

## Research Article

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# Rebuilding Authority in “Lumpen” Communities: The Need for Basic Income to Foster Entitlement

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**Abstract:** This article presents an immanent critique of neoliberal welfare reform using observation of participatory research involving left-behind communities in the North East of England and Australia. It argues that harms, such as passivity, invoked to reduce social security and increase conditionality are actually enhanced by austerity, conditionality and philanthropic giving. Deploying Mauss’ conception of the gift suggests that aggressive, conditional giving, combined with consumption through indebtedness, has served to strip individuals of authority. This leads to a radical conclusion: the stated aims of policy platforms like Big Society can only be realized through statutory entitlements like basic income.

**Keywords:** big Society, philanthropy, basic income

As Britain faces a cost-of-living crisis that has pushed millions of households into fuel poverty (Keung and Bradshaw), the recent UK Prime Minister, Liz Truss, presented even further rolling back of the state as the means of enhancing prosperity and agency within the population. Prior to Truss’ Premiership, the UK Conservative-led Coalition Government of 2010–2015 provided the fullest articulation of this perspective in diagnosing the cause of the Global Financial Crisis and prescribing neoliberal courses of treatment. The Labour Governments from 1997 to 2010 had, they argued, coupled poor deregulation of the economy with “big government” spending, funding an ever-expanding welfare system that promoted individual passivity and societal inefficiency (Summers; Cameron, “Big Society Speech”). Not only was society in debt, but its debt stemmed from the activities of socially disruptive groups that were making a lifestyle choice to receive welfare (Waugh). The remedy was small government, massive reductions in public spending and efficiency-promoting deregulation coupled with the renewal of civil society through the Coalition’s flagship social policy: Big Society (Coote). This reflected a coherent account of neoliberal reform consistent with a small state, a free market and a modest welfare system administered through efficient institutions that uphold formal neutrality between conceptions of the good (Vallier).

By placing emphasis back on moral and geographic communities to address their own challenges and by increasing responsibility of individuals to satisfy their own needs, the Coalition argued that Britain could develop a more dynamic, self-sustaining society capable of addressing the sources of disruption at root (Goodley and Runswick-Cole). Yet, very early into the Coalition’s term, it became clear that the policies associated with Big Society were achieving precisely the opposite of the stated aims: destitution, passivity (Malli et al. 15) and dysfunction, particularly in those places with existing vulnerabilities (Poinasamy). People’s authority to act appeared to be reducing alongside their formal entitlement to social security. Jones’ *Chavs* made clear that harm stemmed in part from the diminution of the vestiges of authority from previously self-organizing

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communities, while Standing's *Precariat* emphasised that whatever work did emerge in the state's wake was inevitably precarious. One unresearched aspect of the process of reform was the notion that philanthropy could fill the gap of reduced entitlement while fostering authority within communities.

With individuals and communities now facing the prospect of even more extreme need for material resources despite the UK Government's commitment to Levelling Up, it is essential that we understand the impact of philanthropy on authority within "left behind" communities. This article examines this issue by drawing on ethnographic observation of a Participatory Action Research Project (PAR), "A Cross-Cultural Working Group on "Good Culture" and Precariousness," involving community members from two communities of most difference affected by similar processes of reform: Ashington, Northumberland and Aboriginal Australian groups from South East Queensland (Johnson et al.). I focus on observation of the experiences of the Ashington group, by virtue of more embedded exposure and understanding of the cultural context, but draw on the experience of an Australian philanthropist's promise to the group overall to illustrate the impact of power imbalances on assessment of giving between those with authority and those without in the North East of England.

I begin by outlining a broader challenge that was presented by reformers as necessitating Big Society – social passivity. I engage with the conceptual work of Marx and Standing to suggest that the conditions associated with that passivity in left-behind communities have specific features of predictable drudgery that demarcate them from popular characterisation. I then deploy Mauss' conception of the gift to analyse two examples of failure to give within the project. First, I explore the diminution of a long-standing working-class tradition of tea and biscuits and the way in which individuals appeared to have lost the authority by which to give. By way of contrast, I then trace the power relations of the group's engagement with a philanthropist who first promised and then reneged upon a commitment to fund the group's travel to Australia to explore the impact on people's sense of self. Exploring the impact of power relations on entitlement and authority leads to a discussion of a counter-intuitive means of promoting agency: fostering greater statutory entitlement via basic income (Johnson et al.). The analysis produced draws on my experience of growing up in similar North East working class communities to Ashington, but is not auto-ethnographic (Adams et al.). Rather, I draw on wider cultural understandings throughout the region to provide context to the impacts of reforms, seeking to balance local embeddedness with concern for a description of universal processes. First, I outline the social pathologies presented as justification for Big Society.

## Neoliberal Reform in Very Different Groups

It is now quite easy to overlook Big Society's (Barnard) place as the UK Coalition Government's (2010–2015) flagship social policy. It aimed to stimulate civic action to replace activity previously performed by the state. For Levitas (320), it was part of "a thirty-year process of redistribution to the rich": "Rather than being a necessary response to the economic crisis, they constitute a neo-liberal shock doctrine, forcing through punitive policies which undermine the collective provision against risk." The approach adopted was illustrative of broader neoliberal reform processes that had emerged over several decades in Anglophone countries and which had accelerated in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis (Mays et al.). That acceleration was achieved, in part, by branding reforms "austerity" measures, implying a temporariness (Guinness 495) at odds with the long-term nature of the resulting distributive and social impacts (Cameron, "The Age of Austerity"). "Big Society" was presented as a liberating series of independent, spontaneous and consensual civic engagements in stark contrast to, and in "zero-sum" competition with, the dominating presence of a Big State, its connotations of pre-1989 unreconstituted socialism and failing 1970s corporatism (Williams et al. esp. 2804). If the notion of the Big State spoke to the pernicious self-interest of bureaucrats highlighted by the public choice literature (Niskanen), nation-building endeavours, such as Big Society, upheld the view that citizens ought to act voluntarily and benignly to take advantage of the opportunities available to them in order to promote their interests (Willetts).

Whereas the Financial Crisis itself stemmed from risk-taking within the financial sector, the Coalition Government was able to tie widespread concern about antisocial behaviour and welfare dependency into a narrative that attributed responsibility for society’s economic condition and budgetary deficits in particular to excluded welfare recipients and an entitlement culture that fostered social pathologies of passivity and fecklessness (McGrath et al.). Whereas previous nation-building efforts were “big societal” processes leading to the creation of national institutions, such as the NHS, Big Society focused much more clearly on good housekeeping – often, literally, on clearing up the dog mess produced by elements previously controlled by a range of institutions, but not yet in cognisance with the reciprocity of civil society (Barnard 25). In effect, Former Prime Minister David Cameron and others conceived Big Society as a means of dealing with a transitory period in which people shifted from collective welfare dependency to independent enterprise – a teleological approach seemingly at odds with traditional conservatism.

The problem, though, was that large swathes of society appeared to be harmed, not helped, by the reforms (Malli et al.). As the concept of communities “left-behind” by neoliberal reform was beginning to emerge (Jennings and Stoker), Jones highlighted in *Chavs* the startling effects of de-industrialization on towns like Ashington in Northumberland. Once regarded as the largest village in the world and a successful site of collective self-organization (Burrell), Ashington’s decline demonstrated that material gains associated with neoliberal reform could be uneven and accompanied by forms of serious social disintegration. Ashington was emblematic of working-class communities that had upheld people’s interests during periods of extreme exploitation and resource scarcity by creating institutions informed by class-based commitments to equality, solidarity and non-domination. Those commitments had informed post-War national institutions, such as the NHS, nationalised industry and an expanded welfare state. The rolling back of those institutions from the late 1970s onwards led to increasing inequality, punitive undeserving poverty discourses (van Oorschot; van Oorschot et al. regarding general trends) and micro-management of people’s lives. None of this seemed consistent with effective nation-building.

Indeed, similar outcomes were to be found wherever neoliberal reforms were being pursued (Malli et al.), including in communities that appeared to lie on opposite sides of colonial/colonized dichotomies. Aboriginal Australian societies had, historically, oriented their institutions around values that resembled equality, solidarity and non-domination (Johnson). Having been subject to centuries of genocide and colonialism and then increasing conditionality of state support, Aboriginal people were now subject to similar discourses of welfare dependency and extensive forms of intervention and micromanagement. Ashington and certain Aboriginal communities permitted comparison of most differences with salient similarities in terms of collective challenges of responding to a public discourse that held that the only means of reducing passivity and increasing functioning was by threatening individuals with destitution and enhancing the degree of conditionality associated with welfare support. In keeping with the emphasis on volition, both groups were presented with charity and philanthropy as meritocratic means of mitigating undeserving poverty.

I believed that these similarities and the tradition of working-class institutions, such as trade unions, forging co-operative international relationships gave reason to develop a participatory project in which representatives of the two communities would engage one another as equal agents to examine the reasons for social pathologies and develop strategies to advance collective interests informed by traditional commitments to solidarity, equality and non-domination.

## **An International Working Group as a Counter-Hegemonic Institution**

To achieve these ends, we formed a participatory action research project shaped around the creation of a non-hierarchical, international working group of non-academic community members from Ashington and Aboriginal communities in South East Queensland. In this sense, the working group, as an institution, was intended to function as a quasi-diplomatic entity through which members would articulate their experiences

and advance their interests. This form of PAR was intended necessarily to grant a central voice in the research process to excluded, left-behind groups (Bennett and Roberts; Perry and Rappaport) as a means of enhancing agency. This, indeed, had clear parallels to the transformative, civic pretences of Big Society.

Within this, ten community co-researchers, five from Ashington and five from Brisbane, spent 2 years developing relationships with one another via email, phone and Skype in advance of 1-month embedded visits to each other's communities in mid-2015. During these exchanges, the co-researchers lived in their counterparts' communities, shadowed their hosts in their workplaces and social environments and conducted research on their (often overlapping) areas of interest: relationships, employment, health, education, environment and arts. The groups engaged in interviews, focus groups, daily group meetings and weekly seminars as they developed their ideas. Interviews, presentations and discussions were recorded on film during the production of two documentaries on the project with a filmmaker experienced in co-production. There then followed three conferences, each aimed at explaining the lives of group members within the context of their deep history and, with the participation of academics and community professionals from a range of backgrounds and disciplines, outlining means of developing meaningful collective responses to challenges. I deploy observation of that process, through reference to the two documentaries produced, in order to explore key areas of discussion. I focus on social conditions within the UK but draw on engagement with an Australian philanthropist to illustrate the impact of power relations within the UK group.

## Precariousness

The first issue we examined within the working group was the nature of the communities' conditions themselves and specifically the notion of precariousness. For Standing (2011), the defining phenomenological feature of the precariat as a class is its unpredictability and insecurity. Given the identities of the participating groups, it seemed only natural that the groups, as among the most alienated and excluded within their respective societies, would regard their conditions as precarious and view themselves as possible members of a precariat. Indeed, some members of the working group were on either fixed-term or zero-hours contracts that approached the minimum wage. However, as discussions developed, it became clear that the all-inclusive nature of precariousness and its concern for unpredictable neoliberal conditions did not easily match the experiences of the groups. The thought that the precariat can include both a minimum wage cleaner and millionaire Barrister, Guy Opperman MP (Chapman, "Tory Minister Says..."), by virtue of their having piecework or zero-hour contracts seemed analytically deficient. Not only is there great inequality within "precarious" positions, but also the sources of precarity exacerbate racial, gender and citizenship inequalities in ways that render categorization of class members problematic (Hua and Ray, 2017).

Indeed, in our discussions, it became clear that people's assumptions regarding the nature of precariousness differed markedly from the concept presented by Standing ("The Precariat"). Throughout his account, Standing makes reference to those in the precariat having clear, coherent forms of ambition that relate strongly to social mobility. Many of those who fall into the precariat have clear aims – to achieve comfortable, affluent, secure lives, etc. – and objectives – to graduate from Higher Education, secure a mortgage and achieve status in employment. Their precariousness lies in the increasingly narrow and shaky rope bridge that leads through their objectives to their aim (Appleton). Much of their discontent, that Standing maps so clearly, stems from having those desires stymied and confounded. In a sense, if their phenomenology is insecurity, it is because their mindset is aspirational in an era in which those aspirations cannot always be realized (Appleton).

In our case, the lived experience of individuals in communities shaped by long-term, intergenerational engagement with the welfare system differed markedly. All too often, individuals are excluded from mainstream employment, even in precarious forms. Their lives are occupied and shaped by ongoing engagement with a range of welfare, social service and other state agencies as well as private financial organizations (Burton). While this engagement and the relationships attendant to the condition are often chaotic, they are predictable and long-term in ways that Standing's precariousness is not (Appleton). At base, individuals born

into the condition are likely to die in similar circumstances, often prematurely and through lifestyle diseases that compound disadvantage (Nettle et al.). One clear substantive reason for this is that, with the exception of an education system that offers often notional means of progression, all other institutions are concerned with maintenance and management. Even essential work previously conducted by the state is now precarious. As Gallagher put it, “working on community contracts usually only lasts a year or two years and you’re struggling for funding and for your next job.” That comprehensive form of institutional exclusion, on the one hand, and institutional domination on the other, deprives individuals of the capacity to structure a precarious rope bridge to realizable ends (Johnson and Johnson, “Stress, Domination and Basic Income”; Appleton, 2015).

As a consequence, individuals often orient ambitions around the achievement of material ends that are synonymous with status, but without an underpinning set of qualities and skills that oft-cited examples of precarious workers, such as IT technicians and academics, take for granted. The Jeremy Kyle Show benefited from the sense in which ends often have a quantitative, rather than qualitative, foundation: the *more* famous a person is, the better. The reasons for an individual’s fame are almost irrelevant. If the phenomenology of the precariat is one of insecurity, the phenomenology of individuals in this condition is one of predictable, fractious, heteronomous and micro-managed drudgery.

Attempts to categorise such social phenomena within class terms have a long history. In *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels (Volume 6, 494) describe a category of individuals existing on the very fringes of the proletariat:

The ‘dangerous class’, the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society, may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.

For Marx and Engels, the “lumpenproletariat” fostered near-permanent anxiety upon those in employment by virtue of its members’ notional ability to provide alternative wage labour and their willingness to entrench the power of older exploitative groups on the basis of personal patronage and identitarian affiliation, achieving coordination and organization only in doing the bidding of others. They were a “mass sharply differentiated from the industrial proletariat, a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds, living on the crumbs of society, people without a definite trade” (Marx and Engels, Volume 10, 62). Through the dissolution of feudal, agrarian society, once productive individuals were transformed “en-masse into beggars, robbers, vagabonds, partly from inclination, in most cases from stress of circumstances” (Marx and Engels, Volume 35, 723) as a surplus “industrial reserve army” (Marx and Engels, Volume 35, 490). Whether by active support of reactionary movements or by threatening to fill jobs filled by the proletariat, they serve simply to undermine the interests of progressive classes.

Standing revises this account of the lumpenproletariat. He notes that “part of the precariat is drifting into a lumpen precariat, unable to survive in a milieu of precarious jobs, many drifting into gangs, or becoming “bag ladies” or addicts of some kind” (Standing, “The Precariat”). Standing (“The Precariat and Class Struggle”, 4) describes this “lumpenprecariat” dramatically as “consisting of sad people lingering in the streets, dying miserably... [T]hey are effectively expelled from society, lack agency and play no active role in the economic system beyond casting fear on those inside it.” Whereas Marx’s lumpenproletariat emerged from the dissolution of feudalism, the lumpenprecariat emerges from the decline of the industry. Members may emerge from the disintegration of industry rather than feudalism, and they may have access to some state, rather than Church, welfare services, but, phenomenologically, unpredictable chaos is consistent across Marx’s and Standing’s lumpen groups. The consequence is the same: groups of people cast adrift from active engagement in the mode of production, bereft of class *in* and *for* itself identities, increasingly casting fear upon those left participating in the production.

At a time of COVID-19, the cost-of-living crisis and attendant anxiety about security in employment, the resonance of this articulation is understandable. Yet, experience within the group suggested that it is not just some fringe and it is not just drifting. Rather, swathes of communities once rich with active roles and associated identities are now consigned to lives of long-term exclusion from formal work and to life-long conflict with an increasingly inadequate welfare system (discussion in the study by Belfield et al. 66; HM Government). Governments’ substitution of long-term unemployment and “needs-” and “means-” based

welfare payments for paid work in Ashington (discussion in Grover) or independent, autonomous, collective management in Australia constitute a cluster of “settlements” inflicted on people without their consent or, in many respects, knowledge (Gamble). While there is evidence to suggest that those payments serve as a stimulus for local businesses, it is clear that individuals within this condition seldom play a productive, rather than consumptive, role in the economy (Hayward and Yar). They are presented with a choice of long-term negotiation with the benefits system or, often, unfeasible long-distance migration in search of low-paid labour at the cost of further dissolution of social networks and capital (Johnson et al.; see Green and White). They may exist on the sidelines of society, but they include a large number of individuals, indicated by the one and a half million UK citizens who find themselves in long-term, intergenerational destitution (JRF 20).

The notion of this diffuse cohort’s being marked by unpredictability is, then, deficient. Lives are predictable in ways not so unlike those of prisoners, with agency stripped over generations. As Burton (“Carl Burton”) put it, life is “bland”: “there’s nothing exciting, but nothing particularly horrible – it’s just dull. There’s no life in it and no prospects... unless you have the means and ability to move away.” A person born to the condition is likely to die in that condition, with predictable hardship in-between (Johnson et al.). While they consume (albeit decreasing numbers of) goods, they own and control little. As Marx noted of the lumpenproletariat, although their behaviour is often presented as uncontrollable, on the whole, they are not capable of achieving any transformation of their circumstances. In effect, the condition is marked by the absence of authority by virtue of individuals being subject to the authority of others. As Burton (Burton) added, “[I am] 26 years old, I’m not quite sure how to describe myself, because I don’t really have a position or anything to call mine.”

For the working group, recognizing this meant that there was both agreement with neoliberal assertion of dysfunction and attribution of that dysfunction to neoliberal reforms. One of the everyday examples of the long-term consequences of loss of authority was apparent in visiting houses.

## Gifts and the Loss of Authority: The Death of Tea and Biscuits

The effect of the loss of authority permeates public and private spheres. The ritual of giving and receiving of tea and biscuits is central to working class communities in the North East of England. Originating as a workplace tool for sustaining productivity through its combination of sugar and caffeine (Mintz), tea was drawn into working class homes as a means of improving dry, unpalatable food, eventually becoming an “integral part of the social fabric” (Mintz 266) and achieving the status of a rite of respectability (Smith). In the communities I grew up in, any visit by an adult to another adult’s house would follow a similar pattern. The visitor would be met by the host at the door, who would permit entry and, often immediately after enquiring as to the visitor’s health, offer tea and biscuits. This rite was universal, with hosts offering sincere apologies when no biscuits were available and using dried milk in lieu of fresh when circumstances and preferences dictate. Tea and biscuits depend upon authority: the authority of the host to guide guests spatially into their territory, to direct them to sitting spaces and to determine the point at which tea and biscuits are offered to the guest. This is their space, and in this space, they have the authority to exercise power. The gift of tea and biscuits is, actually, an assertion of authority and its infliction an act of power.

Mauss grasps this in *The Gift*. In his various examples of gift-giving among Indigenous peoples along the West Coast of North America, the aggression of the act is gradually revealed as groups shift from giving to destroying goods, all to jostle for positions of power with those with whom they are engaging in acts of apparent reciprocity (Mauss 20). Inevitably, “A gift is received ‘with a burden attached’” (Mauss 53). The dance of offering to pay for rounds of drinks or meals or other collective expenses is instructive. The example of Mrs Doyle and Mrs Dunne in Father Ted fighting over a bill chimes with generations of Tyneside people: each opportunity to pay is accompanied by a desperate, exaggerated battle to adopt full responsibility for payment, all in the name of generosity. But it is not generosity or if it is generosity we ought to view it in a much less gentle light, since this is the active struggle of individuals to sustain authority. Nobody necessarily wants to pay. People want to assume authority that goes with payment, often, literally, at great cost. As Mauss (53) puts

it, “To refrain from giving, just as to refrain from accepting, is to lose rank – as is refraining from reciprocating.” People in North East communities understood this well.

Throughout the project, however, it seemed that people no longer upheld the joust. Adults seemed resigned to being given things and, in effect, being seen as passive subjects. This reflects the death of a key element of resistance in the deep history of people in the North East, since the joust is grounded in intricate awareness and understanding of the importance of authority as personhood. For tens of generations, people in the region were subjected to feudal and post-feudal hierarchies in which indebtedness was the basis of serfdom and wage slavery. People sought as fully as possible to avoid indebtedness, controlling spending, maintaining budgets and saving where possible (discussion in Prasad et al.). O’Connell (1–2) charts this through the lives of various working-class people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

John Moores was born in Eccles in 1896... John’s father was a bricklayer who, at one point, also part-owned a public house. However, this financial interest developed into a taste for the pub’s chief product and alcoholism and violence made the marriage an unhappy one... Young John watched his mother secretly pawn her husband’s gold watch to help with family finances. Eventually, debts forced her business to collapse and Louisa was compelled to take in washing to make ends meet, visibly tumbling down the social hierarchy in the process.... John’s early life experience had provided a stark lesson in the hazards that faced the working-class family and of the difficulties of retaining respectable status in a world filled with economic uncertainties and judgemental onlookers. His mother’s experience of debt, and the loss of personal autonomy that it brought her, left a deep imprint. Until his death, in 1993, he constantly urged his family to take a cautious approach to consumer credit.

Awareness of the relationship between receiving goods, debt and autonomy is one of the key reasons for the discourse of austerity finding favour (NEF) among older people, in particular. Belt tightening is a long-standing response to resource scarcity. It is responsible insofar as it upholds authority.

Yet, many people who have not experienced long-term, secure employment prior to the demise of heavy industry in the 1970s and 1980s see no means of avoiding debt. Indeed, their lives revolve around it. Whether through hire purchases, “pay day” loans that often equate payday with the day on which benefits are paid, rent arrears and any number of other debts to any number of creditors, people often place themselves in positions of subjugation to satisfy wants and to achieve status through consumption (Hayward and Yar). The consequence has been dramatic. Often, people’s place of occupation and its contents belong wholly to others. This has fractured territorially the authority of householders. Indeed, it was apparent that people were used to those with official authority, such as bailiffs and Local Authority officers, wandering into their houses and asserting authority over the contents. It seemed that the loss of tea and biscuits was not an example of people engaging in Bailey and Shibata’s (687) “imperceptible forms of dissent,” but of people recognising a loss of authority.

The demise of an apparently unremarkable rite of tea and biscuits has occurred at the back end of a process of stripping away, first, the mode of production, then the accompanying social institutions that fostered consciousness of authority and then the home and family itself. Stripped of authority, people have no power left to exercise save to choose whether to open the door or watch it being kicked in. As Gallagher (“Biographical Interview”) put it, “government legislation can affect individuals’ lives so much”: “it can take your home away” and “upset your kids” and “they might not all find a place together.” This is a condition imposed across Conservative and New Labour and then accelerated across UK Coalition and Conservative Governments and has reduced people to positions of passivity and hopelessness (Grover; Rustin). This reflects, like Matthews (44), a pernicious dissolution of social bonds that enabled collective self-organisation in the past, but, unlike Matthews, the absence of an “awakening of class consciousness not experienced for decades.”

## Funding and Philanthropy

As the project proceeded, we needed to find means of funding the reciprocal embedded visits. This search for funding ran parallel to the examination of the prescribed pathways for community renewal within Big Society: charity and philanthropy. In the spirit of Big Society, we sought philanthropic donations. For group members,

private funding appeared to offer a number of sociocultural benefits. There was great concern among the Ashington group about the possibility of taxpayer contributions being directed away from vital services towards a project that might be seen to benefit participants with mixed working histories. There was genuine anxiety that public funding would expose to public scrutiny the moral character of the group (Appleton). There was a belief that philanthropy might circumvent such concern by offering opportunities for wealthy people to exercise agency in electing, benevolently, to present resources for the purposes of fostering social goods.

As a consequence, we sought funds through existing relationships forged by our Aboriginal lead as a Traditional Owner and Chairperson of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples. While Aboriginal people are often represented as welfare dependent undeserving poor, and while there are allies of Aboriginal people within European Australian society who act out of egalitarian solidarity, there is also a trend of philanthropy that regards Aboriginal people as being in need of support and guidance and as being passive recipients of gifts (Rowley 96). This stems from centuries-old racist pseudo-scientific evolutionism, in which European administrators believed themselves to be exercising *noblesse oblige* by dismantling Aboriginal society and, "charitably," providing putative pathways to assimilation (Bell 69; 96). Today, there is an entire aid industry associated with Aboriginal society, with European Australian actors and groups providing goods and services to people viewed as passive and incapable of self-organisation (Toohey 6).

At a very early stage, the Aboriginal group was approached by an individual, who presented himself as a wealthy and benevolent philanthropist who had an interest in cross-cultural projects, including those that related to his British heritage. The philanthropist is a founder of a large Australian construction company, who formed a humanitarian organization to address issues of housing and homelessness. Over the course of several meetings with the Aboriginal group, the philanthropist made a series of pledges to support the project, each increasing the value of the commitment towards an eventual \$100,000AUD (letter from philanthropist 11 April 2014). He claimed that he wanted nothing in return for the gift and decried philanthropists who reneged on promises. Upon processing the proposal through the university costing and approvals system, he forwarded a signed letter committing to provide the funds "estimated to be by the end of June 2014" (letter from philanthropist 11 April 2014).

This was well-received by members of the working group in both Australia and the UK. It provided a means of funding that allayed UK members' fears about the deservingness of the project. The formal commitment meant that planning could take place, with a prospective date for the exchanges in September 2014 and January 2015. Members began to make arrangements with employers for unpaid leave, with the Department for Work and Pensions for suspension of benefits and with family members for support in caring for relatives. This consumed time, effort and energy, but the greatest investment came from members' belief in the possibility of their circumstances, however briefly, being improved, opportunities opened and agency enhanced (Appleton). In communities otherwise bereft of hope, this was important.

However, as June 2014 passed, it became apparent that the philanthropist's commitment was not as fixed as his letter of support might have suggested. His communication became less frequent and attempts to make contact were rebuffed. During August and September 2014, we worked to document the background for the project in Brisbane and to engage with the philanthropist directly. At this point, the philanthropist began to qualify his commitment during phone conversations and to introduce a range of other products that might be of relevance to our project. Finally, he agreed to meet us at his retirement condo in Brisbane on 8 September 2014.

While this was intended as a means of confronting the philanthropist, the philanthropist, the son of a working class Glaswegian, disarmed the group through the tea and biscuits right before articulating motivation for giving. First, he highlighted the number of projects produced by his company. He then noted that the money promised was to be drawn from funds that had been offshored in order to avoid Australian tax. He then added that he was unwilling to repatriate those funds within the existing Australian tax arrangements and would only be willing to fulfil his commitment once the Australian Government had either exempted him from, or amended in general, Australian tax law. In effect, the philanthropist presented philanthropic donations as leverage against the Australian Government since, by refusing to fulfil commitments, he was able to cite the Australian Government as being responsible for the deprivation of social goods. Having accumulated wealth by virtue of public contracts and subsidies and state protection of property and provision of



infrastructure (Parsell), the philanthropist felt entitled to the whole sum of earnings. His sense of entitlement appeared commensurate with his authority.

Phenomenologically, entitlement is important, since the contrast with the response of the members of the working group to news of the philanthropist’s decision to renege on his agreement was one of quiet disappointment, rather than anger. They appeared to feel no sense of entitlement to wealth that they believed was justly the philanthropist, while he believed that he had total entitlement to wealth that had been produced through alienated labour. He expressed no shame or guilt about his renegeing. Indeed, when asked what we should say to those members who might not be able to engage in the project in the wake of his decision, the philanthropist said “Tell them I’m a mongrel, but that my heart’s in the right place” (Appleton). His actions did not seem to support this claim. Yet, it seemed difficult to sense anger or condemnation from those whose interests were undermined, precisely because they had no sense of entitlement.

In the context of neoliberal reforms, that ought to be confounding. Whether in the UK or Australia, welfare recipients are presented consistently as having a sense of unwavering entitlement, while those in business are presented consistently as having a sense of unwavering civic responsibility. The example of the philanthropist suggested the opposite. Indeed, as the example of the former Chairman of Persimmon Homes indicates (Neate and Monaghan), wealthy individuals have the social capacity, in Pettit’s terms, to dominate individuals by imposing decisions without reference to the interests of those whom the decisions affect. Pettit’s work on domination and resilient non-interference is salient precisely because it highlights the demand that neoliberalism places upon citizens: it requires that we believe in the unstinting goodwill of actors and trust that they will decline to exercise their capacity to injure our interests (Johnson and Johnson, “Stress, domination and basic income”). Given that the UK Coalition’s narrative for austerity reforms was grounded in the fallibility of human nature and the propensity of individuals to pursue their individual interests in ways that undermine the interests of others, this requires a leap of utopian faith that conservative politics is supposed to disabuse.

It is in this context that the implications of Mauss’ conceptualization of the aggression of the gift become abundantly clear. Philanthropy is an active assertion of will on less powerful entities who can have their power reduced further by the gift. It can be an act of aggression perpetrated on individuals whose only defence is refusal and consequent diminution of their other interests (McVicar 201). It represents a fundamentally idealistic vision of civic virtue that *may* foster goods, but may otherwise not. This has been clearly identified historically:

When Standard Oil-founder John D. Rockefeller attempted to secure a federal charter for his Foundation, politicians and progressive journalists competed with one another to denounce his project. (Congress rejected the request and Rockefeller settled for incorporation in New York). According to critics, these new foundations, unprecedented in their scale and scope, posed a direct challenge to federal authority; as the head of a Progressive-era congressional investigation into their practices declared, they represented ‘a menace to the future political and economic welfare of the nation’. The debate about the legitimacy of large benefactions became so heated that in 1909 one New Orleans newspaper quipped that philanthropy had become ‘the recognizable mark of a wicked man’. (Soskis)

The idealism of the Coalition Government’s policy platform helped to conceal the need for statutory frameworks that might institutionalize economic transfers resiliently as a form of non-domination. In effect, programmes like Big Society obscure “the workings of power” and pay “scant attention to how inequalities of time and resources differ across areas and groups. Poorer areas have been disproportionately affected by the cuts, while their residents are among the worst off, and most in need of support” (Slay and Penny 30). This creates vulnerabilities that can be exploited in various forms.

As Mauss (54) notes with regard to the Kwakiutl of the West Coast of North America, but with demonstrable relevance to the condition of philanthropy examined here, “The punishment for failure to reciprocate is slavery for debt.” Culturally, if accepting gifts without reservation were not worrying enough in terms of the effect on agency, the fact that individuals felt no intuitive injustice in a philanthropist renegeing on their agreement highlights the extent to which passivity has shaped people an undeserving sense of self. For Soskis, challenging and criticizing philanthropy is a democratic imperative; the lack of antagonism to philanthropy ought to be concerning. As such, while the UK Coalition and Big Society were correct to diagnose passivity, they actively entrenched it through their prognosis and treatment. What treatment, though, can enhance agency?

## Entitlement and Agency

While the state has withdrawn economically from provision of activity, it has become, through schemes like Big Society, ever more present morally in the assessment of activity (Johnson and Nettle), not just imposing extreme levels of conditionality in welfare (Lansley 209–223), but also granting power to philanthropists to determine the worthiness of individuals and ensuring that the most vulnerable themselves internalize and conduct those assessments on their peers. This is in keeping with Slay and Penny's (30) belief that Big Society and similar neoliberal initiatives make “no effort to build reciprocity and partnership between citizens and the state, or to promote these at the heart of a new social contract, using approaches such as co-production to reconfigure public services.” The institutions that once underpinned now “lumpen” communities stemmed from particular modes of production that granted purpose to collective activity. Now that those modes are moribund or vestigial in left-behind communities, the impetus for the creation of new institutions from within is limited, and with mechanization a threat to large-scale employment, there is little prospect of groups' being re-engaged in production without state intervention.

As the UK Government's own “Levelling Up” agenda now recognises, state investment is required to support areas afflicted by under- and unemployment, including Ashington (Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities). While infrastructural investment is required, this is unlikely to address issues of agency. To do that, a counter-intuitive approach may be required: reduction in conditionality and enhancement of entitlement (Johnson et al.).

Social Security reforms, such as basic income, entail a transfer “paid to all, unconditionally, and in cash,” albeit with numerous caveats with regard to “amount and frequency, and whether children or noncitizens would benefit” (Gentilini et al. 57). As a statutory universal entitlement to enable all individual adult citizens to satisfy basic needs (Johnson et al.), basic income actually achieves a key Big Society aim of reducing administration and red tape, the cost of which was recently invoked by the Chancellor of the Exchequer as a reason to provide cost of living support to second home owners (Chapman; Reed et al.; Johnson et al.). Indeed, policy seems to be shifting in the direction of reduced conditionality through such schemes as Furlough and the Cost-of-Living Payment, neither of which were conditional on resources being used for socially valuable ends. These pressures may be contributing to shifts in public opinion on the policy (Nettle et al.; Johnson et al.; Roosma and van Oorschot). While Elizabeth Anderson articulated widespread concern that such programmes promote freedom without responsibility and undermine the social obligation to work, there is reason to believe, from observation of the workings of the project above, that the opposite may be true. Elements of basic income's formulation may offer value in the context of agency (Johnson and Johnson), since the diminution of entitlement has stripped individuals of the agency. To foster civic ends, there may be scope to make basic income conditional upon participation in essential civic activities, such as elections, which underpin the interests of society as a whole, and to withdraw basic income in instances of other-regarding criminal harm, including acquisitive and violent offences. While there is debate about whether any such conditions mean disqualifying schemes from meeting full basic income conditions (Afscharian et al.), they are consistent with a republican account of resilient non-interference. If we wish to achieve the ends of programmes like Big Society, we may need precisely the opposite set of policies.

## Conclusion

By drawing on observation of “A Working Group on ‘Good Culture’ and Precariousness,” this article ties general phenomena associated with lumpen conditions with particular experiences of giving, receiving and entitlement in left behind communities. The observations above serve as an immanent critique of Big Society in particular and austerity in general, presenting a course of treatment directly at odds with that prescribed by successive Anglophone governments. If the government is concerned with creating scope for people in left-behind communities actively to develop their own institutions and to advance their interests through collective self-organisation, it needs to be involved centrally in supporting statutory entitlements. Cash transfers, in

particular, enable individuals to invest in themselves and their communities in ways that are in accordance with the spirit of Big Society. It enables the possibility of those in “lumpen” groups to participate in gift giving, asserting themselves on society in ways that are otherwise precluded by philanthropy. All of this raises the prospect of “lumpen” conditions themselves being transcended and overcome, bringing individuals back into active engagement with the society around them, not simply as articles of anxiety, but as contributors to common interests.

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