

The Simple Bare Necessities: Scales and Paradoxes of Thrift on a London Public Housing Estate

CATHERINE ALEXANDER

Anthropology, Durham University, Durham, UK

INTRODUCTION

In 1913, Maud Pember Reeves published her investigation into poverty to identify effective interventions to reduce child deaths (2008). Based in London, her book charted how working-class households barely managed and sometimes failed to make ends meet on a weekly income of about a pound. Even though the households were not classified as the poorest of the poor, the living conditions they documented objectively and compassionately were appalling. Food was scarce and infant mortality high, with one in five dying at birth.

Amid accounts of how a sliver of soap might be husbanded and what expenditures foregone to ensure children were shod and fed, one item stands out: despite the hunger and cold that haunted the dank rooms where these families lived, the mothers always made sure there was enough to pay the weekly burial insurance, the third largest outlay after rent and fuel. Pember Reeves noted that some might say disapprovingly this was a luxury such families could scarce afford, but that the horror of a pauper's funeral and not being able to bury a child decently shaped the thriftiness of these housewives (*ibid.*: 58; also Stedman Jones 1974: 473). What price an extra meal if it came at the cost of dignity and respectability?

Their report reinforces two common themes in studies of low-income, urban households carried out from the nineteenth century to the present. The first is that respect (Stedman Jones 1974; Bourgois 1995 for a U.S. parallel), respectability (Skeggs 1997), or decency typically outweigh other considerations in working-class households. Arguably, this reframes the trajectory from necessity to decency

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to luxury that appears in the two main thrift-to-consumerism narratives identified by Alison Hulme (2019a; 2019b): those (e.g., McKendrick et al. 1984) that follow Thorstein Veblen's emphasis on upwardly mobile emulation of conspicuous consumption (2009), and the related narratives that privilege a model of industrialized production driving increased demand (e.g., Galbraith 1958). Both are tinged with moral panic about the apparent slide from thriftiness into consumerist degeneracy.

As the above suggests, rather than decency being a step up from necessities, it can itself be a bare necessity that trumps even the satisfaction of biological needs. Adam Smith spelled this out: "Under necessities, therefore, I comprehend, not only those things which nature, but those things which the established rules of decency have rendered necessary" (1811: 287). Smith thus reminds us that to be fully human requires more, and sometimes less, than the needs of bare existence. Equally, much of economic anthropology, alongside its concerns with well-being, happiness, and the good life, has long insisted that economic actions are embedded in social and moral orders (Polanyi, Arensberg, and Pearson 1957). "The ends of economics [and] politics," Edward Fischer writes, should be "provisioning the good life ... for people as they conceive it" (2014: 1). The present article excavates how British economic policies, underpinned by tropes of middle-class household thrift, have disabled low-income, urban families from thriving or pursuing the good life for which kin care and decency are fundamental needs.

The second theme in studies of low-income, urban households is that of middle-class censure of livelihood strategies that do not conform to the bourgeois take on thrift, the measure by which the working class has historically been condemned (Skeggs 1997). A third element is less a theme than the substrate: the material affordances of the urban context profoundly affect household economies, and often structurally compromise their ability to manage. The question here is what a focus on low-income, urban households reveals about contemporary contradictions in idioms and practices of thrift at different interlocking scales—kin, community, city, nation, planet—a question whetted by austerity and injunctions to those with scant resources to manage better and cut wasteful habits, both driven by particular norms of thrift.

I explore this question through a four-way dialogue between anthropology and history, first considering how anthropologists and historians have engaged with thrift, each providing complementary insights that, to date, have developed in parallel. I bring these approaches into critical dialogue with my ethnography of a London social housing estate, which I explore in the context of the historical trajectory of low-income urban residents.¹ Thinking with both history and anthropology opens up a space to consider what happens when different forms

¹ I use "social housing estate" and "Council housing estate" interchangeably.

of thrift coincide and sometimes clash at different scales. Public expenditure cuts can disable kin-centered practices of thrift, including minimizing waste: failing material infrastructure impedes the formal recycling practices enjoined upon residents.

Stephen Gudeman and Alberto Rivera's pioneering work on thrift (1990), which concentrated on rural, Panamanian, self-sufficient households, shows that thrift is a guiding principle of careful saving, spending, and eschewing waste to ensure reserves against lean periods for the household's long-term continuation. This is juxtaposed with capitalist market "thrift," where accumulation and future-oriented actions are also found, but geared towards short-term, constant increase. In the starkly different context of London, Daniel Miller reaffirms that thrift is central to households as an expression of kin care (1998), but with its emphasis on shopping, his account explains only one of the strategies used to get by. Markus Schlecker's (2005) analysis of thrift in Vietnam not only juxtaposes traditional household thrift with a socialist regime premised on frugality but also explores tensions between the two scales: the former incorporating proper ritual celebration that the latter denies. Such conflicts between thrift understood only as frugality and thrift that incorporates thriving drive the ethnography below, where thrift emerges at the nexus of projects of worth, sustainability, welfare, kin, waged labor, and material affordances (see Alexander and Sosna 2022a, and 2022b, for extended accounts of anthropological engagements with thrift).

The more normative cultural-historical accounts (Hulme 2019a; Yates and Davison Hunter 2011; and Yarrow 2014) usefully highlight two distinct meanings of thrift. In its premodern appearances it was coterminous with its cognate "thriving," not in the etiolated sense of economic wealth but, as Alison Hulme nicely suggests (2019a), more akin to Aristotle's eudaemonia: human flourishing (Aristotle 2004; see also Fischer 2014: 2). This sense echoes through Thoreau's commitment to simplicity and heightened awareness of being-in-the-world, as well as twentieth-century anti-capitalist movements that emphasized steady state economies (Daly 1973) degrowth and ecological sustainability (Kallis, Kerschner, and Martinez-Alier 2012). Such thriving chimes with Gudeman and Rivera's idea of household replenishment (1990). There is more to this premodern thrift, however. It was a condition rather than a virtue or trait, appearing in this form as late as 1679 when John Bunyan used it to refer to "a state of being ... of blessedness" (Yates and Hunter 2011: 11). Chaucer uses thrift variously to mean "luck" in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book III (1957: 434, line 1249), "skill" in *The Reeve's Tale* (*ibid.*: 57, line 4049), "suitability" in *The Man of Law's Tale* (*ibid.*: 62, line 46), and "prosperity" in *The Canon Yeoman's Tale* (*ibid.*: 215, line 739). Thrift qua profit appears once, alongside these other meanings (Cady 2019: 137). Chaucer's fourteenth century marked the start of the early modern period when an urban, merchant, middle class became established and thrift in the service of profit emerged as a quintessentially bourgeois virtue (McCloskey 2006a; 2006b) and has largely occluded, but not

replaced, alternative idioms of thrift ever since. Hulme's shorthand distinctions of thrift-as-thriving as different from but giving meaning to thrift-as-frugality are useful (2019a). Joshua Yates and James Davison Hunter further provide a taxonomy of thrift ethics and practices corresponding to "distinct moral orders" and aimed at human flourishing, variously defined, from one age to the next (2011: 12–15). This foregrounds that thriftiness at the scale of the household has been reshaped over the last centuries (e.g., from Puritan thrift to consumer thrift), and that thrift with a view to long-term thriving is not only a household practice. Indeed, what Yates and Davidson Hunter call "collective thriftiness" appears in forms as varied as mutual saving groups, state welfare, and most recently, planetary ecological thrift qua minimizing resource extraction and waste production.

My argument here is twofold. Many of these forms of thrift have become enrolled and modified by capitalist logics. Thus, ecological thrift has translated into big business via *managing* wastefulness rather than reduction methods that might counter growth;² the virtue of frugality has become joined or supplanted by responsible borrowing (the latest manifestation of consumer thrift) as an index of wise household management, good character, and citizenship. Indeed, borrowing appears as both right and obligation. These different practices of thrift may materialize at different scales and coexist, interacting and shaping each other. Failure to comply with these shifting norms can be cast as a moral failure that ricochets from the individual and household to a lack of good citizenship and concern for the planet's survival. This resonates with and extends an emphasis elsewhere in Europe and the United States on autonomy, responsibility, and self-empowerment for impoverished communities while the means for them to do so is removed via welfare retrenchment (Cruikshank 1999; Muehlebach 2012; Fennell 2015; Koch 2018). Again, neoliberal policy often draws on an idea of the household to legitimize practice. This is not only a restricted understanding of how many households operate but actively hinders how low-income urban households practice thrift, and, crucially, it ignores that states are qualitatively different entities since they can raise taxes and sovereign debt.

Scale is central to unpacking what thrift means, and does, at different junctures. Since the twentieth century, ideas and practices of thrift have been deployed in state and urban policies. Citizens were first encouraged to cut waste and save for the nation's salvation during the wars (Cooper 2008; Gille 2007; Hulme 2019a), in ways now familiar from contemporary recycling strategies. Keynesian postwar state borrowing was meant to stimulate the economy *and* provide better standards of living (the OED cites "welfare" as another translation of thrift-as-thriving). Following Yates and Davison Hunter (2011), we might

² Vance Packard's diatribe against built-in obsolescence in the 1960s, where producers build constant growth on the back of deliberate wastefulness, is equally relevant now (1960).

understand this period as collective thrift, before the virtue of frugality, as simply limiting spending, wandered across scales from household to national economy in the late 1970s, eclipsing the shift in scale (indexed by the recurrent phrase: “we’re all in this together”) and therefore how thrift at one scale can have a savage impact on its enactment at another. This is not Keynes’ paradox of thrift (1936: 84), where the good of individual saving translates to the bad of a sluggish national economy and unemployment, but where policies of frugality grounded on the idea of the *oikos* and balancing books can damage household practices of thrift.

In his keynote to the 2009 Conservative conference, David Cameron called for “a new age of austerity” and hailed a necessary “culture of thrift” in public spending (Wheeler 2009) that merged individual with fiscal responsibility. Austerity policies were introduced by Cameron’s newly elected government in 2010 and vigorously pursued by successive Conservative governments until September 2019, although public spending remained below 2010 levels until the COVID pandemic. This was not the first time the logic of the contained household had been used to justify British fiscal policy. In an abrupt turn from classic economics approaches to market modelling, Margaret Thatcher applied “the principles of household budgeting (‘living within your means’) to the management of the national economy” (Samuel 1992: 17), saying in 1982, “Some say I preach merely the homilies of housekeeping or the parables of the parlour. But I do not repent. Those parables would have saved many a financier from failure and many a country from crisis” (Young 1989: 5).

Austerity measures have battered vulnerable people across Europe and beyond (Narotzky 2020). But the ethnography here is given a particularity by austerity’s longevity in Britain, compounding earlier welfare cuts, alongside the long-term valorization of home ownership, stigmatization of social housing, and use of household thrift tropes to deride the poor and serve as moral and economic rationales for national economic policy.³ The portmanteau neologism “ecology” again draws on the imaginary of self-sufficient household logic to conceptualize a hierarchy of biophysical environments that ultimately encompass the world.

Placing everyday thrifty practices in the context of histories of thrift, national economic policies, and the estate itself foregrounds why a focus on low-income urban households complicates and extends current analyses of thrift. In so doing, this article reiterates recent calls (Narotzky and Besnier 2014) to focus on how people actually get by and to what end, thereby recentering social reproduction. What appears is a different kind of thriftiness from more familiar paradigms of the self-sufficient household-as-*oikos*, whether the grand estate of Aristotelian economics (2000) or smallholding (Gudeman and Hann 2015) on the one hand,

³ There are parallels with Germany. In 2008, Angela Merkel said, “The American banks . . . should have consulted a Swabian housewife because she could have told them how to deal with money” (*Economist* 2014).

or bourgeois thrift on the other. Moreover, tracing the trope of the spendthrift urban poor back to the nineteenth century highlights how waged work excluded the urban working class from practicing the sort of thrift they were adjured to pursue. This paradox of requirement and exclusion continues to play out today.

I explore these themes through an ethnography of a huge social housing estate of dense, high- and low-rise buildings in London. Initial fieldwork at “the estate” was carried out from 2002–2005, with Christine Storey and Chris Smaje, via about forty interviews, and twenty women keeping a diary for a month of everything that entered or left their flats, which we discussed with them weekly. This was supplemented by regular conversations with members of a local environmental NGO and other residents, helping with shopping, and chatting at home or in the local pub. Few men were interested, and the ethnography here is therefore focused largely on female-headed households (see Mollona 2009; Koch 2019; Skeggs 1997; Smith 2012; 2021 for female-centered UK households; and Stack 1974 and Fennell 2015 for the United States). Afterward, I kept in touch with estate developments. Some fieldwork data presented here were used in a methodological comparison study (Alexander et al. 2009a) and some in an urban recycling evaluation (Alexander et al. 2009b).

This period was a critical juncture when the Council⁴ was trying to improve the estate, which they stopped abruptly in 2005. Since 2009 it has been demolished in phases to make way for a private/third sector development. Almost from its inception, the estate’s residents were the object of the Council’s infrastructural spending cuts and, after 1999, were also cast as recalcitrant citizens for failing to comply with new demands for recycling. However, as I will detail, the estate’s material environment hindered residents from adopting the “attitude and behavior change” the Council enjoined upon them: sorting then carrying their recyclates to the appropriate receptacles. In new forms, the same castigation of low-income households for apparently unthrifty, wasteful behavior continued, eclipsing alternative understandings of what constitutes careful economy, and to what end, as well as structural obstacles such as the dysfunctional infrastructure. Notably, no singular model of actions and beliefs was followed by all of the estate’s residents, some of whom judged each other just as fiercely as they were themselves swept into the same category by certain officials and the media.

In what follows, I start with historical contexts to the changing meanings of thrift over time and then to the intersection of scales and practices of thrift on and in the estate, some of which contributed to its eventual dissolution. I then trace how various thrifty measures by central and local governments shaped the estate, which might be seen as the object of both spectacular welfare expenditure (modernist “streets in the sky”) and equally performative cuts as it was starved

⁴ London is divided into local government authorities (borough Councils) responsible for housing and waste management.

of maintenance to the point that destruction was presented as the best option. I then examine household thrift through different understandings of what for my informants constituted decency, or the right way of doing things, and their mechanisms for getting by. This segues into a discussion of how households managed time, labor, money, and materials to achieve, if not a condition of blessedness, then norms of kincare. In line with the literature on provisioning in Britain (e.g., Mollona 2009: 63–78; Smith 2012; Davey 2019a; see also Narotzky 2012) the ethnography here suggests a more expansive, elastic idea of households than do official definitions, but it also extends this literature by including material repair, sharing, and remaking. The final ethnographic section juxtaposes such care in conserving material resources—expressed as care for kin—with a common characterization of estate residents as bad recyclers or environmentally unaware, despite the infrastructural limitations they face in complying with official demands. Such negative portrayals form an ecological strand of a broader discourse on working-class wastefulness as households and individuals are caught in the mesh of contradictory policies, imperatives, and admonitions concerning responsible, thrifty behavior.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THRIFT AND THE “PRODIGAL POOR”

While different disciplines emphasize distinct aspects of thrift’s intellectual history, the gender,⁵ class, and temporal dimensions of thrift are rarely examined explicitly beyond the short- and long-term horizons of late capitalism and households, respectively (Gudeman and Rivera 1990). Nor has there been a close examination of the structural and scalar changes in how thrift-as-frugality has been conceived, fervently enjoined upon others, and practiced, changes that often curtail the very practices and rationales of thrift being preached to the poor. Here I therefore sketch a history of ideas and practices of thrift in Britain to provide a genealogy for the multiple, sometimes contradictory norms and practices of thrift in the ethnography, where earlier censorious misrepresentations of the practices of low-income households still resound.

The dominant meanings of thriftiness have differed from one age to another. Thus, in Europe, we might trace the moves from the relatively self-sufficient peasant smallholding (Gudeman and Hann 2015),⁶ William Cobbett’s “cottage economy” (1979), to bourgeois, urban thrift, national thriftiness in both world wars, and thriftiness qua care for the planet’s limited resources prompted initially by the 1970s oil crisis. These “moves” only hazard a historical trajectory, and

⁵ While the postwar sociology of gender and working-class respectability (e.g., Moge 1956; Goldthorpe et al. 1968; Skeggs 1997) examines changing discourses and practices of consumption and thrift, the latter is not addressed directly.

⁶ The kind of smallholding that allows surplus for reserves is a step up from bare subsistence where thriftiness is neither possible nor valorized (Foster 1965: 296, 307).

many overlap, continue, or, as with recycling (Cooper 2008; Alexander and Reno 2012), are by turn foregrounded, forgotten, and then rediscovered. The divergences between smallholders and low-income families in industrial and post-industrial cities show the problems with extrapolating ideas and practices of thrift from one context to another. Cottage economies are based on a gendered division of labor and a range of activities from vegetable plots to baking, brewing, turf cutting, making, and mending (Cobbett 1979; Sturt 1912), and, critically, access to common land for the family pig, rivers for fishing, forests, for firewood, and other commoners' rights (Linebaugh 1991; see Geremek 1994 for an overview of European rural and urban poverty over the last millennium).

In his chronicle of nineteenth-century rural dispossession in England, George Sturt (1912) noted the temporal shifts from rural to industrial domestic economies and their profound effects on thrifty practices. The largely self-sufficient cottager could save toward the occasional significant purchase needed to keep the household going. Factory work initiated a new tempo, not just for work (Thompson 1967) but for income and expenditure as weekly wages were immediately sopped up by buying goods that could no longer be homemade or grown.⁷ The new rhythms meant a more hand-to-mouth existence with fewer opportunities to save, not for accumulation but simply as a buffer against hard times and for the occasional sizeable expenditure (Sturt 1912: 127–41). The strategies used by urban workers, usually women, to stretch weekly pay across the week often became the focus of middle-class opprobrium. For example, the weekly and seasonal cycles of pawning and redeeming Sunday or winter clothes (Tebbutt 1983) were typically decried as heedless and wasteful, much as burial insurance was. These are the same voices that now censure the financial irresponsibility of those forced to borrow at high interest rates for periodic high-cost items, while lauding prudent borrowing. This is a useful reminder that Mr. Micawber's familiar maxim for financial health—"Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen [pounds] nineteen [shillings] and six [pence], result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery" (Dickens 1850)—is little help if the *rhythm* of income across the year does not match that of outgoings. Cash flow matters more than end-of-year balance sheets. Moreover, what counts as financial responsibility and for whom has sharply altered. Older estate residents described childhoods punctuated by weekly knocks on the door by the collectors of rent, insurance, contributions for savings clubs, friendly societies, and sometimes the tallyman's collections for hire-purchase instalments, known colloquially as "buying on the never never" (Davey 2019a). In twenty-first-century Britain, a new financial tempo and discipline is marked by "the responsible

⁷ The 1908 Small Holdings and Allotments Act placed a duty on Councils (except in inner London) to make land available.

meeting, management, and manipulation of ever-greater [payment] obligations” (Langley 2009: 18, see also Montgomerie’s (2007) discussion of macroeconomic models of growth based on high levels of consumer borrowing where debts are never fully redeemed), a tempo that is out of synch with irregular, precarious work. While regular cycles of debt and redemption for the poor are not new, the current preference by lenders for on-going debt servicing rather than redemption is a relatively recent innovation.

The bourgeois ethic that privileged thrift qua saving therefore appeared alongside the structural shift of rural dispossession and contraction of the commons that made saving impossible for those whose resources were now restricted to weekly pay. The working classes were at once pauperized and castigated for being idle, improvident, and vicious, exemplified in the 1834 Report of the Poor Law Commissioners (quoted in Engels 1943: 286). We will encounter this theme in my ethnography, as urban residents of dense housing estates are urged to recycle and rebuked for failing to do so, yet severely constrained by their material environment and the reduced services they receive.

The ethics or virtue complexes of which thrift is sometimes part reinforce class distinctions. The medieval, aristocratic virtues of honor and generous largesse were rooted in the classical, public virtues along with courage and justice (Casey 1991; McCloskey 2006a; 2006b) while the laboring poor had to make do with the Christian virtues of submission to their lot via faith, humility, and “the redeeming effects of suffering ... in the life to come” (Freedman 1999: 230). Otherwise, the peasant was reduced to a figure that exemplified Christ-like poverty (ibid.). The rise of the urban middle class and the bourgeois mode of thrift composed of self-discipline, hard work, self-denial, accumulation, and reinvestment was at odds with, first, the aristocratic virtues (nominally inimical to thrift),⁸ second, peasant practices of making do from a variety of resources, and third, the very urban workers who fueled bourgeois accumulation but who appear as the dehumanized object of profound moral, social, and economic fear. Their alleged lack of thrift, as index of irrationality (Ketabgian 2010), joined other vilifications that targeted absence: “Workers were excoriated as uncivilized heathen, signifying only a sociocultural lack: ‘*ir*religion, *im*temperance, *im*providence’ [and] *im*mortality” (Stedman Jones 1974: 463, his italics).

Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Harriet Martineau was rightly celebrated for her insistence on connecting domestic and political economy. Nonetheless, she also gave voice to a horrified, middle-class vision of a profligate working class addicted to ephemeral indulgence and instant satisfaction, linking the same fast immediacy of “modern industrial production with acts of impulsive

⁸ A critique of lazy aristocrats was partnered with one of working-class profligacy in the rise of Swedish middle-class thriftiness (Frykman and Lofgren 1987).

and improvident consumption” of luxury goods (Ketabgian 2010: 153). The proposed corrective lay in control and deferral, treating “capitalist self-denial as gratifying in its own right” (ibid.: 154). Martineau was not alone in celebrating the moral and economic benefits of self-discipline, and censuring what were cast as “irrational, incomprehensible and anti-economic actions” seen through a neoclassical economic lens (ibid.: 151). The trope of low-income workers unable to defer gratification is part of a broader rhetorical trope that infantilizes colonized peoples and the working class by portraying them as lacking discipline in countless ways (Alexander and Sosna 2022a; Wilk 2022).

Alongside the pathologizing of the working class,⁹ the hectoring tomes of Samuel Smiles, author of *Self Help* (1859) and *Thrift* (1875), best exemplify the spirit of exhortation to the working classes to buck up, improve themselves, and recognize that they “themselves (are) to blame for what they suffer” (1875: 154). However, Smiles merely made explicit in a Victorian idiom a view that can be traced back to the Henrician English Poor Laws of 1536, which castigated the physically able but poor as undeserving because they were lazy and improvident (Alexander 2009a; Cunningham and Innes 1998; Polanyi 2001).¹⁰ Stedman Jones (1974) highlights not only the different moral and economic norms for the nineteenth-century working and middle classes, but that the former’s “thrifty” practices, such as drawing on kin labor, were often hidden from view; this was problematic since, to be considered deserving of and to benefit from middle-class philanthropy, claimants had to demonstrate signs of thrift that donors recognized, much as twentieth- and twenty-first-century welfare has always depended on the performance of middle-class norms of deservingness (Skeggs 1997; Smith 2021: 38; Koch 2019). Since the 1980s, such deservingness has been partly metricized through credit scores: an “institutionalized measure of moral worth” (Dudley 2000: 63).

In sum, the urban households in the ethnography I present here differ from both rural and middle-class households and follow different models of thrift. Yet, media excoriations of “the feckless poor” (Tyler 2015) still often draw on the discourse of middle-class thrift as an index of moral and economic rectitude, oblivious to structural and material impediments the poor face. They ignore, too, questions of what counts as a “respectable” household and barriers to achieving that status. Finally, in response to the frequent portrayal by defenders and accusers alike of “the working class” as homogeneous, I underscore the differences in people’s approaches to getting by without using the terminology of a failed or fractured class consciousness. The next section traces the estate’s history, highlighting how different ideas about thrift at different scales shaped residents’ material environment as well as the demands placed upon them.

⁹ Gareth Stedman Jones (1974) summarizes the “slum life literature” that followed Charles Booth’s observation of the working classes’ “strict rules of propriety.”

¹⁰ Margaret Thatcher frequently and approvingly quoted Smiles (Samuel 1992: 11).

THE ESTATE

This colossal estate, housing almost ten thousand residents in concrete-panel blocks of flats, was built between 1967 and 1977 and financed by borrowing, like much postwar council housing (Beckett 2016). Such state indebtedness and expenditure were aimed at providing a better living environment than London's insanitary, crowded, and often bomb-damaged slums. Initially hailed as the epitome of the modern, ideal way to live, the estate rapidly decayed through lack of maintenance and became a byword for inner city deprivation. By the time I started fieldwork there had been a furor over Channel 4 using the estate for its ident in a video clip that was "enhanced" by additions of flapping laundry, artfully scattered litter, and an abandoned shopping trolley in a long, empty corridor (Murray 2012).

Eddie, sixty years old and leading light of local politics, complained in the pub where we regularly met that anything negative that happened in the area was always ascribed to the estate (see Slater 2018), which she insisted was "just another community." Her point was reinforced by a Task Force of architects, police, teachers, and NGOs that had been created to tackle problems on the estate: "If you look at the statistics," the young project manager noted, "crime levels aren't much worse than other areas, but when something *does* happen, it can be something big that makes the news and distorts what things are normally like." A 2015 report (Social Life 2017) made the point more forcefully with its graphics of the estate and surrounding areas' 2010 indices of multiple deprivation. Not only did the estate appear safer than neighboring districts, but the highest scoring index of deprivation was in barriers to housing and services. The media's fascinated hysteria over the supposed deviance of estate residents resonated with Martineau's phobic caricature and was reinforced by the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act which, as Insa Koch explains, reevaluated access to social housing: what had marked "a citizen's worthiness" became "a mark of dismal inadequacy" (2019: 46). The initial relocations took place just before the 1977 Housing Act was passed.

Many early residents were thrilled with what they described as large, well-appointed flats. One of the first to move in from nearby Bermondsey (Ashton 1972), a dockland area that was savagely shelled during the war, Doreen said, "It was like going to the Ritz, dear. Huge windows and mirrors everywhere. So much space! And an indoor bathroom. We couldn't believe our luck." At the start, residents were often moved street by street, each one allocated to a corridor, thereby keeping familiar communities together. This was a very different experience from that described by Michael Young and Peter Willmott, where relocated East End residents complained of a lack of neighborliness (1957: 119; see also Moge 1956: 85). In the 1960s and 1970s, Eddie explained, most girls left school at sixteen and went to work at the Peek Freans biscuit factory in Bermondsey, staying at home until they married and then often moving to

another flat on the estate. Gillian Evans' ethnography of white, working-class Bermondsey confirms its continuing tight-knit community; as one of her informants commented, "Bermondsey's like Alabama—everyone is related to everyone else" (2006: 19).

The population changed markedly with new incomers, a process that accelerated in the 1980s when the Right to Buy Act (1980) allowed Council tenants to buy their apartments at a discounted market price, a scheme that continues. The Act reframed responsible, thrifty behavior and thriving to mean borrowing in order to secure the "dignity" of home ownership. Although the idea was first mooted by a Labour government in the 1930s (Jones and Murie 2006), it took off under the Conservative government then in power, aimed at reducing the public cost of state-owned and managed housing. Numbers peaked under the subsequent New Labour government. Perhaps unexpectedly, given the government's emphasis on prudent household saving, many who had no collateral could take out mortgages on the strength of the discount. Arguably, Right to Buy marked the shift from the virtue of thrifty saving to normalizing borrowing as thrifty good sense, which climaxed with the sale of subprime mortgages and the 2008 financial crash. Encouraging tenants to buy their homes was not accompanied by building more public housing; in 2020 over a million more homes were needed to provide everyone with a decent home to live in (Gompertz 2020). The cost of subsidizing private rentals for welfare recipients exceeds the cost of Council housing. By any reckoning, public money has not been saved.

New owners rapidly found that the dignity of ownership extended not only to liability for their own apartment, but to a share of their building's common areas (e.g., walls, roofs, stairwells), which had suffered from long-term deficiencies of investment and maintenance, both arguably central to any thrifty endeavor (see Verdery 2003 and Alexander 2009b for "postsocialist" examples). Interest rates escalated during the late 1980s and early 1990s, due partly to a housing bubble, and partly to short-lived monetarist policies that also sharply increased unemployment, rendering many new homeowners vulnerable to dispossession after repayment defaults. Meanwhile, house prices slumped between 1988 and 2002; those who found themselves with negative equity disproportionately were on lower incomes and younger and had bought between 1988 and 1991 (Dorling and Cornford 1995). In response, some had to take out more loans, some sold up, while others moved to cheaper housing and rented out their flats. Some illegally subdivided flats into bedsits, each room with a lockable door. This increased churn and, some residents observed, diminished the closeness of the community.

By 2001, the Council was planning to transfer the large remainder of the estate that it still owned and managed to an independent social housing organization, but it was dumbfounded when the tenants voted overwhelmingly (73 percent) to refuse the transfer. Edie's friend in the pub chipped in that she had

voted no, since, “My friend was regenerated and she didn’t like it at all, so I said no to that happening here.” Articulating a common sense of betrayal, Edie added tartly that it was the Council’s responsibility to look after the people who had been relocated from Bermondsey and that privatization was selling residents short. The Council was now faced with having to bring the estate up to scratch. Edie, as well as some local community NGOs, explained that several Single Regeneration Budgets (SRBs)¹¹ had been awarded but, mysteriously, had never been converted into improved living standards. Edie did not stint on her accusations of corruption among local officials and councilors and claimed they had converted the SRBs straight into their bank accounts.

During my fieldwork there were plans to improve the estate. Architects were commissioned, tenants—including Edie—consulted, plans drawn up, and one corner was renovated. This was short-lived. In 2005, the Council announced that the estate’s largely concrete-panel construction was a safety hazard due to the possibility of gas explosions. Other irredeemable material shortcomings were cited: the heating system, untraceable leaks, and flat roofs (Beckett 2016). The only responsible thing to do, it was decided, was to evacuate residents and hand the estate over to private or third-sector developers, creating twice as many, but smaller flats. At least half the flats would be sold to finance the new development. Residents who rented from the Council were told they would be able to return once building was complete, but the flats would be smaller and rents 80 percent of market value.¹² Approximately 2 miles from the City of London, the estate is “prime” land commanding high market values. Despite vehement protests, the plan was implemented in phases starting in 2009. Tenants, now called “decants,” were moved elsewhere, their homes termed “voids.” As of 2020, only 34 percent of previous tenants have returned. Residents who had bought their flats were served “Compulsory Purchase Orders” that many claimed were significantly below market values. To find affordable housing they were forced to move a considerable distance away, making a mockery of the discourse of the dignity and self-reliance that would supposedly accompany becoming an owner-occupier.

This short account of the estate’s troubled history has necessarily skimmed details (see Lees 2014; and Beckett 2016 for longer versions). Nonetheless, it shows that whereas the estate’s initial construction drew on Corbusier’s modernist spirit, if not the quality of his materials and design (see Coleman 1985), almost from the outset, estates such as this were targets of government cost reductions and stigmatization (see Mogeys 1956). Further, it indicates the

¹¹ Established by Blair’s Labour government, the SRB scheme ran 1994–2004 to address multifaceted urban deprivation through “partnership working” with residents, Councils, and private and third sector groups. It included a mandate to improve both the environment and the infrastructure.

¹² Following an outcry, the percentage was reduced, but for many former Council tenants, returning to the estate is still impossible.

difficulties in considering thrift in such a context, where a household's material infrastructure, let alone the added affective dimensions of home (Alexander, Hojer Bruun, and Koch 2018), are in the care of a landlord who either fails to maintain buildings to acceptable standards (see Koch 2018) or chooses evacuation, demolition, and rebuilding over maintenance. Informally, local community NGOs, as well as some Council officials with oversight of the Borough's housing, observed that while rebuilding is hardly a thrifty option in terms of an economic balance sheet, it has more political value than the "invisible" expense of maintaining infrastructure, a view with which Edie vociferously agreed. Other tenants were equally fervent in believing the estate urgently needed to be rebuilt to better standards. One irony is that the UK campaign for decent homes, launched by Tony Blair's government to improve living standards, has often been used to justify new build rather than maintenance, fueling the current phase of demolition-and-rebuild gentrification (Wilde 2020; Lees 2014).

DECENCY AND RESPECTABILITY

The brief history of thrift just presented is a preliminary foray into its class dimensions over time. Here I will explore ethnographically the complications of managing on a limited budget to maintain at least a public face of decency. Institutional admonishments to have a planetary conscience, or indeed accounts of the rising popularity of secondhand circuits of exchange such as charity shops, car boot sales, or eBay (e.g., Tranberg Hansen and le Zotte 2019), typically eclipse the sharp class difference between conspicuous thriftiness as a fashionable trend and careful frugality as the only means of managing on a low income when poverty is a recent memory and painfully near to hand. To paraphrase Clifford Geertz's observation that the difference between a twitch and a blink hinges on the action's context (1973: 6), we might say that darning a sock can be read very differently if that sock was initially a good quality wool one able to bear several darnings or one that rapidly disintegrates. The same action can be a statement of skill or eco-commitment—"visible" darns have become an eco-fashion statement (Noguchi 2019) enacting an aesthetic of thrift irrespective of need—or a source of shame because it denotes poverty, or simply a habit.¹³

Two women on the estate, quite different in character, dominated local politics, and residents tended to side with one or the other. They also exemplified different approaches to thrift and decency. Edie, introduced earlier, was joyfully raucous and frequently obscene. She chain-smoked and had a fondness for leopard skin patterned clothes that she had triumphantly unearthed in local charity shops.

¹³ Likewise, the complex responses to secondhand clothing in southern Italy emerge from the confluence of social pressure to wear designer clothing, poverty, and charity's negative associations (Pipyrou 2014).

Passionately engaged with both local politics and the Labour Party, she was an enthusiastic and respected advocate for estate residents' welfare.

I first bonded with Edie in the local pub, partly because I was buying the drinks but also because I had just bought a large quantity of cheap offcuts of ham from a nearby supermarket, which I offered to split with her. "That'll do nicely for my Mikey's tea," she said, scooping the ham, now carefully wrapped in a handkerchief, into her handbag. The ham cemented our friendship; she found a way of mentioning it most of the times we met up. Her rival, Maureen, was quite different: neatly dressed, hair carefully permed, and never leaving her flat without "putting her face on," she was equally invested in the estate and furious about media calumnies, but supported regeneration via demolition and rebuild, believing the estate was past its sell-by date.

Not only did the two women present themselves very differently in terms of appearance and comportment, but Maureen carefully pointed out that she only bought her food from Marks and Spencer, a fairly upmarket food store, pre-prepared if possible, because she knew it was "good quality." Not for her ham offcuts slid under a table in the gloom of a pub. That food is richly symbolic is hardly news, but what perhaps needs restating is its role in marking out the slippery ascent from poverty to respectability. One should also note that government-sponsored injunctions not to waste food (WRAP 2009) can clash with other imperatives, particularly the marking of ritual occasions (Alexander, Gregson, and Gille 2013).

Provisioning for children elicited a particular set of views of what was appropriate or decent. Maureen had started a small exchange system for children's toys, encouraging mothers to bring toys their children had grown out of and swap them for new ones. A young woman had also started her own exchange scheme with her friends. For the younger group, swapping toys became a social occasion, but most also tried to save up to splash out on at least one big, new toy for each of their children each year. The rising cost of these as the children hankered after electronic games worried the mothers, anxious to do the best for their children lest they be mocked by friends. Clothes were a different matter. Discussing a couple of local charity shops, the same young women all said emphatically that they would never dress their children in secondhand clothes. One added slowly that if she was really stuck for money and needed something she might think about it for herself, "but never for my kids. I get the best I can for them." Having to wear secondhand clothes or "hand-me-downs" from older siblings and cousins reminded her of her own childhood and being acutely aware of how little money there had been to keep the family going. Again, while some siblings might swap clothes, there was often a boundary drawn around immediate family—sometimes extending to close friends—beyond which clothes were not exchanged for reasons varying from disgust at an unhygienic practice to social embarrassment.

Edie's delight in charity shops was not widely shared.¹⁴ But the social gatherings, finding toys, or indeed saving enough to buy a child something new, all afforded pleasure far beyond the instrumental value of saving money. While toys and clothes may seem a world away from burials, they arguably belong to the same register of proper provision, highlight the fragility of maintaining decency, and moreover, reduce waste and save money.

Maureen also liked to remind people that she and her (rarely seen) husband had bought their flat under the Right to Buy scheme and were therefore owner-occupiers, suggesting that owning was a social notch above renting from the Council. Edie, when asked if she would consider buying her flat, pointed out that the right *she* wanted was the right to rent from the Council, explicitly invoking the postwar social welfare contract on which the estate was literally and politically founded (Alexander, Hojer Bruun, and Koch 2018). Owning, in Maureen's eyes, not only afforded social distinction but also indicated the moralized ability to save—and borrow. She had paid a deposit from her savings and borrowed the rest as a mortgage. At a time when mortgage repayments were cheaper than renting—until interest rates shot up to nearly 15 percent in 1989—the thriftiness of buying usually depended on a stable income that was enough to save and borrow on. The opportunity for such thriftiness was not open to those whose income was both insecure and low, unless they could take advantage of the Right to Buy discount.¹⁵ Thus, indigent people rarely have the ability to be thrifty in terms of saving, or indeed to borrow for longer-term investments.¹⁶

The differences between Maureen and Edie underline some of the contradictions inherent in ideas, idioms, and practices of thrift. Edie may have embodied an unbounded extravagance of manner at odds with the attributes associated with thriftiness, but she practiced a careful frugality, making it into an adventure. Maureen's apparently more self-disciplined habitus nonetheless exemplified the shift from valuing the skills of household frugality, and the relationships that enabled them, to valuing increased status through conspicuous consumption (Skeggs 2011: 504). Pre-prepared, expensive food is more wasteful in terms of cost and packaging but speaks to a different moralized schema of class ascent. Home ownership promised stability, a key characteristic of the condition of thrift, and dignity in a re-moralized Britain (Davey 2019b), but was also founded on speculation that was undermined by government policies that left many homebuyers vulnerable to eviction, even before Compulsory Purchase Orders decimated their investment. Meanwhile,

¹⁴ None of my informants used the three pawnshops near the estate, but they did a lively trade.

¹⁵ "The incomes of RTB purchasers were below average; most were from lower middle-class or skilled working-class backgrounds" (Cole et al. 2015: 1).

¹⁶ Robert Tressell (2012) and Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) vividly illustrate the proportionately higher living costs for the financially insecure (and see Miller 1998 for the same perspective among wealthy Londoners who see buying good-quality items as thrifty).

many continued to rely on kin-based networks as their main resource for managing, meeting both utilitarian and moral needs.

NETWORKS AND SHARED LABOR, OR THE AXIOM OF AMITY

Through a focus on dynamic household practices, this section will highlight how conceptions of thrift based on households as coterminous with dwellings, long the Census definition, conflicted with residents' thrifty practices (Mollona 2009: 63–78). Our initial survey exposed some odd results. Mary, a slim widow in her mid-fifties had lived alone in a two-bedroom flat since 1993. She spent a huge amount on food, vastly in excess of either one person's capacity for consumption or her income from a small pension and a part-time cleaning job. In startling contrast, Lydia, a young woman who lived in a nearby one-bedroom flat with her baby and toddler, appeared to be on a virtual starvation diet, comprised only of "treats" like the occasional chocolate bar, snack, or pizza; she purchased no "provisions" in Miller's schema of shopping (1998). Such treats were often purchased just to save time. It soon became clear that the widow was not gluttonous, nor the little family malnourished; Mary was Lydia's mother and was shopping and cooking on her behalf while Lydia, who received welfare benefits, looked after her children. There were no affordable crèches in the area, and it was hard to find a job that paid enough to be worthwhile after the costs of childcare. This, however, was only a small part of the large and complex household that Mary headed up.

Mary also had two sons, one of whom, Mark, rented a room on the estate and had two children who lived with their mother, with whom he had broken up. His children occasionally visited and were usually brought round to Mary's flat to join in whatever meal was being served. On the strength of her job, Mary had borrowed money to pay Mark's deposit. He and his brother, who also lived nearby though not on the estate, brought their laundry to Mary, who ran daily loads in her washing machine. Her sons had been intermittently in prison for petty theft and now sporadically worked as building laborers or helped in East Street Market, known locally as "The Lane," which ran along one of the estate's boundaries. Occasionally, they gave Mary some money towards buying food, although they preferred to contribute to a celebratory blowout rather than make regular contributions that, she muttered, would be of more use. Nonetheless, Mary was not averse to feasting when the occasion called for it. "Say what you like," she said [I had said nothing], "but when my boys come out the nick, I always have a good spread on the table for them." Such spreads necessitated weeks of careful scrimping to save enough money to buy the food and drink her sons were partial to. A recurrent theme was how to celebrate ritual occasions properly (see Stedman Jones 1974: 473). Christmas warranted the largest outlay and, by the same token, the most careful saving, sometimes via "Christmas Clubs," which offered no interest but, as Mary said, made it easier to save up

across the year. Careful as Mary was, she also commented that she often simply lacked the time to find the best value buys whether in the high street or market, which entailed trailing from shop to shop comparing prices. Time invested in childcare and cooking was traded for time that might have saved money: a different calculus from that suggested by Miller's informants (1998).

Mary's other daughter, Rhianna, had a temporary job and two children: a school-age son and a three-year-old daughter. Mary looked after them after school, often along with Lydia's children when Lydia had to be away from home. Lydia and Rhianna gave Mary money weekly to buy food that she cooked and either ate with her children and grandchildren or gave to her children to reheat at home. Occasionally, Mary coordinated other child-minding arrangements when she was busy, such as collecting Rhianna's children for Lydia to look after.

Sharing labor and money was common across the estate when children lived nearby, especially among female-headed households. Mary was effectively the family's accountant, working out the complex permutations of monetized and unmonetized labor and exchanges necessary to keep the family going. Contributions varied from one child to another and over the course of the year, but there was no sense that cash acted as an equivalence for non-monetized labor or other resources. This is a reminder that an Aristotelian anathematization of money and markets and valorization of a non-monetized domestic realm of mutual aid is certainly common (Block and Parry 1989), and though it underpins a bourgeois separation of public and private spheres it is not universal. Thus, Chris Gregory (2009) describes how householding, in Karl Polanyi's (2001) taxonomy of economic modes, initially appeared as an abstraction of the *oikos*, before being recast as just another form of redistribution. Although grounded on distinct kinship norms, Gregory's ethnography in middle India shows that households can straddle monetized and non-monetized economic spheres, pooling and redistributing money. In rural Turkey I found a similar sense that money was just another resource to be shared (2002: 164, 172–73).

Quite apart from the economic sense it made to share labor, income, and costs in this way, there was also a moral balance sheet over which Mary presided. "At the end of the day," she liked to say, "it's family innit, you've got to look after family, even if they drive you up the wall sometimes." This neatly paraphrased Meyer Fortes' axiom of amity: "a general principle of kinship morality that is rooted in the familial domain and is assumed everywhere to be axiomatically binding. This is the rule of prescriptive altruism" (2004[1969]: 231–32).

The household in this case is wholly defined by neither co-residence nor "family," but as "activities and relationships" (Wilk and Netting 1992; see also Yanagisako 1979) that draw together a series of overlapping kin-based units, partly independent and partly pooling resources to address the complex logistics of low-income survival. Reliance on such kin and friendship networks for

sharing resources is widespread (see Evans 2006 and Koch 2019; Fitchen 1995; and Gullestad 1985 for England, the rural United States, and Norway, respectively; and Stack 1974 and Fennell 2015 for U.S. low-income Black urban households). Although the details of Mary's extended household are specific, the principle of closely linked kin units was common across the estate, even if people still puzzled over the ethics of exchanges and sharing.

Linda was Mary's neighbor and friend, had worked most of her life as a secretary, was recently divorced, and had taken early retirement because of ill health. "It don't seem right," she said, describing how she had always helped her daughters financially when they left home and started families of their own. But then the tables had turned when Linda's mobility became impaired. One of her daughters now had a well-paid job and was paying Linda's rent. "She's a good girl, but it don't seem right having your girls giving you money." Again, Mary sometimes had to mediate in squabbles between Rhianna and Lydia when prescriptive altruism rubbed against a sense of injustice, with too much clothes borrowing, childcare taken for granted, or the tedium of office work being underappreciated.

This raises several questions as to how we think through thrift. For example, what resources, such as labor, material, and time are needed to enact thrifty practices? When and how does thrift come into play, and when is it inappropriate? Both Mary and Linda managed their households according to a dynamic understanding of what a household is, one far removed from the English census definition that acknowledges that non-kin may make a household but only within a single dwelling, recalling distinctions between the nuclear family, typically assumed in law, and the "unclear family" produced by multiple relationships and separations (Simpson 1977). The kind of gentrification via forced evacuation and destruction that happened on the estate destroys this kind of domestic economy that relies on proximity.

RECYCLING FOR THE NATION: PROVISION OR PERSUASION

As the previous two sections suggest, from the estate residents' perspective, minimizing wastefulness was simply part of a broader repertoire of activities to care for kin properly that combined saving money and eschewing waste. More than this, however, waste avoidance was rarely thought of as such, shading at one end into enjoyable gossip or the triumph of the find, and at the other hedged about with the anxieties over showing inadequate care and propriety. But if we shift our scale of analysis to examine how waste avoidance is viewed and practiced by local and central authorities, as well as enjoined upon citizens, we see how formalized recycling has been plucked from its broader rationale of preserving resources and now has little connection with informal practices that do just that.

Recycling thus provides an illuminating perspective onto the conjunction of different scales of thrifty practices and assumptions, and the institutional

hollowing out of planetary care. The 1970s energy crisis gave rise to ecological movements and economics driven by a sense of the world as a shared *oikos* whose sustainability was threatened by excess extraction and waste (Alexander and Reno 2012: 16). In response, the EU's waste strategy "aims to help Europe become a recycling society that seeks to avoid waste and uses waste as a resource" (EU 2005)—a thrifty aim. This extends the EU's 1999 Waste Directive issued to each member country to reduce biodegradable waste they sent to landfill to 50 percent of their 1997 levels by 2020. Britain, traditionally reliant on landfill, was hit hard by this, and its government responded by passing the targets on to Councils, letting them decide how to meet them.¹⁷ Recycling plus disposal methods such as incineration or anaerobic digestion have been the main instruments for reducing landfilling. Households were faced with new demands to sort their rubbish into different materials and then store it until collected or take it to a collection point. Dense housing was rapidly linked to low recycling rates by local authority officials, the media, and scholars (see Oluwadipe et al. 2021, for a comprehensive overview), narrowly understood as correctly sorted material streams collected outside the home. But this raises questions about how thrifty this process actually is and how well these expectations of citizens fit with high-rise, postwar housing estates. For example, the waste chutes at the end of each corridor have long been notorious across this and similar estates for regularly being blocked.

There is a commonly agreed upon hierarchy of practices for dealing with waste, preferentially ranked according to the amount of energy and material they require and hence their efficiency, or thriftiness. Landfill is the least attractive option since it produces methane that is rarely convertible to usable energy. Incineration and anaerobic digestion may recover some energy but, again, address waste disposal rather than its creation. Recycling—dismantling an object to re-use its parts—is also low-ranked because recycling processes consume energy. Ranked above it are repair, then re-use, and then the best options of reducing waste or producing none at all.

The conundrum for Councils tasked with reducing landfilled waste is that the least effective methods are the easiest to quantify because they are the most visible. Repairing or re-using an item (e.g., mending, exchanging, or repurposing clothes or reusing empty containers) is rarely detectable outside the home. There is another distinction between the apparently seamless climb from one option to another. Re-using, repairing, sharing, or passing on items to extend their use within and between households are straightforward, thrifty practices, examples of productive consumption: they obviate or reduce expenditure, although they may require time and labor. Putting recyclates that cannot be absorbed into the

¹⁷ Councils were given choices of how to meet targets, but the government made £1.4 billion available to them for choosing commercial contractors (National Audit Office 2014).

extended household out for external collection requires time and space to sort and store them, with no immediate benefit to the household economy.

Household recycling rates have long been lowest in deprived urban areas (BBC 2019). Much of the grey and white literature on how to improve recycling rates assumes that low returns mean that people in these areas are unwilling to recycle or are indifferent to or unaware of the reasons for it (Barr 2007). Consequently, considerable effort is spent on communicating to them the importance of recycling (WRAP 2013), and conducting experiments to determine whether punishments (e.g., fines) or rewards (e.g., shopping tokens) will better ensure their participation (Thøgersen 2003). We found some (although by no means all) local officials were scathing about residents' civic commitment, care for public spaces, and willingness to recycle. One observed that "these people are like animals" in how they dealt with their rubbish and listed items he had seen stuffed down the chutes: "nicked bikes, a microwave, duvets, cats, broken glass..." Another gleefully repeated the urban myth of babies being found in the containers into which the chutes delivered rubbish and noted that although flats had been provided with plastic boxes for separating recyclates, these had been either thrown outside or used for storing toys or laundry. This, he asserted, was caused by a failure of comprehension.

Such comments disregard the physical constraints on recycling in such areas and betray an ignorance of residents' views. Long corridors with small cupboards ran the length of the estate's larger housing blocks. There was no other external space in which to store recyclates, so space had to be found inside. Marisa spelled out the problems: "Inside my flat I just don't have room for all these recycling bins we're supposed to put next to the ordinary bin. So, one idea they had was to give us see-through plastic bags! I came home to find these bags shoved through my letterbox. I was furious. I do childcare and these bags are really dangerous. So, where are we supposed to put stuff? I'm not keeping glass or tins in my flat with the kids around." She gestured to the corridor cupboards, many of which had doors missing or hanging off their hinges. "I'm not going to put stuff in there with no lock or no door at all! If you put glass out in the recycling box, the kids smash it on their way home from school all over the corridor or throw other stuff around. My neighbor had one lot of card and paper set alight."

Marisa's neighbors faced other difficulties in storing recyclates. Stan was in his late seventies and waiting for a hip operation. He had lived alone on the twentieth floor of a high-rise block since his wife had died two years previously, in a flat they had shared since the estate was first built. He took great pride in the estate, often slowly walking round checking that "things were in order," as he liked to say, picking up litter and reporting on broken benches or windows in the hope of getting them mended. Stan described the early years as a time when residents taught incomers from overseas "how we deal with rubbish here," noting that he had intervened to stop waste being thrown out of windows, but that people had quickly stopped when he explained local ways of doing things.

For Stan and many others, the biggest problem was the frequently malfunctioning lift that made a nightmare of “life in the skies,” as he and his wife had once called their new existence. Laboriously hobbling down the stairs with a bag of recyclates to drop in the “bring banks”¹⁸ that had been set up outside, he was upset to find not only that they had been firebombed but that the Council had responded by merely taping them over. It was a lesson learned, he said sternly. But it was also a shock to someone who tried to “do the right thing,” Stan’s phrase for recycling, although, like many people, he was hazy on why he was being asked to recycle.

Lift failure featured largely in residents’ grievances. A young mother of a toddler and baby, who lived in a high rise, complained how she had twice taken her recycling down many flights of stairs with a pushchair and child in tow, only to find on the second occasion, as Stan had, that the bring bank was out of order. It was not, she said firmly, something she was likely to try again any time soon. Later that year, the residents’ association, led by Edie, gathered with banners outside the town hall protesting lift failures.

The Council’s website says its aim is to be “socially, economically, ethically and environmentally sustainable,” but it has been unable to find a waste strategy that fits the startlingly different areas it is responsible for: broad streets of Georgian villas abut Victorian terraces and dense housing estates. The typical response has been to provide households with large containers for recyclables and collect them via curbside or “doorstep” collections, but the estate’s physical layout has precluded residents being offered the doorstep collection service enjoyed by nearby households with front gardens, ground-level access, and more space generally. Councils continue to emphasize education and communication rather than provision. A government-sponsored report on waste for proposed high-rise flats in London observed the need for adequate internal space as well as: “a system that encourages a sense of personal responsibility for correct segregation of waste and use of waste management service/infrastructure. This could include linking use of service to individual, household, or business via technology (e.g., smart bins) and/or monitoring (via CCTV and caretaking staff)” (Eunomia 2018: 10). Existing housing is not easily retrofitted to increase internal space, but authorities prefer to encourage the kind of thriftiness and responsibility they desire through “clear user instruction” and “signage,” along with enforcement and smart technology, rather than, for example, repairing corridor cupboards or lifts or providing effective collection services.

Despite the constraints, and contrary to assumptions that low recycling indicates ignorance of requirements or simply a lack of moral fiber, most of our informants expressed a wish to recycle if they could. Luisa, who had recently

¹⁸ These are large, fixed containers for the public to deposit dry recyclates in.

moved to the UK from Columbia with her small daughter, was anxious to comply with what she saw as orders from “the Council,” but she also, like her friends, spoke of recycling as something to do “for my country.” People rarely spoke of formal recycling collection as something related to any global or ecological concerns. We occasionally heard people dismiss the Council’s recycling efforts as an outright fraud and claim they really sent the carefully sorted waste to landfills or to China.

Other actions of finding and saving oddments or other items that might be put to future use were sometimes carried out not primarily to be thrifty but in response to quite different imperatives and temporalities. Both men and women collected items or bits and pieces, often for either children when they grew older or grandchildren sometimes yet to be born. These imagined future kin had a rich, material prefiguration via the clothes and toys piled in drawers, or not-yet-made go-karts or doll houses that were eagerly discussed via the fragments of wood, wheels, and other found bits and bobs that had been squirreled away. In these narratives, it sometimes took me a while to realize that the recipient was still only mentally conceived. What was apparent was the self-making of the narrator as a future parent or grandparent, skilled in crafting and providing for their family, woven through with the delight and satisfaction of finding, making, mending, and keeping things going. Such actions and imaginings cannot simply be ascribed to an instrumental frugality, and skein together the positive effects of people thriving with their means to do so. Inevitably, for flat dwellers, the problem was where to store the screws, wooden fragments, jars, wheels, glue, tools, and so forth that were consequently scattered across friends’ attics, cellars, cupboards, and allotment sheds as limbo spaces where things were regularly forgotten and joyously rediscovered. Sometimes such practices became simple hoarding; most flats had a small space where things were thrown to be sorted later. Occasionally a flat was so drowning in stuff that one had to carefully move a pile of oddments just to sit down.

There was one more unexpected category of holding onto things, which again did not fit into straightforward frugality. Three flats had white goods (two washing machines and a freezer) that had been kept after they were broken and beyond repair. The freezer was used as a cupboard, but this was not the main reason for keeping it. In all three cases, the owners associated them with dead parents who had once used them. Olivia had covered her broken twin tub with a red cloth and put a potted plant on it, speaking movingly of the memories it evoked of her mother bending over it, stuffing it with laundry or hauling out a wet load to be hung to dry on the balcony. “I can still see her when I walk past it. I haven’t the heart to get rid of it, even though I can afford a new one.” An unthrifty action perhaps in terms of space and time—she had to walk her wash over to the local launderette every week since she had no room for a washing machine—but a reminder that spirits can inhabit even the most anonymous of machines.

Both monetary and material thrift, sometimes even hoarding after a family death, were woven through with reliance on kin and the material anticipation, or recall, of future and past kin.

CONCLUSION

Tracking thrift over time and across scales shows how a model of thrift privileging self-sufficiency has since the early nineteenth century fueled derogatory discourses about the urban poor as undisciplined and wasteful. Changes in the meaning of thrift in British public discourse partly follow the shifting parameters of what is deemed to constitute responsible individual behavior and good citizenship. Thus, the thrifty virtue of saving and avoiding debt and wastefulness became joined, and sometimes supplanted, by an emphasis on prudent consumer borrowing to provide a good family home, from buying something on the never-never to obtaining a mortgage and supposedly joining a democracy defined by property ownership. Thrift's malleability and potency therefore play a key role in capitalism's persuasions to spend more.

This is where Yates and Davison Hunter's (2011) taxonomy of thrift ethics and practices appears ethnographically as the changing form, scalar elision, and coexistence of different kinds of thrift over time, some of which hobble thrift at another scale. Thus, the estate's history manifests the move from a collective sense of thrift based on state borrowing for improved welfare to public expenditure cuts that are morally and economically underpinned by an *oikos* model of thrift. Thrifty borrowing switched from something performed by the state *for* its citizens to a practice enjoined *upon* citizens for their own welfare (see Fennell 2015 for "post-welfare re-education"). It is worth re-emphasizing, however, that the estate also suffered from poor design and construction materials showing little evidence of the long-term careful economy that characterizes household management (Gudeman and Rivera 1990).

The 1970s saw an abrupt gear shift when middle-class thrift ceased to merely shape belittling discourse but migrated across scales and began to be operationalized, underscoring national policy, stigmatizing social housing, valorizing borrowing and ownership, and cutting "wasteful" public expenditure. In the same decade this trope was also mobilized to frame concern for planetary sustainability as the common *oikos*. Over the next two decades, paralleling the moralized economic move from public to private responsibility, postwar technocratic waste management (Alexander and Reno 2012: 7–8) increasingly emphasized individual accountability for planetary care. This is so paradoxically framed that it privileges offering up carefully sorted waste over reducing waste production. As recycling schemes were rolled out in dense urban environments, low participation was typically ascribed to refractory individuals rather than failed infrastructure. The irony is that many household practices that do reduce waste receive scant formal recognition.

Selling off state housing brought scales together: home ownership was supposed to provide citizens with security while asset divestment reduced state financial obligations. But many who bought their homes through Right to Buy were successively hit by unforeseen costs beyond their control: extra liabilities, increased interest rates and unemployment, and Compulsory Purchase Orders. Far from providing security, such purchases heightened household exposure through financialization and a host of concomitant policies.

Such normative understandings of the moral-economic orders through which thrift appears continually occlude the alternative, resourceful forms of thriftiness pursued by many low-income families. Crucially, where fiscal and ecological reasoning are separated at the scale of policy, they form a continuum in household practices that are shaped by a solicitude for the proper and decent care of kin. Thus, concern with economic survival is entwined with thrift as an aesthetic to be performed, read, and judged, whether in vertical class judgments, anxieties over the correct enactment of proper kin care (e.g., buying new or secondhand for children), or lateral censure. Both renting and house-buying may be seen as responsible, or the opposite, depending on how state-citizen relationships are construed and valorized. The potential stigma of failed performance haunts many of these practices. Such thrift and thriving therefore appear as the product of historically embedded livelihood struggles at the intersection of different scales and practices of thrift and how fundamental needs are construed.

We can understand low-income households as extended kin units that may share, pool, and redistribute money and labor. But if we also recognize how they can be enmeshed with and dependent on the centralized redistribution of housing, benefits, and infrastructural provision then we grasp how vulnerable aspirations for a good life are to changing policy. The sheer complexity of how kin groups organize resources or extend the lives of objects through exchange, sharing, and creative reuse was ignored in media accounts and stigmatizing narratives about estate residents. This continues the long history of blindness to or misrecognition of low-income, urban household thrifty practices and budgetary ingenuity, from swopping and exchange to canny manipulations of various forms of credit (see James, Neves, and Torkelson 2022).

Kin care is both the aim and the means of household thrift on the estate. Such thrift incorporates the skill of conjuring adequate time, labor, resources, food, and care from and for kin networks, the luck of finding leopard skin clothes for some, or children's toys for others, and the careful management of moral and economic balances between daily frugality and celebratory blowouts. Kin relations as the object of thrift can extend backward and forward in time, materially pre- and post-figured, sometimes in actions that show how close carefully balanced thriftiness is to the vices of its excesses: hoarding or miserliness. Such actions may be beset by anxiety but may equally generate multiple positive affects where thrift-as-thriving or flourishing is an end in itself.

Much of this resembles Gudeman and Rivera's house economy. The distinction is the urban context and the relative lack of resources, such that many households there lack the luxury of an encapsulated commonwealth and so must draw on a wide kin network. The cruel paradox is that the deployment of an *oikos*-centered idea of thrift has unraveled how such localized but distributed households get by. The dispossession and displacement of families caused by such government-level thrift has made it harder for residents to carry out their own thrifty practices based on pooled kinship labor. This is but the latest iteration of enjoining low-income households to be thrifty while removing their means of doing so.

Adam Smith declared self-restraint, that classic attribute of thrift, along with respectability and decorum, to be the great and "awful" virtues compared with the "amiable virtues" of compassion and humanity (1976[1759]: 41). Smith, of course, was a theorist of the bourgeoisie with its morally cleft spheres of public and domestic concerns (Davidoff and Hall 1987). By contrast, the thrift, and indeed necessary respectability of low-income, urban households appears as a quintessentially compassionate virtue, expressed through relations of care (The Care Collective 2020) but also profoundly susceptible to dislocation and the careless virtue of austerity.

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Abstract: This article tracks how a trope of middle-class household thrift, grounded on the autarchic Aristotelian *oikos*, has long fueled derogatory discourses in Britain aimed at low-income urban residents who practice quite different forms of thrift. Since the 1970s this trope has migrated across scales, proving a potent metaphor for national economic policy and planetary care alike, and morally and economically justifying both neoliberal welfare retraction compounded by austerity policies and national responses to excessive resource extraction and waste production. Both austerity and formal recycling schemes shift responsibility onto consumer citizens, regardless of capacity. Further, this model of thrift eclipses the thriftiness of low-income urban households, which emerges at the nexus of kin and waged labor, sharing, welfare, debt, conserving material resources through remaking and repair and, crucially, the fundamental need for decency expressed through kin care. Through a historicized ethnography of a London social housing estate and its residents, this paper excavates what happens as these different forms and scales of household thrift coexist, change over time, and clash. Ultimately, neoliberal policy centered on an inimical idiom of thrift delegitimizes and disempowers low-income urban households and undermines their ability to enact livelihood practices of sustainability and projects of dignity across generations.

Key words: thrift, austerity, urban, low-income, household, environmental discourse, history, anthropology, Britain, the good life