

WORKING THE SPACES OF POWER

ACTIVISM, NEOLIBERALISM
AND GENDERED LABOUR

Janet Newman

B L O O M S B U R Y

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BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC

First published in 2012 by

Bloomsbury Academic
an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

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CIP records for this book are available from the British Library and the
Library of Congress

ISBN 978-1-84966-489-9 (hardback)

ISBN 978-1-84966-490-5 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-78093-277-4 (ebook)

This book is produced using paper that is made from wood grown in managed, sustainable forests. It is natural, renewable and recyclable. The logging and manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by the MPG Books Group, Bodmin, Cornwall

Cover design: Sharon Cluett

Cover image: © Alice Kettle

www.bloomsburyacademic.com

Participants

The book draws on interviews with over fifty women who have taken activist commitments into their working lives. In the notes below I indicate some of the kinds of politics and work they talked about in our conversations. Their engagements with power span six decades, from the 1960s to the present, and the notes also suggest the generational cohort to which each participant is linked. These are not exact and refer to the period of their political formation rather than age. Generation 1 (G1) came to politics in the 1940s and 1950s; generation 2 (G2) in the 1960s and early 1970s; generation 3 (G3) in the late 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s; and generation 4 (G4) in the 1990s and beyond.

The notes against each name do not extend beyond the date when we met (interviews were conducted 2009–2011) and by no means do justice to the richness and complexity of the participants' individual working lives.

Beverley Anderson (G1) Jamaican Foreign Service; local government councillor; teacher, Inner London Education Authority; head teacher, Oxfordshire; presenter of 'Black on Black' TV programme; Council of Educational Technology; Board of the Arts Council; Chief Executive of Booker Trust.

Marian Barnes (G3) Local government researcher; universities of Leeds, Birmingham and Brighton; Mental Health Act Commissioner; Professor of Social Policy; researcher and author.

Bec Bayliss (G4) Women's refuge manager; social worker; Sandwell Rape Crisis Centre; South Birmingham Women's Forum; Women's Aid schools project.

Sue Beardsmore (G2) Further education teacher; youth arts projects; London Borough of Hackney councillor; Leeds Voluntary Action project; organization development consultant.

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Davina Cooper (G3) Local government councillor; Warwick School of Law; University of Keele; University of Kent; Arts and Humanities Research Council Centre for Law, Gender and Sexuality; Professor of Law and Social Theory; author.

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Jan Etienne (G3) Labour Party politician; diversity consultant; Women's Rights Officer, London Borough of Hackney; Race Relations Adviser in the London Borough of Haringey; head of the Race Equality Unit, London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham; former Chair, Ebony Sistren Housing Association and Africa Refugee Housing Association; tutor at Birkbeck, University of London.

Jane Foot (G2) Community work; housing campaigns; anti-privatization; Services to Community Action and Trade Unions; local government policy roles, London Borough of Camden; Local Government Improvement and Development Agency; head of policy and quality, London Borough of Merton; consultant; researcher; author.

Lisa Harker (G3) BBC; Child Poverty Action Group; Chair, Day Care Trust; Institute for Public Policy Research; Civil Service (advising on child poverty targets, formation of National Childcare Strategy).

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Sue Himmelweit (G2) Women's Budget Group; International Association for Feminist Economics; Greater London Council; National Abortion Campaign; professor of economics, The Open University.

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Marion Macalpine (G2) Equal Opportunity Officer, Greater London Council; Head of Training and Staff Development, Inner London Education Authority;

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P.G. Macioti (G4) Migrant and sex workers rights activist with the x:talk project; translator; PhD student, OECUMENE, Open University.

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Kate Oliver (G3) PhD; transport and peace campaigner; public transport strategy, Greater London Council; policy advisor, Birmingham City Council; school governor; flexi-time schooling campaigner; foster-carer; Director, Birmingham Children's Fund; Trustee, Bristol Refugee Rights.

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Kate Raworth (G3) United Nations Development Programme; senior researcher on climate change, Oxfam.

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Kate Simmons (G3) Campaigner, charity for special education needs; school governor; researcher and academic.

Theresa Stewart (G1) Labour Party councillor, Birmingham City Council; Chair, Birmingham Brook Advisory Service for young people; Regional Hospital Board; Chair, Social Services; Chair, Community Development Programme; Leader of Birmingham City Council.

Helen Sullivan (G3) Birmingham City Council; INLOGOV (Institute for Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham); Cities Research Centre, University of the West of England; Professor of Government and Society, University of Birmingham; Director, Centre for Public Policy, University of Melbourne; author.

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Marilyn Taylor (G2) Community Development Foundation; School for Advanced Urban Studies; Professor of Social Policy, Brighton; author.

Munira Thobani (G3) Haringey Women's Employment Project; race equality advisor; Head of Equalities, London Borough of Hounslow; Office of Public Management.

Mary Upton (G2) Universities of Bath and Bristol; Open University; Feminist Archive work; adult education teaching; international development researcher.

Kitty Ussher (G3) Local councillor; ministerial special advisor; MP for Burnley; Minister in the Treasury and Department for Work and Pensions; director of Demos.

Heather Wakefield (G3) National Council for Civil Liberties (now Liberty); Commissioner to the Low Pay Commission; Head, Local Government Service Group of Unison.

Camilla Warren (G3) Greater Manchester Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament; Women Working Worldwide; human rights lawyer.

Cecilia Wee (G3) Senior producer, Sounds and Music; Royal College of Art; regional council member, the Arts Council; independent curator.

Jane Wills (G3) Trade unionist; local government worker; academic at Queen Mary, University of London; active in London Citizens campaigns.

Tricia Zipfel (G2) Welfare rights worker, United States; London School of Economics; cooperative housing projects; Priority Estates Programme; Neighbourhood Renewal Unit; consultant and researcher.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

AHRC	Arts and Humanities Research Council
CASCA	Canadian Anthropology Society/Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie
CCT	compulsory competitive tendering
CDF	Community Development Foundation
CDP	Community Development Programme
CND	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
CPAG	Child Poverty Action Group
FGM	Female genital mutilation
FPI	Family and Parenting Institute
GAP	Gender Audit Project
GLC	Greater London Council
ILEA	Inner London Education Authority
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPPR	Institute for Public Policy Research
LGBT	Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender
LSE	London School of Economics
NHS	National Health Service
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OECUMENE	Citizenship after Orientalism programme, Open University
SCAT	Services to Community Action and Trade Unions
WBG	Women's Budget Group

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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