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**Welfare convergence, bureaucracy, and moral distancing at the food bank**

**Forthcoming in *Antipode***

Author accepted manuscript

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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to extend geographic thinking on the changing constitution of the UK welfare state, suggesting the need to supplement ideas of the 'shadow state' with an analysis of the blurring of the *bureaucratic practices* through which welfare is now delivered by public, private and third sector providers alike. Focusing on the growing convergence of the bureaucratic practices of benefits officials and food bank organisations, we interrogate the production of moral distance that characterise both. We reveal the ideological values embedded in voucher and referral systems used by many foodbanks, and the ways in these systems further stigmatise and exclude people in need of support. Contrasting these practices with those of a variety of 'ethical insurgents', we suggest that food banks are sites of both the further cementing and of challenge to the injustices of Britain's new welfare apparatus.

## Introduction

*Even if you're ten or fifteen minutes late you're sanctioned ... At the Job Centre, they'll say: 'It's okay, we'll sort it out'. But it isn't sorted out, and they are sanctioned. It's just to get the person out the building. Then you've got the people who are on ESA [Employment Support Allowance]<sup>i</sup> who fail the medical ... I saw a man this morning who ... he is mentally ill, so when he's on Jobseeker's he misses the appointment and he gets sanctioned ... [it's] been a cycle of ESA, JSA [Job Seekers Allowance]<sup>ii</sup>, back and forth. He hasn't had any benefits since March. And he's like a skeleton ... (Food Bank Referral Agent 1, London)*

In Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016), a 59-year-old carpenter (Blake) suffers a heart attack and is signed off work by his doctor. At his *Work Capability Assessment*, the assessor fails to read the doctor's report and Blake is denied *Employment Support Allowance*. Unable to work, but without an income, Blake is left to try and navigate the Kafkaesque world of the British benefits system; struggling with impossibly complex forms, waiting on hold to speak with numerous assessors, and fighting to engage with physically and emotionally distant bureaucrats for whom Blake seems more obviously a 'nuisance factor' – 'an awkward and unpredictable subjectivity ... over which the ... system must triumph' (Bowring 2011: 57) - than a fellow citizen in need of help.

Besides the (wholly unsurprising) reaction the film provoked from Conservative politicians, who were quick to claim Loach's portrayal as both unrealistic and unfair to hard working and well-meaning *Department of Works and Pensions* (DWP) staff (Watts 2016), the film was notable for two reasons. First is that Blake's *Work Capability Assessment* was conducted neither by trained medical personnel, nor a state official, but by an employee of the Paris based multinational *ATOS*, whose assessors are provided with only one day's training and who are required to sign the Official Secrets Act before starting work for the company (Gentlemen 2013). Since 2013, together with *Capita PLC*, *ATOS* have been paid more than £700 million by the DWP to undertake *Work Capability Assessments* on behalf of Government, with a third contract (worth £500 million) signed with the American outsourcing company *Maximus* in 2015. In the same period more than 160,000 people have, like Blake, failed their assessment only for the case to be overturned at tribunal (requiring the Department to spend a further £100 million on reviews and appeals (Press Association 2018)), and all three companies have

been plagued by charges of insensitive, inept and unfair procedures; including one case in 2017 when an assessor asked a claimant suffering with poor mental health why she had not (yet) killed herself (Stone 2017). In many ways, *I, Daniel Blake* is less a comment on the current state of the British 'welfare state', than a condemnation of a new quasi-state welfare apparatus that seems more obviously designed to reduce the welfare bill, and increase the profits of shareholders, than serve the needs of citizens. Such a system is dissolving the bonds of social solidarity (Lister 2003) and creating a denuded sense of citizenship (Patrick 2017).

The second notable element is that, failed by this apparatus, the film implies that the only place left for people like Blake to access meaningful support is the local food bank. Whilst the food bank Blake and his friend Katie visit to find food for her children is certainly austere, the gentle warmth of the welcome extended by the volunteers stands in stark contrast to the distant and nameless bureaucrats Blake encounters in his dealings with benefit officials. In *I, Daniel Blake*, the food bank thus stands as a space of respite from, and challenge to, an increasingly inhuman - and inhumane – quasi-state welfare bureaucracy.

Though especially powerful, *I, Daniel Blake* is by no means an uncommon portrayal of either the British benefits system or UK food banks. The increasingly strict, and more strictly enforced, conditions now imposed on UK benefit claimants (for example, mandatory 35 hour week job searches) and the rise in sanctioning especially has been subject to intense scrutiny. Since June 2010 more than 3.8 million *JSA* claimants have been sanctioned; with their payments stopped for a period of between four weeks and three years following an alleged breach of the rules - usually being late for or missing an appointment with a benefit official or employer, or failing to apply for enough jobs (Butler 2018; DWP 2018). Of these, more than 900,000 claimants were registered disabled, with a further 110,000 *ESA* claimants sanctioned in the same period (Savage and Ferguson 2018). In response to this rise, critics have pointed to a range of inconsistent and unfair practices, including people sanctioned for missing a meeting with a benefits official because in hospital following a heart attack, and for failing to attend a job interview before the invitation to interview had even been issued (Butler 2015); to the disproportionate number of sanctions imposed on disabled people who through no fault of their own were unable to attend appointments (Savage and Ferguson 2018); and to

the thousands of people, like Blake, struggling to navigate an increasingly opaque system, wrongly denied benefits, or unlawfully denied the right to appeal (Mason 2017).

As the opening quote from a referral agent attests, food bank volunteers and associated voluntary welfare service providers are keenly aware of these injustices (see, for example, submissions to the APPG 2014). The UK's largest food aid provider (the Trussell Trust), whose network of food banks began to grow almost immediately following the first cuts to UK public spending ushered in under the auspices of austerity in 2010, has been a vocal critic of welfare reform - regularly drawing attention to the fact that the single most common reason for needing food reported by those using its food banks is a problem with benefits – and positioning its activities as a direct response to an increasingly unjust and inhumane benefits system (Trussell Trust 2017). Indeed, the rapid growth of the UK's food banking network, and the timing of this growth in relation to austerity and welfare reform, is startling. In 2009-10, the Trussell Trust operated 56 food banks across the UK (Trussell Trust 2013a). By 2017, the Independent Food Aid Network had identified more than 2000 food banks and associated food distribution centres in the UK, with approximately two thirds provided by franchises of the Trussell Trust, the remainder by a range of independent organisations (Butler 2017).

The UK's food banking network differs from its better-known counterparts in the USA and Canada (Riches and Silvasti 2014; Fisher 2017) in several respects. The majority, including franchisees of the Trussell Trust, are relatively small; operating out of local churches or community halls, reliant on public donations rather than state or corporate funding, and staffed either entirely by volunteers or by volunteers and one or two paid workers. Further, rather than as warehouses for the storage and re-distribution of food to other welfare organisations, UK food banks typically provide food direct to clients. In the case of franchisees of the Trussell Trust, but also a significant number of 'independents', however, to visit the food bank potential clients must first be referred by a local 'welfare professional' (a doctor, teacher, third sector welfare advisor, social worker or benefits official) who assesses their need and provides a voucher that can be exchanged for food. Unless an exception is made by the food bank manager, clients may visit a Trussell Trust food bank on only three occasions in any six-month period and claim only three days of emergency food on each visit.

Critical studies of food banking have thus far tended to coalesce around three main positions. The first argues that charitable food assistance depoliticises problems of food poverty by apparently meeting the need for food without confronting the systemic injustices in food production and market-based distribution systems that lead to problems of hunger in the first place (see, for example, Dowler 2002). The second positions third sector involvement in emergency food provision as caught up in the wider incorporation of voluntary sector organisations and resources in the neo-liberalisation of welfare (Peck and Tickell 2002). According to these arguments, food banks represent a privatisation of political responsibility that enables policymakers to ‘look the other way’ in the face of the damage wrought by retreating central and local state welfare systems and de-politicises food insecurity by constructing food as a matter of charity rather than a political obligation and human right (Poppendieck 1998; Riches 2002). The third highlights the stigma and shame people experience when having to turn to food banks (Douglas et al 2015), and the profound sense of insecurity many feel because of their growing reliance on over-stretched, insecure (and always contingent) charitable welfare providers (Pemberton et al 2017). Here, critics have noted the ways in which the organisational practices adopted by food banks can heighten this stigma and sense of precarity: whether through the provision of near out of date or ‘surplus’ food, or the interactions between volunteers and clients through which the unequal power relations of charitable provision are further cemented (Horst et al 2014).

In previous work we have engaged with these arguments in a variety of ways, highlighting how whilst responding to the cruelties imposed by austerity UK food banks also sometimes reproduce and further embed discourses (of scarcity, for example) central to it (May et al 2018a); but also the care and commitment many volunteers show to their clients (Clope et al 2017), and the space food banks can provide for a translation of this ‘ethics of care’ in to political activism as they foster awareness of the structural inequalities driving food insecurity (Williams et al 2016). Here we engage with this field in a different way. Specifically, we suggest an important limitation of current debates on food aid (and voluntary welfare provision more widely) is that whether comparing charitable provision (moving around traditional constructions of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor) with a rights based statutory system or - for those more supportive of voluntary welfare efforts - a dehumanising (quasi) state welfare bureaucracy with the apparently more sensitive approach of voluntary providers,

such work continues to assume a clear distinction between the values and practices of (quasi) state and voluntary welfare organisations.

By contrast, we point to a growing convergence in the discursive framing and governmental technologies of state, for-profit, and voluntary welfare providers. Just as increased outsourcing (Taylor-Gooby 2013; Froud et al 2017), financialisation (Kish and Leroy 2015), and privatisation (Hills 2011) have rendered a distinction between state and for-profit welfare providers increasingly blurred, recent years have seen increasing penetration of the techniques of the 'new public management' (Clarke et al 2000) in to the voluntary welfare sector (May et al 2005), of traditional discourses of deservedness in to the for-profit and quasi-state sectors (Tyler and Slater 2018), and the growing bureaucratisation of all three (Gill 2016). Comparing the practices of the British benefits system and UK food banks, in this paper we trace evidence of this convergence across four areas: in the limited value of the cash and in-kind benefits available through either; in the stigma associated with each; in the complex, fragmented and difficult to navigate bureaucratic systems that are a feature of both and which are marked by processes of moral distancing; and in the suspicion embedded in these organisational practices and with which some food bank volunteers greet food bank clients, leaving people already traumatised by encounters with benefits officials confronted by a similarly dehumanising bureaucracy at the food bank.

To do so, we build on work that has examined the organisational practices and internal dynamics of food banks with regards to their efficiency in meeting a demand for food (Tarasuk and Eakin 2003, 2005) and the stigma attached to surplus food and charitable welfare encounters (Horst et al 2014) to analyse these practices through the literature on bureaucracy. Focusing on the voucher and referral systems used by many UK food banks and which, we argue, can be understood as both articulating and enabling the changes in each of the four areas outlined above, we examine the bureaucratic forms and work of 'street level bureaucrats' (Lipsky 1980) in UK food banks. Conceptually the paper thus extends work exploring the governance of voluntary sector welfare and contractual arrangements of the 'shadow state' (DeVerteuil 2015) by focusing more explicitly on the growing convergence in the *bureaucratic practices* shaping welfare encounters in both statutory and voluntary welfare settings. Politically, it seeks to bring evidence of this convergence to the attention of



food aid providers who continue to deploy such practices even whilst seeking to challenge the injustices of welfare reform; a task that we recognise is more likely to be achieved when academic outputs such as this are supplemented by more direct engagements with food aid providers themselves (see, for example, May 2014; May et al 2018b).

The remainder of the paper is in three parts. In the next part we chart the changing architecture of the British 'welfare state', noting the rise of an increasingly alienating quasi-state welfare bureaucracy; briefly examine different conceptualisations of how voluntary welfare providers fit in to this changing architecture; and suggest why we find it more helpful to think in terms of welfare bureaucracies rather than continuing to distinguish between state, quasi-state, for-profit, and voluntary welfare provision. In the second, and main, part of the paper we examine the bureaucratic practices of UK food banks before, in the final part, turning to some examples of food banks and food bank volunteers seeking to disrupt these practices.

The paper draws upon material gathered as part of an investigation of emergency food provision in the UK during which we surveyed 90 independent and Trussell Trust food banks (collecting information on their mode of operation, client base, staffing and funding); conducted ninety one semi-structured interviews with food bank clients, volunteers, managers and referral agents in twelve towns and cities in England and Wales, and with executive officers of the Trussell Trust; undertook discourse analysis of emergency food related issues in the UK newspaper press, and of campaigning and fundraising materials produced by food banks; and engaged in several months participant observation (working as volunteers but also observing the internal dynamics and practices) of a Trussell Trust and independent food bank.

## **The changing architecture of the British 'welfare state'**

Recent processes of outsourcing, financialisation and privatisation suggest that it may no longer be accurate or useful to refer to the British 'welfare state'; not least because, whether dealing with state, private, or quasi-state providers, users' experiences are now as likely to be

defined by profit (or at least, direct and narrowly defined costs) as by need (Hart 2017). From its inception the British 'welfare state' has, of course, always made up a mixed economy of welfare and the changing mix of this economy has been well documented, with particular attention focused on the increasing role of voluntary sector providers from the 1980s onwards (Fyfe and Milligan 2003). The growing role of private providers has received far less attention. Yet the level of private sector involvement in the UK welfare system has also been growing significantly since the 1980s (Hills 2011) and has accelerated sharply since 2010. As Plimmer (2015) has shown, '£1 in every £3 spent by central government and local authorities on delivering public services [now goes] to outsourcing companies' (Plimmer 2015, in Froud et al 2017:6) with almost 70% of the clinical contracts put out to tender by the NHS in 2016-17 awarded to private firms (see also Tyler and Slater 2018). In the same year the DWP spent £3.1bn with private contractors (compared to only £2.6bn on its own wages bill), with *ATOS*, *Capita* and *Maximus* three of the largest beneficiaries (National Audit Office 2017). In education, 72% of secondary schools and 27% of primary schools have become academies, taking them out of local authority control and opening them to private sector sponsorship (National Audit Office 2018). The UK also has also led the way in developing innovative new financial instruments – for example, Social Investment Bonds - designed to open hitherto 'unproductive' areas of social welfare to new forms of private profit (Kish and Leroy 2015).

This new quasi-state welfare apparatus is marked by four key characteristics. First, irrespective of who administers them, UK benefits can no longer be understood as offering a meaningful 'safety net'. Since 2010, Coalition and Conservative governments have capped, scrapped, frozen or reduced the value of more than 45 benefits (Tucker 2017). As the real value of benefits has continued to fall (Heykoop 2018), sanctions have produced a dramatic rise in the number of people left destitute and in rates of suicide amongst benefit claimants (Cowburn 2016). Indeed, the UK Government's new flagship benefits programme, *Universal Credit*, has a statutory delay of five weeks on payments of a first claim; resulting in an average 52% increase in food bank use in areas where the programme has been rolled out (Trussell Trust 2018).

Second, partly to justify cuts to welfare spending, but also helping to legitimate them, successive Governments have engaged in a systematic cultural assault on benefit claimants

(Tyler and Slater 2018) and in attempts to undermine popular support for redistributive welfare itself (Hoggett et al 2013). This anti-welfare rhetoric has both drawn upon and further amplified constructions of benefit recipients to be found in newly popular forms of 'poverty porn'; in which claimants are presented as dishonest, profligate, and workshy, trapped in a cycle of 'dependency' and fundamentally 'undeserving' of the support of society's 'strivers' (Jensen 2014; Valentine and Harris 2014). Unsurprisingly, these narratives have helped produce a marked hardening of public opinion against benefits claimants (Humpage 2015) but have been taken up by some front-line welfare professionals too; with British social workers increasingly deploying a range of these stereotypes in their interactions with clients, for example, because such stereotypes enable them to more easily categorise their clients and so move more quickly through ever increasing case-loads (Morris et al 2018).

Third, though the UK 'social assistance system has a long history of highly intrusive, detailed and ongoing surveillance of claimants' (Henman and Marston 2008: 194) recent years have seen a marked heightening of these trends. The surveillance to which different claimants are subjected varies both within and across different welfare domains (for example, between those claiming state pensions and those on *Jobs Seekers Allowance*) and according to welfare officials' moral evaluations of different groups; with those more 'at risk' of 'dependency' subject to more intensive monitoring and stricter penalties if unable to change their behaviour because understood as incapable of governing themselves. Such surveillance is indeed of course 'best understood ... as a calculated practice for managing and manipulating human behaviour' (Henman 2004: 176) with the aim of engendering self-governing subjects, and there is growing evidence that claimants are increasingly engaging in processes of self-surveillance. For example, Manji (2017) has traced the ways in which disabled claimants carefully monitor their performance at assessment interviews and emphasise the things they cannot rather than can do in an effort to ensure their claim is successful.

Fourth, despite neoliberalism's apparent disdain for bureaucracy and David Cameron's pledge to usher in a 'post-bureaucratic era' (Cameron 2009, in Pathak 2013:61), this quasi-state welfare apparatus has seen a burgeoning of bureaucratic systems and practices; practices which, in Weber's (1922/1992) ideal typical form at least, are inevitably marked by processes of physical and moral distancing and an accompanying dehumanisation of welfare

encounters. Hence, whilst the outsourcing of benefit assessments to companies like *ATOS* and *Capita* can clearly be read as an attempt by Government to distance itself from any blame when errors in assessments are uncovered (Kish and Leroy 2015), it can also be understood as a form of ‘moral outsourcing’ (May 2014): enabling the DWP to portray the injustices such cases reveal as ‘operator errors’ rather than as inherent to a system of its own design. Indeed, this distance is increasingly built in to the basic mechanics of the system; whether the use of increasingly complex (on-line) application forms, of assessment interviews conducted over the telephone rather than face-to-face, or ever more restrictive decision-making tools that leave less and less space for discretion on the part of those completing them (Høybye-Mortensen 2015). As the benefits and other parts of the UK welfare system has become more mechanistic, it has also become increasingly fragmented and difficult to navigate; with claimants having to interact with multiple agencies that are increasingly distant from both each other and from users, each with their own budgets to protect and targets to meet (Carey 2014).

Where exactly voluntary sector providers fit within this new welfare apparatus is a matter of continuing debate. For some scholars, the increased uptake of the principles of the new public management positions voluntary providers as key ‘translation mechanisms’ in the on-going neo-liberalisation of welfare (Trudeau and Veronis 2009: 1130) and some voluntary providers do now clearly put their desire to meet performance targets (and safeguard investor’s profits) above the needs of their clients. In the case of the Greater London Authority’s street homelessness programme, for example, voluntary sector outreach teams now work alongside police and UK Border Agency officers to find, identify and deport homeless overseas nationals in accordance with targets set out in the Social Investment Bond which funds the programme (Taylor 2017). Others have highlighted instead voluntary sector organisations which continue to articulate values that place them in clear opposition to the tenets of neoliberalism (May and Cloke 2014); differentiated between organisations which enter in to purchasing agreements with the local or central state, and a variety of ‘outsider agencies’ (May et al 2005); or pointed to the continued discretion displayed by voluntary sector staff who deliberately disrupt the performance indicators and outcome measures to which they are now subject in an effort to support their clients (Williams et al 2012). Such variation has led to debate as to how best to define the sector. Trudeau (2008) has suggested replacing a

singular 'shadow state' (Wolch 1990) with a shadow state continuum. Echoing Allen and Cochrane's (2010) ontology of the state as a 'spatio-temporal assemblage' involving both public and private, local and central state actors Jones (2012) prefers to see the sector as part of Mitchell's (1996) 'state effect', or of what Painter (2006) calls the 'prosaic state'.

An obvious limitation of these attempts to (re)define voluntary welfare is that they all continue to define it through its relations with 'the state'; whether as a central part, extension of, or constituent outsider. Yet, in the aftermath of privatisation, what exactly constitutes the 'state' in the British 'welfare state' is no longer clear. Rather than being distracted by definitional issues, Gill (2016) examines instead the ways in which the bureaucratic practices of both state and private providers in the UK asylum system shape the experience of those seeking asylum, focusing on the extent to which these experiences might be a product of 'tendencies inherent to ... bureaucratic system[s]' themselves rather than different providers (2016:13). Building on Gill, we believe it is possible to trace growing convergence in the discursive framing, governmental technologies and practices of a variety of 'street level bureaucrats' (Lipsky 1980) that now make up the UK's welfare system; including public and private sector benefit officials but also third sector employees and volunteers. Examining this convergence and new bureaucratic forms in more detail is important because, however important different definitions of 'public', 'private' and 'voluntary' welfare may be to theorists, they are liable to be much less important to welfare recipients themselves; for whom the primary concern (beyond the value of any benefits they may be eligible for) is how the bureaucratic systems now operating across a variety of welfare arenas shape access to welfare and the nature of the welfare encounter.

Having outlined the basic contours of this framework, in the next but one part of the paper we examine the nature of this convergence in more detail as it is articulated in UK food banks. First, we review differing theoretical interpretations geographers might use to conceptualise welfare bureaucracies.

## Dehumanising bureaucracies?

Though by no means the first to reflect upon the nature and role of modern bureaucracies (see, for example, Shaw (1992) on Hegel; Krygier (2007) on Marx; Faught (1985) on Simmel and Weber) debates in the social sciences around the bureaucratic form and the ethics of bureaucratic encounters have been most profoundly shaped by Weber's essay *Bureaucracy* (1922/1992). In the best-known reading of Weber's arguments, Bauman (1989) claims that the functional separation of those processing and determining the outcome of decisions, and the technologies (of categorisation, quantification and audit) on which bureaucratic systems rely, introduces an inevitable distance between bureaucrats and the subjects of their decision making. For Bauman this separation ruptures a natural moral capacity which he argues, in a misreading of Levinas (1981), is only (and always) revealed in our 'being with' physically proximate others. Read through Bauman, contemporary welfare encounters are thus characterised by alienation and moral distance; achieved through mediatory technologies (such as the standardised questions asked by ATOS assessors) and the organisational and spatial separation of the assessors and benefits officers who pass on assessor's decisions to a claimant.

In a critique of Bauman, Du Gay (2000) suggests instead that for Weber though inevitable the dehumanising effect of bureaucratic systems was not necessarily regressive. Instead, because bureaucracies focus only on those elements of the subject which are relevant to a claim (reducing subjects to distinct, bureaucratic categories), adjudicate each case according to a pre-determined and unvarying set of criteria, and stretch the distance between those making, sorting, and adjudicating a claim bureaucrats are able to operate behind a 'veil of ignorance' (Rawls 1999); positioning the bureaucratic form as dehumanising but also the most efficient, and fairest, mechanism of the (re)distribution of resources. For Du Gay (2000), far from vilified, bureaucrats and the 'bureaucratic ethic' should therefore be celebrated as central to the realisation of a just and fair society, with questions of justice ultimately hinging on the purposes to which bureaucratic systems are turned, and the categories through which they operate, rather than any innate qualities of the form.

In an important intervention in these debates, Gill's (2016) analysis of the UK asylum system draws attention to a conflation of physical and moral distance evident in both Bauman (1989)

and du Gay's (2000) work. Drawing on Simmel's arguments in the *Metropolis and Mental Life* (Kemple, 2018) concerning the necessary psychic protection afforded by a blasé attitude, Gill reminds us that an overexposure to suffering is as likely to produce indifference as care; with the constant churn of cases in the asylum system resulting in desensitised frontline workers who adopt a strategic aloofness in their dealing with asylum seekers, for example, in an attempt to navigate emotionally demanding encounters. Gill's work is important not only for questioning too easy a connection between physical and moral distance, but because it also reminds us that – as Weber recognised – bureaucratic systems are often as alienating for the bureaucrat as for their subjects. In the case of the British benefits system, for example, assessors frequently have next to no training and little knowledge of what happens to a claim once they have sent it for processing; whilst those failing to comply with strict performance criteria are themselves subject to increasingly harsh penalties - with anyone taking too long to elicit the necessary information, moving off script, or failing to meet their targets (whether claims processed, or denied) at risk of losing their job (Anonymous 2018).

In a related vein Gill (2016) also warns against the danger of further connotations underpinning readings of Weber's ideal-typical bureaucrat; namely that whilst emotion is, or at least should be, driven out of any 'properly bureaucratic' encounter, it does not follow that rationality is the enemy of compassion, or that emotions are a necessary precursor of care. Rather, emotion can either 'creep in to' bureaucratic encounters (in the case of the distrust that can characterise the interactions between social workers and their clients, for example), or may form part of a more conscious exercise in pastoral power (McDonald and Marston 2005) that works *through* emotional sensitivity: *Often at the job centre, they'll say: 'it's okay, we'll sort it out'. But it isn't sorted out, and they are sanctioned. It's just to get the person out the building.*

Further, as a discussion of emotions implies, and a host of studies inspired by Lipsky (1980) make clear, whatever the vision of bureaucracy the reality is that the work of 'street level bureaucrats' is inevitably shaped to varying degrees by the exercise of discretion. Zacka (2017), for example, has differentiated between the 'enforcer' who rigorously upholds the rules, and the 'caregiver' who is more likely to bend or break the rules if it would benefit their clients. In fact, whilst discretion often works to the advantage of the bureaucrat (finding workarounds and streamlining procedures to ease the pressure of work, for example) it can work both for and against clients; as some officials move beyond the constraints of the system

to help their clients, whilst others withhold or misrepresent the rules in an attempt to police the distribution of resources according to their own values. Such values are, of course, powerfully shaped by the bureaucrat's own subject position and their reading of their client's position as 'deserving' or 'undeserving'; positions which are in turn shaped by the intersections of racialised, gendered and class privilege, disadvantage and stigma (Silver 2010). Whatever the outcome, the discretion of street level bureaucrats in and of itself thus undoes any conception of 'blind justice' and reveals bureaucratic systems and processes as always already entangled with unequal relationships of power.

A consideration of discretion underlines the importance for geographers of analysing the performativity of justice in welfare encounters; of highlighting the moral judgements that inform bureaucratic discretion; and being alert to the ambivalent role that 'care' plays in these encounters and the ways in which it may shape acquiescence with but also a reworking of or resistance to dominant codes and practices (Williams et al 2012). Within this framing, food bank volunteers might then be conceived as both 'street level advisors' (guiding people through the maze of quasi-state welfare provision) and 'street level carers', providing emotional and material support to those they advise. This might also apply to benefits officials including Jobcentre staff, some of whom in our research were acutely aware of how unfair many of the procedures they were required to follow were and referred unsuccessful claimants to an appeals service run by a homelessness charity with a strong track record of overturning DWP decisions (interview with referral agency 2018). But occupying these more care-full positions is, of course, always a privileged position decided by the bureaucrat rather than service recipient. The 'bureaucratic ethic' is thus dominant even when it is dormant and may be reverted to when called upon. Without romanticising these ethical possibilities, we therefore suggest the need to develop more nuanced approaches to welfare bureaucracies that move beyond unwieldy and universalist accounts and emphasise instead how welfare encounters are deliberated, improvised, negotiated and experienced.

### **Bureaucracy at the food bank**

Though there is now a growing body of work by British geographers on food banks covering a range of themes (Garthwaite 2016, 2017; Lambie-Mumford and Green 2017; Loopstra et al 2018; Power et al 2017, 2018) scholars have not yet examined the bureaucratic systems that



play a central part in their operations. In light of the increasingly institutionalised and bureaucratic nature of food banks in the US, and the growing institutionalisation of food aid in the UK - evident in the recent announcement by the Trussell Trust of a new partnership with the US technology conglomerate *CISCO* to manage their data systems (Trussell Trust 2019) and of £20m of sponsorship (jointly with *FareShare*) from the grocery giant *ASDA* (IFAN, 2018) - this seems surprising. As Duffy et al have noted:

*'As food banking [in the US] has grown to "industry-like" proportions ... critics have highlighted the increased bureaucracy ... which creates more social distance between volunteers and clients ... [and which] ... has made the system ... more like the bureaucracies of the welfare programs.'* (2006: 504)

The UK's food banking landscape is less corporatized than the food aid landscape in North America. Nor, given the limited role of state funding in the sector, is it easy to conceptualise UK food banks as some of kind of 'shadow state' (in a contractual sense at least). None-the-less, the Trussell Trust at least can certainly be read as articulating a number of aspects of Weber's ideal typical bureaucracy – with a clear system of rules (formalised in the network's Operating Manual); a hierarchical structure (with local franchisees overseen by regional coordinators reporting to a CEO and Board of Trustees); growing specialisation (whether between the *Fundraising, Marketing and Communications* or *Risk and Quality Assurance* teams at head office, for example, or the volunteers with responsibility for sorting and packing food and those working 'front of house' to serve clients at one of their food banks); and a system that is heavily reliant on particular forms of documentation.

In terms of documentation, by far the most important are the vouchers clients must obtain to collect food and which have a crucial role in the smooth running of the Trust's whole system:

*... a notional start and a finish [3 visits] ... helps us manage stock better ... If the project manager knows that they have issued 100 vouchers ... you are going to [need] 3 tonnes of food in a warehouse. So it also helps in managing warehouse flow, which then in turn allows you to manage your donors, to say we need an appeal next month because we are going to*

*run out. So it's a mechanism which has all sorts of [benefits] (Staff 1, Trussell Trust Headquarters)*

As well as providing an efficient means of stock control, and of managing donations, vouchers double up as a key means by which the Trust can record and report on their 'outputs'; the number of parcels, or the weight of food, distributed each year. This focus on outputs (rather than outcomes) speaks to the tenets of the new public management. Other aspects of their operation (most notably their franchising model) are more obviously related to the world of business in which a number of the Trust's founders previously worked:

*As far as a national network goes ... McDonald's was something we looked at. Obviously, that's where we got the franchise idea from ... [In fact] some of the principles in the business-world can be really useful to the church ... having a good strong brand that people can identify with to be able to leverage national support, having a good robust data system to be able to evidence what you're actually doing (Staff 2, Trussell Trust Headquarters)*

But, whilst referral vouchers are a useful tool for managing stock and monitoring food bank use and have been instrumental in providing evidence to inform public debate on UK food insecurity (Williams et al 2016), this system poses significant difficulties for people in need of food. Not least, a number of volunteers from both the Trussell Trust and independent food banks operating similar systems talked about how difficult it could be for people to navigate referral networks so as to obtain a voucher:

*I think the referral system works once you've found out how you can be referred. It's the pre-referral that I think doesn't work very well. If you asked ... my mother ... how do you get food from a food bank, she'd have no idea. (Volunteer, 1 Trussell Trust Foodbank, London)*

Indeed, echoing the growing fragmentation of the wider welfare system, referral agents themselves also sometimes struggled either to recall which other agencies offered referrals or where clients might redeem their voucher:

*You know what, I don't think I knew that GPs had food vouchers ... Since I started the role, I've had real difficulty trying to find out where the food banks are and what their referral criteria are (Food Bank Referral Agent 1, Midlands)*

The Trussell Trust suggest that one reason they use a referral system is because people find it easier to ask for help from a 'welfare professional' they already know (for example, a teacher or doctor) than approaching a food bank directly (Lambie-Mumford 2013), thus reducing some of the shame people experience asking for food aid. In fact, the system re-directs rather than reduces such shame. For example, the respondent below described peoples' reluctance approaching schools for vouchers because of the risk that other parents might find out about their situation but also because they feared any future relationship with the school would be compromised by their 'spoiled' identity as a parent unable to provide for their children:

*I find schools very reluctant to help. And I find with parents, they're very ashamed to admit it to the school. So, I'm not sure if they would ask for food vouchers very much (Food Bank Referral Agent 1, London)*

For the food bank client below, approaching the *Citizen's Advice Bureau* to ask for a referral felt like a public confession of need, with the voucher itself a visible marker of stigma:

*You have to go inside the waiting room and ... tell them why you're there ... I have to say that I've come for a foodbank voucher. And then ... everyone can hear you ... I always say to her: 'When you give it to me, can you put it in an envelope?' ... Because I'm sure they [the other customers] know what it is ... you don't have to read what it says on the piece of paper, you know it's charity. 'I've no food, give me food, I'm begging for food.'* (Client 1, Trussell Trust Food Bank, London)

Nor do these difficulties end when a person (eventually) reaches the food bank. People must also hope their voucher has not expired, that it has been completed properly by the referral agent, or that by the time they navigate the referral system the food bank will still have food to offer:

*\*\*\*\* entered, notably distressed, and recounted the journey he had made. He explained that after having been rejected from \*\*\*\* food bank (because his voucher was invalid), he ...*

*[was] advised to make the twenty-six-mile journey to a food bank in \*\*\*\*. He ... queued for a food parcel but was rejected for a second time as they had run out of food (Field Notes, South West England)*

And, of course, they must hope they don't encounter what Zacka (2017) calls an 'enforcer' - someone who seems more concerned with following procedure than responding to the needs of the person in front of them:

*Lots of the referrals...when they come through they're not completed properly. Last week, a lady came in and it [the voucher] just had her name on it. That's it ... [so] I ...explain[ed] ... if they're not filled out properly, they'll be declined. That's how the system works (Volunteer 2, Trussell Trust Food Bank, London)*

### ***Moral distance at the food bank***

In contrast to *I, Daniel Blake* the accounts above therefore start to suggest a number of shared experiences amongst those using Britain's benefits system and those seeking help from UK food banks, including difficulties in navigating an increasingly fragmented and bureaucratic system; the stigma attached to making a claim; and the very limited value of the benefits on offer (£72.40 a week for claimants of *JSA* and a three day supply of food in the case of those using a Trussell Trust food bank).

The characteristic most obviously shared by these systems, however, is the moral distance each opens between claimants and the various street level bureaucrats responsible for administering claims. At food banks this sense of distance is produced through a range of material practices (Dubois 2010) - from the strict ordering of space (with clients required to wait, remain the other side of the service counter and asked to 'point but not touch' any item they want) to the use of aprons and name badges that clearly demarcate volunteers from clients. But again it is most obviously produced by the technology of the voucher.

For Levinas face-to-face encounters expose the self to the "plea and demand of the other", making indifference impossible whenever and wherever one is confronted by another's

destitution' (Levinas 1981, in Gill 2016: 26). Within such encounters any denial of this plea comes at a heavy cost to the self. One way to avoid this pain is therefore to pass on any decision regarding whether or not to respond to this plea to someone else. As this food bank manager explained:

*I think the [referral] system is very useful, because it divorces our volunteers from the decision of who actually has a food parcel ... Some of our volunteers would find it very difficult to be the person who has to say yes or no to somebody. So I think the fact that that decision is made elsewhere is a real strength* (Former Trussell Trust Food Bank Manager, South Wales)

As with the *DWP* and *Capita*, *ATOS* and *Maximus*, this separation of those assessing and processing food vouchers can be understood as a form of moral outsourcing, in which ethical dilemmas relating to who should and should not have food are displaced from food bank volunteers to referral agents. This outsourcing serves another purpose too. Most obviously, it was understood by some managers as also ensuring the food bank operated according to Weberian tenets of impartiality (1922/1992) and Rawlsian 'blind justice' (Rawls 1999). Setting aside the obvious question as to why so much faith should be placed in the judgement of welfare professionals when many people accessing food banks are doing so because of their unjust treatment by some of these same agents (many of whom have little in the way of training), the implication is that professionally trained staff are less likely to succumb to the prejudices that can hinder the judgement of volunteers and more likely to embody a proper 'bureaucratic ethic':

*'The problem is that volunteers have got their own views. They read the newspapers and ... are as susceptible to stereotyping as anybody else'* (Assistant Manager, Trussell Trust Food Bank, South West England)

In fact, just as every bureaucracy leaves space for discretion, every bureaucratic encounter moves around the values and judgments of the street level bureaucrats administering that system. In the case of UK food banks, referral agents are asked not only to record the 'nature of the crisis' that led a person to them (for which they may identify one of twelve pre-selected options) but to make a judgement as to whether that person is in (genuine) need of food. In practice, this assessment of need very often elides with judgements as to whether a person

is 'deserving' of food. These judgements are made in accordance with a range of criteria, but include whether the agent feels a person has tried to manage their finances properly for example and, if not, whether withholding the voucher might 'encourage' them to do so in the future:

*I think [vouchers] offer a bit of protection to the food bank ... if people just turned up ... it would be like going shopping ... It's [the voucher system] not onerous enough to put people off using it, but I think it's enough to stop people who are just a bit lazy and can't be bothered to manage their finances properly or whatever, it ... helps them to focus (Food Bank Referral Agent 2, London)*

Such discretion can lead to obvious hardship for those whose claims are rejected. It also produces an uneven geography of food aid - with different agencies in the same place more or less likely to issue a voucher (May et al 2018c) and exacerbates the sense of a fragmented, opaque and fundamentally random (but also often cruel) system that mirrors rather than contrasts with people's experiences of the wider benefits system:

*They [the city council] don't believe you. They told me that I couldn't get a voucher and that I should ask my family to help me' (Client 1, Trussell Trust Food Bank, South West England)*

Food bank volunteers are also sometimes faced with clients who do not have a voucher. In a striking example of the Kafkaesque qualities of the system, though they are not supposed to dispense food without one Trussell Trust volunteers may still provide food (once) if approved by the food bank manager because – despite the efforts to which clients are expected to go to obtain a referral voucher - food bank managers are also 'voucher holders', able to raise a voucher on the spot in exceptional circumstances. In such cases, rather than horizontally to a referral agent, the decision as to whether to provide food is displaced higher up the organisation, from the volunteer to a manager who conducts their own assessment of need. These assessments too can sometimes hinge less on questions of need than on a desire to ensure the 'proper functioning of the system', and be characterised by the same suspicion and distrust that frames benefits assessments (Manji 2017):

*This guy ... [had] brought his ... letters to show this is his situation, and it's fine. It's as simple as that. [But] when someone ... [has] no ID, no letters, they have no proof, they have no evidence – I will turn them away. Because I don't have any choice ... [And] Obviously, we do question people at length to ascertain - we don't just accept their word. (Pause) You treat the world as scoundrels and find out who is honest' (Manager, Trussell Trust Food Bank 1, South Wales Valleys)*

Indeed, this sense of suspicion framed a number of the food bank encounters described to us. Many volunteers were especially exercised as to whether the vouchers people presented had been falsified in some way, and regularly drew on the enhanced surveillance capabilities provided by computerised records to check the veracity of people's claims:

*Very occasionally we have people who have been tampering with their vouchers – it's been crossed out and looks like they have got five kids. I'm like, 'hmm, I'm not quite sure that's true' ... [So] we always phone up and check with the agencies just exactly what's going on ... \*\*\*\* has what she calls her 'Miscreant File', and once a month she looks up on the database anybody who has had more than three vouchers and ... I phone those agencies to enquire why ... and it's really helped us to be quite clear in making sure that people genuinely need the vouchers and genuinely need the food when they come to us (Former Manager, Trussell Trust Food Bank, South West England)*

Significantly, despite the importance placed on 'welfare professionals' in the running of referral systems, and the faith placed by food bank managers in these professionals' 'bureaucratic ethic', this suspicion extended to referral agents too – as managers tried to manage the increased space for discretion that comes with a proliferation of bureaucrats:

*Inevitably, with 50 referral agencies and each of those referral agencies with quite a large number of signatories, they will be interpreting things in a different way. We did have a situation whereby one referral agency was giving out a large amount of vouchers ... and seem[ed] out of kilter with other agencies. So we went and visited them. Not to tell them what to do, but to [have] a conversation with them, and it made them consider more carefully their own criteria for providing vouchers (Manager, Trussell Trust Food Bank 3, South Wales Valleys)*

Rather than contrasting with an increasingly alienating and inhumane benefits system, the voucher and referral systems used by many UK food banks seem often to replicate it. As with the benefits system, referral networks can be difficult to navigate and the referral process deeply stigmatising. If they reach a food bank, clients may be subjected to intrusive and demanding assessments procedures. Whilst the benefits available in either system are limited, both clients and referral agents are also often viewed with a great deal of suspicion, with these limited provisions tightly rationed and zealously guarded. Most notably, both systems are characterised by bureaucratic practises through which the people responsible for assessing claims are distanced from those processing them, and those processing them from any decision as to a person's eligibility, and with claims sometimes less obviously determined by a person's needs than whether they fit within the system's parameters.

Further, where discretion does arise this discretion is often underpinned by the same distinctions between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor that now characterises the UK benefits system. These distinctions move around a number of criteria, including judgements about 'genuine' need, the responsible stewardship of resources, and the apparent honesty of claimants. But as in the benefits system they also hinge upon a fundamental desire to avoid the dangers of 'welfare dependency'. Echoing, but also re-enforcing, the spectre of a cycle of poverty and dependency that haunts poverty porn and the speeches of Conservative politicians alike, the Trussell Trust especially has been at particular pains to distance itself from any charge that their food banks might further encourage a 'dependency culture' as this Briefing Note illustrates:

*Trussell Trust foodbanks are structured to avoid long term dependency: no self-referral; no drop-in service; time-limited support. Trussell Trust foodbank clients may redeem three foodbank vouchers in a row at which point the foodbank manager will contact the referral agent about putting together a support plan to help the client break out of poverty (Trussell Trust Briefing for MPs on Parliamentary Debate on Food Banks, December 2013: p3)*



## Ethical insurgents

Though a number of the bureaucratic practices in UK food banks clearly echo the practices of the wider welfare apparatus it is also clear that, like Goffman's 'total institution' (1961), ideal-typical bureaucracies rarely remain so 'pure' in practice. Rather, bureaucratic practices vary and bureaucratic systems unfold unevenly on the ground (Billo and Mountz 2016). The UK food banking system is similarly varied (Clove et al 2017) with a number of independent food banks rejecting many of the tenets around which the referral and voucher systems described above operate. Most notably, perhaps, rather than limit clients to just three visits, some food banks offer either unrestricted or greatly extended access, partly because they recognise people's needs are often both chronic but also on-going, and partly because they reject the idea of dependency on which these restrictions rest:

*R: We don't have three times, you're out... cause ... to say ... you can only have a problem three times a year isn't the case for many of our food bankers ... I have heard [other organisations saying that we are creating dependency] ... but we don't see that ... I don't think that anyone really wants to be queuing for three or four hours outside a food bank (Manager, Independent Food Bank 2, Midlands)*

*I don't really understand the problem of dependency. I mean ... the government ... wouldn't say to commercial companies: "Oh, we're only going to give you very short-term contracts because we don't want you to become dependent." ... [Yet] with the people who are our clients, it's ... "Oh, you're only going to get once off help here because we don't want you to become dependent." So it ends up with poor people having to go to place after place after place. Why not say to people, "We're going to help you for the next three years until you get back on your feet." ... I mean, something that you can depend on is seen as a positive thing, and yet being dependent is seen as negative (Trustee, Independent Food Bank, London)*

Others operate self-referral systems, allowing people to obtain food without the need for a voucher. For some, this decision to offer self-referral has been taken in a conscious effort not to subject people traumatised by their encounters with the benefits system and a highly intrusive social welfare apparatus more generally to further indignities and pain: whether the denial of their own hunger; the distrust with which people are so often treated by welfare bureaucrats; the shame of having to recount their 'failings' over and over; or the gnawing fear

that moving 'off script' or offering up too much information could result in a refusal of help, or worse (sanctioning, or an investigation in to child welfare, for example). As this respondent put it:

*If you have to be referred you're saying a professional is more trustworthy to tell us about your situation than you are ... [With self-referral] ... people don't [have] to tell their case to fifty people before they get to see you ... [and] If somebody wants to tell you something, it's their decision ... to go through all the agencies, they have to say their name, how many kids they've got. Then they worry 'Why do they want to know how many kids I've got? ... I'm going to be investigated' .... (Volunteer 1, Independent Food Bank, London)*

Though the food bank above operates self-referral, it does still limit the number of times people may use it – offering fifteen (rather three) fortnightly visits. They also keep records of those using the food bank; partly to log these visits, partly to provide data on the number of people provided with food to support their fundraising work. But there is a strong desire to ensure that the need for record-keeping remains secondary to the needs of clients. Compare, for example, the (bitter sweet) pleasure the manager below took when she realised a client had 'beaten' their system, with earlier accounts of the primacy of procedure:

*We've got one client who I am convinced but couldn't prove it – not that I would ever try to – has finished her visits and come in under a different name and started again. And I think she stole her file. (Laughing). I really do ... I think ... she's probably distracted somebody, and took the paper so that she can come back. I haven't confronted her. She needs it ... She's an asylum seeker, she can't get anything anywhere else. She's got no benefits and she needs to survive. I say good luck to her to be honest. But how sad that we've been part of the system that we had to make her do that, in a way, you know? (Manager, Independent Food Bank, London)*

With the majority of UK food banks using either the Trussell Trust's voucher and referral system, or some derivation of it, it would be easy to position the independent food banks which have rejected that system as some kind of 'outsider agencies' (May et al 2005), and certainly they are often portrayed as such by other food aid providers - as one of the managers above intimated. But it is important not to restrict an account of these challenges to bureaucratic practices as only evident in the work of a few food banks. Not least, attempts to delineate between 'insider' and 'outsider' agencies can obscure the challenges to official

procedures sometimes made by volunteers within 'insider' organisations, resulting in a tendency to both under-estimate the role of individual ethics (rather than organisational ethos) in shaping welfare practices, and over-emphasise managerial control (Williams et al 2012). As Evans has argued, 'the view that policy is communicated in a pristine state is implausible ... [and] Lipsky's work is prescient in its challenge to the idea of managerial organisations as well-oiled policy implementation machines' (2011: 372-3). Thus, even if these individual acts do not necessarily result in any further challenge to such systems themselves, it is certainly possible to find examples of volunteers and managers in both Trussell Trust and independent food banks running voucher and referral system using their discretion to provide someone with food when without a voucher. Sometimes this discretion comes with a strict warning that it will not be extended again. At other times, volunteers seek 'workarounds' that, even if leading to more (paper) work on their part, provide a way to help when the system they are working within does not allow it:

*The Church [used to have a] separate food bank [run by the same people and operating out of the same room but] with separate food [supplies]. And we'd give them [food] from the church instead of from the Trussell Trust. We don't like to see anyone go out empty-handed (Volunteer 1, Trussell Trust Food Bank 2, South Wales Valleys)*

Importantly too, these systems are also sometimes challenged by the referral agencies on which the system relies and, of course, by clients themselves. In the account below, for example, a volunteer in a Trussell Trust food bank explains the difficulties posed by clients who turn the Trust's bureaucracy against itself:

*The sorts of people I've been describing, the ones who take advantage ... they'll come and get [food] as many times as they can. In fact we do have some people who will go around the different agencies, getting vouchers, so they can have in their possession more than three vouchers in six months. And that's a tricky one for us - because if they've got a voucher, we can't turn them away (Volunteer 2, Trussell Trust Food Bank, London)*

In the sense that those (very sensibly) seeking to get a little more than the meagre rations they are allowed are more likely driven by the need to secure enough to eat than any explicit desire to challenge the bureaucratic practices of the Trussell Trust, it may make more sense

to view these acts of insurgency as examples of transgression rather than resistance (Creswell 1996). In the case of the referral agent whose account opened the paper, however, it is possible to glimpse a purposeful act of 'ethical insurgency', one that though perhaps relatively minor, and certainly simple, is an important reminder of the limits of bureaucratic control:

*.... He hasn't had any benefits since March. And he's like a skeleton ... He'd be the kind of person I wish I was, you know, still able to refer. [But] he's had his three vouchers, and I think now his stomach has shrunk so much that he doesn't even feel hungry anymore. It's awful.*

*I: Do you ever try and refer for more than three [times]? Have you tried to negotiate with the food bank at all?*

*R: I have given people more than three and I haven't negotiated with them. I just hoped they wouldn't notice. (Food Bank Referral Agent 1, London)*

## **Conclusions**

Growing convergence across public, private and third sector welfare providers raises difficult questions for the Left. Whilst traditionally those on the Left have been suspicious of the charitable domain and championed the state – with the response to welfare reform to call for a return to state provision – many of the regressive characteristics of traditional charity (stigma, distinctions between the deserving and undeserving poor, 'less eligibility', and contingency) now also characterise the quasi-state welfare apparatus. Even if it were politically plausible to return to 'state' provision it is not necessarily desirable unless there are also changes to the discursive framing and bureaucratic practices of 'state' welfare.

Equally, many of these characteristics continue to mark the practices of some third sector welfare providers, with many UK food banks providing only the most basic rations, and with voucher and referral systems that further cement distinctions between the deserving and undeserving, magnify the stigma felt by those in need of food aid, and re-enforce the contingency of charitable giving. Indeed, one of the most insidious aspects of these voucher and referral systems is, perhaps, that they enable volunteers who are keen to promote

themselves as welcoming to all and non-judgemental to feel able to make such claims despite the fact these judgements continue to be made (on their behalf) elsewhere in the system:

*The referrer ... will judge the need for that client. Our general requirement is ... a client can have three parcels in a six-month period ... For us, underlying everything that we do is the fact that the client comes first. We just hope that when a client comes in to the [food bank] they feel like they are the only person that counts in that moment* (Food Bank Volunteer, South West England)

Recent years have also seen a growing convergence between practices more usually associated with state bureaucracies - functional separation, moral distancing, intrusive assessment procedures, and difficult to navigate and fragmented services - and third sector providers, with all four of these elements a feature of UK food banks.

The most progressive approach to the problems of food poverty is to address its structural drivers (notably the rise in poverty itself). But this convergence suggests that it is important to also challenge elements of current food bank practices so that, whilst the need for food aid exists, its means of distribution is as at least less regressive. If the Trussell Trust (undated) are serious about their desire to 'speak truth to power' in their campaigning activities, we would urge them to also engage in some 'self-talk', and to reflect on the power dynamics shaping their own rationing and referral systems that too often result in the further stigmatising of people in need and create barriers for those seeking support. Indeed, we challenge UK food banks more widely to move beyond voucher and referral systems and to embrace instead more radical approaches of a sharing economy; an economy that does not distinguish between 'gift-givers' and recipients, and which redistributes resources according to need not deservedness (Ince and Hall 2018). Such a move is rooted in recognition that rather than a gift bestowed on others through one's generosity, food aid is in fact merely returning to people what has been stolen. Stolen through the wilful cruelty of welfare reform and purposeful creation of precarity. At a practical level this could mean embracing the self-referral and unconditional giving of some independent food banks; involving people experiencing food insecurity in the design of food aid systems and disbursing these systems away from food banks and in to other spaces of the community (Nourish Scotland and the

Poverty Truth Commission 2018); or championing the replacement of charitable food aid itself with cash entitlements (Menu for Change Scotland 2018).

The alternative – the further institutionalisation of food charity within the welfare apparatus - has clear ramifications for citizenship. As Ernst et al (2013) have argued, encounters between welfare bureaucrats and clients are ‘not merely transactional ... They are communicative messages ... [and] the way in which individuals are treated ... has important implications for the construction of citizenship’ (2013: 1285). We suggest that very similar, and damaging, messages about citizenship are now being sent by some voluntary as well as by quasi-state welfare bureaucrats. In-line with those who have recognised the complex and uneven nature of real-world bureaucracies (Billo and Mountz 2016), however, we have also charted some of the ways in which some food banks, and food bank volunteers, are seeking to disrupt these systems in an attempt to open up a space for more humane welfare encounters; attempts that may, in the end, begin to challenge both the form of, and need for, food aid itself.

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<sup>i</sup> *Employment Support Allowance* (ESA) replaced *Incapacity Benefit* in 1998. It is a higher rate benefit paid to those who need additional support to find work, or who are unable to work, because long term sick or disabled. Depending of which group a claimant falls in to it can pay up to £110.75 a week. All UK citizens, including those granted refugee status and discretionary or indefinite right to remain (but excluding people currently seeking asylum) are eligible.

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<sup>ii</sup> *Job Seekers Allowance* is a non-contributory UK unemployment benefit paid to those who are without, but 'actively seeking', employment introduced in 1996. UK citizens, including those granted refugee status and discretionary or indefinite right to remain (but excluding people currently seeking asylum), are eligible for payments of up to £57.40 a week for people under the age of twenty-five, and £73.10 a week for those over twenty-five years of age.