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## Women and the politics of austerity: new forms of respectability

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## Women and the Politics of Austerity : New Forms of Respectability

### Abstract :

The relationship of women to conditions of material austerity is often characterised as having two main themes: women as recipients of charity and the question of which women are entitled to various forms of charitable and state assistance. This paper discusses the ways in which discourses about women and charity are highly moralised, assuming both that women are unlikely to 'ask for more' and that women have to be 'good' and 'respectable' in order to deserve public assistance. In the concluding section the paper considers the ways in which women's 'respectability' has become associated with participation in the labour market, and the various ways in which this constitutes a new form of the 'deserving' female poor.

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### *Introduction*

In the Birmingham Museum there is a painting of 1865 by the artist William Adolphe Bouguereau entitled *Charity*. The painting depicts a woman leaning against a classical pillar with three children huddled around her, one of them that often cited creature of British Victorian fiction 'a babe in arms'. All three of the children look well nourished but their gaze is away from the viewer and the young female child has her eyes closed. The mother at the centre of the picture has one of her hands extended in supplication but it is a hand that is gently offered; there is nothing to suggest that charity is being demanded. Although we, the viewers, are supposed to 'see' poverty the painting does not suggest that the children, or their mother, are in any sense confronting the viewer either with aggressive demands or with difficult questions about why they are poor.

This is only one painting of many forms (including that of literature) in which Victorian artists and writers depict poverty. Like much of that other work the aim is to invoke feelings of compassion and consequently the wish to give. It is an image of the sympathetic poor woman of the global north which we seldom see in the twenty first century. Although the pages of the popular British magazine *Picture Post* once contained vivid black and white photographs of the extent of poverty in Britain in the years before the establishment of the welfare state such pictures have now largely disappeared from the popular press. With the possible exception of the striking images of a homeless woman and her children in the BBC television play *Cathy Come Home* ( first shown on British television in 1966 ) the depiction of poverty, and particularly the poverty of women, has shifted from the global north to the global south. (1) In the first decades of the twenty first century the image of poor women, as defined as women with low and insufficient incomes , has increasingly been that of the benefits scrounger, the female version of what Owen Jones has characterised as

'the chavs'.(2) The 'poor' woman is no longer the dishevelled, but beautiful, Cathy of the television play but the overweight and tattooed figure, caught with a cigarette hanging out of her mouth who presents a number of negative indications of personal behaviour. This demonised group of the population (about whom Lisa McKenzie and Imogen Tyler have written ) has attracted various kinds of disapproval, those forms of social opprobrium including what is seen as moral incompetence and greed, an unacceptable personal aesthetic and a more or less total rejection of the Protestant ethic. (3) To be poor, and in the context of this paper the female poor, in contemporary Britain is less likely to be a person who is unfortunate and the innocent victim of circumstance and more likely to be a person who is regarded with contempt and derision, and assumed to be entirely responsible for her own situation. Indeed, the young mother who swops her baby for a CD in the British television comedy series *Little Britain* (screened between 2003 and 2006) was consistently a figure of fun and very seldom a stereotype that was challenged. (4)

These contemporary portrayals of poor women suggest that in the 150 years since Bouguereau completed his painting attitudes to the poor , and specifically to the female poor have changed dramatically. The discursive impact of the helpless, lonely figure has given way to a new construction: the woman who is a lazy, feckless burden on the state and its benefits. This new creation, both real ( the infamous 'Black Dee' who featured in scenes from the Channel 4 2014 television series *Benefits Street* ) and fictional ( the virtually mythical benefits cheat who has lived a life of what is presented as endless hedonism ) has become the composite picture of the poor woman. If this person was simply one who existed – and firmly remained within – the limits of the imagined world she may be of little importance. However, it is more than apparent that the new 'poor woman' has become entrenched in the public imagination and in government policies as a reality, as a defined and likely inhabitant of real communities. The 'welfare mother' is a new character on a political stage that has long included individuals apparently dangerous to the nation.

### *The origins of the 'new' poor woman*

The first question that arises here is how and why it is has become possible for such a mythical figure as the feckless, greedy female poor person to become so 'real'. That she is *not* real has been made clear by the ongoing work of groups such as the Fawcett Society and the Women's Budget Group whose work has made it abundantly clear that women have been disadvantaged very much more than men by 'austerity' politics. (5)From this, it is important to stress that whilst the feckless female of sections of the popular imagination has been accepted by many (and crucially by many in power ) but not by all. So to explain how the real poverty of women, which has existed across centuries and still exists today, has been translated into a form of pathology we need to examine the changes that have taken place in the lives of women in the past fifty years.

It is useful to start with one feature of the lives of those women who appeared in the pages of *Picture Post* and the women who were the central characters in pre-1945 examinations of the condition of the lives of British women such as Margery Spring Rice's *Working Class Wives* ).(6) That feature is that the majority of those women

very seldom had any meaningful access to contraception. For the women interviewed by Spring Rice and others a 'careful' male partner was the most accessible form of contraception; poverty and lack of availability made the use of technological forms of contraception difficult if not impossible. Contraception has now become so generally accessible that arguments based around the need to protect and to provide for mothers of numerous children has lost much of its rhetorical force; large families are more likely to be regarded with surprise rather than sympathetic forms of social intervention. Indeed, the latest constraint introduced by the present UK government on the payment of child benefits has quite clearly said that anyone who has more than two children cannot look to the state for support.(7) The coded message to the population as a whole (that only those who can afford it should have families with more than two children ) is in part a public statement, an endorsement , of what the majority of the population knows perfectly well already : that children cost money and that it is women who will play the major part in caring for them. But it is also a statement which assumes that having more than children is inexcusable for two reasons : that it is careless not to make material calculations about the cost of children and that viable forms of contraception make this a entirely achievable goal.

Yet what is also contained in what might be described as the anti-natalism of the present British state is a taken-for-granted and highly problematic second assumption : that about the participation and the presence of mothers in the work force. As is generally known, and equally largely applauded, more women, whether mothers or not, are now in paid work. Although this contemporary reality is sometimes presented as if no woman had been in paid work until the late twentieth century or at a time of national emergency it is both generally correct but frequently silent on the reality of that work, work which is often badly paid, precarious and distant from those career ladders and material rewards expected in professional employment. (8) Accounts of this change, even by historians such as E.J.Hobsbawm who are cognizant of material inequality, have often emphasised that this shift is a consequence of the emancipation of women rather than more ancient needs for all members of a household to contribute to its economic survival. (9)

This imperative, a formative part of the experiences of the majority of the UK population over the past three hundred years, has too often been obscured by forms of feminist campaigns which have campaigned for the access of women to professional employment. Those campaigns were formative in opening up to women the professions of, for example, medicine and law, as well as establishing women's access to the necessary forms of higher education for those professions. (10) Yet whilst these campaigns were themselves important (and the women who led them rightly accorded significant public recognition ) the issue of women in paid work outside the context of the professions has been afforded less public attention, not least because this has been in many ways the continuation of women's employment in poorly paid, insecure, contexts throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. But, and in the context about this discussion of contemporary representations of poor women, the emphasis given to those 'spectacular' campaigns by women for various forms of professional access have arguably contributed to the marginalisation of that majority of women in paid work who do not work ( and did not work) in well paid and high status employment. (11) The impact of this is to suggest, albeit implicitly, a measure of success – and with it a corresponding *lack* of

success – that furthers already existing narratives of the limited value of what is seen as ‘women’s work’.

So when we consider the overall picture of women, employment and poverty in the twenty first century we can see that women still work what has been described as the 'double shift', paid work and work within the home that involves, primarily, the care of others. Thus for many women in the Britain of the second decade of the twenty first century there exists both a form of emancipation and its absence. There is no formal barrier to paid work, indeed it is read as an accepted part of all adult lives, be they male or female. But at the same time there is very little state provided care for those two categories of people who are most likely to be dependent: children and the elderly. In the case of children that dependence is of course absolute and continues as such for any number of years. However, if we return to that visual representation of a poor woman which opened this discussion what we see is a public recognition of a woman’s responsibilities for others which has largely disappeared in the twenty first century. The children of the woman in Bouguereau’s painting had to be cared for, a condition of the mother’s life, and the support which she needed was clearly portrayed as absolute. If we compare this with similar representations of poor women in the twenty first century we see little similarity: the mere presence of children has become suggestive of fecklessness and a reason for the avoidance of paid work. In short, if women are poor today, it is their own responsibility.

#### *Contemporary forms of poverty : matters of consumption*

So what we encounter, as we look at the context of women and poverty in today's Britain, is a set of assumptions about the 'emancipation' of women which contain both fact and fiction. It is undeniable that parents have fewer children than many of their mothers and fathers and almost all of their grandparents. Women have rights to their own income and property as well as forms of access to education and employment that were unknown in the nineteenth century. But at the same time the idea that this *in itself* constitutes and finalises and achieves the conditions of women's emancipation is problematic, not least because some of the changes in the lives of women have been as of as much benefit to men. (The study of campaigns around the issue of what was known as 'unmarried motherhood' by Pat Thane and Tanya Evans shows how women and men could be very effectively politically united ).(12) The view that women have, in the words of the infamous cigarette advertisement, 'come a long way' , disguises and refuses those various ways in which aspects of gender relations remain structurally unchanged.

The picture of the young, urban, autonomous woman of that advertisement would seem to have become entrenched in generations the collective imagination of generations of the British state with the result that this woman ( or her slightly older counterpart ) has become the model for 'real' women. Thus in the present political rhetoric about 'hardworking families' there is seen to be little or no need for public debate about the internal dynamics of the family, dynamics in which decisions have to be made about care, actual availability for paid work and the ways in which adults have to maintain themselves and others. For a small percentage of educated women in well paid professions it is possible to live what might be described as the 'emancipated life', not least because the rewards of their employment are sufficient to pay for a significant amount of replacement care. But, and it has to be a central

interruption to any narrative about the 'emancipation' of women, for the majority of women, the majority of women with children who are in badly paid and/or part-time work no such life is likely. Fiction, and what sections of the political class might wish to believe is the case, has become confused with reality. The rhetorical everyday question of 'Is the case or what you like to be the case?' is relevant here. Young, childless, women in urban settings may well live lives of autonomy but they constitute only a part of the female population and all available evidence, from across the global north, affirms that this way of life will be interrupted by the birth of children. That interruption on the lives of women will not be matched by a similar impact on the lives of men.

But for a period in her life a young woman may be enjoying a life style that is based on a significant disposable income. (Although evidence about the generation of young people in the age group 20-30 in the UK suggests that this picture is by far from general).<sup>(13)</sup> She is an eager consumer, even if both what she consumes and what she earns in order to consume is likely to be produced under exploitative situations. The goods sold in, let us say *Topshop*, will have been produced by badly paid women working in dangerous conditions. The young woman working in *Topshop* to buy those clothes will work in less immediately dangerous conditions but her work is also poorly rewarded. In both cases the work makes a great deal of money for a very small group of people. A relationship which continues, and it will be argued here, intensifies the various forms through which women are poor.

In this suggested association between women, poverty and consumption I shall outline three aspects of this connection. The first is that of the connection between women, agency and consumption, the second is between women, shame and consumption and the third is between women, shaming and consumption. It is through this third point that I shall go on to outline what I have propose as the idea of 'uncharitable' women. So first to turn to the connection between women, agency and consumption. Various issues are involved here: in the first place it has to be noted that by the end of the twentieth century feminism had turned very sharply away from the idea of women as 'victim'. Those many texts of the 1970s which invoked the 'oppression' of women had been replaced by material setting out the places and the means of women's agency. Women were no longer portrayed as the passive victims of male power but people – like men – who were capable of making their own history. This idea is extremely important here because of the way in which it connects with neo-liberal ideas about the responsibilities of the individual; Margaret Thatcher was energetic in proposing that poverty was a negotiable state and in doing so played a considerable part in turning back what had become a consensus about the necessity of state intervention in structural inequality and poverty. In setting out the idea that the budget of the state was similar to that of a household and that 'sensible' budgeting was central to the public finances the idea further developed that long standing tradition of the 'good' housewife. <sup>(14)</sup>Indeed, the particular combination of the feminised and domesticated accounts of the public finances given by Margaret Thatcher and neo-liberal resistance to extensive welfare provision by the state brought into a central political focus two pictures of womanhood. One was the affluent, 'emancipated' young woman and the other the thrifty housewife. In the exercise of both forms of agency – consumption and careful domestic management – women were being asked to support two of the central tenets of the neo-liberal state: to spend liberally and to provide for themselves. Women and agency – for which there has always been plentiful evidence for any

reader of fiction, history, sociology or social anthropology - came to take two very focussed forms.

To turn to a second connection between women and consumption: that of women and shame. In this the work of Emma Casey is important since in it the author provides evidence of the way in which women with very little money exist in the threat of the constant shame of being unable to buy what is required for their children. (15) What very often cannot be afforded, Casey makes clear, is not in any sense luxury goods. On the contrary it is the basic provision for children's lives: food and clothes. To this might also be added the many hidden costs of services which are apparently 'free'. For example, the various financial demands that state schools might make on their pupils or the cost of attending medical appointments in terms of both travel or time taken off work. For women with limited and/or insecure incomes the arrival of demands such as these which involve the unexpected purchase of goods and services is a constant concern. Casey points out the anxiety created in these situations and the ways in which the lived practice of consumption, and the taken-for-granted assumption that a person can consume, is a constant source of socially produced worry, concern and conflict. Not to be able to consume is, in the twenty first century a form of shame.

But although evidence about the extent of poverty in the UK in the twenty first century has established that austerity politics have impacted more severely on women than on men there nevertheless remain those who are apparently convinced that women have only themselves to blame for their poverty. This is the 'shaming' of the women who are poor or who fail to achieve. Those who shame, in this context, be they male or female fall into two groups. On the one hand are those who demand that women 'ask for more', those exhortations from highly paid female employees in the corporations of the United States who believe that individual women have only to ask and they will be given. Outstanding in this group is Sheryl Sandberg, whose book *Leaning In* encouraged women to take a more aggressive stance in the work place . (16) This proposal, which fits easily with the kind of values about paid work demonstrated on television shows such as *The Apprentice* , does not include plans for more collective organising on behalf of women, nor does it raise the question of the power relations of all hierarchical organisations. There is an extensive literature on those highly paid parts of the labour market such as the City of London which demonstrates all too clearly that the culture is not only masculinised but is also intensely individualistic. (17) A culture in which it is all too easy for forms of sexual identity other than those of the most orthodox heterosexuality to be a matter of 'shame'.

### *Un-friendly Family Policies*

Just as women can be shamed for not being able to reproduce the forms of self derived from masculinity so they can also be shamed, and have been shamed for centuries, for failing to achieve the standards of perfect wives and mothers. What is centrally involved here is the expectation that women will always put the interests of others before their own. Yet this, paradoxically, is what is being increasingly made difficult by the ruthless demands by various countries (and the UK and the USA are outstanding in this regard) of insisting that mothers dependent on state benefits should be in paid work. Furthermore, the legitimacy of mothers 'staying-at-home' has been presented differently in media representations of middle and working class women;

the latter group being presumed to have no justifications for this choice. (18) The mechanics of this, the problems of travel, little or no or prohibitively expensive child care are seldom allowed. What is being said, in this demand by the state, is that it is not the state's responsibility to assist in the care of children. But what is also an issue here is that the state ( whether that of the central state in the UK or federal states in the USA ) resists any real intervention that might enforce support by fathers : the non-payment and the absence of prosecution for maintenance by fathers is common.(19) The implicit sense of shame that is produced here – and a possible interpretation of this draconian state practice – is that women who cannot adequately ensure the continuation support ( usually by men ) for themselves and their children should not be helped.

This last, exceptionally punitive feature of the UK welfare system, is not spelt out in terms of personal failure but the ever present narrative of the words ' hard working families' is such as to impose on those who do not live in a conventional heterosexual family a sense of difference .That sense, whether internalised or rejected or some mixture of both kinds of reaction, is then reinforced by the reality of the re-invigorated examination of household budgets. In the 1970s and the early 1980s, in the context of what Hilary Land has described as the 're-discovery of poverty in Britain ' British feminists questioned both the refusal of the recognition of the plight of single mothers and what was then described as the 'co-habitation' rule, namely that any woman living with a man was deemed to be supported by him and could not claim state benefits in her own right. (20)The ruling was successfully challenged and for two decades women were allowed a measure of autonomy within the benefits system. This autonomy has now been eroded and *household* income has come to be the budget which is assessed in terms of eligibility for benefits. Again, there is a curious coming together here of aspects of liberalised norms about sexual relations and policies that impact in negative ways on women. What has occurred is that it has clearly been recognised in the past ten years that many people are living together as couples and/or families without being formally married. Should all the women in all these relationships then claim independent benefits for themselves the cost to the state would be higher than an assessment which negates possible benefits to women through a revived co-habitation rule.We can see the same process at work in the changes brought about by the Conservative- Liberal Democrats Coalition government of 2010-2015 in the ways in which Child Allowances are paid. For generations these payments had been organised in such a way that they were paid to mothers and that the payments were not means tested. The changes brought in between 2010-2015 assumed a co-ordination and a consensus about money in relationships that has been widely challenged.(21)

So enacting and devising public policies on the basis of what is being read as the 'modern' family has been negative in the case of women in the same way that the taken-for-granted achievement of the 'emancipation' of women has allowed the implementation of policies that in fact penalise women . The coded expectation of the phrase 'hard working family' is one that implicitly assumes a fully functional and internally democratic group within a family ; an aspiration that has existed since time immemorial about the family but as an equally long tradition indicates is far from always achieved. Critics of the present government and that of the period 2010-2015 have spoken of the return to 'Victorian' values, a critique that misses both the complexity ,not to mention much of the radicalism of a historical period that included



Marx, Darwin and Josephine Butler, but also the precise Victorian value which has been so explicitly negative for women. That value – the social implications of which will constitute the second part of this paper – is that of 'respectability'.

### *Being 'respectable'*

It is not claimed here that the Victorians invented the term 'respectability' or that the concept of the 'good' woman (whether married, single or widowed) has not a long history. Every society has rules about female and male behaviour and endorses those who obey and maintain the normative order. But what will be argued here is that during the nineteenth century the growing development of state and private sector institutions (be they schools or government departments or forms of private industry) increasingly operated with explicit codes of what constituted 'respectability' in women. The individual who is both policed by external forces and her/himself is a standard reading of the Victorian citizen, as is the domestic 'angel in the house'. (22) But the form and implications of dual policing is less often gendered in terms of the connections between a norm about women and its persistent, but changing and endlessly powerful nature. Most dramatically this changing understanding of 'respectability' can be seen in the expected ways in which women should dress. The hats and gloves which were markers of Victorian 'respectability' changed into battlegrounds about the lengths of hems and hair in the 1920s and then again into ever lively contests in the latter half of the twentieth century. How women should dress became even more politicised as the twentieth century went on and as migration ensured the emergence of aspects of Muslim culture in Europe. In this, questions about the wearing of the veil and the headscarf intersected with state expectations about secularisation. (23)

But apart from the visual changes that have occurred in the past two hundred years about the dress of women what has arguably not changed are a number of factors which maintain the distinction between those who are respectable and those who are not. In much of the material about and by women in the nineteenth century there were a number of adjectives about the dress of women which consistently denoted the respectable: neat, simple, quiet, modest being amongst the most common. Every heroine of every canonical Victorian novel (with the possible exception of the anti-heroine Becky Sharpe in Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair*) follows this dress code. 'Neatness' is serially inscribed onto the great majority of Victorian heroines. The heroines are set against more sartorially expressive others; the lack of elaboration in dress is an immediate marker of moral stature and of 'respectability'. (One of the most vivid examples of this binary is that of the sisters Dorothea and Celia Brooke in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Here is how Eliot introduces her heroine Dorothea: 'Young women of such birth ... naturally regarded frippery as the ambition of a huckster's daughter.' (24) Dorothea Brooke continues to resist any form of sartorial extravagance throughout the novel; it is perhaps fitting that at its end, as she promises to marry a man with little or no income, she commits herself to 'learning the cost of everything'. Quiet and modest dress has found its fitting place.

In the quotation from Eliot above we see that association between display in dress and the amoral or immoral that continues to this today. Even though the British public is endlessly presented with pictures of the royal family wearing jewellery worth more than a lifetime's earnings for the majority of the population it is somehow assumed

that no association of immorality follows from this. It is acceptable to display wealth that can be read as symbolic wealth, the inherited diamonds which in some sense do not belong to an individual. But it is quite unacceptable, and has been a feature of much internet abuse of women on benefits, to display or even suggest the purchase of fashionable clothes by those without obvious wealth. Thus although George Eliot is in many ways a radical critic of many Victorian values – those, for instance, about the moral authority of Christianity and the parochialism of much of the English middle and upper class – she is also (as was Charlotte Bronte and Elizabeth Gaskell) wary, if not explicitly condemnatory, of any aspect of dress that might be named as fashionable or elaborate.

Dress – attitudes to it and about it – might appear to have little immediate connection with austerity politics but the emphasis on it here is that this inevitable aspect of human behaviour, dressing ourselves, is a deep thread which runs through decades of the making of female respectability. Moreover, it is a thread in which women themselves are immediately present, both as those who create dress and those who create attitudes to it. I have argued above that 'decent' and 'respectable' women obeyed and exemplified, throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, certain homogeneous standards about dress. The quality of dress then, as now, differed across divisions of wealth but the overall habits and expectations of women's dress had connections across class lines. Crucial to these expectations was the covering of the female body, a norm which the fashion of the 1960s radically challenged. But the importance of this change is about more than the arrival of very short skirts, underwear as outerwear and all the other innovations of dress in the decades between 1960 and 1980. What these changes quite literally embodied was the multiplicity of forms in which the feminine was now becoming visualised, a plurality in which the most deliberately fashionable (the shortest skirt or the most transparent dress ) became entirely detached from any moral code about respectability. Chaos and confusion reigned in dress, but more importantly the very concept, the understanding of 'respectability' became, particularly for its detractors, a threatening and confusing shift.

What has been described as the 'youth revolution' of the 1960s brought with it a variety of moral panics and narratives of miserabilism about the impact of affluence. (25) Long hair in men, like short skirts for women provoked panic and fury in many , but that site of panic was nothing compared to the energy devoted to the criticism launched against the tranche of legislation passed in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s about various aspects of sexuality and the intimate lives of citizens. This panic, and the shaken certainties which provoked it, was equally challenged by what has been described as the second wave feminism of the 1970s. On both sides of the Atlantic women from various political positions argued for gender neutral forms of citizenship and against what was perceived as the longstanding misogyny of western culture. In many of these debates what women claimed was not the position of the respectable woman but that of a very different position: the woman who determined her own moral position and was not to be defined to be standards which were, it was argued , implicitly dependent on expectations of patriarchal authority.

In this heady atmosphere of debate, difference and dissent about gender relations the British state was enjoined to revise its previous assumptions about women. In legislation such as the Equal Pay Act new values were enshrined, if not actually

implemented. (26) Changes in legislation about abortion and divorce shattered previous public connections between respectability and the need for these forms of access to particular services. But at the same time as the Acts about divorce and abortion made generally available (or safely available in the case of abortion ) what had once been available only to the wealthy much of the rhetoric surrounding the arguments for these changes in the law was made in terms of the 'respectable' woman. For example, much was made of the woman who wished to divorce a violent husband or the young woman who would be unable to support a child. Respectability had found a new function and a new location.

But still the term remains as active as it had been in 1880 when Mrs Fawcett spoke for votes for women under the banner of the 'respectable ' suffragettes. In the second decade of the twenty first century the term has continued some of its longstanding meaning ( particularly those meanings which are attached to questions about general appearance and public behaviour ) but it has acquired a new and important aspect : that of the respectable woman – mother and carer or not - as the economically active citizen. In these concluding remarks I wish to set out some of the implications of this shift and the ways in which contemporary 'respectability' resonates with the lack of charity towards those nineteenth and early twentieth century women who were not considered 'respectable'. In the instance of morality about sexual relations the change is less about the context of sexual activity in women given that there is no longer a general expectation that sexual relations , be they heterosexual or otherwise, on the part of women will be confined to marriage. But there remains an expectation that women will restrict, more than men, the numbers of their sexual partners.

Aside from this – what could be construed as a limited equalisation of standards about sexual behaviour for women and men – what has become a formal, if not actual, consensus throughout the west is that sexual behaviour and identity is a matter of personal choice. Terms such as 'illegitimacy' and 'unmarried mothers' have disappeared from much of public discourse, if not private comment. Yet new coded forms of stigmatisation have emerged : the term 'welfare mothers' has replaced that of 'unmarried mothers', whilst in both cases what remains is the underlying view that women , rather than the fathers of their children, have somehow failed at heterosexual relationships. The punishment for the birth of children outside stable financially supportive relationships is no longer confinement to the workhouse or social ostracism but it is in those forms of demands by the state ( mentioned before ) which are generally impossible, or very difficult, for mothers of young children to meet.

If we return to that painting which was discussed at the beginning of this paper we must recognise that the feeling that the painting was intended to evoke was that of sympathy. The picture of the women in *Benefits Street* (or any of the other female 'benefits cheats' appearing on web sites such as that of the *Daily Mail* ) is not intended to elicit pity, yet alone empathy. On the contrary the reaction that is expected is one of fury, of intense rage that a woman should 'get away with' such apparently gross misuse of public funds. What this expectation brings into sharp focus is the continuing reliance of women, and crucially mothers, on the negotiation of the financial support of others. Thus whilst questions about respectability have largely , if not entirely, disappeared from issues about dress and sexual identity they have been replaced by what is at least as oppressive, if less apparent. The new form of 'respectability' in women is that of the financially autonomous citizen, the woman whose life is dictated

by material calculation potentially every bit as fierce as that immortalised in Defoe's, *Moll Flanders*, first published in 1722. In this novel, the introduction ran :

'During a life of continued variety for threescore years, besides her childhood, she was twelve years a whore, five times a wife (whereof once her own brother) twelve years a thief, eight years a transported felon in Virginia; at last grew rich, liv'd honest and died a penitent'. (27)

Moll Flanders became 'respectable', a fictional ending which should suggest that the path to this socially positive judgement does not necessarily follow a straightforward pattern. But what this fiction also suggests is that the making of 'respectability' is endlessly fluid. In the recent study by Mike Savage and his colleagues on class in contemporary Britain they emphasised the importance of the work by Beverley Skeggs on this characteristic for working class women. (28) That work ( and work by Steph Lawler ) has been central to the resistance of the demonisation of class based forms of taste. Yet what also needs emphasis is a quotation from Annette Kuhn in Savage's book *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* in which Kuhn writes 'Class is something ...at the very core of your being'. (29) What this encourages us to consider is the way in which the increased social and political authority of negative constructions and the pathologisation of those living in poverty, both increases the pressure on women to be 'respectable' employed citizens and the difficulty of challenging the social and political relationships which assist and maintain inequality. Not the least of these relationships is the difficulty for any citizen of fulfilling the conditions of contemporary 'respectability' whilst also responsible for the care of others.

#### Footnotes

1. *Cathy Come Home*, directed by Ken Loach was shown by the BBC in 1966.
2. Owen Jones, *Chavs : The Demonisation of the Working Class* (London, Verso, 2011)
3. Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects : Social Abjection and Resistance in Neo-liberal Britain* ( London, Zed Books, 2013 ) and Lisa McKenzie , *Getting By : Class and Culture in Austerity Britain* ( Bristol, The Policy Press, 2015)
4. Vicky Pollard was the name of the fictional character who swapped her baby for a CD. She appeared, in various situations, in *Little Britain*, the television series which ran from 2003-2006 and was directed by Matt Lucas and David Walliams.
5. The Women's Budget Group has provided numerous publications demonstrating the impact of the UK austerity regime on women. For those publications see [www.wbg.org.uk](http://www.wbg.org.uk). Another important source of material is Equality Group of the TUC; see [www.tuc.org.uk/equality](http://www.tuc.org.uk/equality)
6. Margery Spring Rice, *Working Class Wives* ( London, Virago, 1981), first published in 1938. On the same subject see (ed.) Margaret Llewelyn Davies, *Maternity : Letters from Working Women* (London, Virago, 1987), first published in 1915.
7. From January 2013 Family Allowances in the UK were abolished for households that included a higher tax band earner.

8. The first British Census of 1851 recorded that 40% of the adult female population were in paid work.
9. E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes : The Short Twentieth Century* ( London, Michael Joseph, 1994), pp. 311-316
10. Sheila Rowbotham has recorded some of the lesser known campaigns by women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in her *Dreamers of a New Day : Women Who Invented the Twentieth Century* ( London, Verso, 2010). She has also recorded the long history – and struggle – for access to contraception in ‘The Long Sexual Revolution : English Women, Sex and Contraception’, *English Historical Review*, 492, 2006, pp.896-898
11. John Jervis has made the important point about the way in which British suffragettes can be seen as amongst the first ‘spectacular’ political subjects of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See John Jervis, *Sensational Subjects : The Dramatization of Experience in the Modern World* ( London, Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 95-97
12. Pat Thane and Tanya Evans, *Sinners ? Scroungers ? Saints ? Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth Century England* ( Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012 )
13. See : T. Shildrick, R. MacDonald, C. Webster and K. Garthwaite, *Poverty and Insecurity: Life in Low-pay, No-pay, Britain* (Bristol, Policy Press, 2012) and Jane Brown, ‘Citizens fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century ?’, *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 7(1), 2012, pp. 19-31
14. There is a full discussion of the origins of Margaret Thatcher domestication of the national budget in Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher : The Authorised Biography, Volume 1, Not for Turning* ( London, Penguin, 2013)
15. Emma Casey, ‘Struggle and protest or passivity and control ? The formation of class identity in two contemporary cultural practices’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13 (2) 2010, pp 225-241
16. Sheryl Sandberg , *Lean In : Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* ( New York, Knopf, 2013). Dawn Foster has challenged many of the assumptions of the book in *Lean Out* ( London, Repeater Books, 2015)
17. A foundational study in this context was Linda McDowell’s *Capital Culture : Gender at Work in the City* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1997). For the same author’s reflections on what has not changed since that publication see ‘Gender, Work, Employment and Society : feminist reflections on continuity and change’, *Work, Employment and Society*, 28 (5) 2014, pp. 825-837
18. Shani Orgad and Sara de Benedictis, ‘The “stay-at-home” mother , post-feminism and neo-liberalism. Content analysis of UK news coverage’, *European Journal of Communication*, 30(4), 2015, pp.418-436
19. J. Stykes, W. Manning, S. Brown, ‘ Non resident Fathers and Formal Child Support’, *Demographic Research* 29 (July/December ) 2013, pp.1299-1330
20. The co-habitation rule was an important issue in feminist engagements with the British welfare state in the 1970s. See Ruth Lister, *As Man and Wife ? A Study of The Co-habitation Rule* ( London, Child Poverty Action Group, 1973) . Hilary Land has pointed out the notice given to ‘single mothers’ in the ‘re-discovery’ of poverty in the 1960s. See Hilary Land, ‘ Social Security and Lone Mothers’ in (eds.) K. Kiernan, Hilary Land and Jane Lewis, *Lone Motherhood in the Twentieth Century* ( Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998), pp.151-210
21. Jan Pahl, *Money and Marriage* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1989)
22. The term ‘angel in the house’ is derived from Coventry Patmore’s poem, first published in 1854 and expanded in 1862.

23. Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2007)
24. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* ( Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999), p.8
25. Avner Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006
26. The first UK Equal Pay Act was passed in 1970.
27. Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*
28. Mike Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* ( London, Pelican, 2015)
29. Mike Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, pp.375-376