

Chapter 8

Challenging the De-Politicization of Food Poverty: Austerity Food Blogs

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ABSTRACT

Austerity food blogs have come to the fore with the emergence of a neoliberal ideology of austerity, which in Britain has seen cuts to welfare benefits legitimized through individual failure explanations of poverty and the stigmatizing of benefit claimants. The consequence has been to distance ministers from food poverty and de-politicize it. Austerity food blogs, written by those forced to live hand-to-mouth, are a hybrid form of digital culture that merge narratives of lived experience, food practices and political commentary in ways that challenge the dominant views on poverty so re-politicize it. A Girl Called Jack did this by breaking the silence that the stigma of poverty imposes, by personalizing hunger through Jack Monroe's narratives of her lived experience of it and inviting the pity of the reader. Monroe also challenged austerity through practices derived during the struggle to survive and eat healthily on £10-a-week food budget. Her blog resonated powerfully but also revealed a British society deeply uneasy and polarized over modern poverty.

INTRODUCTION

The eponymous blog *A Girl Called Jack* told the story of an unemployed single mother's rapid descent into and rise out of food poverty in austerity Britain. When faced with escalating poverty Jack Monroe sold nearly everything she owned or had been given, moved with her son into a single room in a house share, started feeding the two of them on a shoestring budget using recipes she concocted or adapted and blogged about her experiences. Monroe was unusual in that her budget recipes were initially created from free emergency relief parcels from her local food bank supplemented with supermarket "value" or "basic" packs bought as part of her £10-a-week food shop because that was all she could afford. *Jack* not only included recipes, it also recounted Monroe's daily struggles to survive and after her intensely

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personal account of the pain of poverty went viral, she attracted local, national and international media attention to her blog. Her writing expanded onto other platforms and included a weekly recipe column in a national newspaper, political commentaries in a range of broadcast and online news media as well as two books based on her blog recipes. Monroe also won awards for “revolutionizing” budget cooking and rejected an offer to sell her life rights for the making of a Hollywood film.

At one level, this was an archetypical narrative of individual triumph over adversity albeit with a social media angle. At another level, *Jack* challenged the ideology of austerity that became dominant after the 2010 election of a Conservative-led government in Britain, which valorized cuts to welfare benefits, ascribed the causes of poverty to individual failure, stigmatized benefit claimants and legitimized food banks thus de-politicized food poverty. Monroe’s experiences of the direct effects of benefit cuts and poverty politicized her (Monroe cited in Godwin, 2013). As her financial situation improved with income from writing, Monroe reinvented herself as an anti-poverty campaigner, drawing on her lived experience, a natural eloquence and the platform that her media profile and sizable social media following gave her. Monroe has also used these platforms to engage very openly in transgender debates. As she reinvented herself post-poverty, Monroe renamed her blog, *Cooking on a Bootstrap*, by Jack Monroe, “Author of ‘A Girl Called Jack’” thus linking her past and present while omitting the essay-type posts of the original blog that had brought her to the public attention.

The focus in this chapter is on *Jack* as an example of a type of blog that narrates the lived experiences of poverty so challenges the de-politicization of suffering. *Jack* is located within the wider context of 30 years of the rise of “mass poverty” in Britain in which a growing number of people, like Monroe, report missing meals so they can feed their children or because they cannot afford to buy food (see Caraher & Coveney, 2016; Dowler & Lambie-Mumford, 2015a; Lansley & Mack, 2015; Oxfam UK, 2012). This upward trend is due to a wide-range of factors including long-term structural changes to the job markets and systemic changes to welfare benefits. Britain’s post-war welfare system was based on a normative belief in the role of the State in ameliorating poverty through an inclusive welfare system available to everybody at the point of need from “cradle to grave” (Field, 2011). The rise in mass poverty coincides with a 30 year “re-imagining and re-constructing” of this conception of welfare (see Clarke, Gewirtz, & McLaughlin, 2000, p. 2) most notably when the 1997 Labour government re-constituted welfare as “workfare”, restricted benefit payments and made them contingent on “evidence” that claimants were seeking employment. The 2010 Conservative-led government drew on a new ideological and moral mantle of austerity with its emphasis on reducing the public deficit to expand workfare, legitimize “the most radical reshaping of welfare policy since 1945” (Hamnett, 2014, p. 490) and further cut benefits. Charities and churches are openly critical of the government doing so at a time of financial crisis (Perry, Williams, Sefton, & Haddad, 2014) and medical experts warn that the government’s austerity agenda has reversed 60 years of progress made against food poverty and that an impending public health crisis is brewing (Ashton, Middleton, & Lang, 2014). While the poorest in society, particularly the unemployed, have been disproportionately affected by these changes (Lansley & Mack, 2015), more generally, household budgets across the country have been constrained by rising global food prices and falling or stagnating incomes. It is in this context, that food banks also proliferated as a form of charity in which free food is distributed to those deemed to be most in need. Moreover, it is also in this context that austerity-related blogs and budget cooking television programs focused on the practices of making cheap, healthy meals have proliferated.

The concern here is with austerity food blogs written by those who due to force of circumstance live hand-to-mouth (Wren, 2013). Austerity food blogs are a hybrid form of digital culture that combines nar-

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