The Morality of Inequality: Charity Encounters and the Making of "Real Need" in Austerity Portugal

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Abstract

Austerity welfare reforms, often justified as a way of increasing efficiency, fairness and technical targeting in the provision of "those who are really in need", intensified the transfer of welfare state provisioning responsibilities to private and not-for-profit organizations, which has been accompanied by the rising prominence of religious-based charity organizations as welfare providers. In this article I focus on the administrative interactions between volunteers and claimants that mediate the allocation and distribution of food charity provisioning in a Catholic parish. The analysis developed in this article suggests that under austerity, basic human needs are refashioned as an anti-politics device instrumental in the erosion of economic citizenship, capabilities and entitlements, ultimately enabling the simultaneous technical and moral legitimation of inequality and its outcomes.

Keywords: austerity, charity, inequality, needs, Portugal

Introduction

The recent history of Portugal was shaped by severe austerity processes of dispossession which accelerated ongoing processes of neoliberal state restructuring (Hespanha and Portugal 2001), shaping modalities of distribution and possibilities of citizenship belonging, and instruments of claims-making and capacity-building.[1] Austerity welfare reforms, often justified as a way of increasing efficiency, fairness and technical targeting in the provision of "those who are re-

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1 In 2011 Portugal signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Troika (the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund) binding the country to a four-year plan of austerity medicine in exchange for a €78 billion bail-out. Between 2011 and 2014, the government implemented severe cuts to state spending, harsh tax increases and reduction of welfare benefits. Like other countries on the indebted periphery of the Eurozone, Portuguese policies of austerity entailed measures of "internal devaluation" (Blyth 2013) – wage repression, precarious employment and mass unemploy-

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ally in need", intensified the transfer of welfare state provisioning responsibilities to private and not-for-profit organizations. This has been accompanied by the rising prominence of religious-based charity organizations as welfare providers. In Portugal, Catholic charities became critical sites for the allocation and distribution of provisioning resources of various kinds (i.e. material and immaterial) for those confronting a severe crisis of social reproduction as a consequence of welfare cuts, withdrawal of state services, increasing conditionality and rising unemployment. The transfer of redistribution responsibilities from the state to charity organizations has enhanced the erosion of formal citizenship rights as a distributive criterion. Increasingly, as a consequence of the decoupling of basic needs fulfilment (food, shelter, health) from a framework of rights, entitlement to resources is defined and validated according to technical criteria, measurement typologies and the moral qualification of behaviours. As I show in this article, the deployment of such criteria in assessing the worth of needs, and of claimants, contributes primarily to recast basic human needs as an anti-politics[2] device instrumental in sustaining and legitimizing the anti-distributive tenets of the austerity economic and political project.[3]

In this article, I focus on the administrative and relational interactions between volunteers and claimants that mediate the allocation and distribution of food charity provisioning in a Catholic parish. I show that food charity provisioning is strongly determined by how claimants' needs are evaluated and valued by volunteers, according to scales quantifying claimants' income and moral frameworks of deservingness. Claimants' access to food provisioning is made conditional upon volunteers' evaluative quantification of the claimant's financial livelihood conditions and the moral valuation of the claimant's behaviour, conduct and choices. Measurement and behaviour are the two main mutually reinforcing criteria, enabling and enhancing the

ment – contributing to the most violent and rapid transfer of income from labour to capital in democratic Portugal (Reis et al. 2013).

2 I am drawing inspiration from Ferguson's (1994) notion of "anti-politics", a term used to account for the paradoxical outcomes of failed developmental projects against poverty in Lesotho. The author examines how the language and practices of development framed by the merits of "technical solutions to technical problems" contributed to depoliticizing modalities of resource allocation and distribution while expanding bureaucratic state power. In the Portuguese austerity conjuncture, the anti-politics of basic human needs is primarily defined by how the technical imperatives of debt repayment are embedded in a "hyper-moralized" (Muehlebach 2016, p. 5) language and category of needs, which contributes to masking a broader reconfiguration of welfare state provisioning and of the mutual obligations and responsibilities between citizens and the state.

3 I understand austerity as an economic project primarily centred on the implementation of measures of internal devaluation to tackle government debt (Blyth 2013), and also as a political framework facilitating the reshaping of capital and labour relations through the rescaling of the welfare state and the unmaking of social reproduction expectations, entitlements and claims (Bear 2015; Knight 2015; Knight and Stewart 2016).

discretionary power of volunteers to classify, order, compare and rank the worth of claimants and their needs carriers. Building upon recent anthropological relational approaches to the state (Fassin et al. 2015; Thelen et al. 2017), the setting of the Catholic parish that provides the material for the analysis developed in this article is considered to be a privileged context in which to observe the everyday practices, relations and moralities through which the austerity restructuring of distributive relations, claims and entitlements is experienced, negotiated, reproduced or challenged.

This article is based on 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Setúbal, Portugal, between 2015 and 2016.[4] Setúbal is a post-industrial city of 117,000 residents located 50 km south of Portugal's capital city. Once a prosperous industrial city, it has suffered decline – de-industrialization and high unemployment – through much of the twentieth century as well as ineffective top-down regional development plans backed by European funds following Portugal's accession to the European Union in 1986. It is also one of the areas of the country most affected by the 2008 financial crisis and ensuing austerity measures. The empirical research and data collection were particularly focused on exploring the grounded practices of livelihood pursuit and regimes of meaning, value and morality mobilized by households and individuals confronting the austerity crisis. This also included following, observing and registering the rationales and logistics of the food charity schemes at the church of the most impoverished parish of Setúbal. During the 16 months of my ethnographic research, I spent two days a week at the church, carrying out formal interviews with the church priest, volunteers and charity recipients and claimants. I also followed and shadowed the interactions and formal meetings between volunteers, charity recipients and claimants; participated in the activities involved in the two food charity schemes available at the church (which included, for instance, the preparation and delivery of monthly food baskets, or the assembling of meals and their delivery in a refectory located in the church); and attended various activities taking place in the church setting, including courses focused on financial literacy or the pragmatics of household budgeting administered by Caritas technicians and social security public servants to those benefiting from food charity.

The anthropological literature has investigated how third-sector organizations sustain neoliberal austerity regimes as both moral endeavours and political and economic projects; the relations between poverty-alleviation policies and the cultural and institutional embeddedness shaping diversity of charity organizational forms; as well as the links between volunteering discourses and

4 The research was carried out within the context of the ERC-funded project Grassroots Economics: Meaning, Project and Practice in the Pursuit of Livelihood (GRECO), coordinated by Susana Narotzky, based at the University of Barcelona. For more information, see: www.ub.edu/grassrootseconomics/.

practices, emergent ethical relationships and the meanings of economic crisis (Caplan 2016; Douzina-Bakalaki 2017; Koch and James 2020; Muehlebach 2012; Pusceddu 2020; Venezuela-Garcia, Lubbers and Rice 2019). The analysis developed in this article focused on examining the modalities of evaluation and valuation of human needs under conditions of transformative welfare regimes. It contributes to the literature described by proposing that the anti-distributive tenets of austerity rest upon the dismantling the factual and real objective existence of fundamental human needs and their satisfaction as the grounds for the development and enhancement of human capabilities. Under austerity, basic human needs are refashioned as an anti-politics device instrumental in the erosion of economic citizenship, capabilities and entitlements. As the ethnography of charity encounters will show, this process is both reinforced and challenged through particular bottom-up relations, practices and moral registers.

This article is structured as follows. In the next section I explore how the Portuguese government mobilized the austerity framework to further accelerate the neoliberal restructuring of state welfare. The growing neoliberalization of welfare distribution was made possible by privileging a political language and rhetoric focused on the national *needs* of fiscal sustainability to the detriment of human rights and needs. The article then turns to examine the bureaucratic and relational dimensions of a food charity scheme run at the church where I conducted my fieldwork. Drawing inspiration from Nancy Fraser's (2013) proposal for a politics of needs interpretation, I analyse how volunteers' quest to assert "real need" (*verdadeira necessidade*) is mediated by quantitative income assessments and moral typologies of deservingness. The latter express a long-lasting tendency to causally link poverty to individual failures of behaviour and perceived moral character deficiencies (Katz 2013), enabling volunteers to classify, rank and enact a "hierarchy of deservingness" (Holmes and Castañeda 2016; Little 1994; Otazu and Sabaté Muriel 2020; van Oorschot 2006; Willen 2012) which defines the value and legitimacy of needs and those who are needy. Moral typologies of deservingness are integral to how volunteers distinguish between "real" and "false" needs, expanding their discretionary power in the allocation and distribution of food resources. In the conclusion I discuss further how the erosion of the political and moral legitimacy of collectively shared basic human needs under austerity enables the simultaneous technical and moral legitimation of inequality and its outcomes.

Going "beyond the Troika" and the national *needs* of fiscal sustainability

In 2011 the Social Democratic Party won the national elections and formed a parliamentary majority in coalition with the Christian Democrats. Since the

beginning of the implementation of the austerity adjustment programme, the right-wing coalition government had announced it wished to go "beyond the Troika" (*ir para além da Troika*). In contrast with other European settings, in Portugal, the government's quest to legitimize harsh tax increases and wage and welfare cuts was not prominently framed through a tactics of external blaming (Moury and Standring 2017). The government claimed for itself the role of saving the country from errors of past governments, in light of the "national condition of social emergency". The austerity demands made by the government resulting from its deal with the Troika provided the institutional and political conditions to accelerate the neoliberal redefinition of rights and welfare logics of redistribution, which would have been difficult to accomplish through a democratic mandate (Rodrigues and Adão e Silva 2015).

The politics of wanting to go "beyond the Troika" was discursively translated and justified as a form of "patriotic duty": a "historical mission" to transform a country which had reached a condition of "social emergency" due to the errors of past governments and people's irresponsible spendthrift behaviours. The infamous moralization coming from Northern European politicians stating that Southern European people had been "living above their means" (i.e. spending and consuming above their real means and needs) was reclaimed by the Portuguese government not as an accusation but an admission of collective guilt. The government's quest to redeem this collective guilt elevated the national *needs* of fiscal sustainability to the number one collective priority to which all other needs should be subordinated.

Ensuring the fulfilment of the national *needs* of fiscal sustainability required, in the first place, "reform[ing] the state and rethink[ing] its social functions" – an expression often used by the prime minister and the members of government.[5] The idiom of needs was mobilized to express and legitimize an economic regime framed by the two core ideas of scarcity and sustainability. "Reforming the state and its social functions" was to be attained through the necessary technocratic spending cuts for which there was no alternative *and* attending to "those in greater need" (i.e. restricting welfare support to the morally deserving). That is, "reforming the state" through expenditure cuts, tightening eligibility criteria for welfare benefits and increasing taxes was necessary due to the state's bankruptcy (i.e. lack of resources), while attending only to those "in greater need" was justified as a way of making better use of scarce available resources (i.e. "mak[ing] the

5 In 2012 the government 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.

social security system sustainable", a phrase often used by the members of government).[6]

Attending to those "in greater need" entailed the enactment of a particular policy response. In 2011 the Programme of Social Emergency, to be implemented between 2011 and 2014, was launched by the Ministry of Solidarity and Social Security with the aims of "fighting the lack of efficiency" in state redistributive practices and "changing the paradigm of social response to severe material deprivation". The programme targeted specific population segments (e.g. impoverished households; long-term unemployed; elderly and disabled persons), with a budget of €630 million for 2012. The programme laid out several policy projects to be carried out in partnership with third-sector institutions and civil society organizations, including the Programme of Food Emergency to expand the network of soup kitchens – the food charity scheme analysed in the next section is a part of this programme. As a consequence, the number of soup kitchens in Portugal skyrocketed from 62 in 2011 to 843 in 2015.[7]

During the austerity adjustment programme, while state expenditure was dramatically reduced, particularly for non-contributory social benefits, state funding to the third sector grew. The Social Emergency Programme prominently benefited third-sector institutions through increased state budget funding; speeding up the simplification of legal procedures associated with acquiring equipment; state-funded training for third-sector directors and managers and an exclusive micro-credit line specifically for third-sector institutions. The Social Emergency Programme implied a shift in the model and logic of welfare redistribution, with the state delegating its responsibilities to the third sector while reinforcing a broader philosophy of charity and poor relief in welfare provisioning (Joaquim 2015).

Such a shift would not have been possible without a political rhetoric centred on the imperative of attending to the national *needs* for fiscal sustainability, together with the necessity of managing scarce state resources which

6 As in the British context (Clarke and Newman 2012), the Portuguese government characterized the restrictive welfare policies being undertaken as conducive to a higher degree of fairness in the allocation and distribution of resources. In Portugal, the political uses of the idiom of fairness to legitimize divisive policies was not focused on the dichotomy between "skivers and strivers". Instead, the government characterized austerity policies as a sort of rebalancing conducive to greater fairness between generations. Parents and their adult children were called upon to become agents of austerity, as illustrated in the reasoning that cuts for present pension beneficiaries were imperative to ensure the sustainability of the system in the future. Parents were called upon to sacrifice themselves in the present for the well-being of their sons and daughters in the future. Or, conversely, adult children should accept the burden of fewer rights to social protection and stable employment, as a way of redeeming the irresponsible and unsustainable excess of rights their parents had had in the past.

7 See: www.dn.pt/portugal/interior/cantinas-sociais-serviram-quase-48-mil-refeicoes-por-dia-no-primeiro-semestre-4723210.html (accessed April 2019).

redefined welfare state protection as a form of last-resort assistance to "those in greater need". During the austerity conjuncture, the right-wing coalition government privileged using a language of *national needs* to the detriment of human rights and needs, to assert the coherence and validity of austerity measures. The idiom of needs – in both political discourse and public policy – played a key role in legitimizing the new "architecture of need" (Haney 2003), justifying granting some persons access to certain resources, rights to certain goods and claims to particular entitlements, while depriving others.[8] In the next section I explore further how this new "architecture of need" is enacted, negotiated and acted upon in the interactions between volunteers and claimants in a food charity provisioning scheme.

Charity encounters and the making of "real need"

Until 2011 the church of the most impoverished parish of Setúbal, concentrating more than 40% of the local population,[9] had only one type of food charity available: the delivery of monthly food baskets. These were prepared by volunteers, after receiving donations from private entities and the Banco Alimentar Contra a Fome (the major national food bank). In the context of the expansion of the state-sponsored Programme of Food Emergency, the parish priest designed what I will call the Social Refectory (hereafter SR), a food charity aid scheme in which each person pays according to their means. The priest envisioned the SR as an instrument of poverty relief and social intervention, to increase feelings of self-esteem among the poor population, and to stimulate self-responsibility and participation in the local community.

The entrance to the SR is located in the main front porch of the church, through a small door next to the mortuary chapel. The restaurant space is around 40 square metres, occupied by a few tables and chairs, and a self-service desk where recipients go to pick up their food. Recipients may eat at the SR or take the food away – which is what most people do. The SR is open every day of the year between 7 pm and 8.30 pm; more than 30 volunteers organize the food, distribute it and clean up. Meals are not made in the church but prepared by a subcontracted private company. To gain access to the SR, claimants have first to attend the Atendimento Social (Social Counselling, hereafter AS) at the church. The AS consists of a scheduled

8 Haney's (2003, p. 7) study of changing Hungarian welfare regimes in the latter part of the twentieth century highlights how "states not only create provisions to redistribute benefits but also articulate historically specific conceptions of need". By constructing "architectures of need", states define "who is in need and how to satisfy those needs".

9 Corresponding to roughly 50,000 inhabitants.

encounter between church volunteers and claimants, in which the former evaluate the financial living conditions of the claimant and decide whether to grant them access to the SR. The AS has the formal aim of "identifying the real needs" (*identificar as reais necessidades*) of claimants. It takes place every week, on Wednesdays and Fridays, from 9 am to 12.30 pm, excluding July and August, and is carried out by four female volunteers in their mid-60s and 70s. The volunteers go through a one-year training with social workers from Caritas, learning about applicable legal frameworks, state welfare procedures and how to collect and analyse claimants' data.

Scheduling an appointment is done with Maria (volunteer, aged 51),[10] the person accountable for the preparation of the monthly food baskets and the cleaning of the common spaces of the church. Claimants are informed about the documents they should bring, which includes identity cards, receipts of valid household expenses (i.e. utility bills, including rent or mortgage, gas, water and electricity); receipts of household members earned income and medical expenses. Access to the SR is granted at the threshold of a maximum household monthly income of €750 after deduction of valid expenses. Volunteers use a grid, designed by the priest, divided by income brackets, which corresponds a meal price ranging from €0.10 to €4.

The AS takes place in a small room next to the priest's office, which used to be an archive of books, brochures and religious material. A file for each claimant fills the folders in the shelves. At the AS appointment, volunteers fill in a form with the claimant's personal data, take copies of the relevant documents and put everything together in a plastic folder, later archived by alphabetical order. This information has evaluative, regulatory and institutional purposes. Church volunteers are obliged to send this information to the state social security services and Caritas to cross-check information and detect potential frauds.

Volunteers would often explain to claimants at the beginning of each AS session that before "providing help" they had to understand what was (the claimant's) "situation", because "we try to help everyone, but we need to know what the person's situation is". Getting to know the claimant's "situation", and thus his/her "real needs", was mediated by how volunteers deployed income measurement devices together with moral typologies of deservingness. The deployment of these instruments enabled the discretionary and arbitrary intervention of the volunteers in the distribution and allocation of food resources. Volunteers' discretionary capabilities could either restrict or expand the support given to claimants, which was only possible in the first place because of how claimants' needs were made and re-made as "real" by volunteers through material and moral instruments. The charity encounters of three claimants, Antonio, Maria and Cristina are represent-

10 To protect the confidentiality of my interlocutors all names have been anonymised.

ative of the broader everyday relations, practices and moralities underpinning the making of "real need".

I first met Antonio, a fragile unemployed man in his late 60s, in one of the AS sessions. A friend of Teresa, one of the volunteers, told her that Antonio had been an immigrant in Switzerland for many years and benefited from a Swiss state pension not declared to the Portuguese tax authorities. Without mentioning this information, Teresa proceed with the usual questions.

> Teresa: How much rent do you pay?
> Antonio: Around €200.
> Teresa: Do you have any income?
> Antonio: No, none.
> Teresa: Then how do you pay the rent?
> Antonio: I don't pay it...
> Teresa: Do you live alone?
> Antonio: Yes.
> Teresa: What was your work before?
> Antonio: I was a truck driver, for 20 years, I worked in Switzerland. I had 65,000 francs in savings, but my wife and son robbed me, and I came back to Portugal with 20 francs on my pocket.
> Teresa: Since when have you not been paying the rent?
> Antonio: Three months.
> Teresa: Is it rent or a bank mortgage?
> Antonio: It's a bank mortgage, but I have to eat…

Antonio had all the necessary documentation in a folder, including a medical document stating he had suffered from severe depression and suicidal tendencies in the past. Teresa continued with her questioning, clearly trying to obtain some sort of revelation regarding the rumour of the hidden Swiss state pension. Antonio had six children, two girls and four boys. Two of the boys had emigrated to England and Brazil, and Antonio had no contact with the others. Antonio added that one of his sons, knowing about his clinical condition, attempted to take charge of Antonio's affairs: "his goal was to take away the Swiss pension which I will receive in the future. My sons don't care about me…" Finally, Teresa asked: "So, you would like to have access to the SR?".

> Antonio: Yes, I have friends who go there, they tell me the food is good and we pay according to our means.
> Teresa: Yes, but right now we don't have any vacancies, it is very complicated, let me call the refectory.

Teresa made the call and told Antonio that no vacancies were available. Antonio insisted that being able to get food through the SR was very im-

portant to him, given the economic hardship he was confronting. Suddenly, Teresa's husband – who is also a volunteer at the refectory, distributing tickets and organizing food packages – came into the room.

> Teresa: Look, Mr Antonio, we came to know that you have a Swiss state pension, that you were the owner of a restaurant and that you can make ends meet quite well by yourself. The SR is only for those who really need, so you will need to prove to us that you do not have any income before we can grant you access to the SR!

Visibly upset, almost in tears and with his hands shaking, Antonio insisted he did not have a Swiss state pension, thought in the past he had a small local restaurant for a brief period: "But how do I prove to you that I do not have any income?", to which Teresa replied:

> Teresa: You should go to the social security bureau and ask for a declaration stating that you do not have any income.
> Antonio: But today is Friday I will not be able to go there before Monday, meanwhile what do I eat?

Antonio was denied access to the SR primarily because he fitted the volunteers' moral typological profile of the poor person who lies, manipulates and tries to cheat the system to his own benefit. Volunteers' moral typologies of deservingness classify, compare and differentiate the poor and their needs along a continuum ranging from the "professional" to the "new poor" (*os novos pobres*) – expressions which form part of an emic repertoire volunteers use among themselves when speaking about the claimants. The "professional poor" are manipulative, false; they know how to cheat the system and combine different sources of distributive resources networks to their own benefit. The "new poor" broadly comprises middle-class individuals who have fallen from grace; they are poor for reasons considered to be outside their control; they do not know how or where to ask for help and are too ashamed to do it. In between these two broader categories volunteers would often refer to those dependent on charity saying: "They prefer to live on charity than teaching their sons and daughters to fight and change their lives, they get accustomed to being poor". The broad range of those seeking help included: those who abused the various charity institutions in the city – those who tricked the system, lied, and accepted help from multiple places; those who "really needed" help, often living alone with few resources (e.g. single mothers who showed a commitment to a solid work ethic and had been abused by the family, partners and state institutions; elderly people, particularly women; young people who showed a commitment to study, self-discipline and responsibility); those who did not need any help, often Roma people, because volunteers considered them to have other businesses

(informal illegal activities such as drug trafficking or tobacco smuggling), or because they exhibited conspicuous consumption habits deemed to be irresponsible (such as smoking or drinking); those with external signs of possessions which seemed to indicate that they had money (such as good clothes, a car, expensive smart-phones); those who did not fulfil their parental obligations and prefer to spend their money on food and drinks; and finally, those categorized as the "new poor". Not all "new poor" were deemed to be deserving of help, but only those who showed humility and the ability to reinvent themselves as deserving poor.[11]

The moralization of food charity restricts support to those, like Antonio, who do not conform to the volunteers' typologies of deservingness. Antonio's need is denied and cancelled by the volunteers' perception of his unworthiness. Antonio's case is representative of how volunteers' discretionary morally grounded power to define "real need" may converge with the government's aim of restricting welfare support to "those who are really in need". At the same time, volunteers' moral typologies of deservingness may also be mobilized and acted upon by claimants in ways which enable an expansion of people's capabilities to shift entitlements, particularly vis-à-vis the state. Maria's case is illustrative in this regard.

Maria (aged 51 in 2016) was a single mother of three under-age boys, working as a subcontracted technical assistant in the refectory of a secondary school, earning the national minimum wage.[12] Being subcontracted meant that Maria had an employment contract running only from the beginning until the end of the academic year (i.e. from September to June). Not being entitled to either holiday or Christmas pay, Maria had only ten

11 Some studies have stressed the heterogeneity of trajectories and motivations among Third-sector volunteers. In the Catholic charity where I conducted fieldwork, the group of volunteers' carrying out the AS was instead shaped by a high degree of homogeneity. The overwhelming majority of the church volunteers are women in their mid-60s and 70s. They share a background of a successful trajectory of escape from poverty and necessity, grounded on a strong ethic of hard work and adherence to the kinship obligation of fulfilling the aspirations of livelihood improvement of their sons and daughters towards middle-class distinction and educational attainment. All the church volunteers interviewed mentioned the experience of food deprivation in their youth due to the irregularity of wages and resources of their rural landless parents; the lack of possibilities of studying beyond primary or elementary school; the imperative of having started working in agriculture early on in their lives to help the household; and the efforts put into reaching a stable work position within the context of building a family. These common experiences among the volunteers have shaped their common-sense understandings concerning the righteousness of a strong work ethic, the duty of abiding by inter-generational projects of livelihood improvement and upward social mobility, or the superior moral value of sacrificing forms of instant gratification to the benefit of the household and the family. These common-sense understandings inform how church volunteers value and evaluate the worthiness and entitlement of the needs of others, their character qualities and legitimate behaviours.

12 In 2015 the Portuguese national minimum wage was €505 and in 2016 €530.

monthly wages per year. Her meagre income was the only one coming into the household, which is why she decided to request access to the SR, "I can come here after work, take the meals with me and make them stretch for more than one day". Nonetheless, when Teresa was doing the accounting of income minus expenses to determine if Maria's household income was above €750, and thus determine the price she would pay for each meal, she realized that Maria's household income was still very high (€350 after expenses). This was because Maria lived in social housing, paying a symbolic rent, and had no medical expenses. At a given moment Maria said:

> Now I even regret having bought a new freezer, which I am still paying by instalments. But I only bought it because friends and relatives sometimes helped me with food, which we don't eat immediately but I didn't want to throw it away. And I also started to make salty pastries to sell, it's not much money but helps to pay for my kids' education.

Confronted with this, Teresa replied, "Well, in that case I think we should consider the freezer loan instalment as an expense …" By doing so, Teresa actually reduced Maria's household income and thus the amount to be paid for each meal.

Another woman I first met in 2015, Cristina, 35, was always met by volunteers with a deep sense of compassion and empathy. She was a single mother, who had worked all her life to sustain herself, displaying a sacrificial self to the benefit of her daughters, and had been abandoned by the state in a moment of severe economic hardship. Teresa went to great lengths to help Cristina, including visiting her house, arranging to gather donations from the church followers (e.g. for furniture, kitchen appliances and clothing for her daughters). Teresa commented that she could not support the idea of seeing such "a hard-working young woman" living in those conditions, by herself, with two daughters. After being granted access to the SR, Cristina was further helped by Sara, another volunteer whose cousin works as a social worker at the municipality. Sara's cousin intervened on behalf of Cristina so she could be given access to social housing and explained to her the best way to ensure she could get the RSI.[13] In 2016, Cristina was living with her two daughters in social housing, paying a symbolic monthly rent of €5, had been able to access the RSI, receiving €320 per month, and was finishing high school through a specific training programme at the local jobcentre. Following the advice of Teresa, she planned to look for a job after gaining

13 RSI means Rendimento Social de Inserção, or Social Insertion Income, which was introduced in 1996. It is a guaranteed minimum income scheme composed of a monetary component (a cash benefit) – which is a universalistic right, though means-tested and time-limited – and a programme to get claimants back into the labour market. It is aimed at individuals and families who are in a severe situation of economic deprivation.

more educational qualifications. Her partner, who worked informally as a car mechanic, was living with her. In one brief meeting at the church, while talking about how her life was going, Cristina made sure to specify with regard to her partner that "If you see him with a car it's only because he works with cars". Most of the charity claimants I met at the church were realistically aware of how typological criteria of deservingness drove volunteers' discretionary decisions of food aid allocation. Some claimants would make an effort to conform to the volunteers' expectations of moral deservingness through modesty in physical appearance, clothing and possession of expensive goods (such as a car or a smart-phone), frugal consumption habits, display of a solid work ethic, or gratitude and deference (rather than confrontation) in their verbal interactions with the volunteers. Doing so enabled claimants to secure access to the SR, as well as to resources of various kinds – including privileged information about a job opening or a personal favour which could facilitate navigating the paperwork and bureaucratic procedures to obtain municipal housing or the RSI.

Taking inspiration from the pioneering work of Michael Lipsky (1980), who analysed the uses and functions of discretion in shaping policy implementation among front-line workers in public services, Dubois (2014) has recently explored how discretion shapes the modalities of control in French welfare agencies. The author argues that neoliberal governmentality does not involve the disaggregation of the state, but is rather indicative of the way "individualization and uncertainty can instead signify a consistent mode of state governance in which the state exerts power over its citizens by affording street-level bureaucrats' discretion and leeway" (Dubois 2014, pp. 39–40). Similarly, the charity encounters I observed and followed in Setúbal reflect how austerity welfare in Portugal has intensified the morally based discretionary and arbitrary powers of volunteers in the allocation and distribution of food resources to severely impoverished populations. Charity volunteers' mobilization of moral discourses of deservingness to classify and differentiate the behaviours and perceived character qualities of claimants in their quest to assert "real need" determines who is entitled to what resources, how and why. Hence, the power to define "real need" represents the power to establish access to resources, the legitimacy of claims on resources and provisioning responsibilities. As depicted in the cases of Antonio and Cristina, volunteers' quest to define "real need" can both restrict and expand people's capabilities to assess fundamental livelihood resources and instruments to negotiate their claims to entitlements vis-à-vis the state, thus revealing the ambivalent character of the actions of those who mediate the enactment of wider state policy projects (James and Koch 2020).

Conclusion

The Portuguese context shows how austerity policies have exacerbated contestation processes over both the idiom of needs and struggles over the value and political legitimacy of basic human needs. The idiom and category of needs (and the modalities through which needs are met and who should take responsibility for this) has always been a source of contested processes and power struggles precisely because defining them also defines and legitimises different economic projects, citizenship regimes and political ideologies. For instance, in the aftermath of the implementation of structural adjustment programmes in countries in Africa or Latin America from the 1970s onwards, various authors mobilized the notion of human needs to criticize and propose alternatives to the fetishization of economic growth that has long underpinned modernization development theory (e.g. Max-Neef et al. 1991). Recent austerity welfare reforms implemented in Europe, following the financial crisis of 2008, were able to co-opt the idiom of needs to erode citizenship entitlements and sustain the legitimacy of anti-distributive social policies. During austerity, the Portuguese government mobilized the idiom of needs to define the parameters of public discussion concerning the imperative of "rethinking the state and its social functions". The government's aim – to reinforce a hegemonic consensus concerning the priority of the national needs of fiscal sustainability – was the justification for redefining welfare state provisioning as a form of last-resort assistance for the morally deserving. In doing this, the Portuguese government deployed the idiom and category of need as an anti-politics instrument, that is, an instrument to conceal a broader shift in the mutual obligations between citizens and the state (e.g. transfer of provisioning responsibilities), expressed as a different relationship between rights claims and needs claims.

Since the 1980s neoliberal-driven welfare reforms targeting the Keynesian state-sponsored "welfare dependency" (Fraser and Gordon 1994), technocratic and moral approaches have increasingly merged in the orientations, practices and policies guiding the distribution, allocation and provisioning of welfare resources. Under austerity in Portugal, the government's aim of erasing the objectivity of fundamental human needs as a source of entitlement to resources and claims-making capabilities is further reinforced by the intersection of distinct logics of classification, differentiation and valuation of human needs – as expressed within the charity encounters analysed in this article. Volunteers' deployment of income quantitative measurements and moral grids of deservingness to determine "real need" define a techno-moral governance framework which displaces the structural causes of unequal patterns of social security and well-being towards people's choices and behaviours, who thus become materially and morally responsible for their own condition. The techno-moral governance framework pervading

charity encounters sustains the anti-distributive austerity project by reinforcing and legitimizing the morality of unequal needs inscribed in the government's agenda of targeting "those who are really in need" as deserving of being helped. At times volunteers' "moral fixes" benefit some claimants, giving certain individuals more possibilities to access resources, make claims and demand entitlements that are less available more generally as a result of austerity policies. But they do not contest the parameters of the public discussion on welfare and social protection set out by the government and focused on the notion and category of needs as an anti-politics instrument at the core of a broader reconfiguration of state welfare provisioning, rights and entitlements. If the neoliberal retrenchment of the welfare state was especially shaped by the dismantling of rights and its replacement by workfare, activation policies and residual social assistance, austerity has successfully accelerated these trends through a deeply morally laden anti-politics of human needs, making it increasingly difficult to redress inequalities and its outcomes.

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