A British national scandal:

Hunger, foodbanks and the deployment of a Dickensian trope

Dr Anita Howarth, Brunel University London (corresponding author)

Anita.Howarth@Brunel.ac.uk

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0102-6096

Word count: 7865

The normalization of foodbanks in Britain has polarized public debates around issues of hunger. Government supporters laud foodbanks as a timely revival of an earlier tradition of voluntarism or stigmatize foodbanks as new spaces of 'dependency' and 'scrounging'. Critics view them as a consequence of ministerial indifference to growing hunger, a dereliction of a duty of care to those in need and a betrayal of the core values of the welfare state. The very presence of foodbanks in one of the richest countries in the world is denounced as a national scandal, a violation of some intrinsic quality of Britishness signifying a regression to an earlier more heartless era. In mooting this argument, critics have deployed a Victorian trope that evoked familiar figures and narratives from popular culture in a circular social imaginary of 'what we were' in the Victorian era as distinct from 'what we have been' in the post-war welfare state to 'what we are reverting to' now. The paper critically deconstructs the trope as a device to hold government policies to account while also critiquing a nostalgia rooted in a mythic notion of the welfare state which was never as unifying or inclusive as people would believe.

Introduction

The first charitable foodbanks providing short-term emergency food relief to those struggling to feed themselves in Britain opened in about 2004 however they were largely unknown until the 2007 financial crisis. Within a decade, foodbanks had become normalized with an outlet in every community (Butler, 2017). Hunger hitherto largely relegated in popular imagining to

the global south assumed a new visibility with the proliferation of foodbank queues, donation points in supermarkets and homeless beggars. However, the visible does not always register in public consciousness and for much of history hunger was everywhere yet barely mentioned, its presence taken for granted (Vernon 2009). By the 19th, its naturalization was being disrupted as print capitalism fostered an imagined community through national conversations and hunger became a resonant theme in new forms of popular culture aimed at the middle classes (Anderson, 2006; Cozzi, 2010). The dissonance between visible suffering and the social imagining of Britain as an enlightened nation ruptured the understanding of hunger as punishment for sin making it possible for new ways of seeing to emerge. By the turn of the century, the hungry body had been re-imagined from individual deficiency to innocent victim of structural forces unleashed by the Industrial Revolution (Vernon, 2009).

The 20th century welfare state materialized paradigmatic shifts in understandings of human nature from individual culpability to the recognition of human fragility and the interdependence of all citizens in new institutions (Freeden, 2010). Hunger was reconstituted as a social problem and risks to the individual posed by the vagaries of life were collectivised in a state-managed insurance scheme that promised a 'cradle to the grave … safety net' for all citizens accessible at the point of need (Field, 2011). The 'war on want' waged by the early welfare state, rooted in an idyllic vision of banishing hunger from Britain, was evocatively captured in slogans such as ''bread for all … before cake for any'' (William Beveridge, cited Renwick, 2017). The vision required the state to assume a central role in ameliorating poverty and new contract emerged that re-structured the state-citizen relationship around the right to help and the responsibility to contribute (Freeden, 2010). Common understandings of a social solidarity behind the early welfare state are out of sync with the actuality where powerful interests resisted the new welfarism and questioned both the affordability of the new settlement and viewed benefits as a potential moral hazard that

could incentivize indigence and dependency (Freeden, 2010). The founding principles of universal access for all citizens at the point of need suggested inclusivity whereas the actual experience of ethnic minorities seeking to access support was of bureaucratic barriers (Jacobs, 1985). Much of the contemporary debates around foodbanks romanticize the early welfare state drawing on social imaginings of a golden age while remaining silent on the exclusions. Such accounts have also tended to downplay the unresolved tension embedded in the architecture of the welfare state from the outset i.e. between the rights and responsibilities (cf, Freeden, 2010).

Such tensions hardened into a fault-line at the core of the welfare state with successive economic crises and the restructurings of the economy since the 1970s state (Goodin, 2003). A resurgent libertarianism inspired by philosophers such as Robert Nozick (1974) not only challenged the foundational premises of state-delivered welfare by questioning the ethics of taxes extracted by the state to provide benefits for others, it also offered an alternative moral order to that encapsulated in the welfare state. The shifting climate re-ignited latent concerns about the affordability of the welfare state and the moral hazard of benefits ignited latent concerns which over the next forty years hardened into 'anti-welfare common-sense' and a stigmatizing of benefit claimants from the 1970s (Jensen & Tyler, 2015). The 2010 Conservative-led government capitalised on shifting sentiments and financial crisis to re-shape the underlying philosophy of the welfare state within an austerity agenda and to radically re-engineer its apparatus. As welfare benefits shrunk, foodbanks proliferated. Government euphemisms of 'we are all in this together' were openly derided by public health experts and bloggers with everyday experience of hunger (Howarth, 2017). Proliferating foodbanks became material manifestations of need and a contested symbol of responses to hunger and the fracturing of the post-war social imaginary of Britishness.

The paper explores what debates about hunger and foodbanks reveal about the politicization of hunger within fracturing social imaginaries of 21st century Britain. It does so through a critical deconstruction of a theme of hunger as a national scandal, and the need for foodbanks the consequence of policies that transgressed fundamental British values. One of the discursive devices in mooting such criticism was a Victorian trope deployed in a circular narrative of 'what we were' in the 19th century as distinct from 'what we have been' in the early welfare state to 'what we are reverting to' now. The paper first deconstructs the trope in terms of a resonant critique of government policy then problematizes it for a romanticized account of the early welfare state and for neglecting the racism in the writings of Dickens.

Contextualizing UK foodbanks within a contracting welfare

Although mass poverty had been rising since the 1970s, it accelerated sharply with the austerity policies of the 2010 government that pledged to turn a sovereign debt disaster into the 'triumph of a new neo-liberal settlement' (Clarke & Newman, 2012, p. 300). Within a decade, though, a fifth of the population were living in poverty, 1.5m were deemed destitute and Britain's child poverty rate was expected to reach 40% by 2020 (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2018).

The causes of rising poverty in Britain range from structural changes which have brought more precarious forms of employment; falling incomes and rising food prices which made food 20% less affordable; as well as government policies (Lambie-Mumford, 2019). Prior to the 1980s, governments had sought of offset the impact of structural change and financial crisis on individual households through increased spending on welfare. The 2010 government prioritized reducing the national debt over benefits which not only did they cut, they also introduced systemic changes which disrupted receipt of benefits and made it harder to claim. From 2012 policy took a punitive turn as government introduced sanctions to further 'incentivize' people to move off benefit and reduce the welfare budget (Fletcher and Wright, 2018). The process was further de-humanized by digitalization which not only

created distance between claimant and processor, it also introduced a greater degree of surveillance than hitherto. The consequence was that more households already struggling were pushed into greater precarity by social policies. Hunger had become a mechanism to drive people into work often on low-paid precarious jobs and Britain had become a 'centaur state' with a 'neoliberal head on an authoritarian body' (Fletcher & Wright, 2018, p. 323).

The driver behind the reforms was a neoliberal commitment to shrinking the state while retaining enough residual welfare to support the demands of business for cheap labor (Hartman, 2005). The changes were justified through the simultaneous 'willful institutional ignorance' of the evidence of structural causes of poverty and the privileging a 'single behavioral explanation' within a 'broken Britain' narrative that denied the existence of acute hunger and blamed the plight of benefit claimants on individual pathologies of dependency and worklessness (Slater, 2014, p. 950, 952). By defining poverty as a problem of worklessness, ministers could present measures to get people back into work as rational however callous they might be. As the consequences of the policies began to play out in mounting use of foodbanks, ministers dismissed claims that systemic failures and punitive sanctions were the main reasons for recourse to food aid (Howarth, 2017). When charities launched the first anti-poverty campaign in Britain since 1948, they were accused of politicizing the issues and betraying their core principles of impartiality (Hobbs, 2018).

The radical re-engineering of the welfare state was made possible by a shifting climate of public and political sentiment which since the 1970s had been hardening into an 'anti-welfare commonsense' that blamed a 'bloated welfare state' for all manner of social ills (Jensen & Tyler, 2015). Added to which, a Malthusian ideology that accused benefit claimants as abusers of the welfare system or burdens on society had also 'crept' into some of the tabloid newsrooms and a new genre of poverty porn television programs further objectified, stigmatized and denigrated welfare recipients (Harkins & Lugo-Ocando, 2016;

May., *et al.,* 2019). The welfare state critical to the 'war on hunger' from the 1950s had been re-imagined as the enemy within that needed to be tamed by a resolute government.

By 2019 there were signs of a softening of tone. The High Court found 'dramatically fluctuating' incomes of those claiming benefit and a report for the UN subverted the government's Broken Britain narrative, concluding that the 'mentality' informing welfare reform had 'brought the most misery and wrought the most harm to the fabric of British society' (Alston, 2019, p. 5; Hughes, 2019). Ministers conceded that the system was not as 'compassionate' as hoped and that increased reliance on foodbanks might be linked to some of the government's policies (Amber Rudd cited in Hughes, 2019). The most recent British Social Attitudes Survey found that 56% of respondents thought benefit cuts 'would damage too many people's lives' and were concerned at the scale of poverty suggesting a 'quiet revolution' might be taking place in public sentiment. (The Economist, 2019).

The premise underpinning the paper is welfare sentiments ebb and flow rather than develop in a linear fashion. It explores how government's anti-welfare agenda was challenged from spaces of outrage and nostalgia in ways that made it possible to identify with the hungry and question what suffering said about British values and how the nation wanted to imagine itself.

Food, hunger and welfare in shifting social imaginaries

Hunger pains serve as existential reminders to eat response to which in the form of consumption or denial over time leave corporeal markers inscribed on the body. Food is also a commodity where consumption is circumscribed by transactional relations of production and consumption that determine access and by extension status within communities (Sen, 1983; Appadurai, 1981). Corporeal markers are therefore irreducible to lifestyle choices, they need to be understood in terms of transactional and social constraints imposed on the

individual. Hunger is also cultural category where how it is understood shift over time and where such imaginings partly shape policy responses to it (Vernon, 2009).

During modernity, the print capitalism that fostered national conversations and the emergence of an imagined community also fostered new understandings of poverty. Benedict Anderson (2006) illustrates the connection in his account of a novel whose protagonist is moved to pity by a news report of the death of a destitute vagrant and to anger at the system that allowed it to happen. The protagonist did not see the body yet imagined it from print; he did not think so much of the individual but the suffering he represented and identified with it. In Victorian England, such accounts in popular fiction and mass newspapers not only disrupted the naturalization of hunger, they also disrupted popular imaginings of a prosperous England that had from the 18th century understood national superiority in terms of the abundance of food epitomized in the self-satisfied satirical figure of John Bull (Cozzi, 2010).[1] The 'fantasy of plenty' encapsulated in John Bull was subverted in the 19th century when abundance set against deprivation in the emaciated figures of William Blake's chimney sweeper or Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist juxtaposed against well-fed adults (Cozzi, 2010, p. 2). Fictitious characters were given added credence by the factuality of the new journalism of the mass press whose journalists reported from coroners' courts into workhouse deaths and ethnographies from within Britain's slums (cf. Vernon, 2006). The hungry child became a central figure in the emergence of a new social imaginary where their innocence at a rational level disrupted dominant understandings of hunger as punishment for individual failure and at an affective level evoked the type of pity and outrage that Anderson (2006) recounted.

The denaturalizing and politicizing of hunger during the 19th century culminated in the second half of the 20th century in the welfare state. A raft of public health initiatives over

[1] The satirical character of John Bull created by Dr John Arbuthnot first appeared in 1712 in a pamphlet and he continued to appear in posters and cartoons as late as World War 1 and into the late 20th century.

the next 60 years reversed many of the nutrition-related Victorian diseases (Ashton, *et al.*, 2014). The figure of hungry body was displaced in the British social imaginary, relegated to the famine-stricken victims in the Global South or romanticized in the repackaging of characters such as Oliver Twist into film, television and videogames for the entertainment of new content consumers. However, by the 21st century, the impoverished were held up for new derision in some of the media particularly the so-called poverty porn programs which presented figures from Britain's sink estates as objects of pity to be ridiculed in toxic narratives of lifestyle choices and dependency culture (Jensen, 2014).

More recently, such pejorative accounts have been challenged by rival understandings of poverty. Parallels drawn by health experts between contemporary and Dickensian levels of poverty were reiterated in some news outlets while others campaigned against the return of pauperism, prevalent in Victorian slums yet widely thought to have been eradicated from Britain with the advent of the welfare state (Cooper, 2013; Evening Standard, 2010). Historically, print capitalism mediated personal narratives of Britain's impoverished people through the voice of the journalist. Digital capitalism in the 21st century provided platforms for individuals to speak directly through personal blogs about the everyday embodied experience of hunger and foodbank use (Howarth, 2017). Such chronicles of personal experience are 'interstitial spaces between government rhetoric and media representation' and in making poverty an 'intimate, personal and present proposition', the first-hand narratives invite the gaze of the public and politicians on the corporeality of hunger (Ibrahim, 2018, p. 364). The Dickensian parallels drawn by experts were echoed on blogs which uploaded of Oliver Twist in the workhouse asking for more (Diary of a Benefit Scrounger, 2016). The blogs presented an alternative more visceral reality of poverty that made possible an alternative imagining of the hungry body that disrupted the neoliberal accounts of ministers.

Social imaginaries are neither static nor monolithic. The imaginaries that emerged with print capitalism in the 19th century not only disrupted the existing Malthusian understandings which ascribed poverty to individual indigence and the solution to the workhouse, they also facilitated the re-imagining of hunger as a humanitarian issue and a social problem (cf. Vernon, 2009). Hunger was increasingly understood, not as the consequence of individual deficiency but of market failure to offset the adverse impacts of Industrial Revolution on human beings and a laissez faire approach of successive governments toward poverty. The re-imagining of hunger in Victorian England as a social problem coalesced with the emergence of an understanding of nation as having a collective and moral responsibility to those less fortunate whose lives had been disrupted by structural transformation. The 'story of modernity became partly organized around the conquest of hunger' and the key technology for this was the 20th century welfare state (Vernon, 2009, p. 13). The ebbs and flows in social imaginaries became apparent again from the 1970s in the hardening of anti-welfare common-sense and more recently in the signs of a softening of attitudes amidst a perception that government policies had gone too far and were an anathema to an imagined notion of the compassionate British (Cohen, 2012; The Economist, 2019).

Charles Taylor (2002, p. 96) has conceptualized certain kinds of social imaginaries as 'inseparable' from some of the institutions and practices that emerged in late modernity. Social imaginaries are not the ideas or theories of the elites; rather, they are the self-understanding of ordinary people, the frames of reference in which the average citizen 'imagines, understands and conceives of his society or social predicament' (Stock, 2006, p. 230). They speak of how social relations are understood, expectations met and the normative assumptions that enable members of a community to co-exist. In modernity, social imaginings were usually 'carried in images, stories and legends' and historical events or

institutions became reconstituted in symbolic terms and where ‘misremembering’ plays a significant role in the transformation of social understandings (Taylor, 2002, p. 106, 116).

The carriers of social imaginaries are embedded with normative assumptions which arise from an underlying moral order which in late western modernity were rooted in certain assumptions around natural rights and moral obligations, around the means as mutual service and the ends as common benefits. For much of modernity the norms were ‘out of sync’ with actual experience in that segments of society were outside the social imaginary (Taylor, 2002). The paper posits that the advent of the welfare state was an attempt to synchronise the norms with the actuality through a new understanding of universalism and with mutual rights and benefits available to all citizens of the imagined community. The welfare state was an attempt to materialise this social imaginary in a new set of institutions, practices and norms. The hearkening back to a ‘golden age’ of the welfare state in the deployment of the trope is a form of misremembering, an attempt to connect with norms and values from an earlier era.

Deconstructing a Victorian Trope

The paper critically deconstructs a Victorian trope deployed by government critics and bloggers to make sense of the proliferation of foodbanks and associated acute hunger. Tropes are modes of rhetoric such as metaphor that can assume a narrative form which links different events into a sequence that privileges certain elements and glosses over others (White 1973). Primary sources were identified through a search of ‘Foodbank AND Victorian OR Dickens’ from January 2000 to June 2019 first on Nexis, then on Google and on Hansard parliamentary debates. The intention was to compile a body of primary sources that deployed the trope across a range of spaces and platforms including UK national newspapers (127 articles); Hansard (32 debates; and blog posts (42). The trajectory of the trope was then mapped.

Associations between foodbanks and Victorian hunger first emerged in 2010 however they were sporadic until 2012 when bloggers and experts began to use it (*Diary of a Benefit Scrounger,* 2012; Cooper, 2013). Thereafter the trope was increasingly deployed in newspapers, by Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs in parliament and most recently in a 2019 report for the UN on extreme poverty in the UK. The trope was not the exclusive preserve of left-leaning commentators and critics as more conservative titles such as the *Financial Times*, *The Times* and *The Telegraph* used it as a type of a shorthand for the resurgence of extreme hunger in Britain. The surge in the usage of the trope coincided with the proliferation of foodbanks, the launch of Save the Children's first British poverty campaign, blog posts by ordinary people going viral and in 2013 the launch of investigation by a cross-party parliamentary group into hunger and poverty (Oxfam, 2012; Rainey, 2012; Howarth, 2017). The deployment continued into 2019 (Alston, 2019).

Having mapped the trajectory of the trope, a thematic analysis entailing an open reading and re-reading of the diverse source materials was conducted and from it became apparent that its deployment was predominantly within a theme of 'national scandal' around working parents having to forego food to feed their offspring or children going to school hungry. The trope operated in three ways within the scandal theme. Firstly, there was an attempt to explain where foodbanks fitted in relation to the welfare state and what type of 'model' of welfare did they represent. The trope was also used in the evoking of Dickensian figures including that of hungry child whose return signified a 21st century 'Oliver Twist Britain' (Smyth, 2014). Thirdly, it served to convey an unravelling of the 'Beveridge social contract' in which the very social fabric of society was seen as being destroyed by welfare reforms and British values of compassion were being replaced with callousness and cruelty (Cohen, 2012; Alston, 2019).

The analysis concludes with an exploration of the response from government ministers and right-wing politicians and commentators to the deployment of the trope and criticism of policy. Their defensiveness took the form of vicious counter-attacks that stigmatized the hungry users of foodbanks and accused the third sector of betraying a commitment to impartiality. The conflating of the politicizing of hunger with party partisanship highlighted both the political sensitivity of mounting poverty and perversely confirmed the sense that little remained of the social contract that bound post-war generations together or the social imaginary of the welfare state that sought to construct a different vision of Britain and translate it into social practices, symbols and images.

Foodbanks and hunger: a 'national scandal'

Visible reminders of foodbanks had within two decades proliferated in outlets near high streets, the growing queues for food aid and the associated donation boxes in local supermarkets, all of which challenged popular assumptions that hunger in Britain had been relegated to the history books (Espinoza, 2015). As the reminders proliferated, foodbanks shifted in public consciousness from the novel to the normalized, from peripheral in public consciousness to centre stage in a general election. As fierce debates waged about the visible presence of mounting hunger, spaces of emergency food aid became contested symbols of precarity and the locus of outrage at one of the wealthiest countries in the world that allowed its people to go hungry (cf. Monroe, 2013a).

The ability to identify with and feel outrage for the suffering of another is crucial in the imagining of the nation. Personal narratives of the everyday experience of precarity where foodbanks were all that stood between some households and starvation played a crucial role in the re-imagining of contemporary hunger in 21st century Britain (Monroe, 2012). Brought up with a belief in the welfare state as a 'safety net' against the unjust vagaries of life, there was a strong sense in some of the austerity blogs and commentaries of

feelings of bewilderment and abandonment (Monroe, 2013b). Outrage at the injustice of children going to school hungry as well as consequences of poor diet in reversing progress in in public health came through strongly in accounts of teachers and health/food experts (Cohen, 2012; Ashton, *et al.*, 2014). Anecdotal accounts of hunger were given added credence by official records that captured growing number of people hospitalized on the point of starvation and the return of diet-related 'Victorian diseases' (Woodhouse, 2013). As the sense of moral outrage widened beyond the blogosphere, spaces of food aid were increasingly re-constructed as a national scandal.

John Thompson (2000) has drawn attention to the social significance of scandals in what they tell us about how a nation imagines and wants to imagine itself. Scandals are symbols of the transgression of the collective values, norms and moral codes of a society and are 'constituted in public outrage' (Sass & Crosbie, 2013, p. 857). Existing norms can be energised by the exposing of deviant behaviour to public scrutiny, reminding society of what these are and thereby serving social cohesion (Brenton, 2012). However, scandals can also become cultural traumas where failure to address them corrodes the social fabric of a society and 'scars national self-understanding' (Sass and Crosbie, 2013, p. 859).

Something of these dynamics can be seen in the foodbank scandal. Critics perceived transgression to be rooted not in individual deficiencies but in the misaligned priorities of an 'obese and useless' state that spent millions on changing the colour of the British passport ahead of Brexit yet could not feed its children, that restricted taxes paid by wealthy entertainers and global corporations while arguing welfare benefits for the most vulnerable citizens were unaffordable (Cohen, 2012; Poulton, 2012). State transgressions were not only of omission manifest in an indifference and neglect of those in need, they were also of commission. The punitive turn in welfare which imposed benefit sanctions for minor infringements was seen as causing unimaginable misery and a sign that destitution had

become a policy tool' where the 'work not welfare' mantra of ministers signalled that while people could seek benefits the state was increasingly unwilling to provide them (Veit-Wilson, 2017). Government rhetoric sought to justify the reluctance to pay benefits within a denigrative and polarising that differentiated between the 'skivers' and 'strivers' thereby implying claimants had reneged on the responsibility to seek work and therefore the right to state support.

The privileging of the interests of the rich at the expense of the poor and the callous indifference to the plight of the most precarious spoke not only of deeply polarized society, but also a repudiation of the notion of interdependence at the core of the visionary rhetoric of the early welfare state. The brutal erosion of the safety net was not only dismantling the welfare state, it was also eroding the social fabric of a society. The welfare safety net that had lasted for half a century had become more memory than actuality. The unravelling of the welfare state in this context was understood as a regression to an earlier era captured most evocatively in the deployment of the Victorian trope to convey human misery and state indifference to hunger, destitution and hopelessness.

The deployment of a Victorian trope

The evoking of a Victorian trope particularly after 2011 drew parallels between the 19th and 21st centuries in the previously unimaginable technological advances taking place, the emergence of previously unheard of new jobs and social transformation (Gentleman, 2017). In both cases, transformation was seen to have brought new wealth while also devastating traditional livelihood, dislocating labour markets and creating new precarities on a hitherto unheard of scale. More than two centuries after the full impact of the Industrial Revolution became apparent, the third sector once again felt morally compelled to provide the social goods for which the market could not, and the state was unwilling. The deployment of a Victorian metaphor was one way in which government critics made sense not only of

foodbanks per se however also where they sit in relation to a contracting welfare state in the 21st century and what the shifts said about notions of Britishness.

Co-existence or Regression? Foodbanks and the welfare state

For some the revival of the third sector and their provision of food aid signified an evolution to a 'new model' where charity was 'embraced as an essential part of the welfare state' (Gentleman, 2015). Food aid complemented rather than supplemented benefits and the increased engagement of the third sector in Britain was welcomed as a sign of the revival of key part of civil society that had been displaced by the expansion of the state's role in providing welfare after 1948 (David Cameron, cited Rovnick, 2016). Sceptics counter-argued that the semblance of a safety net through the provision of emergency food aid however limited had enabled ministers to distance themselves from responsibility for the vulnerable and accountability for their policies (Ronson & Caraher, 2016). The third sector thus found itself in an invidious position, caught between being co-opted into serving a political agenda to which they are ideologically opposed or doing nothing as families starve they negotiated it by opening more foodbanks and becoming more vocal, labelling hunger a 'national crisis' and calling for government action (Butler, 2014).

Critics were particularly alarmed at the rapidity with which food aid, 'inconceivable' a decade earlier, had become normalized and institutionalized (Garthwaite, 2016). The government in allowing this as seen as not only complicit in the naturalization of food age, but also having endorsed a 'Dickensian model of welfare' whereby charities fed those unable to feed itself while the state absolved itself from responsibility (Tim Lang, cited Cooper, 2013). Some of the most scathing criticism was levelled at the 'mentality' with which welfare reforms had been introduced where getting people into work took priority over individual wellbeing (Alston, 2019, p. 20). The department charged with welfare stood accused of designing 'a digital and sanitized version of the nineteenth century workhouse, made

infamous by Charles Dickens' with support contingent on demonstrating a 'willingness' to work and direct encounters by officials with the human suffering resulting from benefit decisions is minimized (Alston, 2019, p. 5. The normalizing of foodbanks had been facilitated by a 'radical shift' in the philosophy underpinning the British welfare state most explicitly manifest in continued cuts to benefits while the economy improved, the introduction of even harsher penalties and the depersonalizing and stigmatizing of those needing benefit support or food aid (Ashton, *et al.*, 2015; Alston, 2019, p.9). The accusation was that government reforms were pushing people into using foodbanks by conveying the message that 'almost any alternative' would be better than seeking government benefits' (Alston, 2019, p. 20).

The figure of the hungry child

The strongest expressions of outrage after 2012 were centred around the figure of the hungry child and in evoking Oliver Twist government critics were not only drawing on contemporary imaginings of Victorian Britain, they were reviving tactics deployed by reformers in the mid-19th century. The emergence from the 1840s of hunger as a news subject and a prominent theme in Victorian fiction and poetry challenged its naturalization and facilitated its politicization (Vernon, 2009; Cozzi, 2010). The techniques of new journalism which included accounts of personal tragedies and tales of human suffering that readers could identify with re-humanized Britain's hungry slum-dwellers. The 'humanitarian discovery' of hunger challenged then disrupted the Malthusian hegemony that ignored the structural causes of poverty and attributed it instead to individual indigence and moral deficiency (Vernon, 2009). Such assumptions had legitimized the workhouse regime which took the destitute off the streets and sought to transform them, including the children, into workers able to serve a growing capitalist economy (Foucault, 2003).

The centrality of the hunger child in 19th century print capitalism, was evoked two centuries later when news organizations and public health experts claimed that the 'spectre of Oliver Twist' had returned (Smyth, 2014). Not only did the evoking of Dickensian characters humanise the desperation and innocence of food bank users, they were drawing on a mythology of individual suffering familiar to the British public and capturing more evocatively than statistics could, the expansion of hunger in the child population of Britain (Smyth, 2014). However, constructions of the agency of the hungry child in the Victorian trope was a contradictory one. The child in foodbanks, unlike Oliver Twist, was depicted as passive, 'just seemed happy to have something at all' (Purdam, 2017). At home, when they asked for more there was little to be had or what there was watered down (Monroe, 2012). Children's charities reported more coming in search of food or reduced to shop lifting to eat however it was in schools that their presence was most visible, where 'starving pupils dressed in threadbare clothes and shabby shoes' stole food from classmates, an estimated one in five arrived at school hungry and teachers brought in food to feed them (Parry, 2013).

Such accounts sounded 'like a scene from a Victorian drama (Parry, 2013) except the reality of hunger was marked on the body of child in the return of diseases of 'Dickensian England' (Berger, 2013). Britain's hungry children were victims of a 'silent epidemic' as 'horror illnesses' many believed had been stamped out along with Victorian slums including rickets, the soft bone disease believed to have afflicted Tiny Tim in A Christmas Carol (Parry, 2013). The fear of public health experts was that a generation would be permanently 'damaged' physically and psychologically by hunger (Woodhouse, 2013; Smyth, 2014). The figure of the hungry child, the accounts of those encountering them in daily work and the medical statistics combined to present a 'grim picture of life at the bottom of the pile' (Mowat, 2016). The fact that 37% of children living in Britain were brought up poor was a 'national humiliation' (Toynbee, 2017).

Where then the 'Beveridge social contract'?

There was a broad consensus across the political spectrum of increased numbers accessing foodbanks yet a fundamental disagreement as to the causes. Anti-poverty campaigners attributed it to a 'perfect storm' in which economic transformation and higher food prices coincided with unprecedented cuts to benefits that had eroded the welfare safety net at a time when it was needed most (Landale, 2014). Government constructed foodbank users as 'just rational opportunists' looking for free food or hungry because they were unable to manage their household budget (BBC News. 2013; Hartley-Parkinson, 2014). Or foodbanks were reduced to market logic, where increased usage was a function of supply, not demand (Morris, 2014). Bishops, increasingly vocal in their criticism of government policy and punitive turn, were accused of 'straying too far into the political arena' and being 'out of touch' with reality (Doughty & Groves, 2015). Charities were accused of betraying their founding principles of impartiality (Hobbs, 2018). The attacks conflated the politicization of hunger with party partisanship in a brazen attempt to damage the credibility of government critics and with it their voice. The double standards were laid bare in that while acceptable for the third sector to speak out on the causes of hunger in the global south, it was considered unacceptable for them to do so in Britain. The denial of the credibility of the messenger, was a denial of the message that acute or extreme hunger was a mounting problem in Britain. It was also a wilful denial of the historical origins of British charities such as Oxfam and Save the Children which had been founded in the early 1900s in response to what they saw as the deleterious effects of government policies of the day.

The viciousness of the attacks on the third sector reflected the political stakes. The government, driven by a neoliberal ideological commitment to a smaller state, was attempting to radically re-engineer the welfare state and dismantle some of the critical components of 'Beveridge social contract' (Hamnett, 2014). Ministers were seeking to

negotiate tension between rights and responsibilities embedded within the contract and the architecture of the welfare state by discrediting the right to claim benefits for anyone who the government deemed was not trying hard enough to find work. The interdependence in which the early welfare state had been rooted, had been replaced by individual responsibility, human fragility by self-sufficiency and a 'single-minded focus' on getting people into work. The punitive and callous manner in which the changes were implemented were not eroding the welfare state and the very 'fabric' of British society (Alston, 2019). The denigrative rhetoric over-rode that of solidarity, the 'glue' that had held British society together since 1948 was coming unstuck (Chakelian, 2019). The 'national 'we'' had been 'replaced with a deep split between the mean-minded and those horrified to live in a country with a widening chasm between haves and have-nots' (Toynbee, 2017).

Problematising the Dickensian trope

The Victorian trope while powerful, evocative and resonant was also unproblematically deployed in its criticism of welfare reforms. While Dickens had been ahead of his time in campaigning against the social injustices of hunger in Britain and slavery abroad, there are 'hostile tones of imperialist racism' and antisemitism in some of his writings (Moore, 2004; Purchase, 2006, p. 4). In *Oliver Twist,* Dickens not only created one of the most memorable child figures, he also positioned him as an innocent target for the exploitative machinations of one of the most grotesque Jewish characters in English literature i.e. Fagin who runs a school for child thieves. The aim in drawing attention to the racism of Dickens is not to argue that attacks on government need to be politically correct, but to draw attention to the deracialised deployment of the trope. Not only did the deployers of the it ignore the antisemitism in evoking Dickens, in romanticizing a 'golden age' of the welfare state that was supposed to have unified the nation, the trope is ahistorical in its ignoring of the formative role eugenics played in the formative influences on the welfare state (Jacobs, 1985). Similarly, the trope

glosses over the ways in which the early welfare state was both inclusionary and exclusionary from the outset, where ethnic minorities struggled to access the rights to benefits enjoyed by their white counterparts (Freeden, 2010; Ratcliffe, 1998). The amnesia is not only historic. The deployment of the trope while drawing attention to the unimaginable suffering of some of Britain's most vulnerable people, it made little mention of race even though the UK poverty rate is twice as high for black and minority ethnic groups and even more so for migrants from Africa, Pakistan and Bangladesh (Weekes-Bernard, 2017). Unconsciously, the figure of Oliver Twist evoked through the trope is that of the 'white hungry child' while the black or brown one goes unmentioned. The social imaginary of Britain constructed through the trope is one of white homogeneity.

Conclusion

The paper has sought to critically deconstruct the deployment of a Victorian trope used by critics of welfare reforms to convey. The trope evoked familiar figures and narratives from popular culture in a circular imaginary of 'what we were' in Victorian Britain to 'what we have been' in the post-war welfare state to 'what we are reverting to now'. While the trope may appear melodramatic it did serve to hold government to account for policies seen as regressive both nationally and internationally. At another level, a critical deconstruction of the trope draws attention to how it unwittingly evoked historic racism in Victorian literature and in the early welfare state while glossing over the deep racial divides in 21st century Britain where black and ethnic minorities are disproportionately impoverished and more likely to use foodbanks (Alston, 2019). Having said that, the trope was part of a critical debate on the consequences of government policies for foodbank use. The debate over foodbanks was not only about the social imaginary of hunger in 21st century Britain, it was also between rival social imaginaries in a highly fragmented nation. The fragmentation and

flux in social understandings spoke more of post-modern imaginaries than of a modern social imaginary constructed around a grand narrative of the welfare state in 20th century Britain.

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