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## **The geographies of food banks in the meantime**

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### **Abstract**

Geographies of food banks have focused predominantly on issues of neoliberal political-economy and food insecurity. In this paper, we trace alternative understandings of food banking – as spaces of care, and as liminal spaces of encounter capable of incubating political and ethical values, practices and subjectivities that challenge neoliberal austerity. Our aim is to develop a conceptual approach to voluntary welfare capable both of holding in tension the ambivalent and contradictory dynamics of care and welfare in the meantime(s), and of underlining some of the more hopeful and progressive possibilities that can arise in and through such spaces of care.

### **Keywords:**

Food banks, food insecurity, spaces of care, ethics of in-common, liminality

## Introduction

It is a national scandal that in the seventh wealthiest nation on the planet, in excess of half a million people are now reliant on food aid ... austerity and cuts are leading directly to an explosion in hardship and hunger across the UK. (Cooper and Dumbleton, 2013: 16) In December 2014, an All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into hunger reported on the findings of its investigation of the root causes of the significant increases in food poverty that have been brought to light by a recent surge in demand for food aid, and especially food banks, in the UK. The report's assertion that 'hunger stalks this country' (All Party Parliamentary Inquiry, 2014a: 8 – see also 2014b) is connected directly to the broader context of an eroding welfare safety net. It concludes that 'something fundamental is happening in advanced Western economies which throws in to doubt the effectiveness of a national minimum below which no one is allowed to fall' (p. 9). Indeed, the very visible presence, and contested politics, of food banks in the UK has become iconic of social injustice and welfare failure, replacing the previous iconographic position (but not the continuing significance) of homelessness. Though such issues have been prominent for some time in North America (see, for example, Bhattarai et al., 2005; Poppendieck, 1998, 2014; Riches, 1986, 2002; Tarasuk et al., 2014) and Australia (Booth, 2014), food banking, albeit operating differently in different places, has become established as a key mode of responding to food insecurity in 'First World' countries across the globe, including Hong Kong (Tang et al., 2014), Brazil (Rocha, 2014), Turkey (Koc, 2014), Spain (Perez de Armiño, 2014), Germany (Lorenz, 2012), The Netherlands (Van der Horst et al., 2014), Italy (Santini and Cavicchi, 2014), Estonia (Kõre, 2014) and Finland (Silvasti and Karjalainen, 2014).

Excellent comparative analyses of food banking and food insecurity are available elsewhere (for example by Riches and Silvasti, 2014), providing important insights into the diversity of social policy responses adopted in different countries in pursuit (or not) of food security (Rocha, 2014). Here, however, we want to suggest that by positioning food banks simply and predominantly as a response to food insecurity, geographers have often neglected the complexities inherent in food banking, and in so doing have failed to give this phenomenon the conceptual and theoretical attention it deserves. Accordingly, this paper focuses on the contested and contradictory spaces of political and ethical subjectivity articulated by food banks, to argue both for a critical reassessment of geographical interpretation of the food bank phenomenon, and that such a re-evaluation can contribute to a wider reconsideration of the politics of voluntary service provision in the context of austerity.

Theoretical perspectives on the geographies of food banking have predominantly been framed in terms of North American ideas about neoliberal political-economy and food security. Such work has tended to emphasize how, by meeting the immediate ‘symptoms’ of poverty and food insecurity, food banks are themselves symptomatic of insecure and corporatized food networks (Dowler, 2013) and depoliticize issues of poverty by institutionalizing food poverty as deserving of charitable emergency aid rather than collectivist welfare entitlements (Poppendieck, 1998; Riches, 2002; Lambie-Mumford, 2013). While we do not dispute the importance of this kind of interpretative framework, we argue that it can obscure some of the more progressive possibilities arising in and through spaces of food banking and wider welfare and care. Accordingly, building on Gibson-Graham’s (2006) notion of reading for difference (see also May and Cloke, 2014), this paper traces some alternative ways of understanding food banking, conceptualizing food banks as spaces of care that potentially serve to articulate a newly emerging and not yet fully formed ethical and political response to welfare ‘*in the meantime*’, introducing values other than those of neoliberal capitalism as a response to the austere conditions of the here and now.

We begin by examining the dominant theorizations of food banking found in anti-neoliberal and food security scholarship, suggesting that alternative grammars are needed to foreground the neglected geographies, politics and ethics constructed in and through food banks. Understanding the geographies of food banks requires a deconstruction of any simplistic dichotomy that identifies them either as embodiments of the neoliberal shadow state or as symbolic representations that work to catalyse public debate about the pernicious injustice of austerity welfare. Wider social science scholarship has already identified how ‘invited spaces’ of grassroots voluntary activity, seemingly legitimized as a form of tyrannical pseudo-governmental intervention, can be subverted into ‘inventive spaces’ by means of participatory performances that confront the status quo (Houghton et al., 2013; Kesby, 2007). In particular, research on indigenous empowerment and community organizing recognizes the possibility for individuals to be caught up (often unintentionally) in transformative praxis (see, for example, Crosby, 2009; Montero, 2007; Smith, 2000; Weil, 2005), and in so doing become (in Freire’s terms) ‘conscientized’. Accordingly, by focusing on the ethical and political possibilities emerging in the ‘on the ground’ performances of care in food banks, we reflect on their potential as sites for the incubation of social practices, values, and subjectivities that both deviate from, but also challenge, their capitalist counterparts. To illustrate this potential, we draw upon evidence of the politics of food banking in the UK context, an arena that has received relatively little (although fast growing) international attention. We argue that in order to critically assess the political and ethical possibilities arising in and through spaces of food banking, geographical

scholarship must examine the intersections of four interpretative strands: (i) the political construction(s) of food banking, particularly the enrolment of food banks in an array of competing discourses of responsibility, dependency, and welfare austerity; (ii) the organizational landscape of food aid provision, and in particular the ethos, politics and *modus operandi* deployed by a diverse set of emergency food aid providers; (iii) the ambivalent spaces of care and/or stigma experienced by people who use food banks; (iv) and the formation of ethical and political subjectivities, especially amongst those people who volunteer in food bank settings. Such examination, we argue, needs to provide a more nuanced appreciation of the welfare and care work that is carried out ‘in the meantime’, seeing beyond mere incorporation in neoliberal subject-formation and tracing the possibilities for an in-common politics of encounter to emerge in different settings, and to sponsor important opportunities for the formation of ethical and political citizenship. In other words, we need to appreciate how spaces of charitable care can transcend short-term pragmatism, and offer spaces for ethical talk and performance that connect to wider transformative politics and praxis. Overall, our aim in this paper is to develop a conceptual approach to voluntary welfare provision capable of prising open a theoretical and empirical space able to hold in tension the ambivalent and contradictory dynamics currently at work in food banking, thereby underlining the more hopeful and progressive possibilities that can arise in and through such spaces of care.

### **Interpreting food banking in the meantime(s)**

Though also sometimes positioned as a relatively benign, if limited, response to the victims of austerity, the typical starting point for geographical analyses of food banking has been to apply either a food security or political economy perspective. According to the first of these perspectives, food should be considered a human right rather than a charitable concern (Dowler, 2002) and the danger of food banks is that a short-term emergency response to problems of food insecurity will become accepted as a response to an issue they cannot solve: enabling some people to experience less hunger, but doing little to tackle the underlying injustices and inequalities that provoke poverty and that need to be dealt with via radical state-level reform. Food banks are also enmeshed in a series of other (perhaps unintended) consequences. First, they can divert attention away from the state’s duty to provide income and food security for all citizens. Indeed, there is increasing evidence that food banks in the UK are being formalized as *part* of a denuded state welfare system, both through the provision of direct funding from local authorities for food banks through local community grants (Downing and Kennedy, 2013), and by active engagement of public sector care and welfare professionals in the distribution of food bank vouchers. Secondly, food banks benefit food corporations whose donations

produce positive public relations and community capital, but who at the same time save on the costs of disposing of food waste and are themselves engaged in political economies of low pay and unstable employment (Dowler, 2013; Riches, 2011).

According to the second – political economy – perspective, food banks are (even if unwittingly perhaps) caught up in a wider neoliberalization of the economy and welfare; part and parcel of welfare austerity and of the punitive regulatory regimes of the post-justice city (Deverteuil et al., 2009; Mitchell, 1997; O’Hara, 2014). In this light, food banks can be seen as inextricably entwined within a multiplicity of largely aggressive political forces deployed to replace established models of welfare provision and state regulation with a free-market fundamentalism that normalizes individualistic self-interest, entrepreneurial values and consumerism. In fact, given that many food banks in the UK and elsewhere (see, for example, USA and Canada; Poppendieck, 1998) are associated with faith-based organizations, they might also be interpreted as an integral part of what Hackworth (2012) has called ‘religious neoliberalism’, in which a political mobilization of individualistic, anti-state and pro-religious interests serves to promote an ideational platform fuelled by the apparent rationality of replacing collectivist secular welfare with religiously-delivered charity. Understood in this light, food banks can be seen as active agents in shaping the conduct (Larner, 2009) of neoliberal welfare subjectivities in which the needs of the ‘deserving’ poor are to be met through the disbursement of charity, whilst others are ‘undeserving’ of assistance because they are somehow deemed to be responsible for their own plight. Indeed, food banks can also be seen as contributing to the feel-good factor of voluntarism – in which the ‘moral selving’ (Allahyari, 2000) of organizers and volunteers permits the impression of a positive contribution to the needs of others, but which may reflect a deeper-seated desire to project a certain kind of social citizenship that is content to achieve a ‘quiet sense of the ordinary’ whilst reproducing existing exclusions and wider anti-welfare discourses (Ehrkamp and Nagel, 2014; see also Poppendieck, 1998).

Given this evidence of entanglement with the forces of neoliberalism and punitive and self-perpetuating charity, food banks might in fact be understood as representing a serious barrier to the fight against poverty, inequality and food insecurity, and the most logical response to their recent and rapid rise would be for critical geographers to further highlight exactly these kind of issues, and join with those who have called to close them down (see, for example, Power, 2011; Polzer and Power, forthcoming). Such a conclusion is perhaps unsurprising given longstanding criticism directed to the ‘good works’ of civil society, whose entanglements in the territories of the capitalist state-market supposedly serve as a mechanism to buttress the powerful (Gramsci, 2005; Foucault, 2007), and

encourage those struggling for justice to settle for a humane face of capitalism that delays a better solution for all (Villadsen, 2008; Goode, 2006; Lyon-Callo, 2008). In this sense, the 'apolitical' posture of some food banks might be read as politically short-sighted and reactionary, placating the excesses of capitalism by enchanting the oppressed into a charitable consolation which tempers dissent and individualizes the causes of poverty.

The problem with hegemonic applications of these kinds of interpretative frameworks is, however, that they can too often lead to self-fulfilling, overly-formulaic and potentially uncritical analysis; food banks, and other such spaces of care, become accepted as inextricably mired in the neoliberal politics of their context, and no possible good can be seen in them. However, there are other perspectives that run counter to this conclusion. First, refusal to contemplate emergency responses to food poverty runs the risk of a politics of abandonment (Cloke et al, 2010). Put simply, whilst food banks are certainly not the solution to the current mean times, where, for example, might the hundreds of thousands of people in the UK currently reliant on food aid turn for food in the meantime whilst longer term solutions to the problems of food poverty are sought? Secondly, whilst the very rapid growth of food banks in the UK and elsewhere has generated significant public and political debate around exactly the kinds of issues outlined above, a slew of reports by third sector organizations – such as Church Action on Poverty, Oxfam and the Trussell Trust in the UK context (Cooper and Dumbleton, 2013; Cooper et al., 2014; Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2014; Perry et al., 2014) – and the government (Lambie-Mumford et al., 2014) have admitted that the evidence on which this research is based remains both limited and contested. In particular there remain important questions to ask about: the scale and geographical spread of food banking; the diversity of organizations providing food banks, and the very different approaches and practices of these organizations; and about the use of food banks – not only who is using them, how and why, but the experiences of users. Geographers would seem well positioned to engage with these questions, thus deepening the evidence on which any assessment of the efficacy and politics of food banking might be assessed. Thirdly, the potential diversity in the approaches and practices of food banks may well militate against any simple or singular reading of the extent to which they can begin to address the structural problems of food insecurity, or are irretrievably caught up in the further neoliberalization of welfare and the reproduction of paternalistic discourses of charity.

These 'counter' responses may, of course, be dismissed as merely pandering to the idea that food banking is simply the salve used by neoliberal austerity to placate the terror of its meanness – a matter of incorporation rather than resistance. Here, it is certainly important to be cognizant of the pitfalls of

what Žižek (2011) has termed 'liberal communism' – that is, the actions of good people who are fully embedded in greedy capitalism engaging in a public worrying that focuses on secondary level social and economic malfunctions of the global system but neglects to challenge that system. However it also seems to be crucial to avoid what he refers to as 'a politics of cynical pedagogy' in which the response to neoliberal governance is restricted to demands for an expansion of the welfare state, in full knowledge that the state is unable to deliver (cf. Massey, 2013). Alongside these considerations, it seems important to establish appropriately critical but open-handed analytical tools to examine the geographies, politics and ethics of welfare and care that happen '*in the meantime*'. The idea of '*in the meantime*' has previously been used to examine the ways in which the temporalities of everyday life function as forms of biopolitical control (Sharma, 2014). Here, we adopt the phrase to present an understanding of the role of social action in the austere conditions of the here and now, whilst at the same time working towards an anti-capitalist sea change to bring about more structural change. As such, '*in the meantime*' can be understood in three main ways: as a *political* space of engagement that transcends analytical binaries of incorporation and resistance, or reformism and revolution; as an *ethical* space of engagement with the phenomenology of need, the possibilities of in-commonness, and the development of communicative publics in which ethical conversation provokes new practice-based normativities; and as a *theoretical* space that opens up a recognition of progressive and hopeful activities (as well as their darker 'shadows').

'In the meantime', then, requires a more careful empirical examination even within those spaces and organizations that are considered 'legitimizing devices' (Trudeau and Veronis, 2009) in order to highlight the efforts, struggles and spaces of contention that might offer more hopeful lines of flight for resisting the processes and powers that food banks are willingly or unwillingly caught up in. As Weizman (2012) ponders in his discussion of greater and lesser evils in the role of humanitarianism in the presence of geopolitical violence:

Is the choice only between squabbling with power about the correct measure of its violence, helping to calibrate it and tend to its wounded, or on the other hand a call for its amplification in order to 'expose its contradictions' (contradictions seem only to sustain power's march) to shock a complacent population into rising up? (p. 23)

To some extent, this age-old wrestling match between notions of incorporation or subversion has run its course for, as Fisher (2009) has emphasized, contemporary capitalist culture now trades on different forms of 'precorporation', resulting in a pre-emptive patterning of desires and hopes and an



elimination of ethical senses of value. Recent geographic scholarship on ethics, care and responsibility (Young, 2004; Lawson, 2007; Massey, 2004, 2007; also see Noxolo et al., 2012), concerning the limits of connectivity and propinquity in producing ethical sensibilities and ethical subjectivity, has helped to direct critical attention to the mundane spaces and practices that open up – and close down – different formations of ethical and political responsibility (Popke, 2007). Reading for difference, then, might point to the need for new geographical sensibilities to arenas where there are glimpses both of a realignment of hope, perhaps in relation to the desires that remain unfulfilled by neoliberal capitalism, and of a (re)emergence of countercultural ethical values.

Such a reading offers at least two applications to the critical interpretation of ‘in the meantime’ spaces of welfare such as food banks. The first concerns the possibility that these seemingly mundane spaces of care and welfare can serve as potentially virtuous arenas of common life. It is well documented that spaces of care can sometimes provide material resources, refuge and therapeutic encounters in sensitive contexts characterized by anxious and often stigmatized subjectivities (Conradson, 2003a; Johnsen et al., 2005; Parr, 2007). However, we would argue that they are also capable of creating spaces in which social responses to the phenomenology of need can lead eventually to political and ethical ruptures in the art of the possible within capitalist realism. Badiou’s (2010) assertion that effective anti-capitalism needs to present a *rival* to capitalism and not just a *reaction* to it appears on the surface to rule out any idea that something like a food bank could ‘count’ as anti-capitalism. However, it could be argued that ‘reaction’ and ‘rival’ are not mutually exclusive. In his essay on what money can’t buy, Sandel (2012) bemoans the crowding out of worthwhile nonmarket norms under neoliberalism, and identifies social solidarity and civic virtue as qualities that have languished under market-driven governance. However, he argues:

Altruism, generosity, solidarity and civic spirit are not like commodities that are depleted with use. They are more like muscles that develop and grow stronger with exercise. (p. 130)

These kinds of virtues are not only capable of feeding into competing conceptions of appropriate social practice, they also offer potential for meaningful encounters between people of different social positions and, as a consequence, some political and ethical re-evaluation of what constitutes the common good, and how it might be cared for.

This notion – that care-relations with the survivors of food insecurity are capable of prompting political and ethical re-evaluation on the part of those who are doing the caring – opens up a second conceptual

possibility, that caring spaces such as food banks can also serve as liminal spaces of encounter. Staff and volunteers in such spaces are likely to represent a wide range of ideological, religious and other normativities that might otherwise prevent any kind of unified, or certainly transformative, ethical impulses. However, recent discussions of ideas of ethics that draw on poststructural thinking (see, for example, Connolly, 2006; Popke, 2009a) have focused on more emotional and affective registers of encounter in which the contemporaneous engagement of mind, body, habit and reflection can lead not only to processes of self-expressive agonistic confrontation, but also to an enlarging of the capacity to be generously 'in common' with others. Here, we can see the possibility in the cultural work of dispositions and habits for 'proto-political longings for change' (Thrift, 2004: 69) to emerge as people learn to be affected by in-common encounters with food bank users who would otherwise remain beyond their visceral (and often emotional) domain. Pragmatically, in-common communities will often be the sites of political and ethical deliberation involving what Barnett (2008, 2012) refers to as 'ethos talk'. Participation in care-giving and welfare-provision provides people with situated encouragement to talk about their personal experiences of volunteering and serving in ways that develop wider ethical understanding and political awareness. This personal phenomenology of need can prompt changes to wider values relating to the common good. It follows that ethos talk can aid the formation of communicatively formed publics (Barnett and Bridge, 2012), and that the liminal formation of such publics allows the possibility that they come to act as effective agents for change. The performance of virtue, and the ethos-talk that emerges from extending the community boundaries of in-common togetherness, point to interesting trajectories for reading foodbank spaces for difference; indicating a series of fascinating lines of enquiry that offer some potential in deconstructing binary interpretations relating to incorporation or subversive resistance.

### **Organizational and political constructions of food banking: The example of the UK**

In the remainder of this paper we explore the conceptualization of food banks through attendant themes of care, welfare, encounter and political and ethical sensitivity in two ways: first, using the UK as an example, via an analysis of the wider organizational and political discourses in which understandings of food banks are embedded; and secondly, via an exploration of the on-the-ground potential for care, virtue and ethical encounter *in amongst* the seemingly mundane 'in the meantime' practices of food banking. Food banks have become seemingly well entrenched within particular organizational and political discourses which both enrol them into particular understandings of welfare, responsibility, non-dependency, generosity and the like, and to some extent shape broader societal assumptions through which food banking is understood. In particular, we argue that the

discourses of charity claimed and performed by food bank organizations and food bank volunteers 'on the ground' play a key role in configuring possibilities for 'in common' spaces of encounter and the formation of ethical and political citizenship.

The dominant *organizational* force behind the development and growth of food banks in the UK has been the Trussell Trust, which currently runs over 400 food banks and in 2014–15 provided more than one million 3-day parcels of emergency food supplies to people in need. Started as a single food bank in Salisbury in 2000 by Christian charitable entrepreneurs Paddy and Carol Henderson, the Trust grew quickly into a non-profit franchise network with the objective of rolling out a local-focused, community-based approach across the nation (see Lambie, 2011). Inspired by the theo-ethics (Clope, 2010) of its Christian roots, the Trust sought to harness local (and often church-based) volunteers and food donors into a standardized system of food distribution to those in need. Instilled in the franchise were a number of key objectives. First, in order to discourage dependency, service users would be restricted to three food parcels in a six month period. Second, the Trust uses referral partners (for example general practitioners, Citizens Advice Bureaux) who issue vouchers to clients experiencing crisis; a system that devolves responsibility about who deserves support, and thereby avoids potential divisiveness across the broad spread of political and faith-based positionalities that go to make up the voluntary workforce. However, in so doing, the Trust risks capture by wider political ideologies and practices that subjectify deservingness and undeservingness, and thereby opens itself up to claims that it subscribes to and re-enforces the moral landscapes of poverty promulgated by neoliberal governance. The centrality of the Trussell Trust in public discourses concerning food poverty has masked somewhat the significance of other food aid providers, who are often ignored or undercounted in the enumeration of the food bank landscape. Research by May et al. (2014) used a web-based survey of the 10 largest UK cities outside London and 10 other smaller towns and cities to assess the importance of independent food bank provision. Scaling up from these sample figures suggested a national total of well over 700 food banks, approximately 300 of which are independent of the Trussell Trust network. These organizational networks prompt two key conceptual questions about food banking. First, do Trussell Trust and other similar faith-based food banks consistently perform a kind of conservative theo-ethics (Clope, 2010) that embraces within its protocols and practices moral stances on dependency and deservedness, and steers clear of promoting wider sets of political values? There is already some evidence that this kind of assertion may represent an unworkable stereotype. Whilst many such food banks embrace *both* practical and pastoral support *and* forms of political awareness and campaigning at local and national levels (see, for example, Webster, 2014a), they may also be understood as promoting alternative and potentially radical forms

of distribution and economy, for example by removing food from the trade economy and claiming it instead for the gift economy (but see Lindenbaum, 2016, for a critical discussion of re-gifting). As Webster (2014b) explains, investment in the gift economy represents an investment in compassion that dissolves boundaries between 'haves' and 'have nots' and between the 'brutal rhetoric' (p. 18) of contemporary poverty and the possibility of building community and intimacy. Food banks, as pivotal axes in the contemporary gift economy, may therefore be actively co-producing an affective landscape of alternative welfare, despite their apparent associations with aspects of neoliberal subjectification.

The second question relates to the potential for other kinds of anti-capitalist values to emerge in the independent sector. For example, recent interest in Muslim involvement in food banks (for example through the Sufra organization working in a range of UK cities – see Forrest, 2014) initially suggests a somewhat similar approach to that of the Trussell Trust – a system of referrals and vouchers is used to disburse food parcels to needy households irrespective of colour, creed, gender or political affiliation. Such organizations similarly negotiate political constructions of dependency and welfare crises. Nonetheless, it would seem that this ethical outpouring extends to other practices too, such as a lower-profile and discrete delivery of food hampers to families in need, and mosque-based collections of food for use by a range of local food aid organizations. Secular organizations, such as Real Aid, offer a non-religious, nonpolitical contribution to food aid via collection of food donations, charity shops and food banks. In this case there is a particular emphasis on attempting to address the issues of stigma experienced by working families, both by rejecting the use of vouchers, and by making a small charge for the food so as to replace charity with equitable exchange (Rayner, 2013). In another model, local teams from Food Not Bombs use collections of surplus food to serve up free vegan meals on a weekly or fortnightly basis in many cities as an unconditional response to food poverty. In this case, volunteers seem to be motivated by a wider set of anti-war, antipoverty and anti-capitalist concerns, and their provision of food represents an activist response to food waste and to the needs of homeless people (see Heynon, 2010). Politicized action against food waste is also a significant motivational force for volunteers with FareShare, who collect surplus food that would otherwise go to waste within the food industry and redistribute it around the country for use by partner charities (such as breakfast clubs, homeless hostels and women's refuges), providing an estimated 13.2 million meals per annum (FareShare, 2014). To these more politicized interventions should be added the phenomenon of social supermarkets (Holweg and Lienbacher, 2011; Ram, 2014), in which the idea of food banks as investments in gift economies is problematized and replaced by attempts to combat issues of stigma caused by charity via integrating food aid into a more conventional shopping experience. These various organizational discourses and practices suggest significant complexity in

terms of conceptualizing the landscape of food banking. Independent organizations bring a complicated assemblage of ethical values – including charity, equitable exchange, unconditionality, reduction of food waste, anti-war, anti-capitalism – to the table. And even the dominant, seemingly theo-ethically conservative faith-based models have the capacity to create compassionate affective landscapes of alternative welfare.

These organizational questions are themselves embedded within wider *political* discourses. As Wells and Caraher (2014) have shown, there was no press coverage of political debate involving UK food banks before 2008, and relatively little until 2012, since when there has been an explosion of media interest and public debate. To some extent, the political construction of food banks by the UK government reflects what Cresswell (1995 – following Therborn, 1980) has described as the operation of ideology in human life. An initial ideological construction of what does and does not exist rolls over into an assertion of what is good, just and appropriate, and finally reverts to more fundamentalist evaluations of what is, and is not, possible. Each of these modes of interpellation can be used as a line of defence of the given social order. Thus, initial government accounts of food banks in the UK seemed content to acknowledge their existence, provided that narratives conformed to a politically appropriate emphasis on the charitable voluntary spirit of the organizations concerned, which were easily conveyed as the admirable little platoons of self-helpers envisaged by the public rhetoric of ‘Big Society’ (Wells and Caraher, 2014). In the early years of his office, Prime Minister David Cameron was content to regard the Trussell Trust as ‘a fantastic Christian charity’ that he regarded as the ‘epitome of the Big Society’ (Conservative Home, 2012), thereby enrolling food banks into a public construction of how a smaller state can be supplemented by ‘extraordinary organisations run by faith groups and Christians in our country’ (quoted in Fisher, 2014). To some extent this ideological enrolment coincided with the practical operational requirements of the Trussell Trust, who positioned themselves as a non-political force, not least because their banks of helpers were necessarily drawn from a wide range of political and moral positionalities, and for whom a seemingly neutral organizational emphasis on meeting needs and serving people was necessary to maintain a wide social and political spread of volunteers and food donors.

This initial ideological construction quickly became difficult to maintain, as the preferred emphasis on *organizations* shifted to a focus on the plight of foodbank *users*, and in particular the role of austerity governance in creating negative changes to the welfare landscape. The little platoons of religious and secular voluntarism proved to be unreliable political bedfellows for the government, preferring to voice prophetic warnings about over-stringent welfare reforms than to bask in the supposed warm

glow of inclusion in rhetorics about the Big Society. In particular, Christian ethical concern was marshalled towards campaigns in favour of the food bank movement (and against payday lenders) as responses to the conditions created by these changes to welfare provision (Brown, 2014). As a result, the government turned to its next defensive mode of interpellation in an ideological assertion of what it considered to be good, just and appropriate in the treatment of the kinds of people who had become foodbank users. In an ironic exercise of ‘turning its guns on the little platoons’ (Cohen, 2013) that it had previously lauded, government ministers lined up to counterattack against the idea that increased use of food banks was connected with welfare cuts, and blamed foodbank users for mismanaging their resources (see Gentlemen, 2014).

The ideological assertion of what is ‘right’ and ‘just’ here is transparent. The priority of government was clarified as a supposedly moral mission to wean people off ‘welfare dependency’, and to do so they need to present multiple subjectivities of impoverishment that differentiated between deserving (those who work hard and do the ‘right thing’) and undeserving (those who can work but don’t – see, for example, Seabrook, 2013). By this token, hunger (bizarrely) became presented as a lifestyle choice, and food banks as self-serving spaces dominated by supposedly undeserving users. In some ways, foodbank organizations such as the Trussell Trust had already been forced to negotiate this question of ‘who *deserves* help’ as part of their *modus operandi*, and the Trust’s use of other welfare professionals to issue vouchers for use in food banks could be viewed as upholding a distinction between deserving and undeserving service users. However, in its position as the principal provider of public information about food bank use in the UK, the Trust has become increasingly vocal in publicizing both the scale of food bank use and the welfare-related problems experienced by its users, not least the increasingly harsh use of sanctions against benefit recipients. Simply by their presence in the contemporary landscape of social care, and their capacity to feed information about users into public debate, food banks have therefore created a space for political contention that has resulted in obvious public contradictions in the explanatory logic given by government to explain the contemporary social order. Castigation of the so-called undeserving poor founders when it is channelled via criticism of organizations that had previously been cited as paragons of voluntaristic charity and faith-based community engagement, and whose on-the-ground experience points to significant issues of hunger amongst both the working poor and by those disadvantaged by welfare cuts and sanctions. In turn, food banks are becoming transformed from (often) non-political spaces into agencies increasingly devoted to giving a voice to the voiceless, and thereby represent spaces which are becoming ripe for further public ‘ethos talk’ as external critique becomes ever more illogical and out of touch with the phenomenology of need.

The ways in which government will respond to any such changes are equally fascinating. One possibility is, of course, that faced with growing opposition to austerity, government will revert to their third line of ideological defence, switching away from these obvious contradictions towards politically and economically blunt constructions of what is and is not possible. Reverting to a basic politicised recognition that it is the poor that always bear the brunt of recession and subsequent austerity, may be an obvious tactic by which government can be seen once again to endorse social voluntarism as part of their political platform, and thereby attempt to quell the ethical conscience currently being brewed in spaces of care such as food banks. Recognizing the disparate constructions of food banking goes far in helping analyse the public acceptability of food banks and the charitable ethos and practices of organizations and volunteers, and sharpens analysis of the discursive and affective resonances between the values of altruism, generosity and solidarity and the ways that these are made to resonate with various political agendas – both reactionary and progressive (Connolly, 1999). This in turn raises urgent questions concerning what type of ethos is constructed and performed in food banks themselves.

### **Food banks as ambivalent spaces of care?**

Over recent years, human geographers have both become more sensitized to issues of care and responsibility, and been more willing to understand care and responsibility as part of wider notions of solidarity. Understanding care as ‘the provision of practical or emotional support’ (Milligan and Wiles, 2010: 737), particular attention has been channelled towards how care becomes expressed in new forms of relationships, institutions and actions such that particular social spaces come to produce enhanced mutuality and well-being (Conradson, 2003b; Lawson, 2007). It has become clear that care involves both physical and emotional labour, not least in overcoming the potential destabilization of identity that occurs when sharing spatial proximity with people who potentially invoke a sense of psychological insecurity because of their perceived difference (see Parr and Philo, 2003). As Milligan (2001) contends, variations in coping with this kind of emotional caring work can lead to differences in local contexts and individual performances of care but, at its most productive, the performed ethic of care can be instrumental in developing an expanded, relational and collective vision of the social (McEwan and Goodman, 2010). Despite accounts that equate social volunteering with the self-moralizing and self-gratifying performance of charity (see, for example, Allahyari, 2000) or with an incapacity to move beyond discourses involving the ‘sin talk’ of personal irresponsibility or the ‘sick talk’ of pathological otherness (Gowan, 2010), a focus on geographies of care therefore opens up

alternative possibilities for conceptualizing food banks as institutional, relational and performative places of practical and emotional work involving practices and cultures of listening and responding to the needs of people in crisis.

In tune with prevalent geographies of punitive welfare, public accounts of the relationships between food banks and their service users often focus either on the possibility that service users do not really need help, or on the shame and stigma which can haunt the 'dark side' of food aid (van der Horst et al., 2014), with the latter presenting food banks as spaces in which the neoliberal state forces users into the shame of admitting an inability to cope (Bridge, 2014). The twin embarrassments of being seen entering and leaving a foodbank or carrying a food parcel, and of being obliged to interact with staff and volunteers in the giving and receiving of charity, conjure up an image of environments which might be thought to require displays of deference, needfulness and gratitude alongside the stigma of need (see Butler, 1990, 1993). Food banks also often operate from utilitarian buildings such as community or church halls, which can present barriers for some people who fear unwanted proselytization or unwanted publicity of their plight, especially in rural and closely-knit communities. In our research we have come across several examples of foodbank users who, by hook or by crook, travel significant distances in order to avoid being recognized by anyone in their own community. In assessing the role of food banks as potential spaces of care, it is certainly important to take this 'dark side' seriously, foregrounding the divergent meanings and experiences attributed to and derived from the spaces of emergency food provision by those who make use of such services. Emotional geographies of shame, stigma and moral judgement abound, and are further stratified socially, for example by gender, ethnicity, age and so on.

However, there are also other aspects of food banking that indicate the potential for a more progressive 'lighter' side, and here we argue the need to conceptualize food banks as ambivalent spaces, often characterized by complex interconnectivities between shame and gratitude, stigma and acceptance, moral judgement and emotional support. Evidence from research in the UK has identified food banks as places of 'last resort' (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014) in which people who have experienced social and economic crises seek help that is not available elsewhere. Some such crises are sudden – due, for example, to the loss of income arising from unemployment or unexpected problems with welfare benefit payments; others are the culmination of longer-term struggles with the gradual inability to resolve the collective impacts of cost of living increases, low wages, benefit reductions and increasing indebtedness. Detailed research with food bank users (for example, Lambie-Mumford et al., 2014) suggests that two particular scenarios of precariousness act as triggers for seeking out food



aid: extreme housing vulnerability, involving a downward spiral beginning with an inability to afford the rising costs of living in the rented sector and culminating with hidden homelessness or even rough sleeping (see Cloke et al., 2014); and extreme financial vulnerability, often associated with 'financial difficulty as a result of changes to their social security benefits, which involved either their experiencing a complete absence of income (because of sanctions or errors), or sudden increased outgoings as a result of changes to housing benefit and council tax benefit' (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014: 1420). It is clear that many users arrive at food banks at the end of a line of frustrating and often unhelpful encounters with welfare state officials who are simply unable to help, or provide practical care, because of the increasingly punitive nature of contemporary welfare restrictions and bureaucracy. While food bank users arrive with a clearly marked identity, there is scope in the food bank encounter for a different response, involving aspects of both caring about and caring for in relational exchanges with people who care enough to contribute personally to providing care and welfare to individuals and households in positions of last resort.

In our research we have found little evidence of food bank staff and volunteers performing roles of responsabilisation and/or moral guardianship over whether service users deserve help or not. In some food banks, volunteers are freed from the moral responsibility of having to decide who is and who is not deserving of assistance, enabling them to claim a more comfortable, 'non-judgemental' stance because these decisions are made for them in advance by trained welfare professionals. Nevertheless, food bank organizations have grown increasingly vocal in connecting food insecurity with the changing nature of food bank provision. Notably, the supposedly 'non-political' Trussell Trust has been vocal in demonstrating that half of all referrals to its food banks resulted from benefit changes or delays, and that 83% of its food banks were reporting that benefit sanctions were causing rising numbers of people to use their services (see Trussell Trust, 2013). The accounts of both food bank providers and their religious and secular supporters have posed a straightforward challenge to government discourses that seek to shrug off food bank users as part of the 'undeserving poor', enabling researchers to focus instead on the 'new hunger' (Caraher and Cavicchi, 2014) arising from contemporary crises rather than from political caricatures, and to provide serious analyses of how food banks fit into people's wider coping strategies involving changing shopping and eating habits, stringent control of expenditure and leaning on the support of friends and family (Hossain et al., 2011; Goode, 2012a, 2012b; Lambie-Mumford et al., 2014).

It is this space of last resort where strategies and tactics of care are variously used to combat the dark side of food bank use. Research in these and related spaces of care (see, for example, Cloke et al.,

2012; Conradson, 2003b; Darling, 2011; Johnsen et al., 2005; Williams, 2015) has made clear that any such shame and stigma tends always to be variegated by the material configuration of the space concerned, by the practices of staff, volunteers and service users themselves, and by the degree of sensitivity with which organizational regulations are interpreted and enacted. Although some food bank facilities are characterized by a basic and unwelcoming infrastructure and an understaffed and overstretched group of volunteers, elsewhere very considerable efforts are made to ensure user-friendly materialities and practices, and to perform care in a way that works hard to provide a positive encounter for service users. Some food banks are increasingly becoming cafe-style centres (Garthwaite et al., 2015), with an accent on hospitality and personal attention. Non-food items are becoming increasingly available, and small details – such as ensuring that bags used for food are not recognisable – are being addressed, and more radical re-orientations such as home delivery or even different versions of social supermarkets (Harrison, 2014; Holweg and Lienbacher, 2011) are gradually becoming more common. Only through detailed participatory research can these different affective landscapes be effectively discerned and understood, and the associated attempts to counteract the stigmatic culture of foodbank use be assessed. Initial evidence suggests that the stigma of the first visit can sometimes be assuaged in subsequent visits due to the impact of these caring practices and performances. However, this should not be read as an uncritical endorsement; clearly compassion is mediated through very different technologies, from vouchers to tea and cake, and food bank spaces will usually represent a complex amalgam of ambiguous and contradictory dynamics involving charity, solidarity and civic spirit, variously articulated via religious and political motivations to care.

### **Food banks and the ‘in common’ politics of encounter**

Recent discussions in geography about what it is to be ‘ethical’ have focused on how, in Negri’s (1996: 170) words, the responsibility for the common becomes a ‘terrain of possibility of action, of hope’. This emphasis on the common draws on Nancy’s (1991) insistence that ‘being’ needs to be understood as ‘being with’, thereby prioritizing senses of co-presence with others in time and space. Ethical geographies, then, have questioned how this in-common becomes constructed, and how spaces of in-common can be produced as sites of ethical responsibility (see especially Popke, 2003, 2007, 2009a, 2009b). This focus on collective responsibility establishes care as a communal project, and embraces not only care for individuals but also care through new communal spaces of thinking, moving and encounter (what McCormack (2003: 502) emphasizes as ‘developing a fidelity to the event’). Ethical practice can therefore be seen, at least in part, as the discovery of an emotional, connected and committed sense for the other, both through explicit moral values and in implicit sensibilities involving

emotion, affect and even spirituality. Following Barnett (2008, 2012) we can suggest that appropriate affective inflection will sometimes facilitate the emergence of ethical and political deliberations and judgements that involve a kind of 'ethos talk' that permits a registration of commitment to certain values without having to adhere to foundational norms and principles or argue on the basis of such norms. Ethos-talk, often in the form of asking for and giving reasons, in turn permits the potential for communicatively formed publics (Barnett and Bridge, 2012) where common understandings of communication, problem-solving and rationalities for action are transactionally contingent and enacted as a response to the experience of problematic situations. These ideas about ethical uncommonness provide a second conceptual possibility for the understanding of food banks, namely that these sites of supposedly reactionary charity could possibly be re-read as event spaces in which potential glimmers of alternative political-economic possibilities incubate as rivals to neoliberal capitalism. As Fisher (2009) contends, the oppressive pervasiveness of market-led capitalism means that such glimmers can have disproportionate effect; the smallest eventspace of alternative political and ethical virtue can begin to 'tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism' (p. 81). As growing numbers of scholars debate the possibility of alternative food networks and collectives in generating more progressive ethical and political sensibilities (Trauger and Passidomo, 2012; Galt et al., 2014; but also see Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014), we contend that the liminal event-spaces emerging through food banking are capable of facilitating similar, albeit unfinished and embryonic, spaces of ethical citizenship.

Little detailed research has yet been carried out with staff and volunteers of emergency food aid organizations, and previous investigations of the role and performance of charitable volunteers has focused on the key roles of self-fulfilment, and of self-aware displays of virtue in understanding the motivations of participants. More recently, these kind of interpretative grammars have been questioned, with a more complex amalgam of self-aware morality *plus* a desire (often described in moral, ethical, political or religious terms) to 'do something about something', *plus* a less tangible performative capacity to express ethics of *caritas*, *agape* or generosity, being advanced as a more accurate reflection of why and how people respond to perceived and experienced need (Cloke et al., 2012; May and Cloke, 2014; Williams, 2015). Participation, of course, takes many forms – in food aid, for example, the behind-the-scenes giving and sorting of food does not entail the kinds of face-to-face performances of 'frontline' encounters, and so volunteers can find a niche of activity that suits their personal comfort zone. However, the scale of involvement in emergency food aid projects, and the multiplicity of political, ethical and religious positionings represented by participants, raise very significant questions about whether and how participation may change the participants (both

volunteers and service users) and effect deeper processes of ethical and political transformation both within and beyond the space of the foodbank itself. In what ways does the practice of being-in-common with people experiencing food poverty, involving as it does an engagement of mind, body, habit and reflection (Popke, 2009a), lead to processes of micro-political transformation (Lawson and Elwood, 2014) and of new forms of ethos-talk in the development of new communicative publics (Barnett, 2008)? Such questions are central in a critical analysis of the impacts of 'in the meantime' spaces and subjectivities such as those associated with food banks.

Much can be learned here from the longer-term presence of emergency food aid in places such as the USA. In her book *Take This Bread*, Sara Miles (2012) presents a detailed autoethnography of how envisioning and implementing an emergency food pantry in a San Francisco church raised a host of micro-political and ethical questions for herself and her fellow volunteers. As if both to allay Lancione's (2014) fears of acritical analysis of faith-based activities, and to decentre Hackworth's (2012) narratives of religious neoliberalism, Miles describes her story as 'an unexpected and terribly inconvenient Christian conversion, told by a very unlikely convert: a blue-state, secular intellectual; a lesbian; a left-wing journalist with a habit of scepticism. ... I'm hardly the person George Bush had in mind to be running a "faith-based" charity' (p. xii). We dwell on this example here not because of Miles' particular Christian theo-ethics per se, but because it offers a vivid account of how the phenomenology of need leads to ethical and political judgements, and a development of ethos talk, that transcends foundational norms and principles. Miles' account highlights three very significant insights into the potential for – and factors shaping – ethical and political change in the process of meeting the needs of hungry people.

First, Miles articulates the power of material and affective engagement as a potential force for connection, with an attendant capacity to speak to and transform those who seek to put it into practice:

What I heard, and continue to hear, is a voice that can crack religious and political convictions open, that advocates for the least qualified, least official, least likely; that upsets the established order and makes a joke of certainty. It proclaims against reason that the hungry will be fed, that those cast down will be raised up, and that all things, including my own failures, are being made new. (p. xv)

Here Miles narrates the affective power of performance and practice; of 'plugging away with other people ... acting in small ways without the comfort of a big vision or even a lot of realistic hope' (p.

162). It is about doing-something-about-something, the keeping on working in the pantry, simply feeding as many people as possible. Her narrative reflects that the phenomenological engagement she understood as spirituality chimed with the experience of a host of other volunteers, including some who brought rather different understandings of religion to the process, and some who did not share any religious convictions or would identify such engagement through a spiritual register. In the practice of feeding hungry people, cross-over connections were made in both discourse and performance that forged postsecular-style partnerships (Clope and Beaumont, 2012) out of the simple process of 'plugging away'. Engagements in the food pantry thereby proved to be far distant from any foundational or exclusive religiosity, suggesting instead an affective openness to connection and generosity that can transcend different shades of the sacred and the secular.

Secondly, Miles' account champions the performance of 'right practice' over 'right belief'. The *praxis* of connective encounter (see Clope et al., 2012) is central to the idea of being in-common with excluded social groups, and to the working out of the conditional practicalities of performing unconditional welfare. Early in the development of the food pantry, Miles was faced with a series of questions about the limits to be imposed on the service:

How were we going to decide whom to serve – what if people came who didn't really need the food? What if thieves started coming back after the pantry to steal from us? And how, by the way, would I possibly raise enough money to pay for feeding all comers? (p. 115)

Her response was to identify how embodied engagement made sense of what being unconditional really meant:

Serving at the pantry evoked muscle memories for me of long-ago nights on the restaurant line: hard lifting, sore feet, companionship. I'd help lug and haul literally tons of food in an afternoon, heaving fifty-pound sacks of potatoes, pushing industrial garbage cans full of spoiled onions into the reeking basement, sweating like a horse. I'd bend and lift and drink too much coffee; curse with my co-workers when the rush hit, wipe my dirty hands on my apron and go home to discover huge purple bruises up and down my legs. But the work reminded me of what I was doing at church on Sundays. ... The people who came to get food at the pantry had been, to regular middle-class churchgoers, basically like Jesus – that is invisible. We knew that they were there, but we couldn't see them, and their sufferings and loveliness were imagined, not incarnate in a specific body. But as I got to know them, I started

to see more clearly how the people who came to the pantry were like me: messed up, often prickly and difficult, yearning for friendship. (pp. 125, 129)

This combination of mind, body, habit and reflection suggests something of the transformative and performative possibilities of praxis, which in turn opens up practical prospects for postsecular collaboration with volunteers whose experience was founded on a non-religious appreciation of embodied unconditionality.

Thirdly, Miles recognizes that the food pantry was far more political than she had anticipated, reflecting a charged intensity arising from ordinary interconnections in the process of working together in the mutually constitutive acts of giving and receiving. By opening the door to hundreds of hungry people, the collective presence of visible need, shared food and the range of gathered humanity over time enabled the development of a sense of 'vivid community'; a space of mutual shaping and being shaped. Miles suggests that for some service users there was an opening up of an imaginative space demonstrating genuine democratic possibilities for collaborative participation. She also describes how for some middle-class volunteers the experience of encountering people in need generated a new set of sensibilities both about the otherness of social marginality and the flawed orthodoxies inherent in political and religious mainstreams:

These poor lives illuminated middle-class life – our anxiety, our reliance on managing and fixing feelings rather than having them, our desire to punish. They made clear the limitations of religions that cast out every member whose reality didn't fit inside church doctrines. Their lives showed the profound resourcefulness and strengths of the weak. (pp. 216–17)

Here then is putative evidence of how through the giving and receiving of emergency food aid an ethical in-commonness can be generated, albeit in very gritty down-to-earth ways, that has an affective and performative potential for transformation.

These autoethnographic narratives from Sara Miles pose a series of important questions with which to assess the political and ethical potential of food banks more generally. In some ways it is difficult to imagine such a vivid community of encounter emerging in the often smaller and potentially stigmatizing and awkward worlds of food banks. However, limited evidence from a case study in a city in southwest England (Williams et al., forthcoming) suggests that volunteer encounters with service users can disrupt the kinds of political discourses of poverty discussed earlier in this paper: through

improvised performances of care that bring about different emotional and affective relations, often involving unexpected sociability; through reflexivity in volunteers when clients' narratives invoke powerful emotional responses to social need; through conversation between volunteers and clients reflecting on the causes and experiences of poverty; and through the ethos-talk arising from conversations between different volunteers about the expressions of need from people using the food bank. Such reflective encounters are by no means unidirectional; sustained and long-term engagement with needy individuals can often lead to burn-out, or even to a hardening of attitudes towards issues of personal responsibility. However, we want to argue that the extension of in-commonness in spaces of care such as food banks does offer some prospect of progressive liminality, as the ethos-talk sponsored by particular local encounters engenders a sense of larger scale welfare problems and of the need for political and ethical justice as well as for localized care. Food banks therefore present at least a potential capacity for expanding the affective, ethical and political reach of being in-common.

## **Conclusion**

Food banks have fast become an iconic signification of social injustice and welfare failure, and as such are hotly contested spaces subject to vehement enforcement of ideological interpretation. Political constructions of food banks in the UK have shifted quickly and radically from warm government support for their supposedly 'Big Society' style of voluntarism to strongly negative reactions to the supposedly self-seeking publicity behind public lobbying about links between food bank use and the negative impacts of welfare reform. The switch in emphasis from narratives of community-minded charitable organizations to narratives of self-generating demand from supposedly undeserving social elements betrays a nervous sensitivity from government about the use of food banks to portray both the deleterious impacts of austere welfare reforms on benefits claimants and the outcomes of wider cost of living crises on the swelling ranks of the working poor. Some academic discourse has been equally vehement. Food banks are often interpreted as being inextricably implicated in the aggressive neoliberalization of welfare, the shrinkage of the welfare state and the subjectification of the undeserving poor. And/or they appear to represent a form of (often religious) social citizenship that prioritizes a quiet sense of the ordinary rather than any more revolutionary unsettling of existing mechanisms of social exclusion.

In this paper we have argued that there is much more to food banks than these interpretative grammars of ideology, neoliberalism and post-welfare give access to. Indeed, food banks are

emblematic of a series of spaces and subjectivities that have sprung up both *in the meantime* and *in the mean times* to provide welfare and care in new and small ways that await, and may be connected to, larger scale anti-capitalist changes. In this way, food banks can be recognized as expressions of ethical and sometimes political responsibility in which positive and progressive virtues (such as hospitality, generosity, solidarity and public spiritedness) are exercised and developed. They can also be understood as liminal spaces of encounter in which staff and volunteers can find new ways of being 'in-common' with excluded social groups with whom they would not normally coincide. It should be emphasized here that relational and physical proximity to experiences of food poverty is no guarantor of ethical transformation; the liminality of these spaces will always be contingent, contested and subject to a range of performative limits. Exploring the ground-level possibilities for reflexive engagement and mutual transformation, which can coexist alongside and potentially speak back to neoliberal subjectification of poverty, necessitates a clear acknowledgement of the messy, unfinished and divergent character of postsecular politics. The inculcation of new ethical and political sensibilities in these contexts may well engender responses which recognize the wider drivers of food insecurity and generate a keener awareness of the need to mobilize protest at a more structural level. Equally, however, participation in food banks could foster less sympathetic reactions, and even potentially strengthen more conservative understandings of individual responsibilities. Even where more progressive political and ethical responses are forthcoming, these will be likely to oscillate in myriad ways between hospitable care and arguing for more structural change. It follows that in order to reassess the politics of possibility emerging in these ambiguous and contested responses to social need it will be necessary to deconstruct the 'revolutionary' versus 'reformist' binary that too often characterizes dominant ways of thinking about such spaces of care.

Nevertheless, we would argue that a key concern in the interpretation of the food bank phenomenon is to assess the degree to which their role in the common politics of encounter is opening out spaces of politicization in the welfare landscape. Using the autoethnographic example provided by Sara Miles, we have illustrated the potential power of material and affective engagement as a force for connection and compassion, capable both of transforming those who seek to put it into practice and of building postsecular style partnerships, especially when 'right practice' is championed over 'right belief' as part of embodied and visceral engagements with people experiencing food poverty. What is more, such a process has been found to be surprisingly political, both in the illumination of the emotions and materialities of poor lives and in holding a mirror up to the nature of middle-class lifestyles and postures. It may be that the most significant role of food banks in the meantime/mean time is to open out just these kinds of spaces of liminal encounter and politicization.



By framing food banks as occupying a liminal space that is neither wholly revolutionary nor reformist, our aim is to direct academic attention both to the contested ethical and political spaces constructed within food banks themselves and to the complex interrelationships they engender between the ethical self, common life and political sensibilities. While some will still want to regard food bank volunteering as a placatory device which serves to reduce energies for political activism and valorizes a certain kind of social citizenship that is content to achieve a 'quiet sense of the ordinary', we argue for the possibility that these seemingly mundane event spaces of care and welfare can serve as potentially virtuous arenas of common life, in which social response to the phenomenology of need can lead eventually to political and ethical ruptures in the art of the possible within capitalist realism. By focusing research on key political and organizational questions, as well as on ambiguities and contradictory dynamics to be found within spaces of food banking, human geographical scholarship is well placed to advance these conceptual understandings.

In terms of political context, there is a need to question how, in what ways, and for whose purposes food banking is constructed, by politicians, media, researchers, campaigning groups and by food banks themselves. Analysis of the political construction of food banks will not only provide insight into the principle fault-lines that structure political and popular assent for food banking, but also reveal the geographical specificities that must be overcome by a right-to-food/anti-poverty movement in order to mount a challenge to the institutionalization of charitable food hand-outs in replacement for welfare entitlement. However, as importantly, we would argue, critical attention is also needed to analyse the discursive and affective resonances between the values of altruism, generosity and solidarity and the ways that these are made to resonate with various political agendas, not least the political commodification of charity and generosity (Connolly, 1999). Organizationally, we need to question how different organizations present specific opportunities for developing politics 'in common'. In the UK, for example, there has as yet been relatively little scrutiny of wider landscapes of emergency food aid, involving both food banks run by agencies other than the Trussell Trust and other forms of emergency food provision.

Questions also remain over the different meanings attributed to charitable food provision among volunteers and workers engaged 'on the frontline' and those engaged 'at a distance', either sorting food or donating food, and it is crucial to understand the spatialities and temporalities involved in the production of ethical and political sensibilities. Very little focus has yet been given to different spaces within food banks themselves, and how these generate different opportunities for reflexive

engagement that may lead to particular ethical, and potentially political, sensibilities. Geographic work also needs to acknowledge the fluidity of self-other identification underpinning in-common politics of encounter, taking into account, for example, the changes over time in motivations, political attitudes and beliefs, and emotional geographies of burnout and fatigue. Lastly, and most importantly, research needs to draw attention to the divergent meanings and experiences attributed to and derived from spaces of emergency food provision *by those who make use of such services*. Geographers need to examine the complex intersection of gratitude and shame, acceptance and stigma, emotional support and moral judgement, and the differential ways such emotional geographies are stratified by markers of class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, gender and religion. There is an overwhelming responsibility to draw attention to the narratives of service users, be that positive or more exclusionary, without which the idea of phenomenology of need in the context of food banks remains an empty concept.

Finally, we argue that the multiple geographies of food banks suggest wider interpretations in that series of spaces of encounter that we have termed 'in the meantime'. As formal welfare activity continues to shrink, increasing numbers of voluntary sector organizations are becoming significant in the short-term provision of care, for example in areas of homelessness, addiction, domestic violence, asylum, trafficking, offending, elderly care and youth work. In each of these arenas, the tendency has been to dismiss the caring work concerned as short-term pragmatism, an incorporation into neoliberal policies and postures to perform 'sticking plaster' work that at best constitutes temporary relief, and at worst acts against radical structural change. However, our analysis of food banks indicates that these 'in the meantime' activities are capable of opening out rather more progressive and hopeful spaces of political conscientization, invention and reorientation, associated with (1) the motivational nature of the phenomenology of need, the emergent ethics of hospitably and generously being in-common with others, and (2) the springing up of communicative publics in which ethos talk promotes new forms of practice-based normativities. Faced with an unremittingly austere landscape, politics 'in the meantime' requires a commitment both to re-reading seemingly mundane spaces of care and welfare that are ill-served by analytical binaries of incorporation and resistance, or reformism and revolution, and prising open new theoretical, empirical and political spaces capable of examining hopeful transformations in political and ethical praxis (as well as their darker, less progressive shadows).

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