109 | book review

the cultural politics of austerity: past and present in austere times

Rebecca Bramall, Palgrave Macmillan Memory Series, Basingstoke, 2013, 192pp.,
ISBN: 0-2303-6047-5, £50.00 (Hbk).

Through the strictures of the global financial downturn and its aftermath citizens have been urged to 'keep calm and carry on'. This slogan, first coined in the 1940s and revived in the 2000s, found its way into political rhetoric, media commentary and popular culture and was embraced with consummate irony and aplomb by many Britons. Some cultural critics on the left, in particular, regarded the revival of this and many other rhetorical returns to the Second World War with deep suspicion, spying in them a propagandist drive to manage a citizenry beleaguered by financial cuts and the rolling back of the welfare state. For critics, the discourses and practices of mid-twentieth-century austerity, revived and revised for modern times, were worryingly nostalgic and literally retrogressive. Surely, the re-emergence of mid-century archetypes (the resourceful homemaker, the resilient working class, the middle class with upper lips held quite stiff, the frugal senior citizen) heralded an unwelcome return to the gender and classed politics of another period, when inequalities and material deprivations were tolerated by the quiet majority for 'the common good'? Rebecca Bramall's insightful book *The Cultural Politics of Austerity* tackles these concerns head on while also asking us to think differently and more progressively about the opportunities of the current moment.

Bramall seeks to unpack the investments we have in the past, in myth-making and in public histories in order to outline a road map of possible political and social futures. The book's introduction lucidly establishes the current discursive field of austerity discourses and exposes the strains and cross-currents between them. It highlights how historical resources have been deployed to persuade citizens of the validity of various models of social progress, including neo-liberal calls for economic belt-tightening, the rolling back of the state and a renewed individualism, anti-consumerism, sustainability and green politics, and a revival of interest in the domestic and the local. These resources include recipes, posters, pamphlets and the iconography of mid-century Britain, which are redeployed through current practices such as vintage and thrift-based living, in national events such as the Royal Wedding and the Olympics, and in exhibitions, lifestyle television and consumption. Bramall assesses these via a mixed-methods approach embedded in British cultural studies and organised primarily through post-structuralist, post-Marxist discourse analysis. This

terrain allows her to explore effectively the tensions and interpretative possibilities of the paired concepts of history/memory and ideology/discourse. These concepts illuminate the six chapters and an afterword, all of which are furnished with case studies and critical reflections whose richness invites re-reading.

Of the three primary 'objects' that Bramall argues are at stake in austerity culture—the environment, the welfare state and gender equality—readers of this journal will be especially interested in the last, although, naturally, they are all connected at many levels. As Bramall explains, austerity discourse often addresses or invites a feminine subject position in relation to its instruction to cope with financial cuts, to put one's 'best face on' or to save for a rainy day. On British television, for example, women such as financial journalist 'Miss Money Penny' (presenter of the series *Superscrumpers*), home crafts advocate Kirsty Allsopp and, more recently, vintage clothing up-cycler Dawn O'Porter have all overtly drawn on the imagery and skills of the feminised home front and/or 1950s. Similarly, the British national press has addressed women in the language of home economy, as seen in articles such as the *Daily Mail's* 2007 piece 'Can a modern family survive on wartime rations?' which featured a picture of smiling Oxfordshire 'housewife' Dee Brooker surrounded by her four children and a table groaning with fresh food. In recent years, war-time iconography and catchphrases such as 'beauty is your duty' and 'make do and mend' have also been revived by British and international bloggers such as Miss Thrifty, 1940s Experiment and The Home Front House Wife. Here idealised domestic practices seem to offer solace to women faced with making difficult choices in times of economic hardship.

Bramall focuses on similar examples in Chapter 6 specifically, which addresses feminism, domesticity and 'austere femininities', exploring the political limitations and possibilities of the re-deployment of the past in the present. Through wide-ranging references to baking, crafting and aesthetic revivals, lifestyle television and, less predictably, political protest, she shows that austerity is a gendered phenomenon and that issues of inequality are foregrounded when material resources are scarce or diminishing. When redundancies increase, pay freezes and childcare and food costs rise, it is women who risk being driven back into part-time jobs, zero-hour contracts and full-time unpaid labour in the home. From this perspective a national conversation that promotes the pleasures of the domestic for women, in particular, is politically convenient and a cause for feminist concern. Nonetheless, the author's starting position is that a properly nuanced analysis must move beyond a suspicion that every sampling of the past is inherently conservative and that every woman who bakes a cupcake is ideologically compliant. This is an ambition closely pursued by Bramall on a case-by-case basis in this and other chapters, although one example will have to suffice. In 2011, the Fawcett Society, which lobbies for women's rights, organised a day of action with the slogan 'Don't turn back time on women's equality'. It invited participants to dress as 1950s housewives to protest against a punitive austerity budget. In a

convincingly wrought analysis Bramall makes the case that these pleasurable public performances were not only politically important, they also forged links between women across eras, between communities, and between established and emergent feminisms. But just as crucially, they also traversed the critical space between feminism and 'traditional femininities' and thereby pointed to new potential alliances. Examples such as these challenge readers to think differently about the marshalling of the past for present purposes.

Overall, Bramall's valuable intervention makes space for a much needed political self-confidence in the face of austerity and its aftermath. It advocates re-moulding anti-austerity politics to a more innovative and productive politics that both imagines and labours to build a sustainable and equal society in the context of dwindling resources. As such, it will be of interest to students, scholars and activists seeking to understand and grasp the possibilities for change.

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