**Playing cards against the state: precarious lives, conspiracy theories, and the production of ‘irrational’ subjects**

**Abstract**

This paper discusses the role of conspiracy theory in political speech amongst service users at a soup kitchen in Brixton, south London. Rather than categorizing conspiracy theories as ‘irrational’ it argues that this speech must be read in the context of precarity and an oppositional relationship with the state. In particular the paper argues that ‘behavior change theory’, which has become a key influence in British social policy, works on the basis that those at the margins of society are not fully capable of making the right decisions for themselves. Behaviour change theory, which has become influential around the world, excludes the most marginal aspects of society from political discourse by assuming they are ‘irrational’. In this way the very ontological security (Giddens 1991, Laing 2010, Philo 2014) of individuals on the margins of society is threatened by policies which aims to govern behavior and territorialize precarious lives. This paper will argue that conspiracy theories, where deployed by marginalized people, are strategies which attempt to act across multiple political scales. From the socially marginal space of the soup kitchen, conspiracy theories claim knowledge of larger scale political geographies. This paper demonstrates that an ethnographic method is instrumental in exploring this multi-scalar complexity.

Keywords: Conspiracy Theory, Precarity, Behaviour Change, Ethnography, Poverty, Welfare, Austerity

1. Introduction

At the margins of society political speech becomes more unusual, where people are excluded from society they are also excluded from making any claim about what society is or should be. In the ethnographic account of political speech at a soup kitchen in South London, which makes up the empirical aspect of this paper, political speech very often incorporated conspiratorial tropes. How then to engage with this discourse, which it is perhaps too easy to dismiss as irrational? In this paper I make the argument that conspiracy theories, and the apparently ‘irrational’ subjects who shared them in my ethnographic research are a phenomena of the precarious lives of the marginalised.

Behaviour change theory which underpins contemporary social policy, not just in Britain but elsewhere in the world, undermines the autonomy of those who exist on the edges of society. By focussing on ‘nudging’ (Thaler & Sunstein 2009) behaviour change theory works on the basis that an individual in need cannot be relied upon to make decisions in their own interest, as such they are pushed into an oppositional, manipulative, and game-like relationship with the state. In this context conspiracy theories, whilst at face value ‘irrational’, can be read instead as a strategy to intervene in a narrative which casts the most marginalised members of society as incapable of conceptualising and producing their own lives.

This paper makes the original claim that conspiracy theories, in the context of the case study, are spatialised discourses, serving to tie the everyday to the geopolitical. The logic of behaviour change influenced social policy territorialises the smallest daily geographies of precarious lives. The margins of society have become a site through which the British state attempts to compensate for the global economic crisis, this paper sees conspiracy theory as a partial response to this spatial contortion. The paper will show the complex multi-scalar nature of life on the margins of society in regards to both policy from above and political speech from below.

With reference to psychoanalysis, and to behavioural psychology, this paper makes a broader intervention into the way that geographers engage with the ‘space’ of politics. This paper uses an in-depth ethnographic method to reveal what Philo has called the “closest in” (2014:288) geographies of human life. By attending to precarious life at this scale it is possible to make an account of the multi scalar and complex forms of discourse which extend from the global to the space of an individual’s everyday life. Significantly this paper offers a rigorous case study into the relationship between the daily life and political speech of those on the margins of society and the societal structures which produce such precarity.

The next section (2) will begin by positioning the paper within geographical approaches to first austerity and behavioural psychology, and then literature on conspiracy theories. This section will argue that these divergent political phenomena share a spatial complexity which oscillates between geographically closest in and furthest out. This sets the context for the following section (3) which will introduce a series of vignettes detailing the game-like and oppositional relationship between service users at the soup kitchen and the austerity state. Influenced by the “behavioural conditionality” (Dwyer and Wright 2014:29) of British social policy, this relationship undermines life on the edges of society at an ontological level. Finally (section 4) I will describe the political speech of the soup kitchen with a set of descriptions of conversations about conspiracy theories, through analysing these ethnographic descriptions. These too easily dismissed forms of political speech deserve particular attention. I argue that such political speech is exacerbated by a set of social conditions that produce ‘irrationality’ by actively destabilising the ontological security of the marginalised.

2.1 Spaces of precarity

This paper draws upon data gathered during fieldwork in a soup kitchen in Brixton, south London. The soup kitchen in its current form began in 2013 at the height of the ongoing era of austerity in the United Kingdom, whereby following the economic crisis of 2008 onwards the incoming 2010 government enacted a vast array of cuts to state expenditure. One of the effects of the resulting structural transformation in the British economy and welfare state during this period were, and continue to be, acute levels of food poverty (Loopstra et al. 2015). The soup kitchen in Brixton fulfilled a dual role as drop in centre and informal foodbank for the homeless and otherwise marginalised.

This paper contributes to research in three interconnected geographies of precarious urban life: food banking (Cloke et al. 2017; Garthwaite 2016a,b,c; Williams et al. 2016); homelessness (Cloke, May and Johnson 2011; DeVerteuil 2006; DeVerteuil et al. 2009; Lancione 2014 a,b, 2017; Smith 2005); and non-state spaces of care (Conradson 2003a,b; Parr 2000). While literature on foodbanks, homelessness, and drop-in-centres has provided detailed accounts of the effects of economic hardship and precarity on the lives of those who live on the margins of society, the sustained and intimate account of the political speech produced in response to this research is the significant contribution of this paper.

Cloke, May and Williams have argued that food banks, as liminal spaces, have the capacity to be “hopeful spaces of political conscientization” (2017:72). On one hand this paper agrees with their analysis in its account of the soup kitchen’s easy accommodation of diverse political speech. On the other, the argument made here, that social precarity exacerbated by encounters with ‘the state’ excludes the marginalised from mainstream political discourse, suggests that Cloke et al. may have been being over optimistic. One of the consequences of what deVerteuil has called the ‘Post Welfare City’ (2017), where the third sector fills the gaps left by a retreating state, is that spaces such as drop in centres, food banks, and soup kitchens constitute a semi-private space apart from the state. DeVerteuil’s (2011) work on the self-organised ‘welfare’ of migrant communities in Los Angeles and London is a valuable comparison point regarding the non-state provision of care. In this way spaces such as the soup kitchen described below are good places to reflect on the political relations between marginalised people and the state, even if they do not offer opportunities for “conscientization” in the manner that Cloke et al. envisaged.

2.2 Behaviour change and the state

While the geographical scope of this research is British, the prevalence of behavioural psychology as an intellectual correlate of, and support for, the British austerity welfare state is part of a policy trend with global traction (Whitehead et al. 2014). For the service users at the soup kitchen, much of their interaction with local or national government institutions should hence be seen in the context of what Dwyer and Wright have termed “behavioural conditionality” (2014:29): the idea that welfare serves not as a support net, but as a means to change the behaviour of claimants.

The behavioural insights team set up in 2010 positioned behavioural psychology at the heart of British austerity era social policy (Dwyer and Wright 2014:29). British austerity policy’s impetus to cut costs at this time coincided with the logic of behaviour change theory which aimed to shift responsibility away from the state and onto the individual. This paper argues that the government has drawn citizens in to a ‘game-like’ relationship where by the state seeks “to become the most skilful nudger” (Leggett 2014:14). These ‘nudges’ have come under criticism for being manipulative: *The Guardian* has reported that one psychometric test reported outcomes which did not correspond to the answers inputted by jobseekers asked to take it (Malik 2013).

There is a growing geographical literature on the significant role of behavioural psychology on policy in the United Kingdom and around the world (Jones et al. 2011a, b, 2013; Pykett 2012, 2013; Pykett et al. 2016; Reid & Ellsworth Krebs 2018; Whitehead et al. 2011, 2014). Most recently Whitehead et al. 2017, the authors describe what they call ‘neuroliberalism’; the governance of human behaviour based on psychological, neurological, and behavioural insights. This brings into question how we consider what is and what is not “state space” (Jones et al. 2013:40). It is not in the remit of this paper to theorise the state, I follow Jones et al. in recognising that “peopled encounters […] with state apparatus” (2013:36) produce a singular image of the state for the individuals who encounter its diverse structures.

Central to the logic of behaviour change policy is what Whitehead et al. have called “governing irrationality”, they characterise the focus of these policies as “nothing less than the nature of the human subject, the relationship between our conscious and subconscious selves, and the complex interface between the rational and the irrational” (2011:2819). This paper argues that wherever government policy attempts to territorialise the minutiae of precarious lives, it undermines the very ontology of those in most severe need.

2.3 Precarious Ontologies

The previous section (2.2) has suggested that under the influence of behavioural psychology British social policy intervenes into the smallest geographies of marginalised people. In creating sets of conditions that govern the most minute everyday geographies of daily life the state (in its broadest configuration) moves away from any structural responsibility regarding social need and instead implies that it is a matter of encouraging ‘correct’ behaviour. From this emerges a game-like politics that attempts to introduce new ‘rules’ into the daily lives of marginalised individuals in the hope that they start adapting their lives. The consequence of these interventions is that individuals are treated as if they are incapable of being responsible for their own lives, since even their most inner motivations are assumed to be in need of state intervention.

The sense of autonomy in one’s own being was described by the psychoanalyst R.D. Laing as ontological security (2010 [1969]), a concept subsequently taken up by Giddens (1991) and more recently by geographers such as Philo (2012, 2014), Bondi (2014) and Waite, Valentine & Lewis (2014). For Laing ontological security denotes a state of confident autonomy, an individual experiencing their “own being as real, alive, whole; as differentiated from the rest of the world” (Laing 2010: 41-42). Philo uses Laing’s term to refer to the “closest in” geographies of security (2012:3), also offering a way to describe the feelings and anxieties of those who feel “unplaced” and hence ontologically *(in)*secure (Philo 2014:288). At the soup kitchen I witnessed service users’ lives being undermined and literally denied place geographically, socially and psychologically. This feeling of being unplaced encourages what Philo calls “contorted strategies” in search of security (2014:288).

The consistent undermining of marginalised lives through the territorialisation of close-in geographies detailed above actively produces a subject which is left contorting themselves to claim their own autonomy. This might be usefully read in relation to Marx’s early 1832 manuscript on Alienation which makes a somewhat existentialist argument that the economic alienation of the individual from the means of economic production corresponds to the social alienation of one person from another (2000). The point being that as this paper goes on to consider the apparently ‘irrational’ language of conspiracy it is important to ask how such marginalised forms of thinking might be as a consequence of social precarity. I wish to argue from the furthest out structures of society towards the “closest in” (Philo 2014:288) effects of such economic and social structural inequalities.

This use of psychoanalysis to illuminate the psychological effects of societal structure subverts the logic of behavioural economics (Thaler and Sunstein 2009). Where, on one hand, the ideology of ‘nudging’ holds that the state can effect specific behavioural change in order to enact broad social improvements; this paper explores how the treatment of those most precarious members of society specifically limits the ability of such individuals to achieve ontological security. The following section suggests that conspiracy theories are a response to this situation. Though by referring to psychoanalytical theory I am not suggesting that conspiracy theory at the soup kitchen is a symptom of mental ill-health (see Fenster 2008:8 on Hofstadter 2012), but a contortion in political speech which results from the precarity of life on the margins of society.

2.4 Conspiracy theory as a precarious political geography

Conspiracy theories have been a feature of geopolitical research (Cairns 2014; Dittmer 2010; Jones 2010, 2012; Kneale 2011) but the social context from which they arise and the ways in which they circulate discursively has not been researched at intimate scales. This paper offers an empirical description of conspiracy theories as they circulate in the very close-in geography of the soup kitchen, instead of the further out geographies of international politics. In the context of the soup kitchen conspiracy theories gesture towards an imagined large scale realm of state power that, it is assumed, must hold an explanation for the claustrophobically constrained lives of the service users.

When first confronted by conspiratorial speech at the soup kitchen my response coincided with Hofstadter’s, 1964 article “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” (2012) which laid out a strongly derogatory position. Mark Fenster has characterised this position as a pathological take on the topic, casting conspiracy theory as “a malady or affliction which differs fundamentally from a healthy engagement in politics” (2008:8). Contrary to the geopolitical analyses cited above here the conspiracy theory appears as a phenomena of the individual psyche, a close-in geography as opposed to a transnational one.

The political geography of conspiracy is itself precarious. Conspiracy theories are spatially multi-scalar, they are seductive in part because they offer a way to negotiate the gulf between everyday life and global structural change. This multi-scalar logic shares an odd symmetry with that of post-crash austerity policy which positions the daily lives of the most disadvantaged in society as a nexus through which to compensate for a global economic crisis. The following section will use the soup kitchen as a case study to illustrate the precarious and game-like relationship between the state and those on the margins of society, setting the context for section 4’s analysis of conspiratorial political speech in this context.

## 3.1 Precarious games with the state at the soup kitchen

Brixton is a neighbourhood of London that, despite undergoing rapid gentrification, remains relatively deprived. The neighbourhood has been at the heart of the London Afro-Caribbean community since the arrival of post-World War II migrants from the Caribbean, a community who have recently suffered from the extreme nudging of the government’s “hostile environment” policy towards migrants (Kirkup & Winnett 2012). It has been a space at the edge of London’s cultural and political geographies, welcoming to minority groups, sub-cultures, and radical political groups. The Geography of Brixton is simultaneously global and marginal, as such it has long been a site of encounter, and this is echoed in the soup kitchen, a small space on the fringes of Brixton’s centre, a space of multiple marginalisation.

During 2015, I carried out ethnographic research as part of a project designed to describe the rapid transformation of Brixton[[1]](#endnote-1). Between April and December of that year, I visited the soup kitchen two to three days a week during opening hours 10am-2pm. My status as a researcher was overt, but I took the role of volunteer, helping to organise breakfast and lunch as well as chatting, playing cards and drinking tea. This sustained immersion allowed me to develop close relationships with a core of 15 regular service users. Beyond this core there were a large number of additional service users who would come and go. I took detailed field notes during or after each day and these form the basis for the empirical material that follows.

The soup kitchen was founded in 2013 by two young unemployed men who had been asked to carry out volunteering under threat of having benefits sanctioned. The founders were also experienced youth workers. Service users were sometimes homeless, very often in precarious housing such as a hostel and almost all of them, the soup kitchen staff estimate 75%, have mental health problems. Similarly, addiction was a very common factor in the lives of service users.

Five days a week the soup kitchen would provide cereal, milk, and plentiful tea and coffee for breakfast and then a hot lunch prepared from donations from both local and national businesses solicited by the main volunteers through ceaseless networking. There were five key volunteers including the founders with numerous others that would drop in regularly or semi-regularly. The soup kitchen consisted of a large open plan space on one floor of a converted Victorian house, adjacent to a well-provisioned kitchen.

In carrying out this research I was both ethnographer and volunteer, not necessarily in that order. Garthwaite has reflected on the particular role of the “volunteer ethnographer” (2016c:60) having a dual role as both researcher and volunteer led me to find, much like Garthwaite, that it can feel compromising to “apply a critical lens” (2016c:69) to people who have been friends, colleagues, and for whom you have been part of a structure of care. Rather than interrupt the caring nature of the space with extractive ‘interviews’ or tape recorders, I focused on the capacity of the body and the concrete presence of the researcher to record a “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1988). Hall, in this journal, has recently advocated for the value of feminist and ethnographic approaches to studying the geography of everyday austerity (2018), also recalling Parr’s (1998) emphasis on embodied and ethnographic methods in researching mental health. In place of an approach which focuses on the life-story of individual service users, the data in this paper emerges from the soup kitchen’s complex space of encounter. In order to maintain this sense of place I emphasise writing and poetics as techniques for forming a rich representation of the field, drawing upon the cultural anthropologies of Geertz (1973) and Clifford and Marcus (1986).

The value of an ethnographic account of places like the soup kitchen is born out in previous geographies of “semi-institutional” (Parr 2000) “spaces of Care” (Conradson 2003a). Following urban ethnographers such as Back (1996), Duneier (1999), Modan (2008), and Paton (2014) who allow their empirical work to speak in some sense for itself, I have chosen to incorporate sustained empirical passages to preserve some of the embodied and situated data produced in this project. The longitudinal and open nature of this methodology allowed me to observe the actions and speech of service users across multiple scales. From the close-in geography of dealing with housing officers, to the expansive theory making of conspiracy. In this way my analysis strives to accommodate and deal with somewhat messy and contradictory forms of data (Johnson-Schlee: in press).

## 3.2 Playing the game

‘The state’ in this paper refers to how service users experience the complex legislative landscape that faces those who want to sustain their lives at the edges of society. Natalie would come in on the way to a meeting with her housing support officer for a game of cards and she would say something like, “to sharpen me up ready to take on the man”. When Natalie referred to “the man”, she referred to state power manifest in those that “peopled” (Jones et al. 2013:36) the apparatus of the welfare state. In this case she wanted to be rehoused in order to meet the conditions of a detox programme that she wished to attend. Dealing with the state for her was not unlike playing a game.

Games are a common metaphor when discussing the challenges of social production. Think – “you’ve got to play the game”, “hate the game, don’t hate the player”, “the game of life”, “#winning”, and so on. Games are not simply a way to waste time, they are a means to practise and explore some of the basic mechanics of everyday life (Huizinga 1949, Caillois 2001). Blackjack, the card game that we played at the soup kitchen, was a common backdrop for speech about politics at both a macro and micro scale. This section will make an account that characterises interactions between the state and those on the margins of society as game-like and oppositional. By opening with a brief description of blackjack, it will suggest not just that this is a valuable metaphor but that card games were an actually useful form of practice for the challenges of participating in society.

Games are not simply past time, but an ontological experiment. Winnicott relates them explicitly to his notion of “transitional objects” (1971:1-34), play is a way to explore the tricky distinction between self and other[[2]](#endnote-2). In play the child brings their dream world into relation with external phenomena. It is this interplay that makes play psychologically precarious due to the ambiguity between the subjective and the actually perceived (Winnicott 1971:70). Giddens explicitly makes the connection between transitional object theory in Winnicott and the notion of ontological security (Giddens 1991:38). Through a brief description of blackjack I will suggest that the particular nature of this game did indeed reflect the conscious and unconscious knowledges required to negotiate precarity.

The rules: seven cards each, if you have more than four or five players, you can use two packs of cards. If there are, only two of you, each take eleven cards. With each turn you must place down cards in runs of sets; you must follow suit or rank when you play, the aim being to get rid of all of your cards. There are several magic cards which can either help you play or punish your neighbour. Blackjack is a vindictive game: you need a killer instinct, and you have to be prepared to use the magic cards in combination to ruin the games of your opponents. The only way you can avoid penalty is by retaliating in kind. In particularly competitive games there were also severe penalties for making mistakes: “one for revealing, two for mistake” Jay or Laurie would say, “bang to rights.” There were few arguments since we all abided by the rules.

The game reflected the precarious conditions of daily life for service users at the soup kitchen wherein the adversarial nature of service users’ interactions with the state – via welfare, healthcare, criminal justice, and housing – created severe consequences. A short illness or an administrative error could result in rapidly mounting consequences such as benefit sanctions, unemployment, fines or time in prison. In order to win at blackjack, you need to anticipate malice and to deal it out yourself; you had to anticipate the moves of your competitors and to plan carefully how you would play your hand. The mindset of a successful blackjack player, when applied to the conditions of daily life, might appear irrational, paranoid, and conspiratorial. In the next section I will introduce ethnographic vignettes to illustrate the games that service users were expected to play with the state.

## 3.3 Vignettes of games played with the state

Behaviour change theory has influenced a set of policies which, like a game, consciously and unconsciously influence the behaviour of the individual through setting rules, but crucially through destabilising ontological security. The government has imagined policy makers as “choice architects … trusted to design the rational default environments in which we are to live” (Whitehead et al. 2011:2834). The state actively produces scenarios forcing people into situations where they make decisions that they might not otherwise have made – imposing arbitrary changes to the ‘rules of the game’ that deny the capacity of individuals to produce their own lives, undermining dramatically individuals’ sense of personal autonomy. Negotiating this relationship with the state requires the kind of approach that one takes when playing blackjack: a heightened perception of threat, and a deep and brooding suspicion of one’s opponent. Like childhood games this oppositional and rule based relationship is in itself ‘precarious’ (Winnicott 1971:69). The following vignettes are two of countless similar stories that I heard from service users at the soup kitchen. They were not out of the ordinary, and such stories were a common feature of small talk between service users and volunteers.

Johnny and Nicola came in for the first time in September; they needed food desperately. They had been more than six weeks without money. They had no electricity at home, Johnny was diabetic and had no working fridge in which to store his insulin. They would dodge fares on trains to get to the soup kitchen. Johnny had held a job, cooking on a market stall for one day a week, but the Job Centre told him that because it was so few hours, it was impossible for him to pay his rent and he would have to give it up in order to claim benefits. When you apply for benefits it takes as long as 13 weeks to start getting the money through. You can receive an assessment rate payment during that time. Because Johnny and Nicola had already been on this rate shortly before he had his job, and because they made a mistake during the application process and were, sent back to the beginning they had reached the limit of thirteen weeks for this payment and were left with nothing until their benefits were approved.

Johnny had been a footballer: he had played semi-professionally and now a promising youth career had given way to playing the odd game for £50-100, which ended when he had a fight on the pitch. After a week or two of coming to the soup kitchen Johnny got a job. I did not see them again until December, but things had taken a turn for the worse. The fight that had ended Johnny’s footballing career had resulted in court proceedings: two years after the incident Johnny was sent to prison and when he came out they were left relying on the soup kitchen once again. A lack of skill in negotiating the challenging bureaucracies of welfare created a circumstance where Johnny’s attempts to earn money became invalid forms of behaviour; then in applying for unemployment benefit a confusion with their application put them in a precarious and dangerous situation. The delayed consequences of a crime then meant that Johnny’s further efforts to earn money were pointless. The behaviours of Johnny and Nicola were not recognised as the right kind of approach to becoming ‘useful’ members of society: even as they tried to return to work a failure to play by the rules led them back to a situation of acute need once again.

If you fail to turn up to appointments at the Job Centre or refuse to participate in a work placement[[3]](#endnote-3), you can be penalised. Benefits are suspended for people in these situations for an amount of time that varies depending on the apparent severity of the ‘crime’. For those who face these sanctions, the soup kitchen is one of the last remnants of the safety net. In a twist of fate, however, the soup kitchen was also a place where one could be sent on work placement. After the soup kitchen founders agreed that they would take one or two people on placement when they needed help, six or seven people turned up. These were people in receipt of benefits made to work for no money, a ‘voluntary’ position intended to improve one’s employment prospects. If any of the individuals on these work placements had found themselves falling foul of the sanctioning regime, they would have likely found themselves needing to come as a service user instead of as a ‘volunteer’.

Jacob and Mo, the founders of the soup kitchen, told me that they had not expected as many ‘volunteers’ to turn up. It was a real challenge to them, as without obvious things for them to do everyday, the soup kitchen was warehousing these people. The volunteers would sit on one side of the large room, the service users on the other. There was very little interaction between the two groups, despite the fact that there were some who were there because of the same sanctions that threatened the volunteers if they did not participate. Jacob and Mo recognised the irony of the situation, they had to sign these peoples’ forms and accommodate them at the soup kitchen to prevent them from being forced further into poverty.

For Giddens human life at its most essential should be “to know, virtually all of the time, in terms of some description or another, both what one is doing and why one is doing it.” (Giddens 1991:35). However, when someone like Johnny or Nicola is forced to play to a rule book not fully described to them, and where the rule book is constantly changing, it is impossible to know “what one is doing and why one is doing it”, their ontological security is threatened. The system of benefits sanctions creates an environment of fear by constructing absurd situations whereby ‘voluntary work’ at a soup kitchen is a condition of one not being forced to use its services. Whitehead et al. have observed the tendency of behaviour change policies to “naturalise irrationality within certain segments of the population” (2011:2830), precarious life is in fact enforced, and reinforced by these policies because of a working assumption that individuals who live on the edge cannot make ‘good’ decisions.

Behaviour change policy, by focussing on directly altering behaviour rather than engaging individuals on their own terms works on the basis that the most vulnerable in society are irrational. When public policy refuses to recognise one’s capacity to even understand one’s own decisions, let alone make good ones, what means of engaging with politics are open to you? In the following section of the paper, I describe the political speech heard at the soup kitchen. The prevailing trope was the conspiracy theory. This paper argues that the politics of conspiracy as it occurred at the soup kitchen is a response to a mainstream political discourse, influenced by behaviour change theory, that simultaneously undermines and refuses to believe in the ontological security of the marginalised. The fear of many conspiracy theories, that unseen large forces are directly controlling or limiting the lives of individuals. When viewed in the context of a precarious environment where the state is actively extending policy into the very intimate geographies of everyday life, these apparently irrational ideas must be read more carefully.

# 4.1 Conspiracy theories

Politics at the soup kitchen was part of a strongly suspicious discourse, with a tendency towards cynicism and conspiracy. In the previous section I have suggested that austerity welfare policy, influenced by behaviour change theory produces an ‘irrational’ political subjectivity through its treatment of those in need as being incapable of making decisions in their own interest. This section explores the political discourse of the soup kitchen and reads it against this presumed irrationality. Furthermore conspiracy theory is a spatial narrative which works to explain the conditions of everyday life on the edge of society and relate them to the global scale of national political discourse. In this sense they operate within the same scalar logic that places the burden of international economic crisis on the most deprived sections of society.

The events described in this section are representative of the kinds of political speech that occurred at the soup kitchen. Even when a discussion began in a more mainstream register of political discourse, perhaps around party politics or changes to the welfare system, it would often escalate towards some of the more heightened elevations recounted below.

It is important to state that conspiracy theories can incorporate anti-semitic or other violent tropes of the extremes of politics which this paper condemns. For instance, in the second story below a service user called Carl mentions the supposed global influence of the Jewish banking family the Rothschilds: I do not believe Carl to be anti-semitic, since on another occasion I heard him strongly confront someone who was denying the Holocaust. Such narratives pave the way for narratives of supposed Jewish conspiracy which have preceded and justified centuries of persecution, as detailed by Norman Cohn in *Warrant for Genocide* (1967). Nevertheless this paper, without excusing their content, insists that conspiracy theories should be listened to, seen as political, not dismissed out of hand, and carefully read in the context of the social conditions endured by their adherents.

## 4.2 Everything is a circle

I was explaining my PhD to Doreen when James jumped in excitedly. “The thing with Brixton is, it keeps changing, it always keeps changing, it did in the 1950s, it did before, it will change again. We stay in the same place and the world changes around us because the world is round. Everything is a circle.” Carl joined in, agreeing about the circular history thesis. He had a bleaker view, citing the New World Order, FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) camps in the United States, and stacks of coffins stockpiled to accommodate mass killings. James was very animated – “the world doesn’t care about us we’re new here, land used to be sea and will be sea again. Brixton will change, but it’s still got soul.” Carl said that gentrification relates to drug money. James told us that every shop in the arcades is new. “It’s criminal money” stated Carl. James said sure, but it has always been criminal money: money from slavery and other crimes.

Carl talked to me for a while after this about the New World Order, ‘chemtrails’, the Rothschilds[[4]](#endnote-4), and various other familiar conspiracy tropes, but at the same time he made a careful capitalism-is-crisis type of economic analysis. “They already have power”, he says, “they already have money, they want total control. They want to reduce the population to 600 million.” He believes that the crisis is in the interest of the rich, inviting them to tag everyone with RFID (radio frequency identification) chips to monitor our movement and permit privileges. He asked me – “would you take the chip?” If there is a choice, then no, I said “What can we do to stop this happening”, I asked him: “nothing”, he answered.

For James and Carl, the shifting ground beneath their feet – including the changing nature of Brixton and the turbulence of gentrification – leads logically to the conclusion that, once again, the system is working against them. The spatial scales operative in the discussion veer from the very local, the neighbourhood market, to the vast, FEMA, Empire. There is a clear attempt here to link the very local geography of Brixton to a much broader global political geography. There is an interweaving of conspiratorial tropes – The New World Order – and historically reliable arguments such as James’ point that ‘slavery and other crimes’ continue to underpin our economic system.

Both James and Carl are black men with histories of drugs, criminalisation and mental health problems. Fenster has remarked that the total dismissal of conspiracy as pathology “ignores the fact that it can correctly identify present and historical wrongs” (2008:11). Certainly there is no simple way in which we can separate conspiratorial speech from more ‘acceptable’ political discourses in this discussion.

Knight has described conspiracy theories as an “epistemological quick fix to often intractably complex problems” (Knight 2013:8), but is this desire for the quick fix not also not true of much political discourse? Freeman has commented on the resemblance of gentrification to conspiracy theory (2011:118), clearly echoed in the discussion described above. With its fear of spectral forces of change and suspicion of poorly defined groups such as ‘hipsters’, gentrification discourse coincides with the structures of conspiracy theory, but it is an idea propagated by ‘legitimate’ voices, academics included. It is not easy to dismiss political speech that interweaves more mainstream and empirically defensible narratives with those of conspiracy theory.

## 4.3. Bad medicine

Cynthia was worried that drinking lemon in boiling water was bad for her: she had taken this up, having read that it was healthy. We agreed that one lemon and three green teas a day was probably okay; she checked with Jacob and he agreed – anything in moderation. A guy who I did not know told us he had been reading about ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) diagnoses and began an outraged description of the problem with drug companies and over-prescription. Mental illnesses were not real anyway, he said. A pregnant woman, who was also new, disagreed with him, he moderated his stance, speaking instead about over-diagnosis. He cited a study he was aware of from Finland that found counselling was the key to overcoming mental illness, and that schizophrenia was caused by childhood trauma. I was a bit worried about how Cynthia would react to this statement, she was listening quietly to the discussion, she had previously identified herself as a paranoid schizophrenic who had been prescribed medicine that she struggled to take consistently. Other people became involved in the conversation. Carl said that everyone who died of Swine Flu had been vaccinated against it. He also said Ebola was human-made, that people are poisoning our food[[5]](#endnote-5) and that vaccinations are killing us. Cynthia said quietly that they probably were trying to get rid of all the poor people.

In this conversation conspiratorial thinking emerges to deal with the giddying gap in scale between the body of the individual and the body of ‘all the poor people’ as spaces of governance. For service users at the soup kitchen, the idea that their bodies, scrutinised and medicalised by the state, described in the media as unhealthy, were under a specific threat from ‘they’ seemed less far-fetched in that moment. The conspiracy theory offers one way of claiming a knowledge of the multi-scalar relationship between the everyday experience of precarity and the structures that uphold it.

Fiske produced a powerful but also somewhat wild analysis of conspiracy theories relating to AIDS as they circulated in black communities in America (1996: 191-216). Unlike Fiske, heavily criticised by Fenster (2008:279-289), I do not wish to be drawn into the vertiginous question of truth, and there are genuine dangers emerging from anti-vaccination and other anti-medical narratives, recently fuelled by European populist movements (Boseley 2018). Fiske’s analysis of the social context for the conspiracy theories that he discusses remains valuable. Specifically that conspiracy theories should be read as a form of “counter-knowledge” (Fiske 1996:191) reflecting the fact that black communities interpret the world in the context of a long and “systematic assault on the Black body” (2008:194). Similarly, the discourses above regarding medicine, and indeed the transformation of Brixton, reflect a long history of marginalisation and inequality.

A conspiracy theory is a way of explaining experience, just as anyone thinking politically is involved in a form of theory-making. Waters has called conspiracy theories “ethnosociologies […] theories that ordinary people use to explain social phenomena” (1997:114). It is a way of comprehending the relationship between oneself and the external world, between close in geographies of everyday life and expansive transnational economic and political geographies. Service users at the soup kitchen were living their lives in an intense relationship with the state mediated through welfare, policing, medical and other state actors.

4.4 Kind-of-Cassandras

The precarious position of the service users, and the necessary assumption of behaviour change policy that they are not capable of making rational decisions for themselves produces the conditions from which this political speech emerges. In a context where a life is lived under constant scrutiny, hyper-awareness and suspicion are necessary skills. Political speech in this context is necessarily spatial as it involves reaching from a claustrophobically constrained life on the edge towards a more central and more all-encompassing set of political and spatial logics.

What first appeared to me as aberrant speech and behaviour soon became the reality of the soup kitchen. Through reacting with something like disgust or fear at discussions of drug addiction or mental illness, or through squirming at the mention of familiarly ‘crazy’ conspiracy theories I recognised that I was participating in the production of ‘irrational’ subjects: meaning that those who knew most about what it was to be marginalised, the soup kitchen regulars, could be ignored. The capacity of people on the edge to speak truth to power[[6]](#endnote-6) is too easy to disregard. Academic researchers must not accept a narrative whereby those who are speaking from the margins are dismissed like Cassandra, the mythological Greek prophet whose prophecies were always true but never believed.

# 5. Conclusion

The vignettes drawn from my ethnographic case study of the soup kitchen provide an empirical account of the lives of people living on the margins of society. The symmetrical relationship between the card game blackjack, and the game-like interactions with the state, reveal the extent to which the care aspect of welfarism has been sidelined in favour of policy oriented around behaviour change. Being a skilful player of both blackjack, and of interactions with the state relies on strategic manipulation of rules and preparedness for malice. However, whilst blackjack operates on an even playing field, games with the state are weighted heavily against those who live on the margins of society. The destabilisation of the ‘rules of the game’ undermines the lives of people in precarity on an ontological level (Giddens 1991, Laing 2010, Philo 2014).

Beyond the everyday lives of service at the soup kitchen the paper also described the political speech which took place there. This political speech extended beyond a claustrophobically bounded life on the edge into a set of explanatory narratives which deploy conspiratorial tropes to try to claim a knowledge about the state and the lives of service users. An escape from the ‘choice architecture’ (Whitehead et al. 2011) which the state imagines for the marginalised. This research rejected the easy logic that conspiracy theories are ‘irrational’ and identified them as discursive strategies with which soup kitchen service users sought to account for the multi-scalar aspects of society.

Through the technology of behaviour change theory the British government is creating territory in the close-in geographies of everyday life (Whitehead et al. 2011:2819). Consequently, a critical geography of poverty must attend to the subjectivities, as well as the places, produced by precarious conditions. This paper challenges those doing research in such spaces of precarity to recognise the conspiracy theory as a spatial and social device, one whereby those who are treated as ‘irrational’ can claim knowledge that circumvents those discourses which malign them.

Life on the edge is not just materially precarious but also ontologically so, this is because the state appears to feel no imperative to account for autonomous actors on the edge of society; it is instead prepared to conceptualise precarity as nothing more than bare life (Agamben 1998). Ethnographic research which focuses on the most intimate and small-scale geographies of precarity has the potential to reconnect these marginal geographies to the complex multi-scalar geographies of political speech and policy making. Both behavioural psychology and conspiracy theory perform a spatial contortion attempting to operate across both the furthest out and closest in scales of society. This requires an ambitious empirical response: one which works to similarly contort our sense of how the large scale relates to the small scale, and build data which accommodates such complex spatial configurations.

In an era of fake news and alternative truths geographers must attend closely to forms of political speech which attempt to reshape the reality of the world. This should not simply take the form of fact-checking, but should engage directly with the social and political conditions in which such apparently ‘irrational’ narratives are produced. In particular, as with the conspiracy theory literature cited already here, we should not settle for a geopolitical scale without attending in detail to the circulation and life of these narratives. Equally, where we focus on the lives of the marginalised, we must not assume that they do not conceptualise their everyday lives in terms of larger scale political forces.

*One problem with governing via mood is that there is no precise way of controlling who you affect and how. It’s no good saying that the innocent have nothing to fear: fear doesn’t work like that* (Davies 2018:13)

In an article in the *London Review of Books* Davies (2018) has reflected on the official policy of a hostile environment towards migrants in Britain and its similarities with the ‘nudge’-influenced regime of benefit sanctions. The quotation above supports the argument made in this paper that interventions into peoples’ lives at the level of behaviour change is not a strategy which is limited to decision making, rather it produces a wider atmosphere of fear. In this paper the topic has not been fear per se, instead I have argued that the very right to personhood, and the actual ontological security of those who live in precarity is deliberately attacked in order to make territory out of the everyday lives, and bodies, of those who survive with the support of voluntary spaces like the soup kitchen. As researchers, but also as policy makers, we must listen to the political speech that occurs in these sites. Few moments in my research felt more perspective–altering than hearing Cynthia say that they probably were trying to get rid of all the poor people.

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1. In 2009 Brixton Village Market was proposed for demolition. A successful campaign to list it inadvertently led to the transformation of the market into a bourgeois food destination (Johnson-Schlee: 2017). This has made Brixton iconic of gentrification in London. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For a discussion of some of the geographical implications of Winnicott’s notion of the transitional see Aitken and Herman (1997), in particular some sensitive discussion of gender normativity. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Work placements are one of the ways that the state tries to provide experience for people on JSA. Often this means being asked to participate in employment schemes such as doing voluntary work at the behest of your ‘Job Coach’. Individuals are given a specific number of hours and weeks during which they are expected to attend their placement. A range of sanctions can face those who do not participate (Gov.uk 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Chemtrails refer to the conspiracy theory that Aeroplane condensation trails contain chemical and biological agents. The Rothschilds are a banking family who often feature in conspiracy theories as an example of mysterious and influential powers pulling the strings behind global politics. The Rothschilds are Jewish and this conspiracy theory has its origins in anti-semitism (Byford 2008:104) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Accusations of poisoning were often made against small Jewish populations in Europe. This scapegoating and persecution was used to ‘justify’ the massacre of Jewish communities. Girard details one such series of events in 12th century France in the first chapter of *The Scapegoat* (1986), the book develops an account of the way persecutors justify violence in times of crisis. He writes: “Ultimately, the persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society” (Girard 1986:15). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This phrase likely has its origin in a text published by the American Society of Friends (Quakers) in *Speak Truth to Power: A Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence* (1955). This text was influential in the civil rights movement (as were contributors such as Bayard Rustin). The idea echoes in some of Foucault’s final lectures (2008), which considered the role of truth telling in philosophy or Parrhesia. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)