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Everyday Authoritarianism: Class and Coercion on Housing Estates in Neoliberal Britain

In Britain, especially in the 2010s, neoliberal reform involved an extension of legal coercion into the domestic and community lives of marginalized citizens. On two postindustrial housing estates in Britain, working-class residents experience this “everyday authoritarianism” in areas that the liberal state typically constructs as private and purports to leave alone: the home and the intimate relations that frame it. Residents engage this legal coercion by adopting responses that range from defensive avoidance to co-opting officials to acts of vigilantism. By doing so, they negotiate the presence of an authority that is often out of sync with their own expectations for protection, and in some cases actively undermines their efforts to remain safe. Their pluralism can be framed neither in terms of an acceptance of state authority nor as a straightforward refusal to be governed. Rather, it reveals the contradictory ways in which marginalized citizens define their relationship to the state under contemporary conditions of class fragmentation. By adding detail on everyday life to meta-narratives of an authoritarian turn, this article theorizes the political potential and limits of people’s daily engagements with the state for contesting the latter’s authority. [class, coercion, liberal governance]

Despite its ambitions of universal freedom, liberal governance has historically featured limits where it interfaces with authoritarian forms of rule. This is especially the case for those people deemed to lack the capacity for self-governance (Bennett, Dodsworth, and Joyce 2007). In Britain, class marks one such limit, along with—and intersecting with—gender and race. Liberal democracy not only historically enfranchised the property-owning classes but also monitored, policed, and controlled working-class people in ways not known to their middle-class counterparts (Joyce 2013). Our fieldwork was conducted in the 2010s, with our focus on the recent period of British governance known as neoliberalism. In Britain, neoliberalism is generally seen as commencing in 1979 with the election of Margaret Thatcher as prime minister and her policies of privatization, welfare retrenchment, and accumulation by dispossession. During this time, the state came to subject many working-class people to evermore open forms of coercion (Hall 1979; Poulantzas 1978). This has culminated, in the decade since 2010, in what some describe as an authoritarian turn (Bruff 2014; Bruff and Tansel 2019; Flohr and Harrison 2016; Jessop 2019; Wilkinson 2021).

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In this article we explore the ways in which authoritarian state policies and practices have come to be felt and articulated within the daily lives of some of Britain's more marginalized citizens. Not all working-class people in Britain share this experience. We concentrate on a specific section of the postindustrial working class; namely, those who live in Britain's social housing estates called council estate or estates (in the United States known as housing projects). This type of housing has been subject to territorial stigmatization under conditions of "advanced marginality" (Wacquant 2008; see also McKenzie 2015). Social housing estates are neighborhoods with a high prevalence of public housing. The majority were built originally by local councils (i.e., municipal governments); hence, the term council estates, although today the vast majority of public housing in Britain is owned and run by third-sector housing associations. With a decline in social housing since the 1980s, estates have come to be associated with images of the "welfare ghetto" (Gray and Mooney 2011, 14); "the underclass" (Hastings 2004, 236; I. Tyler 2015, 153–178); and, most recently "the broken society" (Hancock and Mooney 2013; Slater 2018, 881) under the government's embrace of austerity politics. But this language betrays the structural inequalities that many inhabitants of Britain's housing estates face and the legal coercion that comes with them. The people we lived and worked with have precarious incomes and rent their homes. Unlike the mid-twentieth-century industrial working class (or at least representations thereof), they were typically unable to subsist on wage labor alone. Hence, they resorted to welfare benefits, consumer credit, and/or petty criminality to make ends meet.

What acts of coercion does the state legitimize both within and beyond its conventional areas of punishment in these people's lives? What are the different ways in which estate residents engage with the state's coercive apparatus? And what does this pluralism tell us about state legitimacy and state-citizen relations in Britain today? By "coercion," we mean "subtle or not-so-subtle threats of physical force" (Graeber 2012, 105), which is distinct from consent or hegemony as a mode of domination (Hall et al. 2013). It is "legal" when it is government-backed and government-enforced. Legal coercion is a function of the sovereign power to exercise discretion over decisions that can be enforced with physical violence (Hansen and Stepputat 2005), which is distributed to a range of state and nonstate agents in Britain today (Davey 2020b). It does not usually materialize as overt police violence, but the latter is always a possibility should someone refuse the command in question (Graeber 2012). In our field sites, the penal state and the social state are intimately intertwined. Contrary to dominant narratives that have focused on the rise of the "law and order state" alone, we start from the assumption (as detailed in Koch 2018) that the state's capacity for legal coercion cuts across both welfarist and criminal justice-related parts of the state. This holds for the United Kingdom's current Conservative government: arguably shifting away from neoliberal principles during the Covid-19 pandemic, it has increased public spending, amplified nationalist rhetoric, and proposed an intensification of repressive police powers through the controversial Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill.

Paradoxically, we find that liberal governance's legal coercion is expressed particularly forcefully today in the domain that it typically constructs as private and purports to leave alone, as falling beyond the reach of state control (Lacey 1998): the home and intimate relations that frame domestic spaces. A variety of authorities act on the home, threatening to take away what people value and depend on the most: their possessions, their incomes, and in some cases even their children. But residents are not passive in the face of this "everyday authoritarianism." Instead, they engage with it in a variety of ways—at times by withdrawing, or by "personalizing" its powers, or by making demands for punishment that exceed the limits of state jurisdiction. Our ethnography shows that estate residents' various

engagements with state coercion tend not to place the state's own claims to authority at their center. While the state is sometimes a source of protection for vulnerable people, it can also constitute the very danger from which protection is required. Indeed, if there is a unifying factor across the range of situations surveyed here, it is people's impulse to protect what they value the most: their family, kin, and friends that coalesce around the home. We argue that the pluralism of citizens' responses to state coercion cannot be framed in terms of citizens' acceptance of state authority. Nor can it be read solely in terms of resistance to state rule; less even an outright refusal to be governed (cf. Alves 2019), or grounded in the existence of a homogeneous "class consciousness," or oppositional subculture (cf. Willis 1977). Rather, their pluralism reveals the contradictory ways in which marginalized groups in Britain today redefine state-citizen relations under conditions of class fragmentation, including along gendered and racialized lines.

Authoritarianism, Class, and the Neoliberal State

The argument that liberal states exercise coercion even as they claim to facilitate the freedom of their citizens is hardly new. Anthropological work on state margins highlights a complex relationship "between violence and the ordering functions of the state" (Das and Poole 2004, 6), echoed by ethnographies of sovereignty in postcolonial societies (Hansen and Stepputat 2005) and by accounts on race, policing, and prison from within the Global North (Koch 2018; Wacquant 2009). In Britain, capitalism has always involved barriers to substantive democratization. Writing against the "view that the British state was a weak and limited one quite far into the twentieth century," Joyce argued that the "working-class, poor, Irish, [and] the 'criminal classes' [. . .] were the [. . .] most exposed to what by 1914 was the long-developed and sophisticated security apparatus of the state" (2013, 318). Even in the so-called golden decades of postwar British democracy, when the excesses of capitalism were tempered through state welfare and corporatism, working-class people were subject to intimate monitoring with governance through "the social" (Rose 1999, 98). Postwar welfare policies positioned the white, male breadwinner as the idealized worker-citizen (Lacey 1998; MacKinnon 1989; Patenam 1988), thus excluding many women, immigrants and people of color from vital social services that were supposedly universal in their reach and instead exposing them to demeaning forms of social assistance.

If the liberal state has always had a coercive edge, then the shift toward neoliberalism brought it more openly to the fore. Far from constituting a "radical break" from a "golden age" of postwar social democracy, the period starting in the late 1970s has constituted a deepening of long existing tensions (Koch 2018). The state has played an active part in this process, especially when Britain experienced the uneven expansion of its "iron fist" in both its welfare and policing realms (Graeber 2012). Stuart Hall saw in incipient Thatcherism the rise of an increasingly coercive state through what he termed "authoritarian populism" (1979, 15). Around the same time, Poulantzas described as "authoritarian statism" the normalization of "intensified state control over every sphere of socio-economic life [. . .] combined with radical decline of the institutions of political democracy and [. . .] curtailment of formal liberties" (1978, 203–4). When New Labour was voted into power in 1997, its "third way" policy placed "law and order" at its center, deepening the previous Conservative government's emphasis on policing (Hall et al. 2013), even if it also increased spending in many areas of social welfare.

This changed with a Conservative-led government elected in 2010, following the global economic crisis of 2008–2009. Under the mantra of "austerity," the government, ostensibly aiming to reduce the public deficit, introduced the largest cuts in the postwar history of the welfare state (Clarke and Newman 2012). Among local authorities, processes of "austerity

localism” (Dagdeviren, Donoghue, and Wearmouth 2019) and “super-austerity” (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012) added new cuts on top of previous ones, with dangerous multiplier effects (Koch 2020). Meanwhile, so-called welfare reforms hit the most vulnerable populations the hardest. The “Bedroom Tax,” for instance, penalized social housing tenants deemed to under-occupy their property (Bogue 2019), while a new streamlined system of benefits called Universal Credit brought insecurities commonly associated with the market into the heart of the social state (Koch and Reeves 2021). Austerity policies have rightly been characterized as reductions in state-provided resources and support, often with disproportionate costs to women and ethnic minorities (Bogue 2019; Hall 2019). At the same time, however, and as we will show, such cutbacks have also involved an extension of the state’s capacity to apply force in citizens’ intimate lives.

This recent uneven expansion of coercive state intervention has variously been described as the rise of “authoritarian neoliberalism” (Bruff 2014; Bruff and Tansel 2019), “authoritarian statism” (Flohr and Harrison 2016, 313; Jessop 2019, 348), and “authoritarian liberalism” (Wilkinson 2021). Such accounts posit shifts in statecraft, from the welfare state to the consolidation state (Streek 2015), from democracy to postdemocracy (Crouch 2004), and from welfare to lawfare (Comaroff and Comaroff 2017). While Hall (1979) and Poulantzas (1978) saw the shift to “law and order” under Thatcher as a strategy that was aimed at manufacturing popular consent, it is argued that the British government today relies on explicit disciplining of dissenting groups (Bruff 2014; Bruff and Tansel 2019), even as “the apparent strengthening of the state simultaneously entails its growing fragility” (Bruff 2014, 113). In “landscapes of antagonism” (Newman 2014), marginalized actors articulate various “grammars of critique” (Williams, Goodwin, and Cloke 2014, 2799) to austerity and coercion.

This double dimension—a top-down expansion of legal coercion into many working-class people’s daily lives, on the one hand, and bottom-up responses of avoidance, appropriation, and usurpation, on the other—is central to our analysis. We provide empirical nuance about everyday life to meta-narratives of the authoritarian turn as well as theorize the political potential and limits of people’s daily engagements for contesting the state’s authority. We investigate these dynamics across three areas of state-citizen relations: the criminal justice system, the welfare state, and the supposedly state-free markets. Borrowing from Sarah Marie Hall’s concept of “everyday austerity” (2019, 29–68), we refer to the state’s enactment of legal coercion in these domains as everyday authoritarianism because it acts in “everyday” realms of social reproduction in and around people’s homes. Recent shifts in coercion act primarily on households and the relations that frame them, thus in our respective ethnographic sites it was disproportionately women’s normative responsibilities of caring for children and homes that were affected by these shifts. Likewise, racist and xenophobic structures of violence further compound the concentration of coercion that residents experience, as Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) residents encounter racism not only at the hands of their white counterparts but also in harsher policing, including practices of stop-and-search (Koch 2018).

In analyzing these interventions, our central claims pertain to the subsection of the working class in Britain that lives on housing estates and/or claims social security benefits (i.e. welfare payments) rather than to “the working class,” per se. Still, our understanding of the term “working class” bears spelling out, perhaps especially in post-Brexit Britain, where increasing political rhetoric around an “ordinary working class” constructs a white-racialized constituency as a primary object of government social justice (Shilliam 2020). This echoes the longer historical formation of the “English working class” in opposition to “racialized outsiders” and through alliances with imperial elites (Virdee 2014). The lay

identity of “working class” is used by many affluent people (Savage 2015), yet has often been disavowed by poorer people, especially women, who are mindful of its stigmatizing connotations (Skeggs 1997). Our own analytical usage of the term working class is multiracial and internationalist (Virdee 2014). We conceptualize the term expansively and simply as people who do not own enough private property to live off; thus, it encompasses those occupied outside of formal employment and those employed outside blue-collar jobs. For the more precarious sector of the working class on whom we focus, their exposure to legal coercion aids their subjection to class-related stigma such as the (imprecise) appellation “underclass” (Davey 2020a). Before we move to our arguments, however, we will introduce our field sites and some of the people who live in it: the working-class residents of Britain’s postindustrial estates.

Estates as Places of Territorialized Stigma

The recent expansion of authoritarian state powers in Britain has been concentrated in neighborhoods that are stigmatized in the public imagination. For Wacquant, territorialized stigma is attached to spaces of “advanced marginality,” which he defined as “the novel regime of socio-spatial relegation and exclusionary closure [. . .] that has crystallized in the post-Fordist city as a result of the uneven development of the capitalist economies and the recoiling of welfare states” (2008, 2–3). In Britain, chief among these spaces are its postindustrial estates found in inner cities, urban peripheries, and rural areas across the country. Built largely in the postwar decades as housing for the Fordist working classes, estates have often been represented as emblems of an inclusive welfare state that cared for its citizens. However, they were always intended as sites of state-building and class segregation. As the direct landlords, local governments selected and disciplined tenants according to normative expectations of who and what counted as a “respectable” (read: white, patriarchal British) working-class family.

In subsequent decades, estates became sites for neoliberal restructuring. By 1977 the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act obliged local authorities to prioritize the most vulnerable in allocating social housing. While on the surface the act marked a much-needed expansion of the role of social housing, it also transformed estates from a privilege for the respectable working classes into a residualized “dumping ground” for the poor. In 1980, Thatcher introduced the Right to Buy policy, allowing sitting council tenants to buy their homes at a much-reduced rate. This resulted in rapid polarization: the more desirable estates became prime real estate, whereas those with high numbers of social tenancies entered the public imagination as “sink estates” (Slater 2018) and “welfare ghettos” (Gray and Mooney 2011, 14). This defamation works to justify “special” measures, often with intensely gendered and racialized effects. While young working-class men are associated with crime and antisocial behavior (Jones 2011), especially BME men (I. Tyler 2015), women are typically represented as welfare scroungers, fraudsters, and/or poor parents (Gillies 2007).

Our respective field sites, two postindustrial estates in the south of England, provide cases in point. Both places were seen as “problem areas” by local authorities and professionals. Davey carried out his fieldwork in Woldham, an outer-urban housing estate. Unusually for a housing estate, Woldham was built in the early twentieth century as “married quarters” for Armed Forces personnel stationed at an adjoining naval base. It was passed to civilian use in the 1990s following defense cuts and a national shortage in public housing. Its housing stock was carved up and long-leased to five different housing associations, and a tranche of semidetached houses was sold at a discount to military veterans. By the start of fieldwork in 2012, it had a population of around five thousand people, of whom 96 percent

were classed as white British, 44 percent of residents lived in social housing, 12 percent rented privately, and 43 percent were owner-occupied (though with some informally rented out). Around a fifth of adults received out-of-work benefits. With the recent transition to civilian use, there were many young families and few long-standing ties to the area. Koch has been carrying out research since 2009 in Park End, a council estate of nearly thirteen thousand residents in the peripheries of an otherwise wealthy town. Originally built in the postwar decades for a population of white working-class families in the vicinity of a local car factory, immigration from the Caribbean mostly has been a consistent feature of Park End. In the postwar decades, the majority of families were employed by the factory, but this changed with the onset of industrial decline. Today, rates of unemployment and welfare dependence are high. Nearly 50 percent of the housing stock is still run on a social tenancy basis. Woldham residents often internalized the stigmatization of their estate by referring to it as “a dump” or “a shithole,” whereas on Park End residents expressed a stronger sense of local pride.

Both of us lived in our respective field sites at multiple points between 2010 and 2019. We stayed with families or single people in social housing, participated in their daily lives, and worked in local institutions, including a community center in Koch’s case and a debt advice service in Davey’s. More formal research methods, including interviews, were often counterproductive, given many residents’ reservations about “official” methods of recording. Most of our interlocutors are British-born white or BME tenants who survive on low wages and often draw supplementary incomes from informal practices, borrowing, or benefits. This is not to say they are representative of all estate residents, less even the working class as a whole. Tensions were evident, including along gendered and racialized lines (K. Tyler 2015). On both estates, many of our female interlocutors expressed a sense that they did not trust men to be caregivers to their children or breadwinners. Racial tensions, by contrast, played out differently between the two estates. Among Woldham’s predominantly white British population, racism and xenophobia could be disturbingly widespread through racial caricatures and anti-immigration views, though these were also contested. Residents constituted the estate as a normatively white (and white British) space, and numerous times a resident remarked on the mere sight of a Black person. In Park End, where long-standing relations between the white and Black communities were strong, Black young men frequently spoke of racial discrimination coming from state agents, in particular the police.

Differences within and between the estates notwithstanding, the people we lived and worked with also shared a number of similar experiences with respect to the state. We came to gradually understand the omnipresence of state and state-like officials, or what people amorphyously framed as “Them” (Koch 2018). “They” included local officials, such as social workers and the police; public bodies, including the Department of Work and Pensions; and private actors to whom the government outsourced responsibilities, such as housing associations and bailiffs. In Woldham, residents additionally characterized “Them” as unamenable to reason, through the local saying “you can’t argue with them.” This phrase referred to the futility of explaining oneself to bureaucracies and law enforcement, in anecdotes of encounters with the police, welfare agencies, the local authority, and the courts. Here, we use our interlocutor’s emic understanding of “Them” as both an important part of their lived reality and as an analytical term that captures the British state’s “everyday authoritarianism.” It is precisely the capacity for coercion that unites these disparate actors as part of the same amorphous mass of “Them,” and that creates an impression of an all-encompassing presence for residents.

“Everyday Authoritarianism” on Two Housing Estates

On a warm summer’s evening around 8 p.m., Koch was walking home with a group of four young men, two of them mixed-race and two white, from the community center situated at the center of the estate. Life was still buzzing, with people going in and out of shops, chatting on street corners, and going for walks along the estate’s main road. The young men were joking with each other, discussing how to spend the long evening ahead. As we were walking, a police car with two officers drove past and slowed down as they saw us. They turned around a few meters ahead and came back up the road, again slowing down as they drove past us, eyeing us from behind the windshield of the car. The young men watched the officers in silence as they repeated the show a couple more times. “Watch it—they will jump out now,” Callum, one of the young men, predicted. “The police, they hound us, they hound us.”¹ Callum was wrong this time; after eying us for a few more seconds, the car suddenly sped up and drove away.

Although Callum had been wrong on this particular occasion, this episode—mundane and seemingly insignificant—nonetheless revealed a central truth; namely, just how present the police appearance was in Park End as a potential source of threat and harassment. Being arrested, stopped, searched, and taken to the police station were regular occurrences in the lives of young residents, particularly for young Black and mixed-race men. In 2009, when Koch began her fieldwork, the police and police-like actors had established an omnipresent visibility on the estate with daily patrols on foot, by car, in helicopters, and even occasionally on horseback. Alongside the establishment of a neighborhood policing team, powers to deal with “antisocial behavior” were extended to local authority officials, including social landlords, so-called street wardens, park rangers, and police community support officers. In Woldham, too, there were frequent police patrols, along with reports of night-time convoys of trucks on the neighboring dockyard, one time “surrounded by loads of police cars and soldiers” and “running round with machine guns,” as a resident told Davey. Some residents reported the patrols were Ministry of Defense police, responsible for military security, while others said the police officers were on the lookout for drug dealing or people selling unlicensed tobacco. One resident, a white man in his twenties, commented: “When I had a shaved head, nearly every time I walked up to the shop [a ten-minute walk], I would get stopped by the police because they thought I looked like a thug. Tattoos, shaved head, big bloke, you know. I don’t really go out now. I don’t like all the confrontations.”

The workings of the “punitive turn” at the start of the twenty-first century are perhaps best illustrated in the case of the Anti-Social Behavior Orders (ASBOs), which were established in 1998 and superseded by similar measures in 2015. An ASBO is a civil injunction order that, upon breach, turns into a criminal offense punishable with up to five years of imprisonment. When Koch started her research, ASBOs were in their heyday. In Park End, Kieron, a fifteen-year-old of mixed African-Caribbean and white British descent, was told by the police that he risked getting an order for acting “like he was in a gang.” In contrast, this racialized epithet of “gangs” was seldom reported in mainly white Woldham. Kieron’s own explanation for what constituted the alleged antisocial behavior was that he had been walking with friends wearing their hoods up, which the police perceived as threatening. If he had received an ASBO, he would likely be banned from associating with his friends and have his movements curtailed. But control also extends far beyond the individuals targeted, effectively collectivizing punishment by attaching criminal sanctions to kin and friends. Kieron’s mother worried that if he was to be given an ASBO, this would constitute a valid ground for the family to be evicted from their socially rented home. The threat of having her home taken away and being classed by the local authority as a case of “intentional homelessness” (which relieved the local authority of any duty to rehouse) meant that

she had to start policing her own son's behavior, including telling him not to associate with his friends in public anymore.

Men were targeted by the police, but women, as the main caregivers of homes and children in Park End and Woldham, tended to have closer encounters with the agents of state welfare: welfare bureaucrats, housing officers, and social workers. As with policing and antisocial behavior laws, the coercive elements of the welfare system have a class dimension. Since the 1980s, reforms have created a residualized system of means-tested assistance that is conditional on performing specific tasks. The 2010s saw an increased use of sanctions for those breaking benefit-claiming regulations, a ramped-up government drive to directly recover alleged benefit overpayments out of people's meager incomes, and local government's increased reliance on bailiffs to collect council tax arrears (part of local government's response to cuts from central government). Consequently, residents of both estates reported experiences of privation and punitiveness in their encounters with state welfare. Many expressed a deep sense of frustration with the benefit system, speaking of how "They" did not care. Additionally, in Woldham (as opposed to Park End), many white British residents expressed this through xenophobic narratives of abandonment. Some used phrases like "second-class citizens" and "a secondary race within our own country" to describe their perceived racial subordination by UK public services, as compared to ethnic minority people or migrants. A few said Enoch Powell (who made the racist "Rivers of Blood" speech) was right about immigration.

The logic of coercion in relation to the welfare state acted intimately on households and child-rearing arrangements. For example, the rules of benefits encouraged individuals to claim as "single" claimants, despite many living in collaborative and fluid household arrangements. This was particularly onerous for women who relied on cohabiting family members and friends to make ends meet and to share childcare (Koch 2015). Failure to comply was evidence of so-called benefit fraud, which resulted in loss of entitlement and even prosecution. But worse than this was the threat sometimes issued by agents of the welfare system to remove children from their parents by force. At the extreme end, Shirley, who lived in Woldham, had her three youngest children removed from her custody and placed into foster care, only for social services to stall on providing contact information for several weeks. Shirley said: "I feel like I'm being punished for being a parent." In more everyday fashion, conversations in both Woldham and Park End frequently featured references to someone's children being removed by social services. At a peer-support group in Woldham's community center for parents of children with behavioral difficulties, a father (the only man in attendance other than Davey) cautioned the other parents that asking social services for help was "the worst thing you can do," because once they had you "on their books" they no longer needed to have serious concerns before intervening. He added: "I'm worried that if I ask for more help, they'll say I'm not coping and take my kids off me."

Only social workers could carry out such interventions, accompanied by police, if they deemed that the parent posed a risk of harm. But a wide array of community professionals (teachers, housing workers, youth workers, health visitors) monitored residents' parenting and could trigger interventions from social workers. In Woldham, professional complaints of parental "apathy" called into question childcare practices that were not demonstratively upwardly mobile. Echoing Skeggs's observation that to be identified as working class "generates a constant fear of having never 'got it right'" (1997, 6), many women in Woldham expected professionals to presume their parenting practices to be lacking. Indeed, successive policies around parenting have fostered such experiences. The SureStart Centers, established during New Labour, were concentrated in so-called deprived areas, providing

classes on individual parenting skills, while eclipsing the political-economic conditions in which children grew up (Gillies 2007). More recently, the Coalition government blamed social problems, including the 2011 England riots, on an alleged outbreak of poor parenting (Jensen 2018). The Coalition's Troubled Families program, a half-billion-pound scheme launched in 2012 to "turn around" so-called problem families, exemplifies both the trend for behavioral explanations of poverty and a superficially gender-neutral discourse of "poor parenting" that holds working-class women responsible for structural inequalities (Jensen 2018).

In addition to policing and welfare, a third realm in which legal coercion loomed in our interlocutors' lives was in the supposedly nonstate domain of market transactions, especially personal debt and private renting. Legal enforcement here has increased with the growth of credit and insecure tenancies. Daniel, a private renter in Woldham, had been unemployed for eighteen months since losing a job as a forklift driver. He commented: "Whatever jobs there are, aren't enough to provide for a family. Sometimes you need to take out loans. But you can't ever pay it back. I just feel like there's no way out." But problems paying the rent, bills, or loan installments exposed people to eviction, bailiffs seizing household possessions, or even, in certain cases, imprisonment. While volunteering at Woldham's debt advice service, Davey received a telephone call from a former client who was terrified that bailiffs might imminently force their way into her home in pursuit of unpaid council tax arrears. An adviser instructed him to say:

Unfortunately, if you have let them in once, then they can now force their way into your home. They will want to make a list of what you have in your flat and after that they will decide which ones they intend to seize.

Questioning the legitimacy of such intrusions, the client shouted: "But there's nothing here! I called you up to get your help and all you're trying to do is make it worse. You're just telling me there's nothing I can do. How's that helping?"

The client's desperation reflects a broader context in which classed and racialized structures of dispossession are central to capital accumulation and tend to fragment propertyless populations (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008; Ralph and Singhal 2019). Since the 1980s, credit markets expanded significantly due in part to Thatcher's removal of the cap on interest rates (Deville 2015). Wage stagnation and employment precarity led many propertyless people to borrow out of necessity. A system of "risk-based pricing" means the poor pay proportionately higher interest rates (Langley 2009), which makes them more likely to default. Thatcher's government also removed rent controls and protections against eviction, thus encouraging the private rental sector's growth from 9 percent of households in 1991 to 20 percent in 2019. These neoliberal reforms were instituted in the name of free markets, but the freedom of lenders and landlords to charge any level of interest or rent went hand-in-hand with the state's provision of legal enforcement against borrowers and tenants who fell behind (Davey 2020b). This coercion stigmatizes those it affects and denigrates those who do not demonstrably pursue upward social mobility. It also lends legitimacy to accumulation practices based on financial lending and house price inflation.

Popular Responses to State Coercion

While the people we worked and lived with experienced a diffuse sense of state coercion in the intimate realms of their home lives, they were not passive in their responses. One of the most common responses to state coercion involved attempts to avoid it. On both estates, advice workers spoke of debtors and benefit claimants who they said were "burying their heads in the sand" by failing to sort out an impending debt or benefit problem. In Davey's research, many debt advice clients spoke of having left debt-collection letters unopened,

refusing to answer telephone calls, unplugging their landline phone, and even hiding out of sight. One person reported “barricading yourself inside your home” when bailiffs arrived (see Davey 2019). One over-indebted Woldham resident, Frank, was in arrears on his loan repayments, water bills, and council tax, and (in an earlier life) had engaged in petty crime. As a result, he was used to receiving unwanted knocks at his front door from salespeople, debt collectors, bailiffs, and the police, and in his domestic routines he tried to anticipate this. The first time Davey visited Frank’s apartment with a neighbor, Frank instructed Davey never to knock on his front door or to ring the buzzer, saying: “I don’t answer it. If you want to come in, knock on the [living room] window. That way I know you’re someone I know.”

By telling this to those he trusted, Frank made it possible to identify unacquainted visitors simply by how they announced their arrival. His code about where visitors should knock subtly altered the arrangement of particular actions in and around his apartment. Defending homes against intrusions could also revitalize seemingly traditional gender norms. In Woldham, there was a run of attempted break-ins to a block of apartments that had scaffolding around the outside. Normally dormant neighborly networks sprang back into action as male residents offered to keep watch on the building and to protect female residents, especially women without cohabiting male partners, whom the men considered especially prone to attack. It is reasonable to suppose that a similar patriarchal dynamic of protectiveness and ascribed vulnerability arose in response to potential legal intrusions, too, since residents generally considered both kinds illegitimate.

Defensive strategies were not, however, the only way that housing estate residents responded to the everyday authoritarianism of the state. Many times, residents incorporated the state’s coercive capacities into their local social relations, often for reasons that state officials neither cared nor knew about. Hence, a second way of responding to the diffuse presence of legal coercion was through selective but active co-optation of state officials and their powers. In Koch’s research, mothers sometimes called the police, either to reinforce their own authority or to exert pressure on someone who was close to them, such as a family member or a next-door neighbor. For example, Tracey called the police when her teenage son disrespected her authority by staying out late at night drinking with friends. This occurred after he had stopped contributing to rent payments for a few months after losing his job, leaving his mother struggling to pay the rent on her own meager income. On the night she called the police, she reported him for “vandalism” when he was banging on the front door. Tracey justified this by saying that she wanted him to realize who the authority in the house was, and that he was seventeen years old and acting like her home was a “hotel.” Tracey’s decision to call the police also allowed her to manage her standing within the estate, since she had been worried about what her neighbors might think or say of her son’s late-night banging on her front door.

In such instances, residents, and particularly mothers, personalized the state: they appropriated its legal language (including notions such as vandalism, criminal damage, antisocial behavior, and even fraud) and tools (including the police’s power) to frame personalized disputes. Like the African American mothers studied by Bell (2016), the Soweto residents analyzed by Hornberger (2013), or the citizens at a police station in Nigeria explored by Cooper-Knock and Owen (2015), these housing estate residents invoked a *situational legitimacy of the state* by using its powers to bring about a change in relations with each other. What was central to these strategies was not a moral allegiance to the state but its instrumental usefulness for the situation at hand. This was particularly the case for women who could take advantage of men’s involvement with illicit activities to put pressure on them or to exercise revenge. In addition to the mothers who called the police on their teenage

sons, women also called them on their partners. One woman in Park End “grassed” (i.e. informed on) her lover to the police after a fall-out about his breach of bail conditions; another reported her boyfriend for drug dealing when the latter refused to take on parental responsibilities. Whereas women invoked the criminal justice system, men were more likely to threaten women with reporting them for benefit fraud, given the latter’s use of rental subsidies and benefits for dependents (Koch 2015). Many BME men, moreover, felt the police would not come if they called on their help. This reflects the residents’ differential capacity to mobilize different domains of the state on their behalves (Koch 2018).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these strategies of personalizing the state were not always available. Many residents felt the decisions of state and corporate bureaucracies to be arbitrary yet incontrovertible. This was not to say they felt legal force could never be on their side, in the sense of being able to use it to make others recognize rights and responsibilities they earnestly claimed. Rather, they could not rest assured that the law would chime with their own notions of justice, particularly in situations of acute danger. To protect themselves and those dear to them, residents often conveyed being willing to move between legal and alternative means of coercion, the latter of which could be stylized as illegal by the state. One woman in Park End advised a neighbor who had been victimized that he should go to the police, but to tell her if they failed to help. She explained: “If the law won’t finish them off, we will.” Another woman wanted to fight her dismissal from her workplace in “a legal way,” yet she also entertained the possibility that someone might want to find her employer’s car and “smash it up.” The need to go heavy-handed, for instance by mobilizing friends or extended family, was a matter of common sense for many of the estate residents we met, and one that set them apart from middle-class “liberal” professionals, such as social workers.

In addition to defensive avoidance and selective co-optation of the state’s own powers, self-protection, through vigilantism or self-policing, constituted a third set of responses that our interlocutors sometimes entertained to protect their homes and children. We had seen that danger to children was one of the gravest threats from the point of view of residents, and this threat was not just exercised by the state. When an incident of attempted child abuse by an alleged pedophile occurred in Woldham, the residents responded with promises of vigilantism. One summer afternoon while driving onto the cul-de-sac street where he was living, Davey saw a small crowd, including two police officers, gathered on the street and the surrounding grass verges. After he got out of his car, a female resident approached Davey and explained:

Eleven years I’ve lived here, and I’ve never had anything like this happen. I called the cops ’cause I’m not standing for that. [An elderly man] asked my daughter and two other girls how old they are and when one of them said she’s ten, he said, “That’s too young.” Then he grabbed my daughter by her arm. She did a [karate-style] downward block, so she got him off her. When they [the police] knocked on his door and asked to come in to speak to him, he wouldn’t let ’em in. Now that just says guilty, don’t it?

Another female neighbor, who had joined the conversation, said suggestively: “Well, if they [the police] don’t do nothing, we could just get a few black balaclavas and pay someone a visit.” Two other residents hissed at us from a fourth-floor balcony—meaning “grass snake” (or informant)—for talking to the police, to show their disapproval. “Fuck off,” the second neighbor wearily responded. “Idiots.”

In the weeks following this incident, several other parents on the street made similar vows of vigilantism regarding the alleged pedophile. “He’s under investigation,” one man said, “but if he comes down here, I’ll brand him on the street, like they used to do in the middle ages, with a branding iron.” Ultimately the vows were not acted upon. However, they

provided a rationale for dispensing with the state's own jurisdiction, as residents were quick to conclude that the police's protective capacities were lacking for the situation at hand. The ethnographic record on informal policing has repeatedly made the point that vigilantism is not the antithesis of order but rather an attempt to reassert its possibility under conditions of generalized insecurity and high crime (Abrahams 1998; Goldstein 2003; Pratten and Sen 2007; Steinberg 2006; Super 2016). In a similar manner, in Woldham and Park End, parents collectively claimed greater capacity to protect children from danger. The parents would allow the state to undertake its duties, but if it proved inadequate for this protective task, they would intervene by organizing their own informal networks of physical violence and control. Avowals of vigilantism performed a reversal of (and an indirect riposte to) the role the state usually assumed toward these parents. Police and social workers were normally on standby, ready to intervene should parents not manage to protect their kids. But here it was parents, neighbors, and resident collectives who would wait, vigilant as to whether the state performs *its* duties adequately.

Our interlocutors' readiness to switch between calling the police and vigilantism indicates that they believed the state was failing in its duties of protection. Others made this point more explicit. In Park End, people's experiences of police persecution or excessive force led one person to say the police are "the biggest gang of all." In these moments of acute danger, when residents were forced to rely on their own means of policing, sentiments akin to those of popular authoritarianism were expressed. Unlike in Hall's (1979) concept of popular authoritarianism, this was an authoritarianism *despite* the state. Granted, at times some residents expressed state-aligned authoritarian sentiments, often in racialized ways. One man in Woldham said the reason there had been no Irish Republican Army terrorist attacks on the city's military base in the 1980s—when "it was all Paddies who were involved in terrorism"—was that local white English civilian men would listen for Irish accents and "make sure there were no attacks." More recent stereotyped associations of Muslims with terrorism likewise imagine that xenophobic hostility and violence serve national security interests. In contrast, when some of the same individuals avowed vigilantism toward the (white) suspected pedophile, a greater sense of antagonism with and independence from the state was evident.

Conclusion: Class Fragmentation and Pluralist Attitudes to State Coercion

In liberal theory, the social contract between the state and the citizen is constructed against the backdrop of the privacy of the home, defined by noninterference on the part of the state (Lacey 1998). However, neoliberal authoritarianism has led the residents of Britain's places of territorialized stigma to confront the state's coercive reach in intimate, everyday domains of social reproduction. Our analysis has shown this through a focus on legal coercion as exercised by a variety of agents, including in the criminal justice system, the supposedly softer arm of the welfare state, and even in what are often seen as state-free market transactions. But "everyday authoritarianism" is only half of the story. Residents also come to act on legal coercion, including by adopting defensive strategies, selectively co-opting state powers, and exceeding the state's coercion through self-policing. In so doing, they articulate a complex relationship with the state, at times defending themselves in opposition to its organization of coercion (when they withdraw from it), and at other times accepting the state's organization of legal coercion but deploying it to suit their own ends (when they personalize its powers). At yet other times, residents express a need for coercion while criticizing the state's organization thereof (when they rely on their own forms of vigilantism).

Our analysis adds nuance to the dominant political economy accounts of the authoritarian turn. By shifting the focus from developments at the level of state policy and institutions to the plurality of ways in which marginalized groups respond to legal coercion, it captures voices that have not been commonly featured in these narratives. This is not to say that the various forms of state engagement recorded here are particularly unusual. Legal pluralists have long shown that people's relationships to the state emanate from lived experience and produce a range of responses irreducible to the state's point of view (Merry 1988). Similarly, we would argue that marginalized citizens in Britain come to engage the state on their own terms as they negotiate the presence of an authority that is often out of sync with their own expectations for protection; in some cases, the presence of this authority actively undermines these citizens' efforts to remain safe. Many estate residents experience the stifling effects of coercive authority, yet in other moments they cannot rely on it when they require it. Indeed, from the point of view of Woldham and Park End residents, to the extent that the different forms of engagement with state coercion surveyed here have anything in common, they do not indicate a unitary allegiance to the state. They reflect a sensibility of wanting to protect those who are nearest and dearest to them—their home lives and the people who matter within it—from a variety of both informal and legally enforced threats. As with those who show the persistence of sociality in marginalized neighborhoods (Mollona 2009), our cases illustrate “grammars of critique” (Williams, Goodwin, and Cloke 2014, 2799) in Britain's places of territorialized stigma.

At the same time, however, residents' responses to state coercion cannot be read straightforwardly as an outright attack on state authority or as a simple refusal to be governed by the state. We did not observe a single, homogeneous, or stable set of cultural perceptions among our interlocutors that could mobilize collective responses against structures of oppression, of the kind that those investigating “class consciousness” hope to find (Kalb 1993, 514). Insofar as there were shared cultural expectations in Park End and Woldham, these did not consist in a constant opposition to state coercion but rather in a sense that the law's formulas of justice could not be taken for granted. It was this awareness that produced a pluralist willingness to shift between legal and informal channels of compulsion, as evidenced at the extreme end in the case of vigilante action. What is more, by variously engaging or disengaging the state for protective purposes, residents also became complicit in yet further entrenching tensions that inhibit collective action. Mothers would mobilize the police against their teenage children; men would threaten their female partners with calls to welfare officers; and residents would organize vigilante responses that could divide the local population along xenophobic lines.

This seemingly contradictory landscape of state-citizen relations should not surprise us: the potential but also limits of citizens' engagements with the state reflect social fragmentation among working-class people in Britain today. The differentiated impacts of economic dispossession, punitive “law and order” policies, means-tested welfare benefits, and the extension of consumer credit through “risk-based” pricing all find expression in heightened intraclass conflicts along intergenerational, gendered, and ethnic and racial lines. Indeed, much recent ethnographic work on postindustrial communities has emphasized precisely the existence of such conflict, ranging from tensions within the family and home (Mollona 2009) to frictions among different sections of communities, including those that pitch a supposedly “indigenous” working class against those considered to be outsiders (Dench, Gavron, and Young 2006; Evans 2012; K. Tyler 2015; Rogaly and Taylor 2009). But intraclass tensions neither take place in isolation from nor are they untouched by the state. The political challenge ahead lies in dismantling structural inequalities in the

organization of coercive state force and overcoming the social divisions it sows among these more precarious sectors of the population.

Note

1. All names are pseudonyms.

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