

Tracey Jensen

*Tough Love in Tough Times*

### **Introduction**

We are going to ensure, like every solvent household in the country; that what we buy, we can afford; that the bills we incur, we have the income to meet; and that we do not saddle our children with the interest on the interest on the interest of the debts we were not ourselves prepared to pay.

George Osborne, 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review

The global recession of 2008-2009 was caused by the collapse of the speculative housing market, global inflation as a result of new emerging markets for commodities, the over-inflation of asset prices and other high-risk lending practices in the banking industry. Many economists have also linked the current recession to the cyclical boom-and-bust nature of late capitalism. In response to the recession, a variety of economic measures have been implemented on national and international levels in an attempt to encourage recovery, most taking the form of fiscal 'austerity'. 'Austerity', the quality or state of being austere and the condition of enforced economy, was named Word of the Year in 2010 by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, and has since been attached to a raft of neoliberal economic policies which have been concerned with deficit reduction, reduced public spending and diminishing/disappearing welfare benefits and payments. 'Austerity' is also the central agenda under which the responsibilities of the state towards its citizens are being reconfigured, for example in new, tighter conditions being imposed on those receiving financial aid and assistance.

In the UK in 2009, David Cameron, then leader of the Conservative party in opposition, now Prime Minister, announced that Britain would move into an 'age of austerity', characterised by restraint, thrift and transparency in public spending, and here positioned as a necessary response to the national deficit and to the profligacy of the then-Labour administration (1997-2010). Cameron's speech referred to this previous Labour administration as 'spendaholics', 'irresponsible' and 'a party of extravagant waste', situating the cause of the crisis within public overspending and lack of fiscal restraint. In this speech, and in many others since, repeated distinctions are drawn between the out-of-control

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**Tracey Jensen, Tough Love in Tough Times**

**Studies in the Maternal**, 4(2), 2012, [www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk)

indebtedness of the past and the ‘necessary’ lean fitness of the future. These distinctions have been mediated through a range of metaphors, specifically around the ‘solvent family’, the hardworking family, and above all the *responsible* family which lives within its means and saves in order to spend, rather than borrows in order to spend. These metaphors are illustrated in the remarks above from George Osborne, Chancellor of the Exchequer, in which the promises to embrace austerity as a Government are linked explicitly to the economic realities of the responsible family. Osborne is not the first politician to explicitly link national economic policy to the balanced household budget: during her time as Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher famously claimed that her knowledge of how to balance a household budget qualified her to take decisions about the British economy, drawing on powerful tropes of the prudent housewife and her own mythologised past as a grocer’s daughter (Campbell 2001). Now, as then, national ‘solvency’ is aligned with the responsibility, thrift, and temperance of the individual household.

The relationship between children, parents and institutions has become increasingly politicised, with ‘good parenting’ positioned in public, policy and popular culture as the principle means for securing good outcomes for children (Gillies 2005; Leira and Saraceno 2008; Furedi 2008 ; Jensen 2010). The first five years of a child’s life in particular have been fetishized by policymakers as the make-or-break period for later successes and failures. The recent flurry of consultation and policy papers, directly addressing parents and what they do as the principle interface for social change, documents an intensification of these processes. What is particularly interesting about these policy debates is the way in which they have sidelined issues of resources, family wealth and economic inequality in favour of more abstract notions of parental ‘engagement’ and ‘warmth’ (Jensen 2010): as such they presume that it is not the unequal distribution of capital that impacts negatively on family life, but rather the lost ability to ‘parent’ well. In this paper I examine how ‘austerity’ has been taken up as a cultural annotation in this politicisation of parenting, reproducing fantasies of the national fitness of the past.

This ‘national fitness’ is gendered, attached in particular to the mothers of the past who become signs of the capacity to thrive through times of hardship. The austerity agenda that has been adopted in both the UK and in other parts of Europe is similarly gendered and has been shown to impact upon women disproportionately: and specifically upon mothers (see Fawcett Society 2012; Women’s Budget Group 2011). Added to the existing ‘motherhood penalty’ for mothers seeking work, penalties which are not experienced by fathers seeking

work (Corell and Barnard 2007), and the broader gender pay gap whereby women are still paid 16.4 per cent less for full time work and 35 per cent less for part time work than men (again with *mothers* absorbing the bulk of this gender pay gap), these multiple impacts offer a bleak picture for women raising children. Despite the fact that they are hardest hit by the recession, some mothers are taking up the turn to ‘austerity’ in remarkably positive ways: stationing their reduced income, greater precarity, unemployment or underemployment and uncertain futurity within broader projects to remake their family life, their domestic practices, their labour and consumer subjectivities, in order to become frugal, thrifty and austere parents.

I situate the current ‘turn to austerity’ not just within economic spheres, but also within the realm of the affective, examining how austerity positions us in ways which are at once social and psychic. This paper contributes to a growing field of work that attends to the psychosocial aspects of contemporary life and to the anxieties, fears and fantasies that are at play in the production of social identity and practices which attempt to consolidate and defend social privilege (Hollway and Jefferson 2000; Vincent and Ball 2006). This field combines social science with theories of the interior and offers novel accounts of how social inequalities take shape psychically (Reay 2008), how the social world is ‘desirously and defensively’ appropriated (Hollway 2004) and how value systems are consciously and unconsciously reproduced and circulated, attaching moral worth to specific lives and subjects through the pathologising of others (Sayer 2005; Skeggs 1997, 2004; Haylett 2001).

This paper asks what affective incitements are circulating around austerity, gender, family and the future: what are the romances of austerity, and specifically of austerity parenting, and how is austerity being incorporated into a longer rewriting of the affective components of citizenship? I examine the echoes and resonances between popular cultural texts such as weblogs, television and self-help books which promise to show ‘families’ (specifically mothers) how to ‘do more with less’, and recent social policy texts, speeches and publications which suture ‘good parenting’ to social mobility, aspiration and future success. These ‘new thrift’ projects perhaps speak to a contemporary disillusionment with consumerism, but they also, as I aim to show in this paper, demonstrate the ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2011) with which we continually attach ourselves to promises of future happiness via institutions and practices which diminish us. It is not my aim to show that the austere parents who author these cultural texts (or those that follow these pedagogies of austerity) have been hoodwinked by neo-liberalism, nor that they are deluded in their continuing aspirations for

the ‘good life’. Instead, I aim to unpick the potency of these promises and to reflect upon the constructed and consoling nostalgias which underpin them. I aim to examine the new cultural politics of wanting in the context of austerity regimes, and to ask, what kinds of wanting are permissible or possible in this moment? What are the attachments to respectable, responsible restraint and what becomes abject in these thrift projects? I also want to excavate the gendered tyrannies of ‘happiness’ and happiness scripts which reinforce the new thrift movement: specifically the revitalisation of the figure of the ‘happy housewife’ in new thrift culture. In this sense I will examine what ‘austerity’ *does* and how it works to both orient us to an imagined future and to placate current exacerbations of experiences of inequality and hardship.

### **‘Getting Tough’ on ‘Broken Britain’**

The current magnetism of austerity speaks to older, and recently reinvigorated, notions of a ‘social crisis’: a crisis of solidarity, community and civil society. The term ‘social recession’ has been a popular device across the political spectrum – including the progressive left – for some time, appearing even before actual economic recession began (see Rutherford and Shah 2006; Finlayson 2010). To understand the contemporary stitching together of parenting and austerity it is necessary to examine the emergence of the ‘social recession’ and the more populist (and alliterative) version of ‘Broken Britain’ discourses which weld together fears about ‘bad’ cultural choices (‘lifestyle’), worklessness and social reproduction. These in turn revive notions of the ‘underclass’. The term ‘underclass’ emerged in the United States in the 1980s and was popularized in the UK principally through the work of Charles Murray, who defined the term as referring not to a degree of poverty, but to a type of poverty (1990), a turn which contributed to popular and political reconstructions of poverty as a result of social pathologies, rather than of structural inequalities.

Murray defines the ‘underclass’ in terms of illegitimacy, crime and unemployment and, in later work, elaborates upon the significance of the family (and its collapse) in the transmission of behavioural deviancy, which he saw as cementing the position of the underclass across generations. His understanding of poverty is, above all, behavioural and revives late-Victorian and Edwardian moral categories of pauperism, which distinguished between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor. This notion of the ‘underclass’ has come under sustained criticism by social scientists who have found his statistical analysis to be highly selective, his sociological methods unsound and evidence of a ‘dependency culture’

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amongst the poor and unemployed lacking (for example, Gallie 1994; Oppenheim and Harker 1996; Kempson 1996: for an overview of this work see Lister 1996).

Yet despite the robust critique of Murray's work, his notion of the 'underclass' was enthusiastically incorporated by successive UK Governments, replacing 'underprivileged' – the preferred term of the 1970s – and in turn subsumed in the later 1990s by the term 'socially excluded' (Levitas 2005). Murray himself commented on the 'ugliness' of the concept of the underclass, and others too have remarked on the ugliness it prompts in those who write about – often using the language of disease – contamination and moral hygiene (Lister 2006). The flexibility of the term 'underclass' has made it a highly potent political tool: indeed, re-reading Murray's original essay now I am struck by its neat synergy with current UK political rhetoric.

Underclass discourse has not suddenly 'reappeared'. Rather, it has been continually spoken and re-spoken through an ever-expanding palimpsest of categories: 'chaotic' or 'dysfunctional' families being the preferred term of Prime Minister Gordon Brown who in his 2009 Labour Party Conference speech estimated numbers of 50,000, while, after the English riots of August 2011, Prime Minister David Cameron spoke of 'problem' families, this time revising the number up to 120,000.<sup>1</sup> 'The underclass' remains a flexible concept (in the sense that a shifting constellation of moral 'failings' can be diagnosed as its symptoms), but what remains constant across these categories is the claim that poverty and disadvantage are a matter of choice and can be explained through the poor lifestyle choices of those who have *chosen to remain* at the bottom of society in the form of a static strata of pathologically and economically dependent families. As such, underclass discourse forms a key pillar in the substitution of class politics with the culturalisation of poverty (Haylett 2001; Levitas 1998) and the emergence of new vocabularies of social class which are 'bodied forth' by political fantasies of meritocracy and enthusiastically circulated in populist languages of disgust (Tyler 2004; see also Tyler, forthcoming).

In its current form, the rhetoric of dependency which emerges from this reinvigorated underclass discourse states that the current crisis of worklessness in the context of austerity is not a result of global recession or of diminishing job opportunities, but rather is a direct result of a munificent welfare system which has 'gone soft' and allows the unemployed to languish with no real pressures to find work. This rhetoric of dependency performs two functions: first it situates poverty as *only ever* a condition of worklessness, and worklessness as *only ever* individual failure. The myths of full employment, which are central to

this rhetoric, operate cross-party, and can be seen in both New Labour's *Unleashing Aspiration* (Panel for Fair Access 2009) and the Coalition's social mobility strategy paper *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers* (2011). The flexibility of this rhetoric can be seen in moralising statements which call forth an imaginary workless/workshy Other to whom various affects might be attached:

[T]hrough this reform process we must not lose sight of the fact that we currently have a welfare system whose cost has spiralled out of control, in good times and bad, and has now trapped generations into worklessness. (David Freud 2012)<sup>2</sup>

When you work hard and still sometimes have to go without the things you want because times are tough, it's maddening to know there are some people who could work but just don't want to. You know the people I mean. You walk down the road on your way to work and you see the curtains drawn in their house. You know they could work, but they choose not to. And just as maddening is the fact that they seem to get away with it. (David Cameron 2011)

The 'generosity' of the welfare state is here cast as both causing worklessness, trapping the unemployed in a benefit trap, whilst at the same time, worklessness is said to be the cause of poverty. The resurgence of this doublethink dependency rhetoric in a time of recession works to re-animate moral categories around the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, holding the undeserving as responsible not only for their own predicament, but also for that of the 'bloated' welfare state. One of the most grotesque narratives that has emerged from the current financial crisis is that the crisis has been caused not by high-risk speculative capitalism, but by those who subsist upon the public purse: not just the unemployed but also the lone parent, the disabled, and the sick.

The current austerity agenda which I interrogate here, positions the withdrawal of public services and reduction of public support from these groups as a solution to the burdens of fellowship and mutual support which (it is said) we can no longer afford. This withdrawal and reduction of social support is also positioned as the solution for the 'epidemic of the diseased will':<sup>3</sup> in short, the discourse of dependency actively *frames* the current crisis as one where personal responsibility has been undermined by state pampering, where, as Tom Slater suggests, 'big government' has 'broken' Britain (Slater forthcoming). 'Personal responsibility' is absolutely key to understanding how the financial crisis is being discursively circulated on multiple levels as an individual (not collective) failure. The individual family's 'failure' to be responsible for itself is cast here as a sickness of dependency, for which the remedy is austerity. Just as the late Victorians considered 'fecklessness' to be a marker of

undeserving pauperism – caused by individual moral failures – so too does contemporary underclass discourse equate poverty with personal irresponsibility. Slater argues that the rekindling of dependency discourse is documented by the liberal use of the alliterative term ‘Broken Britain’ across policy, and furthermore that this rekindling is ‘agnostological’: perpetuated through ‘the cultural production of ignorance’. Referring to a major five-part ‘pathways to poverty’ consultation (conducted by the Centre for Social Justice<sup>4</sup>), Slater notes that *no* social scientists were invited to join the working groups. The agnotology here is shockingly clear. The weak, tautological and numerically massaged evidence of the resultant ‘evidence-based policy making’ consultation (see Jensen 2010), prompts Slater to re-name it ‘decision-based evidence making’.

Slater is rightly scathing in his attack on the agnotology of the thinktank industry and the part they have played in popularising myths of the feckless and irresponsible underclass. The myths of ‘Broken Britain’ ignore the politics of unemployment: the global impacts of neoliberal policy, regional de-industrialisation, global migrations of capital, tax evasion and consolidation of wealth by a new class of super-elites, the wilful destruction of organised labour, and new topographies of work which normalise insecurity. ‘Broken Britain’ rhetoric ignores the intensified precarity of *all* labour – the rise of short-term contracts or contractless work, underemployment, low wages, the threat of outsourcing, diminishing returns on maternity pay and sickness pay, the failure to recognise caring responsibilities, ‘flexploitation’, the shift of education and training costs and risks to the individual and so on (Ross 2009; Weeks 2011; Standing 2011). By locating blame for unemployment in a ‘generous’ welfare state, these myths fail to recognise how important the welfare state has become in supplementing low paid and precarious work. For example, sixty-one per cent of British children who are officially ‘in poverty’ have at least one parent in work (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2011), a statistic which seriously troubles the attribution of poverty to worklessness.

‘Broken Britain’ dependency rhetoric around work and worklessness is of consequence here because of the readiness with which it is *already attached* to childrearing practices and to the field of parenting, newly understood as a set of skills and competencies rather than a personal relationship (Furedi 2008). ‘Good parenting’ has been identified, first by New Labour and now by the Coalition, as the central means by which stagnant social mobility is to be invigorated and social inclusion guaranteed. The success or failure of children to perform well academically, get into university, maintain relationships and become

employed is increasingly attributed to the style of parenting they received *over and above all other factors*. Similarly, ‘poor parents’ are seen to be reproducing the moral inadequacies of their own childhoods. The stitching of individual parental behaviour to more and more future ‘outcomes’ has resulted in policy targeting earlier periods of childhood in the name of social renewal. Couched in the language of efficiency, we are told that a pound spent in a child’s first year (principally spent teaching its parents how to be responsible ‘good parents’ via parent pedagogy programmes and services) will save many more of the pounds that the child will (inevitably) cost the social purse of the future.

There are three main consequences of the ‘good parenting’ policy model that I want to draw out here. First, this model circulates a deficit model of working-class parenting and recasts social inequality as an individual failure to live well (Gewirtz 2005). The ‘cycles’ theory of poor parenting powerfully echoes that of worklessness and dependency and contributes to the caricature of the ‘underclass’ which is so central to the notion of Britain being ‘broken’. Multi-generational worklessness/poor parenting explanations are deeply regressive and reproduce a classed ‘Other’ who has nothing to offer and everything to learn (Walkerline and Lucey 1989). The ‘good parent’ that is referenced in these debates is silently but resolutely middle-class – privileged and resourced – but these (classed, material) advantages are obscured in policy which speaks of ‘good parenting’ as a matter of culture and aspiration. ‘Good parenting’ thus forms a key pillar in fantasies of meritocracy (Gillies 2005) even in the face of powerful sociological evidence which documents the impact of economic and material (classed) constraints on family practices (Lareau 2001; Gillies 2007). The only (tantalisingly brief) references to social class appear as an apology to those who seem to effortlessly fulfil the tenets of good parenting: ‘Much of what we say here may not immediately appear relevant to middle class readers, whose children imbibe effective social behaviour unconsciously with their mother’s milk’ (Allen and Smith 2008, p.21).

Second, the fix on ‘poor parenting’ in these current debates around disadvantage illustrates how far policy has moved away from structural explanations of inequality, and towards behavioural explanations which focus on conduct and skills (Jensen 2010). The explanatory power that is attached to individual family’s ‘good parenting’ has intensified since the economic downturn, particularly through an extended discourse of ‘tough love’: the elusive, correct balance of discipline and warmth which is said to guarantee educational and social successes. Tough love *names the crisis* of social immobility as one of parental indulgence, failure to set boundaries, moral laxity and disciplinary incompetence. As a familial solution to



social problems, ‘tough love’ emerged from US intervention treatments for addictive and compulsive behaviours, and is based on recognising destructive/co-dependent love which ‘rescues’ and enables such behaviours to continue. It is a significant contribution to the established field of emotional interventions, knowledge and pedagogies which aim to transform the social world through appealing to us to change the way we emotionally relate to it, in this case through the way that we love our children. In order to set them up for future success, proponents of tough love insist that we must love children differently: we must say ‘no’, set boundaries, teach them resilience and build their characters. This ‘good parenting’ policy direction is pivotal to the growth of ‘emotional capitalism’ (Illouz 2007), which puts the transformation of emotional life and of our relationships to others at the centre of the public sphere and questions of social equity and renewal (see also Hochschild 2003, 2012; Furedi 2003, 2005).

The eruption of the how-to-live self-help movement – which has swollen further in the contemporary moment of austerity – can be viewed as a cultural extension of social policy individualisations of poverty and disadvantage, which promise to demonstrate how you can transform yourself, your feelings, orientations and practices in order to get rich, be happy, raise confident children and so on. Self-help is one cultural expression of the ‘post-social’ welfare landscape. At the sharp end, emotional capitalism substitutes anger at social justice into a resolve to live better; a resolve that has become the tyranny of positive thinking and happiness science (Ehrenreich 2009). Happiness science and happiness scripts have become particularly established in the thrift and frugality culture which is the subject of this article, and I return to the connections between them in more detail in subsequent sections.

Thirdly and finally, it is important to note how ‘tough love’ is sutured to promises of ‘social mobility’. Social mobility is a privileged object in neoliberal government, serving as a proxy for social justice. Social mobility is articulated as a matter of ‘equality of opportunity’, equal *chances*, rather than equal treatment or equal shares: as such it pronounces that we must have more *aspiration* rather than more redistribution. There is much robust evidence that social mobility has stalled and that social immobility links to social inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; Dorling 2011). However, political commitment to ‘mobility’ (but not ‘equality’) remains. The Coalition government attaches ‘fairness’ to the former but not the latter. While Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg claims to be ‘appalled’ by social immobility<sup>5</sup>, he is appalled only by the lack of movement between rich and poor, not by the gap between rich and poor itself. In naming the source of his outrage as social mobility (but not inequality), Clegg draws

on the elastic term ‘fairness’ and its associated productive myth of meritocracy to argue that we/our children can succeed if we want to/we want them to. Again, the spectre of social class is raised by Clegg, but only to reference the ‘poverty of aspiration’ in working-class households and the ‘class attitudes’ which apparently prevent working-class children from aspiring. Again the material effects of social class are dismissed and ignored in familiar ways.

The fix on ‘social mobility’ (but not equality) transfers attention away from poverty to the ‘non-financial dimensions of poverty’: in other words, away from *incomes* and towards *outcomes*. Recent consultations on poverty, such as Frank Field’s (2011) *Independent Review of Poverty and Life Chances*, have made paltry acknowledgements that ‘income is an important determinant of outcomes for children’ (2011 p.87), but like the other policy documents discussed here, the question of income is continually sidelined by the call for supplemental measures – including the mother’s age, qualifications and mental health and the presence of ‘positive parenting’ – all of which have unclear causal/symptomatic relationships to poverty. The most recent publication on social mobility *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers* (2011), calls for no fewer than *seventeen* supplemental measures of social mobility.

In the context of a national austerity agenda which disproportionately impacts the poor, and socially stagnant mobility which means that family wealth remains the biggest predictor of educational success, this rhetorical fix on ‘mobility’ over ‘equality’, ‘poor parenting’ over poverty, and teaching ‘tough love’ whilst enacting fiscal ‘toughening’ is revealing. I want to conclude this section by reflecting on how mobility-over-equality discourses and the call to ‘tough love’ both work to animate fantasies of the future and the past, and to anchor the present as a space of ‘responsibility crisis’ that bridges the two.

The moral annotations around today’s ‘problem families’ in public, political and academic debates, work by constructing a fantasy family of the past. As in the production of a broad range of ‘modern’ problems, a ‘golden age’ of the family is set up as that from which we are understood to have retreated (see Coontz 2000). In the case of parenting, the post-war years are held up across policy documents as a paragon of parenting skills and familial stability. Frank Field’s (2011) poverty consultation references Geoffrey Gorer’s 1955 survey of ‘the English character’, which apparently offers Field the ‘evidence’ he needs to uncritically posit that ‘tough love’ is what turned England into ‘what was until recently a peaceful self-governing kingdom’ (2011 p.20). Gorer’s survey offers an interesting sociological account of post-war class prejudices, but to argue that it demonstrates the uninterrupted peace of the ‘tough love’ past is a methodological stretch. Nonetheless, these consoling nostalgias around

post-war parenting are potent, and can be seen in a variety of popular cultural texts, which I turn to in the next part of this article.

One such text takes the form of a viral essay titled ‘We Was Brung Up Proper’, which catalogues the ways that children born in the 40s, 50s and 60s had a ‘proper’ childhood. The essay is fascinating for the affective life that it breathes into ‘tough love’ and ‘thrift’, the two mobilising pillars that I am interested in here, and for the ways in which it constructs its vision of the rosy past as one of liberation and freedom from regulation. Its inventory of ‘proper childhood’ includes the use of physical discipline and corporal punishment, the absence of parental surveillance, the freedom to play outside all day, the fearless consumption of sweets and processed foods, and so on. Having begun circulating on social media sites in 2011, the essay formed the basis of a number of newspaper comment pieces, all accompanied by nostalgic black and white Getty images of post-war suburbs (see Hanson 2012; Fairbairn 2012). Although the essay interpolates its reader through the past, it is very much a product of the current moment, and speaks to the tough love meritocracy discourse, concluding with the claim that ‘we had freedom, failure, success and responsibility, and we learned how to deal with it all.’ ‘We Was Brung Up Proper’ romanticises a time when parents were less intensive, paranoid and risk-averse (Hays 1997; Furedi 2004). It gestures towards multiple kinds of responsibility which are now considered to have been lost: reproductive responsibility via heterosexual marriage, financial responsibility via ‘doing without’, educational responsibility and a ‘solid 3 R education’ and so on. This essay, like other intersecting political and cultural fantasies of a now-‘Broken Britain’, constructs the modern parent as evading responsibility for the successes and failures of their families and children.

The construction of a ‘golden age’ of responsible parenting in ‘We Was Brung Up Proper’ ascribes blame for the current social responsibility crisis upon modern ‘disengaged’ parents who have lost the capacity to be financially autonomous, self-sufficient and moral disciplinarians. Ros Edwards and Val Gillies (forthcoming) revisit the community studies research of sociologist Dennis Marsden and argue that the notion of a ‘golden age’ of responsible parenting is not borne out by the research archive: not only does the contemporary discourse of ‘parenting’ and ‘parental responsibility’ simply not exist in the 1960s, but also practices which would, through current eyes, be seen as neglectful were common and completely unremarkable. Tough love discourse and policy is resolutely ahistorical in this sense. In the next section I turn to the second of the affective pillars which

are foundational to the responsibility themes of austerity parenting: thrift culture and the rise of the frugal family.

### **The New Thrift**

‘Economy is a poor man’s revenue: extravagance a rich man’s ruin.’

Title page of Lydia Child’s *American Frugal Housewife*

Mrs Child’s 1828 tome to domestic economy was a nineteenth century bestseller and has gone through thirty two editions, its current issue forming part of a wider nostalgia around the frugal survival strategies of pioneer, ‘old-timey’ housewives. There has been a recent explosion of media content, including books, television and weblogs, which combines housewife lore, proverbs, recipes, remedies and vintage photographs. This ‘new thrift’ content approaches key historical eras and periods as repositories of both kitsch appeal and ‘common sense’ wisdom.

The cultural turn to thrift, previously a countercultural mainstay of anti-consumerist movements, gathered pace at the beginning of the global recession and is now a somewhat familiar trope across a broad range of cultural and lifestyle sites and texts. Although thrift has always been a central and necessary component of survival for those at the sharpest ends of poverty – and, indeed, perhaps we should not necessarily be surprised by the proliferation of thrift guides in a time of austerity – the shape of contemporary thrift and the affects it attaches to do merit specific attention. Far from being a means to survival, thrift is here being promoted as a lifestyle, reinvigorated as a source of cultural value and a site of distinction. The contemporary *cultural* expression of thrift is, as I will show, disconnected from working-class life, necessity and pleasure and is instead connected to middle-class romances of retreat.

The ‘new thrift’ is a term I am borrowing from the US-based Institute for American Values, a proselytizing organisation which positions its twin aims of promoting (heterosexual) marriage and of replacing the ‘culture of debt’ and waste with thrift and frugality. In 2005 the Institute announced a new Centre for Thrift and Generosity which now regularly publishes on the need for America to rebuild its economy through marriage and thrift, and situates ‘the new thrift’ as a solution to the national addiction to debt and overspending (see Whitehead, 2008; Whitehead and Blankenthorn 2009). These publications also contribute to the neo-liberalising rhetoric which is emerging in many places in response to the 2009-2010 recession, whereby the reduction and disappearance of public services is seen as the necessary (and

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only) response to public deficit and where elective philanthropy is considered an adequate replacement for progressive taxation and a publicly funded welfare state (see Gaudiani 2010).

Although the central focus in this article is on the specific cultural politics of austerity in the UK, these US origins of the term ‘new thrift’ are highly significant. ‘New thrift’ culture is highly mobile and many of the ‘thrift objects’ (books, weblogs and so on) that I discuss in this paper are not restrained by geography. Although the British and American cultural manifestations of thrift have distinctive and separate histories, I found many crossovers and resonances between them: for example, British weblogs on post-war rationing which connect to US weblogs on pioneer cooking. In addition, there are important resonances between the Institute for American Values and its UK counterparts. For example, the Centre for Social Justice – the ‘independent’ thinktank which I have already referred to in this paper and which is a central moral lobbying voice for the Coalition government – also positions (heterosexual) marriage as the solution to most social problems and views poverty as a failure of the individual. A member of the Institute, David Blackenthorn (2008), positions thrift as a ‘miracle cure’ with the etymological root ‘to thrive’, defining it as a set of habits that can fortify the individual against the toxic culture of the modern world, including ‘shameful wastefulness, growing economic inequality, independence-killing indebtedness, runaway mindless consumerism’. Again, the explanation for ‘poverty’ offered here has nothing to do with low pay, the stagnation of wages in real terms, poor education and health provision, structural unemployment or underemployment, the effects of global neo-liberalism, deregulation of social security, reforms to welfare which aggravate class fractures (and so on). Rather, ‘poverty’ is seen as a result of the failure to prudently use one’s resources and is connected to moral conduct and responsibility.

The cultural turn towards ‘new thrift’ practices and habits repositions thrift not as a matter of survival, but as a matter of transforming the relationship of the self to itself. New thrift presents a new cultural politics of wanting, whereby to want, to desire, is marked as vulgar, irresponsible and a sign of excessive attachments to the material world. New thrift culture repeatedly states that these orientations to the material world – its acquisition and possession – and the desire for the ‘good life’ has weakened our moral resilience and our ability to defer our pleasures until we can pay for them. Austerity is presented not only as fashionable and fun, but as a source of personal self-esteem and thus of national transformation. The self-help end of austerity culture has exploded in the last three years in particular. Like other avenues of transformation culture (such as parenting), social problems

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**Studies in the Maternal**, 4(2), 2012, [www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk)

are relentlessly individualised and psychologised with the responsibility falling on the flawed, damaged or incompetent subject and their ‘bad’ cultural choices. In this vein, UK lifestyle television has been able to quickly exploit the cultural politics of recession, developing a self-help genre of ‘austerity chic’ which can be seen in programmes such as *Economy Gastronomy* (BBC2 2009) *Superscrimpers* (Channel 4 2011, 2012) and *The Ultimate Guide to Penny-Pinching* (Channel 4 2011). All of these promise to transmit rules for ‘smart’ spending and instruct viewers in consumer competence and responsibility.

On the borders of ‘recession television,’ with its emphasis on being ‘smart’, is a range of content which offers alternative philosophies for resisting and opting out of consumption, including downshifting, up-cycling and repurposing. Heather Nunn (2011) has named this genre ‘retreat TV’ and notes that this emerging strand of television prioritises home and property as a space of emotional comfort, ‘affording its subjects (primarily middle-class) the privileges of self-reflexivity with, and often without, expert advice’ (2011, p.175). Nunn rightly situates the strand within a broader post-recession disillusionment with white-collar work and disenchantment with consumerism, and points out that to address such disenchantment requires money, mobility and competence, which are not available to everyone. For example, property expert Kirstie Allsopp made her name in fast-profit property investment television but has since moved into the world of affected nostalgia and the kitsch of crafting in her home makeover programme *Kirstie’s Homemade Home* (Channel 4 2009). Nunn argues that this kind of programming is ‘retrogressive’ in the sense that it reproduces the dominant models of self-improvement/overcoming faulty lifestyle which it ostensibly tries to escape (Nunn 2011, p.176).

The retrogression of austerity chic culture interpolates the consumer of today through post-war nostalgia, situating the past as a time of self-sufficiency, pride and ingenuity, to which we must return. Channel 4’s *Superscrimpers*, now in its third series, explicitly foregrounds the post-war period that it sentimentalises in the first few minutes of each episode. The opening credits overlay portraits of members of the ‘army of superscrimpers’/austerity experts with phrases of thrift wisdom (‘a stitch in time’, ‘money doesn’t grow on trees’). These credits are immediately followed with archived black and white footage of housewives seeking a bargain in exchange for ration cards while a clipped Scottish voiceover offers a deeply affective explanation:

For postwar Brits, bagging bargains was a matter of *national pride* [...] now in 2012 we’re *rediscovering the thrill* of being thrifty, finding clever ways of having the lifestyle we want without paying as much for it. Leading the way is Mrs

Money Penny, and her army of superscrimpers. Between them, they will help us all waste not, want not. [emphasis added]



Opening credits of *Superscrimpers* (Channel 4, 2011-present)

The wider context of austerity chic, far from marking the end of consumer distinction, demonstrates the degree to which austerity has itself become an opportunity to showcase one's consumer competence and thus cultural value. At the extreme end, austerity chic has seen the Ripe Food Movement, dumpster diving, and 'freeganism', which have been received ambivalently at best and often with a degree of unease, embarrassment or even disgust. At the softer end, however, there are many examples of milder romanticisations around austerity – the rising popularity of activities now seen as 'retro' like knitting, crocheting and crafting; but also how to use up leftovers, how to forage for food, how to grow your own vegetables, how to reduce your heating bills, how to shop strategically, how to shop around, how to source vintage goods in your local charity shops. These practices and habits were once, and remain, a central part of the hidden labour of living on the breadline and even of working-class pleasure. And yet in 'new thrift' culture, these practices are transformed by these lifestyle texts into aesthetic pleasures and art-forms. As such the 'new thrift' has become/is becoming a site where classed Others are produced and symbolically shamed for not being austere enough: those who do not re-use, recycle, upcycle, who are wasteful, who pay full price for the new consumer goods they want but do not 'need' and so on. The cultural politics of thrift is certainly about taste and taste cultures: yet its concerns are also broader than taste. 'New

thrift' culture produces and circulates fantasies of the classed Others against whom austerity is positioned as necessary, and who need to re-learn the lessons of frugality.

The echoes of 'Broken Britain' rhetoric are stitched through 'new thrift' culture, which insists that fiscal crisis and insecurity is a consequence of spendthrift habits, consumer incompetence, and a broader cultural forgetting of the tricks of the breadline. One such example of where romanticisations of past austerity are explicitly connected to contemporary crisis is the enthusiastic adoption of 'rationing' on thrift weblogs. The website *Rationing Revisited*, whose author sets herself the challenge of feeding her family of five on Wartime rations, claims that a return to rationing is not only viable for the modern family, but is also a way to save money, get healthy and (along with other 'drastic downsizing') be happy. The author of a related weblog, *The 1940s Experiment*, is currently living on Wartime rations for a year in order to lose weight: she also hosts a frugal living weblog. These weblogs are scattered with vintage Wartime propaganda posters which extol the virtues of the kitchen garden, the allotment, vegetables, 'making do and mending', keeping calm and carrying on, and so on: the combination of vintage imagery and rationing chronicles working to eulogise frugal shopping and cooking. The daily humiliations of rationing – the drudgery of visiting multiple shops every day for basic goods that were not available, the repetitive and often poor-quality ingredients, the petty oppressions of shopkeepers and bureaucrats – are entirely ignored in new thrift texts such as these, which re-write rationing as an entirely beneficial solution to contemporary over-consumption, irresponsibility and wastefulness. Historian David Kynaston documents the quiet desperation and relentless hunger of the rationing era in his often-heartbreaking *Austerity Britain* (2007), which draws on Mass Observation diaries and interviews to paint a vivid account of dirt, damp, weariness, scarcity and avarice. This powerful book offers a sobering counterpoint to the rationing fetish of 'new thrift' culture. It also, I would argue, illuminates the new class discourses of contemporary Britain, whereby conspicuous *non-consumption* is emerging as a new marker of cultural value. The working-class witnesses of Kynaston's austerity Britain – their misery and their survival strategies – are caricatured by thrift and re-written into lessons of hardy resilience.

As such the 'new thrift' seeks to position itself as a philosophy that is at odds with the contemporary world and which harks back to the wisdom of the past. Many of the 'new thrift' authors and architects refer to themselves as 'tightwads' (Dacyczyn 1998) or 'cheapskates' (Yaeger 2010) and recount vignettes of how their spouses, friends or colleagues have ridiculed them. If we consider the principle tenets of even the most vague account of



social mobility – a better life than that of your parents – then we can see how embracing thrift practices, even ‘new thrift’, might pinch at the self in uncomfortable ways which need to be defended against. This ironic distancing and pre-emptive use of such hostile terms signal the countercultural power of frugality tropes, as well as gesturing to the labour of resisting consumerism. By knowingly adopting these terms, thrift authors and pedagogues endeavour to create new forms of ‘tightwad pride’, an affective expression which is deeply classed in this context: taking pride in being ‘cheap’ is surely only possible when it is experienced as an option one has chosen, not a necessity. Pride, and its affective twin of shame (Munt 2007) are the powerful affective outcomes of these emerging discourses of thrift and frugality. These complexly affective and ambivalent figurations connect specifically to cultural fantasies of the enterprising and responsible family. In this final section I attend to the question of the family more closely and examine how thrift, and particularly the promise of happiness contained within it, connect the mothers and children of frugal families in troubling and even retrogressive ways.

### **Thrift, ‘Happy Housewives’ and the Happy Child**

I believe staying at home has made me a much better person and has been the greatest thing I've done with my life. However, it has been stressful on us financially, causing tension in our marriage [...] I have great pride in what we are doing... I just think it's annoying (and a little pathetic) when I hear people say, 'We just can't afford to have a parent at home.' It's not a matter of affording it, but about changing one's priorities and lifestyle, and about being brave. Children need us—it is so apparent in our youth today.

Jenny, quoted in *Welcome Home* by Cathy Myers<sup>6</sup>

The articulations of thriftiness and frugality as pleasurable are deeply gendered, interpolating the housewife mother as the solution to the family’s consumer waste and fiscal incontinence. Sara Ahmed (2010) tracks the figure of the ‘happy housewife’ and asks, what does she do in an affective economy? How does she work to secure ideas of happiness, and who is entitled to that happiness? Ahmed argues that the happy housewife was central in the articulations of second-wave feminism, offering an Other who functioned as a sign of happiness which erased the signs of labour (in this case, the unpaid and unrecognised labour of domestic work, childrearing and spousal servitude). In this broader examination of happiness as a desired object – demonstrated in the emerging ‘science of happiness’ as well as political references to happiness as a form of national worth (‘gross domestic happiness’) – Ahmed is interested in why happiness fixes to specific figures and lives and how unhappiness operates

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**Tracey Jensen, Tough Love in Tough Times**

**Studies in the Maternal**, 4(2), 2012, [www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk)

to expose social inequities. Her argument is immensely valuable for thinking about the fantasies of happiness that are now re-attached to the figure of the housewife via popular texts around thrift and publicly proclaimed in pedagogical texts such as weblogs and self-help books. Jenny's quote above is typical of the diversification of affects which are attached to the contemporary 'happy housewife' – pride, frustration, annoyance – which, as Ahmed points out, 'give her [the housewife] a more complex affective life' (2010 p.51)

The repetition and accumulation of affective power that is produced in this ambivalent figure of the happy housewife can be seen across new thrift texts: the mark of happiness branded into each as a future promise. Books such as *Suddenly Frugal: How to Live Happier and Healthier for Less* (Ingram 2010), *The Joy of Less: A Minimalist Living Guide* (Jay 2010), *Live More, Want Less* (Malagno 2011) and *Savvy Chic: The Art of More for Less* (Johnson 2010) document how instructions for happiness – 'happiness scripts' – are gendered as well as classed. These scripts are, in the main, written by women for women, and thus interpolate a post-feminist, autonomous feminine subject whose pleasure comes not merely in her ability to consume, but in her ability to consume *wisely*, or even perhaps her ability to take pleasure in not consuming at all.<sup>7</sup>

Following Ahmed, I want to consider what these emerging articulations of the happy housewife/thrifty housewife do in terms of both scripting a future promise of happiness and exposing the *unhappiness* of the present. 'Happiness science' (see Layard 2005 and Cromby, 2011; Bentall 1991; Ehrenreich 2010; and Ahmed 2010 for critiques) has been preoccupied with mothers in particular, and particularly the comparative happiness of working mothers and stay-at-home mothers. Happiness science has been drawn on to report that working mothers are happier than their stay-at-home counterparts (Mendes, Saad and McGeeney 2012) and equally to demonstrate that stay at home mothers are happier than their working counterparts, provided that their husbands are 'emotionally engaged' (Wilcox and Nock 2006). Ahmed's case does not rest on whether it is 'really' staying at home or working that makes mothers happy, but rather that unhappiness is constantly and discursively connected to feminism, such that 'it is feminism that gives women the desires that have made them unhappy' (2010, p.53). In the happiness paradigm, it is not the social, economic and material costs of motherhood (the motherhood penalty, patchy and unaffordable childcare, incompatibilities between unpaid care and paid labour (see Gattrell 2005), shrinking welfare benefits for lone parents, a lack of well-paid flexible work and so on) which create maternal

unhappiness, but the failure of mothers to fully and selflessly embrace, and willingly retreat, into happy housewifery.

In the ‘tough’ economic climate the social advances around gender equality as they pertain to parenting (and specifically motherhood) have been among the first to come under political attack and we can already see how they are being eroded in, for example, the reduction of tax credits for working parents, including elements which contribute to childcare, such as a shortening of the time which lone parents will receive an income which recognises their childcare responsibilities and the removal of universal child benefits for higher earners.<sup>8</sup> Emerging evidence also suggests that maternal discrimination in the workplace is increasing as a result of the recession (see Working Parents 2011 briefing), with some media commentators stating that halting maternity benefits would boost economic growth, reduce unemployment and increase flexibility (Phibbs 2011). The interlocking layers of happiness science and political retreat from collective measures (which rightly challenge gendered divisions of labour) create affective incitements to become a happy housewife over a killjoy feminist (Ahmed 2010). I want to consider two of these thrift texts in more detail, the Miserly Moms website and Shannon Hayes (2010) *Radical Homemakers*, in order to disentangle some of the shifting principles of solidarity which are emerging in the socially brittle terrain of austere neo-liberalism

The first of these texts comes from the Miserly Moms website, a US based website from which *Miserly Moms: Living Well on Less* (McCoy 2010) emerges. This website has a section entitled ‘Coming Home’ on which users are invited to post their stories of retreating from dual income lives to male breadwinner/happy housewife lives. The details of these ‘coming home’ stories vary enormously, but what is striking is the impossibility of surviving and thriving in an increasingly brittle social landscape and a retracting safety net. Women recount hostile employers who refuse flexible work, unexpected financial emergencies which push family budgets into crisis, escalating mortgage and loan repayments, endless guilt, inadequate and expensive childcare provision, non-existent leisure and family time, and so on.



**Miserly Moms web-banner (reproduced with permission)**

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Tracey Jensen, *Tough Love in Tough Times*

*Studies in the Maternal*, 4(2), 2012, [www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk)

What is remarkable through the repetition and circulation of these stories is the paralyzing responsibility that their narrators pronounce for the fraying of their fantasies of ‘the good life’, ‘fantasies of upward mobility, job security, political and social equality and lively, durable intimacy’ (Berlant 2011, p.3). The contributors to *Miserly Moms* exchange stories of present contingency and precarity in terms of making a trade-off for future happiness: enduring less now in exchange for the promise of a future free of debt, retreating from employment (which they often have enjoyed) in order to save on wasteful extravagances (like childcare!), foregoing consumer pleasures and learning to embrace and enjoy creative thrift in times of hardship. The figure of the happy child saturates all these stories. These exchanges question the coexistence of consumption and childhood happiness, rehearsing moral anxieties about late capitalist consumption, whereby a greater proportion of income is seen to be spent on discretionary luxuries than on necessities, and where meaningful social relationships are seen to be replaced with competitive acquisition.

Moral panics around childhood and consumption are not new, a recent swathe of academic and popular publications illustrate the intensification of anxiety around the ‘problem’ of the child consumer (Schor 2004; Linn 2004; Mayo and Nairn 2009). These texts share a vision of children as defenceless, of consumerism as an erosion of family values and spiritual worth, and parents as partners in a crusade to reinstate authentic living. *Miserly Moms* is a site where the economically crunched can produce new forms of solidarity around their conspicuous *non*-consumption, situating their retreat from worker and consumer subjectivities in opposition to the modern family ‘in crisis’: lacking fiscal discipline/deferred gratification, chaotic, impulsive, its worth measured in money and things

The new normativities of thrift exchanged on *Miserly Moms* echo panics about the unhappy child who is understood to be the result of dual-income consumptive life. In the UK and US this figure emerges across moral panic texts which cohere in discourse around ‘toxic childhood’, such as Sue Palmer’s (2006) *Toxic Childhood: How the Modern World is Damaging our Children and what we can do about it*, swiftly followed by similar publications from the campaign group Compass (2006), the National Union of Teachers (2007), and a sequel from Palmer herself (2007). In his excellent account of the aftermath of this panic, David Buckingham (2011) highlights the strong sense of nostalgia for the happy childhoods of the past and the powerful narratives of moral and cultural decline. Buckingham also points to the class bias that circulates throughout Palmer’s work and the subsequent debates. It is working-class, urban children who are marked in her account as particularly dysfunctional, even ‘feral’,

and their working-class parents who have failed to instil, as well as to exercise, self-restraint and discipline

Within this constellation of ‘new thrift’ cultural texts, there is a complex, and commendable, challenging of the systems of worth that are implicit within contemporary regimes of capitalist accumulation, as well as a strong sense of environmental and sustainability activism. The second text I want to turn to, also from the US, is Shannon Hayes (2010) *Radical Homemaking: Reclaiming domesticity from consumer culture* which encapsulates these complexities particularly well. Hayes positions her radical homemaking as a sensible response to an employment economy which would require that she spend much of her wage on buying food she could grow, paying for a commute she could avoid and childcare she could do herself, and so on. Having ‘done the math’ she outlines in her book the rationale for reclaiming homemaking as an educated, feminist woman, stating that ‘the key to success isn’t in how much money you make, but how much money you don’t have to spend’ (2010 p.11).

Hayes’ book is interesting because of the ways that it defines, manages and defers aspirations for a better life and world through the family. The generational and intergenerational strivings and failings that result in classed formations and systems of privilege are bypassed in the somewhat romantic portrait she offers of a reconfigured future which secures happy childhood, ‘authentic’ living and the health of the planet. The retreat from the ‘extractive economy’ which Hayes and her husband successfully manoeuvre for themselves is absolutely reliant on the family farm of her parents; the emerging ‘new thrift’ publishing market she is able to exploit in her writing career is dependent upon their college educations and the accumulation of knowledge and resources which (despite the claims to frugality) put them in the third highest quintile of US incomes. Hayes’ manifesto for radicalism thus requires a great deal of unexamined privilege.

All of these thrift texts ‘explain’ contemporary unhappiness with the misdirection of energy and resources towards material accumulation, and rest on the fantasy that having less/domestic retreat will improve your life. ‘Thrift’ rests on the fallacy that it is *over-consumption* which creates debt, unhappiness and the estrangement of parents from their children. This is a misattribution: for many economically crunched families the issue is not over-consumption, but stagnating wages, insecure and precarious underemployment, rising basic costs of living, inflated housing and rental costs and classed bifurcations. How much trimming of the household budget ‘fat’ is there really left to do? The political rhetoric around ‘tough choices’ and the austerity agenda exacerbate the sense of bankruptcy caused by public

welfare support and provides the social cues which legitimate a substitution of social altruism with amoral familism (Rodger 2003) via the enterprising and thrifty family. The powerful fantasies around thrift might be theorised as an extension of the gendered tyrannies of the family, willingly retreated into as the remnants of collective solidarity are dismantled, outsourced and undermined

### **Conclusions: ‘Thrift is a Virtue’ and Other Cruel Optimisms**

The current turn to austerity in the UK did not begin with the forming of the Coalition government in 2010, and nor is it limited to the political right. Rather, the ‘age of austerity’ has become cross-party, and in many ways pan-European rhetoric, with more progressive alternatives being obscured or entirely denied. In the face of broader backlashes to the austerity agenda (and the rejection of austerity mandates in 2012 local UK elections as well as Greek and French national elections) we are seeing the emergence of semantic evasiveness. David Cameron insisted that what is being mis-named *austerity* is more ‘correctly’ titled *efficiency*. Speaking on *Question Time*, Conservative MP Caroline Spelman stated that ‘thrift’ as an economic policy would work at both a household and national level: ‘lets call it thrift then because thrift is a virtue and thrift needs to be part of the solution to our nation’s problems [...] thrift is living within your means’. Drawing on the positive discourses of thrift and efficiency as the reduction of waste and consumption competence, both Cameron and Spelman are in these comments redefining ‘austerity’ not as a dismantling of public services and assistance, but as virtuous household fiscal habits. In this paper I have outlined how thrift is not simply a matter of taste, but rather mobilises a new cultural politics of wanting which obscure the structural immobility of contemporary life and circulate a cruel optimism about the future: if you can just spend less and more wisely, you will move out of debt, survive and thrive, and become happy. Thrift texts produce a classed Other against whom austerity is positioned as necessary. These configurations of thrift are powerfully gendered, cementing in the gendered fantasies of the happy housewife.

We might ask whether this really is an ‘age of austerity’ (which we have recently moved into and will presumably move out of, eventually) or whether this ‘age’ is in fact a continuation of neo-liberalism which emerged in the 1970s in confrontations with organised labour and in a context of inflation. The objectives of ‘austerity’ align neatly with those of neo-liberalism: to discipline labour, to reduce the role of state and to redistribute income, wealth and power from labour to capital. We might therefore interpret this current turn to, or

age of, 'austerity' as the most recent translation of neoliberal rhetoric which has a much longer history than the current crisis and which has 'proved flexible and opportunistic in supplying arguments' and which has been 'quite principled and unwavering in its objectives and instruments' (McBride and Whiteside 2011).

The 2008-2009 UK recession officially lasted for five financial quarters, making it the longest and deepest since the 1930s. The economic recovery appears fragile even now. Unlike the shallower and shorter previous recession periods (1980-81 and 1990-91) this economic recovery looks set to be slower and more precarious: in 2012 the UK officially entered a second phase of recession. While the financial politics of austerity appear to be failing, the cultural politics remain powerful. We need to understand how these cultural politics take hold of us psychically as well as socially: in this paper I have sketched out a preliminary map for connecting tough love, parenting, discipline and financial continence through the consoling nostalgias of the thrifty, happy and responsible housewife. Austerity is not on the retreat: most of the dismantling of public services and the cuts to welfare benefits are yet to come. We need to extend our examinations of the current austerity 'moment' as a crisis of the present which in fact has long roots and the potential to seed far into the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Where these figures come from has never been explained, although the Department for Communities has recently offered the following definition, 'a troubled family is one that has serious problems and causes serious problems' and suggested that meeting five out of the following seven criteria is adequate to have the label 'troubled' attached: low income, no-one in the family in work, living in poor housing, parents with no qualifications, having a mother who has a mental health problem, one parent with a long-standing illness or disability, or where the family is unable to afford basics, including food and clothes.

<sup>2</sup> Freud has been a key figure in recent reforms to the UK welfare system. He was appointed by Blair in 2006 to review welfare-to-work programmes and recommended that the private sector be recruited to 'support' the unemployed back into employment, including recipients of Incapacity Benefit and single parents, in his report *Reducing Dependency, Increasing Opportunity* (2007). In 2009 he joined the Conservative Party.

<sup>3</sup> I borrow this term from Lauren Berlant (2011, p.115) who borrows it from Mariana Valverde (1998).

<sup>4</sup> The Centre for Social Justice is headed by former Conservative leader Iain Duncan-Smith and has been the key advisory think-tank for the Coalition on matters of welfare reform.

<sup>5</sup> Speech on Social Mobility given at The Sutton Trust, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2012 available in full at <http://www.politics.co.uk/comment-analysis/2012/05/22/nick-clegg-social-mobility-speech-in-full>

<sup>6</sup> Available on the Family and Home Network website, which advocates 'generous time-spending' with children and links to resources which advise, encourage and campaign for this, see <http://www.familyandhome.org/content/affordability-survey>

<sup>7</sup> The pleasures of thrift do not interpolate a masculine subject in the same way (if at all) though there are parallel pedagogies around craftsmanship (see for example Crawford, 2009), which warrant a separate investigation which is outside the scope of this paper. Thrift guides written by men are notable in their rarity (see for example the books of Jeff Yeager), but they tend not speak of thrift pleasures around domestic retreat and childrearing and do not script the 'happy househusband'.

<sup>8</sup> In the UK and until 2008, Income Support (IS) was paid to lone parents until their youngest child reached the age of twelve, at which point their Income Support ceases and they start receiving Jobseekers Allowance (JSA), which compels parents to begin actively seeking work and carries a sanction of reduced or ceased benefit if they refuse a job offer. In 2009 this child's age was reduced to ten years, in 2009 reduced again to seven years and in 2012 this was reduced to five years old. In practice this means that parents come under tighter conditionality to

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accept paid work which may not be flexible or where childcare may be inadequate, limited or costly. This has clear bearings on the issues raised in this paper, especially around the question of which kind of labour is politically recognised and valued.

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**Tracey Jensen, Tough Love in Tough Times**

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**Studies in the Maternal**, 4(2), 2012, [www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk)

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