

The Straight Line: Sexuality, Futurity, and the Politics of Austerity

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After all is said and done, the prospects and promises of heterosexual culture still represent the optimism for optimism, a hope to which people apparently have already pledged consent.

Berlant and Warner

HOW ARE THE POLITICS OF AUSTERITY related to particular structures of feeling that are future-oriented and which assume certain measures of progress can function as markers of success and happiness under neoliberalism? How are these measures related to temporal modes of belonging that are generational and heteronormative? And how might these modes of belonging demonstrate the cruel optimism, as Lauren Berlant puts it, with which we attach ourselves to promises of future happiness via institutions and practices that diminish us? Berlant claims, “a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (1). It might “involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being” (1). Our relationships to these objects might not even feel like

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optimism, but according to Berlant all attachments are optimistic in that they move us out of ourselves, offering “a cluster of promises” about what we imagine is possible in the world (23). Our relationships to these objects become cruel when the object/scene that ignites the sense of possibility is the very thing that makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which we are striving (2). For instance, we might hold on to a fantasy of the good life, or the life of upward mobility, job security, and political and social equality, despite overwhelming evidence that liberal-capitalist societies can no longer be counted on to provide opportunities for individuals to make their lives “add up to something” (Berlant 2). We might do this even if it threatens our well being, because to do so gives us a sense of what it means to look forward to living in the world.

The politics of austerity operate through a similar affective structure. Like cruel optimism, austerity is future-oriented and relies on an attachment to a scene impossible to attain. Austerity also relies on a similar temporal structure. In focusing on saving the good life, if not for oneself at least for one's children, austerity requires a psychic investment in a particular narrative of progress. I want to suggest that this narrative follows a sequence of events—birth, childhood, adolescence, marriage, reproduction, death—that is heteronormative. As Sara Ahmed explains, “for a life to count as a good life, it must return the debt of life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course” (554). Such points accumulate, “creating the impression of a straight line. To follow such a line might be a way to become straight, by not deviating at any point” (554). To stay on this straight line is also to inhabit a kind of straight time, what Judith Halberstam describes as reproductive, biological, and generational. As Halberstam outlines, in straight time “values, wealth, goods, and morals” are imagined to be “passed through family ties from one generation to the next,” so that the family is tied both “to the historical past of the nation” and “to the future of both familial and national stability” (5). Queer time, on the other hand, is non-normative, what Halberstam describes as those forms of belonging that emerge once “one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (6)—the very keywords of austerity.

I therefore want to suggest that the politics of austerity rely on a temporality that is generational and straight in the way that Ahmed and Halberstam outline and cruel in the manner that Berlant describes. Thinking of austerity in this way might allow us to acknowledge that the rhetoric of austerity forecloses certain desires, orientations, and ways of being. As

Ahmed argues, understanding the relationship “between inheritance (the lines that are given as our point of arrival into familial and social space) and reproduction (the demand that we return that gift of the line by extending that line)” allows us to see, first, that objects of identification are available to us “because of the lines we have already taken” (554), and, second, that this process is not automatic but involves a social pressure that can feel like a physical press on the surface of the body: “we are pressed into lines” (555). Austerity is cruel because it presses us into this line and does not allow for the potentiality of a life unscripted by the economic conventions of family, nation, and inheritance. It does not allow us to believe that our futures could be imagined according to logics that lie outside of certain paradigmatic markers that may appear common sense but which are deeply normative.

If it has traditionally been difficult to include questions of sexuality into conversations about neoliberal economic structures, it is because desire has been cast as part of a ludic body politics outside of the categories class/global/political (Halberstam 5). Desire, however, is an integral component of “common sense” modes of living. For example, under austerity some subjects are recognized as “activating their own (and their families’) futures,” as desiring properly, or as following the straight line, while others “are condemned as failing, irresponsible, wasteful, wasted and out-of-place” (Allen and Taylor 4). Locating those who are “wasted” or “wasters” is a distinctly intersectional process, one that is as much about policing desires as it is about economic policy. What might change in this process, however, if we were to queer the politics of austerity? That is, what if we were to see queerness not as sexual orientation but in “practices that feel out alternative routes for living without requiring personhood to be expressive of an internal orientation or part of a political program advocating how to live” (Berlant 18)? Perhaps this might open up new avenues for critiquing the politics of austerity and for discussing what makes a good life, outside of the conventions of futurity and inheritance; perhaps this might allow for other objects of desire, for other forms of optimism, and for other ways of looking forward to living in the world.

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