Facing hunger, framing food banks, imaging austerity
Samuel Strong
Homerton College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

ABSTRACT
This paper analyses the scopic regime established by images of UK food banks. Analysis of three popular images of ‘Food Bank Britain’ reveals the persistence of historical practices for visualizing hunger – namely, the dominance of faciality, infantilization of the hungry, and erasure of geographical context from visual frames. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, this paper demonstrates how such images serve to ‘frame’ austerity – where framing describes the link between the bounding of the literal edges of an image and the epistemic, affective frames for understanding and feeling austerity that are mobilized. Rather than attempting to portray ‘real’ images of food banks, this scopic regime is instead marked by the production of ocular affects that structure the feelings of the viewer towards certain political ends. It is concluded that this framing of hunger denies the political life of food bank users, a process that in turn effaces the radical questions necessary to address the causes of hunger at a time of austerity.

Enfrentar el hambre, enmarcando bancos de alimentos, imaginando la austeridad
Este artículo analiza el régimen escópico establecido por imágenes de los bancos de alimentos del Reino Unido. El análisis de tres imágenes populares de ‘Food Bank Britain’ revela la persistencia de prácticas históricas para visualizar el hambre, a saber, el predominio de la facialidad, la infantilización del hambriento y la eliminación del contexto geográfico de los marcos visuales. Basándose en el trabajo de Judith Butler, este artículo demuestra cómo estas imágenes sirven para “enmarcar” la austeridad, donde el encuadre describe el vínculo entre el límite de los bordes literales de una imagen y los marcos epistémicos y afectivos para comprender y sentir la austeridad que se movilizan. Más que intentar retratar imágenes ‘reales’ de los bancos de alimentos, este régimen escópico está marcado por la producción de afectos oculares que estructuran los sentimientos del espectador hacia ciertos fines políticos. Se concluye que este encuadre del hambre niega la vida política de los usuarios de los bancos de alimentos, proceso que a su vez borra las cuestiones radicales necesarias para abordar las causas del hambre en un momento de austeridad.
Enfrentar el hambre, enmarcando bancos de alimentos, imaginando la austeridad

Résumé
Cet article analyse le régime scopique établi par les images des banques alimentaires britanniques. L’analyse de trois images bien connues de « Food Bank Britain » révèle la persistance de pratiques anciennes pour présenter la faim visuellement : c’est à dire, la prédominance d’expressions de visages, l’enfantilisation des affamés et le gommage du contexte géographique dans les cadres visuels. En s’appuyant sur les travaux de Judith Butler, cet article démontre comment ces images permettent de « cadrer » l’austérité, quand le cadrage décrit le lien entre les propres bords d’une image et les cadres épistémiques, affectifs pour comprendre et ressentir l’austérité qui sont mobilisés. Plutôt que d’essayer de représenter des images « réelles » des banques alimentaires, ce régime scopique est en fait marqué par la production d’effets oculaires qui structurent les émotions du spectateur vers certains buts politiques. Nous concluons que ce cadrage de la faim dénie la vie politique des utilisateurs des banques alimentaires, un processus qui, à son tour, efface les questions radicales nécessaires pour traiter les causes de la faim en temps d’austérité.

Introduction

A central contention in Judith Butler’s (2009, p. 2) Frames of War is that images of ‘the precarity of life impose an obligation upon us.’ Whilst noting their power to haunt us affectively, Butler argues that the affects imbued by images – what this paper positions as their ocular affects – are central to how we understand and respond to the lives of others. This is because our felt obligation towards precarious others is not a given. Rather, images shape the ‘recognizability’ of life – the extent to which we view the other as a life. For Butler (2009, p. 4), such a recognition is not natural but is socially constructed – so that ‘recognizability precedes recognition.’ Images therefore not only provide a literal frame: they also provide social frames through which the experiences of both viewer and viewed are structured (Goffman, 1986).

Butler’s theory of framing precarious life provides impetus for the analysis of UK food banks pursued in this article. Food banks are charitable organizations that receive and sort food donations before distributing these items to those they deem to be hungry. Whilst long-established internationally (notably in North America), their rapid rise in the UK has been more novel – with the last decade of austerity seeing the number of food banks surpass 2,000 in ‘Food Bank Britain’ today (Garthwaite, 2016; Independent Financial Advisors Network, 2018). The Trussell Trust, a Christian charity that operates over half of these through a franchise system, last year distributed 1.6 million packages of three-day worth of emergency food (Trussell Trust, 2019) – a 26-fold increase on figures from a decade ago (Strong, 2020a).

Increasing material operations have been met by a ‘rising tide’ of representation (Wells & Caraher, 2016). For Cloke et al. (2017, p. 2) this ‘very visible presence . . . of food banks in the UK has become iconic of social injustice and welfare failure’ borne by austerity. This is no doubt in the case. However, the precarity of life presented in food bank images also
prompts other, often conflicting frames. Such images play a contested role in social crafting and form, shaping values and conduct in what Butler (2009) refers to as a ‘social ontology of the body.’ It is therefore surprising that scholars are yet to more fully consider food banks specifically, and austerity more broadly, as a scopic regime (Rose, 2001). In responding to this gap, this article argues that images of food banks have been utilized to structure feelings about hunger at a time of austerity.

This argument is propelled by analysis of three ‘public’ images of UK food banking (Fleetwood, 2015). Rather than providing an exhaustive account, the intention is to identify framings that exist across disparate examples – ascertaining ‘which frames permit the representability of the human and which do not . . . and how that presentation affects our responsiveness’ (Butler, 2009, p. 63). Together, these images demonstrate how food banks serve as ‘spaces of constructed visibility’ for the transmission of ocular affect imbued by the transitive relationship between viewer-image-viewed (Gregory, 2001). Here, visibility refers not simply to what we see in representations: it also describes the practices and forms of knowing and feeling that prevail at a time of austerity. This relationship between visibility and space is integral to ‘cultural modes of regulating affective and ethical dispositions through a selective and differential framing of violence’ (Butler, 2009, p. 1).

Whilst Howarth (2016, n.p.) notes that ‘in Britain . . . the vulnerable corporeality of the hungry body [has] become more pervasive and more visible . . . hunger as a lived experience is laid bare in ever-longer food bank queues,’ this article identifies a scopic regime marked by the absence of genuine depictions of food bank spaces and users themselves. Instead, food banks have been reduced to affective signifiers for the production of competing ways of feeling about hunger that tie into the broader cultural political economy of austerity. This article concludes that the consequences of this frame are twofold: views on the actually existing practices of food banks are distorted, and the experiences of the hungry are erased.

**Food banking and food insecurity in the age of austerity**

There are numerous ways to measure and map the absence of food. Whilst naming this condition ‘hunger’ seems obvious, its ‘perpetual presence and apparently unchanging physical characteristics belie the way in which its meaning, and our attitudes toward the hungry, change over time’ (Vernon, 2007, p. 2). In the Global North today, a particular iteration of hunger dominates: food insecurity.2 Distinct from acute malnutrition and starvation that describe the effects of a (near) total absence of sustenance, food insecurity defines persistent precarity of subsistence – where a healthy, nutritious diet is harder to sustain.

Food insecurity has been rising in the Global North generally, and the UK specifically, since the 1980s (Riches, 1997). This upsurge has been particularly marked following the 2008 financial crisis, with the Food and Agriculture Organization (2013) reporting a 15.5% increase in the number of people undernourished in Europe and North America between 2005–07 and 2011–13 (Riches & Silvestri, 2014). Latest figures estimate that 8% of people in North America and Europe are currently experiencing food insecurity (FAO, 2019). Not only does the UK have the highest number of food insecure people in Europe: it is also home to one in five of those Europeans experiencing food insecurity (FAO, 2018).
8.4 million people – roughly 13% of the UK population – are living in households reporting some level of food insecurity (Food Foundation, 2016), whilst 2.2 million are experiencing severe food insecurity (FAO, 2018). Writing in 1981, Sen explained why such hunger should not occur in the UK:

‘But for the social security arrangements there would be widespread starvation and possibly a famine. What prevents that is not the high average income or wealth of the British … but the guaranteed minimum values of exchange entitlements owing to the social security system’. (Sen, 1981, p. 7)

Since Sen’s time of writing, the UK has delivered ‘an austerity package that has decimated forms of social security and cut public services’ (Allen et al., 2015, p. 2). Reductions in public sector employment, pay and spending have combined with welfare cuts to engineer precarity amongst the UK’s most marginalized (Gray & Barford, 2018; Hamnett, 2014; Strong, 2020b, forthcoming). In real terms, the incomes of the UK’s poorest households (at the tenth percentile distribution) are lower than they were a decade ago (pre-austerity but post-2008 crash) (Resolution Foundation, 2020) – a diminishment that is all the more marked due to a real terms rise in food prices by 3.9% between 2002–03 and 2017–18 (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2020). Returning to Sen, austerity has driven entitlement failure amongst the UK’s poorest – where hunger is not caused by a sudden scarcity of food, but by the withering of systems that guarantee exchange entitlements to those lacking market-based means.

Food banks have emerged as a response to such entitlement failure. Philip Alston (2018, pp. 1, 15) – the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights – noted ‘the immense growth in foodbanks and the queues waiting outside them’ as evidence of such charitable institutions ‘step[ping] in to do the government’s job.’ This is also clear in the Trussell Trust’s own data. Benefit delays and changes accounted for nearly 40% of the reasons for referral to a food bank in 2017–18, whilst a further 33% were driven by income not covering essential costs (Trussell Trust, 2019).

UK food banks exercise a variegated approach to hunger, making international comparison difficult. They practise highly localized forms of food redistribution (distinct from ‘warehouse’ models seen in North America), with donations (almost exclusively of dried and tinned goods due to storage challenges) coming from local communities, before being distributed proximately. Most food banks, and certainly those in the Trussell Trust network, aim to provide ‘emergency relief’ – where food is provisioned on a temporary basis (Strong, 2019). In the Trussell Trust system, forms of triage, including a voucher system, mean access to food is tied to calculations of deservingness, whilst regimes of planned scarcity limit any household to three packages of three-days’-worth of food in a six-month period (May et al., 2020).

Whilst the correlation between food banking and austerity is clear, what is less so is the political and cultural coordinates upon which these trends have been secured. The sharp increase in food banks and food insecurity at a time of austerity runs counter to the modern history of hunger:

We no longer hold the hungry responsible for their hunger; we demonstrate our humanity by sympathizing with their suffering; we routinely lament hunger’s damaging effects on the growth of the global economy; and barely a year goes by without heads of state or aging rock stars gathering to declare another war on global hunger (Vernon, 2007, p. 2).
If this is the case, then why has hunger proliferated in the UK today, and why have food banks emerged as the response? Crucially, hunger cannot be understood outside of its changing geographical coordinates. The entitlement failures that prevail in the UK today can only be scrutinized through an analysis of the social, cultural and affective geographies through which hunger is understood and felt at a time of austerity, and from which food banks have emerged as a specific response. If we are to understand our changing sense of obligation to precarious life, to return to Butler, then we need to analyse the more-than-economic aspects of austerity as it becomes lived and felt (Hall, 2019; Hitchen, 2016) – namely, how austerity ‘colonises and contaminates the value system through which all citizens are encouraged and expected to conduct themselves in the austere present’ (Strong, 2020c, p. 15). This requires us to place hunger more squarely in an analysis of its framing.

**Framing hunger**

Just as the precarity of life levies an obligation upon us, hunger specifically ‘makes a visceral claim on our attention … it connects us in elemental ways to others, because we believe that in the modern world no one deserves to live with hunger’ (Vernon, 2007, p. 1). But this incitement to our attention has not always been the case – nor is it necessarily the case today. Just as material realities of hunger have changed over time, so too have forms, styles and mediums of representation (Andersson & Valentine, 2015). Rising rates of food insecurity and food bank usage in ‘Austerity Britain’ suggest that our sense of obligation in the face of hunger is diminishing. To understand this changing sense of obligation to the lives of others, hunger must be examined as a cultural category that exceeds the material absence of food, bearing a history that is concurrently an account of the techniques – political, technological, scientific – that have sought to frame it.

Despite its visceral claim upon our attention, hunger is hard to represent. The reasons are in part geographical: hunger is experienced at an intimate, bodily scale. Its association with shame and embarrassment, in a western context at least, lead to its heightened performance in private spaces away from view (Strong, 2020c). Limits to representation also trace the limits of language. As Scarry (1987) notes, we lack a language for writing the experience of corporeal hurt (in this case, hunger pains). All linguistic accounts contain an ontological deficit, meaning we cannot understand another’s pain as pain: instead, we must always rely on communicative forms of mediation.

It is because of these various challenges that images of hunger continue to be central to its representation. Due to their transitive function between viewer-frame-viewed, images ‘do not merely portray or represent – they relay affect’ – specifically, ocular affect that arises from encounters that connect the viewer and the viewed (Butler, 2009, p. 68). Sontag characterizes such ocular affect as the power of images to ‘haunt’ us – an affective quality that she argues holds them apart from language. For Sontag, ocular affect is both what defines the power of the visual, but also their limits: accordingly, images ‘are not much help if the task is to understand’ (Sontag, 2004, p. 56). But Sontag’s argument not only presumes that feeling and understanding can be considered separate: it also attenuates our appreciation of the agency and political work achieved by images (Lisle, 2011). This reproduces the notion that language supersedes images, and that images are only
important insofar as they work as a vehicle for texts that interpret them. Such a theorization fails to capture both the political potential of ocular affect, and the dialectical relationship between feeling and knowing:

'We do not have to be supplied with a caption or a narrative in order to understand that a political background is being explicitly formulated and renewed through and by the frame, that the frame functions not only as a boundary to the image, but as structuring the image itself. If the image in turn structures how we register reality, then it is bound up with the interpretive scene in which we operate ... [it] is not merely a visual image awaiting interpretation; it is itself actively interpreting, sometimes forcibly so'. (Butler, 2009, p. 71)

Ocular affect therefore describes the ability of an image to relay feeling whilst also noting that such feelings play a direct role in how we come to understand that which is imaged. In this way, ocular affect is not innocent. Rather, images are both constituted by, and constitutive of, broader relations of power. What is included in visual depictions of hunger is decided upon by those producing, editing and disseminating images, meaning they are no more ‘natural’ or ‘real’ than language. They do not simply ‘show’ us hunger, but serve as a frame for, and a framing device of, power. Framing hunger therefore describes both the literal bordering and bounding of hunger imagery, and the production of a social frame that organizes the experiences of hunger felt by both those who view and are viewed by such imagery.

Thinking in these terms allows us to conceptualize framing beyond an analysis of individual images alone, and towards an analysis of the ‘scopic regime’ of hunger (Rose, 2001): ‘an ensemble of practices and discourses that establish the truth claims, typicality and credibility of visual acts and objects and politically correct modes of seeing’ (Feldman, 2005, p. 224). Images do not simply show us what hunger ‘looks like’: they also drive the process through which hunger is organized as a ‘seeable’ phenomenon – ‘how things [are] made visible, how things [are] given to be seen, how things [are] shown’ to knowledge or to power’ (Rajchman, 1988, p. 91). What, where and who we think of as hungry – and why we think hunger exists – are thus questions that not only drive hunger as a cultural category: images of hunger also help constitute our answers to these questions.

Framing thus refers to the social principles through which experience is organized. The literal framing of images – the boundaries of images, the fields displayed, the visual proxies repeated – not only shapes our ‘background understandings’ of hunger: it also influences the subsequent ‘standards’ and ‘guided doings’ exercised in the face of hunger (Goffman, 1986). Images are therefore fundamental to what Butler (2009, p. 3) refers to as a social ontology of the body, where ‘to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form.’ The framing of hunger is a crafting not only of the hungry body, who may (or may not) be present in the literal frame of an image. It is also a crafting of the audience who comes to view this body – acting over and through their normative understandings of food consumption. Frames not only organize our visual experience, then; they also ‘work to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot’ (Butler, 2009, p. 3). On a fundamental level, images influence which lives we recognize as lives. Such recognition is thus not inevitable: it is the outcome of a politics of recognizability.

An account of framing demonstrates how this politics of recognizability is inseparable from competing agendas of political visualization that allow phenomenon to be seen in determinate ways (Gregory, 2001; Metz, 1982). Given their stated ability to transitor
connect viewer and viewed through ocular affect, images are powerful tools for structuring feelings (Williams, 1977) – where images of hunger not only provide descriptive views onto subsistence, but also buttress prescriptive political projects. Illustratively, the ability of images to structure feelings about hunger have played a strategic role in building consensus for and against colonialism (Davis, 2002), ‘making poverty history’ (Harrison, 2010), writing off sovereign debt (Clark, 2004), and encouraging public donations to humanitarian industries (De Waal, 1997).

This article adds austerity to this list of political projects facilitated by images of hunger, arguing that the politics of hunger and austerity are thoroughly intertwined through framings of food banks that advance certain ways of thinking and feeling about the austere present. This represents a key divergence, running counter to established socio-spatial frames of hunger. In the Anglo-European imagination at least, the historical repetition of certain styles, types and mediums of image illustrate sites of colonial exploitation as spaces of absence – not simply of food, but an apparent lack of civilization, development, culture and morality (Campbell, 2003; Ryan, 1997). This relationship between images and understandings has continued to reproduce a geographical imaginary of the Global South as the ‘hollow-bellied place of the world’ (Campbell, 2004). But as Landau (2002) notes, ‘the history of the European view of non-European peoples has always reflected Europeans’ history of imaging themselves.’ Images of hunger thus have a ‘double effect’ (Sontag, 2004). They not only project an image of the Global South as in need: they also act as a vehicle of self-affirmation of the West as civilized, independent and subsisted (Said, 1978) – a geographical imaginary in which hunger is exorcised from perceptions of the (apparently) developed world (Campbell & Power, 2010).

**Framing food banks**

If hunger in the UK runs counter to these established historical frames, then what can we learn from visual frames of ‘Food Bank Britain?’ And if the visual is an operation of power, to echo Butler, and hunger is a social frame that describes more than the material lack of food, then what politics of visualization ties together hunger and austerity in the UK today? To answer these questions, three images of food banks are interrogated. By tracing the ocular affects generated, my intention is to analyse the process of framing established in each image. Introduced in chronological order, each is a ‘public’ image of food banks, freely circulated and designed for broad consumption, selected for its popular reach (Fleetwood, 2015). The source and style of images is deliberately broad, covering a range of genres and political-editorial viewpoints. They also differ in their relationship with text and, where appropriate, these texts are treated as part of the frame and included and/or quoted herein.

Whilst I draw attention to certain affective intensities, all images come with a constitutive ambivalence such ‘that no final meaning will ever prevail’ (Lisle, 2011, p. 873). Even as the transitive function of images means they communicate understanding and feeling to the viewer, the type of response provoked varies via the opinions and experiences of the viewer themselves. Rather than generalizing across images and audiences, my intention is to examine how food banks have been mobilized as ‘spaces of constructed visibility’ (Gregory, 2001). Accordingly, I scrutinize the partial and particular ways food banks are visualized – which aspects are illuminated, recuperated and
privileged, and which are erased. Put simply, my intention is to trace if and how food banks have been ‘reduced to their exhibition’ (Gregory, 2001, p. 140).

One final aside: by selecting certain images of food banks, I myself am involved in an act of framing. Whilst the visuals discussed are broad ranging and from differing perspectives, they are all images that I have deemed to demonstrate the arguments that follow. Given the limits of length and the desire to build a cohesive argument, there is an unavoidable level of selection bias in the analysis that follows (a bias we might argue applies to all research, wherein the forms of data deemed to be most noteworthy or significant are afforded attention over those deemed not so). Hence, as Goffman (1986, p. 11) notes, ‘discussions about frame inevitably lead to questions concerning the status of the discussion itself, because here terms applying to what is analysed ought to apply to the analysis also.’ Whilst I follow from Goffman in observing that the act of writing allows sufficient flexibility for a reflexive analysis, I am not hoping to uncover the specific intention of the producers and editors of these images, nor am I making the claim that all viewers will be drawn towards identical responses. Neither is my argument that the images selected represent the entire field of food bank iconography. Rather, I am attempting to work with and through the ambiguity of the frames shown herein whilst recognizing my own position within, rather than apart from, these frames.

**Pity: the face of austerity**

Food banks fill the front page of the *Daily Mirror*[^1] 16 April 2014 print edition.[^2] A young girl’s face gazes directly at the viewer, their tear-filled eyes swollen, tangled blonde hair unkempt, and pale cheeks bearing the glistening tracks of tears. With lips slightly ajar, the child appears between cries of suffering. The effect is synesthetic: the viewer can almost hear the child crying, as though we can viscerally feel their predicament as a ‘desire to howl when we see someone howling, a desire to see someone safe when we see them in harm’s way’ (Edkins, 2013, p. 423).

The image metonymically reduces the general phenomenon of food banking to the embodiment of a suffering child. It pins collective anxieties and desires (to save children from suffering) onto this child, who in turn functions as a fetish abstracted from a geographical place in the world (Burman, 1994) – an abstraction achieved through the use of a *close-up* of the face. The affective power of such images is that they bridge distance in order to evoke feeling for the ‘distant stranger’ (Haskell, 1985). However, in lacking a field the suffering of the child is rendered placeless, de-anchored from history, culture or community. Their face ‘stands in for the field so that we do not see what the field is missing … [as] a lure to distract us from the conditions that produce their pre-eminence’ (Roof, 1999, p. 3).

It is an image that functions as the *face of austerity*. The face is a key site for the realization of an ethical relation to the Other and the production of subjectivity (Andersson & Valentine, 2015; Lacan, 1949). When confronted with an image of a face, therefore, the audience is led towards heightened feeling. However, this shepherding of emotion is not inevitable or natural, but the outcome of ‘face politics’ (Edkins, 2015). The face of this suffering child functions as an affective signifier – or, in the words of Deleuze (1986, p. 87), as an ‘affection-image’ capable of ‘the combination of a reflecting, immobile unity and of intensive expressive movements.’ As Edkins (2013, p. 423) notes:

[^1]: *Daily Mirror*
[^2]: 16 April 2014 print edition.
What photographs of the face do more than anything is prompt a response of sympathy . . . We feel ourselves implicated in those circumstances. It does not matter whose face it is, the face connects.

But rather than sympathy, the affective intensity that this face-image provokes is pity. This is because the ‘politics of pity,’ to echo Hannah Arendt, is one marked by unequal power relations that secure the position of the viewer as morally concerned – where ‘both producers and consumers take pleasure in being able to feel pity and compassion for damaged victims . . . because such feelings produce “us” as benevolent viewing subjects’ (Lisle, 2011, p. 878). This infantilization (and feminization) of the hungry body continues a long-established trend in famine imagery where such ‘pictures offer up . . . a place that is passive, pathetic, and demanding of help’ (Campbell, 2003, p. 70). Given Western constructions of childhood as a period of dependency, we not only pity the child but view them purely as a victim: helpless, passive, and without agency (Koven, 2004).

Whilst tears gesture to their suffering, the viewer cannot ascertain from the image alone why the child is crying. It is only the accompanying headlines and by-lines that identify these as tears of hunger. This text encroaches over and blurs the edges of the image with brightly coloured font that wrestles for ocular attention. The headline – ‘Britain, 2014. We’re the sixth largest economy in the world. We have more millionaires than ever before . . . So why have we handed out one million food parcels?’ – centres on the existence of hunger amidst plenty. The emboldened, red font of ‘one million’ accentuates the scale of the phenomenon whilst alliteratively pairing with the word ‘millionaire.’ Confirmed via the capitalized by-line ‘shame of ConDem 6 cuts,’ the intention is pellucid: the facing of the child victim is employed to frame austerity as the villain. The accompanying text is thus integral to the frame, encouraging the viewer to associate their pity for the child with subsequent anger at the identified ConDem perpetrators, and collective shame for the existence of hunger amidst affluence.

Despite the directness of this framing, the child imaged here is not hungry. Nor are they suffering due to austerity. As explained on the Flickr page from which the Daily Mirror lifted this image, it was taken in 2009 – in San Francisco. Rather than shedding tears over their hunger and food bank usage, the child is mourning the loss of an earthworm befriended in a park that later escaped from their clutches. Despite temporal and spatial distance from hunger pains driven by austerity, the field-excising and de-anchored nature of this physiognomic close-up allow it to be placed as the face of austerity. Clearly, then, the structuring of feelings about austerity does not require an image of food banks as they ‘actually exist’ (Strong, 2020a).

The consequences of ‘giving a face’ to austerity in this fashion are twofold. Firstly, by imaging just the face, the literal and metaphorical ‘body’ of food banking is not only concealed, but depoliticised. We learn nothing of their aforementioned bureaucratic practices for producing scarcity (May et al., 2020), their contested nature (Williams et al., 2016), or their vital politics (Strong, 2019). Whilst food banks cannot be understood without the context of austerity, they also cannot be collapsed into a Manichaean story of victim and villain (Garthwaite, 2016). The architectures of violence that exist behind the picture are erased when we focus on the abjection of the victim alone (Nally, 2011).

Secondly, framing the hungry as powerless ‘is incompatible with human dignity’ (Koven, 2004, p. 137). Infantilising food bank users reproduces the epistemic violence of
austerity – a violence that denies the agency and experiences of those in poverty (Tyler, 2013). Such images are part of a broader set of ‘underclass ontologies’ where those in poverty are spoken for through framings that occlude those who actually use food banks (Strong, 2014). This not only denies a fuller appreciation of power: it also dehumanizes those in food poverty, positioning them as objects devoid of political life.

**Revulsion: the perversity of (food) poverty**

Through numerous bigoted and misleading writings, Richard Littlejohn has established himself as one of the UK’s most infamous (and highly paid) journalists. His take on food banks is a case in point. Accompanying his caustic piece in *The Daily Mail* in September 2015 is a visualization of Littlejohn’s ‘visions of expensively coutured Lady Bountifuls in chauffeur-driven Range Rovers touring the royal borough of an afternoon, distributing organic quinoa and quail eggs to forelock-tugging proles.’

The viewer is confronted by a woman with bright yellow hair grasping a box full of ‘tasteful’ (and, one assumes, expensive) produce. She weeps at the supposed predicament of the figure of the man, cigarette hanging from lips, she is servicing – who looks positively jubilant to be receiving a ‘handout.’ Depicted in the moment of giving, a large teardrop is drawn falling from her tightly closed eyes and towards her open mouth that appears in the midst of a howl of pity. Her face shies away from the man, burdened down by the emotional weight of the encounter unfolding and the physical weight of the food gifted.

The scene described by Littlejohn and visualized in this image is spurious. Food banks, and certainly those operated by the Trussell Trust, do not offer delivery services, nor is there any moment where the donor and recipient of food meet (Strong, 2019). Instead, food is collected mostly from donation points (often supermarkets, schools, churches), before being prepared for distribution locally. As with our previous example, then, the actually existing spaces of food banks are removed from the viewer’s field of vision.

Instead, the frame centres on the giver of charity, who is explicitly feminized. Described in Littlejohn’s accompanying text as a ‘full time bleeding-heart … only doing it so they can feel good about themselves,’ their giving is positioned as selfishly motivated virtue signalling. This feminization of charitable giving continues a long trend of heightened attention on female morality at times of crisis (Skeggs, 2005). In today’s era of austerity, women have not only been positioned as responsible for the economic deterioration of the nation, but also its apparent moral decline (Allen et al., 2015). In the context of heightened discourses of thrift and frugality, the woman depicted here represents ‘indulgence, failure to set boundaries, moral laxity and disciplinary incompetence’ (Jensen, 2012, p. 8). Rather than providing a solution, they are framed as part of the problem (de Souza, 2019).

This effect in turn relies upon the infantilization of the receiver of charitable food. The literal framing of the cartoon here is very deliberate: the female giver of charity is handing the package down to the shrinking recipient. Limited to the side of their face, the man is still clearly jubilant at receiving the food. His smile is farcically broad, reaching almost to his nose, whilst his out-stretched hand reaches upwards – welcoming the handout he is to receive imminently. The effect is to portray a figure motivated by a sense of entitlement and with no shame. Just as Littlejohn questions if ‘people who use food banks are
genuinely destitute,’ the cartoon makes no attempt to suggest this figure is hungry. Indeed, the male figure’s enlarged face is suggestive of someone who consumes too much food, not too little. This is furthered by the cigarette that hangs from the man’s lips. Together, these features position this as a stigmatized body – where interpretations of dirt and moral decay come with a marked class politics (Graham, 2012; Tyler, 2013). The viewer is thus directed towards revulsion of both the recipient of food and the donor for her willingness to provision such an individual.

The frame’s deception extends to the food items depicted. The indulgence of the quinoa, fresh fruit and lobster displayed is entirely out-of-sync with the realities of food banking. Without facilities to store fresh food, most food banks only distribute dried and tinned goods – a diet of basic subsistence and nothing more (Garthwaite, 2016). These visual symbols of indulgence highlight the lifestyles of those living in food poverty as the apparent problem – so that ‘every luxury of the worker seems to be reprehensible, and everything that goes beyond the most abstract need – be it in the realm of passive enjoyment, or a manifestation of activity – seems … a luxury’ (Marx, 1959, p. 50).

The combined effect of this image is to conjure the perversity thesis of poverty as a frame for food banking. First distilled by Malthus, the perversity thesis suggests that attempts to provide relief for those experiencing poverty in fact makes the problem of poverty worse:

‘In the poverty to perversity conversion narrative, structural blame for poverty is discredited as empiricist appearance while the real problem is attributed to the corrosive effects of welfare’s perverse incentives on poor people themselves—they become sexually promiscuous, thrust aside personal responsibility, and develop long term dependency’. (Somers & Block, 2005, p. 260)

Through this frame, food banks are positioned as positive institutions that corrupt both the giver and receiver of charity. In turn, they (apparently) not only produce a population draining communal resources, but also pose a threat to social stability and classed notions of respectability. Characterized by ‘dishonesty and opportunism … who would rather spend their benefits on booze, drugs and big-screen televisions,’ food bank users are pathologized by Littlejohn. In turn, food banks are deemed to instil a culture of entitlement where ‘morality is corrupted as the poor are increasingly robbed of their own independence’ (Somers & Block, 2005, p. 270). There is a clear elision, then, between the ‘revolting aesthetics’ of the cartoon (Tyler, 2013), and the moral arguments that have been mobilized to underpin austerity more broadly (Morris, 2016). In this discourse, austerity is framed as the means to replace a supposed culture of dependency with one of responsibility.

With its aesthetic of class abjection and revolting ocular affect, the cartoon in question is part of an ever-expanding genre of poverty pornography where those in receipt of relief are stigmatized (Allen et al., 2015; Strong, 2014; Tyler, 2013). This frame instils a sense of revulsion whilst concurrently (re)moving any sense of guilt in the viewer at the predicament of food bank users. Rather than drawing attention to the structural causes of hunger, food banks are instead deemed the guilty party. This framing of food banking serves to justify austerity: it builds revulsion that in turn fosters consent for policies that further disenfranchise those in food poverty.
Celebration: saving the hungry through austerity

Conservative Party politicians have recently established a novel trend of being photographed in spaces associated with food banking. Given the aforementioned correlation between food bank usage and austerity, this may seem an intractable hypocrisy. And yet, the images that have emerged articulate a particular ocular affect at a time of austerity: celebration. Take the case of Iain Duncan Smith MP, the former Minister for Work and Pensions, photographed at a supermarket donation-point in December 2018 (Bletchly, 2018).\(^\text{10}\) Having masterminded the transition to Universal Credit that the Trussell Trust (2018) has identified as the key driver of increasing food bank usage, one would presume that this association is not one to draw attention to. However, Smith – along with a range of other prominent Conservative politicians\(^\text{11}\) – has been quick to publicize occupation of these spaces through social media.

As with our second image, this photograph portrays the act of charitable giving. However, rather than provisioning the consumer, instead Smith is handing bags of dried pasta and rice to a brightly uniformed volunteer. In the background, rows of food and magazines identify this as a supermarket. The gaze of both Smith and the anonymous volunteer are fixed on the camera and, in turn, the viewer of the image. Each smile broadly, indicating the seeming joy attached with this transaction.

The politics of “race,” is central to the ocular affect of this image – demonstrating ‘the ways in which the black body often determines the ways in which the landscape around the black body is read’ (McKittrick, 2006, p. 4). As a frequent visual device in the framing of hunger, Blackness exists in a ‘racialized regime of representation’ (Hall, 1997). With colonial imaginaries continuing to animate around the place of Black women as preparers of food for white others, this image functions as a ‘racial icon’ (Fleetwood, 2015) – where hierarchies of “race” are reproduced through visual means. It is impossible not to see the humanitarian narrative at work in the framing of this image – where it is the white (often male) individual who provides the nourishment possible for others to work with. The ability to represent charity as something linked to such a celebratory ocular affect relies upon a deliberate framing. Invariably snapped at donation-points (as opposed to food banks themselves) in the run up to Christmas (as opposed to times when giving is less prominent), side-by-side with volunteers (as opposed to more solitary acts of donation), Conservative politicians have sought reputational alignment with the affective intensities produced by the publicization of acts of giving.

This geographical and racialized framing achieves two effects. Firstly, it serves to romanticize food banking. Replicating the ‘halo effect surrounding food banks as charitable agencies staffed by volunteers’ seen in print coverage turns food banks into a ‘good news story’ (Wells & Caraher, 2016, p. 54). Placing the ‘saviour’ at the centre of this image propagates the charitable imperative whilst also reproducing divisions between donors and recipients. This is accentuated by the concealment of food bank users, allowing the celebration propelled by the image to remain undiminished by their plights. The image thus captures the sentiments expressed by politicians when evading questions on the expansion of food banking by instead drawing attention to the ‘many amazing volunteers who man those food banks’ (Cameron, 2015), and arguing that ‘charitable support given by people voluntarily to support their fellow citizens is rather uplifting and shows what a good, compassionate country we are’ (Rees-Mogg, 2017).\(^\text{12}\)
Secondly, a politician and volunteer sharing the same visual frame legitimizes and naturalizes an understanding of hunger as a matter for charity, as opposed to political questions of the austere state, inequality and social security (Riches, 2011). This operates primarily through the geographical funnelling of attention of the audience towards a specific space: that of the donation-box. Positioned at entrances to many supermarkets around the country, donation-points are a vital spatial mediator between the public and food banks. They function to resolve the collective feelings of pity described earlier, where donors can receive a sense of satisfaction at combatting hunger without ever facing the structural drivers of hunger or the hungry themselves.

Given that the cultural politics of austerity privileges thrift, the imaging of politicians donating food might seem off-message. However, romanticizing localized acts of food redistribution and naturalizing charitable giving frames an ideological message: that cutbacks under the sign of austerity are evidence of ways in which communities can be made to care for themselves. Placed in the context of previous and current policy messages around resilience and localism, such celebration of food banks fits a broader anti-state rubric – with ConservativeHome (2012) describing food banks as ‘the epitome of the Big Society.’ Imbuining such congratulatory ocular affects whilst concurrently introducing policies that drive hunger is thus not a contradiction: forwarding the viewpoint that hunger is being solved is an exercise of austere statecraft.

Conclusion

This article has applied Judith Butler’s theory of framing to three images of ‘Food Bank Britain.’ Demonstrating the dual meanings of frames as both visual and social, and influencing both feeling and understanding, the pictures analysed do much more than simply depict hunger. Rather, they play a crucial role in organizing social and political phenomenon as we, the viewers of hunger, are invited to ‘reflect upon the world we inhabit’ (Vernon, 2007, p. 8). In the images discussed, this has been a world deliberately framed through the social and political context of the UK’s decade-long project of austerity.

In linking the framing of food banks to the imaging of austerity, this article has exhibited how visual depictions of hunger influence, though never fully determine, broader histories and geographies. This is achieved through the production of ocular affect – a process that describes the affective intensities realized in the transitive relationship between viewer-image-viewed. Facing hunger is affectively intense because ‘the precarity of life imposes an obligation upon us’ (Butler, 2009, p. 2). However, this sense of obligation – indeed, in thinking precisely what we are obliged to think and feel in the face of hunger – is not natural or homogeneous. As the examples of pity, revulsion and celebration reveal, our visual relationship to hunger and hungry others is framed through attempts to imprint differing affective and ethical dispositions upon viewers. But whilst they vary in the type of ocular affect imbued and the political direction they pursue, the visual techniques employed in these images are consistent: a focus on faciality, the erasure of geographical context, and the concealment of food bank spaces and users. The repeated style and substance of these visual frames is therefore indicative of a scopic regime that privileges the production of ocular affect over more grounded, candid and authentic views.
The framing described in this article is thus reliant upon the effacement of food banks themselves. That the viewer is delivered such frames onto food banks without actually viewing food banks reveals the potential of images as ‘politically saturated … operations of power’ (Butler, 2009, p. 1). The most obvious effect of this framing is that the actually existing practices of food banks – the vital politics (Strong, 2019), contested forms of care (Williams et al., 2016) and management of scarcity they operate (May et al., 2020) – are deliberately occluded (Strong, 2020a). We learn nothing from these images of what food banks truly are and what they do – indeed, we are actively misled by the frames they advance. Whether it be an image of the pitiable child, the revolting recipient or the celebrated volunteer, the architectures of violence that underpin austerity and the system of food banking are concealed when we only see these caricatures (Nally, 2011).

Moreover, through misrepresentation and distortion, these images reify an understanding of food banks in which we do not see the identity of the hungry person (Andersson & Valentine, 2015). This is not an incidental or natural effect of such imagery. To borrow from Lancione (2014, p. 707, 709), such a ‘spectacle of the poor does not serve to confront the poor but precisely to avoid the phenomena of poverty,’ thus functioning to ‘distract from the real issue at stake … poverty itself.’ In this way, the visual frames onto food banks analysed here project and amplify the social frames and political conditions that have allowed hunger to flourish in the UK: the deepening forms of structural violence and inequality that underpin entitlement failure at a time of austerity.

By simply focusing on the abjection of the victim or the celebration of the volunteer, these images therefore serve to distract us from ‘the forces that lie behind them’ (Sen, 1981, p. 6). If we are to respond by interrogating such forces, then we must construct a distinctly social ontology of the body, to follow from Butler, where our conceptualization of hunger does not stop with the material geographies of food. Instead, hunger must be understood as a thoroughly visually mediated phenomenon – where the ability to access and receive provision is intimately connected with the capacity to present and re-present one’s experiences. This means recognizing that hunger as an experiential, affective, epistemic and political concept cannot be held separate from the frames that represent and, in the case of the images analysed in this article, re-produce the conditions that enable hunger to exist. Constructing such a social ontology of the hungry body requires us to face much more than food banks alone.

Notes

1. Though see May et al.’s (2020) analysis of an ‘empty cupboard’ iconography associated with UK food banks, and de Souza’s (2019) discussion of US food pantries, for notable exceptions.
2. The term food insecurity is not apolitical. Allen (2007) notes one consequence of its usage: that we lose the ‘sharp edge’ that comes with the language of hunger. Another is the ‘rendering technical’ of hunger – which in turn reifies the knowledge of experts over those with experience (Kimura, 2013). This article treads carefully between naming the predominant experience of hunger as food insecurity, whilst also maintaining the ‘sharp edge’ of hunger for naming its broader cultural, experiential and emotional geographies.
3. I have decided to occlude images produced by food banks themselves from analysis. This is because these images warrant sustained analysis in their own right, and because this article is interested in the frames established by images emerging from more directly popular, political and media spaces.
4. The *Daily Mirror* is a British national daily tabloid newspaper.

5. A copy of the front-page can be viewed here: https://tinyurl.com/54axva8r

6. ‘ConDem’ is the merging of Conservative and Liberal Democrat, the two political parties in coalition government between 2010 and 2015.

7. https://www.flickr.com/photos/laurarenosenbaum/4084544644/in/photostream/

8. The *Daily Mail* is another national daily tabloid newspaper.

9. The article and accompanying cartoon can be viewed here: https://tinyurl.com/d3fmsfzp

10. This photograph of Duncan Smith, along with others of Conservative politicians in similar acts of giving, can be viewed here: https://tinyurl.com/36ydey5z

11. Others include Ross Thompson, John Lamont, Kirstene Hair, and Luke Graham.

12. Rees-Mogg is a prominent Conservative politician and, at the time of writing, serves as the current Leader of the House of Commons.

13. ConservativeHome is a webpage that describes itself as independent of, but supportive of, the Conservative Party. This independence is often blurred, however: ConservativeHome is owned by Michael Ashcroft (a former deputy chairman of the Conservative Party), edited by Paul Goodman (a former Conservative minister), and regularly features stories authored by current Conservative politicians.

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