Political Action in an Age of Neoliberal Austerity

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By Rebecca Geach (18907640)

Supervisors: Professor Carolyn Pedwell and Dr David Nettleingham

Abstract

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In the United Kingdom, since the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, neoliberal governance has shifted the economy toward deregulated, privatised, competitive frameworks. Such socioeconomic patterning can be regarded as a value-laden, political undertaking upheld by socio-economic and legislative approaches which have profoundly affected political culture. Following the global financial crisis in 2008, and the election of the UK Conservative-led coalition government in 2010, austerity as an extension of older forms of neoliberal state governance has involved vast, long-term cuts to social spending and public services. It has also extended a political agenda requiring citizens to be independent, self-responsible, economically productive, and adaptable to economic instability. As this PhD project explores, austerity discourses and policies in the UK have been responsible for extensive social harm; and affect the socio-material conditions politically active people face; and extend to the rhetorical framing of political action.

The thesis takes a narrative inquiry approach based on 14 in-depth oral historical interviews with self-described left-wing activists, based across the South of Britain, and Wales. Political action is broadly defined here to encompass everyday manifestations of dissent, symbolic resistance, direct action and protest, mutual aid, counterculture, ways of being, and imagining alternative political futures. The lived experiences and critical reflexivity of politically active and dissenting people are central to my analysis. Through engagement with the oral historical narratives of my participants, my research traverses the socio-political, material, and legislative landscape of the UK since the 1980s with a focus on post-2010 austerity. I grapple with multi-dimensional conditions of neoliberal governance, legislative approaches, and political rhetoric that I maintain have altered the strategies, contingencies, and framing of political action.

My analysis aims to illuminate the diverse ways that political action currently plays out in the UK, and how the socio-political and affective conditions of austerity affect the strategies, ethos, and resources of politically active people. In developing conceptualisations of the neoliberal imperative and austerity as a political undertaking, I offer an interdisciplinary sociological analysis that acknowledges the difficulties faced by politically active people in the face of ongoing economic restructuring. Attending to the discrete ways that resistance can be embodied, I seek to contribute to political counter-narratives and affective discourses that resist neoliberal power and cast light on the political violence embedded in the austerity agenda in the UK and far beyond.

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Introduction: Political Action in an Age of Neoliberal Austerity

> You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment. You can call it freedom. You can call it responsibility. I call it the Big Society.
>
> The Big Society is about a huge culture change…
>
> Where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace, don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face, but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities – David Cameron ('Big society' speech, 19th July, 2010)

The 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and the failure of sub-prime mortgage schemes brought the insecurities of the capitalist system into light, and raised important questions about the practices of bankers, in what had amounted to widespread fiscal corruption (Basu,2018). Responses from governments varied. For instance, the Icelandic government prosecuted those responsible for fiscal abuses and found twenty-six financiers guilty with combined sentences of seventy-four years (Birrell, 2015). Yet within the United Kingdom, government response to the financial crisis was another story. The years between the initial crash in 2008 and the May 2010 election encompassed significant rhetorical shifts in how the role of the state was construed in relation to social spending. This involved a re-framing of the causes of the GFC to assert the national deficit as a crisis in need of urgent attention, and austerity cuts as a 'necessary and inevitable' fiscal intervention (Basu, 2018:70). Indeed, tackling the national budget deficit became a central motif of the 2010 election campaign which swung between the Labour party protecting the welfare state, the Conservative party making cuts to social spending, and the Liberal

Democrats' promise of not increasing student top up fees, which was later quickly relinquished.

The UK general election on 11th May 2010 resulted in the formation of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, with David Cameron as Prime Minister and Nick Clegg as deputy Prime Minister. Just over two months later, Cameron made his pivotal Big Society speech to an audience at Liverpool Hope University on 19th July. The decision to hold the speech at a university in Liverpool, a city with a history of anti-Tory sentiment, signalled to the dramatic culture change the coalition government sought to set in motion. The speech promoted a vision of civic engagement and community empowerment and reframed the economic crisis as stemming from inadequate monetary policy and excessive public spending, rather than as rooted from within the banking industry. The implementation of austerity policies in the UK since 2010 has broadly involved an accumulation of cuts to social spending and public sector jobs, reinforced by legislative changes to the benefits system. Cuts and changes were postured as a necessary response to the national deficit, accompanied by a tacit rejection of governmental responsibility to attend to social issues. Particularly in the UK, austerity carries an explicitly ideological dimension, in part, because the International Monetary Fund (IMF) did not impose austerity measures, as had been a condition for Greece and Ireland. Instead, austerity was a political choice (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker 2011; Clarke and Newman, 2014) that extends from the neoliberal appeal for the state to shrink the scope of government spending, assert the free-market, de-regulate, privatise national resources, and increase social regulation. That is, austerity forms part of a longer-term process of political and economic patterning, which has wide-ranging impacts that alter social conditions. Whilst austerity policies primarily aim to regulate the economy and shrink social welfare provision, this thesis explores how the political orientation of austerity policies extend further into the management of political activism and dissent.

My research focuses on the impact of austerity post 2010 on politically active people involved in a broad array of struggles and resistance in the United Kingdom. My empirical chapters are based on 14 in-depth, semi-structured, oral historical interviews with left-leaning activists and politically active people across the South of

England, midlands, and Wales, that took place between 2020-2023. I take an analytical approach based on narrative inquiry enabling analysis of political subjectivity. I situate austerity as part of a longer trajectory of neoliberalism in the UK and explore how the socio-material, rhetorical, affective, and legislative conditions of austerity affect the strategies, ethos, and resources of politically active and dissenting people. Despite socio-material, discursive and legislative constraints, my research participants share insight on how they develop and pursue renewed ways of transforming the world. I focus on socio-political knowledge, subjectivity, and lived experience as ways of knowing the world and sharing praxis. Contributing to research on austerity, political action and political subjectivity: this thesis aims to develop conceptualisations of neoliberal imperatives, relative to political action alongside deteriorated socio-material and rhetorical conditions. In doing so, I hope to foster counter-narratives and discourses that challenge and resist neoliberal austerity.

My research questions thus seek to address how changing conditions under austerity impact left wing activists involved in a broad range of struggles:

1. How do the socio-material, rhetorical, affective, and legislative conditions of austerity shape political action and political consciousness?

This question explores how austerity conditions place limitations and constraints on activists, how my participants respond to socio-material conditions and austerity rhetoric, as well as the circumstances that foster political consciousness. I focus on changes implemented under Conservative governance, since the 1980s, and austerity as situated within a broader landscape of neoliberalism in the UK. The social and legislative targeting of activists arises in my empirical material, from which I analyse how the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 affects the strategies, ethos, and resources of politically active people.

2. What are the social impacts of austerity on activists and counter-cultural groups, particularly in terms of their strategies, ethos, and resources?

My second research question explores the material and conceptual spaces that politically active and dissenting people inhabit; and how the broader social

conditions of austerity affect my participants, with regard to their praxis, ethical priorities, and the resources available to them. By studying how activists alter their approaches in response to austerity, I aim to shed light on the challenges they face, as well as the creative ways in which my participants continue to resist social and economic injustice.

By pursuing these two key research questions, I hope to contribute to understandings of the impact of austerity on political action in a way that goes beyond specific anti-austerity campaigns and social movements. Narrative based methodologies offer a practical way of understanding the relationship between the past and present conditions, and developing social understanding of lived experience and political subjectivity. An oral historical approach to the interview design, and co-construction of narratives with participants, centres the lives and experiences of participants amidst socio-economic change and political struggle. Oral historical approaches involve the recording of social and political experience and the emergence of counter-narratives and alternative perspectives which often conflict with 'official narratives' (Portelli, 1991). As oral historian Jan Vansina comments, 'the biggest drawback of official histories, in larger more complex systems is that they only represent the view of the elites.' Insofar, that elite perspectives and 'official' interpretations of history serve to sustain dominant power relations and require critical examination that challenges hierarchies and acknowledges whose stories are lost (1985:100). Particularly in a post-2010 austerity context, the messages stemming from governance often stem from positivist logic that imposes particular ways of thinking about the nature of social conditions, including the causes of the financial crisis and reasoning for austerity. By taking an oral historical approach that centres the lived experiences of my participants, I bring attention to alternative narratives, counter-discourses, seek to challenge epistemic violence, and relay the actual condtions of austerity that emerge from the re-telling of experience.

Narrative inquiry supports the emergence of stories that are abundant with meaning and applicability to the human condition (Kim, 2016). An analytical approach oriented through narrative inquiry allows me to engage with the interpretation of narratives within their contexts, so as to identify meta-narratives and retell stories for analysis. The stories that emerge from the narratives of my research participants,

open up analyses that address implications, are focussed on subjectivity and knowledge production, and enable a hermeneutical approach to understanding experience in its broader context.

This thesis delves into lived experience as shaped by broader social and institutional processes to gain important insights on the experiential impacts of austerity, and how shifts in governance, rhetoric, and legislation shape and affect the lives of politically active and dissenting people. The theoretical framework this thesis develops addresses neoliberalism, austerity, and activism through an interdisciplinary framework to connect relevant critical scholarship particularly from sociology, cultural studies, radical (human) geography, and critical theory. In particular, I draw broadly from David Harvey's (2005a, 2005b, 2010, 2016) post-Marxist thought which maps the spatial patterning of capital accumulation, and traces historical patterns and structures of control, such as, neoliberalism, as it collides with the current austerity context. Radical geography 'seeks to understand social and spatial problems and 'advocate for a fairer and more equal society where everyone's basic needs are met, and everyone has an equal opportunity to participate and thrive.' (Pickerill, 2019:1) Radical geography connects with Urban Studies and can incorporate and extend left wing sociological anarchist perspectives which merge with human geography. This includes, for example, work by Paul Chatterton and Stuart Hodkinson (2006) who traverse urban resistance and the social centres movement; Chatterton and Jenny Pickerill (2010) who explore the autonomous spaces that activists build and inhabit; and Jeff Shantz (2009, 2016) who conceptualises the resources sustained by politically active people in the community as infrastructures of resistance.

My theoretical approach also mobilises theories of affect, to analyse the felt tonalities and atmospheres of lived experience within the austerity context. I engage with Ben Anderson's conceptualisation of affective atmospheres, as collectively felt timbres of experience mediated through the social world (Anderson 2009, 2016). I also draw on Carolyn Pedwell's (2016, 2017, 2019, 2021) perspectives on how the affective qualities of everyday life mediate the social world and processes of habituation; that is, how progressive habits and dispositions, hold the capacity for tangible social transformation.

I engage with the notion of political consciousness and the political imagination through Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish's sociological rendering of the radical imagination which 'evokes in us the notion of the capacity to think critically, reflexively and innovatively about the social world' (2014:2). In exploring the ways my participants resist their conditions and engage in prefigurative praxis, I draw from radical agency perspectives such as political philosopher Anna Stetsenko's theorisation of Radical Transformative Agency (RTA) (2019, 2020, 2023) which addresses how materialities and social action co-construct each other. From such a perspective, agency is conceived as transformative through: 'an ability to shape and essentially create our world, our future, and our own development, while relying on the social and cultural resources that we bring into existence and co-create in each and every act of our own lives, our knowing-being-doing' (2020b:56).

With regard to the philosophical and methodological assumptions that underpin my approach to research, I challenge the predominance of positivism in framing social action and the impetus for austerity policies. The design and development of austerity policies has been shaped by positivist, ostensibly evidence-based, thinktanks that position social knowledge as politically neutral and objective (Pautz, 2020). In short, positivism can be understood methodologically as based on scientific process, including the collation of statistics, graphs and perceived facts about the social world. Furthermore, positivist thinking tends to relegate subjective knowledge and lived experience as biased and lacking validity. Right-wing thinktanks that have been particularly influential in a post 2010 austerity context include the Centre for Social Justice, and Centre for Policy Studies. Despite their positioning as neutral and value free, thinktanks are ideologically laden, having influence on policy decisions as well as the discourses that inform wider public sentiments about the nature of austerity (Pautz, 2017). I further address how the co-opting of positivist discourses connects with neoliberal tendencies in more depth in my literature review section. With this in mind, I argue that positivism should be understood as a political standpoint because despite appearing to be logical and objective, positivist methods and discourses are ideological and can promote patterns of epistemic violence by making assertions about reality as though they were unquestionable truths.

My analysis addresses feminist scholar Donna Haraway's epistemological insight surrounding situated knowledge, which challenges dominant positivist views on what constitutes knowledge. As Haraway (1988) put it, 'science – the real game in town – is rhetoric, a series of efforts to persuade relevant social actors that ones manufactured knowledge is a route to a desired form of very objective power'. Taking a stance against positivist reasonings surrounding austerity is particularly important because the discourses that precede and emerge relative to austerity tend to present as objective interpretations of lived conditions. I argue that positivistic reasoning and framings of austerity constitute epistemic violence, operative through a network of discourses associated with neoliberalism that assert claims to truth about lived reality, the nature of austerity, and are allied with discourses surrounding deservingness, stigma, blame and shame. Furthermore, that epistemic violence emerges in governmental and media narratives that frame the causality for austerity, as well as the public legitimisation of austerity policies, largely based on the proliferation and weaponisation of moralising rhetoric and subverted portrayals of social conditions. Not only that, but epistemic violence arises in the degradation of critical subject disciplines, alongside neoliberal imperatives that lend to the marketization of universities and the privileging of STEM[1] and business subject areas.

Conversely, situated knowledge connects with objectivity framed not through positivist claims of an omniscient truth, nor through relativism. Instead, situated knowledge brings attention to 'subjectivity as multi dimensional'. (Haraway, 1988:586). The 'optics' as the lenses through which we see the world, point toward politically objective, yet subjectively experienced standpoints and ethical positions. Situated knowledge is garnered through partiality, positioning, as well as the splits and contradictions that arise through bearing multiple subject positions. As Haraway put it:

> The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly and therefore able to join with another, to see together (Haraway, 1988:586).

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[1] Science, technology, engineering and maths

Haraway understands social experiences as both unique and interconnected through webs of knowledge and experience, recognising subjective experience and objective conditions as intertwined and co-constructive of reality.

The value of lived experience and situated knowledge aligns with the notion of ethico-onto-epistemologies. The term ethico-onto-epistemology was first neologised by philosopher and quantum physicist Karen Barad (2007) 'to mark the inseparability of ontology, epistemology, and ethics.' (Barad 2007:409). In this sense, being in the world, the production of experiential knowledge, and agency are entangled, contingent and framed by ethical standpoints. Stetsenko (2020a, 2020b) expands the ethico-onto-epistemology to underscore the interrelationships between *being-knowing-doing* and *knowing-being-doing*, whereby subjectivity and objectivity are intertwined and co-constructive of reality, underlying radical agency and praxes that enable social transformation. Importantly, Stetsenko's (2020a) rendering of ethico-onto-epistemology asserts the necessity and legitimacy of engaging with activist research, merging the ontological dimensions of 'being activist' with ethics, knowledge production, and political imagination, that is, 'how the world can be changed in light of what should be' (Stetsenko, 2020a:734).

Through Stetsenko's view, social transformation and human development are not grounded on positivist notions of adaptation to political circumstance. Adaptation, 'takes the "givenness" of the world for granted and assumes that individuals have to fit in, each on one's own, with its status quo while competing with others for its resources' (Stetsenko, 2015:103). Particularly given the positivist co-opting of Darwinist discourses of adaptivity relative to widely contested notions of *survival of the fittest,* I agree that social transformation must be driven by agency and political practice, not by adaptation. However, particularly in a neoliberal austerity context, politically active and dissenting people are still subject to material pressure and rhetoric that fosters notions of economically adaptive resilience to precarity, despite such ontological contradictions.

With both Haraway and Stetsenko in mind, in this paragraph I define the politically dissenting ethico-onto-epistemologies that emerge in austerity conditions. Ethico-onto-epistemologies in austerity can be understood as the transmission of experiential political knowledge between people; inhabited by holding multiple subject positions; framed by ethical positions and embodied through everyday

actions, resistance, choices, and dispositions that challenge the sociomaterial violence and ideological power of austerity. Experiential political knowledge includes understandings of how contemporary austerity came about, what is known, and how it is known. Being politically active and dissenting whilst living within the systems that are resisted, is harnessed by awarenesses that oppose hegemonic interpretations of lived reality and is contingent on experiential knowledge (including understanding their conditions and those of others). Ethico-onto-epistemologies are shared and replicated amongst people, as acts of being-knowing-doing, through the endurance of political knowledge, dispositions, and being activist, despite austerity conditions. Through their oral historical reflections on being politically active, the narratives of my participants reveal how despite austerity conditions, their ethos endures. Knowing the world through experience, everyday praxis, and acts of resistance challenges the epistemic violence of austerity. They provide counter narratives that dispute official interpretations of austerity, and continue to reproduce left wing dispositions that carry forward to future generations. My thesis provides oral historical evidence that contributes to counter-narratives that challenge positivistic and hegemonic narratives of austerity to offer a broader interpretation of political life post 2010. Throughout my thesis, I seek to deepen understandings about political action and emphasise the agency of politically active and dissenting people. I also draw attention to the importance of a political imagination in finding creative ways to address the problems faced by continued austerity, structural instabilities and looming ecological crisis. Despite radically compromised conditions and capacities, my participants envision and lay the groundwork for desirable political futures.

Thus far, I have outlined the context of my project, as well as the methodological approaches I take to pursuing my research questions and analysing my empirical material. I now turn to addressing the longer-term political conditions that frame my account of how austerity conditions affect left-leaning activists and politically active people in the UK, post 2010. The next subsection straddles with political context spanning over the 20th century, particularly the beginnings of neoliberalism as a political disposition in contest with the post-war consensus, the early welfare state, and the emergence of the New Left in the 1950s and 1960s. I situate contemporary austerity as an outcome of neoliberal patterning, and then address how I conceptualise activism in my thesis.

Ideological contests: The Post War Consensus, Neoliberalism, Austerity and Political Action in the United Kingdom

Before engaging with post-2010 austerity in the United Kingdom, it is first necessary to outline the pre and post-war political context with regard to social welfare interventions in the twentieth century. I draw attention to ideological contests and discuss the historical constitution and emergence of neoliberalism, and the subsequent political influence it has carried within UK governance, particularly since the 1979 election of Margaret Thatcher. The political expansion of neoliberal political, legislative, and economic processes has had lasting implications for how socioeconomic policy and resistance has been shaped across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The Austrian-British economist and political philosopher Friedrich Hayek played a pivotal part in the 'furbishing' of ideas that eventually led to the practice of neoliberalism within the UK (Vanhorn and Mirowski, 2009). Hayek's ideas loosely stemmed from the Austrian school of economics and challenged classical liberalism based on the view that traditionally liberal tendencies and regulation were a threat to individualistic market freedom (ibid). Classical liberalism is traditionally associated with enlightenment reason and rationality, modernity, individualism, commerce, innovation, and alongside the rise of the nation state gave weight to notions of the natural rights of men as gained through democratic process (Dillon, 2019). Hayek's views diverted from classically liberal traditions, insofar that he not only asserted the free market, but also sought strong regulation to increase property rights to protect the interests of private owners.

The concept of neoliberalism was first formally discussed at the Colloque Walter Lippman in Paris in 1938 which sought to establish a vision and ideals for how to implement free-market values to the economy and society. Affect theorist Ben Anderson (2016) wrote of the warm and convivial atmospheres felt during these early meetings that began to bring together a spirit of change that garnered interest amongst economists and philosophers in generating radically right wing ideas. Hayek had 'nascent plans' for an international academy of neoliberalism which later 'metamorphosed' into what became the Mont Pèlerin society (Vanhorn and Mirowski 2009:149). The Mont Pèlerin society (MPS) was, and is, an economic forum that

promotes free market values and seeks to minimise the role of the state in public affairs. Although World War two (WW2) hindered its formal progress, the MPS began to establish a global network of economists who began to build discourses and strategies of instituting and bolstering free market principles within the economy (ibid).

Contention between classical liberal styles of economic thought and the emergence of neoliberal discourses reflect economic anxieties about the roles and responsibilities of the state, economy, and the individual (Tribe, 2015). Social regulation and state welfare are regarded as threatening to free market liberties because implementing reforms requires centralised administration of government services, entailing costs that neoliberals argued could only be accrued through increased taxation (ibid). Increased taxation was regarded by neoliberal critics as threatening to economic aspiration and the power of bourgeoise elites. However, neoliberalism as an emerging doctrine was still at the fringes of political life in Britain and did not hold sway at that time (ibid); particularly given the parallel movements toward social reform in the UK.

During WW2 and prior to the formal founding of the welfare state, a number of strategies were implemented to protect the post-war health of the nation. Historian David Kynaston (2008) notes that in 1941 the publication Picture Post outlined a plan for post-war Britain with a series of articles such as '*Work for all', 'Plan the Home', 'Social Security', 'A Plan for Education', 'Health for All', 'The New Britain Must be Planned'*. Kynaston (2008:21) suggests that these articles helped in solidifying public acceptance of the need for a welfare state. The Beveridge report (1942) was particularly influential within governance and sought to tackle 'the five giants' – that is, idleness, squalor, disease and want. The war time coalition government had also been inspired by the 'New deal' in the US, which was a form of wartime assistance, responsive to rising levels of unemployment. Keynesian economic practice was implemented as an approach to increase employment levels (Kynaston, 2008). Keynesian economic principles suggest that maintaining a system of state welfare and building a societal safety net through taxation (not entirely dissimilar to Marx and Engel's assertion of taxing the rich), contributes to a fair and balanced economy, whereby wealth is said to trickle down through society. However,

Keynesianism is not supportive of a prolaterian revolution in a Marxist sense, and is not only bound within the logics of capitalism, but arguably also reinforces its dominance. Nonetheless, Keynesian principles still run counter to the neoliberal view that frames social welfare as a cost imposition and threat to market liberties.

Before the end of WW2, the wartime coalition government legislated the right to state secondary education under the Education Act 1944, and the Family Allowance Act 1945, which legislated to provide a non-means tested universal payment to all families. The UK election on 5th July 1945 resulted in a Labour government. Under Clement Atlee as prime minister, the Labour party were committed to making deep societal change. Conversely to the neoliberal assumption that welfare states are threats to market freedom, the Labour party manifesto (1945) spoke to a different kind of economic freedom and post-war peace: The freedoms that come with access to 'good food', stable employment, homes, and education; including the freedom of a safety net, and 'security for all against a rainy day' as well as an education system to provide all children with 'a chance to develop the best in them' (Labour party manifesto, 1945).

In Europe, the surrender of Germany following Adolf Hitler's suicide signalled the end of World War 2 on the 8th May 1945, which gave rise to mass public celebrations that would come to be known as 'Victory in Europe' day, or more colloquially, VE day (Kynaston, 2008). However, globally speaking, the end of WW2 was marked by a succession of attacks on Japan. On August 6th and 9th 1945, US forces launched the world's first atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki causing an unprecedented scale of death, destruction, and ongoing harm due to radioactive poisoning that still persists causing numerous cancers (Tomanaga, 2019). On August 9th, 1945, the Soviet Army invaded Manchuria and Emperor Hirohito subsequently surrendered on August 15th 1945 (Hasegawa, 2005; Tomanaga,2019). The devastating impact of the atomic bomb had also brought public and political attention toward the ever growing possibility of global annihilation with lasting implications for how the cold war played out across the next decades.

On January 10th 1946, the first session of the United Nations General Assembly was held in London. Fifty-one states attended including the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). British Prime Minister, Clement Atlee spoke of 'a spirit of hope' in

bringing nations together to advance global peace and security as well as stabilising the postwar economy (United Nations, 1946). Whilst the UN clearly played a role in further naturalising capitalist frameworks, a momentous aspect of the formation of the UN was the gradual codification of universal human rights. However, the drafting of human rights legislature was a relatively drawn-out process fraught with ideological disputes with regard to the content and semantics of the drafted legislation (Patenaude, 2012).

Positive rights were endorsed by the USSR and many Western states including the UK. Positive rights are 'rights from the government' as social rights that benefit the whole of society, and takes a collectivist stance rather than being individualistic in scope (ibid). The US and some Western states sought to prioritise 'negative rights' as the 'rights of individuals against the government' (ibid); which includes civil and economic rights. This is not to denigrate or undermine the vital importance of civil and economic rights, or the hard won efforts of civil rights campaigns. Instead, I would like to draw particular attention to the context, process, and willingness of states to implement the requisite infrastructures that enable and embed social institutions. In the UK, this includes, but is not limited to: The National Health Service, state education and social housing. Importantly, scepticism and contention about positive rights, as social rights, reflects the aforementioned neoliberal anxieties about costs to the state, the fear of increased taxation, and the ostensible threat to liberty that welfare states entail.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was eventually ratified on 10th December 1948 by the UN General Assembly. The UDHR includes various social, positive rights, such as, the right to social security (Article 22); the right to work (Article 23); the right to rest and leisure (Article 24); the right to an adequate standard of living (Article 25); the right to education (Article 26); the right to the benefits of science and culture (Article 27). However, the USSR did not sign the declaration, due to concerns that doing so would enable too much Western intervention within Soviet domestic policy (Patenaude, 2012), which undoubtedly fed into cold war tensions.

In the UK, the post-war implementation of the welfare state sought to establish a framework to protect the social health of the nation. The National Insurance Act

1946 codified social welfare provision (albeit in a limited form); and the National Health Act 1946 legislated the right for free health care which set in motion the institutionalisation of the National Health Service (NHS). Following this, the National Assistance Act 1948 abolished Poor Law to provide for elderly and disabled people as well as those facing illness, also making limited provision for funeral services. The Children Act 1948 provided the legal mechanisms to create social and child protection services. Whilst the implementation of the welfare state was antithetical to the neoliberal project that was emerging internationally, it was far from radical with regard to the provision of social welfare. The provision of housing prioritised so-called nuclear families, and excluded arrangements outside of heteronormativity, as well as the needs of single men, and with severe restrictions on financial support for unmarried mothers, which left many people facing destitution (Thane and Evans, 2012).

Alongside the broad societal and cultural changes encompassed by the post-war consensus and early iterations of the welfare state, another important contrast to the neoliberal project was the emergence of New Left politics in the mid-late 1950s. In a UK context, 'important antecedents' of the New Left included socialist movements of the 1920s, Trotskyist organisations and the Communist party of Great Britain (Kenny 1995:5). The geopolitical significance of 1956 was pivotal in the emergence of the first wave of the New Left: Nikita Krushchev's secret speech had brought light to the extent of oppression and violence under Stalin, and in November of that year, the violent thwarting of the Hungarian revolution by the Soviet Union had revealed the lengths the USSR would go to protect party interests. Further, that the failed British and French invasion of the Suez Canal also played a role in shifting attitudes away from party politics (Kenny, 1995; Berlin, 1996; Hall, 2010). These events had contributed to a loss of faith in institutionalised politics, and raised ethical dilemmas bringing attention to the 'underlying violence and aggression latent in the two systems that dominated political life' (Hall, 2010:177). Whilst many remained loyal to their roots within the Communist party, such as historian Eric Hobsbawm, many others became dissidents from the party (E.P.Thompson, 1978; Kenny, 1995; Berlin 1996).

Indeed, the first wave of the New Left in the UK was primarily an intellectual undercurrent including sociologists Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Edward

Thompson, Perry Anderson, John Rex, Peter Worsley, John Saville, Charles Taylor and Raphael Samuel (Kenny 1995:1). As sociologist Stuart Hall (2010:196) contends, the emergent intellectual undercurrent was 'only a first stage in the constitution of a new kind of left politics' that whilst inconsistent and broadly defined, was invaluable in shaping the terrain for renewed engagement with socialist democratic politics. The emerging New Left altered the aesthetic of the political landscape through the 'eclectic' co-existence of various political traditions bringing forth 'unique alliances' and 'a genuinely diverse set of voices from the cultural as well as the political realm' (Kenny, 1995:6-7).

Whilst there is a clear academic specificity to the first wave of the New Left in a UK context, the US New Left also emerged as an undercurrent within the intelligensia, that, at least in part, stemmed from aspects of the intellectual Beat counterculture of the 1950s (Huddlestone, 2012). The New Left in the US was activist led, through anti-racist campaigns for civil rights, merging with student movements including the Student Non-Violent Coordinating committee (SNCC), the 1960s student protests, and the anti-war movement against the Vietnam war (Breines, 1989). The politics of the New Left continues to influence and shape activist groups as non-hierarchical, prefigurative, and deinstitutionalised (ibid). Furthermore, the renewed left wing political terrain opened space for broader critical engagement and political action beyond universities and into the politics of everyday life, filtering into the ways that community action plays out in a contemporary context (Nettleingham, 2017:597). Both in the UK and US, the collectively built New Left emphases were antithetically opposed to the economically individualistic, parallel neoliberal project that was taking shape.

To return to the neoliberal trajectory that played out across the 1950s, the Chicago School of Economics sought to further establish, legitimise, and formalise neoliberal ideas and rhetoric, including economic positivism (as will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter). Notable members of the Mont Pèlerin society also associated with the Chicago School included Milton Friedman, Frank Knight, James M. Buchanan, George Stigler, and Friedrich Hayek (Vanhorn and Mirowski, 2009). At stake here, was not only economic practice, but also a political project 'constructed, quite deliberately, for specific ends.' (Vanhorn, Mirowski, and Stapleford (2011: xvii). That is, as this thesis explores, neoliberalism also stands as a calculated and

meticulous rearrangement of public values which has had lasting ramifications, with regard to how monetary policy has been oriented in the United Kingdom, and as a form of violence that affects the way that political action is shaped.

I now jump forward in time to outline how neoliberalism as political and economic practice shaped Margaret Thatcher's perspective and informed her approach to governance between 1979-1990. Thatcher was particularly influenced by Hayek, having been fascinated by his novel *The Road to Serfdom* which she had read whilst as an undergraduate at Oxford University (Margaret Thatcher Foundation, 2023b)[2]. In particular, Thatcher was aligned with Hayek's disdain for socialism and the belief that even socialist democracies lead to oppression and poor fiscal management (ibid). It can thus be inferred that these views fed strongly into Thatcher's motivation to become Prime Minister and actively dismantle socialist institutions. Between 1974 and 1990, there were at least 149 letters documented between Hayek and the Conservative cabinet in Britain, asserting the importance of adopting monetarist fiscal policy to control the money supply. Monetarism is based on Hayek's Quantity Theory of Money, which stresses that the amount of money in circulation within the economy should be relative to the price of goods and services, therefore inflation must be controlled. Having largely contributed to the theoretical underpinnings of neoliberalism; Hayek was regarded as a 'benign philosopher king' (Thatcher MSS, 2023b). Milton Friedman also heavily influenced Thatcher's Conservative government, and played a far more active role as, 'the frenetic man of business', in the adoption of monetarist policies (ibid). To emphasise how seriously Thatcher took monetarism: Her personal economic advisor was Alan Walters, an expert who strongly advocated for monetarism, and even lived in 10 Downing Street (Frazer, 1982:525-526).

On the surface, neoliberalism is based on notions of market freedom. Yet, neoliberalism can also be viewed as a furtive and oppressive system that seeks to control human activity and shape the scope of what is believed possible. Part of this has involved building rhetoric that delegitimises alternative ways of being and a

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[2] The Margaret Thatcher foundation is an archival resource that was set up in 1991 to document Thatcher's period of governance as Prime Minister. No particular author has been ascribed to the website commentary. However, the archives contain primary sources and hundreds of declassified documents and letters that support Thatcher's intention to build neoliberalism as a carefully constructed political project.

process of re-orienting public values to align with free market ideology and the rejection of collective interests. Through Harvey's lens, the way that neoliberalism has played out in the UK since the 1980's is particularly associated 'with the restoration or reconstruction of the power of economic elites' (2005:19). Thatcher's approach across this period extended beyond deregulation and privatisation and actively shifted social relations toward neoliberal ways of being, such as individualism over collectivism, and entrepreneurialism as the route out of poverty. Harvey (2005:3) conceptualises this as 'creative destruction' which not only fragments pre-existing institutional arrangements such as the post war consensus and the provision of social welfare, but also alters the forms that emerge in social life. This includes 'divisions of labour'; and expands into 'ways of life, and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land and habits of the heart' (2005:3).

The creative yet destructive aspect of neoliberalism extends further into a concerted siege on socialist institutions, political action, and alternative ways of thinking, and being, replacing them with neoliberal ways of life. Thatcher's governance targeted socialists, unionists, striking miners, protestors, LGBTQ+ people, counter-cultural groups, and many others, to smash all that which challenged the principals of the neoliberal vision she sought. The political philosopher Will Davies describes the period between 1979 and 1989 as marked by a 'cultural and ideological orientation of combative neoliberalism, which was to demolish non capitalist avenues of political hope' (2016:126). Furthermore, Thatcher's implementation of the Public Order Act 1985 came alongside an intensification of public order policing aimed at those deemed a threat to the state (Wall, 2019). Thatcher wielded systematic attacks on the striking miners and counter cultural groups (Harvey, 2005; Davies, 2016, Wall, 2019). I discuss Thatcher's siege on the left in further detail in Chapter 2.

The years between 1989 and 2010 constituted what Davies calls a 'normative' phase of neoliberalism. During this period, neoliberalism was embedded in the UK through a process of normalising free market ideologies and the increased prevalence of entrepreneurial values within governmental and educational strategy (Davies, 2016). Following increasing political tension, protests against the poll tax, and pressure to resign, Thatcher stepped down from her position as Prime Minister on 28th November 1990. John Major followed Thatcher as Conservative prime minister.

Under Major's governance, Michael Howard as Home Secretary advocated for the imposition of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 which affected numerous political actions. The bill was targeted toward a broad range of political groups including gay (LGBT) rights activists, road protesters, animal rights campaigners, hunt saboteurs, environmental direct-action groups, and also included footballers, ravers, and travellers (SchNEWS, 1994; McKay, 1998). On the 13th of September 1994, under the pseudonym *Justice?* activists posted a letter to Howard to thank him for the Criminal Justice Act and its role in bringing together a network of people who may not otherwise have had shared purpose. They write, 'Your attempt to criminalise our culture has unified it like never before' and they invite him to visit their squat in Brighton (Letter to Michael Howard, SchNEWS, 1994)[3].

The 1997 election of New Labour with Tony Blair[4] as Prime Minister broke nearly two decades of Conservative power in the UK. The stated purpose of New Labour was to 'give Britain a different political choice' as a 'renewed and revitalised' party that would 'put a commitment to enterprise, alongside the commitment to justice' (Labour party Manifesto, 1997). The stated purpose of New Labour sought to create a bridge between left- and right-wing perspectives and build an ostensibly centrist position. Bolstering a centrist position concealed the neoliberal emphasis of New Labour that involved merging public and private interests and outsourcing previously nationalised assets to private enterprise. New Labour promised 'fairness' but 'no favours' to unions (ibid). Such a proposition might seem balanced and centrist. Yet such rhetoric assuages to the neoliberal assumption that workers unions militantly demand special treatment, as opposed to fighting for workers' rights and justice.

The political theorist Aihwa Ong (2006) emphasises the shift from Conservative governance as biopolitical modes of population control, to New Labour's embrace of self-responsible modes of self-governance and actualisation. Whilst this was a shift from the combative neoliberalism that Davies (2016) analyses, neoliberal patterning still creates fundamental shifts in how the state is organised. Ong argues that

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[3] SchNEWS was a free publication established in 1994 as a response to the Criminal Justice Act 1994 and the impact it would have on numerous protest campaigns. SchNEWS ran until 2014 and was instrumental in the DIY ethic and party and protest movement.

[4] Or Tony 'B-liar' as he had come to be known amongst anti-war activists protesting against the war in Iraq.

neoliberalism demarcates and complicates the boundaries through which rights and entitlements can be expressed and understood by subjects, playing out according to the logic of capital, and emerging in distinct ways, in varying geopolitical contexts (2006:500). New Labour played a further role in embedding a neoliberal hegemony that also served to downplay the extent to which neoliberal principles guide governance and the shape of the politics of everyday life (Rose, 1999; Davies, 2016).

Austerity is a mechanism of the neoliberal pattern of decreasing social expenditure, and increasing privatisation, whilst implementing legislation that bolsters and protects state interests. As is the tendency with neoliberal monetary strategies, there is a social and legislative counterpart, that involves increasing levels of regulation that may extend into social control. Davies (2016) asserts that austerity forms a 'punitive' phase of neoliberalism and signifies a renewal of the combative style of neoliberalism experienced during the 1980s. Despite the fact that the financial crisis was rooted in underhand practice within the global banking system, the Conservatives maintained that weak monetary policy and excessive public spending were the cause of the financial crisis in the UK. The Labour government under Gordon Brown began introducing cuts to public spending in October 2009, with the caveat that the NHS and education would be protected (Breadline Research, 2018).

Following the 2010 UK election, the coalition government were quick to affect an accumulation of cuts to social spending and public sector jobs. The initial wave of cuts targeted QUANGOS[5], and youth services (YMCA, 2020). The further implementation of austerity policies and ostensible welfare reform was reinforced by legislative changes to the benefits system. The introduction of the Welfare Reform Act 2012, the Benefit Cap (Housing Benefit) Regulations 2012, the Bedroom Tax 2013, and the roll out of Universal Credit (since 2013) have all minimised welfare provision. Such legislative changes also increase the scope for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to impose disciplinary force, insofar that these legislative changes enable 'punitive' benefit sanctioning policies and discriminatory *Fit for Work* testing. Such interventions point to the weaponization of austerity and societal punishment for claiming benefits (Wacquant, 2009). Ostensible welfare reform

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[5] Quasi autonomous NGOs. QUANGOs are organisations that are funded by tax but not controlled by central government.

programs have been reinforced by heightened anti-welfarist rhetoric driven by 'scrounger' tropes, (Wiggan, 2012); alongside popular television genres that depict 'poverty porn' (Jensen, 2014; Jensen and Tyler 2015). Poverty porn often takes on a coercive tone that serves to shame unemployed people to seek work (Jensen, 2014; Tyler, 2014). Such rhetorical shifts serve to publicly justify and legitimise cuts, and to further stigmatise and vilify those in receipt of social security. Indeed, austerity conditions in the UK have led many vulnerable people to destitution and death (see Calumslist.org.)

I return to the Big Society speech: Cameron was explicit about his intention of initiating cultural change through welfare reform. However, the extent, impact and lasting ramifications of cuts and changes to the benefits system were not initially transparent to the public. On one hand, the Big Society speech mirrored the rhetoric of grassroots campaigns, by calling for community action and civic engagement to respond to emerging social crises. Yet on the other, such rhetoric clearly undermines the aims of left-wing activists, by re-situating and depoliticising social and political action, as civic responsibility, and national pride; rather than as mutual aid, solidarity, and opposition to governance. The speech also concealed the political emphasis of austerity, and the extent of precarity to come.

Austerity cuts go beyond limiting the scope of welfare and into the repatterning of space and civic arrangements. As Ong (2006) suggested, neoliberalism fragments the relationships between citizenship, rights, and entitlements. In the Big Society speech Cameron emphasises civil responsibility. However, in an austerity context, such fragmented relationships have been further fractured by cuts and losses of a vast range of civic locales, through which communities could unite, mobilise, and assist in mutual aid. In the UK, austerity cuts, closures, and the shrinking scope of welfare are socially and 'geographically uneven' (Grey and Barford, 2018); and disproportionately affect women (Newman, 2012; Craddock, 2016), disabled people (Hitchen, 2018), and young people (Horton, 2016:351). Sociologist Emma Craddock suggests that austerity holds a gendered dimension that spills into the relations between activists resisting austerity; whereby women fulfil multiple roles undertaking paid and unpaid physical and emotional labour, alongside an excess of expectations (2016, 2020). The impact of the re-orientation of civic spaces is

extensive. Spaces such as Surestart centres and Children's centres which parents could turn to for advice, support and community have faced widespread cuts and closures, and the availability of services under austerity can be described as a 'variable patchwork' (Jupp 2013:174). The broader context of cuts and closures has particularly led to women of colour performing an excess of emotional and physical labour by filling in the care gaps left by cuts to services (Emejulu and Bassel, 2018, 2020).

Sociologists Katherine Robinson and Ruth Sheldon (2018) explore the impact of austerity cuts 'in places which are less markedly deprived' (2018:113) yet still noticeable by losses to civic spaces. Such locales also include libraries which have largely faced closure or privatisation (Forkert, 2016). Closures may deepen educational inequalities and limit access to knowledge, as well as closing off the spaces through which communities and activists may mobilise. Cultural studies researcher and activist Kirsten Forkert (2016), for example, critiques the limited success of the activist intervention and occupation of Lewisham Library which faced closure, in Southeast London in 2010-2011. Although the library did not close, it was ultimately privatised by a social enterprise. Activists had differentiated notions of what constituted success because of the varying demographics within the campaign group. Some local activists regarded the buy out as a success because the library remained open, and others saw it as another way in which neoliberalism pervasively reconstitutes civic space as social enterprise. Rather than either keeping the library open as it was, or as an activist run community space; success was framed from the neoliberal perspective that social enterprise is the solution for a range of socio-political issues and ends. (ibid)

As sociologist Kate Harrison's PhD thesis (2020) explores, political resistance to austerity has not been successful or enduring. Nonetheless, political responses to austerity in the UK were arguably stronger during the earlier part of the austerity process between 2010 and 2014 (Harrison, 2021:2). For example, anti-austerity protests merged with anti-student fees protests and the student movement but were heavily criminalised and received disproportionate sentencing for their participation (Hancox, 2020). Focus E15 opened squats in response to gentrification and forced evictions in East London and Sisters Uncut opened refuge squats and fought against

cuts to domestic violence services. Both were heavily monitored by the police and bailiffs. Disabled People Against the Cuts challenged the disproportionate impact of cuts and changes to disability benefits.

The Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO) was implemented during the early trajectory of austerity and has neoliberal undertones in how it sedimented punitive modes of governance against political action. The legislation criminalised squatting in residential buildings, as well as making cuts to the scope of legal aid available. This means that for the vast majority of cases[6] there is no eligibility to apply for legal aid to assist with the cost of legal counsel, defence, or to put forth cases that fight the broader harms perpetrated by the state and corporations involved in corrupt, unethical, and illegal activities. Cuts to legal aid may deter activists from engaging in political action that may make them liable for arrest. LASPO re-orients civil loopholes that previously allowed for squatters' rights under Section 6 of the Criminal Law Act 1977. As such, LASPO has made it much more difficult for UK activists to utilise empty spaces to live in, build resources, and protect themselves and others from homelessness, in the midst of a spiralling housing crisis and gentrification. Indeed, activists are not immune to generalised precarity and experience an accumulation of impacts which affect the ways and means through which they act. Moreover, changes to the benefits system disrupt the activities of full-time activists who opt out of working for a living to dedicate themselves to activist endeavours; thus, simultaneously amplifying the privilege and financial resources required to do so.

As my research explores, activists and counter-cultural people may face an analogous rhetorical process of cultural delegitimization akin to how welfare recipients are stigmatised. Activists can be portrayed in the media as work-shy and dependent on the state, naïve and idealistic, or militantly radical (Pendlebury, 2010). The way the rhetorical delegitimization of activism converges with how benefit recipients are stigmatised can best be explained through the sociologist Imogen Tyler's argument that rendering divergent subjects as abject involves, 'the curtailing of the representational agency of those individuals' (2014:26). That is, the agency of those individuals to engage with the world, and to challenge the injustice of their social and

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[6] Apart from some military human rights cases against the state. See Maya Evans appeal.

economic conditions, may be limited. This is the case, in part, because they may no longer be perceived as trustworthy citizens, but instead are wrongly figured as scroungers of the system, and thus a problem. Similarly, when discursively rendered abject, activists may be taken less seriously by the public when trying to achieve their political aims. Such rhetorical conditions also serve in garnering public consent for legislation that frames politically active people as "militant" and as a threat to society and could further criminalise aspects of political action.

Since the 1980s, neoliberalism has been a pervasive mode of political control that extends beyond structural rearrangements and shifts social relations and the ways that political action and resistance plays out. As this thesis will expand, the social, material, legislative, and rhetorical conditions of austerity shape political action and manage dissent through a variety of mechanisms. Alongside broader neoliberal social change, the ways that political action manifests may vary and has opened up scope for broader interpretations of how activism can be conceptualised in a UK context, which I now discuss in further detail.

Conceptualising Political Action and Dissent

Political action and activism are typically described in relation to social movements, where activists tend to lack clear definition unless they are dedicated to a particular campaign. Social movement studies emerged as its own field of study over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as relative to sociology and political science. With this in mind, there may be a scholarly tendency within sociology to elevate social movements as though they are the only worthy source of analysis. However, such a tendency shifts the epistemological focus away from activist subjectivity and everyday practice, and thus how knowledge and praxis are reproduced. An exemplification of this is the scholarly focus on social movements with leaders, with the assumption that activists operate with a collective identity that determines their strategies and actions (see Polletta and Jasper, 2001). For instance, Doug McAdam's Political Process model (PPM) (1982) which is influential to social movement studies, posits that changing social and political conditions affect the availability of political opportunities to resist. This could have sway in understanding austerity conditions as both constraining and enabling activism. However, Adams' model is suspicious of the notion of activism as a pathologized subjectivity. Instead, he

emphasises members of collective political movements as holding a unified collective disposition. Yet such an interpretation implies that social movements necessarily have a clear shape and form, which negates the experiential subjective aspects of being an activist, that I grapple with.

Importantly, conceptualising activism exclusively in terms of social movements does not entirely match how political action is shaped in a contemporary setting. In the new millennium, protest movements are largely held together by dispersed actors that are distinct from the formed 'milieu of the 1970s and 1980s' (Chesters and Welsh, 2004:315). As socioeconomic structures have changed through neoliberal patterning, the social movement structures that were prominent in previous decades have also shifted toward more autonomous forms. Autonomism has its roots in post-Marxist and anarchist perspectives, and is shaped by decentralised participation, non-hierarchical leadership, and a tendency to practice principles of consensus building in collective decision-making processes. Post-Marxist human geographer Brian Marks (2012) suggests that Marxist autonomism can best be defined, 'as a political tendency premised on the autonomy of the proletariat' (2012:468). However, as class relations have become more complex than a structural binary between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, autonomous activism might not necessarily present as a direct transposition from Marxist autonomism. That is, contemporary activists often reflect the decentralised shape of autonomous Marxism yet may not always be self-consciously Marxist (although according to their experience and education, they often are).

Nonetheless, the notion of autonomous activism is still used to conceptualise forms of contemporary left-wing action. For example, in the context of the squatted spaces that activists may inhabit, human geographers Paul Chatterton and Jenny Pickerill (2010) describe their activist participants as 'autonomous activists' and 'non-party political activists'. Through their lens, autonomous activists are decentralised, non-hierarchical, tend to take on multiple causes as they arise, and are not attached to party political perspectives. Yet, nor are they split off from collective action. Rather than situating autonomous activists through Marxism, Chatterton and Pickerill describe autonomous activists as those who 'self-legislate' and define them in relation to the collectively governed spaces and geographies they create, inhabit, and build resources for. Autonomous activism is figured as 'messy, everyday practices

[which] define participation in political projects where participants attempt to build the future in the present' (2010:487). Through their unique contributions to political action, my research participants are in closer proximity to the kind of autonomous activism that Chatterton and Pickerill describe. That is, they are politically active people who are not necessarily involved in one campaign or movement, but instead actively participate in an array of political endeavours and resistance movements.

Yet autonomist activism is not without it's fallbacks. As cultural sociologist David Nettleingham (2015:858) asserts, such patterns of action reflect processes of individualisation which can be highly detrimental to collectively built socialist activism and working class solidarity. In an interview with *Jacobin,* David Harvey is also critical of the political turn toward 'autonomous and anarchical' resistance, suggesting that:

> The reorganisation of the production process and turn to flexible accumulation during neoliberal times has produced a left that is also in many ways, it's mirror: Networking, decentralised, non-hierarchical (2016)

What Harvey is suggesting is that the contemporary left parallels the shape of neoliberalism via its individualised forms which are decentralised from institutional regulatory capacity and thus reflects the cultural logic of post-capitalism with loose connectivity between actors. That is, living in a neoliberal system tends to have an individualising effect, that mirrors the shape of the economy. It is difficult not to concede with Harvey's assertion. Indeed the shape of autonomous activism could be seen to reflect Cameron's Big Society rhetoric because of the emphasis of taking power into your own hands and operating outside of state boundaries to implement collective change. However, Cameron's vision is about replacing social welfare services with a matrix of private and community initiatives that hide neoliberal ideology under the guise of civil apoliticism and which require private funding, governmental grants, or other organisational subsidies.

 I thus disagree with the implication that there is a mirrored equivalency between the autonomous left and neoliberalism. Deinstitutionalised, de-centralised, non-hierarchical forms are not an equivalent to neoliberal practice in that autonomous activists collectively operate through a dispersal of power that is directly oppositional to the concentrated power and wealth of the political and economic elite. Nor can

autonomous activism be understood as a shadow[7] reflection of neoliberal desire. The aims of autonomous and anarchic activists are collective and do not reflect the profit-oriented needs and imperatives of the capitalist economy. Autonomy in this sense is not about distance from each other, but about the freedom to build shared values that can be practiced with others in collective spaces. Autonomous activists work with what they've got to challenge power hierarchies, employ critical imagination, and strive to enact political futures outside of neoliberal framing. Having situated my participants as autonomous in shape (albeit as spiky and ill-formed), I now turn to exploring how activists can be defined in relation to their political actions in a UK context.

Conceptualising activists through their actions

Michel Foucault's notion of counter-conduct is one way in which political action, dissent and counterculture can be conceptualised through action. Counter-conduct was developed within the context of Foucault's *Security, Territory and Population* lectures at the Collège du France, and was first tentatively named in a lecture on 1st March 1978 as a way of expressing the historical relations between the pastorate as a system of power, and the 'laity' (Foucault 1978, trans Burchell, 2009). Within the broader context of Foucault's lectures, counter-conduct can be understood as actions taken that resist, revolt, and refuse forms of overarching power and governmentality. Counter-conduct thus emphasises actions and activities that challenge and resist the existing social order.

Although the concept of counter-conduct was left underdeveloped by Foucault, critical scholars from the emerging field of resistance studies have furthered the notion of counter-conduct as applicable to contemporary resistance, activism, and counterculture. Olga Demetriou describes counter-conduct as that which 'politicises the everyday and locates politics everywhere' (2016:218). To take sociologists Chris Rossdale and Maurice Stierl's explanation, counter-conduct is that which 'allows for power to be conceptualised as dispersed, networked, and as predicated on unstable and multiplicitous subjectivities' (2016:1) This reflects my research participants who are intergenerationally dispersed, come from a variety of backgrounds and engage

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[7] In the Jungian sense of hidden, dark side 'shadow' desires.

with a broad range of activism, locally, nationally, and on a global scale. They often act from the periphery of movements and contribute extensively to interrelated causes and campaigns through their actions and ethos.

As I will discuss in the empirical chapters that follow, my participants predominantly discuss their activism in relation to their political beliefs, actions, and identities. Although they do often mention episodes of focussed participation in campaign groups; their reflections place more importance on their everyday actions. Marwan Darweish and Andrew Rigby describe different forms of non-violent resistance: Polemical, offensive, symbolic, defensive, and constructive (2015:7-8). I relate these forms to the diverse ways my participants engage in resistance. What Darweish and Rigby describe as 'polemical' resistance involves overt political campaigning and includes strikes, boycotts, protest demonstrations, benefit gigs, petitioning, and awareness raising, which all of my participants have been engaged in, at some level. Offensive resistance goes a step further and relates to actions that may push the limits of the legal scope in how far actions go (ibid). For example, direct actions often involve circumnavigating bureaucratic processes and may respond to state and corporate criminality for a broad array of injustices. Some of my participants have previously been involved, for instance, in direct action campaigns against cruise missile convoys, road protests, live export, weapons factories, immigration centres, and corporations.

Many of my participants are involved in counter-cultural actions that cross over with activism, such as, the party and protest movement and DIY culture, as well as squats, and the resources that can be sustained in reclaimed spaces (McKay 1998; Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006; Shantz, 2009). I suggest that the party and protest movement might best fit between the categories of offensive resistance and symbolic resistance (Darweish and Rigby, 2015:7-8). Symbolic resistance includes gestures, motifs, expressions, and performances that may be subversive, meaningful, and embody resistance by conveying deeper messages (*ibid*). I further suggest that symbolic resistance may be covert and discrete and could involve practices such as guerrilla gardening, craftivism, graffiti, artwork, music events, radical theatre, and alternative comedy. Symbolic resistance conveys social and political messages that may prompt reflexivity, deeper understanding and challenge some aspect of the

political order. Defensive resistance applies to those who aid, protect, and offer sanctuary (Darweish and Rigby, 2015:7-8). This involves protective actions that may, for instance, include mutual aid, radical kitchens, and offering refuge. Some of my participants provide shelter for those in need, some have cooked for and supported refugees at the camps in Calais, others have been involved in matters of ecological protection. Constructive resistance refers to challenges to 'the existing imposed order by seeking to create alternative institutions that embody the values that we hope to see flourish' (2015:8); and links to the prefiguration of political ideals as praxis.

The political scientist Carl Boggs first conceptualised prefiguration as a critique of Leninism and 'the failure of Marxism to spell out the process of transition' (1977:5). Boggs was dubious of the assumption that revolutionary transformation was an inevitable end point to capitalism and asserts that the 'most direct attack on statist Marxism' came from emerging prefigurative movements which he describes as 'the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal.' (1977:36) Prefigurative praxis seeks to build the resources, habits, and dispositions that make a world beyond capitalism attainable. That is, Boggs drew attention to the need for the left to not wait passively for revolutionary conditions to emerge, but rather to take matters in their own hands, to strategize differently, and build on collective goals toward shared aims. In the contemporary context, Guilherme Fians regards prefiguration as the 'strategies and practices employed by political activists to build alternative futures in the present and to effect political change by not reproducing the social structures that activists oppose' (Fians, 2022). The term prefiguration arises in contemporary political contexts to refer to myriad practices such as, direct action, consensus decision making meetings, communicative hand gestures, the occupation of spaces, and many other practical means of striving for desirable political futures. Alternative frameworks, resources and dispositions are created and sustained through the everyday practice of non-hierarchical, decentralised forms that may include collective ownership and the reclamation of space. Many of my participants are, in this sense, prefigurative in their beliefs and praxis and assert the ways in which a future beyond capitalism can be imagined and acted upon.

Yet allowing for such conceptual breadth around activism raises the question as to whether such a dispersed reading of activism is capable of drawing out generalisable implications about political action. Worse still, enabling a dispersed definition of activism could even be 'reinforcing the end game of neoliberalism' (Harvey 2016:9). Harvey's contention is that activism which is disconnected from labour struggles and is otherwise aimed towards the politics of everyday life, may be reinforcing neoliberal objectives and values. Whilst Harvey's concerns remain, this does not, in my view, reflect how social change and structural inequalities transform the shape and form of resistance. Critically, his perspective may still rest on the assumption that the experiences of politically active and dissenting people must fit within a coherent movement for their insights to be considered analytically useful. Yet, autonomous action still follows a pattern, and empirical research that reflects the changing make up of those who regard themselves as politically active has utility in drawing out the influence and impact of neoliberalism as a system of control and as a shaping structure. I suggest that autonomous activists can offer critical insight into how resistance is shaped by broader social and legislative forces.

My other concern is that understandings of political action grounded in social movements tend to be context specific, and so therefore may be somewhat static and less suitable for analysing social change and the experiential aspects of being an activist amidst austerity. Applying a broad assertion of activism necessitates an understanding of political action that reflects the experiences and lives of my participants amidst social, economic, and legislative changes. Conceptualising activists through action, rather than alliance, challenges the notion that implications can only be drawn from looking to social movements as though they were the sole expression of legitimate political resistance. Furthermore, conceptualising activists through their actions allows space to understand how everyday practice shapes collective movements. As Pedwell suggests (2016, 2017, 2019, 2021) micro processes, everyday habits, and sustained political strategies hold the capacity for social transformation. Conceptualising activists through action exposes the scope of political action to a broader analysis, and challenges exclusive and privileged modes of activism to forefront the multiplicity of discrete contributions made toward collective transformation.

There is a growing body of empirical and theoretical research on the broader socio-material, rhetorical and legislative conditions on politically active and dissenting people within austerity. The narratives and stories of my participants reflect how they formed their political consciousness and how austerity conditions hindered them, yet also the occasions in which their political imaginations were stirred by the injustices they faced, and how they responded. Several of my participants provide empirical basis to position austerity as part of a longer-term neoliberal social and economic pattern of control. This thesis also contributes to understandings of political subjectivity and lived experience subject to alterations and shifts in socio-material, rhetorical, affective, and legislative conditions. By taking an oral historical and narrative approach to centre lived experience, my contribution seeks to bring a humane quality to how activism is conceived that engages with the lives and actions of my participants and recognises the struggle involved in continuing to resist in austere times post 2010.

The political project of austerity goes beyond deteriorating socio-material conditions and extends into affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2009, 2016); as well as discursive and legislative conditions. Analysis of the narratives of my participants provides insight into how over a decade of austerity conditions have affected political consciousness and the strategies, ethos, and resources of politically active and dissenting people. This thesis contributes to counter-narratives of resistance with regard to the causality of austerity, its ongoing trajectory, and its transformation of everyday life. In doing so, I contribute to ethico-onto-epistemologies pertaining to the reproduction of politically dissenting subjectivities, knowledge, collective ethos, and praxis.

Outline of Chapters

Following this introduction, Chapter 1 situates an historical trajectory of neoliberalism relative to socio-economic change and legislative approaches, since the start of Margaret Thatcher's governance in the United Kingdom, since 1979. This historical review chapter spans the 1980s and 1990s to offer an account of how neoliberal imperatives emerge as necessary and urgent cultural interventions, relative to political action and counter-cultural dissent. The literature review that

follows in chapter 2 expands conceptualisations of the neoliberal imperative, with regard to austerity and political action. In this chapter, I go deeper into understanding neoliberal imperatives with regard to the socio-material and rhetorical conditions of post 2010 austerity. Neoliberal imperatives emerge as an acceleration of implicit and explicit commands for adherence to austerity protocol, alongside deteriorated socio-material and rhetorical conditions. The necessity to alter pathways of action toward economically adaptive decisions in the face of economic precarity and uncertainty could be all the more compelling and negate making choices that build toward alternative political futures.

Chapter 3 outlines my methodology and begins with a discussion on my positionality and motivation for this research. I discuss my approach to sampling, which has allowed for a broad range of activism to be encompassed within my analysis. I discuss the oral historical approach I took to the construction of interview questions and the collection of narratives; and then how narrative inquiry has framed my analytical approach. Chapter 4 is a shorter follow up chapter which introduces in a storied format that seeks to honour the truth of their experiences (Kim, 2016); whilst maintaining their anonymity.

Chapter 5 is the first empirical chapter of the thesis and explores the affective relations of shame relative to austerity rhetoric and the inter-relationship between governance and the mainstream media. The narratives of my participants shed light on how weaponizing discourses of blame, shame, and scapegoating alter causal narratives for austerity and the financial crisis and affect politically active people. Particularly within the context of austerity, the rhetorical function of shaming, could play a strong role in mediating decision making processes around engagement with political action; and feeds into the processes of social and political abjection (Tyler, 2014). My analysis consider how divisive discourse plays into fragmentations and disidentifications of class positions. I also analyse the contexts in which the experience of austerity conditions stirred the political imaginations and agency of my participants; and how socio-material and rhetorical conditions under austerity have shaped changes to their political perspectives. The second part of the chapter addresses the positivistic obsession with promoting science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and business subjects over critical disciplines including arts and humanities. The social malignment of political action and critical forms of

education has implications with regard to the reproduction of political knowledge and counter-narratives which challenge and resist neoliberal austerity and build alternative political futures. This chapter adds to counter-discourses with regard to the importance of political action and critical education in attending to contemporary socio-political problems.

Chapter 6 is the next empirical chapter and draws from the narratives of my participants, to explore how socio-material, rhetorical and legislative conditions affect the strategies, ethos, and resources of politically active people. Deteriorated socio-material and legislative conditions affect the choices and decisions that politically active and dissenting people make in the face of economic uncertainty. Furthermore, anti-squatting legislature under the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO) affects the legality of mobilising political resources from squatted infrastructure. The LASPO emerges relative to broader socio-material instabilities and uncertainties under austerity conditions. This chapter provides empirical evidence for a longer trajectory of neoliberal socio-political and cultural control in the UK and adds to conceptualisations of the neoliberal imperative with regard to political action, dissent and counterculture. In particular, my analysis in this chapter explores the notion of prefigurative parenting that has so far been underdeveloped within scholarly literature but was coined in 2007 in an activist blog post by Renata Janowski. My analysis aims to contribute to the development of understanding prefigurative parenting as challenging neoliberal imperatives and as a vital means of transmitting ethico-onto-epistemologies intergenerationally. In Janowski's (2007) words, 'When we incorporate the children as part of the fabric of our communities of resistance, we are raising the next generation of revolutionaries.'

Chapter 7 is my final analysis chapter which analyses the themes of accumulation, burnout, and self-care amongst politically active people. Beyond resource mobilisation theories (which emphasise social movements); interpretation of empirical material enables an approach that considers how the individual impacts of austerity can have broader ramifications on political thought and consequently affect collective participation. Using the gentrification of East London as an example and David Harvey's notion of accumulation by dispossession (2005b); I analyse how the accumulated pressures of austerity contribute to feelings of burnout. The accumulative matrix of deteriorating socio-material, affective, rhetorical, and

legislative conditions can have an affective quality of depletion on the mental resources of politically active and dissenting people and contribute to feelings of burnout. The chapter speaks to anyone facing burnout in the midst of increasingly unstable and unequitable circumstances; and challenges the view that self-care is inherently antithetical to collective needs. Burnout need not be the end of the road. Instead, as my empirical material and analysis suggests, practicing self-care in response to burnout can assist in enabling on-going patterns of activism, and building politically desirable futures.

Chapter 1: An Historical Trajectory of Neoliberalism, Political Action, and Dissent across the 1980s and 1990s.

As I critically outlined in the introduction of the thesis, neoliberalism, as a socio-economic and political mode of governance, stems from early 20th century economic philosophy and came into practice in the United Kingdom upon the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. Beyond the shrinking of the state, and the primacy of the competitive free market, neoliberalism manifests as a cultural undertaking that encourages living in accordance with established economic principles and ideologies (Harvey, 2005; 2016; Davies, 2016). Such principles can arise as a set of imperatives to make appropriate choices and changes, and promotes adherence to entrepreneurial rationales, in response to precarious circumstances (Rose, 1999; Krce-Ivančić, 2018). As Michel Foucault suggests neoliberalism has altered classical liberal assumptions about the nature of capital and labour exchange: Liberal economics would position homo economicus as a '[person] man of exchange', entailing transactional exchanges of labour for capital. Yet neoliberalism, not only alters such relations, but it also engenders an understanding of homo economicus as an 'entrepreneur of himself [themselves]' as their 'own capital', their 'own producer' and 'source of [their] his earnings' (1979/2008:225-226). That is, the expectation and assumption that people harness their bodies and minds as their own personal capital to create their own circumstances and opportunities and make rational

choices that maximise their stake in the economy and wider society. Neoliberal principles arise within culture as a set of imperatives to make appropriate choices, commanding adherence to economic, entrepreneurial rationales in response to precarious circumstances (Rose, 1999; Krce-Ivančić, 2018).

In order for neoliberal economic principles and imperatives to gain cultural traction; however, it could be argued that urgencies, and necessities to alter economic relations must first be forged, and then embedded and sustained at the level of governance, and within culture, over time. Looking back over the late 20th century, neoliberal principles and imperatives are in many ways antithetical to the lifestyles, strategies, and ethos of politically active and dissenting people; and have a historical basis that can be traced with respect to the relationships between resistance, political power, the economy, and the state in the UK.

With this in mind, the following historical review chapter maps an unfolding trajectory of neoliberalism relative to political action, countercultural dissent, and legislative approaches across the 1980s and 1990s. I focus on Conservative era governance, and political resistance, as well as how the legislative repression of dissent has been wielded as a means of embedding and sustaining neoliberal imperatives: That is, the impetus to legislate against, and control political action and dissent can be understood as embedded in the neoliberal imperative to erode and destroy, that which does not serve an economic purpose. In chapter 6, I draw on the experiences of my participants to analyse the socio-material and legislative conditions of austerity relative to the neoliberal imperative. This chapter casts light on the temporal periods from which many of my research participants were politically active. In doing so, I flesh out the socio-political and historical context in the UK relative to the political trajectories that arise through their narratives. Whilst I do not draw explicitly from empirical material in this chapter, I do on occasion refer to the lived experience of my research participants. I invite the reader to step back in time to critically explore how neoliberal economics and its co-occurring principles shaped cultural imperatives relative to political action and counter cultural dissent in the last two decades of the century.

In the first section of the chapter, I situate the positivist theory of the Chicago School of Economics as a corollary with neoliberal principals, the shaping of choice structures, and Thatcher's approach to governance. I address the socio-historical

context of the 1980s with regard to what Will Davies (2016) describes as a 'combative' phase of embedding neoliberal principles, sometimes with violent force. I confront the political circumstances surrounding the Battle for Orgreave and the Battle of the Beanfield as two examples of state police co-ordinated attack against dissent (Wall, 2020); as well as how these events are broadly understood to have been part of the Thatcher government's impetus to implement the Public Order Act 1986.

The second section segues into the political culture of the 1990s and the intersection of direct action, the DiY ethos (Do it Yourself), and free parties, as at once resistant to, and susceptible to neoliberal imperatives. I critically explore how state anxieties about political activism, raves and nomadic living led to the enactment of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, and the longer-term implications for direct action campaigns and the counter-cultural dissemination of dissent.

Overall, the chapter seeks to draw attention to the interconnectivity between a seemingly diffuse scope of political action and counter-cultural dissent in the UK, and how neoliberal imperatives have a longer history relative to a broad array of political action. In doing so, I aim to establish a basis from which to further conceptualise the neoliberal imperative in relation to austerity and political action in the literature review chapter that follows this historical review.

Sowing and Embedding Neoliberalism

The style of neoliberalism practiced in the UK, since 1979, centres around the promotion of free-market, competitive principles, alongside the aim of limiting the role of the state in public administration. Upon winning the UK general election, on the 4th of May 1979, Margaret Thatcher explicitly sought to transform what she regarded as a stagnant economy that she believed required renovation through privatisation, deregulation, and the assertion of free-market principles (Thatcher MSS, 2023). However, neoliberalism as a governing strategy extends beyond the state and economy and into the framing of social action. As David Harvey (2005:3) traces, neoliberalism constitutes a political endeavour that extends beyond the economy and into social relations and 'ways of life'. In this vein, economists, Philip

Mirowski, and Dieter Plehwe (2015:426) advocate for neoliberalism as, 'an intricately structured long-term political project' in the form of a so-called 'thought-collective'.

As explored in my Introduction, Thatcher's approach to socioeconomic policy was heavily influenced by the neoliberal economic philosophy of Friedrich Hayek and the Chicago School of Economics in the United States. As philosopher and socio-legal scholar Guiseppi Campesi (2009) articulates, through a neoliberal, positivistic lens, all action has an economic basis. Positivist economics is premised on rational choice. That is, the notion that all social actors have capacity to make rational decisions based on their stake in the consumer market and can levy their way out of precarity through the choices they make. The cultural undertaking of positive economics frequently frames social agency as operative solely within economic rationales, as a politically neutral expression of everyday life. For instance, economist Milton Friedman's widely cited essay "The Methodology of Positive Economics" (1953) was particularly influential to the development of neoliberal economic and cultural theory within the Chicago School, and positivist economic theory. In his essay, Friedman argues that positive economics is a 'principle independent from any particular ethical position or normative judgements' (1953/2009:4). That is, positive economics (positivism) seeks to operate as though it were not a political undertaking, it is framed as free from tradition, subjective values, or assumptions. While such economic principles and stances are in fact laden with political assumptions about how best to live, such political and ideological elements are neutralised as logical and objective within public understanding.

Thatcher's approach to instilling neoliberal socioeconomic principles was aggressive and aimed at all those deemed to be undermining her. Davies (2016) describes her approach as 'combative' insofar that she targeted socialists, unions, and other politically non-conformist groups (Harvey, 2005; Davies, 2016). Thatcher's aim to subdue the power of unions was underpinned by legislative approaches, such as, the Employment Act 1980 and 1982; the Trade Union Act 1984; and the Trade Union Act 1988, following the re-election of Thatcher in 1987 (Towers, 1989:168). Such legislation restricted the capacity of unions to fight against mine closures. Historian Jim Tomlinson (2021) describes the process of deindustrialisation as a 'decline' in industrial work which he argues was reinforced by Thatcher's market-fundamentalist approach and appeals to the moral economy, 'in which moral conduct is encouraged

by the maximising of the self-reliance and autonomy of individuals and their families and minimising their reliance on the state' (2021:621). Pointing to the cultural dimension of Thatcher's neoliberalism, economic processes of deregulation, privatisation and deindustrialisation were reinforced by moralising discourses that fostered notions of financial independence from the state as inherently "good", whilst simultaneously denigrating those unable or unwilling to adapt to widespread structural and economic changes (Tomlinson, 2021:621).

In her 1979 pre-election speech, Thatcher had promised to end strike bargaining and insinuated that there is no alternative (Thatcher, 1979). This was not the first time that such a notion would arise. The assertion that there is no choice or alternative to neoliberal modes of governance was echoed by Thatcher across the 1980s in various forms and collocations and became so ubiquitous that it attained the acronym, TINA – There Is No Alternative (Moncrieff, 2013). Thatcher's governance strategy explicitly sought to cement the notion that there was no alternative to a competitive, enterprising, free-market economy and that the nationalised economy and strike action were threatening forces that needed restraining and ultimate destruction. Alongside moralising discourses, cuts in subsidies to the coal-mining industry had threatened the existence of the coal fields, and non-profitable mines were subject to closure in the early 1980s (Nettleingham, 2015:854).

Against the announcement from the National Coal Board of the closure of Cortonwood Colliery, in South Yorkshire, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) voted to strike. The miners' strikes took place between 6th March 1984 and 3rd March 1985, despite Thatcher's vehement opposition (ibid). The Miners' strikes drew support and solidarity from numerous political groups and campaigns, such as, black civil rights activists, LGBT campaigners, feminists, and members of the Greenham common peace camp (Kelliher, 2021; Gildea and Phillips 2020). Furthermore, as radical geographer Diarmaid Kelliher (2021) expands, despite widespread assumptions, solidarity between the miners and the middle classes was strong.

On the 20th of July 1984, Thatcher delivered a private speech to the 1922 Committee (back bench parliament) where she relayed her underlying attitudes towards segments of society who she deemed to be the 'enemy within':

Enemy without – beaten him and strong in defence.

Enemy within – Miners' leaders, Liverpool, and some local authorities. Just as dangerous, in a way more difficult to fight. But just as dangerous to liberty. Scar across the face of our country. Ill motivated. Ill intentioned. Politically inspired. (Thatcher, 1984)

This infamous speech relates to how Thatcher began to amplify cultural anxieties and the narrative of an internal national threat. 'The enemy without – beaten him and strong in defence', refers to the Falklands war and the extent of military force imposed on the Falklands Islands as ostensible proof that the British empire still had prevailing force. The Falklands war was a 74-day war between 2nd April – 14th June 1982 over the contested sovereignty and political status of the British colonised Falklands and amounted in the unnecessary loss of life for hundreds on both sides. Having re-asserted colonial power and military dominance over the Falklands, Thatcher turned next to the notion that there was an 'enemy within' composed of union leaders (especially Arthur Scargill), seemingly the totality of Liverpool and 'some' (Labour) local authorities. Although Thatcher's speech to the 1922 committee was never delivered publicly, it clearly demonstrated her underlying assumption that those opposed to her were an enemy threat, from within national lines, that needed taking down. Thatcher's drive to instil the neoliberal imperative was to emerge via paramilitary force and public order policing. The cultural and legislative circumstances of the Battle for Orgreave amidst the miners strikes and the Battle of the Beanfield are both broadly understood to have led to the Public Order Act 1985 and are intimately connected with Thatcher's drive against dissent and efforts to instil the neoliberal imperative.

The Battle for Orgreave and the Battle of the Beanfield

After months of strike action, the National Union of Mineworkers picket on 18th June 1984 mobilised 5000-6000 strikers who blockaded the Orgreave British Steel coke plant, near Sheffield, South Yorkshire. The aim was to obstruct non-strikers, disrupt business and draw attention to the mine closures (Juliff, 2018:86). The police attack on strikers at Orgreave culminated from a co-ordinated strategy that was aimed toward breaking down the strength of the NUM. The 1983 public order manual had

laid out a model for the use of escalated force within policing which enabled Thatcher to devise a 'secretive' training program for police to follow (Wall, 2020). The training program engaged police forces with paramilitary training, alongside the introduction of an array of novel weaponry and protection, including batons (rather than traditional truncheons), masks and riot shields, as well as mounted horses. The strikers at Orgreave were met with the first mass deployment of police who were trained under the escalated force model (ibid). Such escalated force was in contrast to previous policing models and involved phases of attack. Firstly, walls of police with batons barricaded strikers; then mounted police with riot shields and batons chased and charged at strikers, ostensibly because "missiles" had been thrown at police shields (Gilmour 2019). The novel use of enhanced arms and weaponry by law enforcement set a militaristic tone that normalised and legitimised the use of coercive force.

The extent of the violence and control asserted by the police is depicted in Mike Figgis' (2001) documentary *The Battle of Orgreave* which commentates Jeremy Deller's historical reenactment of Orgreave and illuminates the dynamic between the miners and the police. The reenactment attempted to reproduce the sights, sounds and atmospheres felt in the fields by re-constructing events as accurately as possible and is based on extensive interviews with miners and police. In Figgis' documentary, interviews with miners, describe the extent of brutality and control exerted by walls of police in full riot gear who were beating batons against their shields to build a militaristic atmosphere. One miner viscerally describes the sounds and feeling of a police baton smashing the bones in his leg. Another miner reports how those who tried to flee were pursued on mounted horses.

Although there is no way to truly grasp the extent of feeling at Orgreave, something that stands out from Deller's re-enaction is the effort that went into reconstructing the atmospheres of Orgreave. Affect theorist, Toby Juliff (2018:88) suggests that the sensorial qualities of Deller's reconstruction, 'communicates a set of potentials' in how it recreated the multilayered affective atmospheres felt at Orgreave. Illan Wall (2019) conceptualises the atmospheres sustained by the police as 'atmotechnics'. The atmotechnics of Orgreave involved the deliberate construction and manufacture of experiential conditions, alongside the use of paramilitary tools, as a co-ordinated strategy to control crowds through intimidation; such atmospheres are designed in

co-ordinated phases to disengage targets and facilitate excessive force (ibid). Wall's conceptualisation of atmospheres is based on but differs from Ben Anderson's (2009) notion of affective atmospheres. Anderson's theorisation suggests that atmospheres are 'impersonal' and 'indeterminate' and felt through intensities emanating via proximity to material and spatial factors. The multilayered affective atmosphere of constructed and indeterminate intensities would likely be felt simultaneously, adding to the panic and confusion felt on the field.

Overall, 93 miners were unlawfully arrested in relation to Orgreave. Yet no arrests led to conviction because the police evidence did not stand up in court (Juliff 2018). After seven years, compensation was paid to 39 strikers for unlawful arrest and amounted to £400 000, after the Public Order Act 1986 was passed (ibid). However, the extent of police violence and consequential cover up has still not wholly been accounted for, in court. It is important to note that the utilisation of offensive and defensive paramilitary weaponry was a new strategic progression of police powers and directive to use force. Orgreave marked a shift in tone to how policing operating had previously been carried out. That is, the emergence of paramilitary approaches relays state anxieties and enabled the police to engage with unprecedented force and draws attention to the temporal context in which neoliberal technologies began to cross into public order policing. That is, arming the police with a vast array of weaponry not only requires interactivity with privatised providers to obtain weaponry, but such armoury was utilised to violently assert neoliberal relations of power.

Thatcher's attack directly affected those at Orgreave and other mining communities and served as a symbolic stab at the solidarity movements arising around the miners strikes. Furthermore, as historian Andy Worthington (2021) alludes, the Stonehenge Free Festival was Thatcher's 'next enemy within'. The festival was an annual autonomously run event at the site of Stonehenge which attracted a variety of counter cultural and politically active people. The event spanned over the course of a month and represented a counter-cultural rejection of the neoliberal imperatives, moralisations and values that were being heavily transmitted during Thatcher's governance. The ethos of the festival was to practice free-living principles and exist outside the existing economic framework, by operating without money. Instead of formal currency, bartering and labour exchange replaced the need for commodified

services. The convoy of travellers has also been widely described as the 'peace convoy' partly because it included many of those who were at the Greenham Women's Peace camp against cruise missiles, alongside, environmental protestors, anarchists, pagans, and new age travellers (St John, 2008).

Prior to the 12th Stonehenge Free Festival, the English Heritage, National Trust, the Wiltshire local authority and local landowners unsuccessfully attempted to impose land injunctions to prevent the festival from taking place in 1985. The failed injunctions alongside the extent of Thatcher's wrath toward dissent, culminated in another co-ordinated use of paramilitary force via Operation Solstice. On the 1st of June 1985 the newly para-militarised police force was sent on mass to support Wiltshire police with *Operation Solstice*, which was targeted to prevent a convoy of travellers from reaching the festival (Worthington, 2021). The name of the operation could be a direct reference to a WW2 military operation that was responsive to Soviet advances on Berlin in 1945, alluding to the ideological overtones of the state co-ordinated attack. The police set up a roadblock seven miles from the site of Stonehenge to prevent the convoy from passing. Due to the roadblock, many chose to stay in their vehicles and take refuge in an adjacent field, yet many others were forcefully rammed into the field by police (ibid).

On paper, *Operation Solstice* was an attempt to restore order to the countryside and protect national heritage. Yet the actualities of the operation involved the police exerting the same kind of paramilitary techniques aimed at the strikers, yet with perhaps even more disregard for their humanity. ITN reporter Kim Sabido who witnessed, and filmed the events, found them extremely harrowing (Morris and Goodwin, 1991). Despite filming the attack and submitting it for report, the news coverage that was televised at the time of the events, replaced Sabido's narrative of event with another voiceover and edited out the more grotesque police violence. Upon seeking the footage from ITN, Sabido was told that parts of the footage were missing, (ibid); which arguably points to the extent to which the police and state sought to cover up their criminality. Eventually documentary footage broadcast on Channel 4, in 1991, showed the police charging into the field on mounted horses, using batons to break through the windows of homes and vehicles. The footage also revealed police dragging families, including a mother and child, through large shards of glass in the smashed-out windows of vehicles (ibid).

After viewing the footage, it is difficult to put into words the sheer extent of violence, intimidation and criminal damage exerted by the police as they beat, kicked, and dragged members of the convoy from their vehicles, before setting their homes and possessions ablaze with firebombs and arresting everyone, meaning that many children were taken into foster care (Morris and Goodwin, 1991). The Beanfield was not only a psychological and physical assault that threatened human life, but it was also domination by abjection, and was symbolic of Thatcher's pursuit to instil neoliberal values by whatever means necessary. The attack cemented the notion that those who lived oppositional lives to pursuits of economic productivity deserved to have their entire lives violently uprooted. The ramifications of losing their home, possessions, and vehicle all at the same time, are that each family and individual who suffered were rendered abject. Keeping in mind that the paramilitary techniques wielded against the convoy were based on colonial policing practices, such abjection is relative to how Imogen Tyler expresses colonial oppression and the degradation of travellers as, '*abjection as lived*, as a form of exclusion and humiliation' [emphasis in original] (2014:42).

The cultural problematisation and construction of New Age nomadic people as a civil threat from within national lines had longer-term implications with regard to the lifestyles and choices of politically active and dissenting people. This is the case, in part, because the cultural delimitation of acceptable lifestyles and the politics of social abjection continue to play out in the context of post-2010 (Tyler, 2014). Social abjection not only affects travelling communities, but also could close down opportunities for dissent by delegitimising other groups and people. As explored in Chapter 6, the strategies, ethos, and resources of politically active and dissenting people making adaptations amidst precarious circumstances are often limited by socio-material, rhetorical and legislative conditions that reflect neoliberal imperatives.

The legislative circumstances surrounding both Orgreave and the Beanfield, as mentioned earlier, contributed to the impetus to legislate the Public Order Act 1986 (POA) The Public Order Act 1986 part 1 introduced the categories of riot, violent disorder and affray and public disorder. Part 2 of the act posed restrictions on public assembly and gave the police increased powers to impose conditions, designate or deny procession routes, or even ban demonstrations for a period of up to three

months. The POA also affects spontaneous protest, and actions carried out on private land. The phrasing of the legislation can afford the police a large scope of discretion in the interpretation and implementation of these laws (Walsh and Conway, 2011). Moreover, the POA assisted in strengthening the propriety rights of landowners whilst weakening common law rights to roam the land and may be used as a tool in the neoliberal enclosure of commodified spaces.

Beyond legislation, both Orgreave and the Beanfield have neoliberal overtones in relation to the commodification and privatisation of rural land. These state-led, police co-ordinated attacks were legitimised on the basis that the striking miners and the convoy were internalised threats to state stability. The aftermaths of both played into a system of state denial. The sociologist Stanley Cohen suggests that states that avoid accountability tend to employ tactics of denial and normalisation, and 'reflect personal and cultural states in which suffering is not acknowledged' (2013:52). In both cases, police, media, and official statements reframed the public narrative to deny the extent of police violence portraying the police as having been overwhelmed and victimised (Figgis and Deller, 2001; Morris and Goodwin, 1991). In doing so, the state narrative negated the suffering of the strikers and the convoy by tarnishing them as the aggressors and legitimised the use of police force. The longer-term ramifications are that the policing of both events began to normalise paramilitary approaches against civilian populations, and thus constitute a turning point in policing relative to the military industrial complex.

Thus far, I have described how the economic imperative of neoliberalism was bolstered by state-led targeted attacks on striking miners and counter-cultural people. I argued that legislation and public order policing are upheld by economic principles and erosive to the strategies of politically dissenting people. I now turn to exploring the political context of the 1990s in the UK, the DiY (Do it Yourself) ethos, direct action and free parties (party and protest); and how the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 was responsive to raves and direct action.

The 1990s and the DiY ethos, Direct Action, Party and Protest

By the early 1990s, over a decade of Conservative power in the UK had, as discussed, been marked by neoliberal processes of economic deregulation, privatisation, and widespread unemployment, underpinned by the cultural patterning of free-market values in everyday life (Harvey, 2005). Thatcher's plans to implement the poll tax in 1990 led to widespread political dissent and community action. Previous attempts to impose a mass tax (similar to the poll tax) under the feudal rule of Richard II between 1377-81 had led to the Peasants' revolt (Hannah, 2020b). The wider movement against the poll tax in Britain at this time incorporated dissent from many political factions including socialist groups and unions, as well as grassroots and community organisations.

Cultural sociologist George McKay (1998:7) situates the community protests against the poll tax as inspirational for the emergence of the DIY culture and party and protest movement. Although the tone of community action and DIY were different in strategy and ethos the lessons from the protests resonated with the emerging party and protest culture (ibid). The counter-cultural politics of the early nineties rejected the individualistic Thatcherite notion that 'there is no such thing as society', and sought collective engagement and active participation, alongside the construction of political resources. DIY culture also emerges at the intersection between direct action and the culture of free festivals (McKay, 1998). As McKay positions it, the strength and ethos of the DIY culture is embedded in action and 'takes many forms from throwing a free party to setting up a long-term protest camp' (1998:4). DIY praxis also built from the direct-action strategies of previous generations of politically active people such as the communities that had grown from the Stonehenge Free Festival and the Greenham Women's Peace Camp (McKay 1998:9). The ethos of DIY is centred around a rejection of reliance on economics to solve the problems of inequality, exploitation, and excessive consumer culture and may involve taking political matters 'into one's own hands', such as through direct action, and collectively building resources and relationships that could sustain political alternatives.

The resources built by politically active people in the early nineties also directly challenged the imperative to look to the market for solutions to local and global

problems. For example, through protest camps, squats (residing in or occupying abandoned properties), squat kitchens, vegan cafes, allotments, zine making and swapping, skills sharing, sound systems, pirate radio and other collective utilities. Sustaining collective political resources reject profit as a driver, and enable non-hierarchical relationships based on mutual aid, collaboration, and collective ownership. That is, building collective resources re-negotiates the relations of production in ways that open up alternatives, space for expression, and potentialities for different political realities. Sustaining such political infrastructure may confront the neoliberal imperative to adhere to a profit-oriented ethos and wider forms of economic normativity.

The DIY ethic was multifaceted and recursive insofar that McKay emphasises that 'DIY and non-violent direct action (NVDA) feed each other' (1998:4). The DIY ethic connected an array of direct-action campaigns and encompassed direct action movements such as hunt saboteur campaigns, roads protests, environmental actions, protest camps, and continued action against section 28. One notable example of anti-road protests was the Solsbury hill protest camp. Solsbury was part of a succession of protests against the longer-term plans that Thatcher had devised in the 1980s, to construct a super-highway that would ostensibly eliminate the need for public transport (Monbiot and Kingsnorth, in Arbib 2009). Such plans relayed neoliberal imperatives which necessitate the individualisation of all aspects of life. In this case, through maligning collective forms of transport. The construction of a by-pass on Solsbury Hill would involve the destruction of a multitude of trees and wildlife habitats and change the environmental landscape forever (ibid).

Aufheben's (Aufheben is a Libertarian communist journal, and the article is published under the collective name Aufheben) article in David McKay's anthology *DiY culture, Party and Protest in Nineties Britain*, recalls the 'No M11 link road' campaign in 1994 and expresses how the direct-action campaign challenged the expectations of life under capitalism by drawing attention to everyday struggle:

> much of the significance of this day-to-day existence of struggle lies in the fact that a certain way of life is required to maintain the capitalist system: a life of discipline and conformity, with expression limited to purchasing power (1998:107)

That is, everyday struggle is framed by the expectation that one lives a particular way of life, whereby subjects are repressed by normativity and in which expression is bound by consumption choices (Aufheben, 1998). Activist and political journalists George Monbiot and Paul Kingsnorth comment that 'no-one returned from Solsbury Hill unchanged' (Monbiot and Kingsnorth, in Arbib 2009:9). The direct-action camp served as a terrain in which to put prefigurative ideas and practices into action. Due to the novelty of the approach and praxes:

> The police, bailiffs and private security had not yet learnt how to extract people safely from trees and their machinery, nor had the draconian laws such as the Criminal Justice Act' been passed (Monbiot and Kingsnorth, in Arbib 2009:11)

The direct-action campaign was successful in blocking the construction on multiple occasions through direct action strategies such as occupying the land, locking onto trees, and general obstruction of the tree killing machines (bulldozers). Moreover, many built tree houses and squatted in trees marked for demolition (ibid). Adrian Arbib's collection of photography from the Solsbury hill camp reveals the structures and resources the road protestors built, as well as their praxes of disrupting construction efforts, climbing onto machinery or locking on; and building camps 'designed to be broken down quickly in the event of an eviction' 2009:21).[8]

Monbiot and Kingsnorth further note that:

> Road protestors put their bodies in the way. In doing so, they focussed public anger toward a government that wouldn't listen, a politics that put money ahead of human beings, a philosophy that placed no values on anything that couldn't be quantified' (Monbiot and Kingsnorth, 2009:9)

Ultimately the campaign was unsuccessful but cultivated a framework of praxes that would go on to be of utility for a variety of future direct-action campaigns. The DIY ethos also extends into the production of alternative space and the intersection of party and protest. As John Jordan argues, DIY culture takes the 'utopian demands' of

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[8] Arbib's photography also highlights the amity between animals and humans, alongside efforts to avoid the displacement of wildlife. The comraderies made at the camp included a wild piglet, a young magpie, and a duck; amongst other unphotographed animals. Such relations challenge the imperatives of motorway construction by fore-fronting alliances between humans and animals in preventing environmental destruction, and loss of habitat.

introducing 'creativity, imagination, play and pleasure into the revolutionary project' (1998:129) Such a vision of a hedonist utopia may be antithetical to the kinds of utopia theorised by the cultural sociologist David Nettleingham's (2014) reading of socialist utopias, insofar that socialist utopias are projected forward and are based on dedication to ideals and coherent models of achieving the political aims of socialistic institutional reconfiguration. Nonetheless, DIY culture is not entirely devoid of political meaning. The utopian demands of party and protest may be more reflective of a widespread political yearning to bring the future into the present and move away from political traditions that hold desire captive to the notion that politics must always be a serious endeavour. As such, the party and protest ethos challenges the cultural demand for obedience to the mundanities of life, as mapped out by economic goal posts and normative approaches to living.

Regarding the dynamic of the 1990s it would lack nuance to not mention that raves and free parties were also associated with drug culture[9]. In particular, the emergence of MDMA (3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine) aka Ecstasy in recreational drug culture is widely recognised as a major part of the experience of raves in the 1990s. In the context of raves and free parties, sociologist Mary Anna Wright suggests that the so-called ecstasy revolution played a role in bridging social relations, challenging behavioural norms, and deconstructing embedded social and legislative values. That is, the ontological experience of Ecstasy (MDMA) may engender experiences that transcend social and generational boundaries, 'rules like the structure of the British class system, the role of men and women and the sanctity of the law have become increasingly untenable' (1998:229). The consumption of Ecstasy in a collective setting from this perspective, facilitate affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2009) with the potential to alter unconscious associations and assumptions broadly associated with building connection and empathy with others.

Free party events operated outside of formal regulatory frameworks, in fields, houses, squats and warehouses. Although outside the scope of my analysis, my

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[9] MDMA was first developed pharmaceutically in 1912 by the pharmaceutical company Merck (who still hold the patent). However, biochemist Alexander Shulgin further developed MDMA in the 1970s for its potential as a therapeutic drug, as the drug is known for its humanist potential of promoting empathy, conscious awareness, and feelings of belonging (to the world), which could offer cognitive scope to process difficult feelings and emotions (Shulgin, 1990). I cannot in good conscience promote the notion that there are no risks associated with taking drugs, or that each and every person responds in the same way to mind-altering substances, or that it is a safe or appropriate course of action for every psychological disposition. Nor can I deny that the production and consumption of mind-altering substances can be embedded in social privilege and practices of global exploitation. However, I can acknowledge the affective capacity of Ecstasy in bringing together different people in society. More recently MDMA has been trialled for its potential as a therapy for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) yet are constrained by Merct still holding the patent.

empirical material reveals how there may have been a moment in time in which social change felt tangible, relative to the potentialities emanating from unregulated space that had not yet been defined by market imperatives. Such unmarked space may be akin to Deleuze and Guattari's notions of war machines and smooth space. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari specify, 'an ideological, scientific, or artistic movement can be a potential war machine' insofar as they may lead in another direction and exist in a 'smooth space of displacement' from the dominant culture (2004:466).

> It is because they take war as an object all the more necessary for being 'merely' "supplementary": they can make war only on the condition that they simultaneously create something else, if only new non-organic social relations (Deleuze and Guattari 2004:466)

The unbound potentialities within the nomadic tendency of the early free festival movement could have constituted a war machine, in that nomads withdraw from the cultural impetus with capacities of building entirely novel social relations. Rather than simply existing as a sub-culture within an oppressive dominant culture, war machines are creative enablers of differentiated social relations, yet are 'exterior to' state codification (2004:387-389). Many free festivals and parties were held by traveller communities (typically 'new age' and Romany) and sought to keep the 'spirit' and 'vibes' and 'family community' of free parties intact, and based on informal economies of bartering and swaps, largely keep profit-making aside from the motivation (Malyon, 1998:192). Travelling communities, similar to squatters in precarious situations, threaten the neoliberal imperative of economic and domestic normativity and provoke pre-existing cultural anxieties. The possible normalisation of nomadic tendencies could compromise state stability by virtue of it being harder to track, control and monitor the movements and demographics of temporary populations.

The targeting of drugs and raves was central to the police operation, *Operation Nomad* which was a surveillance and information gathering exercise aimed at travellers and the free festival movement, in the early 1990s (Lodge, 1998). The police had successfully blocked access to the Avon free festival near Bristol, which had caused the convoy enroute to divert to the Malvern Hills and Castlemorton Common where the Castlemorton free festival took place (Malyon, 1998). The

Castlemorton free festival ran between the 22nd and the 28th of May,1992, and included various sound systems such as, DiY, Bedlam, Circus Warp, and Spiral Tribe. (Transpontine, 2014). As media attention grew, more people joined the party, amassing over 40 000 people. The nature of *Operation Nomad* as a surveillance exercise meant that the police were heavily outnumbered and unprepared to exert force to remove the crowd. As such, the police did not use the same kind of force and abjectification as they did toward the travellers at the beanfield in 1985. Instead, the festival played out for nearly a week, and the police targeted their arrests at the new age travelling community who were de-rigging and leaving the site in vans. The police arrested 13 people who were associated with Spiral Tribe, on charges of 'conspiracy to cause a public nuisance' (Transpontine 2014; Guest 2009). As well as targeting direct action and large-scale rave gatherings, the events at Castlemorton are widely regarded as the tipping point for the government to respond with plans to impose the Criminal Justice and Public Order act 1994 (McKay, 1998; Transpontine, 2014; Worthington, 2020).

The lead up to the final legislation of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 (CJPOA) ignited a mass movement against the Bill. However, it was ultimately unsuccessful in stopping it, with the new law coming into force on 3rd November 1994. The CJPOA plays a number of functions in limiting the scope of political action. The Act affected the direct-action groups that were prominent in the 1990s, such as, road protests, anti-cruise missile protests, black civil rights activists, hunt sabotage, gay liberation anti-section 28 campaigns, and continues to have implications for political campaigning. The CJPOA solidified the neoliberal ethos of the Public Order Act 1986 by amending it to include the offence of 'trespassory assembly'. Section 61 imposed additional restrictive measures against unauthorised assembly, criminalised unauthorised encampments, and gave police increased powers to remove protestors from land.

The CJPOA also went further in directing its attention to raves as a societal problem. Section 63 (b) also prohibits 'sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of *repetitive beats*.' The phrasing was specifically collocated to address so-called rave music, while responding to the wider perceived social threat of raves, protest, and direct action which had further implications for nomadic ways of life (McKay, 1998; Worthington, 2009, 2021). Building from the Public Order Act

1986, the CJPOA has neoliberal overtones in that the legislation privileged rights over land, rather than democratic freedoms to protest. Thus, enabling in the longer term, I would suggest, increased public acceptance of limitations to the countryside tradition of public access. The imposition of the CJPOA played into the capitalisation and commodification of rave culture, as well having the longer-term impact of shifting the ethos of the party and protest culture.

The criminalisation of dissent in the UK has a far more detailed trajectory that is outside the scope of this chapter. However, the CJPOA may have implications with regard to necessitating economic choices and rationales. One of my research participants, Eden, who is aged in his sixties, commented that 'Government regulation in the early 1990s tamed the wild west a bit and made people aware of the opportunity as a business, rather than a way of life'. That is, increased legislation and public scrutiny had further implications insofar that banning raves as well as targeting direct action played a role in shifting social relations toward economic ways of being. The continued pervasiveness of neoliberal values also shaped entrepreneurial and consumerist attitudes within party and protest culture. Arguably (as reflected in my empirical material) a shift in ethos from free-festivals and nomadic living as a 'way of life' began to be eroded as people became more aware of 'business opportunities' (Eden).

The tendency toward finding group identity within club culture was particularly prevalent by the late 1990s. As sociologist Sarah Thornton (1995:203) suggested, subcultural capital 'confers status' as 'objectified or embodied'. That is, objectified through patterns of sub-cultural consumerism, and embodied by 'being in the know' (ibid). Sub-cultural capital extends from Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of cultural capital and the distinctions of taste that mark class and proximity to others. Yet, as Thornton argued, 'shared cultural consumption does not necessarily form a coherent social group' (1995:205). The commodification of political culture shifts the emphasis away from the key issues at stake and toward consumption practices that may build a sub-cultural identity. As John Jordan suggests:

> Those who attempt to push the boundaries of the revolutionary project are rapidly recuperated, neutralised, their political ideas forgotten, their work turned into commodities. (1998:130)

Jordan raises an important issue that resounds with the contemporary era: That is, that there are many ways of disintegrating and demolishing political ideas beyond the direct use of state-sanctioned violence, seen in the 1980s. I argue that one important way the cultural erosion of dissent in the 1990s manifests, is as a neutralisation of counterculture that brings counter cultural dissent into the mainstream consumer fold. Neoliberal principles and values underpin cultural shifts and legislative approaches, and as this chapter has explored have been violently asserted by paramilitary force in the 1980s, and culturally embedded across the 1990s (and beyond).

Conclusion

This chapter mapped how neoliberal imperatives emerge in the UK with respect to the proliferation of economic interests and cultural anxieties across the 1980s and 1990s. I argued that neoliberal principles may emerge in legislative approaches, as they reflect the needs of a competitive, privatised, free-market economy. Thatcher's approach to legislating against trade unions placed restrictions on industrial action and set in motion a longer-term process of delegitimization (Dorey, 2016); which has had lasting implications with regard to how strike action takes place, and the public perception of striking as a political strategy. That is, strike action was routinely positioned by Thatcher as militantly opposition to the aims of the state, and to some extent such framing continues to persist in the public eye in media reportage. The public delegitimization of strike action could foster longer term dispositions that encourage acceptance, resilience, and adaptation to economic precarity; Rather than seeking to challenge instability through collective action that aims to negotiate for stable and equitable working conditions.

In this chapter, I have established a basis through which to conceptualise the dissemination of neoliberal imperatives relative to austerity and political action in the literature review that follows. Whilst I do not tackle the 1997-2010 New Labour era in the literature review or analysis, there is basis to assess the implications of post 9/11 national security concerns, the war on terror, governmental initiatives against anti-social behaviour and police surveillance relative to the targeting of politically active people (Pickard, 2005). However, taking a focus on Conservative era governance has enabled a tracing of neoliberal imperatives relative to state anxieties

and economic reasoning, that may project forward into shaping dispositions that are amenable to economic rationalities within an austerity context. As will be explored throughout the thesis, neoliberal imperatives continue to underpin socio-material and rhetorical conditions and were heightened post 2010. The next chapter offers a review of the literature surrounding the question, what is the neoliberal imperative relative to austerity and political action? I explore how austerity conditions go beyond cuts to social spending and changes to public services. Disintegrated socio-material conditions, legislative approaches, and rhetorical reproach can have additional impacts that affect the adaptive tendencies, strategies, and ethos of politically active and dissenting people.

Chapter 2: Neoliberal Imperatives, Austerity, and Political Action

Following the 2010 election of the coalition government led by David Cameron, the national agenda of austerity in the UK has involved widespread cuts to social spending alongside an expanding private sector. As I explore in this literature review chapter, austerity conditions go beyond the economy and the shrinking of the state as an extension of neoliberal governance that shapes political dispositions and the perceived scope of choice. Neoliberal subjectivities can be understood as 'self-scripting, flexible, entrepreneurial, and individualised' (Tyler 2014:133). Particularly in the context of post-2010 austerity, I consider how the cultivation of such neoliberal dispositions, alongside eroded socio-material conditions could negate tendencies toward political action and dissent and compel adherence to economic rationales. Throughout the chapter, I refer to 'the neoliberal imperative' (as a collective noun indicating necessities and urgencies), and also 'neoliberal imperatives' (as implicit and explicit calls for adherence to economic rationale) and examine how both can be understood in relation to austerity and political action.

The neoliberal imperative within UK austerity can be understood as a set of value-laden political understandings based on neoliberal principles, that may be exerted as an exigent force which plays out through the affective-discursive inter-relationship between governance and the mainstream media. Linguistically speaking, an imperative may function as a noun, adjective and/or mood. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, as a noun the word 'imperative' conveys something that is of vital and of crucial importance. Similarly, as an adjective, imperative describes the urgency of a command to action. The imperative mood, in turn, is a function of language that expresses a requirement for action on behalf of another.In a contemporary context, the phrase the neoliberal imperative alludes to free-market tendencies within the economy and their effects on social and cultural life. With regard to the cultural modalities of neoliberalism, sociologist Matko Krce-Ivančić (2018) conceptualises the neoliberal imperative relative to 'the proliferation of anxiety' as playing a strong role in the production of neoliberal subjectivities. Through Krce-Ivančić's (2018:263) view, the neoliberal imperative 'operates as a Conservative political technology preserving the status quo'.[10] However, rather than sustaining the status quo; I want to argue that neoliberal imperatives project forward, with the aim of shaping long-term economic subjectivities.

From Krce-Ivančić's perspective, 'the place behind the neoliberal imperative is fundamentally empty' (2018:265). That is, he argues that neoliberal imperatives are not imposed by a person or thing, but rather become self-imposed by virtue of its hollow ambiguous form. For Krce-Ivančić 'it is this emptiness that neoliberal subjects find agonising and react to with anxiety.' He argues that because no-one explicitly tells subjects what to do, they do not know how to choose when faced with everyday socio-political dilemmas, and so, expectations to take initiative and make "good" economic choices become self-imposed (ibid; Salecl, 2010). Based on the psychic-discursive processes that Michel Foucault termed subjectification, Nikolas Rose (1999) suggested that subjects are compelled by internalised neoliberalism, as entrepreneurs of the self. Yet, both Rose and Krce-Ivančić could, I want to suggest, underestimate the role of political subjectivity and radical agency in shaping the

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[10] The propagation of neoliberal imperatives is not limited to the processes of Conservative governing. As political theorist Will Davies (2016) suggests, normative neoliberalism was a process of normalising and promoting free market values across New Labour's governance within education and civil society.

choices of politically active and dissenting people. At the same time, the view that neoliberal imperatives are fundamentally empty, and un-imposed, could negate the forceful and ideological ways in which demands for adherence arise in an austerity context, implicitly, explicitly and through patterns of institutional violence.

Particularly during the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007/2008, the 2010 election campaign, and the election of the coalition government, neoliberal imperatives emerged explicitly through governing rhetoric. For example, David Cameron's Big Society rhetoric was the cornerstone of national austerity. His speeches called for a shrinking of the 'big state' and communicated neoliberal imperatives toward increased civic participation as a replacement for state care and expenditure. As social anthropologist Johanna Bockman (2013:312) indicates, 'political projects may seek to alter the state spaces of politics or turn to non-state places as places of politics.' As such, the political project of neoliberalism transcends into austerity, embeds imperatives, alters socio-material conditions, and shifts the tone of cultural and political life. The urgency and necessity of responding to economic uncertainty through individualised pathways, is clearly shaped by economic rationales. Moreover, the political project of austerity implicitly and explicitly makes demands towards adherence to neoliberal principles, in ways that limit or denigrate alternative political choices. This literature review chapter explores how neoliberal tendencies operate in tandem with the politics of austerity.

Neoliberal principles leave a lasting imprint on culture. As discussed in the previous chapter, the co-relation of positive economics and neoliberal thought was particularly influential to Margaret Thatcher's governance. Through the lens of positivism all social action has an economic basis (Campesi, 2009). Moreover, the implicit tendency of neoliberal positivism to establish itself as though it were value-free, can be particularly compelling in the orientation of subjectivities; insofar as such relations extend not only through the shaping of economic forms, but also through the cultural patterning of everyday life. Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx (1845/1970:93) wrote of the material basis of ideology, and the tendency for material conditions and economic relations to appear natural and undiscernible, as unextractable from everyday reality. Philosopher Jason Read relates the neoliberal emphasis, not just as a 'transformation of ideology' but as a rendering of socioeconomic conditions and subjectivity that neutralises the aims of the state in its

'claims to present not an ideal, but a reality; human nature.' (2022:311). That is to say, the economic basis of cultural neoliberalism is ideologically obscured by virtue of its ostensible detachment from politics which naturalises economic frameworks as objective and unquestionable.

The framing of socioeconomic and political processes as scientific and objective, connects to evolutionary rhetoric at the level of governance and culture. One way this occurs is via institutional discourses that assert socially Darwinist, biologically essentialist rationales to social life including the refuted notion of *survival of the fittest* to push resilience and acceptance of precarity as a condition of life that to which we must adapt to (Read, 2016:102). In Britain, social Darwinist discourses emerge historically alongside the power dynamics embedded in Victorian discourses of morality, technological advancement, and scientific progress. A key problematic of social Darwinism is that it superimposes biologically essentialist values onto socially and materially constructed facets of life (Sanchez, 2019:97). It could be said that social Darwinism mirrors the free-market economy in its competitive emphasis, while articulating moralisation that over-simplifies lived reality as mirroring the processes of plant life. Furthermore, social Darwinism has had serious implications pertaining to the eugenics movement, social oppression, and moralisation across the 20th century. With regard to the economy and its actors, social Darwinism frequently frames the ability to adapt to economic conditions as a moral attribute; whereby difficulties and inability to change accordingly, is considered atavistic and an individual failing. That is, the political discourse of natural selection is powerful in shaping moralities, and promoting positivist ontologies, despite the tenuous connection between biological processes in the natural world and the arrangement of social and political life.

The notion of welfare reform can be historically traced to the post-war consensus, and Labour movement. In these contexts, welfare reform sought to attend to social concerns and poverty by broadening the provision of welfare and increasing social spending (see Beveridge report, 1942). However, for the post-2010 Coalition government, the concept of welfare reform sought to limit the scope of support available and frames cuts as a positive cultural shift to ostensibly encourage unemployed people into the sphere of work. The discourse of welfare reform perpetrated by the UK Department for Work and Pensions has played a strong role in

the public legitimisation and shaming of state-dependence (Wiggan, 2012), and emphasises the imperative for individuals and community groups to take economic responsibility. Concerningly, such discourse suggests that state responsibility for social welfare and care has been tainted by the actions of irresponsible actors who require reproach to ameliorate their perceived lack of responsibility. As such, the discourse around welfare reform perpetuates the assumption that urgent remedial action is required to alleviate the state from perceived obligation. Such individuals are rhetorically blamed, not only for their personal circumstances but also as the reason austerity has been implemented. The weaponization of shaming discourses ignore the role of elite financial institutions and the socioeconomic disparity between those who are blamed, and those driving the economy.

Neoliberal imperatives and rhetorical framing are not deterministic of pathways of action. However, how something is framed and spoken about in a public arena can epistemically frame (Shaffer, 2004) and socially categorise acceptable choices and decisions. Michel Foucault (1972/2010:66) suggests discursive constellations form relative to a multiplicity of potential choices, formations, structures, ways of being that could be, and all possible alternatives. As he puts it, 'In order to account for the choices that were made, out of all those that could have been made, one must describe the specific authorities that guided that choice'. On elaboration, Foucault foregrounds the 'economy of the discursive constellation' as diffuse, yet intersecting, authoritative discourses that enter into 'mutual delimitation' in shaping legitimate choices (1972/2010:67). By virtue of their placement within positivist discourses, neoliberal imperatives are legitimised and epistemically framed as simple truths about the ways life should be lived, and the choices that must consequently be made. As explored in the previous chapter, the strategies, ethos, and resources of politically active people are mediated by socio-material, affective, rhetorical, and legislative circumstances. Amid austerity conditions, the ways in which people can actively choose to participate in collective action are increasingly limited, not just by neoliberal imperatives but also by the changing socio-political terrain from which people exert agency. Yet, as my empirical chapters will discuss, politically active and dissenting people can be, at once, susceptible, and resistant to neoliberal imperatives, the experience of political blaming, shaming, and scapegoating, and accumulated socio-material conditions.

The first section of this literature review explores the ideological imperative of neoliberalism as it emerges in governmental and mainstream media narratives. Such narratives position austerity as an urgent and necessary undertaking in response to the Global Economic Crisis (GFC) and national deficit. In this section, I address the socio-material impacts and ramifications of austerity, and how such conditions frame the lives (and choices) of politically active and dissenting people. The second section explores the affective moods and discursive tonalities of austerity. The affective-discursive inter-relationship between governance and the mainstream media mobilises blaming, shaming, scapegoating, and stigmatising discourses. As I discuss, politically active and dissenting people are subject to the experience of accumulated socio-material and discursive conditions. While, responding to politically urgencies and engaging with political causes under austerity conditions can become overwhelming and lead to feelings of burnout.

Austerity as Urgent and Necessary

The political principles behind austerity, viz, the neoliberal imperative to minimise public spending, was obscured by the narrative that cuts and changes were an urgent, necessary, and undisputable response to the national deficit. The neoliberal imperative as a mode of urgency and necessity is particularly apparent within the discursive, affective, and socio-material conditions of austerity in the UK; and may conceal its values by appearing to be a logical and objective response to the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and national deficit:

> Now this deficit didn't suddenly appear purely as a result of the global financial crisis. It was driven by persistent, reckless, and completely unaffordable government spending and borrowing over many years. By 2008, we already had a structural deficit of more than 7%, the biggest of any G7 country. And in the cold reality of the bust that followed, we saw the true scale of the myth of the boom that had preceded it. We saw the broken model of growth that was propelling our economy into an increasingly unsustainable

position. We will not be able to build a sustainable recovery with long-term growth, unless we fix this fundamental problem of excessive government spending and borrowing that undermines our whole economy.

(Cameron, 2013)

David Cameron's speech quoted above was addressed to an audience in Yorkshire, two years into the austerity program, and cements the conception that social spending was the cause of the economic crisis and national deficit. As media studies scholar Laura Basu (2018) asserts, the causal re-framing of austerity played a strong role in perpetrating a cultural 'amnesia' concerning the reasons behind the global economic crisis. In accordance, the dominant government and media discourse surrounding austerity policies in the UK has taken on a monetarist emphasis by asserting blame away from the banking sector, toward the shaming of public sector spending, in particular social welfare. That is, early reporting of the GFC emphasised the inadequacies of the global banking system in causing the crisis, yet soon shifted to establishing the crisis and national deficit as having emerged from excessive social spending (Basu, 2018). Further, sociologists John Clarke and Janet Newman (2012:300) express how the GFC was 'ideologically reworked' from its roots in the banking sector toward blaming social spending and poor fiscal policy for the cause of the GFC. The ideological implications of austerity as a political project are often obscured by rhetorical framing within governance and the media. Indeed, the framing of austerity policies by both government and mainstream media, as a logical, necessary, and urgent response to crisis, thus conceals the underlying long-term neoliberal imperative to reduce state expenditure. As Gargi Bhattacharya (2017) expands, crisis rhetoric was crucial in building a hegemonic project to underpin austerity measures by asserting that cuts were unavoidable. The political project of austerity rests on garnering and sustaining public consent based on perceived urgency, whereby cuts and policy changes are legitimised as an inevitable means to achieving perceived economic safety.

Austerity policies have involved multi-layered cuts and changes to public services in the UK that are geographically uneven in their reach, and disproportionately affect areas of relative deprivation (Fitzgerald and Lupton 2015; Gillespie, Hardy and Watt, 2018; Grey and Barford 2018). These policies also disproportionately affect women who take on numerous formal and informal care arrangements (Craddock, 2016;

Jupp, 2022); including migrant women of colour who tend to fill in the care-gaps left by cuts to essential services (Emejulu and Bassel, 2018; 2020). As critical sociological and political literature have documented, the socio-material conditions of austerity can have an accumulative effect as multiple stressors and impacts build up from vast cuts to social spending (O'Hara, 2014); depleted social housing (Watt, 2013); eroded social welfare (Gillespie, Hardy and Watt, 2018, 2021); the quiet loss of public buildings (Robinson and Sheldon, 2019); stagnated wages, and increasingly precarious working and living conditions (Standing, 2011; Beck and Gwylym, 2024) - alongside the underpinning rhetoric and narratives that normalise these conditions (O'Hara 2014:110-117). Cuts to funding have affected education, health, and social care through re-orienting the relationships between personal and state responsibilities. Legislative changes and cuts to the benefit system have enabled a divestiture of state and local responsibility and for social support through cuts to welfare entitlement under the guise of welfare reform (Newman, Pykett and Smith, 2018). Legislation included (but not limited to) the Welfare Reform Act 2012, The Benefit Cap (Housing Benefit) Regulations 2012, and The Bedroom Tax 2013.

Post-2010 welfare reform strategies emerged from long standing discussions and plans with neoliberal Think Tanks, such as, The Centre for Social Justice (Slater, 2012). Under Iain Duncan Smith as the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (2010-2016), the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) launched the policy of welfare reform. The white paper *Universal Credit: Welfare that Works* outlined the coalition government's approach to the gradual roll out of Universal Credit and underscored the assertion that Universal Credit would 'make work pay' (Department for Work and Pensions, 2010:2). By this, one could be forgiven for thinking that Duncan Smith sought to increase wages relative to the cost of living. The proposition of making work pay, in fact, expresses the presupposition that it is more financially lucrative to receive benefits than working, (which assumes that minimum wage employment pays enough to live on). The notion of 'making work pay' does not consider social circumstances, and the cost of childcare. Neither does it allow for people to engage with voluntary work, be stay at home parents; or to pursue other meaningful activity outside of work such as, full-time activism. The ideology of 'make work pay' is linked to other long-held assumptions about the nature of worklessness supported by 'scrounger' tropes associated with neoliberal imperatives to "get a job!" or suffer the social and material consequences.

As sociologist Mary O'Hara (2013) suggests, the early austerity transition in the UK was a period of immense instabilities. Cuts to public sector jobs, and stunted recruitment due to the recession, had led to widespread unemployment and 'a country in the throes of a job crisis' in which people 'were expected to grapple with a dramatically changing employment landscape' (O'Hara, 2013:139). In contrast with the previous framework of social security under New Labour; austerity conditions under the coalition government made it increasingly harder to receive social support through the imposition of increased conditionality on entitlement to benefits, underpinned by discursive framing that vilifies state dependency based on neoliberal logics of self-sufficiency. The gradual roll out of Universal Credit, since 2013, merges pre-existing benefits into one payment and eventually replaced Job Seekers Allowance (JSA). Changes to the benefits system, such as this one, have been underpinned by an intensified punitive approach toward benefit claimants (Wiggin, 2012, Wacquant, 2013; O'Hara, 2013, Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Davies, 2016). Punitive approaches include sanctioning welfare recipients as a form of financial punishment imposed at the discretion of Job Centre employees, as a penalty in which a person (or family) is denied funding for a variable period of time. According to the DWP (2017) 'If you don't meet one or more conditions of your benefit claim without good reason, your benefit could be stopped or reduced. This is a benefit sanction.'

The extent to which sanctions were imposed for egregious reasons has been widely reported in the mainstream press. The Guardian newspaper compiled some particularly callous cases of sanctioning which include a man whose brother had died unexpectedly on the day of the appointment, and people with terminal illness who were sanctioned on the expectation that they be looking for jobs (Butler, 2015). Other examples include administrative errors, on part of the DWP and people being held in the queue at the Job Centre for their appointments, but unable to check in, before the appointment time. There was even the case of a man who had successfully secured a job commencing a few weeks later, and so ceased his search for employment, yet was still expected to fulfil job searching requirements and received a sanction (ibid). Empirical research by Jamie Redman and Del Roy Fletcher (2022) examined the experiences of Job Centre employees during the Coalition period of austerity and how the broader tone of austerity rhetoric led to a dehumanising workplace culture. Their research reports how the DWP directed Job Centre management to set employees sanctioning targets, to be imposed on benefit recipients. Although the

DWP vehemently denied the facts, Job Centre employees were encouraged to act in 'institutionally violent' ways (Redman and Fletcher 2022:316). Whereby negative discretion can be wielded against people as a mode of pushing resilience and economic productive yet emerges as an act of coercive violence that has caused destitution and death (see Calumslist.org)[11].

The policy of sanctioning is a large driver of what compels the need for food banks (Beck and Gwilym, 2020, 2022; Trussel Trust, 2023). Yet, food poverty, and the need to turn to foodbanks for sustenance, is the reality for millions of families in the UK, including those in employment. For example, Trussell Trust foodbank data from 2013/2014 reports that 913,138 people including 330, 205 children received food packages. By the following year the number of people increased to 'almost 500 000 people [who] received three days food, a 38% increase on the same year' (Trussell Trust, 2015). Latest figures published by Trussell Trust suggest that alongside the rising cost of living, between April 2022 and March 2023, the number of people receiving food from the Trussel Trust was nearly 3 million (298 6203). The data from the Trussell trust only accounts for a portion of foodbanks because there are other kinds of food banks and kitchens set up by organisations such as charities, churches, community groups, schools, universities, and autonomously run radical kitchens. Whilst foodbanks existed under New Labour governance, increased food bank usage corresponds with the deepening of austerity policies, sanctioning policy, and the rising cost of living.

Importantly, food banks are not subject to the mandatory responsibilities expected from state service providers, which shifts political responsibility of care onto voluntary organisations who can operate on a discretionary basis (May et al, 2019). Such discretion is reinforced by voucher and referral systems, mediated by perceptions of poverty, and food bank recipients, as underpinned by the discursive framework of austerity (ibid). That is, such discretionary systems may uphold notions of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' and operate as a 'moral maze' of welfare conditionality whereby recipients may be shamed for their circumstances (Beck and

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[11] Calum's list documents the deaths of people resulting from destitution following benefit cuts and sanctions. It's a harrowing read.

Gwilym, 2020). As sociologist Kayleigh Garthwaith (2016:280) suggests 'stigma, shame and embarrassment can manifest in different ways for foodbank users, worsening existing health problems and creating further stigma'. There may therefore be hidden costs to surviving on rations, especially when there are power dynamics at play and the possible expectation of excessive gratitude from those with judgemental and stigmatising attitudes.

It should be noted that austerity policies breach rights under the United Nations (UN), International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The committee for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 2016 report was the first UN review on socio-material conditions in the UK, since 2009, and it stressed that the body were:

> Seriously concerned about the disproportionate adverse impact of austerity measures, introduced since 2010, are having on the enjoyment of economic social, and cultural rights (2016:4)

By 2019, United Nations special rapporteur Philip Alston published his report on the state of *Extreme Poverty and Human Rights* which brings attention to the social disparities and the disproportion of wealth in the UK economy:

> The United Kingdom, the world's fifth largest economy, is a leading centre of global finance, boasts a "fundamentally strong" economy and currently enjoys record low levels of unemployment. But despite such prosperity, one fifth of its population (14 million people) live in poverty. Four million of those are more than 50 per cent below the poverty line and 1.5 million experienced destitution in 2017, unable to afford basic essentials. Following drastic changes in government economic policy beginning in 2010, the two preceding decades of progress in tackling child and pensioner poverty have begun to unravel and poverty is again on the rise. (Alston, 2019:3)

Alston's report found that 'employment alone is not sufficient' mitigation for austerity, and that 4 million people face poverty whilst in employment (2019:8). Further, it has been noted that 10 years after the GFC, a stagnation in wages could be

a significant contributory factor to worsening conditions (Cribb and Johnson 2018, in Alston 2019). Despite these findings, the current Conservative government have been dismissive of the extent, and impact of poverty, on over 14 million people in the UK. Social affairs correspondent Robert Booth (2019) reports how an unnamed spokesperson for the Department of Work and Pensions responded to Alston's report, declaring it, 'barely believable'. Further, this spokesperson claimed, 'the UN's own data shows the UK is one of the happiest countries in the world to live'. Yet, high levels of employment do not equate to happiness, health, and prosperity, particularly when wages do not increase alongside the rising cost of living, and employment conditions are increasingly precarious, with regard to zero-hours contracts and underregulated, flexible, short-term arrangements (Standing, 2011); as the so-called "gig economy". Low-paid, exploitative, short-term jobs, however, still contribute to governmental employment figures giving a false representation of the extent to which work pays in mitigating economic instability.

The current UK employment economy, I want to suggest, offers an example of the kinds of ideological subversion that play out within an austerity context. Marx and Engels (1845:1970:68) famously suggested that 'the production of ideas' is 'directly interwoven with the language of real life' in that economics becomes ideologically embedded and socially conditioned through everyday relations. Language and political subjectivity shape the tone of productive force and mental effort toward market interests. Marx and Engels further argue, 'if in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura' it is because 'this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life process' (ibid). The experiential conditions of everyday life are embedded in historical material processes and power structures, and thus naturalised, to conceal actual lived circumstances, making the extent of class power undiscernible. On the surface the austerity agenda was about relieving the national deficit and attending to an allegedly 'broken Britain' (Jones, 2012). Yet, as I have discussed, the ideological undertones of neoliberalism are repeatedly concealed through naturalising austerity as logical, urgent, and necessary.

The national agenda of austerity has not achieved its ostensible aim of economic security in the UK. Instead, austerity policies have contributed to amassing human

crises, and worsened instabilities which have vast socio-political implications. With regard to politically active and dissenting people, it may be progressively harder to make other choices in response to economic uncertainty, and to engage in meaningful activity, efforts, and projects that are not financially lucrative which could extend to involvement with political action and dissent. As Kate Harrison's (2021; 2022) mixed method research on austerity and political resistance suggests, political responses to austerity in the UK, have been muted. Political responses, she finds, have been mediated by public perception and have been limited by not only a lack of time and resources, as per resource mobilisation theories; but also, by a lack of public visibility, in that the significant effects of cuts have not necessarily been apparent to those socially and geographically unaffected by austerity. Harrison's main contention is that austerity has 'caused considerable harms' yet 'broadly failed to provoke political participation' (2021:152). Similarly to my thesis, Harrison draws attention to the role of public perception in mediating resistance. However, whilst the thesis offers a generalised view of public perception and formal political participation, it does not account for the impact on broader left-wing political modalities or the lived experience of politically active people grappling with socio-material instabilities, which my research seeks to foreground.

Political epistemologies that run counter to neoliberal discourses face exclusion from public narratives. The prominence of governmental and mainstream media discourses and explanations for austerity (Basu, 2018); marginalise alternative political discourses and choices, despite the necessity for counter-narratives and options that challenge political power (Portelli, 1991). Sociologist Renata Salecl (2011:18) argues that stress and anxieties stem from the ideology of choice, that is, the unbounded freedom to make choices, along with the expectation that one must choose their own life and destiny. Although Salecl does not explicitly refer to neoliberal structures as shaping decision-making, she attends to the mediation among consumer choice, perception and the societal fear of judgement as creating fears and anxieties (2011:21-23). She suggests that people may question whether they are making an 'ideal choice' and 'what others will think of their choices', which raises questions about who bears responsibility to make some choices (such as, choosing an electricity provider), and the extent to which capitalism frames decisions, whereby they may be 'afraid that they are not actually making a free choice' (2011:23).

The cultural framework of neoliberalism not only creates and exacerbates economic and cultural tensions but also seeks to shape subjectivities that are uncritical and pliable to fluctuating socio-material and economic circumstances. In such conditions, neoliberal imperatives may not even be recognised as a set of demands, but rather experienced as unquestionable, common-sense (Hall and O'Shea, 2013). Politically active, and dissenting people do not, of course, hold subject positions immune from the impacts of changes under austerity. They are, as my empirical research indicates, often subject to increased demands on their strength and resources that can stunt capacities to respond to political crises and engage in broader resistance. Nonetheless, as my empirical chapters draw out, politically active and people do resist neoliberal imperatives, as much as worsened socio-material conditions may necessarily compel people to take economic routes out of precarious circumstances.

The next section explores how neoliberal imperatives work within and through discursive framing, affective atmospheres, and moods of austerity, and aims to expose the limiting and generative impacts of socio-material, discursive, and affective conditions on politically active and dissenting people.

Discursive Weaponizing and the Imperative Mood

David Cameron's speech on the 25th of June 2012, at the *Bluewater* shopping centre in Greenhithe, Kent, was delivered two years into the austerity programme and epitomises the rhetoric of shame that underpins austerity measures post-2010:

> First, we must treat the causes of poverty at their source…whether that's debt, family break-down, educational failure or addiction…Second, we've got to recognise that in the end, the only thing that really beats poverty, long-term, is work. We cannot emphasise this enough. Compassion isn't measured out in benefit cheques – it's in the chances you give people…the chance to get a job, to get on, to get that sense of achievement that only comes from doing a hard day's work for a proper day's pay.

> That's what our reforms are all about. Transforming lives. Helping people walk taller... (David Cameron, 2012)

Here, in the above quote, Cameron oversimplifies the reasons behind systemic poverty by suggesting that debt, family breakdown, educational failure and addiction are the *key* reasons for poverty. Yet, he does so without acknowledging that those experiencing those struggles are not wholly limited to people facing poverty, or, in turn, that poverty can precede, and instigate such difficulties. As such, Cameron addresses the causes of poverty as though people's personal circumstances can only be understood as a manifestation of their life choices. In turn, he ignores systemic inequalities, the ever-increasing cost of living, and the prevalence of poverty amongst those who are employed.

Whilst at first glance it could appear that Cameron is attempting to address systemic poverty and societal problems, it would not appeal to state interests to engage with a sociological imagination. Charles Wright Mills (1959) suggests that the intersection between personal circumstances, social structure, history, and power offer deeper insight to the underlying tensions surrounding systemic poverty. In Mills view, mass unemployment is indicative of a broader social problem that he positions as a 'collapse of opportunities' (1959:4). Prospects may be limited, society may be hostile, and unemployment may not relate to personal fault. However, neoliberal perspectives assert that the only valid route toward social and economic security is to work hard and make economically productive choices that benefit the economy. The suggestion that work is all it takes to escape poverty implies that poverty is shameful and due to personal failings. Governmental rhetoric casting blame and shame on groups and individuals with less socioeconomic power is underpinned by ideological re-orientations of social and material conditions.

Such socio-material and discursive conditions of austerity contribute toward affective moods and intensities, as understood through Ben Anderson's (2009, 2016) notion of an affective atmosphere. Through Anderson's perspective, atmospheres are indeterminate, impersonal, and subjective, yet can also be experienced collectively. The mood of austerity transmits multiple intensities that emerge from the cultural dynamics of neoliberalism, which can take shape in affectively diverse forms including, hopelessness, uncertainty, individual adaptation to economic precarity, acceptance of cuts as necessary, and neoliberal imperatives to change oneself

according to the shape of the market. The imperative mood is pervasive to the extent that the affective qualities of austerity may be all encompassing in the places, contexts, and localities it is felt. As social geographer Esther Hitchen (2016:112) suggests, the variable and 'sometimes contradictory' intensities of austerity 'come to shape how individuals feel and act in multiple space-times of the everyday'. Hitchen raises questions as to the extent to which myriad affective relations and the desire to 'get by' could affect capacities to act against austerity (2016:113). Indeed, the notion that mitigating affective impacts could hinder meaningful critique and action is both compelling and problematic when considering the politically lived experience of austerity.

In my empirical chapters, the narratives of my participants offer insight into the moods of austerity. Particularly where neoliberal imperatives exert as institutional claims to knowledge about the nature of austerity; which can, for instance, shift political desires toward attaining basic needs and survival, rather than enabling space to consider radical politics and alternative political futures. However, despite living within austerity, my participants reveal deeper modes of political subjectivity and radical agency in the ways they recognise, challenge, and act against oppressive and inequitable conditions.

Neoliberal framing strongly influences how people accept and respond to economic uncertainties and political situations, contributing to the cultivation of particular form of resilience and adaptivity. As the philosophers David Chandler and Julian Reid explicate (2016:1), adaptive, resilient neoliberal subjects are assertive and responsive to economic 'threats'; they accept state authority, including limitations to, and moralising, of choice structures. Neoliberal institutions and agencies promote resilience to unstable circumstances by compelling subjects to make the "right" choices for the future within established economic trajectories, and legitimised frameworks. Autonomy from the system is all the more precarious and can even constitute 'a threat to life' (Chandler and Reid, 2016:1). In such conditions, those who desire a different kind of political future often find themselves at a loss for choices and opportunities to enact and reproduce existing forms of praxis. When adapting to economic uncertainty left wing political ethos could be swayed toward accepting concessions. Sociologists Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish (2014:95) argue that the crisis of reproduction is two-fold; radical movements may be stunted

by generalised socio-material conditions which affect society in 'differential and unequal ways.' Moreover, by how discursive and legislative conditions amid neoliberal austerity particularly threaten to hinder or damage activist praxes, ethos, resources, and ways of knowing the world.

The intensities and mood of austerity particularly affect the existence of people living outside the bounds of economic normativity and felt through intensified discursive and ideological approaches to instilling the neoliberal imperative through institutionally violent means (Wiggan, 2012; Tyler, 2014). That is, the rhetoric of austerity is framed in accordance with economic rationales which entail the weaponizing of multiple discursive strategies that target and stigmatise those who cannot, or refuse to, obey neoliberal imperatives. The construction of common-sense understandings of neoliberal austerity are often underpinned by morality tales that seek to adjudicate whose suffering is worthy, and whose is a result of moral deficiencies and poor choices. Sociologist Lee Marsden (2020, 2024) writes how the dominant media discourse of austerity draws distinctions between 'economic martyrs and moralised others.' Such divisive rhetoric plays a role in shaping the moods and intensities of the austerity climate. Marsden acknowledges sociologist Chris Haylett's (2001) argument that morality discourses are historically situated and reflect the shape and 'sensibilities' of the economy. The notion of 'necessary austerity' alters those 'economies and sensibilities' as well as the 'criteria upon which moral distinctions are made' (Marsden, 2024:74). These distinctions construct an othered underclass alongside representations of a broad hard-working tax-paying group of people united by their moral outrage (Marsden, 2024). Such distinctions arguably perpetuate divisions and fragmentation to working class identity and solidarity between classes.

In the context of austerity, for the discursive elements of neoliberal imperatives to function as a simultaneously divisive and unifying strategy, national scapegoats must be constructed. Not only to bear the burden of fault for cuts, but for an endless array of societal ills that lend ostensible weight for the necessity of austerity (Jones, 2012; Tyler, 2014). Arguably, the inter-relationship between governance and the mainstream media operates based on a set of epistemic framings that discursively weaponize, proliferate, and solidify moralised judgements that serve to categorise subjects, and denigrate those who for myriad reasons fall outside of economic

normativity. Amid austerity, scapegoated people include benefit recipients, refugees, disabled and/or neurodivergent people, young people, and those who are politically active. The existence of scapegoats enable the neoliberal imperative to retain its figurative power by placing blame on people who already carry stigma and serves to reinforce authorative claims to knowledge about the lived experiences of people who are suffering under austerity conditions. Such epistemic violence extends to the framing of refugees as either deserving or undeserving (Dhaliwal and Forkert, 2015). In that, scapegoating discourses seek to render all refugees as undeserving. Undeservingness upturns traditional designations that all refugees are deserving (due to their protected social position as seeking political sanctuary from war, violence, and persecution). Even more worryingly still, austerity motifs underlie xenophobic and nationalist narratives about the nature of immigration that reinforce deeply troubling interpretations of the realities faced by those risking their lives to find some modicum of safety. The causes and effects of austerity are often misattributed to immigration and contribute to the misperception that funding constraints are due to over-population, rather than austerity cuts. For example, legitimate concerns about disparities in healthcare and NHS waiting times are conceptually twisted so as to blame immigration for a lack of funding, rather than acknowledging the ideological motive of austerity and extent of cuts to funding. Such operates as a misattribution of causality, alongside ideological subversions of lived social conditions whereby migrants and refugees are blamed and scapegoated for social and economic problems that austerity has led to. Xenophobic discourse contributed to the politics surrounding Brexit and the misplaced belief that leaving the European Union would offset national funding cuts under austerity (Bhambra, 2017). Within the context of cuts and changes, the misdirection of causal narratives embraced by neoliberal perspectives avoids critical engagement regarding government conduct, long standing structural inequalities, and the deficiencies of a capitalist oppressive system in attending to human need. These kinds of narratives relay nationalistic neoliberal imperatives that assert the importance of state economic interests over humanitarian and political intervention into global crises.

For example, Katie Hopkin's vitriolic hate filled column in *The Sun* newspaper on 17th April 2015 not only completely dehumanised refugees but also called for mass killing by 'gunships' (Stone 2015). Her venomous attack was based on the far-right trope that Britain was not only under siege, but also at breaking point because of

immigration. The British tabloid press was later strongly condemned by the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights for its approach to reporting on immigration and the refugee crisis. The Black Lawyers Society reported *The Sun* to the Metropolitan police on the basis that Hopkins publicly incited racial hatred under the Public Order Act 1986 (Stone, 2015). Yet despite, Hopkins faced no criminal charges for incitement, although at the very least she lost her platform in *The Sun* newspaper.

The rhetorical persecution of refugees negates the realities faced by millions who are fleeing war and suffering. Such rhetoric disturbingly minimises the severity and scale of the refugee crisis, the root causes of social displacement, and the terrifying conditions that many lived through to get to the camps in the first place. Moreover, rather than being afforded state care, refugees lived in extreme precarity in the uncertain setting of the camps in Calais. An article by Selena Sykes was published in The Daily Express on January 28th, 2016, with the headline *No Borders: Who are the activists stirring up migrant violence in Calais.* Sykes article focusses on *No Borders.* She begins by asserting 'the activist group *No Borders* has been accused of masterminding the escalating unrest in the northern French port town' without acknowledging that No Borders is decentralised and not a specific grouping (Noborders.org.uk); and that it was the police and French authorities that routinely instigated violent attacks on refugees and activists at the camp. Ultimately the violent dispersal and demolition of the camp occurred from February 2016 (Al-Jazeera, 2016) Demolition teams in full riot gear began to clear the southern part of the camp with bulldozers and sledgehammers (ibid). Starting from October 25th, 2016, the northern part of the camp was violently demolished and dispersed by police and state authorities. By March 2017 authorities had blocked all humanitarian aid workers from assistance (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Framing care, solidarity, and supportive action as militantly radical, exploitative, and dangerous, minimises and subverts the social and material conditions that activists respond to as unimportant and not their business to attend to. Through the subverted discursive lens, assertive action and caring about the lives of refugees is rhetorically reconstituted as an extreme position deemed shameful and undesirable. Such rhetoric plays into existing far-right tropes that position refugees and migrants as a societal threat. Not only does such discourse marginalise the experiences of

people fleeing war as threatening, but by shaming those acting in solidarity and mutual aid, could also limit the capacity for people to relate to these fears and struggles and engage in political action (even if they are far removed from the experience). In this vein, discursive attacks on activists convey the assumptions that caring about political causes and the lives of other human beings is somehow naïve or idealistic, and that acting on behalf of others is somehow socially irresponsible, and militant. Arguably such discursive misalignment can dissuade people from considering the issues as part of a broader picture, and in turn can affect political responses to global crises.

While growing, literature focussed on the discursive delegitmisation of politically active people amid neoliberal austerity is currently limited. Nonetheless, Andrea Brock, Carol Stephenson, Nathan Stephens-Griffin, and Tanya Wyatt (2022) analysed the rhetorical delegitimization of environmental activists against open coal mining in the northeast of England. Drawing from Imogen Tyler's conceptualisation of stigma and abjection, they describe austerity as a 'hostile environment' with the delegitimization of activism operative via the tropes of 'worklessness/idleness' (2022:519); as part of the longer-term social control of dissent.

The scapegoating and stigmatising of particular subjects and groups entails institutional violence connected with the dynamics of abjection. Tyler (2013) describes how social abjection is channelled via the affective politics of disgust. The 'spatialising' political mobilisation of repulsion 'functions to create forms of distance between the body politic proper and those excluded from the body of the state' (2013:41). Abjection, or the threat of abjection, are weaponised to communicate the implicit message: If you do not adhere to what is, and is not deemed desirable, (i.e. economically aspirational behaviour), then degradation and destitution will follow. Through their abject status, scapegoated people may be wielded as ideological proxies that enable distance, so as to mediate perceptions, and further embed cultural divisions. Tyler (2013) situates the affective experience of this division for those marginalised by it as emanating from disgust, and being on the receiving end of disgust can involve shame. The ontological quality of scapegoating is that scapegoats take on the position of blame on behalf of someone or something else. However, scapegoating also operates as an epistemological subversion in that the false attribution of blame gains its believability based on ideologically laden, moralised

claims to knowledge. Shaming people for circumstances that are not of their making (such as the GFC) cannot, of course, be an effective strategy for ethical social change, particularly when wielded at an institutional level. Analysing the discursive weaponisation of blame, shame and scapegoating in my first empirical chapter (Chapter 5), I draw from my participants' narratives to explore how such discourses and moral sensibilities relate to epistemic (re)framing, political subjectivity, and radical agency as an expression of politically dissenting ethico-onto-epistemologies (Stetsenko, 2020).

Austerity has also involved a number of educational "reforms" that have severe implications in furthering neoliberal agendas and assuaging to positivist dispositions on what constitutes meaningful education. Gove's speech, to the first Educational Reform Summit in London on 10th July 2014 illuminated how his crusade to change schools rested on a moralising of the purpose of education:

> Because everyone here is united by more than just a professional commitment to improving education. We all share a moral purpose - liberating individuals from ignorance, democratising access to knowledge, making opportunity more equal, giving every child an equal chance to succeed. And nowhere has the case for reform to drive that moral mission been clearer than in England. As part of our long-term economic plan to secure a better future for Britain, we want to deliver the best schools and skills for our young people. We want young people and their parents to have the peace of mind that they'll gain the skills they need to get a good job, no matter where they live or how well off they are. When this government was formed in 2010, we inherited one of the most segregated and stratified education systems in the developed world. (Gove, 2014)

'The long-term economic plan to secure a better future for Britain' alludes to the austerity program and its ideological overtones. Gove's educational reforms were premised on improving education, yet rested upon the problematisation and moralisation of the purpose of learning and educational values. The neoliberal ideological intensity of austerity presents itself in how Gove frames his 'moral mission' of providing the 'best schools and skills.' Such rhetoric asserts economic productivity and entrepreneurial scientific advancement as the sole end point of

education. Yet, how exactly do Gove's reforms *democratise access to knowledge*? Arguably such reforms constitute epistemic violence, particularly when attempting to legitimise limitations to pathways of knowledge by asserting the positivist view that only STEM subjects matter.

 Furthermore, it seems particularly crass to speak of morality when austerity affects teachers, schools, families and the allocation of resources. Many children are going to school hungry because of the extent of poverty faced in the UK (Ahmed, 2024). The criteria for free school dinners is restricted to recipients of Universal Credit on an income of less than £7400 a year. With such a low threshold for support, this excludes many children from low income families who are going hungry. Schools are dipping into their own budget to alleviate hunger (ibid). Austerity has also brought about an increased role of private sector investment in food initiatives. A survey conducted by the Association of Public Service Excellence in 2014 estimated that since 2008, there has been a 45% increase in breakfast clubs (Kelloggs, in Lambie-Mumford and Sims, 2018)

Changes to the culture of schooling and the national curriculum were largely underpinned by discourse that dangled the carrot of meritocracy and institutionally embedded notions of what are, and what are not, acceptable educational choices, in line with future economic productivity. Louis Althusser wrote that, 'all Ideological State Apparatuses, whatever they are, contribute to the same result: the reproduction of the relations of production,' (Althusser, 1971, in Marxists.org). Gove does not foreground broad educational values but instead underscores 'skills' as the utilitarian solution to educational inequality. Yet, Gove's slant involves an ideological reframing of the purpose of education, whereby the intimation of skill is rendered to fit the needs of a neoliberal economy that needs disposable workers to fulfil its ends.

Austerity discourses relating to education can strategically harness public anxieties about cuts to education and are characterised by governmental strategies to re-orient the culture of state education to encompass neoliberal moralising perspectives about the purpose of education. The process of differentiating educational choices occurs during a formative time of childhood development. This can involve dividing school age children according to perceived ability, whereby some are steered toward practical, vocational, and occupational pathways and apprenticeships. Other young people may be encouraged to specialise in science, technology, engineering, and

mathematics (STEM) subjects which may be culturally delineated as economically viable and productive, and thus virtuous and moral decisions. Whereas arts, humanities, and other critical disciplines such as sociology are often devalued and denigrated and denigrated as 'soft subjects' and unproductive economic choices, and therefore shameful choices to make when faced with the socio-materialities of austerity. These discursive underpinnings are employed to publicly legitimise funding cuts (or the threat of cuts) to the humanities and social science, while prioritising funding for STEM subjects.

Limiting the scope of education to accentuate skills-based learning geared down specific pathways assumes that there is a linear path from developing skills, to gaining stable employment. Moreover, such framing could imply that the only legitimate forms of knowledge are occupational and relate to economic productivity. Yet anxieties about financial stability may stem from generalised precarity and limited opportunities, alongside the prevalence of zero-hours contracts, and increasingly precarious working conditions (Standing, 2011). In addition to an erosion of social welfare, Gove wields the pre-eminence of skills as an adaptive mode of capitalising upon the self, thus commodifying people, not for their human potential, but for their potential to reap profit and embrace the working economy as skilled drivers of production. Yet, as anarcho syndicalist philosopher Rudolf Rocker (1938/1989) might argue, skills and productive force can manifest as human potential for collectively achieving material stability, rather than profit as the ultimate end goal.

In the long term, there are real and lasting consequences of the long-term disparagement of critical scholarship. The University of Kent has recently begun the 'phasing out' of philosophy and religious studies, anthropology, health and social care, English language and linguistics, comparative literature, art history, as well as music and audio technology. The livelihoods of staff and the future of critical education at Kent have become a material scapegoat for longer term patterns of poor financial decision making on part of university management. Cuts play into neoliberal imperatives of elevating STEM disciplines as the solution to economic deficit, and place assumed value on the success of those courses attracting enough students. Cuts are occurring despite the critical importance, popularity and inferred profitability of the aforementioned phasing out of subject areas. The degradation of

arts, humanities, and politically informed disciplines in the context of cuts operates on epistemic framing that privileges skills based training and economically productive choices as the sole route to material stability. Furthermore, such epistemic framing negates discourses that provide counter narratives to austerity and reinforces the neoliberal imperative to be economically productive and uncritical of social conditions.

The accumulative matrix of austerity conditions conveys the imperative mood of neoliberalism insofar that the socio-materialities, discursive conditions, pressures and instabilities bound within austerity conditions could interact synergistically. As heightened neoliberal imperatives play out throughout the austerity agenda there is increasing pressure, which can be overwhelming and unsustainable, to respond both to personal circumstances, and the needs of others, the environment, and political causes, amid deterioration and precarity. While self-care is susceptible to neoliberal colonisation, my empirical analysis in chapter 7 suggests that engaging in practices of self-care in response to burnout may enable broader participation and patterns of activist work. As Hiʻilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese put it, 'self-care is both a solution to, and a symptom of, the social deficits of late capitalism' (2020:2). That is, self-care may help to ameliorate feelings of over work and stress; yet strategies of self-care are necessitated by survival in the same system that perpetuates precarious and inequitable conditions. The imperative toward over-productivity and the underlying commonsense of neoliberal thought lends itself to advice structures and strategies of resilience that might enable continued efficiency and output; and could also break someone. Likewise, an ethic of self-care framed narrowly, as a means of burn-out prevention for busy people with demanding jobs can reinforce the neoliberal narrative that self-care is an earned reward to compensate for hard work.

The psychological discourses of self-help in relation to neoliberal values have a longer history, as charted by Rose (1999). Although Rose may assume a lack of agency in resisting the imperatives of neoliberalism, he attends to the ways in which rigid styles of self-discipline connect with the shaping of neoliberal subjectivities. Self-help undertakings may operate in conjunction with the ubiquity of selfcare consumerism, discourses and aesthetics that fuel the neoliberal imperative to optimise 'the self' and delay gratification. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2010) writes

in this vein, about happiness as produced through objects that project forward towards goals and endpoints, not yet attained. Happiness, from this perspective may rarely be felt in the present, but instead only recognised as deserved only once certain points and goals have been reached. The conditions of contemporary social life as driven by neoliberal affects and values, could thus encourage subjects to perpetually defer their happiness, and pin it to a perpetually not-yet attained goal.

By contrast, as my empirical research indicates, self-care in response to burnout challenges the neoliberal imperative of over-productivity and, as such, is in opposition to framing rest and leisure as transactional and a reward, rather than a human necessity. Self-care may be idiosyncratic, introspective, and involve recognition and active negotiation of attending to personal needs. It can also entail a refusal to extend beyond the limits of current capacities to act and require a temporary withdrawal or retreat from political action. Moreover, analysis of my empirical material reveals how self-care practiced in solidarity rejects the neoliberal emphasis on individual adaptation to conditions and may thus challenge the isolation felt by many, in enabling distinct and collective pursuits of happiness and material stability.

Anarchist anthropologist Peter Kropotkin (1902) famously wrote of the persistence of mutual aid, solidarity, and collective activity across the world, despite the tendency of states to limit modes of solidarity. He notes that, the 'iron laws' of states 'have broken all bonds between men' but that, in times of need 'these bonds are reconstituted' despite pervasive socio-political and economic challenges (1902:359). Yet are they? Kropotkin could not have anticipated the extent to which neoliberal principals would proliferate within state and economic logics. Neoliberal imperatives could compel people to individually put their productive energy into sustaining the needs of the economy, which could be playing a role in dismantling the bonds of solidarity between people. Rudolf Rocker (1938/1989) also brought attention to the historical longevity of collective co-operation in attaining material stability and the tendency for capitalism to crush the creative capacities of humanity. Neoliberal principles play a significant role in shaping both patterns of economic activity and perspectives on social life. The narratives of my participants bring attention to how creative capacities can be hindered during times of austerity, as well as the ways they endure and build alternatives.

Conclusion

Post-2010 austerity measures were rhetorically framed by the notion that cuts to social spending and changes to the national structure were an urgent and necessary response to national deficit. As discussed, austerity policies have brought about and embedded vast changes to the state and civil society and contributed to worsening economic instabilities and uncertainty and disproportionately affected the most marginalised in society (Fitzgerald and Lupton 2015; Gillespie, Hardy and Watt, 2018, 2021; Grey and Barford 2018). The discursive proliferation of the view that the welfare state was in crisis and needed reform concealed the neoliberal principals that underly the austerity agenda (Clarke and Newman, 2013).

Neoliberal imperatives arise as pervasive ideological, discursive, and affective sets of tensions that mediate the scope of perceived choices. In this literature review chapter, I have explored how neoliberal imperatives play out within austerity. As my empirical material will explore, political subjectivity and agency can be affected by a conjunction of socio-material and discursive conditions experienced amidst austerity. Changes to the political structure can pose particular challenges for politically active people, especially when adjusting to economic uncertainty. Worsening economic instabilities, uncertainty, and increasing demands on strength and resources in the context of austerity, can make politically active and dissenting people susceptible to, and resistant to, neoliberal imperatives. Calls for adherence to neoliberal imperatives emerge implicitly via the necessity of survival in deteriorated socio-material conditions; and arise explicitly through governmental and mainstream media discourse, and relations between people. The necessity to adapt and adjust toward economically productive, independent, flexible behaviour that maximises one's stake in the economy could feel ever more pressing (Chandler and Reid, 2016). Austerity conditions make it increasingly harder to challenge conditions and attend to emerging political causes and crises, whilst keepings one's head above water. The need for a radical political imagination to find solutions to local and global problems may be more pressing than ever (Haiven and Khashnabish, 2014; Barker and Hunter, 2023; Ghodsee, 2023). The following chapter outlines my methodological approach to the thesis through oral historical, and narrative inquiry

approaches to researching the lived experience of politically active and dissenting people in light of ongoing and embedded austerity conditions.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter offers a detailed account and rationale for my research design and methodology. Between April 2020 and December 2023, I conducted twelve in-depth oral historical interviews, and two text-based interviews (with neurodivergent participants who felt more comfortable expressing their perspective in writing) with politically active and dissenting people in the UK. Oral history is a method of co-constructing narratives and stories of social and historical significance. Oral history methods provide a way for participants to share their experiences in the form of an in-depth interview that typically considers a particular timeframe, or a specific historical event and is often archived for future posterity. Narratives are a part of everyday life and the ways we understand ourselves, others, society, culture, and the human condition. As it is not possible to directly access the experiences of others, narrative and stories are a medium to express lived experience. As Penny Summerfield (2019:107) suggests oral historical interviews are an important way to preserve narratives and memories and 'rescue them from historical omission'. This is especially significant when considering the experiences of activists within the neoliberal context of austerity, given how such experiences and perspectives may be sidelined, denigrated, and delegitimised, both rhetorically and legislatively.

My framework of analysis is aligned with oral historical approaches and is informed by narrative inquiry as an approach to locating stories within personal narratives that have broader meaning and applicability to the human condition (Clandinin 2000, 2006, 2007; Kim 2016). As a flexible qualitative framework, narrative inquiry originates largely from educational studies, as an antidote to positivism and 'way of understanding human experience through stories that, in turn, help us better understand human phenomena and the human existence' (Kim 2016:190). Narrative

inquiry focuses on the broader applicability of subjective experience in conveying deeper meanings and messages, sometimes for their transformative potential. As Jean Clandinin (2007:42) puts it, 'narrative inquirers study an individual's experience in the world and, through the study, seek ways of enriching and transforming that experience for themselves and others' (Clandinin 2007:42). Bringing oral historical and narrative inquiry approaches together allows for a creative approach to analysis that foregrounds lived experience. Narrative inquiry involves encapsulating the narratives of my participants within stories, whilst protecting their anonymity.

As indicated in the introduction of this thesis, the key questions that frame my research are as follows:

1.   How do the socio-material, rhetorical, affective, and legislative conditions of austerity shape political action, and political consciousness?

2.   What are the social impacts of austerity on activists and counter-cultural groups, particularly in terms of their strategies, ethos, and resources?

These questions have helped to frame my research with regard to the impacts of neoliberal austerity on political subjectivity, radical agency, and the production of political knowledge. An approach aligned with Narrative inquiry, and sense making through stories enables analysis of how socio-material rhetorical and legislative conditions affect strategies, ethos, and resources, as well as rationales for engagement with political action.

In this chapter I first discuss my positionality and rationale for research, after which I address my approach to sampling. I then outline my methodological approaches of oral history and narrative inquiry. The next sections describe the phases of my analytical process and conceptualise how I undertake a three-phase analysis that cycles between phases. Firstly, *gathering* as the phase of analysis that pools together all collected knowledge thus far. Secondly *mediation and intervention* as my approach to storying and generating analysis. Through my role as mediator of the text, I simultaneously seek to honour the truth of each narrative and negotiate and reconstruct meaningful stories that convey deeper understandings and have broader applicability. Intervention serves as an engagement with the hermeneutics of

narratives, and as a deployment of multiple critical perspectives to generate applicable analyses. The third phase I designate as the *reverberations* phase, in which I address implications and repercussions, as they resonate with austerity and political action. Finally, I discuss some lingering implications with regard to the Covid-19 pandemic and ethical considerations.

Positionality and Rationale for Research

The motivation for this research stems from my own involvement within a variety of broadly left-wing and anti-capitalist activist causes and anarchist politics, in Brighton between 2007-2012. I had been working as a night porter (in what was colloquially and somewhat ironically known as 'the hippy meeting house') at Sussex University around 2007 (having briefly been enrolled as a student before becoming immersed in activism). At that time, I saw myself as non-party political. Aside from being left wing in my perspective, I was tentative about assigning a specific label to my political beliefs.

My political consciousness first began emerging when I was a teenager,[12] I was deeply concerned about the war in Iraq. Inspired by another school's protest walk-out, I tried to organise a protest walk-out at my school (five of us attended and got as far as the school gates, before being intercepted and given detention). I also attended local protests, and the infamous demonstration against the Iraq war in London that had brought together millions from across the country yet was largely ignored by Blair's government. The rejection of millions of pleas to stop the war had a profound impact on my political faith and had begun the process of dismantling the narratives of political process and change I had been spoon fed as a child. That is, at school, watching the TV, sometimes even at home, we were told as children: That the world was progressively becoming a better place, and that the fears of the past were no more. My (naïve) belief that people's democratic participation in protest actions could be enough to change the world was shattered, and I had lost faith in democracy. I had lost trust in Tony Blair - we had been told he was one of the "good" ones, that he would change the country for the better.

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[12] My first exposure to anti-capitalism was at age 12, talking to a 15-year-old in an internet chatroom about politics and prior to that I didn't even know what capitalism actually was.

Despite my grappling with politics as a teenager, having grown up on the edge of a moderately deprived suburban town in the Southeast, I had not had much exposure to prefigurative radical politics, until I was about 18. I had started attending political events in London and Brighton, which led me to various free party and alternative club events. The intersection of party and protest was still thriving in the mid-late 2000s. My eyes were starting to open as to the potentials and possibilities that lay out there, and the resources that people had collectively put into motion. Although I did not have the language to articulate it at the time, my political imagination was stirred by the existence of other realities and ways of life.

I started at the University of Sussex in 2007, unsure of myself, mentally unwell (undiagnosed ADHD and ASD, unbeknownst to me at the time) and not ready to embark on the academic journey required of me. However, the structure of the university provided a framework for politically motivated people to come together, and for political action to thrive. I abandoned my studies and put all of my efforts into campaigns. The political scope of the activism and resistance I was involved in was broad. I was broadly involved in an array of anti-capitalist, anti-war, anti-racist, vegan, anti-imperialist, anti-globalisation, and Palestine solidarity. I was also involved in anti-deportation demonstrations outside the Home Office, protests over gentrification, and of supermarkets pushing out local traders. I was also heavily involved with a vegan café[13] that served soups, stews and curries predominantly made with (plastic wrapped) vegetables rescued from supermarket bins. There were regular violent contestations with police at SmashEDO demonstrations against EDO MBM Technology which owned the local factory that manufactured weapons components. Although I did not join the direct-action campaign group, I attended various protests that led to small-scale riots that were rarely widely reported for their incendiary potential but would end in shattered glass, batons, blood, and bruises.

In April 2008, I joined a 10-day delegation of activists, including quakers and anarchists, on a solidarity, and fact-finding mission to the West Bank of Palestine. The Brighton Tubas solidarity group had existing connections with the town of

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[13] I would use the term freegan. Unfortunately, the term became synonymous with a cult operating in Brighton at the time, Jesus Christians who gave out self-published books that promoted freeganism as a guide to draw in members. The next level of book they gave to "interested people" was effectively a manual on how to leave your family and your worldly possessions behind (those oppositional were demonic) - live your life as though God has a gun to your head - and join their cult. I am in possession of a copy of this book.

Tubas. With an interpreter in our group, we stayed with and spoke to farmers, families, ex-prisoners, Bedouins, local authorities, university students, and schoolteachers. Since this is a reflexive section on my positionality, I do not have the scope to get into the depth of detail that would be required to give a full picture of the socio-material, institutionally bureaucratic, and visceral violence faced in the West Bank, (as things stood in 2008). Since 7th October 2023, there have been ongoing bombing attacks on Gaza carried out by the Israeli state military[14]; and form a longer pattern of violence against Palestine, since the Balfour Declaration in 1948. At the time of writing on a February 29th leap year, 146 days have passed, and more than 30 000 people, including children, have been killed by Israeli forces (Al-Jazeera, 2024). Humanitarian aid is limited and so far, there has been no end to the worsening crisis.

It was not long after returning to the UK that I first experienced burnout and was unable to continue the way that I was. It was with my own experience of burnout in mind that inspired me to engage with the empirical analysis in chapter 6. That is, how the narratives of my participants reflect patterns of self-care in response to burnout which may enable broader patterns of political action, albeit with a changed intensity. By the time 2010 came, I was still politically active, yet not to the extent that I had been. I remember first reading about David Cameron's Big Society plans in 2009 and at first glance, thinking it was odd that a Tory politician seemed to be calling for radical grassroots and community action. Yet, whilst I could see behind the veil that Cameron's rhetoric was ideologically loaded and worrying, at that time I didn't have the political language to articulate the implications.

Post 2008 precarity made it hard to find stable work that paid enough to live on and I took on a series of temporary contracts in administrative roles that were unsuited to my (at the time, still undiagnosed) ADHD and autistic conditions. I was feeling generally dissatisfied with my situation, and I was keen to learn. The announced rise in student fees in 2010 prompted me to apply to university again, before potentially facing a much larger debt. Having used up one year of possible funding whilst at Sussex, I was able to apply for a student loan to cover three years of study. In 2011, I

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[14] Ostensibly in response to attacks from Hamas but disproportionate and would constitute collective punishment. There are also other important arguments about the validity of framing the recent bombing as responsive to the Hamas attacks, as military occupation and attack are a much longer pattern of socio-material, discursive and visceral violence carried out against Palestinian that follows a pattern of ethnic cleansing and dehumanisation.

applied for, and got a place at the University of Kent on the single honours Cultural Studies program (that is now non-existent). I chose the course based on its socio-political, media studies, and inter-disciplinary approach to understanding cultural life.

The main inspiration for my initial PhD proposal came about when I was writing my dissertation for a master's in law and the Humanities (LLM) in 2017. My LLM thesis was about how the public legitimisation of austerity had been largely based on symbolically violent representations of poverty, and the erosive impact on economic, social, and cultural rights. The shock outcome of the Brexit referendum and the worrying election of Donald Trump in the US was still resonating in the collective political consciousness and seemed to have replaced narratives of austerity. I found myself reflecting on how there seemed to be a change in how resistance came about. In 2011, there had been the global Occupy movement, which seemed to signify a continuance of political praxis from former decades. Was it just that I was immersed in a different world now and detached from political prefiguration? I was not so sure. I suspected that in city contexts there were certainly still active solidarity movements and collectives providing mutual aid and political resources. Yet given the widespread momentum there may have been in 2011, I wondered why there was not more localised responses. Had the bleakness of austerity changed things? What had changed how social centres, squats, convergence centres and other forms politically imaginative activist infrastructure emerge and thrive?

The more I spoke to others the more it seemed that austerity conditions had disrupted many patterns of political action in the UK. I hope that my research can contribute both epistemologically and as a form of activism in itself, of illuminating alternative political narratives, perspectives and understandings that might otherwise become obscured through the passage of time and ideological interference.

Sampling

As a result of my history of political activism, I have various connections with different people involved in political action, activism, and resistance. As such, my main approach to finding research participants was snowball sampling, which is a

method of participants passing on the call for participation directly to those who may be interested. This is a method of finding participants from 'hidden populations' (Noy, 2008) and helps counter some of the issues associated with what Jonathon Neale (2015a) describes as holding an 'insider' and 'outsider' position, as participants can vouch for who I am, and my credibility as a researcher. In different contexts I hold an 'insider' position through my own experience as a former activist, and in many other situations bear an 'outsider' position through my lack of involvement, and role as an academic researcher and PhD student. As elaborated in the introduction of the thesis, activists are typically understood relative to their involvement with social and political movements. However, many politically active and dissenting people do not consider themselves activists, despite their contributions to numerous causes and movements. This constituted an early limitation to my empirical research because my initial calls for participation looked to speak with activists, and I found it difficult to recruit interviewees.

These sampling issues could have potentially been avoided by using the phrase 'politically active' in the calls for participation. This is partly because the term activist is loaded with connotation, can be construed in diffuse ways, and often rhetorically maligned. Indeed, some of my participants have expressed anxieties about the terms activist and activism, wondering whether their work was enough, or whether they could be regarded as an activist. This could stem from exaggerated expectations and idealised notions of an activist archetype that are internalised. I am always keen to stress to participants that whatever their political work is, is enough. Furthermore, the term activist, or as one of my participants, Griffin puts it, an activist 'moniker' may also allude to the exclusivity and privilege attached to some activist groups.

As I discussed, understandings of activists as rigidly determined by the social and political movements they belong to (see Jasper and Polletta, 2001); does not necessarily reflect the experiences of my participants, or how political action plays out in a contemporary context. However, engaging with *activisms* through the lens of political action and dissent enables a situated analysis of how socio-material, rhetorical and legislative conditions can shape political subjectivity and everyday practice. As such, I broadly conceptualised my participants relative to political action through (Marxist, but not always consciously) autonomism, and Michel Foucault's notion of counter-conduct. Counter conduct, as a concept, was left underdeveloped

by Foucault. However, counter-conduct has been developed by resistance scholars to include protest actions and dissent, mutual aid, solidarity, and practices of resistance that counter prescribed dominant modes of governance (Demetriou, 2016). Although the following positions may cross-over and intersect at times, I sought to include a range of participants involved broadly in broader social and political action as well as anti-austerity politics, including:

- People involved in single issue/focussed protests associated with austerity (e.g.: focus e15, Sisters Uncut and Disabled People Against Cuts).
- Those acting in response to austerity who are either employed or volunteering and who regard their work as a form of resistance and/or of mitigating the effects of austerity. Also included in this segment are people who have crossed from activism to volunteerism.
- I was also open to speaking to people involved in specific actions broader to anti-austerity campaigns, such as, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ activists, Extinction Rebellion, and others as I sought to understand how austerity conditions affect activists involved in struggles for justice and social rights, environmentalism, and broader resistance to the economic system.
- Former activists and those who have taken a step back from activism in the midst of austerity conditions.
- Other politically active and dissenting people who came forward include those who intersect the fields of activism and the free party/festival scene and would regard themselves as part of the party and protest dynamic.

I have had the most difficulty establishing connections with activists involved in single issue matters relating to austerity processes. This may relate to my insider/outsider position, and I have fewer direct contacts from established campaign groups that have emerged within austerity. I directly contacted relevant organisations such as Sisters Uncut, FocusE15, Disabled People against the Cuts.

Without clear links to these organisations, I faced various difficulties, some of which, stemmed from valid concerns about police monitoring and spies[15].

Contemporary police spying became evident in October 2010 when Mark Kennedy, aka Mark Stone was revealed to have been posing as an environmental activist whilst engaged in the covert surveillance of environmental activism and protest (policespiesoutoflives.org.uk). However, the infiltration and surveillance of political groups has a longer history in the UK, Stone was just one of many undercover operatives infiltrating hundreds of political groups in the UK, since 1968 (Schlembach, 2024:22). Groups that were targeted and victimised include various political organisations, trade unions and their members, activists, justice campaigns, as well as environmental and social activism (Schlembach 2024:13).

The surveillance of activists is state violence. The implications of decades of covert surveillance on activists, political groups, and organisations are vast. Particularly problematically, undercover police were using the identities of deceased children without knowledge and consent from their parents. Not only that, but police spies were engaging in sexual and long-term relationships with activists, including some police having children with their supposed partners under false pretences (ibid). The Undercover Policing Inquiry was launched in 2015 by the Home Office and has been largely focussed on the activities of the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS, ceased operations in 2008) and the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU) (Schlembach, 2024). The inquiry is not only responsive to covert surveillance but also the 'distinct, yet allied' structural violence of institutionalised racism and a culture of misogyny within policing practice (Schlembach, 2024:9).

When asked, I reassured potential participants that I was not involved with the police but did not push anyone to participate who did not feel comfortable. With these concerns in mind, during the interviews I did not ask for specific information about potentially illegal activities or legal cases. General suspicion about 'outsiders' among the populations I sought to reach meant that there were times when finding participants through calls for participation were slow and embarrassingly unfruitful.

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[15] I remember from my periphery involvement in direct action around 2008 that concerns about surveillance and police spying tended to manifest as scepticism about outsider influence and protective actions like taking sim cards out of mobile phones before entering closed meetings.

One participant (Griffin) further speculates that issues around the exclusivity of activist circles may have deepened and driven some activists further underground and others to the periphery, no longer identifying as activists. In one case, a potential participant withdrew prior to interview because although they were engaged in political action, their political perspective was right-wing, and they did not wish to align themselves politically with left-wing activism. They politely declined and wished me the best.

These issues were compounded by the inability to travel during the lockdowns, and further pandemic related constraints to meeting in-person. Difficulties in securing participants from these organisations could also relate to a slowing down of campaign action during the pandemic. In another case this was because of the justified expectation that I would participate with helping, yet with limited ability to travel during the lockdowns, I was unable to make the journey.

History as Partisan: History Workshop and Oral History as Political Practice

Oral tradition has a long historical precedence. There is written acknowledgement of spoken testimony dating from as far back as the ancient Greeks as well as within the venerable Bede's studies of *History of the English Church and People* in 731AD, and Samuel Johnson who utilised oral historical evidence to inform his research on Scottish culture in 1773 (Oral History Society, 2024). Oral historical evidence has also played an important role across the 20th century as a way of uncovering narratives and subjective accounts of history. The term 'history from below' was neologised by British Marxist historian and New Leftist Edward P. Thompson in 1966 in a segment of *The Times* literary supplement *New ways in History*. History from below expands the confines of the so-called academic ivory tower to foreground proletariat voices and usurp the dominance of elite narratives in explaining lived conditions. History from below allies with History Workshop which began at Ruskin college in 1967, as a rejection of formalised examination culture and as a means of broader historical engagement that encouraged research from the vantage of trade union and labour movements (Samuel, 1980; Berlin, 1996). In this subsection, I offer a brief outline of the cultural significance of the New Left, which gave rise to and shaped the tone of History Workshop which began in 1967, at Ruskin College, and

was largely spearheaded by Marxist historian Raphael Samuel. I then discuss the potency of oral history as political practice that challenges positivist modalities of knowledge production, and enables the recording of narratives that can disrupt official narratives, and hegemonic perspective.

The non-hierarchical, prefigurative politics, and left wing political alliances formed through the British New Left, informed the politics of History Workshop which stemmed in part from the historiographical traditions of the Communist Party of Great Britain's Historians Group (CPHG). CPHG Historiographical interventions include that of Eric Hobsbawm and the lesser known Marxist Dona Torr who inspired and oversaw the *History in the Making* series (Hall, 2010; Gentry, 2013). The CPHG included notable figures, Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, Edward Thompson, and Raphael Samuel (Berlin, 1996; Gentry, 2013). All of whom, with the exception of Eric Hobsbawm (who remained loyal), became party dissidents and gradually formed part of the New Left. As mentioned in the introduction of the thesis: The events of 1956 included Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech that had unveiled the extent of force, oppression and violence embedded by Stalin's regime. In November of the same year, the violent incursion of the Hungarian revolution by the Soviet army also brought significant attention to the extent of violence and secrecy within the party. On the other side of the coin, the failed British and French invasion of the Suez Canal had brought light to the futility of party politics (E.P Thompson, 1978; Kenny, 1995; Berlin, 1996; Hall, 2010). Problematically, communist party policy was to forbid open discussion and debate from within the party, which had been particularly disruptive to party intellectuals seeking to make sense of events, and had given rise to mass departures from CPGB (E.P Thompson, 1978; Kenny, 1995; Berlin, 1996; Hall, 2010; Scott-Brown, 2015). Edward P. Thompson (1978:i) wrote that, 'reasoning was disliked by the leadership of the party' and had led to the editors of the Communist party journal *The Reasoner* being suspended from party membership, and consequently the journal *New Reasoner* was established in 1957. Raphael Samuel joined the party dissidents, but given that he had been raised as a communist by his mother, leaving the party had disrupted his political identity (Scott-Brown, 2015). Nevertheless, Samuel is widely regarded as among the first wave of the intellectual New Left which included sociologists Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Edward Thompson, John Rex, John Saville and many others (Kenny, 1995).

The New Left is associated with broadly socialist, deinstitutionalised, non-party political, prefigurative, political action, and shaped the tone of anti-racist civil rights campaigns, feminism, and anti-nuclear action (Brienes, 1989). Stuart Hall described the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmnament (CND) as 'one of the first' of a 'new kind of political mobilisation' that was non-party political, implicitly anti-capitalist, and mobilised across class lines without 'a clear class composition' (2010:19). The New Left could also be regarded as a merging of two different but complimentary left-wing positions. Hall (2010:179) explains this as expressions arising from 'two political experiences or generations', of independent, non-party political, socialists of the 1950s, who first produced *Universities and Left Review*. The other generation being, communist humanism, associated with John Saville, one of the founders of the *New Reasoner*. Samuel was also associated with the journals *Universities and Left Review* and *New Left Review* which had shaped his attitude toward the production of historical knowledge.

Rather than being a tight knit grouping, the New Left is described as a 'mileau' (Berlin, 1996); which had a social side that was encouraged by the emergence of New Left clubs (Hall, 2010). The first London Universities and Left Review (ULR) club initially began as a reading group and did not set out to actively 'recruit' members. Nonetheless, the club quickly gained popularity with up four hundred people from across the left attending talks and meetings (ibid). The club found permanent residence 'through another of Raphael Samuel's nerve wrackingly risky but brilliantly innovative ventures – in the Partisan café in Carlisle street' which had a coffee bar, library, and club space (Hall, 2010:189). Such clubs arguably prefigured the terrain for the kinds of autonomous left wing spaces and social centres that I discussed in my historical review and will analyse in chapter 6.

Ruskin college was established in 1899 as an institute for trade unionists and labour officials as a site for fostering working class solidarity and education (Gentry, 2013). The college had radical roots: In 1908, students of Ruskin set up the Plebs league and challenged the colleges ties with the elite Oxford University to fight against political neutrality and reassert their political position as class conscious and overtly left wing (ibid). As recommended by Christopher Hill, Raphael Samuel joined Ruskin college in 1962 as a part-time sociology tutor, and was granted a permanent position in 1964 in economics, social history and sociology (Gentry, 2013). Yet Samuel became

disillusioned by what he saw as a deterioration of Ruskin's roots of promoting working class interests and solidarity (ibid). Samuel's approach often diverted from purist modes of Marxist analysis in several important ways. Firstly, that Samuel expanded his scope beyond economic structuration and into the 'cultural dimension of politics' (Gentry, 2013:194); and in doing so renegotiated the relationships between structure and agency. Secondly, that Samuel's interdisciplinary approach connected the dots between facets of everyday life for working people. He took specific interest in pedagogy and the importance of adult education, particularly history, 'as a vehicle for moral argument and political debate' (Gentry, 2013:199). That is, Samuel placed weight on the study of history as unconfined to objectivist paradigms of neutrality, as a 'tool' that connected disciplines and enabled adult learners connexon to research based on lived experience shaped by working class identity.

The Workshop also provided a framework for public meetings and set up study groups in working class communities (ibid). Samuel (1980) wrote of how the methodologies employed within the Workshop explicitly negated historical positivism, whereby subjects become 'subsumed in the methodological preoccupations of the historian; an economic history which insisted on the primacy of the statistical, irrespective of what was being measured' (1980:164). Samuel argued that such approaches led to writing 'which left no space for political or moral commitment' (ibid). The History Workshop posed a direct challenge to the supremacy of positivist frameworks of knowledge production, by placing important emphasis on deeper knowledge emerging from a plethora of studies of everyday life and lived experience (Samuel, 1980).

The *History Workshop Journal* was first published in Spring of 1976. The introduction, written by Samuel, reads as an important mission statement that refutes the epistemologies of traditional historical study as being methodologically narrow and closed off to human experience. The aim of the journal was to 'restore a wider context for the study of history' – both as a counter to the scholastic fragmentation of the subject, and with the aim of making it relevant to ordinary people' (Samuel, 1976:1). History Workshop and the *History Workshop Journal* made bold steps in asserting the significance of subjectivity, class consciousness, and ethical framing in the production of historical, sociological, and political knowledge.

As Samuel put it, History Workshop stood 'in opposition to the whole tradition of historical neutrality and "value free" social science' suggesting that 'the Workshop has asserted that truth was partisan', and 'a weapon in the battle of ideas' (Samuel, 1980:168). Samuel's emphasis on ethics, direct politics and subjective accounts as exhibiting objective conditions aligns with ethico-onto-epistemology. As I discussed in the introduction to the thesis, ethico-onto-epistemology pertains to the interconnectedness of ontology and epistemology, as being-knowing-doing framed by ethics. Ethico-onto-epistemologies are not positivist but instead framed by explicitly political ethical standpoints and account for agentic subjectivity and objectivity as co-constructive of lived conditions (Stetsenko, 2020a, 2020b).

Whilst oral tradition clearly predates, the collective efforts within History Workshop were instrumental in the development of oral history as political practice, giving weight to spoken evidence and subjective accounts of everyday life. Advances in technology and the mass availability of portable equipment and devices enabled ease of recording, which lent to the potency of oral history as radical political practice. Notably, recordings of various oral historians associated with History Workshop are hosted by the British Library. The recordings include one from Alun Howkins, a former Ruskin student who had initially studied economics but switched to studying History, after finding the positivism of economics unstimulating and realising he was far more interested in studying the economic histories of working people (Morgan, 2017). There is also a recording of Cynthia Brown who came upon oral history as a methodology whilst as an undergraduate at Ruskin during her dissertation research; and a recording from Elizabeth Roberts who pursued oral historical research on the experiences of women during the early 1970s. Similarly to my own sentiments, her account suggests she was skeptical of superfluous technology and a keen transcriptionist (ibid).

The process of founding the Oral History Society (OHS) in Britain spanned over several years. The OHS website mentions discussions about the formation of the society, in 1969 at an 'informal conference' at the British Institute of Recorded Sound. Samuel suggested that History Workshop played an important role in the founding of the OHS in 1971 (1980:166). In *An oral historical discussion with Paul Thompson – On the need for the Oral Historical Society* (Thompson, 2016), renowned oral historian Paul Thompson recalls the early discussions of the OHS and

a conference in Leicester that had led to the agreement that an oral history society should be set up. The OHS was finally instituted in 1972. Thompson's (2016) account mentions key oral historians who were involved in the founding of the society including himself, John Saville, Theo Barker, Christopher Storm-Clark, Brian Harrison, Eric Cregeen, Chris Smout, and Raphael Samuel. Having such a strong intellectual stronghold bore weight in legitimising oral history as a methodology. Oral history encapsulates the vitality of the spoken word in its capacity to create detailed, beautifully subjective, politically partisan, unique historical records that have relevance to political action, academic practice, and beyond.

Oral histories are more than just a series of facts relayed to a listening ear; as Luisa Passerini contends, they are 'pre-eminently an expression and representation of culture, and therefore include[s] not only literal narrations, but also the dimension of memory, ideology, and subconscious desires' (1979:54). The content of oral historical recordings exists as part of the culture they are born from and reflects the ideologies, materialities and memories that frame subjective experience. Memories hold potential beyond their representational capacities, and are revelatory of deeper understandings of history and political experience. For instance, based on oral historical recollections, cultural sociologist David Nettleingham (2015) analysed generational identity and how socialist activists come to understand their political identity in relation to other activists, through the specificity of their shared experiences. By extending Ben Ze-ev and Lomsky-Feder's (2009) notion of canonical generations - as cohorts whose experiences are located relative to formative events; Nettleingham casts light on the narrative production of generations through the recollection and selective framing of experiential memories, as part of the process of building collective identity and in the delineation of generational location. The generation of activists involved with the Miners Strike of 1984-85, are canonised in memory, whereby 'divisions and tensions' are less discussed and recollected, but instead remembered relative to their contributions. Generational identity is formed through 'the active demarcation and attribution of collective identities, articulating a shared generational participation or defining generations against one another' (Nettleingham, 2015:862). Such analysis brings important insights into political identity and the potential of looking between official histories and personal retellings of events as to what is included and excluded from framings of memory.

The ongoing impetus of oral history toward political engagement is made evident by the sheer number of politically imporant oral historical recordings archived online at The British Library. Notably there are recordings from people who were present during the Brixton Riots of 1981, the Miners Strikes, Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, as well as Communist party oral histories and recordings from numerous trade unionists. In a contemporary context, there are numerous critically, politically and academically engaged oral histories that consides lived experience and activism, exploring solidarity, struggle, identity, and collective resistance in various social contexts. Research of this kind includes Simon Vickers' (2020) recordings of John Sewell and Edna Dixon who mobilised in the late 1960s to oppose gentrification and urban renewal to their community. Such interviews highlight the political potential of oral history as a method of understanding more about the cultural worlds that narratives emerge from and of conserving history.

As explored, oral historical interviews evidently have the capacity to record historically and politically significant events and issues and as a methodological approach is clearly relevant to engaging with the lived experiences of activists within the austerity timeframe. As a method for relating lived experience, oral historical methods are frequently utilised to uncover political understandings from marginalised populations, and those who are oppressed by powerful political interests (Portelli 1991). The preservation of narratives that trace the austerity period post 2010-2022 is also of importance for their potential for re-analysis at a later point in time. Recording an oral history is process of reflection, and the co-creation of narrative may also be a revelatory process for participants and myself as the researcher. Narratives can be understood through their temporal position, and sometimes recontextualised in relation to other events. Events that might seem random or disconnected can take on new meaning and connections with other events and rhetoric. As well, there are causes and effects, unforeseen consequences, and knowledge that emerges later on, of which can then be understood in relation to the future analysis of particular oral history recordings.

With this in mind, I have found oral historical approaches to be highly applicable to recording the lived experiences of activists within the austerity timeframe post 2010. As a methodology, oral history opens space to gain broader cultural understandings and political knowledge about the impact of austerity on activism that may otherwise

be lost. What Alessandro Portelli (1991) describes as 'official narratives' are those which dominate the cultural landscape and may occur through governance, media reporting and other institutional positioning of narrative. Official narratives and ways of understanding the past and present are often shaped by the ideological motivations of those concerned with proliferating them. Preserving oral historical evidence that accounts for the experiences of activists is of importance particularly in reference to contemporary austerity in the UK, particularly given how much has happened since 2010. Particularly, Brexit, and an intensification of instabilities within the Conservative party. Narratives that run counter to official understandings, such as those of activists, are threatened with potential erasure from historical record. As Portelli (1992) explores, history is constantly developing through the passage of time. Our understandings are constituted through the knowledge systems and discourses available and progressed within each era. As new discourses and ways of conceptualising ideas emerge, and transform, so does our ability to understand our memories and history within and according to its wider significance.

In summary, the politics of the New Left continue to implicitly shape the tone of political action in the UK, and resonates with the political perspectives of my participants. The History Workshop was influenced by New Left politics and the preceding communist histiographical traditions, playing an important role in the legitimation of oral historical evidence as providing deeper and politically nuanced historical accounts. Oral history challenges the predominance of positivism and official narratives by forefronting subjective experience and narrative as providing deeper insight into lived conditions. I come to write some of these passages at the latter stages of completing my corrections and revisions, so it would be disingenuous to retrospectively suggest that the ethico-onto-epistemologies of Samuel and the History Workshop had specifically informed my approach to oral historical research, regrettably they did not. Nonetheless, my methodological approach identifies with the socialist emphases of History Workshop, oral history, and the vital insights gained through studies of lived experience. The prefigurative, non-hierarchical politics of the New Left resonates with how I have conceptualised my participants as politically active and dissenting (see thesis Introduction). Analytically, both History Workshop and my approach have centred the cultural aspects of political subjectivity and ethics, with tensions between structural constraints and radical agency, as well

as harnessing the importance of narrative in shaping class conscious historical records that challenge hegemonic narratives, positivist framing and elite power.

Ethical adaptations to Oral Historical Approaches during the COVID-19 Pandemic

I received approval from the University of Kent's School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research Ethics Committee on 22nd April 2020 and proceeded with seeking participants for my research. The first interview I arranged took place on a bright and sunny day on the 27th of April 2020, via Zoom. This was just over a month after the start of the first Covid-19 lockdown in the UK. Due to the legal and ethical constraints of the lockdowns, it was unfortunately, necessary to adapt my planned methodology of in-person interviews with participants. The cultural changes that COVID brought about meant that even after the lockdowns had finished, most participants opted to engage with the interview virtually from the comfort of their own home. This raised some issues in terms of keeping with oral historical traditions: The Oral Historical Association Guidelines (2020) state that recording remotely breaks established tradition, due to lack of physical proximity. Furthermore, Oral Historical Association guidelines that were adopted in 2008 state that an 'atmosphere of equality' must be sustained and that it is easier to ensure equilibrium within in-person contexts. Maintaining an atmosphere of equality is important, and remote recordings could also detract from what Ben Anderson (2009) describes as affective atmospheres whereby atmospheres create a 'more'. A more that is an additional layer of feeling bound by contradicting forces held in a 'relation of tension' (2009:80). That is, affective atmospheres are an emotive space felt through social relations. I suggest that within the context of an oral historical recording, the co-creation of a narrative creates an affective atmosphere in and of itself that holds its own within the shared virtual space of remote oral history recordings and provides ample terrain conducive to co-creating an atmosphere of equality.

Despite these potential issues, being able to record interviews at the convenience of participants and myself has been helpful in maintaining the aforementioned atmosphere of equality stated by the Oral Historical Association. Particularly amongst neurodivergent participants, a strong preference for remote recording was specified even after lockdown restrictions passed. This could be because telephone and virtual interviews might alleviate stress or worry associated with anticipating a visitor to their home or traveling to meet elsewhere because recordings can be done from the comfort of our own homes. This might offer a layer of comfort and sense of equality for the participant, as well as an additional layer of safety for myself, in that I would not need to travel to meet someone I am unfamiliar with. Another benefit of recording remotely is financial, in that. recording can be done for free, rather than facing expenditure in travel costs, which broadens the geographical reach of participants. For example, three of my participants live in relatively remote parts of rural Wales (Ceridwen, Alden, and Cornelius) and it would have been extremely difficult and potentially expensive to reach their homes via public transport. Remote recording thus has enabled an approach less constrained by anxiety, time, cost, and proximity.

Nonetheless, there are drawbacks to remote recording in that doing so may have limited the extent to which I could engage directly with campaign groups. There is a just expectation from activist groups, that in return for being interviewed there should be some deeper involvement with their cause and actions. I hold solidarity, and my general desire is to engage with, and support campaigns. However, my task of writing this thesis requires that I do not enough time or resources to offer the depth of involvement that would be hoped for from each group. Despite some of the losses and constraints to research that the pandemic introduced, COVID circumstances have provided a unique lens and opportunity to discuss issues of austerity in light of further crisis. Furthermore, shifting circumstances underscore the urgency to record narratives associated with activism and austerity that may otherwise be lost.

The interview design and the co-construction of narratives

Oral historical approaches provide a way of preserving, establishing and proliferating counter-discourse and narratives of struggle within personal and socio-political histories. Keeping in mind the discussion on the significance of oral history as political practice , I will now outline my approach to the interview design and my role in facilitating the co-construction of narrative. The construction of time in the retelling of remembered time periods and events is often messy and asynchronous. Understandably, speakers do not always address stories in a neat chronological order and through the course of recollection often engage in 'pursuing and gathering together bundles of meaning, relationships, and themes' (Portelli 1991:63). Rather than being a problem for researchers, this is extremely beneficial in yielding thematic clusters of meaning within interpretations of narratives. Taking a semi-structured approach to the interview questions that addresses the timeframe of post-2008, has allowed for meaningful interpretations as situated in various time-spaces across the austerity trajectory.

I structured the questions in such a way that I hoped would allow narratives, meta-narratives, and stories to emerge and to keep the interview as flexible as possible so as to still be applicable to multiple aspects of the research questions. I initially set out with a somewhat longer set of questions but found that time constraints meant that it was unfair to ask too many questions and that there was some cross over that could be mitigated. Fortunately, my first interview was with Anka, who has been politically active in many campaigns, and is a friend of mine. She was patient, enthusiastically willing to participate, and kind enough to take the time to engage with a pilot interview, to gauge how the questions would work. This also meant that Anka's narrative was longer than others (2 hours +) and contains situated knowledge and significant insight that is highlighted throughout the thesis. Following this, most of the interviews have taken between 30 minutes and 1 hour. Some participants have requested a list of questions in advance of the interview and this has been helpful for them in facilitating well thought out responses. Two neurodivergent participants opted to have a text-based discussion rather than interview but nonetheless provided important empirical insight.

Throughout the oral history interviews, I was conversational, cautious of the tone of my voice, and tried to avoid sounding overly authoritative and clinical. As discussed, my subject position is a potential issue posed when balancing the academic

expectations of my thesis and how I approach the professionalism of the interview without coming across unintentionally intimidating. I avoided academic jargon as much as possible. In avoiding setting a tone that reflects insider pressures and judgements about someone's level and engagement with activism, I did not ask about the activism they were involved in early on in the interview. Some participants relayed anxieties about whether they could be regarded as an activist due to the informal hierarchies associated with activist movements. As discussed in the Introduction of the thesis, I am keen to stress that resistance takes on many forms, particularly within austerity. Lived experience is not neutral and can reflect deeply political modes of consciousness.

Typically, across my interviews, I began by getting to know a bit about the person by asking participants about how they described their political beliefs. I hoped to bring attention to the broader range of left-wing political beliefs held by politically active people. I have largely found asking this to be a helpful approach. The second question that I asked was whether there were any particular political events or processes that shaped their political views. I asked this question to get a sense of when and how their political consciousness developed. Most of the participants had strong political stances prior to austerity.

Narrative responses to this question were particularly thought-provoking through a generational lens, considering the wars that frame political eras. June Edmunds and Bryan Turner suggest that generations 'can be defined in terms of a collective response to a traumatic event' (Edmunds and Turner 2002:12). Traumatic events include wars that shape how generations experience their formative political consciousness, as tied to the contexts that they politically responded to. To illustrate, many of the cohort in their fifties, sixties, and seventies reported anxieties around the Falklands War and Cold War, and a few mentioned their involvement in Campaign for Nuclear Disarmnament (CND) and direct actions against cruise missiles during the 1980s, particularly Aldermaston. Cold war tensions were an aspect that my cohort who were politically active in the 1980s have lived memories of and accordingly framed their political perspectives.

Many participants in their thirties and forties discussed the politics around the War in Iraq as playing a part in the formation of their political perspectives. Protests against the War in Iraq were of tremendous proportion. According to statistics from

the Stop the War coalition who organised the march, up to two million people attended in London on 15th February 2003 (German, 2023). However, those figures were contested within the mainstream media. Indeed the Daily mail estimate from the day was in the thousands (Mail online, 2003). The report vastly underestimated the sheer numbers of people at the march and implied that the general public did not form a large proportion of the number of people in attendance suggesting that the protest was a fringe affair, mainly driven by radically left wing groups. Reflexively speaking, having attended the march myself as a younger teenager with friends, I do not think I have ever seen such a large protest with such a vast turnout and engagement from the general public. Indeed, the protest against the War in Iraq remains the largest in recorded history in the United Kingdom.

Many of my participants also mention the generalised yet by no means less brutal War on Terror as having influenced their political perspective. The dynamic of post 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror was the driving geo-political context prior to austerity mediated by enhanced security measures and surveillance, lack of transparency, legal grey areas, and an expansion of 'neo-colonial ambitions' and Islamophobia (Haiven and Khashnabish, 2016:11). Asking about the political circumstances in which their political perspectives arose has been effective in providing situated context for my empirical chapters.

Whilst discussing their political views it was often the case that my participants had already referred to the kinds of political action that they have been, or are involved in. Nonetheless, I asked the question, 'What kinds of [activism/campaigns/politics] have you been involved in?' I occasionally varied the phrasing according to the flow of the conversation, to give people the opportunity to reflect on the kinds of broadly left-wing political action, protests and campaigns that they have been, or are allied with. The narrative responses of participants have informed both of my key research questions as well as helping in defining activism/activist as a broad disposition toward acting against forms of political injustice or toward a particular aim. Political action and dissent can play out in differential ways according to the idiosyncrasies of subject position, with regard to personal experience, gender, race, class etc), as well as geographical location, generation, and social and cultural capital. As I have discussed, I consistently stressed that political action takes on many forms,

particularly within austerity, and that traditional definitions of activism may not carry a neat transposition to the austerity context.

I also tended to ask about whether they felt their political/ethical priorities and habits had changed since austerity. Asking about these aspects has helped me understand the extent to which austerity processes have affected what politically minded people prioritise when times are difficult. I asked this question in a broad way to get an understanding of what may or may not have changed for them in their everyday lives in relation to their politics. Many of the participants maintained that their ethical priorities had remained the largely the same, others had adjusted their priorities towards family life. Some of the participants reported that their political views had softened or that they were less inclined toward revolutionary politics; yet were still radically inspired.

As the conversation progressed I asked participants about whether they had experienced impacts of legal changes over the austerity period. I phrased the question differently according to the flow of the conversation. As I previously discussed in the subsection on sampling, concerns about ethics and police surveillance meant my focus has not been on court cases and legal action. At the time of recording the interviews (apart from the two text-based interviews with neurodivergent and/or anxious participants) the Police Crime Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 and the Public Order Bill 2023 had not yet been passed. However, campaigns against the Bill were mentioned in passing by a few participants over the course of the conversation but was not a prominent theme across the interviews.

Another question that I often adapted according to the conversation was around the kinds of actions, networks, institutions, activist built infrastructures, and alliances that they felt were particularly helpful going forward. Whilst this could seem vague, this allowed participants to approach the question from the perspective that they felt comfortable with. Themes surrounding this question clearly run through the course of the interview. However, I asked the question to get a sense of the networks of action and solidarity that they ally with and to understand their beliefs on the kinds of political praxes that make a difference in helping people and changing political relations. Some participants spoke about this in terms of specific campaign actions, such as Extinction Rebellion (XR), anti-racist and anti-fascist movements, as well as anti-austerity. Various participants discussed institutional and party politics as well

as organisations, such as charities and advocacy groups in challenging policy. Others still, spoke about the community networks that they have been involved with that including local food banks. Some participants discussed social media as playing an important role in mobilising action, raising awareness, and bringing to light patterns of institutionalised racism and gendered violence, particularly with regard to Black Lives Matter and #Metoo. Yet others mentioned the pitfalls of social media.

I often asked participants whether they felt being an activist was part of their identity and if this had ever changed. Responses to this varied between participants – some regarding it as a key part of who they are; others constituted activist identity as malleable to context, and others still discussed some of the pitfalls of self-identifying as an activist. Narrative responses relating to activist identity have helped me grapple with some of the pervasive definitional issues surrounding activism and led me to describe my participants as 'politically active and dissenting'. Indeed, as my research developed, activist identity became a less significant theme. As my empirical material suggests, notions of activist identity over political identity could be problematic; not only in terms of exclusivity, but also with regard to collectively forming coherent left-wing aims. I concluded each interview by asking participants about their hopes for the future. I hoped to end the interview in an optimistic way. Doing so, I hoped could help shift the focus to the present moment, and the future, after having discussed the past, which can be emotionally challenging.

Empirical research warrants ethical consideration, particularly when the thoughts and feelings of others arise through the recording of narratives based on austerity, given how austerity conditions bear socially differentiated effects and traumas. Had it ever been necessary during the interview process, I would have signposted participants to relevant sources of help and support. Nonetheless, I remained sensitive to potential discomfort or anxiety stemming from reliving difficulties experienced amidst precarious circumstances. Other potential issues that could arise when discussing political action, include topics raised that contain information about illegal activity. Practices of activism and direct action have many legal grey areas, and as this research explores, the legal structure around practices of resistance is routinely subject to change. As mentioned, I did not actively seek information from participants that could be deemed criminal, nor did I store information that could

implicate any participant in criminal activity. If any such disclosure was made, then I would not transcribe that part of the interview.

Narrative Inquiry as an Analytical Framework

Narrative inquiry is an emerging research methodology that has gained momentum as an interdisciplinary approach to narrative research since the 1980s (Kim, 2016). Despite earlier tensions in establishing the field against positivist and post-positivist research methodologies, narrative inquiry is practiced from within a broad array of disciplines such as, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and history (ibid). The sharing of knowledge through lived experience, (as per the epistemological orientation of narrative inquiry) complements oral history; Both are methods of co-creating narratives and are valuable tools for analysing, interpreting, and contextualising stories of social and historical importance. Formative narrative inquirer Jean Clandinin elaborates: 'Narrative inquirers study an individual's experience in the world and, through the study, seek ways of enriching and transforming that experience for themselves and others' (Clandinin, 2007:42). That is, narrative inquiry takes a particular focus on narrative and the emergence of stories that relay broader applicability to the human experience, and convey deeper meanings and messages, sometimes for their transformative potential.

A narrative inquiry approach centres the importance of storytelling as a way of encapsulating experience. Meta stories emerge from within longer narratives. The researcher's role is to listen, interpret, and analyse whilst honouring the truth of the narrative (Kim, 2016). The active co-relation between participants and the listener/researcher enables an interpretive approach to situating stories in their wider context (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990; Kim, 2016.) The following paragraphs outline my approach to analysis as it relates to narrative theory. Although, for the sake of clarity, I discuss these phases as though they are a linear process, my approach, in practice, has often been to go back and forth and cycle between the stages where necessary.

Gathering

The first part of my analytical process I refer to as gathering. Gathering involves the pulling together of collected knowledge, such as, empirical material from the interviews, understandings from my literature review, and other knowledge obtained from the scholarly fields I draw from. This includes, for example, sociology, human and urban geography, cultural studies, and critical theory. Gathering also involves all the preliminary work undertaken before embarking on the empirical component of my research. Prior to recording the interviews, I did a preliminary literature search that helped in mapping initial themes of interest. I first took a deductive approach to mapping out thematic codes stemming from the research undertaken for my initial literature review. This accounted for scholarly theoretical work, and relevant empirical research in the field, alongside my embodied experience of austerity and activism.

I first began transcribing the interviews using Windows Media Player to listen to the recordings and then typing verbatim in Microsoft Word. This was a slow process with much stopping and starting. When transcribing, I found linguist Liz Marsden's (2015) approach to be of tremendous assistance. Here, I relay how I employed Marsden's strategies to help smoothen the process. In case it might prove to be a helpful approach for any reader conducting empirical research, struggling with the transcription of interviews. Firstly, I recorded the interviews using a portable recording device and uploaded them onto my laptop into secure files. I describe my process of transcription as quick and messy, yet ultimately leading to a functional and clear transcription. Marsden overcame many of the unwieldy aspects of transcribing by using free VLC Media Player software, which has enhanced functionality and features. In particular, speed control and keyboard toggles, were instrumental in refining my process of transcription. I downloaded VLC player and found it to be a valuable decision in speeding up the process of transcribing. It took a few minutes (and an internet search for clarification) to adjust the toggle functions on VLC and assign properties to keys. Based on the assigned properties, pressing the shift key along with the backspace button, enabled rewinding in 10 second increments. The shift key with the p button allowed for pausing and starting the recording. Doing so, meant I could keep my eyes on the transcription, rather than having to switch between multiple application windows each time I had to stop and

start, which had proved to be unnecessarily cumbersome, and at times a distraction. VLC allows users to slow down or speed up recordings. Being able to incrementally slow down recordings meant that I was able to type along with the recording as much as possible. I allowed room for shorthand and error as long as the transcript was legible and had appropriate break spaces between speakers. I fixed typos and denoted who was speaking, after the whole recording was written. The process of tidying allowed for deeper familiarity with the interviews, and initial coding.

During and after the process of transcribing I took a multi-step approach to anonymisation which is described in more detail in chapter 4 with regard to the stories and lives of my participants. Reading and re-reading was a process I undertook throughout all stages of analysis to seek further connections and patterns. In this vein, the gathering phrase of my research also relates to Connelly and Clandinin's (1990) suggestion of 'broadening' and 'burrowing' as analytical tools for coding themes and understanding patterns and emerging stories. Broadening involves expanding understandings of the wider context and developing a general description of the narrative and participant. Burrowing involves going deeper into specific details of the codes and narratives and identifying themes, patterns, and areas of interest. After the interviews were recorded and transcribed, I began reading and re-reading each transcript to get a stronger understanding and closeness to the content of the interview. Through engagement with the empirical material I had collected, I began observing and collecting further themes that arose through the narratives. I took both a deductive and inductive approach to determining themes, insofar that I began with some pre-conceptions based on my own experiences and assumptions, yet tried to remain alert to patterns and themes that I was not expecting. After I had gained some closeness to each narrative, I initially started by taking an idiosyncratic approach to colour coding each text to a key I developed.

My approach to gathering also aligns with Kim's (2016) tactic for this phase of the research, which is to 'flirt' with the data that is there. Kim employs the term flirtation in its Freudian psychoanalytical sense a way of both 'playfully' and 'seriously' working with the data using a critical imagination to allocate codes and themes and identifying various 'storied' arcs with reference to knowledge gained through a robust scholarly underpinning.

I colour coded the first five interviews to denote different codes that pointed to different aspects of the narratives. For example:

Affective. Emotion/Tone/atmosphere/space emotional reactions. Hopes **Fatigue, humour, reflective,(Or this when +)**

Narrative: **reflection, Shift. Junctures Longer trajectory**

Community: breakdown of community, building community

Precarity: poverty, Gentrification, uncertainty, privatisation, refugees (or this)

Institutional: working with organisations, hierarchies, institutional conflict,

Methodological interest: technical errors, questions to rethink/rephrase, things of further methodological interest.

Forming political consciousness: Identity

Actualisation: (political habits/dispositions/interaction with infrastructure

Rhetoric: challenging rhetoric, obvious rhetoric

Subjectification and state attack Strategies outside of previous habits, breakdown of habits, changes to strategies

This was both a playful and serious approach to working with the narratives. Initially each code contained multiple notions, eg Narrative: **reflection, Shift. Junctures Longer trajectory** and was broad enough to encompass different aspects within the code category, including those aspects that may be contradictory to each other that would help in building links, connections and contradictions between different aspects, such as community, breaking down and building up. The codes assisted in producing additional sub-themes relating to austerity and rhetoric as they arose.

This was, at first, a generative approach in helping visualise patterns in the text and was part of my initial research process. Unfortunately, it was an approach I had to sacrifice and here I explain why: As the codes employed began to expand and multiply, the coded texts became unintelligible as I was running out of distinct ways to link colours to codes. As such, I faced difficulties increasing the number of codes without the text becoming too obfuscated to derive meaning from. Colour coding was also problematic in denoting where parts of the transcripts fell into multiple code

categories and thus looked overly convoluted. As such, I soon dropped this approach and found more flexibility in writing out each code within squared brackets in the text e.g., [code] as it pertained to each segment of text. This was more productive as it allowed me to easily read the text and use the text search function to sift through codes.

Although my initial literature review helped inform my analysis, and shaped the scholarly context of this thesis, themes derived from literature reviews did not always play a strong role in the development of further themes from my interviews. Instead, my approach was grounded by the narrative, and sought patterns within and outside of my predetermined thematic categories. I took an inductive and top-down approach to draw links between broader, macro-level deductive themes; and micro, grounded themes that arose through deep engagement with the content of the narratives. After generating themes, I began looking again at the patterns and connections I found between the experiences that were shared in the interviews. Within the larger narratives of the interview, were meta narratives that constituted stories of their own which leads to the next phase of analysis which is *mediation and intervention.*

Mediation and Intervention

In this phase of analysis, I began to develop coherent stories from longer narratives. I engaged with the consolidated knowledge and understandings gained from the prior research phases and started to make deeper interpretations. This involves work undertaken to facilitate and mediate meaningful stories from the narratives. Although I construe mediation and intervention within the same phase, they constitute separate and interlinking processes. Mediation occurs through the responsible extraction and reconstruction of meaningful stories from longer narratives. Intervention takes a hermeneutical approach to situating stories within their broader contexts, with reference to critical, conceptual, and theoretical perspectives, and their implications.

I have adapted names and locations to protect privacy where a participant could easily be identified. Exceptions are when participants explicitly expressed that they

did not want to be anonymous. My approach is to steer as close as possible to the narrative truth of the stories related within interviews and avoid meshing together a preconceived story simply for its oomph factor. In a podcast interview with Pengfei Zhao (2017) Kim suggests that the ideal story is one that can stand alone in its power to convey a deeper meaning. Nonetheless she recognises the importance of situating stories in relation to existing fields of knowledge and research and of engaging in strong scholarly work. Thus, the intervention component of this phase involves analytical engagement with storied elements within their contexts, assists in identifying patterns and connections to existing knowledge and traces the connectivity between different aspects of much longer narratives.

As the mediator, it is my responsibility to interpret narratives in such a way that avoids forcefully meshing together incongruent elements for the sake of providing a punchy story. I found Kim's (2016:77) cautionary tale of the Procrustean bed to be pertinent here: Procrustes, under the guise of a hotelier, would force guests to sleep in his bed that ostensibly would fit to anyone's size. However, Procrustes was maliciously sadistic, and would either stretch his victims with rope to force them to fit or cut off their legs, if they overhung the end of the wood. One day a mysterious guest turned the tables on Procrustes, who then suffered a painful death at the hands of his own contraption (ibid). The point of the tale is to warn researchers to prevent a dishonest approach that forces pre-established and assumed elements to fit together, on the basis that doing so, leads to a poor research design that loses the truth of participants' lives (ibid). The process of intervention is an interpretive approach based on hermeneutics, that interprets, situates, and make links between the stories and pertinent scholarly theoretical work, and begin to develop bases of analysis. Here I begin to bring theory and praxis together and negotiate meaningful analyses from the stories and narratives.

Reverberations

As discussed, I analytically traverse deteriorated socio-material conditions, alongside discursive-affective, and legislative conditions, under post 2010 austerity measures. The reverberations of my analysis unfold social impacts and implications, as they resonate in tune with broader socio-political understandings, scholarly work, and

theoretical insight. Reverberations play out with regard to how altered conditions bear on political subjectivity, and the repercussions of legislation and discursive malignment on the capacities of politically active and dissenting people. Reverberations are also entangled with the affective tonalities of how political action plays out in an age of neoliberal austerity; I draw out the ramifications of shifts in political mood on how resistance emerges in everyday life. However, such reverberations do not assert totalising subjectification onto politically active and dissenting people; My analysis is attuned to the endurance of political agency and radical consciousness; despite worsening socio-material and political conditions.

Reverberations communicate epistemological implications. The long-term impact of neoliberal austerity politics could hinder the reproduction of politically resourceful praxes, knowledges, and discourses (Haiven and Khashnabish, 2014). My reverberations grapple with political plangency and deleterious impacts, yet they also leave room for political hope and imagination. As Kim (2016) encourages, the 'coda' of research is essential to answering the eternal question of 'so what?'. In the coda of my research, I advocate for a radical political imagination to promote the production of counter-narratives and discourses that could move beyond current socio-political configurations.

Conclusion

This chapter first offered some reflexive positionality, addressing my motivations to engage with this line of research in the thesis. I clarified some sampling and definitional issues surrounding activists and activism and positioned my participants as politically active and dissenting. The oral historical approaches of Alessandro Portelli (1991) and Penny Summerfield (2019) have informed and shaped the collection and co-construction of narratives; That is, as a mode of political intervention; a reflection of culture and ideology; and means of preserving political narratives that might otherwise be obscured by dominant ideological narratives. Methodological approaches based on narrative inquiry enable deeper understanding of lived conditions and political subjectivity, by analysing narratives for their broader meaning and applicability to the human condition. Drawing on Jean Clandinin

(2000, 2006, 2007) and Jeong-Hee Kim (2016), I conceptualised my analytical approach in three stages that may cycle back and forth where necessary: Gathering, Mediation and Intervention, and Reverberations. My approach has enabled empirical analysis of political subjectivity and the implications of changing conditions for politically active and dissenting people.

The circumstances of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdowns meant that changes had to be made to my planned approach to in-person interviewing, even after the lockdowns were over. Despite logistical difficulties in building connections through active participation during the lockdowns and subsequent restrictions, I found that remote interviews actually seemed to help promote the 'atmosphere of equality' advocated by the Oral Historical Association. Telephone interviews and online meetings also enabled an approach to the recording of the oral histories that was less inhibited by time, cost, proximity, or safety concerns. Many of my participants also felt happier being interviewed from the comfort of their own home. Another possible limitation worth mentioning is that there are contradictions that arise when attempting to write for both activist and academic audiences. There is a wide disconnect between attempts as an activist to ignite fury and indignation at the political issues that arise, and efforts as an academic to write in a critically coherent and appropriate form. From my own experience, there have been difficulties in aligning both narrative and language toward an academic audience, whilst still passionately relaying the activist politics that shape this research. Writing specifically on this issue in two (later academically published) blog articles, radical academic Jonathon Neale (2015a) recognises this divide insofar that radical academics face a quandary given how 'the values, the audiences and the constraints are different' when writing for activist and academic audiences. Attempts to blend passionately fuelled activist writing with academia runs the risk of 'too much ranting for an academic audience, and too much gobbledygook for the activists.' (Neale, 2015a) Furthermore, this approach often leads to, 'muddled thinking and murky prose' (Neale, 2015b). There are certainly aspects I have struggled with in the writing of this thesis. Ultimately it has been important to remember that this is a PhD thesis and not a political manifesto and as such the tone must meet the standards expected for doctoral research.

Even so, the academic tone of this thesis did generate a few difficulties. Whilst the topic and concerns of this research are clearly of activist interest, the way I initially wrote the participant information sheets may have created barriers for some participants due to an excess of academic jargon. During the early stages of my field work, a potential participant shared some scepticism that the academic language within the information sheet was too far removed from on-the-ground activism and lacked words that reflect an understanding of lived activism as praxis. This particularly pertained to the word 'rhetoric'. However, after a conversation that highlighted that we were 'on the same page' so to speak, and that through my own involvement in numerous causes, I wasn't a naïve 'outsider' fishing for information, the participant was satisfied and enthusiastic to continue with the interview. I acknowledged their helpful feedback and discontinued use of the word rhetoric in further calls for participation. Regardless, this remains to be a wider concern of mine relating to the power dynamics relayed through academic research and writing, and how this changes my position as an activist and as an academic. I acknowledge my own privilege and precarity as a researcher. As framing for my empirical chapters, and an extension of the methodological approach outlined in this chapter, the following short chapter delves into the storied lives of my participants. The chapter explores biographical context for each of my 14 participants and engages with the storying approaches offered within this methodology chapter.

Chapter 4: The Stories and Lives of Politically Active People

In this short chapter, which resonates with my methodological use of narrative inquiry and oral history, I engage with the narrative voices of my participants, translating their interviews into biographical stories which provide context and foregrounds their lived experiences. As per Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky's novels (1984), the stories in this section are unconstrained by the fabrication of logical story-arcs, and do not aspire to create logical plot lines and representations. As Bakhtin (1984:7) suggested 'pragmatic links at the level of the plot … are insufficient and presuppose … that characters have become objects, fixed elements in the authors design'. Too much emphasis on building 'pragmatic' links

runs the risk of objectifying and reducing lived experience to interpretation, particularly given that life is perpetually in flux. As Bakhtin puts it:

> The position from which a story is told, a portrayal built, or information provided must be oriented in a new way to this new world – a world of autonomous subjects, not objects. (Bakhtin, 1984)

The stories contained in this short chapter engage with direct experience to bring forth a plurality of voices and consciousnesses, avoiding deterministic interpretations of lived experiences to cast light on multiple political realities. With this in mind, my approach to storytelling focuses on political memory rather than imposing structure and form to lived experiences. In straddling storytelling and oral historical approaches with sociological analysis, my approach to the hermeneutical interpretation of narratives centres on political subjectivity and rejects positivist framings. Storytelling emerges from the recording of political experience as both a historical record and form of resistance in speaking out against austerity policies. (Portelli, 1991)

To protect the privacy of all participants I have made alterations to specific identifying information. Participants have been designated pseudonyms, and highly specific locations have been omitted. Apart from where participants have consented and could not easily be identifiable from wider locations. All of my participants are over eighteen. I took a multi-step process to anonymising names by changing the pseudonyms used for participants on various occasions, including toward the end of writing the thesis. As part of the anonymising process, I describe the ages of my participants within age brackets. For example, early, mid, or late, thirties, forties, fifties, sixties, or seventies (none of my participants were in their late teens, twenties, or older than in their seventies). I have written the stories in such a way that participants could still recognise themselves and their truth in the writing. I have not included anything politically sensitive about participants, and nor was anything of the sort disclosed in the interviews. With regard to gender and sexuality, my participants broadly identify across spectrums.

A limitation of my research is that my sample is relatively homogenous with regard to race and ethnicity, despite efforts to include a diverse range of participants. My participants can broadly be described as white, working class, lower-middle and

established middle class. However, the experiences of my participants do not necessarily reflect traditional class relations. This, in part, might stem from how precarious circumstances alter dynamics and create new forms of class, based on shifts within employment culture (Standing, 2013). However, their social positions could also be understood through economic, social, cultural capital and symbolic power, as developed by Bourdieu (1984) to articulate class, through distinctions of taste. Politically active and dissenting people can hold social capital through their associations with other activists, and cultural capital through access to education and critical discourses. In addition, the relations within activist groups can be susceptible to informal hierarchies and symbolic power. With this in mind, I do not refer to my participants in terms of their class within their stories, unless relevant, and specifically mentioned by them.

Noush

Noush is woman in her mid-thirties from the Southeast of Britain. She describes her political views as left wing and influenced by her upbringing 'my dad is working class and my mum was a refugee, so I think I was brought up in that kind of environment and my mum was quite socially minded'. Noush has worked in East London as a social worker dealing with child protection cases and faced difficulties in her work due to local funding cuts and reduced budgets. Noush routinely faced burnout in her job, which was particularly worsened by her reduced agency to help people meet their basic needs because of the lack of funding. However, she was aware of this tendency and sought to prioritise her self-care and planned long holidays to rest and recover which helped her to continue in her work. She has now taken on a new line of work, but still sees social work as part of her identity and is politically active in the workplace. Noush's hopes for the future are to see a change in government towards a kinder politics that 'that cares about the needs of the people that are struggling and people living under the poverty line, which is a ridiculous number in London, and I hope they listen to those people'.

Cornelius

Cornelius is in his early forties and is from rural Wales. He describes his political beliefs as left-wing. He finished his university degree in 2009 during the turmoil of economic recession. He had been politically active at a university with a reputation for activism and had 'loved' the activist culture. Cornelius' narrative describes how he took an active stance against his own financial uncertainties amidst the recession and subsequent implementation of austerity policies. He took work abroad teaching English, which paid for his accommodation as well as receiving a lucrative wage which gave him more financial agency. He found stability by taking economic pathways which were suited to his skills and experience. Cornelius experiments with bitcoin as an alternative currency, and sees it as a way of getting something back from the capitalist system he feels is exploitative. Cornelius has a dark sense of humour about his situation and jokes a lot about needing to take more responsibility. Since the time of interview, Cornelius reports that he is now a father, and how his hopes for the future are invested in his family and the decisions he makes. Cornelius' story presents the struggle that many are up against, in living through economic precarity, and the loss of political imagination that may arise in times of economic survival.

Grace

Grace is a neurodivergent woman in her early fifties from the southwest of England who works in education and is involved in craftivism. Her key political concerns are around imbalances of power and capitalism and 'not politically aligning with a party but being completely anti-conservative'. Grace found she became more politically aware during austerity as a result of having children and more responsibilities, as well as witnessing widespread changes within the education system as a result of Michael Gove's intervention (2010 -2014). Although she does not describe herself as a feminist, her narrative describes patterns of gendered violence, particularly how this affects younger generations, and she is concerned by events such as the police murder of Sarah Everard and violence against women. Grace is keen to point out epistemological inequalities in whose voice is heard and privileged and uses craftivism as a medium and strategy to express her political values and address power imbalances where she sees them. Grace chooses to project a political

imagination in the ways she discretely hides strong messages in her stitching. As she put it, 'You can say things that are really quite controversial, and people don't really notice' and how she likes to 'engage you in a conversation about something you wouldn't normally talk to me about'. She hopes her messages encourage others to be reflexive about their own lives, and blossom into deeper thought and action with regard to social violence.

Eden

Eden is in his sixties and has lived in south-east London since he was a child. He has been politically active since he was a teenager. Having seen a copy of the consent sheet, he was kindly willing to engage with a text-based conversation over Facebook messenger, and enthusiastically confirmed his consent 'You can quote me on anything, and I am not bothered who knows I've said it.' He was involved in anti-racist campaigning in the 1980s, and the early free festival movement from around 1989. He describes the free festival movement as having provided some optimism, and a chance for something else to emerge from what had been a bleak political period, under Thatcher. Since then, Eden has continued to be politically active in his local community, including anti-gentrification actions. His engagement with the early party and protest dynamic enabled him to carry forth his wealth of expertise to younger generations of party goers, including politically active and dissenting people. In particular, Eden has been involved in welfare and safeguarding at parties and festivals and takes a harm-reduction approach, with a listening ear, that is complimentary to his professional experience in the field of drug and alcohol services. He feels strongly about how the austerity agenda has affected access to these services. Not only do cuts threaten his own job stability, but he is also astute, concerning how policy has shifted toward punitive approaches, particularly with regard to reducing the harms of drug use. Eden suggests that 'Austerity policies aren't designed to enable people to experience joy and genuine connection, quite the opposite, in fact.' His narrative also brings attention to the pervasiveness of entrepreneurial values and the erosion of counter cultural spaces. He discusses the

tendency of 'business hippies' to prioritise 'making coin' over the opportunity to build community. Eden ends the chat with some food for thought:

> Back in the day people used to neck LSD as a rejection of capitalism and the system. Nowadays they microdose it so they can get on at work and keep the system running smoothly for the capitalists. Thats as good a footnote as any, I guess.

Marcel

Marcel is a man in his mid-thirties from the southeast of Britain. He grew up in a rural, primarily Conservative voting area and did not feel exposed to left wing politics until he was an adult. Marcel alludes to the trust that was broken by Tony Blair referring to the war in Iraq as 'a ghost' that 'still haunts us.' His narrative also attributes significance to the long-term effects that the War in Iraq and War on Terror more generally, had on disenfranchising younger Labour voters in the pivotal 2010 election that led to austerity policies and practices. He did, however, go on to support the Labour party again when Jeremy Corbyn was 'pushing the anti-austerity ticket' and volunteered as a local canvasser for the Labour party. Yet, he reports that 'There were periods where I've been less political, as I was still reeling from the 2019 election.' He had hoped that the 2019 election might enable a shift in political emphasis, and that Corbyn would be elected. Yet now he feels 'let down' by the treatment of Corbyn by the Labour party and the media. At a political crux, Marcel dares to dream of something beyond, yet tends not to think outside of party-political structures. He explores emerging political movements such as the northern party as a potential voting alternative. More recently he has joined Black Lives Matter protests. Marcel's hopes for the future include aspiring that 'we can get a positive influence in force in mainstream British politics to take us in completely in the opposite direction than we are now before it's too late, and we basically become, dare I say it fascistic'. Marcel's situation reflects that of many who feel politically disenfranchised under the cultural conditions of austerity, and reflects the difficulties faced in conjuring political imagination.

Catkin

Catkin is a man in his late thirties from Essex who describes himself as a guerrilla gardener. He came from a working-class background and reports that 'we really didn't have a lot growing up'. His family always voted Labour, but he recalls that he never really had a strong understanding as to why that was. He expresses some regret at not having thought much about political issues when he was younger, particularly during the recession, and earliest parts of the austerity trajectory. His focus was on becoming qualified in his former professional career and finding stability for himself. He gained more political awareness when he moved to London in 2013, and began guerrilla gardening by planting seeds and mosses in his local area. He hopes to do small acts that brighten up other people's days and regards his style of guerrilla gardening as a symbolic and direct form of politics that counters the bleakness of urban spaces, encourages pollination, and prioritises the micro forms of insect and plant life over broader political ecologies. Catkin's hopes and fears are situated in the future and the lives of future generations of species. He hopes to do more to encourage pollination as an 'urgent' matter because bee species are in decline. His hopes for the future are also situated in how he hopes that the industry he is in changes. Since the time of interview, he reports that he has changed careers and is much happier in a new job working with plant life.

Lara

Lara is a woman in her early forties who lives in southern England with her children. Lara has been politically active for over twenty years and began her political involvement within the Socialist Worker Party (SWP) and says, 'the last ten years or so I've mostly been in and out of it'. Since austerity Lara has leaned more heavily toward 'anti-fascist or anti-racist stuff' and recognises the link between austerity politics and the deepening of xenophobia in the United Kingdom. She participates in 'underground monitoring' of far-right groups and, as a legal observer, watches the behaviour of police during political events. Lara is more careful about the kinds of actions she is involved with and less willing to be arrested, which she understandably attributes to motherhood and increased responsibilities. Lara has faced increased financial pressure since 2010. With children she has limited time and resources which she finds frustrating. To some extent, she finds engaging in activism, 'easier

when I'm like on the dole because I've got loads of spare time' but finds that having less money makes it more difficult to help in practical ways. Lara finds that she is often spurred to action due to how she is treated at the Job Centre, despite feelings of 'rage' and 'humiliation'. Lara went to university and feels that studying philosophy helped shape her political perspective and offers her a more 'nuanced' view of her circumstances and that of others.

Ruby

Ruby is a woman in her mid-thirties living in the southwest of England. Going to university had the effect of 'quite radicalising' her and she engaged in 'a lot of activism', including anti-austerity and student fees protests. More recently she has been involved in No Borders actions in Morrocco and worked in kitchens at the Calais refugee camps. Ruby is open from the start of the interview that her political perspective has changed alongside the austerity period after 2010. She mentions how increased responsibility, getting older and having children have changed her priorities. Although she never labelled herself as such, she previously 'felt more like an anarchist'. Whilst she continues to have anarchist sympathies, she suggests, 'I don't think there's going to be an anarchist revolution, so I think I'm more of a socialist now, it's more realistic'. Being a parent and grappling with austerity has played a role in why she reports stepping back from intense activism. However, Ruby's continued radical imagination connects to the prefigurative ways that she brings up her children and how she wants them to be part of and 'know' the ongoing struggle for another world.

Stella

Stella is a neurodivergent woman in her late thirties from the southeast of England who fights for educational justice for her children and other families. She does not believe that austerity was justified, either in practice or principal and that government policy shows a 'complete lack of y'know, emotion or like empathy towards other human beings.' Her children have complex health needs and require

educational support plans. She experienced difficulties in attaining funding for appropriate educational support for her children's needs. Stella explains that cuts to local authorities, and a lack of resources to accommodate the needs of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) have made the process so much harder. Stella elaborates on how local authorities initially reject cases for Educational Health and Care Plans (EHC) meaning that families must go through the stressful process of tribunal. Despite cuts, a lot of public money is unnecessarily spent on the cost of tribunals, which could be going towards helping children and their families. Stella challenges social inequalities and uses her knowledge to help others who might not be familiar, or struggle, with the process. She explains how 'there's so many people' who 'might not have the ability or the strength to do it - or the knowledge or funding, and all that sort of stuff, so it really does intensify inequalities even more'. Stella approaches helping families with the bureaucratic processes of application with an activist mindset, and uses her experience, understanding, and expertise to help other families in need of support with preparing for and attending tribunals.

Stella's hopes for the future are to:

> ...see a more inclusive society where y'know people are celebrated and where...y'know, we can think about inclusion at every single level, whether that be physical or other sorts of disabilities or differences and that everyone gets equal opportunities rather than people from poorer backing having less access to education...

Alden

Alden is a man in his early sixties who lives in the southwest of England. Alden describes himself as left wing in a party-political sense, 'but also probably anarchist from the point of view of philosophy, and also socialism'. Alden was a young man in the 1980's and found himself, 'very angry about the Falklands war' as well as being concerned by the prevailing Cold War context. He recalls his involvement in direct actions, and spent 'much of the 1980s lying around in front of cruise missile convoys.' He also went to free parties, and embraced the early party and protest dynamic. Alden had young children in the early 1990s, and so stepped away from involvement in direct action and parties. He went to university in the late 1990s as a

mature student and studied sociology, which have informed various theoretical suggestions during our conversation that are pertinent to existing scholarly insight and the empirical analysis in my thesis. In particular, the longer trajectory of neoliberal and right-wing power and its relationship to the dynamics of austerity. More recently, Alden has been involved in co-ordinating recycling efforts at festivals and local events where he lives and is involved in community groups such as *Transition* which seeks to promote a sense of preparedness for impending environmental disaster, as well as the prefiguration of new ecological alternatives and political possibilities. He aims to be inclusive in promoting sustainable ideas beyond *Transition* and works with other community groups. Alden's continued political strategy is prefigurative and involves working with others in non-hierarchical community group settings and is keen to avoid the informal hierarchies that may form within groups.

Kaz

Kaz is a non-binary gender fluid person in their late sixties living in the midlands of Britain. They lived and worked in London in the early 1980s as management for a sales and advertising firm. Kaz explains that they were responsible for high stake clients but began to feel disillusioned by the nature of the role:

> It occurred to me, even back then in 1983, was what we were doing was manipulating people's minds. And when I resigned, I went to the Director, I said, "I would rather be a prostitute then at least I'd actually be selling something real."

Kaz went to university as a mature student and gained more critical understanding which they relate to their long held political beliefs. Over the years, Kaz has been involved in various kinds of political action. In particular, 'Palestine solidarity, gay rights and equality'; including action against Section 28, which was Thatcher's repressive law against the promotion of 'homosexuality' within public settings that extended to schools and sex education, despite the need for equitable sex education during what was a worsening AIDS crisis. Kaz also holds an anti-war perspective and discussed the broader political processes which impacted their political beliefs. Kaz recalls the Falkland's war, the Miners' strike and the poll tax riots as 'massive things.'

Particularly after Tony Blair's major involvement in the Iraq war, Kaz is mistrustful of politicians, and commented, 'It was all the lies, that's when I became *much* more political. I mean the miners strikes, [and] the poll tax was obviously wrong, but the war in Iraq was so full of lies.' Kaz has, at times, lived nomadically but due to aging and poor health they now prefer to live in a settled environment and mostly participates in political action in an online context campaigning for peace and promoting the white poppy.

Anka

Anka is a woman in her late thirties, from southeast England who has been involved in numerous causes and participated in direct actions, anti-war protests, anti-fascism protests, and anti-deportation actions. She had been a member of the socialist worker party (SWP) but had eventually become disillusioned by what she described as an 'awful organisation, they have their own hegemony and have their idea of how the world should be, and they have their little slate of people which who were just as ruthless and relentless as any politician'. Although Anka was already involved in political action outside of the SWP, she found herself drifting more toward anarchist groups and autonomous actions in her local community. She lived in East London in squats and on barges and faced increasing disruption to her living situation and engaged with the Radical Housing Network. Although Anka fought hard to resist gentrification in her local area, she felt the mental health impact and burn out from straddling her own precarious situation, with involvement in an increasing number of emerging causes. Anka's narrative reflects on how taking a reflexive approach to action and practicing self-care alongside meditation has developed and improved the relations involved in her activist work.

Griffin

Griffin is a man in his mid-thirties from the southeast of England who has been engaged with various forms of activism since he was a teenager including environmental direct action, campaigns against the arms trade, the hunt saboteur

movement, and anti-war protests. He was heavily involved in activism whilst at a particularly politically active university and continued dedicating his effort to full time engagements for many years after graduating. He is highly critical of the notion of activist scenes or self-identifying as an activist. This is because of the privilege attached to the 'moniker'. He also alludes to the role of self-perpetuated rhetoric in shaping perceptions of activists: 'For me it's very important as a social community that we can moderate the language that we use about ourselves because it influences how we seem to everyone else.' Griffin also discusses how the notion of a scene tends to lean towards excluding others rather than embracing solidaristic ways of bringing communities into the fold. For Griffin, social movements and political action needs to be about 'finding common ground to influence exterior to itself'.

Griffin experienced changing socio-material conditions under austerity, relative to the recession, and saw how this affected the ethos and priorities of politically active people he knew:

> When the austerity program started, and when the recession kicked in, I think the biggest change for me, and for others around me, that I saw, was actually people were suddenly fighting for their own wellbeing, and you see a really drop off in those solidarity projects and a real lack of focus in those directions.

Griffin's narrative also relates shifts within austerity to his changed relationships to activism and self-care. Despite pulling back from 'front-line' action, he has found ways to continue living in accordance with his political values and found a sense of stability working full-time as a Sea Shepherd.

Shark

Shark is a man in his early fifties from the southwest of Britain who has been interested in direct action since the early 1980s after seeing Greenpeace anti-whaling activists. He describes himself as 'very compassionate and caring' and 'has a fluffy cat' who he loves very much. Shark has been vegan since the early 1990s, and helped out with animal rights stalls and pickets. He engaged in protests against the Poll Tax and the Criminal Justice Bill and has witnessed first-hand the extent to which

legislation hinders protest. In particular, he was involved in the hunt saboteur movement and acknowledges how the introduction of 'trespassory assembly' hindered group actions. In an austerity context, Shark continues to be politically active, but has difficulties with his living situation due to grappling with increased responsibilities caring for his elderly mother and needing to travel long distances to do so, which is exacerbated by cuts to funding for care resources.

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Despite deteriorated socio-material conditions, rhetorical weaponizing and legislative changes, the stories of my politically active and dissenting participants bring attention to the multiplicity of discrete and tangible ways they contribute to political action. Something common to each narrative and story, my own experience, and that of many others, is a sense of longing for something more than what the current political system can offer. The following empirical chapters explore the experiences of my participants in further detail amid austerity governance. The first empirical chapter analyses the socio-material, rhetorical and affective conditions of austerity: The discursive weaponizing of blaming, shaming, and scapegoating discourses has implications for political action and critical education. The second analytical chapter addresses neoliberal imperatives as relative to the socio-material, rhetorical, and legislative conditions of austerity, as part of a longer pattern of neoliberal socio-political and cultural change. My final analytical chapter addresses how accumulative socio-material, discursive and affective conditions can contribute to the experience of burnout. However rather than constituting burnout as the end of the line for activists, I explore how self-care may both alleviate burnout and enabled broader patterns of activist work.

Chapter 5: <u>Blame, Shame and Scapegoating: Class Division and the Denigration of Critical Education</u>

As discussed thus far, austerity in the UK has involved sweeping policy changes and broad cuts to social spending. The political emphasis of austerity is underpinned by neoliberal ideology that seeks to shrink the scope of state expenditure and justify cuts to social spending as a necessary result of an ostensibly broken welfare system. Such a political endeavour depends on 'the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse' (Foucault 1976/2015:93). In particular, within an austerity context, blaming, shaming, and moralising discourses have been weaponised through governmental rhetoric and the British tabloid media (Tyler 2014). The political relationship between governance and the mainstream media may be particularly prominent in the UK. Political parties, politicians, and the press seemingly have a mutual dependency whereby media owners and stakeholders rely on governments not to impose restrictive regulations. Simultaneously, politicians depend on the media, not only for favourable coverage, but also to deliver broader political agendas and 'marginalise dissent' (Herman and Chomsky,1988:1).

In this chapter, I draw from coalition government speeches and the British tabloid press, alongside the interviews I undertook with activists between 2020-23. I argue that the political programme of austerity is upheld by shaming discourses that position economically unproductive subjects to be at fault, not just for the national deficit, but also for an array of societal ills. Shaming operates alongside the expectation that subjects change their course of action toward economic productivity (Scambler 2018). Activists, politically active people, and those who otherwise challenge austerity are subject to the generalised socio-material and discursive conditions of austerity. They also face additional discursive shaming for their involvement in political causes, to the extent that politically active and dissenting are shamed as economically unproductive, militant, and idealistic.

Yet, how is shame felt by politically active people? How best to understand the role of shame within the discursive conditions of austerity? As discussed in Chapter 2, there are numerous ways of articulating the affective qualities of shame. For instance,

psychologist Silvan Tomkins' theorisations have been seminal to the development of affect theory and have since been influential to sociology and the humanities. Tomkins viscerally describes shame in relation to humiliation, whereby 'shame is the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation' and 'is felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul' (1963/2008:351). This may feel like an apt description of the affective qualities of shame. Yet, I am unsure about Tomkins' analysis which may focus too heavily on the notion that shame is an innate affect originating from within the self, rather than as something external that may be better understood as wielded and exerted socially. That is, feelings of indignity, defeat, transgression, or alienation, are context specific and can only be experienced in contrast to a set of opposing forces and requires a relation between at least two parties or perspectives. That is, I argue that to be shamed necessitates a shamer or a set of socio-material conditions that are shaming.

In some circumstances, feelings of shame may engender critical reflection, action, and long-term change. Building from Tomkins' framework, Elspeth Probyn suggests that 'shame is immensely productive politically and conceptually in advancing a project of everyday ethics' (2004:329). From such a perspective, the role of shame can play a powerful social function by drawing attention to the self within its respective societal milieu and encouraging positive, ethical changes. Probyn also regards shame as innately felt in the body, making it a powerful affective force which 'brings the fear' of being cast out by society and that 'it is a capacity for shame that makes us such fragile beings' (Probyn, 2015:3). That is, there is the assumption that internalised shame may have socially beneficial ends, as opposed to recognising the institutionally violent shaming experiences of social abjection, as explored by Imogen Tyler (2014).

 Indeed, both Probyn and Tomkins, I want to suggest, may underestimate the relation between feeling shame and being shamed, as well as downplaying the violence embedded in displays of shaming and humiliation. Besides, the underlying ethical considerations that feelings of shame can engender may not reflect lived realities, and instead stem from socially moralised constructs. Probyn (2015:79) does acknowledge that 'certain ways of harnessing the effects of shame may be misguided'. However, I feel this may understate the extent to which shame is strategically weaponised at an institutional level; as well as how shame may be embodied in ways

that are destabilising and disruptive to meaningful introspection and action. In some instances, feelings of shame may originate from prior lived experiences of institutional shaming, that when felt may conjure memories of previous shame, which could have an accumulative, layered effect on how shame is felt.

Particularly within the socio-materialities of austerity, many experiences of shame result from prejudice stemming from a lack of insight and miscomprehension of lived social conditions. Governmental and media rhetoric weaponised blaming and shaming discourses to support the notion that a vast number of benefit claimants were fraudulent. For example, Iain Duncan Smith's exclusive with the *Daily Mail* on December 29th, 2014, particularly targeted those receiving disability payments. The article names and shames benefit recipients found to have been falsely claiming disability payments (Chorley, 2014). Yet such reporting exaggerates the extent to which fraudulent claims are made and gives the false impression that the national deficit has at least, in part, been contributed to by fraudulent claims. Lory Barile, John Cullis, Philip Jones (2022:33-34) analysed public attitudes around tax evasion and benefit fraud in the UK and found that, citizens may be 'even more disapproving when considering benefit fraud than when considering tax evasion (because benefit fraud appears to be theft from the cohort of "deserving" recipients of state benefits).' Additionally, they found that the fear of 'scrutiny/stigma/shame' was levied by citizens as a 'cost' that deterred people from both benefit fraud and tax evasion.

In the socio-material context of austerity, normative moralities that surround feelings of shame are linked to neoliberal discursive paradigms of what it is to be a moral person. That is, shaming discourses are underpinned by moralised judgments about the nature of poverty, and may operate on a continuum of perceived deservingness, which is both ideologically constructed and discursively proliferated by governmental and media actors. As Tyler (2014:133) elucidates, neoliberal subjectivities are 'self-scripting, flexible, entrepreneurial, and individualised'. Explicitly, neoliberal subjectivities are those that are singularly attuned and adaptive to economic productivity. The discourse surrounding austerity may solidify and cement such neoliberal motifs to moralise socioeconomic life, as functioning through the will power of those who make economically productive choices. Such a view is twinned with the notion that economic growth is stunted by poor decisions, and lack of action on part of those deemed economically unproductive. Such discursive

conditions also shame and denigrate modes of social life such as, critical education that are invested in meaning beyond the scope of the economy.

Governmental speeches are routinely published within mainstream newspapers The discursive emphasis on shame, I want to argue may have played a crucial role in legitimising and building public consensus for austerity policies in the UK, as well as remediating perceptions of state care. One particular approach of the coalition government was to engage directly with the tabloid press to publish articles promoting welfare reform as a necessary austerity policy. As the secretary of the state for work and pensions between 2010-2016, Iain Duncan Smith's campaign to legislate the benefit cap was supported by journalists across a variety of newspapers. To exemplify, Duncan Smith wrote at least eleven articles relating to welfare reform for a variety of newspaper outlets, whereby each article took on a different tone to appeal to each respective readership. Notably, on 22nd January 2014, articles were published in The Guardian (Wintour, 2014); The Daily Mail, (Chorley and Chapman, 2014); and The Telegraph (Dominizak, 2014). Each article directly related to Duncan Smith's speech at the 10th anniversary of his co-founding of the right-wing think tank, *Centre for Social Justice.* Blaming and shaming played a central role in how Duncan Smith framed the coalition governmental approach to welfare reform. Both the articles and the speech drew parallels between the content of the television programme Benefits street and the impetus to reduce social spending. Benefits street was produced by *Channel 4* as a so-called reality TV show that depicted the lives of the residents of James Turner Street in Birmingham in which there were a predominance of people in receipt of social security benefits. Whilst my main focus in this chapter is on governmental and tabloid rhetoric, the aesthetic and discursive tone of such programming relays governmental motivations to cut spending and relies upon the stigmatisation of economically unproductive subjects.

In many circumstances, feelings of shame might be felt as paralysing and hinder capacities for action. By the same token, shame and the fear of shame may dissuade people from engagement with activism and thinking critically about political and economic issues. Yet despite such stigmatising rhetoric, politically active people continue to endure in varying ways. Through engagement with the narratives of my participants, I explore the contexts in which critical reflexivity and radical agency emerge in response to austerity conditions.

In my analysis, I explore shame as multi-dimensional and context-specific, with respect to power and neoliberal ideology, as well as infused within the social dynamics and struggles that shape the austerity context in the UK. The first section of this chapter draws from my interviews with activists, alongside coalition government rhetoric post 2010. I analyse how my participants relate to, and are affected by the weaponization of blame, shame and scapegoating within governmental discourse. In the second section, I analyse how divisive and moralising rhetoric serves not only as justification for austerity, but also ideologically conceals and naturalises austerity conditions as a necessary and a positive progression. As explored through deeper engagement with my participant Catkin's story, experiences of shame also apply to the experiences of activists engaging in assertive political action within the governing framework of austerity. Yet, despite feelings of shame, Catkin's narrative also reveals critical reflexivity and radical agency emerging from his lived experience within the socio-materialities of austerity.

The third section draws from my interviews and tabloid news reporting to analyse how austerity rhetoric employs discourses of shame to negate the actions of activists and politically active people as militant, idealistic, and infantile. I analyse how anti-activist and anti-student discourses intersect, and how these interlink with rhetoric that threatens education that exceeds neoliberal aims and values; yet I also discuss the value of critical education in fostering political consciousness. I engage with Marcel's story of critical education and performative resistance to analyse the importance of building counter discourses that challenge elite narratives, as well as sharing and extending vital political knowledge that shape ethico-onto-epistemologies, and ways of engaging with the world.

Blame, Shame and Scapegoating

Ruby has been politically active since she was in her late teens and involved in anti-war, anti-racist, environmental and anti-capitalist campaigns. In 2015, she cooked for refugees at the Calais migrant camp. She is now a mother of two and focusses on passing on her political knowledge and praxis to her children. Ruby discusses how she feels that austerity rhetoric 'shifts the blame from the government' and ignores the root causes of the global financial crisis and 'the bankers who created the

problem in the first place'. As Ruby points out, 'blame' for the GFC was placed 'onto people and their personal responsibility, which I think is untrue.' Ruby's counter critique of the framing of blame, reflects a pervasive notion that is heavily implied within governmental rhetoric, which is the perception that some figures in society are not taking economic responsibility and are therefore burdens to society. The blaming and shaming of subjects in austerity also extends to how the role of the state is articulated in public life. The rhetoric of austerity reflects a dereliction of state care whilst simultaneously pushing for economic productivity.

Griffin is in his mid-thirties and has been politically active since he was a teenager, more so, at university and after, involved with many politically left-wing and anarchist causes. He has more recently stepped back from taking a 'frontline' role in activism and works as a Sea Shepherd[16]. Griffin's narrative reflects on how the relationship between state responsibility and care has been re-mediated:

> The experience and intention of austerity was very much in my opinion to say f*ck you all, we don't want to help you, do it yourself. I don't think that was hidden in any sense.

Griffin constitutes the cultural tone of austerity as actively pushing an uncaring agenda that shames subjects into changing their course of action toward economic productivity. Conversely to a mode of crisis rhetoric that seeks to protect vulnerable people and requires a humanitarian response; the discourse of austerity works to both explicitly and implicitly shame those regarded as "lagging behind" and are framed as a "drain" on society. Relatedly, Noush is a social worker in her mid-thirties who has seen firsthand the extent of harm caused by cuts to social spending. She discusses how, 'I think the rhetoric coming from the government, the way I interpret it, is that they are pushing it as a positive thing'. That is, such rhetorical framing endorses the perception that cuts and changes are beneficial to society and that the

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[16] Sea shepherd is a marine conservation ship that protects marine life from illegal activities at sea. In 2022, Sea Shepherd shifted its emphasis away from direct action toward co-operation with governments. The direct implications this will have are as yet unclear to me, yet I suspect this will hinder the scope of their action and could enable states to continue to flout marine regulations. Their name has been modified to be the Sea Shepherd conservation society and the logo has already changed from a skull and cross bones to a picture of a dolphin.

solution to 'reckless' social spending (Cameron, 2013) is ostensible welfare reform, cuts, and punishment for the poor and economically unproductive (Wacquant, 2013).

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels express ideology as embedded within and beyond historical and material processes, as 'directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life.' (1875/1998:68). That is, ideology is infused within social practice, and underpins the rhetorical conditions that uphold and reinforce state/capitalist interests in day-to-day social relations. Marx and Engels (1970:68) further suggest that 'if in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura' it is because 'this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life process'. That is, the experiential conditions of everyday life are not only embedded in historical material processes and power structures, but also that such conditions of life are naturalised, and subverted to conceal the actual situation, lived circumstances, and extent of class power. Thus, the notion of welfare reform is subverted and operationalised to justify deep cuts to social welfare and a cultural re-orientation of values, that serves to shame those who are unjustly blamed for austerity. The ideological function of austerity rhetoric is, furthermore, to push the agenda as a necessary and positive reform, rather than as hostility and a deterioration of social and material conditions.

Ruby is concerned by the extent to which the rhetoric surrounding austerity blames people for being in poverty, despite that austerity policies may instead worsen or create conditions of poverty:

> I mean the government...their rhetoric is around blaming people for being poor and insisting we need to cut resources for the good of the country when it does the opposite. Cutting essential services that people rely on, pushes people into poverty...

Stella is an activist advocate for families with children with learning differences. I asked her about the rhetoric surrounding austerity, and she responded, 'It's so really depressing, isn't it?' She went on to relay similar concerns to Ruby, about how the rhetoric surrounding the causality of austerity is 'very negative' and that she does not think austerity 'was justified very well'. From Stella's perspective, 'it just seems like they don't even care about y'know, people who need extra support' and how 'they almost blame the people who need support' as 'the reason for financial difficulties.'

For example, 'things like blaming immigrations' or 'people who might use benefits inappropriately, even though that's... not as common as they say it is...' The view that there was a large number of people falsely claiming benefits was discursively reinforced through governmental rhetoric and underpinned the policy of welfare reform (Wiggan, 2012).

Ceridwen is in her late sixties and is a former care worker who had been involved in road protests in the 1990s amongst various other environmental actions. More recently Ceridwen aids and assists young people facing homelessness and unemployment amidst austerity conditions. She further discusses the function of austerity rhetoric as pervasive and serving to assign blame toward people who are not deemed economically productive:

> I think that's a massive thing, the ways it's talked about and expressed, the blame... all that rhetoric, and shifting conditions - if you don't play the game you are blamed for it... It's scapegoating ultimately, in the exploitative regime we're all in.

Scapegoating is a technique used by those who wield power over others, involves a lack of accountability for wrong-doing, and serves to reassign blame away from the perpetrator(s), and onto another person or group. Therefore, scapegoating can be regarded as a form of epistemic violence in that public knowledge of austerity circumstances can be framed by warped interpretations of social culpability that evade lived knowledge of events. As sociologists Ana Dinerstein, Gregory Schwartz, and Eden Taylor (2014:862) discuss, crisis discourse also involves narratives that 'simultaneously scapegoat[s] fabricated vulnerable groups as agents and victims of the crisis, whilst reinforcing the impossibility of alternatives and ultimately the power of capital'. Part of the reason scapegoating is so powerful is because it is rare that a so-called 'ideal victim' (Christie, 1972/1986) with ostensibly perfect attributes will be chosen. Instead, those who are scapegoated, and thus blamed, are typically already stigmatised in some way, which the perpetrators of scapegoating exploit, thus making it believable that the scapegoats could be at fault. Being scapegoated is an experience of blame that may lead to feelings of shame, that play out in different ways according to many different social factors such as education, race and ethnicity, class, and gender. In an austerity context, the scapegoated may include welfare recipients, a parents (Jensen 2013, 2014), disabled people (Hughes, 2015), refugees

fleeing war and persecution and those who have migrated to the UK for other reasons (Tuckett, 2017), as well as activists involved in political action. Being scapegoated affects how others perceive a group or individual (Brock et al, 2023); by asserting claims to truth about the nature of lived conditions and invalidating the positions of the scapegoated. Therefore, a scapegoated group or person might thus be rendered 'abject' and lose what Imogen Tyler suggests is 'representational agency,' (2014:26); insofar that their legitimacy and capacities to act in the world may be diminished as they are no longer societally figured as trustworthy actors.

Systematic blaming may lead to feelings of shame whereby scapegoated subjects feel deserving of austerity, rather than challenging their conditions. Within austerity, how people think about themselves, others, and their material conditions may be shaped by governmental rhetoric and ideology that upholds the austerity agenda and conceals the punitive and coercive subtext of austerity. Marx and Engels express how the material forces and power struggles shape popular beliefs of each historical period. Insofar that relations of monarchist, state and economic power are naturalised: people have thus, 'had to share that illusion of that epoch' (1970:86). As my participants reflect on in different ways, austerity cuts and changes to policy are ideologically masked as events that are simply natural, matter of fact and necessary (Gramsci,1971), yet illusory in how they evade recognition of lived conditions.

Divisive Shaming and Moralities of Deservingness

Lara is in her early forties, has been involved in political action for 'over twenty years' and used to be particularly active with the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). As such, she views the issues through a Marxist lens and observes that divisive discourse operates to naturalise class divisions and assign moral attributes to those who have property and investments as ostensible *good citizens,* who may be unaffected by austerity themselves. As Lara put it:

> … [T]he fundamental social divide around which the rhetoric frames, is that
> there is such a massive proportion of property and citizens who can promote
> that in a pure sense of identity, and the power of othering - based on this idea

> that if you are a good person then you will naturally have, and if you don't [have] then you deserve this austerity...

Austerity rhetoric thus tends to embed and deepen societal divisions. Such "good citizens" are likely to be those who have built up their identity around economic productivity and property ownership. Yet, although they are still largely subject to elite interests, "good citizens" may see themselves in contrast to those who are most affected by austerity. Thus, they may feel vindicated by the othering of those who do not have property and assets, who are discursively framed as deserving of their conditions. The discursive conditions of austerity, as Ceridwen puts it, 'plays into the logic of *Divide et Impera';* that is, *divide and conquer*. A clear rhetorical illustration of this was put forth during David Cameron's speech on the 25th June 2012, delivered to an audience at Bluewater shopping centre in Kent. In the speech, Cameron draws parallels between working class families – those who live by a 'culture of entitlement' and those who 'pay into the system'. By creating an oppositional binary between the two positions, the lexis Cameron draws from operates to divide those he deems economically unproductive and socially irresponsible, compared with tax paying economically productive citizens (who may also be in categorical poverty). Yet in doing so, may only serve to fragment and divide communities and perspectives whilst erasing the importance of myriad profit-less productivities and unpaid labour, which still hold profound social importance. Such rhetoric constitutes the unfortunate life experiences of others as manifestations of poor character and choices. For policy to acknowledge the experiences of socially and economically disadvantaged people as valid and legitimate, would mean letting go of the fundamental morality stories that underpin positivist interpretations of poverty. Including those relating to bad choices, natural consequences, and notions of meritocracy. Instead, divisive rhetoric cements such motifs as not only natural and matter of fact, but also as acceptable to discuss in public.

During the early years of austerity, Grace was bringing up young children. She discusses how cuts to tax credits, the decreased scope of support, and a deterioration of universal entitlement have affected her family, 'I mean we're not poor, poor... but we do struggle.' As discussed in my literature review, with regard to UN rapporteur Philip Alstone's report on *Extreme Poverty and Human Rights* 'employment alone is not sufficient' in mitigating the broader impacts of austerity (Alstone, 2019). Part of

the function of divisive rhetoric within austerity has been to minimise the struggle of people who are in employment, making it increasingly harder for people to recognise their conditions and experiences of hardship. Such operates through ideological subversions of conditions, increased precarity, and increased modes of neoliberal intervention at the level of policy and rhetoric (Beck and Gwylym, 2024).

Neoliberal discourses of resilience promote individualised responses to economic struggle in ways that negate class solidarity. Marx and Engels (1848/1998:38) anticipated the expansion of capitalist interest into all areas of life, and how the breakdown of all relations outside economic realms would bring forth deeper awareness; whereby class consciousness arises as a deeper recognition of the real conditions of life. However, whilst their analysis stands, they could not foresee the role of neoliberal policy and rhetoric as it plays into contemporary modes of austerity in obscuring class relations as well as renegotiating and fragmenting class positions. As sociologists Dave Beck and Hefin Gwylym (2024) attest, neoliberal rhetoric has played an integral role in reformulating working class identity and how people understand their class positions. This has, in part, played out through linguistic shifts from social security as a universalised entitlement toward the language of dependency in terms of welfare and benefits. Such rhetoric plays a role in reinforcing and problematising notions of an "underclass" by reducing class identity solely to economic dimensions (Beck and Gwylym 2024). My participant Stella discusses how austerity policies and vilifying rhetoric 'have further made people's lives difficult' and how the situation is worsened by 'the complete lack of y'know, emotion or like empathy towards other human beings y'know who come from poorer backgrounds or y'know have any additional needs'.

Divisive rhetoric clearly reinforces and naturalises class divisions. I argue that alongside civic re-orientation and material precarity, the institutional proliferation of divisive discourse contributes to fragmentation within and between classes. Additional dynamics and pressures emanating from vast cuts and vilifying neoliberal discourses within governance contribute to ideological misidentifications of class positions in ways that fragment working class communities. Through an economic lens it becomes increasingly difficult to neatly compartmentalise people into Marxist binaries of class in terms of bourgeoisie and proletariat. Thatcher's government had

already set in motion class disidentifications by selling off social housing under right to buy schemes and smiting traditionally working class industries. Culturally speaking, Owen Jones hits the nail on the head: Even prior to austerity, working class identity and culture had become politically demonised. The polarising figure of the so-called chav, 'has obscured the realitiy of the modern working class' (Jones, 2012:139). Jones points to the dwindling of traditionally industrialised working class occupations through 'the ruinous economic policies of successive governments' and that the 'long lingering demise of the industrial working class began but did not end with Thatcher' (2012:140). I would further argue that austerity conditions and divisive rhetoric contribute to the tendency to renege the traditional cultural category of being working class. Such is relative to the popular assertion 'we are all middle class now' which could play a differential role in how people identify with their class position; whereby the maligned category of underclass supplants working class identity, and working people with a higher income who might have previously identified as being proudly working class, would now prefer to be seen as middle class and could regard being perceived as working class as insulting.

Conversely, Griffin mentioned that many of the people he knew who were middle and upper middle class who had graduated from university were 'still working almost meaningless, not meaningless... but like wage labour jobs 15 years later'. Griffin corrects himself in how he used the word meaningless in describing the conditions of wage labour jobs. His remark was not meant as a negative value judgement but instead aimed at bringing attention to the precarious adhoc nature of employment which resonates with how Guy Standing (2011) described the emergence of a precariat class. Furthermore, in a post 2008 recession context, Standing (2011:57) points to a decline in upward social mobility and low intergenerational mobility as an ongoing trend across the latter 20th century. Griffin's narrative alludes to how the implementation of austerity measures worsens social mobility and affects people from varying class brackets. The identification of 7 different class categories in the *Great British Class Survey* (Savage et al, 2013) further illustrates class fragmentation and disidentifications with traditional class categories.

For Grace, rhetorical misconceptions and misalignment with class identity means she has the tendency to minimise the difficulties she faced in bringing up children

under austerity conditions. Nonetheless, continued austerity alongside an escalating cost of living crisis has meant that Grace has found it harder to make ends meet:

> When it's just yourself, you can cut corners, you can do things, it's not so critical is it, but when you've always got to provide for kids...

Indeed, austerity and the rising cost of living brings stark choices in that there are punitive consequences for not paying bills - 'You cannot be taken to court for not buying food; You may however be taken to court for not paying bills' (Beck and Gwylym, 2024:72). However, particularly with regard to children there are further implications with regard to the affordability of food. Access to foodbanks require referral from professionals such as GPs and social services. Yet the misalignment of class positions could contribute to people staying quiet about their situation, regarding themselves as "not poor enough". She points to the experience of being in work but not affluent:

> You can get by [if] you're not struggling to heat your house or buy food, but you aren't doing any other things and you are doing a lot of mostly working...

This is not to erase the lived realities of hardship and relative privilege but to bring attention to everyday experience as deeply political, alongside a blurring and fragmentation within and between classes, where there could be stronger solidarity. That is, the broader conditions of neoliberal austerity and ever rising cost of living restrict possibilities to maintaining basic stability though wage labour and economic exchange. As Marx and Engels analysed, the broadening scope of capitalism expands into all domains of social life; persistently revitalising itself and creating new systems of class based oppression (1848/1998:37-38). Indeed austerity plays into the hands of capitalism through the multiplicious ways that all forms of social life are increasingly reduced to the economic realm 'in which the only value that matters is exchange value' (Giroux, 2017:14).

Lara's experience illustrates how she grapples with having a radical imagination, and the experience of shaming as it emerges through her experiences at the Job Centre and receiving Jobseekers Allowance:

> I also think the rage, the experience of being on the dole, you experience such humiliation and rage that actually…that quite… it fires you up! Y'know, I do not have to work very hard to reach back in my experience for a time when I've been humiliated in the job centre to feel motivated to want to do some anti-capitalist shit…

Lara takes a moment to find the right way to express how her experiences 'on the dole' affect her. The lexical field she uses includes 'humiliation', and 'rage' which are words associated with shame, and are juxtaposed with the phrases, 'fires you up', 'motivated' and 'anti-capitalist'. However, she reclaims the pejorative term 'dole' and compartmentalises the shame as theoretical, thus distancing herself from internalising humiliation as shame, instead externalising it as rage against an unfair system.   Lara's rage and humiliation at the hands of Job Centre employees are thus transmuted through the insurrectionary feelings she has relative to her political imagination. Lara evades possible feelings of shame and affirms that she has 'more time' to spend on activism when she is not working. Although Lara is not entirely immune to stigma and feelings of shame, through her political volition and radical imagination; she recognises the value of unemployment in enabling her the time and space to carry out political actions. Carolyn Pedwell (2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2021) strongly cautions against situating affective moments alone, as a necessary or sufficient catalyst for action, and emphasises the capacity of habit (in its unfolding interaction with affect) as central to social transformation. In this instance, Lara's affective reaction confirms Pedwell's perspective. Lara experiences humiliation and rage through her political lens and feels the pull to action based on how she has responded politically in multiple past settings. Lara's dissenting feelings are rooted from her experience and well-established political perspective which is already embedded in her regular political habits and everyday actions. Her pull to action is based on her existing political framework and how she has habitually responded in multiple past settings. In accordance, Lara experiences negative feelings about her circumstances as ideological recognition, or what we might call Marxist class consciousness which facilitates her political imagination and agency (Stetsenko, 2019). More recently Lara has been less involved in institutional political action,

preferring to lend her time and assistance where needed, and as responsive to emergent causes, in particular Black Lives Matter.

Although Lara resists the drive to continuously search for work, she must still show the Job Centre evidence of a job search or else she faces sanction.). Arguably, Job Centre managers act as tools of the state to actualise the desires of a neoliberal government - the attitudes of job centre employees may reflect the broader rhetorical and affective conditioning around the nature of unemployment. Ben Anderson argues that neoliberal affects operate as atmospheres that create multiplicities of mediations that extend to 'how the feel of existence is conditioned and conditions' (2016:736) Arguably, Job Centre employees can be affected by neoliberal atmospheres that emanate from being given both sanctioning targets and broad discretion in how they treat people whereby they can act subject to their own prejudices (or not) in how they wield power over people. Notably, Mary O'Hara (2015) interviewed Angela Neville who was a whistle-blower on DWP policy, as to how Job Centre employees were given targets to meet and pressure to impose sanctions, 'often for stupid reasons.' Angela Neville went on to write a play *Can this be England?* The play bought to light important counter-discourses on the nature of austerity and sanctioning policy as a 'dramatic consciousness raising exercise' (ibid). Austerity conditions and the discursive weaponization of shame is just a small portion of the political violence of the state, yet such social, material, and discursive conditions play a powerful role in altering culture in the UK.

Whilst the practice of sanctioning pre-exists coalition and Conservative governance, sanctioning policies mark a shift of atmosphere from New Labour policies surrounding unemployment. Although New Labour policies promoted work-fare schemes, the approach to unemployment was arguably positively individualised in that there was access to subsidies and volunteering opportunities to gain skills and experience, and was less marked by disciplinary targets. As Will Davies (2016) suggested New Labour policies took on normative approaches to embedding neoliberal attitudes rather than the punitive approaches that both Davies and Loic Wacquant (2013) understand as forms of punishment for being poor and unemployed.

Austerity and political consciousness: Catkin's Story

Catkin's story is a story of political consciousness and of becoming more attuned to his local environment and being activist. Catkin is in his late thirties and is an environmental activist who specialises in guerilla gardening[17] in his local area. Upon asking Catkin about whether he was personally affected by the UK recession in 2008, he begins sharing a deeper story about how his political views began changing as he started witnessing material shifts within austerity. Catkin describes his political perspective during the 2008 recession:

> I was oblivious to it, cause, I was just… I dunno. I was just rolling along. I didn't have that concept… erm it's not even that… I just can't explain why I didn't have it… I was just never really told about it [the recession] and I just never thought to read into it, and find out what was going on, and how it was affecting me, and everyone around me… And then work and college and yeah… I just… I just genuinely was unaware…

Catkin explains that although he grew up in a working-class Labour voting household, he did not know why his family voted the way they did, and he did not feel exposed to much political discourse. Yet Catkin's material circumstances meant that he needed to prioritise his stability by working and gaining professional qualifications for his career, and he had less time to think about politics.

> We didn't have a lot growing up, as you know, I didn't have loads… but that, I guess, is a matter of perspective now. I've grown up - and I've seen how much some people have, and also how little some people have. I realised that the reason I probably didn't know about these things is because I was living a relatively comfortable existence and I guess I just didn't even have like the

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[17] Guerilla gardening involves the 'illicit cultivation' of plants in public and natural spaces (Guerillagardening.org) Illicit because it flouts bylaws but is largely unpunishable. For Catkin, this involves scattering wildflower seeds to promote biodiversity.

knowledge to know what was affecting me or people… erm yeah so, it's just really ignorant I'm really ashamed of it…

Catkin expresses shame for his lack of knowledge. I assure him that he has no reason to feel ashamed and that I am not casting negative judgement on him. Catkin explains that when he moved to London in 2013, amid austerity, he recalls that he witnessed increasing poverty and homelessness. When he returned to his hometown in Essex to visit family, he noticed vast differences to the extent of poverty that had not been so visibly apparent prior to austerity:

> Going back home I don't know if I was just unaware of it before, but I genuinely started seeing people sleeping under underpasses, and like cardboard boxes on the ground, and sleeping bags, and piles of bits in my hometown - which I never really saw as a child, but in the last five years, I think that's even got worse there… (Catkin)

Catkin's feelings of shame may have dissuaded him from configuring a solidified and specified political outlook when he was younger. However, witnessing the extent to which the austerity agenda played a role in worsening social and material conditions stirred his political consciousness. Feeling shame, led to a shift in his perception and over time his disposition has morphed toward a critically reflexive approach to how he relates to his environment and political ideas. Within the austerity context, he does not feel like environmental issues are 'politically prioritised by the government' and so he prefers to take matters into his own hands, in his own way. He began scattering seeds on his walk to work, to promote pollination and smaller eco systems in his local area as well as seeking to challenge the 'greyness' of the austerity mood.

Catkin explains his rationale:

> I think austerity creates like, a mood for people. I think what I do, I'm coming at from erm a different perspective. I know people in a low mood, and I know people who're in trouble and there's not much *financially* I can do about that.

Experiencing austerity conditions pushed him to take an idiosyncratic approach to his political action. The mood of austerity relates to the feelings that discursive and material events conjure and contribute to atmospheres, whereby the shifting material and discursive conditions of austerity take on an affective tone that negatively alters the public mood. Ben Anderson suggests that although affective atmospheres 'proceed from and are created by bodies, they are not, however, reducible to them' and 'exceed that from which they emanate' (2009:80). It is in this sense that, although the mood of austerity is carried through the experiences of people, such intensities do not originate from those people, but stem from the wider structures of feeling generated through austerity conditions and rhetoric (Williams, 1977/2015). The systematic blaming and shaming of groups and individuals, in particular, shapes the felt tonalities of the austerity era, post 2010. Catkin critically reflects on the affective conditions and atmospheres that are upheld in an austerity context, and through his approach challenges the austerity mood through his environmental actions. Catkin enjoys 'helping to cheer someone's day up' and reflects on the connection between the environment and mood, 'I'm hoping they can see that connection' and how 'it makes me feel better when I walk around a nice garden and see a patch of flowers I was not expecting, or seeing them there, in a bit of a weird place. But they are there and they're fighting, and they can do it.'

Although Catkin's actions may seem isolated, he is part of a growing movement of guerilla gardeners who also reflexively engage with and prioritise environmental needs. Sustaining such political praxis could proliferate further with collective transformative potential (Pedwell, 2021). Catkin's political imagination also resonates with scholarly critiques that situate environmental destruction as 'ecocide' and seek to prioritise the needs and rights of eco-systems alongside human struggles (Higgins, 2021). Catkin challenges the austerity mood by contributing to a different atmosphere and has thus taken his political 'shame' and turned it into a pro-active habit of thoughtfully engaging with his local environment. Catkin's actions are a political response to the atmospheric qualities and moods of austerity, embedded in a critically reflexive radical imagination that enables him to think discerningly about how ecology is politically deprioritised within austerity, and informs the actions he takes. One could be critical and suggest that Catkin's actions are futile. Yet, through Anna Stetsenko's perspective we can appreciate that 'human subjectivity including

hope, imagination, and commitment' are not only bound within, but also constitute social practice insofar that 'all forms of human subjectivity are understood to be a genuine part of our world' (2019:734). Thus, 'subjectivity is simultaneously a form of acting, knowing, and being, by people collaborating in active pursuits of social transformations' (ibid;).

Kaz's narrative grapples with the implications of the discursive stigmatising of activists and the concern that this could dissuade younger people from engaging with political causes or alternative lifestyles. Kaz is a non-binary person in their seventies who had previously worked in advertising sales in the 1980s and saw the extent of financial dishonesty and 'corruption' within the industry. Kaz now describes themself as 'anti-capitalist' and 'anti-state'. In the 1990s and 2000s, they were involved in campaigning for LGBTQ+ rights, Palestine solidarity, and anti-war protesting. More recently, Kaz campaigns on social media. They share their thoughts on how discursive conditions affect how young people perceive and relate to political action:

> I think it's hindering them getting involved in emerging causes or living an anti-capitalist lifestyle because they want to be part of the crowd and accepted. They don't want to be isolated and be the weirdo. It's all been drummed into them more and more.

Kaz points to a nuanced relation, whereby young people do not want to be isolated, and 'be the weirdo', and therefore may be collectively encouraged to live individualised lives in pursuit of economic productivity. In this sense, the collective may be more like a hegemonic collective that asserts neoliberal ways of being, whilst shaming politically collective endeavours and pursuits outside the scope of economic productivity. Such action may be rhetorically positioned as either militant and idealistic or reckless and irresponsible. Further implications of discursive assaults on activism are that such rhetoric may divide forms of collective political action. Such division demarcates between that which is regarded as legitimate, such as, engagement with institutionalised, party political and democratic processes, and actions that are delegitimised, such as direct action and dissent. Resistance that operates outside of institutionalised lines may be discursively illegitimated as radically extreme, threatening and militant, or in some cases naïve and idealistic.

Such oppositional framing of activism distorts the political circumstances that activists respond to as unimportant and not their business to attend to. Not only that, but such discourse may also rhetorically enclose the concept of activism as illegitimate action (Brock et al, 2023). Such malignment of political action, could push people away from considering it a civic duty, or responsibility to engage in political action. Moreover, from a direct-action point of view, the legitimacy of taking matters into your own hands to prevent harms may also be under threat. Discursive legitimisation of political action fragments left-wing and dissenting perspectives, and marginalises counter-discourses that look to radical solutions to the world's problems.

Thus far, this chapter has explored how the socio-material and rhetorical conditions of austerity have been underpinned by discursive blaming, shaming, and scapegoating. The narratives of my participants have offered insight into political agency and how they grappled with broader circumstances. The lives of children and young adults have been particularly marked by austerity and may be intensely political. However, for them to understand and articulate these encounters in their political contexts; it may be necessary to cultivate and harness critical perspectives that illuminate lived conditions and provide counter discourses that challenge normative and hegemonic ways of interpreting the world. Critical discourses may offer a way of explaining the role of power and capital in shaping life courses and can also provide a lexis through which to express a political imagination that may embrace a complexity of hopes and desires for a life beyond the now. The next section addresses the relationships among austerity, critical education, counter-discourses, and political action.

Critical Education as Counter Discourse

Post 2010, the broader rhetoric surrounding austerity underlies cultural anxieties and divisive controversy around rising student debt, the marketisation of the university, and the purpose of education and employment. As conceptualised in Chapter 2, the neoliberal imperative operates as an exigent force that steers subjectivities toward economically productive choices. Neoliberal processes of

marketising universities pre-exist austerity (Wedlin 2008). Business studies theorist Linda Wedlin (2008:143) describes the gradual process of marketising universities as 'the meeting of science and the market' pointing to the positivist angle through which marketisation plays out. She acknowledges two conditions necessary for marketisation to take hold, how it depends on both the 'increasing presence and acceptance of a market ideology' as well as 'market-oriented reforms'. Whilst Wedlin advocates for the free market expansion of universities, I argue that this has epistemological implications, particularly in an austerity context underpinned by ideological neoliberal imperatives.

The tendency to regard a university education instrumentally as a means to an end of finding employment is particularly heightened in austerity conditions. In keeping with positivist tradition, the political mood of austerity promotes STEM subjects as the anathema to economic instability. The value of education for the sake of learning and gaining knowledge is diminished by these tendencies. Furthermore, neoliberal imperatives have epistemological consequences. Critical subject disciplines in the arts, social sciences and humanities are threatened by governmental and public attitudes regarding their economic viability, which suggest that the main objective of education is to gain the requisite skills to enter the labour market. Particularly within an austerity context, critical education is threatened by neoliberal discourses and marketising tendencies that assert the pre-eminence of economic productivity, and thus sideline the necessity of critical disciplines.

Although political learning may begin at a much younger age, higher education provides a vital terrain to develop political perspectives, gain knowledge and understanding of the social world. I refer to critical education as mode of pedagogy that questions and enhances knowledge that that could otherwise be obscured by dominant explanations of social, economic, and historical processes. Engagement with critical education is particularly important in developing awareness as well as offering counter-discourses and nuanced political perspectives to address problems, challenge social disparities, question power, and invoke a reflexive political imagination. Rhetoric surrounding the viability of educational choices and institutions was apparent in polarising disputes about the purpose and cost of education during and following the 2010 protests against student fees in the UK.

Nick Clegg is perhaps most infamous for his 'broken promise' (Marcel; Ruby) to scrap student tuition fees, which was made in the 2010 Liberal Democrat election manifesto (Liberal Democrats/Clegg, 2010).

The Coalition government's decision to significantly increase university fees, change the terms of student loans and scrap the Educational Maintenance Allowance triggered mass protests across the country. In particular, the student protests organised by National Union of Students (NUS) and the University and College Union (UCU) in London on 10th November 2010 were notable insofar that mobilisation was strong, and particularly disruptive. Splinter groups mobilised to occupy the Conservative Headquarters and engaged in the symbolic destruction of party materials and technology (Cammaerts, 2013). Lara, Anka, Griffin, Ruby are aged in their mid-late thirties and early forties, and recall their involvement in the student protest movement against cuts and fees. From Griffin's perspective the anti-austerity movement and the student movement were intersected by rhetoric: 'I think the rhetoric around austerity created a student movement, a real self-preservation movement for students fighting the tuition fees.' Marcel and Ruby similarly describe how the strong mobilisation of the protest reflects widespread frustration at austerity conditions and 'the broken promise' to scrap student fees and instead raise them to £9000 a year. Alongside generalised precarity, cuts to public sector jobs and NHS bursaries meant there were fewer opportunities for working outside of the private sector, which many politically active people strive for.

As my participants discuss, higher education provides fertile terrain for developing knowledge, nuanced political perspectives and critical reflexivity. In developing her political perspectives, Ruby remembers how she 'was at Uni when austerity started in 2010, so I think it had the impact of quite radicalising me, because we did lots of student activism around that [anti-austerity].' Protests against rising student fees and anti-austerity demonstrations went hand in hand, and Ruby's politics developed as a student living through the social realities of austerity. Going to university exposed her to broader political issues, and engagement with prefigurative politics informed her perspective going forward. Ruby laments that austerity rhetoric may be detrimental to the mental health of young people and their involvement in political action:

> I think that [rhetoric] could have a negative impact on young people especially mental health and might make them feel like they can't get involved in activism or political things because um they need to focus on other things.

On one hand she feels such discourse could 'make them more angry and radicalise them'. Yet on the other hand, austerity discourses could, she suggests, reinforce the message that being poor is a fault of the self, and that making economically productive life choices is the only option, and that taking actions that run outside the scope of economic productivity is shameful, 'I guess if you're told repeatedly that it's your fault you are poor and it's your fault, and there's no opportunities because they are not creating any opportunities by enforcing austerity' – this could be widely internalised. Alongside a re-configuration of social conditions and opportunities, austerity discourse thus communicates strong ideological messages, which could be compelling to young people who are at a formative time in their development.

The student protests had sought to prevent further marketisation of the university through increased fee structures and protestors were discursively shamed and vilified. However, changes to the shape of educational frameworks did not stop at higher education. Following the implementation of austerity measures, education secretary Micheal Gove (2010-2014) sought to impose cuts in the guise of educational reforms. Gove was rather unpopular with teachers across the country (Berry 2012). Pedagogist, Jon Berry (2012) suggests that coalition approaches conveyed major contradictions to neoliberalism; insofar as educational reforms limited the freedoms of teachers in providing education, and applied pressure on schools to take on academy status. Akin to ostensible welfare reform, cuts to schools were dressed up as educational culture reform, as a response to the perception that the education system was failing young people.

Stella's experience within austerity has led her to become an activist advocate for her own children and other families seeking Educational, Health and Care (EHC) plans and special educational needs funding (SEND) to receive educational support. As Stella notes, 'a lot of the money goes on things like tribunals' in which parents attempt to 'battle against decisions being made' that affect their children's wellbeing, as part of their efforts to access education for their children. According to disability specialist and activist Matt Keer, only 3.7% of local authority decisions are upheld after tribunal (Keer, 2022). That is, tribunals follow legal procedure and typically

find that local authorities are not working within legal bounds when making decisions on EHC plans. Stella feels that the experience of living through austerity has made her more aware of issues 'I might not have known much before'. Her perception of Conservative governance has become more negative, particularly in light of 'the complete lack of emotion, or like empathy toward other human beings who come from poorer backgrounds or have additional needs.' The experience of dealing with the bureaucratic aspects of discrimination in a funding crisis, has brought forth a different set of understandings and a critical reflexivity that she carries forth as she assists as an advocate helping other families gain an equitable education. By resisting educational inequalities and demanding fair and equitable conditions for children to learn, Stella contributes vital ethico-onto-epistemologies: Through being an activist advocate, intertwined with her knowledge of how to navigate the complexities of the tribunal system, and advocating for the educational rights of children framed by ethical imperatives. Stella challenges the division of education and the neoliberal view that everything must be profitable and the notion that the purpose of education is simply a means to an end toward economic productivity

Critical education as Counter Discourse: Marcel's story

I now turn to Marcel's story which demonstrates the social value of a radical education in fostering political dispositions, as well as the development of critical perspectives, counter-narratives, and ethico-onto-epistemologies, as acts of knowing-doing-being. This experience took place, in 2013, at a time when the discursive messages of austerity were strongly proliferated, and the implementation of austerity policies and legislation was in motion. Marcel is in his mid-thirties and has become increasingly politically active as he has experienced living through austerity. Although Marcel was politically aware and had engaged politically prior to austerity, he had ambivalent political views. Marcel recalls a significant aspect of how his radical imagination emerged in an austerity context which was, 'the last show I did for acting school'. He elaborates on how, as an actor, he was involved in the research process behind a theatre production of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* by Dario Fo

(1970), which is set in Italy post-fascist rule. The play addresses state and police corruption amidst the case of an anarchist railway worker who *mysteriously* fell to his death out from the window of the police headquarters. Fo's stage directions gave artistic license to include contemporary political themes, particularly those of police corruption and state sanctioned violence, to bring attention to the historical longevity of state oppression and police complicity.

Two political soapbox speeches (which Marcel refers to as 'rants') were included in the performance. The first speech tackled the social impact of state, police and media corruption, and the lack of accountability in relation to the Hillsborough disaster. On the 15th of April 1989, 97 Liverpool football fans including children were killed, and 766 were injured in a major crush at Liverpool's Hillsborough stadium, due to the negligence of police and crowd management. The subsequent cover up involved a dehumanising reframing of culpability (Scraton, 1999). In particular, just days after, on April 19th The Sun newspaper published the headline 'The Truth' and perpetuated the narrative that the crush was a result of football hooliganism. The cover-up played into a system of state denial (Cohen, 2013:52). To this day, people in Liverpool largely boycott The Sun newspaper. The other rant pertained to the rhetoric of austerity, as proliferated by the tabloid media, and describes how the tabloid media 'attack those on low incomes' and 'demonise whole groups of people'. As per Tyler's (2014) analysis, Marcel points out that such discursive attacks are often based on the proliferation of contempt for social figures who are pilloried as ostensible examples of a problematised group. This is to say, rhetorical malignment can legitimise 'unfair policy such as the bedroom tax' whilst large corporations are 'being allowed to pay f*** all in tax'. For Marcel, researching these issues alongside broader historical political context enabled him to gain important knowledge about the relationship between discourse and power in society. In the vein of, Michel Foucault's (1976) conceptualisation of power/knowledge, discourse is enmeshed with relations of power, and simultaneously power is embedded in discourse, that can shape legitimate forms of knowledge and understanding.

The political knowledge Marcel gained through researching and performing the soapbox speeches resonated further than the play itself and is also a story of becoming more politically attuned. He recalls that 'doing the play left a big stamp on

me' and 'reinforced' his political values, making him more attuned to the rhetorical emphasis of austerity and the experiences of others, and thus, more opposed to austerity. For Marcel, this has involved 'thinking about things on a more socialistic level' with regard to how 'property and money should be circulated in the country.' Acting in the play enabled him to creatively enact performative resistance by sharing political knowledge and casting light on the connections between historical and contemporary sociopolitical events and perspectives to an audience who would hopefully then 'go away and think about' the issues in more depth. Gaining political knowledge fed into his performance and had a lasting impact on his political perspective, framing his ethical standpoints going forward. Performative resistance enabled a process of becoming, aligned with an ethico-onto-epistemology through acts of knowing-doing-being. Indeed, Fo's foreword to the play notes the 'great and provocative impact' of providing 'counter information' as counter discourses to cast light on lived conditions (1980: xi-xix). Marcel's story demonstrates performative resistance as a way of providing 'counter-narratives' that have the capacity to reveal that which has been concealed by official narratives and renderings of events (Fo, 1980, Portelli, 1991). Marcel's narrative demonstrates the capacity of live performance as an ethico-onto-epistemology that challenges positivistic interpretations of austerity through acts of knowing-doing-being. The knowledge Marcel gained shaped his embodiment as politically active, informing how he shared knowledge, through ethical standpoints that are carried forth through the medium of performance.

Conclusion

In the UK post-2010, austerity policies have been underpinned by an array of neoliberal cultural shifts and re-orientations of public values that are reflected in governmental and tabloid rhetoric. Although stigmatising discourses around unemployment and the receipt of benefits pre-exist the contemporary austerity context, the Coalition government mobilised shame as a coercive force that not only deepened stigma but may also have led to intensification of the shame associated with worklessness. The first two sections of this chapter grappled with blaming, shaming, and scapegoating within austerity discourses alongside cuts to social spending. I explored how governmental and media rhetoric surrounding austerity

mobilises shame as a divisive and coercive force to push subjects toward economic productivity in ways that embed long-term neoliberal changes to how the state is organised. I then analysed how discursive shaming directed at activists can delegitimise their position and may, in turn, dissuade people from engaging in political action for fear of stigma. I also analysed how divisive shaming can contribute to fragmentations and misidentifications in working class identity and culture. In exploring the relationship between critical education and political action, I analysed how shame is mobilised in an austerity context within tabloid media rhetoric and the discursive relationship between austerity rhetoric, anti-activist, and anti-student discourse in the tabloid media. Those who advocate for social improvement are denigrated as militant, infantile and a threat to society. Infantilising activists and shaming them for their participation in direct action further serves to delegitimise political action. In part, because aligning soft left perspectives such as the desire for social welfare and accessible education with hard-left militant positions further distances socialist principals as not only unattainable, but as threatening and shameful.

Within an austerity context economic productivity is foregrounded and shame is cast upon choices that lie outside neoliberal imperatives to regard all action through economic rationales. Such a discursive terrain may limit the desire for resistance by doubling down on the notion that political action is economically unproductive and therefore shameful. Productivity is only regarded as legitimate when it has an economic basis, in the sense that "they" only want us to work and pay taxes and embody the traits of the ideal neoliberal individualistic, self-made person who must always be adaptive and resilient, and ever-seeking a side-hustle no matter how hard conditions are. The reproduction of political knowledge may also, as I have discussed, be threatened by the erasure of critique within educational institutions. Knowledge and understanding of colonial history, power relations and critical thought is limited within schools. Critical education is at the heart of political thought yet is threatened by the discursive re-shaping of educational frameworks in line with neoliberal imperatives of profit, future profit, economic productivity, and profitable technological advancement. The social denigration of political action can have broader implications with regard to how collective societal success is framed.

The next analysis chapter delves into how the socio-material, legislative and rhetorical conditions of austerity relate to a longer trajectory of neoliberal imperatives. The narratives of my participants shed light on how socio-material conditions and legislative approaches affect the strategies, ethos, and resources of politically active and dissenting people. They also bring attention to the important ways that they challenge neoliberal imperatives through prefigurative parenting.

Chapter 6: <u>Austerity, Neoliberal Imperatives, and Prefigurative Parenting</u>

The socio-material conditions of austerity expand a cultural direction that fosters the development of subjectivities that are malleable to the demands of the economy. Philosopher Jason Read describes the cultural expansion of neoliberalism as a transformation of ideology, that leans into positivist modalities in how cultural neoliberalism, 'claims to present not an ideal, but a reality; human nature.' (Read, 2022:311). That is, neoliberalism operates as a value-laden political ideology, culturally reinforced as matter of fact and objective reality, whilst simultaneously concealing the political aims of the state. In this chapter, I address how the socio-material, legislative and discursive conditions of austerity affect how politically active people adjust to changing conditions and precarious circumstances, and the capacities for activists to build and sustain resources. I also analyse how my participants challenge neoliberal imperatives, exert radical agency, and share ethico-onto-epistemologies, as acts of being-knowing-doing through prefigurative parenting. This part of the chapter contributes to conceptualising prefigurative parenting in austerity and attends to a gap within scholarly literature.

In Chapter 1, I discussed how a trajectory of neoliberal social and legislative changes have progressively affected political action, since the 1980s. I framed the Public Order Act 1986 (POA); and the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 (CJPOA) as two key examples of neoliberal legislation that affect the strategies, ethos, and resources of politically active and dissenting people. Within the context of Conservative governance, I argued that legislation affecting politically dissenting people tends to arise as a response to perceived threats to state and fiscal interests.

The tendency within neoliberal governance is to malign and root out left wing political arrangements which I argued affects counter-cultural and dissenting dispositions. That is, legislation may be specifically targeted to limit the scope of political participation, whilst increasing the scope of protection for the state, property owners and corporate bodies. As Michel Foucault (1979/2008:163) argues, the law and the economy are intertwined in that economics is a 'set of regulated activities.' Indeed, neither the law nor economic principles are natural entities; they are instead constructed and mediated by a vast array of socio-political arrangements, as an 'economic-juridical ensemble' in ways that reinforce governing power (ibid:163). While neoliberal principals are based on a de-regulated economy, the formal economy is sustained by the law, and legislative arrangements are informed by political governance. Contributing to socio-material conditions, the regulatory function of neoliberal legislation embeds value-laden economic principles that sustain elite relations of power (ibid).

The first section of this chapter addresses austerity as part of a longer term mode of political control that relays the ideological imperative of neoliberalism, and reinforces Conservative power, engendering renewed forms of class warfare. Elite power is restored through the shaving of social resources that level out social inequalities (Giroux, 2017). Austerity policies enhance existing class divisions and constitute a potent form of class warfare waged by the economic elite (ibid); which I argue also reinforces and normalises neoliberal ideologies of individualised adaptation within legislation and culture. Austerity policies are 'more than the scandal of a perverted form of neoliberal rationality' (Giroux, 2017:14). That is, austerity increasingly becomes a precondition for authoritarian intervention and criminalisations of numerous aspects of everyday life (ibid). My participants provide empirical insight as to how cultural change under austerity has affected how they navigate generalised precarity in the midst of a shifting socio-material landscape. As conceptualised in Chapter 2, neoliberal imperatives progressively delineate the scope of choice toward individual expressions of economic agency and self-responsible, independent, responses to economic uncertainty. As Imogen Tyler (2014:133) suggests, neoliberal subjectivities are 'self-scripting, flexible, entrepreneurial, and individualised'; as actively and independently choosing their own destiny, overcoming hurdles and barriers, and seeking additional ways to improve their financial stake.

Neoliberal imperatives promote entrepreneurial and consumerist attitudes as the primary answer to economic and material precarity. Socially Darwinist, biological rationales, such as, the refuted notion of *survival of the fittest* can push resilience and acceptance of precarity as a condition of life, that must be adapted to (Reid, 2016:102). The political discourse of adaptation is powerful in shaping moralities, despite the tenuous connection between the natural world and the arrangement of social life. As cultural critic Henry Giroux (2017:) argued, the refuted ethos of *survival of the fittest* is 'the ethic of barbarians, the thoughtless and cruel financial elite' (2017:18). Austerity brings into play renewed relations of class power in which elite forces re-orient the lines of struggle, and are ideologically legitimated on the premise that ruthless self interest is that which underpins agency. In this vein, 'selfishness is the highest civic virtue' (2017:17). By addressing the legislative trajectory alongside cultural change, this section aims to draw out further nuances of neoliberal political control.

The second section of this chapter draws on the narratives of my participants to analyse how political resources for mitigating precarity are specifically affected by section 144 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO), which criminalises squatting in residential buildings. I consider the ways in which neoliberal imperatives go beyond the scope of the economy into legislative control, and the deterioration of ways of life (Harvey, 2005:3). I engage with political action, counterculture, and the practice of squatting as it emerges through the experiences of my participants and the capacity to build alternative resources. I address further ramifications of neoliberal imperatives and the LASPO, with attention to the cultural implications of the pervasiveness of entrepreneurial and consumerist values in the rationale for political and community-based action.

The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 is situated as an austerity policy because temporally speaking, it was initiated during, and as part of, the broader atmosphere of austerity, and the rising housing crisis alongside hastened precarity. LASPO came into force in 2013. Foremost, LASPO makes cuts to the scope of legal aid funding and is a broad statute encompassing numerous pieces of legislation. Liz Davies of the Socialist Lawyer (2013:3) described government cuts to legal aid funding as 'part of its assault on the welfare state'. Cuts to the provision of legal aid are made in Part 1, Section 9 of the LASPO, affecting families, housing

disputes, employment issues, immigration, debt management cases and more. Following the implementation of LASPO, there has been a 59% decrease in the number of law firms and advisory agencies providing legal aid services and the number of cases has dropped from 'almost a million in 2009/10' to 'just over 100 000 in 2020/21' (Law Society, 2023). LASPO has had an overall negative impact on society by restricting access to justice and creating 'wide gaps in provision' (ibid).[18]

However, whilst keeping the broader context of cuts and LASPO in mind, my analytical focus in this chapter is on the criminalisation of squatting in residential buildings. As discussed in my methodology, valid concerns about police spies and surveillance meant that I did not set out to collect empirical material about potential criminal activity and court cases. Nor did my participants discuss their involvement, or not, in legal aid activist cases. However, a few participants spoke about LASPO in terms of its impact on residential squatting. I consider the impact of anti-squatting legislation within section 144 of the LASPO. I am particularly interested in how LASPO affects the production of alternative resources, the ways politically active people can mobilise in free spaces, and the available means of mitigating economic impacts of austerity from community spaces.

As a praxis, squatting is understood as occupying or residing in uninhabited properties, and can provide a space from which to build personal and political resources; and recourse for people in mitigating precarious circumstances. In the UK, prior to 2012, squatting was legally regarded as a civil matter. Under Section 6 of the Criminal Law Act 1977, a paper copy of Section 6 could be displayed on the door of a property, which enabled so-called squatters' rights. Squatting has a long historical basis as a form of resistance across the mid-late 20th century in the UK. For example, in 1960s squatted streets (Reeve, 2009); in the 1970s, gay squatting communities in Brixton (Cook, 2011); Anarcho-punk squats in the 1980s (Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006); 1990s road protests squats (McKay, 1998:8); and 2000s squatted social centres (Chatterton and Pickerell, 2010). These kinds of squatted social centres can be broadly understood as collective, non-hierarchical spaces.

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[18] Although Section 10 of LASPO allows some provision for 'exceptional cases' these may be few and far between and arguably less likely to be granted for activist cases as decisions must be made by the director. Particularly given the clause in, *Qualifying for Legal Aid* section 11 (3)h which pertains to the conduct of the individual in relation to decision making on part of the Lord Chancellor
 Notably, on 31st January 2024, in the High Court, the Law Society judicial review successfully challenged the Ministry of Justice on the grounds that LASPO undermines criminal justice.

As well as being understood as social centres, squatted domains are also sometimes known as self-organised spaces which enable forms of self-governing and collective decision-making (Chatterton and Pickerell, 2010; Finchett-Maddock, 2010). Self-organised spaces can provide a point of convergence for an umbrella of numerous causes (Chatterton, 2010). Drawing from the praxes of previous decades, the further resurgence of anarchist squatting, social centres, and squat cafes in the 2000's enabled and assisted in maintaining networks of activists and in providing community support and mutual aid (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006; Chatterton and Pickerell, 2010). Sociolegal scholar Lucy Finchett-Maddock (2010:49-50) argues that squats and social centres enable engagement and self-legislation within hidden law, that is 'underneath the webs of official law' and pre-existed formal legal systems. Relative to state intentions, she suggests, 'squatting and social centre movements move up and down along the lines of legitimacy, legality and illegality' (ibid).

In the final section of this chapter, I contribute to defining and developing the concept of prefigurative parenting. I analyse how my participants exert radical agency in challenging neoliberal imperatives through acts of parenting. I analyse the political potential of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988); how politically active parents are affected by austerity, and how they pass on political understandings, and ways of being to younger generations. The notion of prefigurative parenting was first conceptualised in a blog article for *LeftTurn*, by US activist Rahula Janowski (2007) with regard to collective parenting and the inclusion of young people in activist spaces. Janowski suggests, 'when we incorporate the children as part of the fabric of our communities of resistance, we are raising the next generation of revolutionaries.'

However, the concept of prefigurative parenting has barely been addressed within scholarly literature or political and cultural discourse.[19] My conceptualisation of prefigurative parenting considers how austerity conditions hinder parenting as well as how my participants carry forth their political dispositions and practices, offering hope for how future generations could enact politics. My participants provide insight into the ways they challenge and resist socio-legislative conditions through

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[19] Albeit, there is an interesting article by dentist Jimmy Pinkham (1991), for the American Society of Dentistry for Children regarding best practice for reducing fear in children going to the dentist. The article discusses prefigurative parenting as a paradigm popularised in US collective alternative living situations, and aids dentists, in keeping cultural differences in mind when working with children in families who live alternative lifestyles (Pinkham, 1991).

prefigurative parenting, and lend to the reproduction of activist ethico-onto-epistemologies: as politically and ethically imbued acts of being-knowing-doing.

With reference to the experiential insight of my participants, I begin the process of outlining how prefigurative parenting could be understood in an ongoing austerity context. Whilst I do not have the scope in this chapter to offer a full conceptualisation of prefigurative parenting in all contexts; I analyse how prefigurative parenting challenges neoliberal imperatives. That is, as an embodied transference of political knowledge, ethos, discourses, and praxes, as a way of reproducing ways of being that are framed by political understanding, as ethico-onto-epistemologies. Given the paucity of scholarly conceptualisations I hope to invoke others to build on the notion of prefigurative parenting. I would like to add the caveat that this is not about deferring responsibility. The responsibility for political change does not lay in the hands of children. The responsibility belongs to those adults with the prefigurative capacity to bring the future into the present (Boggs, 1977). Furthermore, there are countless other meaningful ways to live beyond rearing children and given the social and ecological crises of the world, many reasons not to give birth at all.

Austerity and the Ideological Imperative of Neoliberalism

The 'credit crunch' following the global economic crisis led to economic recession in the UK which affected mortgages, employment, the cost of living, and the rental market (Basu, 2018). Many of my participants were affected in some way by economic precarity during the post 2008 recession. Anka is in her late thirties, has been politically active since she was a teenager, and has lived in squats and on boats. During the recession, Anka remembers how she got a job in a café and recalls the work relationship she had with her boss, the café owner. She relates how, 'he was always stressed and always angry' and speculates that 'it must have been the sheer financial burden of it'. It was through the conversational process of the interview that Anka came to the realisation that her manager's anxieties were linked to the economic uncertainty of the recession:

> I didn't see it like that, but now I do, now I've reflected, that was the recession, that was the stress and anxiety being put into his business...

The process of reflection has enabled Anka to consider her experiences as part of a wider picture of generalised precarity and uncertainty that affected many across the UK. The instabilities and uncertainties emerging from economic recession preceded the formal imposition of austerity yet marked the tone of the legitimising discourses that asserted cuts under a false promise of economic stability. Austerity policies were purported to be the route to reducing the governmental deficit, yet rather than being a short term reduction to public spending, have instead been a means of accentuating elite class power and the accelerating the immiseration of society. As analysed in Chapter 5, traditionally Marxist class categories of proletariat and bourgeoisie become increasingly blurry and untenable.

 Another participant, Alden who is in his early sixties shared a longer-term perspective, which offers important insight as to how austerity as a national strategy fit into a longer pattern of neoliberal political control - 'the evidence from observation is there'. He goes on to outline his perspective on generations of 'attack' which resonates with sociologist Will Davies' (2016) contentions surrounding the phases of neoliberalism:

> ...If you look back over a period of time of neoliberalism from the 1980s through the Thatcher government, and weighing the picture in the John Major years and then new Labour watered things down, and then when the Cameron government came in 2010 that was the big change for the right really, of the Cameron years to change things on its head really and that's the second attack, and I feel like we're now in a third attack with this regime, the Boris Johnson regime...

Alden brings attention to how measures go beyond the scope of economic cuts, to the extent that the socio-material conditions of austerity pose as barriers to political and counter cultural resistance. Davies (2016) analysis addresses how neoliberal governance takes different forms and rationalities according to each temporal political context. According to Davies, and as discussed in Chapter 1, the 1980s formed a 'combative' phrase in which neoliberal economic and social values were

aggressively imposed through state co-ordinated paramilitary attacks on dissent. Alden remembers the transition between the 1980s and the election of Tony Blair as Prime Minister in 1997 and how 'New Labour watered things down'. In the sense that within the New Labour era, there was a stronger safety net of social welfare and public sector funding aimed at reducing social inequalities. Following Blair's election, the government's approach to asserting neoliberal values enabled market logics to take on less aggressive characteristics so as to render business thinking as reasonable, and even cool. Eden, who is in his early sixties refers to the period as 'cool Britannia' insofar that the hyper commodification and marketization of alternative music (and drug culture) was normalised and celebrated, such as, Britpop. In this vein, Davies (2016) frames the New Labour era as normative neoliberalism in which the values of meritocracy and entrepreneurialism were softly embedded in the civic structure and educational settings.

Alden suggests that the election of the Conservatives as leaders of the Coalition government in 2010, was the 'big chance for the right' and describes the early austerity period as 'the second attack' in a series of assaults. He describes David Cameron as 'the instrumental one', in that 'the policy of austerity played, it was about readdressing the balance of wealth and power from the financial crash in 2008'. Alden's point resonates with David Harvey's assertion that neoliberalism is associated with 'the restoration or reconstruction of the power of economic elites' (2005:19). That is, class warfare plays out implicitly in the ways that austerity was framed as imperative, to right the supposed wrongs of public spending during the New Labour era and to negate wider ameliorative strategies aimed at levelling out socioeconomic inequalities. The cultural angle has been to desecrate the social institututions embedded in the welfare state, vilify social dependency, and promote neoliberal resilience. Class warfare plays out explicitly in the disciplinary strategies exerted institutionally. Davies (2016) situates austerity as a 'punitive' phase of neoliberalism in that the cultural logic of austerity has directed governmental attention toward the punishment of those who have not, or cannot, accept the normative messages embedded within and through such phases of neoliberalism: That is, "chin up, work hard, get a side hussle, get a mortgage, rinse and repeat."

Alden reflects on a younger generation of politically active people, discussing how they initially drew from the DIY praxis and the nomadic culture of previous generations. He notes how young adults were particularly affected by the spiralling rental crisis, and difficulties in securing housing and alludes to cities, such as London and Bristol, where 'rents were literally over the top' and 'people couldn't afford to live there'. In the context of worsening precarity and cuts to social housing, he recalls that he saw how many young politically dissenting people who were opting to live in 'trucks and vans' on sites and parkland to avoid paying unaffordable rents. By domesticating vehicles, and living alongside other van-dwellers, they were finding ways to pool multiple resources together and adapt to their situations collectively. In the context of precarity such a survival strategy may be a reasonable response to circumstances and reflect a subversive common sense (Gramsci, 1971). Yet Alden explained that 'local authorities have legislated locally to outlaw people living in vans in streets' and that such bylaws have led to increased police scrutiny. Those exerting strategically resourceful, flexible/nomadic tendencies counter to neoliberal imperatives, thus face constraint and political problematisation. They stand at risk of losing their homes, vehicles, and possessions, as experienced by those targeted at the Beanfield in 1985. As such, shifts and alternations in material conditions, the threat of abjection, and local bylaws contribute to the dismantling of subversive common sense and reinforce hegemonic ways of responding to precarity.

As I have discussed, the economic circumstances of austerity foster economically responsible behaviour whilst closing down opportunities to make choices through an alternative scope[20]. As Chandler and Reid (2016:1) elucidate, neoliberal discourses that call for resilience in response to threat and precarity, limit possibilities for autonomy and agency by promoting acceptance of economic instability as a part of life that must be overcome. That is, the 'resilient subject' is one who makes "good" choices and can withstand 'threats' in the environment. (ibid). Alden alludes to 'the kind of right-wing actions that are applauded' and the notion that there 'may be

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[20] Furthermore, given that many politically active people are fighting against poverty, I do not suggest that taking economically normative measures to maintain personal stability is something to judge harshly, or a route that I have never taken, or do not take to protect myself. Particularly as the sociopolitical and material conditions of austerity may further reduce the opportunities available to engage in politically adaptive strategies.

people who can pick up above the rest' by adjusting to precarity by taking economic pathways:

> The overall emphasis has been about trying to deny those kinds of choices that people may have held, those choices that are fundamentally there, if people don't have the resources themselves to live a certain lifestyle that others expect them to be.

That is, the scope of choice may be limited in line with neoliberal imperatives that condemn alternatives, limit the scope of social welfare, and promote participation in the free market. As discussed, and analysed, throughout this chapter: The state does not encourage choices that wield agency through an alternate scope than the expected economic pathways. As Chandler and Reid (2016) explicate: the values of neoliberalism are premised on resourcefulness, adaptability, and resilience to economic uncertainties and pressure, and are qualities that may be rewarded in an economic context. Yet, to be regarded as legitimate, actions must be carried out within recognised channels and economic frameworks, to the extent that autonomy from such systems may entail destitution and constitute 'a threat to life' (2016:1).

Griffin is in his mid-thirties and has been politically active in various capacities since he was a teenager, in particular solidarity with Palestine, anti-war, anti-arms trade, animal rights and anti-fascism. Griffin's earlier experiences of political action resonate with prefigurative, non-hierarchical modes that are reminiscent of New Left attitudes and praxes. Yet, given that prefigurative productivity is not economic, such political practice is not recognised by the state as conducive to national interests. Griffin describes the difficulties faced by activists who had previously been able to live by 'claiming the dole in order to free up your time in order, to be more or less semi-professional activists' and how 'many of the people I knew' had found themselves 'forced back into either low wage, or into career jobs'. Material precarity and the need to survive have meant that many politically active people have needed to change their course of action due to new difficulties in accessing unemployment benefits. Griffin offers his perspective on how economic uncertainties, instabilities, and alterations to social welfare changed how people engaged with politics:

> When the austerity program started, and when the recession kicked in, I think the biggest change for me and for other around me that I saw was actually people were suddenly fighting for their own wellbeing and you see a real drop off in those solidarity projects and a real lack of focus in those directions…

Griffin attributes the 'lack of focus' to needing to have 'enough security in your own wellbeing that you can put your political empathy elsewhere'. As such, austerity conditions could serve a broader function of limiting political solidarity by shifting the focus from external political concerns, toward individual survival. Particularly in the early austerity transition, socio-material and cultural changes were in stark contrast to the previous civic structure. Griffin elaborates further on how the socio-material conditions of austerity work against engagement with activism:

> I actually think austerity pushed me away from activism because losing that social safety net and being unable to live for almost nothing meant that you have to go out and find work and get low-waged, long-houred work, which is an issue with unsparingly much less time to participate in these projects to participate in activism, and you have, as is the neoliberal idea, as you start earning a little bit more, you do inherently become a tiny bit more conservative, you have something to lose, you worry about the rent in the place that your living , you worry about losing that job, whether it's good or shit or whatever and that does, having something to lose makes people more conservative I think… not necessarily with a capital C or drifting politically to the right, but it does mean your less [pause]… my lived experience of it is that I felt less willing to do… to pursue a course of action that may lead to me losing everything that I may have been previously… (Griffin)

Changes to the shape of the social welfare system, 'the safety net' mean that there is increased need for taking on increased economic responsibility. This is not to say that taking responsibility for financial matters is inherently neoliberal or problematic. Griffin draws attention to an inherent part of getting older. Particularly given that, maturity entails a level of accountability and concern for material stability, particularly in situations where others depend on reasonable behaviour. (For example, paying rent on time in shared living situations, or turning up for work

on time so as not to inflict on colleagues.) The threat of loss is arguably an integral part of the dynamic of the neoliberal imperative, in that economic responsibility changes the stakes involved in taking alternative pathways.

Alden refers to the neoliberal legislative trajectory. He suggests that it is 'only about legacy that we've come to this point':

> So yes, they are trying to - without a doubt - to homogenise society and any sort of dissent is being outlawed, criminalised actually, and if you go back through the bills and again back at the Criminal Justice Act and go back to the Public Order Act of 1986, they have a long history that had been - since 2010 - really extended in my mind. Y'know it's kind of the finishing of the icing, if you will, but they haven't yet finished.

Based on Alden's observations, the motivations of governance are to 'homogenise' culture and criminalise acts of dissatisfaction. Yet, as Alden suggests, austerity and LASPO are 'the finishing of the icing' – which conjures notions of confectionary concocted by processes, layers and finishings toward an end-product. If, however, austerity is not the end product then it raises the question, what next? Yet, supposing austerity was a cake, conversely to the phrase 'eat the rich', the cultural angle of austerity surpasses and eats away at political existence, whittling it down to labour exchange and consumption as imperative to the continued existence of capitalism. Austerity is a source of scarcity which could culminate in restraints to radical thinking and politically imaginative ways of finding solutions. The cultural angle of austerity has been to intensify the pull toward economically normative pathways as the only legitimate responses to economic precarity, whilst simultaneously altering social welfare, and limiting the choice structures of politically active and dissenting people.

Cornelius' experience of grappling with austerity is a useful demonstration of Alden's previous point about how some people can 'pick up above the rest' by taking economic pathways of action and wielding cultural capital as a resource. Cornelius is in his mid forties and his narrative relays the pressure to make economically adaptive

choices in response to precarious circumstances. Cornelius had been involved in early 2000s rave culture and was in his late twenties at the time of the recession. He attended university in his late twenties and had been politically active as a student at a university with a reputation for political dissent. He 'really loved the big activist culture they had there'. He comments that he was 'definitely impacted by the recession' particularly the change in the job market, alongside low wages, and general financial uncertainty (Standing, 2011).

Cornelius' explains how he took 'steps to bypass' precarity and exerted economic agency to manage his financial affairs by getting a well-paid job teaching English language in South Korea, which provided him with accommodation. From Cornelius' perspective he was drawing from his mental resources and accumulated cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977); to pragmatically exert economic agency and survive. It is understandable why Cornelius took a normative economic path amid austerity. However, it highlights the ongoing pervasiveness of neoliberal values that work against the impetus to engage in collective political action, in that neoliberal imperatives necessitate individualised economic choices and undertakings to survive precarity. I am not casting judgement on individuals making choices to survive precarity, but rather the systems that disable alternatives and moralise subjectivities toward economic actions and interests. Although Cornelius had been exposed to political campaigns and prefigurative squats, and had 'loved' activist culture, these experiences did not inform his survival strategy following the financial crisis. It could be argued Cornelius had appreciated activist culture on an individual level involving an appropriation of activist signifiers that did not lead to sustained left-wing praxis.

Cornelius also discusses how he began investing in cryptocurrency, 'I've seen different financial instruments as actual activism against the financial system'. Yet to what extent can engagement with libertarian mechanisms that enable the continuance of neoliberal flows of power actually constitute meaningful left leaning political action? Or is bitcoin another way that people can wield symbolic power, gain capital, or even conceal wealth? Cornelius' narrative brings attention to his class and gender as well as illustrating how political rationales can shift and change and how austerity conditions supplant collective interests with individual needs.

The LASPO as Neoliberal Legislation and Implications of Neoliberal Imperatives

As discussed in the introduction of this chapter, there is a precedence of left wing social spaces that have laid the groundwork for the development of social infrastructures in squatted spaces. The political resources built and sustained by social centres stem from praxes developed by the 'autonomy clubs' run by anarcho punks in the 1980s, as well as the movements against the poll tax and Criminal Justice Bill in the 1990s (Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006). During the 1990s and 2000s social centres gained particular traction amongst activists (ibid). In particular, the 2000s social centre movement offered a means through which politically active people could provide mutual aid and mitigate precarity whilst enacting prefigurative aims (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006).

Having a space from which to mobilise people toward collective participation, and the means from which to produce alternative resources can enable many kinds of imaginative, creative, and practical solutions to economic instability. Occupied social centres can provide a variety of radical services as social support for the broader community (Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006). Social centres can provide a venue for kitchens, cafes, safe spaces, radical libraries, food banks, seed banks, radical media, zine swaps, allotments, skills swapping, art spaces, the space for benefit gigs, sound systems, pirate radios, the collective 'reclamation' of public utilities and more. Radical geographers Stuart Hodkinson and Paul Chatterton (2006) argue that squatted social centres are distinct from domestic residential squats and housing co-ops and politicised through the 'very act of reclaiming private space' for the benefit of the community 'as part of a conscious refusal and confrontation to neoliberalism and the enclosure of urban space' (2006:310). The living arrangements of squatted social centres could from this perspective, outline a prefigurative template for a different way of being and existing in the world.

The squatted social centres of the 2000s could have laid the ground for a collective framework through which to respond to precarity in a post 2010 context, on a mass level. Squatting provides a means for people 'excluded from housing consumption through traditional channels' (Reeve, 2005:197). Sustaining alternative spaces

challenges the logic of capital and enables spaces undefined by the aims of enterprise and profit. Self-managed spaces may thus provide a framework to 'live life despite, but nonetheless beyond, capitalism' (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010:476). That is, squatted social centres can provide territory to enact broader projects of solidarity and commitment to long-term social and political change. Self-managed, autonomous, prefigurative spaces could have held some sway in mitigating urban displacement through community based mutual aid. During a time of increased precarity and loss of options for low cost-living, the LASPO creates difficulties and limits the potential for would-be squatters to be resourceful in finding free accommodation and adapt in ways that enable collective engagement. Furthermore, whilst social centres, and indeed squats, do continue to exist, the ability to reproduce these frameworks and resources in a multiplicity of settings has been limited by austerity conditions. This section explores how changes to policy under LASPO and austerity conditions affect the capacity of social centres to self-legislate as their continuance beyond squatting is dependent on licensing regulations and could lend to commercial motivations for setting up forms of social enterprise.

Anka's experience as a squatter in East London points to the potential of social centres as a resource for mitigating social precarity and urban displacement, as well as the strategic possibilities arising from mobilisation in squatted spaces. The *Focus E15* campaign was first initiated in September 2013 by a group of young mothers in protest of their eviction notices by Newham council from their mother-baby residence at the *E15 foyer*. Anka describes how the young women 'were being forced out to all kinds of different parts of the country'. Due to local funding cuts and restrictions to housing benefit for young adults, many of the women were due to be relocated to other parts of the country away from their support networks. She describes how members of *Focus E15,* and local squatters worked together to enable the creation of a safe space squat and 'occupied a council house' that was up for demolition. They redecorated the home, 'for next to no money'. Anka explained:

> These kinds of social centres that were developed by squat, squatting people... it just gives people space to be a bit different, it's not about going to the shops,

> it's not about spending money, it's not about any of that, it's about just being together and eating some food together and hanging out, that is just it.

The socio-material conditions of austerity further erode the places that people can go to, to the extent that there are increasingly fewer places to go that are not private businesses of consumption. Anka relays how the solidarity between Focus E15 and local squatters enabled a 'community space where mothers, friends and people in that local area could come and mingle' without having to spend money. The squats provided a location to carry out mutual aid, and facilitate collective resources within uncommodified space. She explains how 'having the doors open and inviting people in so they can mooch around and learn stuff' allowed them to reach the community it was intended for, and how the temporary social centres:

> ...seems to really give people a sense of relief, like from their everyday life. They are in debt, they are in arrears, they're... y'know, everything is coming at them all sides...

In chapter 7, I analyse how the socio-material conditions of austerity are felt accumulatively and can lead to burnout. Social centres can offer reprieve from everyday stressors emanating from economic deterioration and project a different set of affective conditions that challenge normative frameworks. Anka describes the atmosphere of squat meetings and how she saw 'these incredible strong women' who could have a 'very strong hold on the room and be able to assert themselves' which was 'exciting to see that it wasn't a male dominated space which I was so used to, it really blew my mind'. Anka draws attention to affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2009) as giving rise to radical agency in re-shaping the traditionally masculine hierarchies found in activist spaces and sustaining alternate atmospheres that give deeper credance to lived realities. From this perspective, squatted spaces can perform a practical function beyond providing shelter in the here and now, as the atmospheres fostered in such environments serve as 'shared emotional space' (Lacey 2005:289); from which collective hopes, aims, feelings and a political imagination can be fostered. Whilst informal hierarchies could arise, they may present differently in the context of the Focus E15 mothers. By taking ownership of a domain, they could

connect with a social support network, meet material and social needs, and have a space for creative expression. Arguably, the affective atmospheres of squatted social spaces, in part stem from the radical agency of activists in collectively building deinstitutionalised political resources that fill in gaps left by cuts to the welfare state. As Jeff Shantz describes, social centres exist as 'alternative institutions that operate in the shadows of the dominant institutions[and] provide frameworks for the radical re-organization of social relations in a miniature, pre-insurrectionary form.' (Shantz, 2009:103)

Following the squat campaigns, Focus E15 activists were harassed and targeted by police, Newham council sought to uphold evictions under the new legislation within LASPO, and demonstrated the extent to which police and the council were willing to spend resources on processes of eviction and arrest, (Focus E15, 2015). The housing benefit cuts introduced by the Coalition government in 2011 were counter-productive to reducing social spending because they had led to a spike in homelessness and increased the amount that local councils were spending on homelessness strategies (Fetzer et al, 2022). As a consequence of longer-term neoliberal processes (Davies, 2016); and the progressively deteriorated autonomy of local councils (Fetzer et al. 2022) local members of Parliament are helpless in their complicity with enabling displacement and gentrification. Furthermore, homelessness could be avoided with the right kind of support and social safety net, if social spending had not been framed by Tories as a kind of social sepsis. Cuts kill vulnerable people and squats were a means of shelter for homelessness.

The implementation of the LASPO came at a time of vast changes concurrent to austerity conditions. On one hand, deepening precarity and uncertainty, on the other vast opportunities for widespread urban development. Writing prior to austerity, sociologist Swapna Banerjee-Guha (2010:14) argues, neoliberalism and the imperative to expand the domains of potential profit, corells with renewed contest as to who has the right to the city, relative to the acceleration of capitalist development. The implementation of LASPO under austerity conditions lends itself to enterprise and the requirements of urban planner in carving out increasing spaces for development, particularly those deemed to be less aesthetically pleasing. My participant Anka mentions how 'the towers and rivers used to be pretty dire places to be, no-one wanted to be on them, they are not pretty like they are now...' As

Banerjee-Guha (2010:14) put it, 'cities are becoming beautiful and slumfree through the expulsion of the poor'. Whilst gentrification evidently precedes austerity, increased precarity leaves less of a buffer for resistance to totalising development schemes. The LASPO reneges the possibility of legally cracking open squatted spaces that can provide accommodation and shared resources whilst serving to reaffirm the primacy of the private rental sector. I go into more depth on the implications of urban development in the next chapter where I analyse David Harvey's (2010) notion of accumulation by dispossession.

Displacement and homelessness underscore the process of social exclusion and is underpinned by neoliberal principals that decry the notion of social housing as unnecessary social expenditure. Neoliberal principles promote the view that the only way to provide choice, affordability and flexibility is through a competitive free market. Such "principals" operate alongside the expectation that subjects be resilient to the fluctuations of the private rental market. The LASPO directly affected the subsistence strategies of the Focus E15 campaign, and serves to uphold the interests of the government, and property developers. Anti-squatting legislation contributes to the deterioration of the ways people can survive precarity through alternative means. Focus E15 have nonetheless persisted in their resistance to austerity and gentrification. The group continues to protest and offer mutual aid through their stall, 'every Saturday, 12pm-2pm outside Wilko's on the Broadway in Stratford, London, E15' (Focus E15, 2024).

As discussed, squatted social centres in the 2000s had built and sustained alternate means and resources and played a role in mitigating precarity and urban dispossession (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010) However, due to the LASPO, and the criminalisation of squatting, the capacity of social centres to spontaneously emerge was diminished. In part, because in order for previously squatted social centres to continue, there would need to be a licensed property[21]. In order to legitimately obtain a licensed property, groups and organisations may be required to have a business

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[21] Unless there was a reasonable claim for 'adverse possession' of a property. A person can apply to register the title of a property if there has been at least a decade of uninterrupted squatting, and the person applying does not need to have been resident at the squat for the duration of the decade as long as the property has been squatted. For example, Keith Best is a construction worker from East London who had moved into a vacant property in 2012. A high court judge ruled in his favour on the basis that section 144(1) should not be used to superimpose pre-existing common-law that had enabled adverse possession (Exanda, 2014).

plan, stakeholders and people willing to act in the official capacity of chairperson, treasury, and secretary. In doing so, the process of licensing could impose an ordered chain of demand onto groups that were previously without formal hierarchy; as well as altering the broader ways that prefigurative infrastructure emerges.

Eden lives in southeast London. He was involved with squatted social centres in the 2000s as well as anti-fascism and anti-gentrification campaigning. Eden takes a strong position on the extent to which profiteering has warped the ethos of events and how the socio-material conditions of austerity lend themselves to fostering entrepreneurial and consumer attitudes. He refers to 'synergy', which was initially a squatted social centre*, The Synergy Centre,* in Lambeth that had eventually obtained permission from the Lambeth council to continue as a non-profit charitable organisation. Reflexively speaking, I attended an event at the synergy centre when I was 21. Although I had been to a few squats previously, the setup of the synergy centre had opened my eyes to different kinds of community spaces and the possibilities of living relatively comfortably in such a situation. The synergy centre had spun off into the Synergy project which was a 'conscious partying' event held in South London, particularly at the former nightclub SE1, over several years (synergycentre.org.uk). The ethos of the event was to co-join political causes and direct action with music, performance, art, poetry, political speeches and more; and reflected what was an enduring party and protest dynamic. The popularity of the event enabled broader engagement with political causes and ideas. Following the redevelopment of the London Bridge area and parts of Bermondsey, many venues that had taken residence under the railway arches were subject to demolition (De Souza Crook, 2015) including SE1, where the Synergy project events had gained more visibility and accessibility.

The Synergy centre had been a squatted social centre providing mutual aid in the community, then it had become a conscious partying club night to promote political causes, and after redevelopment in London Bridge, arose again as a licensed venue in Brighton. A clash of cultures emerged because of the opportunity to make significant profit from creating a 'brand' identity. Eden explains further:

> The business opportunity thing was the downfall of synergy really. Lots of idealistic people wanting to build community meeting lots of business hippies out to make coin and build their brand. Sad really because the projects aims were more relevant now in an era of lost community spaces and rising climate issues than they were back then.

Eden has become very critical of how 'the scene' has shifted:

> it's been a downhill track of people spending fortunes to wear hats at jaunty angles to take photos of their conspicuous lifestyle consumption to put on Instagram. The original spirit has died.

Eden's narrative draws attention to the notion of 'scenes' as embroiled with overt consumer practice. The notion of conspicuous consumption was neologised by Thorstein Veblen in 1889 to relate to the expression of overt consumption choices that marked class divisions. Eden refers to "the original spirit' of events such as raves and free parties which may have fleetingly had political potential. Yet political rave culture had long been packaged and commodified within club settings. Eden's narrative brings attention to how the subcultural aspects of 'the scene' relate to the reproduction of a stylistic aesthetic, operating as a set of signifiers to distinguish those in the scene and exclude those who are not. The meshing of political culture with club culture creates clashes of interest. As sociologist Sarah Thornton (1995:203) argued, sub-cultural capital is objectified through patterns of consumption and embodied by 'being in the know'. Eden draws attention to the increased need for community spaces that could provide mutual aid and be environmentally viable, yet consumer scenes displace spaces that are undefined by capital. Thornton suggested that the youth club cultures of the nineties were sustained by a 'freedom from necessity' and, 'exempt from adult commitments to the accumulation of wealth and capital'. (1995:207). Yet, austerity and heightened neoliberal imperatives to take self-responsible routes can create additional "adult" responsibilities, and young people might not possess such freedom from necessity, or the luxury of disposable income. The capacity for social centres to be politically resistant is negatively affected by LASPO partly because of the increased need to

engage with licensed premises, which could reduce broader political projects to a consumer 'scene'.

As Eden's narrative suggests, previously prefigurative projects can become susceptible to commodification; and could instead promote sub-cultural values, based on consumer practice (as per Birmingham School for Contemporary Cultural Studies critique). Alluding back to the points raised by John Jordan (1998:130) that 'those who push the boundaries of the revolutionary project are rapidly recuperated, neutralised, their political ideas forgotten, their work turned into commodities.' Rather than the violent oppression of counterculture, the suppression of dissent may manifest itself as a neutralisation of political values. Griffin attended squatted social centres as a young adult and suggests that 'scenes' may be problematic for political culture and ethos:

> I really dislike it when people talk about the radical scene or the squatting scene or the anarchist scene, because it has to be a movement, anything that is a scene is about self-identification rather than looking in on itself and finding group identity. A social movement is people finding common ground to influence exterior to itself...

Griffin brings attention to the tendency for radical and anarchist groups to be driven further underground, yet susceptible to the subcultural logics of a scene. That is, self-identification within scenes contributes to fragmentations and divisions as to who is, and who is not in the circle. In this vein, Anka alludes to how activism can become predicated on being *seen* to be involved in everything, as an embodied form of sub-cultural capital that Thornton (1995:203) suggested, of always being in the know. Moreover, that shared consumption practices do not necessarily lend to collectively held values (1995:205). Griffin positions movements as about finding 'common ground' that promote 'exterior' values for the common good. He points to the need for a movement to be 'looking in on itself and finding group identity' as collective identity that can be externalised and acted upon in day-to-day life, as a collective process. The tendency for activists to navigate their political life through scenes, rather than collective process, could, from this perspective, be worsened if political

action is driven further underground by legislative reproach and a heightening to neoliberal imperatives to adhere to economic rationales.

Marcel's hopes for the future include aspiring that 'we can get a positive influence in force in mainstream British politics to take us in completely in the opposite direction than we are now before it's too late, and we basically become, dare I say it fascistic'. Noush's vision, in turn, includes 'more money for the NHS' and social services and for the government to be 'listening to people'. Stella would like a 'reverse of austerity' and 'changes to the way that people are perceived, and that change the way that decisions are made' because 'the processes' do not seem fair.

In this statement, she alludes to political hope and the flaws in democracy. That is, as explored in Chapter 5, the cultural war of austerity has been based on vilification that divide people into good or bad economic actors; rhetoric affects the way that democracy plays out and exposes the mediative processes involved in electoral politics. However, such hopes could signify a broader tendency of limiting political desire to the here and now and only holding faith in existing institutions to solve the problems faced through embedded austerity. Dwindling political hope could lead a person to reach out for hope in the success tales of the wealthy and story arcs that depict triumph and success against precarity. That is, through hard work and adherence to economic protocol and neoliberal imperatives. Yet, as the next subsection will explore, there remains the possibility of thwarting neoliberal objectives in the here and now.

Challenges to Neoliberal Imperatives: Prefigurative parenting and the Transmission of Activist Ethico-onto-epistemologies

The broader conditions of austerity affect how my participants enact politics in their everyday lives which extends to how they bring up their children. In this sub section, I explore how parents are affected by austerity and how they challenge neoliberal imperatives through prefigurative parenting. I describe prefigurative parenting as an intergenerational transference of political dispositions and practices with the hope of fostering political consciousness and habituation for younger generations.

I begin by discussing how austerity conditions affect my participants who are parents. However, neoliberal imperatives need not be all encompassing. Keeping in mind, Marx and Engels suggestion that capital and bourgeoise power 'has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation' (1848/1998:38) I maintain that prefigurative parenting produces additional relations beyond economic capital. I go on to conceptualise prefigurative parenting as building additional relations beyond economic rationales that challenge elite power, as well as transfering and sustaining left wing political ethos, ways of being, and dispositions. In this vein, prefigurative parenting can be understood through ethico-onto-epistemologies, that is, as being-knowing-doing framed by ethical standpoints. In the context of neoliberal austerity, this involves being politically active whilst negotiating sociomaterial conditions and resisting neoliberal imperatives. Vital ethico-onto-epistemologies emerge through everyday acts of parenting and active political engagement, as well as passing on specific knowledge, dispositions, and practices to younger generations. The following analyses thus demonstrate how prefigurative parenting could provide children with capital at the level of political reproduction, as a potent form of future-oriented resistance from within the system being resisted.

Cuts to the scope of familial support have made things increasingly harder for parents. The shrinking of the welfare state has involved the benefit cap, cuts to universal early years resources such as Sure start centres (Jupp 2012; 2020), alongside increased welfare conditionality, cuts to tax credits, and generalised precarity (Wiggan, 2012). Grace discusses how having children within the period of austerity has made her more politically attuned to 'the influence politics has on their growing up'. Becoming more aware of 'how political policy shapes their future' and 'the responsibilities' she has toward her children, Grace remarks, 'I don't think I cared so much when I didn't have kids.' Grace reflects on how bringing up children amid austerity conditions has led her to be critically reflexive about the role that policy has in shaping the future for her children, 'It's about being reflexive yourself and reflecting on your own actions'. In turn, she has become more politically aware and angered by political conditions. Grace feels her responsibilities as a parent outweigh her desire to actively protest. Instead, she engages in symbolic actions that carry deeper messages about political issues and seeks to bring her children up in a way that teaches them kindness and respect for human and animal life. Moreover,

Grace employs a radical imagination in the conversations she has with her children and others, whereby she hopes that by 'planting a seed' both for her children and broader society, that people will begin to think more deeply about the human condition. As communist historian Eric Hobsbawm put forth, engagement with Marxian analysis extends further than contemplation of material conditions and into the realm of philosophy. That is, as an 'eschatological' engagement with human potential whereby destiny is unfixed and full of change and possibility (1998:22-23).

Lara is a mother of two children and discusses her role as a parent along with her political identity as an activist, as well as how class based assumptions affect her situation negatively, particularly with regard to her educational background. Lara discusses 'growing up so poor, having f*ck all' and how she feels fortunate 'in that I now own my own home, randomly'. The use of the word 'randomly' draws attention to how Lara regards this as chance, rather than as entitlement. As explored in chapter 5, Lara has gone through various periods of unemployment and experiences at the Job Centre before and after austerity, as 'a single mum that's been on the dole, been on universal credit, who's had to go in there and beg'. She describes feeling invalidated at the Job Centre 'because I talk nicely, and I've got a degree'. She acknowledges she is fortunate to have a home and education but that she had been driven 'in a rage of having experienced these things: and feeling that socioeconomic situation, growing up poor.'

As analysed in chapter 5, Lara experiences an atmosphere of hostility and degradation exuding from her experiences in the Job Centre. Anderson (2016:735) refers to neoliberal affects as ambiguous and indeterminate, pointing to changes and shifts in public opinion, as structures of feeling that connect to hybrids of neoliberal thought. He argues that, 'neoliberal reason is actualised in the midst of collective affects that are irreducible to neoliberal reason' (Anderson 2016:741). That is, rather than operating through signifying/subjectification, neoliberal affects mediate feelings and atmospheres as they interact with lived conditions, and personal experience, as a backdrop to situations and responses. For Anderson (2016) atmospheres shape conditions as constellations with overlapping resonances, such as constructed moralities which could apply to the dispositions and attitudes of Job Centre employees, underscored by managerial pressures to meet targets. Such

atmospheres seemingly interact with Lara's feelings of material insecurity which stem from her lived experiences of poverty. Lara's narrative points to how she feels the hostile atmosphere as a hybrid of loosely connected constellations of neoliberal attitudes and assumptions. Whereby, gendered feelings of judgement about being a single mother connect to discourses, dispositions, and power dynamics that historically pre-exist neoliberal policy (Thane and Evans, 2012). Secondly, the assumption that she is middle class minimises the struggles she faces, and could contribute to fragmentations in working class solidarity because of ideological misrecognitions of circumstances. Given Lara's background in philosophy, such atmospheres work in tandem with neoliberal attitudes toward education, particularly the delegitimising of critical subject disciplines, such as that which is philosophical and critical of social conditions, or Marxist in tone (as analysed in chapter 5).

Lara's political background has largely been in Marxist socialism and the Socialist Workers Party. She points out that when she 'first got politically active' over twenty years ago 'there was definitely like a clearer space' to have 'a pragmatic, a practical revolutionary kind of political program [and] political strategy'. She remarks that there was 'a space for making revolutionary arguments' but that 'in the last 10 years of austerity' that revolution does not feel attainable:

> I think you are kidding yourself, you are deluding yourself, and like doing a false consciousness, a substituting thing, talking out your arse, if you think that's like a realistic program...

Arguably the collective atmospheres of austerity alongside her experience, contradictorily contribute to Lara's seeming loss of faith in revolutionary politics, whilst remaining true to her core Marxist socialist beliefs. Whilst this seems controversial and potentially offensive, her argument resonates further with Marxist understandings as well as situated knowledge and ethico-onto-epistemologies (analysed in the upcoming paragraphs). Lara's perspective points to how the expansion of capitalist modalities supplants other power dynamics, and how advanced industrial societies sustain hegemonies that naturalise capitalism and the tacit acceptance of exploitative socio-material conditions. Herbert Marcuse of the Frankfurt school (1964/2006) wrote of capitalist domination as producing

rationalities that accept the market order, wage labour, and hierarchical structure in ways that enable capitalism to exploit 'ever more efficiently, the natural and mental resources, and distributing the benefits of this exploitation on a much larger scale' (1965/2006:147).

Under austerity, the extent to which capitalist modalities and exploitative wage labour have not only expanded but become ever more naturalised would likely not be a surprise to Marcuse. In the context of contemporary austerity framed by neoliberalism, acceptance of established rationalities (that I suggest become imperatives) therefore produces a false consciousness that contributes to and aligns with 'a false order of facts' that have 'become embodied in the prevailing technical apparatus, which in turn reproduces it' (Marcuse, 1964/2006:147-149). Revolutionary politics are disrupted in such a way that not only fragments working class identity in the face of instability but also naturalises inequalities, and reinforces the false promise that wage labour and adherence to neoliberal imperatives is the only solution to precarity. Furthermore, that the social realities and ostensible social facts produced by Conservative power and neoliberal imperatives become increasingly embedded in the social psyche when faced with insecurity. To put bluntly, the public belief in the market and wage labour to solve the problems of material instabilities have become stronger than ever under austerity. Lara's narrative points to how sociomaterial and rhetorical conditions not only compel protective and ameolerioative intervention, they operate to solidify such beliefs to the extent that revolution seems entirely implausible.

Yet in other parts of our conversation, Lara strongly advocates for revolutionary politics. She also pointed out that facing austerity conditions 'makes philosophy...more useful' as 'a time of more nuanced thinking.' My argument here is that rather than a pure denouncement of revolutionary politics, Lara's insight actually provides situated knowledge relative to her multi positionality. As Haraway (1988) argued:

> The split and contradictory self is one who can interrogate positionings and be accountable, the one who can construct and join rational conversations, and fantastic imaginings that change history (Haraway, 1988:586)

Situated knowledge is engendered through the contradictions that emerge from inhabiting numerous subject positions (being a woman, a mother, an activist, a philosopher, and working class). Deeper understanding is framed through political partiality as she continues to advocate for revolutionary thinking through her experience of parenting. It is worth noting, that parenting in any capacity entails taking on more than one subject position, notably being the person who was, before being a parent, as well as the identity that comes alongside the responsibility of parenting. Nevertheless, revolutionary politics emerge in how Lara's philosophical perspective intertwines with austerity conditions as 'a time of more nuanced thinking'. Political experience frames how she shares knowledge with her children which translates into important acts of being-knowing-doing, as radical ethico-onto-epistemologies. Lara's multi-positionality of being a woman, a mother, an activist, a philosopher, and working class, informs her scopes of knowledge. How she lives is framed by her political dispositions and ethical positions. Her approach to parenting lends to the sharing of political knowledge and politics, through everyday acts of political resistance that emerge in the habitual ways she engages with parenting.

Lara elaborates, 'I think it [parenting] gives you like a different motivation than just ego, or just like mates. Y'know, you also want to model to your children…and that the work of parenting is trying to be showing them how to be part of society'. Lara is motivated by her parental responsibilities, and the desire for the next generation to live in a better world and states that, 'I do think that sometimes there is a sense of being quite invested in how politics works out because of [our] kids, we don't want them to live in a f**ked-up world.' Lara draws attention to the prefigurative aspects of parenting and how by being a role model for her children may influence their future lives by instilling habitual tendencies and dispositions that could contribute toward social transformation. Prefiguration seeks to build frameworks, strategies, praxes, languages, and dispositions that reflect collective aims and actively builds toward leftist social transformation in the here and now.

Such approaches to everyday politics denaturalise the relations within neoliberalism and the capitalist economy, to nurture the radical imagination of young people. As Carolyn Pedwell suggests, social transformation 'that makes a difference requires the ongoing interaction of "the affective" and "the habitual" – a relational dynamic central to processes of affective inhabitation' (2021:130). Affective habituation is

understood as the embodiment of an accumulation of everyday actions, which over time form dispositions, tendencies and habits, and become part of how the world is felt and sensed. That is, prefigurative parenting could socialise children at a micro level whereby their political dispositions are habituated and thus, embodied through their daily actions, also framing the potential for future actions and possibilities. Rather than pointing to stasis, and the 'automatic reproduction of things as they are'; prefigurative tendencies are, 'what enable the potentiality of different futures' (Pedwell, 2021:153) Whilst Pedwell focusses on affective habituation, both her approach and Marxism acknowledges that social change does not happen suddenly. For Pedwell not simply as a result of affective rupture, but rather through collective dispositions and habituation that I argue can take hold through prefigurative parenting styles. For Marx and Engels, the inevitability of proletariat revolution also requires deep level changes that make capital accumulation untenable and rest upon widescale societal change that disrupts the power vested in bourgeoise ruling ideas, which are, and historically have been, based on patterns of exploitation. Through both perspectives, revolution cannot arise overnight but rather as a result of dedication to forming relations of solidarity and the denaturalisation of ruling power. Prefiguration arises in the repetition of everyday political choices that are ethically informed whilst living within the system that is otherwise resisted.

For Lara, prefigurative approaches to parenting embrace caring and inquisitive dispositions embedded in socialism and the politics of everyday life. By sharing her perspective, teaching her children, sharing knowledge, and including them in her political activities, Lara passes on prefigurative ways of being and acting in the world.

Ceridwen's perspective echoes Lara's, in that she believes in:

> the idea of transfer [of leftwing politics] for children, and for our grandchildren to inherit. Having respect for other life forms and trying to create a minimal impact to consumption really.

As cultural sociologist David Nettleingham (2013:278) suggested, it is through 'inherited debates that the past retains its relevance to present conditions and building for the future'. Not only that, generational transmission occurs through the

sharing of epistemologies, as legacies of socialist action that come to shape and frame generations wherebt the reproduction of left-wing ideas that can arise through parental approaches to upbringing (Nettleingham, 2013). In this sense, prefigurative parenting provides capital at the level of political reproduction and transference of dispositions in ways that discretely challenge the system from within.

Ruby (34) reflects on how becoming a parent under austerity conditions has affected her political strategy and how her priorities have shifted within austerity toward parenting:

> Well yeah, it's changed a lot partly just getting older, and partly having way more responsibilities than I used to, having one child and another on the way... I've got bills to pay. My priorities have massively switched so I guess it's partly that my political priorities have'.

Ruby's narrative alludes to 'just getting older' and the increased financial responsibility she has being a mother in the context of austerity have increased her responsibilities. Again, Ruby's knowledge stems from her partial perspective and positioning as an activist and as a mother. She understands that the rhetorical and atmospheric conditions of austerity are underpinned by an enhanced need to be economically self-supporting. Yet, facing altered conditions has not entirely disrupted her formative political identity. She mentions that whilst she is less overtly politically active than she was, she still regards activism as an important part of her identity, 'I wouldn't say I've changed morally or ethically. I still have similar beliefs and I try to live in an ethical way'. Living within the system whilst straddling political identity comes with challenges of having more responsibilities and less time for activism due to having children. However, she is critically reflexive about her situation and continues to exhibit a radical imagination in how she parents, and how she construes her hopes for the future.

Ruby hopes for her children to 'know and be part of the struggle' and to 'live in a world that's fairer'. Referring to 'the struggle' implies the ongoing life of struggle, consequent to myriad historical and current power dynamics, inequalities, and oppressions. 'I guess feeling involved in that struggle definitely makes you feel like

you are doing something and have power over something'. Although struggles clearly take on differing tones according to the political needs of each epoch, the unification of, 'the struggle' is interconnected with a broad conceptualisation of struggle and solidarity with causes. For Ruby, 'to know the struggle' is to pass on historical awareness, political understandings, and share with her children a radical imagination that they too can carry forth in the choices they make.

Indeed, the habits they sustain could be disruptive of capitalist modes of production and exploitation further down the line. Prefiguration emerges through her experiential political knowledge and how she seeks to pass on vital ethico-onto-epistemologies in how she shares political dispositions with her children who she hopes will be part of the next generation of activists. Ruby enacts prefigurative parenting, through her situated knowledge of being a mother, being activist, and being a woman. Prefiguration emerges through the ethical choices she makes, the knowledge she passes on to her children, and the social support network around her, which includes politically active people.

Through prefigurative parenting strategies, my participants denaturalise unequal socio-material conditions and challenge neoliberal imperatives. Grace, Ceridwen, Lara, and Ruby's narratives demonstrate how they exert vital forms of radical agency in teaching and exposing their children to the politics and character of the struggle. Prefigurative parenting contributes to solidifying building blocks of everyday political action that are based on the sharing of political knowledge, strategy, and ethos including awareness and compassion that carries over to the perspectives of young people, as acts of being-knowing-doing. That is, being a parent, being informed, and sharing political knowledge with young people, through everyday acts of parenting and teaching.

There are urgent challenges, cultural wars, and forms of social violence that need contesting in the here and now and cannot simply wait until young people pass into adulthood. Prefigurative parents can model ethico-onto-epistemologies to their children in many ways including (but not limited to): Being anti-fascist, anti-racist and challenging xenophobia; Demystifying capitalism; Dismantling patriarchal systems of oppression that affect women, also men, and all people who fall outside of

the patriarchy; Thwarting transphobic and homophobic discourses and agendas; Tackling misogyny; Ideologically smashing the systems and structures that uphold the military industrial complex, and powerful interests; Challenging ableism in all its forms. Engaging seriously with ecology and looming environmental crises; and more. Prefigurative parenting mirrors important ethical positions to younger generations through situated knowledge, and in doing so, passes on vital ethico-onto-epistemologies that can play an important role in reshaping social relations from the bottom up.

I want to be optimistic and suggest that prefigurative parenting styles -as the transmission of ethico-onto-epistemologies - can give rise to class consciousness despite broad ideological misrecognition of class conditions. There is scope to suggest that prefigurative parenting could play an active role in reshaping relations in ways that have revolutionary potential. Equipping younger generations with habituated political awarenesses could shape a processual reconfiguration of power at a multiplicity of levels including class, race, gender, dis/ability, sexuality and more.

Prefigurative parenting fosters the importance of ethico-onto-epistemologies as reproduced in the next generation of activists. This subsection has contributed to knowledge through a novel conceptualisation of prefigurative parenting as the intergenerational transference of political dispositions and knowledge. Everyday political action emerges from situated knowledge and ethico-onto-epistemologies are replicated in prefigurative approaches to parenting. Prefigurative parenting builds relations that are not defined by economic capital, and instead produces alternate capital at the level of political reproduction as resistance from within the system being resisted.

Chapter conclusion

Austerity serves a broader purpose in further closing down material and rhetorical avenues of dissent via it's punitive and discursive edges that penalise and delegitimise ways of being and thinking outside of socially prescribed governmental and corporate socio-economic normativity. Legislation has socio-political ramifications with regard to living politically counter cultural lifestyles, and the mobilisation of dissent. That is, socio-material and rhetorical conditions under austerity produce constraints upheld by imperatives to respond to economic uncertainty through established protocols of economic choice and action. For politically active and dissenting people, the adaptive tendencies of surviving on 'little to no money' (Griffin) are further thwarted by legislative strategies such as the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012.

Alden was part of a cohort of activists who have been politically active since the 1980s or before. His narrative brought attention to the longer trajectory of neoliberalism and his perception of how such patterning has affected politically active and dissenting people. In the context of the early austerity, he witnessed the initial survival strategies of a younger generation of counter-cultural and politically active people in the South-West of Britain who were opting to live collectively in vans and trucks. Yet local bylaws and police intervention had soon hastened the proliferation of what had been pre-existing counter cultural tendencies. Alden also reflected on how the targeting and denigration of politically dissenting nomads plays into a longer pattern, such as the violence and abjection that played out on the beanfield. The consequences are that what had 'seemed sensible' (Alden) based on the commonsense and political praxis of previous decades, became untenable and fraught with police intervention. Furthermore, it could be argued that the so-called hipster van-life may be increasingly a privileged option for those with economic capital to purchase land and bespoke vehicles; and enough social and cultural capital to appear affluent and unthreatening. By virtue of the boutique aesthetic, van life influencers may be less targeted by police and authorities. Such points to the tendency of counter cultural activities being maligned and targeted, until they become part of the wider web of consumption.

Shifting ethos amidst austerity also collides with surviving and making choices when met with social and structural uncertainties. The withdrawal of state social support has ramifications for collective movements. As Griffin mentioned, 'a lack of focus' in 'solidarity projects' may be because in order to assist in broader efforts, one requires 'enough security in your own wellbeing'. Socio-material, discursive, affective, and legislative conditions operated as a collection of alternations to the previous civic scope under New Labour. The shift between socio-material and discursive arrangements was particularly stark for politically active people who were suddenly finding themselves grappling for personal survival and faced with cultural imperatives to act according to economic rationales in mediating their material wellbeing. As expressed by Aihwa Ong (2006) in accordance with the logistics of profit and capital, neoliberal governance historically complicated the boundaries from which rights and social entitlements were understood by subjects. Yet within an austerity context, social welfare entitlements faced additional levels of conditionality and are further demarcated by rhetoric and legislation. Alongside deepening individualisation, societal success may be measured by economic productivity, rather than understood by assessing the overall welfare of the population.

National austerity changed the tone of governance from what had been broadly framed as a nanny state, with regard to its ostensibly paternalist social intervention strategies. Insofar that, Coalition and Conservative policy overturned the civic structure and affective relations between the state and society by promoting civil responsibility, independence from the state and resilience strategies to provoke economic participation, whilst vilifying and taking punitive approaches towards those in need of state support. Whilst independence from the state would not necessarily be unfamiliar to those with anarcho tendencies, the denigration of socio-material conditions made it harder to find creative ways to self-sustain whilst engaging in political practice. As analysed in Chapter 5, blaming, shaming, and scapegoating discourses operate through lines of divide and conquer. However, divide and conquer can only be successful if we are divided. Although solidarity can prevail in spirit, without sustained engagement from the collective body of politically minded people, it is much harder to build the kind of momentum needed to transform relations and practice. Realistically, it is more difficult to provide mutual aid to others, when in need of aid oneself.

The survival of knowledge, political strategies, and active modes of political participation that challenge hegemonic power depend on the agency and the capacity to re-write what it means to be a political subject (Stetsenko, 2020). The reproduction of politically adaptive strategies is hindered by the ongoing prevalence of neoliberalism within culture (Haiven and Khashnabish 2014). Nevertheless, my analysis has explored the political potential of situated knowledge and how the sharing of knowledge can play out in parenting strategies as vital ethico-onto-epistemologies that challenge neoliberal imperatives. This chapter has also contributed to the development of understanding prefigurative parenting as a vital way of transmitting political knowledge and living politically despite austerity conditions. Prefigurative parenting embraces radical agency in everyday situations and circumstances, as a potent transference of ethico- onto-epistemologies within family life and beyond. Prefigurative parenting challenges neoliberal imperatives toward unquestioned, individualised, value-free, economic engagement. Prefigurative parenting equips young people with essential political knowledge that denaturalises neoliberal imperatives and counters political power. Such has the potential for reshaping future relations between people and in reconfiguring social life from the bottom up.

Neoliberal "goodness" is typically reflected by a person's ability to withstand not just economic fluctuations but the grizzly everyday realities of existence, and to come out better and stronger every time. Then what happens when people cannot or will not perform those functions to the extent expected? What to do about burnout? The socio-material, legislative and rhetorical conditions of austerity all contribute to shifts in ethos, alterations to praxis, and changes to the spaces in which politically active and dissenting people can inhabit. The next empirical chapter explores how the accumulation of austerity conditions can contribute to feelings of burnout, as well as exploring how self-care is not only necessary but can sustain further patterns of activist work.

Chapter 7: Accumulation, Burnout and Self-care

In this final analysis chapter, I focus on how politically active people may experience burnout relative to the accumulation of impacts stemming from austerity and the need to attend to their own circumstances, as well as responding to political urgencies. I take a double lens to contemplate accumulation: I firstly employ accumulation as a rhetorical device to encompass multi-layered meanings, materialities, feelings, affect, and epistemologies that gather, build up and impact. As Esther Hitchen (2016:117) puts it, 'austerity holds the potential to be felt anywhere, the accumulation of affective experiences throughout everyday practices can serve to increase these negative affects over time'. Myriad situations and conditions within austerity have accumulative impacts which, for many of my participants have contributed to how they experienced burnout. Whilst the effects of austerity are geographically uneven (Fitzgerald and Lupton 2015; Grey and Barford, 2018; Gillespie, Hardy and Watt, 2018), austerity may be all encompassing in the places, contexts, and localities it is felt. I suggest that the socio-materialities, discursive conditions, pressures and instabilities bound within austerity conditions may be interactive as a negative synergy; insofar that accumulated conditions may have a detrimental effect greater than the sum of its parts.

Secondly, I apply David Harvey's notion of 'accumulation by dispossession' (2010). Accumulation by dispossession is a process of urban transformation involving the (neo)bourgeois accretion and accumulation of capital, property, and assets via the 'creative destruction' of devalued property, assets, and labour (Harvey 2010:27). That is, accumulation is relative to property development and processes of gentrification as the alienation, displacement, and dispossession of all 'those marginalised from political power' (ibid). Based on Harvey's perspective, austerity policies may serve the requisite pre-conditions that simultaneously enable an accelerated accumulation of property, capital, and assets by a minority of rich elites while hastening the process of dispossession (of property, assets, infrastructure, morale), occurring prior, during and consequent to accumulation. In the context of austerity, the dispossession that Harvey specifies could also be experienced as a result of the accumulative effects of multiple austerity conditions, (as described

above). As Harvey asserts 'violence is required to achieve a new urban world on the wreckage of the old' (2010:27).

The accumulation of austerity conditions includes cuts, generalised precarity, poor working conditions, depleted public services, alongside the discursive and affective moods of austerity (Anderson, 2009; Hitchen 2016). The amassing shifts and stressors of socio-material, discursive and legislative conditions operate as an insidious form of long-term social violence (Cooper and Whyte, 2017). Based on the experiences of my participants, politically active and dissenting people are affected by both their personal and immediate circumstances, as well as by feeling compelled to respond to social need and political urgencies. As this chapter will discuss, the intersection of these conditions and experiences has a multi-layered impact that can lead to burnout.

The notion of burnout syndrome was first conceptualised by psychologist Herbert Freudenberger (1974, 1975) within a range of occupational settings such as education and healthcare and defined as 'as failure or exhaustion because of excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources' (1975:abs). Social movement scholars have expanded on Freudenberger's conceptualisation of burnout to be applicable to activist work (Gorski 2015; Gorski and Chen 2015; Plyler 2009). Activist scholar Paul Gorski describes burn out as a 'formidable challenge' to activist groups and 'a condition that affects not only the well-being of individual activists, but also the sustainability of social justice movements (Gorski 2015:697). The experience of burnout thus has broader implications that affect engagement with political action.

My participants provide insight into how self-care may be oppositional to the neoliberal framing of rest and leisure as a transactional reward - rather than a human necessity. That, practices of self-care may be idiosyncratic, introspective, and involve recognition and active negotiation of attending to personal needs. Self-care may involve a refusal to extend beyond the limits of capacities to act, which may involve temporary withdrawal. Moreover, as I will discuss, self-care practiced in solidarity rejects the neoliberal impetus to individually adapt to conditions.

Amidst the embedded and accumulated socio-material conditions of continued austerity, an attitude of self-care need not be overtly political in order to hold political meaning. As Sara Ahmed (2014) emphasises:

> To assume people's ordinary ways of coping with injustices implies some sort of failure on their part – or even an identification with the system – is another injustice they have to cope with (feministkilljoys, 2014).

Survival, as Ahmed puts it, 'getting by,' 'coping with,' and 'making do,' *should not* be assumed as antithetical to confronting inequalities. Nor should survival be regarded as a 'failure' or 'lack of commitment' to political change, reminding us how 'choices are compromised when a world is compromised' (Feministkilljoys, 2014). In this vein, activist Jen Plyler suggested, 'The basic act of survival can in itself be very political' (Plyler, 2009). The narratives of my participants emphasise how housing and employment insecurities on top of a changed rhetorical emphasis accumulate and contribute to feelings of crisis and burnout. They suggest, in turn that the praxis of self-care may operate as a defence against burnout within austerity, as well as enabling broader activist work to take place.

The first section of the chapter analyses the accumulative socio-material and rhetorical effects of austerity. The second section focuses on how such conditions lead to increased pressures and experiences of burnout. Through the lenses of the local, global, and interpersonal, the third section analyses how the experience of burnout necessitates engaging in practices of self-care that can enable broader patterns of activist work. I also hope to raise a broader point around the importance of self-care as a strategy in uncertain times, for politically active people and anyone else suffering from burnout and overwhelm. Rather than promoting complete withdrawal from action, this chapter argues that self-care can be a crucial tactic for enduring challenging times, with regard to personal wellbeing and wider political praxis.

Austerity, Crisis, and Accumulation

My participants reflect on how austerity can be experienced as a crisis, and how such socio-material conditions may accumulate and exert on embodied capacities. Ceridwen is in her late sixties, has now medically retired and receives support for multiple disabilities, including mobility. However, until fairly recently, she was juggling her disabilities with 'working zero-hour contracts on national minimum wage' in supportive roles with children with learning and behavioural disabilities and the elderly'. As an agency care worker, working conditions were precarious,

particularly as zero-hours contracts do not guarantee set working hours (Standing, 2011). Ceridwen describes how she struggled amid economic uncertainties, particularly given her near retirement age and long-standing disabilities that she had only recently been granted support for.

Ceridwen's narrative also reflects broader fragilities within care work, which is predominantly privatised, commodified underpaid, under regulated and precarious for both employees and service-users (Jupp, 2022). Due to the limited contractual obligations of her employer, Ceridwen explains how there was continuous ambiguity as to how many hours of work she would be expected to do. To avoid having her hours cut, Ceridwen often found herself working 45 to 50 hours per week, 'If you refused shifts, they would cut your hours right down so you couldn't afford to live. The upshot of this? Yup, burn out.' Ceridwen felt at the mercy of her employers to not cut her hours, with little room for recourse. Where employment precarities deepen, austerity rhetoric may be employed as a moralised justification for cuts to public sector jobs, and benefits (Wiggan 2012; Jensen 2013, 2014; Jensen and Tyler, 2015). Ceridwen experienced these conditions as multi-layered. Her age, disabilities, variable and uncertain hours, alongside generalised precarity, and her belief in helping others, made it increasingly difficult for her to address her own needs. Alongside a deterioration of socio-material conditions, the broader conditioning of austerity takes shape through conditionality and the movability of rights and entitlements (Bhattacharya 2015). Such shifts relate to the neoliberal emphasis on self-responsible, independently driven responses to economic instabilities.

Alongside precarity in work, access to support in finding work may be limited and imbued by power dynamics relative to the austerity agenda of ostensible welfare reform. A benefit sanction, for example. is a measure that may be imposed by Job Centre workers who perceive the claimant to have flouted part of their agreement and results in the reduction or stoppage of their payments. Benefit sanctions existed prior to the Coalition government; however, as mentioned earlier, within an austerity context sanctioning can be experienced as particularly disproportionate and excessive. Withdrawing support for people already in financial difficulties can lead to destitution and has led to the deaths of vulnerable people (Goulden, 2018) (see Calumslist.org). Such punitive approaches resonate with Loïc Wacquant's (2009)

assessment of sanctions as a form of social violence which reflects an internalisation of the broader rhetorical conditioning of austerity (as explored in Chapter 5 and 6).

Alongside punitive approaches, social workers working to mitigate the effects of cuts also experience increasing difficulties in securing public funding to enable their capacities to act. Noush is in her mid-thirties and worked as a social worker in child services in a deprived part of London. She explains the difficulties the social services face in trying to assist people. Previously, social services had funds allocated as 'an emergency pot of money which was for families, [who were] for example fleeing domestic violence,' so that they still had access to basic things like 'clothing, bed, a mattress.' Noush explains how 'that pot has shrunk and shrunk and shrunk which has meant that in order to access those things, it's very very difficult.' Whilst the effects of austerity may be accumulative, funding for social services to assist families faces a process of decumulation, which adds to the cumulative impact of socio-material conditions. Mary O'Hara's (2014) qualitative analysis emphasises the mental impact of austerity conditions and the impact on both service-users and workers trying to mitigate the impact of cuts. Noush describes the stress and fatigue she faced when continuously faced with setbacks in trying to help families meet their basic needs.

If the affective conditions of austerity have promoted a sense of social hostility that emerged in punitive approaches to social welfare, a similar shift can be observed in drug policy in the UK. As Eden's narrative relayed, 'austerity policies are not designed to enable people to experience joy and genuine connection'. As a professional, Eden works within the field of drug and alcohol services and has seen the extent to which the austerity agenda also serves to shift other areas of policy. As he explained, 'the Tories arrived, and Cameron's Big Society resulted in the gutting of third-sector providers and the reinstatement of punitive rather than treatment policies.' Generalised cuts to public funding have deteriorated the scope of support. However, whilst there may not be widespread disinvestment in services there has been a discursive shift away from harm-reduction toward abstinence-based recovery approaches in community settings (Roy and Buchanan, 2016). Harm-reduction approaches can play an important role in saving lives (for example, needle exchanges, Naloxone and Naltrexone intervention).

Neoliberal governance and austerity era cuts also impact waiting times for services under the NHS (Cummins 2019). Psychologists Shelly Wiechelt and Shulamith Straussner (2015) suggest the relationship between addiction and trauma is 'empirically well established' within psychology. Withdrawing psycho-social support from traumatised people serves as additional punishment and could extend the cycle of trauma onto others, including children. Anka's narrative draws attention to a growing number of activists suffering from both trauma and addiction. The accumulation of shifting socio-material conditions and discursive weaponizing within austerity could be traumatic or heighten existing traumas. Politically active people could be susceptible to trauma and addiction relative to their lives, the suffering of others, and the intensity of their experiences with police and authorities. Toxic activist relations can also contribute to trauma and burnout (Craddock, 2020b).

Politically active and dissenting people can also be susceptible to trauma and alcohol and substance misuse. As Anka relays, 'the activist scene has had a huge call for people to become sober, and actually I'm seeing a lot of my friends' sobriety is very much part of their lives these days, they've stopped drinking.' Anka's narrative optimistically referred to a general tendency toward addressing psycho-social needs and addiction amongst the activist circles she was involved in. Thus, bringing attention to the possibility of creating and sustaining collective groups and associations geared towards attending to political trauma and meeting social needs. Practices of self-care in response to burnout include nurturing practices of mutual support and solidarity with others. Politically active and dissenting people may respond better to sobriety alongside others with similar dispositions based on different aims and motivations, and the desire to grow different sets of relations and associations. During the early years of the austerity trajectory, Anka was living in East London in squats and on barges, whilst being engaged in full-time activism. She describes how she experienced the socio-material conditions of austerity as a crisis:

> The fight was coming from all angles... selling everything off, there isn't a safe place to be or go, there isn't a safety net for people for without money, there's no place to go. There's no place to go, there's no home to go to, there's no break in the levels of austerity...

Anka's narrative emphasises how the socio-material conditions of austerity can be experienced as an accumulative effect that may be confrontive from multiple directions. Anka's repetition of 'there's no place to go' has a weary affective quality of resignation toward the diminishing collective spaces that can be inhabited, alongside a seemingly progressive commodification of space. In addition, the loss of public meeting spaces in which community matters can be discussed and acted upon has broader ramifications that affect how public space is constituted and thought about (Robinson and Sheldon, 2018). Particularly as the shift toward the commercialisation of public space becomes even more entrenched through austerity (Findlay-King et al, 2018).

Like Anka, Ceridwen also experiences instabilities exuding from austerity circumstances as an attack that is felt on multiple levels. Ceridwen's situation can be understood through an intersectional lens, as an accumulation of impacts relative to her age, gender, and disabilities. As a woman, Ceridwen faces gendered disparities. As a care-worker she 'juggled' multiple precarious contracts, with the stark choice of eating or sleeping; The disparities faced by care workers collide with the socio-material conditions of austerity (Abramovitz, 2012; Emejulu and Bassel, 2018; Jupp 2022). Sociologist Esther Hitchen (2016) analyses the affective atmospheres of the 'austere'. In ways that resonate closely with the experiences of several of my participants, she asserts how, particularly for disabled people, the uncertainties of austerity exert in ways that can paralyse capacities to act (Hitchen 2016:117). As a disabled woman, Ceridwen faces particular barriers in terms of her mental health and mobility and has had to fight to gain access to the support and care she needs which created additional burdens and uncertainties. This accumulation of concerns and anxieties extends to Ceridwen's experience of austerity as a disabled service-user and the difficulties she faced accessing services and receiving Personal Independence Payments (PIP). Ceridwen had an accumulation of needs that could not be easily met in an austerity context, and there was a need for change.

Accumulation by dispossession in East London

Anka's experience living in East London as a squatter and on barges casts light on processes of displacement. Since planning preparation for the 2012 Olympic Park site began, East London has faced widespread redevelopment that has transformed the locality. Developments began under New Labour in 2005 with the compulsory purchase order of homes and businesses in Stratford, whereby over 1000 individuals were relocated and displaced (Hatcher, 2015). Alongside austerity conditions and ostensible welfare reform, the process of displacement was amplified under the Coalition government. Longstanding state-led neoliberal tendencies to reduce social housing are particularly prominent in an austerity context and have enabled conditions for gentrification (Watt, 2015). That is, the socio-material and rhetorical conditions of austerity lend to increased property development, and the subsequent displacement of localities relative to how Harvey conceptualises accumulation by dispossession: 'Capital necessarily creates a physical landscape in its own image, at one point in time, only to have to destroy it at some later point in time' (2005b:66) Pre-existing industrial landscapes may become surplus to requirement, and development figured as a profitable solution to economic problems can result in the displacement of existing populations. This has also involved transformation to consumer localities: gentrification involves, 'the replacement of neighbourhood shops tailored to local needs by upscale boutiques and restaurants catering to new high-income urban elites.' (Harvey 2010:39)

Dispossession, in this sense, has been multi-faceted. In many cases, residents faced forced removal from their council homes or were pushed to rent privately despite vastly increased costs of living (Watt, 2015). Anka describes how 'no-one can afford to live in rented accommodation now' and that 'the towers and rivers used to be pretty dire places to be, no-one wanted to be on them, they are not pretty like they are now…' Such displacement has occurred alongside the development of luxury, alternative living opportunities and parks that the dispossessed not only do not benefit from, but are forcibly excluded from, emphasising their displacement within their locality[22]. Anka's narrative suggests that gentrification may be yet another

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[22] An underrated low budget film *Cockney's vs Zombies* captures the period of change in East London. Filmed in 2011, incorporated footage within its opening scenes of the demolishment of localities where development was taking place. Although the film is not explicitly political, it exists in a particular moment in time, only made possible through processes of gentrification induced in preparation for the 2012 Olympics. The underlying message of the film is made within the opening sequence that depicts bulldozers, rubble, and the demolition

accumulative aspect of austerity which reflects the processes that Harvey's sense of 'accumulation by dispossession' (2005b) relays; whereby the accretion of land, property and resources constitutes the new imperialism (Harvey 2010, 2012). This new imperialism is actualised in the way that developments may be presupposed on the notion of affordable housing, yet unaffordable to the communities within which they are placed.

I would also suggest that preparation for the Olympic Park allies with the social exclusion of people who did not fit into the idealised image of London that was being conjured in advance of the events. Anka describes a situation around 2011, whereby local children were excluded from the newly built play parks that were built specifically for the new housing developments yet were in very close proximity to existing social housing. Anka explained that private security firms protect the land redevelopments and play the role of gate keeper, (to uphold coercive neoliberal relations of power): 'people who've lived there all their lives' and 'lived in over-crowded situations' and 'can't even go into the parks, they have been told. They get told to move on. Because it was the Olympics'. Anka brings attention to the political intensity of the build up to the Olympics, and how preparations may have been prioritised over and above the needs of people living in the local area. She elaborates how local squatters and cyclists acted in response to the social division of space by engaging in a critical mass[23] of the local area which was ultimately violently dispersed by police force.

 As discussed in Chapter 6, the *Focus E15* occupations came to epitomise the fight against forced removal from their homes. Reflecting on gentrification, her involvement with the Radical Housing Network and her actions of solidarity with the

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of the existing order. The scene concludes by zooming in on a development advertisement sign depicting an artist's impression for luxury homes with the caption, 'luxurious living in the heart of East London.' The film bestrides the tension between long term residents and an emerging threat: gentrification dressed up in the metaphor of zombies. I include this as an example because the film captures, albeit largely through tropes, a sense of how East London has faced stark changes. Further it can be read as a piece of media, a relic from an unfortunately now maligned pre-austerity genre that celebrated working class culture and cultures of unemployment, e.g. shameless.

[23] A critical mass is a direct-action strategy in which cyclists take to the road on-mass in order to protest and reclaim space. Traditionally this has been in protest of how the safety of cyclists is deprioritised relative to motorists but can be employed as a protest strategy to draw attention to broader concerns.

FocusE15 efforts between 2013-15, Anka explains how 'it was on such a grand, huge scale', the extent to which people were being displaced from their homes and 'forced to go somewhere else where they're not with their family or friends' describing it as an 'intense time' with 'no space to breathe'. From her perspective, 'gentrification really screwed over a lot of small communities' and reflects an accumulation of conditions that Anka has felt compelled to respond to as an activist, despite facing housing insecurity and displacement in her own life.

Such processes of displacement are further reflected in the worsening crisis of homelessness. According to Newham council, as of 2021, including temporary accommodation, rates of homelessness in Newham are the highest in London at 48 per 1000 compared with the mean average of 17 per 1000 for London overall. Further unpinning the austerity context, between 2011 and 2018, there was a 120% increase in households residing in temporary accommodation. (Newham.gov.uk 2021). There are more than 100 people who regularly sleep inside the Stratford Centre (Focus E15.org) for shelter, just yards away from, and in stark contrast to the more recent Westfield shopping centre which draws in vast consumer wealth. Such dynamics make apparent the relationship between processes of austerity in enabling the conditions for capital accumulation and consequent gentrification of a locality. Property development, gentrification and state-led social cleansing in East London displaced large numbers of people and could be construed by the wealthy as a 'solution' to the problem of deprivation. Yet, approaches that do not seek to regenerate, or alleviate poverty, but instead make a locality look more aesthetically pleasing, could only serve to accommodate and encourage the arrival of a highly affluent, trend-driven population.

The accumulation of socio-material, affective and legislative conditions interweave with processes of accumulation by dispossession. The accumulative conditions of austerity exert as a build-up of difficult and negative experiences, which contributes to feelings of burnout and requires taking on radical modes of self-care in resistance to neoliberal modalities of resilience and over-productivity. The next section explores how attending to accumulated conditions has affected the capacities and mental resources of my participants.

Accumulation and Burnout

As I have explored, the cumulative effects of austerity can be all encompassing and contribute to feelings of overload and burnout, particularly for politically active people who may be both tending to their own circumstances and responding to socio-political needs and urgencies. Earlier in the chapter Noush's narrative cast light on how social services tried to mitigate the accumulated pressure of cuts, yet also faced decumulated funding subject to further cuts. Working against the socio-material conditions of austerity may be particularly demoralising and exhausting. Noush explains how 'when your caught up in the system, you can burn yourself out by trying to help too many people'. Alongside the accumulation of socio-material conditions, attempts to assist some of the people worst affected by austerity policies are perpetually hindered.

The experience of extending oneself beyond capacity is surely heightened by cuts and barriers to capacities to mitigate such conditions. Eleanor Wilkinson and Iliana Ortega-Alcázar (2018:164) oppose the notion that enveloping, enduring exhaustion is always antithetical to action and suggest that weariness may be a 'form of passive dissent'. However, when up against such constraints, such exhaustion could manifest in compassion fatigue. According to WebMD (as used and reviewed by medical professionals), compassion fatigue may arise from the 'physical, emotional and psychological impact of helping others, often through experiences of stress and trauma'. The articles also suggests that whilst compassion fatigue might be mistaken for burn out, burnout may be differentiated by 'a cumulative sense of fatigue or dissatisfaction' (WebMD, 2022). Such a cumulation, may be relative to the accumulative socio-material conditions that stem from cuts and policy changes.

Through her practice as a social worker battling to mitigate the impacts of austerity on vulnerable service-users, Noush faced burnout, which involved compassion fatigue. It was not that she did not, or had never cared, but in order to carry on against cuts and constraints, she found it necessary to create mental distance, and had become wary of how that affected her job. Aware of her limitations and need for self-preservation, Noush took steps to maintain her mental health which involved taking longer holiday breaks at scheduled points. Doing so, enabled her to continue

helping others to the best of her ability in light of decreased funding. She affirms the notion that self-care in response to burnout is not only necessary but may also counter or transform the compassion fatigue felt by over-exertion, enabling one to continue with renewed energy.

Ceridwen experienced 'severe' burnout in direct relation to bearing a multitude of demands under precarious contracts caring for elderly and vulnerable people. Cuts to public services fall disproportionately onto women who make up the majority of workforce within the care sector and informal care labour is inordinately performed by women (Abramovitz, 2012; Craddock, 2016; Emejulu and Bassel, 2018; Jupp, 2022). Burnout can emerge relative to heightened engagement with activism in response to increasing pressures under austerity (Craddock, 2020b). Anka has faced an accumulation of pressures and disruptions experienced through housing instabilities alongside managing employment and the pressure to engage with activism. She found that juggling employment with activist work was met with increased difficulties. The feeling she was always 'failing' gave rise to her experiences of burnout, initially as a personal failing (and later with more self-compassion):

> I felt like I was doing never doing enough, and actually I was doing a lot. All of that and also having jobs trying to find security and support myself was a huge undertaking. I should be a bit kinder to myself because I always felt like I was failing, but I think that's part of that do or die activist mentality.

Anka's narrative alludes to a broader concern around interpersonal relations within activist groups, and a tendency to 'always be on it'; that is, to be consistently and rapidly responsive to emerging needs and causes, and assertive with action. Such competitively active dispositions lend to informal hierarchies and toxic relations. Anka's narrative also resonates with Craddock's (2020) empirical research that relates the 'dark side' of activism whereby social policing and gatekeeping of who is regarded as an activist based on their perceived level of action, relative to gendered and informal hierarchies. Craddock contends that the gendered dimension of activism within austerity reflects informal hierarchies largely driven by male members of movements who perform front-line activities.

Over-work and burnout are well explored within social movement literature. Indeed, Paul Gorski and Cher Chen attest how a 'culture of martyrdom' plays into 'a culture of silence' and self-sacrifice and affirm that 'finding that time devoted to self-care - to trying to mitigate looming burnout – is often looked upon with suspicion or even derision' (2015:389). Activists often unwittingly reproduce patterns of over-exertion and martyrdom. In this vein, activist Jen Plyler (2009) laments 'the internalized violence that I feel we often replicate in our own circles' and how 'the fear of having open dialogues about how our organizing impacts us emotionally, politically, physically, and spiritually.' She notes, how within activist groups, much critique was levelled at those who were seen as not committed enough and were often derogatorily referred as 'flaky' or 'fluffy'. Yet, reflecting on structural and socio-material inequalities, as Sara Ahmed (feministkilljoys,2014) reinforces, 'the more resources you have the easier it is to make such a critique of those whose response to injustice is to become more resourceful.'

Anka further echoes an accumulation of pressures stemming from her activist identity to the 'do or die' mentality that was exacerbated by the accumulation of austerity impacts and urgencies. For Anka, constant action without time to think, takes its toll and prevents the possibility for deeper consideration concerning what she needs to grow and thrive. Such a mentality of 'do-or-die' sets the expectation for constant devotion 'all the time' to 'all the causes' (Anka). Do-or-die allows no time and space for self-care or introspection to consider what is beneficial for herself and for activist movements to sustain and flourish. For Griffin, in turn, stepping back also means pragmatically recognising a lack of care from 'the system' necessitates a need to 'look after yourself financially or emotionally because the system, the social system is not going to do it'. For Griffin, this does not emerge in his narrative as subjectification to neoliberalism as Nikolas Rose (1999) might posit. As will be explored in the following section, for Griffin, stepping back manifests as a politically invested, pragmatic response outside of neoliberal rationales.

Burnout, Self-care, and Broader Patterns of Activist Work

As discussed, there may be a pervasive disposition within activist movements to over-work and regard self-care as unnecessary and antithetical to collective needs (Gorski and Chen, 2015). Yet, alongside Gorski and Chen, there is a growing recognition of the importance of self-care in the longevity of resistance movements. Tanya Chase's (2014) empirical research on long term anti-war activists in the US found that compassion fatigue and burnout were mitigated by practices of self-care. In this section I take a deeper focus on the narratives of Ceridwen, Griffin and Anka whose experiences have shaped this chapter. Their narratives bring attention to differing ways in which burnout necessitates self-care and how self-care may enable broader patterns of activist work.

Local

Despite additional pressures, precarities, and sets of self-expectations, Ceridwen affirms that it is important for her to maintain her activist identity, 'I am what I do', and extends to how she has taken on habits of self-care in response to her burnout. Acting on her burnout, Ceridwen has been able to take a step towards her self-care and extend her activist work.

> I guess partly [because of] getting older and becoming ill and disabled, is that I've got a realisation that if you don't take care of yourself, you are not going to be of any use to anybody.

Although this might sound self-deprecating, as though her value was dependent on her utility to others, she is referring to the survivalist need to attend to one's personal safety so as to be in a position to assist others to safety. Being 'older, ill and disabled' makes Ceridwen vulnerable to precarity, and could make practicing self-care more difficult to achieve. However, she does not overcomplicate her self-care and having a stable home and receiving personal independence payments (PIP) has allowed her to maintain her fundamental needs: 'maintaining relationships, maintaining a home,

you know, eating well, staying as fit as you possibly can, it really is your duty to yourself.'

Her approach to self-care has enabled Ceridwen to be in the position to engage in direct action and offer accommodation to young homeless people: 'for sometimes as much as a couple of weeks, couple of months, couple of years, sometimes just overnight, when and where it's needed'. Ceridwen was acting in response to need emerging in her community as a result of the unpopular policy of removing housing benefit for 18–21-year-olds. Wilkinson and Ortega Alcázar (2017) refer to the changed age-threshold of eligibility for housing benefit as 'one of the most severe cuts' that has affected the affordability of homes for adults under thirty-five, and disproportionately affected vulnerable younger adults. Although the policy was scrapped in 2018, during its existence blocks to housing benefit for young adults impacted some of the most vulnerable people outside of the care system such as young LGBTQ+ folk who had fled their parental home, particularly those of colour (Rutter 2015); and others who faced homelessness fleeing abusive situations including religious sects, and cults. As a former social worker, Ceridwen is aware of safeguarding procedures, is a nominated appropriate adult[24], and is a safe and responsible person for young people to turn to.

Ceridwen's narrative offers insight into how having stable living conditions lend to having the mental energy to adopt practices of self-care beyond immediate survival needs. Not only that but engaging in basic self-care has enabled her to engage in an informal kind of social work activism. Being in a stable position to actively address her self-care may be essential to carrying out the emotional labour involved in the informal social work she performs. It is vital that she takes care of her own emotional health, so that she can make the right judgements for her own and others' safety. Ceridwen's informal social work requires that she operates both within and outside of the system, which relates to what sociologist Janet Newman (2012:47) describes as having 'contradictory subject positions, both inside and outside dominant institutions and forms of rule'; On one hand she circumnavigates bureaucratic processes and long housing lists by offering direct and immediate accommodation.

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[24] The role of an 'appropriate adult is to over-see that legal procedure is being met and accompany under 18s who are being interviewed by police in a criminal justice context, who do not otherwise have an appropriate guardian.

On the other, the ability for Ceridwen to provide a safe environment stem from her long-term employment within youth and social services, and later as a care worker. Assisted by her knowledge of how formal social services operate, she helps the young adults with filling out forms and engaging with the bureaucratic processes involved to find long-term accommodation. For Ceridwen, then effective care and resistance entails working with existing procedures, as well as recognising radical outlets for action.

Ceridwen's approach bypasses economic modes of reward, she does not charge rent. Instead, she is invested in ethics of solidarity and mutual aid and understands her work in terms of the social value produced through providing accommodation to those in need. Helping, and receiving help, from others and making friends, she notes, has a positive 'ripple effect' in the community. Such a ripple effect spans further than Ceridwen and extends to those she assists, by reducing the social harms associated with homelessness and accumulation of deteriorated socio-material conditions. Furthermore, Ceridwen's narrative highlights how security, material stability and taking time for self-care enables sustainable activist work. Relatedly Plyler asserts 'It is the privilege of having access to health care and education and having a job that pays a living wage' and how having support in place enables sustained activism and has enabled her to continue her activist work (uppingtheanti.org, 2009). Although Plyer's temporal and geographical context cannot account for the role of UK austerity, the message resonates to the present moment via the recognition that having a sense of stability may enable and free up mental energy to engage in activism. In this vein, taking a steady approach to her self-care has enabled Ceridwen to offer a stable home to those in need. Her direct action is responsive to austerity conditions, housing crisis and dispossession and she continues to act in response to homelessness in her local area.

Global

Griffin's narrative reflects on how self-care may entail withdrawal (albeit temporary) from enmeshment with political action. Taking a step back from 'frontline' activity is actualised as Griffin's 'greatest understanding of self-care' and a way of removing

himself from visually performative forms of protest. Griffin also considers how self-care involved taking a reflexive approach to his position as a white able-bodied male. Although he does not explicitly mention this, temporary withdrawal from activism may not be a disservice to political action, particularly when stepping back from immersion could enable the voices of others to come forward, and for the symbolic burden of responsibility of being an activist, to be eased somewhat. Withdrawing from intense action, is not necessarily permanent withdrawal from political action and nor does stepping back erase political consciousness. As Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar remind us, endurance is resistance, as 'the right to be weary' as a form of survival (2018:161). Griffin's narrative also relates his withdrawal from 'frontline' activity through becoming aware realisation that he must find his own sense of stability: 'the realization that you have to look after yourself financially or emotionally because the system, the social system isn't going to do it.' Griffin's approach to self-care builds a set of relationships that run counter to economic imperatives and enabled adaptive approaches to material stability whilst engaging in activist work.

He found stability working full-time as a sea shepherd working to protect marine ecology. Sea Shepherd is a direct-action oriented charitable organisation founded in 1977. They operate to defend marine wildlife and habitats from poaching, destruction, and monitor and challenge illegal activities at sea, and holding groups and nations accountable within international courts (seashepherd.org.uk). Griffin's approach to self-care builds a set of relationships that run counter to economic imperatives and enabled adaptive approaches to material stability whilst engaging in activist work. Indeed, international environmental law does not go far enough in protecting marine habitats from 'ecocide'; which is a proposed legal term that would enable the evolution of legal mechanisms to protect the environment (Higgins, 2021). Taking an active approach to his self-care has given Griffin the space and distance to introspect and begin to operate from a global context engaging with activist work that has tangible outcomes and may feel more productive, whilst enabling escape and withdrawal. Yet withdrawal for Griffin does not mean working in isolation, instead he works alongside others who share similar aims. His understanding of self-care was to acknowledge his own needs and consider how he can best move forward in line with his values. Working with Sea Shepherd has

enabled him to find stability and focus on sustained direct action with a global emphasis in-line with his long-term political hopes.

Interpersonal

The pervasive suspicion that self-care is oppositional to collective needs, or that the needs of others should always be paramount, may be prominent within some activist communities. As reflected by Gorski and Chen (2015), the embedded common-sense of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, and neglect of self-care and self-kindness, may be entrenched in the collective attitudes and relations within some activist groups. Such an outwardly projecting disposition may emerge as a set of relations that are reproduced between activists and could contribute to burnout. Anka acknowledges the tendency of activists to deny themselves self-kindness. She further reflects on the relations between activists:

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> Yeah, people were harsh to each other and themselves and if we can't be nice to ourselves who can we be nice to?

Anka understands that self-kindness is integral to self-care in such a way that can only be harnessed by herself, and that only she is responsible for. Anka explains how a disposition of self-kindness and practices of self-care had not always been a part of her mentality toward activism. She had also put all of her efforts into helping others, with the effect of negating and invalidating her feelings of burnout, relative to the expectations of other activists. Ultimately the experience of severe burnout meant it was not sustainable to continue in the ways she had before. Similarly to Griffin, Anka needed to withdraw from the intensity of her involvement and take some time to understand what self-care meant for her. Although self-care could indicate individualised strategies of survival, it can also be understood as an idiosyncratic process of introspection and self-kindness. Moreover, for Anka, tending to her self-care has not been in isolation, and she works alongside others. She discusses how she 'started doing meditation' as a restorative process for her burnout and ongoing mental health, amid the accumulated impacts and affective moods of austerity.

Anka's approach to meditation challenges the affective moods of austerity in ways that run counter to the kind of meditation strategies wielded at an institutional level; for example, the Western appropriation, rationalisation commodification of mindfulness meditation within corporate and civil society (Cook 2016). Downloadable mindfulness applications (apps) may be prescribed in human resources contexts as a remedy for work-related stress, yet such interventions could reinforce neoliberal modes of over-productivity, and feelings of failure when struggling adjust to superfluous work expectations. Mindfulness alone cannot address structural work-related problems at a systemic level (ibid); and could promote self-care as a resilience strategy to enable continued efficiency and output. In such a context (but in many circumstances), being implicitly expected to simply cope with problems, only serves to invalidate mental health struggles. Whereas Anka takes an approach that is not shaped by neoliberal imperatives but rather active, non-judgemental attention to sensations that arise and allowing herself to feel the way she feels. Attending to her self-care through meditation has stimulated ontological shifts in how she perceives and negotiates her circumstances. Of course, meditative practice alone may not do much to challenge or ameliorate socio-material conditions, or the root causes of structural, social, and systemic inequalities. However, what a sustained practice of meditation could engender is the cultivation of a generative set of affective relationships, dispositions, and ways of making sense of the world. Anka explains how she hoped to: 'redirect my energy and more effort into something that felt more productive and beneficial in helping people…'

Extending her approach to meditation with others, also gives rise to shared affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2009, 2016; Hitchen, 2015). Collective self-care praxis can challenge the moods of austerity and operates to a different set of urgencies and necessities. Anka discusses the workshops she holds as an interactive process, helping others find their own peace. Holding meditation workshops has been helpful for her own self-care and the collective care of others and enabled to her continue to engage with activism with a renewed tonality that is regenerative and may be collectively practiced and individually experienced. Anka later got involved with a radical theatre group that sought to deliver activist performance as a means to spread important political messages including anti-austerity. The dynamic of the group had engendered a space in which self-expression and a set of self-caring relations could be negotiated, in solidarity with each other: 'talking to each other and expressing

ourselves, not always using words, using our bodies, and finding new ways to be, and have a new dialogue with each other...' Collective meditation enables Anka and others to occupy shared conceptual space, in physical settings that are not determined by money. Shared praxis enables them to focus attention on channelling imaginative ways of being political, knowing the world, and engaging collectively. In doing so, they generate and share vital ethico-onto-epistemologies through acts of being-knowing-doing framed by ethical standpoints. Anka's political imagination emerges in the ways she nurtures herself and others. Sustaining self-care, kindness to others, and self-compassion transmutes as a generative abundance from which political imagination can be fostered. Placing importance on a different set of political urgencies can offer value outside economic rationales and neoliberal imperatives. In addressing the systematic harms that are symptomatic of continued and embedded austerity, a political imagination is all the more necessary (Barker, 2021).

Conclusion

This chapter explored how the accumulation of austerity conditions has led to burn out for many of my participants. Accumulation was analysed through a double lens, as a linguistic device and through Harvey's notion of accumulation by dispossession. I analysed how self-care in response to burnout opens up pathways for changes of direction and enabled broader patterns activism to emerge. In the face of accumulated pressures and burnout under austerity Ceridwen, Anka, and Griffin each found ways to continue living according to their values, albeit with changes to their former directions and periods of withdrawal from action. I suggest that these stories and narratives have wider applicability and express a collective message about self-care that may be beneficial to others facing burnout. Self-care is typically practiced as an individual response to personal circumstance; however, the narratives of my participants challenge economic individualisation through their recognition and acknowledgment of social and material needs, that are not solely defined through economic relationships and rationales.

Enduring deteriorated socio-material conditions and sustaining oneself despite ongoing accumulative stress can get in the way of recognising the dire need for self-compassion and care. Life under austerity can be painful and feel like trying to sprint through slippery treacherous muds. However, it may be those nuggets of self-kindness and compassion that help keep the human species ticking along as conscious thriving beings. Although self-care practice may be personalised to individual needs, it need not be a solitary endeavour and can be experienced collectively. Attending to the self in times of uncertainty, precarity and personal crisis may be necessary both in terms of survival and in recovering from experiences of burnout. Ceridwen, Griffin, and Anka's accounts could offer hope for the many who are caught in the midst of burnout: that you are not alone in the experience, and that self-kindness and self-care are *urgent and necessary* amidst the shiftings of austerity conditions. Moreover, that self-care is not selfish, self-care is endurance that may sustain resistance (Ahmed 2014; Plyler, 2015) Engaging with radically informed self-care praxes could engender a deeper political imagination that could attend to the problems faced through continued and embedded austerity.

Thesis Conclusion

I have set out to understand the broader impacts of austerity on politically active and dissenting people in the UK through two intersecting research questions that are woven between the empirical chapters: How do the socio-material, rhetorical, affective, and legislative conditions of austerity shape political consciousness and actions? What are the social impacts of austerity on politically active and dissenting people, with regard to their strategies, ethos, and resources? Despite a relatively limited sample size, the narratives of my participants provided a polyphony of voices and consciousnesses (Bakhtin, 1984). Through the depth that a one-to-one interview allows, their narratives lent empirical evidence and insight as to how the national agenda of austerity has affected their lives and those of others. A key objective of the research is to bring to light additional counter-narratives and discourses that challenge hegemonic understandings of austerity. Relative to its long history as a mode of political inquiry, I took an oral historical approach to the interview design and collection of empirical material. Through the process of listening and giving voice to experience, this thesis reinforces counter-narratives with regard to the ongoing trajectory of neoliberalism and austerity, and the effects on political action and counter-culture.

Politically active and dissenting people are not immune to the socio-material, rhetorical, affective, and legislative conditions of austerity. However, they often hold a subject position that is resistant to political power or refuses passive acceptance of changes to the relationship between the state and society. As my historical review explored, political action, dissent and counterculture can be hindered by political intervention and legislative conditions, alongside socio-material and cultural change. However, the shape of political action has largely shifted from the institutionalised formations of the 1970s and 1980s (Chesters and Welsh, 2004:315). In the 2010s and 2020s, politically active and dissenting people are typically more fragmented, yet mobilise around a particular cause or event before 'dissipating back into wider culture and society.' (Ruiz, 2014:150). That is, even when acting in an autonomous capacity, my participants still tended to hold affinities with numerous wider causes, and social movements. With this in mind, I did not determine my participants as rigidly bonded to specific social movements, single-issue causes, or a particular slant

of left-wing politics. Instead, I conceptualised my participants as politically active and dissenting. Conceptualising activists through their actions, rather than formal alliances has enabled analysis of how austerity conditions shape everyday practice, and the shared ethos of collective movements.

The socio-material, rhetorical and legislative conditions of austerity extended from longer-term neoliberal socio-economic and cultural patterning in the United Kingdom, since 1979. Despite the endurance of neoliberalism within governmental strategies, and its historical precedent of coercive violence geared at civilian populations; neoliberalism's relationship to social and cultural life may be oscillating and obscured within austerity. That is, neoliberalism is rarely made explicit within governmental and public relations; yet emerges implicitly through governmental and media rhetoric (Hall and O'Shea, 2013). I shaped conceptualisations of the neoliberal imperative as an exigent promotion of adherence to economically productive pathways of action and rationales. Neoliberal imperatives can frame the scope of choices and decisions, particularly as socio-economic deterioration, and instabilities under austerity, create increasing pressures and uncertainty. The narrative that employment and economic productivity is the hero's journey out of poverty has been sustained by rhetoric at the level of governance and mainstream media. However, such narratives remain a phantom to the lived experience of grasping for material stability amidst continued austerity, a spiralling cost of living, and stagnated wages. As mentioned previously, 'employment alone is not sufficient' in mitigating the effects of continued austerity (Alston, 2019). Evidently, austerity policies have not been conducive to improved material stability, despite assurances that austerity cuts and culture change would alleviate the national deficit, and ostensibly lead to economic stability.

As this thesis has expanded, austerity conditions mediate political ethos and habituation, as both disrupted and enduring. Despite changes to conditions and shifts in ethos, the habits and dispositions of politically active people continue to be generative in transforming the social world; that is, by sustaining and embedding longer-term patterns of action and affective habituation (Pedwell, 2017a; 2017b; 2021). The empirical insight and narratives of my participants lent weight to existing understandings and calls for a radical imagination with regard to moving beyond continued austerity (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014). In some instances, the socio-

material conditions of austerity provoked critical reflexivity, and political consciousness, and is made apparent in the prefigurative strategies of my participants, and the ways they strive to build alternative futures. Throughout this thesis I have brought attention to the discrete ways that political resistance and dissent plays out amongst my participants. The narratives and stories of my participants relayed radical agency through their distinct everyday contributions to transformative political practice (Stetsenko, 2020).

Empirical chapters and original contributions

My empirical chapters have facilitated a diffuse understanding of political action and dissent. The stories and narratives of my participants have brought forth insight as to how political resistance, strategy and ethos have been altered by the neoliberal embedding of continued austerity. They also cast light on the discrete ways that their political consciousness frames their actions, which enabled a dispersed conception of the impacts of austerity, relative to neoliberalism. Austerity conditions are not entirely deterministic of changes to political capacities. Many of my participants communicated the ways their political ethos endured despite austerity conditions, and how they engaged with a critically reflexive radical imagination (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014), as well as how ethos is shared intergenerationally. Some relayed shifts in their political consciousness toward clearer understandings of the relationships between governmental power and changing socio-material and rhetorical conditions; as well as their exposure to counter-narratives and political discourses.

Chapter 5 was the first empirical chapter of the thesis and attended to the first research question with regard to socio-material, affective and rhetorical conditions; and also intersects with the second question, relative to the strategies and ethos of politically active people. I analysed the role of blaming, shaming, and scapegoating

in governmental and mainstream media discourses in the promotion of austerity strategies. Politically active and dissenting people do not necessarily hold a subject position immune to socio-material, affective, and rhetorical conditions. In an austerity context, societal scapegoats have included benefit recipients, refugees, economic migrants, disabled people, as well as politically active and dissenting people. Via the spatialising politics of abjection, scapegoats may lose 'representational agency' (Tyler 2014:26). Whilst people are not bound by rhetoric, discursive framing can affect institutional processes, such as the legitimisation and application of sanctioning policies that have led many to destitution and even death (see Calumslist.org). If some portions of the population have been discursively patterned as unreliable narrators of their conditions, there are epistemological ramifications with regard to the (re)production of counter narratives and discourses.

Chapter 5 contributes to critical discourse surrounding class fragmentation and disidentifications relative to divisive discourse and class war perpetrated by an economic elite within governance, whereby class war arises through fragmentations and divisions underpinning austerity conditions.

In this chapter, I also contribute to the conversation and critiques surrounding positivism in its alliance with the promotion of STEM disciplines relative to the marketization of the university and neoliberal imperatives. There are current and real implications of the rhetorical denigration of political action and critical education. A situation currently playing out at the University of Kent involves the 'phasing out' i.e. the cutting of entire departments including philosophy and religious studies, anthropology, health and social care, English language and linguistics, comparative literature, art history, and music and audio technology. People's livelihoods have become the scapegoat for a legacy of managerial mismanagement of money and poor decision making. Despite the popularity and inferred profitability of the aforementioned subject areas, cuts place assumed value on STEM disciplines as the solution to economic deficit. Access to critically informed education is a vital way of learning counter-narratives, discourses, and ways of articulating social and political life. Education gives life to how history has shaped the present and offers critical lenses and tools for understanding the relationship between political power, institutions, people, and economic process. My participant Lara, mentioned, how austerity can shift ethos, yet 'makes philosophy more useful' as a 'time of more

nuanced thinking'. That is, there is a need for critical discussion on the philosophical implications of austerity on political ethos. Yet the long-term cultural denigration of left-wing political alternatives is also reflected in the erosion of critical disciplines, as relative to neoliberal imperatives to maximise profit and the promotion of economically productive subject areas.

Socio-material, rhetorical and legislative conditions can cause disruptions to the strategies, resources, and ethos of politically active and dissenting people. Chapter 6 developed conceptualisations of neoliberal imperatives and prefigurative parenting with regard to austerity and political action. In the midst of economic uncertainty and precarity, neoliberal imperatives manifest as exigent socio-environmental pressures toward taking economic pathways of action. The narratives of my participants provided empirical insight regarding the consequences of heightened socioeconomic instabilities, uncertainty, and legislative intervention. For some of my participants, adherence to economic protocols has been an essential part of their survival when met with broader economic instabilities and uncertainty. In the midst of widespread cuts and a housing crisis, the criminalisation of squatting under LASPO hinders the proliferation of squatted social centres. Access to spaces undefined by capital could enable creative solutions to mitigate precarity within community settings yet faced constraints under LASPO. Although squatting continues in various capacities, the neoliberal tone of LASPO heightens imperatives to act in accordance with the needs of the economy. Neoliberal imperatives and legislative reproach contribute to counter-cultural erosion. Eden's account of the morphing ethos of the Synergy centre (and project) lent weight to how the prevalence of entrepreneurial and profiteering values is erosive to ethos, at a time when community spaces and mutual aid is much needed.

Yet despite, knowledge, discourses, and counter-cultural ways of being, continue to persist in the everyday actions of politically active people. Chapter 6 also analysed the neoliberal atmospheres of austerity (Anderson, 2016); and the political potential of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988). I analysed how neoliberal imperatives can be challenged through everyday iterations of prefigurative parenting and the sharing of vital ethico-onto-epistemologies. Ethico-onto-epistemologies are engendered through acts of being-knowing-doing, that is: Being politically dissenting, sharing political knowledge and doing the work of parenting as shaped by ethical

standpoints. Prefigurative parenting passes on political knowledge shaped by positionality and the understandings derived from partial perspective. Prefigurative parenting embraces alternate relations undefined by capital. Acts of prefigurative parenting can denaturalise capitalism, neoliberalism, and the power dynamics embedded in austerity. Prefigurative parenting could have the potential to reshape future dynamics with the important caveat that it is not the responsibility of children to fix the problems caused by adults. Instead, prefigurative parenting should be a means of mirroring ethical positions, sharing knowledge, compassion, and caring dispositions that could assist in reshaping social relations in ways that are kind, equitable, and inquisitive to other social realities. This chapter contributes to conceptualisations of prefigurative parenting in austerity, and invokes others to develop or apply these critical insights.

Chapter 7 explored how the accumulated socio-material and rhetorical conditions of austerity contributed to feelings of burnout amongst my participants, and how patterns of politically attuned self-care can enable broader activist engagement. I analysed accumulation through a double lens. Firstly, as a rhetorical device with regard to the cumulative layering of socio-material, rhetorical, and affective conditions that emerge from living within austerity. Secondly, through David Harvey's (2010) conceptualisation of accumulation by dispossession. In this chapter, I attended to how constellations of austerity conditions give rise to urban displacement, revisiting Anya's experience of living in East London during the early years of austerity.

This chapter contributes to discourses and discussions of radical self-care in response to burnout. Hermeneutic interpretation of the narratives and the empirical insight of my politically active and dissenting participants enables the understanding and production of ethico-onto-epistemologies that challenge neoliberal assumptions about self-care. Rather than closing opportunities for resistance, engaging in practices of self-care was, and can constitute resistance to working the self beyond its limits and capacities. Temporary withdrawal from action need not be the end of the road, engaging with practices of self-care and critical reflexivity can enable broader patterns of activist work.

The CODA: Austerity, Political Imagination and Counter-discourse

With regard to the political context of embedded austerity and a worsening cost of living crisis, my coda explores political hopes and imagination. I address how a radical political imagination could shape politically nuanced counter-narratives and discourses as additional ways of subverting and challenging the hegemonies of austerity. In prefiguratively bringing the future into the present and creating and sustaining political alternatives: What can be learnt from our forebears, and carried forward? Particularly at a time when austerity, I would argue, continuously exposes the flaws of parliamentary systems.

I concluded each of my interviews by asking my participants about their hopes for the future. Interestingly, Haiven and Khasnabish asked their participants a similar question, 'what would it mean to win?' (2014:91). Whilst I formulated my interview questions long prior to reading Haiven and Khasnabish's empirical chapter, there are striking similarities between how both mine and their participants expressed their political hopes. Albeit, I was intending to illicit hopefulness and optimism, rather than the notion of winning. As Haiven and Khashnabish suggested, rather than fully articulated visions for the future, there was often 'something far more sparse, weary and emaciated' (2014:92). Rather than projections of alternate futures, or deeply considered calls for revolution, there was often a sense of hopelessness, or for immediate needs to be met within current structures. As explored within the biographical stories in Chapter 4, many of my participants situated their future hopes relative to fixing problems caused by austerity policies and longed for a change in direction with regard to party politics. Their narratives also reflect disillusion after repeated state failures to account for the needs of the population, rather than those of a small elite.

The narratives of my participants brought attention to the importance of critical education. In particular, Lara's narrative alluded to the notion that access to critical discourses and education can give rise to politically imaginative answers to the

problems currently faced through embedded austerity; how living through the broader context of austerity 'makes philosophy more useful' as 'a time of more nuanced thinking' (Lara). The fight for critical education is all the more urgent and imperative, particularly when higher education explicitly promotes an entrepreneurial spirit. There may be a general trend toward measuring student success as relative to future profitability and aspirational utility to the economy. Instead of success measured through fostering pedagogical modes of critical thinking and knowledge and the harnessing of intellectual tools and the capacities of the mind in problem solving. I would suggest that we need to find additional ways of using those capacities in addressing socio-political, global, and national issues, including the urgent crises faced through continued austerity.

Neoliberalism's relationship to social and cultural life may oscillate and be further obscured within austerity. Indeed, the austerity agenda is also obscured and oscillates in its public appearance. Other political agendas, such as, the Brexit campaign and referendum, and the subsequent parliamentary upheaval and elections, took the political fore (Gibbs, 2018; Harrison, 2020). The austerity agenda arises as a forgotten cause of problems in healthcare, education, and daily life. Sophie Parker (2022) calls for a radical political imagination in a discussion about continued austerity for *Emerging Futures* at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Ameliorative strategies to poverty are, of course, necessary; however, they can only go so far in addressing the underlying structural inequalities and problems caused by over a decade of austerity (ibid). We urgently require ways of expressing social progress that make a tangible difference.

 Amidst spiralling socio-economic problems and legislative reproach: the discursive weaponizing of immigration, Europe, activists, and progressive political ideals has shifted the political mood considerably. The affective conditions of embedded austerity continue to promote the endurance of neoliberal tendencies and could affect the reproduction of politically dissenting ethos and practice. There is a need for widespread resistance that recognises austerity as an embedded political project that could be disrupted through social action. As concluded by Kate Harrison, widespread and ongoing political resistance to austerity has been 'muted' (2020).

Despite austerity, the narratives of my participants brought forth a multiplicity of ways in which their political ethos and praxis are carried forward and engender critically reflexive and politically attuned ways of being. In order to bring the future into the present it could just take many of us taking persistent steps toward social transformation in everyday life. I have contributed to novel conceptualisations of prefigurative parenting in austerity. The narratives of parents have brought attention to the intersection between political life and parenting in ways that emerge as prefigurative acts of bringing the future into the present and carrying forth political dispositions. As Carolyn Pedwell (2021) maintains, tangible social and political transformation plays out through sustained patterns of habitual action and affective habituation. The actualities of political change may operate on a micro scale, through affective habituation as a relational dynamic between affective and habitual practices that form lasting dispositions and tendencies with the capacity for social transformation (Pedwell, 2021:130). The narratives of my participants have brought light to how resisting political circumstance plays out through ethos and everyday practice, as politically conscious habitual activity, and refusal to unquestionably accept the systems and economic frameworks that sustain inequity, uncertainty, and precarity.

Resisting change and resisting circumstances are qualitatively different. To resist change can be fruitless, as the passing of time is perpetual, and change is inevitable. Challenging and resisting political circumstances entails resilience framed by ontological recognition of the dynamics and relationships of state power and economic interest, refusing to be subjugated and acting against it. Resilience, in this light, is carried through enduring political ethos and critical insight, rather than through neoliberal imperatives. Donna Haraway's (1989/2006) seminal essay *A Cyborg Manifesto* is applicable beyond gender dualism and speaks to the social processes, myths, narratives, language, and coding involved in demarcating the social world. Haraway describes cyborgs as 'a creature of social reality, as well as a creature of fiction'. Cyborgs, in this sense, straddle between materiality and myth, as the substance of being, that is, 'the cyborg is our ontology: it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation' (1985/2006:104). Through this suggestion, similarly to Stetsenko (2019, 2020, 2020b) the intersection

between political imagination and socio-material conditions co-constructs possibilities for opening up pathways of agency, resistance, and radical social transformation. Haraway argues, 'liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression and so of possibility' (ibid). That cyborgs can, at once, be understood as both oppressive, and as embodied reality, as unafraid of, and immersed with human and non-human entities, as part of a world full of 'partial identities and contradictory standpoints':

> The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many headed monsters (Haraway, 1985/2006:107).

In the context of continued and embedded austerity, Haraway's perspective resonates with the political stalemate faced currently in the UK. That in order to move forward and transform relations, it will be necessary to be conscious and attuned to the ways that political systems structure and dominate our lives; yet also to embrace the imaginative possibilities that emerge from being in a world full of change and technological advancement. To perceive one position without the other is to fall into the trap of either camp: To be caught in a perpetual fight against dominion or to embrace neoliberal imperatives unquestionably as ethos. The question is: how could we foster an innovative ethos towards the development of technology and social organisation as distinct from entrepreneurial motivation and profit?

If austerity is a scarcity, then why not use that empty terrain to create an abundance of ideas for human activity and subsistence? That is, ideas that can look to the past to revive old ways to solve new problems; and project forward in finding new ways to solve old problems. A lot could be learnt from anarcho syndicalist perspectives: free associations of collective and co-operative ownership and labour exchange could be the primary productive force and alternative to the economic system (Rocker, 1938/1989). Much more can be learnt from socialist traditions and generationally canonised experience as 'a negotiated process of lived experience, appropriations, and needs' (Nettleingham, 2013:422). With that in mind, what kinds of experiential

knowledge could be added to the wealth of knowledge and praxis passed on by socialists?

What if we could collectively foster an innovative ethos for the development of technologies (and ecologically sound infrastructure) that are not constrained by aims of future profit and research agendas, but instead framed by imperatives toward socio-political improvement? What about the imperative to address the urgencies of looming ecological crises, the protection of animal life, and the human necessity for material subsistence and creative expression? Work does not have to be motivated by neoliberal imperatives and economic interest. Our creative, and productive capacities could serve humanity and broader ecologies, transform relations, and help solve problems of disparity by providing alternative frameworks to attend to the crises caused by austerity and capitalism's relatively short reign on Earth.

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