

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Austerity's implications: Parasitism and charity in an English village

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Council, Grant/Award Number: EP/V042564/1**Abstract**

English political discourse has long featured accusations of parasitical behavior. In this article, I provide insight into how discussions of parasitism feature in English people's daily lives. Specifically, I discuss how more than a decade of austerity has informed perceptions of parasitical behavior. In exploring this, I make use of more than a dozen months of fieldwork conducted with residents of Lyon, a rural, post-industrial village in North East England. My specific focus is discussions of parasitism occurring in two fixtures of austerity-era England: the food bank and the charity shop. After more than a decade of austerity, even those villagers volunteering at charity shops and food banks frequently engaged in conversations about parasitism. I draw on Michel Serres's scholarship on the parasite and place it in conversation with George Foster's various writings on the image of the limited good and the static economy to explain why this occurred. I suggest that the development of a worldview informed by a sense of limited good has encouraged beliefs about parasitism's contemporary prevalence.

KEYWORDS

austerity, charity, England, parasites, worldview

INTRODUCTION

It bucketed down as we trudged to the food bank. Such precipitation was a common occurrence in Lyon — a rural, former pit village in North East England.¹ It sparked the memory of Kelly, my elderly traveling companion. They reminisced that their deceased partner was prone to saying, “I don't understand why we pay for water with all this rain; it should be free!” One might interpret Kelly's quoting of their partner's statement as disputing the commodification of a commons. Instead, I regard it as a criticism of rentier capitalism; that is, the water company was behaving parasitically. Such parasitism is common in England, where it is “the basic business model ... that has defined the British economy from the 1970s to the present, from the North Sea to PPE” (Christophers, 2020). However, I am not specifically interested in the actions of the nation's rentier elite; rather, I am concerned with the perception that parasites are omnipresent, which I argue is a product of austerity's impact on my interlocutors.

To return to Kelly, on our weekly, five-minute toddles to the food bank, they invariably identified parasitic behavior in Lyon's landscape. It included the council skimping on pavement maintenance, the cash-only Chinese restaurant, and “thieving” villagers who targeted the supermarket. Kelly never used the word *parasite* directly but instead frequently framed things in terms of entities behaving improperly by taking, with such actions coming at the expense of others. Kelly was not alone; conducting fieldwork in Lyon between 2022 and 2023, I encountered and participated in numerous discussions about what I recognized as parasitic behavior. Claims of parasitism seemed to me to be entangled with the outworkings of austerity. The Cameron–Clegg coalition imposed this policy on England in 2010 as a response to the 2008 financial crisis. Although it formally concluded in 2019, my argument is that austerity led to perceptions in England that good exists in limited quantities.²

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More expansively, this article's overarching argument is that austerity has informed villagers' comprehension of the economy's functioning. It is now seen as static and thus, by extension, in terms of taking. This reorientation results in even sites of charity becoming places where parasitic behavior is a concern. I illustrate this by focusing on two sites, Light and Redemption, both of which acted as food banks and charity shops, and exploring discussions of parasitism at these locations.

Food banks and charity shops emerged as key sites in austerity-era Britain. The former experienced an astronomical growth; prior to austerity, the Trussell Trust, the nation's leading food bank network, had only 35 food banks in Britain, and now they outnumber England's McDonald's restaurants. In discussing these sites, I explore not only the use of technologies like special-purpose money to diminish parasitism but also situations in which donors were suspected of parasitical behavior. In sum, the legacy of austerity is a situation in which the perception of ever-depleting resources meant that all parties could be accused of parasitic behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior to discussing and analyzing the impact of austerity and the presence of parasites at food banks and charity shops, I want to offer a brief overview of the relevant literature. This will clarify not only what I mean by austerity but also what it means to refer to good as limited and the role that I am attributing to parasites.

Austerity is a macroeconomic ideology holding that public spending cuts and tax increases are necessary for debt reduction. In the 2008 financial crisis's aftermath, some scholars characterized austerity's history as "short and shallow" (Blyth, 2013, 99). In contrast, Powers and Rakopoulos (2019) identified austerity as a continuation of 1980s structural adjustment policies implemented in Asia and Africa, and Keith Hart (2018) has traced austerity's origins to classical antiquity.

England has known two recent bouts of austerity. After World War II, the nation's politicians had implemented austerity and rationed goods because they deemed it "necessary to avoid a balance-of-payments crisis as the release of pent-up domestic demand sucked in dollar imports that the country could ill afford while its export industries struggled to recover and it serviced its debts" (Roodhouse, 2013, 4). More recently, Prime Minister David Cameron's coalition government implemented it to manage ballooning sovereign debt that had resulted from bailing out banks that had been financially exposed due to the 2008 financial crisis.³ These instances were partially distinguished by public responses. Postwar, there was a general sense of unified purpose, whereas Cameron's austerity was something "no one genuinely believes in and whose results pretty much everyone deplores" (Graeber, 2016).

In some respects, austerity's implementation in England was a continuation of efforts initiated in the Thatcher era to reduce the welfare state, replacing it with the private sector and voluntary initiatives (Davey, 2020; Forbess & James, 2014; Plender, 2021). It has further exposed some groups to economic hardship (Koch, 2018; Wilde, 2020). During the post-Thatcher era, volunteers intended to replace the local state were frequently overwhelmed (Fisher, 2006; Hyatt, 2005). In the wake of austerity, this reoccurred in Lyon's charity shops and food banks.

In this article, I explore how austerity in England has influenced my interlocutors' worldview. Originating in German philosophy, the concept of worldview has a long and varied history in anthropology (Kearney, 1975). My usage is inspired by A. I. Hallowell's (1964) formulation: a "cognitive orientation in a cosmos ... basic premises and principles implied, even if ... not consciously formulated and articulated" (50). I draw on George Foster's (1965) terms the *static economy* and the *image of the limited good*, developed studying Michoacán "peasants," to explain how austerity informed my interlocutors' worldview. A static economy is an unchanging one. It ineluctably leads to the perception that life's good is limited and that any unexplained fortune is either extrasystemic in origin or gained at the expense of one's coresidents (Foster, 1964, 1965, 301).

While Foster talked of limited good, Alan Dundes (1971), his colleague at Berkeley, argued that the United States' dynamic economy meant that Americans possessed an image of unlimited good, so "the good fortune of one individual does not necessarily mean misfortune for another" (97). Recently, Paul Trawick and Hornborg (2015) suggested that the Global North needs to abandon such dynamic economies for environmentally sustainable static economies with inherent expectations of limited good. This ignores that elements of northern economies have long been static. Indeed, Frederick Gamst (1980), who studied under Foster, described how the image of the limited good shaped the 1970s American locomotive engineer's worldview. He prophesied that "the Image of Limited Good ... will apply to still more sectors of our society as both general economic security and particular occupational opportunities diminish in response to the limits to growth" (Gamst, 1979, 146).

Were accusations of parasitism a result of austerity-era Britain's mode of governance? Imogen Tyler argued that in neoliberal Britain, revulsion helped the state obtain "public consent for policies and practices that effect inequalities and fundamentally corrode democracy" (Tyler, 2013, 5). But such attempts at mobilizing a portion of the populace against their fellows for political purposes long predate neoliberalism's emergence in England. For example, in the late 18th century, both Edmund Burke and Robert Malthus condemned 18th-century cornucopianism — a philosophy that held that technologically enabled growth was boundless and thus state support for the impoverished a sensible policy — and opposed state-provided relief for the poor on the basis of scarcity (Burke, 1800; Frederik Albritton Jonsson, 2014; Valenze, 2023).

Where my fieldwork seemingly diverges from these long-standing framings of the poor as parasites is in the fact that during my time in Lyon, seemingly any party might accuse another of taking more than they were entitled to. For example, some interlocutors repeatedly espoused the view that both parish and county councilors were enriching themselves through their expense claims. “That’s why they are rich,” Kelly had told me on another of our toddles. They had been explaining how they believed that a local councilor had been able to amass enough resources to donate their almost new flat screen television to a local charity shop. Accounts like Kelly’s point toward a static economy, as in such a formulation, people worry about coresidents of all classes because they believe that any good fortune comes at their own expense, as it depletes the overall pool of resources. In Foster’s various articles on static economies, otherwise inexplicable economic phenomena like wealth growth are explained in varied ways, including pacts with devils, the discovery of treasure, and, most germane for my argument, gained at the expense of others, that is, parasitism (Foster, 1964, 1972).

In discussing such acts of parasitism, I turn to Michel Serres, who once declared, “We parasite each other and live amidst parasites. ... They constitute our environment” (Serres, 1982, 10). An audacious French philosopher, Serres (as cited in Bandak & Knight, 2024) wrote about knowledge production, mythology, and ecophilosophy deeply influencing science and technology studies. My specific focus is on his concept of the parasite defined as either static, an abusive guest, or a microorganism (Serres, 1982). It acted as a thermal exciter potentially altering a system. Yet it lacked a fixed identity, and as systems evolved, different parties emerged as parasites. Above all, “the parasitic relation is intersubjective. It is the atomic form of our relations” (8).

Recently, several anthropologists have fruitfully engaged with the Serresian parasite. For example, Robyn Taylor-Neu (2020) has discussed how American political groups producing narratives that opposed climate change science engaged in communicative parasitism. The press releases they produced aped those of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and “by iconically and indexically referencing climate science organizations and media,” they were able to “mine scientific authority,” diminishing “popular perception of scientific consensus regarding anthropogenic climate change” (21).

However, my use of Serres’s concept engages more directly with Sophie Chao’s and Andrew Shryock’s work. Chao (2021) deployed the Serresian parasite in analyzing natives’ perception of parasites, such as the rhinoceros beetle, on a West Papuan palm oil plantation. She argued that natives’ sense of the parasites’ moral subjectivity shifted because they fed on a parasitic social formation, the plantation. Chao presents this shift, with reference to Serres’s work, as an instance of a parasite preying on a parasite. I, too, regard this critical Serresian concept of shifting moral subjectivity as central to my analysis. It helps me account for villagers’ claims of parasitism as located in concrete actions and always subject to revision in response to new actions.

Of three anthropologists I have mentioned, Shryock has exerted the greatest influence on my thinking. He employed the Serresian parasite to examine hospitality among Jordanian Bedouin in Balga. Shryock (2019) suggested that this analytic allows us to see “key social institutions as means and responses to parasitism, as byproducts of taking and depletion” (553).

Shryock’s (2019) argument has two implications for argument in this article. The first is that it helps me to think about the food banks cum charity shops that were my field site not merely as sites of relief but also as places that developed specific practices and programs to organize and limit the taking and depletion associated with parasitism. Second, because his discussion about parasitism centers on the well-defined areal interest of anthropologists of the Middle East on hospitality and honor, and thus, by extension, shame, he has helped me to think about these linkages more carefully. Serres (1982) twice mentions shame directly in *The Parasite*. The relevant instance for me is in an interlude titled “Confessed Meals.” Here Serres analyzes Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s account of his behavior in his autobiography and observes that

He put Marion in the position of having been a thief — a predator — to put himself immediately in his usual position, that of the parasite. Marion gave it to me as a present. He admits the real truth while lying. This shame that has weighed on him throughout his entire life had just been revealed.

(114)

In contrast to Serres’s rather minimal mentions of the relationship between parasitism and shame, Shryock (2019), while never using the word, is much clearer. He argues that among his interlocutors, hospitality has long been an obligation such that “entire political worlds collapse and rise in strategic encounters between guests and hosts, within the physical space of the guest chamber” (555). As hospitality invariably involves parasitism, such encounters must be managed lest honor be diminished due to resource depletion. This understanding proved immensely helpful to me in coming to grips with the questions of shame and deservingness. However, before turning to my analysis, I offer a brief discussion of the context for my fieldwork.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Lyon is a rural village of several thousand people located in North East England. Its current form is a result of several taskscapes — the collection of activities that create a landscape (Ingold, 2000). Over time, their relative significance has altered.

The agricultural taskscape is several centuries old but has changed markedly. Underground coal mining began in the middle of the Victorian era and dominated for two centuries. It brought new families to Lyon and its surrounds, and most men worked at the mine. Mining's taskscape shaped not just the landscape but life in general. Remediation has removed much of the physical infrastructure associated with this taskscape, and regeneration in the form of light industry, retailing, and commuting has created a new taskscape.

I conducted 15 months of fieldwork in Lyon between March 1, 2022, and October 14, 2023. As energy and food prices rocketed, I carried out 37 unstructured interviews; participated in several local clubs, such as a book club; and volunteered for third-sector groups that organized food banks and ran charity shops. Fieldwork occurred during what was perhaps a nadir for Conservative Party administration when the failings of the Thatcherite philosophy of privatization were clearly exposed. The Russo-Ukrainian War's escalation in early 2022 led to ferociously rising energy prices across Europe. One reason the United Kingdom's populace was particularly exposed was the nation's lack of a store of natural gas. In 2017, Centrica, the energy and services conglomerate, shuttered Rough — the nation's largest storage facility — because the government had refused to subsidize its maintenance.

During my fieldwork, English public discourse about parasitic energy companies probably reached its acme. In 2022, a group of activists, inspired by the poll tax revolts of Thatcher-era Britain, formed Don't Pay UK (Murphy, 2022). The government regulator had announced that the maximum rate people would pay annually would increase by more than £600. In response, a Don't Pay UK founder contrasted people's circumstances, having to choose between food and fuel, with the energy companies they described as profiteering in a most monstrous manner. Don't Pay UK called on members of the public to refuse to pay their energy bills, and at the zenith of their popularity, more than a million Britons pledged to do just that.

Ultimately, living in Lyon during such crises, volunteering at a food bank and a community center, and engaging with people, many of whom remembered the welfare state's heyday, made it impossible to be unaware of how more than a decade of austerity had reshaped life in the village and badly damaged state support systems. Globally, anthropologists have attended to how various nations' pursuit of austerity has had a profound impact on their populaces' quality of life (Pusceddu et al., 2022). While media coverage has often detailed the middle classes' increasing impoverishment, anthropologists have asserted that austerity has been simply disastrous for those now figured as the precariat (Pusceddu, 2022).

In Lyon, austerity's consequences were evident in several ways. Public health care was perpetually slow. I vividly remember Dani, an aged interlocutor whose hands had become red and swollen over the winter, explaining in March how they had received a letter stating that their dermatology appointment would be in August. Busses were increasingly unreliable, so much so that one food bank manager used their car to ferry the elderly around the village. Meanwhile, another interlocutor feared for the library's existence. It was already limited to two and a half days a week, despite being declared a warm space, but they noted, "There's another restructure going on. ... we are worried for Lyon."⁴ Libraries had been shuttered at such a rate in neighboring Sunderland, a city of more than 150,000 people, that "there's only about three or four left." Yet council tax rose, and some interlocutors, who referred to it as a poll tax, wondered why. What services were they paying for? There was a sense that quality of life had markedly declined. Consequently, some held, resources must be husbanded and people's behavior scrutinized. In this context, I ask, What about the charitable, community organizations that stepped into the gap? Why did I witness frequent discussions of parasitic behavior within their walls?

ON THE ROLE OF MONEY IN DETERMINING DESERVINGNESS

"It's terrible. They treat you as if you have done something wrong," Jo said. We sat at a table in Light, an Evangelical Christian-founded community space in Lyon. The effervescent, ever-present Jo was Light's only full-time staffer. They played an important role in organizing not just the space's activities, like chair-based exercise for seniors and its charity shop, but also its food bank. Jo possessed a deep reservoir of sympathy for those who were suffering from misfortune, so much so that they had been told by management that they became too involved in the lives of those who depended on Light. However, they had known bouts of both severe financial and emotional hardship in the past, which made them empathetic.

Jo had described to me over tea and biscuits how they had spent all morning on the telephone trying to obtain food bank vouchers for Iva, a recently arrived Ukrainian refugee. They had likened it to an interrogation. The person on the other end had wanted to know what Iva had been spending their welfare money on. Did they not know how to budget? Why did they need new food vouchers so soon? Eventually they were convinced, after Iva explained that they had spent some of their social security payments on childcare to enable them to attend an English language class.

Jo had explained that in their experience, this was how you were treated when you exceeded the rationed vouchers, as if your circumstances were a product of personal failings. I explore this discourse of deservingness at Light and its relationship to austerity, parasitism, and money. Furthermore, I discuss how vouchers came to act as a rationing system. Ultimately, these vouchers continue a long history in capitalist nations of trying to manage the poor's consumption. Concurrently, I demonstrate how the discourse of deservingness when applied to wealthier patrons relied on other social sanctions, such as gossip.

The invasive inquiry that Iva and others encountered as they sought more vouchers at Light stemmed from a discourse of deservingness. This divided food bank users into those regarded as parasites and those thought of as worthy. Charlie, a retired, middle-class health care professional who regarded themselves as a pillar of the community and sat on Light's board, explained that the voucher system.

Is the best way because you've got to have some kind of control and accountability because ... it's very easy for some people ... you can so easily become dependent. And it's much better if we can signpost people to help and get them off that dependency.

As Insa Koch and James (2020) discussed in their article on debt service agencies, it was part of a return to the sorts of moralistic language that had been prevalent in English society in earlier eras. Thus, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, English legislators saw vagrancy as "moral failings on the part of an 'inferior class'" (Eccles, 2016, xi). In its most recent incarnation, this discourse is linked to "the introduction of more punitive regimes based on 'welfare to workfare' ideologies" (Koch & James, 2020, 5). Such ideologies were not confined to Britain alone but were part of a wider turn across the Euro-American world against welfarism. Thus, Valenzuela-Garcia et al. (2019) observe, "today, programs directed to poverty relief tend to be also punitive in order to push people (primarily single mothers) toward the labor market" (3).

This perspective on deservingness was evident in the way that individuals and groups across the British political spectrum have discussed food poverty and the rising usage of food banks. For example, for several years now, health care workers' unions have repeatedly highlighted that nurses and junior doctors were using food banks. Their profession casts them as the deserving poor. In contrast, in 2022, Lee Anderson, a former coal miner and MP, contended that people's increasing reliance on food banks and food poverty resulted from a generational decline in home economics skills. Their use of this system thus stemmed not from need but from an inability to cook or budget. When I interviewed Charlie, their views chimed with those expressed by Anderson. They acknowledged that many of the food bank's users were "people who maybe are on zero-hours contracts or work for an agency ... never able to save up for things that go wrong" but argued that part of the solution was "for people to learn budgeting from an early age, learning to save from an early age." It was due to this discourse that there is often a profound sense of shame among those who must rely on food banks in Britain.

One of Serres's (1982) arguments was that the presence of parasites led to the transformation of systems. Once this occurred, he then suggested that the parasite's presence stabilized this new system's existence. For Serres, there was no greater example of such a parasite than money, because it "can be substituted for every relation" (150). What is interesting in this instance is that the discourse of deservingness and a fear of abuse by parasites led to the implementation, and then to the persistence, of a voucher system at Light. Following the work of Karl Polanyi and other substantivists, I regard these vouchers as a form of highly rationed special-purpose money. This is to say that it is money put toward a particular purpose (Polanyi, 1957). Polanyi regarded special-purpose money as existing outside of market-dominated economies, but other scholars have argued that special-purpose money is present in market societies as well (Melitz, 1970; Zelizer, 1994). Special-purpose money goes unmentioned in Serres's text, but given his position on general-purpose money, it is clear that he would regard it as a much-diminished parasite because of its limited ability to leak out and create new relationships. Indeed, this would have been ideal for the charity, which wanted to avoid such qualities of general-purpose money.

The food bank's reliance on vouchers to determine who received food parcels was not unusual in contemporary England (Caplan, 2016). The Trussell Trust, which organizes most of the nation's food banks, employs this system. At Light, each of the vouchers had to be approved by a referrer, that is, someone with pertinent expertise. Attendees were limited to three vouchers for food parcels over a six-month period, and each food parcel contained approximately 3 days' worth of long-life foodstuffs. Jo was not in favor of the voucher system, but they were not responsible for the policy, which was supported by board members like Charlie.

Light's food bank was not the sole form of food aid that it offered Lyon's residents. It also allowed anyone to purchase food using what Polanyi would have referred to as general-purpose money. Thus on the left-hand side of the shop floor were surplus bread, fresh fruit, and vegetables. These were just at their sell-by date and had been donated by a local supermarket. To the right, close to the shop window, were canned goods, baby products, and toiletries. The fresh goods required only a token monetary donation. Indeed, buyers were instructed to "donate what they felt they could." The availability of fresh goods varied significantly; at times, there was scarcely any, and on other occasions, volunteers went so far as to offer it to me because it was beginning to rot. In contrast, the canned goods and toiletries were priced in a more complicated manner. One pound allowed one to purchase four canned items and an article of toiletry. Furthermore, I was never offered any of these.

Unlike the food bank, there was seemingly no discourse of deservingness attached to these other items. However, this was far from true. Needy villagers were disciplined into making "appropriate choices." The four canned goods and toiletry for a pound forced a consideration of need. For example, did one require diapers or toilet paper? This type of practice is hardly new. Vivana Zelizer (1994), to mention but one scholar, has documented how, in the 19th and 20th centuries, social reformers and others sought to use various payment systems to reform the American poor's "problematic" consumption habits.

However, as one would expect in a static economy, the discourse of deservingness was not limited to the seemingly impoverished. Light held a regular hot lunch club where volunteers would cook food that any member of the public could purchase at relatively low prices. One of the frequent attendees at the club was a financially comfortable person with a propensity for purchasing comestibles in excess of what the volunteers deemed necessary. They frequently arrived at Light's lunch club pushing a wheeled basket laden with food. They then proceeded to claim the biggest portions of whatever was being served and requested seconds. Inevitably, this behavior would incur a series of social sanctions. Initially, this would take the form of hard stares, disapproving tuts, and the clearly vocalized instruction to wait your turn. It would also take the form of post event gossip in which they were labeled "greedy" by volunteers and other patrons. Such practices were unsurprising in a time of austerity, for as Foster (1972) observed, in a static economy, "violations of the preferred normative behavior are discouraged by invidious sanctions such as gossip, backbiting, witchcraft, and assault" (58).

My purpose in examining the different sorts of food that Light provided, and the varied systems of payment and control, has been to discuss the prevalence of the discourse of deservingness. It did assign blame to those least well prepared to weather the innumerable indignities unleashed by austerity. They were encouraged to change their behavior in line with ideals that were not necessarily their own. However, they were not the sole parties to be disciplined into making appropriate choices. My account of the wealthy person who was labeled greedy indicates that such sanctions were applied to any party demonstrating behavior deemed parasitic.

ON THE ENTANGLEMENT OF NEED AND DESERVINGNESS

I had the first of many encounters with Jess one morning early in spring 2023, when I was volunteering at Redemption. A tall, seemingly nervous person, they were there for a food parcel. After Jess had departed, Jules, a frequent volunteer, remarked to me, "Some people take advantage. They've been in here several times this week."

Redemption was, like Light, a food bank and community center that offered a variety of activities. The interior of its building was rather cramped, slightly dark, and untidy. As Redemption also doubled as a charity shop, several shelves were piled high with various items for sale in the main area of the building. The untidy nature of the place spoke to a certain extent to the far greater number of activities involving youth that took place in the building. Like Light, Redemption was staffed mainly by volunteers, the majority of whom were Christians. However, its food bank did not make use of vouchers or referrals to ration access because Frances, the affable, well-meaning manager, felt strongly that such systems ran contrary to their Christian beliefs. Nonetheless, a lack of a formal rationing system did not mean that there was not a belief in the static economy or the image of the limited good. In this section, I concern myself with the question of how and when in this space parasitism became a matter of interest and the results of such concerns.

Jules's critique of Jess's behavior, specifically their frequent use of the food bank, employed the same sort of discourse of deservingness that had informed the rationale for introducing vouchers at Light. Underlying this was an appreciation of life in England in this period of austerity as being one of lack. It was felt that public services were limited and that the state was failing to provide the necessary help. This notion of the economy as being static was by no means limited to the nation's failing state welfare system. Jules argued that Jess's repeated use of the food bank was "unfair," as it meant that there might not be enough food parcels for others. They were not being at all metaphorical; rather, Jules was talking in exceedingly grounded terms, as there were occasions when people had come to get a food parcel and there were none. These limitations made a powerful statement about the lack of accessible good in the world.

Redemption's food bank did not have a supermarket donor to furnish it with items close to expiration. Indeed, Frances noted that they did not receive "much from the local supermarket." Instead, they explained, Redemption was almost entirely reliant on a single donor for the items that made up its food parcels. Frances described them as "one particular person from the Catholic Church."

When I interviewed Frances, I asked them what their criteria were for distributing food parcels, and they explained, "Well, it's if people need food that's what we're here for." The discourse of need has an exceedingly long history in Christian thought, yet its place in the early Church has often been overlooked by those with the capabilities to translate such texts because they found them philosophically uninteresting (Holman, 2009, 4). Thus, Frances drew inspiration from a mixture of biblical scripture and more modern practices originating in the 19th century. It was then that Protestant ministers ministered to the people of the coalfields, offering them material and spiritual support.

The question of the role of need in charity and care is by no means a new one for anthropologists. In the 1980s, just as Thatcherism was reconfiguring social relations by promulgating the belief that "problems could be identified and known, difficulties measured and quantified," anthropologists of Britain were beginning to think about the nature of need (Hyatt, 2005, 178). One such scholar was Ellen Michaud (1987), who, based on her work in rural Derbyshire studying informal community care for the elderly, argued, "To complete the establishment of a caring relationship and to facilitate its maintenance there has to be some agreement between the two partners about 'need' and on how it should be fulfilled" (14).

Michaud's (1987) point about the socially defined nature of need was exactly at the crux of the matter in Lyon. Frances's needs-based approach was not universally popular in the village, because others saw need differently. One such person was Charlie, the board member at Light. They explained to me,

People called at Redemption and then come to us for food, and I tried on several occasions to get Frances to tell us who these people were. It wasn't fair because people are very generous, as I've said, with giving us food. What we don't want to do is then use that generosity to just perpetuate these people who rely on it.

Furthermore, there were those in Redemption who would agree with Charlie. Thus, while Frances refused to engage with the variant of the discourse of deservingness promoted by Light, Jules in particular frequently assessed food bank users' deservingness. "Keep an eye on them. Make sure they don't take anything," they told me when a homeless person who had recently been sleeping at a railway station turned up at Redemption to ask for some help. Jules, like Kelly — the aged interlocutor I described in the introduction — saw parasites everywhere.

While I have thus far offered a description of affairs at Redemption's food bank that counterposes need and deservingness as binaries, the reality was decidedly more complex. Redemption did not employ a voucher system, but like Light, it collected personal information. Collecting such information is common at English food banks. Indeed, Pat Caplan (2016) has discussed how food banks' collection of information makes them important sites for the creation of statistical data on food poverty. At Redemption, the information exceeded basic biographical details, as users were asked to explain the circumstances that had led them to the food bank. This question served as an opportunity to discuss Redemption's various services. These were intended to help food bank users identify their needs and address their problems. Users who returned to the food bank, as Jess had, were required to complete another form providing an update on their circumstances.

The link between what might appear to be Redemption's use of basic bureaucratic procedure and parasitism might at first be unclear, but it becomes readily apparent upon reading Serres. In his discussion of the parasite (Serres, 1982), he observes,

The parasite is invited to the *table d'hôte*; in return, he must regale the other diners with his stories and his mirth. To be exact, he exchanges good talk for good food; he buys his dinner, paying for it in words. It is the oldest profession in the world. (34)

In this formulation, the parasite willingly proffers, in the most literal sense of the term, bon mots. These serve as payment for the meal. Yet, at Redemption, something else occurred as the food bank user was asked to exchange an accounting for a food parcel.

In Serres's schema, parasites can transform relations and create new systems that render things commensurable. However, at Redemption, a user was told what the currency was. Rather than engaging in an act of parasitism, they were being asked to prove their deservingness through discussing their misfortune in an audit-like process. The existence of such a system is unsurprising, for as Valenzuela-Garcia et al. (2019) have argued, globally, we are seeing "new pressures in the form of business-like accountability, auditing and control" (3).

In her account of the lives of the impoverished residents of an inner-city Manchester suburb, Katherine Smith (2017) contrasted their "performing poverty in the eyes of the state in order to secure further state benefits" (123) with informal support systems between neighbors that were premised on place-specific notions of fairness. The latter did not require lengthy articulations of why the requesting party needed money. Regular users of Redemption's food bank, much like Smith's interlocutors, often seemed to want to avoid a lengthy articulation of the reasons for their need. They tried to circumvent such discussion of need by swiftly indicating that their circumstances remained unchanged.

The collection of personal information was not the only way that access to food parcels was limited at Redemption. Toward the middle of the year, there had been several thefts of food parcels from their building. Frances's response to these acts of parasitism was to introduce a new sociotechnical system. They locked the food parcels in their office, and as the only party with a key, they made themselves solely responsible for the distribution of food parcels.

That an act of parasitism had resulted in a new system would come as no surprise to Serres (1982), who saw parasites' actions as central to the destruction of old systems and the creation of new ones. The new system meant that when users like Jess came to claim their parcels and Frances was absent, they were unable to access these needed resources. Instead, with some *schadenfreude*, Jules had informed Jess that they would have to return later, when Frances was around.

In discussing the case of Redemption, I have demonstrated that neither the lack of a voucher system to ration access nor an ideology based around comforting the needy eliminated the discourse of deservingness. It still existed because of the way in which information was gathered and the volunteers' awareness of the limited supplies available to satisfy the needs of users. This persistence was a product of the need to control taking in a static economy. Finally, the introduction of a locked room in response to theft accords with Shryock's (2019) description of how hospitality among Jordanian Bedouin had to be constantly and carefully managed to avoid the collapse of existing social worlds due to parasitism.

ON THE MATTER OF PLACING MATTER

"I hate that they do that," said Jean angrily. We had encountered each other on the edge of Lyon one late spring afternoon and decided to go out for a walk. On the return leg, we had seen a burned-out car and signs of fly-tipping. Jean strode over to get a closer look, shook their head in disgust, and commented angrily. They regarded the litter as signaling a marked lack of respect for the area and the community. Lyon had largely been remediated and regenerated since the pit had shuttered, yet its relatively secluded areas suffered from litter and fly-tipping. While the local government's social media frequently carried stories of fly-tippers fines, they omitted how this was reflective of a national phenomenon. The problem stemmed partially from the various ways that successive austerity budgets reduced councils' abilities to manage waste. Bearing this in mind, I turn to discussing Lyon's charity shops and parasitism. My central concern in doing so is to argue that these specific sites can be seen as places where, to follow Serres's (1982) line of reasoning, "the parasite parasites the parasite" (55). In saying that, what Serres meant was that all parties in each situation can be regarded from a particular angle as parasites. Similarly, as I have been arguing throughout this article, this is not the well-worn neoliberal framing that descends from scholars like Burke and Malthus, in which the destitute claiming relief through food parcels are the sole parasites. Instead, at these food banks cum charity shops, anyone, wealthy included, can come to be regarded as a parasite.

During the nine or so months that I volunteered at Redemption, my role was seemingly uncomplicated. I, along with other volunteers, had to sort and categorize donations as they were dropped off at the shop. Items were assigned to one of the following groups: things that might be plausibly sold in the shop, things that might be sold on to the ragman, things that must be disposed of in the garbage or at the tip, and things that possessed a value that could not be realized by the shop. Items that were to be retained for sale in the shop would then be priced and displayed by another volunteer. Items for the ragman would have to be categorized and stored with other similar items in a shed until the ragman made their monthly visit. Items for the garbage were small, while those for the tip generally consisted of bulky furniture that would otherwise have been dumped. Finally, there were those items, like antique pocket watches or war medals, whose value was best realized by selling them on to a specialist capable of capitalizing upon them.

Sorting items for the shop floor was a skilled practice that demanded attending to burls, small stains, or anything else that might lead to an item being regarded as defective rather than nearly new. Redemption manager Frances's overwhelming concern was "I don't want people to feel like the items are from a charity shop." Consequently, many donations never made it to the shop floor and were instead sold on to the ragman.

"That's got to go. ... I don't like that. ... Can you imagine anyone wearing that?" A stream of judgments issued from the mouth of small, sparrow-like Ash as they sorted through the already-hanging stock, determining what they felt was worth keeping. In sorting items, Ash, my other colleagues, and I were making value judgments in the manner that Michael Thompson (2017) described in *Rubbish Theory*. Thompson argued that material objects could be classified as transient items whose value declined over time, rubbish that had no value, or durable items whose value increased over time. He theorized that it is only by passing through the status of rubbish that a transient item becomes durable. Charity shops, like Redemption, with their collections of secondhand goods, are sites where such forms of value can be realized. Consequently, they are also locations where discussions of parasitism might occur.

When Mary Douglas (2003) observed in *Purity and Danger* that dirt was matter out of place, she was referring to the ability of some in society to define what had value within a categorical system and what did not. This is germane, because much of the time, volunteers found themselves in conflict with donors who, judging by their donations, appeared to have a different understanding of the function of a charity shop. Volunteers regarded items donated in a disorganized fashion not as potential boons but as signifying a perception of the shop as a waste disposal facility. They observed that this attitude often seemed to accompany death. Ash explained to me that donations under such circumstances often meant the person was trying to clear items out of a house that had either entered, or would soon enter, the market. These donations were often bundled together haphazardly in garbage bags. This practice increased the amount of time that had to be spent sorting them. Distaste was reserved for what were considered wholly inappropriate items, like an urn containing a pet's ashes. "They just wanted rid of it," Ash had observed. Thus even seemingly charitable donations could come to be regarded as signs of parasitic behavior, particularly if, rather than helping the charity shop achieve its goal of providing high-quality, affordable items for the village, volunteers had to expend their time and effort disposing of unsuitable donations.

In keeping with Serres's proposition about the possibility of any party being a parasite, those patronizing charity shops could also be the subject of accusations of parasitic behavior. One summer day, I had volunteered at a sale at Light's charity shop. The event was designed to sell off the excess stock that the shop had accumulated over the past several months. The sale seemed to be going well, with the shop doing a brisk trade. However, at one point, a person attempted to leave the shop without offering a donation. Jo explained to them that "charity did not mean that these clothes were free." They went on to explain that they would have to offer at least a nominal donation as payment. In response, the person pleaded poverty. They explained that they were a refugee who should be the beneficiary of the charity shop's stock. They offered a donation regarded as derisory. Jo responded by saying that they would have to reduce the number of items that they were leaving with. "They've

tried that before,” Jo said. They stated confidently that the items the person had sought to take for free would then be resold at a car boot sale. Despite their articulation of their plight, the person had failed to convince Jo of their need.

This was far from the only occasion that I witnessed such behavior. One afternoon, a customer entered the charity shop at Light. They began inspecting the racks of carefully curated clothes, seeking to identify if there were any items to their liking. Eventually, they located a coat and inquired how much it cost. They were told to donate what they felt was reasonable. They donated 20 pence and swiftly left. The volunteers framed their behavior as parasitic. One remarked that they worked at a fast-food franchise as a manager and that their partner was a plumber. It was observed that neither of them was impoverished. Moreover, they went on to observe that their Instagram feed revealed a comfortable life. It was felt that they could have afforded to be more generous than they had been. While, according to Serres, parasitic behavior is capable of initiating change in a system, it does not always do so. In this instance, it was felt that altering the system to discourage such behavior would discourage those who did need the resources and could not afford more than a token donation.

In sum, volunteers were capable of leveling accusations of parasitic behavior against both those who donated to and those who purchased from the charity shop. The former were targets for such accusations if they were perceived as donating not to benefit the community but because of an unwillingness or inability to travel to the tip. To reference Mary Douglas again, what donors were doing was asserting that their categorical judgment of what constituted an acceptable donation was more accurate than that of the volunteers. In contrast, consumers were criticized as exhibiting parasitic behavior if they sought to profit from selling items on outside of the community. Returning to George Foster's work on the static economy, in such systems, there is the perception that the community has limited wealth that can neither grow nor expand (Foster, 1964). By taking items sold at such low prices and selling them on for a profit, these consumers were not just converting transient items into durable ones, as Michael Thompson had discussed; rather, they were doing so at the expense of the charity and fellow villagers. They were engaging in what Serres termed the classic parasitic tactic of leaking out of the system. This allowed them to convert these items into general-purpose currency — the ultimate parasites!

CONCLUSION

After more than a decade of austerity, Lyon's villagers now regard the economy as being relatively static. This is to say that they have a worldview informed by what George Foster once termed the image of the limited good. A belief that there are a limited number of good things in the world is not necessarily a bad thing, as such, an attitude might represent a suitable response to the long-standing and ruinous belief many hold in the doctrine of unlimited growth (Nash, 2007; Trawick & Hornborg, 2015). However, negative consequences can result from this emphasis on the limited good. These might include a deep, abiding suspicion of one's coresidents. In such a worldview, any good fortune they possess is held either to come at the expense of others or to be a result of extrasystemic factors.

One of the effects of this growing suspicion of others is that accusations of people behaving in a parasitic manner were very common during my fieldwork in Lyon. This is particularly problematic, as, at least initially, the Conservative Party's argument for what should replace austerity starved public services had been initiatives run by communities, that is, charitable ventures.

In this article, I have sought to demonstrate that austerity led to the mainly volunteer workforce of such charitable replacements for the welfare state becoming increasingly suspicious of their users. This is the context in which a discourse of deservingness has flourished in food banks and a whole variety of punitive measures, including special-purpose currencies, have emerged to reeducate the poor users of such services about what constitutes good behavior. Similarly, charity shops have sought to define for donors what constitute acceptable donations and for buyers what amounts to acceptable consumption. Those who fail to meet such standards may themselves come to be regarded as parasites.

Anthropologists have productively examined the nature of charity and gift giving for close to a century. Considering English charitable behavior through the lens of Michel Serres's and George Foster's works offers an excellent opportunity to extend this conversation into new theoretical terrain. My focus on the negative aspects of parasitism and the limited good should not be read as a belief that this is all that such an engagement enables. Instead, I would suggest that from this vantage point, it proves possible to ask how the new forms of sociality and charity that are being birthed in England represent a departure from what was previously accepted as normalcy.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The supporting research dataset will not be published because it contains sensitive data.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ I use pseudonyms for the people, the village, and the charitable organizations I discuss in this article. I have further sought to protect people's identities by using non-gender-specific pseudonyms and nongendered pronouns.
- ² During the New Labor era (1997–2010), some decision-making powers were devolved to legislatures in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Consequently, different areas of the United Kingdom experienced austerity differently. This article is limited to a discussion of England.
- ³ The United Kingdom uses the first-past-the-post system in national elections. Generally, this has resulted in single-party government, but 2010 proved the exception. The Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats formed a coalition government, as no single party won enough seats to command the house's confidence.
- ⁴ The term *warm space* entered English vocabularies in the 2020s as a result of rising energy prices. It referred to places where people could go to experience both physical warmth and the warmth of community.

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