

Austerity, Women and Right-wing Populism

The Case of Monroe vs Hopkins

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Austerity politics in the UK

In the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 and the 2010 General Election, which ended 13 years of rule by the Labour Party, the Conservative Liberal-Democrat Coalition government undertook a programme of drastic cuts to public spending. This was justified by the argument that the previous government had irresponsibly overspent and that the public must now ‘live within their means’ – essentially a revival of the economy-as-household metaphor used by former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher many years earlier. Like in Thatcher’s time, this was an argument which was mostly accepted by the public, who – as intended – made the common-sense intuitive link between household finances and macro-economics. Although there were vibrant protests and anti-austerity campaigns, these did not involve a majority of the population and did not force the government to change course. After the

2015 General Election, a Conservative government continued the austerity programme. Cuts were applied to a great number of welfare benefits such as Child Benefit, Employment and Housing Support Allowance, Universal Credit, but also to the salaries of public sector employees and to the budgets of local authorities, who in their turn were forced to close hundreds of libraries and youth clubs as well as reduce support for creative activities. All these measures together had the combined effect of entrenching social and economic inequality.

Women hit hardest

At a closer look the brunt of austerity was mostly borne by women, thus reversing gains made on gender quality. Although women were already at a disadvantage because of the gender pay gap - they earn 82 p for every pound earned by a man - and were more likely to live in poverty, at the time of writing £22 billion of the £26 billion of ‘savings’

since 2010 have come from women (MacDonald 2018). This was partly due to tax and benefit changes which reward traditional single-earner families with a male 'breadwinner' and penalise the 'second earner' (most likely to be a woman) in dual-income households. Furthermore, according to the Women's Budget Group, public sector job cuts have affected women in particular, as 73% of the work-force is female. Cuts to benefits for low-paid part-time workers have also disproportionately affected women, notably mothers who find it difficult to work full-time because of inadequate childcare support. By 2020, women will have borne 86% of the burden of welfare cuts. (Stewart 2017).

Some groups of women are hit especially hard. Among them are lone mothers, who represent 92% of single parents and are 50% more likely than the average citizen to be living in poverty (ibid). Black and Ethnic Minority women are also particularly vulnerable, as, due to workplace discrimination, they are more likely to be unemployed than white women. These groups depend more than others on the benefits system and are therefore more vulnerable to the cuts, which increases their risk of falling into deeper poverty and deprivation (Women's Budget Group/Runnymede Trust 2017).

The role of right-wing media and popular responses

The tabloid press (with a conservative or right-wing bias) have successfully supported austerity propaganda by vilifying certain social groups such as the unemployed and immigrants as scroungers and burdens on the taxpayer. Positioning these people as objects of resentment has caused a hardening of public attitudes towards them, which then has made further cuts affecting these groups more socially acceptable.

Pro-austerity arguments are often based in old prejudices such as the lingering Victorian fears of the 'residuum': the lazy, feckless and dangerous underclass, who were seen as a demographic threat to other social classes. A large number of the stories proliferating in the tabloid press along these lines additionally draw on ideologies concerning traditional views of social reproduction and family care, putting most of the blame on women: single mothers, unemployed and migrant women with large families - not coincidentally the groups which are also the most vulnerable to austerity cuts - have served as favourite targets for scorn. They are blamed for being irresponsible parents who had too many children. Such accusations tend to play on moral panics about public health.

In particular, food has become a politicised issue within the austerity

context, as the increasing reliance on foodbanks and reports about children going to school hungry have alarmed the public. Commentators in the media, arguing from a mixture of old and new prejudices, have especially singled out working class mothers, blaming them for rising childhood obesity and the poor diets of children. For example, in 2013 celebrity chef Jamie Oliver's bemoaned "the mum and the kid eating chips and cheese out of Styrofoam containers, and behind them is a massive f*cking TV" (Deans 2013). Note that in Oliver's comment mothers, and not fathers, are assumed to be responsible for cooking and preparing meals. Food is thus mobilised within discourses and processes of othering. The reference to televisions and other gadgets in the quote further suggest *en passant* that the poverty experienced by working-class mothers is not real, and that unhealthy food is an irresponsible lifestyle choice and an example of bad parenting.

A part from traditional gender roles, heteronormativity and cis-gender normativity are brought into play to underpin austerity rhetoric. For example, former Prime Minister David Cameron's "hardworking families" rhetoric combines 'hardworking' and 'family', which suggests that the hard work of individuals who are not in families or might have other living arrangements does not matter. On the other hand,

there is the fact that the past few years have seen a renewed activity in feminist and LGBT+ campaigning, from #MeToo to women's marches to the increased visibility of trans rights campaigns. The UK voted for gay marriage in 2013, and there are currently plans to update the Gender Recognition Act to define gender in terms of self-identification rather than biology. Therefore, an austerity discourse which draws on traditional gender and sexual norms is no longer uncontested.

A further form of othering within austerity discourses is the framing of people as unpatriotic subjects. I have mentioned immigrants as key targets for public resentment and have written about this elsewhere (Forkert 2017). However, unlike immigrants - whose very right to be in the country is disputed - British citizens can be vilified as traitorous, often through accusations of lacking respect for the military. These accusations are routinely employed to discriminate those on the Left, as for instance the frequent attacks by the tabloid press on Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn for his anti-imperialist politics show. Conversely, to assert the importance of respect for the military is to make a claim for the authority and moral superiority of traditional values such as the discipline associated with the British national character - symbolised in the stereotype of the 'stiff upper lip' -, adherence to social norms, etc..

Disrespect for the military is also proxy for other controversial issues. Thus it is used as an argument in an intergenerational conflict: the younger generations are accused of lacking gratitude towards the bravery and sacrifices of older generations, particularly those who had served in the Second World War, which still is a powerful symbol of British identity. At this point in history there are few people still alive who served in the Second World War, so that it has become less of a living memory and more of a generalised and simulacral association with older generations. Memories of the backlash in the 1970s against anti-war protestors and stereotypes about scruffy, undisciplined hippies are also deliberately exploited – the tabloids’ obsession with the clothes Corbyn wears during official memorial events is a good example.

Accusations of disrespect for the military have become further politically loaded in the context of discussions about ‘compulsory patriotism’, originally an American concept much employed after the 9/11 attacks and in the war on terror debates. Whilst the 9/11 attacks have, however, not mobilised the same strong support of ‘compulsory patriotism’ in the UK as in the US, the recent rise of the populist right and far right - represented by the UK Independence Party, the Brexiteers and street protest groups such as the English Defence League

or Britain First – has created pressures on mainstream politics to embrace compulsory patriotism in the form of English nationalism, lest this be ceded to the far right. Conversely, those who do not embrace patriotism are dismissed as an out-of-touch metropolitan elite (ironically a right-wing version of Stalin’s “rootless cosmopolitan”, a discriminatory term for Jews).

Jack Monroe and Katie Hopkins as paradigmatic figures of Austerity Britain

These three themes underpinning austerity discourses – responsibility for providing healthy food, the traditional role of women and respect for the military – became issues in the controversy around a dispute between two public figures: the food blogger and anti-poverty campaigner Jack Monroe and the right-wing columnist Katie Hopkins. In different ways they are paradigmatic figures of Austerity Britain.

Jack Monroe first came to prominence through a food blog entitled *A Girl Called Jack* (now renamed as *Cooking on a Bootstrap*), on which she shared cheap recipes which could feed a family under £10/week. Formerly a call handler for the Essex County Fire and Rescue Service, Monroe became unemployed after having given birth and being unable to negotiate changes to her work schedule to accommodate

childcare. She was living in poverty and struggling to feed her family, which led her to develop the blog. The term ‘Jack’ referred to a ‘Jack-of-all-trades’: someone who is good at fixing things and does a combination of odd jobs to make a living.

Monroe became known as both a food writer (she has since published several cookbooks with budget recipes and written for *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*) and as an outspoken anti-poverty campaigner. In her newspaper columns and in her campaigning, Monroe consistently rejected these stereotypes and moralising



Jack Monroe, English writer, journalist and campaigner, in 2015

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arguments and contested the necessity of austerity cuts in general. For example, in a

recent article in *The Guardian* she sharply criticised the government’s decimation of free school meals and pointed out the hypocrisy of “those who sit back and moralise under a warm roof with food in the cupboard” (Monroe 2018).

Unsurprisingly, Monroe’s views on food poverty have made her the target of columnists in the right-wing *Daily Mail*, including Sarah Vine (the wife of former Prime Minister David Cameron), who accused her of choosing a life of poverty, and Richard Littlejohn, who described her as “a cross between [Labour Party politician] Yvette Cooper and [cookbook writer] Delia Smith, with tattoos” (Littlejohn 2013). Littlejohn berated her for resigning from her job at the fire brigade, calling it a “lifestyle choice” – ignoring the difficulties she faced in securing flexible working arrangement or job-shares that would enable her to keep her job. He also got some other facts wrong, including her marital status (Monroe 2013).

Monroe has been frequently targeted by right-wing commentators and received online abuse not only because of her living circumstances, but also because of her gender identity. Although using the pronouns she/her, Monroe identifies as non-binary; she came out as lesbian at the age of fifteen and identifies as trans. At one point, Monroe had considered transitioning and having a double mastectomy, which provoked

a furious response from journalist James Dellingpole, who, in a blog post on the far-right website *Breitbart*, compared the operation to “drowning a sack of puppies” (Dellingpole 2015).

Right-wing newspaper columnist Katie Hopkins first attracted media attention in 2006 as a contestant on *The Apprentice*, a reality television programme, in which she made a series of negative statements about the other contestants, working-class children’s names and overweight people (*The Guardian* 2013). Hopkins worked for the tabloid newspaper *The Sun*, who promoted her as “Britain’s most controversial columnist”. She then left *The Sun* in 2015 to work for the *Daily Mail* until 2017. She has since become known for her extremist views, like comparing refugees to cockroaches, saying that Islam disgusted her and expressing conspiracy theories about white genocide. She repeatedly attracted complaints and legal challenges for both the content of her columns and her Twitter feed; the latter will be discussed below.

The Monroe vs. Hopkins case

The issues discussed above - gender identity, anti-austerity campaigns and perceived lack of respect for the military - came together in the Monroe vs. Hopkins court case. This was triggered by a Twitter exchange in 2015, in which Hopkins accused Monroe of approving

the defacing of a war memorial during an anti-austerity demonstration. A memorial to women of the Second World War in Whitehall, Central



Katie Hopkins in 2018
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London, had been vandalised with the words “Fuck Tory Scum”. Hopkins was in fact confusing Monroe with Laurie Penny, another prominent anti-austerity campaigner and *New Statesman* columnist. Penny had tweeted from her @PennyRed account saying that she didn’t “have a problem” with the graffiti as a form of protest because “the bravery of past generations does not oblige us to be cowed today”. Hopkins attributed the tweet to Monroe, tweeting her former account @MsJackMonroe and saying: “Scrawled on any memorials recently? Vandalised the memory of those who fought for your freedom. Grandma got any more medals?” Monroe, who is from

a military family, responded by saying “I have NEVER ‘scrawled on a memorial’. Brother in the RAF [Royal Air Force]. Dad was a Para in the Falklands. You’re a piece of shit.” She then followed this up with a demand for a public apology: “Dear @KTHopkins, public apology + £5K to migrant rescue and I won’t sue. It’ll be cheaper for you and v satisfying for me.” Hopkins deleted her tweet but refused to apologise, asking what the difference was between “irritant @PennyRed and social anthrax @MsJackMonro”. The judge ruled that Hopkins’ tweets were defamatory and had caused reputational damage to Monroe. Jack Monroe won the case in court on 10 March 2017, with Hopkins being ordered to pay hundreds of thousands of pounds in damages and legal fees.

Why does the court case matter?

The confusion of Monroe and Penny reveals how easily right-wing commentators conflate the issues of anti-austerity campaigning, trans and queer identities and (lack of) respect for the military. Notably, Laurie Penny identifies as pansexual and is involved in polyamorous relationships. There is a sense that the sexuality of both Penny and Monroe represents something unsettling and transgressive for right-wing columnists like Katie Hopkins, who then make a link from the challenging of sexual norms to other forms of transgression, such as vandalising war

memorials or supporting others who do.

The court case was the beginning of a series of events in 2017 which led to Hopkins’ financial ruin and the collapse of her career as a mainstream journalist, and her self-reinvention as a spokesperson for the alt-right. After losing the court case in March 2017, Hopkins left LBC Radio in May 2017 after tweeting about the need for a “final solution” following a terrorist attack in Manchester. In July 2017 she was tweeting on board a boat which was commissioned by Defend Europe, an international coalition of far-right groups formed with the intention of disrupting and harassing NGOs rescuing refugees in the Mediterranean. Her association with projects such as these possibly explains why Hopkins did not apologise to Monroe or donate £5,000 to a refugee organisation: such a gesture would have made it more difficult for her to operate as a far-right spokesperson. On 27 November 2017 Hopkins’ contract with the *Daily Mail* newspaper was not renewed after a series of complaints from readers, although a spokesperson said that this was by mutual consent and gave no further details. The collapse of her journalistic career, combined with the costs of the court case, forced her to sell her home and apply for an insolvency arrangement to avoid bankruptcy. Hopkins then became a columnist for *Breitbart* and the Canadian far-right news

website *The Rebel Media*, which features contributors such as Tommy Robinson, founder of the English Defence League.

There are lessons to be learnt from the court case and Hopkins' further movements. For a while, Hopkins provided profitable clickbait to right-wing tabloids, which was controversial but attractive at a time of declining sales, until her views were considered too extreme even for them. However, her controversial tweets still give her a presence in mainstream media, enabling her to claim an anti-establishment outsider status within the networked alt-right. Although the Monroe-Hopkins case can be largely considered to have a positive outcome, questions remain about where far-right commentators go when they are forced off mainstream platforms.

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