

Article

Subverting Poverty Stigma—Dub Theology and the Politics of Shame

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Abstract

Poverty stigma scapegoats people with direct experience of poverty, blaming and shaming them for being poor. The depiction of poverty as individual moral failure has enabled political leaders to sidestep its systemic causes. In breadline Britain the blaming and shaming of people in poverty as ‘undeserving’ ‘skivers’ has resembled a debilitating form of epistemic violence. Drawing on case studies and interview data from our Life on the Breadline project, this paper breaks new ground by fashioning an austerity-age theology of liberation that provides researchers with the tools to subvert the demeaning damage wrought by poverty stigma. The paper demonstrates the ways in which the power of language enabled policymakers to fashion a powerful political myth that has scapegoated and diminished the agency and the dignity of people in poverty. The use of primary research and the transformative potential of dub hermeneutics enable the paper to demonstrate how a holistic emancipatory engagement with the Biblical concept of *shalom* and the development of a politics of empathy and spirituality of solidarity can resource a new theology of liberative reversals that subverts poverty stigma.

Keywords: poverty; liberation theology; politics; austerity; church; social action; hegemony; conscientisation

1. Introduction

For centuries people experiencing poverty have been blamed by politicians and preachers for being poor. In this paper I draw on our Life on the Breadline research to explore the debilitating damage that this stigmatising public discourse has caused to people with direct experience of poverty.¹ By bringing our extensive primary research into dialogue with a multidisciplinary range of literature and the foundational values of liberation theology, I will show how my reframing (Shannahan 2025) of the dub hermeneutics originally developed by Beckford (2006) can subvert the hegemony of shaming poverty-stigma and the individual and collective insecurities it foments by weaponising the power of language to frame poverty as the result of individual moral failure. Informed by a discussion of the nature of contemporary poverty, stigma, lament, the politics of empathy and the Biblical concept of *Shalom*, the paper will draw on a hermeneutics of suspicion to interrogate the experience of poverty stigma and its systemic causes. To date theological analyses of contemporary poverty have rarely been rooted in the kind of extensive qualitative research that characterised Life on the Breadline. This paper represents the first attempt to fashion a model of political theology that draws primary research into a dialogue with a liberative re-reading of stigma, theologies of lament, the politics of empathy and *Shalom* spiritualities. I will show how such an engagement can resource a pattern of empathetic liberative reversals that inverts the shaming impact of stigma, enabling existential liberation, strengthening



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communal resilience and deepening an egalitarian vision of the common good. This will enable me to sow the seeds of an original fieldwork-led theological analysis of austerity that foregrounds subaltern voices as a first step towards the articulation of a theology of liberative reversals that subverts poverty stigma and resources holistic existential liberation.

2. Methodology and Hermeneutics

Life on the Breadline (2018–2021) explored the different ways in which the Church responded to deepening poverty and inequality during the Age of Austerity that followed the 2010 UK General Election and was the first major fieldwork-led project of its kind within political theology. Life on the Breadline focused on experiences in the UK, but the lessons we learned have the potential to inform understanding in other comparable contexts. Our qualitative research adopted a mixed methods approach, enabling us to fashion a nuanced analysis. During 2019 and 2020 we conducted 60 interviews with national Church leaders, anti-poverty NGOs and practitioners. When combined with our 2020 online survey of more than 100 regional Church leaders from across the UK, photo-voice focus groups, 3 national poverty consultations co-led with our project partner Church Action on Poverty that engaged with 90 community leaders and 6 ethnographic case studies of varied responses to different faces of contemporary poverty in Birmingham, London and Manchester, we engaged with approximately 800 participants during our research. Some qualitative social research has been undertaken within academic and church-facing theology into aspects of contemporary poverty, especially the proliferation and practice of food banks. In the UK such research includes Allen (2016) and Pemberton (2018) and in a New Zealand context the work of Cresswell Rioli (2022). However, it remains the case that Life on the Breadline provides the most extensive empirical basis for the most detailed and holistic theological analysis of Christian responses to austerity-age poverty yet developed.²

This paper is an example of multidisciplinary contextual theology and argues that extensive fieldwork is an essential component of theological reflection, not a voluntary added extra (Schreiter 1985; Bevans [1992] 2002; Pears 2009). It roots theological reflection in the interplay between experience, social analysis and a liberative re-reading of Christian theology that is informed by a hermeneutics of suspicion (Segundo [1976] 2002). The discussion of the stigmatising of people caught in the trap of systemic poverty and the damaging slow violence of the shame and insecurity it causes forms the experiential basis of this paper. This arises from the insights and testimonies of the women and men alongside whom we worked during Life on the Breadline and the activists and Church leaders whom we interviewed or completed our survey during the project between 2018 and 2021. My use of critical discourse analysis, a hermeneutics of suspicion and dub hermeneutical practice in this paper will enable me to interrogate the nature, purpose and impact of poverty stigma uncovered during Life on the Breadline to subvert its hegemonic hold and pave the way for a contextualised theology of liberative reversals.

Beckford (2006) draws on the dub practice of Reggae DJs in his development of an emancipatory hermeneutics to resource Black liberation theology in the UK. Emerging from the sound systems culture of Kingston, Jamaica, in the early 1970s, dub practice revolved around the deconstructive-reconstructive techniques of DJs and producers who stripped away the melodic layers from a piece of music to leave just its rhythmic foundation, upon which they created a new track. However, Beckford (2006, p. 1) argues that “Dub is more than sound: it is the product of sophisticated signification and the raw material for a dynamic interplay between word, sound and power.” For Beckford (Ibid, p. 67), dub reflects “...a quest for meaning”, emancipation and redemption. The deconstruction of a track, “...aims to redeem by restructuring the narrative...rather than destroying it.” (Ibid, p. 72) Building on the work of Beckford, I suggest that such dub practice can provide us

with the creative analytical and interpretive tools needed to subvert poverty stigma and fashion a new, liberative hermeneutics as I demonstrate in this paper.

3. Discussion

3.1. *The Political Significance of Language*

Our words are never neutral. They can be weaponised through the hegemonic use of culture to deepen insecurity and portray systemic poverty as ‘natural’ or ‘blessed’ by God (Galtung 1990; Gramsci 2007) or stimulate a critical awareness that fosters liberative praxis (Freire 1970; Castells 2010). Language, therefore, is a political construct, what Geertz (1973, p. 5) called a “web of significance”, that can only be understood in relation to the context from which it emerges. Consequently, public discourse only assumes political significance if it resonates with aspects of our experience. At the heart of Bourdieu’s (1979, pp. 77–85) exploration of the interaction between language, culture and power is the suggestion that political discourse shapes our self-understanding and perception of the world. Bourdieu (Ibid, p. 79) suggested that political discourse is an “instrument of knowledge which exert[s] structuring power”. This echoes Gramsci’s (2007) argument that cultural discourse carries the power within it to strengthen the hegemony of the ruling class or to foster the critical awareness needed to subvert false consciousness. The language used to discuss poverty can be seen as a form of what Galtung (1990, p. 292) calls ‘cultural violence’, forging and reinforcing the stigma and insecurity that undermine individual and collective resilience, and can elicit shame as our Life on the Breadline research demonstrates.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) reminds us that the study of language cannot be separated from the social practice and ideological processes from which it arises. Fairclough (1992) argues that language is inherently political. There is, he suggests, a dialectical relationship between the material and the ideological; the individual and the collective. The words we use (‘text’) interrelate with and need to be understood in relation to public and political discourse (‘discursive practice’), which, in turn, arises from and shapes wider social processes (‘social practice’). Fairclough (1992, p. 137) contends that CDA can help us to, “systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality between. . .discursive practices, events and texts and. . .wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes”. More recently, he (2023, pp. 17–20) has shown how CDA can illuminate the nature, purpose and impact of public discourse relating to the global financial crisis of 2008 and the onset of the Age of Austerity that followed in its wake in the UK. First, with reference to the cause of the financial crash, Fairclough (2023, p. 17) points to the ideological assertion that “. . .markets are always right”. Such was the power of this neoliberal discourse that, Fairclough (Ibid, p. 18) argues, it assumed the status of ‘dogma’, ensuring a light-touch response to the failure of the banks and the bankers. Second, Fairclough (Ibid, pp. 18–19) discusses the response to the recession that followed the Crash. He (2023, p. 19) argues that Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s response in 2009 implied that globalised capitalism was the most effective way of fostering international economic growth, through the implementation of global financial agreements and regulations. Third, Fairclough (Ibid, p. 20) argues the need to fashion a “discourse for transforming the existing financial and economic order so that the financial markets become the “servant’ of social aspirations and goals for the Good Society”. He suggests, however, that the dominant political discourse in the UK during 2009 focused on repairing and sustaining the financial markets, rather than the common good. In this context the key markers of post-financial crash discourse in the UK foregrounded public spending cuts, raising the spectre of what was to become a decade of austerity. Our Life on the Breadline research highlighted the prevalence of such stigmatising discourse during the Age of Austerity as seen in Figure 1 below.

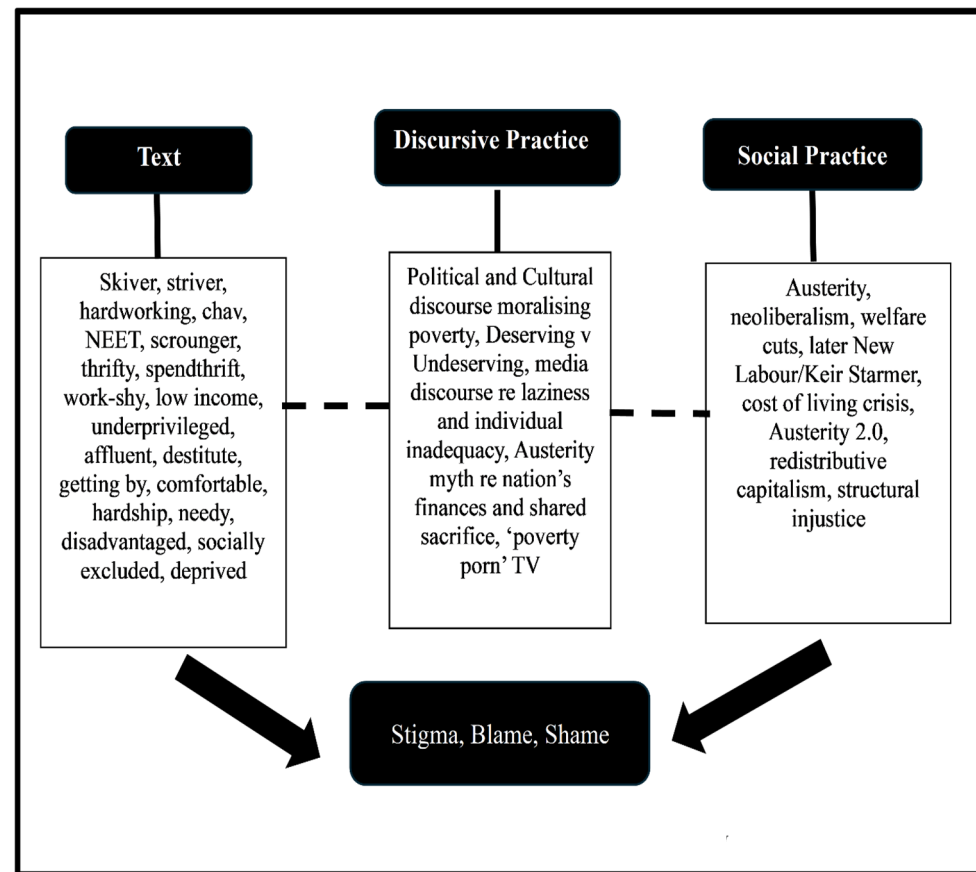


Figure 1. The Stigmatising Language of Poverty.

Whilst the relationship between ‘text’, ‘discursive practice’ and ‘social practice’ may not always be clear, CDA can help us to look beyond the material to the political, psychological, cultural and spiritual violence of systemic poverty that we witnessed during Life on the Breadline. As Figure 1 above demonstrates, the words we use are shaped by and channelled through various discourses to reflect wider, more fundamental social, economic and ideological perspectives. The combined impact of this interaction since the global financial crash has enabled the persistent stigmatising of people with direct experience of poverty. During the Age of Austerity, the ideology and social practice of neoliberal capitalism were embedded in a political myth, which weaponised stigmatising public discourse to fuel socio-cultural conflict and deepen shame and insecurity, as we discovered during Life on the Breadline.

Myths have served as encoded cultural, religious and political maps throughout human history (Gardiner and Engler 2010). Analyses of the stigmatising power of public discourse during the Age of Austerity can be sharpened through engagement with two forms of myth—origin myths and political myths. Flood (1996, p. 42) describes a political myth as an, “...ideologically marked account of past, present or predicted political events...that...conveys an invitation to assent to a particular ideological standpoint.” Bottici (2011, p. 41) points to the subliminal power of myth “slipping into our unconsciousness, political myths can deeply influence our most fundamental perception.” The normalising of poverty stigma within contemporary public and political discourse owes a great deal to the origins myth of austerity articulated by former Prime Minister, David Cameron and his Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, following the 2010 General Election. Origin myths weave together a narrative about beginnings that roots our present experience in past struggles, providing a justification for contemporary political policies, which are cast in a moral light. Contrasting what they depicted as New Labour’s financial irresponsibility

with Conservative commitment to freedom and fairness, Cameron and Osborne fashioned what [Clarke and Newman \(2012, p. 299ff\)](#) described as a form of political alchemy.³

The austerity origins myth was rooted in much older tropes contrasting the responsible ‘deserving’ poor and the irresponsible ‘undeserving’ poor, which imbued the discourse with moral purpose and ideological legitimacy ([Muers 2021](#)). Cameron and Osborne presented necessary pain as a prelude to national flourishing in three ways. First, the austerity myth provided a neoliberal interpretation of the causes of the financial crash that laid much of the blame at the feet of interventionist ‘big government’. Second, by echoing right-wing narratives in sections of the tabloid media, the austerity myth was able to articulate a persuasive public discourse of Britain as morally ‘broken’. Third, austerity’s origins myth pointed to the promise of a free and fair future where neighbour cared for neighbour in a rejuvenated ‘big society’, hard work was rewarded and entrepreneurial spirit was released. Speaking ahead of the launch of the 2012 Welfare Reform Act that embedded austerity in legislation, Osborne’s speech to the annual Conservative Party Conference exemplified the relationship between ‘text’, ‘discursive practice’ and ‘social practice’. Osborne summarised austerity’s binary moral claims—“It is wrong for someone to be better off on benefits than they would be in work” and it is unfair for the “shift-worker, leaving home in the dark hours of the early morning” to see “the closed blinds of their next-door neighbour sleeping off a life on benefits.” Second, he sought to provide austerity with a moral purpose that valorised entrepreneurship and hard work—“We modern Conservatives represent all those who aspire, all who work, save and hope, all who feel a responsibility to put in, not just take out.” Third, Osborne implied that the pain of austerity would be felt by everyone—“We are all in this together.” However, as our Life on the Breadline research demonstrated ([Shannahan and Denning 2023](#); [Shannahan 2025](#)), the claim that we are all ‘in this together’ was never true. Austerity hit those who were already left out or left behind hardest. Austerity has never been neutral, but its mythic status enabled UK governments to individualise poverty and fairness, thereby avoiding awkward questions about systemic injustice.

3.2. *The Moralising of Poverty: ‘Skivers’ and ‘Strivers’*

The stigmatising language deployed by Cameron and Osborne reinforced the binary moral categorisation of people in poverty that has woven its way through political and theological discourse for more than a thousand years. As far back as the 1601 Poor Relief Act poverty was presented as a moral issue, rather than a structural problem. People in poverty were placed in fixed moral categories, which shaped the response of local Parish churches—the ‘able-bodied’, the ‘impotent’ or the ‘idle’ poor. The Parish was responsible for helping the ‘able bodied’ poor to find jobs. The ‘idle’ poor, who were people who chose not to work were punished and, in some cases imprisoned or required to do forced labour. The ‘impotent’ poor were physically unable to work and were often given accommodation in alms-houses. This moral categorisation was sharpened in the 1834 Poor Law, which defined people in poverty as ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’.

The political discourse of George Osborne and David Cameron echoes this older moral categorisation. Their austerity myth can be seen as a form of slow cultural violence ([Nixon 2011](#); [Galtung 1990](#)), which normalised the stigmatising of people in poverty, the erosion of their agency and the deepening of their insecurity. ‘Strivers’ were ‘deserving’ exemplars of the entrepreneurial spirit applauded by Osborne, but ‘skivers’ who did not lift themselves up by their own bootstraps were ‘underserving’ embodiments of the Elizabethan ‘idle poor’. [Lister \(2004, p. 102\)](#) argues that the intersection between labelling people in poverty, disapproving moral discourse, stigma and cultural Othering, robs people of their dignity and threatens communal resilience:

...the bifurcation of ‘the poor’ into ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’, each with their associated stereotypes, has had a profound impact on their treatment... The label ‘undeserving’ poor has been negatively charged by the process of stigmatization, which has had implications for how society sees ‘the poor’, how they see themselves and how they are treated by welfare institutions.

Drawing on Lister’s argument, Muers (2021, pp. 42–43) suggests that the “moral categorization of people in poverty” within a binary ‘deserving’/‘undeserving’ ethical framework is “politically powerful, historically deep-rooted, and has wide-ranging material effects”. She argues that such cultural hegemony provides moral camouflage for policies that deepen systemic poverty. By categorising people with experience of poverty as cultural ‘others’ it becomes easier to blame and shame those whom we are told are ‘undeserving’ ‘skivers’ for their poverty and for a broken economy. Girard (1989) pointed to an ancient practice used by power elites to ‘other’ and blame marginalised groups for deep-seated social problems. Cultural ‘others’ are scapegoated—a society’s sins are loaded on their back and they are, metaphorically, cast out into a social wilderness. Girard’s reflections alert us to the cultural violence that characterises the scapegoating political myth of austerity and its categorisation of people into ‘hard working’ ‘deserving’ ‘strivers’ and ‘lazy’ ‘undeserving’ ‘skivers’ who are happy to take ‘handouts’ from the State. The plausibility of this stigmatising moral discourse as a defining descriptor of contemporary poverty depends on the extent to which it can be framed as the result of individual failing, rather than systemic injustice.

3.3. *The Individualisation of Poverty*

The individualising of poverty during the Age of Austerity built on the neoliberal social and economic policies of Margaret Thatcher in the early 1980s. Thatcher’s shrinking of society to me and my family reduced social responsibility and individualised social mobility.⁴ Emphasis was placed on individual hard-work, moral strength and entrepreneurial spirit, rather than collective support, communal resilience, systemic failings or the State. In the years that followed their victory in the 1997 UK General Election the New Labour Government focused on macro-economic factors: the 1999 introduction of a national minimum wage, redistributive tax credits and the establishment of the Sure Start programme in 1998 addressing the systemic factors that caused child poverty. However, Levitas (2005, p. 7) argues that as the New Labour decade wore on conservative behaviouralism displaced earlier engagement with systemic inequality and poverty was seen as, “pathological... rather than endemic”.

Following the 2010 General Election, David Cameron and George Osborne exemplified the individualisation of poverty. Such a perspective was rooted in the seventeenth century philosophical liberalism of John Locke and the eighteenth century economic liberalism of Adam Smith. A focus on individualised citizenship, neighbourliness, meritocracy and economic entrepreneurship and critique of collective social action, common ownership and an interventionist State were writ large in the neoliberalism of the Cameron led Coalition. Cameron’s depiction of New Labour Britain as a ‘broken society’ and his vision of an empowered ‘big society’ of good neighbours in place of an interventionist Welfare State offered a contemporary articulation of neoliberal principles (Kisby 2010; Farnsworth and Irving 2018), providing the moral justification for the Age of Austerity (Piketty 2014).

Whilst most of the Church leaders with whom we spoke during Life on the Breadline voiced their opposition to austerity-age policies, strands of Christian theology continue to individualise and spiritualise the causes of poverty and its solution. Early Protestantism and Capitalism have been depicted as two sides of the same coin (Cohen 2002). Whilst this depiction is partially true, such unreflective generalisations fail to capture the breadth of

early Protestantism and, arguably, owe more to ideology than fair-minded history (Hart 1995, p. 202ff; Frey 1998, p. 1573ff; Delacroix and Nielsen 2001, p. 509ff). Weber (2011) pointed to such nuance in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. However, whilst suggesting that poverty resulted from systemic inequality rather than individual moral failings, Weber highlighted aspects of Calvinism that enabled early European capitalism to flourish—An emphasis on the individual nature of Salvation, the need to respond to God’s Saving Grace by becoming hard working stewards and using our gifts in entrepreneurial ways to bring glory to God.

Elements of nineteenth and twentieth century evangelical Protestant theology, however, did not reflect the balance of entrepreneurship and social responsibility to which Weber referred and increasingly depicted material wealth as a sign of God’s blessing for faithfulness and poverty as a punishment for a lack of faith. Developing this binary theology further some evangelical and Pentecostal Christian communities framed poverty as a curse that can only be lifted through greater faith and harder work as an expression of gratitude to God, laying the foundations for what became known in the second half of the twentieth century as the prosperity gospel (Bowler 2013). Beckford (2006, p. 136ff) points to the traction that prosperity teaching has gained within Black Pentecostal Churches in the UK, especially amongst marginalised communities. It is not surprising that in the face of the soul-sapping slow violence of poverty, where everything feels hopeless, that the hope of release that characterises prosperity gospel teaching is embraced. However, this depiction of poverty as a punishment from God is problematic for three reasons. First, the individualisation of Christian ideas about salvation, sin, faith and blessing represents a one-dimensional understanding of the Christian Gospel. Second, prosperity teaching can be seen as a form of theological neoliberalism (Wrenn 2021). By individualising poverty and presenting it in exclusively spiritual terms prosperity gospel teaching ignores its systemic causes. Third, prosperity gospel teaching and the wider moralising individualisation of poverty, neglect the calling within the Bible to challenge structural injustice (Beckford 2006).

3.4. Poverty Stigma: Shamed and Blamed for Being Poor

Stigma blames and shames people who have been framed as cultural ‘Others’—It is a weapon. In the Roman world, stigma’ denoted the physical marking of slaves and people with mental health problems. The brand or tattoo was a mark of ownership. Those who were stigmatised were marked as worthless. Implicitly alluding to Said’s (1978) discussion of the debilitating cultural ‘Othering’ of European imperialism, Spivak (1988) argued that the normalising of Eurocentric cultural discourse silenced and stigmatised the ‘subaltern’ class. Such slow epistemic violence (Nixon 2011) diminishes, devalues and damages the cultural ‘Other’, leading to an internalising of self-hatred and shame. Such reflections, when informed by insights drawn from our Life on the Breadline fieldwork, can sharpen theological analyses of the corrosive impact of stigmatising public discourse on people with direct experience of poverty. Ahead of the 2012 Welfare Reform Act, Jones (2012) pointed to the way in which George Osborne’s use of the term ‘skivers’ stigmatised people experiencing poverty. Tyler and Campbell (2024, p. 4) write extensively about the hegemonic intersection between poverty and stigma during the Age of Austerity, describing it as “a powerful glue that holds poverty in place.” They (Ibid, p. 14) suggest that poverty stigma is “embedded in social systems”. As a form of slow violence, its impact, they argue, “is cumulative. It wears down people’s self-esteem and self-worth over time.” (Ibid, p. 34). Such stigma, argue Tyler and Campbell (2024, p. 11) weaponises internalised feelings of worthlessness and shame to deepen existential insecurities, foster atomisation, feed scapegoating, foment social conflict and damage cultural resilience—“Poverty stigma leads to rich people feeling like they have a right to keep their wealth whilst people in

poverty need to be kept poor to teach them to behave better. . . Stigma excuses people with power from having to act and enables them to shrug off their responsibility.” (Ibid, p. 19). Garthwaite (2016, p. 278) points to the stigmatising impact of such narratives in relation to the experience of food bank users in Northern England, suggesting that they perpetuated the political myth of austerity. Beddoe and Keddel (2016, p. 155) make a similar point, alluding to the ways in which poverty stigma can divide communities, deepen social conflict and justify structural injustice—“Blame and shame. . . are powerful weapons with which to empower political disengagement. . . Stigma intensifies the othering of people who are poor, side-stepping structural explanations of violence and neglect.” The reflections of two of the Church leaders who completed our Life on the Breadline survey illustrate the ongoing traction of moralising poverty stigma within some Christian communities. A Methodist leader from the North-West of England told us that there is “*. . . still a sense that it is the individual’s fault if they are poor.*” (Life on the Breadline survey 2020) and a Salvation Army Commander from Southern England said “*There is still a feeling of deserving and undeserving. Generally, it is thought by congregations that if you try you will thrive*” (Life on the Breadline online survey 2020).

3.5. Deepening Conflict and Insecurity

The pioneer of liberation theology, Gutiérrez (1974, p. 175), argues that poverty is a form of “systemic sin” that is used to justify and underpin unjust power relations. In a similar vein, I argue that structural injustice contradicts the nature and the will of the God who has a preferential option for the poor (Shannahan 2025, pp. 79–81). However, given my discussion of the weaponising of stigma and the ways in which public and political discourse have been used to shame and scapegoat people in poverty, such a moral assertion is not enough to transform structural injustice. As I show below in relation to our Life on the Breadline fieldwork, poverty stigma divides communities, drives socio-cultural conflict, deepens epistemic violence and damages human security. This cocktail of division, conflict and insecurity undermines spiritual, political, individual and communal resilience.

The language of resilience is not common within theology, although it could be argued that the concept (if not the term itself) has been part of theological conversations about shared suffering, exile, violence, persecution and responding to individual and collective trauma for millennia. Patel et al. (2017) note the use of the term ‘community resilience’ in relation to collective responses to physical disasters or socio-cultural and political disturbances. Writing about the experiences of socially excluded individuals and marginalised communities, Wright (2021, p. 2ff) conceives of community resilience as a more “multifaceted” concept that refers to the varied ways in which we respond to and overcome threats to social wellbeing that deepen individual and collective vulnerabilities. When framed as a multidimensional strength that enables individuals and communities to overcome traumatising shocks and suffering and to rebuild insecure, vulnerable and shattered communities, the concept of community resilience can provide theological analyses of poverty stigma during with new insights. It is a concept that deserves further exploration within emergent austerity-age theologies of liberation.

3.6. Glimpses from Life on the Breadline

The existential damage caused by the weaponising of poverty stigma was apparent in three of the ethnographic case studies we developed during Life on the Breadline—B30 foodbank in South Birmingham, Hodge Hill Church in East Birmingham and faith-based responses to the Grenfell Tower fire of 2017. We encountered an incipient sense of shame amongst foodbank users at B30. One person spoke of his commitment to providing for his family, saying, “*. . . if you can’t do that it lowers your self-esteem, makes you feel bad as a person. . . a*

man is supposed to provide for his family and if he can't do that, what is he? Feels like everything's gone." (B30 client 2019 interview). Another person said, *"I feel embarrassed that I'm here. I feel that because I'm working I shouldn't have to be, should be leaving it to people who are more needy than me, but here I am."* (B30 client 2019 interview). Three volunteers at B30 expressed an anger at the existential damage caused by the slow violence of poverty stigma. One person alluded to the ideological nature of austerity, saying, *"Austerity is a political choice, not a necessity."* A second volunteer reflected on the damaging nature of poverty and its impact on personal resilience, pointing to, *"the brutality of the benefits system and the ignorance our leaders have regarding how people in poverty actually live. . . People are spiralling out of control. . . meanwhile the fat cats are okay."* A third volunteer spoke about the Church's response, implying this was still hampered by a lingering attachment to 'deserving'/'undeserving' moral binaries and a lack of understanding about the systemic nature of poverty.

I think they understand it from a moral view—there is poverty we should be helping. But when we first started the foodbank there were comments from people which were the equivalent of the underserving poor—"these people" "they have all got cars and phones". And I don't think there was any understanding of the structural poverty that exists where people just don't have choices, they think they do. (B30 volunteer 2019)

Hodge Hill Church sits on the edge of the Firs and Bromford housing estate in East Birmingham. As I have noted elsewhere (Shannahan 2025, pp. 24, 111), the neighbourhood is one of the 5% most multiply deprived in England and Wales. Poverty in Bromford predated the 2008 financial crash and recession that followed, but it was deepened by a decade of austerity policies, and the community was damaged by public and political discourse that depicted it a neighbourhood for 'skivers'—the 'undeserving' poor. Just four miles from Birmingham city centre, Bromford can sometimes feel like a *"forgotten estate"*, according to a woman who spoke to us during Life on the Breadline—*"The tower blocks were meant to be pulled down thirty years ago. . . The centre, we had funding for that, then they took it away . . . We only had one bus route, used to wait hours. . . just forgotten."* (Interview 2020). Another woman told us that, *"The community doesn't trust the government. They don't trust the council either because they never get help from them"* (Interview 2020). The Revd Al Barrett (Vicar of Hodge Hill Church) discussed the stigmatising narrative that fosters insecurity and low self-esteem and damages communal resilience, Barrett said, *"Neighbours in communities like ours feel doubly stigmatised. . . somehow they're made out to be the problem. . . a drain on the state, whilst at the same time being punished through punitive benefits sanctions and the removal of vital services."* (Interview 2020). Barrett pointed to the Church Urban Fund's reflections on the existential damage caused by the interweaving of a poverty of relationships and a poverty of identity (CUF 2014) that result from the epistemic violence (Chase and Walker 2013) of poverty stigma and the political myth of austerity. He spoke of, *"a deficit of empathy. . . a form of violence between the rich and the poor"*, suggesting that *"we've seen that empathy deficit play out in all kinds of horrible ways."* (Interview 2020). In the face of the debilitating shame and feelings of being forgotten, Barrett discussed the need to *" . . . help local people to shift the narrative about their neighbourhood"*. He suggested that *"we wanted to enable local people to tell a different story about themselves and their neighbourhood, to themselves, to each other, to the wider world."* (Interview 2020).

3.7. Subverting the Stigma of Poverty

I have argued that poverty stigma has targeted those already damaged by a decade of austerity and its lingering after-effects. I have shown that the conscious shaming of people with direct experience of poverty can be seen as a form of cultural violence and the inheritor of a centuries' old binary labelling of people as 'deserving', 'undeserving', 'skivers' and 'strivers'. When allied to the individualising of poverty this debilitating political discourse

resembles an incipient form of slow violence (Nixon 2011) sapping self-belief and feeding shame. Fricker (2007) points to the impact of what she calls “epistemic injustice”—the ways in which marginalised groups are epistemologically excluded because of the silencing force of hegemonic political discourse. The soul sapping slow violence of austerity age poverty stigma should be seen as a form of epistemic injustice. The liberation theologian Tamez (1982, p. 12) argues that within the Bible poverty leads to the “degradation of the human being, a seizure, as it were, of the divine image in the person”. As we discovered during Life on the Breadline, such epistemic violence diminishes, damages, demeans and drives a self-reinforcing and self-fulfilling spiral of internalised shame and existential insecurity that foments cultural conflict as marginalised ‘others’ are scapegoated and blamed for society’s ills.

Poverty stigma is a form of epistemic violence that deepens individual and collective insecurity, damages individual wellbeing and communal resilience and undermines our dignity and sense of self-worth. However, our research during Life on the Breadline made it clear that this desperate cycle can be broken. Stigma and shame need not have the last word. Such subversion should not be confused with a neat ‘happy-ever-after’ ending as it can only be forged in the fires of existential struggle and a commitment to epistemological emancipation. Beckford (2006) draws on the deconstructive-reconstructive potential of the dub musical technique to transform Black Church culture and rediscover its emancipatory energy. Beckford’s goal is to fashion an emancipatory Black Christology of liberation. Consequently, the dub hermeneutics he articulates, “. . . is an ethical quest to restore human dignity. . . and is always aligned to justice.” (Ibid, p. 91). Within Beckford’s Black liberation theology, therefore, dub, “is guided by an emancipation ethic which seeks out redemptive themes in history, culture and society” that can form the basis for a new emancipatory praxis (Ibid, p. 91). Building on Beckford (2006), I have argued (Shannahan 2025, pp. 39, 40) that the transformative practice of Dub-DJs provides us with the hermeneutical tools we need to fashion a holistic theology of liberation that can transform the structural injustice of neoliberal austerity. To date, the potential of dub hermeneutics as a resource within liberative political theologies remains largely untapped, with the exception of my own engagement with the defining principles laid out by Beckford. This deconstructive/reconstructive process provides us with the tools we need to forge a liberative Dub Hermeneutics capable of subverting the poverty stigma that shames, demeans and diminishes, as depicted below in Figure 2.

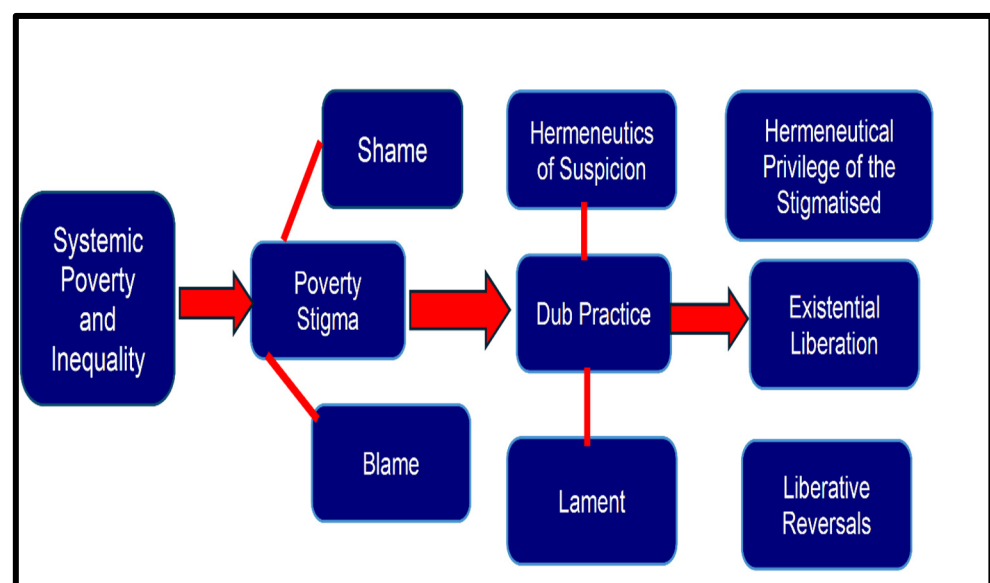


Figure 2. Dub Hermeneutics and the Stigma of Poverty.

The subversion of a poverty stigma dub begins with the deconstruction of the political myth of austerity and the hegemonic force of individualised moral narratives blaming and shaming people for being poor. If such deconstruction is to be effective it must engage with the visceral impact of poverty with unvarnished honesty. Well-meaning narratives that skip quickly passed oppression to liberation, whilst tempting, are of little value and change nothing. It is for this reason that engagement with the ancient tradition of lament is the essential first movement in a poverty stigma dub hermeneutics.

3.8. Subversive Lament

Whilst it represents a significant strand within the Hebrew Scriptures, the power of lament is underexplored within contemporary political theology. Our Life on the Breadline case study of Christian responses to the Grenfell Tower fire, homelessness and housing justice (Shannahan 2025), however, points to the way in which lament can enhance theological analyses of poverty stigma.

Within the Hebrew Scriptures, lament is more than individual complaint or unhappiness. It is a communal act of shared anguish, an embodied expression of solidarity and subversion. Lament can be seen as the weaponising of grief, an existential shaking of our fist at the universe. In a Biblical context lament embodies a raw and ragged response to powerlessness, dispossession, loss and marginalisation. Lament in the Hebrew scriptures accompanies an individual's anguished pain, the shared experience of Exile and the fall of Jerusalem—the political and spiritual heart of the people of Israel. The book of Job offers a glimpse into the random suffering of a faithful person. Job loses family, wealth and health. A person of deep faith, he shakes his fist at his absent Creator (Job 3). Job demands answers from a silent God who finally responds in the form of a storm (Job 38–42). God's response to Job's lament, however, does not provide him with the answer he was hoping for. Instead, the Biblical text emphasises the power of God and the limitations of humanity. Ultimately, Job, even though he does not get an explanation for his suffering, repents and acknowledges his faith in and need for God who then rewards him with greater wealth than before (Job 42). The suffering, anguish, complaint to God, acceptance, redemption plotline of Job can be seen as the template for Biblical lament. However, not all expressions of lament in the Hebrew scriptures conclude so neatly, ending instead with ongoing isolation and nagging questions about God's presence.

The Psalms are hymns of praise, but that does not stop the Psalmist from railing against suffering, injustice and an apparently absent God. Psalm 13 offers us an example of a person who feels abandoned but ultimately articulates a sense of trust in the faithfulness and overarching presence of God. Psalm 88 speaks to us of another individual who feels lost and isolated, railing against an absent God. Here, however, the Psalmist's lament appears to be unheard—no trust, just ongoing anguish. A different cry is heard in Psalm 137 as the Psalmist asks how an exiled people, taken from Jerusalem, can sing a song of praise by the rivers of Babylon. This collective cry of lament reflects a people's shared sense of loss, abandonment and anger. Babylon becomes a metaphor for oppression within Rastafarianism and Black liberation theology, not just a particular place of Exile (Cone 1970; Beckford 2000; Aldred 2024). Written soon after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, the book of Lamentations exemplifies lament as collective mourning for a lost homeland. Here we can see lament as a people's shared rage and grief. Whilst, as in the Psalms, we see an affirmation of God's faithfulness (Lamentations 3), Lamentations concludes without resolution. God may be faithful but is silent and the people continue to feel abandoned.

Lament represents an existentially powerful strand within the Bible and yet, in spite of its resonance with human experience, it is a largely overlooked theme within contemporary political theology. However, the tradition of lament was an important ingredient of the

Civil Rights struggle against systemic racism in the USA and faith-based opposition to the Apartheid regime in South Africa. In his exploration of the use of music to respond to historical and contemporary African American suffering, Pinn (1999) points to the differing ways in which the Spirituals, Gospel, the Blues, Soul music and Hip-Hop have given voice to individual and collective lament. For Pinn the Spirituals and Gospel music, whilst often emerging from personal or shared anguish, tend to discuss lament within a framework of redemptive suffering or an implicit Christology of solidarity. The Blues and Hip-Hop, suggests Pinn (Ibid, p. 116), engage in a more visceral and untidy way with unresolved suffering. Lament within Hip-Hop and the Blues guarantees no happy endings, but its honest wrestling with suffering can resource a ‘nitty-gritty hermeneutics’ that resists easy answers. Pinn (2003) places lament at the heart of the ambivalent relationship between ‘terror’ and ‘triumph’ in the evolution of African American spiritualities. Cone (1970, 2011) depicts lament as one of the defining motifs of Black liberation theology and the historic and contemporary struggle for a still unrealised emancipation. For Cone (1972) lament, strategies for survival and a Jesus-centred spirituality of solidarity were articulated within the Black Church in the language of the Spirituals and the lyrical rawness of the Blues.

In the struggle against Apartheid the South African Church drew heavily on the multifaceted power of lament as an existential weapon in the fight against systemic racism. Leading theologians such as Boesak (1987) forged liberative anti-racist theologies of lament. In Church and on the street songs of lament like *Thina Sizwe* (we are Africans) or *Siyahamba* (We are marching in the light of God), articulated rage, pain and a cry for change.⁵ In a similar manner *The Kairos Document* (1985), produced by an ecumenical group of South African theologians drew upon the tradition of lament to publish one of the most iconic theological critiques of Apartheid. Within *The Kairos Document's* lament, a clarion call for liberation was articulated that was heard across the globe.⁶

I do not presume to equate responses to the slow violence of poverty in the UK with the historic struggles against systemic racism in South Africa or the USA. However, I do suggest that the same spiritual tradition of lament can resource those seeking to subvert poverty stigma. Lament identifies and names suffering, challenges those with power and insists that we hold them accountable. In this regard, lament, forms an important, but neglected, stage in the process of conscientisation (Freire 1970, 2004)—Becoming critically aware of the nature and the causes of oppression. Williams (2014, pp. 1–4) suggests that the Church in the UK has largely neglected the liberative potential of lament as an expression of communal pain and an invitation to solidarity. Williams (2014, p. 4) argues that “Failing to embrace and respond to the voices of lament in our congregations and beyond will more likely make us acquiescent partners in the political status quo—lulling ourselves into believing “everything is fine” when it is not.”

Lament can help us to subvert poverty stigma as we discovered during our case study of Christian responses to the Grenfell Tower tragedy. I have written elsewhere about the slow violence of austerity-age poverty, decades of underinvestment in social housing and stark inequality in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea that paved the way for the Grenfell Tower fire on 14 June 2017 (Shannahan 2025). I have shown how the congregation of Notting Hill Methodist Church, which is just a stone’s throw from the Tower, served as a space of sanctuary and solidarity on the night of the fire and as the community continued to mourn the deaths of the ‘Grenfell 72’. Hosting vigils on the anniversary of the fire in 2018, 2019 and 2020, Notting Hill Methodist Church became a space of communal lament. The tragic deaths of the 72 men, women and children who died in the fire symbolise the brutality of neoliberal austerity. The poet Ben Okri summarised the visceral pain of the Grenfell 72 in a poem of lament that he wrote just a few days after the fire—“It was like a burnt matchbox in the sky. . . You saw it in the tears of those who survived. . . You heard it

in the cries howling for justice. . . If you want to see how the poor die come see Grenfell Tower.” (Okri 2018).

Three of the photographs I took as part of our Life on the Breadline research into the intersection between the Grenfell tragedy and housing injustice illustrate the political and theological significance of the tradition of lament as a means of subverting poverty stigma. These three images illustrate the discursive logic of CDA and its value as a tool in political and theological analyses of poverty stigma. All three photographs (‘texts’) point to and comment upon the shared suffering and collective lament (‘discursive practice’) that arise from and should be read against decades of underinvestment in social housing, homelessness and austerity (‘social practice’).

The first photograph (Figure 3) is of a small section of the memorial mosaic at the foot of the shell of Grenfell Tower—“There’s no justice, it’s just us!” The image articulates the individual and collective anguish of loss and grieving—there “Ain’t no sunshine now you’re gone. . .”, whilst also hinting at a more politicised lament—“To the dead we owe the truth.”

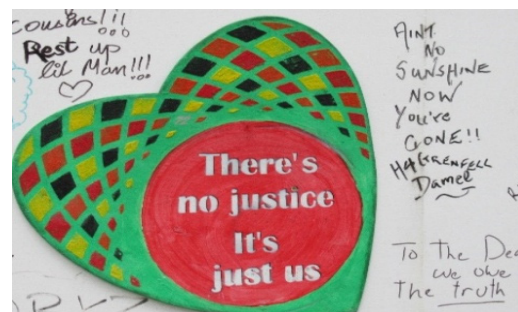


Figure 3. ‘Just us. . .’—A photograph taken by the author, 2020.

A second photograph (Figure 4) of a placard that was hung on a railing on the edge of the Lancaster West Estate (just a few hundred yards from Grenfell) exemplifies lament as visceral protest—a collective shaking of the fist at those with power. This political lament revolves around a single pointed question that pinpoints the intersection between systemic inequality and the slow violence of poverty as drivers of social conflict—“Why do we the working class have to suffer again?”—“We must never forget Grenfell.”



Figure 4. ‘Why?’—A photograph taken by the author, 2020.

A third photograph (Figure 5) exudes pain, loss and anger. It was part of an ‘Art for Justice’ series of paintings by Primary School children in North Kensington following the fire and illustrates the transformative potential of culture in what Gramsci (2007, p. 167ff) referred to as the “cultural war of position”. Here we see the seeds of a conscientised lament that fuses anger, pain, spirituality and a demand for justice—The beginnings of a discourse that foregrounds and valorises the experience of stigmatised men, women and children.



Figure 5. ‘A child’s prayer’—A photograph taken by the author 2020.

3.9. *The Hermeneutical Privilege of the Stigmatised*

As we ‘Dub’ poverty stigma, conscientisation and lament need to be supplemented by a use of a hermeneutics of suspicion if they are to generate liberative reconstruction. The earliest extended discussion of the hermeneutics of suspicion is found in the work of Ricouer (1970, p. 32ff) who argued that it is essential to treat textual sources and dominant narratives with a hermeneutics of suspicion if we want to subvert the hegemonic false consciousness they can foster. The liberation theologian (Segundo [1976] 2002, p. 8) echoed this view, suggesting that we need to suspect that “anything involving ideas, including theology, is intimately bound up with the existing social situation, at least in an unconscious way.” As we discovered during Life on the Breadline the anguish of the people of North Kensington was heard, felt and affirmed by local faith groups like Notting Hill Methodist Church following the Grenfell Tower fire. The resulting people’s movement’s collective cry of lament was informed by a hermeneutics of suspicion, as typified by the intervention of the North London rap musician and activist, Akala. As Grenfell still smouldered, Akala was interviewed by Channel 4 News and argued that “The people of Grenfell died because they were poor. We are in one of the richest spaces in the world. There is no way that rich people would live in a building without adequate fire safety.”⁷ Sharpened by this hermeneutics of suspicion, the conscientised lament of the people of Grenfell was amplified by faith communities and activist allies like Akala and Okri. Their lament stimulated an interrogation of systems of political and economic power, locally and nationally and the resulting campaigns for housing justice, not just in North Kensington but across the UK.

At the heart of this subversion of poverty stigma lies the transformative potential of dub hermeneutics. The stigmatised are no longer voiceless or forgotten, but centre stage. Early expressions of Christian spirituality arose in a Roman context where to be stigmatised was a sign that a person was considered worthless. Reflecting on the wounds of the Crucified Jesus, early Christians subverted the perceived shame of his stigmata. His marks of worthlessness were dubbed, becoming signs of God’s solidarity with all whom society stigmatises and marks as unworthy. In his reflections on Latin American struggles against oppression Gutiérrez (1983, p. 204ff) argues that the people’s liberation struggle subverts unjust power relations and hegemonic portrayals of poverty as natural. For Gutiérrez (Ibid, p. 204) this is “a theology...done by history’s nameless ones.” He points to his hope for a new day—“What had been a dominated, repressed theology, an underground spring, working its way to the surface, today has burst into the sunlight in uncappable geysers.” Those who are stigmatised stand in a place of hermeneutical privilege. Those who bear the mark of stigma, suggests Gutiérrez, are best placed to feel and understand the Gospel of the stigmatised Jesus. A dub hermeneutics that is informed by such a liberative

hermeneutics of suspicion can re-frame debates about structural injustice and poverty stigma in breadline Britain. However, poverty stigma can only be subverted when we engage with its debilitating existential impact. If we are to dub poverty stigma we first need to wrestle honestly with the spiritual scarring it causes. Only then can we begin to strip away the epistemic damage that results from shaming stigma and articulate the hermeneutical privilege of the stigmatised with understanding and credibility. As a United Reformed Church leader who spoke to us during Life on the Breadline put it, when we articulate the hermeneutical privilege of the stigmatised we stand shoulder to shoulder with “*the God of the outsider*” (Life on the Breadline survey 2020).

3.10. A Spirituality of Solidarity and Liberative Reversals

An austerity-age theology of liberation can only be a force to progressive social change if it is grounded in a spirituality that subverts the poverty stigma that stalks breadline Britain. The search for such a theology was the inspiration behind our Life on the Breadline project. Our case studies and interviews during the project painted a picture of the damage caused by austerity’s origins myth and a stigmatising public discourse that individualised and moralised the slow systemic violence of poverty. We learned of a Church that tends to bandage up the wounds of people damaged by austerity, rather than ramming a spoke into the wheel of injustice itself (Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Bethge 1995, pp. 316–17). And yet, we also caught glimpses of a spirituality of solidarity that can underpin a theology of liberation that engages implicitly in a dub hermeneutics to subvert the hegemonic hold of poverty stigma and articulate a new discourse of liberative reversals. Those who have been stigmatised become the heralds of liberation.

I draw on just one of our case studies, that of Hodge Hill Church in East Birmingham, to tease out the guiding themes in a spirituality of solidarity that can subvert poverty stigma. A spirituality of liberative reversals that has the capacity not just to subvert poverty stigma but to enable the transformation of structural injustice will, necessarily, be premised on a *shalom* oriented vision of holistic emancipation. Referenced more than five hundred times in the Bible, the concept of *shalom* is often, mistakenly, translated as ‘peace’. *Shalom* encompasses peace but is far more multidimensional than the mere absence of conflict. The Hebrew term implies peace, healing, righteousness, repair, justice, reconciliation, resilience, harmony, individual and communal wellbeing, and wholeness (Yoder 1997, p. 10ff). I suggest that too often theologies of liberation or movements for social justice focus exclusively on radical political, economic and policy change, whilst neglecting the cultural violence that underpins structural injustice and the need for existential emancipation. A *shalom* oriented theology of liberation asserts the need for integrated holistic emancipation. Such a *shalom* spirituality can inform our subversion of poverty stigma and the damage it causes and pave the way for the fashioning of a holistic theology of liberative reversals within which the stigmatised become the heralds of a new discourse of meaning that dubs the multifaceted violence of the age of austerity.

During Life on the Breadline Revd Al Barrett (the Vicar of Hodge Hill Church) spoke to us of the existential impact of what, borrowing the words of the Scottish theologian and community builder Alastair McIntosh, he called a “deficit of empathy between those who have much and those who have little”.⁸ Our Life on the Breadline research frames poverty stigma as a form of cultural violence that reflects a deficit of empathy borne of collective melancholia that others and objectifies people with direct experience of poverty—blaming and shaming them for being poor. However, as we discovered in Hodge Hill, when informed by an emancipation oriented hermeneutics of suspicion, it is possible to dub precarity, inverting it so that it becomes the source of solidarity instead of separation. The effectiveness of a precarity dub and its capacity to subvert the damage caused by austerity’s

poverty stigma and resource the practice of liberative reversals in communities like Hodge Hill rests, to a large degree, on the extent to which we can fashion a credible *shalom* infused politics of empathy. Clohesy (2013, p. 3ff) discusses the possibilities of developing an ethics that can foster shared wellbeing and the common good. Whilst recognising the value of universal ethical systems that are rooted in overarching religious or philosophical traditions, Clohesy (Ibid, pp. 3–4) argues that their universalising character decontextualises ethics. A progressive ethical vision needs to recognise the pivotal and moulding importance of context and experience. Only then can it foster the articulation of an organic *shalom* oriented politics of empathy. The first step in such a process is the recognition of our own violence towards cultural Others.

This lived experience of difference is ethically significant because it allows us to see how we have denied the singularity of those we now recognise and it allows us to see how we have committed violence to them in order to sustain the unity of our own identities. (Ibid, p. 3)

Such a recognition of our complicity in cultural and structural violence can be compared to the process of conscientisation or repentance and forms the basis for a contextualised *shalom* oriented ethics of empathy and liberative reversals that recognises our common humanity and shared dignity. For Clohesy (2013, p. 4) a politics of empathy enables us to “see how we have misrecognized others. . .and denied their singularity. It is this confrontation with our violence that brings into being the duty to recognise others as equals.” Such an epistemological shift, suggests Clohesy (2013, p. 6), can be seen as “an epiphanic moment. . .that interrupts us.”

Our Life on the Breadline case study in Hodge Hill illustrates the central interrupting role that a politics of empathy needs to play in a theology of liberation that subverts the hegemonic hold of poverty stigma. The congregation at Hodge Hill Church use the concept of *shalom* to describe their approach to community building, which revolves around a commitment to long term presence, engagement and solidarity. This is characterised by the use of Asset-Based Community Development (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Shannahan and Denning 2023) and the patient fostering of a new empathetic narrative of meaning that overcomes the poverty of relationships and identity and subverts the debilitating poverty stigma that has shamed and blamed people on the estate for being poor. Allannah (Interview 2020), one of the volunteers at Hodge Hill’s Local Pantry, exemplified this ABCD politics of empathy—“If you go to a foodbank you have to have what they give you, so that takes away that element of choice. . .the pantry builds you up. I believe in building people up” Another volunteer called Peter (Interview 2020) suggested that “It’s demeaning to have to go to a foodbank but if you go to a pantry that’s different. It’s a wellbeing feeling, it’s respect. . .You’re not getting charity you’re actually paying towards restocking.” Paul, a pantry volunteer and organiser of the Hodge Hill Street Connectors pointed to wider community building benefits—“If people aren’t going to Tesco’s to get their stuff, they’re getting stuff from this social pantry and supporting the local economy, then that will benefit people in lots of different ways” (Interview 2020). A Street Connector from the Bromford estate exemplified this ABCD informed politics of empathy and its capacity to subvert the hegemony of poverty stigma.

Look at the good in the area, we are really blessed. We are a little council estate, and there’s always been a stigma about it. But if you stay on the estate you’ll find absolutely amazing people. . . And that’s how we look at people, as gifts and skills. It’s all over Bromford and we’re the ones who go and find it. We don’t give in do we! (Interview 2020)

The slow violence of poverty has been individualised and moralised through the fashioning of a brutal poverty stigma that blames, shames, demonises and ‘others’ women and men who are blamed for being poor. We encountered such perspectives amongst

Church leaders from across the UK, the women and men traumatised by the Grenfell Tower fire and housing injustice, the clients using the B30 foodbank and the people of the Bromford estate in Hodge Hill who have been persuaded they have little value and little worth. However, we also glimpsed the possibility of a subversive spirituality that can dub poverty stigma and generate a hermeneutical privilege of the stigmatised and a contextual theology of liberative reversals. Reminiscent of the inversion of oppressive political realities articulated in Jesus Beatitudes in Matthew 5 and Luke 6, this theology of liberative reversals will include but move beyond the subversion of structures, systems, policies and practice to generate the epistemic emancipation needed to dub existential oppression, subvert stigma and begin the building of a new *shalom* oriented holistic theology of austerity-age liberation.

4. Conclusions

The debilitating slow violence of poverty diminishes dignity, damages communal resilience, deepens systemic inequality and drives social conflict. Such visible structural violence is enabled and perpetuated through the use of demeaning cultural violence. Shame inducing poverty stigma is fed by and sustains the scapegoating othering that blames people in poverty for being poor. In this article I have demonstrated how the capacity of language to imbue public discourse with moral, cultural and political power was used by former UK Prime Minister David Cameron and Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne to fashion the political myth of austerity. By drawing on our Life on the Breadline research I have demonstrated the corrosive damage caused by this neoliberal framing of poverty in exclusively individualised binary moral categories. I have shown how the poverty stigma used to demean and rob people of their dignity and their agency in breadline Britain draws on a damaging discourse stretching back a thousand years. Today's 'skivers' and 'strivers' are a contemporary reworking of the 'undeserving' and the 'deserving' poor of Victorian Poor Law and the 'idle', 'able-bodied' and 'impotent' poor of Elizabethan England. As I have shown, such moral tropes still linger just below the surface in the self-understanding, theology and social action of the Church. The case studies we developed during Life on the Breadline and our interviews with practitioners and Church leaders across the UK represent the most extensive source of primary research into contemporary poverty within political theology in the UK. Our research has shone a light on the epistemic violence and existential damage caused by the weaponising of these binary moral categories within contemporary poverty stigma. I have demonstrated how our case studies show that we cannot transform the structural injustice of contemporary poverty if we limit our gaze to policy and practice alone. Only when the hegemonic hold of poverty stigma is broken can we subvert its power. This multidisciplinary analysis arises from a UK context. Consequently, I do not claim that the argument I have developed can be uncritically transplanted into other contexts that have been shaped by different histories. I do, however, suggest that this paper breaks new ground in political theology. The insights I have offered and the fieldwork we developed during Life on the Breadline can enhance theologies of liberation and struggles for justice in other comparable international contexts.

By drawing on a multidisciplinary range of literature, the guiding principles of liberation theology and our Life on the Breadline research I have shown that dub hermeneutics can provide political theologians with an original hermeneutical tool that can help us to subvert the hegemony of poverty stigma as an essential first step towards a theology of liberative reversals. I have argued that such a theology necessarily begins with a recognition of the existential importance, emancipatory potential and political significance of collective lament. This step towards conscientisation represents a subversive political act. The paper demonstrates that the tradition of lament provides a creative new resource for theologians and social scientists exploring the existential damage and insecurity caused by structural

injustice. Lament opens our eyes to the repressive impact of poverty stigma and calls us to subvert its logic and invert its moral frame by asserting the hermeneutical privilege of the stigmatised. Those considered worthless become the heralds of a new politics and a new theology. Subverting poverty stigma demands a new relational politics that can overcome the deficit of empathy that dominates contemporary political discourse. Our Life on the Breadline case studies of community building by Hodge Hill Church in Birmingham and Christian responses to the Grenfell Tower fire exemplify the hermeneutical privilege of the stigmatised and the *shalom* oriented politics of empathy and solidarity that are essential building blocks in a new theology of liberative reversals that can transform the epistemic and structural injustice embodied by systemic poverty. Only such a perspective can help us to fashion a new politics that consigns the lingering violence of austerity to history and resources a liberative theology that draws the sting from poverty stigma.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The Life on the Breadline research project was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Coventry University (protocol code P47441 and date of approval: 13 August 2019).

Informed Consent Statement: All Life on the Breadline participants gave the informed consent for quotations from their interviews or survey responses to be used in publications arising from the project. Participants who are named gave their written permission.

Data Availability Statement: Further details about the Life on the Breadline project upon which this paper is based can be found at <https://breadlineresearch.coventry.ac.uk>.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Life on the Breadline was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, <https://breadlineresearch.coventry.ac.uk/> accessed on 20 June 2025.
- ² Life on the Breadline Report for Policymakers https://breadlineresearch.coventry.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Life-on-the-Breadline-report-for-policymakers_July-2021_web-1.pdf accessed on 20 June 2025.
- ³ The full text of Prime Minister David Cameron's 2009 Conservative Party Conference speech is found at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/oct/08/david-cameron-speech-in-full> accessed on 20 June 2025. All quotations from George Osborne's speech to 2012 Conservative Party Conference is printed in full at <https://www.newstatesman.com/business/economics/2012/10/george-osbornes-speech-conservative-conference-full-text> accessed on 15 December 2025.
- ⁴ <https://www.margareththatcher.org/document/106689> accessed on 20 June 2025, Margaret Thatcher: Interview for Woman's Own, 31 October 1987. Accessed via Margaret Thatcher Foundation archives, 21 July 2025.
- ⁵ Freedom Songs: The role of music in the Anti-Apartheid struggle, <https://antiapartheidlegacy.org.uk/heritage-arts-culture/history/articles/part-a-freedom-songs-the-role-of-music-in-the-anti-apartheid-struggle/> accessed on 17 July 2026.
- ⁶ *The Kairos Document*. 1985, <https://kairossouthernafrica.wordpress.com/2011/05/08/the-south-africa-kairos-document-1985/> accessed on 17 July 2026.
- ⁷ Channel 4 News (15 June 2017), 'People died in London fire because they were poor.' Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9NWK7VOLig>, accessed on 31 March 2026.
- ⁸ Independent Catholic News (29 July 2018), 'Christians called to deep solidarity with poor'. Available at <https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/35352#:~:text=Rev%20Barrett%20continued:%20'The%20Scottish,McIntosh,%20Poverty%20Truth%20Commission%20commissioner> accessed on 1 April 2026.

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