Big Society, Philanthropy and Domination: On the 'lumpen' need for Universal Basic Income

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Abstract: The UK Coalition Government's Big Society policy sought to fill the void left by the rolling back of the state. Drawing heavily on Mauss' account of the gift, I examine ways in which this actively reduced the agency of those supposed to benefit most by subtracting authority from recipients of philanthropy. I do this by analysing engagement with an Australian philanthropist during a participatory project involving community members from Ashington, Northumberland, and Aboriginal groups around Brisbane, Australia. I argue that the apparent aims of Big Society can only be realised through introduction of statutory entitlements, such as Universal Basic Income.
Keywords: Big Society; philanthropy; gift giving; lumpenproletariat; domination; Universal Basic Income

The dissolution of traditional impediments to action, such as shared understandings regarding gender relations and work, is widely regarded as widening the range of life choices for citizens of modern, liberal societies. At least until the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-2008, modern technology, consumerism and social liberalism fostered, in many, a post-modern mindset in which possibility was limited only by the imagination of the individual. In the UK, the Conservative-led Coalition Government of 2010-2015 provided the fullest articulation of this perspective in diagnosing the cause of the Crisis and prescribing neoliberal courses of treatment. The Labour Governments from 1997-2010 had, they argued, coupled poor deregulation of the economy with 'big government' largesse, funding an ever-expanding welfare system that promoted individual passivity and societal inefficiency. The remedy was small government and efficiency-promoting deregulation coupled with a renewal of civil society through the Coalition's flagship social policy: Big Society.

Yet, very early into the Coalition's term, it became clear that society was suffering and that certain communities in certain areas of the country were suffering in particular. Indeed, with the *Precariat* (Standing 2011) served to foster in the public consciousness the notion of precariousness as a defining feature of modern life, while *Chavs* (Jones 2011) highlighted the ways in which once self-organising communities were being stripped of authority. In that context, I co-developed participatory project involving ten community co-researchers from Ashington, Northumberland and Aboriginal groups around Brisbane, Australia, which sought to advance means of promoting community interests in ever-increasingly insecure circumstances. In this article, I draw upon the findings of that project to argue that Big Society served simply to compound dysfunction and impose forms of domination that can only be overcome, contrary to neoliberal intuition, by fostering entitlement.

First, I outline the context of Big Society, the emergence of the notion of precariousness and the reasons for developing a participatory project grounded in these communities. I then engage with Marx and Standing to articulate the specific lumpen condition of an increasing number of people in such groups, before drawing on Mauss' (2002) conceptualisation of the gift and the loss of the tradition of tea making in North Eastern communities to demonstrate

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the ways in which philanthropy and debt accumulation has actively diminished their agency. Next, I outline our project's search for funding to illustrate the structural and socio-cultural processes that lead to communities being stripped of authority and power and rendered apolitical precisely because of, not despite, Big Society's values of volition, opportunity, benevolence and reciprocity (see Ishkanian and Szreter 2012). I argue that 'lumpen' groups are subject to collective forms of domination that can only be overcome by 'big societal' projects grounded in a statutory entitlement to Universal Basic Income (UBI). With 'centrist' politicians engaged in a never-ending appeal for relevance, the findings emphasize that, for much of our societies, 'centrist' 'consensus' politics reflects a radical dismantling of individuals' possibility. I begin by introducing 'Big Society'.

Big Society and culture

Big Society (see Ishkanian and Szreter 2012) was the Coalition's flagship social policy, introducing a range of stimuli for civic action in areas in which the state's presence was beginning to recede. The neoliberal policies through which that diminution was achieved were branded cleverly as 'austerity' measures, implying a temporariness (see Guinness 1944, 495) at odds with the fundamental transformations intended (see Cameron 2009). The notion of Big Society sought to contrast the dominating presence of a Big State, with all its connotations of pre-1989 unreconstituted socialism and failing 1970s corporatism, with a liberating series of independent, spontaneous and consensual civic engagements. The underpinning concern was that citizens ought to act voluntarily and benignly to take advantage of the opportunities available to them in order to promote their interests (see Willetts 1994). If the notion of the Big State spoke to the pernicious self-interest of bureaucrats articulated through the public choice literature (see Niskanen 1971), Big Society spoke to the consensual, benign and utterly inoffensive collective self-interest of organizing committees for village fetes, the Neighbourhood Watch and hiking associations.

At times, the agenda promoted institutions with radical origins, such as Community Organisers, but it was clear that any such support would be time- and resource-limited and that any outcomes from such programmes would have to be self-sustaining and self-funding. Those involved in Big Society schemes were aware that their work, which was inevitably supported on fixed-term contracts, would be evaluated regularly according to short-term outcomes (see Gallagher 2015). Whereas nation-building efforts in times past were 'big societal' processes leading to the creation of national institutions, such as the NHS, in a post-Crisis, austerity-driven world, 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 (see Barnard 2010, 25). In effect, 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.

As a young man from the Tyne Valley with relatives directly affected first by the deindustrialisation of the region and then the effects of austerity, I felt that there was a need to examine both the consequences of Coalition cuts and the opportunities afforded by Big Society, particularly at a time in which concern was beginning to intensify about the long-term consequences of the decline of our communities. As the concept of 'the left-behind' was beginning to emerge as a means of describing those not dragged forward with (or, or more optimistically, by) neoliberal reform (see Jennings and Stoker 2016), Owen Jones (2011) highlighted in *Chavs* the startling effects of de-industrialisation on towns like Ashington in Northumberland. Once regarded as the largest village in the world and a successful site of collective self-organization, Ashington's decline demonstrated that material gains associated

with neoliberal reform could be uneven and accompanied by forms of serious social disintegration.

As an academic, I was keen to establish the extent to which culture, or shared understandings, within such communities, was capable of shaping effective, wellbeing-promoting responses to circumstances. I argued that it is possible to evaluate culture objectively and across societies, on account of the extent to which shared understandings shape institutions capable of promoting well-being within a particular set of circumstances (see Johnson 2013). I argued that societies uphold 'good culture' in their institutions by commitment to three key values – equality, solidarity and non-domination – that check and balance one another as well as any other values held. Quite aside from material deprivation, without equality, people develop pathologies associated with generalized feelings of superiority or inferiority; without solidarity, people are alienated from one another and are unable effectively to co-operate empathically, and, without non-domination, people are subject to the arbitrary will of others. Commitment to such values can look very different when realised in different societies, but must underpin whichever other values and whatever other ends societies pursue in order to avoid harm. While those core values must be resilient and robust, there must be commitment to ensuring that institutions are sustainable and flexible, capable of responding resiliently to changing circumstances without depriving members of their fundamental interests.

While I noted the ways in which contemporary institutions in liberal societies (as well as many other societies) disparaged those commitments, I also noted the ways in which some societies threatened by neoliberal reform had historically upheld those commitments robustly and in challenging circumstances. I (2013) cited the example of Aboriginal Australian societies that had, historically, oriented their institutions around values that resembled equality, solidarity and non-domination and that promoted ends associated with wellbeing. I also highlighted the way in which colonialism and then neoliberal reform had inflicted a range of pathologies on group members, radically excluding and impoverishing those who survived waves of killings. It was also apparent from lifelong discussions with family and community members in the North East that, for a relatively short period of time (several decades), and in ways that differed markedly, there had been a range of institutions developed in our own communities that upheld people's interests with similar success.

During the process of industrialization, people had left the shackles of post-feudal agrarianism and entered new and complex shackles in the towns and villages of the North East. Within those communities, they had gradually resisted the domination and inequality of industrial capital through development of a range of important social, economic and health-based institutions, formed through organized labour and other forces that served seriously to achieve collective self-improvement. During the years of the post-War Consensus, communities that were subject to extreme pressures of the environment in production and of class in aspiration were able to create productive, civic spaces in which ends could be identified and pursued effectively (see Burrell 2016). De-industrialization and decades of neoliberal reforms had, though, rendered those institutions mere vestiges, with social clubs, for example, transformed from sources of collective self-organization, welfare and education into poor imitations of pubs. Not only was the state receding in these communities, so too was any pretence of private investment. Communities that had been active and self-organizing were becoming radically inactive and passive.

Participation and method

In this sense, Cameron was correct to identify dysfunction and it seemed only right to examine the possibilities for renewal that Big Society claimed to offer. Indeed, one of the key reasons for those communities' being successful in the first place lay in their being rich with people

keen to play active, political parts in advancing collective interests and, importantly, in engaging politically with other groups, including beyond borders. As such, there seemed good reason, academically, to work with members of those communities actively through participation to establish the extent to which, once a set of institutions are diminished, new institutions can be formed spontaneously to advance collective interests. The means by which we sought to achieve this was through creation of a working group – an institution. To ensure that the institution could develop approaches with generalizable findings, we included people from two groups with shared historical concern for key values, but with significant differences in history, Ashington and Aboriginal communities around Brisbane, to work together as quasi-diplomatic entities to explain their condition and to shape institutions to serve their interests. The project oriented around Aboriginal community activists (see Graham 2015) and the work of a Community Organiser in Ashington (see Gallagher 2016).

This form of participatory action research (PAR) emphasized the importance of collaboration between academics and communities in the development and production of research aimed directly at understanding and responding to issues of importance to both (see Johnson, Gallagher and Appleton 2019). Historically inspired by Marxist, feminist, critical theoretical and anti-colonial thinking, the method is now deployed for a range of practical and pragmatic reasons. It has been used widely in public health (see Westfall, Van Vorst, Main and Herbert 2006), but is applicable in a much broader range of disciplines and subjects (see O'Toole et al. 2003: 592; Morales 2016). In particular, it is regarded as an approach capable of adding rich meaning to findings, specifically by granting voice in research to disadvantaged and alienated groups (see claim with regard to poverty in Bennett and Roberts 2004 and minority ethno-cultural groups in Perry and Rappaport 2013). If any method were to have synergy with the transformative, civic pretences of Big Society, it would be PAR.

In this context, ten community co-researchers, five from Ashington and five from Brisbane, spent two years developing relationships with one another via email, phone and Skype in advance of one-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 by Roger Appleton of Brightmoon Media. There then followed three British Academy Rising Star Engagement Award 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.

This article concerns the focus of the first of the two documentaries (Appleton 2015) – the search for and meaning attached to funding. In a sense, funding acted as a proxy for a much broader discussion about entitlement and reciprocity. Understandings of those concepts and their centrality to public life served to constrain seriously the ability of groups collectively to self-organize. Indeed, as I argue in what follows, perhaps the most compelling finding from the project concerns the ways in which neoliberal reforms actively reduce scope for transformative action through their civic pretences. While I refer to philanthropy that emerged from an Australian context, I focus my discussion on its effect in the context of the North East of England and the engagement of the Ashington group with Big Society.

Precariousness

The first issue we examined within the working group was the nature of the communities' conditions themselves and specifically the notion of precariousness that was being used to describe the unpredictable neoliberal conditions faced by radically different people across the world. Unlike its proletarian predecessor, precarious employment can include well-paid roles, including legal (as Barrister Guy Opperman MP infamously argued – see Chapman 2017), IT and intellectual work, contingent on piecework or zero-hour contracts. For Standing (2011), notwithstanding radical inequalities in incomes, the defining phenomenological feature of the precariat is its unpredictability and insecurity. Given the identities of the participating groups, it seemed only natural that they, as among the most alienated and excluded within their societies, would deem themselves precarious. We called the project a 'A Cross-Cultural Working Group on "Good Culture" and Precariousness' (see Johnson 2017a) and, indeed, some members of the project were on either fixed-term or zero-hours contracts that scarcely approached the minimum wage.

However, in our discussions, it became clear that people's imagination of what constitutes precariousness differed significantly from that presented by Standing (2011). At least part of Standing's precariousness stems directly from its members having clear, coherent forms of ambition that relate strongly to social mobility. Many of those who fall into the 'precariat' have clear aims – to live 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. Much of their discontent, that Standing (2011; 2012; 2014) maps so clearly, stems from having those desires, which were once entitlements to their parents, 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 (see Johnson 2016).

In our case, lived experience of individuals in communities shaped by long-term, intergenerational engagement with the welfare system differs 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 (see Burton 2015). 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 (see Appleton 2015). 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. 2017). One clear substantive reason for this is that, with the exception of an education system that offers often only notional means of progression for many, all other institutions are concerned with maintenance and management. Individuals have no means of entering the institutions that enable some precarious individuals to pursue their interests and, as a consequence, no means of shaping aspirations around which to structure even a precarious rope bridge to realizable ends (see Johnson 2016; Appleton 2015).

As a consequence, individuals often orient ambitions around 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 benefits 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 being famous are almost irrelevant. Similarly, those on the precarious rope bridge confounded by the quantity of material goods in the houses of the most excluded may have their envy assuaged by the ways in which few of those goods truly belong to the tenant. 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 bureaucratic drudgery.

The lumpenprecariat

The notion of individuals failing *en masse* to fall into clear classes has a long history in Marxist thought. In *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels (2010a, 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.

Through the dissolution of agrarian, feudal 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 2010c, 723). The 'lumpenproletariat' are '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 2010b, 62), constituting a surplus 'industrial reserve army' (Marx and Engels 2010c, 490). Individuals in such a condition foster near-permanent anxiety among those in employment by virtue of their 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 co-ordination and organization only in doing the bidding of others. 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.

In the present, Standing's reconfiguration of the proletariat into an ever-expanding and almost all-encompassing precariat renders the lumpenproletariat apparently moribund. However, he (2012) adds 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 (2015, 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 the lumpenproletariat emerged from the dissolution of feudalism, the lumpenprecariat emerges from the dissolution of proletarian industry. They 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, the predictable 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 production.

At a time of Brexit and anxiety about security in employment, the resonance of this articulation is understandable. Yet, it is not just some fringe and it is not just drifting. Rather, swathes of communities once rich with employment and associated identities are now consigned to lives of long-term exclusion from formal work and to life-long conflict with an increasingly threadbare welfare system (see Johnson 2017b; discussion in Belfield, Cribb, Hood and Joyce 2016, 66 and HM Government 2010). This is true even as the Government declares a decrease in unemployment, since its criterion of employment – 1 hour of paid work a fortnight – fails to recognise that piecemeal periodic labour does not constitute a life defined by employment (Innes 2017; ILO 2019). Indeed, beyond mere low income, individuals in such

communities are often deprived of any substantive sense of stake-holding, other than that granted by public and private lenders.

This situation stems, particularly in the UK, from the decisions of employers to offshore production, of successive Governments to strip back the state's presence in the economy and to substitute long-term unemployment and a range of measly 'needs-' and 'means-' based welfare payments for paid work (see discussion in Grover 2018) – a 'settlement' that was inflicted on people without their consent or, in many respects, knowledge (see Gamble 1988). While there is good 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 (see Hayward and Yar 2006). They are, deliberately, the vestige of an industrial era and 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 2017b, lines 532-547; see Green and White 2008). They are often described as an underclass (see Murray 1996, 2006) or, demeaningly, just 'Chavs' (Jones 2010). They may exist on the sidelines of society, but their number is significant, indicated by the one and a half million who found themselves in destitution, partly as a result of reforms to welfare, in 2017 (JRF 2017, 20). The problems that such communities face ought to be of the utmost concern to agendas like Big Society (see Crowley and Cominetti 2014).

The notion of this diffuse cohort's being marked by unpredictability is clearly deficient. Lives are predictable in ways not so unlike those of prisoners, with autonomy and agency stripped over generations (see Johnson 2017b, 517-520). A person born to the condition, is likely to die in that condition, with predictable hardship in-between (see Johnson 2107b, especially lines 485-538; 941-942; 517-520). While they consume (albeit decreasing numbers of) goods, not only do they not own much, they do not control anything. Although their behaviour is often presented as uncontrollable, and images of council estate dysfunction certainly foster this image effectively, on the whole, they are incapable of achieving any meaningful transformation of their circumstances, as Marx noted long ago. In effect, their condition is marked by the absence of their authority by virtue of their being subject to the, often ineffective, authority of others. This is apparent in ways that are grasped most forcefully through experience of transformation in custom.

Gifts and the loss of authority: the death of tea and biscuits

Most people from working class backgrounds in the North East of England will recall the tradition of tea and biscuits. Originating as a workplace tool of sustaining productivity through its combination of sugar and caffeine (Mintz 1985), tea was drawn into working class homes as a means of improving dry, unpalatable food, becoming an 'integral part of the social fabric' (Mintz 1993, 266) and achieving the status of a ritual of respectability (Smith 1992). In many communities, 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. The tea (or granular coffee) would inevitably be drenched in milk and served with heaped tablespoons of sugar and accompanying dry, butterless biscuits, dipped so excessively in the tea that the bottom of the cup would resemble porridge. Many will still recall broken biscuits bought and eaten by the pound. I have watched my father abuse the hospitality of many hosts in this way. Even the most feckless of hosts would make efforts to uphold this rite, offering excuses when no biscuits were available and using dried milk in lieu of fresh. As someone who hated tea and the biscuits in childhood, I was a poor and ungrateful guest when accompanying older relatives on their communal ambassadorial visits. However, in adulthood, I lament greatly the rite's demise. This

is because its loss symbolizes and illustrates a radical stripping of authority that permeates each area of people's lives. Tea and biscuits depends 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 (generally immediately) at which tea and biscuits are offered to, then forced upon, 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 (2002) grasps this beautifully 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 unveiled as groups shift from giving goods to destroying goods, all to jostle for positions of power with those with whom they are engaging in acts of apparent reciprocity (Mauss 2002, 20). Inevitably, 'A gift is received "with a burden attached"' (Mauss 2002, 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 accompanied by a desperate, exaggerated battle to adopt full responsibility for payment.

A good performance follows a consistent pattern: one person fights to receive the bill, the other demands to know the cost; the recipient of the bill makes moves towards the cash, the other person pushes the purse or wallet out of the way and makes strides towards their own money (often realizing that there is insufficient money on their person to cover the bill); the first person throws their money at the cashier and the other person, if unable to intercept the cash, tries to force whatever money they have in the first person's pocket, bag or shirt, often with hilarious consequences; a fight ensues, with voices raised, faces stern with indignation and heads shaking with increasing frequency, all in the name of generosity. But it is not generosity or if generosity is to be elided with the act, we ought to view it in a much less gentle light, since this is the active struggle of individuals to sustain authority. Nobody wants to pay. They want to assume the authority that goes with payment, often, literally, at great cost. This is about buying authority. It grants individuals the ability to mutter contemptuously when the recipient of the gift does not put up sufficient fight and to bask in the glory of victory when the fight is robust. As Mauss (2002, 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.

Until recently, I have never once not engaged in this joust with another adult, male or female, when a bill was to be paid, irrespective of the relative income of the parties. For all participants, this is a battle to uphold authority and, as a consequence, personhood. Not fighting to pay is accepting a position of subordination. I know that I will never buy more of my wife's step father's drinks than he buys for me because he fears, rightly, that accepting payment would be to accept that position of subordination, but I battle nonetheless to demonstrate willing and avoid a reputation of freeloading shamelessness. I sometimes allow my welfare recipient parents to pay, not because I need or want their money, but because it gives them a fleeting brush with authority and me a sense of philanthropic contentment as a good son – all for receiving, not giving, money.

Throughout our project, however, it seemed that people no longer upheld the joust. Men seemed untroubled by being given things, by 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 equality of authority. 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. Bobby Thompson's comedy had a resonant capacity precisely because of his willingness to subvert that relationship, wilfully, actively embracing and disregarding indebtedness as he upheld his

autonomy and authority as a counter-cultural waster. Others simply sought as fully as possible to avoid indebtedness, controlling spending, maintaining budgets and saving where possible (see discussion in Prasad, Hoffman and Bezila 2016; O'Connell 2009). This is one of the key reasons for the discourse of austerity finding favour (NEF 2013) 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 regard pay day as the day on which benefits are paid, rent arrears and any number of other debts to any number of creditors, people can often see no other means of satisfying wants and achieving status through consumption than by embedding themselves in a position of subordination (see Hayward and Yar 2006). The consequence has been dramatic. Not only do some people's homes belong to others and are paid for by others, the contents of those houses belong to lenders too. This has fractured territorially the authority of house holders. Indeed, by virtue of failure to uphold debt commitments, people have become used to people with official authority, such as bailiffs and Local Authority officers, wandering into their houses and asserting authority over the contents. Moreover, when the general stress and malaise of the condition wear people down and disrupt their ability to sustain relationships with partners and to parent children, they have become used to social workers, police officers and others entering their homes and exercising authority over the family collectively or the individuals individually.

It is this 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, that has caused the death of tea and biscuits. Stripped of authority, people have no power left to exercise save to choose whether to open the door or watch its being kicked in. In the course of one generation in my family, I have witnessed one elderly relative, a time-served joiner, who performed the rite with great precision, give way to a son who simply opens the door and passively walks inside, only ever making tea, with resignation, if requested – a request his father would have regarded as an insulting affront to his authority. This is a condition that few, if any, within it have requested, that has persisted across Conservative and New Labour, and then accelerated across Coalition and Conservative, Governments and has reduced a great many people to positions of passivity and hopelessness (see Grover 2018; Rustin 2010). Their lives are all too predictable and, while they are not always lying and dying on streets, their loss of authority hurts us all, except, that is, the tiny minority of the population who can extract moral value from their existence. Whether lumpen proletariat or precariat, those within the condition assume a much larger number and a much greater presence than that recognised by Standing. The scale and complexity of the pathologies associated with it, however, can only be exacerbated by programmes like Big Society.

Funding and philanthropy

Prima facie, a participatory project such as the one I sought to develop would seem to tick a number of funding boxes, especially in an era in which academia increasingly is asked to justify itself in terms of impact: a clear collaborative orientation, a series of substantive sites of knowledge exchange and dissemination and an explicit focus on impact by virtue of its transformative aspiration. Indeed, as an academic at a good university, there were many prospective internal and several external sources of funding for international travel and collaboration. My personal research allowance could be supplemented through departmental, faculty and university sources. Externally, there were research council network-building resources as well as funding body fellowships for knowledge exchange activities. All of these

funds, which range greatly in levels of competitiveness, are grounded in the notion that projects ought to be supported on the basis of merit. Academics are deemed worthy of support insofar as we have attained professional status, exist within a clear institutional structure and have developed projects that are intellectually credible and feasible. Funding is an investment that is taken, by many academics, with a sense of entitlement. Yet, this project proved difficult to fund, not just because of concern about intellectual merit, but also because it offered prospective benefit (international travel and experience, which is of particular benefit to individuals cut off from travel – see Johnson 2017b, lines 534-535) to those who had no credibility within academia. Indeed, colleagues treated the project, in many respects understandably, as a bit of a joke – an illustration of the diminution of the academy in an era marked by agendas imposed from without. While there was funding for dissemination and knowledge exchange through faculty enterprise funding and a British Academy Rising Star Engagement Award, funding for the mechanics of the project – the visits – could not be located within academic sources.

As such, discussion shifted among the group toward philanthropy and the possibility of wealthy individuals or bodies funding the project as a gift. For group members, the shift from public to private funding offered a number of socio-cultural benefits. There was great concern among the Ashington group, in particular, about their worthiness as individuals and the worthiness of the activity itself. Put simply, at a time of austerity, the group collectively were concerned about the possibility of taxpayer contributions being directed away from vital services toward 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. Individuals feared having to justify receipt of public resources through reference to prior contributions to society (Appleton 2015).

In contrast, however, there was belief that philanthropy might circumvent such concern in offering opportunity for a wealthy person to exercise agency in electing, benevolently, to present resources for the purposes of fostering social goods. In that regard, the personal relationship between the philanthropist and the recipient would represent a worthy investment in the members and the concept by virtue of the donor's agency and evaluation of the beneficiaries' worthiness. Chiming with Marx's assertion of the importance of patronage to lumpen groups, the sentiment sometimes seemed to stem from representation of the dynamics of *Dragons' Den* or *Undercover Boss*, two TV programmes in which the worthiness of individuals is ascertained by wealthy benefactors who identify and pursue their own ends ruthlessly. It felt, sometimes, as if individuals felt that being subject to that kind of assessment would be preferable to the assessment of peers who might otherwise have an interest in preventing their fellow community members advancing their own.

As a consequence, we sought funds from a range of philanthropic sources. In the UK, those sources gave the endeavour short shrift, often not responding to submissions or informally responding by phone that the project lacked the entrepreneurial basis to warrant investment. Often, though, it felt that the perceived identities of the members, white and working class, meant that bodies deemed the group undeserving poor – they simply had no excuse for the situation in which they found themselves. What good would granting resources to undeserving individuals do for publicity eager philanthropic bodies? At a time of austerity, in which those same individuals were being blamed for the burden of the state, participation in such a project offered little return on investment.

In Australia, however, there was a slight difference. Although Aboriginal people find themselves in similar socio-economic circumstances, though fostered by colonialism, and although Aboriginal people represent perhaps *the* group most commonly cited as a burden on the state, there is a long-standing tradition of their being subjects of white philanthropy. The

racist logic that underpinned the forced assimilation of Aboriginal people assumed a hierarchy of evolutionary development that could only be addressed by dilution of Aboriginal genes and organisation of Aboriginal lives. In this scheme, white administrators exercised *noblesse oblige* by dismantling Aboriginal society and, 'charitably', providing putative pathways to European society (see Bell 2002, 69; 96). This manifestation of the white man's burden continues in Australia's present. While Aboriginal people are often represented as welfare dependent undeserving poor, and while there are coherent and cogent allies of Aboriginal people within European Australian society, 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 (see Rowley 1972, 96). The motives for this, beyond benevolence, include guilt amelioration as well as public recognition for aiding a vulnerable group. Indeed, there is an entire aid industry associated with Aboriginal society, with white actors and groups providing goods and services to people viewed as passive and, in effect, feckless (Howard 1982, 174; Toohey 2008, 6).

This context increased the likelihood of our securing philanthropic support. Indeed, at a very early stage, the Aboriginal group was approached by an individual, Malcolm Dixon, 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. Mr Dixon is founder of Dixon Homes, which, as his header in figure 1 indicates, has provided housing for over 70,000 people in Queensland and 326,000 worldwide. He formed Dalriada Humanitarian Foundation Australia PTY to act as a vehicle to address issues of housing and homelessness. Over the course of several meetings with the Aboriginal group, Dixon made a series of pledges to support the project, each increasing the value of the commitment toward an eventual $100,000AUD. Mr Dixon 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' (figure 1).

This was well-received by members of the working group in both Australia and the UK. It provided means of funding that allayed UK members' fears about the worthiness of the project and 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 work for unpaid leave and with family members for support in caring for relatives. The academics made workload adjustments and passed the project through the necessary ethical approvals and risk assessment processes. 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. In communities otherwise bereft of hope, this was significant.

The Equalizers

DALRIADA HUMANITARIAN FOUNDATION AUSTRALIA PTY LTD
A Dixon Duraframe Group Associated Company

Trustee: Malcolm Dixon
Dalriada Humanitarian Foundation Australia Pty Ltd
PO Box 3048,
Ashgrove East
Brisbane 4060
Queensland Australia
Phone: 61-7-3269 1815
dixoninterholdings@hotmail.com

Dear Prof Robert Geyer, Ms Christine Parker, Dr Matthew Johnson and Ms Mary Graham,

Thank you for your correspondence regarding 'A Cross-Cultural Working Group on "Good Culture" and Precariousness'. I fully support the project and am aware that it has received University approval (Pfact51143). I write to confirm that I have agreed to provide $100,000.00AUD in funding for the project and that I will transfer at the earliest opportunity (which I estimate to be by the end of June 2014) the equivalent funds in Sterling to:

Should you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours Sincerely,

Malcolm Dixon

Malcolm Dixon
(Authorised by Malcolm 11/4/24)

Malcolm Dixon, Founder of "DIXON HOMES" in Queensland where today in Australia in excess of 70,000 people live in a Dixon Home AND wider afield with in excess of 326,000 of the World's citizens today living in a steel frame Duraframe Dixon home.

Figure 1. Letter of commitment of funds by Malcolm Dixon 11/04/2014

Entitlement and domination

However, as June 2014 passed, it became apparent that Mr Dixon'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. As a consequence, it was decided that I would use my British Academy research funds to work with the leader of the Australian group in Brisbane to meet Mr Dixon in person, with a filmmaker accompanying to document the work.

During August and September 2014, we worked to document the basis for the project in Brisbane and to make every effort to engage with Mr Dixon directly. At this point, Mr Dixon began to qualify his commitment during phone conversations, making reference to the tax status of his gift and the 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 8th September 2014. While this was intended as a means, forcefully, of confronting Mr Dixon, it quickly became apparent that Mr Dixon, the son of a working-class Glaswegian, was disconcertingly adept at the tea and biscuits ritual. Upon arrival, we were ushered authoritatively to a made table replete with finger food, with his partner offering a wide range of homemade drinks and baked goods. Having entered with a desire to impose ourselves on this septuagenarian philanthropist, we were disarmed by his generosity. Indeed, it took until the second course of teas for us to move beyond pleasantries and only then because Mr Dixon began to use the presence of the documentary filmmaker to advertise a range of products carefully ensconced beneath a side table. At that point, we began to press Mr Dixon on his commitment. The organizer of the Australian group framed his offer in terms of the collaborative, horizontal relationship she believed that they had forged, while I framed the failure of Mr Dixon to fulfil his commitment in terms of my hierarchical responsibility to group members. By not fulfilling a commitment to his collaborator, I was unable to fulfil mine to group members. Ms Graham described her disappointment, while I described my guilt (see Appleton 2015).

Mr Dixon's response was telling. First, he highlighted the number of homes produced by Dixon Homes. He then noted that the money promised was to be drawn from funds offshore that remained offshore in order to avoid Australian tax. It was not clear whether those funds were from overseas profits or from domestic profits that had been transferred overseas. However, it was clear that Mr Dixon was wholly 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, Mr Dixon presented philanthropic donations as a bargaining chip against the Australian Government since, by refusing to fulfil commitments, he was able to cite the Australian Government as being responsible for deprivation of social goods. Having accumulated wealth by virtue, not just of public contracts and subsidies, but also as a consequence of the state ensuring his protection and the predictability of business environments (see Parsell 2014), Mr Dixon felt entitled to deprive the state of at least a share of his profits.

Phenomenologically, entitlement is important, here, since the contrast with the response of the members of the working group to news of Mr Dixon'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 his, while he believed that he had total entitlement to wealth that had been produced, not even by his own hand, but by the labour of others under the protection of the state. That sense of entitlement ensured that he felt no shame or guilt about his reneging. 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, Mr Dixon said 'Tell them I'm a mongrel, but that my heart's in the right place' (Appleton 2015). The point, though, is that only a jaundiced view of affairs could place his heart anywhere other than in the wrong place. 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 the Coalition's reforms, that ought to be confounding: welfare recipients were presented consistently as having a sense of unwavering entitlement, while those in business were presented consistently as having a sense of unwavering civic responsibility. In reality, though, Mr Dixon's behaviour reflects that of a great number of business figures who present their work as socially conscious and their philanthropy as a solution to society's ills. As the recent example of the outgoing Chairman of Persimmon Homes indicates (see Neate and Monaghan 2018), these are individuals with both the social capacity and disposition to make individuals and collective groups beholden to their will. In effect, they preserve the capacity to dominate individuals by imposing decisions without reference to the interests of those whom the decisions affect. Far from enhancing the agency of those groups most affected by the dissolution of their institutions, Big Society and its civic commitment to philanthropy served to enhance, what Philip Pettit (Pettit 1999; 2006) described compellingly as domination.

Pettit's work on domination and resilient non-interference is salient precisely because it highlights the demand that Big Society places upon citizens: it requires that we believe in the unstinting good will of actors and trust that they will decline to exercise their capacity to injure our interests (see Johnson and Johnson 2018). Given that the Coalition's narrative 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 as an active assertion of will on passive entities made ever more passive by the gift. The more that is given, the more that society is stripped of its agency, such that, having appropriated wealth through tax avoidance, philanthropists seek recognition for returning some of it at a later date. In that regard, philanthropy is not a civic good of reciprocity, it is an act of aggression perpetrated on individuals whose only defence is refusal and diminution of their other interests. It represents a fundamentally individualistic vision of civic virtue that *may* foster goods, but may otherwise not. It is not bound by any statutory framework that might institutionalise gift giving resiliently as a form of non-domination. As Mauss (200P2, 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 reneging on their agreement highlights the extent to which passivity has pervaded people's sense of self. As such, while the Coalition and Big Society were correct to diagnose passivity, they actively entrenched it through their prognosis and treatment.

Conclusion: lumpen groups, agency and Universal Basic Income

While the project outlined above might be regarded as frivolous, the engagement of those within it with gift giving is illustrative of a broader set of issues that affect agency within our societies. The withdrawal of the state from activity in our regions and the replacement of active economic activity with an ever more measly 'needs'- and 'means'- based welfare system has served seriously to condemn individuals to lumpen conditions and to strip them of the capacity for collective self-improvement. 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, granting power to philanthropists to determine the worthiness of individuals and ensuring that the most vulnerable themselves internalise and conduct those assessments on their peers. This totalising cultural presence is subjecting increasing numbers of individuals, individually, but also as groups, collectively, to domination, leaving them

beholden to the fallible and sometimes pernicious judgement of others when seeking to advance their interests. It is no surprise, then, that Big Society both failed to advance activity and succeeded in fostering passivity.

If our concern is passivity, we need consciously to create institutions that uphold and advance agency. The institutions that once underpinned now 'lumpen' communities stemmed from particular modes of production granting purpose to collective activity. Now that those modes are moribund or vestigial in these communities, the impetus for the creation of new institutions from within is absent and, with mechanisation a threat to large-scale employment, there is little prospect of groups' being re-engaged in production without state intervention.

To challenge passivity we need to remove its central sources: indebtedness, lack of self-ownership and, in contrast to Cameron's diagnosis, an *absence* of entitlement. While Universal Basic Income (UBI) has been presented as a treatment for a wide array of society's ills, is reason to believe that elements of its formulation may offer value in this context. As a statutory universal entitlement to adults, it is neither 'means'- nor 'needs'- based. While that might seem a counter-intuitive consideration when dealing with groups so clearly without independent means and so clearly in need, it is these elements that offer the prospect of addressing the issues that Big Society claimed to address.

UBI grants individuals the right to a share of the nation's wealth and affords them the right to spend that resource as they see fit. The fact that there can be no guarantee that that money will be used for ends that society at large deems valuable or meaningful enhances the distance between income and philanthropy. This does not mean that reasonable conditions cannot be attached to UBI. To foster civic ends, it is entirely reasonable to make UBI conditional upon participation in essential civic activities, such as elections, which underpin the interests of society as a whole, and the individuals within it as parts, and to withdraw UBI in instances of other-regarding criminal harm, including acquisitive and violent offences. The point is that these are conditions that reflect the interests of society as a whole, rather than the whims of wealthy individuals, and are entirely in keeping with a republican account of resilient non-interference.

If sufficiently generous, UBI creates scope for people in 'lumpen' conditions actively to develop their own institutions and to advance their interests through projects such as the one outlined above. Those resources enable individuals to invest in themselves and their communities in ways that are in accordance with the spirit of Big Society. Indeed, UBI as monetary policy may prove much more effective at stimulating local economic activity than, for example, quantitative easing in the hope of encouraging banks to lend. 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, dragging 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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