Entering the Spaces of Power

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Date : January 16, 2015

Janet Newman, Governing the present: activism, neoliberalism, and the problem of power and consent, 8 **Crit. Pol. Stud.** 133 (2014).

What has happened to the vocabulary of justification associated with the welfare state – that language of need, equality and social justice so crucial for anchoring and grounding public action? Have the terms of justification become appropriated and re-aligned, articulated to neoliberal concepts of entrepreneurship, discipline and waste, or simply abandoned? And does anything remain of a more progressive set of significations (or chains of meaning)?

In a thoughtful, wide-ranging and nuanced article, the eminent public governance scholar, Janet Newman, explores some ways of diagnosing the present, situating contemporary strategies of governing, in nations such as Britain, in relation to concerns about the securing and unsettling of political consent. What causes people to sign up to or acquiesce in current governance arrangements, and what challenges to this often reluctant acquiescence are posed, as nations struggle to define, mobilise and respond to political moments of 'crisis'?

Newman's article focuses on the recent financial crisis and resulting austerity measures, particularly the disproportionate impact public sector cut-backs have had on women. Her analysis addresses the problematic of governance, consent and power in relation to gender, drawing on feminist work for analytical resources as well as critical texts.

At the heart of Newman's account is the question of political contingency. This doesn't deny the strength of dominant social relations to shape events but avoids a depiction of political and institutional life as fixed and predetermined. Newman draws on the conjunctural thinking of Stuart Hall, John Clarke and others to reveal the cluster of factors that have produced the current crisis, to show that it is more than an economically driven affair. Conjunctures identify specific space/ time configurations in which multiple forces, tendencies, pressures and possibilities combine. As a conceptual framework conjunctures have something in common with actor networks in the sense that they depict a cluster of processes and phenomena that converge and, for a while, sustain a particular shape. Conjunctures (like actor networks) are also productive. They produce particular projects as hegemonic – through the ways in which forces, discourses and tendencies get articulated together. As Stuart Hall (who Newman quotes) remarks, hegemony "is a process, not a state of being". As such, it needs constant work to be sustained, even as sustaining hegemony also involves its ongoing revision.

Conjunctural analysis is helpful for progressive and more radical scholarship. We can approach conjunctures, such as the current neoliberal 'crisis', in two ways: first by focusing on its conditions of production or assemblage; second by considering what counter-hegemonic strategies it might enable. In relation to the former, Newman considers critiques of current feminist and gender equality practice made by influential feminist scholars, Angela McRobbie and Nancy Fraser. Newman focuses on the claim that feminism has contributed to the current austerity crisis by helping to consolidate neo-liberalism. Struggling and campaigning to detach women from conventional social roles, feminism, it is argued, has helped women to enter post-Fordist economies. By focusing on identity politics, feminism has also become a target for capitalist commodification. What gets lost, in the process, is a direct attack on

exploitative and unjust economic relations.

Newman's account respects, but does not adopt wholesale, feminist critiques of feminism made by different academics and commentators over recent years. Arguing that they overstate the power and agency of capitalist economic relations and of neoliberalism as a cultural regime, she also suggests such arguments fail to give adequate recognition to the forms of agency and creativity refracted through dissent. Feminism may be vulnerable to resignification in ways that support the articulation of gender equality to market processes, but that is not all it offers.

The importance of recognising feminism's far more complex character in order to avoid simple, overstated claims of co-option or hegemony, speaks to a different way of approaching a conjuncture. This focuses on the counter-hegemonic possibilities conjunctures make available – in part by providing a more nuanced account of the conjuncture itself. Thus, in discussing feminism's contribution to state and governance politics, Newman draws on her own research – intensive interviews with four generations of British-based feminists "working the spaces of power". By exploring how these activists straddle institutional and community activist spaces – simultaneously inside and out – Newman addresses the counter-hegemonic practices these feminists engage in. Such practices include bringing novel ways of working into state institutions (ways that subsequently become mainstreamed within state practice); taking advantage of new state paradigms to advance particular feminist agendas; and developing cutting-edge services both within and beyond the official state.

Engaged in 'border work', feminists working the spaces of power establish and combine new repertoires of governing. State governments may be criticised for appropriating and co-opting activist paradigms and practices, but feminist border workers takes activist frameworks and concerns *into* official apparatuses of government. Likewise, those engaged in community politics – including those 'thrown out' of state structures – take governmental concepts with them into the community sector, inflecting concepts such as entrepreneurship and localism with social justice values.

Throughout, Newman argues against binary accounts that draw a clear division between state and civil society; and between power and resistance. Instead, she focuses on three kinds of political labour, engaged in by those working across the multiple and divergent spaces of power. The first involves making visible the damaging effects of governmental policy measures, such as cut-backs, challenging in the process the naturalised status of necessary and responsible austerity. Second, Newman talks about the importance of forging new public conversations that shift the discursive repertoires of government and wider public culture – a process that also involves the production of new forms of publicness. Third, she discusses the work of creatively stitching together new alliances and new ways of performing politics.

In this article and her work more generally, Janet Newman makes a vital contribution to understanding governance. She combines a close understanding of public governance, particularly in its changing managerial form, with interdisciplinary scholarship – embracing organisational studies, political discourse, public policy and feminist analyses, among others. Newman's work approaches governing as situated public processes and activities that embody contradictions and tensions; and it is through these dissonant encounters and connections that new directions for progressive practice are opened up. Thus, her work avoids the universalising tendencies sometimes found in radical political philosophy when it is insufficiently attentive to differences of time, place and context, and so generates totalising accounts organised around single axes or particular splits.

At the same time, Janet Newman's engagement with social, cultural and political theorising allows for meanings and patterns to become evident that might be missed in more narrowly technical accounts of governance. For me, what emerges with particular prominence in Newman's recent work is a hopeful

orientation; one that identifies pathways for progressive politics, while holding onto a critical account of public governance as it manifests itself in countries, such as Britain, today.

Cite as: Davina Cooper, *Entering the Spaces of Power*, JOTWELL (January 16, 2015) (reviewing Janet Newman, *Governing the present: activism, neoliberalism, and the problem of power and consent*, 8 **Crit. Pol. Stud.** 133 (2014)), https://equality.jotwell.com/entering-the-spaces-of-power/.