The Rage of Well-fed Lions: The Economic Foundations of UK Welfare Claimant Demonisation in the Neoliberal Era

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A word of warning

Ernest Mandel once said that Marxist writers too often echo Marx’s polemic without matching his nuance. The following paper is guilty of this. I have focused on empirical data, which I think will be of most interest to the reader. For reasons of space, this information is discussed within a bare-bones theoretical framework that is at times too simplistic to capture the full complexity of welfare-to-work policy. Nevertheless, I contend that they are solid bones, and were the analysis extended into more nuanced considerations, a significant amount of further empirical evidence could be presented to justify the thrust of the central thesis. Regarding the polemic tone of the paper, ‘workfare’ is no mere historical curiosity; it is a current, ongoing and expanding social policy affecting millions. It is my hope that this paper will encourage the reader to engage, react and feel moved to contribute to the debate surrounding this important economic phenomenon.

Introduction

Overview

This paper explores the political and media use of labels applied to the welfare claimant unemployed in the UK between the mid-1970s and 2013. Utilising a Marxist socio-economic analysis, these labels are shown to have emerged primarily as responses to the UK’s gradual reorientation towards a low-wage, partially ‘workfare-dependent’ service economy. Three distinct ideological periods—necessity, social exclusion and Broken Britain—are argued to have over-arched the gradual gestation of this economic formation, with propagandist continuums of deceit emerging in each phase in order to mask intensifying exploitation and control.

Workfare

Since the mid-1970s, the UK’s welfare system has steadily shifted from largely unconditional unemployment benefits towards what is generally termed ‘workfare’. While workfare is a plastic and contested term, in the UK it has taken on the broad meaning of ‘reciprocity’—that is, making welfare claimants perform mandatory activities in return for their dole, thus ‘restoring fairness to the welfare system’. Mandatory workfare activities vary, but generally include some combination of working for benefits, regular attendance at private workfare centres, re-training and attending case-worker interviews to provide proof of active ‘jobseeking’ activities. Workfare in the UK is currently administered by private companies on behalf of the government, usually under ‘black box’ agreements which permit individual workfare providers to design and implement their own regimes in order to fulﬁl payment-by-result contracts.

The reserve army of labour and pauperism

According to Marx, the fundamental source of capitalist proﬁt is the general practice of paying wage-labourers less than the value which their work produces. Keeping wages down to a minimum is one of the primary means via which the exploitation of this ‘surplus labour’ is maximised. Fewer workers on the labour market thus means higher average wage prices and less surplus value extraction; hence, conversely, more unemployed workers on the labour market is good for individual employers as this exerts a downward pressure on wages. However, this situation is bad for capitalism generally as a lower average income may reduce the overall demand for goods—and this, as Mandel puts it, is the ‘Achilles’ heel’ of capitalism. In a related process, capitalism also exerts a systemic tendency towards the creation of a ‘reserve labour army’ of under, or unemployed, people, often due to continuing technological innovation and increases in productivity. (Capitalist regimes may also take active measures to increase the numbers of unemployed in order to drive down inflation.) The general functions of the reserve army of labour
are: to undermine the value of labour-power and so enhance profit; to act as a
disciplinary warning to those in work; and to function as a ‘Lazarus stratum’ who
are raised from economic ‘death’ as and when businesses require them.4 The reserve
army of labour, often surviving in the most desperate of circumstances, constitutes a
continual testament to the irrationality, cynicism and human tragedy that underpins
capitalist productivity. Defamatory labels thus emerge to poison public support for
this group and to justify its continued punitive control. This helps to prevent the
wider emergence of class-conscious awareness of the structural flaws of capitalism,
and also, following capitalism’s periodic crises, to justify the driving back of
paupers into super-exploited low-wage work in order to underpin a recovery.5

The materialist theory of ideology
According to Marxist theory, material factors, most significantly the specific
historical configuration of economic organisation surrounding production, exert real
pressures that drive economic elites to adopt ideologies which justify and mask the
2 Karl MARX, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, 1887 [first English edition of 1887,
published online by Marxists.org, 2010].
p. 69.

realities of class exploitation. Welfare claimant obloquy thus emerges because it is
needed: defamatory labels are ideas, and their role is primarily reactive to changes in
the economy, rather than being causes of changes. However, while labels may be
obnoxious propaganda, for example ‘scrounger’ or ‘scum’, they may also be subtle
misdirections, such as ‘training scheme participant’, or ‘the socially excluded’.  

Purpose matters more than form.

The matriculation of labels into the ideological superstructure is explained by
Gerry Cohen’s concept of ‘functionally selectivity’.6 Via functional selectivity—a
process in some ways comparable to natural selection—ideas which most usefully
service a contemporary phase of capitalist ideological requirements enjoy a much
greater chance of being ‘selected’ up into the ideological architecture. This
architecture may include the political, media and academic spheres, but ‘selected’
ideas may also in turn trickle down to become temporary phases of ‘common sense’
amongst sections of the general public. Labels are chosen, in other words, for their
usefulness and subsequently disseminated by people who have a vested interest in
masking the exploitative economic realities of capitalism.

The workfare-dependent state, the world market and the lion’s rage

By the 1970s, emergent globalisation, the seemingly unresolvable crises of
stagflation stemming from the implosion of Keynesianism, and a significant
diminution of capitalist profit and power7 prompted the formation of ideological
apertures in the UK’s political architecture. The colonisation of these apertures
(i.e. explicatory and policy voids) by neoliberalism,8 marked a significant proof of
Cohen’s functional selectivity hypothesis: a previously marginal ultra-right-wing
economic theory was rapidly drawn-up, via idealist capillary action, into active
power and ideological legitimacy due to its usefulness in restoring power and profit
to the elite.9 In other words, what precipitated the nascent neoliberal counterrevolution
in the UK in the mid-1970s was not a change of ideological
superstructure, but a shift in the material infrastructure.

The economic territory governed by what might be cautiously labelled the
‘neoliberal order’ is a vast world-market of interconnected regimes, businesses and
workers. Within this global economy, as economist G. F. Ray puts it, ‘from the point
of view of international competitiveness, it is total labour cost that counts’.10 As
J Jessop warns, however, the term ‘competitiveness’ places a positive spin on
exploitation and should be treated with caution;11 properly interpreted, what Ray

7 Bob JESSOP, ‘Towards a Schumpeterian Workfare State? Preliminary Remarks on Post-
Fordist Political Economy’, Studies in Political Economy, vol. 40, 1993; David HARVEY, A
8 David HARVEY, The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism, London: Profile
permanent neoliberal disability: a vicious economic stalemate in which the elite attempts to prevent capitalism
years grew in direct proportion to increasingly desperate and ultimately pointless eat would be ideology
Adorno puts it:

Two important elements of Marxist economic theory need to be outlined in order to make clear what happened next. Firstly, there are two primary ways a business can increase its profits: by improving the productivity of industrial manufacture (for example by utilising better machines), or by more deeply exploiting workers (for example by lowering their wages and/or intensifying their working day). Secondly, that crises tend to be overcome by employing the lowest paid workers, from whom the highest ratios of renewed exploitation can be extracted. This generally means the intensified exploitation of women, children, poor-law claimants, foreign workers and immigrants who, due to historically embedded chauvinism, can be paid the lowest wages. Which of these two courses the UK would take in the crisis of the late-1970s was conditioned by its pathdependency on one of the primary features of late capitalism: the significant deindustrialisation and concomitant increase of the tertiary, or ‘services’, sector in the major capitalist nations. This occurs for many reasons, one of which is cheaper foreign labour markets. Like most industrialised countries, the UK experienced this reorientation from the 1970s onwards. Short of genetic engineering, or a vast investment in education, people cannot be reinvented and so by definition drawing a greater ratio of profit from a service economy requires the deepening of exploitation through lower wages and more disciplined working conditions. One of the most important actions of the Thatcher government, elected in 1979, was to apply the ideological grease that lubricated this transition. As Thatcher put it: ‘[We should not] prop up yesterday’s industries, rather than encourage the creation of tomorrow’s’. The transition would occur, however, not through ‘encouragement’, but through the weakening of hard-won quasi-socialist safeguards embedded in the political, legal and economic architecture, allowing them to buckle, and eventually yield, to the extreme economic pressure pushing for the replacement of full-time, primarily male industrial labour with ‘flexible’ low-paid, significantly female, service work. Seen via the Marxist lens, the obsessive neoliberal-era academic, media and political defamation of the poorest, most vulnerable units of society—i.e. poor, female-headed households, welfare claimants, immigrants, the disabled, and ‘feral’ youth—is thus revealed not as glib ignorance or simple nastiness, but as an ideological response to a material imperative: the wealth that supports the lifestyles

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9 David HARVEY, 2007, op. cit.
11 Bob JESSOP, op. cit.
12 G. F. RAY, op. cit.
13 Ibid.
14 Ernest MANDEL, 1971, op. cit.
19 Ibid.
intensiﬁed exploitation of the most vulnerable is no longer a quasi-temporary phase 
i nitiated to stimulate a recovery, but a permanent ‘workfare state’.20 This economic 
vacuum draws ever greater sections of the population, employed and unemployed, 
legal and illegal, domestic and foreign, paid and unpaid, into a nightmare of poverty 
and servile work, recoded glibly as necessary ‘austerity’ and noble ‘hard-work’. 

Rage presaged
To create the workfare-dependent state in the UK—and so harmonise its 
economy with more ‘competitive’ global conditions of production—a fundamental 
change in the socio-economic structure ﬁrst had to be engineered viz a major rolling 
back of welfare state provision.21 This was essential because the welfare state 
protected the most vulnerable, and therefore valuable, social units from having to 
sell their labour-power as a commodity. In 1974, key architect of Thatcherism Keith 
Joseph made an early, ham-fisted attempt to win support for this brutal recommodiﬁcation 
by declaring that welfare funded, unmarried mothers from poor 
estates were ‘producing problem children, the future unmarried mothers, 
delinquents, denizens of our borstals, sub-normal educational establishments, 
prisons, hostels for drifters’.22 Such language would, decades later, be so 
ideologically ingrained in national discourse that even calls for the poor to be put 
into concentration camps (now re-styled as ‘boot-camps’),23 or sterilised,24 could be 
reported glibly in mainstream media. But in 1974 it was a career-damaging gaffe: 
the power of organised labour was still far too inﬂuential to permit such a naked 
attempt at economically motivated class-racism. It would require time, and 
an incrementally prosecuted ideological campaign, to manufacture widespread support 
for the terrifying ambitions of politicians who, in Gouldner’s memorable insight, 
were disgusted by their own people.25 As Thatcher outlined the project in 1981: 
‘Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul’.26

Necessity
However, the ﬁrst phase of the long, bitter journey towards national workfare 
dependency began not under Thatcher, but under Callaghan’s Labour government. 
Labour came to power under Wilson in 1974 promising socialist policies—including 
increased welfare payments and major nationalisations.27 Callaghan assumed the 
Prime Ministership in 1976 and, following a crisis bail-out from the IMF, promptly 
adopted monetarist policies and regressive changes to the welfare system.28 
Callaghan subsequently used his 1976 Labour Party conference address to warn that: 
‘we used to think that you could spend your way out of a recession, and increase 
employment by cutting taxes and boosting Government spending. I tell you in all 
candour that that option no longer exists’.29 The initial phase of neoliberal 
reorientation would thus not be Joseph’s naked class-racism, but the ideology of 
’necessity’. Thatcher gave this phase its iconic rubric—‘TINA’ (there is no 
alternative)—shortly after the Conservative Party replaced Labour in power in 1979 
when she stated that ‘there’s no easy popularity in what we are proposing but it is 
fundamentally sound. Yet I believe people accept there’s no real alternative’.30 

Behind the scenes, Arthur Seldon, director of the neoliberal think-tank the Institute 
of Economic Affairs, was less circumspect, writing to neoliberal luminary Friedrich 
Hayek of his desire to ‘ram the truth [of neoliberal economics] down the throats of 
unwilling swallowers’.31 

Wielding the TINA ideology, the Thatcher government deliberately engineered 
a recession; ostensibly to tame inﬂation,32 but with the lucrative side-effect of 
producing a reserve labour army of 3.3 million people.33 The government’s response
was not, contra Seldon, the truth, but bald deceit, with 190,000 unemployed people disappearing from official statistics almost overnight in 1983 due to a spurious change in counting method.\textsuperscript{34} According to the Bank of England, by 1990 this number had risen to 750,000 people.\textsuperscript{35}

With the help of an enlarged reserve labour army, rising wage costs were reversed by 1983—\textsuperscript{36} but this was merely the beginning of the neoliberalisation of the UK economy. A series of brutal industrial confrontations, combined with the passing of regressive legal instruments, weakened the labour movement


\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{30} Margaret THATCHER, 1980, \textit{art. cit.}, p. 2.


\textsuperscript{32} Andrew CLARK & Richard LAYARD, \textit{op. cit.}

\textsuperscript{33} Kenneth HOOVER, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 213.


\textsuperscript{35} Andrew CLARK & Richard LAYARD, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 7.

\textsuperscript{36} G. F. RAY, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 64.

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significantly.\textsuperscript{37} Many older working class males, bred on strong unions and the expectation of decent wages, found little demand for their labour in the new economy of ‘flexible’, low-wage service work. Partly due to humiliating dole rituals the percentage of male over 55s exiting the labour market rose to 37% by the early 1990s, from 14% in 1977—primarily by shifting to sickness benefits.\textsuperscript{38} The number of full time males in the labour market overall, meanwhile, dropped by 20%.\textsuperscript{40}

Already by 1986 the numbers of long-term (over one year) male unemployed in the UK had risen to around one million, from 100,000 in 1974.\textsuperscript{41} While significant rises in long-term and youth unemployment constituted a major structural change throughout the industrialised nations,\textsuperscript{42} the UK government was quick to adapt to the new reality, facilitating the intensified super-exploitation of the most vulnerable categories of cheap workers in order to supplant the expensive skilled male labourers now being held in cold-storage on a welfare pittance. British women, who were already ‘almost the lowest paid among [the major] industrial countries’,\textsuperscript{43} subsequently saw two million, primarily female, full-time roles displaced by lower paid, more precarious part-time positions.\textsuperscript{44} A major pressurisation of welfare claimants accompanied the change, with the real value of benefits dropping by 15% for the poorest 20% of the population.\textsuperscript{45} Alterations to claimant procedures, meanwhile, saw desperate individuals and families lose vital benefits for minor administrative transgressions. As welfare minister John Major reported to Parliament in 1986 regarding the new dole-scheme Restart: ‘10,842 decisions to disallow benefit or credits [have] been made. Of these, 9,757 were as a result of a failure to attend an interview without good cause’.\textsuperscript{46}

To distract public attention from deliberately manufactured mass unemployment, a high-profile government campaign was launched in 1985 which, according to the \textit{Times}, would ‘crackdown on people claiming unemployment benefit while secretly working’ and ‘cut the jobless total, believed by ministers to be artificially high in some areas’.\textsuperscript{47} As poverty rose, British neoliberal Digby Anderson—director of the right-wing Social Affairs Unit—encapsulated the Right’s

\textsuperscript{37} David HARVEY, 2007, \textit{op. cit.}


\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 9.

\textsuperscript{42} Andrew CLARK & Richard LAYARD, \textit{op. cit.}
politicians that welfare rendered recipients While the far machinery of exploitation beneath. A new necessity ideological grease was burning of
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While youth unemployment now topped 1 million.58 while youth unemployment now topped 1 million. All 1
numbers, so boring? […] I am not alone in
finding the poor boring. Everyone does.48
Another crackdown was announced in 1987 targeting people ‘out of work without good cause’, which, according to Labour spokesman Michael Meacher, was ‘the first time in the history of the welfare state that families with children will be expected to survive on an income 40 per cent below the official subsistence level for a full six months’.50

Meanwhile, under the guise of addressing the plight of the unemployed, the government re-jigged one of capitalism’s oldest terms for exploitation—‘apprenticeship’—to produce perhaps the most pernicious and misleading label for the super-exploited unemployed of the modern era: ‘training scheme participant’. Numbers of benefits claimants on such programmes rose from 8000 in 1982 to 376,000 by 1988.51 In 1986 alone, in any average month 70,000 super-exploited workers were servicing UK industry under the guise of training or work experience.52 By 1985, 750,000 people had been churned in and out of the Youth Training Scheme as cheap labour for businesses, with plans announced in that year to exploit 500,000 more.53 Predictably, the exploitation of the young was ideologically greased by their demonisation. Social commentator Mark Godyer exemplified the trend, writing in the Times that ‘many problems abound, but dwarfing all the others, particularly in the summer holidays, is vandalism and petty crime, smashed telephone kiosks, defaced lavatories, smelly bus shelters, mutilated memorials’.54 Seeming eminently socially conscientious, the idea that ‘it is dishonest to preach the “right to a job” if we cannot realize that right for all citizens’55 masked an emerging ideology that posited disciplinary labour—regardless of wage remuneration—and not the attenuation of poverty and hopelessness as the ‘cure’ for ‘the new excluded underclass’.56

However, as rubrics for super-exploitation go, ‘training scheme’ is particularly time-limited by the implied promise of eventual matriculation into actual employment. By 1986 it was already clear that this was not happening, as the proportion of UK unemployed who were long-term had not shrunk, but risen to 40%, up from 20% in 1979.57 while youth unemployment now topped 1 million.58


Ibid.

Andrew CLARK & Richard LAYARD, op. cit., p. 45.


Ibid.

Ibid.


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The ideological grease was burning off ‘training scheme’, threatening to reveal the machinery of exploitation beneath. A new necessity-based ideological aperture appeared—and was promptly filled by ‘welfare dependency’. While the far-right of the Conservative Party had complained as early as 1973 that welfare rendered recipients ‘wholly and permanently dependent on officials and politicians’,59 Conservative government minister John Moore introduced the idea of ‘welfare dependence’ to the wider UK public in 1987, following a fact-finding trip
to the United States. Attacking the post-war welfare consensus, Moore argued that ‘a welfare state worthy of the name aims […] to widen the understanding that dependency is debilitating and that the best kind of help is that which gives people the will and ability to help themselves’.60 These words were not idly chosen; ‘helping oneself’ was code for the introduction of US-style workfare schemes that forced the unemployed to work for their benefits.61

The ideology of welfare dependency brought with it a bundle of concepts already functionally selected precisely for this purpose in the United States—where the shift towards workfare had begun in the 1960s.62 Significantly, this included the notion that welfare corrupted entire neighbourhoods by destroying family values and undermining the work ethic. In 1943, arch-neoliberal theorist Wilhelm Röpke had claimed that welfare transformed claimants into docile state ‘pets’,63 and it was a small logical step to argue that, freed from the discipline of work and self-reliance, the pets had inevitably gone feral. Charles Murray described this putatively inevitable degeneration as ’welfare’s law of unintended consequences’.64 In support, Digby Anderson, unable—or unprepared—to comprehend the coexistence of welfare and poverty in the UK as a palliative, not causual relationship, deployed chauvinism’s primary ideological weapon—presenting prejudice as evidence of itself—by arguing that there was ‘many a pub or bus stop conversation to endorse Charles Murray’s American study’.65 In 1989 Murray returned the favour, arguing in the British press that the underclass ‘disease’ had now spread to the UK.66

Murray’s argument was by no means new, however: Joseph had spoken of a ‘cycle of deprivation’,67 and before him, Moynihan of a ‘tangle of pathology’68—and SELSDON GROUP, ’The Selsdon Manifesto’, 1970, Margaret Thatcher Foundation, 2013, p. 5.


61 Jamie PECK, 2001, op. cit.

62 Ibid.


65 Digby ANDERSON, op. cit., p. 2.


67 Keith JOSEPH, loc. cit.


226 REVUE FRANÇAISE DE CIVILISATION BRITANNIQUE — VOL. 19 N° 1 there were many earlier iterations, stretching back to England’s Statute of Labourers in 1351. The idea was so old, in fact, that James Mill had punctured its underlying tautology in 1808, noting that ‘it is first making the vices of the poor account for the poor rate, and next the poor’s rate account for the vices’.69 Nevertheless, material realities re-selected the notion; now neatly dovetailed with neoclassical ‘hysteresis’ arguments that characterised welfare as precipitating the psychological degeneration of claimants, causing them to withdraw from the job market—artificially raising the price of labour and so causing employers to cut down on hiring.70 Unemployment, in other words, was argued to be causing itself. As Conservative MP Ralph Howell put it in 1994: ’To offer people the chance to work and contribute a bit to the community must be better than trapping them in a depressing state of enforced idleness that leaves them less and less able to get back to work’.71

However, like many other libertarians, signally Nozick72 and Gilder,73 Murray recommended the near-total abrogation of welfare, musing: ’Why should I not let [a man who refuses to work] starve, considering it a form of suicide?’74 Influential anarcho-capitalist Murray Rothbard went much further, arguing that even allowing babies to starve to death was justifiable according to the ‘ethics of liberty’, as babies had no legitimate property claims over others.75 But dead workers do not produce surplus value, and dead babies offer little leverage over their mothers, and so this position was not functionally selected by the ruling elite.

In 1986, US sociologist Lawrence Mead took over Murray’s territory and, functionally selecting what was useful in it, added the notion that over-generou,
unconditional welfare had corrupted the ‘underclass’ to such a degree that disciplinary socialisation in the form of workfare programmes was now necessary. These programmes were to be highly disciplinary, and modelled on the military where ‘the clearest example of [...] standard setting occurs’. Low-paid work was to be mandated—but compensated for with a priceless wage of citizenship and enhanced self-esteem. As Mead put it: ‘The rich man who puts in long hours in an office on Wall Street is seen as morally equivalent to the welfare recipient on workfare who is made to clean the streets’. Work, in other words, was to be transformed into its own wages. Soon Mead was on UK television promoting neo-Benthamite pauper control schemes, while his Hannah Arendt-inspired argument that workfare underpinned ‘active’ citizenship began to be touted by left-leaning intellectuals as ‘fair’ and not necessarily contrary to socialism. Eminent sociologist James MILL, On the Overproduction and Underconsumption Fallacies, Jefferson School of Philosophy, 1808, p. 15.

P. Potts thus reported that Mead was its ‘pimp’, seeing as one of the clearest examples of ‘socialist claptrap’. Mead’s work was functionally selected into elite political discourse. In an enthusiastic article in support of workfare entitled ‘Purge of the Parasites’, journalist P. Potts thus reported that ‘Mrs Thatcher recently became interested in workfare after watching a television programme about it. The next morning she dispatched a note to ministers asking for their thoughts’. Perversely, Mead’s unsympathetic notion of an intransigent, criminal, pathologically idle underclass not only shifted the blame for training scheme failures onto their victims, it also transformed those failures into justifications for their intensification. Far from being the ‘godfather’ of workfare, as one media sycophant would later style him, Mead was its pimp, hooking-up the early workfare-dependent economy with an easy, proleaphobic ideology: ‘Low-wage work’, Mead argued, ‘apparently must be mandated, just as a draft has sometimes been necessary to staff the military’. This, he claimed, was the only reliable means of ‘dissolving’ the ‘welfare class’.

Particularly useful to the UK regime was Mead’s demonisation of single mothers. Mead attacked their ‘refusal to take “dirty” jobs that they feel are beneath them’ as ‘political behaviour’ designed to force society to ‘adjust to them’ [Mead’s emphasis]. With 578,000 single mothers surviving on supplementary benefit in 1986 (365,000 of these divorced or separated), Mead’s argument that they should not be allowed to ‘blackmail’ society, but instead be mandated to perform unskilled

Richard LAYARD et al., op. cit.
Charles MURRAY, op. cit., p. 197.
Ibid., p. 237.
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Ralf Dahrendorf was less convinced, characterising Mead’s theories as ‘almost totalitarian’. Regardless, Mead’s ideas were needed. By the mid-1980s, despite suffering a serious ‘credibility problem’, training schemes had become a structural element of UK economic policy—not only supplying cheap labour to industry and helping to mask unemployment, but also acting as a retardant on real wage values—seen as one key to increased ‘competitiveness’. However, with the number of UK citizens living in poverty rising dramatically between 1983 and 1986, from 9 million to 10 million, social security minister John Major was having difficulty defending current policies, able merely to insist glibly that ‘the clearest example of [... ] standard setting occurs’. Low-paid work was to be mandated—but compensated for with a priceless wage of citizenship and enhanced self-esteem. As Mead put it: ‘The rich man who puts in long hours in an office on Wall Street is seen as morally equivalent to the welfare recipient on workfare who is made to clean the streets’. Work, in other words, was to be transformed into its own wages. Soon Mead was on UK television promoting neo-Benthamite pauper control schemes, while his Hannah Arendt-inspired argument that workfare underpinned ‘active’ citizenship began to be touted by left-leaning intellectuals as ‘fair’ and not necessarily contrary to socialism. Eminent sociologist James MILL, On the Overproduction and Underconsumption Fallacies, Jefferson School of Philosophy, 1808, p. 15.

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In 1998, Margaret Thatcher revealed her contempt of single mothers, arguing that they ‘devalue [...] our community’, but the opposite was true—they, and their children, were an extremely valuable potential resource, and the venal obloquy inflicted upon them throughout the 1980s should be seen in this light. Signally, government minister Rhodes Boyson condemned single mothers as responsible for ‘probably the most evil product of our time’—uncontrolled male young—who perpetrated ‘violent crime, [...] football hooliganism, mugging and inner city revolt’. Meanwhile, the pernicious spread of neoliberal ideology to the Labour Party was signalled in 1989 when Labour MP Frank Field declared that ‘for the first time groups of unemployed and young single mothers don’t think the offer of rejoining mainstream Britain is worth taking. They opt consciously to stay on the outside’. Field’s solution was not to make work worthwhile, or to value parenting in itself, but to shift women towards workfare. This pincer-movement, between Conservative class-racism and Labour’s crocodile-tear paternalism, would prove characteristic of the pseudo-debate between right- and left-right that swept the road to national workfare dependency.

The term underclass, meanwhile, maintained not only its class-racist, but also its actual racist inflections. Signally, the Independent Audit Commission produced a major report in 1987 in which director John Banham spoke of a ‘horrific’ situation in which ‘a 15-year-old black is having her third child by different fathers’, unemployment stands at 80 per cent, gangs roam the streets, drug-related crime is rife and ‘you have to set up créches in schools’. The solution, Banham suggested, was a productive partnership [with] the private sector. Workfare, in other words. However, Banham was not quite as independent as he seemed: he was shortly to assume leadership of the Confederation of British Industries, a major capitalist organisation which, in 1985, had argued that government unemployment training schemes had ‘yielded big dividends, with an enormous amount of companies [becoming] deeply and actively involved’ and that efforts should be ‘devoted to expanding them’.

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Media allies of the bourgeoisie, not for the first or last time, supported the agenda, blurring class-racist comedy with reality, with the Daily Express asking:
It is more accurate to say that, for the bourgeoisie, workfare schemes were much better than employing and properly remunerating people.

In 1988, the Conservative Party initiated a venal campaign of welfare claimant demonisation aimed at driving the poor into workfare and low-wage work. Terrifying hate-language resurfaced, with the Daily Express announcing an imminent ‘welfare purge on single mothers’. Little was off-limits: in a speech vowing to end the UK’s ‘scrounger culture’, Minister John Moore claimed that a pregnant ‘unmarried girl’, having miscarried and so lost her eligibility to somewhere to live, had complained to him that it was ‘silly to make her move because she was going to get pregnant anytime. “I’m working on it now” she said’. Extracting ghastly political capital, Moore concluded that it was sad to see people ‘caught in the dependency culture, sat passive in the face of new opportunities’.

One such ‘new opportunity’ was the Employment for Training workfare scheme, introduced in 1988 at a cost £1.4 billion and intended to provide 600,000 ‘training scheme’ placements for the long-term unemployed. The scheme was, according to its White Paper, necessary in order to address the complex problem-set faced by the long-term unemployed, including benefit dependence and low motivation. In the same year, control and exploitation of children was intensified as all 16- and 17-year-old benefits claimants were mandated to attend the Youth Training Scheme. According to social policy expert Professor Alan Walker, this scheme was ‘slave labour’ and had ‘a fatal accident rate of 138.2 per 100,000’. However, with places on the scheme limited, many young people simply lost their eligibility to welfare altogether, forcing them into destitution and/or the black economy.

With middle income earners now being squeezed to fund cheap labour schemes for the benefit of businesses, Chancellor Norman Fowler diverted taxpayers’ ire towards benefit fraud, announcing at the 1988 Conservative Party conference that ‘we are not prepared to see taxpayers’ money being used to finance the fraudulent. It is a totally unnecessary imposition on those in work paying taxes and, above all, it is an insult to the genuinely unemployed in this country’. In reality, UK businesses had developed a significant, tax-funded, cheap-labour habit, with the supply now extending well beyond dole claimants: numbers receiving the Family Tax Credit—a supplementary benefit for low-wage workers—for example, had risen from 71,000 in its introductory year of 1971, to 199,000 in 1985, and to 317,000 by 1990. However, Fowler was considerably less squeamish about insulting the public when it came to wage increases, complaining that they ‘discourage employers from taking on more staff, and reduce opportunities for expanding’.

By 1989, average wage values for low-skilled workers plummeted between 10% and 25%, while the numbers of service sector roles rose 23.8% on 1979 figures. John Moore dismissed complaints of rising poverty, declaring ‘the end of the line’ for anything but voluntary indigence. In fact, relative poverty increased significantly through the 1980s and ‘the growth of child poverty on the relative measure was particularly alarming, with a rate of 12% in 1979 rising to 27% by


Ibid.


Andrew Clark & Richard Layard, op. cit., p. 55.

John Westergaard, op. cit., p. 118.


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‘young ladies who get pregnant just to jump the housing queue’. Dismissing the engulfing misery, Chancellor Norman Lamont took the line that ‘rising unemployment and the recession have been the price that we have had to pay to get inflation down. That price is well worth paying’.

While inflation was again wrested down to 2% by 1994, the new threat to the now intensifying globalising system was the collapse of global growth rates: down from 3.5% in the 1960s to 1.1% in the 1990s, with the UK rate going negative in 1991. By no coincidence, from the late 1980s the term ‘reckless’, with its core sense of inability to produce anything of value, began to migrate from descriptions of absent fathers to the general unemployed. As Kilroy-Silk signally phrased it, ‘hard-working members of the community [should not] have to tend to the needs of the lazy and feckless’.

Despite 61 million people living below the poverty line across Europe, lifecrippling low-pay was cynically justified as positive and unavoidable by bourgeois academics: ‘if employers pay a living wage, they simply will not want to employ all the available labour’. Politicians were little better, with now Prime Minister John Major arguing that ‘the minimum wage [makes it] more difficult for people to find work’. The Conservative answer was more workfare, with Employment Minister Michael Portillo announcing in 1995 yet another new scheme — Network — in which 16-18 year old workers would be paid primarily in training and work experience.

Meanwhile, the potential cash value of transforming benefits claimants into superexploited workers was underlined when Conservative MP Ralph Howell published, via the neoliberal think-tank the Adam Smith Institute, a thinly veiled call for workfare, arguing in the Observer that ‘we spend £10 billion per year supporting the unemployed. We could offer work to everyone who wants it for roughly the same money’.

However, in the ever more interconnected world-market, the Conservative Party was now only one minor power in a vast neoliberal network. With an unprecedented global glut of potential low-wage workers, all European capitalists now faced an intensive struggle to maintain growth and global market share. Notably, in 1995 the European Union’s Competitiveness Advisory Group warned of a significant ‘decline in the ability of the Union to exploit its productive potential to
and the Netherlands


129 Andrew CLARK & Richard LAYARD, op. cit., p. 73.

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the full due primarily to ‘eight million permanently unemployed’, and too low rates of females and long-term unemployed engaged in the labour market.134 The solution

was the expansion of exploitation beyond its contemporary, limited remit, to force

individuals previously protected under sickness, single-parent or other ‘passive’

long-term unemployment status into ‘active’ labour market regimes.135

In 1997 the European Union’s Jobs Summit directed member states to activate

further workfare schemes to drive, initially, 20% of this ‘passive’ group back into

the labour market.136 However, work-for-benefits, not actual jobs, was to be, as

Bruttel and Sol put it, ‘the underlying paradigm of the European employment

strategy’.137 Member states drew-up ‘National Action Plans’ to steer this project

locally138 but administering them required reinvigorated steering committees armed

with new ideological weapons. As Tony Blair put it, following neoliberal Labour’s

sweep to power in 1997, ‘the job of refashioning welfare and the job of refashioning
government are inseparable’.139 This new governmentality would be, as Jessop had

previously predicted,140 a ‘workfare state’. The Conservative party might have managed this restructuration in the UK—

and later did—but they lost the 1997 election. Besides which, the old ideology of

welfare dependency, although still very much part of the neoliberal rhetorical suite,

was, by itself, too shallow to justify the vast economic reorientation now required of

member states: despite Tony Blair claiming in 1995 that there were ‘two Britains,

one on welfare, the other paying for it’,141 in reality, by 1997 unemployment

benefits accounted for only 9% of total social security spending in the UK,142 and

only 8% across the European Community as a whole.143 The corrosive effects of

neoliberalism in the UK in the early 1990s were far too extensive to hang onto this

little peg; particularly the ‘exceptional’ growth of inequality which saw the richest

10% increase their income by close to 70%, and the poorest decile suffer an

effective 8% decrease.144 An ideological canopy of a whole new order was required.

This could have taken numerous forms, but it needed, as its foundation rationale, to

protect neoliberal wealth-theft: returning pilfered capital was off the table and any

suggestion of such had to be denounced as pointless. This ideological void drew up,

via capillary need, a natural extension of the dependency thesis: that it was not

134 COMPETITIVE ADVISORY GROUP, Enhancing European Competitiveness, European Union,

135 Ibid.
136 Ivar LODEMEL & Heather TRICKEY, ‘A New Contract for Social Assistance’, in Ivar

LODEMEL & Heather TRICKEY (eds), op. cit., p. 14.
137 Oliver BRUTTEL & Ely SOL, ‘Work First as a European Model: Evidence from Germany

138 Colin GILL, Michael GOLD & Peter CRESSEY, ‘Social Europe: National Initiatives and

140 Bob JESSOP, op. cit.
142 Ivar LODEMEL & Heather TRICKEY, art. cit., p. 185.
144 JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION, Income and Wealth: The Latest Evidence, 1998,
p. 1.

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welfare, but welfare claimants that were the problem. In fact, more than a problem, a
national threat; a group—almost an ethnicity—whose pathological culture emitted a destructive moral radiation that destabilised surrounding communities, corrupted children and threatened to undermine both social order and the economy. As the Sunday Times had put it in an early ideological rehearsal in 1993, ‘the growth of a hard core of long-term unemployed and the spreading culture of welfare dependency have brutalised British society well beyond its developing underclass and undermined much of what we thought made this country civilised’. The outgoing Major government attempted to adapt its ideology to this intensified class racism with a disastrous ‘back to basics’ moral crusade: a jeremiad which managed to juxatpose child pornography, crime, the Yugoslavian conflict and Irish terrorism with ‘accepting a responsibility for yourself and your family and not shuffling off on other people and the state’. But this was merely a desperate, local ideological mutation which rapidly self-aborted in toxic pools of hypocrisy. Behind Major’s back, at the global neoliberal level, the tumbler of ideological functional selectivity was piecing together a profoundly more effective discourse: social exclusion.

Social exclusion

‘Social exclusion’ has been identified by scholars such as Lodemel and Trickey, Skeggs, Cameron and Palan, Byrne and Crompton as a key strut in the ideological architecture of neoliberalism. However, there was never one version of this idea that achieved neoliberal hegemony: continually functionally reselected for the plasticity of its ideological infrastructure, ‘social exclusion’ should be seen rather, as a continuum of implications which steadily adapted to material imperatives—eventually, in the UK, evolving into the ideology of ‘Broken Britain’. The idea of social exclusion initially emerged in radical French critiques of socially corrosive economic policy. In 1995, the United Nations’ Social Development Summit partially adopted this critique, stating that ‘full and adequately renumerated employment is an effective method of combating poverty and promoting social integration’. However, this, by definition, contradicted the European Union’s workfare paradigm; and with the colossal expansion of the EU’s reserve labour army to 15.7 million by 1999, Europe’s workfare trajectory was intransigently set at the economic base. Rather, bombarded by the intense pressure of economic reality, the meaning of social exclusion itself...

147 Ivar LODEMEL & Heather TRICKEY, art. cit.
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buckled, eventually fully inverting to become a justification for socially corrosive policies. As the European Commission put it, ‘the aim of [social inclusion] policy is to strengthen incentives to work and to improve the adaptability and employability of the work force’. By emphasising ‘the complex and multidimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion’, European Union apparatchiks began to re-image poverty, not as lack of income, but as a broadly ‘psycho-social’ issue—a behavioural, cultural and attitudinal matter—and the solution, therefore, not as full and adequate remuneration for work, but as ‘reintegration into society through linking welfare and work’. Via the ideology of social exclusion, work-for-welfare was thus transformed into an apparent mechanism of ‘cultural matriculation’ which could re-qualify the poor as members of society happily clutching wage packets filled with self-esteem and social membership. All that remained was for national administrations to sell the idea to their populations.

Tony Blair—typically ‘on message’—downloaded the new ideology into UK political discourse: ‘Social exclusion is about income but it is about more. It’s [...]
damaging to self-esteem, more corrosive to society as a whole, more likely to be passed from generation to generation than material poverty’. What was only 9% of the UK benefits budget thus became, via words, something apparently massive: an ‘underclass of people cut off from society’s mainstream, without any sense of shared purpose’. With facts overcome by whimsical appeal to ‘what we all know exists’, capital exclusion was thus rhetorically inverted to justify a significant intensification of social discipline and pauper exploitation; a major neoliberal reorganisation of the UK economy dwarfing anything that the Conservatives had managed to achieve. Such a project required an ideological justification of similar proportions: an extensive continuum of deceit, adapted cynically to varying levels of gullibility.

At the apex of this continuum the government argued that ‘for people of working age, a job is the best route out of poverty’, and that work was the key weapon in the ‘fight against poverty and social exclusion’. In reality, the country was being transformed into a low-wage, workfare-dependent state: a series of ‘New Deal’ workfare programmes were set up between 1998 and 2010, aimed at driving ‘inactive’ benefits claimants into the active reserve labour army. As minister Peter Hain put it, ‘we must push forwards with further reform [...] focusing on the 4.5 million people of working age on out-of-work benefits’. In fact, only 5.6% of New Labour was creating work. By 2008/2009 13m people were in poverty. Of these, 5.8m...
Suicide


Society, 2008

180 179

Our Generation

p. 10.

Welfare Reform


Inequality and In

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(44% of the total) were in “deep poverty” (household income at least one-third

below the poverty line), the highest proportion on record’.175 Meanwhile, seven

million UK citizens were suffering in-work poverty,176 with half of all UK children

who were surviving in poverty living in working families.177 But with work now the

marker of cultural matriculation into ‘social inclusion’, minister Peter Hain was able

to fudge the reality by emphasising that ‘the rewards of work […] go far beyond

financial independence […] because work is inherently good’,178 while neoliberal

apologist Simon Heffer argued that poor-work at less-than-benefit levels was ‘the

price they [low-wage workers] pay for dignity, decency, self-respect’.179

However, the reality of the New Deals was difficult to reconcile with the true

scope of capital exclusion—and a lie inevitably emerged of a ‘hard-core’ who were

resistant to Labour’s paternalist interventions. As minister Peter Mandelson

complained, ‘we are spending vast sums of money, often over and over again, on the

same people through different programmes, without improving their ability to

participate in the economy and society’.180 Bizarrely, some of the socially excluded

were characterised as so hard-core that it would be necessary, according to Tony

Blair, to target them while they were still foetuses.181 Oppression of the unemployed

was intensified, meanwhile, as ‘the number of sanctioned jobseekers with a reduced

entitlement to JSA doubled in 2010 to around 800,000’.182

A dangerous notion was forming: that some people simply could not be

included. And this propaganda game was soon out of the control of Labour’s spindoctors;
in fact, it had already emerged amongst the attack-dogs of the neoliberal

media who pushed the idea almost as far is it could possibly go in socially excluding

the poor as an utterly alien, immoral culture who were a threat, as Phillips

disturbingly put it, to the nation’s ‘social and moral health’:183 ‘Britain’s feckless,
thuggish, self-pitying, sponging criminal underclass’;184 ‘that terrifying growing


Rodolofo G. PALACIOS, Ana M. G. RODRIGUEZ & Ramon PENA-CASAS, ‘Earnings

Inequality and In-work Poverty’, Working Papers on the Reconciliation of Work and Welfare


DEPARTMENT FOR WORK AND PENSIONS, Ready for Work: Full Employment in


Simon HEFFER, art. cit.


Melanie PHILLIPS, ‘We Have a Choice: Face Up to this Crisis or Commit Social

Suicide’, Daily Mail, 9 July 2007, p. 3.
phenomenon: a feckless, amoral, workshy, benefit-dependent underclass’; 185
‘scroungers who try to take a free ride on the backs of others’; 186 ‘an ever-growing subculture of neglect, violence, drugs, pornography, crime and unemployment’; 187 ‘scum. Sorry, but there’s no other word for it’. 188 With glib hypocrisy, journalists who impered over the fate of ‘underclass’ children simultaneously used their images and identities in exploitative photo-shoots. 189 Class-racist hate was celebrated: ‘Hurrah for the chav-hating holiday boss—champion of the middleclass!’ 190 Those workers, meanwhile, whose wage values had collapsed to close to unemployment benefit levels were encouraged not to hate the system, but to despise those already surviving on an unemployment pittance: ‘Ignore leftist hysteria—at last Britain has woken up to the grotesque irony that so many on welfare are better off than hard working families’. 191 Fiction overtook reality as class-racist comedy shows and characters such as Wayne and Waynetta Slob, 192 Vicky Pollard, 193 and Shameless 194 became emblematic of ‘a daily tragedy whose victims, like Shannon Matthews, are all too real’. 195 Conservative Shadow Home Secretary Chris Grayling took this blurring of fantasy and reality to quixotic heights, bruiting the US fictional television drama The Wire as an accurate representation of the ‘urban war’, ‘culture of violence’, and ‘collapse of civilised life’ plaguing Britain. 196 At the bottom of the continuum of deceit, class-racists used the internet to spew vile ‘solutions’, with even a mainstream journalist eventually feeling safe to muse: ‘Of course, forcibly sterilising a woman is something that cannot be countenanced in a civilised society—or can it?’ 197

Following the 2008 economic crisis, neoliberal Labour’s ideology began to buckle under the weight of economic reality. Blair’s crocodile-tear appeals for social inclusion were largely abandoned, with Gordon Brown dropping the phrase altogether from his 2008 leadership speech. A new ideology was emerging: that only those who worked, and worked hard, really mattered: ‘my starting point is onenation, rooted in a commitment to common democratic citizenship. It is’ 198


Ibid., p. 2.


Natalie CLARKE, art. cit., p. 1.

238 REVUE FRANÇAISE DE CIVILISATION BRITANNIQUE — VOL. 19 N° 1 unashamedly majoritarian, focusing on the concerns of the hard working majority’. 198

Broken Britain

The Conservative Party, meanwhile, had been following its class instincts and mooting poor women as the primary grist of economic recovery: around 2006, Tory spin-doctors and their media allies began aggressively pushing the sound-bite ‘Breakdown’ or ‘Broken-down’ Britain, 199 with the primary connotation of broken homes—and the truth-reversing conclusion that ‘one of the most important factors implicated in poverty and a low sense of well-being is family breakdown’. 200 However, ‘Breakdown Britain’ was a clumsy phrase that implied either total hopelessness, or else a satisfactory fix in the near future—neither of which usefully
justified the oncoming scale of economic transformation which would see the
impoveryishment and intensified disciplinary control of much of the population. The
umber of functional selectivity spun-on until it fell, eventually, into the ideological
configuration of ‘Broken Britain’.

Early in 2007, the Times reported David Cameron as pledging to mend
“‘Broken’ Britain’,201 with the word ‘broken’ in quotation marks. In July, the
Edinburgh Evening News quoted Cameron as stating that “repairing broken
Britain” would combine cutting the cost to business and the taxpayer with
increasing social justice’.202 By mid-2007, the term was a Cameron catchphrase,
with the Evening Standard reporting: ‘I want to fix broken Britain, Cameron tells
critics’.203 By the end of the year the term had become a media buzz-phrase in its
own right, with Daily Express editor Martin Townsend complaining that in ‘broken
Britain’ a ‘Left-liberal agenda’ had ‘kicked away the building blocks’ that created
World War Two heroes.204

Early in 2008 the neoliberal elite fully captured the phrase as the Sun
newspaper, in partnership with David Cameron, launched a major ‘Broken Britain’
campaign. Capitalising ‘Broken’, it was reported that ‘yesterday David Cameron
unveiled his plans to mend Broken Britain’.205 The new ideological paradigm was
that Britain was ‘a society at breaking point’, and the answer, ‘work for welfare’ to
’make poverty history’.206

199 ‘Cameron and a Haynes’ guide to Fixing Broken Down Britain’, Daily Mail, 21 July 2007;
CENTRE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, Broken Down Britain, 2006.
200 Ibid., p. 29.
201 Anthony BROWNE & Angus MCLEOD, ‘Tories Pledge to Help Families in “Broken”
202 ‘Cameron Ready to Square Up to Brown over Social Breakdown’, Edinburgh Evening
203 ‘I Want to Fix Broken Britain, Cameron Tells Critics’, Evening Standard, 31 July 2007,
p. 1.

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The Broken Britain narrative retained an intensive focus on driving female
heads of household into poor work—not necessarily to lift them from poverty, but
because, argued Cameron, ‘the transition from worklessness to work has beneficial
effects on both parents and children alike’.207 But the new ideology was to go much
further ‘to build a welfare-to-work programme that goes so far, in scale, beyond
[Labour’s] limited plans’.208

With work-for-welfare already contributing to an increase in inequality—both
of opportunity and income—so great that the National Equality Panel warned that the
’sheer scale’ of it ‘for many readers […] will be shocking’209—selling an
intensified crackdown on the reserve labour army required a whole new level of
cynical propaganda. The primary weapon in this project was the recording of the real
‘break’ in Britain—that between rich and poor—into the fairy-tale of an urban
conflict between the imagined moral dead-zones of welfare-dependent ‘sprawling
council estates’210 and an ideological realm populated by middle-class ‘hardworking
families’.211 High profile crimes were cynically exploited to widen the gap. Signally,
making political capital from a famous child abduction case, David Cameron
damned the poor for something they had not even done, stating that ‘there are 5
million people on benefits in Britain. How do we stop them turning into Karen
Matthews?’. Cameron then linked this crime with ‘an estate where decency fights a
losing battle against degradation and despair. A community whose pillars are
crime, unemployment and addiction. […] Before her [Mathews] there was Baby P, a
tiny boy beaten by lower-than-life thugs. Before him, there was Shaun Dykes, a
suicidal teenager taunted by a gang of yobs to end his own life. Before him, there
was Rhys Jones, shot dead as he cycled home from football practice. It goes on’.212

Media allies pushed the agenda: ‘In these households and in these areas, where
people fuelled by a constant flow of drugs, alcohol and pornography exist outside
the norms of civilised behaviour, society most definitely is broken. […] It can’t be
restored unless welfare dependency is stopped dead in its tracks’.213 The Public were
nudged towards the required conclusion: ‘EVERY candidate standing in the general election should read [...] the comments of Beryl Teasdale about the state of British society. After seeing young thug Jessica Parry jailed for attempting to rob her, 73-year-old Beryl said: “When I was her age I was working around the clock”.\footnote{14}{Ibid., p. 4.}

In 2010 a new Conservative-led coalition government came to power. They inherited a neoliberal economic reorientation in full swing. In 2011, 81% of the UK workforce, and 92% of working women, were employed in the services sector.\footnote{215}{Ibid.}

The workforce-dependent sector of the economy, meanwhile, was big and hungry—and seemingly more needed than ever, with growth at 1.1%, going negative to minus 0.2% in 2012.\footnote{216}{Ibid.}

In 2011, the new regime launched its Work Programme—a major expansion of workfare predicted to force around 3.3 million people into disciplinary workfare centres by 2016\footnote{217}{Ibid.}—the same number initially made unemployed by the early Thatcher government. With around 900 sub-contractors nationally,\footnote{218}{Ibid.} the Work Programme marked a major intensification of workfare.

In his pre-launch press-release for the scheme, Conservative welfare minister Iain Duncan Smith claimed that the Work Programme constituted a ‘radical welfare reform designed to tackle entrenched poverty and end the curse of intergenerational worklessness’.\footnote{219}{Ibid.}

Blaming jobless parents for influencing their children into choosing welfare as a preferred lifestyle, Smith argued that ‘family is the most important influence on a child’s life, so it is no surprise that with this many children growing up with parents on benefits we are facing intergenerational worklessness. [...] Our broken welfare system has reinforced this destructive cycle for generations, root and branch reform is long overdue’.\footnote{220}{Ibid.}

In reality, the UK government kept no records showing that intergenerational unemployment even existed.\footnote{221}{Ibid.} Rather, thirty years of deliberate and cynical labour market destabilisation, and consequent economic impoverishment, was being parasitised as evidence for the necessity of more of the same.

To boost support for workfare as an essential, even philanthropic project, the government initiated a propaganda campaign claiming that there were 120,000 seriously dysfunctional underclass families in the UK who alone cost the country £9 billion per year. They were, argued Cameron, ‘sealed in their circumstances with a weekly welfare cheque’, and required ‘help to turn their lives around and heal the scars of the broken society’.\footnote{222}{Ibid.} In 2012, government advisor Louise Casey’s codsociological report Listening to Troubled Families appeared just in time to aid the fiction: choosing to describe rape and sexual abuse (in one case perpetrated by an apparently unrelated neighbour) as ‘incest’, Casey speciously juxtaposed her findings with discussion of these 120,000 families, tentatively insinuating that they were, as a group, the bearers of repulsively dysfunctional social mores, vitiated by welfare dependency.\footnote{223}{Ibid.}

Even the right-leaning Daily Mail however, which had The workfare-dependent sector of the economy, meanwhile, was big and hungry—and seemingly more needed than ever, with growth at 1.1%, going negative to minus 0.2% in 2012.\footnote{216}{Ibid.}

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Blaming jobless parents for influencing their children into choosing welfare as a preferred lifestyle, Smith argued that ‘family is the most important influence on a child’s life, so it is no surprise that with this many children growing up with parents on benefits we are facing intergenerational worklessness. [...] Our broken welfare system has reinforced this destructive cycle for generations, root and branch reform is long overdue’.\footnote{220}{Ibid.}

In reality, the UK government kept no records showing that intergenerational unemployment even existed.\footnote{221}{Ibid.} Rather, thirty years of deliberate and cynical labour market destabilisation, and consequent economic impoverishment, was being parasitised as evidence for the necessity of more of the same.

To boost support for workfare as an essential, even philanthropic project, the government initiated a propaganda campaign claiming that there were 120,000 seriously dysfunctional underclass families in the UK who alone cost the country £9 billion per year. They were, argued Cameron, ‘sealed in their circumstances with a weekly welfare cheque’, and required ‘help to turn their lives around and heal the scars of the broken society’.\footnote{222}{Ibid.} In 2012, government advisor Louise Casey’s codsociological report Listening to Troubled Families appeared just in time to aid the fiction: choosing to describe rape and sexual abuse (in one case perpetrated by an apparently unrelated neighbour) as ‘incest’, Casey speciously juxtaposed her findings with discussion of these 120,000 families, tentatively insinuating that they were, as a group, the bearers of repulsively dysfunctional social mores, vitiated by welfare dependency.\footnote{223}{Ibid.}

Even the right-leaning Daily Mail however, which had
initially welcomed the findings, printed a partial retraction once it was realised that
Casey’s report was based on only 16 loosely investigated case studies.\textsuperscript{224} In fact, the
government’s definition of ‘troubled families’ was based entirely on poverty, poor
opportunity, deprivation and ill health, and not criminal or ‘dysfunctional’
behaviour.\textsuperscript{225} Nevertheless, yet again deploying indigence as evidence to support
more of what caused it, the government mooted placing these ‘troubled families’
onto a quasi-food-stamp scheme,\textsuperscript{226} potentially reducing them to the most basic level
of survival permitted by law—and possibly extending this scheme to another
400,000 households.\textsuperscript{227}
Speaking in 2012, meanwhile, Cameron argued that ‘first, we must treat the
causes of poverty at their source. […] Second, we’ve got to recognise that in the
end, the only thing that really beats poverty, long-term, is work’.\textsuperscript{228} In reality, by
2012 13 million UK citizens lived in poverty, half in working families, with another
two million artificially missing from the data because average incomes fell 8% on
2008 figures, superficially ‘lifting’ them out of the reckoning.\textsuperscript{229} Furthermore, there
were record numbers of childless, working-age people in poverty, while 4.8 million
people were churned in and out of unemployment benefits—and 5 million people
were working for below the minimum wage.\textsuperscript{230} By Cameron’s own admission, the
average UK household was now £3,000 a year worse off compared to 2007.\textsuperscript{231}
In its first year the Work Programme experienced a failure rate of 97%.\textsuperscript{232} By
2014, this figure was unchanged.\textsuperscript{233} The neoliberal regime’s response was, as it had been
for the previous thirty years, more of the same: a ‘crackdown on migrants’
benefits’;\textsuperscript{234} for British youth, ‘if they are still unemployed after six months, they will
have to start a traineeship, take work experience or do a community work
placement—and if they don’t turn up, they will lose their benefits’;\textsuperscript{235} for older
workers: ‘The long term unemployed are no longer going to get something for
nothing. They’ll have to put back into their community, including compulsory
work’.\textsuperscript{236}

\textbf{Concluding comments}
From the 1970s, the West’s bourgeoisie, witnessing falling profits and
diminishing class power, engineered an atavistic reversion to the essential
mechanism of national capitalist class control: the expansion of the domestic reserve
\textsuperscript{224} ‘Criminal Culture at the Heart of Feckless Families’, \textit{Daily Mail}, 16 November 2012.
\textsuperscript{225} Michael KELLY, ‘A Look at the “Troubled Families Figure”’, \textit{Family Action}, 2013.
\textsuperscript{226} ‘No-booze Smart Cards for Benefits Claimants’, \textit{Daily Mail}, 13 November 2012.
\textsuperscript{227} ‘Another 400,000 “High Risk” Households to Get Help’, \textit{BBC News}, 24 June 2013.
\textsuperscript{229} JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION, 2013, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{230} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{231} David CAMERON, ‘Prime Minister’s Questions’, House of Commons, 16 January 2014.
\textsuperscript{234} ‘Crackdown on Migrant’s Benefits’, \textit{Times}, 19 February 2014.
\textsuperscript{236} George OSBORNE, ‘Speech at Sertec’, 2014, p. 8.
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labour army. Exploitation of this group has led to the creation of a servile, low-paid,
service economy, significantly underpinned by workfare. Three broad ideological
canopies have been deployed in justification of this project: \textit{necessity, social
exclusion} and \textit{Broken Britain}. Beneath these umbrella deceits, a series of sub-lies emerged:
that unemployment was essential, first to re-model the economy, and/or to
control inflation; that workfare was required—first to provide training and control
feral ‘youth’ and blacks, and then to attack the evil of ‘welfare dependence’ and the
‘underclass’. In the 1990s, as the European Union shifted significantly towards a
workfare paradigm, work became its own wages as ‘social inclusion’ replaced actual
earnings for a new class of workfare helots. In the UK, neoliberal attack-dogs
savaged the poor, and by the late 2000s the idea of ‘Broken Britain’ had emerged,
deployed against the victims of poverty with ghostly and naked class-racism. The
anger, the bile, the disgust of the neoliberal regime and its apologists is, however, too easily dismissed as ignorance, or mere chauvinism. It is, rather, the rage of the lion at the antelope: the despising of the people upon whose misery the elite feed to support their own wealth and privilege. Claims of supporting the long-term unemployed, the family, industriousness, wayward youth, British culture, law and order and the work ethic are primarily ideological reflections of a material, systemic impulse towards the super-exploitation of women, single parents, young people, paupers and immigrants amidst a miasma of poverty and disciplinary control engulfing the UK. Workfare has been a major engine driving the growth of this miasma—as similar schemes have also been in all earlier iterations of British capitalism. With the shifting of significant tax revenues from one group of working people to support the low wages of another, this overall project can be described as transforming Britain into a workfare-dependent economy.

In 2014, numbers of in-work housing benefits claimants rose 59% to 936,964, from 586,181 in 2010. The government’s ambition to harmonise in-work benefits with workfare has already been signalled, with welfare minister Lord Freud stating in 2012 that ‘obviously, we are interested in [...] extending conditionality to claimants who are in relatively substantial levels of work but who are nevertheless capable of working more. A conditionality regime can play an important role in encouraging such claimants to progress towards more self-sufficiency’. The paradox of an unremitting expansion of the seemingly failing workfare regime is only solved when these events are viewed via the Marxist socio-economic lens: a disciplined and super-exploited workforce, and a growing reserve labour army, are the raw dinner-meat of the well-fed lions of the neoliberal jungle. Continued poverty and exploitation is, for the bourgeoisie, a tremendous success.

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