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Cameron, Angus; Smith, Nicola; Tepe, Dani

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Household Wastes: disciplining the family in the name of austerity

Angus Cameron

University of Leicester School of Business

Leicester, LE1 7RH

a.cameron@le.ac.uk

Nicola Smith

Department of Political Science and International Studies

University of Birmingham,

Birmingham, B15 2TT

n.j.smith.1@bham.ac.uk

Daniela Tepe-Belfrage

Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology

University of Liverpool,

L69 7ZA

d.tepe-belfrage@liverpool.ac.uk

Abstract:

There is a substantial body of scholarship on the role of discourses in producing the neoliberal politics of austerity, but this has tended to leave untouched the question of how the household might be implicated in such discourses. This article argues that the introduction of various austerity programmes in the aftermath of the financial upheavals of 2008-9 has produced a new normalisation of the British household, and that much of this centres on particular narratives surrounding the concept of waste. Offering a genealogy of waste, we contend that the language and very politics of austerity are in part made possible through longstanding, historic discourses of household waste, and yet the concept of waste is in itself being reconfigured and reimagined in and through the language of austerity. We argue that such discourses serve to naturalise the systemic inequalities and structural violences of neoliberal capitalism, for they render the poor both individually culpable for their own poverty and collectively culpable for Britain's economic and social crisis.

Keywords: household, austerity, waste, inequality, poverty, gender

Introduction

In 2011 a new series appeared on British television screens claiming to be 'the money show for these financially straightened times' (Endemol 2015). Called *Superscrimpers: Waste Not, Want Not* by its makers, the global media giant Endemol, the show was, as its website makes very clear, on a mission to improve and discipline us:

Hosted by Queen of the Penny Pinchers, Mrs Moneypenny, the show delves into the purses of some serious superspenders, filming their wasting ways and gathering evidence before bringing them face to face with their excess spending (Endemol 2015).

Directly addressing the UK's 'squeezed middle,' *Superscrimpers* was produced as a response to the lingering aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008-9. Despite low or zero inflation, the withdrawal of state subsidised services (e.g. childcare) and some aspects of the welfare state (e.g. tax credits) placed considerable additional financial pressures on 'average' households with static incomes. To help its target audience make ends meet in the face of this economic crisis, the show presented advice on both how to spend less and how to save more. Viewers of both the series and its associated website could gain access to money management advice (credit cards, bank accounts, etc.) and tips on making the most of purchases, doing it yourself and/or simply doing without.

Ostensibly an exercise in thrifty home economics, *Superscrimpers* also carried an explicitly moral agenda. Its main targets, as the quote above suggests, were 'superspenders' – shorthand for households spending beyond their means. As this implies, British middle class households were not passive victims of the financial crisis but – because of their 'wasteful ways' and 'excess spending' – were complicit in any hardships they were encountering. The somewhat cartoonish figure of 'Mrs Moneypenny' invoked both a James Bond-like

Britishness and, much more directly, an image that Margaret Thatcher presented to the British people in the late 1970s of a conservative housewife running the country like a tightly-budgeted, conventional 'household.' If only we were all more careful with our money – by following the *Superscrimpers* tips, buying its spin-off books and subscribing to its website – then all would be well.

One of the first of such shows, *Superscrimpers* has formed part of a wider cultural trend that scrutinises, and more or less explicitly condemns, the 'lifestyles' of middle and low-income families – lifestyle implying an active choice. While *Superscrimpers* went for the lower middle classes, so-called 'poverty-porn' shows such as *Saints and Scroungers*, *Secret Millionaire* or *Benefit Street* have purported in various ways to represent even the poorest communities. Whatever their target, such shows allow 'experts' to adjudicate on, and prescribe solutions for, the faults of those in financial difficulties. Almost invariably, those solutions emphasize the need for restraint, self-improvement and self-help (Mooney and Hancock, 2010). According to such shows, then, the central problem to be faced is neither poverty nor financial difficulty *per se*. Rather, it is a problem of waste and, more precisely, the wastefulness of households. Waste is located in the household, and so it is households that require discipline.

In this article we contend that austerity programmes introduced in the aftermath of the financial upheavals of 2008-9 have produced a new normalisation of the British household that often centres on particular narratives of waste. The UK's austerity regime (of which the media is an adjunct part) ascribes negative notions of waste and wastefulness to households in ways that intensify what counts as 'normal' for some groups whilst accepting very

different versions of normal for others. As a consequence, poor households are presented not only as individually wasteful, but as *the* key contemporary site of waste.

Importantly, part of how such discourses function is to present themselves as natural facts rather than as contingent products of historical legacies. It is, then, critical to historicise discourses – to pursue a genealogy or ‘history of the present,’ as Michel Foucault so famously put it (Foucault 1979, 31). We therefore situate our discussion of contemporary discourses within a broader genealogy of the evolving meanings of household waste in order to illuminate how these have long been inextricably connected to the evolution and reproduction of the ‘social body’ of the British state (Poovey 1995). Our argument is that concepts of household waste have been deployed in both historical and contemporary struggles to describe, explain and locate what counts as ‘belonging to’ and, by contrast, ‘excluded from’ (or ‘not tolerated by’) emergent state/social forms. Although it has been argued elsewhere that the story of modernity might itself be understood as a story of the ‘production of “human waste,” or more correctly wasted humans (the “excessive” and “redundant”)’ (Bauman 2013, 4), the contribution we make here is to show how the production of waste has long been intertwined with that of the household. It is not only that waste is constructed in part through the household but that the household itself is constituted through the normative social and economic boundaries of ‘wastes’. By taking the household as our point of departure, we open up new space for critical enquiry into austerity as a mode of governance that is built upon constructions of people and populations as making, and being, waste.

Our article proceeds as follows. First, we establish the need to politicise discourses of household waste and, in the light of this, offer a discussion of our overarching methodology,

genealogy. Second, we turn to the past in order to politicise the present, and present two historical illustrations of how discourses of household waste have long played a role in constructing the boundaries of national sovereignty. We suggest that – although the concept has evolved and been transformed – older meanings have not been supplanted but remain as part of an expanding lexicon of household wastes. Third, we turn our attentions to the present in order to map some of the ways that household waste is being used – explicitly and implicitly – in contemporary British politics and, especially, as an integral part of the austerity agenda as articulated and implemented by successive Conservative governments under David Cameron. Drawing on the discourse analysis of Cameron’s speeches from throughout his time as Prime Minister, we interrogate how the household appears as a key locus of ‘waste’ in ways that enable poor households to be marked out as deviant (e.g. ‘troubled families’) and which therefore work to naturalise structural inequality and poverty as ‘normal.’

Politicising discourses of household waste

In this article we ask: how have discourses of household waste come to be mobilised in neoliberal austerity politics? This question is especially significant given the routine erasure of the household in political economy – a body of scholarship that often treats capitalism as if it has ‘no home’ (Eisenstein cited in True and Hozic 2016, 4). In particular, although there is a substantial literature on the role of discourses in (re)producing the neoliberal politics of crisis and austerity (see for instance Hay and Smith 2013; Fairclough 2013; Blyth 2013; Schmidt 2016), this has tended to leave untouched the question of how the household might be implicated in such discourses. This is not to say that the household is overlooked *per se*,

for scholars have explored both the housing market as a *cause* of crisis and the *consequences* of austerity on households (see for instance Hay 2011; Browne 2012; Murphy and Scott 2014; O'Hara 2015). Yet the household as a discursive site in and of itself does not tend to feature in discussions of crisis and austerity. For example, Colin Hay suggests that the austerity imperative has been discursively constructed through the language of debt and that this both obscures and sustains the very Anglo-liberal growth model that led to crisis in the first place (Hay 2013). Similarly, Mark Blyth argues that austerity is 'a dangerous idea' that rests upon the mistaken notion that economic crisis is a 'sovereign debt crisis generated by excessive spending' (Blyth 2013, 5). But what has received scant attention is how the politics of austerity are being articulated not only through references to the public indebtedness of prior governments but also through a series of metaphors surrounding the 'irresponsible' private household (Jensen 2012). This omission matters a great deal for, as feminists have long argued, political economy is built upon the household: 'Households are at the root of the language of modern economics ... We might even say that all traditions of political thought that assume rulership or sovereignty as the essence of government and politics find their origins in practices of household rule' (Owens 2015, 3).

In asking how neoliberal austerity is bound up with discourses of household waste, we should be clear from the outset that we approach this intellectual question as an inherently and inescapably political one. We do so not only because it addresses one of the major concerns of present-day British politics – the austerity agenda – but more fundamentally because we are committed to a post-positivist rather than neo-positivist agenda in which all social questions are understood to be necessarily political (for a discussion see Sjoberg 2015). It is not that all social questions happen to have political elements but rather that

power relations structure the very contours and conditions of possibility of all social enquiry (Butler 1992).¹ We therefore begin from the premise that the task of social enquiry is to denaturalise, and thus to politicise, the power relations through which dominant discourses and forms of knowledge are produced – and this is the purpose of genealogy.

Genealogy is a ‘particular form of critique’ that uses historicisation to ‘document how we became what we are and what we must become’ (Jenkins 2011a, 164). It is most closely associated with the work of Michel Foucault, who defined genealogy as the ‘antisciences’ – not because it rejects knowledge or defends ignorance, but rather because it openly resists claims to scientific legitimacy, including through positivistic gestures towards empiricism (Foucault 2003, 9).² Although Foucault himself approached genealogy as a methodology that is ‘grey, meticulous, and patiently documentary’ (Foucault 1978, 76-7), it has been deployed in a multiplicity of ways in a wide variety of different contexts, including in the study of sovereignty (Bartelson 1995), the welfare state (Fraser and Gordon 1994), transitional justice (Teitel 2003), terrorism (Puar 2008), and body politics (Phipps 2014). Genealogy is not, therefore, tied to a specific method or set of techniques, for this in itself would be antithetical to the spirit of genealogical enquiry. Rather, it is perhaps best understood as characterising those modes of investigation that pursue the ‘intrinsic critique of the present’ (Crowley 2009, 341) through historicisation.

In practicing historicisation, genealogy resists rather than pursues any kind of a comprehensive historical project in which history is treated, either explicitly or implicitly, as a ‘linear narrative that reveals our progressive drive towards enlightenment’ (Fadyl and Nicholls 2013, 24). Instead, it offers a way of ‘using history as a means of critical engagement with the present’ in order to illuminate ‘the contingency of the present and the openness of

the future' (Garland 2014, 367, 372). Genealogy does not always/only involve historical enquiry, however, as it can also entail the 'historicisation of the contemporary moment' (Puar 2007, xix) through the interrogation of present-day discourses. Such an approach is particularly valuable given that, as Laura Jenkins notes, 'genealogy does more than simply exposing and helping us to recognise when things are contingent' but rather aims to politicise the here and now. This means attending to how historical forces have produced the present but, if we are to 'make sense of ourselves in new ways,' then it also means evaluating the present (Jenkins 2011b, 166). Accordingly, although genealogy often entails the study of what Foucault termed 'local, discontinuous, disqualified, or nonlegitimised knowledges' (Foucault 2003, 9), it can also productively be put to the task of studying dominant discourses in order to politicise and destabilise them (Fadyl and Nicholls 2013, 24). Genealogy represents, above all, a 'critical strategy that can be used to loosen, confront or disrupt depoliticizing perspectives' (Jenkins 2011b, 164); it is, then, a politicising intellectual agenda.

In this article, we employ genealogy as a means to make connections between the present and the past by situating contemporary discursive 'moments' of household waste within the context of past historical legacies. Our aim is not to provide a comprehensive historical overview of particular issues or events but rather to render visible how – as much as dominant discourses can appear as natural facts and so beyond contestation – they are themselves forged out of history. By discourses, we mean 'systems of meaning-production ... that "fix" meaning, however temporarily, and enable us to make sense of the world' (Shepherd 2006, 20). Thus, we view discourses as constitutive of – rather than as neutral

descriptors of – ‘reality’ and so as deeply implicated in the power relations that structure what is, and is not, politically possible to think, say and do.

Historicising ‘household waste’

Although ‘waste’ is now often associated with the physical detritus of industrial societies – the term is actually much older and much more varied than this. In its older variants, waste is a more complex notion, relating to wider discourses of spatiality, inclusion/exclusion, the drawing of boundaries and the setting apart. This evolving meaning of ‘waste’ is one that is entangled with the governance and control of populations through moral and indeed material means, particularly through successive tax and benefit regimes, which has formed an integral part of a continuous process of state-making (Cameron 2008).³ Two historical moments – William Petty’s *The Down Survey of Ireland* (1662) and Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree’s *Poverty, A Study of Town Life* (1901) – exemplify how constructions of household waste have been bound up with the constitution of sovereignty for centuries.

In his justification for *The Down Survey of Ireland* in the late 1650s,⁴ Sir William Petty (1662) described its purpose as follows:

Ireland is a place which must have so great an Army kept up in it, as may make the Irish desist from doing themselves or the English harm by their future Rebellions. And this great Army must occasion great and heavy Leavies upon a poor people and wasted Countrey; it is therefore not amiss that Ireland should understand the nature and measure of Taxes and Contributions.

The 'wasting' in question had resulted not from the brutal colonial war waged by the English, but, in Petty's eyes, from the inefficient management of the land and people of Ireland. Petty's vision for the Irish was an ordered, rational and planned form of governance (by the English – hence the prominence of the army), all based on what he called 'political arithmetick': statistics. The land was 'wasted' not because it was in any sense surplus or destroyed, but simply because it was empty and or underused. Petty wanted to replace the rather haphazard system of Irish 'parishes' with a new form based on standard population units. Each parish would consist of a specific number of households, neatly combining spiritual, economic and social discipline. Thus controlled, parishes would be managed for maximum agricultural production (Petty was himself a significant landowner in the conquered territories), freeing surplus labour to be used to build infrastructure both in Ireland and back in England. Although fortunately never fully realised, Petty's totalitarian vision for Ireland was nonetheless very important as a precursor to later 'rationalist' state-building enterprises. Unlike later political economists, at this stage in the active development of state theory the household was still a foundational unit. Bodin's vision of state sovereignty had, almost a century earlier (1601), begun with the household. Hobbes' later vision (both in *De Cive* (1647) and *Leviathan* (1651)) was more atomistic and individualised, but retained the household in the form of the 'natural family' as the foundation of all dominion. As Petty stood firmly within this mercantilist tradition (he had acted as Hobbes' personal secretary), it is hardly surprising that the household also formed the basis of his own conception of the orderly state. Importantly for our purposes, Petty's vision also stood at an important turning point in the use of the concept of waste.

In Petty's terms waste referred in part to the oldest use of the term; as a descriptor of open and/or unused territory. Sharing etymological roots with 'vast', this ancient concept of waste was a descriptor of all that lay 'beyond' – the wilderness beyond the city walls. In this original form the concept does not carry any notion of degradation or pollution. On the contrary it was often used to describe land in its pristine form but full of potential – not yet territory, not yet exploited, not yet owned. Petty also, however, looked forward to a world where such wastes – at least on land – no longer lay beyond the pale, because the whole of the land-surface of the earth was – at least in theory – occupied. More than that, the notion of a waste people, already gaining currency at the time Petty was writing,⁵ was closely linked to the territorial definitions. The nascent state, using techniques pioneered by Petty's 'political arithmetick', more and more completely occupied the land, so that the concepts of waste and wastefulness moved from the land to those occupying it (Poovey 1998). More than a passive exercise in mapping the physical terrain, Petty's visionary mission was to draw territory and people together into a carefully planned colonial domain in which the full potential of land and people would be harnessed to goals of spiritual purity and economic efficiency. From the outset, as the quote from Petty above makes all too clear, such goals were functions of state finance. For Petty, taxation – not yet an established 'national' practice – was the key to taming land and people, because they were to pay for their own military subjugation (cf. also Bourdieu 1998). As we will see in greater detail below, the linkage of waste and wasteful people to state finance now relates more to the benefit system than to taxation (i.e. the burden on rather than the contribution to state finance), but the connection between finance and spatial repression remains extant.

Petty was an early exponent of the idea of waste as moral laxity – excessive, unplanned, uncultivated: wasteful. This use of waste emerged rapidly from then on as part of a series of interlinked narratives all designed to create the ‘social body’ of the state (Poovey 1995). As the bureaucratic and infrastructural demands of the emergent ‘public sphere’ (Habermas) developed, antipathy to wastefulness was joined by notions of discipline, hygiene (Ross 1995) female passivity and submissiveness (Easlea 1980), the separation of public and private domains of activity, class and racial hierarchies and so on.

Just as Petty’s vision of the planned space economy deployed territorial enclosure as a form of primitive accumulation, so similar techniques were applied to particular social groups. As Sylvia Federici has shown, the rise of the witch-hunts in Europe during the 15th to 17th centuries contributed to a specific and very violent gendering of economic activity (Federici 2004). Federici and others have argued that the witch-hunts were both a particular technique for removing women from ‘waste’ land prior to enclosure, but were also symptomatic of a wider disciplining and restriction of female economic participation (Zemon Davis 1975, Easlea 1980, Davies 1999, Federici 2004).

The notion of *wastefulness* in relation to ‘household spending beyond means’ emerged as early as Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree’s study *Poverty, A Study of Town Life* published in 1901. Here he made his influential distinction between primary and secondary poverty, with the former defined as ‘families whose total earnings are insufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency’ and the latter defined as characteristic of ‘families whose total earnings would be sufficient for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency were it not that some portion of it is absorbed by other expenditure, either useful or wasteful’ (Rowntree 1901: vii-x). Although Rowntree regarded

structural factors as key causes of poverty, he nevertheless claimed that these were at least in part in the control of the individuals. They included 'drink, betting, and gambling. Ignorant or careless housekeeping, and other improvident expenditure, the latter often induced by irregularity of income' (Rowntree 1901: 5) – understandings of wastefulness that mark a close resemblance with current usages of the concept as we will turn to below.

The moral laxity of this excessive expenditure by one end of the social spectrum of Britain, is connected – albeit loosely – to acknowledgement of an emerging 'libidinal economy' among wealthier classes. In the late 18th century, for example, the founder of the Methodist Church, John Wesley, noted a contradiction among his congregation whose pious frugality led to wealth, but whose wealth then led to impiety. As he put it (1786):

The Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal; consequently they increase in goods. Hence they proportionately increase in pride, in anger, in the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life. So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away. Is there no way to prevent this continual decay of pure religion?

The tradition for non-conformist religions to invest charitably in the social and moral fabric of local and national communities (Quaker towns, school endowments, missionary foundations, etc.) arose precisely from this need to counter the 'wastefulness' inherent to an emerging 'libidinal economy'. In Wesley's and others' terms this was still excess spending, but it was much less morally clear-cut because it lacked the additional 'flaw' of expenditure over means that featured in Rowntree's later account. Nevertheless, these and similar narratives about the 'proper' use of wealth found their way not only into the foundational legislation of what would later become the British 'welfare state' (e.g. the Poor Laws of the 1830s onwards), but also into more recent debates around charitable

giving and corporate social responsibility, and on up to and including the terms in which the causes of the 2008 banking crisis were described (Cameron et al. 2011).

We do not have space here to fully rehearse the ways in which the meanings of waste have proliferated and evolved. But it is important to note the inflections that the concept adds to emergent aspects of 'economy' that rapidly become embedded within the emergent structures of the state and which continue to inform the ways in which contemporary political economies mobilise 'waste'. Our two tales of waste are intended to illuminate how, historically, waste carries a range of meanings – a description of wilderness (the wastes), a pejorative notion of excess (wasted money, time, etc.) and a definition of both environmental and social pollution (waste products, waste people). They also highlight how the process of enacting a political economy (inscribed in territory, population, law, etc.) necessarily involves mobilising a series of overlapping definitions of waste/not-waste and allocating these normative constructions in different ways to different social groups – 'those forces that strip people of their human dignity and reproduce them as dehumanized waste, the disposable dregs and refuse of social life' (Tyler 2013, 140). Finally, these two tales exemplify how constructions of household waste in particular were involved in the constitution of the British nation state. National sovereignty, though it constitutes diverse groups of people as a single population contained within a defined state territory, also makes a series of more or less explicit assumptions about the division of that population into households. This is, of course, partly an attempt to describe how 'most' people live – as part of some form of family household in one place. But mobilising a concept of a 'normal' and/or 'average' household entails making choices about what does and does not

count as a household, what its responsibilities are expected and/or required to be, how it is legally defined and disciplined and so on.

The wasteful politics of austerity

We now turn to dominant contemporary discourses in order to explore how conceptions of household waste continue to play out in the present. As noted earlier, appeals to household waste are being made in a variety of contexts, but we focus on their articulation in formal political speeches by the British Prime Minister (at the time of writing),⁶ David Cameron. Although formal speeches are clearly not the only/primary site of political discourse, it is nevertheless performatively significant that the Prime Minister (who, after all, is symbolically positioned as the very embodiment of political authority in the United Kingdom) is deploying the language and logic of household waste. This does not mean, however, that we conceive of discourses in terms of individualistic intentionalism, for 'discourses, as the actors themselves and the institutions that they represent, [are] both constituted by and constitutive of a wider discursive terrain' (Shepherd 2008, 296-7). Our aim is rather to point to particular discursive moments in which various appeals to household waste are being 'fixed' in current political discourse. That they are being articulated in multiple contexts – including in speeches by Cameron on themes as diverse as the 'August riots,' 'troubled families,' welfare provision, and the government's long-term economic plan – suggests that they are internal rather than incidental to neoliberal austerity politics.

The claim that austerity politics draw on narratives surrounding 'waste' may seem a rather intuitive one. After all, central to the austerity agenda of the Conservative governments under David Cameron has been the notion that economic crisis has represented a crisis not of the UK's model of economic growth but rather a crisis of debt (Hay and Smith 2013), with austerity representing an attempt to rein in such debt. That public debt is a direct consequence of 'wasteful' government spending has of course long been a defining feature of Conservative Party ideology, and so too has it been a consistent theme for the current government – indeed, the 2015 manifesto alone contained six references to 'waste' - for e.g. 'wasteful spending' or 'wasteful projects' (Conservative Party 2015). However, what has received scarce attention in the literature on economic and social crisis is how the austerity imperative is being articulated as much through the language of private debt as public debt, and how this in turn depends upon a series of metaphors surrounding 'responsible' versus 'irresponsible' households (Jensen 2012). This is a surprising omission, for it is striking just how consistently and explicitly Cameron articulates government waste in and through the language of the household, although he does so in a variety of different ways. Indeed, as we shall discuss, it is through a complex lexicon of waste and wastefulness that Cameron sets out both his vision for Britain's economic and social recovery and, conversely, his assessment of the causes of Britain's economic and social decline.

As Cameron stated in his speech, 'The Values that Underpin Our Long-term Economic Plan' in March 2014:

Let's be clear: there is no such thing as government money. It's your money – taxpayer's money. It's not my money, not George Osborne's money, not the government's money - it's your money. Hard-working people's money ... [E]very bit of government waste we can cut, every efficiency we can achieve, is money we can give back to you. (Cameron 2014)

Here the 'needs' of the household are appealed to in justifying cuts in government waste or, put another way, government 'waste' is constructed as a drain on the family – it is the responsibility of government to scale back in order to protect households:

Some people talk as if the sums of money the government spends are so big that it almost doesn't matter about the odd pound or two here or there. That's totally irresponsible. You wouldn't take that approach to managing your money. And neither should we in government. That's important at the best of times but it's more important than ever when families are feeling the squeeze. Because every bit of government waste we can cut, every efficiency we can achieve, is money we can give back to you (Cameron 2014)

Similarly, Cameron (2015) argued at the Conservative Party Conference:

Who gets hurt when governments lose control of spending and interest rates go through the roof? Who gets hurt when you waste money on debt interest and have to cut the NHS...No – not the rich...it's poor people, working people.

Yet, just as government waste is articulated as impacting upon household waste, so too is the household constructed as responsible for Britain's economic and social prospects. Simply put, if 'Britain' is in trouble through (public) debt, then it is the job of the (private) household to cut back, while still retaining the necessary level of (credit-fuelled) spending to enable growth. As Cameron claimed in 'The Values that Underpin Our Long-Term Economic Plan':

If we don't get to grips with the deficit now we are passing a greater and greater burden of debt to our children. We are saying that more and more of their hard earned future income should be wasted on paying off the bill we leave them. Do we really want to be the ones who responded to a crisis by putting off to tomorrow what we had to do today? ... We all want the same for our children: a secure future and a chance to make something of their lives. But they won't get that future unless we cut the deficit now' (Cameron 2014).⁷

Indeed, at times Cameron reverses this logic so that, rather than blaming families for overspending, families and their saving habits are used as moral examples for the state:

We can't just be thinking about today, we should be thinking about the rainy days that could come – just like a family does. They put something aside, take out the insurance plan, pay off some of the mortgage when they have something spare. That's what we should do as a country – making sure we are ready to cope with future crises (Cameron 2015).

And, on occasion, Britain itself is likened to a household at risk of bankruptcy – as Cameron argued in a 'Speech on the Big Society' on 23 May 2011, for instance:

Everyone knows that sorting out our nation's finances, and dealing with the terrible economic mess that we inherited, is this government's most urgent priority ... Because spending cuts are not the ends; they're not even the means to the ends ... they're just a symptom of the inescapable reality that you cannot get anything done if your country goes bankrupt ... No country is owed a living in the modern, global economy. It's got to earn it – and earn it the hard way (Cameron 2011).

Or, addressing the Scottish conservative conference in 2015:

[W]e have fought the risk of break-up, now we have to fight to stave off the risk of bankruptcy (Cameron 2015a).

Although these multiple and, at times, competing discourses might at first appear to suggest contradiction and confusion, what they all in fact highlight is how the politics of austerity itself depends upon connections between the economic and the social through the drawing of parallels between the greed, consumption and profligacy of both the state and the household (Stanley 2014). Central here is the repositioning of economic crisis into the realm of social responsibility, so that economic imperatives become articulated in and through the language of social responsibility. For example, in his 'Speech on the Big Society', Cameron's

social vision is explicitly situated within the context of the economic challenges facing Britain. Having outlined the pressing need to ‘rebalance and revitalise our economy’, he sets out his vision for a ‘bigger, stronger society’ in which the social is defined in strikingly individualistic terms – ‘taking responsibility for your family’ and ‘taking responsibility for your community’ (Cameron 2011). This vision, although the terminology has slightly changed, is the same in Cameron’s speech to the Conservative Party conference in 2015, where the roots causes of poverty – ‘children growing in chaos; addiction, mental health problems, abuse, family breakdown’ – are firmly placed in the realm of individual responsibility: ‘Because we know in this party that the best way out of poverty is work. That’s why we reformed welfare, introduced the cap and helped to create 2.5 million jobs’ (Cameron 2015). This move – in which collective action problems are placed squarely on the shoulders of individuals – in turn directly enables poverty and inequality to be attributed to individual failure rather than to government policy or socio-economic structures (Tepe-Belfrage 2014). For, as Cameron also states:

We must build a bigger, stronger society because we can’t keep tolerating the wasted lives and wasted potential that comes when talent is held back by circumstance ... The problem today is that a culture of responsibility is too often absent in our country. And we need to restore it’ (Cameron 2011).

Such narratives depict the poor as individually responsible for the structural context in which they find themselves – ‘Our heart tells us that we can’t just stand by while people live these lives and cause others so much misery. Our head tells us we can’t afford to keep footing the monumental bills for social failure’ (Cameron, 2011c). Or, as Ian Duncan Smith has stated even more explicitly: ‘Britain is witnessing a growth in an underclass whose

lifestyles affect everyone' (Smith 2008), therefore requiring intervention in *some* peoples' lifestyles.

Although the language of the 'Big Society' has subsequently fallen away, such constructions of household waste remain a core characteristic of more recent Conservative narratives that are mainly built on getting people into work as the 'only' way out of poverty (Cameron 2015). These narratives continue the focus on individuals' responsibility for their own situation and stress the need to develop individuals' aspirations and get them out of their 'wasteful' ways, rather than to focus on providing decent housing, equal access to good education and good health for all, and/or developing a society that provides a good life for all.

And yet it is not just individuals per se but rather individual households that are constructed as lying at the heart of Britain's economic and social troubles: 'Broken Britain' is the 'broken family' very specifically (Smith 2016). A prominent and consistent theme in Cameron's discourse is precisely that both public and private waste is the direct consequence of the failure of individual families – 'we must treat the causes of poverty at their source ... whether that's debt, family break-down, educational failure or addiction' (Cameron 2012); 'a bad relationship between parents means a child is more likely to live in poverty, fail at school, end up in prison or be unemployed in later life' (Cameron 2011a); and so on. It is the productive household and the hard-working family that represents the future for Britain, and the wasteful household and dysfunctional family that threatens such a future. In this sense, waste is articulated in ways that define poor households not only as wasteful in terms of their practices but as themselves constituting a form of waste, with human lives literally

depicted as economic costs. As Cameron stated in his now infamous 'Troubled Families' speech of December 2011:

Officialdom might call them 'families with multiple disadvantages'. Some in the press might call them 'neighbours from hell'. Whatever you call them, we've known for years that a relatively small number of families are the source of a large proportion of the problems in society. Drug addiction. Alcohol abuse. Crime. A culture of disruption and irresponsibility that cascades through generations. We've always known that these families cost an extraordinary amount of money ...but now we've come up the actual figures. Last year the state spent an estimated £9 billion on just 120,000 families...that is around £75,000 per family (Cameron 2011).

As the title and content of the 'Troubled Families' speech exemplifies, the wasteful poor are constructed not only as wasteful individuals but specifically as wasteful families:

This waste of human potential is not sustainable and therefore the Government has committed to a renewed drive to deal with troubled families (Communities and Local Government 2011).

These narratives of poor households not only as *making* waste but as *being* wasteful thus serves to naturalise the structural inequality (indeed, the structural violence) of neoliberal capitalism. As Grace Hong writes, to depict human-beings as without morality does important political work, for to be constituted as a moral subject means 'having a claim to exist, and for one's existence to be protected.' To cast people and populations as immoral therefore enables them to be rendered 'surplus' and 'extinguishable' (Hong 2012, 92). In this sense, households – or, more accurately, imaginaries of household waste – become implicated in the production of systematic material oppression. In his 'Speech on the Fightback After the Riots' following the so-called August riots of 2011, Cameron put it as follows:

Do we have the determination to confront the slow-motion moral collapse that has taken place in parts of our country these past few generations? Irresponsibility. Selfishness. Behaving as if your choices have no consequences. Children without fathers. Schools without discipline. Reward without effort. Crime without punishment. Rights without responsibilities. Communities without control. Some of the worst aspects of human nature tolerated, indulged - sometimes even incentivised - by a state and its agencies that in parts have become literally demoralised' (Cameron 2011b).

The politics of individualizing responsibility for wellbeing must be understood as sitting firmly within processes of an ongoing neoliberalisation of the welfare state (Peck 2002) where the market is presented as the best, if not only, means of securing individuals' wellbeing and social assistance is understood as an obstruction to this aim. Yet, this politics of disciplining individuals and their lifestyles serve to legitimise a deepening and extending of neoliberalism (Fraser and Murphy 2013: 38) in the context of 'severe austerity' (Rubery and Rafferty 2014: 123). Here, a regime of market citizenship (Bakker and Silvey 2008) provides the ideological foundation of a sharp reduction of benefits levels and a further rise of workfare, thereby constructing recipients as undeserving (Peck 2001) and their lifestyles open to critique and disciplining. Appeals to 'family values' take on a very different hue when viewed in the context of the dismantling of the welfare state and the shift from public to private sources of support and economic relief (McGarry and Haggerty 2015; Halberstam 2011: 72).

Although 'state-household'⁸ spending as linked to conceptualisations of 'family-household' conjures up a normative sense of equality, it is deeply morally loaded against the poor. For example, it is striking that loans taken out by students to pay for education are left untargeted by discourses surrounding waste, even though they can lead to indefinite

indebtedness. Yet the taking-out of loans from 'payday lenders' to pay for absolutely crucial and life sustaining utilities or food at the end of the month is, by contrast, constructed as wasteful. More precisely, in terms Mrs Moneypenny might understand, the wasteful lifestyle choices that make such loans necessary mean that the lenders/spenders have been unable to live within their means. And so poverty becomes recast as consumption.

Such discourses elide how state and household spending 'beyond means' has been a crucial feature of deficit and/or credit-fuelled growth over the last decades.⁹ Although both national and household debts are routinely cited as problems, '[n]eoliberal states have produced legal and institutional environments where even many moderate-income households cannot afford to live without voluntarily submitting to usurious debt contracts' (Kear, 2015: 1). The role of political decision-making – in determining what level of 'state household' debt is considered appropriate and, similarly, what kind of expenditures are considered necessary – is thus obscured through the individualising and responsabilising language of wasteful consumption. Moreover, as Susanne Soederberg has argued, the emergence of 'debtfare states' has entailed a normalisation of 'the reliance on credit to augment and/or replace the living wage or the government benefit cheque' (Soederberg 2014: 3), and this has enabled the very growth model that neoliberalism is so reliant upon (Hay 2013).

It is a cruel irony that households – especially the most populous ones – must spend beyond their means in order to ensure growth even as they are blamed for their wastefulness. And yet the governing and controlling of complex and contradictory forms of wastefulness and necessary spending is itself required by the neoliberal British state. While the narrative of the wasteful middle and lower class household serves as a strong moment to legitimise

welfare cuts and disciplinary politics, this must of course be balanced against the need for all households to spend up to and beyond their means to enable growth, with even the Office for Budget Responsibility (2015) predicating the UK's future growth on rising household debt levels. An expansive and scarcely regulated industry that enables credit to be available, even to those living 'beyond their means' (and because such 'sub-prime' loans are so staggeringly expensive, pushing them inevitably further beyond their means) further exemplifies this: 'Traditional pawnshops and loan sharks now compete with a variety of products designed to serve the under-banked' (Soederberg 2014: 1).¹⁰ Poor households are constructed as a 'drain' on the 'the system' that 'we' all have to 'hold up' and yet poverty *is* the system, for poverty is hugely profitable for capitalism. The 'poverty industry' targets the poor, unemployed and underemployed by including them in the financial sphere through credit whilst these populations are simultaneously targeted through morality discourses as wasteful and immoral (Soederberg 2014). As Martijn Konings writes:

The culture of self-help that is so crucial to neoliberal governmentality involves a dialectic of continuous affirmation and rejection, seduction and denial ... Neoliberal governmentality involves the creation of chains of disciplinary pressures, networks composed of acts of everyday sadism and expressions of judgment that serve to distract us from the resentment provoked by our submission to authority structures we do not fully understand and experience as oppressive and constraining. This re-directing of our anger and discontent serves to ... contort our notions of self-realization and responsible living in such a way that we end up ascribing a spiritual dimension to balancing the household budget (Konings 2009, 120-21).

Discourses of household waste, then, should be understood as anything but trivial, even if their absence in the literature on crisis and austerity suggests that they are regarded as a 'merely cultural' matter (Butler 1997, 265). Rather, they are deeply implicated in contemporary political imaginaries that find expression not only in everyday sites and in popular media but also in 'formal' political discourse from policy-makers themselves. Indeed,

as we have sought to show through our genealogy of household waste, these longstanding, historic discourses define the very discursive architecture upon which austerity politics are being articulated and made thinkable, even as they are in turn being reconfigured in and through neoliberal austerity. As we have also argued, these narratives render the poor both individually culpable for their own poverty and collectively culpable for Britain's economic and social crisis. If we are to challenge the mechanisms through which the structural sources of capitalist oppression are naturalised and normalised over time, it is vital for scholars to expose and contest the discursive practices that construct people and populations as wasteful in this way. But, as our intervention has above all highlighted, this in turn requires doing justice to the household as an integral part of this story, for it is households (and especially poor ones) that are constructed not only as producing waste but as constituting waste in and of themselves. Critical scholarship therefore needs to do much more to bring in, and perhaps even begin with, the household in order to interrogate, critique and resist the production of 'wasted lives' in this way (Bauman 2013).

Conclusions

We want to end, as we began, with *Superscrimpers* in order to tell one final tale of household waste. Around the time that *Superscrimpers* appeared on British screens, the production company behind it, *Endemol*, was having to confront its own 'wasteful ways'. Already a major global media company, by 2011 *Endemol* was reported to be in debt to the tune of \$4.1 billion (Kuo 2011). Major investors such as *Goldman Sachs* and *Mediaset* (a company owned by the Berlusconi 'household') were 'facing losses of more than 60 percent' as the company's complex financial structure unwound with the plummeting value of the

Euro (Bloomberg 2011). Facing a financial meltdown, *Endemol* was rescued through a debt-equity swap led by private equity firm *Apollo Global Management*. With roots in the junk bond businesses pioneered by disgraced financier Michael Milken in the 1980s, *Apollo* specialises in ‘distressed expertise’ – i.e. identifying over-leveraged companies on the verge of collapse and applying their particular knowledge of the inner working of share and bond markets to turn them into profitable and/or saleable assets. *Apollo* is also linked to several intertwined ‘households’; several members of its board being married to each others’ siblings or other relatives. Most recently, *Apollo* entered into a joint venture with another global media household headed by Rupert Murdoch, Chairman and CEO of *21st Century Fox*. Together, *Apollo* and *21st Century Fox* have formed the *Endemol Shine Group*. In doing so, the debts run up through *Endemol’s* excessive spending have been converted into share equity for its new parent companies.

We tell this final story, rather obviously, to further underscore how households are presented as equal, but that some are (with apologies to Orwell) considerably more equal than others. Those ‘extraordinary’ households that are able to magically convert debt into equity constitute a bizarre norm of ‘non-excessive’ consumption against which the ‘ordinary household’ is found wanting.

Just as John Wesley’s Methodists sought to avoid the perils of libidinal economy through charity, so the more ‘extraordinary’ end of the contemporary ‘household’ disburses its wealth through good works. The owners of Endemol-Shine, Mrs Money Penny’s new paymasters, all have impressive lists of charitable, cultural and environmental projects on their corporate social responsibility web-pages. Many of these are oriented, in one way or another towards the family and the promotion of family values. Whilst all this is no doubt of

considerable value and importance to those who benefit from such largesse, it also in a sense brings the contemporary debate about 'household waste' full circle: the excess wealth of the corporate household is offering itself as supporting those 'households' falling through the gaps of a privatised, austerity-oriented welfare system.

The problem with this, of course, is that whilst private philanthropy can do great things, not only can it not replace a welfare state, it serves to further constrain it. In the peculiar discourse of waste and wastefulness that has accompanied austerity – markedly in Britain, but elsewhere too – the household is presented both as an ideal-typical social and economic unit, but also a problem to be solved. Notwithstanding that the corporate households that bring *Superscrimpers* and the rest to our screens are thoroughly abnormal, by implication they constitute a vague norm of the proper household – the one that lives within its means – against which the rest are found wanting. David Cameron's and others' confusing and shifting positions on the nature and meaning of the household centre on its particular relationship to the concept of 'waste' – a moral agenda smuggled in as 'normal' domestic economics.

In this article, we have offered a genealogy of household waste in order to show how – well before the likes of *Superscrimpers* emerged – the household has long been connected to waste. Households have variously been constructed as the source of or solution to waste, and – as is the case with current austerity debates – they are also being categorised as waste themselves. In the UK, these specific narratives are being deployed as part of a broader neoliberal project to reoccupy the 'wastes' of the world as a means of escaping not just the state, but those flawed consumers and, especially, households that seem to make the greatest, wasteful, demands upon it. Multiple meanings of household waste are therefore

being used – as they have been used historically – to re-differentiate state spaces (both normative and real) in ways that close down some forms of households in favour of others. As we have argued, this operates as a form of ‘everyday sadism’ (Konings 2009, 120) through which the ‘structural deleterious effects of neoliberal practices, principles and cultures’ (Winnubst 2012, 80) are not only lived by the poor, but are blamed on them too. Thus, even as austerity politics are constituted through appeals to the household, so too the consequences of austerity impact devastatingly upon actual households – the material depletion of households made possible through imaginaries of household waste.

Notes

¹ As Judith Butler writes, to recognise social theory as always-already imbued with power does not represent a turn to apolitical nihilism but, quite the contrary, is ‘the very precondition of a politically engaged critique’. Indeed, ‘the recourse to a position ... that places itself beyond the play of power ... is perhaps the most insidious ruse of power’ (Butler 1992, 6-7).

² For example, although it is customary in the social sciences to justify exactly how many pieces of a type of ‘data’ (e.g. semi-structured interview ‘data’) have been collated and analysed, such moves are directly at odds with the spirit of genealogical critique, and Foucault does not make them accordingly. Indeed, for Foucault it is precisely that certain forms of knowledge attempt to cast themselves as ‘legitimate’ knowledge – including through the language of technical expertise – that warrants critique, i.e. to uncover how unequal power relations are reproduced through practices of knowledge production (Foucault 2003).

³ Here refer to the state not only as a legal/territorial entity (though clearly that too) but also in terms of a much more diffuse notion of statehood in which boundaries are complex and multiple – normative and moral as much as physical and/or territorial.

⁴ An extensive digital collection of material relating to the Down Survey can be found at

<http://downsurvey.tcd.ie/> [accessed 30/10/2015].

⁵ The Oxford English Dictionary dates this notion of waste as far back as Thomas Nashe's *Pierce Penniless*, 1592 (OED 2016).

⁶ April 2016.

⁷ Also cited in Smith (2015, 244-5).

⁸ While the English language does not make the equation automatically, in German the 'Staatshaushalt' clearly equates the form of economic management of the state with the 'Haushalt' of the family. German proclaimed 'probity' around state spending decisions has often been legitimised through this comparison.

⁹ Indeed at the time of writing, the UK's 'national debt' has risen to an estimated £1.53 trillion under Cameron's government.

¹⁰ David Harvey's (2001) notion of a spatio-temporal fix is instructive in describing the displacement of wasteful spending through available credit (Soederberg, 2014) and the role of the credit card industry in securing this fix sponsored by (a lack of) state regulation.

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