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Introduction: Research as Mapmaking

I want to begin with events and encounters that inspired the research on which this book is based. The first was a retirement party where I realized that the room was full of women who had been part of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and who had taken their politics into different forms of paid and unpaid work. While talking with them it became evident that their work had helped to shape many of the policy innovations and new governing rationalities of subsequent decades. But in the process the changes they sought became subject to what some critics view as governmental processes of incorporation and depoliticization. Feminist claims that ‘the personal is political’ had opened up a range of new government policies concerned with how personal lives are lived. Community activism had been transformed – and in part depoliticized – through successive governmental programmes promoting active citizenship, volunteering and civic responsibility. Anti-racist struggles had been partly deflected through discourses of multiculturalism and social cohesion. Women’s claims for equality had been incorporated through processes of ‘mainstreaming’ that have served to bureaucratize and depoliticize feminism. Struggles on the part of disabled people had been accommodated through consumerist logics of choice. Experiments in cooperative living and working had prefigured new organizational forms geared to promoting the commitment of both workers and stakeholders. And so on.

A second inspiration came from a series of encounters with young women involved in contemporary struggles: mobilizing against cuts, involved in transnational environmental movements, participating in anti-globalization protests and the Occupy movement, engaged in lesbian, gay, bi- and transgender politics, and aligned with revolutionary struggles in India, the Arab nations and South America. Such women were passionate about the movements and struggles in which they were engaged, but faced a much less hospitable environment in which to conduct politics, and much tougher employment prospects, than had the groups associated with the ‘new social movements’ of the 1960s and 1970s. But they were helping constitute new waves of radical protest following the banking crisis and, in Britain, the election of a government committed to austerity and retrenchment. And, like earlier generations, they were also engaged with a more practical politics in which their labour – paid and unpaid, formal and informal – was helping to mitigate the consequences of cuts for particular groups, and to exemplify new ways of living, working and performing politics for the present and future. These new forms and styles of

politics were less subject to narratives of incorporation, but were potentially subject to accommodations through the rise of consumerism and expansion of new markets and cultural forms.

These encounters led me to a series of puzzles about the strained relationship between political activism and neoliberal forms of rule, and how this relationship is mediated through gendered labour. I wondered how far the politics that many women carried into their working lives had really been eradicated, how far the energies of social movements had been co-opted and how emerging struggles were being accommodated and contained. Such questions arise in the context of existing narratives that trace the exhaustion of feminism and other social movements in the face of neoliberalism or, conversely, demonstrate their complicity in generating new capitalist logics and neoliberal rationalities (Bagguley 2002; Baker 2008; Eisenstein 2006; Eisenstein 2009; Fraser 2009; Laurie and Bondi 2005; McRobbie 2009; Richardson 2005). Women's work in a series of unpaid or low paid jobs – in voluntary organizations, partnership bodies, community projects, project teams and in a whole series of hybrid organizations – is viewed as integral to the management of the contradictions of capitalism and to dealing with those 'left behind' in the rollout of new neoliberal forms (Katz 2005). Women who moved into more 'strategic' roles in central and local government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and policy teams have been seen as agents of 'professionalization' or as the much maligned 'femocrats' and 'governance' feminists who became complicit with governmental power (Watson 1990; Yeatman 1990). But such accounts do not, it seems to me, satisfactorily solve the puzzles I wanted to explore. What actually happens as multiple rationalities are negotiated and aligned – or not – in particular spaces of power? How can this illuminate the tensions faced by activists and campaigners, workers and students at the beginning of their working lives? How far can their activism be sustained in the current climate of cuts and retrenchment? Might future governments and corporations pick up on their success, draw on their energies and rework their claims in ways that strip them of their politics? In short, might the dominance of neoliberal forms of governance erase the successes of activist politics – or is there a more complicated story to be told?

To engage with such questions this book draws on interviews with over fifty women across four generational cohorts. They had prefigured new ways of living and working across the borders of activism and policy; between 'community' or 'civil society' and government; between different sectors and services; between research and policy, and between public and personal lives. Some had begun by working in community projects and brought their experience and skills into government and local government. Others had successfully translated campaigning work into jobs in voluntary and non-profit

organizations, getting more or less entangled with new governmental pressures and policy opportunities in the process. Yet others had brought political commitments into professional and public service occupations and the academy. And some had served as local or national politicians. One – my oldest participant – moved between the Civil Service, entrepreneurship, philanthropy and policy advice. And across these (rather unstable) groupings many worked – at some point in their life – as consultants, trainers, researchers or social entrepreneurs. All worked the spaces of power generated through contradictions in the ruling relations of their time, mobilizing new spaces of agency, prefiguring alternative rationalities and opening out spaces for those that followed. Their work did not just ‘reflect’ the profound social and political transformations of their day but were generative of them.

The chapters that follow map some of the ways in which spaces of power are both mobilized by and negotiated through women’s labour. They offer a series of stories – snapshots from working lives – about how many women attempted to ‘make a difference’, the decisions they took about where and how to pursue radical change, the dilemmas they faced, and how they reflect on the times they lived through. The accounts of those participating in the research (hereafter ‘participants’) show how they opened up and occupied diverse spaces of power associated with the unsettling of the post-war consensus in British society, the rise of Thatcherism, the development of managerial forms of governance, the emergence of new political projects and state forms under Blair, and the austerity politics of the early twenty-first century. The political struggles that took place in these transformative periods informed the lives and work of women who helped shape, worked within and often struggled against new political projects and shifting governmental practices. The book also, then, says something about the shifting politics and culture of Britain. It is not, however, a history book. It is possible to trace some shifts over time as new struggles arose, as new political tactics developed and as different governmental regimes displaced each other. But as I will show, the picture of change offered is dynamic rather than sequential (see especially Chapter 8). Nor does the book set out to be a history of feminism or address the rise (and, some would argue, fall) of a series of social movements. Rather, the book seeks to engage with contemporary debates on the incorporation or assimilation of activist struggles by the overwhelming force of neoliberalism.

The ‘gendered labour’ of the subtitle reflects my emphasis on how women have acted to bring about social and political change in their working lives – with work defined broadly to include paid and unpaid, formal and informal labour. I argue that such work was generative of a succession of new political, cultural, social and organizational shifts. As I will show, such shifts were often double-edged, opening up innovations that could be aligned with new

governmentalities and neoliberal rationalities. But they also produced new forms of organizing and ways of performing politics that are not easily erased, even in the current climate of cuts and austerity.

This generative labour has at least three dimensions. First, it was about *making visible*: bringing into view perspectives, voices, agendas and issues, and asserting and performing difference. The work of participants was that of overcoming silences (on issues ignored or rendered invisible) and absences (asserting the voices of marginalized and exploited groups). Such work, as I will show, also enacted alternatives to dominant ideologies and practices; it was performative as well as critical. Second, it was about *generating public conversations*. Such conversations were crucial to winning support for policy or legislative reform, but also generated wider processes of political and cultural change. Participants not only promoted public conversations through relational labour (brokering between different power bases and actors) but also by generating new discursive repertoires within which such conversations could be conducted. Third, it was about *creative labour*: making new things and generating the possibilities of alternative ways of living, working and practising politics. Examples of each of these three kinds of ‘work’, and their interconnections, are threaded through each of the subsequent chapters, and I offer more substantial commentary on each at various points (see especially in Chapters 6, 7 and 8).

My focus on work, then, is not about traditional concerns about gendered patterns of exploitation and inequality. Although some experienced exclusion and discrimination, many also benefited from the expansion of education and employment opportunities for (some) women in the economic shifts that brought access to higher education and to jobs in the expanding public sector of the second half of the twentieth century. But they tended to work on the edges and borders of mainstream institutions and most had fractured and highly varied working lives. Few talked of ‘glass ceilings’ that impeded their progress: more often the focus was on the ways they had used opportunities created by new governmental projects or shifting organizational forms to redirect their political energies. They spoke of the pleasures of agency – of their pride in and enthusiasm for their work and their capacity to bring about change. But they also frequently spoke of the unsustainability of the places in which they found themselves. Working lives were frequently punctuated by periods of illness, by a shifting balance between ‘public’ and ‘personal’ lives as care and other responsibilities came to the fore, and by decisions to change sectors or to develop a new direction.

I am grateful to those participating in the research for their willingness to share the experience and to open their lives up to the researcher’s gaze. In the chapters that follow I draw on their accounts to better understand shifting formations of governance, politics and power, and to make maps that others might use to make sense of their lives.

Gendering the analysis

The impact of feminist scholarship beyond the cultural and linguistic turns means that it is somewhat unfashionable to focus on women's experiences as sources of historical knowledge or contemporary political analysis (Downs 2004). Women can no longer be viewed as a distinct category and the assumption that common gender identities can form the basis of political agency has been unravelled (Butler 1999; Butler and Scott 1992; Mohanty 2003). Such arguments inform much of the analysis of this book. Nevertheless, I want to argue that it is women's embodied agency that has informed – and continues to shape – the political and institutional changes with which I am concerned. I focus on women's working lives for at least three reasons.

First, changing material conditions of work are gendered in their effects, such that women have often found themselves bridging the boundaries between paid and unpaid labour, between a focus on public and personal lives, between organizations characterized as belonging to state, market or civil society, or between mainstream and marginal organizational spaces. As such they have often taken on the roles of brokers and transactors, bringing skills and resources generated through political activism, civil society engagements or 'edge-work' projects into the generation of new political, policy and governance rationalities.

Second, I focus on women's lives because of the significance of the women's movement in the formation of contemporary politics and culture. This book is inspired by feminist politics – broadly defined – and the accounts of participants show how a feminist sensibility came to inflect a range of activist struggles: on race and ethnicity, on sexuality, on environmental and antipoverty movements and so on. But the women's movement is not the only struggle with which I am concerned, and it was not necessarily the foundational politics that shaped the lives of participants. The accounts of their political formation (see Chapter 2) confound any depiction of politics as a series of social movements, all distinct from each other and with individuals 'belonging' to one or another. Rather, I use the idea of feminist-inflected 'activism' to suggest how politics was lived and practised across a range of struggles. Of course, not all of the women would welcome the term activist – many viewed themselves as 'less political' than that term suggests, and some deliberately distanced themselves from a particular image of activism. Indeed, one of the younger participants commented:

I have ever quite felt that I'm an activist. I do go on demos but I find open space technologies and consensus decision-making too woolly and time consuming. And I'm not a vegetarian.

But their labour has nevertheless generated alternative ways of 'doing' politics that have resonated across a series of struggles through the later decades of the twentieth century and that prefigured the ways in which

contemporary movements – on global justice, anti-capitalism, climate change and other issues – seek to bring about change.

Third, however, it is feminism and its presumed demise that has generated significant discussions about the capacity of neoliberalism to incorporate or assimilate the energy of those who seek political change – for example, by ‘empowering’ women as consumers to drive economic development and renewal, or to play their part in the shift from manufacturing towards the development of a more flexible and mobile economy. Women, it is sometimes argued, have become ideal neoliberal subjects – and their role in generating new markets and patterns of consumption can be located in the ways in which feminism freed us from old patriarchal ideologies and paternalistic institutions (Aapola, Gonick and Harris 2005; Baker 2008; Gill and Scharff 2011; Gonick 2006; McRobbie 2009). In the process women have become subject to new forms of exploitation – as flexible and often un-unionized workers, as sex workers, as migrants juggling multiple care roles stretched across the globe, as consumers responding to shifting cultural norms of femininity and family life, as mothers producing the next generation of citizen-workers equipped for the high pressure information economy and, of course, as the neighbours, carers and civic actors taking up the responsibilities shed by retreating welfare states and cash-strapped public services.

I focus on women, then, because of the centrality of ‘second wave’ feminism to the profound transformations of culture and politics since the 1960s. I began this book in the year that marked the fortieth anniversary of the first Women’s Liberation conference in Britain. Looking back there is a certain nostalgia for the heady politics of that period – not only feminism but also a range of other movements, protests and radical gatherings. Reassessments of that period (Bagguley 2002; Rowbotham 2001; Segal 2007) have highlighted the partiality of its politics and the privileged economic and cultural backgrounds of many of those involved. The period is also paradoxical: it was a period of opening up new spaces and possibilities, but also of profound silences and silencings – especially around ‘race’ and the resonances of colonialism (Brah 1996; Mohanty 2003). However, there is nevertheless a sense that something shifted in chilly, grey, post-war Britain that opened up new forms of agency and prefigured the remaking of politics and culture.

Politics did indeed change. Without the women’s movement the ‘new’ could not have been put into New Labour, despite the subsequent fate of the Labour women MPs entering Parliament in 1997 who quickly became marginalized as power was progressively centralized. The assumption that politics should address issues of childcare, parenting, sexuality and more elusive ideas of well-being – the very stuff of everyday life – would never have become part of the realization that the personal was, indeed, political. Equal opportunities and anti-discrimination legislation might not have become such defining features of what it meant to be a ‘modern’, western state, marked out from

the dangerous ‘others’ both within and beyond the nation. The relational and cultural dynamics of politics – feelings, attachments, identifications – would not have presented such significant challenges to the rationalities of political participation (Young 1990). And the feminist-inflected post-structural and discursive turns in political theory might never have taken place (see Chapter 6).

These are all, of course, contradictory legacies. They represent the success of feminism and other social movements of the 1970s, while also closing down many of the progressive and radical possibilities they heralded. How can we understand this? As noted above, several propositions have been offered, ranging from the complicity of feminism with new capitalist logics (Fraser 2009), the incorporation of ‘femocrats’ into state bureaucracy (Sawer 1990; Watson 1990; Yeatman 1990), the disbenefits of mainstreaming (Duggan 2003), all rolled into broader theories of neoliberal adaptation and cultural appropriation (Eisenstein 2006; Eisenstein 2009; McRobbie 2009). Some ‘second wave’ feminists have resisted the deconstruction of gender identity, arguing that poststructuralism produces a form of ‘post modern paralysis’ that circumscribes political agency (Hoff 1994). Others have noted the coincidence between the post-structuralist deconstruction of gender as a category of analysis and the erasure of feminist politics (Genz 2006). These are all, of course, critiques from the left and from within feminism itself: there is a whole other agenda of charges of the harm done by feminism, the cultural evils of political correctness, the social harms of poor parenting resulting from female equality, lack of social mobility and even the moral degradation of a feminized, secularized society.

In order to limit the potential of such claims to become hegemonic, I think we need to face – and address – the contradictions in our own history. That feminism is not a singular entity but encompasses multiple and ever-changing struggles is a fairly obvious point, but one that is often missing from accounts of mainstreaming or incorporation, and from debates about whether feminism – as a presumed singular entity – has any continued relevance. Its multiplicity thus troubles depictions of the confluence of feminism and neoliberalism. What feminism is it that is at stake in such claims? The interviews reveal multiple feminisms, but also different orientations to ‘feminism’ as a political discourse. Most – though not all – of the participants in the project claimed the term; however, their accounts showed the complex articulations between feminism and other struggles, especially around those of ‘race’, class and sexuality. McRobbie argues that the forces of neoliberalism have offered an impoverished conception of feminism by disarticulating it from other struggles (McRobbie 2009); it is this process of impoverishment that has allowed it to be mainstreamed and assimilated. I am sympathetic to this view; however, the interviews suggest that the politics of those working the spaces of power continue, in practice, to show complex entanglements between different

commitments and struggles. Indeed, it is these connections that sustain them and form the basis of their political agency.

I do not want to suggest that the experiences I trace in this volume are necessarily particular to women. However, I decided early on to focus on women's accounts of their engagements within shifting 'spaces of power', partly because these accounts are largely unwritten, but also because the exploration of neoliberal governance from the standpoint of women both generating these shifts and managing the contradictions they produce might add something important to the understanding of governance and processes of social and political change. While gender may be a category ripe for deconstruction, the experience of embodied women is often 'outside', marginal or fragmentary in relation to economic and political power – and this may be a source of innovation, a way of bringing different perspectives and experiences into productive alignment. Such alignments may challenge existing institutions or they may of course offer new resources and capacities that enable entrenched forms of power to renew themselves or find new sources of legitimacy. But it is in trying to exert influence – sometimes from the margins, sometimes in more mainstream places – that new and emergent spaces of power have been generated, occupied and sometimes transformed by embodied women in their working lives.

Personal and political – doing the research

The research on which this book draws was conducted from the standpoint of an older, white, western feminist. I was one of the 'baby boomers' (born in Britain in 1945) involved in the profound political and cultural transformations of the 1960s and beyond. I participated in many of the political movements and counter cultural practices of the period, but my politics was most deeply shaped by my engagement in the early Women's Liberation Movement in Birmingham. I tried to bring some of this orientation into my work in local government and later, as a social/public policy academic, I brought both cultural and feminist perspectives into the analysis of questions of governance, politics and power.

The research is, then, in part a way of making sense of my own life and that of others whom I have met and worked with on the way. But it is also a way of engaging in wider narratives that link feminism to the rollout of neoliberalism. Following the episodes with which I began this chapter I began talking to colleagues about what might be going on and how to engage in a process of research that might illuminate the relationship between activism, work and social and political change. An early conversation with Wendy Larnier led to a bid to conduct research in the UK and in New Zealand, where we would

focus on the experience of both UK and Maori women and try to foster transnational conversations between activists in the global north and south. The bid was unsuccessful so, despite my interest in transnational connections and relationships, the project was, in the end, confined to women currently living in or visiting Britain.

Access to participants was gained through my own networks and brokered by some significant others. The process was iterative: emerging foci provided the basis for eliciting further interviews that could add depth to particular areas of analysis or extend the profile of those participating. My aim was to ensure that the study took account of three main axes of difference. The first was that of *generation*. This is deliberately a cross-generational study since I wanted to explore how activists responded to and engaged with shifts in politics and culture, and I hoped that the study might promote cross-generational learning. My approach draws on other literatures that have worked with the concept of political generations (Maskovsky 2009; Whittier 1995; Whittier 1997; Woodward and Woodward 2009) or have attempted to distinguish between successive 'waves' of social movement activism (Roth 2000; Walby 2009). But generation is a slippery concept. It flattens the complex relationships between time, place and personal history, and implies that time flows in a linear fashion in which the experiences of one generation are neatly packaged before giving way to those of the next. The list of participants at the beginning of the book where (after consultation) I have depicted each as a member of a particular generational cohort should, then, be treated with caution. As Chapter 2 shows, many participants were ambiguous about their generational belonging, and stubbornly refused to be part of a sequential, and very British, history of social movements. While they often had strong conceptions of the times through which they were living, and connections with others engaged in trying to shape political responses to the events they witnessed, this often had little relationship to the date of their birth, and there were as many resonances across generational cohorts as differences between them.

The second main axis of difference is that of *political identity*. As I show in Chapter 2, some came to activism through social movements, some through involvement in trade unions and political parties, some through an upbringing in a politically active family, some by witnessing key political events, and some through personal experience of inequality and injustice. While the predominant focus is on the transformations of British political culture, many participants had been involved in anti- and post-colonial political struggles in other nations or in global environmental and social justice movements. But I did not attempt to elicit 'representatives' from different social movements or political struggles, and some readers may be disappointed not to see their own experience reflected here (for example, there is little engagement with issues of ageing, care and mental or physical disability). Nor did I want to depict political identities as being formed once and for all through participation in a particular movement

or group: indeed, the work of many participants can be viewed as ‘bridge building’ between different movements, identities and struggles (Meyer 2002; N. Rose 1999; Roth 2003). Their accounts also challenge static notions of identity, showing how different axes of subordination and the struggles they generate are entangled, and how individuals occupy and deploy multiple subject positions.¹

The third axis of difference was that of *work*. I have already noted that this encompasses work that is paid and unpaid, formal and informal. Most of the participants worked across these categories, for example, combining voluntary work with their formal job or combining campaigning with research roles and often ‘going beyond the contract’ (financial or relational) to ensure that what mattered to them was delivered at whatever personal cost. Many held multiple roles, stitching them together in different ways across a life-course and managing the tensions between them as best they could. But across this diverse terrain I wanted to ensure that I drew on the accounts of women with different standpoints in relation to governmental, professional, institutional or political power. Some were undoubtedly ‘insiders’ while others held clear oppositional, ‘outsider’ identities: some held significant political or governmental posts (though often did not remain in them), while others worked predominantly in ‘community’ and ‘civil society’. But, as I will show, their lives did not conform to such categories: many worked between government and community, or across multiple occupational identities. I show how some participants moved from community based or trade union activism into different forms of governmental work (Chapter 3); from social movement involvement into spaces in which they might influence the making and enactment of policy (Chapter 4); and from political action into managerial, ‘entrepreneurial’ forms of work (Chapter 5) or into research roles (Chapter 6). And some moved between all of these categories. In order to give a sense of the changing entanglements of work and politics across a life-course I follow the work of a few participants through successive chapters. This is designed to give a more dynamic sense of change across a life-course, and to suggest the different forms of ‘border work’ at stake as participants moved between different organizational, professional and political cultures, and between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ identities.

Border work was intrinsic to the research process itself. It worked across a number of disciplinary traditions and bodies of literature, and sought to bring participants of different ages, backgrounds and experiences into some kind of virtual conversation with each other. It also raised questions about the borders between objective knowledge (‘this happened then’) and more subjective ways of knowing (‘how it felt’, ‘what it meant’) that were, in part, co-constructed in the conversations between myself and participants. Further details on the interview process, method of analysis and the ethical issues raised by the research are given in the Appendix.

Research as mapmaking

Given the aims of the project it has been important to recognize that the events and actions had a collective, not just individual, significance. What took place in the interviews was a conversation: episodes and stories frequently triggered my own memories ('Ah, yes, that reminds me of when I worked in xx ...' or 'I was at that event too ...'). And the narrow dialogue between 'interviewer' and 'respondent' was often broadened to include non-present others ('Oh, several people have used that term – do you think what you are saying is the same?'), colleagues of the person I am interviewing ('Then I met xx and she was really influential') and collective subjects ('What we decided to do was ...') and even other pieces of research.

Tracing collective sensibilities, then, was as important as tracing individual experience. One way of doing this was to note where, in the interviews, the language shifted to 'we' and a collective actor was summoned. The collective actor might be a social or political movement ('The left', civil rights movement, environmental activism); a particular project or organization (Southall Black Sisters, a trade union resource centre), or women connected through networks (women working 'in and against the state'; women creating links between research and policymaking; or women working on 'community' programmes). These offered different spatial imaginaries of connectedness. Social or political movements often linked local and transnational struggles; some projects were transported to new sites and others were explicitly mobile.

In thinking about how to analyse such connections I have been inspired by Dorothy Smith's wonderful work on institutional ethnography. This, Smith argues, is a method of enquiry that works from the actualities of people's everyday lives and experience to discover the social as it extends beyond the local and the everyday. She describes the process as 'mapmaking':

a method of enquiry into the social that proposes to enlarge the scope of what becomes visible from that site, mapping the relations that connect one local site to others. Like a map, it aims to be through and through indexical to the local sites of people's experience, making visible how we are connected into the extended social relations of ruling and economy and their intersections. And though some of the work of enquiry must be technical, as mapmaking is, its product should be ordinarily accessible and usable, just as a well-made map is, to those on the terrain it maps. (D. Smith 2005: 29)

I really like this quote for several reasons. First, it offers a spatial metaphor that I want to play with as I try to make connections between events and projects, between actors and governmentalities, between politics and policy. This implies a series of maps with different scales, legends and features. Second, it emphasizes the value of research to those whose experience it records. This 'making visible' is integral to my project, and one of my purposes in writing this book is to engage in a process of collective sense-making – or mapmaking.

In doing so, however, I think there is a need to recognize that maps, while appearing to be objects that authentically represent what is real, have to be subjected to cultural analysis that troubles the representations offered. This is not a point taken up by Smith, though her methodology explicitly works across the duality between being an embodied, subjective knower and, at the same time, part of an objective, universalizing set of relations.

Smith's work is also helpful in thinking about how to be respectful of the specificity of the lives and stories of each of the participants in the research while also going 'beyond particularity'. Smith suggests that, rather than beginning with the researcher's theoretical categories, an institutional ethnography would 'begin in the actualities of the lives of some of those involved in the institutional process and focus on how those actualities were embedded in social relations, both those of ruling and those of the economy' (D. Smith 2005: 31). Through such work the 'problematic' of the research would become specified. The problematic is not constructed from what is specific to an individual, but from what happens as accounts move from individual experience to explore the social relations in which that experience is embedded. In trying to respect Smith's approach I did not set out with a pre-given set of themes on to which I mapped individual experience. Instead, as the connective and generative work began to fall into clusters, I sought out other participants who might be able to add depth to a particular experience or to illuminate it from a different standpoint. In the chapters that follow I develop the analysis around several such clusters.

The maps I am making, then, do not seek to illuminate the 'facts on the ground' but to delineate continued areas of struggle and contestation. But mapmaking is not only the work of the researcher; it is the work that is and has been done by the participants in this project. They are not just people to whom things happen: they are seeking to bring about institutional, cultural and political change in the name of those others whose local or specific experiences they have encountered or shared. Avtar Brah, one of the participants, notes in her own writing how:

The 'individual' narrator does not unfold but is produced in the process of narration. Rather, the deeply invested self that speaks the events relies heavily upon the hope that its version will resonate with the meaning constructed by my various 'imagined communities'. My individual narration is meaningful primarily as a collective re-memory. (Brah 1996: 11)

My project is to expand the possibilities of 'collective re-memory' within and across generations. Other texts have recounted women's experiences of some of the political and social shifts I am concerned with here: biography and autobiography have been important ways not only of enabling particular women to have a voice but also of shaping the emergence of collective identifications and political histories. Texts such as McCrindle and Rowbotham's *Dutiful*

Daughters (McCrindle and Rowbotham 1977) and Sarah Maitland's *Very Heaven: Looking Back at the 1960s* (Maitland 1988) provide collective testimonies, while individual biographical accounts from authors such as Lynne Segal (Segal 2007), Sheila Rowbotham (Rowbotham 2001) and others offer powerful combinations of personal and political history. But as Julia Swindells (Swindells 1989) has argued, testimony can easily slide into nostalgia and biography into individualism. In addition biographies and testimonies that look back to the 1960s and 1970s can serve to intensify the mythic status of an iconic moment that separates the women who participated in it from others, whether the 'others' are the working class, lesbian or women of colour whom it excluded or the women from successive generations and in other places.

This is partly why I have not followed a strictly biographical approach. I have not, in what follows, attempted to provide a coherent account of the individual lives of those I interviewed. Some may be disappointed to read only fragments of what they shared with me and to find themselves juxtaposed with surprising others in unexpected places. But what is lost in terms of depth of understanding of a particular life-course is, I hope, complemented by what the institutional ethnography approach offers. The juxtapositions offer both resonances and contrasts that seek to illuminate a particular site of activism or work from different perspectives.

The structure of the book

In this book I explore with participants some of the paradoxes that arise as their personal and political commitments encounter dominant ruling relations. Each chapter illuminates the current political moment through an understanding of the changes that have taken place over the previous sixty years. And each speaks to different possible processes of neoliberalization, processes that may engage, redraw and exploit activist projects.

Chapter 2 – 'Talking Politics' – shows something of the range of political struggles and movements that participants were involved in, and how these were entangled in individual lives. It traces processes of political formation, showing something of the significance of transnational encounters and of key political events as well as of family, party and first-hand experience of poverty, racism and discrimination. It traces different forms and sites of political practice, and shows something of the multiple ways in which politics is embodied, lived and performed across time and place.

Chapter 3 – 'Perverse Alignments' – focuses on 'community' as a space in which radical political projects encounter governmental programmes of 'empowerment', 'active citizenship' and 'localization'. It shows the complex – and often perverse – alignments between activism and the succession of projects

that have sought to enrol and manage potentially unruly populations through the production of community as a governable space. Processes of community development and empowerment can be viewed as constituting ‘non economic’ actors as new entrepreneurial subjects, while informal and ‘alternative’ community projects can create innovations that open the way for new cycles of capital accumulation. But at the same time, as I will show, governmental projects and programmes designed to develop and manage through community can be appropriated and their resources mobilized by activists. ‘Community’, then, remains an intense focus of ideological and political struggles as welfare states seek to devolve responsibilities for care and welfare to ‘local’, personal, familial and faith-based actors.

Chapter 4 – ‘Close Encounters’ – assesses the different spaces of power in which social movements came to shape social policy and influence strategies of governance. Not only did women seek to influence policy and legislative reform, but their work prefigured mainstream developments, from the inscription of equality in institutional practice to the use of ‘monitory power’ to check the actions of the powerful. The social policy reforms for which women worked were realized, in part, in the ‘social investment state’ that constituted women as full worker citizens, but which, at the same time, enabled capitalist and state enterprises to access a cheaper, more flexible, less unionized workforce, as well as investing in the capacity of future generations to take their part as productive worker citizens in the global economy. The ‘mainstreaming’ of activist struggles in policy and governance served to strip them of much of their oppositional strength; however, the ‘close encounters’ also led to significant changes in the institutions themselves. This contradiction was lived and worked in different ways, and the paradoxes it opened up are particularly telling in a context in which many of the policy achievements are rapidly being undone through programmes of public sector cuts, welfare reform and state retrenchment.

Chapter 5 – ‘Modernizing Moments’ – continues this theme of contradiction and paradox in exploring women’s influence in transforming ‘traditional’ institutions. It shows women bringing activist commitments into the professions, local government and the Civil Service; the ways in which their work helped generate the shifts towards more collaborative, partnership-based and participative styles of governance; and the development of ‘entrepreneurial’ spaces in which work and activism could be (uncomfortably) aligned. It shows how their labour was inflected through the valorization of the ‘reflexive’ self and the use of ‘soft’ power, both of which are associated with the new governmentalities of advanced neoliberalism; and with the economic shifts that produced more ‘precarious’ forms of labour.

Chapter 6 – ‘Critical Engagements’ – focuses on researchers, professionals and academics seeking to transform hierarchical orderings of knowledge and power. It draws on the accounts of participants seeking to democratize knowledge, to bring ‘experience-based’ ways of knowing into professional

work and public service delivery, and to move towards the co-production of research. It traces how academics have been drawn into new forms of ‘close encounter’ with governments, and the tensions about legitimacy and power that result. Finally, it shows how those working in and beyond the ‘cultural turn’ open up rather different questions about the relationship between knowledge, power and the performance of politics.

Each of these chapters offers a particular mapping of the paradoxical ‘spaces of power’ in which multiple neoliberal rationalities and the projects generated by activist movements collide and are aligned – or not – through different forms of gendered labour. The final three chapters look across these mappings to assess broader processes of political and cultural transformation. In Chapter 7 – ‘Border Work’ – I trace how participants viewed themselves as situated within such transformations, managing the tensions and contradictions associated with political and cultural change. It shows how they spoke of themselves as simultaneously ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ (the nation, the polity, the institution, activist politics) and offers different perspectives on the generative labour of border work. Chapter 8 – ‘Activism, Neoliberalism and Gendered Labour’ – assesses a number of narratives that view neoliberalism as erasing and co-opting activist struggles and interventions. It offers different theoretical framings of neoliberalism and its relationship to feminism and other movements. The chapter reflects on how the work of participants in this book can offer insights into the ‘landscapes of antagonism’ in which emergent practices and alternative rationalities encounter dominant ruling relations. But its aims are political as well as theoretical; the analysis I offer refuses totalizing narratives that foreclose the possibilities of political agency. Finally, Chapter 9 – ‘Postscript: Speaking to the Present’ – reviews how the analysis of the book can speak to the current politics of cuts and retrenchment, economic austerity and social conservatism, and explores the possibility of living and enacting alternative forms of politics in these times.

Conclusion

One of my aims in writing this book has been to explore the prospects and possibilities of political agency in neoliberal times. But another has been to make visible the public work of women who sought to bring their commitments and orientations into their working lives and who, in doing so, forged new ways of doing things that sometimes prefigured larger social or governmental shifts. In writing this book I set out to tell what I hope are interesting stories – stories that celebrate the work of some extraordinary women and that also illuminate how and why what Weeks (Weeks 2007) terms ‘the world we have made’ is as it is. The ‘we’ of this world is highly

contested, and the boundaries of the ‘world’ we have made are constantly being reimagined; economic retrenchment, the rise of political parties of the right, climate change, global poverty and threats to national security all shift the terrain on which politics is conducted, bringing new claims to voice and challenging the authority and legitimacy of the political gains won by earlier generations. Nevertheless, I want to argue for a better understanding of the processes of social and political change that has taken place over the last sixty years in order to illuminate the constitution of the present and help inform the politics of the future – a theme I return to in Chapter 9.

These are challenging tasks. But my purpose, with Smith, is to ‘produce the kind of knowledge that makes visible to activists or others directly involved the order they both participate in and confront’ (D. Smith 2005: 32); that is, to focus on mapping connections from the local and specific to encompass what she terms the ‘ruling relations’; and making such maps accessible and usable to those on whose experiences they draw. Weeks wrote about his goal of looking to the past to help understand the present and future. At the time of writing – a period of recession and dismay following the financial crisis of 2008 and the uncertainties of mainstream politics following the UK election of 2010 – commentators are returning to notions of paradigm shifts in governance and the rejection of past ways of thinking about society and economy, state and market. I want to claim, in contrast, that we need to offer more nuanced accounts of the reorderings of our social and political worlds. We need, in short, to rethink the tales we tell about the past and the resources on which we draw to imagine and enact other possible futures.