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Digital Debt Management: The Everyday Life of Austerity

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Abstract

The age of austerity has seen large swathes of society adversely affected by ever-harsher austerity measures and protracted economic stagnation. This is compounded by the increasing routinisation of debt default and the everyday management of problematic levels of debt. This paper explores the everyday politics of indebtedness—the multifaceted ways in which household debt is transforming debtors’ lives—and the forms of resistance it can give rise to. In particular we focus on the role played in the UK by online resources as a new and increasingly important source of expertise and collaborative support. The paper’s object is a set of web forums that offer platforms for peer-to-peer (p2p) information exchange, specifically: Consumer Action Group, Money Saving Expert, Mumsnet. We analyse the types of expertise that are made available, how this is discussed and achieves legitimacy (or not), as well as the forums’ effects on forms of domestic accounting. We also compare the online forms of debt advice to conventional ‘real world’ debt management expertise. We conclude by considering how this enhances our understanding of the transformative impact of digital technologies on indebtedness as well as offering insights into the everyday life of contemporary austerity.

Keywords

Austerity, debt, debt advice, everyday life, online forums

Biographical note

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Introduction

We have passed the halfway mark of a decade of austerity in the United Kingdom. As we look forward, a retreat from its logics appears to be a distant prospect. Central government-led cuts to welfare provision and public services are justified to bring down public debt levels, but often simply ensure ever-increasing levels of personal indebtedness to smooth out effects of insecure employment and low wage growth. Indebtedness engenders painful struggles in everyday life for significant sections of the British population. This article details some of the specific effects of this. It explores a hitherto underexplored aspect of everyday life of debtors: how peer-to-peer (p2p) online discussion forums are disseminating and promoting everyday practices of debt management and debt resistance. In the UK there are numerous forums readily available for debtors seeking support, echoing the function of similar online spaces in the US, for instance subforums hosted by Credit Info Centre, ExpertLaw, FICO, and Reddit as well as online resources made available by activists like the Strike Debt's *Debt Resisters Operations Manual*¹. As we will see, one function forums perform is as an ever-changing living archive of debtors' own responses to the challenges they routinely face. These online resources bring together and collate the varied experience of life under conditions of indebtedness, from practical debt management strategies to diverse forms of emotional and moral support. In documenting debtors' responses to the often severe material constraints they experience, such forums offer a new resource for those wanting to study in more qualitative depth the impact of debt in everyday life.

We seek to explore and map these forums in order to understand how debtors are using them. As such, we ask what these digital spaces are doing *to debt* and, relatedly, what they are doing *for debtors*? By opening up the intimate micro-level forum discussions to wider political economic themes we explore, firstly, the potential for an everyday politics of debt in austerity Britain; and, secondly, how these online forums are altering debtors' relations to one another and their collective obligations. Principally, these forums transform debt by reconfiguring a two-way relationship between debtor and creditor into new collective relationships and forms of resolution. In the process debt becomes more amenable to political discussion and intervention by debtors themselves. In seeking to understand how these forums shape the conditions of austerity for debtors, two categories emerged as particularly significant from our analysis: (1) Troubleshooting - debtors' responses to particular technical debt management queries; (2) Journeying - the everyday challenge of living with indebtedness and the pursuit by many of a route towards ultimate 'debt freedom'. Although a particular forum thread will often have elements of both, we find this distinction is a useful way of making sense of the interactions that take place within these online spaces and the transformations they effect.

¹ Strike Debt and Occupy Wall Street, *The Debt Resisters' Operations Manual*, New York, Strike Debt / Occupy Wall Street, 2012, <http://strikedebt.org/The-Debt-Resisters-Operations-Manual.pdf> (accessed 11/05/15).

In drawing on our novel analysis of this much under-appreciated online archival resource, the paper provides an account of the layered politics that are revealed on these forums, while also offering new ways of understanding the temporalities, relations, responsibilities and political challenges of indebtedness. We also show that debtors are now routinely countering conventional understandings of debt and the obligations it imposes. Forum members highlight the extent to which attempts to get 'out of debt' are protracted and painful socio-cultural endeavours. At the same time, they position debt as something that is best solved not by the individual and their solitary self-interested economic decisions but by shared, collective endeavour. Here, practical advice is grounded in forum members' own experiences and thoroughly intermingled with forms of emotional support. We draw upon E. P. Thompson and his concept of moral economy to make sense of the ways in which these spaces begin to foment a cultural conversation whereby the powerless contest the actions of elites based on claims to fairness, justify alternative economic futures, or even begin to resist power relations.

The article begins by briefly outlining the challenges that scholars have raised towards the logics of austerity, as well as highlighting the central role played within such logics by the simultaneous expansion and contraction of debt. Then, after outlining the methodology used to research the forums, it provides an analysis of the two categories of threads. The final section provides a cultural economy analysis of personal debt in austerity Britain.

Debt and austerity

The techniques and effects of austerity are transforming the socio-economic relationships between citizens, the state and each other.² Debt is a central organising concept that both explains and justifies simultaneous household and state deleveraging – or paying down debts – in order to repair the damage caused by pre-2008 boom years. During the boom, debt levels grew in lock step with market euphoria of ever-rising house prices and endless consumption.³ In 2008 this came to an end when bank bailouts and subsequent successive rounds of Quantitative Easing (QE) diverted public borrowing in order to repair the financial sectors' balance sheets. However, households are still servicing the debts they incurred during these years of relatively easy credit and now, often, are required to take on yet more debt to cope with the combined effects of a sluggish economy and the withdrawal of state provisioning.⁴

Austerity is typically analysed within the context of evolving post-2008 crisis management techniques. Through this lens, it has become clear that the macroeconomics of austerity is logically

² Dowling, E., Harvie, D., 'Harnessing the Social: State, Crisis and (Big) Society'. *Sociology* 48, 5 (2014), 869–86.

³ Robert Brenner, 'New Boom or New Bubble?'. *New Left Review*, 25, 2004, 57–102.

⁴ Johnna Montgomerie, Carl Packman, Joe Deville, Liam Stanley, Alexander Simpson, Giannina Warren, *The Politics of Indebtedness in the UK: A Public Interest Report*, 2014, http://www.gold.ac.uk/media/PoliticsofDebtinUK_FINAL.pdf (accessed 11/03/15).

flawed.⁵ The very same credit-fuelled and bubble-prone Anglo-Liberal growth model that created the 2008 global financial crisis remains intact,⁶ exacerbating the underlying structural problems in the UK economy, creating a ‘crisis without end’.⁷ The central role of the financial services sector as an engine of growth and the largest contributor to debt overhang in the UK economy⁸ keeps the focus firmly on financial markets as loci of much needed reform for the UK economy to recover.⁹ However, the persistent focus on macro-level failures of austerity leaves little room to explore the everyday experience of indebtedness that shape how austerity materialises as lived experience.

When faced with the effects of austerity, coupled with squeezed wages and/or insecure income, households borrow to plug the gap between present-day incomings, present-day outgoings and payments to service past consumption.¹⁰ Rolling back government provision for households means that debt becomes integral to future planning, for students as much as for homeowners and pensioners. Debt becomes the medium through which past, present and future financial commitments of households are negotiated.¹¹ That being the case, this paper contributes to scholarship that analyses the everyday life of austerity. This ranges from an account of the different cultural spaces of austerity Britain,¹² to how austerity is articulated in everyday discussions,¹³ to the experiential, technical and calculative challenges of managing debt and default,¹⁴ to how indebtedness operates as widely shared everyday socio-cultural condition in search of a political economy solution.¹⁵

From the everyday life of austerity, the article proceeds to explore how debt can become involved in the fomentation of more politically engaged forms of subjectivity. Indebtedness under conditions of austerity has the potential to foster social unrest and collective mobilisation.¹⁶ This makes sense

⁵ Mark Blyth, *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁶ Colin Hay, *The Failure of Anglo-Liberal Capitalism*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013,

⁷ Andrew Gamble, *Crisis Without End?: The Unravelling of Western Prosperity*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

⁸ Helen Thompson, ‘UK Debt in Comparative Perspective: The Pernicious Legacy of Financial Sector Debt’, *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 15, 3 (2011), 476–92.

⁹ Ann Pettifor, *Just Money: How Society Can Break the Despotic Power of Finance*, London, Commonwealth Publishing, 2014.

¹⁰ StepChange, *Life on the Edge: Towards more resilient family finances*, 2014,

<http://www.stepchange.org/Portals/0/StepChangeLifeontheEdgereport.pdf> (accessed 30/11/2014); Money Advice Service, *Indebted Lives: The Complexities of Life in Debt*, London, Money Advice Service, 2013,

<https://www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/files/indebted-lives-the-complexities-of-life-in-debt-november-2013-v3.pdf> [accessed 25/11/14.

¹¹ See also Rebecca Coleman’s article in this issue.

¹² Rebecca Bramall, *The Cultural Politics of Austerity: Past and Present in Austere Times*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; Rebecca Coleman (this issue).

¹³ Liam Stanley, ‘“We’re Reaping What We Sowed”: Everyday Crisis Narratives and Acquiescence to the Age of Austerity’ *New Political Economy*, 19, 6 (2014), 895-917.

¹⁴ Joe Deville, ‘Debtor Publics: Tracking the Participatory Politics of Consumer Credit’, *Consumption Markets & Culture* (forthcoming); Joe Deville, *Lived Economies of Default: Consumer Credit, Debt Collection and the Capture of Affect*, London, Routledge, 2015.

¹⁵ Montgomerie et al. *The Politics of Indebtedness in the UK: A Public Interest Report*, 2014.

¹⁶ See Rob Aitken, ‘Everyday debt relationalities: Situating peer-to-peer lending and the Rolling Jubilee’, *Cultural Studies* (forthcoming); Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, translated by

when we think of the role that unemployment and living costs played to bring about social unrest in the 1970s; today the UK is a debt-led, not full-employment, economy. Indebtedness becomes the vehicle bringing the profound ‘structural’ problems in the wider political economy closer to ‘home’. Although this potential is not always realised, when it is, debt becomes a more public issue, requiring not just individual but collective forms of resolution.¹⁷ In such instances, a direct challenge is raised to explanations in line with economic orthodoxy, which assumes that households respond to economic stimulus (in a rational way): low interest rates signal to continue borrowing; also, that debt is a credit contract between an individual borrower and single creditor. In contrast, we try to understand how debtors are recreating the economy through their everyday actions, reactions and inactions as a significantly more collective concern.¹⁸ Indebtedness, as we will show, is not just a ‘personal’ problem, involving individuals and their (multiple) credit contract(s), but instead it reaches out at once to the wider household and to other similarly affected debtors. By observing how the indebted use digital forums to engage in peer-to-peer information sharing, we can collect data on and analyse the multifaceted ways that individuals navigate the protracted personal and societal processes of dealing with debt – and what this tells us about the everyday life of austerity.

Analysing p2p debt forums

We analysed three forums: Consumer Action Group (CAG), Money Saving Expert (MSE), and Mumsnet. From each of these, we analysed subsections (including specific sub-forums) that reflected the diverse ways in which debtors use these online spaces. These are briefly outlined in Table 1. For CAG, we selected the ‘Debt Management and Debt Self-help’ from the many debt-related sub-forums. Since the content on this sub-forum is not confined to one particular issue – unlike, for example the ‘Credit Reference Agencies’ or ‘Dealing with Debt in Scotland’ sub-forums – it provided an entryway into what broad benefit the forums provide debtors¹⁹. From MSE, we sampled ‘Debt-Free Wannabe’, a general sub-forum dedicated to those looking to get out of debt. Original posters often ask questions or for advice over strategies on how to start getting out of debt, update other posters with news on their ‘debt-free journeys’, or ask specific or miscellaneous questions about getting out of debt relevant. Rather than analyse a subforum of Mumsnet, we instead sampled a single, long thread. ‘The Debt Thread’ is a place ‘for those who feel they are drowning and want a way out’, to quote the thread title. It is used by many posters in a way not dissimilar from a (debt) diary, with posters regularly sharing news of the latest methods they have found for ‘cutting back’ – for example, by collecting and using coupons in a newspaper, or forgoing an activity now considered too luxurious.

Joshua David Jordan, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2012; Andrew Ross, ‘You are Not a Loan: A Debtors Movement’, *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 6 (2014), 179-188.

¹⁷ Joe Deville, ‘Debtor Publics: Tracking the Participatory Politics of Consumer Credit’; see also Noortje Marres, *Material Participation: Technology, the Environment and Everyday Publics*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

¹⁸ Johnna Montgomerie, ‘America’s Debt Safety-net’, *Public Administration*, 91, 4 (2013), 871–888.

¹⁹ The Debt Collection Agency sub-forum, which has already been subject to a degree of analysis by Deville in ‘Debtor Publics: Tracking the Participatory Politics of Consumer Credit’.

Table 1: Different debtor discussions sampled

| Forum | Description | Sample | Description |
|------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Consumer Action Group | CAG was set up in 2006 to support challenge to banks levying unfair charges | <i>Debt Management</i> and <i>Debt self-help</i> sub-forums | General sub-forum on getting out of debt. Offers broad content, unlike other CAG forums confined to one issue. |
| Money Saving Expert | Journalist Martin Lewis' finance and consumer advice website. | <i>Debt-Free Wannabe</i> sub-forum | A general sub-forum dedicated to those who wish to get out of debt. Posters ask for advice or updates on 'debt-free journey' |
| Mumsnet | Forum space for mothers to exchange information and experiences of motherhood and raising a family | <i>Debt thread</i> | Not a sub-forum but general thread on getting out of debt. It is a single (extremely) long thread and is described as a place 'for those who feel they are drowning and want a way out' |

The research is based on a single exploratory research question: What are these online spaces for debt management doing *to debt* and *for debtors*? Some have said that online forums can be like unmoderated focus groups since they highlight processes of collective meaning-making.²⁰ To reflect this, we developed a qualitative research design in part influenced by research into online forums for health issues.²¹ We captured a snapshot of up to the first 40 threads, sorted by latest post, from April 1st onwards from each forum. For Mumsnet, in lieu of different sub-forums we sampled the latest Debt thread²².

The resulting data was coded in line with the research question and based on reading through the corpus in its entirety in order to build further provisional themes. Two key themes in particular emerged: (1) 'Troubleshooting', a form of interaction in which online communities collectively respond and support a debtor with a particular problem; (2) 'Journeying', a form of interaction in which online communities collectively coalesce around the emotional, practical and mundane dimensions of a debtor's "journey" towards debt freedom.

Troubleshooting threads often prescribe forms of action as a solution to a clear problem someone faces, which are often reached through a process of 'collective calculation'.²³ Troubleshooting questions often have a sense of impending crisis or involve responding to a turning point and therefore often require a swift resolution or a coping strategy. In contrast, journeying threads express a particular trajectory a debtor is on (or hoping to be on) towards a debt-free future life, with

²⁰ Margaret F. Moloney, Alexa S. Dietrich, Ora Strickland and Stuart JD Myerburg, 'Using Internet discussion boards as virtual focus groups', *Advances in Nursing Science*, 26, 4 (2003), 274-86; Holtz et al. 2012: 56

²¹ Rose M. Marra, Joi L. Moore and Aimee K. Klimczak, 'Content Analysis of Online Discussion Forums: A Comparative Analysis of Protocols', *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 52, 2 (2004), 35-51; Clive Seale, Sue Ziebland and Jonathan Chararis-Black, 'Gender, cancer experience and internet use: A comparative keyword analysis of interviews and online cancer support groups', *Social Science & Medicine*, 62, 10 (2006), 2577-2590.

²² Since this thread was 60,000 words, we coded it until we reached 1,000 reference points which is in line with the amount of references for the other two sources.

²³ Joe Deville, 'Debtor Publics: Tracking the Participatory Politics of Consumer Credit'.

the mechanism towards achieve debt freedom being frugality or thrifty in the present. The temporality can be short term (e.g. “What small DFW [debt free wannabe] things will you do today?” threads) or have a life span of years and years (e.g. “debt-free days” that are projected years away). Along the way, there may be troubleshooting issues to deal with, but these tend to be seen as steps on a longer road. In both troubleshooting and journeying the temporalities of debt bring into sharp contrast the immediate problems – like ‘how do I end persistent and annoying phone calls from debt collectors?’ – with the long uncertain future, like those wanting “debt freedom” do so by calculated a projected “debt free day” where all their debts are fully repaid. This varied rhythm of the daily life of debt, sometimes intensive, sometimes operating as an anxiety inducing background to everyday routine, can be seen as a characteristic feature of the non-linear temporality of austerity, as explored by Rebecca Coleman (this issue). We will now examine each in turn.

Troubleshooting

Of the sub-forums we sampled, CAG’s Debt Management and Debt Self-Help group featured troubleshooting types of thread particularly commonly. Such threads have a typical pattern. The original poster will start with a request for specific assistance or help with an issue related to indebtedness. Various forum members will then offer guidance, tips, moral support, suggestions for how to proceed, and so on. Many replies are from highly experienced and expert forum members, some of whom could have contributed in excess of 60,000 posts. More often than not, the original poster will receive multiple suggestions for resolution. Sometimes, there will be toing and froing as replies dig deeper into the case, or make seemingly unpalatable suggestions, or collectively think through a particular puzzle. This is the mundane, nitty gritty of communal but voluntary work that produces the forms of collective calculation upon which these forums depend for their success. The actions, budgets and conundrums of debtors are solved, literally, by public forum.

No two troubleshooting threads are alike. Allow us, however, to provide two indicative examples to begin to provide a sense of the kinds of discussions they host. The first concerns a debtor’s debt management plan. A debt management plan is, in effect, a service, in which an organisation takes over responsibility from a debtor for the ongoing management of their defaulting debt and for dealing with the various creditors. In this case, a poster has been contributing to a debt management plan for 8 years at £300 per month but still owes a total of £20,000 to the various creditors. The author has just been made redundant and is therefore seeking tactics to help cope with the creditors while finding a new source of employment. Replies recommend that the original poster reduces their monthly repayments to a so-called ‘token payment’ of £1 a month and request a copy of their original Consumer Credit Agreement (CCA) and submit a Subject Access Request (SAR). Providing token payments are a way of a debtor demonstrating to the creditor their continued willingness to repay, in principle, even if they cannot currently repay at the amount requested.²⁴ Given payments

²⁴ This ‘offer’ may, however, not be accepted; it also serves a specific legal function: if, after a period of six years (in England, Northern Ireland and Wales; 5 in Scotland) the creditor has received no recognition from the debtor of the

have already been made by the debtor previously, in this case it seems the aim is above all to simply reduce the payments being made in the short term. Meanwhile, CCA requests and SARs are both demands for further detailed information from the creditor, which can in some cases allow the debtor to try to dispute the status of the debt but in many cases act, in effect, as delaying tactics, forcing the creditor to produce further information before legal proceedings can continue.

Another thread, with the member appearing on behalf of his mentally ill mother, seeks advice on how to deal with her £50,000 outstanding debts, which were accumulated despite her living only on disability living allowance. The poster, having taken it upon themselves to deal with these debts, was previously paying £750 per month — just to cover the interest — before setting up a debt management plan. The mother has now been made a ‘F&F offer’ (a full and final settlement offer) by her creditors, who have committed to wiping off 60% of the debts and marking the account as repaid on the condition that a fast, single lump sum repayment to cover the reduced debt amount is made.²⁵ Replies quickly broaden out beyond the specific query in hand and begin to ask questions about the ethics of lending to someone with health issues. Advice includes warning against agreeing to anything before a full CCA request and a SAR requests are put in, in order for the poster to potentially work out whether a case can be made for irresponsible lending.

Through these two examples we can see that, as the term we use indicates, part of the function of troubleshooting threads is, indeed, to address a particular technical issue. This occurs through forum contributors drawing on their varied forms of expertise, much of which (as they frequently make clear) is rooted in their own experience. While some of the advice may be more combative than might be provided by a conventional, formally trained debt adviser -- for instance, asking for copies of consumer credit agreements and issuing SARs -- these are functional sets of actions. However, the ‘trouble’ that animates troubleshooting threads can often, through the intervention of site contributors, be much broader in scope. Whether in addressing the alleged profiteering of the debt management industry, or as in the above example, potentially exploitative lending practices, it is common for discussions to begin to open up the power relations that sustain the creditor-debtor relationship. As posters begin to make explicit, these power relations do not involve the legal obligation for repayment, or indeed just the moral obligations that are layered over them, but also the everyday practices of and interactions between creditors and debtors. It is often unclear to debtors whether certain creditor actions have a legal status and whether debtors have a legal obligation to respond in the manner demanded of them. As a result, debtors are often visibly unsure whether their own actions are right or wrong, and whether the creditors should be acquiesced to or

debt, with a payment taken as a legal recognition, then the debt will become ‘statute barred’, which can prevent a creditor from taking further recovery action. See Financial Conduct Authority, *FCA Handbook*, 2015, CONC 7.15, <http://fshandbook.info/FS/html/FCA/CONC/7/15> (accessed 3/2/15).

²⁵ While this may stop action being taken by a particular creditor, it does have an impact on a debtor’s credit file as usually the debt will be marked as only a ‘partial settlement’ which can affect their future credit rating. See National Debtline, ‘Full and Final Settlement Offers’, *Fact Sheets*, 24, <https://www.nationaldebtline.org/EW/factsheets/Pages/24%20EW%20Full%20and%20final%20settlement%20offers/Default.aspx#> (accessed 3/2/15).

resisted. The success of the forums depends to a degree on the ability of the crowd to offer a viable response to such confusions.

It is possible to also observe instances when challenges to creditors emerge through more directly transformative action. When relations between the powerful and powerless are both procedurally valid and ethically justifiable, then a degree of legitimacy is conferred onto the relationship.²⁶ At least in terms of procedural validity, legal frameworks such as the credit agreement establish these relations. However, when a ‘gap’ emerges between the actions of creditors and those shared understandings about fairness, the legitimacy of the relationship will erode.²⁷ The question is, can such gaps lead to collective action by the powerless that alters the terms of engagement to bring relations back into line with shared understandings of ethically justifiable behaviour?

There were examples of this sort action being attempted or at least imagined on the forums. One concerns a poster who had acted as a guarantor on a friend’s loan. The friend signed up to a debt management plan, and yet the original poster was still called upon as the guarantor. As a result, the original poster was receiving many telephone calls and letters from a company named FLM. Since the poster was on a debt management plan of their own, they were in no position to also repay someone else’s debts. To make matters worse, the author made it clear that the friend was hardly in financial dire straights (“the person who has the loan still has 2 properties !!!!! :-/“), despite the debt management plan. Replies concerning how to proceed with FLM were clearly united in advising against all but the most minimum level of repayment:

| | |
|-------|--|
| User1 | pers[onally] i'd tell them to go away off. you are not obliged to converse on the phone or by door etc. everything in writing only/. there is little they can do to you bar send threatening letters via a DCA . offer them £1PCM ... tough luck FLM. |
| User2 | My own view on this is that we are seeing unfair business practices here. Once you have made it clear to them that you are informed that the original lender is still making repayments at a rate he can afford, and that you are also financially unable to make up any shortfall in the repayments as arranged, if they still insist on hassling you then you need to report them to Consumer direct which you can do online and your local Trading standards. First get a response from them in writing and |

²⁶ David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 1991.

²⁷ Leonard Seabrooke, *The Social Sources of Financial Power: Domestic Legitimacy and International Financial Orders*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2006.

demand this.

The original poster then followed this advice by making very small monthly repayments in their role as guarantor, involving the Ombudsman, and refusing to talk about the details of the case on the phone with the collector. The last of these actions seems to have annoyed the subsequent FLM collections worker she or he dealt with:

After posting our letter this morning had a call from FLM asking why we had `nt reply to the letter so I told them that ours was in the post and we would converse in writing only....annoyed yes he was wanted to know why / what was in the letter / that he wanted to discuss over the phone etc...found it rather good to be able to be a parrot and keep saying we will deal with it in writing only! He was `nt happy at that and asked why so I said we wish to do it in writing only I don`t Have to discuss over the phone if I do not wish tohis reply was well we have rights too and I want to discuss on the phone to this I started again by saying in writing only please... [...] Can only say I can`t wait for the next one so I can say it over and over again!!!

In this example, making the token monthly repayment, while preventing the debt from becoming 'statute barred' (see explanation in footnote 24 above), nonetheless marks a significant reduction in the amount being recouped by the creditor, which is owed thousands of pounds. It provides one way of reducing the power asymmetry between creditor and debtor, while also ensuring that the action of the debtor is still procedurally valid according to logics that govern the creditor-debtor relationship.

In another thread, the original poster has had their debt to Nationwide sold to a company called MKDP LLP, who are now demanding repayment. The £400 debt, which is just the bank charges and interest on an overdraft, is 7 years old. Before being contacted by MKDP, the original poster was advised by Citizen's Advice to "let sleeping dogs lie" because there had been no contact for 18 months. With contact now re-established, the poster is considering paying off the debt. The advice from experienced repliers is, very similar to the previous example, that no repayment should be made:

IMO, I would ignore them, it's a poxy overdraft , a measly £50 at that! You can ignore all the charges and fees that the bank have added, as not only could these be reclaimed, they would never be entertained if it were to ever get to the dizzy height of a court room! [...] Don't contact them at all, you can be safe in the knowledge that if the bank really wanted their money then they would have taken legal action well before now, and in any case, a heck of a lot sooner than 6 or 7 years later! [A reference to the potential statute barring of debt discussed above]

Avoiding repayment is here justified on the basis that the actions of creditors are unfair, in that the additional fees that are levied would not (it is asserted) be deemed valid by a court. The implication in such threads is also that, in addition to this, there is an ethical unfairness at work in the actions of creditors and debt collectors. As one poster puts it elsewhere in this thread: “As for banks and their gullible debt collectors, try and remember they don't have any moral fibre in their bodies, they would sell their own mothers if they could get their hands on some precious bits of paper!”. Such statements challenge key norms associated with debt and the obligations it entails, the politics of which we will explore in greater detail later.

Journeying

Journeying threads have a less predictable pattern than troubleshooting threads. Rather than question-and-answer forms of interaction, they can often appear like a collective diary in which the small details, victories and losses of everyday indebted lives are shared, collated and commented upon. In the process, those journeying are often seeking legitimation and confirmation of their new thrifty practices, a place to share personal problems, and a way of monitoring and maintaining their progress towards a debt free life. In the sub-forums we sampled, MSE's The Debt-Free Wannabe Board and the Mumsnet Debt Thread were the most like this.

There are commonalities across journeying threads. One is a simple idea: that in order to get out of debt, you must live within your means. This invokes the power of a long-term adjustment to the terms of how exactly everyday life is lived, in order to meet the demands of the financial products that the debtor has, for better or worse, committed to live alongside. This long-term life adjustment tends to be coupled to a much more immediate shift: a moment of personal transformation. In other words, it requires a rapid and intensive reconfiguration of how one experiences – ‘in the moment’, in the lived passage of existence – certain emotions, beliefs and desires towards economic activity and life itself. In many ways, the debt-free journey does not begin until this moment has been enacted. However, the two tend to go together: it is implied that true debt free living necessitates a major life-changing shift through which the indebted individual reflexively recognises that their debts must be dealt with and, simultaneously, that this requires a permanent reorientation of life, so as to ensure no debt is ever taken on again. The result is the adoption of what might be called a new ‘stylistics of [everyday] existence’²⁸ and, for many, a new way of responding to the pressures and strains of life under conditions of austerity. This is a novel mode of living, as we will explore below, that must be continually re-enacted and reconfirmed.

In the posts we studied, debtors used two concepts in particular to capture these two temporally and affectively distinct shifts in their everyday encounters with debt: the “debt free day” and the “lightbulb moment”. While the lightbulb moment, frequently shortened to “LBM”, is the moment in which the personal transformation occurred, the debt free day (“DFD”) is the placeholder for the

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: Volume 3 of The History of Sexuality*, translated by Robert Hurley, New York, 1986.

longer-term journey that must be taken towards the full repayment of all debts. Many members on the MSE refer to at least one of these two concepts in the signatures that they set to automatically appear beneath each and every one of their posts. The lightbulb moment, used as evidence of personal transformation, also serves a second function: by indicating that the debtor in question has, like other forum members, ‘seen the light’ (again the spiritual undertones are hard to ignore), it indicates their inclusion in the collective. The debt free date is even more commonplace in member signatures. It will usually state a specific future date (often a month and a year), alongside details about how much debt is outstanding and how much has so far been repaid. Sometimes the signatures will be specific, going into what is owed on specific credit cards or accounts (for instance: “SC DMP: 79 Payments to freedom! 1st payment 10th May 2014 76 to go! DFD 10th Dec 2020[,] LBM 17TH OCT 13[,] paid pre-DMP £4723 :-D paid with DMP £325 :-D Total £5048”). Often this is accompanied by uplifting messages or personal mottos (for instance: “The secret to success is making very small, yet constant changes. :-)”), many of which are directly or indirectly related to debt repayment, cementing their role as a form of placeholder, marker or record of the mode(s) of existence deemed necessary to achieve debt freedom.

Looking over typical journeying threads, it is not difficult to find evidence that this new style of life is understood as more than just a way of acting but is also a form of self-transformation. The original poster of Mumsnet debt thread – who is now debt free – is responsible for the most aggressive pushing of “the mindset”, as the personal transformation that is being routinely advocated is known as on the forum. As the author puts in her (one might assume the posters on the forum are likely female, given its targeted constituency) introduction: “this thread is about supporting people through the huge mindset changes needed to come out of debt”. She references or alludes to the form this mindset takes throughout the thread:

I agree that [paying back in one month] £600 is excellent. The real point is that you now have a handle on your true living expenses, are paying off your debts and setting in place the "live within your means" habits that will set you and your family up to be prosperous in the coming years.

At other points she compares the debt-free living mindset to losing weight since “they both involve a HUGE change in mindset and acceptance that past norms were not good and learning to tell family members uncomfortable truths”.²⁹ Her propagation of this way of living perhaps reached its nadir after two prolific posters, following prompts from the original poster as to why the thread had gone quiet, expressed severe doubts about their own progress. Here is an extract from one of the two:

²⁹ The comparison with weightloss and the norms and discourses that flow around the (on and offline) weightloss industry (see Rebecca Coleman, ‘Dieting Temporalities: Interaction, agency and the measure of online weight watching’, *Time & Society*, 19, 2 (2010), 265-285.) is one that could be explored further, if space allowed.

| | |
|-------|---|
| User1 | I'm in a massive funk :- (Feel like I have no control over anything and it's really getting me down. Money, weight, home, work, life. Too much stuff to juggle all of the time makes for a chaotic and joyless existence. This is why I've overspent in the past - cheer us up. Now I'm not doing that either. |
| User2 | <p>Its shit isn't it. BUT You have both made an active decision to make it short lived shit. If you had carried on hiding your heads in the sand, you'd have still been in shit till your kids leave school as it is they may never remember the shit days (as mine do not) you will be , and it will make you make them, more resilient financially so hang on in there as it IS worth it remember this about a LOT more than credit cards its about living within your means for the rest of your life, such that once the shitty debt is cleared, saving up for a treat will feel like a doddle</p> |

Here then, we see what really is at stake in the financialised economies of austerity within which these ambitions towards debt freedom reside. To live under conditions of austerity, extremely constrained financial means, and ongoing seemingly interminable debt repayment involves being forced to confront a considerable loss of control over how exactly everyday life proceeds and takes its shape (indeed, in the above example, this control extends not just to money but over body image). In trying to give meaning to the forms of the ‘chaotic and joyless’ existence this entails, the thread’s original poster extends the terrain upon which the debt-free lifestyle might be consequential to include not only the debtor’s own future, but also her children. The obligation to repay, becomes, therefore, not just towards the creditor but also towards future generations.

On the MSE forum it is the concept of being a “debt free wannabe” (“DFW”) which best captures the personal transformation necessary for ‘proper’ journeying. A thread on “What to do if OH [other half] isn’t a DFW [debt-free wannabe]?” highlights this. It is particularly interesting because of how the original post initially provoked a discussion of what conditions might prompt an uninitiated person to become a debt-free wannabe. Here is a selection of responses:

Completely agree [...] you can't force it upon anyone, they have to have their own LBM!

It took well over 6 months of debt-busting as a one-person band before he finally got on board - the big thing i'd say is tell him why you are doing it - for your future. Once I told the OH what was possible and the reason why he could buy his Xbox One (☺) he came on board and now together we are aiming to be debt free this year!
But remember - you can't force a lightbulb moment but you can nudge someone towards one! ☺

Once you commit to DFW your Oh will be watching and will start to change. The biggest thing is wanting to change

Again we see the centrality to these accounts of the moment of personal transformation as necessary to enter onto the road towards debt freedom. However, we also see that, on the one hand, they should not be assumed to occur autonomously – they have to be ‘nudged’, they require “6 months of debt-busting” – and, on the other, there has to be a strong sense of ownership of the lightbulb moment by the person in need of enlightenment (“they have to have their own LBM”).

Once the original poster had returned and offered appreciation for the replies, other posters began contesting what, exactly, being a debt-free wannabe entails. For instance, one member rejected a later post on the same thread that firmly recommended ending gym membership by asking:

Surely the whole message of this site isn't "miss out on what you want", it's "get what you want as cheaply as possible"

This framing of the site as ultimately aimed at simply reducing the cost of consumption was itself then contested, with other members suggesting that “the goal is to become debt free”, something that “a costly gym membership will not achieve”.

There are, then, on-going debates about what exactly the ambitions of the site are and what exactly is at stake in the quest for debt freedom. However, what is broadly uncontested is a particular collaborative ‘genre’ of talk on the forum, operating around the shared production of ways to achieve a debt free life. This includes identifying and recommending practical resources and calculative aids to assist in better money management, including many involved in the ‘earmarking’

of specific funds for specific purposes.³⁰ Many users, for instance, use a budgeting phone app called “You Need a Budget”. Frequently shortened to “YNAB”, the app is so central to some members that they mention it in their signatures in glowing terms. Many also use the “envelope method”. This is a strict form of budgeting that involves using either physical envelopes or a large number of online savings accounts to divide up a monthly paycheck into different pots corresponding to different needs – e.g. bills, food, the emergency fund, debt repayments, and so on. The forums act as a repository for these kinds of budgeting expertise and advice.

A further central part of this collaborative genre is a mixture between the confessional documenting of the practicalities of the voyage towards a debt free goal, and the public celebration and commiseration of victories and losses in these newly constrained lives. While the lightbulb moment might be a moment of transformation – away from “burying your head” towards embarking on a debt-free journey through living within means – the large majority of the resulting voyage is the mundane, ongoing business of making potentially large monthly repayments, maintaining some semblance of the good life, and avoiding all further debt, all of which are bound together by practices of thrift. These are documented on Mumsnet in particular:

Planning NSDs [no spend days] today and tomorrow...reviewed budget last night and on track to reach payday (20th) with envelope budgets and emergency fund (500) in tact, and not to accrue any additional debt. Food budget tight but manageable, any excess will go towards repaying OD [overdraft].

Spendy day today after 2 NSDS. Shopping for the werk, £71 from Tesco. I suspect I could do cheaper at Aldi, but that is for 4 of us plus cat, all breakfasts, packed lunches and dinners. Plus I love my Tesco rewards, always use the Fuel save to get 6p off a litre of fuel, and also het cashback through my 123 reward account.

There are innumerable similar examples of this that one could find on Mumsnet. In each what we find is the reproduction for public consumption of intimate and mundane aspects of debt-infused domestic, everyday life. In such discussions, the terrain of debt politics is thus firmly relocated to the personal.

Discussion: Moral economies of austerity

Taken together the forum posts offer rich empirical evidence of the lived experience of indebtedness and how debt transforms the everyday politics of austerity. Dealing with debt on a routine daily basis is at once a mundane, wearing activity and a practice that disrupts and transforms

³⁰ See Viviana Zelizer, *The Social Meaning of Money: Pin Money, Paychecks, Poor Relief, and Other Currencies*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1994.

the conventional relations and responsibilities associated with debt management. In this sense, debtors can be understood to be invoking a quite distinct and novel moral economy of indebtedness. Popularised by EP Thompson,³¹ the concept of moral economy is sometimes invoked to highlight how the powerless justify alternate versions of economic relations, or at least show disdain for the current order of things based on claims to fairness. However, the concept can also be used to show how everyday practices can even *perform* or *enact* alternative visions of economic relations. At the extreme, because the forums sometimes flag up the “unauthorised paths”³² that debtors can take in dealing with creditors, these spaces have a clear political edge to them despite few instances of explicitly articulated politically-driven action.

The moral economies of the forums are often benign. For instance, this can at times involve a transformation of the way that acts of debt-related economic calculation are performed. Unlike conventional assumptions that individuals make rational calculations when managing their finances; we see that in forums this process is distributed, at least in part, to the collective. For example when individuals submit their expenditure diaries for collective inspection, or when forum members offer advice on budget management or strategies for reducing expenditure and/or earning more money. At the same time, making decisions about how to deal with specific debts -- practical techniques of money management in other words -- cannot be separated out from both techniques of self-management and the communal care for anonymous others. The emotional support and sense of a caring community within these threads are thus central to the collective processes of both community formation and calculation. Indeed, with respect to the latter, as we have seen, the collective acts of problem solving that the forums host are often communicated through a language that mixtures quantitative and emotional cues, via numbers and emoticons.

A further consequence of such acts of online collectivisation is to render far more explicit both the routine asymmetries of debt and the UK public’s collective implication in debt-infused austerity. In troubleshooting threads this centres on coming together to resist the coercive and disciplinary power of creditors. In journeying threads the focus is on the ongoing, weighty burden of debt on debtors and their families. Despite the differences between the two, in both cases the result is to render debt and its effects a more public issue. In troubleshooting-type threads the act of making ‘public’ turns around the politics of specific credit and collections devices; this can, for instance, become a strategy to enable the debtor to resist a particular collections prompt. In journeying threads debt is utterly routine, but a nonetheless agential background to the everyday commitment to living within means. Debt thus comes to be lived as less intensive and anxiety inducing,³³ and more a regulating force that requires constant self-discipline in order to be conquered and in order for debt freedom to be obtained. It is worth noting, however, that in the process new responsibilities emerge, not to

³¹ E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present*, 50 (1971), 76-136.

³² Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, 'Everyday politics in peasant societies (and ours)', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, 1 (2009), 227-43.

³³ Joe Deville, *Lived Economies of Default*.

creditors but to the forum, with some users becoming intensely self-critical when failing to adequately self-regulate their economic activity as ambiguously dictated by forum norms.

In sharing, and to an extent distributing, the burden of long-term debt to a community debt (perhaps unexpectedly) itself becomes a source of resistance. This can take different forms: from explicit grassroots critiques of the debt economy, to ignoring creditors' demands or refusing to repay their debts altogether. Even less dramatic changes in behaviour can be seen as resisting some norms of debt-repayment: delays in repayment, or negotiating with a creditor in order to lower the repayment amount to an affordable amount.

Troubleshooting threads, in particular, are shaped by interventions that undermine the moral and practical authority of creditors. This authority is to a large extent embedded in the credibility of the everyday technologies of mass communication that they deploy – the letters they send to debtors as well as conversations over the telephone. Because this aspect of their authority is to a degree a performance, its foundations are vulnerable to the scrutiny of the crowd. Further, in those moments when the forums posit debt relations as involving not just financial but also ethical responsibilities, the moral authority of creditors to legitimately *demand* repayment also comes under threat.

A certain ethos of austerity-induced thrift emerges from journeying – one whose politics is somewhat ambiguous³⁴. This is in part because the discussions on the forums can be read as actually undermining the efficacy of the very shared, collective action that the forums seem to make possible. The austerity lifestyle being advocated thus can be seen in part to represent a kind of 'care of self' focused on reclaiming individual (future) agency through practices of (present) pleasure denial.³⁵ It is possible to see that such practices do seem to place individual rather than collective action at the heart of social change. The kinds of debt free life that are often advocated on the forums also bear comparison with the austerity discourses produced by numerous contemporary central governments, including in the UK. This is unsurprising, given that they in turn thrive off a combination of the routine governmental individualisation of economic and social responsibility and misleading parallels being drawn between the management of national and household budgets.³⁶ As Potter and Westall argue, the 'gesture of thrift as compensation for over-consumption invites direct comparison with government spending cutbacks ... [which] are consistently justified by the coalition as future-oriented self-protection, as compensating for past excess or excessive practices, and as a supposedly

³⁴ On this ambiguity, see Tracey Jensen's argument (in 'Tough Love in Tough Times', *Studies in the Maternal*, 4, 2 (2012), 1-26) about the rise of a middle-class and romanticised "austerity chic", David Evans' distinction (in 'Thrifty, green or frugal: reflections on sustainable consumption in a changing economic climate', *Geoforum*, 42, 5 (2011), 550-57) between thrift for maximised consumption and a genuinely ethical realignment towards frugality, and Lucy Potter and Claire Westall's claim (in 'Neoliberal Britain's Austerity Foodscape: Home Economics, Veg Patch Capitalism and Culinary Temporality', *New Formations*, 80/81 (2014), 155-78) that narratives of everyday thrift "collude and collide" with state-led discourses of fiscal profligacy.

³⁵ See Michel Foucault, *The care of the self: Volume 3 of the History of Sexuality*, New York, Pantheon Book, 1986.

³⁶ Liam Stanley, "'We're Reaping What We Sowed": Everyday Crisis Narratives and Acquiescence to the Age of Austerity'

resourceful way of repaying moral/fiscal debt'.³⁷ We saw threads advocate practices that will result in potentially damaging, conditions of material constraint over the short to medium term; most of them are justified by invoking the 'sunlit uplands' of a future that is more economically secure and less debt-reliant.³⁸

Characterising these forums as hosting an inherently conservative ethos would however be to misunderstand the way their politics is layered. For one, it is worth being clear that either aspiring towards or actually living debt free in a society and a historical moment so infused with debt is an act resistance nonetheless, whatever route is taken to get there. But there is more to it than that. In these forums, these transformed or transforming lives are lived in public, with both the steps needed to achieve debt freedom and the painful consequences of getting there laid bare for others to see. An ostensible private act becomes something close to a public performance, with the aim being to encourage others to engage in similar practices, both in their private lives and in their public presence on the forums. The individualist and individualising practices that these forums do, it must be recognised, advocate are thus simultaneously rendered as a collective concern. These are sets of practices, then, that even if not politically radical are certainly politically ambiguous.

A further layer concerns the ways that the persistent theme of thrift is mediated through the gendered distributions of household labour power. Everyday acts of social reproduction like household budget management contribute towards the social foundations of both the economy in general and austerity in particular. Austerity creates a new crisis of social reproduction by downloading state care provision onto households.³⁹ Thrift as the means to achieve debt 'freedom' becomes wrapped up in struggles to have certain forms of domestic *accounting* be seen by presumably male partners as valid and as worthy of an extensive shift in the money management practices of the household (it is worth noting that this is a struggle with a long history).⁴⁰ In the mundane accounting of the life of thrift we see sequences of trivial acts of money saving and economising presented as cumulatively significant. Practicing thrift and living austerely therefore becomes a challenge that is displayed as distributed across the terrain of both paid and unpaid labour, with forum posts routinely documenting and asserting the significance of the latter.

The forms of collectivisation we can observe on these forums also allows us to see a transformations in what constitutes 'debt advice'. Conventionally debt advice is provided by institutionally authorised individuals – whether located in not-for-profit organisations such as Citizens Advice or StepChange, or the plethora of commercial companies in the UK that offer

³⁷ Ibid, p. 166.

³⁸ See also Rebecca Coleman's article in this issue.

³⁹ Nancy Fraser, 'Can Society Be Commodities All the Way down? Post-Polanyian Reflections on Capitalist Crisis', *Economy and Society*, 43, 4 (2014), 541–58. Johnna Montgomerie and Daniela Tepe-Belfrage, 'A Feminist Moral Political Economy of Reform in post-crisis Britain' *Globalisations*, *forthcoming*, (2016)

⁴⁰ Viviana Zelizer, *The Social Meaning of Money: Pin Money, Paychecks, Poor Relief, and Other Currencies*.

advice and debt management services.⁴¹ Debt advisors are formally authorised to provide their services,⁴² they understand and position problem debt as something that requires a specific set of technical fixes. However, on the forums debt advice becomes political and experience-based. The members of these digital communities are particularly able to understand the challenges a user is going through by virtue of having lived through similar circumstances. This is this not simply about providing an alternative source of debt advice, but making clear that a crucial part of understanding problem debt comes from living indebtedness in and through everyday life.

These practices challenge some of the most powerful norms associated with debt and the obligations it imposes on borrowers to repay.⁴³ Often forum advice invites debtors to become unruly and disruptive, to explicitly make life difficult for creditors. Further, these unconventional forms of advice, in creating problem debt as an issue that can be best solved through collective action, tip – no matter how little or unintentionally – the balance of power relations away from creditors and back to debtors. That this rebalancing does not occur through official political institutions does not make it any less political. It is one of the accomplishments of the forums, acting as a living archive of sorts, to act as an alternate space within which the politics of contemporary indebtedness can be debated and acted up in practice.

Conclusion

Life under conditions of austerity is provoking novel sets of responses from debtors. This is a group whose reliance on debt is at once emblematic of the problem which austerity is routinely posited as the sole solution to, while also making them particularly vulnerable to its effects. The various discussions we have documented reveal, however, that debtors exhibit considerable resilience in the face the various challenges that they have to confront. The success of the forums is testament to the ability of debtors respond to the frequently asymmetrical creditor-debtor power relations within which they find themselves implicated. Furthermore, in the process moments of collectivity emerge. There is no need to idealise this: as we have seen, the forums themselves have their own power dynamics and mechanisms of authority. Nonetheless, is clear that while debtors may often be drawn to forums for their capacity to solve individual debt-related problems, the responses and discussions that surround these purportedly discrete issues routinely instantiate important forms of collaboration.

That these collaborative practices invariably involve a routine mixing of emotional and practical forms of support also reveals much about the needs of debtors: living with problem debt is a situation in which the kinds of technical fixes that the conventional debt advice industry relies upon are revealed as offering only a partial solution, with the interactions amongst debtors suggesting that

⁴¹ For a more detailed analysis, see Montgomerie et al., *The Politics of Indebtedness in the UK: A Public Interest Report*.

⁴² In the UK, money advice services have to seek authorisation from the Financial Conduction Authority.

⁴³ See David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, Brooklyn, N.Y., Melville House, 2011.

they would benefit from being more clearly connected to mechanisms capable of also easing some of the psychic pain of debt and default.

Such successes are of course also partly a success of the forums themselves and the infrastructures they provide to debtors by enabling them to communicate with each other in the ways they do. It is this that allows the forums to do what they do *for debtors*. We also can observe significant transformations in what the discussions on these forums do *to debt*. The novel forms of support the forums host – which are variously collaborative, emotional, and practical and whose significance has been notably under-appreciated – also have the effect of enacting a shift in the politics of debt. On the forums, a number of challenges are raised to some of the most well established debt-related norms, even in those instances when the forums’ politics remains ambiguous. This includes assumptions about the obligations that debt entails, with responsibility for resolving problem debt being frequently posited as not *just* individual but, at least in key aspects, *also* collective. In positing the existence of a moral economy of debt within which its more familiar economic relations are wrapped up, whether by contrasting narrowly defined economic responsibilities to notions of fairness, or by disputing a creditor’s moral authority to collect on a particular debt, forum contributors highlight the degree to which debt products are ethico-political constructions. This is an accomplishment whose importance should not be understated: given both the extent to which instruments of debt and credit are posited as natural and unproblematic and the powerful vested interests involved in ensuring this remains unchallenged, such forums provide valuable reminder, for us as analysts as much for debtors themselves, that the relations and politics of debt remain, in significant ways, open questions.

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