

Affect & the Politics of Austerity

An interview exchange with Lauren Berlant

Gesa Helms, Marina Vishmidt, Lauren Berlant

The political climate in the UK, given as it already was to the emotive and nationalist tropes of the War on Terror, found a new affective register with the financial crisis: the invocation of public and personal shame. Admittedly, shame and other moralized negativity has been never far from the national imagination. Some recognizable examples would be the Victorian marking of deserving and undeserving poor, the various moral panics of youth deviancy or the influence of communitarian authoritarianism on New Labour social policy.

Yet, as the banks were folding it was neither single mothers nor young NEETs (not in employment, education or training) in black hoodies that were the object of the public's rage but the profession which continues to operate as the nerve centre of the UK economy: the bankers. Amidst calls for public apologies, financial business practices were re-cast as the reckless activity of individual 'banksters'. Suddenly it seemed that the whole celebrated financial industry, the backbone of London's economy, and thus of the UK as a whole, had been driven into the ground by deviant individuals frenzied by 'perverse incentives', a 'bonus culture' of greed, ambition and excess. Thatcher-era cultural anxieties about 'City boys' resurfaced with a vengeance but with little of the class politics.

Two years on, we can see how much of this outcry by politicians has not led to a stronger regulation of banking practices, but that indeed it amounted to little more than a public shaming of the appetites of bankers; an appeal to conduct their business a bit more privately, not quite so visibly. The lack of any change was re-channelled into a call upon the decency of middle England to sacrifice for the national good and to direct their anger downwards on those who exploit the public without 'creating wealth': people who flout the norms through an 'excess of dependence', those who regard "benefits as a lifestyle choice" (Conservative Chancellor George Osborne, interview 9th September 2010). Their 'shameless' milking of state benefits allows them to live in areas of Central London which low-paid workers can't afford, and their reckless personal habits burden our cash-strapped public services.

Little of this is new if we look back across UK politics of the last 30 years but also if we look across to elsewhere in Europe or North America. However, as part of various discussions on how to organize and intervene, we felt it was important to consider more carefully the affective register that is so forcefully called upon. A register that talks of shame and excess outlined against an assumed notion of a common-sense decency still to be found in the working-class heartlands and which, so some argue, can be mobilized as part of a progressive politics. With these questions in mind, we approached Lauren Berlant. Berlant teaches English at the University of Chicago and is a cultural theorist whose work – informed by influences that range over psychoanalysis, queer and feminist theory, as well as anarchist and autonomist politics – has over the years provided a remarkably sharp and nuanced analysis of the relationship between 'cultures of affect' and social structures. This interview exchange was conducted over several weeks in writing.

MV: Looking at the role of shame and shaming in creating a post-crisis culture and a public consensus, we are interested in how assumptions and norms using the language of personal responsibility shape the political discourse of 'austerity'. There is a sense that such language acts conservatively in how social and economic problems are conceived, including their causes and solutions, that it both permits and excludes certain types of policy approaches and certain types of defenses and criticisms of those policies. The relationship between shame and indebtedness is a major example, how the link of credit to credibility becomes a cipher for all kinds of social violence.²

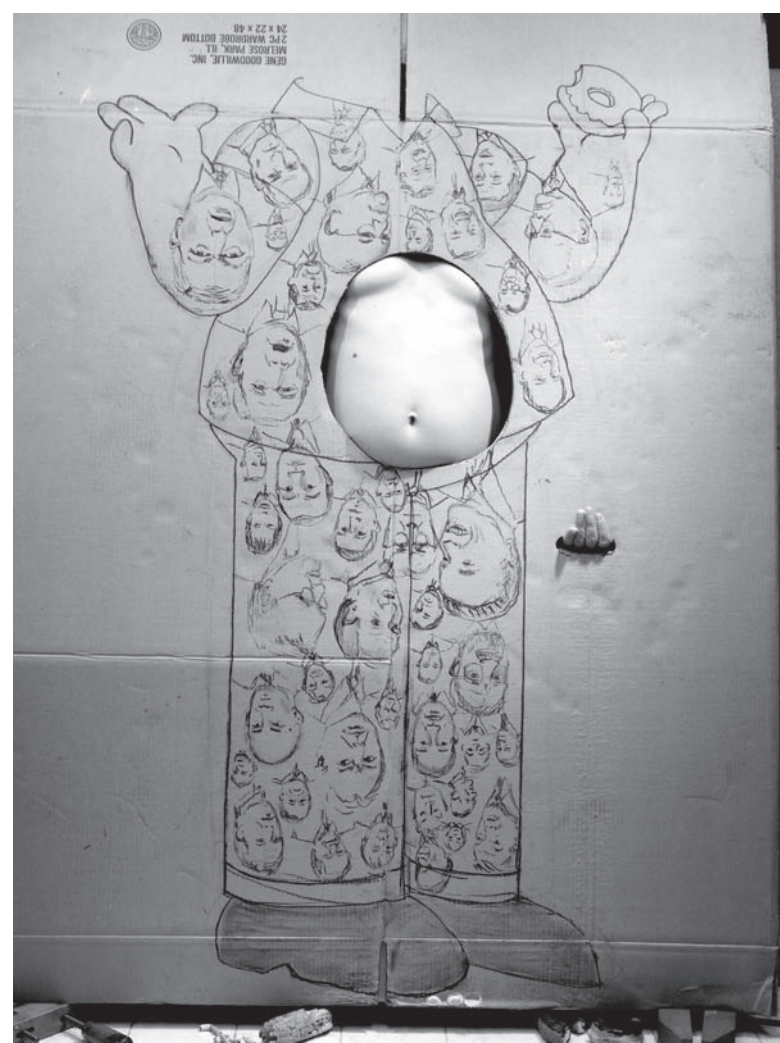
On the other hand, the unstable affect of

shame can also have more radical implications, as with your discussion of the difference between structures and experience of shame³: for example, shame can also be an affect underlying desires for social justice or solidarity: as Mario Tronti said⁴, we have to start with disgust at the way things are before we move on to imagining how we'd like them to be. There is a modality of excess to shame which means its deployment in political rhetoric is just as likely to turn on its handler as on its object – as in all moralistic or moralizing discourse. Is it the difference between individualizing shame or collective shame?

Thus for background. Our question here would be how you would relate the distinction you have made between the structures and experience of shame to the concrete political moment of building a consensus around intensified neoliberal policies in the wake of the financial crash?

LB: Polly Toynbee wrote a great sentence about the savage cuts of the new austerity: "The price of everything was laid out, but not the value of anything about to be destroyed."⁵ What does it mean for a symbolic relation to be too expensive, an unbearable burden? The image of the good life is too dear; something has to be sacrificed. The attempt to associate democracy with austerity – a state of liquidity being dried out, the way wine dries out a tongue – is fundamentally anti-democratic. The demand for the people's austerity hides processes of the uneven distribution of risk and vulnerability. Democracy is supposed to hold out for the equal distribution of sovereignty and risk. Still, austerity sounds good, clean, ascetic: the lines of austerity are drawn round a polis to incite it toward askesis, toward managing its appetites and taking satisfaction in a self-management in whose mirror of performance it can feel proud and superior. In capitalist logics of askesis, the workers' obligation is to be more rational than the system, and their recompense is to be held in a sense of pride at surviving the scene of their own attrition.

This looming overpresence of risk and the leeching out of even the phantasm of sovereignty across nations and persons translates into such a complex assemblage. Under the current conditions of debt and exposure, nation-states can't bear to admit their abjection, can't bear that they have become mere supplicants for the wealth that they have allowed to become privately held on behalf of a spectral growth on whose tithing the state has come to depend. The Euro-American state is a cowardly lion, a weeping bully, a plaintive lover to finance capital. It cannot bear to admit that, having grown its own administrative limbs to serve at the pleasure of the new sovereign of privatized wealth, that the wealthy feel no obligation to feed the state. So the state bails out banks and tells the polis to tighten up, claiming that the people are too expensive to be borne through their state, which can no longer afford their appetite for risk. They are told that they should feel shame for having wanted more than they could bear responsibility for and are told that they should take satisfaction in ratcheting down their image of the good life and the pleasures to be had in the process of its production. The affective orchestration of the crisis has required blaming the vulnerable for feeling vulnerable; not due only to a general precarity but also to the political fact that there is no longer an infrastructure for holding the public as a public. The public must become entrepreneurial individuals. All of the strikes and tea parties in response to the state's demand for an austere sacrifice under the burden of shame tell us that this incitement for the public to become archaic as a public is not going down too easily.



The big question is whether the popular culture of a "civil society" unwilling to let go of the collective good life fantasy secured by a beneficent state can mobilize its assertion of its priority over market democracy in a way that can fundamentally restructure the state's adjudication of capital, and meanwhile avoid fascism. But this is hard too. We remember that the bubble associating economic growth with civil rights of the last sixty years or so is an anomaly in world history. Besides that, though, the demands of the present mean protesting not only the state's servility to capital but people's very own fantasies of the good life. Just as the relations of the market to the state are fraying and changing, so too the destruction and elaboration of fantasy in relation to what a life is and what a good life is will need to shift about and reknit. The response to a potentially radical reconstruction of the conditions of the reproduction of life ought to be very demanding on everyone, including the resisters. At the moment most resisters are protesting state/capital but not protesting themselves. Without accommodating the affective demands for adjustment to the austere ordinary with which they're being confronted, people need to think about what kinds of good life might better be associated with flourishing, and fight that battle (with fantasy, politically) too.

*Appetites/
Sovereignty*
Claire Pentecost
(2003)

That which is unbearable

MV: I am interested in the point you make about responding to the imposition of austerity by reconstructing what counts as good life, and how that relates to the 'shaming of the appetites' which legitimates, as well as provides libidinal satisfaction, to the non-negotiable imperatives of austerity. What forms of social action or structures of feeling do you think it would take for such attempts at reconstruction to rebut this kind of shame, as it were, with another vision of life rather than adopting shame as a purgative

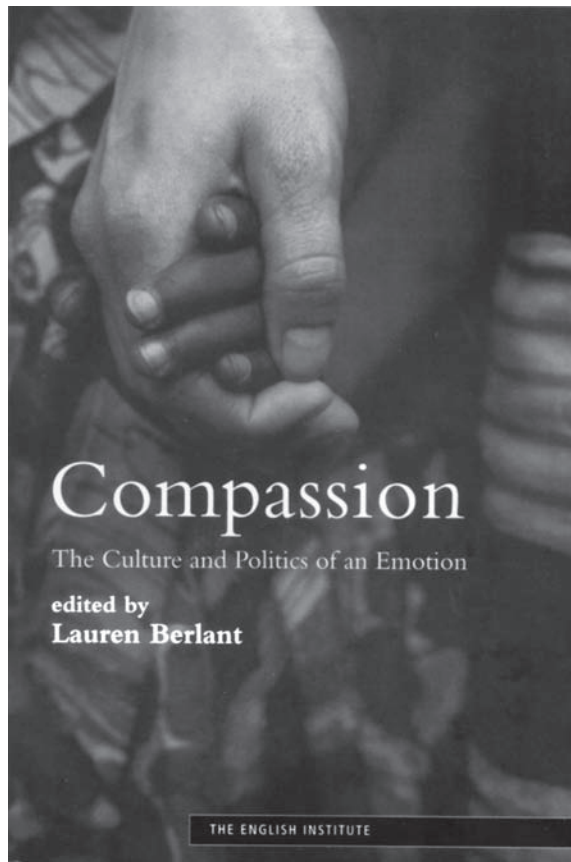
and adapting this vision to the lineaments of austerity? I guess this goes back to the political desires or objectives of the mobilization of shame. Can we programmatically or analytically separate adapting to 'objectively less' from 'protesting yourself', and how?

A smaller follow-up question concerns what you say about the Tea Party being a sign of the public refusing to be individualized, which could be interesting to discuss more since obviously there's a lot of contradictions in what emanates from those groups, and many might think they actually represent a hyper-individualized and libertarian impulse rather than a belief in the public.

LB: The Tea-Partiers are a complex phenomenon, a teratoma of libertarian resistance to the state as well as state actors who are funding and publicizing the new patriotism of fierce nostalgia for a time when one could make a decent living, a living that allowed trust in the continuity of life rather than the constant entrepreneurialism or on-the-make-ness that now links all workers affectively with subproletarian populations at the level of insecurity about the reproduction of life. Everyone's now a hustler: what varies is the verge and the risk. What used to be an exceptional form of subjectivity related to informal economies now pervades the officialized ones.

The Tea-Partiers do see themselves as a group of individuals, you're right: they're amplifying one version of the liberal body politic, the public refusing to become a population. It's also a sentimental public: a world of individuals who feel forced into the political by a structural problem in the world that seems to interfere with their flourishing, but who long for some version of private absorption to be regained after the structural adjustments are made. What it reveals, I think, is that we'd have to think about the different kinds of shame and rage attached to different kinds of mediation of sociality. What form of mediation of collective subjectivity are deemed unbearable, and what kind of threat do they present? Remember that during WWII the austerity public in democratic Europe and the US was associated with competence and pride, not shame. The shame would be in getting caught not caring, which was deemed not just individualism but a diminution of the chances for survival in the social: but even then, everyone knew that at the same time under regimes of crisis where people are asked to become rational for the collective good, informal/grey economies flourish whose existence is not evidence that the austere public is a sham but that people will always make spaces for their appetites to flourish in their unformed and chaotic ways. When I think of political emotions I always presume that even the norm is incoherent.

What's unbearable might therefore appear as many kinds of negativity, not just shame (the thing you're focused on). The state might say it's austerity or you don't matter, you are not deserving of the social. Or it might say, it's austerity: think of your grandchildren's future; or think of the pensioners who are about to go down with no safety net. The absence of compliance would not necessarily involve shame, but resolute narcissism coded as autonomy and pride, or pathos and weakness, or some combination of rationales that would appear as affective noise. It would be interesting to think of austerity in relation to claims that the vulnerable should recode loss as sacrifice and therefore produce an affective cushion to replace the loss of other material ones, which were both real and affective, a sense of trust that all lives fallen from productivity would not land hard on the concrete. The affect not to be borne might be experienced in transmissions of disgust, shame, a tragic sense of not mattering, or an ironic, manic-comic sense of not mattering. It might be unbearable to discover how little one matters to the reproduction of life, but shame is just one of the many moods of affective relation that locates persons and groups in the anxiety of forging an idiom of response.



So then, you ask, how can we reroute shame for making a better social world. Is turning a "shame on you" back on the state effective for organizing not only social justice but an image of a better state, better labor relations, better sociality amongst strangers whose class and collective interest is really not the same, really not ambitious to produce the same better good life? Partly I'm a pragmatist: whatever works to interfere with the reproduction of mass injustice, in this case, the projection of the burden for revamping the cushion and the net onto the people who need the cushion and the net, while the wealthy hoard more of that for themselves. But I still think the battle to be thought through and won is at the level of the imaginary: to confront how powerfully exceptional the neoliberal and democratic economic bubbles of the last 60 years are, how expensive individualism is, how the idea of a mortgaged future needs to be confronted in its stark realities, how entirely different models of collective dependence need to be forged in relation to the reproduction of life because there is no money and the poverty is both material and imaginary.

I don't think it's about converting shame, therefore, into pride or anything. I think it requires a hard confrontation with and a very difficult process of changing what the reproduction of life means in both pragmatic and phantasmatic terms. What this means will vary, but its impact on the political and on the social relations of labour will be astonishing, because it has to happen: there will be politics, and there will be sacrifice, and there will be a chaos of wants responded to badly and with a bigger burden on the already vulnerable unless they converge to rethink their own investments in inequality and xenophobia, the ready-to-hand fear formations.

In *Slow Death*⁶ I argue that the long process of delegating worse life and earlier death to the poor and hyper-exploited is now becoming general through the population, such that mental health and physical health are at war (as seen in the amount of alcoholism and obesity rampant wherever a commodity culture reigns as the collective scene for forging pleasure in a now beyond which there is no future) and that mental health is winning (if what we mean is affective, appetitive relief from exhausted sovereignty). Can people bear to fight themselves for better versions of the good life for everyone? Or are we now spiralling down the rabbit hole of liberal culture, where people will only dig in and fight for the right to their individual pleasure?

GH: You talk about the ways how this struggle needs to be conducted on the level of the imaginary. I am familiar with Cornelius Castoriadis's work on the 'imaginary institution of society'⁷ but I wondered if you could say a bit more about this imaginary? Clearly, this is in contrast to the ideological battles that are conducted, won and lost around, e.g., the free market, family values,

etc. What kind of practices and strategies are possible or necessary to draw upon this imaginary? How does this engage also with affective politics? You mention that converting shame into pride is clearly not a way forward. Yet: how can emotions such as shame be acknowledged, made explicit and dealt with (I am tempted to say: overcome, but that is too developmental)?

LB: You need to say more to me about why shame, for you, is the fundamental emotion of human self-consciousness whose presence is a blockage to action or flourishing. I've argued that we need to distinguish the structure of shame from its normative experience. Structure covers much: the sense of what Ariella Azoulay calls the subject population's 'abandonment' by the world,⁸ their exclusion from the comforts and protections even of a phantasmatic sovereignty; what Eve Sedgwick, in her Kleinian phase, calls 'the broken circuit' of reciprocity that induces a reversion of the subject's attentions onto herself as weight, a heaviness unworthy of being shared or acknowledged); or what Sedgwick calls, in another idiom, the mimetic relation that transpires between a society that negates a population (shaming as political disenfranchisement, moral aversion, and active denigration) and the feeling of that population that it has been shamed and is shameful (thus producing the 'gay shame' movement's mobilization of exuberant negativity).⁹ These are all different explanations for the communication of shame as well as different claims about the relation of social negativity to subjectifying effects.

I am trying to be productively pedantic here. If one of the conditions of contemporary precarity is its spreading throughout class and population loci such that *everyone* has to experience the unreliability of the world's commitment to continuing 20th century forms of reciprocity – this is a central argument of *Cruel Optimism* – it does not follow that people feel in the same way their abandonment or the archaism of their attachment to certain styles of identification, fantasy, and pleasure to be shamed.¹⁰ Even in the face of shaming negation they could feel nothing, numb, disbelief, rage, exhaustion, resentment, hatred, dissolving anxiety, shame – or even feel free to be cut loose from the old repetitions. So the desire you have to name the negation of shaming as the core structure and experience of contemporary retrenchments does not feel to me to cover the range of the relations between experience and structure that we would need to understand in order to theorize adequately the conversion of a stunned public into a demanding one, for example.

The good life as an already sacrificial model

LB: So perhaps there is not a monoaffective imaginary. But what is collective is what *Cruel Optimism* calls the spectacle of the drama of forced adjustment. In that archive, what 'shame' is is to be seen seeing one's own forced adjustment, to be seen seeing the wearing away of the old anchors for being tethered to the world, to be watched or encountered as one displays profoundly not knowing what to do, to be seen frantically treading water or to be encountered in paralysis (again, there is a whole range of proprioceptive performances through which we learn to register feeling the contingencies of survival and the negativity of encountering ourselves as subjects who make sense either in our fantasies or the world). The shame of being seen in one's incompetence to life produces many compensations. The worst of them is in the conversion of shame into all the raging xenophobias we see in a variety of monocultural movements (from state-based ones as in Israel, to community-based ones as all over Europe and the US). But even in the places where the response to capitalist restructuring involves mobilizations into mass body politic autopoiesis, the insistence



that the state remain what it was, as though it is what it was, which it isn't, manifests a desire to underdetermine the social imaginary.

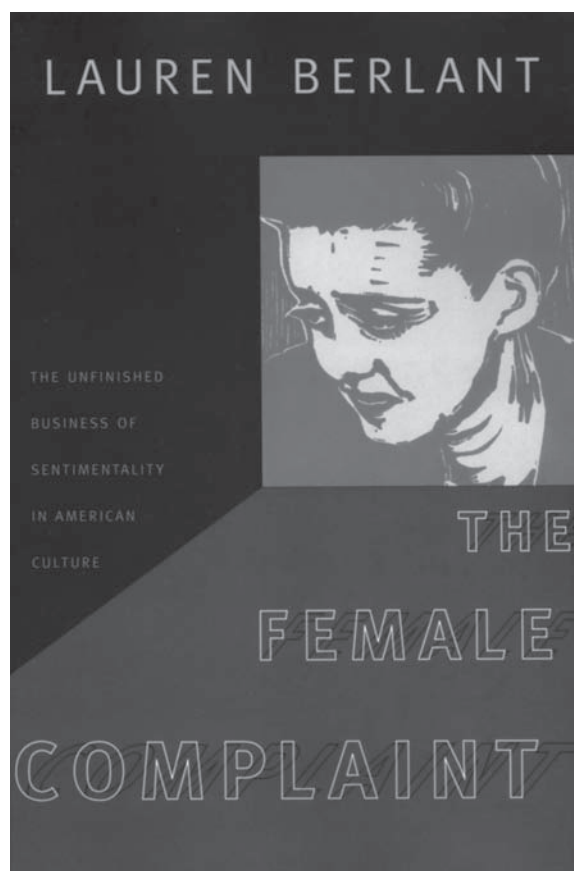
What if people were to take the opportunity to reimagine state/society relations such that the flourishing of reciprocity were differently constructed and assessed, and in which consumer forms of collectivity were not the main way people secure or fantasize securing everyday happiness? This, I would argue, would involve a considerable restructuring of the place of work and expenditure in the production of ordinary life; but might also involve a transformation of what people imagine when they project out what the good life is, when they make images of what will secure satisfaction, and whether "adding up to something" is the best metaphor for justifying having laboured. "Adding up" is just one way to think about what it means to have and to have had a life: it means a radical rethinking of the relation of labor and time, of sacrifice, security, and satisfaction. This involves a huge commitment to rethinking being in relation, and for showing up for the social and sociability. Is it a world, a gathering, a public, a normative fantasy: where are the zones for belonging to be fought out?

The spectre I am proposing of shifting the objects that anchor fantasy and the ambivalent, aleatory affective circuits of sociality is not at all a command to accommodate the current insistence on socializing precarity and privatizing wealth. Far from it. It means gently to point to how the good life model introduced after the war was already a sacrificial model, with softer shadows of longing and shame hovering around aspirations to normative positions of enjoyment, and just with softer landings than what we now confront. I am suggesting that we must begin again to reorganize all of the kinds of value now challenged by the new normal that has not yet become the new ordinary.

GH: Many thanks for being 'productively pedantic' on these points. I feel this section is very instructive and constructive as to the limitations of (a) promoting shame as part of a political strategy from above and (b) similarly in explicating all that 'lies beyond shame', with which I mean your discussion of the limitations of a political/social imaginary if it was to engage in a discussion of a different public. With our impression of how shame as a key emotion has risen to the surface of UK government vis-à-vis its subjects to induce (beyond the shaming) a desire to take responsibility and be prepared for sacrifice, shame has been the key topic for us approaching you to explore further how affect is productive of politics, but also how affect works to precisely avoid the political and the possibilities for a democratic public (as in your concept of the intimate public in the way it operates for US women's culture)¹¹.

In this latest response you talk more explicitly of the investments that people have for maintaining all that exists. You talk of the many compensations that make up for being publicly shamed. It touches on one of my early considerations around how affective politics actively works to not become democratic: The narratives we tell ourselves and others about a past that never quite was. I am thinking particularly here about the narratives of working-class communities that were based on solidarity, consciousness, and an understanding of practice for change. It is also one that too easily is forgetful of its own investments in particular racisms and sexism as well as the many internal divisions of the working classes along craft, industry, religion, and not at least 'respectability'. I fear that much of the political left (when it takes public visibility, in the UK at least) is enthralled by a nostalgia for that past (still) and again is only too forgetful of its own struggles, limitations, and the danger of premising a future on a wrongly imagined past. I am curious as to your thoughts on this.

LB: I love that you asked about this, about the spectre that haunts nostalgia, inducing a



retroprojection of histories that act as screen memories of a time past that was distinguished by its own intractable contradictions, which are now made inaccessible by the affective toupée. You know, we might disagree about this problem a bit. First, to me, and I take solidarity in this from Rancière's *Hatred of Democracy*¹², bad taste, incoherence, wild projection, nostalgias – these are the affective expressions of democracy, these are the neuralgias, the nervous disorders that keep democracy alive for the parties who are included in order to be managed in liberal capitalist regimes. This is what it means to preserve a drive in inadequate objects. But all objects are placeholders, stand-ins, fantasy magnets. Nostalgia is no more like that than fantasies of a revolutionary multitude. Second, and I take this from C. Nadia Seremataki's work on nostalgia, there are many kinds, the kinds that are fetishes in the bad sense, genuine blockages, and kinds that are weapons, fierce refusals of the expropriations of the present.¹³ Who is to say in the abstract? Who is to say what a stuckness is and what an arsenal is and when they are the same? Is stubbornness always a bad thing? I am not here to say that. What I'm interested in is the relation of the noise of the political to the potential to move a question somewhere towards developing new relational modes, not only among people but among people in terms of the infrastructures of sociality that they create, from the state to loose collectivities, scenes of the intimate public all. Third, I have little patience for contemptuous judgments about political style, whether of allies or antagonists. It's like mourning at a funeral: you can't judge people's styles of living with loss in the middle of a situation where loss might be all there is even though one is living on and not dead. So the problem of demanding better conditions of living on has no solution at the level of style. My view about your complaint is that we have to throw everything at the hegemony who are the real problem. The old left is not the real problem, it's the hegemony to whom we consent. Who really blocks our imagination of the social? Can we bear to withdraw our consent to the forms that have pacified us through promising



representation? Can we bear to withdraw our consent from these forms without withdrawing our consent to the possibility (not the probability, sigh) of the capaciously social? The left is not the problem, nor is the fantasy of an older working class solidarity (I hear this story most in the UK from people who lived through the early 20th century Depression). The problem is that in their desperation people try to ride the wave of the forms they know, even when there is no water beneath them nor air to float them. The problem is that people do not feel that the world is a generous and patient space for them to be awkward in. In the meantime they remember the good times. I am grateful that in so many political domains there have been and are good times, though, where solidarity is lived and not just projected. It matters for maintaining social justice aspiration even when the episodes of animated convergence are minor, of short duration. But, beyond comfort: we need to make compelling forms for the social (for sociality, for intimate publics, including the political ones), forms that make taking the leap into the beyond of comfort worth it. It's hard to ask people to become more uncomfortable at a moment when comfort itself seems like a nostalgic fantasy in the bad sense, but that's where things are: at the end of one kind of fantasy we need to be lured toward better ones, new misrecognitions of the relation of the materialized real to a projection but now a projection that reorients us to a different, better mode of the reproduction of life, a different *sensus communis*, a different structure of feeling associated with the good life. There are no unmixed political feelings, there is no unambivalent potentiality for the social. We know that when we come to the social component of the political on affect rather than from the ascriptive. There is just the possibility of teasing ourselves toward a reorientation in which we can sense a better accommodation of desire and pleasure, of risk and sweetness, of aversion and attachment, of incoherence and patience.

'How does it feel to be a bad investment?'

MV: I'd like to come back to something you mentioned at the very beginning: "In capitalist logics of askesis, the workers' obligation is to be more rational than the system, and their recompense is to be held in a sense of pride at surviving the scene of their own attrition." Also, to a point you make towards the end of your introduction to *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*: "What if it turns out that compassion and coldness are not opposite at all but are two sides of a bargain that the subjects of modernity have struck with structural inequality?"¹⁴ The connection between these two propositions for me is that structural inequality as it is produced by capitalist logics effectively disappears by slipping back into a (historically specific) human nature, that of the rational individual, who may on occasion feel some sympathy for the less rational, because after all, contingent sympathy is also part of human nature. But the implication is that when the co-extensivity of capitalism with human nature (as well as with systems of governing human collectives such as democracy) becomes as established as it has – without any serious contestation for some time already – even in times of deadlock and disorientation, the irrationality of the system is so individualized that the perception is that it can be dealt with on the basis of individual rationality; this is augmented by the actual structural equation between people's life prospects and the health of financial systems, like pension funds and so forth. The imperative to 'rationalize' personal spending is then embraced on the scale of the state, thus being converted back into systemic irrationality. So I guess what I'm trying to ask is how that rationality might be disrupted. Would the rupture come from people recognizing not just that the system has failed them and they have

Photo left:
Stephanie
Brooks.

no one to look to but themselves now, but that there is a difference between themselves and the 'system'? Thus to fight not just 'the system' but themselves as reproducers of it, as you say, and I guess that is also a very old question in trying to imagine practical alternatives to capitalism, or how it is practically to be overcome. It is absolutely the question of the imaginary, but an imaginary that has to admit a collective dimension to change in any way. Your observation about the Tea Party as longing to return to a 'private version of absorption' that they're entitled to can perhaps be reflected in the UK context as a feeling of being beleaguered by interests which are scheming to do away with the residual state mechanisms that allow people to pursue that private version of absorption, by and large. So there is generally not a clash of logics, more a vying for the speaking place of a rationality that cannot be breached, that is, an economic one: saving the welfare state in terms of an economic logic or doing away with it according to an economic logic.

At the moment, the fight is indeed being led, in the cases where it is happening at all, by defending what remains of former collective settlements, of an already largely – eviscerated welfare state in the UK. But even this – for example, the recent education protests – is creating optimism on the waste ground, and perhaps generating other kinds of projects on a wider level for the first time in this period – rather than just attempts to hold on to the bearable parts of the current situation.

LB: I love the line Mark Fisher¹⁵ pulls from Jameson, that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism": we have become affectively so saturated by attachment to the atrophied field of enjoyment that we are stymied trying to imagine another way of relating to others and to our own optimism. Developing symbolic practical infrastructures for alterativity is the task of progressive praxis, but it's a daunting task. The collective settlement was that as long as the economy was expanding everyone would have a shot at creatively inventing their version of the good life, and not just assuming the position allotted to them by embedded class, racial, and gendered histories of devalued and unrecognized economic and social labor. The half century since the collective settlement was established embeds many generations in a binding fantasy.

It wasn't cruel optimism to think that there would be give in the system, spreading opportunities for living beyond instrumental productivity, and yet we know that even in the good times so many people didn't have enough hours in the day to look each other in the eye and relax. What expanded was fantasy, not time and not a cushion of real-time money. The expansion of the credit economy in Europe and the U.S. once the industrial growth had moved on took care of that, though, purchasing when it couldn't purchase ordinary time, and now that's being revoked too. Plus the revocation of educational democracy, a stand for a public investment in everyone who wanted a shot, is an admission that everyone didn't have a shot, and maybe shouldn't have wanted it. "How does it feel to be a bad investment?" has substituted itself for "How does it feel to be a problem?" It makes me speechless, for a minute, to face those blinking phrases, and to consider the whole history that has transpired between them.

So if an intimate public were to form around this crisis of what the baseline of survival is, and what realism ought to look like for the present



and in the near future, people would converge to talk not just about taking back the state but taking back relationality as such so that the state would seem not the origin of the social but one of its instruments. That would be a good. If people were to converge around an understanding that a bubble is not a habitable world and that a liveable world requires admitting the need to reinvent work (I am completely an autonomist on this question) that would protect both the people working and the nature and relationality from which they extract value then they would have to look at all the kinds of work there are and figure out a fair way to distribute it not just to match individual capacities but for the good of the world as such.

Can we bear to reinvent "new relational modes" across the incommensurate scenes of work-nature-intimate stranger, and not just among lovers? Can we bear to see the good of education neither as citizen-building toward monoculture (even "in difference") nor as engineering vocational allegories of self-worth, but a space for the kinds of creativity and improvised interest that cultivate in people a curiosity about living (how it's been and how it might be) that's genuine and genuinely experimental and not, as you say, aspiring to an unbreachable rational space? If we are educated in experimentality and curiosity, alterity's comic mode of recognition-in-bafflement, then we diminish our fear of the stranger and of the stranger in ourselves, the place where we don't make any more sense than the world does, in all of our tenderness and aggression. We would refuse to do the speculative work of policing and foreclosing each other that lets the state and capital off the hook for exhausting workers and pressuring communities to clean up their act, not be inconvenient, and to be sorry they tried to live well. To make possible the time and space for flourishing affective infrastructures, of grace and graciousness, such as those I've described could make happiness and social optimism possible not as prophylactic fantasy or credit psychosis but in ordinary existence. All of the hustling that goes on amongst the working and non-working poor and the generally stressed has to do with the desire to coast a little instead of work and police ourselves to death. But right now there's not a lot of easy coasting going around outside of the zones of disinhibition that provide episodes of relief from the daily exhaustion, and people seem to think that if they're policed, if they're always auditioning for citizenship and social membership, so too should others be forced to live near the edge of the cliff and earn standing, the right to stand. Welfare used to be called 'relief'. 'Relief' must have said much more than it was bearable to say about the capitalist stress position.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/sep/09/george-osborne-cut-4bn-benefits-welfare>
- 2 David Graeber, 'Debt: The first five thousand years', *Mute* 12, 2009, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-08-20-graeber-en.html>
- 3 Sina Najafi, David Serlin and Lauren Berlant, 'The broken circuit: an interview with Lauren Berlant', *Cabinet*, Issue 31, Fall 2008, http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/31/najafi_serlin.php
- 4 Mario Tronti, *The strategy of refusal*, <http://libcom.org/library/strategy-refusal-mario-tronti>
- 5 Polly Toynbee, 'Spending review: What's all the fuss about? Just you wait', *The Guardian*, 20 October 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/oct/20/spending-review-fuss-polly-toynbee>
- 6 Lauren Berlant, 'Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)', *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 33, Number 4, Summer 2007. http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/33n4/33n4_berlant2.html
- 7 Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary institution of society*. (trans.: Kathleen Blamey) Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.
- 8 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*. Boston: Zone Books, 2008.
- 9 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2002, 35-66.
- 10 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, forthcoming.
- 11 In *The Female Complaint*, Lauren Berlant writes: "The concept of the 'intimate public' thus carries the fortitude of common sense or a vernacular sense of belonging to a community, with all the undefinedness that implies. A public is intimate when it foregrounds affective and emotional attachments located in fantasies of the common, the everyday, and a sense of ordinariness, and where challenging and banal conditions of life take place in proximity to the attentions of power but also squarely in the radar of a recognition that can be provided by other humans... The 'women's culture' concept grows from such a sense of lateral identification: it sees collective sociality routed in revelations of what is personal, regardless of how what is personal has itself been threaded through mediating institutions and social hierarchy. It marks out the nonpolitical situation of most ordinary life as it is lived as a space of continuity and optimism and social self-cultivation. If it were political, it would be democratic. Ironically, in the United States the denigration of the political sphere that has always marked mass politics increasingly utilizes these proximate or 'juxtapolitical' sites as resources for providing and maintaining the experience of collectivity that also, sometimes constitute the body politic; intimate publics can provide alibis for politicians who claim to be members of every community *except* the political one. There are lots of ways of inhabiting these intimate publics: a tiny point of identification can open up a field of fantasy and de-isolation, of vague continuity, or of ambivalence. All of these energies of attachment can indeed become mobilized as counterpublicity but usually aren't. Politics requires active antagonism, which threatens the sense in consensus: this is why, in an intimate public, the political sphere is more often seen as a field of threat, chaos, degradation, or retraumatization than a condition of possibility." Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint. The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, p. 10f.
- 12 Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran. London: Verso, 2007.
- 13 C. Nadia Serematakis, *The Senses Still*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 17.
- 14 Lauren Berlant, 'Introduction', in Lauren Berlant (ed.) *Compassion. The culture and politics of an emotion*. New York: Routledge, 2004, pp 1-13, p. 10.
- 15 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* London: Zero Books, 2009, p. 1.