



Book Review: *The Violence of Austerity*. Edited by Vickie Cooper and David Whyte

Author(s): Greta Squire

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BOOK REVIEW

The Violence of Austerity. Vickie Cooper and David Whyte (editors), London: Pluto Press (2017). 238pp £8.49 ISBN 978-0- 7453-9948-5

This edited collection with contributions from various academics and activists is very timely in terms of its focus on the violence of austerity. *The Violence of Austerity* (TVOA) is split into four sections; ***Deadly Welfare*** which looks at suicide, mortality rates, the experiences for those who are disabled, workfare, asylum and degradation of young people. The second section is ***Poverty Amplification*** whose chapters consider child mortality, food poverty, fuel poverty, debt, and how austerity disproportionately impacts on women of colour. The third section is ***State Regulation*** with chapters on the withdrawal of social protections, the deterioration of health and safety, environmental degradation, the dangers of fracking, eviction and how austerity is leading to greater numbers of rough sleepers. The final section is on ***State Control*** and chapters consider legal aspects of austerity, the failure to protect women, violence within prisons, foreign policy and the production of a hate filled ideology. All of the chapters link back to the wider question of violence and how austerity has contributed to this and become an integral part of UK social policy. Preceding these chapters is an introduction by Vickie Cooper and David Whyte on the violence of austerity, providing a narrative and overview of austerity and an outline of what the book is looking at achieve.

There is much to be positive about in the book. The chapters are all of a manageable size, with lots of information presented in a concise manner. There is lots of evidence within each chapter, with chapters such as Danny Dorling's on Austerity and Mortality presented with a series of figures and charts to help illustrate the point. Each chapter has a distinctive message which is a powerful reminder of the variety of difficulties that have emerged from government policy. They give a clear and coherent example of how austerity has come to mean much more than just closing the budget deficit but a war against the most vulnerable in society. Often these are shown with anecdotal and statistical evidence to highlight how specific vulnerable groups are suffering disproportionately.

Another of the book's strengths is the breadth of areas it studies. There is a focus on issues such as race, gender and social class, as well as on how the study links to broader political questions around the environment or deregulation.

Often in discussing austerity the focus can be directed at questions of poverty and social class as opposed to looking at how this links to wider questions. The chapter on the impact upon prisoners, cuts to women's services and challenges faced by women of colour or those with disability shows us how the policies of austerity currently intersect boundaries of social class into other areas.

The breadth of the text is not just limited to the topics discussed but also the range of contributors and areas of expertise they bring. As each chapter is relatively short, there is the added advantage of having many different perspectives. Among the contributors are academics from fields such as social policy, sociology, politics, criminology, gender studies and geography. There are also writers who are involved with activist groups campaigning within environmentalism, gender and anti-racism. Not only does this add a range of expertise and depth to the text but also ensures the book is truly interdisciplinary in its approach.

While all the chapters present interesting questions, the chapters on housing, tenants' rights and continued deregulation are now particularly poignant given what occurred at Grenfell Tower in the months following the publication. While the authors warn of the dangers of watering down the legal protections and rightly position this as a central component of the austerity project, seeking to reduce the burdens on businesses' ability to profit, the examples they point to are either grim predictions of what may happen or examples that are not of the scale of the Grenfell tragedy. That Grenfell has now occurred, and with growing evidence emerging that the Council and tenant management company increasingly cut corners on safety to save cost, reinforces the central tenant of this chapter and the wider implications of the book. Events have made the book even more timely post-publication and one that is increasingly catching the emergent mood of a nation ever-more frustrated by austerity and channelling those feelings via a resurgent Labour Party standing on a clear anti-austerity agenda.

While there are many positives to the book, one area where it could be improved is by having a clearer narrative running throughout. It reads at times like several distinctive chapters with not enough attention taken to link each of them together. The opening chapter is very strong but some of the central message is diluted as you go through each chapter because they are each stand-alone pieces. One way this could have been prevented would have been via an author commentary at the start and/or end of each of the four sections of the text. This could have drawn together some of the more disparate ideas and provided a compelling narrative.

One way to do this would have been to be more explicit of some of the wider ideological work around this area. There is little mention of neo-liberalism or financialisation other than in a couple of specific chapters. Understanding some of the changes that are occurring would require us to have a wider look at the ideological underpinnings that have occurred across the western world and the inequality that has ensued. Alongside this, the work of Zizek or Bourdieu on symbolic violence may have also been interesting to examine. While the style of the text was to have shorter, often more practical chapters that didn't get too weighed down by ideology – choosing rather to focus on the voices of those who have suffered – perhaps this is where a connecting narrative could have linked the shorter chapters to a wider range of work.

The majority of the chapters focus heavily on the policies of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat administration post-2010 and pinpoint policies they have undertaken in a variety of areas that have caused severe harm to people. Examples of this may be the increasingly draconian benefits sanctions and procedures around welfare, workfare and the exploitation that exists in this area as a result, or the cuts to legal aid budgets that prevent people from contesting workplace discrimination. However, I do think a focus on some of the policies put into place by New Labour would have been. Much of the privatisation of education and the hospitals, reliance on a debt economy and punitive sanctions against benefits claimants were greatly expanded and developed under New Labour's governance. While they have undoubtedly been expanded under the subsequent coalition and Conservative administrations, their origins lie before that. This again links to the wider point about focussing on more ideological concepts and linking these not just to one bad government but rather to an overarching approach from successive governments and differing political parties. One good example of where this was done was on the question of prison reform which did touch upon the difficulties under New Labour particularly in the culture that was allowed to develop which was then encouraged by the Conservative administration.

That being said, even though the text at times can be a little theory-light and be seen to be lacking a connecting narrative, the chapters provided in the book are broad, interesting and informative. The breadth of research and areas studied ensure that just about every area of violence directed towards different social groups by the government is discussed. While symbolic violence is not explicitly mentioned, the underlying message is extremely clear: that the policies of austerity represent an assault on the majority of people for the interests of a government serving narrow interests at the top of society. It is also

clearly pointed out that this is leading to enormous strain, heartache, pressure, poverty and ultimately deaths of those on the receiving end. In the current context of British and European politics, this is a timely text that presents an important contribution to a growing left response to the challenges that are being faced, pinning the problems of society not upon migrants or refugees and a Malthusian crisis of over-consumption but of a political crisis of the elite's attacking others. Given Corbyn's resurgent Labour Party, the Conservatives' deep split over the question of public sector pay freezes and the project of austerity, it is a timely intervention on a question where progressive forces and ideas are starting to make ground. Hopefully it can act as a starting point in a journey that allows others to build upon its work and connect the undoubtedly well-researched and -documented attacks to a wider ideological framework.

GRETA SQUIRE
University of Brighton