

Underclass

A History of the Excluded, 1880-2000

JOHN WELSHMAN



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1880–2000

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Introduction

In June 1997, in a speech given by Tony Blair at the Aylesbury housing estate, in the London borough of Southwark, the Prime Minister stated that the Government would deal with poverty – the ‘forgotten people’. But he argued that it was not just a question of poverty, but one of fatalism, and about ‘how to recreate the bonds of civic society and community in a way compatible with the far more individualistic nature of modern, economic, social and cultural life’. And he continued, ‘there is a case not just in moral terms but in enlightened self interest to act, to tackle what we all know exists – an underclass of people cut off from society’s mainstream, without any sense of shared purpose’.¹ Blair’s point was that, though problems were caused by changes in the nature of work, and long-term unemployment, there was a danger that people were becoming detached from society, and from citizenship in its widest sense. It was suggested that solutions would have to be long-term; would require greater co-ordination across government departments than previously; and would need to be based on policies that had been shown to work.

These ideas were amplified in December of that year, at Stockwell Park School in the London borough of Lambeth, where Tony Blair gave a speech at the launch of the Government’s Social Exclusion Unit. What was needed, he claimed, was a spirit of national renewal, to tackle problems now defined as ‘social exclusion’. Blair defined social exclusion in the following way:

Social exclusion is about income but it is about more. It is about prospects and networks and life-chances. It’s a very modern problem, and one that is more harmful to the individual, more damaging to self-esteem, more corrosive for society as a whole, more likely to be passed down from generation to generation, than material poverty.²

According to the Prime Minister, part of the answer lay in improved co-ordination of government policy – ‘joined up problems demand joined up solutions’ – but he also warned that the approach was as much about self-interest as compassion. Since then, of course, there have been several reports from the Social Exclusion Unit – for example, on teenage pregnancy, on truancy and school exclusion, on ‘rough sleepers’, and on neighbourhood renewal. The thrust of this interpretation has been reflected in a plethora of government initiatives – Sure Start,

Education and Health Action Zones, the New Deal for Communities, the Single Regeneration Budget, and many more. More generally, government policy in such areas as employment and health has been characterised by an emphasis on personal responsibility, and influenced by research on ways of changing behaviour.³

Social exclusion derives in part from earlier continental thinking, particularly in France, and is also influenced by the more general theme of the 'third way'. We will look in greater detail at social exclusion in chapter 9. Much of the recent writing on social exclusion has sought to distance itself from an earlier underclass discourse, both in empirical terms and symbolically. Thus John Hills has concluded that data from income dynamics has indicated 'there is little evidence in the UK for a permanently excluded "underclass", doomed from childhood ... what there is, however, is evidence of groups whose life chances are much less favourable than others'.⁴ Nevertheless, other writing on social exclusion has tended to underline the continuities between the concept of social exclusion and an earlier 'underclass' discourse. Ruth Levitas, for example, identifies three themes in social exclusion, including a moral underclass discourse which presents the socially excluded as culturally distinct from the mainstream; focuses on the behaviour of the poor; implies that benefits are bad; and ignores inequalities among the rest of society.⁵ Some academics have looked more closely at the language of New Labour. Norman Fairclough, for example, agrees with Levitas that the behavioural and moral delinquency suggested by the term 'underclass' has been carried over into the construction of social exclusion.⁶

The actual language and policies adopted by New Labour tend to support this point. It is noticeable, for example, that several phrases have been used interchangeably. We can see this in Tony Blair's Southwark and Lambeth speeches, where he used both 'social exclusion' and the 'underclass'. Moreover in the specific case of child poverty, there are marked continuities between New Labour's focus on 'cycles of disadvantage' and the 1970s research programme on the 'cycle of deprivation'. In April 2000, for example, the *Guardian* newspaper reported that research indicated that higher state benefits were 'not sufficient to break the cycle of deprivation'.⁷ The writer seemed unaware of the historical resonance of this phrase, and oblivious of the research programme into the 'cycle' carried out in the 1970s. We will examine these continuities in greater depth in chapters 6 and 9. What is sufficient to note here is that the example of social exclusion indicates that what is missing from this debate is a sense of its historical dimension. Very little is known about the extent to which 'social exclusion' marks a radical departure from previous efforts by government in this field, or whether it is simply the latest in a series of similar labels.

This book is concerned with the history of the concept of the 'underclass', and aims to fill that gap. It is arguable, of course, that the idea of the 'deserving'

and 'undeserving poor' is a much older idea, and it can certainly be identified in the early modern era. However, while we briefly review the earlier history of these ideas in the next chapter, this book really covers the period from the 1880s to the present day. Its main focus is Britain, though two chapters, on the 'concept of poverty' and on the 'underclass', also look in detail at the experience of the United States. What is perhaps most important to get across is that the book is not a history of poverty *per se*, but of a particular interpretation of the causation of poverty that has reappeared periodically under slightly different labels. It seeks to understand why these ideas have been so persistent, but also how they have been moulded by the particular political, economic, and demographic concerns of specific historical periods. One issue is that of who has been inventing these labels, and of which professional groups have been defined as 'experts'. It has been pointed out, for instance, that whereas the main writers on poverty in the 1960s were sociologists, this area of research is now dominated by economists, and by the manipulation of large data sets. A further theme is that of the influence of American models on British social policy, notably in the 1960s, and of what the sociologist A. H. Halsey has described as 'ideas drifting casually across the Atlantic, soggy on arrival, and of dubious utility'.⁸ The book also looks in detail at those periods when ideas underwent a process of transition, to emerge in slightly different form, and at the periods when no 'underclass' notion appeared to be in existence. It is thus concerned both with continuities and discontinuities. However its main concern is to explore the idea that an 'underclass' has been successively re-invented over the past 120 years in Britain and the USA.

This introduction seeks to set the scene for the later chapters: these are arranged chronologically and examine successive re-inventions of the 'underclass' idea over the past 120 years. But it is important to pause for a moment to look at the background to this issue. First, the introduction examines some of the difficulties that defining the 'underclass' has posed for researchers. Second, it briefly reviews earlier writing on the history of the concept of the underclass, in both the United States and Britain. Third, it makes a case for the book, arguing that earlier writing, while important, has failed to provide a systematic analysis of the history of the concept in either the United States or Britain. Fourth, it sets the book in the context of recent writing on agency and structure, outlines how the book is organised, and identifies two main questions. The first underlying question is whether the similarities between these ideas are greater than the differences. The second is whether there is sufficient linearity between these ideas to support the argument that the underclass has been periodically re-invented over the past 120 years.

Fairclough's work on the language of New Labour has been paralleled by

greater interest in the vocabulary of poverty. A recent international glossary, for example, includes the phrases 'Charity Organisation Society'; 'culture of poverty'; 'cycle of deprivation'; 'deserving poor'; 'exclusion'; 'genetic explanations'; 'intergenerational continuity'; 'problem families'; and 'underclass'.⁹ It notes that the term 'underclass' has been used both to describe the long-term marginalised or unemployable, and as a labelling phenomenon. Certainly the difficulties of defining the underclass, and the ambiguities of the term, have been both an obstacle for researchers, and part of its attraction for users. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes the Swedish term *underklass*, and defines the underclass as 'a subordinate social class, the lowest social stratum in a country or community, consisting of the poor and unemployed'.¹⁰ The earliest usage given in the *OED* is that by the Scottish poet Hugh Macdiarmid, in a biography of the Red Clydesider, John Maclean. At his trial in 1918, Maclean stated that 'the whole history of society, has proved that society moves forward as a consequence of an under-class overcoming the resistance of a class on top of them'.¹¹ The next reference given by the *OED*, however, is by the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal in 1963, when he stated 'less often observed ... is the tendency of the changes under way to trap an "underclass" of unemployed and, gradually, unemployable persons and families at the bottom of a society'.¹² The usages given in this edition, for the period 1964–85, show how Myrdal's structural expansion has become one based increasingly on behaviour.

However, it is also important to note that defining the 'underclass' has posed problems for researchers. Although it does not appear in Raymond Williams's famous book *Keywords*, the term 'underclass' can be considered in that way, as a phrase that has its own particular history, but which plays a significant role in putting across different meanings.¹³ One of the interesting questions about the 'underclass' is whether it is technically a class in the Marxist sense. As John Macnicol has written, many proponents of the underclass have seen it as 'distinct from the working class – in effect, a rootless mass divorced from the means of production – definable only in terms of social inefficiency, and hence not strictly a class in a neo-Marxist sense'.¹⁴ For Marx and Engels the 'dangerous class' was the *lumpenproletariat*. The other important Marxist concept was that of the 'reserve army of labour'. In *Das Capital*, Marx had written that a surplus working class population tended to form an 'available industrial reserve army', and it was on its formation and re-formation that the cycles of modern industry depended. General movements of wages, argued Marx, were similarly regulated by the expansion and contraction of the 'reserve army of labour'.¹⁵ Other writers have of course suggested that the social security system reproduces a 'reserve army of labour', and functions only secondarily to mitigate poverty or provide income maintenance. The 'reserve army of labour' increases competition among workers, and acts as a downward force on wages. Norman Ginsburg has written,

for example, that ‘in the inter-war years the permanent existence of an inflated labour reserve army, now closely supervised by the state, performed the classic function of holding down wages and dividing the working class’.¹⁶ What Marx meant by the ‘reserve army of labour’ was of course the unemployed. However, it is less clear that the ‘reserve army of labour’ and the underclass are synonymous. That is one question that this book seeks to answer.

These debates about how to define the underclass became particularly heated in the 1980s, as we shall see in chapters 7 and 8. The main contrast was then between those who used alternative structural and behavioural definitions. Thus William Julius Wilson has defined the underclass as:

*Individuals who lack training and skills and either experience long-term unemployment or are not a part of the labour force, individuals who engage in street criminal activity and other aberrant behaviour, and families who experience long-term spells of poverty and/or welfare dependency.*¹⁷

Erol R. Ricketts and Isabel V. Sawhill defined the underclass as a ‘subgroup of the American population that engages in behaviours at variance with those of mainstream populations’. Specifically, they argued that an underclass area was one with a high proportion of high school dropouts; adult males not regularly attached to the labour force; welfare recipients; and female heads of households. They estimated that 2.5m people, or 1% of the American population, lived in these areas, mainly in the older industrial cities.¹⁸ But Robert Aponte countered in 1990, writing of the USA, that the term ‘underclass’ had never been properly defined, despite three decades of sporadic use.¹⁹

British underclass researchers have faced similar problems, with definitions that have stressed either structural or behavioural elements. David Smith defined the underclass as ‘those who fall outside this [Marxist] class schema, because they belong to family units having no stable relationship at all with the “mode of production” – with legitimate gainful employment’.²⁰ Thus for Smith, the underclass lay outside the conventional class hierarchy, and below the bottom class. David Willetts viewed the underclass as the same as ‘long-term or frequent claimants of income support’.²¹ But British commentators have been critical of attempts to define the underclass. Writing in 1987, John Macnicol outlined three problems of defining the underclass. First, that a popular version of the concept had been internalised by ordinary working-class people as the converse of ‘respectable’. Second, there was the difficulty of separating the underclass concept from wider assumptions about the inheritance of intelligence and ability that were common before IQ testing was discredited. Third, a further complication was the fact that the idea of an ‘underclass’ had also been used by those on the Left to describe the casualties of capitalism, and those suffering acute economic deprivation.²² Hartley Dean and Peter Taylor-Gooby have argued that it is a

concept which 'empirically speaking, is hopelessly imprecise and, as a theoretical device, has repeatedly conflated structural and cultural definitions of not only poverty, but of crime as well'. They concluded that 'underclass' was 'a symbolic term with no single meaning, but a great many applications ... it represents, not a useful concept, but a potent symbol'.²³

These debates about how to define and measure the underclass were perhaps most marked in the 1980s. In this book we will not attempt to define the underclass since our concern is with the history of a discourse rather than an empirical reality. Equally, however, we do not regard the underclass as simply a synonym for the poor. Its use over time has generally been more precise than that – generally to define a much smaller group whose poverty is attributed in part to wider structural factors, but also with respect to the behavioural inadequacies of individual members. We are concerned with how the underclass has been defined at different times, and what these definitions illustrate about the individuals and organisations doing the defining. There are continuities in these debates, notably in the relative weighting given to behavioural factors on the one hand, and structural causes on the other. Nevertheless there are also differences in the way in which the underclass has been defined at different times, reflecting the distinctive economic, political, and social contexts of particular periods. Moreover, two of the ideas that we will look at – the culture of poverty and the cycle of deprivation – were more about outlining a process by which people became or remained poor, than about setting out parameters with which a particular social group could be circumscribed. One of the aims of the book, then, is to map these continuities and changes in debates about defining and measuring the underclass.

It is important to recognise that although the history of the concept of the underclass has never been systematically explored, there has nevertheless been important earlier work that provides a set of hypotheses and arguments that can be tested against the evidence. The theme of the deserving and undeserving poor in the early modern period is one example of this timeless discourse. But there has also been writing on the underclass in both the USA and Britain.

In the modern period, academics have explored how ideas about stigma and deviance have become incorporated in labelling. David Matza, for example, argued as early as 1966 that the 'disreputable poor' were being continually rediscovered, and that words were being constantly substituted, mainly in an attempt to reduce stigma. Matza, a sociologist based at the University of California at Berkeley, noted that terms that referred to essentially the same thing shifted rapidly, and that perhaps because of this, both researchers and practitioners remained unaware of historical continuities.²⁴ The latest example, at that time, was the expression 'hard to reach'. Other examples identified by Matza included

the *lumpenproletariat*; Thorstein Veblen's idea of a leisure class; and the term 'pauper'. He argued that those deemed the 'disreputable poor' were 'the people who remain unemployed, or casually and irregularly employed, even during periods approaching full employment and prosperity; for that reason, and others, they live in disrepute'.²⁵ Matza claimed that the 'disreputable poor' was comprised of several smaller groups – the 'dregs' who tended to be migrants; 'newcomers' who were recently arrived; 'skidders', or those who had fallen from higher social standing; and the 'infirm'. In terms of the process of 'pauperisation', Matza identified a process of 'massive generation', by which this population was continually replenished, and one of 'fractional selection', by which newcomers passed into its ranks. Matza concluded the 'disreputable poor' were 'an immobilised segment of society located at a point in the social structure where poverty intersects with illicit pursuits'.²⁶

Matza published a slightly different version of this chapter, that was subsequently revised and elaborated in light of the 'culture of poverty' debates of the 1960s. He argued that poverty might most usefully be seen as a series of concentric circles – the poor; the welfare poor; and the 'disreputable poor' who were 'poor, sporadically or permanently on welfare, and, additionally, suffer the especially demoralising effects of the stigma of immorality'.²⁷ Matza provided more statistical detail on the poor and the welfare poor, included the Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) programme. He added a further group to those that comprised the 'disreputable poor' – the 'functionaries' who oversaw the conduct of those who required assistance. What was interesting about Matza's work was that it was an early recognition that the 'poor' were socially constructed. In addition, his work was notable for the way it recognised similarities with the British experience. In particular, he noted that the 'problem family' concept was defined in terms of the alleged disorder of family life. The concept of the 'problem family' will be addressed in chapter 4.

Matza recognised that, in part, the labelling process was motivated by attempts to reduce stigma, and for this reason was likely to fail. Conversely, some terms were deliberately offensive, originating outside social work circles. Writings on the role of stigma amplified some of these ideas. Chaim Waxman, for example, has observed that social work has been dominated by a social casework approach that is based on a cultural perspective. These commentators saw the poor as manifesting patterns of behaviour and values – to escape from their poverty they had to change their behaviour and values – but as these had been internalised, it was a slow and difficult process. Waxman suggested that Matza's example of the 'disreputable poor' showed how, for some people in society, receipt of certain types of assistance was sufficient evidence of moral defectiveness, and could lead to labelling and stigma. He suggested rather that the patterns and attitudes of the poor were adjustments to the stigma of poverty; these were transmitted

intergenerationally, through socialisation. To break the stigma of poverty, the poor should be 'integrated, rather than isolated'.²⁸

Some of those critical of early underclass concepts located them in a longer-term historical process. In his important critique of the culture of poverty, published in 1968, Charles Valentine noted that this idea had much deeper roots in the history of American social investigation – there had long been a belief that the lower classes had a different social outlook to the middle class.²⁹ There was then a lull in this writing, extending from the late 1960s to the late 1980s. It was only with the emergence of the underclass in the 1980s that some commentators returned to the question of how one term replaced another. The psychologist Michael Morris, for instance, asked why the concept of the 'underclass' had replaced the 'culture of poverty'. He concluded they were similar but not identical – the traits identified by Oscar Lewis as being part of the culture of poverty were almost identical to those allegedly observed in the underclass. However, there were also important differences. The conservative argument that welfare programmes helped develop and maintain the 'underclass' had not been evident in the 'culture of poverty'; the 'culture of poverty' was less single-minded in its treatment of race; and the 'underclass' was seen as a growing problem, whereas the 'culture of poverty' was more static. Morris suggested that the term 'underclass' gained popularity because it appeared to be more neutral; it helped to define a subgroup; it could be fitted more easily into sociological frameworks; it was supported by black scholars such as William Julius Wilson; and it was more in line with the prevailing conservative ideology. Morris suggested that the evidence indicated that 'another chapter in the history of word substitution concerning the disreputable poor is currently being written'.³⁰

Observers have thus commented both on the idea of the 'disreputable poor' as a labelling phenomenon, and on the processes by which one term has tended to replace another. Others have directed attention to the functions of these terms, and viewed them through a historical lens. Writing of the history of the 'underclass' in the United States, historian Michael Katz has suggested that despite the anxiety it created, the emergence of the 'underclass' in the late 1970s was a comforting discovery. It was small and concentrated enough to be helped or contained, and its prominence refocused attention on culture and behaviour, and away from income inequality and the class structure. The concept served to focus attention on a subset of the poor, and it encouraged targeted approaches through reviving discredited notions of the 'culture of poverty'. Katz concluded that:

by diffusing an image of poor people as split into two sharply divided groups, underclass helps perpetuate their political powerlessness by strengthening the barriers that for so long have divided them against each other.³¹

More relevant for our purposes is that Katz has also suggested that the underclass

is a 'metaphor for social transformation' and evokes perceptions of novelty, complexity, and danger.³² Like Matza, Katz points out that there have always been attempts to distinguish between the able-bodied and impotent poor. In the 1920s, 'scientific racism' culminated in eugenics and immigration restrictions. Similarly in the 1960s, the work of Oscar Lewis, in propagating the notion of a 'culture of poverty', along with developments in social psychology, emphasised the helplessness and passivity of dependent peoples. At the same time, Katz is critical of the phrase 'underclass'. For Katz, the term 'muddies debate and inhibits the formulation of constructive policy' – it lacks a consistent theoretical basis, and has 'little intellectual substance'.³³

Nevertheless some of the work of Katz and his colleagues, certainly in the edited collection *The "Underclass" Debate*, is arguably more about urban poverty than about the history of the concept of the underclass itself. More relevant to the concerns of this book has been the work of the American sociologist Herbert Gans. Writing in the journal of the American Planning Association in 1990, for example, Gans, at that time Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology at Columbia University, observed that whereas the term 'underclass' as used by Gunnar Myrdal in the 1960s had been concerned with unemployment, by the late 1970s social scientists were identifying the underclass with persistent poverty, rather than joblessness. In the same period, the term became more mixed up with 'race', and with behavioural factors. Gans argued the term should be dropped, as it had become 'hopelessly polluted in meaning, ideological overtone and implications'.³⁴ Gans argued the term had numerous dangers for planners. These included its power as a buzzword; its use as a racial codeword; its flexibility; and its synthesising function. It covered a number of different groups of people, and had become a stereotype. Furthermore, the term interfered with anti-poverty planning; was extremely persuasive; was associated with particular neighbourhoods; and was linked to the 'concentration and isolation' hypothesis put forward by William Julius Wilson. Finally, Gans argued that the term side-stepped issues of poverty, and was unpredictable in how it might be used. Gans suggested the phrase might signal that society was preparing for an unemployed 'caste', whose members were blamed for their joblessness, and regarded as undeserving.³⁵

Gans has noted that the term can be analysed in terms of its functions, as well as its causes. He has written of the functions of the concept of the 'undeserving poor', both positive and negative, adaptive and destructive. Among these functions Gans lists risk reduction; scapegoating and displacement; norm reinforcement; spatial purification; the reproduction of stigma and the stigmatised; and the extermination of the surplus. The idea of the 'undeserving poor' and the stigmas with which people are labelled persist, he argues, because they are useful to the people who are not poor.³⁶ In arguably his most substantial contribution to this field, Gans has outlined what he calls the 'label formation' process. He argues

that this includes a number of interested parties. First are the 'label-makers' who invent and reinvent the labels. They need to be 'alarmists', able to persuade an audience that the new word identifies a population that is responsible for alarming problems. The 'alarmists' also need to have access to the 'counters', who are able to supply the numbers on the labelled population. Labels need to refer to failings rather to processes or concepts, and also should be credible. At the same time, there may be times when no label for the undeserving poor is needed. Gans refers to a 'sorting' or 'replacement' process when a new label becomes popular after an old one has lost favour. But even the most popular labels undergo 'broadening', when they develop subsidiary meanings, or are attached to other populations. A crucial role is played by the 'label users', in being willing to listen to a new word, and also by the 'legitimators', whether academics or journalists, whose arguments justify the use of the new label. Also involved in this process are the 'labelled', the poor who are the subject of these changing terms. Gans argues that it is 'contextual conditions', embracing forces, agencies, and individuals, that ultimately account for the success of a label. Last are the 'romanticisers', who revive 'dead' labels decades after they have passed out of use.³⁷

The hypothesis suggested by Gans provides a useful frame of reference against which to map the processes of change and empirical evidence explored in this book. Given that the underclass debate has been more influential in the United States than in Britain in the recent period, it is not surprising that there has been more serious historical work on the USA. But in Britain too, there has been work on the history of the undeserving poor; on images of the poor; and on the cyclical nature of particular terms. Bill Jordan, for example, was inspired by the 'cycle of deprivation' thesis advanced by Sir Keith Joseph in the early 1970s to trace the earlier history of the recurring idea of the undeserving poor, from the seventeenth century onwards.³⁸ Peter Golding and Sue Middleton have looked at images of the poor in the period 1890–1939, noting the role of the 'primary definers' and the popular media, and concluding that blaming the victim remains a cornerstone for conceptions of poverty.³⁹ The cyclical nature of ideas underlies Geoffrey Pearson's book on the history of 'hooliganism'. Pearson criticised the view that street crime and 'hooliganism' are evidence of a permissive revolution, and further evidence of a rapid moral decline from the stable traditions of the past. In fact, successive generations have voiced identical fears of social breakdown and moral degeneration, whether the 'Hooligan' gangs of the late Victorian period, or the 'muggers' of the contemporary urban streets. Pearson argued that his history of 'respectable fears' showed that street violence and disorder were a solidly entrenched aspect of the social landscape.⁴⁰ There was thus a strong cyclical element in these anxieties.

But in Britain it has been John Macnicol who has done most to point out

continuities in the history of the underclass concept. Influenced by the emergence of the idea of the underclass in the United States, Macnicol argued in 1987 that those involved in the debate were only half aware of the conceptual flaws of the concept, and were ignorant of its 'long and undistinguished pedigree'. He outlined problems in defining the underclass. These problems of definition notwithstanding, also significant were the continuities that could be observed over the previous hundred years. Macnicol claimed that there had been at least six reconstructions:

- The social residuum notion of the 1880s
- The social problem group idea of the 1930s
- The concept of the problem family in the 1950s
- The culture of poverty thesis of the 1960s
- The cycle of deprivation theory of the 1970s
- The underclass debates of the 1980s

This schematic framework really provides the backbone for this book, although we look in more detail at the idea of the unemployable in the early 1900s, and at the move to social exclusion in the 1990s. Macnicol's main aim was to chart, in some detail, debates about the social problem group in the 1930s, and to demonstrate links between them and both the cycle of deprivation in the 1970s, and the underclass in the 1980s. In the interwar period, there were investigations of an hereditary social problem group, as part of a wider conservative social reformist strategy. Macnicol concluded that:

The concept of an inter-generational underclass displaying a high concentration of social problems – remaining outwith the boundaries of citizenship, alienated from cultural norms and stubbornly impervious to the normal incentives of the market, social work intervention or state welfare – has been reconstructed periodically over at least the past one hundred years, and while there have been important shifts of emphasis between each of these reconstructions, there have also been striking continuities. Underclass stereotypes have always been a part of the discourse on poverty in advanced industrial societies.⁴¹

While acknowledging that the ambiguity of the underclass concept had been one of the main reasons for its on-going popularity, Macnicol also identified five important underlying strands. First, he claimed it was an artificial 'administrative' definition relating to contacts with organisations and individuals of the state, such as social workers. In this respect, it was a statistical artefact in that its size would be affected by such factors as eligibility, take-up of benefits, and changing levels of unemployment. Second, it tended to get muddled with the separate issue of inter-generational transmission, typically of social inefficiency. Third, certain

behavioural traits were identified as antisocial while others were ignored – a wide variety of human conditions were lumped together and attributed to a single cause. Fourth, for him the ‘underclass’ issue was mainly a resource allocation problem. Fifth, Macnicol claimed that it was supported by people who wished to constrain state welfare, and was thus part of a conservative analysis of the causes of social problems and their solutions.⁴²

The key question of linearity has also been addressed by Macnicol, in relation to continuities between the problem family concept of the 1950s, and the underclass notion of the 1980s. Macnicol suggests that the debate over the problem family provided a kind of rehearsal for the underclass debates of the 1980s, particularly in respect of the methodological difficulties faced by researchers. Three groups were interested – the Eugenics Society, Family Service Units, and local Medical Officers of Health – but all experienced problems in proving the existence of problem families. Most of the definitions of problem families were really descriptions of household squalor. Macnicol concludes that the emergence of the culture of poverty in the 1960s and the cycle of deprivation in the 1970s suggests a linear development between 1945 and 1995. Moreover there are similarities in the process of social distancing; the involvement of pressure groups; and a combination of administrative definitions with behavioural ones. However, he also notes that by the 1990s much had changed, most obviously in relation to the labour market, demography, and family formation.⁴³

By the 1990s, Macnicol was inclined to treat the underclass less as a discursive phenomenon, and more as an empirical possibility – though he remained sceptical. The question of how and when these ideas emerge is a key theme for this book. Macnicol has suggested that underclass stereotypes will emerge most strongly at times of economic restructuring, when there are high levels of poverty, unemployment, and general social dislocation. At these times, a large ‘reserve army of labour’ will exist, and its ‘dysfunctional’ behaviour will cause concern. But he concedes that during the 1950s the concept of the problem family emerged at a time of full employment, economic optimism, a strong belief in the nuclear family, and low illegitimacy ratios. Macnicol makes the point that the term ‘underclass’ has become a metaphor for real problems that post-industrial societies face, such as widening social polarisation and income inequality, residential segregation, and segmented labour markets. Nonetheless he observes that as soon as one enters the debate, one enters a world of enormous empirical and conceptual complexity. The former includes such issues as unemployment, family formation and demographic trends, shifts in the social ecology of cities, and welfare spells, while debates about the meaning of social exclusion provide a good example of the latter. In the 1980s, a conservative model of underclass-formation, that stressed over-generous welfare payments and a decline in moral responsibility, was countered by a structural model that emphasised changes in

the labour market, the social ecology of cities, and family formation. Overall, Macnicol has concluded that the term is most useful as a metaphor for widening social polarisation and economic inequality – it might be applied to an underclass of retired people.⁴⁴

Given the impetus provided by Macnicol, it has often been acknowledged that the underclass concept has been periodically re-invented over the past hundred years. Hartley Dean and Peter Taylor-Gooby, for example, have argued the concept has been most interesting for what it has revealed about preoccupations with delinquency and dependency. The underclass has always been negatively defined, by the criteria of productive work and family life from which the underclass is excluded. They have written that the effect of the concept was ‘not to define the marginalised, but to marginalise those it defines’, and was more a potent symbol than a useful concept. It would be helpful, they suggested, to see ‘residuum’ and ‘underclass’ as discursive phenomena that provided a commentary on broader social relations.⁴⁵ Pete Alcock, writing of poverty, has argued that a pathological approach has been a recurring feature of debates about the problem of poverty in an industrial society.⁴⁶ Tony Novak has underlined the importance of the word ‘underclass’, despite its lack of precision, in evoking threats that the poor pose to the family, law and order, and to the labour market.⁴⁷ And researchers have begun to explore contending philosophical perspectives on the causation and resolution of the underclass.⁴⁸

However despite this recognition of the successive invention and reinvention of different labels, academic research has not gone beyond this to provide a systematic analysis of how this process has occurred and what lessons it offers to contemporary policy-makers. In part this reflects the distaste that many academics on the Left have felt for terms such as ‘underclass’. It has been argued that one of the distinctive features of social policy in the postwar period was an almost total focus on structural rather than behavioural factors in the causation of poverty and deprivation. This derived in part from the approach of its dominant figure – Richard Titmuss – and can be seen in the work of one of its most distinguished practitioners – Peter Townsend. But their disapproval for what is perceived as a focus on the behavioural inadequacies of the poor has also led to a failure to explore the meaning of ‘underclass’ and associated labels as discursive phenomena.

While there has been important writing on the history of the underclass in the United States, much of the writing by British-based academics has been superficial and unsatisfactory – with the important exception of Macnicol. Several of the books that have been produced have been by sociologists and social policy analysts who are interested in the history of the underclass only as a preliminary to recent policy developments. The book by Kirk Mann, for example,

The Making of an English 'Underclass', is really a history of the social divisions of welfare and labour, and is not, despite its title, a history of the concept of the underclass. He asks why the poorest members of society are so often segregated from the rest of the working class. Mann touches on the disappearance of the social residuum and the unemployables during the First and Second World Wars, and he is concerned to tackle the ideas of Charles Murray.⁴⁹ However, because of unease over the term 'underclass', the book focuses on intra-class divisions. Lydia Morris's book *Dangerous Class* does examine the historical background to the development of an underclass. She notes that a welfare system that had appeared to offer a guarantee of social citizenship in the 1940s had become transformed into a system that was associated with the underclass and social disenfranchisement. Discussions of the underclass tend to be cast in terms of a nuclear family, argues Morris, where the father is the breadwinner and the mother socialises the children. Morris sees social citizenship and the underclass as linked concepts, one representing inclusion, the other exclusion and moral failure. The term 'underclass' is useful in capturing this sense of status exclusion, though it is less convincing in explanatory terms. Morris suggests the debate should be changed from a focus on the underclass to a reconsideration of how sociologists think about social structures.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, while she relates the term 'underclass' to the history of ideas about citizenship, and to the creation of the welfare state, her book is not an exploration of the different forms that the underclass concept has taken across time.

There is therefore, despite this earlier work, no full-length study of the history of the concept of the underclass in either Britain or the United States over the past 120 years. Several of the reconstructions are known only in terms of their broad outlines, such as the cycle of deprivation debates of the 1970s, in part because of an emphasis on easily-available published sources. In contrast, archival materials remain under-exploited. There has been perhaps an inevitable focus on the underclass debates of the 1980s. Much less is known about other underclass reconstructions, such as the debates about the unemployable in the 1900s, which arguably form an additional conceptual stepping-stone. The links by which concepts in Britain and the United States served to cross-fertilise each other, and the extent to which this occurred, remains unknown, although there is increasing interest in processes of policy transfer.⁵¹ Arguably the most glaring gap in research is that of the process by which one term replaces another. The preliminary hypotheses provided by Gans and Macnicol form a useful starting-point. But otherwise very little is known about the process by which a term comes into existence, gains popularity, falls out of favour, and then is replaced by a different, but similar, alternative. In fact as this brief survey of the secondary literature shows, there is no comprehensive history of this story, either in Britain or the United States.

The need for a study of this kind has been underlined by new thinking in social policy that has sought to look more closely at the relationship between agency, structure, and poverty. In the 1970s, commentators such as Peter Townsend stressed the importance of wider structural factors, and were unwilling to admit that either cultural factors or individual agency might have a role to play in determining the response of people faced by unemployment and poverty. However, increasingly social policy analysts are coming to concede that the structural focus of social policy in the postwar years – typified by arguably its most influential figure, Richard Titmuss – was in fact a source of serious weakness that subsequently left it ill-equipped to deal with assaults by the Right in the 1980s. It is argued that research in the social administration tradition has been limited to distributional issues, and neglected the study of social relations. The effect of this writing has been to refocus attention on the relative importance of behavioural and structural factors in causing poverty and deprivation.

It has long been recognised that the discipline of social administration was dominated by an empiricist tradition. As Peter Taylor-Gooby has pointed out, it was concerned with charting the shortcomings of state welfare, and it ignored the place of welfare within a larger capitalist system.⁵² Ramesh Mishra alleges the dominant influence in social administration was Fabian socialism – its tradition was one of pragmatism; was Britain-centred; concentrated on the factual study of social problems; focused on statutory social services; and had no theoretical approach to its subject matter. In part this was due to the influence of Titmuss – Mishra argues that he furthered the study of social policy in many ways, but was not interested in theory.⁵³ Mike Miller has noted that Titmuss's support for universal welfare was based in part on his belief that more selective benefits would lead to people being stigmatised.⁵⁴

Michael Titterton, for example, has argued that the dominant paradigms in the study of social welfare have ignored the role of agency. In the early 1990s, Titterton was a consultant to the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Human Behaviour and Development Group. He claimed these paradigms were characterised by a preoccupation with pathological views of health and welfare, and by inadequate conceptualisations of the 'mediating structures' between the individual and wider social forces. The concept of 'coping', for example, showed there were variations in vulnerability and coping styles, and these were differentiated by gender, age, and social class. Titterton argued a new paradigm should try to understand people's 'differential vulnerability'; it should examine the different coping strategies that they used; and it should include the people who survived – the 'invulnerables'. Titterton drew on some of the studies that had been included in the cycle of deprivation research programme of the 1970s, and we will look further at the 'cycle' in chapter 6. He called for a new paradigm of welfare, where the focus was on the differential nature of vulnerability and

risk among individuals, and their different reactions to threats to welfare. The work should:

generate respect for informal modes of coping and helpseeking, and should create a new sensitivity towards the creative and diverse ways in which people respond to their own problems and the ways in which they help other people to respond.⁵⁵

Titterton's plea has been taken forward by other writers. Eithne McLaughlin, for example, has suggested that the relationship between social welfare and behaviour is central to understanding the outcomes of welfare provision, and essential for modelling future demand. (Interestingly, she also noted that historians like Michael Katz were trying to place more emphasis on agency than previously). The main problem, claimed McLaughlin, was that in social science people tended to regard structure and agency as alternatives, and as having as a hierarchical relationship to each other – one must be 'on top'. McLaughlin argued rather that social welfare research should investigate the relationships between structures, values, and behaviour in the decision-making processes of individuals. It seemed likely that research into 'decision environments' would require new types of methodology and theory, and combine qualitative and quantitative techniques.⁵⁶

McLaughlin's demand for a shift in the conceptual focus of research on poverty has been echoed by Fiona Williams and Jane Pillinger. They have argued there should be a move from researching social groups as categories to:

integrating an acknowledgement of people's, or groups' own agency, experience and understanding of their position, and seeing them as creative, reflexive agents both constrained by and enabled by, as well as creating, the social conditions in which they exist.⁵⁷

Williams and Pillinger noted research into poverty had become increasingly preoccupied with a pathological approach, whose concern with questions of motivation and behaviour was typified in the notion of the underclass. In response, research on poverty, unemployment, and lone motherhood had focused on meanings and discourses, including the social construction of the 'poor'. But other changes in poverty research, including the concept of social exclusion, had also paved the way for a greater recognition of the heterogeneity of the poor. Overall, Williams and Pillinger argued that a new research paradigm could bridge the conceptual and methodological gaps that dichotomies in social science research had generated, and would create 'a more multidimensional view of what poverty means in relation to the quality of life'.⁵⁸

In a book that summarised research in an ESRC/Rowntree Foundation research programme, Fiona Williams, Jennie Popay and Ann Oakley explored a new paradigm of welfare. In particular they have been concerned to see how a

new framework for research could incorporate new approaches that emphasised individual agency, without losing sight of the approach that stressed structural constraints. They were sympathetic to the efforts of Titterton in identifying a new paradigm for welfare and research, but argued he had overestimated the extent to which one could be constructed from the literature on stress, life events, coping, and social support. They suggested this literature failed to explain or illuminate the relationship between identity, agency, and structure. Williams, Popay and Oakley also questioned the usefulness of old and new paradigms, although they agreed that, with the exception of Titmuss's work on altruism, research in the 1960s and 1970s focused on structural determinants, and inequalities were seen in terms of social class.⁵⁹

Williams and Popay concluded from this work that earlier research had neglected individual experience and agency, so that the recipients of welfare were 'at best, shadowy, largely forgotten inhabitants of the research terrain'. The dichotomy had been represented as analyses of poverty in terms of an individualist (blame the victim) versus a structuralist (blame the system) approach. Williams and Popay concluded there should be four levels of analysis – the welfare subject; the social topography of enablement and constraint; the policy context; and the dynamics of social and economic change. They concluded that while much was changing in the lives of individuals, many old inequalities were intensifying. What was needed was that:

we begin to investigate new ways of researching these issues, new ways of breaking down the separation of the individual from the social, new ways of understanding the relationship between human behaviour and social policy, and between social policy, social inequality and social change.⁶⁰

A slightly different perspective on the same question has been provided by Julian Le Grand, and his typology of people as being public spirited altruists (knights); passive recipients of welfare (pawns), or as self-interested (knaves). Le Grand has argued that the development of quasi-markets in welfare provision, and the supplementation of 'fiscal' welfare by 'legal' welfare, were the result of changes in the way policy-makers viewed human motivation and behaviour. Le Grand characterised the classic welfare state as 'one designed to be financed and operated by knights, for the benefit of pawns'.⁶¹ In contrast, more recent policies have been based on a range of assumptions – that people are knaves; that knaves can be converted into knights; and that we know little about human motivation. However, Le Grand argued neither set of policies has been based on evidence, and each is as likely to fail as the other. What was needed was a more complex view of human behaviour. There was some evidence, claimed Le Grand, that recent policies had begun to incorporate this. Le Grand's work is interesting for its acknowledgement that there have always been tensions between the assumptions

that people were either passive or self-interested, as seen in attempts to control the behaviour of people seen as work-shy, loafers, and scroungers.⁶²

Debates about 'stakeholder welfare' have evoked related debates about character, behaviour, and human nature.⁶³ Frank Field argued subsequently that agency had been neglected, writing that 'the welfare state has developed no room for such a discussion of behaviour, even though such a public debate is crucial for change to be successful and supported'.⁶⁴ He maintained that the state had to allow individuals the freedom to make their own choices, while retaining the responsibility for the framework within which those choices were made. Field was critical of Titmuss, and a resurgence in neo-liberal and individualistic ideas in the 1970s and 1980s also prompted Alan Deacon to go back to Titmuss's earlier writings. Deacon was struck by Titmuss's total opposition to 'judgementalism' – Titmuss seemed to reject personal responsibility in almost all circumstances, and was extremely optimistic about human behaviour. For Titmuss, social policies had to be universal, and non-judgemental. But Deacon argued that this neglect of behaviour rendered Titmuss's analysis vulnerable to Thatcherism, including the concept of 'behavioural dependency', and to the arguments of Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead.⁶⁵

The revival of interest in human agency in sociological and social policy debates, as they saw it, has also been considered by Alan Deacon and Kirk Mann. They have noted contradictions in the apparent similarity of developments in social policy and sociology. Deacon and Mann argued that agency was neglected by participants in debates about social policy, empiricism, Fabianism, and Marxism – the poor were rarely active agents of change. Moreover, questions about agency were not just neglected in the postwar period, but were consciously dismissed, as a reaction to the individualism of the Charity Organisation Society, and the weaknesses of social casework. In particular, the denial of agency was due to the influence of Titmuss, so that 'arguments about problem families or cycles of deprivation were an irrelevance or worse'.⁶⁶ Nevertheless more recent debates about welfare have been more about behaviour than structure, more to do with dependency than poverty. Deacon and Mann characterise these new perspectives as welfare as a channel for the pursuit of self-interest; welfare as the exercise of authority; and welfare as a mechanism for moral regeneration. Overall, they conclude that the revival of agency creates opportunities for a social science that is more sensitive to the activities of poor people, and more representative of the diversity of British society.

Research on the 'Americanisation' of welfare debates has also related policy changes to moralism. Alan Deacon illustrates how American dependency theorists – Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead – pushed issues on to the policy agenda that had been neglected and suppressed in Britain. The void that developed in America around discussions on race following the publication of the Moynihan

Report (1965) seems similar to that which emerged in Britain on questions of the importance of behaviour in explanations of poverty. One example is the hostility evident in the 1970s towards the cycle of deprivation – to the idea that there might be a cultural dimension to poverty, or that deprivation might be transmitted from one generation to another. Deacon argues the direction of the research programme was altered, by the researchers themselves, and this void was filled by conservative writers. Deacon notes that many British academics remain hostile to the idea of an underclass, and to compulsion in welfare to work programmes. He concludes the ‘Americanisation’ of welfare has enhanced and sustained a morality that is shared by Blair and Thatcher, but distrusted by Old Labour and One Nation conservatism.⁶⁷

Deacon has shifted his position, to an extent, in distinguishing between the ‘Titmuss paradigm’ and the ‘quasi-Titmuss paradigm’, arguing that Titmuss’s rejection of individualistic or behavioural accounts later hardened into a more deterministic approach that refused to discuss such factors.⁶⁸ Other work has drawn attention to continuities between New Labour’s emphasis on cycles of disadvantage and the cycle of deprivation research of the 1970s.⁶⁹ Deacon claims that the emphasis of New Labour on child poverty, and continuities in deprivation over generations, has forced it to integrate competing explanations. He outlines these as a cultural explanation; a rational explanation; a permissive explanation; an adaptive explanation; and a structural explanation. Moreover he has underlined the continuities with the cycle of deprivation research programme of the 1970s. Deacon claims that the rhetoric of New Labour is closest to the adaptive explanation. More importantly, it now has an understanding of the causes of social exclusion that is both structural and behavioural.

The interplay between agency and structure is now at the heart of contemporary theorisations of the dynamics of poverty, and agency is at the core of debates about the future of welfare. These debates have served to point out how the study of behaviour has been neglected by earlier commentators. Ruth Lister also notes the denial of agency in postwar British social policy, arguing that agency should be understood in the context of structural, cultural, and policy constraints faced by ordinary people. Interestingly, Lister argues that poverty cannot be understood in simply material terms, but needs to be comprehended in terms of social relations between the poor and non-poor. She notes how the nineteenth century is key to understanding modern American and British discourses of poverty, including the case of the underclass.⁷⁰

But with some notable exceptions (including those of Deacon and Lister) the approach of social policy commentators has been weak in historical terms – evidence is used selectively, and there is little sense of the debate before 1950. It is assumed, without much evidence, that in the postwar period, debates about poverty were framed almost exclusively in terms of structural factors,

whereas research has indicated that even Richard Titmuss was interested in personal behaviour.⁷¹ It is arguable that a focus on the history of the concept of the underclass may endorse a pathological emphasis, and we do not regard agency and behaviour as synonymous. But in seeking to trace how underclass concepts have been successively reconstructed, as discursive phenomena, this book is a contribution to that larger enterprise, in indicating the extent to which debates about behaviour have been marked as much by continuity as by change. Fiona Williams and Jane Pillinger have argued that ‘the discourses of poverty, then, are as significant for study as the numbers in poverty’, and Ruth Lister that ‘contemporary discourses of poverty are rooted in history’.⁷²

The aim of this book, then, is to explore the history of the concept of the underclass in Britain between 1880 and 2000. The first chapter examines the longer-term history of such ideas as the ‘undeserving poor’, the ‘dangerous class’, and the *lumpenproletariat*. It then turns to the theory of the social residuum in the 1880s, the way it was used by social investigators such as Charles Booth and Helen Bosanquet, exploring its rise and fall in the period up to the First World War. Chapter 2 charts the history of the related concept of the unemployable, starting with the role of Sidney and Beatrice Webb and William Beveridge in promoting it in parallel to the social residuum, but also tracing its influence in the interwar period. It also examines how the notion of the social residuum came to be absent from the social surveys of the early 1900s – such as those by Seebohm Rowntree and Arthur Bowley. The notion of the social problem group, espoused by the Eugenics Society in the 1920s and 1930s, is taken up in chapter 3. This was succeeded by the theory of the problem family, which surfaced during the evacuation of schoolchildren at the outbreak of the Second World War, and which remained an influential concept in public health up to the early 1970s. As we have noted, one of the most important aspects of this story is not only to understand why and how these concepts came into existence, but also to examine periods of transition, such as wartime. The problem family, then, is the subject of chapter 4.

The focus of this part of the book is essentially on Britain. In the case of the culture of poverty, however, explored in chapter 5, it is the experience of the United States that is most relevant. The phrase was popularised by the social anthropologist Oscar Lewis, and had an important influence on debates about America’s ‘War on Poverty’ in the 1960s. In Britain, the concept of the problem family re-emerged in a slightly different form, as espoused by Sir Keith Joseph. His thinking, and the research programme on the cycle of deprivation in the 1970s, is the subject of chapter 6. The underclass debates of the 1980s were much more wide-ranging, generating a huge literature, particularly in America. Here we look at the experience of the United States in chapter 7, before turning to

related debates about the underclass in Britain in chapter 8. In chapter 9 we bring the story up to date with social exclusion, exploring the origins of the term, but also examining how the cycle of deprivation has been revived by New Labour in the context of initiatives designed to tackle child poverty. In the conclusion, we examine how this is a story of both continuity and change; empirical detail and conceptual complexity; the expert and the non-expert; structural constraints and alleged behavioural inadequacies. We argue, nonetheless, that despite the many differences between these concepts, there is also much evidence of a linear process at work.

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