 2011) within intersectionality literature can thus become tools to name and challenge the effects of the economic crises that are deepening social and economic inequalities in Europe.¹

Here we consider how researchers might capture the effects of austerity on representations of minority women's vulnerability as well as their activism and new solidarities created by and for them.² We draw on our current empirical work exploring the impact of the crisis on minority women in France and the United Kingdom.

REPRESENTATIONS OF MINORITY WOMEN IN CONTEXTS OF AUSTERITY

At the time of writing, the UK is undergoing the most extensive reduction and restructuring of its welfare state since its enactment after the Second World War (Taylor-Gooby and Stoeker 2010; Yeates et al. 2011). The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government is presiding over a 27% cut to local government — the key mechanism for delivery of public services — and a 68% cut to the social housing budget (Taylor-Gooby 2011, 4).

While France is not implementing as stringent measures, a key policy aim is deficit reduction and cuts to public spending (Clift 2013). The headline of President François Hollande's 2013 budget, which he described as "the biggest budget shock of the past 30 years,"³ is a commitment to cutting the deficit to 3% of GDP in 2013 (*L'Express* 2012).⁴ However, the beleaguered Socialist government has

1. We recognize Erica Townsend-Bell's caution, in this issue, that the U.S. genesis of intersectionality in the experiences of black and other women of color must not be "uprooted from the concept, even as it travels."

2. We use this term to encompass women who experience the effects of processes of racialization, class, and gender domination as well as other sources of inequality, particularly hierarchies of legal status.

3. Guélaud, Claire. September 10, 2012. "Hollande assume un plan de rigueur historique." *Le Monde*. http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2012/09/10/hollande-assume-un-plan-de-rigueur-historique_1757825_823448.html (accessed February 8, 2013).

4. *L'Express*. "Les principaux points du Budget 2013." September 28, 2012. lexpansion.lexpress.fr/economie/le-gouvernement-renonce-a-atteindre-l-equilibre-budgetaire-en-2017_341359.html (accessed February 1, 2013).

announced that it will miss this budget target this year.⁵ The government has opted to side-step sweeping cuts and instead to freeze all government spending (which amounts to real cuts, due to inflation). The precise areas where these cuts will come into force have not yet been specified.

Despite initial reports of a “he-cession,” women appear to be disproportionately impacted by the crisis (Women’s Budget Group 2010). They are more likely to be employed by the local state (as teachers, nurses, social workers, etc.) and the public sector more generally (APPG 2012, 10) and more likely to be subcontracted to the state via private-sector organizations (as care workers, cleaners, caterers, etc.) (Seguino 2010; Taylor-Gooby and Stoeker 2010; Women’s Budget Group 2010; Theodoropoulou and Watt 2011). Women are also more likely to be connected to the local state (through accessing and relying on social welfare and public services) because of gendered caring responsibilities.⁶ Therefore, austerity measures are likely to increase female unemployment while reducing social protection measures that might cushion against mass job losses.⁷

But which women are affected?⁸ And to what extent?⁹ A further “intersectional” move is needed to challenge state representations of the crisis and the silencing of alternative analyses. We propose simultaneous consideration of processes of racialization and hierarchies of legal status, ability, and other processes of stratification that exist *alongside* and are *inflected by* gender inequalities (Bassel and Emejulu 2010), which are exacerbated by austerity measures.

5. BBC. “France to Miss Deficit Target, President Hollande Says.” March 12, 2013. www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-21762247 (accessed April 3, 2013).

6. This finding has been replicated in several European studies (Theodoropoulou and Watt 2011, 23; Women’s Budget Group 2010).

7. In England and Wales, the ability to seek legal recourse regarding decisions to stop benefits will also be restricted. The Ministry of Justice’s own Equality Impact Assessments demonstrate that women and ethnic minorities will be disproportionately affected by many of the changes to legal aid provision (Sommerlad and Sanderson 2013).

8. For example, in the UK, 20.5% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women and 17.7% of black women are unemployed compared to 6.8% of white women (cited in APPG 2012, 4). In France, the unemployment rate of “immigrant women” (defined by INSEE as “people born as foreigners outside of France and residing in France”) is higher than for nonimmigrants, 17.5% versus 9.7% in 2010 (Duhamel and Joyeux 2013: 27–8).

9. In the UK, “given the high numbers of women from these [Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi] groups working in the public sector, job cuts in this section of the workforce may have a disproportionate impact on Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women and inflate their overall unemployment figures” (APPG 2012, 9).

MAPPING MINORITY WOMEN'S POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Our second concern is with the effect of austerity measures on minority women's activism and intersectional mobilization within third-sector spaces, an important site where the paradoxes of austerity are brought into focus. The impacts of budget cuts on the not-for-profit sector are increasingly well documented (Independence Panel 2013), but few studies consider the intersectional effects of austerity on organizations' programs and advocacy, and of activists working within them to make multiple axis claims.

In France and the United Kingdom, the rise of "enterprise" as a dominant ideological frame for action has continued apace during the crisis, generating strategic dilemmas for NGOs working in the antipoverty, housing, and migration sectors (Emejulu and Bassel 2013).^{10,11} Principles of competition, the accumulation of assets, and the commodification of services and products offered by NGOs have been imposed onto individual organizations by the local or national states. In some cases, organizations have actively adopted these ideas for survival, while in some (much rarer) cases, they have resisted or subverted these processes and used them as a springboard for new coalitions.

The ethos of enterprise has fundamentally shifted relationships between state, market, and civil society. These shifts generate a difficult context for NGOs, as — with the rise of privatization of social welfare in the wake of austerity — they must either become "any willing provider" or, often, face extinction. We suggest that the ability of actors seeking to represent "intersectional interests" within the sector is under threat because these claims may be silenced and/or misrecognized due to the prevailing marketized logic of the sector.

The fate of solidarity within these increasingly privatized NGO spaces is important because solidarity both animates oppositional voluntary action and is the hoped-for outcome of this form of action.¹² If solidarity is weakened within the NGO sector, the ability to mobilize at the intersections of different social justice agendas is undermined.

10. We refer here to "formal (professionalized) independent societal organizations whose primary aim is to promote common goals at the national or the international level" (Martens 2002, 280) as well as organizations oriented to the local and regional level.

11. From September 2011 to May 2012, we conducted 35 semistructured interviews with directors, policy officers, and development workers in antipoverty and migrants rights NGOs in Glasgow, Edinburgh, London, Paris, and Lyon.

12. Thanks to Mae Shaw for discussion on this point.

Solidarity is threatened by the rise of enterprise culture within NGOs and increased fierce competition between organizations for government contracts for service provision. Because the Scottish, English, and French states are moving from core funding to contracting out parts of the state for NGOs and the private sector to deliver on a short-term project basis, trust and mutuality within the sector are being eroded. Several of our informants perceived these factors as limiting the spaces for different forms of action, especially oppositional work against various policy regimes.

What, then, does this uncertain context mean for minority women who are positioned at the intersection of these various issue areas by virtue of their legal status, housing, class position, race and ethnicity, and, of course, gender? Because NGOs are facing an erosion of solidarity within and across sectors, attempts to combine claims and issues across these organizations — to reflect multiple and simultaneous social justice issues — is extremely challenging and becoming ever more unlikely. Some of our participants observed that when NGOs are confronted with acute resource scarcity, they prioritize strategies that are often short-term and oriented to service provision rather than to advocacy and more militant confrontation.¹³ Diminishing state and charitable foundation support has, in many cases, meant that the broader intersectional agendas of NGOs are restricted in their struggle for survival. As a consequence, these organizations are presented with strategic dilemmas about the best ways of advancing their social justice agendas in contexts where single-axis claims are the frame of reference most often recognized by state actors who impose stringent funding criteria and encourage competition within a narrowly defined sphere of action.

In the current crisis, resource scarcity shrinks the available range of frames of contestation. It is difficult for these organizations to inflect agendas with multiple-axis (race, class, legal status, and gender) concerns because these may well delegitimize their efforts and weaken their competitive advantage vis-à-vis other organizations vying for the same funding. In a context where organizational survival often asserts itself as the dominant concern, the “simple and straightforward” single-axis claim

13. For example, one participant in Scotland stated, “Increasingly organisations that have got funding relationships with government agencies are feeling that they can’t speak out ... organisations are feeling that they need to be silent because of those funding relationships [with the state] that they need to protect.” A French participant stated this more bluntly: “The reality is that the state [agencies] more or less say, ‘We are the ones who finance you. The stakes are these, from one year to the next we remind you there will be calls for tender, for projects.’ And if we don’t answer someone else will.” See Emejulu and Bassel 2013 for our more detailed findings.

may win out, as it does not attempt to straddle issues and in so doing contest government funding criteria. In this deeply troubling context, who will lobby with and for minority women in the diminishing political field? The dynamics we have identified, both within organizations — where workers are disciplined to avoid questioning of work conditions — and in organizations' relationships with each other, may preclude the bridging and expansion of social justice agendas that are essential to addressing the challenges of austerity.

CONCLUSION

Through intersectionality, the differential effects of austerity measures on various social groups can be understood while also supporting new examinations of and oppositions to neoliberal hegemony. Analyses of intersectionality and neoliberalism must be combined in order to capture the paradoxical politics currently at play. The focus on race, gender, sexuality, legal status, and religion is not to be dismissed, but when discussion of the crisis is absent, some credence is lent to Beverley Skeggs' (2008) argument against intersectionality: “[W]hen people say that we need the intersectional gesture to include race, class, gender, and everything else, what it usually means is to think about these things which *exclude* understandings of the relationship to the capitalist system.”

New political projects can be inspired through the lens of intersectional contestations (Yuval-Davis 2012) that “go beyond a focus on intersectional categories to look at the broader social landscape of power and hierarchy” (Anthias 2012, 14). This is, therefore, a call to arms for a vigorous intersectional critique of austerity in order to understand its asymmetrical impacts.

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