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Poor Choice? Smith, Hayek and the Moral Economy of Food Consumption

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Abstract

This paper explores the moral economy of food in the United Kingdom via the discourse of food bank usage and obesity. It argues that both of these markers of malnutrition have been interpreted under the Conservative-led governments of David Cameron (2010-2016) as failings of personal responsibility and identified primarily with the working class, advancing the assumption that poor people make poor choices. Based on a critique of this account, our wider contribution is two-fold. First we identify the Hayekian lineage of the discourse of personal responsibility, highlighting its utility in facilitating a form of neoliberal market consent through its insistence on self-reliance. Second we stake out an alternative to this conceptualisation through a discussion of Adam Smith's notion of self-command, which we call interpersonal responsibility.

Keywords

Adam Smith; Friedrich Hayek; moral economy; food banks; obesity; personal responsibility

Introduction

In August 2014 internet searches for the British bakery chain Greggs threw up a surprising result. The company logo had been doctored to read 'Greggs: Providing shit to scum for over 70 years' (Usborne, 2014). The following year David Cameron, then Prime Minister, proposed that welfare benefits be withheld from unemployed obese individuals if they

refused to give up calorific foods and participate in state-sanctioned weight-reduction programmes (Mason, 2015). Might such moral judgements and economic governance be related? This paper answers in the affirmative. It makes the argument with reference to food bank users and the obese in the United Kingdom. Despite their differences – food bank usage being associated with under-consumption and obesity with over-consumption – both these markers of malnutrition have been subject to interpretation as a failing of personal responsibility and identified primarily with the poor working class. The underlying assumption of this perspective is that poor people have made poor choices.

As highlighted in Foucauldian scholarship, individualising the responsibility for social risks and transforming them into problems of self-care and rational choice has been a feature of neoliberal government pursued by political parties of all stripes (Lemke, 2000). Yet while many citizens acquiesced to this responsabilisation and the exercise of consumer choice it entailed, other individuals and behaviours remained more intractable (Rose, 1999). What we suggest is that under David Cameron's Conservative governments, in coalition with the Liberal Democrats 2010-15 and in majority 2015-16, the class-based discipline of these recalcitrant subjects took on a distinctive hue.

To the deep-seated Thatcherite insistence in the Conservative Party that people must pay their way in society through waged labour, two further sentiments were added. One was the fiscal austerity of Chancellor George Osborne and his imperative to 'live within your means' (Osborne, 2016). This made a moral virtue, as well as economic necessity, of thrift and spending cuts. The other was the willingness to make explicitly moralised judgements about others. In close alliance with Iain Duncan Smith, the future Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and spearhead of the Conservative's social policy, Cameron set out this position in his speech 'Fixing Our Broken Society':

We as a society have been far too sensitive. In order to avoid injury to people's feelings, in order to avoid appearing judgemental, we have failed to say what needs to be said. [...] We talk about people being 'at risk of obesity' instead of talking about people who eat too much and take too little exercise. [...] Of course, circumstances – where you are born, your neighbourhood, your school, and the choices your parents make – have a huge impact. But social problems are often the consequence of the choices that people make (Cameron, 2008).

This emboldened sense of rectitude represents a fault line with the previous New Labour governments. For while Tony Blair also cast public health issues like obesity as 'questions of individual lifestyle' and 'personal responsibility' (Blair, 2006) he and his cabinets did not go to the same lengths in blaming people for their supposed poor choices and lack of self-control (see Clarke, 2005; 6 *et al.*, 2010). By contrast, under the Cameron governments blame, shame and condescension were readily mobilised in political discourse around food banks and obesity. As shown in Figure 1 these topics were frequently discussed in parliament and in the press, providing ample opportunity for this rhetoric to be aired and amplified, especially within the right-wing media (see Wells and Caraher, 2014).

Figure 1

Our contribution to this debate is two-fold. First we trace the Hayekian lineage of this discourse and its disciplinary function in limiting claims for social justice and in facilitating market consent. While there are certainly other intellectual lineages in what we outline, most notably echoes of the nineteenth century notion of the 'undeserving poor' (see Himmelfarb, 1992), what the Hayekian optic shows is the neoliberalism at work within this discourse.

Like libertarian paternalism or ‘nudging’ which was also entertained under the Cameron governments (see Osborne and Thaler, 2010), moral judgements about errant behaviour offered a way to govern consumption without interfering with the ideological principle of allowing unrestricted market exchange.

Second, we show how an alternative liberal account of personal responsibility is possible, one which upholds the dignity of individual autonomy without succumbing to the necessity of neoliberalism to best guarantee it. For this we draw on Adam Smith and his conceptual apparatus of sympathy and self-command. At first blush Smith may seem an odd choice given his intellectual association with the invisible hand of the free market and ideological association with the New Right. But when read holistically, Smith’s body of work offers a way of critiquing market dogmatism *and* the social condescension that can arguably be found at both poles of the political spectrum. Informed by this textual appraisal of his work, we develop the idea of ‘interpersonal responsibility’ to locate a moral economy beyond the false dichotomy of state and market and the paternalistic collectivism and self-interested individualism that this implies.

The Moral Economy of Food via Personal Responsibility: Food Banks and Obesity

We begin by outlining how personal responsibility has been invoked in relation to food bank users and the obese, and what the political effects of this discourse have been. Food banks are charitable organisations which take food donated by businesses and members of the public and distribute it to people who have typically been referred to them by public sector professionals such as social workers. The largest and most high-profile group of food banks has been the Trussell Trust. In 2008-09 their distribution centres handed out twenty-five thousand parcels containing three days’ worth of food. This increased year on year such that by 2015-16 they were handing out over one million parcels across the country, helping to feed approximately 554,000 individuals (Trussell Trust, 2016). Independent food banks are thought to provide as much food again (Cooper, 2016).

The coincidence of the food bank phenomenon with the coalition government led to conflict between the two camps. Most notably, the head of the Trussell Trust began to publicly criticise the government’s policy *and rhetoric* of fiscal austerity, stating that Cabinet ministers had an insufficient understanding of the causes of poverty and ‘an inadequate level of empathy with the people that we deal with’ (Hasan, 2012). According to the Trust the primary reasons for referral were delays and changes to welfare payments, plus low incomes for those both in and out of work. Iain Duncan Smith, who was overseeing the reforms and sanctions being applied to the welfare system, responded by criticising the ‘political messaging’ and ‘scaremongering’ of the organisation (*The Independent*, 2013). Duncan Smith’s point was that hunger didn’t really exist on the scale being suggested by the organisation but was being produced by the food banks themselves, a claim stated more baldly by Conservative Work and Pensions Minister Lord Freud when he said that by definition there would be an infinite demand for free goods (Morris, 2013).

A more populist narrative of food bank users emerged, though, which depicted them not as rational opportunists exploiting the existence of a free good but as recipients of charitable welfare at risk of dependency. Here it was suggested that people experienced food insecurity because they had failed to live within their means. According to Education Secretary Michael Gove, if individuals lacked money for essentials like food and school uniforms it was ‘often the result of decisions that they have taken which mean they are not best able to manage their finances’ (Chorley, 2013). In the same vein, former Conservative MP Edwina Currie made national headlines with her comments that food banks do not do enough to reform people’s character, being used by people who ‘never learn to manage and

the moment they've got a bit of spare cash they're off getting another tattoo' (*The Sentinel*, 2014). In a follow-up prime-time TV programme for the BBC she went on to deny the claims of social reformers who said hunger was a result of poverty, stating simply: 'It's about choices' (Butler, 2014).

Extending the idea that food bank users are uninformed, at the launch of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger one of its members - Conservative Peer Baroness Jenkin - commented that: 'We have lost our cooking skills. Poor people don't know how to cook' (BBC, 2014). Though Baroness Jenkin was quick to apologise, her suggestion that hunger resulted from the inability of the poor to use low-cost ingredients in homemade meals found a receptive party political audience. Avowing the moral righteousness set out by Cameron in 2008 and his belief in 'saying what needs to be said', one journalist wrote in *The Daily Telegraph* that:

Anne [Baroness Jenkin] knows that a 4p bowl of porridge gives a child a better start to the day than a sugar-infested, Day-Glo bowl of cereal. Pointing that out does not make you Marie Antoinette. Shall I tell you what is truly patronising? All that language of 'stigma' and 'insensitivity', so beloved of the Left, which treats poor people as though they can't be expected to help themselves or to want any better for their kids (Pearson, 2014).

A similar account has been used to explain the prevalence of obesity in British society, namely, that it reflects a lack of self-control in terms of over-eating and under-exercising. The flagship public health policy of the 2010 government, the Responsibility Deal, was premised on the belief that: 'Too many of us are eating too much, drinking too much and not doing enough physical activity' (Department of Health, n.d., webpage). Despite the focus on consumption, there was almost no discussion of the affordability of different foods as a factor in why people ate what they did; the launch document mentions the word 'price' just once (Department of Health, 2011a). Instead, as asserted by Conservative Health Secretary Andrew Lansley in his foreword to the overall strategy document, the first step was 'to be honest with ourselves and recognise that we need to make some changes to control our weight'. Upon this admission, the central government would play its part by encouraging the food industry to voluntarily reduce the amount of calories in their products and funding the Change4Life social marketing service so that individuals could start 'taking responsibility for their own lifestyle choices' (Department of Health, 2011b, pp. 3-4). This dovetailed with the position of food and drink corporations, especially the manufacturers, which had consistently repudiated the benefits of mandatory state regulation for public health, insisting that 'better, more balanced diets and lifestyles' were needed instead (see Food and Drink Federation, 2015).

It is worth noting here that within the academic literature, the 'calories in, calories out' explanation of obesity is considered far too reductive. Not only does it downplay factors that lie outside an individual's immediate control like their mental health and access to fresh food vendors, it also ignores mechanisms of weight gain that work independently of diet such as sleep disruption and environmental toxins (e.g., McElroy et al., 2004; McAllister et al., 2009). But even when some of this complexity was recognised, for some voices aligned to the Conservative Party, personal responsibility was still *the* transformative change that needed to be induced. As The Bow Group concluded in its policy brief on obesity, "'Nannyng" will not work and has not worked. It is also contrary to Conservative principles. The key is to nudge and educate to improve people's awareness, and the decisions and actions they take as a direct consequence' (Kelley et al., 2011, p. 47). And for Anna Soubry, speaking as Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Health, exercising this responsibility was not

just about preventing obesity but also about restoring social order. In comments picked up by *The Daily Mail*, she lamented how in poorer families with obese children, the ‘whole concept’ of getting up in the morning in time to eat a proper breakfast had seemingly disappeared (Borland, 2013).

This discourse had two key effects on economic governance. First, the individual failings of ‘the poor’, represented metonymically by food bank users and the working class obese, became a prism through which broader political and ideological claims were made, particularly those justifying the necessity of fiscal austerity. For example, in a 2013 parliamentary debate on food banks, the Minister of State for Employment, Conservative MP Esther McVey, made the case that the growth of food banks was partly down to individual hardship ‘caused by personal debt, overspending and people living beyond their means’ in addition to national hardship caused by the economic deficit left by previous Labour governments, ‘that whirl of living beyond our means’ (Hansard, 2013, column 812). Likewise, the notion that poor people couldn’t cook was depicted as a loss of the feminised frugality that characterised food provisioning in Britain’s post-war austerity period, a trait which was also used to argue that limited purchasing power need not be inimical to good living (Bramall, 2013). To this end, Potter and Westall (2013) even detected a ‘culinary encoding of austerity’ in which gentrified culinary activities advocating greater self-sufficiency, encapsulated by popular TV programmes like *The Great British Bake Off*, were seen as the best way to adapt to, and accept, straitened economic times.

The re-scaling of personal responsibility from the individual to the national would also take on a performative dimension. George Osborne’s deliberately publicised diet made the front page of *The Times* (2014) with the headline ‘Chancellor tackles surplus with an austerity diet’; a message which again conflated bodily discipline and market discipline, only this time embodied in an ideal-type of corporeal statesman. Later that year Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls announced he had lost weight too, which, as reported in *The Daily Telegraph*, had complemented his political efforts to make his party more fiscally responsible by driving economic restraint ‘deep in Labour’s DNA’ (Riley-Smith, 2014). The neoliberal governmentality that had valorised thinness and tied this to the fate of the economy by encouraging people to consume more whilst weighing less (Guthman and DuPuis, 2006) was hereby extended in a novel way. Thinness was also a means of inspiring confidence in the individual figures managing the national economy; the irony being that the austerity they pursued led to significant cuts in public health spending and a planned reduction in council-led healthy eating schemes and exercise initiatives (Local Government Association, 2016).

A second effect of this discourse was to denigrate the poor working class and undermine entitlements to state welfare. David Cameron had initially cast food banks as part of his Big Society, a vision he had in which people did not turn to the state for assistance but instead to themselves or their communities (Cameron, 2010). Others connected to the Conservative Party, like the editor of *The Spectator* Fraser Nelson, remained enthusiastic about their role in displacing statutory duty, seeing food banks as ‘the shape of welfare to come’ (Nelson, 2015). This implied further cutbacks in socially-redistributive state spending and, importantly for our argument, the institutionalisation of opprobrium. It has been noted by many researchers that by using food banks people have felt a deep sense of shame at having to publicly acknowledge they have failed to feed themselves and their family in the usual manner (Purdam *et al.*, 2015; Garthwaite, 2016). Still, some political commentators on the right questioned whether certain people deserved even this. Incorrectly assuming that only the emaciated experience food insecurity, Rod Liddle (2014) asked ‘Why are there so many fat people in pictures of food banks? If you’re going to take advantage of a food bank, at least have the good grace to look a bit peckish and skeletal’.

Efforts to prevent the food banks effectively becoming a new Poor Law, such as the recommendation by the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger that they be brought into a national cross-sectoral network that could better coordinate food donations and better advise clients, have received no support from central government (APPG Hunger and Food Poverty, 2015). Indeed, the Conservative councillor and journalist Harry Phibbs (2014) damned this proposal as an attempted ‘nationalisation’ of benevolence that would be ‘just as disastrous [in this area] as it has been elsewhere’ (see also Aitken, 2014). It is notable that one of the few recommendations of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry to be taken up has been to allow school governors to refer parents who repeatedly send their children to school hungry to the government’s Troubled Families programme. Backed by Cameron and Duncan Smith, the programme has been criticised for misdiagnosing families as dysfunctional and criminal ‘troublesome families’, not in need of support but of fundamental behaviour change (Wills *et al.*, 2016).

Personal responsibility has also combined with the ‘fiscalisation of fatness’ – that is, the projection of obesity as a cost to the taxpayer and therefore an indirect harm that should be constrained – to help legitimise ideas that National Health Service (NHS) treatment and welfare payments should be withheld from obese people. Almost one third of Clinical Commissioning Groups in England have adopted a mandatory policy to deny patients routine surgery based on their Body Mass Index, with more having voluntary policies which ask patients to lose weight first. The Royal College of Surgeons (2016, p. 2) stated these to be ‘in contravention of national clinical guidance’ and feared the obese were ‘soft targets’ for cost-saving measures. Likewise, in 2012, Conservative MP Chris Skidmore obtained statistics on claimants of incapacity benefits, finding that 950 people had obesity listed as their primary health condition. He declared this ‘an insult to the genuinely disabled’ adding that ‘we need a welfare system that rewards responsibility, not one which allows this to happen’ (Martin, 2012). Demonstrating the hegemony of this distinction between the deserving and undeserving welfare claimant, even the spokesperson of the National Obesity Forum joined in, stating that:

There many valid reasons why overweight or obese people could claim incapacity benefits. GPs should know who they are however and countermand any claim they make if they are simply gross. The government must get serious about tackling obesity and set a time limit for these scroungers to get back into shape for work (Martin, 2012).

As mentioned earlier, David Cameron suggested that unemployed obese welfare claimants be sanctioned, while Iain Duncan Smith even asked his Department to examine the merits of putting them on the liquids-only Cambridge Diet in order to help them return to work (Wheeler and Stevenson, 2014). Meanwhile, to promote public health, the Conservative-led Westminster City Council and the Local Government Information Unit proposed cutting housing and council tax benefits for obese people who did insufficient amounts of exercise (Thraves, 2012). Even on instrumental grounds, these punitive strategies and the stigmatisation they impart could be counter-productive. In terms of health they ignore the psychological effects of weight-related bullying and anxiety on people’s mental wellbeing (see Jackson *et al.*, 2015). And in terms of employment they ignore the existence of widespread discrimination against obese candidates by potential employers caused in part by the pejorative connotations of this condition (Allerton, 2015). Survey data shows that the British public agree: 75 per cent thought that a very overweight candidate would be less likely than a slimmer candidate to be offered an office manager’s job (Curtice, 2016). As we suggest later, from a Hayekian point of view these strategies and perceptions might not be

seen as shortcomings at all. Ahead of this, we first articulate what Adam Smith's work can tell us about the moral economy of food consumption.

The Economistic and the Ethical 'Adam Smiths'

We are not the first to use Smith to think through this topic. However, what we argue here is that this existing literature has been based on partial readings of his work which have brought forth either an economistic 'Smith' or an ethical 'Smith', unduly limiting its disciplinary scope. An example of the former is provided by the neoliberal think-tank the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), which traces its inspiration to Hayek as is evident in its particularistic reading of Smith (e.g., Butler 2007). In 2013 the IEA established a Lifestyle Economics team to 'provide a vigorous and academic rebuttal to the prevailing tide of regulation, tax and opinion against controversial lifestyle products' (IEA, n.d. a). It was headed by Christopher Snowdon, who described his philosophy thus:

Adam Smith said that he had 'never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good'. The same might be said today of those who purport to act in the public interest today, whether they be self-appointed protectors of 'public morality' or those who work in that nebulous and ever expanding industry of 'public health' which today provides the mandate for almost limitless state interference in what we eat... (IEA, n.d. b).

Whilst vigorously opposing ideas of 'correct consumption' and the prospect of government regulation to bring it about, this perspective does align with the contemporary discourse of personal responsibility in its individualisation of socially-stratified inequalities and willingness to condemn those who appear to be suffering the consequences of their choices. In a policy brief on obesity, for instance, Snowdon attacked 'the public health lobby' for their misguided campaign against corporations selling foods high in salt, sugar and fat. For him, these health professionals were reluctant to attack the real culprit of obesity – 'the sedentary lifestyles of the general public' – as this would require them to engage in the 'stigmatisation of individuals'; something they apparently lacked the courage to do (Snowdon, 2014, p. 24). Another proponent of the economistic 'Smith', Tim Worstall, a Senior Fellow at the neoliberal think-tank the Adam Smith Institute, has had no such concerns. In response to a proposal by Labour's then-Shadow Secretary for Health Andy Burnham that maximum limits on the levels of salt, fat and sugar be imposed on foods marketed to children, Worstall argued that not only was this top-down 'recipe' for society morally indefensible, it was also economically suspect. 'Fatty lardbuckets do not cost the NHS money [as] dying young saves the NHS money' (Worstall, 2015). A more callous defence of unregulated consumption is difficult to imagine.

An ethical 'Smith' by contrast can be found in sociological research on food consumption. In the context of contemporary food systems characterised by globalisation, industrialisation and various forms of impersonal interaction, the ethical Smith is used here to show the resilience of 'fellow-feeling' and 'other-regarding' actions (see Jackson *et al.*, 2009; Morgan, 2010; Wilson, 2014). Hence the *Homo economicus* of neoclassical economics, an ideal-type agent who acts only in the market and on a cold and calculative basis – and who has been ironically and erroneously traced to Smith (e.g., Marçal, 2015) – is dismissed in favour of an empathetic individual who acts in socially-embedded economies premised on a multitude of exchange relations. This approach can be seen in Carolan's (2011, p. 117) argument that people who rear chickens at home, rather than buying cheaper battery-farmed eggs from a supermarket, reprise a 'vision [Smith] had of the market [that] remained rooted

in care and sympathy'. This highlights a different moral economy to the one contained in the discourse of personal responsibility, but does so by looking at food provisioning coordinated without the price mechanism. In this respect it appears to be very far from the same Adam Smith who recognises the tremendous productivity gains made possible by the division of labour and market exchange, and who forcefully refuses the idea that commercialism will have a detrimental effect upon the morality and behaviour of society's poorest members. Smith's moral economy instead seeks to demonstrate that justice and prosperity are dependent upon sympathetic interpersonal interactions, which, he contends, provide greater potential for moral and material progress than at stages of societal development prior to commercial society, wherein such progress was restrained by kinship and patronage (e.g., Smith 1776/1976, III.iv.9).

A striking feature of these two distinct contemporary uses of Smith is the way in which the 'economistic camp' refers to arguments put forward in his *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (hereafter WN) while the 'ethical camp' refers to his earlier book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (hereafter TMS). The same bibliographic bifurcation is also evident in party political uses of Smith's work. In his foreword to a reprint of WN, George Osborne (2007) observed that Smith was a doctrinaire advocate of 'free trade and competition' who rightly saw that 'self-interest also serves the wider public interest'. In apparent contrast, when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer the former Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown spoke of the 'helping hand' that he perceives in TMS which, he argues, is needed to complement the 'invisible hand' found in WN (Glaze, 2008).

This selective approach to Smith's work can be seen to re-articulate the so-called 'Adam Smith Problem' which wrongly assumes that the altruism which allegedly characterises TMS is replaced by Smith's purported advocacy of self-interested behaviour in WN. The 'Problem' has for many years been widely and convincingly rejected by specialist Smith scholars who advocate a holistic approach to his work which we adopt here (see Macfie, 1953). This approach clearly demonstrates that, as with his account of material and moral progress, the allegedly economistic and ethical aspects of Smith's work are mutually interdependent. For us it is *this* Adam Smith who helps provide the most meaningful insight into the moral economy of food, especially as it relates to personal responsibility. We pursue this now through his conceptual apparatus of sympathy and self-command, which led Smith to entirely reject moralistic and socially condescending political interventions. As we discuss after, such proclamations are more conducive to the notion of self-reliance advanced by Friedrich Hayek.

Self-Command in Smith and Self-Reliance in Hayek

Smith's opposition to overt interventionism in individuals' moral lives and his non-dogmatic advocacy of commercial society are evident in his widely-cited – and apposite – remarks concerning efficient exchange between the butcher, the brewer, the baker, and their customers:

In civilized society [each individual]...stands at all times in need of the cooperation and assistance of great multitudes...and it is in vain for him to expect it from their benevolence only. He will be more likely to prevail if he can interest their self-love in his favour, and shew them that it is for their own advantage to do for him what he requires of them...and it is in this manner that we obtain from one another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of. It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest (Smith 1776/1976, I.ii.2).

The final sentence of this section of WN is frequently interpreted as evidence of Smith's supposed doctrinaire advocacy of self-interest, including by neoliberal think-tanks such as the IEA (e.g., Butler, 2007, p. 103). However, the central importance that Smith places upon practical co-operation is ignored in these selective interpretations of his work, which overlook his critique found elsewhere in WN and in TMS regarding the detrimental effects to society that unconstrained self-interest brings (e.g., Smith, 1776/1976, II.ii and V.i.g; Smith, 1790/1976, VII.ii.4.6 and III.ii.27). Moreover, the restricted role that Smith grants to benevolence in the quote above does not suggest that his concern for just socio-economic provision is limited, including in WN, where, as Salter (1999: 223) points out, Smith consistently 'adopts the perspective of the poorest member of society'. What Smith contends is that the poorest subsist most effectively not through the acceptance of charitable gifts or donations but instead via 'the same manner as those of other people, by treaty, by barter, and by purchase'. The contrast with David Cameron's Big Society could not be starker.

Smith thus explains that it is this dispassionate social sympathy - which he distinguishes from pity or compassion - that both prompts the division of labour upon which commercial society depends and is key to efficient exchange within it (Smith, 1790/1976, I.i.1.1-5; Smith 1776/1976, I.ii.2-3). This is reiterated in TMS, where he notes that such interaction both requires and encourages individuals to develop their abilities to imaginatively reconstruct their counterparts' motives in a just, impartial manner. As Smith also observes here, the 'imaginary change of situation' that takes place in these transactions can foster the types of interpersonal connections between strangers that we develop among those with whom we interact more frequently (Smith 1790/1976, I.i.4.7 and VI.ii.1.15). An illustrative example can be found in the work of sociologist Val Gillies, whose time spent with working class mothers allowed her to see the provision of 'a favourite junk food for tea' in a different light. In the context of a challenging educational environment and unable to make larger investments like moving to a different school catchment area, Gillies realised that such foods could help these mothers make 'a difficult day at school more bearable for a child, while also communicating a strong message of love and care' (Gillies, 2006, p. 288).

For Smith, it is via such interactions rather than moral interventions by the state through which individuals learn to judge the propriety of their own and others' conduct (Smith, 1790/1976, III.ii.32). This is reflected throughout TMS, where Smith directly relates this idea of sympathy to the virtue of self-command. This refers to an individual's ability to temper and transcend their passions in light of their sympathetic reimagining of others' behaviours and their likely motives. As such, it is '[t]he man who feels the most for the joys and sorrows of others [who] is best fitted for acquiring the most complete control of his own joys and sorrows' (*ibid*, III.3.36). However, this degree of self-command is not automatically attained. Instead, Smith is clear in arguing that individuals develop this virtue via an ongoing process of ethical self-education that rests in part upon their continuing personal evaluation of social situations and norms. And it was precisely this trust in individuals' potential to intersubjectively navigate their own moral lives that led Smith to accord self-command a special status among virtues, noting that: '[t]he most perfect knowledge [of the rules of prudence, justice and benevolence], if it is not supported by the most proper self-command, will not always enable him to do his duty' (*ibid*, VI.iii.1). In Smithian terms then, contemporary strategies to instil personal responsibility through the dissemination of behavioural rules (for example on how to budget) will at best be incomplete.

This holistic Adam Smith thus stands apart from portrayals of him as a doctrinaire advocate of self-interest and the free market as offered by George Osborne (2007) and Iain Duncan Smith (2014) among others. These characterisations closely echo Margaret

Thatcher's (1988) account that 'the Scots invented Thatcherism', referring here to Smith and contemporaries such as Adam Ferguson. As is well known, Thatcher's approving view of Smith is received via neoliberal economists such as Hayek and Milton Friedman. But both of these hugely influential scholars misread Smith as an advocate of market exchange on the basis that it transforms fragmented knowledge and selfish behaviour into a spontaneous order that delivers public benefits (Friedman and Friedman, 1980, pp.1-2; Hayek, 1973-1979/2012, pp. 14 and 36). To the extent that this should be traced to the Scottish Enlightenment at all, it ought to be to Ferguson, who shares Hayek's ambivalence regarding people's capacity to engage in moral self-determination because of their purported lack of self-knowledge (Hill, 1997). By contrast, Smith has a thoroughly 'egalitarian view of human cognition' which purports that individuals know their own interests better than anyone else and which sets him apart from the civic humanism of his contemporaries who do not share his 'confidence in ordinary people's judgment' (Fleischacker, 2004, p. 97).

If self-command – or as we term it, interpersonal responsibility – is the watchword of Smith's moral economy, then Hayek's is self-reliance. Like Smith, Hayek seeks to defend commercial society as a moral as well as a material order. But unlike Smith, Hayek argues that the evident inequalities that liberal capitalism creates ought to be considered legitimate because of the opportunities for individual exchange and choice that it offers (Gamble, 1979, p. 18). At the same time, Hayek does acknowledge that consent for the market would not always be given. He also considers humans to be innately altruistic and solidaristic; apparently socialist instincts which he deems inappropriate for life in commercial society (Gamble, 1996, p. 39). For these two reasons, then, every generation had to learn the virtues of individualism anew. In *The Road to Serfdom* Hayek identifies these virtues as self-reliance, independence, bearing risk, conviction in one's beliefs, and voluntary cooperation with one's neighbours; he then warns against their erosion by 'collectivism' and its 'relief from responsibility' (Hayek, 1944/2005, pp. 217-218). Consequently, it is a universal belief in personal responsibility and 'the reduction of the range of duties we owe to all others' that is deemed essential for the impersonal system of liberal capitalism to be accepted (Hayek, 1973-1979/2012, p. 252). To this end, as Rodrigues (2013, p. 569) elaborates:

Hayek is convinced that individuals can be transformed by the right mix of coercion, pecuniary incentives, persuasion techniques, and a moral climate, assigning blame and esteem to different conducts: 'we assign responsibility to a man, not in order to say that as he was he might have acted differently, but in order to make him different' [Hayek cited in *The Constitution of Liberty*].

This thinking is evident in Margaret Thatcher's (1981) stated intent to reverse the direction of politics from 'the collectivist society' towards the 'personal society', a project in which '[e]conomics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul' (see also the 'moral case for welfare reform' set out by Cameron, 2014). In contrast to Smith, who sees the market as a sphere in which our other-directed instincts can prosper alongside our capacities for self-command, this Hayekian account offers an archetypal neoliberal conceptualisation of the market as a 'self-disciplining subjective process whereby individuals learn to conduct themselves' (Dardot and Laval, 2013, p. 106). Importantly, as highlighted by Rodrigues, this account also implies that if someone fails in that conduct by appearing to reject responsibility then they become a fair target for moral disapprobation from both their peers and themselves. As Hayek (1973-1979/2012, p. 260) contends: 'the demand that we should equally esteem all our fellow men is irreconcilable with the fact that our moral code rests upon the approval or disapproval of the conduct of others'.

We should not overstate the application of Hayek's ideas to recent forms of economic governance. As Davies (2012, p. 768) notes, the distrust by policymakers of consumers' abilities to manage their affairs, articulated in policy proposals on minimum alcohol pricing and restrictions on supermarket promotions of unhealthy food for example, 'represents a significant departure from core tenets of Hayekian neoliberalism' owing to its elevation of 'certain preferences above others...in a way that would have horrified Hayek'. Davies is correct in one sense, as these governmental techniques of behavioural economics owe far more to the utilitarian interventions proposed by Jeremy Bentham than they do to Hayek (Quinn, 2016). Yet where Hayek does retain influence here is in the extent to which such proposals are justified in terms of moral reproach and are used to criticise non-ideal neoliberal subjects. Indeed, insofar as they are not translated into actual legislation, as happened in both of these cases under the Cameron governments, this could be considered their primary function.

Not only is such disapproval communicated by politicians and commentators, but the discursive space they open up also allows for informal sanctions to be issued by members of the public, as is evident on social media and newspaper comment boards. Nor does it stop there. Chase and Walker (2012) show how people living in deprived areas, who are often the recipients of such disapprobation, seek to deflect the sense of shame they feel by identifying others of lower social worth to denigrate in turn. This 'ripple effect' of shame does not so much divide the working class into a deserving and undeserving poor, then, but slowly fragments it group by group. This can be seen to uphold Hayek's belief that invidious comparison of the conduct of others forms the basis of 'our whole moral code' and, crucially, is seen as a permissible form of censure as it appears to be 'spontaneous' in social intercourse rather than planned and executed via the state (Galeotti, 1987; Hayek, 1973-1979/2012, p. 99). This is in direct contrast to the circles of sympathy that Smith contends can widen beyond one's family via empathetic commercial interactions (Forman-Barzilai 2010). Furthermore, for Smith, as we show next, such a situation is fundamentally unjust.

Towards a Smithian Account of Interpersonal Responsibility

As Young and Gordon (1996) argue, Smith's view of justice starts with commutative justice, attending to the obligations that exist between individuals to act on the basis of mutual sympathy and the concomitant duty not to injure one another in word or deed. Whereas Hayek suggests that this kind of injustice was useful for commercial society, Smith sees it as a threat:

Society...cannot subsist among those who are at all times ready to hurt and injure one another. The moment that injury begins, the moment that mutual resentment and animosity take place, all the bands of it are broke asunder, and the different members of which it is consisted are...dissipated and scattered abroad by the violence and opposition of their discordant affections... Society may subsist, though not in the most comfortable state, without beneficence; but the prevalence of injustice must utterly destroy it. (Smith 1790/1976, II.ii.3.3)

If social reformers concerned about hunger and obesity have tended to prioritise material questions about how to make sure people are well fed, a Smithian focus on commutative justice instead highlights the ideational question about how those practices of consumption are intersubjectively understood. This offers a theoretical underpinning for the kinds of conclusions reached by Garthwaite (2016: 159), whose ethnographic research convinced her that 'First we must listen to the voices of people using foodbanks so that can

we understand who they are, why they do so and what it feels like. Maybe then we can do something about it’.

However, as we have pointed out, the new common sense of food consumption has been to assume that it is a lack of self-control that is to blame, which is to be purportedly remedied by policies aimed at enhancing individuals’ calculative capabilities, increasing levels of information available to them, and in the final instance, withdrawing health and welfare entitlements. In Smithian terms, advocates of these types of interventions might be considered ‘men of system’, a disparaging description employed in TMS to refer to politicians who seek to impose their own particularistic moral orders upon the populace. It is thus ironic given their claims about personal responsibility that this display of the ‘highest degree of arrogance’ additionally demonstrates a distinct lack of self-command on the part of neoliberal policymakers (Smith 1790/1976, VI.II.42-43). As discussed, the self-command that is prized by Smith rests on a set of interpersonal processes in which individuals reflect upon their own motives and those of others with whom they interact. As such reflections form the basis of the ‘general rules of morality’ through reference to which individuals ordinate their conduct, they avoid the moral relativism and social atomism that informs neoliberal policymaking, including regarding food poverty and consumption. Smith explains via the mirror metaphor in TMS that standards of aesthetic beauty are also formed via these imaginative processes, through which individuals reflect upon ‘the propriety and impropriety of his own passions, the beauty and deformity of his own mind’ (1790/1976, III.1.3; III.4.7-8). Without this interpersonal mirror we can know little of our morality, just as we can know little of our physical appearance in the absence of a literal reflection. But whereas the mirror may be metaphorical, the analogy between morality and appearance is not. Especially relevant for our discussion of obesity, on the topic of personal beauty and deformity Smith argues that:

We examine our persons limb by limb, and by placing ourselves before a looking-glass, or by some such expedient, endeavour, as much as possible, to view ourselves at the distance and with the eyes of other people. If, after this examination, we are satisfied with our own appearance, we can more easily support the most disadvantageous judgments of others. If, on the contrary, we are sensible that we are the natural objects of distaste, every appearance of their disapprobation mortifies us beyond all measure. [...] It is evident, however, that we are anxious about our own beauty and deformity, only upon account of its effect upon others (1790/1976, III.1.4).

We suggest that the neoliberal discourse of personal responsibility which influences articulations of ‘beauty and deformity’ in terms of optimal standards of behaviour and consumption is given greater potency by its justification in relation to economic imperatives. These have served as the benchmark against which deviance is criticised in *moral* terms, making the construction and acceptance of ‘natural objects of distaste’ all the more pernicious, as is perhaps reflected in the increased prevalence of body shaming and body image anxiety under the influence of neoliberalism (Saguy, 2013). An interpersonal responsibility instead implies that a sympathetic and intersubjective account of the gaze of others be produced, leading to a more rounded assessment of corporeal aesthetics deployed in encounters with the mirror and less reactionary (self-) judgement in our daily lives.

Smith’s emphasis on commutative justice is also evident in his account of taxation in WN. When a proposal circulated to tackle childhood obesity by imposing a levy on sugary drinks and spending the revenue on public health activities (e.g., Fitzpatrick, 2013) it was met with a degree of opposition from across the political spectrum. Some on the right like Health

Secretary Jeremy Hunt considered it a breach of ‘individual choice’ while some on the left considered it ‘classist’ for targeting a product disproportionately consumed by the poor (ITV News, 2013; Lott-Lavinga, 2015). Approaching this debate via Smith, we should first acknowledge his rejection of the idea, commonly held at the time, that increased living standards for the poor and attendant access to ‘luxuries’ such as sugar and alcohol would result in deleterious moral consequences. Moreover, he also reproaches the physiocrat François Quesnay for his supposition that economies, like bodies, could only thrive under a single, perfect regime. Engaging in some metaphorical re-scaling of his own, Smith argues that ‘the human body frequently preserves, to all appearances at least, the most perfect state of health under a vast variety of different regimens’ and uses this parallel to critique Quesnay’s faith in the necessity of *laissez-faire* economics (1776/1976, IV.ix.28).

It is this suspicion of supposed insight into optimal standards of behaviour and not any doctrinaire opposition that forms the basis of Smith’s rejection of state intervention in specific areas of everyday life. This is evident in his discussion of taxes on meat, which shows that not even the butcher, brewer or baker - the figures at the centre of his conception of the market - are off limits. For while Smith neglects to indulge in moral commentary upon the consumption of certain goods, he does not abstain from enquiring into their effects on health:

Taxes upon butchers’ meat are still more common than those upon bread. It may indeed be doubted whether butchers’ meat is anywhere a necessary of life. Grain and other vegetables, with the help of milk, cheese, and butter, or oil...can, without any butchers’ meat, afford the most plentiful, the most wholesome, the most nourishing, and the most invigorating diet. Decency no-where requires that any man should eat butchers’ meat, as it in most places requires that he should wear a linen shirt or a pair of leather shoes (*ibid*, V.ii.k.15).

Smith goes on to note that unlike the absence of meat from one’s diet, the absence of a linen shirt and leather shoes ‘would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty which, it is presumed, nobody can well fall into without extreme bad conduct’ (*ibid*, V.ii.k.3). In this regard he refuses to conflate poverty with irresponsibility. Indeed, he characterises the vast majority of what were commonly referred to as ‘the inferior ranks’ as ‘the sober and industrious poor’ for whom ‘taxes upon such commodities [i.e. *social* luxuries like sugar] act as sumptuary laws, and dispose them either to moderate, or to refrain altogether from the use of superfluities which they can no longer easily afford’ (*ibid*, V.ii.k.7). So to return to the levy on sugary drinks, our Smithian account of interpersonal responsibility suggests that we take its moral economy seriously. The tax is less defensible when premised on perfecting the behaviour of ‘deviant’ consumers; it is more defensible to the extent that it does not impair the culturally-relative consumption practices that form part of a dignified life.

Conclusion

One way of conceptualising the rhetoric about ‘poor choice’ contained in the contemporary discourse of personal responsibility is as a form of symbolic violence; a means of social differentiation effectively forced upon a subordinate class and used to disguise the accumulation processes that have produced those relations of domination (Bourdieu, 1977; Hollows and Jones, 2010). Our analysis suggests another rationale, hitherto overlooked, that a Hayekian insistence on personal responsibility *also* serves to corrode the sympathetic interactions that Smith suggests are central to and might otherwise flourish within

commercial society. By contrast, within the Hayekian tradition of neoliberalism, attempts to explain inequalities in terms other than personal responsibility and invidious comparison threaten not only consent for the market, but the negative liberty underpinning modern civilisation itself, inviting in the totalitarian ethos of socialism. As Hayek (1973-1979/2012, p. 99) warns: ‘the ubiquitous dependence on other people’s power, which the enforcement of any image of “social justice” creates, inevitably destroys that freedom of personal decisions on which all morals must rest’. These high stakes go some way to explaining the spiteful tone of much of the political rhetoric directed to food bank users and the obese, as well as its connections to efforts to undermine the collective provision of basic goods and services and the cultures of dependency and indolence that these supposedly encourage.

In regards to food consumption we highlighted this rhetoric in the persistent conflation between market discipline and personal discipline, as well as wider claims to restore morality to welfare claimants and NHS patients by keeping people within the labour market and without socialised health care. Importantly, these contrast starkly with the erstwhile claims of those on the political right to champion the sanctity of individual choice, which, ironically, have been traced to Smith by a number of leading Conservatives including Margaret Thatcher, George Osborne and Iain Duncan Smith. Unlike these figures, as we have shown, Adam Smith does not advocate doctrinaire non-intervention in the market or interventions into individuals’ consumption practices and choices in moral terms. Highlighting the contiguity of sentiments between his economic discussions in WN and his moral theory in TMS, we suggest that Smith instead places his trust in individuals to develop materially and morally through engagement in sympathetic commercial interactions, which are influenced at times by interventions such as taxes. He certainly does not seek to articulate a set of standards of morality, industriousness, and physical appearance against which individuals’ consumption habits might be judged (Glaze, 2017).

In terms of theory the wider contribution of this account lies with its critique of personal responsibility; a central consideration in the study of moral economy (Sayer 2007). Our critique of Hayekian neoliberalism was to show how its valorisation of self-regulating markets and selves requires and encourages a politics of hostility towards those that are apparently unable to exercise personal responsibility. By contrast, our reconstruction of Smith’s intersubjective accounts of markets, the self and self-command in TMS and WN demonstrate his thoroughgoing concern for social justice and his misgivings about attempts to achieve this through overt state interventions in individuals’ choices on moral grounds and via *laissez-faire* economics. This gives rise to what we dubbed interpersonal responsibility; a form of responsibility which refuses both atomised self-reliance and automatic conformity with authority. Despite appearances, the Cameron governments’ apparent shift towards a similar set of concerns retains a Hayekian insistence upon the *absence* of sympathy to one another, demonstrated in what Hayton and McEnhill (2015, p. 143) term their ‘neo-Thatcherite...analysis of the causes of poverty that locates these at the level of individual “choice”’. Ironically, this analysis requires that individuals’ choices conform to standards of behaviour that are imagined to be meritorious by figures such as Iain Duncan Smith, who defines ‘Conservative compassion’ as ‘taking the tough choices’ *on behalf of* the poor (Bochel and Powell, 2017, no page numbers). Duncan Smith also contrasts Conservative compassion to sympathy, which he defines as an indulgence that encourages welfare dependency and which erodes personal responsibility (*ibid*). As discussed, Adam Smith also distinguishes his centrally important concept of sympathy from compassion, albeit in an entirely different manner: for him, self-sufficiency and social justice in commercial society are facilitated by interpersonal responsibility. Normatively a Smithian approach thus grants dignity, significance and sensitivity to individuals’ choices; analytically it illuminates the connections that exist between the arbitrary standards of moral, fiscal and corporeal rectitude

that pervade neoliberal narratives and which shape the way that experiences like hunger and obesity are understood.

In terms of policy, as we demonstrated in our discussion of body shaming and sugar taxation, interpersonal responsibility is best adopted as an evaluative method rather than as a prescriptive strategy. For example, insofar as primary care reforms allow GPs to spend more time in dialogue with (potentially malnourished) patients, or efforts to create ‘community food hubs’ allow local business people and residents to more easily meet and trade with one another, then each can be defended as ways of defying impersonal encounters and enabling critical imaginative exchanges to take place. Likewise, proposals to use state-guaranteed unconditional basic incomes to realise the right to food ought not to be dismissed on the presumption that the poor would only spend the money unwisely. Indeed, showing trust in the judgement of individuals should be considered important in and of itself. Thus not only do such Smithian principles foreground commutative justice as a precondition of social justice, they also offer a way to take individual agency seriously without licensing the apportionment of blame. This helps to recover responsibility from the preserve of the political right (Saguy, 2013, p. 72) and opens up an alternative agenda for progressive food politics hitherto closed off by the hegemony of neoliberalism (see Bissell *et al.*, 2016).

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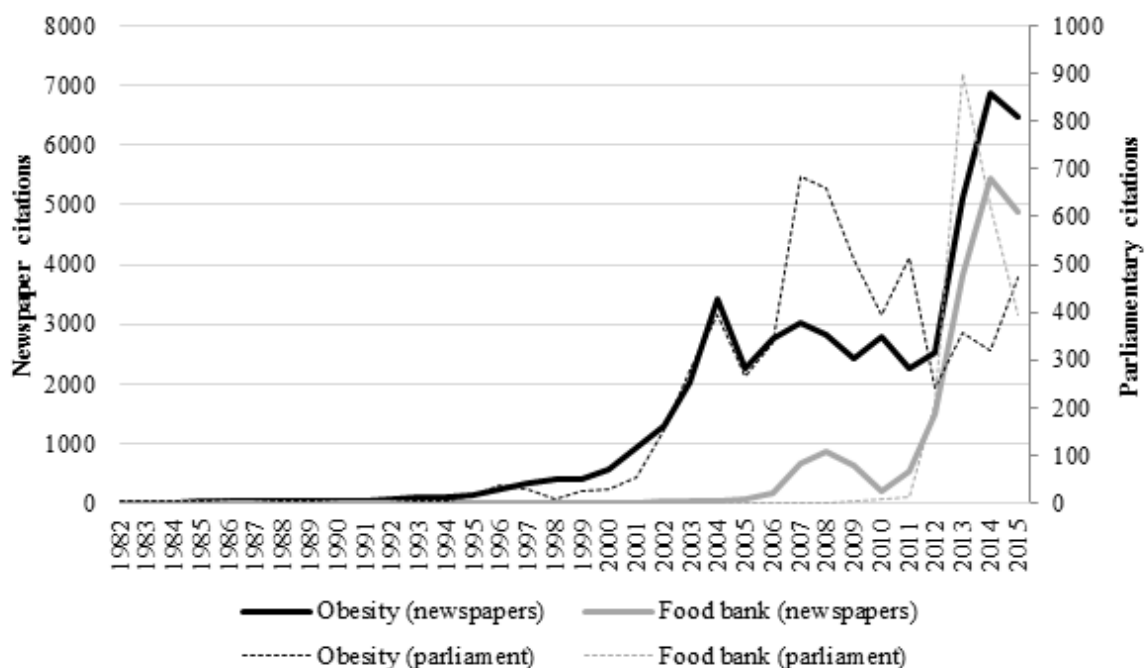
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Figures

Figure 1: Public Debate in the United Kingdom on Food Banks and Obesity, 1982-2015



Sources: newspaper citations taken from Factiva database search for the terms ‘obesity’ and ‘food bank’ in all major national British newspapers; parliamentary citations taken from Hansard database using the same search terms across all recorded speeches and statements made in both Houses.