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## Academic Reflection – Narratives of Justice and the Welfare State in Times of Austerity

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In Chapter Two of *Unspeakable Subjects*, ‘Theories of Justice and the Welfare State’, Nicola Lacey (1998) develops her critique of liberal theories of justice and the ways in which they individualise equality, take the abstract individual as subject of the law, and entrench a public/private divide with deeply gendered consequences. Some twenty years later, in an age of austerity that takes the welfare state as one of its key targets, and in which the neo-liberal model of equality and justice has gone even further than Lacey articulated, I want to reflect on how narratives of justice and the role of the state have been put to play in troubling ways. Lacey’s concern in that chapter, to open our ideas of social justice to a recognition of collective differences and with this to challenge the public/private divide that stabilises and reinforces normative gender, is ever-more urgent in a political moment that refuses precisely these recognitions. In my recent book (Gedalof 2018), I look at policy documents as narratives and focus on how the rhetorical devices of narrative – the setting of chronologies, the construction of crisis and resolution, the establishing of point of view and relations of identification and disavowal – have been mobilised to justify austerity policies across the UK legislative agenda during the period of the Conservative-Lib Dem Coalition government between 2010 and 2015. In relation to key policies such as welfare reform we can see the construction of law’s subject under neo-liberal austerity as not only the abstract and autonomous individual, but also as one who resolves the alleged crisis of welfare dependency by returning all relations of interdependency and reproductive care back to a normative private sphere. The idea of social justice – once one of the foundations for a redistributive welfare state as Lacey argues in this chapter – is turned on its head in the Coalition’s ‘social justice strategy’ (DWP 2012), to argue that social justice means greater *individual* responsibility to make the right reproductive choices and so limit the burden on the state. What struck me in doing the research for that book is how important sustaining the public/private divide that Lacey critiques remains to the way neo-liberal austerity narratives operate and how what I came to call ‘a reproductive excess’ repeatedly troubles these narratives and is what needs to be contained for these narratives to proceed.

Among the policy documents I look at are those arguing directly for the reform of the benefits system – through the introduction of universal credit and changes to disability benefits (DWP 2010a, b) – as well as those outlining the Coalition government’s ‘social justice strategy’ and troubled families programme (DWP 2012; DCLG 2012a, b). I also looked at policy papers produced before the Coalition’s election by the [Centre for Social Justice](#), a think-tank founded by Iain Duncan Smith, who served as Coalition Work and Pensions Secretary, where much of the finessing of this narrative first took place. What I found resonates strongly with what Lacey was arguing lies at the heart of liberal (and now neo-liberal) models of equality and justice and

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demonstrates how theories – of the subject, of justice, of the relationship between the individual and the state – move into the realm of policy and governmentality.

The first recurring move we see across these documents is to individualise the problem of inequality and the crisis it provokes. While much is made of tackling the root causes of poverty, for example, the root causes identified have nothing to do with socio-economic structures; they all relate, first, to bad individual choices and individual failure – family breakdown, educational underachievement, addiction, indebtedness and dependency – and second, to a state system which enables such bad individual choices. According to this narrative, the welfare state has been complicit in producing this culture of worklessness and dependency, and it is the role of the state to change itself and thereby craft a new contract with individual citizens. There is much talk of systemic change, but the only system that really needs changing – but which needs to be changed forever – is the system of welfare benefits. As Wacquant (2009) has argued in relation to the neo-liberal welfare reform project, what is at stake here, then, is not simply a retraction of the state, but rather a reframing of the state from ‘kindly nanny state to strict daddy state’ (2009: 290). This is a remasculinization of the state that emphasises duties over rights, sanction over support, a stern rhetoric of the obligations of citizenship, and that positions state managers as virile protectors of the society against its wayward members. At the same time, the historic sense of the welfare state as a recognition of the ‘categorical entitlement’ of its citizenry is replaced with ‘an individual contract between recipient and state’ (Wacquant 2009: 100-101)

The individualising of the root causes of poverty means that the space for considering inequalities of wealth, resources and opportunity in social or systemic terms is foreclosed, and with it any space for the kind of redistributive argument Lacey considers crucial to social justice (Lacey 1998: 68). Instead, those ‘who have’ are cast as ‘having’ entirely through their own sense of responsibility and effort, and what they have must not be threatened in any way by those remedial subjects who have failed to make themselves independent of state support. Instead, these remedial subjects must be made the objects of state surveillance and disciplining – through the increased sanctions and conditionalities of the benefits system and other social policies. That this disciplining occurs in Coalition policy texts in the name of a reframed and individualised ‘social justice’, which refuses to pay any serious attention to ‘social context, social institutions, communities and cultures’ (Lacey 1998: 67), reminds us how pertinent Lacey’s critique of the limits of liberal theories of justice remains.

The second recurring move is to tie this remedial status to bad reproductive choices and behaviours. As a public intervention into the notionally private and always highly gendered reproductive sphere, welfare policy is necessarily entangled with prevailing gendered norms. It is therefore not surprising that a narrative of welfare reform that sees too much state support as generating a crisis of dependency will also turn its attention to how that dependency unsettles normative gender and its delineation of public and private spheres. If the state is to be recalibrated from reproductive nanny to rule-setting virile daddy, then it also needs the private reproductive sphere of the family to fall into line. Much of the work of the Centre for Social Justice on the causes of what it called ‘Broken Britain’ returns repeatedly to the need to reinstate marriage as the foundation of family and therefore of social stability and criticises the direction of the welfare state under Labour as having perversely produced incentives that undermine marriage (see CSJ 2007, 2009, 2011). We see this repeated especially in policy documents around the Coalition’s vision of social justice and the [Troubled Families](#)

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[Programme](#) (DWP 2012; DCLG 2012a, b) where non-normative family forms take centre stage as producing the crisis of poverty and over-dependence on the state.

The power of normative gender is also mobilised in a less direct way throughout the story of welfare reform, and this is through the language of the cross-generational reproduction of worklessness. This brings us back to the concern about the private reproductive sphere needing to fall into line with a retraction of the public welfare state, here focused on the anxiety that inappropriate patterns of reproductive labour are not training up the next generation as neo-liberal self-actualising citizens, but are rather breeding dependency. This language is seen in the endlessly repeated trope of the family where three generations of people have not worked, despite no one being able to identify or quantify the existence of such families (see Shildrick et al. 2012). This is a trope, interestingly, that Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair was also using in 1997 (MacDonald et al. 2012). It is regularly repeated in these policy documents, where the spectre of whole neighbourhoods being blighted by the transmission of worklessness across generations and from house to house, like a disease, is presented:

In workless hotspots the culture of not working is often transmitted, not just from generation to generation, but reinforced from household to household (CSJ 2009: 48).

[...] welfare dependency took root in communities up and down the country, *breeding hopelessness and intergenerational poverty* (DWP 2010a: 1, emphasis added).

What emerges from these documents is a crisis created by the irresponsible parent who fails to reproduce properly inside the normatively gendered framework of marriage, and in so doing reproduces a culture of worklessness across the generations. This is a sense of crisis produced by the excess of the reproductive, which sits uneasily within the ‘rationality of rationing’ (Bhattacharyya 2015: 100) that imbues the welfare state under austerity. The welfare reform narrative relies on a preoccupation with scrutinising and disciplining the manner in which reproduction takes place, and those who carry out their reproductive activities in ways that would seem to place too great a burden on the state, or who make what are deemed to be inappropriate claims of entitlement to belonging and mutual support become the object of intensified intervention and control. This, I am arguing, is a recurring theme of austerity narratives – that the reproductive is seen as a troublesome incursion into the political that must be taken in hand, disciplined in such a way as to not make too many demands on the political, and managed in line with normative understandings of gender.

The story of who is entitled to the diminished and always precarious share of support on offer in this version of ‘21<sup>st</sup> century welfare’ (DWP 2010a) is therefore marked by gender in multiple ways. It is there most obviously in this targeting of the non-normative family and the championing of traditional marriage as bedrock of society. But it is also there in the way those highly gendered qualities of independence vs. interdependence, productive labour vs. reproductive care, are mobilised in the framing of the crisis and its resolution. In ‘Theories of Justice and the Welfare State’, Lacey argues that liberal theories can never deliver on their promise of justice if they rely on the public/private divide which legitimises so much of gendered inequality (Lacey 1998: 57-8). Austerity policies in their neo-liberal version go even further – in their compulsion to construct the well-functioning citizen/subject as one who engages in paid work so as to be independent of the state, and who privatises the demands of unpaid reproductive care within the normative framework of the family, this narrative necessarily sees any failure to honour this public/private arrangement as a source of crisis. A

critical reading of these austerity narratives, therefore, requires attention to the limits of liberal models of justice, and the subject of law they produce, that Lacey exposed so well twenty years ago.

### **Postscript**

In late 2018, the impossibility of this neo-liberal model of an austere welfare state and its individualised account of social justice is being increasingly revealed. As the long-delayed roll-out of Universal Credit approaches, the ways in which it undermines its recipients' ability to feed, house and look after themselves and their families is causing consternation even among some in the governing Conservative Party (Stewart 2018). Rises in rent arrears, in the reliance on food banks and in personal indebtedness wherever Universal Credit has been introduced so far demonstrate that this 'reform' of the welfare state is an attack on one of its most basic founding principles – that limiting risk to the most basic needs of members of a political community is a *social* responsibility (Lacey 1998: 51) and not one that should be left to an individualised private sphere alone. In its zeal to re-privatise the reproductive, austerity social policy hits out, not only at those perceived to be making excessive reproductive demands on the state, but also at those who would appear to be trying to 'do the right thing' – working single parents, homeowners, those who are trying to 'make work pay' by taking on the low-wage, insecure employment on offer (Foster 2018). These ruptures in the austerity narrative invite us to revisit Lacey's critique of the public-private divide and the structural inequalities it induces in order to continue to argue for a vision of social justice that takes the reproductive seriously, not as a source of crisis to be disavowed, but as intrinsic to its critical project.

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