Commissioned Book Review, forthcoming in *Political Studies Review* (2019), doi:10.1177/1478929918810289, pre-print version, October 2018

**Minority Women and Austerity: Survival and Resistance in France and Britain** by **Leah Bassel and Akwugo Emejulu**. Bristol: Policy Press, 2017. 168pp, £75 (h/B), ISBN 97814473214, pb £22.49

Reviewed by Silke Roth, University of Southampton, UK

Austerity measures such as public sector cuts which eliminate jobs and services hit minority women hardest. In this timely book, Leah Bassel and Akwugo Emejulu argue that the activism of minority women is overlooked as long as it is approached from the perspective of mainstream political participation. Their critical intervention thus widens the understanding of political participation and breaks with dominant epistemological frameworks that cast minority women as victims. The authors acknowledge the expertise of minority women regarding their own lives and they analyse how different national contexts shape minority women’s political participation. This comparative study of minority women’s activism in England, France and Scotland makes an important contribution to the understanding of political participation of minority women – and beyond.

The authors take the lived experience of minority women as the starting point for knowledge production. Their theoretical framework is informed by ‘Black Feminist Thought’ by Patricia Hill Collins who provided a foreword to the book. Bassel and Emejulu also draw on David Theo Goldberg’s concept of ‘political racelessness’ which refers to the ignorance of Europe’s colonial past thereby obliterating race epistemologically and empirically. The authors argue that both the political Left and the political Right engage in political racelessness and thus erase minority women. Bassel and Emejulu also note that white ignorance and innocence which underpins the constitution of colonial identities characterises European feminist spaces which systematically exclude minority women. They illustrate this with the debate around the adoption of a law banning headscarves in France 2004 and the racialisation of sexual violence after sexual assaults in Cologne on New Year’s Eve in 2015. They argue that the white socialist Left and the populist left practice ‘exclusionary universality’ through neglecting race, gender and other aspects of privilege and discriminations and instead focusing solely on class.

The comparison of France, England and Scotland shows how different citizenship regimes and approaches to austerity affect and are responded to by minority women. In contrast to France, England and Scotland promote the idea of multicultural citizenship while the republican citizenship model in France downplays race, ethnicity and religion promoting ‘difference blindness’ (p. 2) which makes it difficult if not impossible to make claims around ‘race’. Despite these differences, all three countries have seen the rise of nationalist and xenophobic movements. Austerity exacerbates the routinized precarity and crises of minority women. In all three countries, minority women represent a high proportion of those who are un- and underemployed, working in low-skilled, low-paid and temporary employment and living in poverty. However, variations between different ethnic minority groups need to be noted – as well as variations in education and income.

Bassel and Emejulu define minority women as ‘women who experience the effects of racialisation, class and gender inequality as well as other sources of inequality, particularly hierarchies of legal status’ (p. 6). This definition captures differing migration histories and citizen statuses across the three nations. Some of the research participants experienced racialization, but were were advantaged with respect to education and professional employment. In addition to activists, the sample included third sector workers (directors, policy officers and development workers), civil servants and local government officials responsible for equality or the third sector including self-identified advocates from the ‘white mainstream’ (p. 7). The majority of participants were directors (15) or case-workers (18), while a smaller group of respondents (4) who were activists (one each in France and Scotland, two in England) were interviewed. In addition, the authors conducted a focus group with activist minority women in Glasgow. Fieldwork was carried out in larger and smaller cities, including Glasgow, Edinburgh, London, Manchester, Paris, the Parisian suburbs, Lyon and Coventry. The majority of the 37 interviews were carried out in Paris (12) and Glasgow (9). This sampling strategy allowed the authors so compare denser and smaller, less dense networks.

Bassel and Emejulu investigate the intersectional work undertaken by third sector organisations such as traditional social welfare service providers, hybrid organisations which engage in advocacy as well as service provision, and grassroots organisations either engaged in crisis relief and political organising or in campaigning and policy advocacy. Through the focus on these organisations they broaden the understanding of political activism and draw attention to the activism of minority women who are underrepresented and marginalised in other political organisations. Moreover, the third sector plays an important role in neoliberal societies in which social welfare services are contracted out and in which competition, commodification and individualisation play an ever increasing role. This is particularly the case in England and Scotland, whereas in France, third sector organisations reached out to those affected by ‘new poverty’ or ‘new social exclusion’. Despite these differences, Bassel and Emejulu note ‘strikingly similar effects’ of neoliberal governances (p. 57).

The impact of austerity resulted in all three countries in budget cuts, staff redundancies, closure and merger of organisations, and cuts to service provisions and to an increasing competition for funds undermining solidarity within the sector. In this situation, the survival of minority women takes places in informal spaces such as self-help groups, DIY networks and grassroots community organisations. Bassel and Emejulu highlight the self-care and solidarity work in which minority women are involved, noting that these women juggle activism, caring obligations and other responsibilities. These multiple demands and lack of resources represent obstacles to activism. Self-help, self-care and self-organising are not only important for personal support, but become ‘DIY autonomous spaces in which survival is radical action’ (p. 82). In addition, Bassel and Emejulu discuss the problem of misrepresentation and instrumentalisation of minority women. Their data collection ended before the organisation Sisters Uncut emerged in England, but refer to this group and several other new actors in France such as the Mwasi collectif or Black Lives Matter in the UK. The book ends with an attention to warning signs such as the burkini ban in France, the Brexit vote in the UK, and silence and complacency and thus a lack of meaningful debates around race and racism in Scotland.

Bassel and Emejulu’s book is an important contribution to an inclusive and intersectional understanding of activism and resistance in contemporary neoliberal societies. Their comparative approach highlights the similarities of minority women’s experience of and reaction to different citizen regimes and austerity measures. It also calls for the need to abandon political racelessness, white ignorance and exclusionary universality. The book is a great starting point for further in-depth research of minority women’s activism through case-studies of third sector and grassroots organisations and the coalitions they engage in. Furthermore, more attention needs to be paid to the opportunities and obstacles to create truly inclusive alliances and solidarity. As Patricia Hill Collins noted, Black Feminist are not defined by biological markers.