Newman, Janet. "Postscript: Speaking to the Present." *Working the Spaces of Power: Activism, Neoliberalism and Gendered Labour*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012. 171–190. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849666725.ch-009>>.

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Postscript: Speaking to the Present

The research on which this book draws is incomplete; I am still meeting active and activist women and trying to capture how they are making sense of their lives and work in a period of cuts, austerity and political reversals. What, then, has been the value of this book? Is it a historical narrative of times past or might it offer some small hope for the future? In this Postscript I want to look both backwards and forwards, revisiting the analysis and assessing its capacity to illuminate some features of the present political conjuncture. This has been the hardest thing to write: trying to hold on to a sense of political possibility while seeing, every day, a new manifestation of austerity politics and its consequences, not least in the reversal or erasure of many of the changes for which the women in this book fought.

All to whom I spoke in the later stages of the research viewed the conditions of the present with anger, concern and dismay:

I think that's the way that British society is developing in light of the cuts and everything that's happening; it's really, really worrying and I just really kind of despair about what this country is going to look like, and the increasing divide between rich and poor, and where I position myself in that. (Cecilia Wee)

Many viewed the present as heralding a form of hyper-neoliberalism in which global capitalism reigns supreme, unfettered by state regulation and untrammelled by concessions to 'old-fashioned' notions of welfare and equality. They worried about the effects of the public sector cuts, the withdrawal of benefits for many categories of people and the impact of high levels of unemployment. These each have a disproportionate impact on women (Women's Budget Group 2010; Fawcett Society 2011) but those I spoke to were equally concerned about the classed and racialized dynamics of recession and the spatial unevenness of its effects. They also spoke of the personal consequences: in parts of Britain the cuts to public services, the reductions in funding for childcare and elder care, the transformations of the NHS and growing material inequalities were making managing the balance between personal and public/political lives more difficult. Many of those I interviewed had been made redundant, had their funding cut or were juggling multiple jobs to try to make ends meet. Some were themselves having to 'rip up' organizations they had helped shape and to cut services they knew would have awful consequences for those most in need – the very people to whom participants were politically committed. The younger women I spoke to were finding new ways of enacting politics but often

in parlous financial circumstances and, for some, with problematic citizenship status.

One way of reading the present, then, is through images of loss and reversal: the undoing of much of what the work of the women in this book had produced. For example, support for the work of community-based and voluntary-sector organizations (see Chapter 3) was being severely reduced as the cuts bit, and many of the policy reforms secured by feminist activists (see Chapter 4) were being reversed. As I write, Naomi Eisenstadt was drawing attention to the increase in child poverty likely to result from the closure of many Sure Start Centres and the Fawcett Society was calling for the restoration of government support for childcare costs, the ring-fencing of funding to childcare centres and for government to prevent local authorities viewing domestic violence services as a 'soft touch' for cuts (Fawcett Society 2011). Others were campaigning against welfare cuts and reforms that were likely to restore a 'male breadwinner' model that earlier feminist campaigns had successfully fought against (see Chapter 4). These specific reversals were set in a wider ideological framing of the relationships between politics and economy, state and society. Such framings were not new, but had been hugely amplified in the orchestration of responses to the banking crisis and subsequent economic recession such that the 'naturalness' of markets was constituted as the new common sense (Newman and Clarke 2009; Massey 2011). The discursive framing of the market as 'outside' and beyond the reach of politics, its presence as an invisible but potent and demanding force, served to justify attempts to appease it through programmes of debt reduction, austerity and cuts. It also served to subject populations to economic logics – we must all change the ways we live and work according to an economic calculus of debt reduction and financial stringency. Poverty, cuts, austerity and hardship were depicted within a masculine discourse of toughness and rugged resilience, displacing – in part – more feminine and feminist discourses of interdependence and ethical concerns (for intimate others, for future generations, for the environment, and for distant populations as well as members of 'local' communities).

But ideologies are never complete; they form crucial components of hegemonic projects, but such projects are always in the making rather than 'won'. And here the arguments of this book have much to offer. Analytically, the book has drawn attention to processes through which hegemonic projects seek to incorporate alternative capacities and resources, but has also depicted these processes as dynamic, taking place in landscapes of antagonism characterized by multiple political forces (see Chapter 8). Politically, it has shown how feminism and other social movements constituted lines of fracture and antagonism that challenged the hegemonic political settlement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in Britain. The legacies of such movements were highly visible in the policy programmes of New Labour

and other Third Way governments, not only in terms of specific policies (civil partnerships, welfare provision, the focus on children and the brief flowering of ‘multiculturalism’), but also in terms of a wider attention to the social and its governance, and the associated reframing of both ‘personal’ and ‘political’. Feminism and other movements also created a discursive repertoire and political resource that continually challenged the status quo (Williams’s ‘dominant’; Williams 1977) and which generated alternatives, preventing the settlement from becoming settled. ‘Race’ continued to be a troubling presence that refused to be accommodated in strategies of cohesion and inclusion. ‘Gender’ was partly silenced in the dominant discursive repertoires of families, parenting and responsible citizenship, but young women continued to assert new feminist agendas and to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions about the power of a ‘gender aware’ governmentality to satisfy women’s demands for equality and justice, both for themselves and their children.

Writing about the present is more problematic; the specifics of British political culture are rather marginal in contemporary global realignments of power, inequality and access to social and economic justice. And even within Britain, events are so fast-moving that it is difficult to distinguish between temporary blips and more sustained conjunctural movements. But, in early 2012, it appeared that the extent to which the naturalness of markets and the prioritization of supposedly apolitical strategies to appease them were uneven; responses to the effect of budget cuts and austerity packages suggested that support for the idea that ‘There Is No Alternative’¹ was far from universal. Trade unions, financial commentators, journalists and organizations on the left were becoming more vocal in their critique of economic policy – not least since it was manifestly failing to stimulate growth. Disquiet about the loss of political support for the coalition government among women voters as a result of cuts to crucial benefits and services had led to some tactical repositioning and a few symbolic (rather than substantive) nods towards the female electorate. And the government’s desire to constitute citizens as workers rather than welfare claimants, as volunteers (in the Big Society) rather than activists (on the street), also seemed to have little traction: connections between people and government appeared to be characterized by ‘disaffected consent’ (Gilbert 2010) rather than positive engagement, coupled with the explosion of new (and old) forms of activism.

However, an analysis that posits neoliberal ideology on the one hand and new forms of resistance on the other replicates the paradox (of simultaneous dismay and a sense of possibility) that I referred to earlier, and does not take us very far. In trying to understand how the work of this book might speak to the present and future I want to revisit four of its key concepts: ‘political formation’, ‘border work’, ‘spaces of power’ and ‘generative labour’.

Political formation

Chapter 2 showed something of how individuals come to politics; how social movements created spaces for activism and how the intersections between different political spaces – community action, political parties, social movements, environmental movements, trade unions – opened up particularly productive possibilities. It also suggested how political struggles and key events produced fractures in earlier political, economic and social settlements: the emergence of the New Left, the civil rights movement and second-wave feminism all shifted political discourses and practices. And it showed how events symbolized the redrawing of the political landscape: the miners' strike and more adversarial politics of Thatcherism; the conflicts between police and Black populations and the rise of anti-racist struggles; Greenham Common and the 'queering' of feminism; the struggles over local government as an oppositional space; the rise of environmental and social justice movements; the explosion of anti-capitalist activism and the associated turn to 'post-identity' forms of creative, performative politics. Each of these arose in response to would-be hegemonic projects (colonialism, Thatcherism, the managerial and military state, the Third Way, consumerism and, of course, capitalism itself). And each generated lines of contradiction and antagonism that were 'worked' by participants to generate social, cultural and political change. It is already evident that political work in the present and future will be very different but will be shaped by the same double process – new forms of politicization and the generation of new spaces of power wrought from fissures and fractures in dominant ruling relations.

As I wrote the final draft of this book, something new appeared to be stirring. People were mobilizing in Greece, Spain and Italy against austerity programmes, and emergent groupings were transforming traditional forms of protest – the demonstration, the petition, the campaign – through web-based social media and imaginative political performances. All of this was taking place against a backcloth of images of a new style of politics in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya and other nations in which 'people power' appeared – for a while – to be able to topple dictatorial regimes, albeit with considerable bloodshed. The Occupy movement was particularly significant. Originating in Spain with the Los Indignados protests, it was taken up in New York and spread to more than 900 cities across the globe. It echoed earlier anti-capitalist protests in Seattle, Genoa, London and other cities, and more recent student led anti-cuts demonstrations, but responses from establishment media and institutions were rather different. The slogan 'We are the 99 per cent' and the explicit targeting of the banks and financial institutions captured the imagination not only of the young and disenfranchised, but of a wider public. The movement thus created some elite anxiety, not least because of sympathetic reporting in leading media (including the *New York Times* and

Financial Times). This anxiety was evident in responses from Barack Obama in the United States and Ed Miliband in the United Kingdom, both of whom offered affirming if qualified responses, and in conflicts within the Church of England about how to respond to the Occupy encampment at St Paul's Cathedral in London. Even though specific protest encampments were subject to enforced closures by police and bailiffs, the impact of the movement may not be so easily contained.

These forms of political mobilization appeared fresh and new. They were less based on single-identity politics and were enabled in part – but only in part – by new social media such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. They combine a focus on education and collective practice with that of political protest and dissent. However, they confronted issues and raised questions that resonated with earlier movements. The dilemmas for the Occupy movement – of how to maintain an open and ethical, spontaneous and performative, non-hierarchical and leaderless movement – resonated with many earlier protests, and, in particular, with the dilemmas lived at Greenham Common (Roseneil 2000).² And the struggles at Greenham also suggested something of the dilemmas for the securitized state in dealing with non-violent protest and dissent. Such resonances are significant. New movements, like older ones, emerge from putting together new alliances and building new networks. But should the aim be to build loose alliances across multiple movements or to try to build a common base? To run a tight and effective campaign that might lead to policy change or to hold on to the value of more spontaneous, open and non-hierarchical models of organizing? To put back what is being lost or to develop new models and practices? These dilemmas, and different responses to them, are threaded through this book.

But resonances between past and present are not a matter of history repeating itself: they are refracted through intergenerational and political differences. Many younger participants pointed to the exhaustion of traditional forms of politics, while those from older generations sometimes bewailed the lack of young women willing to contribute to campaigns to defend services and benefits that their generation had won. Talking about this research to a group of socialist women, they were generally sympathetic but one asked, tellingly:

Ah, but what comes after the performance? Who is going to keep the issues alive and try to influence those with the power to deliver?

Others I spoke to in the final stages of the research expressed concern about the erasure of the discursive repertoires of feminism, anti-racism and queer politics in the search for common cause. Such tensions were often presented as intergenerational, but they also speak to well-worn lines of fracture between socialist and more anarchist, embodied styles of politics; between attention to a politics of identity and a 'post-identity' form of struggle. The borders between first- and second-wave feminism, between gay liberation and LGBT struggles, between a politics of 'race' and a politics shaped by notions of intersectionality

had become the focus of important forms of intergenerational border work. But such work confronted a series of myths (for example, younger women viewing second-wave feminism as liberal and compromised, or older women viewing third-wave feminism as performative and pleasure-seeking, ready to sacrifice – and often ignorant of – the gains made by the second wave). Such intergenerational myths reconfigure narratives of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ in uncomfortable ways (Chapter 7), and inform wider narratives of the fate of feminism and other forms of activism in neoliberal times (Chapter 8).

Border work

Participants I interviewed towards the end of the project faced difficult choices of where and how to be political, and of what politics might mean:

Other people [previous activist comrades] have made different choices, been more committed. I still join in campaigns and so on and have contact with people – for example, activists living outside the economy, in squatted households with illegal migrants, eating from skips, intervening in politics through direct action. They are not implicated in any way in the system – and, of course, don’t have a voice in the system either, or at least their ideas don’t reach the majority of the population to have a chance of making waves. But not everyone can do that. I want to know what choices I am making and why. It doesn’t feel that getting paid by [name of organization] to do little projects is part of the revolution. But on the other hand ...

[Janet: So what’s on the other hand?]

I’m trying to get to grips with what I am doing, what I am buying into – the whole neoliberal stuff. OK, inequality’s a given, capitalism’s a given, but within it you can still enable people to have a voice. (Hannah Berry)

At stake in this extract is the tension around how far to remain ‘outside’, in oppositional and alternative spaces, and how far to engage with what Hannah called ‘*the system*’. Chapter 7 showed something of the discomfort and ambiguity associated with being in ‘inside-outside’ spaces, but also highlighted the generative potential of those engaged in such border work. However, borders and boundaries had become the focus of governmental projects of state retrenchment. There was less talk, at least in the United Kingdom, of partnerships and interdisciplinary working. Units and projects that had previously been ‘on the edge’, such as that in which Hannah worked, had been either cut or cast adrift, made to fend for themselves in an increasingly competitive funding and business environment. The worsening job market meant that many women had become less able to move between sectors or to span boundaries. Agencies and projects that supported ‘community’ and ‘civil society’ had been squeezed of funding or abolished in state-driven strategies of

'disintermediation'. The boundary between 'state' and 'society' that was partly blurred in the governance shift of the 1990s was hardening, even as society (in the United Kingdom in the shape of an imagined series of 'local communities') took centre stage in political discourse. The assumption was that if the state retreated, community action and social entrepreneurship would grow to fill the empty space. But the mediators, translators, transactors and brokers who worked across this boundary (Chapter 5, 7) were finding their spaces of agency squeezed, leaving communities and civil society actors adrift.

However, this is too general a picture. Some forms of border work had also become amplified as a stripped down centre attempted to find allies with which to work in developing new strategies for 'governing the social'. Community-mobilizers had become the focus of training and empowerment work; and groups bidding to take over formerly public 'assets' or to run local public services found themselves working across multiple borders even as those borders were being configured. New kinds of consultants and entrepreneurs had emerged to do some of the 'joining up' between a hollowed out state, malfunctioning market and impoverished civil society. And faith groups had taken on new significance, both in the developing market for schools and other formerly public services, and in projects of moral renewal and civic action.

Border work, then, was continuing, and in some cases offered new kinds of opportunity for activists to mobilize spaces of power. The spatial dynamics of this work were complex. Governments within and beyond the United Kingdom were seeking to extend the strategies of governing through community discussed in Chapter 3, opening up new landscapes of inequality that differ from those generated by earlier community programmes because of the scale of cuts and their impact on human and material 'assets' in different regions and places. Some participants were themselves taking on multiple jobs (paid and unpaid) in an increasingly unfavourable economic climate. The intensification of 'precarious labour' (Chapter 5) was opening up new freedoms but also new forms of economic and political vulnerability. This has implications for how far individuals are able to mobilize spaces of power.

Spaces of power

One of the contributions of this book has been to illuminate something of the plurality of spaces of power from which protest and dissent are conducted and new possibilities are enacted. Spaces of power are not, as previous chapters have shown, simply associated with formal political or governmental power, nor with status and seniority; they emerge as contradictions in would-be dominant political projects are worked and fissures opened up in hegemonic ruling relations. Those working them have the capacity to disrupt taken-for-granted ideas, and to challenge ideological

assumptions of what is natural and normal. They mobilize resources, texts and people, bringing them into new relationships and networks. They work to resignify the meanings of policy discourses and projects. And they perform activist commitments in a multiplicity of ‘contact zones’ traversed by dominant, emergent and residual formations of power.

So what of the future? I want to trace here the threads of three rather different spaces of power: those of campaigning and protest; of building new political institutions; and of working in practical, grounded ways. Each offers a rather different space of power or possibility. The examples I focus on are not intended as templates for the future – each, as I show, has been the object of critique – but as indicators of the plural landscape on which new and old antagonisms were being played out.

The explosion of new forms of protest discussed earlier took place against a backcloth of challenges produced by less visible but more focused campaigning work. The Women’s Budget Group, the Fawcett Society and other feminist groups orchestrated campaigns against the cuts, with a particular focus on the consequences for women. Others participated in campaigns to defend cherished institutions, from the BBC World Service (threatened with cuts) to the woodlands (threatened with losing the protection of public ownership) and, of course, the NHS. Their success was variable: many well-orchestrated campaigns to save public libraries failed, while the early promise of challenges to the NHS reforms by clinicians and by members of the House of Lords was not realized. But such campaigns helped to challenge would-be dominant ideologies and to mobilize new ‘inside-outside’ alliances. This resonates with campaigns discussed in earlier chapters: those that successfully challenged policy and legislation (Chapter 4) and that worked both with and against ‘modernizing’ logics (chapter 5). Such examples show both the potential – and the problems – of campaigns that sought to defend threatened institutions while also, at the same time, seeking to change them.

This tension between defence and transformation was a recurrent theme in the responses of those I spoke to about the present. The welfare state of the 1970s and 1980s, some suggested, was not wholly beneficial and there was some ambiguity about the taken-for-grantedness of state provision of services:

Being a socialist, a 1960s socialist, I think the state has a role, the state has a role in distribution. But this can lead you to defend the indefensible. And I wonder – whether public services have contributed to alienation, whether I should have been more supportive of co-ops, more sympathetic to self-help. The paradox is, when we said we didn’t want the welfare state or council housing in their present forms, we didn’t mean they should be taken away. (Jane Foot)

When I was younger we did a lot of work, it’s all being undone, and so now it’s got to be all done again. I mean we’ve got to defend what we can but also write a new political script. (Angela Mason)

Both extracts underscore the tension between defending what is being threatened and the work of writing new political scripts or performing new worlds. Protesting against cuts, then, was only part of the agenda. Many participants were engaged in trying to write a ‘*new political script*’, and I want here to briefly trace three very different examples: those of UNISON, London Citizens and Compass. When I spoke to Heather Wakefield (G3) at UNISON she was heavily involved in the struggle to defend public sector workers against proposed changes to their pension entitlements, but also spoke of a broader project of renewal:

We had a three-pronged strategy. The first, getting technical, was an attempt to get to grips with local government finance so we could challenge the need for cuts. Some cuts are necessary, but many are not, and we had been confronting a game of smoke and mirrors in the rationales we were given for cuts to services as well as jobs. So we developed more technical skills, doing things like impact assessment – especially on equality issues – so we could talk back effectively. And we have been going out to branches doing training on how to understand local government finances so we would be better armed for negotiations with employers.

The second thing was about getting political, trying to get people to re-engage at local level. Of course, bad situations – like the present – always tend to lead to new revivals, especially among trade unionists, but we have lost many of our old activists and need to work with the new ones coming through. Morale at present is low, people are scared of redundancies so are sometimes reluctant to come forward. But while the short term is bleak, we are trying to develop our capacity for the future.

And the third thing is about getting organized – trying to strengthen the ways we organize, helping people with how to talk to employers, deal with the media, do press releases and so on – a lot of this is in handbooks we have put on the web. (Heather Wakefield; her emphasis)

The three components of this strategy speak to issues raised in earlier chapters: for example, ‘getting technical’ refers to what in Chapter 5 was termed monitory power, the ‘development’ activities to forms of knowledge-work in Chapter 6, ‘getting organized’ to the campaigning work of Chapter 4 and shifts in political struggles to some of the material in Chapter 2. But there was a sense of strain, in her account, between these capacity-building activities for the longer term and the immediate demands of the campaign against proposed changes to public sector pensions. This tension pervaded other accounts where participants were trying to combine taking action against immediate threats with thinking about how to write new political scripts and ‘perform new worlds’.

I will return to this later, but first want to point to a very different form of ‘getting organized’ in what Jane Wills described as the revival of community organizing. This, of course, was not new but was taking new forms in a number of broad-based community alliances modelled on the success of

London Citizens: for example, in its work to secure the London Living Wage and in the formation of a Community Land Trust. As Chapter 3 described, the alliances were formed out of what Jane termed ‘*islands of social capital*’, and the work generated new kinds of public relationships and political action. London Citizens has understandably been very attractive to politicians, but at the same time the alliance had considerable success in holding politicians and other decision-makers to account for the pledges they made. This is the terrain of what in Chapter 3 I termed the ‘perverse alignments’ between activist projects and governmental programmes, mediated here through the discourses of faith, responsibility and active citizenship. Those working in organizations such as Southall Black Sisters have suggested that inter-faith alliances were tending to reinforce hardline positions on gender and sexuality, abortion and reproduction: where there was conflict, more ‘liberal’ positions were sacrificed in the interests of alliance-building, including alliances on projects of civil renewal that were much favoured by the Conservative-led coalition government (Patel 2011). However, as I argued in Chapter 3, the possibility of perverse alignments does not erase the capacity of activists to inflect discourses, policies and resources to more ‘progressive’ political ends.

A rather different engagement with rewriting the political script centred on attempts to renew the political left in Britain. Ruth Lister described her associations with Compass as generating new forms of democratic public politics:

It takes positions I feel comfortable with, and I like the way it works – it tries to be democratic. It tries to bring different strands of politics (green, left, social democratic) together, it offers a pluralist politics and it is open-minded – it operates in a good way. It is also future-oriented, trying to articulate the kind of vision that Labour failed to do. (Ruth Lister)

The work of Compass has some resonances with my discussion of the political work associated with linking ‘inside’ actors (in this case mainstream politicians) with academics, campaigners and social movements (see Chapters 4, 6, 7). Again it has attracted critics; its closeness to ‘mainstream’ politics, especially some strands of the Labour Party, made it an uncomfortable place for those disenchanted with the workings of party politics in general and New Labour in particular; and its attempt to work across different constituencies in a democratic way tended to produce reports that some view as lacking in substance. But it also did sharp campaigning work (for example, on the politics of debt), and the publication of ‘Plan B’, an alternative economic strategy for Britain produced by a group of leading left economists, was widely welcomed. Its earlier (and continuing) work on delineating a vision of the Good Society offered a challenge to the Conservative project of the Big Society while drawing on many of the strands of creative thinking and action that the Conservative Party had sought to appropriate.

However, these attempts to renew and reinvigorate democratic politics do not speak strongly to earlier formations of feminism, anti-racism, or LGBT politics. Many participants spoke of their concern about both the reversal of what had been achieved – the kinds of inscription of feminism in social policy discussed in Chapter 4 – and the loss of an explicitly feminist activism. This relates to the erasure of feminist politics in the face of Third Way and neoliberal strategies discussed by Angela McRobbie, which I analysed in Chapter 8. However, feminist bodies such as the Fawcett Society, the Women's Budget Group and Southall Black Sisters, together with a multitude of local groups, were continuing to raise issues of gender inequality, and to campaign for change and against cuts (Fawcett Society 2011). And feminist issues were threaded through other mobilizations: the Living Wage campaign of London Citizens took up issues of low-paid women's work; the Good Society of Compass drew on feminist agendas and perspectives; UNISON was strengthening its use of equality impact studies to challenge employer-led changes; and feminist performative repertoires were integral to many of the new forms of street protest and occupation.

Many of the younger participants were involved in new feminist debates and actions: in local, grassroots forms of feminist politics, in anti-pornography and street-harassment campaigns, in protests against the opening of new lap-dancing venues, in work on rape and domestic violence, and so on (see Banyard 2010; Redfern and Aune 2010). These campaigns resonate with those of the 1970s in the way they summon a politics of identity, but were taking place in a landscape in which Kurdish women, Palestinian women, Sikh women, Black women and other groups were shaping and speaking diverse forms of feminist politics, and in which feminism had a much stronger engagement with transnational and global struggles against injustice. Debates within the academy were engaged with how to combine scholarship and activism in these times (see, for example, Maskovsky 2011 on the possibility of an activist anthropology, and the Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010, on 'scholar activism'). But there was some ambivalence about how to conduct feminist politics in these times. The following is taken from a discussion with three young women at a workshop in 2011 at which I spoke about the research leading up to this book:

Participant A: I can see women getting angry again, and that is wonderful. They told us feminism was over, but it's not.

Participant B: Yes, but I am uneasy about how not to just replicate the politics of the past. This is not 1968, and we can't recapture that moment; we have to find our own way.

[Janet: So what is your own way?]

Participant B: It's working on issues that affect the women we meet and work with. Enabling them to have a voice.

Participant C: And it's about finding new ways of doing politics that link us more into global agendas – the big ones, like the environment, anti-capitalism, social justice, but also supporting individual women in oppressive regimes, working for peace, in prison, awaiting deportation. That's where my main energy is.

Participant B: But don't you think we have to work first where we are, to practise it in our own lives and try to link in to other women around us?

[Pause]

Participant A: But I think it's much harder now. We have to make harder choices about how to make a living while we are doing all this, and whether making a living is possible anymore. I'm just not sure what the future holds.

This discussion exemplifies many of the tensions faced by young women I met in the course of this research but also speaks to the difficulty of finding coherent definitions of what a feminist politics might be in these times and how it might be conducted. Protests, campaigns and new political mobilizations were only part of the story. Many participants were continuing to work through what they termed a more 'practical' politics, using what spaces of power and influence were available to them:

Sometimes I try not to think about the big picture, however awful it is. I just try to do what I can in my own corner. (Ruth Lister)

Her corner was, she admitted, one of relative privilege. Now a baroness with a seat in the House of Lords, Ruth continued to bring a gender perspective into her writing and her political work in Compass, and into debates on welfare reform. She noted how most of the Labour benches of the Grand Committee of which she was a member, apart from the chair of that group, were women (what had been termed 'a battery of baronesses'), challenging ministers on the detail of proposed legislation as the 2011 Welfare Reform Bill was being debated.

Here and elsewhere participants were struggling to make policy 'less bad than it might have been', but also to use it to generate positive forms of change. Adi Cooper, at the time still working in a senior local government role, was exploring the potential, as well as the dangers, of current policies on localization from the vantage point of a senior local government manager:

I think there's a vacuum that opens that allows potential ... I actually think there's a potential here for ... I'm trying to avoid the ... Big Society rubbish rhetoric, sorry, but there is something about if the state is shrinking then it opens up opportunities to renegotiate the social contract for communities to reclaim some of that, but unfortunately it often comes out of negatives. Resistance movements and activism and politics are often in response to negative stuff aren't they? It comes out of what you can't have or you don't have or you're prevented from having. But there is an opportunity in that kind of shrinking [of the state] for a different way of community to develop. The danger is that it only develops

in that kind of space where people are in positions of privilege and power, and those who are dispossessed and disadvantaged aren't able to, and there's always that risk, isn't there? (Adi Cooper)

There was cynicism here (*'Big Society rubbish'*) and scepticism (*'the danger is ...'*). But there was also hope – about potential, about what was being opened up. At the start she was struggling for words that were not complicit with the government's own discourse (*'trying to avoid the rhetoric'*). She, like others, viewed the Big Society and proposed localization policies (including the Localism Bill, 2011) as ripe for critique, but also saw them as attractive in that they placed more emphasis on ways of living together, on the local and on ethical practices of everyday life.

Others warned that such mobilizations were likely to be spatially uneven and to open up different contradictory alignments between a gendered politics of place and identity on the one hand and other political projects of resistance and regeneration:

It's about how you see politics – as party politics or informed by opposition to some monolithic neoliberalism or as more complex and which engages with where people are on the ground. There is still a need for a politics informed by a gender perspective but what is different now from the 1980s is that gender on its own isn't enough – but that form of politics based on identity and locality still has a place. So the way I see the Big Society is to see it as contradictory (an assemblage if you like) which will be played out differently in different places. In some communities and on some issues there will be opportunities to pursue different rationalities and different outcomes, liminal spaces will be opened up. But they are likely to be limited and circumscribed. (Sue Brownill)

Sue looked back to her early days of activism and saw current policy as offering a continuation of the kind of community programmes through which neighbourhoods were funded, governed and incorporated in the past. She worried that the initiatives in which she was (positively) involved were just *'exceptions in a sea of cuts'* (taking us back to the point about spatial differences highlighted earlier). She also wondered whether, by engaging with the possibilities opened up by policy, this provided legitimation for the cuts themselves:

As ever with community work there are these dilemmas and I think women are more prepared to make these compromises and negotiate the contradictions. (Sue Brownill)

This is the essence of *'working the spaces of power'*. Rather than celebrating political agency or assuming the all-consuming power of neoliberalism, I have tried, in this book, to illuminate the ways in which different rationalities and commitments were (unevenly) aligned through gendered labour. And I have shown how such labour has been generative of new possibilities in how we might live and work.

Each of the kinds of spaces of power I have discussed here is likely to be temporary, fragile, and traversed by ambiguity and contradiction. This is not, then, a platform for the future. My aim, rather, has been to show how currents and threads within the present political and ideological project echo earlier struggles and surface some of the same dilemmas. While many young activists currently engaged in dramatic, radical and disruptive performances have an image of older movements as rather dour, boring and conventional, it is possible to map echoes and resonances: between, for example, the dramatic occupation of Greenham Common, with its innovative communication channels and its theatrical and symbolic queering of a military installation, and the activities of UK Uncut in 2011 as it occupied banks and shops, and installed crèches, libraries and other public facilities; between the Free University projects of the 1970s, the housing squats of the 1980s and Occupy's take-over of a building owned by Swiss bank UBS and its launch of a 'Bank of Ideas' in London in November 2011; or between the older Reclaim the Streets marches and the recent Slut Walks. This is not to say that the *politics* is the same; but that there are resonances in the political performances across different times. Each is a site of antagonism, negotiation and alliance building. Each has to deal with questions of difference. Each builds on the profound shifts in political culture produced by the impact of feminism and other social movements, whether implicitly or explicitly. Each is the site of intense 'border work' through which new possibilities are realized. And each is constituted through the forms of generative labour discussed in earlier chapters.

Generative (and gendered) labour

One of the aims of this book has been to show the significance of the generative labour through which new possibilities and practices emerge. In this final section I want to explore present and future possibilities, returning to the three dimensions of generative labour introduced in Chapter 1: those of 'making visible', 'creative labour' and 'public conversations'.

Making visible

One way of 'making visible' is through embodied protest – on the streets, in demonstrations and actions that testify to collective anger, distrust, unease and disaffection from dominant ideologies and political groups. But the work of making visible is analytical as well as performative. It involves drawing attention to the changing patterns of inequality, exclusion, hardship and ill-health and also articulating that which is silent and hidden from view (Hilary Land, Sue Himmelweit and Ruth Lister's work on gender; P.G. Macioti's engagement

with the politics of sex work and migration; Sukhwant Dhaliwal's concerns about the silencing of issues of sexuality in faith based activism; the fate of LGBT prisoners in Sarah Lamble's work). It involves highlighting the gendered and racialized impact of cuts and austerity politics: how informal care work is intensifying, how racial abuse and police harassment are increasing, how responsibilities for filling gaps in health, education and welfare services are being devolved to 'families' and 'communities', both highly gendered entities; and how pressures generated by inequalities of money, time, care and work are exacerbating mental and physical ill-health.

There is already plenty of evidence about the effects of austerity on different population groups and places across the global north and south. There are signs of a new journalism of poverty, updating the black-and-white photos of inner-city slums in Charles Booth's studies of the late nineteenth century for an ever-hungry media which both brings to attention and exploits personal narratives of hardship (constituting what Chouliaraki terms a 'spectatorship of suffering'; Chouliaraki 2006). But participants did not just seek to bring those living with hardship and poverty to public attention; they sought to bring them to collective voice and to action. Programmes of development and empowerment (Chapter 3) may have been double-edged but they nevertheless had profound impacts on the discursive repertoires through which negotiations with power were conducted and on the people who conducted them. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 traced how such repertoires informed practices of 'making visible' through a combination of research, action and policy intervention. There are difficult challenges for academics and other researchers trying to use creative ways of framing research in order to secure funding for the investigation of new patterns of exploitation, hardship and disaffection in a climate in which such agendas are unlikely to attract research funding. But nevertheless many were engaging with current policy agendas, making visible the impact of budgetary and policy changes or bringing alternative economic and social experiments to public attention.

There are, of course, dangers inherent in allowing such experiments to be taken up by government; the landscape is already littered with green papers and policy briefings profusely illustrated with vignettes of projects, pilots and 'vanguard' initiatives. These both flatten complexity, removing particular projects from the contexts that generated them, and also announce that all is well, that critics and analysts are wrong since the policy concerned is already successful. One of the lessons of this book, then, is that 'evidence' and 'publicity' alone are insufficient: action depends on alliances between researchers, policy actors, think-tanks, journalists, political parties and social movements, coupled with the performative work of campaigners and activists. The work of making visible is both analytical and political, and is most powerful when these come together, creating the capacity for new 'public conversations' to emerge.

Public conversations

Earlier chapters of this book have traced how the work of ‘making visible’ inequalities and exclusions and the creative labour of doing new things was framed by a series of public conversations that shifted the discursive repertoires of government and of the wider public culture. Such conversations succeeded in challenging ideologies that rendered then dominant ideas and practices natural and inevitable. They challenged normative ideologies of the ‘naturalness’ of the nuclear family founded on heterosexual marriage; of the inevitable superiority of men as leaders and managers; of class as the fundamental line of division and identity in Britain; of the subordinations of race embedded in the legacies of Britain as a colonial power; of women’s dependence on male breadwinners and subordinate contributions to the economy, and so on. And each of the policy shifts traced in previous chapters rested on the success of building a public conversation about the particular issue concerned, whether of women’s full citizenship within the welfare system, the needs and rights of children, workplace discrimination, pay inequality, domestic violence, the exploitation of migrant workers in global production and care chains and many other issues.

These conversations not only reshaped public culture but also enabled the remaking of public institutions: the state, local government, public policies, the professions, the public sector. The paradox of the present, however, is that the space for such conversations, supported by a public sector and public institutions, has become impoverished precisely at the moment when we face ideological framings that seek to naturalize a new common sense of the pre-eminence of ‘the market’. One task, then, is to find new spaces and actions of publicness: the constitution of a new commons. In other work (Mahony, Newman and Barnett 2010; Newman 2011), myself and colleagues have drawn attention to processes of ‘public-making’: of constituting public actors, of framing issues as public issues and of articulating an explicitly public discourse.³ We have also argued that notions of publicness have to be recovered from their inscription in particular institutional forms, from their associations with a common people circumscribed by the boundaries of the nation state and from the privileging of rational, dispassionate styles of communication (Newman 2007; Newman and Clarke 2009). The work of some participants has stretched notions of a collective commons to encompass transnational and global agendas (through NGOs, legal practices specializing in human rights work and activist groups using ‘monitory’ power – see Chapter 4). Others sought to bring traditional public values – equality, openness, justice – into the managerialized and marketized spaces of public service delivery (see Chapter 5). Those working on environmental issues sought to redefine the meanings of publicness to encompass ethical agendas and global notions of responsibility, not only for the present but for future populations. And this postscript has suggested processes through which new publics might be constituted: the capacity-building work

of UNISON, the alliances formed out of community mobilizations and the participative ethos of Compass through to the 'We are the 99 per cent' slogan of the Occupy movement.

The work of participants has also shown the significance of discourse: the words through which issues are framed and the meanings that are generated. The idea of the Big Society re-inflected publicness through the prism of locality and ethical conduct, displacing wider interdependencies and issues of resource (re)distribution. The idea of a 'Big Society' may have been short-lived, but the emphasis on localization continues both within and beyond Britain. The question, then, is how to retrieve ethical concerns as necessary features of *public* life, rather than as foreclosed by bounded conceptions of 'family', 'community' and 'faith'. This could open up the possibility of a more political framing of the social; one that reposes moral questions about care, welfare and responsibility as public, rather than simply personal, questions. As this book has shown, public conversations do important work to reframe dominant discourses and offer alternative political repertoires and social imaginaries.

Creative labour

The work of public-making is creative labour, stitching together new alliances and finding new ways of performing and enacting politics. As I have shown, the creative professions often seek to elicit emotional as well as cognitive responses to political issues. For example, Chapter 2 described the work of Cecilia Wee, whose '*spectacles of resistance*' challenged the sponsorship of cultural institutions by the oil industry, and whose wider work mobilizes actions and events connecting art and politics. She, and many of the artists she works with, saw their creativity as a means of expressing their politics:

Lots of you [academics] are involved in policy, you can influence things directly. For me there is no alternative, this is the only voice I have. (Cecilia Wee)

At the same time creative forms of performing politics were at the heart of many of the new movements and protests, including anti-globalization, UK Uncut, Occupy, and new forms of feminist and queer politics. Much of this links back to the 'transgressive' enactments of politics discussed in Chapter 2:

Traditional leftist politics can be very analytical and dour. But queer politics is often more playful and creative. You are doing politics by making connections and creating alternatives. People can really grab on to that. I always look to the success of Reclaim the Streets: people always want to come to a party. (Sarah Lamble)

But the creative labour with which I am concerned was not only transgressive; it was also that of stitching together or weaving new possibilities. I want here to go back to one of the quotes from in Chapter 2 because it captures

the creative work out of which new things – discourses, actors, movements, projects, experiments – were generated:

I think what I bring is lateral thinking: I am a very good lateral thinker, I like making connections. I think quite a lot of women do that but [laughs] I also think that being a socialist feminist – endlessly having to knit things together, to see how things are connected and to make the connections and to see where to make the connections and how to exploit the connections and work with the contradictions. I am not sure whether you learn those things from being an activist or whether you become an activist because you have got that kind of brain. (Jane Foot)

These are precisely the skills and capacities that are integral to the work of women struggling to find and mobilize spaces of power in the present, and to the work of participants in public services having to implement massive cuts. In early 2012 Sonia Khan spoke of how, in her local authority, she was engaged in the creative labour of integrating services both to make savings and to make them more outward facing, with the aim of supporting the most vulnerable as inequalities worsened. Others, as I showed earlier, are using governmental discourses of localization and the Big Society in creative ways.

Creative labour is, as the extract from Jane implies, relational labour. It is out of such labour that new political entities – new publics, new forms of protest, new ways of practising politics – are generated. And such labour rests on what Jane sees as a political mentality: one of making conceptual connections as well as knitting together disparate entities. This is the ‘border work’ of Chapter 7, in which participants mobilized spaces of power at the interface between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ rationalities, doing the work of assembling, translating, stitching, threading, brokering and working the contradictions. These attributes were not, of course, confined to women, but they tend to be created in or amplified by the fractured and diverse working lives of the women concerned, enabling skills and capacities to be carried between different sites. In particular, the experience of being simultaneously ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ enabled many women to bring activism into their working lives, brokering and translating between different rationalities in order to bring about extensive policy and institutional shifts. But it is uncomfortable work that raised some key dilemmas: where to put your energy; how to sustain multiple and often competing loyalties and commitments; how to make a living while living your politics; how to combine working for an imagined future while living, prefiguring that future in the here and now.

This takes us back to the analysis in Chapter 6 of the work of Gibson-Graham and Roseneil who argued that dissent should not stop short at critique but should try to enact new imagined worlds within the present. This is perhaps the long-lasting contribution of feminism, queer, anti-racist and other forms of what were, and often remain, transgressive political movements. As well as critiquing dominant formations of power, they performed new styles of

politics, often based on non-hierarchical and non-violent ways of organizing. They also combined critiques of the welfare state and professional power with the creation of new forms of provision. Many of the current forms of protest and dissent noted earlier carry into the present these ways of combining critique and creativity, generating new forms of democratic practice, offering alternative forms of education, care and welfare, and tracing the contours of new repertoires of public-political engagement. These offer alternative imaginaries of how we might live and work together, not in a fantasized future (when the financial crisis is over) but in the grimly real present.

In the past many women talked of how they tried to live the future in the present, modelling the kind of society they wanted, and we can see such creative labour continuing in some of the spaces of protest that embody new forms of democratic practice and global interconnectedness. But as Sue Brownill suggested:

As academics and activists there is a difficult act of not closing off the positive but also not over-celebrating what can be achieved. We also need to keep re-politicizing the debates, but through a politics that is inclusive and grounded, and which itself does not similarly close the spaces for action. It is a dilemma that has always been there, between community politics and class politics, if you like, a dilemma that feminism has always straddled. And therefore there is much to learn from the past, but it needs to be placed within a dramatically changed context. If we can pull that off, through small-scale projects and through maintaining different rationalities, visions about what is to be done, there could be some small grounds for optimism. (Sue Brownill)

Final reflection

One reader of this postscript noted how the writing of this book has itself exemplified the framework I have offered here. The book has tried to make visible some forgotten histories: of how benefits and services were won, how legal changes were secured, how women used spaces within Thatcherism, managerialism and the Third Way to work for progressive forms of change. It has brought missing voices into public conversations about the fate of feminism and other forms of activism in neoliberal times, and challenged some of the stereotypical distinctions between activist outsides and incorporated insides. It has raised important questions about the generative relationship between individual action and collective practice. And it has opened up public conversations between some of the participants through which narratives of the present and future could emerge across lines of difference. Finally, writing the book has been (admittedly a narrow) form of creative labour in which I have tried to stitch together multiple accounts into a series of narratives, drawing out differences rather than trying to construct a coherent whole (in the spirit of the institutional ethnography described in Chapter 1).

As such, it is very different from other books I have written, not least because it has tried to make sense of the times I lived through but also because it is, at heart, a collective product. I want, then, to end by acknowledging the importance of the conversations I have had, both with the individual women who participated and with those others who gave me intellectual and material forms of support (Wendy Larner, John Clarke, Lin Clark, Peggotty Graham, Esther Saraga, Marian Barnes, Sasha Roseneil, Shona Hunter and Clive Newman, at whose party this all began). I also want to thank those who contributed to collective processes of sense-making: the panel at the CASCA conference in 2009 (Catherine Kingfisher, Jeff Maskovsky, Dana-Ain Davis) at which the first paper was presented; the Feminist Reading Group at the Open University; contributors to Economic and Social Research Council seminars at Bristol, Newcastle and the Open University; and those who tolerated me trying to work things out at many invited seminars. Without their engagement and excitement, support and critique, this book would never have been written.