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Austerity Neoliberalism: a new discursive formation

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Austerity does not necessarily have to be neoliberal and neoliberalism does not have any necessary connection to austerity. But taken together they represent a toxic combination, one that attacks us body and soul.



One Born Every Minute

One of many legacies left by the late cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, in [Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices](#) was to emphasise that to understand "the effects and consequences of representation" we must consider "historical specificity". That is, he writes, "the way representational practices operate in concrete historical situations, in actual practice". With this in mind, we want to consider some cultural trends that have surfaced in British austerity culture and how they are entangled with neoliberal rationalities and philosophies. Our aim is to explore whether we are seeing the emergence of a specific discursive formation that we might call 'austerity neoliberalism'. To suggest this is not only to draw links between austerity and neoliberalism – they are there to be sure – but, more than this, to raise questions about whether they are being put to work in contemporary capitalism in a way that is mutually reinforcing, coming to constitute a novel formation – like Hall's idea of 'authoritarian populism'.

Neoliberalism is a contested term. [Gill & Scharff](#) describe it as "a mode of political and economic rationality characterised by privatisation, deregulation

and a rolling back and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision". In its place is the market – market exchange seen as an ethic in itself, capable of [guiding human action](#), and spreading out across social life so that it reconfigures relations between "[governing and governed, power and knowledge, sovereignty and territoriality](#)". Our own interests have focussed on the role and force of neoliberalism in remaking subjectivity in ways that construct the individual, as [Lisa Duggan](#) and [Wendy Brown](#) suggest, as a calculating, entrepreneurial and 'responsibilised' subject, wholly responsible for their own life outcomes. We are interested not simply in how this construction erases structural inequalities and exculpates brutal social and economic forces, but also in how it materialises new ways of being in the world – that diminish what it is to be human.

There are clear links between neoliberalism and austerity. As [Tracy Jensen](#) and others, such as [Kim Allen et al.](#), comment, the "objectives of 'austerity' align neatly with those of neo-liberalism: to discipline labour, to reduce the role of state and to redistribute income, wealth and power from labour to capital". Britain has seen vast changes to the socio-economic landscape thrust forward under the rationale that austerity measures are needed to pull the country out of recession and place it on the road to recovery. We have seen a devastating increase in social inequality. Increasing changes to welfare provisions like the bedroom tax and cuts to disability and sickness benefits, harsh benefits sanctions and reorganisations and cut backs to state-led services at the same time as rises in [homelessness](#), [food bank usage](#) and [deprivation](#) have emerged.

However as some scholars have argued, austerity is not only an economic programme of 'fiscal management', but also a site of ideological and 'discursive struggle' – and this struggle plays out across government, public sites and popular culture in particular ways with very real material outcomes. As Tracey Jensen and Imogen Tyler point out in a [special issue on 'Austerity Parenting'](#) in 2012, the "public narrative of austerity" increasingly upholds the individual as responsible for their own social and economic status, as well as accountable for their own locality, a bustling economy and increasing independence from the state. Some have explored the emerging importance of [thrift](#), [nostalgia](#) or [gendered domestic entrepreneurship](#) to show how austerity is shaping current formations of the self in the cultural sphere. Other examples of this are studies on the '[stay-at-home mother](#)', the '[recessionista](#)' and the book, [Gendering the Recession](#).

We want to briefly consider three other useful ways of thinking together 'austerity' and 'neoliberalism'. First, and continuing our psychosocial focus, we wish to draw attention to the increasing emphasis on 'character' in contemporary Britain. [As Anna Bull and Kim Allen have put it in a recent call for papers](#), "A growing number of policy initiatives and reports have asserted the importance of nurturing character in children and young people – with qualities such as 'grit', 'optimism', 'resilience', 'zest', and 'bouncebackability' located as preparing young people for the challenges of the 21st century and enabling social mobility." Resilience, in particular, has become the neoliberal trait par excellence for surviving austerity. [As Mark Neocleous argues](#):

"Good subjects will 'survive and thrive in any situation', they will 'achieve balance' across several insecure and part-time jobs, they have 'overcome life's hurdles' such as facing retirement without a pension to speak of, and just 'bounce back' from whatever life throws, whether it be cuts to benefits, wage freezes or global economic meltdown."

Likewise, the [new focus on 'confidence' as a panacea for gender inequality](#) operates within the '[psychic life of neoliberalism](#)' turning away from collective resistance against injustice, and towards a remodeling and upgrading of the self.

In turn, looking at the parenting and family policy that emerged under the coalition government there has been an emphasis on how character can solve the ills of 'poor parenting', which constructs working-class families as 'bad' parents in need of monitoring and disciplining. [Tracey Jensen argues](#) that the preoccupation with 'tough love' in social policy places increased prominence upon parents' character to realise children's social mobility. This, she asserts, "[names the crisis](#) of social immobility as one of parental indulgence, failure to set boundaries, moral laxity and disciplinary incompetence", seeing the responsibility of class inequalities placed on an individual's shoulders.

New forms of surveillance are also a key part of austerity neoliberalism. Austerity has seen a rolling back of the state furthering neoliberal mentalities, such as the increasing withdrawal of welfare support and [pushing of individuals on welfare into work](#). This rolling back of the welfare state has occurred as the state attempts increasingly to observe its citizens and intervene into private life across multiple domains (schools, health, obesity, etc.). [Val Gillies explores](#) how, following New Labour's cue, the coalition government gradually increased its intervention into the family at ever-earlier stages. For example, she notes how under the Family Nurse Partnerships certain pregnant women whose unborn child is considered 'at risk' of social exclusion are assigned nurses who will teach them parenting skills to ensure social exclusion of the unborn child does not occur. As Gillies, [among others](#), suggests, these types of surveillance mechanisms and interventional practices often target the most marginalised in society, retaining and reifying longheld inequalities around gender, class and 'race'.

Lastly, austerity neoliberalism has seen a simultaneous idealisation and dismantling of the state in the cultural realm. Recent research on [televisual birth](#) explores how Channel 4's award-winning show, *One Born Every Minute*, obscures the current context and effects of austerity by emphasising the importance of individual narratives of conflict and resolution through the mothers, families and midwives featured. On the one hand, the NHS/state is idealised but, on the other hand, there is a systematic failure to engage with how austerity has impacted on maternal care, midwifery and maternity wards. This one example of recent "[spectacular dramatizations of the paradoxes of the political present](#)" sees nurses and midwives depicted through a soft-focus image of self-sacrifice, care and romance, seen as 'angels', whose virtues are put to work to obscure a healthcare system that often seems to be at breaking point. This idealisation of hospital life and silence around austerity effects works to distract attention away from the material effects of austerity, cloaking them in a rosy glow in which 'love' and 'goodness' can seemingly compensate for a crumbling NHS.

In all three examples – the new cultural obsession with 'character', the intensification of surveillance, and the romanticisation of welfare and healthcare workers – we see not simply austerity at work, nor simply the impact of neoliberalism, but a distinctive formation where the two become mutually reinforcing. The UK has been through periods of austerity in the recent past – not least in the 1920s and 1930s and in the post-war period. However difficult these periods were (e.g. marked by considerable economic hardship and rationing), what is significant is that they were shaped by entirely different ideological and cultural framings – not by neoliberalism. It is the systematic and patterned framing of austerity measures through an individualizing neoliberal discourse that distinguishes the current formation as one of austerity neoliberalism. Austerity does not necessarily have to be neoliberal and neoliberalism does not have any necessary connection to austerity. But taken together they represent a toxic combination, one that attacks us body and soul.

Part of the [Anti-Austerity and Media Activism series](#) with Goldsmiths.


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