

Chapter 28

Hunger Hurts: The Politicization of an Austerity Food Blog

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ABSTRACT

Austerity food blogs have become prominent as household food budgets have become tighter, government finances constrained, and an ideology of austerity has become dominant. The British version of austerity privileges reducing government spending by cutting welfare benefits, and legitimizes this through individual failure explanations of poverty and stereotypes of benefit claimants. Austerity food blogs, written by those forced to live hand to mouth, are a hybrid form of digital culture that merges narratives of lived experience, food practices and political commentary in ways that challenge the dominant views on poverty. The popular blog A Girl Called Jack disrupts the austerity hegemony by breaking the silence that the stigma of poverty imposes on the impoverished and by personalizing poverty through Jack Monroe's narratives of her lived experience of it, inviting the reader's pity and refuting reductionist explanations of the causes of poverty. Monroe also challenges austerity through practices derived through her personal knowledge gained during her struggle to survive and eat healthily on £10-a-week food budget. This combination of narrative and survival practices written evocatively and eloquently resonate powerfully with readers; however the response to Monroe's blog highlights a deep uneasiness in British society over growing levels of poverty, and deep divisions over who is responsible for addressing it; and more fundamentally, over identifying and defining the modern poor and modern poverty.

INTRODUCTION

The eponymous blog *A Girl Called Jack* tells 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 is unusual in that her budget recipes were initially created from free emergency relief parcels from her local food bank and supermarket 'value' or 'basic' packs

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7311-1.ch028

bought during her £10-a-week food shop because that was all she could afford. Her blog not only includes recipes; it also details daily struggles to survive, and after Monroe's intensely personal account of the pain of poverty went viral, she attracted local, national and international media attention to her blog. Her writing has expanded onto other platforms including a weekly recipe column in a national newspaper, political commentaries in a range of broadcast and online news media, and two books based on her blog recipes. Monroe has also won awards for 'revolutionizing' budget cooking, and rejected an offer to sell her life rights for a Hollywood film. At one level, this is an archetypical narrative of individual triumph over adversity, albeit with a social media angle. At another level, *Jack* challenges the ideology of austerity that became dominant after the 2010 election of a Conservative-led government in Britain, and in particular the valorizing of cuts to welfare benefits, the ascribing of the causes of poverty to individual failure, and the stigmatizing of benefit claimants. 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.

Jack needs to be understood 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 (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 market 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 reconstituted 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 austerity-related blogs and 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), and a hybrid form of digital culture that combines narratives of lived experience of poverty, practices developed to survive it, and political commentary. Thus, the blogs provide a bottom-up social history of food poverty at a critical juncture when welfare reform and the age of austerity have converged. Blogs facilitate this history by providing platforms for ordinary people to circulate their narratives of lived experiences, recount daily practices, and comment on wider social developments. Austerity food blogs are distinctive in that they are organized around a central motif of food poverty and surviving it; furthermore, their vantage point of the lived experience of poverty

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