

## The Guardians of the Welfare State: Universal Credit, Welfare Control and the Moral Economy of Frontline Work in Austerity Britain

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**Abstract**

Ongoing processes of ‘austerity localism’, including the state’s withdrawal from local communities, have created heightened pressures at the frontline. Sitting in local authorities, third sector bodies and community organisations, frontline workers come to act as the de facto guardians of a much-diminished welfare state. Yet, in a situation where needs outweigh resources, they also allocate support based on moral hierarchies of deservingness. This Janus-faced role of frontline workers as both a bulwark against, and an enabler of, neo-liberal welfare control is examined through the framework of a moral economy of frontline work. I argue that the tensions reflect a deeper struggle over competing notions of citizenship, and of the state’s responsibilities towards its citizens, in austerity Britain today.

**Keywords**

austerity localism, citizenship, ethnography, frontline work, moral economy, neo-liberalism, state withdrawal, street-level bureaucrats, Universal Credit, welfare control

‘She is a model customer, almost like the end product of what we want to see’, Paula told me. We looked at Jenny, a neatly dressed woman in her 40s, as she was leaving the Jobcentre,<sup>1</sup> pulling her six-year old daughter behind her. It was August 2018, and I had just sat through an hour-long session with Jenny and Paula, listening to Paula give Jenny advice about the financial pressures Jenny was facing. Paula, a blonde 30-something-year-old woman, originally from Poland, was a case worker for the welfare reform office

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that the local authority in a mid-sized town in the south-east region of England had created in 2013 to help citizens with the transition to austerity-led welfare reforms. Most recently, the team had started working with ‘customers’ who had been moved onto Universal Credit (UC), a new benefit system that targets those on low income or not in work by streamlining six working age benefits into a single monthly payment. In the town, UC was being rolled out to anyone making a new claim for benefits, as well as to those with two or fewer children, with ‘full migration’ (to use the government’s official term) for all remaining claimants to follow later.

Jenny had been moved onto the new system in early 2018, following a change in her personal circumstances. She was the head of a four-person household, consisting of herself, her 26-year-old daughter, her 23-year-old son and her six-year-old daughter. Jenny was in receipt of a carer’s allowance for acting as a full-time carer of her oldest daughter who had severe physical disabilities. Today, she had come to see Paula for advice because she had accumulated rent arrears of £600 in her socially rented tenancy. Jenny explained the reasons: UC reduces a flat rate from benefit payments every month where recipients have non-dependent adults (including grown-up children) living in the same household, as they are expected to contribute. However, her son had stopped contributing to rent payments since becoming unemployed a few months prior. Now, she had to find a way of paying back her rent arrears and avoiding future shortfalls. Paula, having listened patiently to Jenny’s worries, told her about training opportunities available to improve her son’s job prospects, about an emergency grant to cover her electric and gas bills and about a ‘budgeting course’ that she could enrol on. Jenny seemed grateful for the advice and thanked Paula profusely before leaving.

What do encounters, such as the one between Paula and Jenny, tell us about the transfer of responsibilities from central government to local communities in a context of ‘austerity localism’ (Featherstone et al., 2012)? What frameworks do frontline workers use when they distinguish between ‘model customers’ like Jenny and others who fall short of such standards? And what understandings of citizenship are revealed in this process? Paula is one of many individuals who populate the landscape of local support services. I call them frontline workers because they typically act as the first port of call for people in desperate need of support and advice in austerity Britain (Koch and James, 2020). Some frontline workers are directly employed by the local authority to help struggling individuals cope with the range of welfare reforms implemented as part of the government’s austerity package. Others work in the third sector to which the government has outsourced many of its traditional responsibilities: there are case workers hired by housing associations that administer the bulk of the remaining social housing stock (Wilde, 2020); those sitting in advice centres (Forbess and James, 2017b; Kirwan, 2016; McDermot, 2013) and businesses (Tuckett, 2020); and numerous individuals attached to churches (Davey, 2020), foodbanks (Garthwaite, 2016; Purdam et al., 2016) and community centres (Koch, 2018).

This article takes these frontline workers as its point of departure to consider a central issue: how those situated at the interstices of central government, the market and citizens come to engage with, act upon and advocate on behalf of those in need of help, variously labelled their ‘customers’ (in the case of those administering UC), ‘clients’ (in the case of advice centres) or sometimes ‘tenants’ (in the case of social landlords). Austerity-led

state withdrawal and welfare reforms are increasingly turning frontline workers into the de facto guardians of a much-diminished welfare state. Yet, in a context of ‘austerity localism’, where resources are limited and funding to the third sector and to local authorities has been cut, not everyone can be helped. Frontline workers invoke hierarchies of claimants – or ideas of what Paula called a ‘model customer’ above – that are in tension with their drive to help everyone in need. This Janus-faced role of frontline workers as both a bulwark against, but also an enabler of, market-driven logics of welfare control is examined through the framework of a moral economy of frontline work. I argue that the tensions are surface-level expressions of a deeper struggle over the meaning and possibilities of citizenship in Britain today.

### **Governing Austerity: Reconfigurations of Welfare under ‘Austerity Localism’**

Since 2010, successive Conservative-led governments have embarked on a radical wave of reforms to welfare, local governance and public services in the UK. While former Prime Minister Cameron’s plans for a ‘Big Society’ have disappeared from the agenda, the ideals of philanthropy, self-help and volunteerism continue to be rolled out through a number of initiatives dubbed ‘localism’ (Clayton et al., 2015; Dagdeviren et al., 2019; Featherstone et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2014). Localism ‘is best understood as an important recurring thread within UK liberalism, rather than as a wholly new agenda’ (Featherstone et al., 2012: 178), one which was already present in Thatcher and New Labour governments’ policies. Yet, its most recent incarnation has been built upon three distinct pillars which, taken together, constitute a ‘decisive break with the past’: empowering local communities, increasing competition within public service provision and promoting social action that amounts to an asset transfer from central to local government onto communities themselves (Dagdeviren et al., 2019: 145). Localism is ‘upheld as a zero-sum concept of the relationship between civil society and the state, whereby more “society” involvement equates to less “state” activity’ (Williams et al., 2014: 2800).

These policies have to be placed within a context of austerity politics implemented by the same governments following the global economic crisis of 2008/2009 and that has amounted to the largest cuts in the history of the post-war welfare state (Clarke and Newman, 2012). Indeed, authors have coined the term ‘austerity localism’ (Clayton et al., 2015; Dagdeviren et al., 2019; Featherstone et al., 2012) to describe:

the process by which the state can be rolled back via the pretence of dispersing power, when in reality a highly centrally controlled framework of responsabilisation has led local actors to respond reactively in order to contain its worst consequences. (Dagdeviren et al., 2019: 147)

Thus, while austerity localism emphasises the increased autonomy supposedly given to local service providers that makes them more responsive to local needs, the opposite is true – a more fragmented, resource poor competitive environment that compels third sector organisations to specialise in providing essential but limited support against growing demands for help (Dagdeviren et al., 2019). It favours ‘those with resources, expertise and social capital to become involved in the provision of services and facilities’

(Featherstone et al., 2012: 178), while working ‘to sever relationships and trust, creating forms of disconnect between those in power and those who feel on the receiving end of damaging decisions’ (Clayton et al., 2015: 737).

Judged from this perspective, austerity localism appears as the most recent incarnation of an insidious form of neo-liberalism, one that has been accompanied by an ideological turn to the ‘active citizen’ defined by their willingness to take responsibility for themselves and to participate in the labour market, with strong judgement attached to those who fail to become financially independent (Reeves and Loopstra, 2017). This turn to a mantra of self-reliance has been coupled with a push to ‘punish the poor’ (Wacquant, 2009), not least through the blurring of social welfare and policy functions with the tools and logics of criminal justice policy (Burney, 2009; Garland, 2001; Rodger, 2012). And it has been accompanied by the shifting of state tasks to an ever wider variety of non-state actors, including businesses, voluntary associations and community groups, the latter of which are increasingly expected to take on the roles of the welfare state in a resource poor environment (Koch and James, 2020). Given these developments, it comes as no surprise that dominant perspectives on neo-liberalism (Hyatt, 2011; Rose, 1996; Shore and Wright, 2003) and on social policy (see Rodger and Campling, 1996) have tended to emphasise Foucauldian perspectives of governmentality, articulating a critical anxiety about the expanding number of locations where not only the provision of basic support but also the disciplining and monitoring of social behaviour now takes place (Rose et al., 2006).

While Foucauldian accounts have helpfully placed current policy changes within broader shifts in governance, they have not gone unchallenged, however. As Rodger (1988: 569) has argued, post-structuralists’ ‘free-floating conception of power’ fails to display an ‘understanding of human beings as knowledgeable agents’. It also neglects underlying power relations and inequalities in contemporary British society (Savage, 2015). Indeed, earlier Marxist criticisms of ‘social policy as social control’ (see Higgins, 1980 for a review) may provide a more useful starting point. Here, and in line with these earlier criticisms, I develop a political-economy-driven analysis of the complex dynamics of frontline work, one which departs from a Foucauldian perspective in favour of the structural constraints encountered by those at the coalface. In line with recent ethnographies on austerity Britain (Forbess and James, 2017b; Koch, 2018; Koch and James, 2020; Raynor, 2019; Robinson and Sheldon, 2019), I am interested to explore a central tension between, on the one hand, people’s attempts to exercise moral agency, and on the other, the structural context that often militates against them. I argue that the concept of a ‘moral economy of frontline work’ not only captures the resulting dynamics of care and coercion but also provides an analytical lens through which to access underlying struggles over the meaning of citizenship in Britain today.

## **The Moral Economy of Frontline Work: Conceptualising the Ethics of Street-Level Bureaucrats**

While the term ‘moral economy’ has been in use for a long time (Götz, 2015), it was popularised in the social sciences with the writings of historian EP Thompson (1971, 1991) and political scientist James Scott (1976). Thompson used the concept of ‘moral economy’ to explain why the removal of price controls on grain in 18th-century England

resulted in peasant food riots. Contrary to those who have seen the riots as evidence of merely pathological behaviour, he argued that they reflected a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor (Thompson, 1971). The moment of these riots was crucial. It was a time when an old economic order based on paternalistic arrangements between merchants and peasants was coming under attack by the introduction of a modern capitalist economy. A few years later, Scott brought the concept of ‘moral economy’ to the context of 20th-century colonial empire in Burma and Vietnam (Scott, 1976). Like Thompson, he was concerned to understand traditional ways of showing solidarity among peasant populations that resulted in acts of resistance among those repressed by colonial rule.

Notwithstanding the historical specificity which both Thompson and Scott had in mind, the concept of moral economy has recently been applied to a vast range of contemporary relations across the social sciences (Alexander et al., 2018; Arias and Grisaffi, forthcoming; Carrier, 2018; Fassin, 2009; Hann, 2018; Palomera and Vetta, 2016), including in this journal (Banks, 2006; Näre, 2011). This expansion of the concept has not remained uncontested, not least by Thompson (1991) himself. For some, moral economy’s proliferation into an ‘overly capacious, catchall category’ (Edelman, 2012: 63) turns it into an ‘unsatisfactory, “clumpish” term’ (Hann, 2018: 230) that runs the danger of suggesting a ‘specificity where none exists and a spurious intellectual novelty that can produce disciplinary amnesia’ (Carrier, 2018: 19). Yet others have tried to recuperate the analytical value of Thompson’s concept by linking discussions about the ‘moral’ firmly back to the ‘economy’. Thus, Palomera and Vetta (2016: 414) have called for an analysis that discerns how class relations are regulated through moral codes and how modes of capital accumulation are always ‘metabolized through particular fields constituted by dynamic combinations of norms, meaning and practices’.

Here, I follow Palomera and Vetta in their political economy-driven reading of moral economy and its recent application to discussions of austerity and inequality (Alexander et al., 2018; Pusceddu, 2020; Wilde, 2020). Like the grain studied by Thompson, access to welfare services and advice is essential to the daily survival of today’s most marginalised populations. What is more, like the old paternalistic order whose moral authority was being threatened by the introduction of market-capitalism in 18th-century England, so today’s frontline workers are negotiating complex struggles as the last de facto guardians of a shrinking welfare state. My analysis shows how frontline workers shift between enabling support by mediating, translating and advocating on behalf of those more vulnerable than themselves, and acting as gatekeepers of pressured resources in other situations, thus also invoking hierarchies of ‘deservingness’ (Davey, 2020; Pusceddu, 2020) that turn them into the very agents of ‘social control’ (Higgins, 1980) that they often reject. It is precisely these tensions that are central to the moral economy of frontline work, revealing broader contradictions between an ideal of citizenship that sees the provision of welfare as a basic social right and a more selective needs-based conception in neo-liberal Britain today.

My analysis builds upon the call voiced by Alexander et al. (2018) to firmly centre the study of the local state in studies of moral economy. But if such an analysis has been largely missing from recent discussions, literature on street-level bureaucrats can provide an important corrective (Alden, 2015; Dubois, 2009; Lipsky, 1972, 1980;

Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003; Tuckett, 2018). Frontline workers can be seen as a type of street-level bureaucrat because like the latter, they operate at the lowest rung of governance as they come to act in often flexible ways to help those most in need. In a context of austerity localism, exercising discretion becomes a domain of unexpected creativity and resourcefulness, one which allows frontline workers to engage in 'acts of translation' (McDermot, 2013), forms of 'relational labour' (Forbess and James, 2017a; Kirwan, 2016) and practices of 'ethical citizenship' (Muehlebach, 2012) against the structural constraints that they face. As Pia (2017: 122) has recently put it, their labour constitutes 'a bureaucratic form of agency that contrives temporary, ethically driven ways out of the conflicting priorities of state polices and the local provision of public goods'. It is this agency, as well as the structural limits of such 'ethically driven ways', that I explore in the pages that follow. First, however, some words on methods.

### **Methods: Towards a Critical Policy Ethnography**

The data presented in this article are based on 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork that I carried out during 2018 in a town in the south-east region of England where I have been doing long-term research since 2009 (Koch, 2018). The town counts among the wealthiest in the country; however, levels of inequality between the local working class population and a middle class 'elite' have always been high. The fieldwork forms part of a larger comparative and mixed-methods project investigating resilience and community across contrasting English towns in times of austerity. The larger context of this research project makes it difficult to quantify the amount of data that has gone into this specific piece. To give a rough indication, however, the qualitative component of this work, carried out with the help of a locally based research assistant, included over 40 recorded semi-structured interviews and six focus groups with various stakeholders and individuals, including local government officials, third sector employees, charity workers and welfare claimants. In addition, I have supplemented interviews with a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995). I carried out participant observation in both institutional settings and more informal spaces, including people's homes, with the aim of understanding my informants' perspectives in context (Okely, 1994).

The frontline workers were accessed through snow-balling techniques. They included the members of the local authority run welfare reform office tasked to help their clients transition to welfare reforms and UC; a foodbank run by a church in a deprived area of the town; a housing association that administers the bulk of the social housing stock on the town's largest estates; and an independent advice centre based on the same estate. I first met with individuals from these organisations, explained my research to them both verbally and in writing, and obtained consent to undertake shadowing work for a period of time. Most frontline organisations were used to having people shadow them (as this is a common way of training new staff and volunteers) and did not mind my presence. At the start of each meeting, frontline workers spoke to their clients about my research to confirm that they were happy for me to sit in, and offered me an opportunity to further explain my research. In some cases, clients also reached out afterwards to speak about their situations. Notes were taken during and after the shadowing sessions; meetings with clients were never recorded. Names and identities of individuals and places have been changed.



This orderly description of data collection should not be taken to mean that fieldwork is a straightforward and positivistic endeavour. Ethnography is a process of trial and error, and above all, it involves building relations of trust over time. In so doing, I was able to draw upon my skills as a long-term ethnographer on state–citizen relations in marginalised communities. The key arguments presented here emerged gradually and from the bottom–up: as Però (2014: 1161) notes, such a perspective is ‘part of a wider, open-ended and holistic research approach (typical of ethnography) that allows for themes, ideas, hunches, patterns and priorities to gradually emerge and impose themselves on the ethnographer in complex and often unexpected ways’. Often, the most significant clues for analysis presented themselves not in the more formalised encounters when interviews were recorded but in the more mundane and seemingly less interesting moments that mark ‘everyday life’ (Beck, 2015): before and after a client was seen in a meeting, over cups of tea or in the privacy of a person’s home.

I was moved by the great empathy and commitment that frontline workers put into helping others in need. Yet, they also came to act in ways that I consider to be harmful to their clients’ interests, and more so even, as playing into neo-liberal logics of welfare control. I worry that my account will displease frontline workers. But, as Bourgois (1995: 12) said in the context of poverty work, to refuse to write about misery out of a ‘righteous or “politically sensitive” fear of giving the poor a bad image’ is to make oneself ‘complicitous with oppression’. Of course, frontline workers are very different from ‘the poor’. But I similarly see the crucial role of a ‘critical policy ethnography’ (Dubois, 2009: 223) as lying in contextualising, and ultimately, humanising the difficult choices people make in circumstances that are not of their own choosing. In what follows, I will first introduce the context of welfare reform and funding pressures in which frontline workers operate, before in the second and third parts turning to a closer assessment of the moral economy of frontline work: its Janus-faced role both as a bulwark against but also an enabler of market-driven logics of welfare control. The conclusion will address these tensions as surface-level expressions of a deeper struggle over the meaning and possibilities of citizenship in Britain today.

## **Where Welfare Reform Meets Austerity Localism: A View from the Frontline**

‘It used to be the case that you could receive some benefits and if you handled your budget okay, you would just about be all right . . . but this is no longer the case, now this is gone’, Sue, a white English benefit case worker in her late 40s who was volunteering for the organisation Mind<sup>2</sup> told me when we met in one of the town’s buzzing cafes. Her words echoed what was commonly known among advice workers: that even with the most careful budgeting, successive waves of austerity-driven welfare reform implemented since 2010 have pushed an increasing number of people beyond the brink (Forbess and James, 2017c). Some welfare reforms have affected people worse than others. The bedroom tax, a policy which cuts housing benefits for those in social housing deemed to under-occupy their properties, has not resulted in an exponential rise in rent arrears and mass evictions, as most people are finding ways of covering the shortfall in payments by borrowing money, taking in lodgers or spending less on basic needs. By contrast, the benefit cap and

the housing allowance, both of which have introduced a cap on the overall amount of benefits recipients are entitled to, have had hugely adverse effects. In a town which suffers from a hyper-inflated rental market, it has resulted in a steady rise in rent arrears and evictions from both socially and privately rented properties.

The punitive, if uneven, impact of welfare reforms has been further compounded by changes to the benefit system which have made claiming social security more arduous. At the time of my research in 2018, this was primarily discussed by frontline workers with reference to UC. UC has a separate impetus from austerity reforms: it was initially introduced to streamline an overly complex benefit system, and as such originally commanded much cross-party support (Miller and Bennett, 2017). Yet, its implementation has attracted widespread criticism (Alston, 2018; Barnard, 2019; Jitendra et al., 2018), which has focused on its means-tested welfare logic (Reeves and Loopstra, 2017), the system of sanctioning which makes welfare recipients liable to having their benefits cut often for minor bureaucratic mistakes (Adler, 2018; Dwyer and Wright, 2014; Loopstra et al., 2018) and the 'digital by default' set up which requires claimants to be fully proficient in using the internet (Alston, 2018). Sandy, an adviser at a local independent advice centre located on one of the town's most deprived social housing estates, explained the impact of UC on top of successive waves of welfare reform:

The big problem with UC is that it combines with all the other punishing measures which came into place before it. And then you have sanctions, arbitrary rules that are designed to punish, and huge reductions to do with the advance payments.

Welfare reforms and the roll-out of UC have driven up the numbers of citizens in need of advice and basic material help. However, this growing demand for support is not matched by available resources in a climate of 'austerity localism' given the drastic cuts that local authorities, the legal advice sector and third sector organisations have suffered. Between 2009/2010 and 2017/2018, local authorities' spending on local services has fallen by 21 per cent (Partington, 2019), while cuts to the legal aid sector have resulted in the closure of advice services across the country and the creation of 'advice deserts' (Forbess and James, 2017c; James and Koch, forthcoming). These cuts, combined with a shift from grants to commissioning (Forbess and James, 2017b), have created a tough funding environment, in which smaller organisations are struggling to survive (Featherstone et al., 2012). 'When I first came to this job', the director of the above mentioned independent advice centre told me, 'writing funding applications was only one of many tasks I had to do. These days, I spend two of my four working days just doing that.' Others mentioned having to live with short-term funding cycles: for example, the local authority's welfare reform office was part funded by a grant from central government. But funding was only ever awarded three months ahead of the next annual cycle: 'This makes it extremely difficult for us to plan and let our clients know what support, if any, we will be able to offer.'

Forbess and James find that local organisations devise creative ways around 'austerity localism'. They argue that 'austerity was more a matter of seeking new resource flows, inventing novel interventions, and creating new spaces where justice may be sought and found, than of passively accepting funding cuts' (2017b: 1484). Similarly, many of the



organisations had adapted to the challenges they faced, some merging with other organisations; others co-funding specialist advisers across a number of organisations, and yet others training volunteers to help with daily work. Yet, even the most creative solutions were often not enough to meet rising demands: ‘We used to be able to run at normal capacity’, Maureen, an ex-social worker from Canada who had taken early retirement to found the town’s first emergency foodbank said, ‘but now, we are just running behind, there are queues of people outside who need food even before the session has started’. Likewise, Matt, working for a social housing association, worried about the likely impact that a full roll-out of UC would have on his tenants, expecting that once 20 per cent of the local claimant population had been moved over, the town’s local advice services would no longer be able to cope. Already the queues stretched around the offices of the housing association when an externally hired adviser offered advice to financially struggling tenants: ‘I don’t even want to think about what will happen when UC is fully rolled out.’

The sense of overload was made evident to me when shadowing the independent advice centre located on the town’s largest social housing estate, a community of over 13,000 residents. One Monday morning in October 2018, when the centre ran drop-in sessions, I watched the advice worker on duty seeing client after client, with no break for four hours. There was the English woman who had been moved onto UC but who found that her tax credits had been stopped in the process and left her struggling to pay her rent; there was Nadia, a Bangladeshi-Italian woman, who was forced to appeal a negative disability benefits assessment so as to ensure that she would receive the amount of benefits needed to survive on UC; there was the English man whose benefits had been stopped while he was trying to pay back a housing benefit overpayment of £8000 that left him in serious financial trouble; and there was the young English woman who had fallen into rent arrears after being rolled onto UC and now feared eviction from her home. Her UC payments fluctuated every month in accordance with her wages on a zero-hour contract, thus leaving her struggling to manage her budget. All of them were in dire need of assistance, yet, time and resources were scarce. How then did frontline workers respond to this situation? How did they position themselves as the guardians of a shrinking welfare state?

## **Plugging the Gaps: The Guardians of a Shrinking Welfare State**

Virtually all frontline workers I met in the course of my research strongly identified with the challenges and circumstances that their clients faced: there was a sense that austerity had been harmful for the people they came into contact with. Some frontline workers expressed a sense of solidarity with their clients by placing blame with central government, presented as alien and distant from ‘local life’ (Clayton et al., 2015). Such was the stance adopted by the co-manager of the local authority’s welfare reform office, Tom, a young man originally from Cornwall in his 30s, who emphasised that his team ‘counteracted’ and helped customers cope with the most punitive effects of centrally administered and implemented welfare reforms. At other times, frontline workers emphasised an affective rapport with their clients based upon social or biographical proximity. For example, Sue who was introduced above as a volunteer with Mind, explained her motivation to help

others with reference to her own history of mental illness (she had suffered from severe depression) which on more than one occasion had resulted in her losing her job, leaving her struggling to pay bills. In these situations, she had been able to rely upon welfare support, something that she now saw being undermined for the most vulnerable people.

But if frontline workers tended to create an affective space from which they imagined themselves as working alongside those who were struggling, there was also a crucial difference that set them apart from their clients: namely, their role as mediators with more powerful institutions. Like the brokers in the global South (Auyero, 2000; Grisaffi, 2019; James, 2011; Koster, 2012), and the street-level bureaucrats of the global North (Koch, 2016; Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003; Tuckett, 2018), they were helping people access vital services, and in some cases, came to effectively act out welfare state functions themselves. It was not uncommon for frontline workers to see themselves as the local guardians of a shrinking welfare state, invoking a moral economy that saw citizens' access to subsistence and advice as a basic social right that they had to defend. Take the example of Maureen, the founder of the town's first independent local foodbank, introduced above. For her, setting up a foodbank and running it at extended hours for the last two years meant stepping in to respond to a crisis that the government was guilty of causing. 'We are plugging the gaps where the state is no longer looking after its citizens', she said. Others spoke of their role in terms of 'putting out fires' and doing 'crisis management' where the state had largely withdrawn.

While some frontline services, like foodbanks, helped citizens secure basic subsistence, others helped their constituencies get access to much needed advice. The role of advice workers in a context of sustained funding cuts to legal aid has been studied extensively (Forbes and James, 2017a; Kirwan, 2016; McDermot, 2013), including their focus on 'holistic' support rather than narrow legalistic assistance (Kirwan, 2016). One particularly complex, but not unusual, case of advice giving that I came across while shadowing the local independent advice centre was that of Nadia, a Bangladeshi-Italian woman in her late 50s, who did not speak fluent English. She came to see an adviser to get help with a disability claim on a rainy morning in October 2018. Nadia suffered from severe arthritis and had recently had a bad fall that left her back permanently in pain. She had been on disability-related 'Employment and Support Allowance' (ESA) for the past five years. At her most recent reassessment for her ESA, however, she had been found fit for work. This was six weeks ago; since then Nadia had not received any benefit support, leaving her struggling to pay her bills and rent. To reinstitute housing payments and a personal allowance, her case worker advised her to make a 'fresh claim' under UC.

However, in order to receive maximum entitlement under UC, Nadia would also have to appeal her ESA decision because she would be required to prove that she had had a continuous claim for disability benefits. The only way she could do so was by having her latest ESA decision overturned. In this instance, then, a tough approach towards people with disabilities combined with bureaucratic incompetency and complicated rules relating to UC entitlements had created a Kafkaesque nightmare: in order to enforce her rights to benefits under the new (UC) system, Nadia now had to appeal a decision under the old (ESA) system that for all intents and purposes she would no longer rely upon. And if it had not been for her skilled adviser, an English woman called Linda who had chased letters and looked into the bureaucratic mistakes and started the lengthy appeal

process, Nadia would have never known this, and potentially been left without any support. But Linda did more than simply use her legal knowledge to advocate on Nadia's behalf. On top of initiating her UC claim and the appeal process for her ESA, she filled in a short application form for emergency fuel. And she made a referral for a foodbank that technically Nadia would not be entitled to as she had already received referrals in the past, and the foodbank was restricted to a three times only referral policy. Like the street-level bureaucrats studied by Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003), Linda was exercising discretion to help a client she considered to be in dire need.

Pia (2017: 126) has described street-level bureaucrats' practices as 'part of a complicit and affective rapport with service recipients'. Implied here is an 'analytical movement towards bureaucrats' own moralized characterization of the recipients of public goods [. . .] whose assumed status of moral if not legal entitlement to such goods further reinforces the perceived irreplaceability of their providers' (Pia, 2017: 126). Similarly, the frontline workers in austerity Britain – whether these are legal advisers, foodbank providers or local authority employees – subscribe to a particular 'ethics of the office' (Du Gay, 2008) in their attempts to 'plug the gaps', as Maureen had put it above, for those most in need. As such, we can think of them as the moral guardians, and in some cases, as the de facto performers, of a shrinking welfare state who enforce a moral economy that sees entitlement to subsistence and advice as a basic social right. And yet, this is not the whole story: as we have seen, in a tough environment of funding cuts and limited resources, the demand for help by far exceeds supply, and frontline workers were constantly running, in the words of one housing officer, 'two steps behind'. In such a situation, how did frontline workers come to prioritise who to help and how? What moral hierarchies did they base their decisions on?

## **Model Customers and Their Counterparts: Allocating Scarce Resources**

A few weeks after I had accompanied Paula to the Jobcentre where we met Jenny – the woman she described as a 'model client' – I found myself shadowing her once more, this time for an appointment inside the local authority's own building. We met in the backroom on the ground floor, a large open-plan area that had some tables and computers, which acted as an impromptu meeting space with clients for the welfare reform office. Paula led me to a table in the far corner, and explained who we were going to see: her client today was a woman called Nicola, a single welfare claimant in her 30s with no children who had been referred by the Jobcentre for a service recently instituted to help claimants cope with the transition to UC. The referral form had not been filled in very thoroughly, however, and Paula did not know what to expect: the reason stated on the form was that the client needed some advice on 'rent payments', presumably Paula reasoned because she had fallen behind, but it was not clear what had precipitated the arrears. A quick look into the local authority's housing register revealed that this client was not a tenant in any of the city council's socially rented properties and so Paula assumed that she must be in privately rented accommodation.

Nicola arrived on time, at 10 a.m. on the dot and was admitted by reception staff from the council. White English, and neatly dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, she looked shy, and

had a tired face. It soon turned out that Paula's premonitions had been correct: Nicola was facing eviction from her studio flat by her private landlord because of rent arrears. It appeared that her rent arrears were due to fluctuating UC payments, as the benefits kept being adjusted to her wages on a zero-hour contract in a children's nursery. Unlike Jenny, however, Nicola did not seem on top of her financial situation. For a start, Nicola could not remember her UC password – which she needed in order to give Paula access to the online system. Nicola had to call her boyfriend in front of us, asking him for the password, which resulted in a short but visibly tense conversation between the two. Like in the case with Jenny, Paula encouraged Nicola to attend a budgeting course but this time her client was not interested. Nicola objected that the Jobcentre had told her that there would be 'free money' to help her with rent problems, and that she did not need budgeting advice. The meeting ended early with Nicola bursting into tears and running out of the office. We would later learn from reception staff that Nicola had announced her intention to file a complaint against the council for treating her 'with no respect'.

After Nicola had stormed out of the room, Paula fell silent. She seemed shaken and sensing I was too, reassuringly put her hand on my arm. This was a very extreme case, Paula explained. Unfortunately, some claimants, she told me, were not interested in helping themselves, they just wanted one thing, usually free money, and when they realised that they would not get it, they could get angry. The welfare reform office did have a discretionary housing fund that helped struggling tenants with rent payments (usually for a period of three months), but funds were limited and Paula insisted that this was not the kind of case where the team would be likely to do so. Taking another look at Nicola's UC account on the computer screen, she explained: 'Her UC payment is actually quite high. She receives about £1100. Many people [who receive] wages don't have more than that.' Paula continued, there had been a distinct shift in the meeting, when Nicola realised that she would not be given any 'free money' and she had lost interest in anything Paula had to say. At that point, she had just given up, become frustrated and even wanted to make a complaint against the council. 'She is very different from Jenny, the client we saw the other day' Paula concluded, 'Jenny was very keen to turn her life around.'

The contrasting examples of Jenny and Nicola were presented by Paula as lying on opposite ends of the spectrum: she described Nicola's outburst as one of the 'worst' she had ever witnessed, while Jenny was given the role of a 'model customer'. But extreme as these cases might be, they also revealed a broader tendency among frontline workers to differentiate between types of client based on personal assessments of their performance or situation, such as a chaotic lifestyle, a confrontational attitude or, as we will see below, a drinking problem. Lipsky (1972: 395) notes that 'a common feature of organisational behaviour is the need to develop simplifications or some kind of "shorthand", by which [street-level bureaucrats] can make decisions quickly and expeditiously'. Frontline workers drew upon such 'shorthands', when speaking of 'model customers' and those who fail to exhibit appropriate behaviour. Others drew distinctions between clients who 'engage' and those who 'don't', about 'difficult clients' and those who were more amenable; and, in the case of a local housing association, about 'can't payers' – those in need of money through no fault of their own – and 'won't payers' – those who are not interested in paying rent. Irrespective of the terminology used, a common denominator

seemed to be the extent to which a person had shown willingness to be helped, once support or advice had been extended to them.

Alongside the moral economy that emphasised access to subsistence and advice as a basic social right, frontline workers then also drew upon 'shorthands' to invoke a more exclusionary idea of justice, one which was premised on implicit hierarchies of deservingness. For example, in response to my question as to why a particular family on UC had been turned away from the foodbank, Maureen explained that the foodbank had limited supplies, and that this particular family had received support several times before and 'should have gotten themselves out of the crisis by now'. Likewise, the vicar on a deprived social housing estate said he was reluctant to give food vouchers to drug addicts who came begging to his door while spending their wages or benefit money on drugs instead of feeding their children. And Linda, the welfare adviser who had helped Nadia with her ESA appeal, reacted very differently to a homeless man with a heavy drinking problem who turned up at the advice centre, looking tired and unkempt. He had been taken off the housing waiting list because he had failed to be active in bidding for properties. Linda put him in touch with a charity that helps people into temporary accommodation, but she did not try to get him back onto the bidding system, and ended the meeting rather quickly. Afterwards, she told me with frustration in her voice that this client had come to her with exactly the same problem before, and had failed to act on her advice.

Similar to the housing officers studied by Wilde (2020) who justify 'gatekeeping' practices by referring to 'a desire to be fair in a context of scarce resources' (see also Alden, 2015), frontline workers spoke of how they made the most of a tough situation where resources were limited by helping those who 'want to be helped', and who can be 'empowered'. But what was presented as a necessary, morally justified form of crisis management also constituted what Higgins (1980) called a form of social control. Thus, whether or not this was intentional, the hierarchies of deservingness established by frontline workers also acted to reinforce a neo-liberal mantra of 'active citizenship' (Reeves and Loopstra, 2017; Rose et al., 2006) which sees those unable to stand on their own feet potentially as 'undeserving' of welfare support (Davey, 2020; Howe, 1990; Muehlebach, 2016). This also meant that potentially the most vulnerable clients, such as those suffering from drug addictions, long-term welfare dependence or without a fixed address, might be falling through the gaps. And it created a strong sense of being judged among those left struggling. Indeed, Nicola's angry response to Paula's advice that she sign up for a money budgeting course stayed with me for a long time: 'do you think all people on benefits are fucking morons?' she had shouted in despair before storming out, 'I don't need money budgeting advice, my whole problem is that I don't have any money in the first place!'

## **Conclusion: Contestations over Citizenship in Austerity Britain**

Much contemporary welfare politics is focused on redefining the parameters of citizenship and generating a new moral economy for social policy (Rodger, 2000). Indeed, the 'state of the welfare state' is not just economic or political but a moral formation too (Koch and James, 2020), and it is this moral murkiness that has been at the heart of my

analysis. Successive waves of so-called welfare reforms, and the partial roll-out of UC, have driven forward an ever more punitive system that makes the most vulnerable sectors of the population dependent on tighter forms of means-testing. Meanwhile, the government's localism agenda, while emphasising the increased autonomy supposedly given to local service providers, has encouraged an ever bigger withdrawal of central government funding from local communities. It is precisely this situation that frontline workers mitigate as they 'plug the gaps' and, in the words of one worker, 'put out fires'. Sitting in churches, advice centres, charities, businesses and local authority institutions like the welfare reform office, these workers come to act as a *de facto* welfare state as they engage in balancing acts allocating limited resources against ever growing demands for subsistence and advice.

I have argued, drawing upon EP Thompson (1971), that the moral agency of these workers, and its limits, can be captured through the lens of a moral economy of frontline work. On the one hand, frontline workers like Paula and Linda can be seen as the last guardians of a much-diminished welfare state. Exercising discretion in their daily work, they act as a bulwark against market-driven austerity reforms and their moralising logics of individualised responsibility and self-blame. Like the old paternalistic authorities studied by Thompson, the frontline workers of today do so by appealing to an idea of citizens' right to basic subsistence in the form of shelter, food and advice. And yet, this is only half of the picture. Frontline workers also face structural constraints as they operate in a 'zero sum' economy where one person's benefits potentially mean another person's losses: where not only insufficient resources are available to help all those in need but where the responses at frontline workers' disposal barely scratch the surface of people's suffering. Confronted with such challenges, tough decisions have to be made about who to help and how. In these situations, frontline workers have a tendency to measure a client's worthiness in terms of the latter's willingness to 'engage', thus also reinforcing a neo-liberal agenda of 'active citizenship' (Reeves and Loopstra, 2017) that they typically reject.

This moral economy of frontline work seems to run counter to recent uses of the concept which have tended to present moral economies as homogenous and internally consistent orders – as examples of 'solidarity economics' that are constructed in opposition to dominant market rule (see Carrier, 2018; Hann, 2018; Palomera and Vetta, 2016). The complex role of frontline workers as both a bulwark against, but also an enabler of, market-driven logics that risks failing the most precariously situated appears illogical from the point of view of such 'solidarity economics'. Yet, as Palomera and Vetta (2016: 428) have usefully reminded us, 'moral economy is not political economy's "other": it is 'not its historical antecedent in evolutionary terms; nor is it simply another scale of analysis'. Rather, since its inception, the concept has dealt 'with the practices, meanings and institutions that regulate social formations in a world increasingly dominated by principles of capital accumulation', and therefore cannot act as a 'synonym of the – often positively charged – "solidarity economics" functioning outside the market' (2016: 428). A further corollary is that moral economies can never be internally coherent or uncontested (Alexander et al., 2018), as indeed recent work on austerity governance (Pusceddu, 2020; Wilde, 2020) has shown.



It is precisely such a political economy-driven perspective that brings out the Janus-faced character at the heart of the moral economy of frontline work. Like the moral economy of 18th-century England which reflected a moment of transition from an old paternalistic order to modern-day capitalism, so the moral economy of frontline work today reveals competing notions of the social contract between citizens and the state, notions that draw respectively on both older ideals of social citizenship and their neo-liberal counterparts. The post-war welfare state was modelled on what TH Marshall (1950) called ‘social citizenship’, according to which the state assumed the responsibility for providing not only basic safety net protection but also an extensive range of universal services (Timmins, 2017) in return for labour and taxes. Of course, this ideal was never fully achieved, as gendered, racial and classed inequalities continued to create their own forms of exclusion (Gilroy, 1987; Joyce, 2013; Koch, 2018; Patenam, 1988). But it was only in the decades that followed, with the shift to neo-liberal rule, and accelerated since 2010 under austerity politics, that policy making has come to replace this older ideal of citizenship with that of the ‘active citizen’ (Reeves and Loopstra, 2017) which stigmatises, if not actively penalises, those who continue to depend upon – ever more narrowly defined – forms of welfare (Harvey, 2000; Wacquant, 2009).

And yet, neo-liberal mantras have not remained uncontested. Today, frontline services have become a terrain of political contestation where these different meanings and possibilities of citizenship, and of the state’s responsibilities towards its citizens, are acted out and fought over. An older ideal of citizenship that sees access to benefits as a matter of ‘social rights’ continues to live on in the daily practices of frontline workers who display a commitment to ‘the public good’ (Bear and Mathur, 2015) and who have started organising in this respect (e.g. Gutierrez-Garza, 2020; Koch, 2016; Public and Commercial Services Union, 2019; Wilde, 2020). Their daily work challenges the idea of a simple roll-out of hegemonic control showing instead the importance of ‘alternative analytical grammars that render visible the potential for resistance that has been largely overlooked in the overly pessimistic narrative of neoliberal governmentality’ (Williams et al., 2014: 2799). And yet, as these workers operate in a political economy that continuously militates against the possibilities of radical change, they also become the conduits for punitive social control that makes entitlement to benefits contingent on ever more strongly pronounced logics of deservingness, as citizens are expected to help themselves, particularly once they have been the recipients of public advice and support. In the end, then, both care and control are the key ingredients of a moral economy of frontline work, one which might well come to lean in favour of the latter at the expense of the former if austerity is set to continue in times to come.

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1. The government office responsible for the administration of social security.
2. Mind is a mental health charity.

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