

# Political struggles over the logic of human needs quantification

## Negotiating capitalist welfare futures

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**Abstract:** This article draws on historical and ethnographic research conducted in Portugal to examine how the logic of human needs quantification serves as a central point of political struggle among various social actors, each driven by conflicting political motivations, moral commitments, and valuation debates during periods of crisis. It argues that this logic should be understood as a site of struggle where different actors delineate the material, moral, and political boundaries that shape the fulfillment of basic needs, the allocation of resources, and the organization and management of social hierarchies regarding needs and their carriers. Furthermore, the article demonstrates that political struggles over the logic of human needs quantification during each crisis have been crucial in negotiating capitalist welfare futures.

**Keywords:** crisis, hunger, Portugal, quantification, struggle, welfare

This article explores the uses of numbers and rhetoric surrounding quantification in representing hunger, food deprivation, and livelihood impoverishment during crisis conjunctures in the post-industrial town of Setúbal, Portugal.<sup>1</sup> It analyzes how various social actors, including governmental agents, local authorities, labor leaders, church authorities, and ordinary people, framed their quantification-based representations and discourses about basic human needs following antagonistic political calculations, moral investments, and valuation arguments. This article argues that the tensions arising from the debates concerning how to address the emergence of hunger (during the 1980s crisis) or the “specter of hunger” (in the austerity crisis) express a political struggle over the logic of hu-

man needs quantification. Below, I explain what I mean by this and suggest that these struggles play a critical role in shaping the negotiation of hegemonic capitalist welfare futures.

The understanding of human need as an individual and quantifiable category has been examined by various scholars, particularly in the fields of humanitarianism, social history, and critical social policy (Dean 2020; Glasman 2020; Simmons 2015). Recently, Joel Glasman (2020: 2) has charted the evolution of what he refers to as the “bookkeeping of human suffering on a world scale.” He emphasizes that, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the advancement of technologies and infrastructures designed to quantify need enabled the establishment of standards, allowing for the measurement of populations



against them and comparisons across cultures. These efforts claimed rooted scientific certainty and humanitarian impartiality. Glasman points out a significant paradox: the increasing need for quantification often corresponded with a diminishing sense of its universality. As the global infrastructure for measuring need within humanitarianism grew, the definitions of what constitutes human need became increasingly minimal. In other words, the broader the practice of quantifying need, the narrower the scope of need provisions. This aspect aligns with the emphasis of critical social policy scholars on how the notion of human need lost its policy and political significance in the wake of neoliberal economic globalization during the 1970s (Langan 1998). Instead, the focus shifted toward selective social spending, bolstered by a narrative that promoted self-sufficiency and the efficient delivery of public services. This trend was marked by an overwhelming influx of data—an “avalanche of numbers,” to use Ian Hacking’s (1991) term—which brought about disciplinary and controlling effects. Examples of this can be seen in national and transnational organizations’ indicators and best practices, which often revolve around benchmarking and performance measures (Dean 2020).

The abovementioned contributions offer valuable insights into the evolving global technologies, policy frameworks, and infrastructures related to quantifying human needs. However, in this article, I focus on the historically and contextually embedded ways in which the logic of human needs quantification becomes a focal point for political struggle among social actors. My emphasis on the politics surrounding quantification-based rhetoric and reasoning related to human needs is grounded in the idea that any quantified understanding of reality is always influenced by specific sociohistorical contexts and shaped by various forms of interpretive and political work (Fourcade 2011). Therefore, quantification-based arguments can serve as crucial tools for highlighting the contested and shifting boundaries between market and state provisioning, the relationships and

responsibilities between citizens and the state, moral obligations across generations, redistributive dynamics within households, and the impact of government welfare programs. I propose that we view the logic of human needs quantification as a site of struggle where different actors envision the material, moral, and political frameworks that regulate how basic needs are fulfilled, how resources are allocated and distributed, and how social hierarchies of needs and their carriers are organized and managed. Within a capitalist framework, the logic of human needs quantification is always potentially a site of contestation, given the existence of competing visions for balancing the extractive and redistributive aspects of welfare states (Offe 1984).

In recent decades, quantification has gained significant attention across multiple academic disciplines (e.g., Mennicken and Salais 2022). Anthropologists have extensively studied the rise of quantification in modern life, focusing on the intricate relationship between statistical knowledge and colonial power (Cohn 1987), the cultures surrounding auditing and the emerging ethics of accountability (Strathern 2000), how numerical information is perceived in financial contexts (Zaloom 2003), and the relational applications of numbers and mathematical reasoning across various social domains (Guyer et al. 2010). They have also analyzed how quantification and commensuration affect national and transnational governance structures (Merry 2011; Merry et al. 2015; Shore and Wright 2015). Anthropological studies have shown that numbers, indicators, and quantification technologies are far from abstract notions; they are tangible, embodied, moral, and relational phenomena that operate within distinct frameworks of calculation, meaning, and values (Neiburg et al. 2023).

Building upon this idea, this article envisions the use of numbers and quantification-based discourses to represent basic human needs as a *language of contention* (Roseberry 1994) deployed by agents with antagonistic interests, thus rendering the potential hegemonic values and ends (Wise 1995) tied to shifting projects of welfare provision a much more complex process than

anticipated. This article shows that in each crisis conjuncture, the political struggles over the logic of human need quantification have played a critical role in the experience, perception, and negotiation of capitalist welfare futures. Drawing upon Michelle Murphy's work regarding capitalist welfare futures (Murphy 2017), the article points out how specific quantified rhetorical strategies, numerical-based claims, and the (sometimes metaphorical or instrumental) use of various forms of aggregation set out the conditions for upholding or challenging hegemonic capitalist welfare futures.

In what follows, I first address the crisis in the Setúbal region during the 1980s, where hunger emerged as a key issue for various national actors, including the Catholic Church and the government. I highlight how quantification-based representations and arguments concerning hunger and food deprivation influenced priorities regarding who fulfills needs, and under which capitalist welfare frameworks. The region experienced significant industrial downsizing due to the oil crisis and internal factors, amid a shift from a socialist-oriented revolution to compliance with external neoliberal demands, particularly after joining the European Economic Community (EEC). This created a tension between preserving welfare rights from the 1974 Carnation Revolution and meeting neoliberal requirements, often at the expense of visibility for hunger in Setúbal. Moving to the austerity crisis, I examine how government rhetoric frequently sidelined people's basic needs as the focus shifted toward fiscal needs and economic growth. The government's prioritization of balancing the fiscal deficit and repaying external debt influenced social and welfare policies. This was framed through "evidence-based governance" paired with a moralistic narrative, which promoted a utilitarian and individualistic view of need while reinforcing a shift of welfare responsibilities to the third sector. In conclusion, I explore the relationship between political struggles over the logic of human needs quantification and the negotiation of capitalist welfare futures.

## The city of hunger

Various authors have described welfare provisioning in Portugal as the interaction between a weak welfare state and a strong welfare society (Ferrera 1996; Santos 1990). The Portuguese welfare system is historically shaped by unique national circumstances and the pressure to align with broader capitalist shifts in the global economy. One of the most significant elements in twentieth-century Portuguese history was the long-lasting dictatorship known as *Estado Novo*, which lasted from 1926 to 1974. The impacts of this regime have persisted even after its end. These include the resilience of a rural economy, limited industrialization leading to weak trade unions and labor movements, a transition to a post-Fordist economy without a prior Fordist phase, fragmented social policy development based on the principle of subsidiarity, and the lack of a consolidated culture of rights. During the *Estado Novo*, social protection was guided by the principle of subsidiarity, with the state not intervening in individual welfare. Families and basic social groups, such as professional associations, were considered responsible for providing social assistance. The government did not recognize this responsibility, and when families struggled, charitable aid, mainly from Catholic institutions, stepped in. Needs assessment relied on a moralized view of deservingness based on character and behavior.

Centralized welfare state provisioning in Portugal gained significance following the 1974 Carnation Revolution, which was characterized by intense contestation among political parties over the country's social and economic future. Aiming to establish a universal welfare state, the 1977 introduction of a Unified Social Security System integrated social welfare and established regional centers. Significant measures implemented in the late 1970s and early 1980s included a social pension for individuals aged 65 and older, an experimental unemployment benefit for all unemployed workers, and new family benefit regulations. These steps helped create a more integrated and equitable system, but led to

a sharp increase in public expenditure during a time of economic constraints in Western Europe.

Following the oil crises of the 1970s, Portugal experienced a severe economic downturn, leading to a growing public deficit. In 1983, Prime Minister Mário Soares formed a coalition between the Socialist and Social Democratic parties known as the Central Block. The IMF provided financial assistance under strict conditions, including a 12 percent devaluation of the *escudo*,<sup>2</sup> reduced import taxes, significant price hikes on essential goods (including bread, vegetable oils, animal feed, milk, sugar, fertilizers, and oil products), and cuts in public investment and wages. By 1984, real wages had declined by 10 percent, record inflation had reached around 30 percent, and unemployment had soared to approximately 10 percent, despite a decrease in the current account deficit to 6 percent.

During the 1960s and 1970s, due to foreign investment, Setúbal played a crucial role in the growth of heavy industry, including shipyards, metallurgy, fertilizers, cement, and paper. The city offered jobs to many landless agricultural workers who lived in the south, where the economy was dominated by large estates (*latifúndio*). However, the economic crisis of the 1980s put these workers in a vulnerable position as they moved from agricultural labor to wage labor (Rosa 1998). During the 1980s, Setúbal experienced a significant decline in its industrial sector, leading to a rise in unemployment and job losses. The district's unemployment rate increased from 10 percent in 1981 to 20 percent in 1986, surpassing the national average. The district's top five companies were primarily in the metallurgical industry, employing a total of 16,245 workers. The unemployment rate in this sector was particularly significant, as it accounted for nearly half of all industrial labor, totaling 28,000 jobs. In addition, in the first half of 1984, 20 percent of all labor disputes were due to non-payment of wages (Torres 2001: 78). Setúbal gained notoriety in national and international media as the "city of hunger."

The Catholic Church in Setúbal, led by Bishop D. Manuel Martins, was the first to publicly speak

out about the increasing number of households facing hunger due to delayed wages by major industrial employers. In 1982, Bishop D. Manuel Martins convened a meeting with 18 priests to discuss the crisis in Setúbal, and a document summarizing their discussion was subsequently released to the media. The document estimated that there were "more than 13,000 workers with wage delays" and that "unemployed people, in growing numbers, go to the churches to ask for help" (Duarte 1997: 112). Between 1982 and 1984, over 85 companies closed, and in March of 1984, 36,970 workers still experienced wage delays (Duarte 1997: 113). Despite the population's hardships, the government's official position was to "tighten the belt" and reduce social spending.

On January 11, 1984, the Bishop of Setúbal established the Fund of Solidarity (*Fundo de Solidariedade*). This fund would rely on donations from people nationwide and be distributed by local church parishes. Then in March the bishop announced, in a letter to the diocese members, that 18–25 March would be a "Week of Solidarity." The purpose of the week was to raise funds nationwide to help those facing unemployment, wage delays, and uncertainty about their future. In March 1984, Francisco Lobo, the president of Setúbal's municipality, wrote a letter to the prime minister, bringing to his attention the dire situation of the region:

Weekly, many dozens of residents seek the mayor to try to find solutions to their problems. Finding employment is the reason why so many come to us. Cases of hunger arise. . . . *Their frequency reflects the image of the country. The prisons are overpopulated, and the number of suicides is worryingly increasing; these indexes deserve reflection from your Excellency. If the demographic curve of a nation's economic indicator can fluctuate sharply in a few years or even months, the consequences of a desperate life can be irrecoverable. A generation, at least, can be irremediably scarred if the storm of a crisis or cataclysm falls upon it. A nation's economic recovery*

*is not only achieved by reducing expenses but also by creating sources of work.* [emphasis added] (Lobo 2008: 86–88)

Despite numerous voices raising alarming concerns, Prime Minister Mário Soares denied the existence of hunger in Setúbal for an extended period. In June 1984, Alfredo Barroso, the then-state secretary of the Ministers Council, exposed this denial in an article published in *Diário de Notícias*: “The specter of hunger is being claimed only to create mass social and political unrest. Hunger is not being used according to its scientific and rigorous meaning, not in its real sense. . . . There is no hunger or malnutrition in a global sense, with the potential to lead to death, as some have claimed” (Duarte 1997: 121).

The government associated hunger with severe malnutrition and viewed it as a problem confined to Africa or Latin America, rather than in countries like Portugal, which were on the verge of joining the affluent European club.<sup>3</sup> Alfredo Barroso argued that Portugal had achieved “high consumption levels,” indicating improved living conditions (Duarte 1997: 121). He urged unions, the Catholic Church, and the Communist Party to publicly acknowledge that no government can perform miracles or feed citizens with empty rhetoric (Duarte 1997: 121). Six months later, the bishop responded through *Comércio do Porto*, stating:

Without being in Ethiopia or some African regions, we live in situations of need, lack a convenient food diet, and have enormous difficulties feeding entire families. . . . This hunger exists and is highly abundant in Setúbal. *At this moment, more than 200,000 people live in conditions of wage delays. I know of situations in which this delay has reached seven months* [emphasis added].

During the second semester of 1984, the government created a Plan of Social Emergency (Plano de Emergência Social) to be carried out by the regional center of Social Security. The

plan had three main objectives: providing food assistance to children, young people, and the elderly; offering economic support to impoverished households; and implementing various temporary work initiatives. The plan was funded from the second half of 1984 until 1990 by specific amendments to the national budget, totaling over two million *contos*<sup>4</sup> (Faria 2009: 236). In an interview with *Radio Renascença* towards the end of 1984, the government announced that the Plan of Social Emergency was a vital response to severe social difficulties that could not be ignored. However, it was not a structural solution to these problems. At a district meeting of the Setúbal Union of Trade Unions on November 28, 1985, José Encarnação, the then-general secretary, stated that there were more than 100,000 people in the district without their means of subsistence assured (Torres 1996: 65).

The same year, local media reported a heated debate between D. Manuel Martins and Setúbal’s civil governor, Mata-Cacéres, who denied hunger in the region. They accused the bishop of having political ties to the Communist Party due to his support for priests in factories and unions. Despite attempts to discredit him, the Bishop of Setúbal maintained that hunger was a genuine concern:

*Please, do not tell me I don’t have sociological data. I do have, and they are infallible. I live in the middle of the people; I go around the dioceses, contact poor people, and listen to people. I go to their houses and see their tables empty. . . . the poor of Portugal do not live; they vegetate. They are around 75 percent of the population. There are hundreds without wages or with wage delays.* The cost of living is unbearable. A worker with a normal family, paying for transport, house rent, children’s education, etc., cannot honestly feed his family. Most of our people fill their bellies but don’t eat. The state exists so that social justice is practiced so all citizens can access the essential goods for a dignified life [emphasis added]. (Duarte 1997: 131)

In the last trimester of 1985, before accession to the EEC, the prime minister insisted that “Portugal has obvious needs, which has always been the case. But hunger—what is called hunger—no. Incidentally, today’s shortages are no more significant than in the past” (Duarte 1997: 132).

In 1985, a right-wing government led by the Social Democratic Party assumed power. Following the country’s accession to the EEC in 1986, it launched the Integrated Operation for the Development of the Setúbal Peninsula (OID/PS) from 1989 to 1993. This initiative aimed to revitalize the industrial sector by attracting investments and enhancing regional infrastructure, supported by substantial EEC funding. The AutoEuropa project in Palmela represented 82 percent of the total investment and generated four thousand jobs. However, while the OID bolstered Setúbal’s reliance on foreign capital, it also fostered a secure employment niche in the automobile sector, often to the detriment of a larger number of workers in informal, precarious, and low-wage positions (Guerra and Rodrigues 1996).

During the 1980s crisis, the Portuguese government’s reluctance to acknowledge hunger was driven by a desire to distance the country from stereotypical portrayals of the “third world.” This stance threatened the capitalist, neoliberal narrative of modernity associated with joining the EEC. The government’s actions and policies were grounded on the hypothesis of Portugal’s increasing “consumption levels” (i.e., the relation between what consumers spend and consumer income). Reliance on consumption levels for the district of Setúbal implied a gross mystification of the reality on the ground, because the district of Setúbal is included in the greater area of Lisbon—a region which, being the capital city of a highly centralized country, has had historically high levels of consumption. The selective use of one official indicator obscured the reality of hunger. External pressures from the IMF and EEC led to welfare measures prioritizing targeted assistance over universal solutions, like the Plan of Social Emergency and OID. In response, Bishop D. Manuel Martins

challenged the government’s underlying logic of human needs quantification. The bishop argued for the legitimacy of a bottom-up and contextual quantified knowledge of reality as a language of contention. The aim was to criticize systemic issues, such as wage delays and deindustrialization, which fostered a framework of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003) and shaped a capitalist welfare future characterized by the prominence of thin approaches to need and needing (Drover and Kerans 1993: 11–13).

As highlighted at the outset of this section, Portugal encountered significant challenges in developing and expanding a late-emerging welfare state grounded in universal provisioning. This endeavor coincided with the repercussions of the 1970s oil crisis, debt obligations to transnational creditor institutions, and the requirements of the EEC for market liberalization. These factors created a tension between the country’s ambitious goal of fostering social solidarity to fulfill the welfare aspirations of its citizens—aspirations long suppressed during the years of dictatorship—and the prevailing economic conditions. This tension played a pivotal role in the political struggles surrounding the logic of human needs quantification during the 1980s crisis in Setúbal. On one side, the Catholic Church, labor unions, and the municipality’s president advocated for an expansive vision of the state’s responsibilities towards its people, aligned with a universalistic assessment of needs. Their goal was to reinforce a culture of rights and citizenship entitlements. Conversely, the government’s actions (or lack thereof) and local actors contributed to the emergence of welfare neoliberalization in a country that had yet to achieve a fully developed universal welfare state. As elaborated in the next section, the political struggles over the logic of human needs quantification during the austerity crisis will underscore the ongoing tension between a progressive vision of social solidarity rooted in citizenship and social rights and a framework focused on selective and targeted assistance.

## The specter of hunger

Setúbal experienced significant repercussions from the 2008 financial crisis and was among the areas of Portugal most affected by austerity policies. After the crisis, Portugal entered a four-year structural adjustment program with the Troika<sup>5</sup> in May 2011, which resulted in a 78 billion-euro bailout, contingent upon substantial cuts to state expenditure and measures of internal devaluation (Blyth 2013) focused on labor precarization, severe tax increases, and reductions in welfare benefits. The government managed the crisis by a rhetoric centered on the “imperative of reducing the deficit” as an “ideological conductor” (Hall et al. 1978) to reinforce state legitimacy and facilitate broader changes in the public welfare model. The right-wing coalition government that implemented the structural adjustment program used the austerity mandate of reducing the deficit as an opportunity to accelerate the neoliberal restructuring of the economy and the welfare state. In contrast to other southern European countries, the Portuguese government was determined to demonstrate that austerity was effective, striving to “go beyond the Troika” (Moury and Standing 2017). The necessity and inevitability of austerity were conveyed through political rhetoric, framing it as a technical fix aimed at achieving fiscal sustainability while presenting it as a national project focused on moralizing state functions, especially those related to social welfare and redistribution.

In October 2011, during a parliamentary debate where the main topic of discussion was the national budget for 2012, against critiques from the opposition political parties, Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho assumed the violence and severity of austerity policies but added: “The measures are mine, but the deficit that forces them is not mine.” This brief response outlines two key strategies the government would come to adopt during the austerity conjuncture. The first was blaming the previous administration for not managing “the levels of the public debt,” which had left the country in a “national con-

dition of emergency” (i.e., a state of exception), thereby redefining austerity policies as a solution to a domestic issue rather than because of external pressures. Secondly, the government portrayed itself as the nation’s savior, claiming to be addressing problems created by the former government’s irresponsible decisions, which had led individuals, families, and households to be “living beyond their means.” In October 2011, during a press conference organized by the newspaper *Diário Económico*, the Prime Minister stated that Portugal could only emerge from the crisis by getting poorer (i.e., accepting a reduction in living standards and needs satisfaction): “There’s no point in demagoguing about this; we know that we’re only going to get out of this situation by impoverishing ourselves—in relative terms, in absolute terms even, as our Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is falling.”

In September 2012, with an unemployment rate over 15 percent, the Prime Minister proposed changes to the *Taxa Social Única*,<sup>6</sup> reducing employer contributions from 23.75 percent to 18 percent while increasing workers’ contributions from 11 percent to 18 percent. The Prime Minister justified this proposal as a response to claims that the economic downturn and unemployment rise were due to “excessive austerity” rather than high labor costs. In the context of increasing employment precariousness and mass unemployment, the notion that reducing labor costs is the only viable solution to decrease unemployment rates sparked criticism from various sectors of society. Eugénio Fonseca, the then-president of Caritas,<sup>7</sup> stated, “The government has an extreme obsession with overcoming the deficit at an intolerable speed, given the conditions the country is facing.” Representatives from Catholic parishes, including those in Setúbal, expressed alarming concerns about the rising number of people needing help with food and funds for housing, utilities, and medication.<sup>8</sup> On 15 September 2012, over one million people participated in the largest demonstration since the Carnation Revolution of 1974. The newspaper *Público* highlighted that three generations were present

at the demonstration—grandparents, parents, and their children—emphasizing the attack on intergenerational welfare solidarity represented by the controversial proposal to change the TSU parameters.

After weeks of protest, the government announced that the proposed changes to the TSU parameters would be replaced with other measures. Due to austerity's severe impacts, public demonstrations decreased, and the Constitutional Court became a key opponent of austerity, which the government claimed was necessary to "reduce the deficit to restore growth." In 2013, the Court ruled that suspending holiday pay for private sector workers and a tax on unemployment and sickness benefits violated the principle of equality. In response, the Prime Minister stated that the Court's rejection of budget rules worth 1.3 billion euros jeopardized the process, requiring intensified state restructuring and cuts to social security, health, education, and public companies.

On 30 April 2013, the government presented the Budget Strategy Document, which proposed a cut of 1.3 billion euros in social spending in 2014—the largest reduction since 1977. The government emphasized the need to "reform the state and rethink its social functions to achieve fiscal sustainability." Such a need had been part of the government's desire to "go beyond the Troika." To achieve legitimacy for a broader technocratic approach to welfare retrenchment, using the argument that transnational organizations would provide "objective" and "value-free indicators and expertise" to guide such a project, the government in 2012 commissioned the IMF to prepare a study (IMF 2013) focused on how best to proceed with selected options for expenditure reform. The study recommendations, which included reducing the government's wage bill and social protection spending, were diligently implemented by the government in 2013 and 2014. The imperative of reducing the deficit was leveraged to support a technocratic approach to welfare reform, which was morally translated according to the principles of scarcity and sustainability.

The goal of "reforming the state and its social functions" was accomplished through technocratic spending cuts, which were portrayed as unavoidable. The government aimed to focus welfare support on those deemed morally deserving or "those in greater need." This approach suggested that reforms, including expenditure cuts, stricter eligibility criteria for welfare benefits, and tax increases, were essential due to the state's financial crisis, characterized by a lack of resources. Additionally, assisting only those "in greater need" was justified to optimize the limited resources available, often described as a way to "make the social security system sustainable." Much like what occurred in Britain (Clarke and Newman 2012), the Portuguese government described its restrictive welfare policies as promoting a fairer allocation and distribution of resources. Focusing on those "in greater need" led to the implementation of a specific policy response. In 2011, the Ministry of Solidarity and Social Security launched the Program of Social Emergency, which aimed to operate between 2011 and 2014. This initiative sought to "combat the lack of efficiency" in state redistributive practices and "change the paradigm of social responses to severe material deprivation." The program targeted specific population segments, such as impoverished households, long-term unemployed individuals, the elderly, and people with disabilities. It outlined various policy projects to be executed in collaboration with third-sector institutions and civil society organizations, including the Program of Food Emergency, which aimed to expand the network of soup kitchens. As a result of these efforts, the number of soup kitchens in Portugal surged from 62 in 2011 to 843 in 2015.

During the austerity adjustment program, there was a significant reduction in state expenditure on non-contributory social benefits, but state funding for the third sector increased. The Social Emergency Program was crucial in this shift, providing more funding to third-sector institutions, streamlining legal procedures for equipment acquisition, offering state-funded training for directors and managers, and es-



tablishing a micro-credit line. This shift in the model and rationale of welfare redistribution, with the state delegating some of its responsibilities to the third sector, reinforced a broader philosophy of charity and support for the disadvantaged in welfare provision (Joaquim 2015).

In Setúbal, the fetishization of the deficit, disguised as a moralization project of the welfare redistributive functions of the state, reinstated the “specter of hunger” among most of the population, particularly impoverished working-class households. People’s everyday practices and efforts in the pursuit of livelihood and their critical reasoning express bottom-up dynamics of co-constitution *and* refusal vis-à-vis the government’s “numerical representation of social goods and the calculation of social progress” (Lampland 1995: 233). Austerity policies placed individuals in challenging positions, forcing them to make livelihood trade-offs that often resulted in ongoing tensions and contradictions. For instance, some of my informants have had to choose between paying rent and saving money for essential items like food and medicine. Others have found creative ways to transfer their pension funds to support younger, unemployed family members. Some have converted their homes into assets by renting them out to multiple generations living under one roof. Meanwhile, others have had to emigrate to earn enough money to cover their younger relatives’ educational expenses. Additionally, some people have resorted to Catholic food banks for the first time, finding ways to hide this from their loved ones due to the shame and stigma associated with it. Others balanced multiple jobs to generate enough household income, often neglecting their medical needs. These compromises, aimed at achieving “marginal gains” (Guyer 2004), have resulted in conflicting expectations of autonomy and independence across generations, creating further burdens for individuals trying to provide hope for the younger generation. Older generations felt drained of their resources at a time when they expected support from their sons and daughters. In contrast, younger generations ex-

perienced their prolonged dependency on their parents and grandparents as a form of material and moral failure, highlighting their inability to attain a stable and respected adulthood through secure employment in the production sphere and a lifestyle in line with their middle-class aspirations of home ownership and economic independence in the consumption sphere. The combined effects of austerity policies of welfare rescaling, mass unemployment, lack of public investment in care and health services, and the breakdown of expectations of intergenerational projects of upward social mobility led to a “refamiliarization” of welfare and the reinforcement of the household as the main shock absorber of austerity policies.

Simultaneously, ordinary people also articulated critical reasonings that reflected a refusal vis-à-vis the underpinnings of the government’s framework of reducing the deficit, exposing how the latter generated feelings of state abandonment and reinforced regional dynamics of subordination shaped by the unequal distribution of sacrifices. The government’s decision to make the imperative of reducing the deficit the final aim of political action and welfare policy, rather than supporting people’s needs, aspirations, and expectations of livelihood improvement across generations, reinforced the perception that Setúbal was a “sacrificed region,” with only AutoEuropa employees enjoying decent wages and job security. Feelings of abandonment and forced sacrifices echoed memories of the 1980s crisis, when the government used the misleading indicator of “higher consumption levels” to obscure the reality of hunger among Setúbal’s population. At the same time, my interlocutors employed numbers and quantitative rhetoric to challenge official figures regarding livelihood impoverishment and growing deprivation. Many referred to the government and Troika’s “fancy numbers” to conceal the harsh realities of daily survival or as evidence of the state’s neglect. Their discourse and critique of austerity policies reflected their struggles to fulfill basic needs, encapsulated in phrases like “lack of funds,” “reduction in welfare benefits,” “months

of unemployment,” “stretching finances until the end of the month,” “waiting lists for food assistance,” “taxes to pay,” and “unpaid mortgage payments.” Moreover, my interlocutors firmly rejected the government’s focus on “fiscal consolidation” and “public debt,” which they felt reduced their lives to mere statistics (*as if our lives could be reduced to numbers*). There was a prevailing sentiment that the country was being treated like an Excel spreadsheet—this was particularly evident among left-wing groups and most of my informants. When they expressed their experiences of being treated as just a number by the government and the state, it was driven by a desire to hold authorities accountable, counteract despotism and arbitrariness, and highlight social and economic inequality (Mennicken and Espeland 2019: 224).

During the austerity crisis, the focus on sovereign debt as the primary national collective obligation overshadowed the harsh realities of food deprivation and impoverishment. This shift prioritized a “universe of calculi” marked by violence and abstraction over people’s needs, moralities, and social interactions (Bear 2015: 178). Efforts to “go beyond the Troika” through structural welfare reforms, supported by the IMF’s “objective indicators” and “value-free expertise,” further subordinated people’s needs to a future of austerity. The government justified this approach with a moral framework centered on “evidence-based governance,” which relies on trust in technical rationality and the idea that numbers can make political actions clear and objective. However, this perspective is misleading, as it ultimately places the burden of compliance on the governed, regardless of the source of the indicators (Merry 2016: 11–12).

The political struggles over the logic of human needs quantification during the austerity crisis were influenced by the government’s ability to present austerity measures as an appropriate solution to domestic issues. This involved a technocratic approach to deficit reduction, part of a broader initiative to moralize welfare. This initiative prioritized fiscal sustainability over basic human needs, such as food provision,

framing the need to “pay off debts” and “reduce the deficit” as a national obligation. The right-wing coalition government effectively used the language of deficit reduction, masking it as a moral project to reform the state’s welfare functions further and enhance the neoliberalization of welfare provision. This led to establishing a new “architecture of need” (Haney 2002), which limited the recognition of human needs in public policy to minimal, charity-based assistance for the very poorest individuals. As a result of severe economic hardship, cuts to welfare, and widespread impoverishment, hunger became a pressing concern for working-class households in Setúbal. These households absorbed the impacts of austerity policies, leading to efforts and sacrifices on the part of their members to make ends meet. Consequently, austerity measures prompted a retreat to household and family-based welfare provisioning. This reliance was not a new development in the country’s history; rather, it reflected a legacy that had never been fully addressed by establishing a solid, centralized welfare system.

## Conclusion

This article, comparing the 1980s and the austerity crises, examines how, in moments of uncertainty, disruption, and instability, social actors used numbers and quantification-based rhetoric to argue for the legitimacy of different pragmatic, moral, and ideological underpinnings to intervene in the restriction or expansion of social policy responses while negotiating capitalist welfare futures. The historically embedded tensions and ambiguities surrounding the shifting boundaries that determine which needs to be counted, how they should be defined and fulfilled, and by whom reflect a political struggle over the logic of human need quantification. The logic of human need quantification is an object of dispute because it embodies social content that is both past-directed and future-oriented, encompassing material life conditions, access to needs satisfiers, claims-making instruments, and enti-

lements. Focusing on struggles over the logic of human need quantification enables us to jointly theorize how capitalist external requirements, historical legacies, and conjunctural contingencies constitute interacting causality factors that shape the negotiation of global hegemonic macroeconomic welfare futures and heterogeneous and historically embedded realities.

In contrast with the idea of a fundamental shift after the 2008 financial crisis and the emergence of a “new age of austerity welfare,” this article provides evidence that negotiating capitalist welfare futures is always both a continuation of the past and a break with it. During the 1980s, the Portuguese government’s reluctance to acknowledge hunger as a reality was driven by a desire to avoid the stereotype of a “third world country” and to uphold the aspirations of modernity after joining the EEC. The focus on consumption levels, particularly in Setúbal, obscured the true extent of hunger and food deprivation. Influenced by economic pressures from the oil crisis, debt obligations, and market liberalization mandates, the government’s policies leaned toward targeted welfare measures rather than universal provisioning. During the 1980s crisis, a conflict emerged between advocates for expansive social rights, such as the Catholic Church and labor unions, and governmental actions that fostered welfare neoliberalization. This tension highlights the struggle between the ideal of social solidarity based on citizenship rights and a corporatist approach to selective assistance. During the austerity crisis, the government framed deficit reduction as a moral obligation, prioritizing fiscal sustainability over basic human needs and reinforcing neoliberal welfare reform. This approach limited the recognition of basic human needs to minimal charity for the poorest. Austerity policies led to increased economic hardship, with working-class households in Setúbal absorbing the impact, resulting in livelihood struggles and intergenerational trade-offs. This reliance on family and household welfare systems reflects a historical legacy, highlighting an incomplete transition from traditional welfare practices to

a more centralized state-supported system. Ordinary people in Setúbal challenged the deficit discourse, arguing that an overemphasis on indicators masked issues like state neglect, economic hardship, resource inequality, and the enduring experience of sacrifice.

Following each historical period of crisis, the emerging dominant model of welfare provision has recurrently taken for granted the nature and extent of basic human needs, producing projects and programs of social emergency whose frameworks reproduce long-lasting inequalities, exclusions, and the non-neglectable feelings and perceptions of being a constitutive part of a “sacrificed region.” In Portugal’s recent history, the negotiation of capitalist welfare futures has been prominently shaped by historical compromises and struggles between failed projects of state legibility and rationalization (Scott 1999; Stapleford 2009) disguised as moral projects of fairness and the unfinished aspirational projects of greater distributive equity from below. Such a complex interplay indicates the need to take into account the embedded politics, forms of calculations, and historical contingency shaping emerging welfare models in times of crisis to elicit how the latter carry the legacies of prior inequalities, ultimately informing the paths taken to achieve more inclusive and equitable provisioning systems in the future.

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## Notes

1. This article utilizes historical sources, bibliographic and document analysis, and 16 months of ethnographic research conducted in the post-industrial town of Setúbal, Portugal. Setúbal, situated 50 km south of the country's capital, plays a unique role in Portugal's history of capitalist and industrial development. It embodies the rise and fall of heavy industry in the country. It has been significantly influenced by recurring social and economic crises, which have left a lasting impact on the collective memory of its residents. Many people feel that crisis has been a persistent aspect of their lives, affecting their access to basic human needs. The weight of past crises and their recurrence shape how people perceive reality and influence their actions towards creating change across generations. The ethnographic research was conducted in the context of the ERC Advanced Grant Project Grassroots Economics: meaning, project and practice in the pursuit of livelihood (GRECO), based at the University of Barcelona.
2. The national currency before the introduction of the Euro in 2002.
3. Portugal requested to join the EEC in 1977.
4. *Contos* was a colloquial way of referring to two million *escudos*.
5. During the European Debt Crisis, the term "Troika" was commonly used in the media, political discussions, and public discourse to refer to the decision-making group of the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.
6. The Single Social Tax (TSU) is a Social Security contribution measure provided for in the Portuguese State Budget and applied to workers and companies.
7. Caritas is a confederation of 162 national Catholic relief, development, and social service organizations operating in over 200 countries and territories worldwide. It was founded in Portugal in 1945.
8. A 2012 survey by the Portuguese Catholic University and national food banks revealed that 52 percent of welfare-receiving households had a monthly income of 400 euros or less, with 53 percent stating their income was inadequate. One in five reported sometimes going without food, and 28 percent needed extra money for food by the end of the month. Between 2014 and 2016, the percentage of people going a whole day without eating increased from 18 percent to 26 percent (Correia and Costa 2017).

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