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## **Nostalgia Narratives? Pejorative Attitudes to Welfare in Historical Perspective: Survey Evidence from Beveridge to the British Social Attitudes Survey**

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### **Introduction**

Jensen (2014) has powerfully argued that a 'new welfare commonsense', fuelled by negative political and media discourse stressing welfare dependency and deception, has buttressed support for social security reform in recent years (see also: Jensen and Tyler, 2015). Careful analyses of British Social Attitudes Survey data from the mid-1980s onwards has often pointed to a hardening of public attitudes to welfare too, particularly with respect to unemployment benefits (Baumberg, 2014a; Deeming, 2014; Taylor-Gooby and Taylor, 2015). While a growing body of evidence makes it increasingly difficult to argue against suggestions that there is a hostile body of anti-welfare sentiment in the UK, what is often implicit in the analysis of pejorative contemporary attitudes to welfare is the view that there was once a 'golden age' of the welfare state when public support was more fully behind a strong set of social security benefits provided as a social right of citizenship. Whether this was the case is a moot point however. To address this, in this paper we piece together evidence from opinion polls and surveys conducted during the post-war welfare state consensus era.

### **Political and popular vocabularies of austerity**

Quantitative analyses of public attitudes towards the welfare state – both longitudinal national and cross-sectional cross-national studies – have typically observed that public opinion is influenced by 'the immediate surrounding socio-economic conditions' (Gelissen, 2008: 247). For instance, how deserving the unemployed are viewed to be has been shown to be affected by the unemployment rate (van Oorschot, 2006). Curtice (2010) suggests attitudes often reflect a 'thermostatic' pattern, support for additional public spending falling after a period in which public expenditure has risen and vice-versa. However, despite implementation of a significant austerity agenda since 2010 and sustained economic problems since the Global Financial Crisis, British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey data show few signs of a resurgence of support for the welfare state in the UK. Consequently, Taylor-Gooby and Taylor (2015: 77) suggest 'The 'thermostat effect' appears to have been weaker in recent years, with spending cuts no longer immediately followed by demands for higher spending' and people remaining 'relatively unsympathetic' to increased spending in the wake

of the economic crisis is particularly remarkable given it ‘comes after years of a steady decline in support for spending on public services in general and on welfare in particular’ (Taylor-Gooby and Taylor, 2015: 93).

Many have argued that this a consequence of new vocabularies of disapprobation targeting benefit recipients dominating political and popular discussion: the Coalition and subsequent Conservative governments have invoked discourses that emphasise individual behaviours, linking the welfare state to dependency (Bambra and Smith, 2010; Wiggan, 2012; Pantazis, 2016); the media has echoed shouts of ‘cheats’, ‘undeserving’ and ‘scroungers’ (McEnhill and Byrne, 2014; Hughes, 2015), with such stereotypes appropriated for wider political projects. Jensen (2014), for example, suggests that a ‘new welfare commonsense’, fuelled by negative political and media discourse stressing welfare dependency and deception, has buttressed support for social security reform in recent years (also Jensen and Tyler, 2015). Along with many other academics they point to the hardening of public attitudes towards welfare state provision and how notions of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving poor’ have been reintroduced into popular debates (Garthwaite, 2011). Such discourses of poverty, it is often argued, are reminiscent of nineteenth century understandings which gained new life in the twentieth century, particularly during the Thatcher period as the UK embraced a growing individualism (Pantazis, 2016: 9-10). The deserving are those who search for opportunities, embracing the precarious and insecure nature of the jobs market, eschewing social security benefits. The core value of fairness arises from the juxtaposition of the deserving, hard-working taxpayer and undeserving welfare benefit recipient (Pantazis, 2016).

There are perhaps four major threads within this scholarship. First, there is an argument that public attitudes have hardened significantly from an earlier post-war welfare imaginary and settlement to an anti-welfare consensus (Jensen and Tyler, 2015: 16). The post-war ‘welfare imaginary’ can be interpreted as widely shared understandings and expectations around welfare state provision which is underpinned by political discourse and social commitment (cf. Taylor, 2004).

Second, this hardening includes a growing prevalence of ‘Othering’ (Pantazis, 2016; see also, Lister, 2004 and Garthwaite, 2011) whereby ‘us and them’, ‘deserving and undeserving’, ‘taxpayer and beneficiary are sketched as moral binaries on the overarching blueprint of policy reform. Alongside an awareness that the welfare state *did* construct citizenship as both inclusionary and exclusionary (Turner, 2001: 192) and *was* a ‘moral and disciplinary project’ (Jensen and Tyler, 2015:2) that included classificatory distinctions between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’, a powerful shift is discerned as being now underway. Its roots lie in the 1970s economic downturn when achieving the status of ‘deserving of support’ became more difficult for the needy (Oorschot, 2000: 34), and which gave rise to a growing *scroungerphobia* in popular culture (Golding and Middleton, 1982; Garthwaite, 2011).

Third, hand-in-hand with a hardening of attitudes is the broadening of this moral and disciplinary gaze to include groups, such as disabled people, that until recently were not subject to the same amount of stigma as other types of benefit recipients. The deserving versus undeserving distinction rests on three dimensions of disability (defined as whether disadvantage is seen as within individual control), proximity (the boundaries of responsibility and distinctions of ‘us’ and ‘them’) and docility (whether recipients are compliant and grateful) (de Swann, 1998), with each of these essentially contested, subject to redefinition and thus political projects. Empirical work points towards ‘control’ as most significant in explaining deservingness – ‘whether people in need can be blamed or can be held responsible for their neediness’ (Oorschot, 2000: 43). Sickness and disability-related cash benefits have been the focus of extensive reform initiatives to redefine ‘control’ in the appropriate balance of social obligation versus individual responsibility<sup>1</sup>.

Fourth, literature has examined the impact of pejorative welfare discourses on the self-identity and attitudes of disadvantaged groups. Shildrick and MacDonald (2013) undertook fieldwork with a disadvantaged population within Teesside and argue that respondents constructed self-identities as a contrast to those who were “Others” and undeserving. They conclude: ‘There was no ‘deserving poor’ in their [interviewees] equation because they denied that ‘poverty’ applied to them and it only existed as moral and personal failure’ (2013: 293). Patrick (2016a; 2016b in this volume) has identified similar themes in interviews with out-of-work benefit claimants with a tendency for claimants to engage in ‘othering’ as ‘a response to the ‘othering’ they experience as members of a stigmatised and presumed deficit population [...] re-circulating and extending the reach of the ‘scrounger’ narrative’ (Patrick, 2016b).

### **Taking a long view**

Whilst there seems relatively little doubt that the views of political elites in the UK have shifted since the days of the Post-War Welfare Consensus and that there has been at least some hardening of public attitudes to welfare since the 1980s, few studies have tried to piece together the attitudes to welfare of the public during the consensus era. In large part this is because the best and most authoritative source of data on public attitudes – the British Social Attitudes survey – dates back only as far as the early 1980s. This, in turn, means the most commonly held positions about the evolution of attitudes to welfare are rooted in interpretations of this data and so rely on (theoretically rooted) presumptions about the direction of travel in the period before this.

To explore how public attitudes have evolved over time we drew upon:

- Opinion poll data from 1940s-1980s, using data archived/microfiche based copies of original polling reports indexed by Tyler’s (1990) *British Opinion Polls, 1960-1988*, Gallup’s (1976) *The Gallup international public opinion polls: Great Britain 1937-1975* and wartime British Institute of Public Opinion polls stored in the UK Data Archive (Hinton et al, 1996)
- Private/unpublished polling/survey data uncovered in key archives such as the National Archives and Labour Party Archives, including a large survey conducted by the government in 1968 (PRO T227/3094) and Golding and Middleton (1982; see also PRO BN 82/133)
- One-off surveys of attitudes to welfare (or wider surveys with a welfare component) conducted by: BIPO (1942); PEP (1961); Dr Abrams’ Research Services Limited (Abrams and Rose, 1960; Wedderburn, 1967a); IEA (Seldon and Gray, 1967); EEC (1977); Taylor-Gooby (1982); Norris (1978)
- Continuous scientific surveys of attitudes with questions on welfare: notably the British Social Attitudes Survey (1983-) but also the British Election Study (1974-) and predecessor *Political Change in Britain* (Butler and Stokes, 1974)

In piecing together evidence from these different sources we explore how far the four key concerns of the contemporary literature identified above – the hardening of attitudes; the return of deserving/undeserving poor narrative; widening of the moral lens; ‘othering’ by the ‘othered’ – represent historical continuities or change. We tackle each of these themes in turn before reflecting on how, and how far, historical survey data can contribute to contemporary debates.

### **Hardening of public attitudes?**

‘A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead’.

It is now almost something of an orthodoxy to suggest that public attitudes have hardened. Indeed, the House of Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee recently announced it would review the principles of social security, in part because ‘over a long period of time, voters have been withdrawing support for Britain's welfare state on the basis that they believe it is no longer fair’ (Work and Pensions Select Committee, 2015). Such views are supported by BSA data which, Deeming (2015: 867) argues, show a ‘fundamental shift in public views on welfare provision over the past three decades’ (see also: Hall, 2012; Fabian Policy Report, 2012: 12-13.). There is little doubt that at least some attitudes to welfare have hardened in the period covered by the BSA. Most notably, there has been a steady decrease in the proportion agreeing ‘The government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes’: 55% in 1987, rising to 61% in 1989, but falling below 50% by 1995 and at 27%, 29% and 28% in 2009, 2010 and 2011 respectively, but with something of an upturn to 36% in the latest figures for 2013.

The BSA represents by far the most authoritative source of data on public attitudes over time and, consequently, almost all analyses of changing attitudes to welfare rest on analysis of this data. But while the BSA data is the best we have, the first BSA surveys – undertaken in the early-to-mid-1980s – do not represent the start of the story on changing attitudes to the welfare state. This is, at best, an arbitrary moment to begin the story, but it could be a misleading moment from which to start it. The ‘thermostat effect’ (see Curtice, 2010) noted above suggests attitudes to welfare are in part driven by the underlying context: for example, the unemployed are typically seen as more deserving when the overall level of unemployment rises, and support for additional public spending tends to be higher after spending has been cut. The 1980s saw exceptionally high unemployment combined with a clear programme of spending cuts, potentially adding considerable ‘noise’ to attitudes data during this period. Our analysis of pre-BSA data suggests a ‘bounce thesis’ (see also Hudson, Lunt et al., 2016): that there may well have been a clear upturn in support for the welfare state in the 1980s, meaning the BSA data should not be read as capturing the latest stage in a many decades long decline in support for the welfare state so much as capturing an upsurge in support in the 1980s.

Naturally surveys prior to the BSA did not ask questions exactly matching those found in the BSA today, but a number of surveys did ask questions about support for (additional) welfare benefits spending similar to those above from the BSA, and responses provide a good degree of support for this bounce thesis. So, for instance, beginning with those asking the most similar questions, three key surveys conducted in the 1950s and 1960s showed high levels of support for additional spending<sup>2</sup>. Probably the first detailed social scientific study of public attitudes towards the post-war welfare state was that carried out by PEP in 1957 and 1958 (PEP 1961) and it found some 66% felt more should be spent on ‘social services’. A more comprehensive study conducted a decade later by *New Society* (see Nevitt, 1967; Wedderburn, 1967a; Forsyth, 1967; Donnison, 1967; Wiseman, 1967) asked a broadly similar question and found 56% supportive of the view that more should be spent on some social services. Variations in survey design and questions mean the results are not strictly comparable, and neither asked respondents whether they would maintain support should taxes need to rise, but overall the surveys showed high levels of support, similar to those the BSA highlighted in the 1980s. A third survey that was conducted in 1960 (Abrams and Rose (1960) asked respondents if they were willing to pay more taxes for ‘social benefits’ and again found high, though not unequivocal, support, some 50% willing to pay more (compared with 40% not willing).

By contrast, a detailed investigation of public attitudes to welfare undertaken by the Leicester University Centre for Mass Communication (LUCMC) in 1977, albeit with a modest sample size, found that 47% felt too much was spent on welfare and social security and just 21% felt too little was (Golding and Middleton 1982: 182 f/n5). The LUCMC study suggests a hardening of opinion by this point, though limits to the design of this survey give us reason to be cautious. However, other surveys provide additional support for the view that support appeared to harden during the late-1960s and 1970s. Butler and Stokes (1974) report the findings from representative surveys of the electorate conducted during this period for their *Political Change in Britain* study. While, in 1964, 77% said they felt the government should spend more on pensions and social services, only around 55% did in 1966 and 1970 (and just 43% in 1969, though additional survey response options in the 1969 & 1970 surveys add some noise to the findings). Butler and Stokes followed this study with the British Election Study from 1974 and though questions differ a good deal from those above, examination of responses to its question on whether welfare benefits have 'gone too far' provides some support for the bounce thesis too, 33% saying welfare benefits had gone too far in 1974, 49% in 1979, but just 19% in 1983, 24% in 1987 and 16% in 1992<sup>3</sup>.

In short, it may be that the hardening of views since the 1980s may reflect not so much a turn away from 'a post-war welfare imaginary' (Jensen and Tyler, 2015: 3) marked by strong social solidarity and a move away from a markedly *sympathetic* period during the 1980s and that, viewed from a longer perspective, rather than attitudes having hardened since the post-war period they have, instead, fluctuated over time.

### **The 'deserving' and 'undeserving'**

The second issue we identify above relates to processes of othering, particularly the 'deserving'/'undeserving' distinction. One of the problems faced in assessing whether attitudes to 'welfare' have 'hardened' is the fact that, as Baumberg (2014b) argues, 'Benefit attitudes are not simply "hard" or "soft" but complex and uneven'. A common argument, again supported by much of the BSA data, is that the hardening of attitudes has been particularly evident with respect to benefits for out-of-work working age people. Deeming (2015: 867) argues the BSA data show that a 'at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a distinct attitudinal shift begins to emerge', pointing to data showing that relatively few see benefits as inadequate and that some 62% believe that 'out-of-work benefits are too generous and promote the dependency culture' as especially key.

As Walker and Chase (2013: 134) note, a deliberately stigmatising distinction between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor was embedded in the design of the 1834 Poor Law reforms and 'The mantra has been sustained within political and media commentary on welfare policy ever since'. Moreover, their review of the portrayals of poverty in British literature and film from the Victorian period onwards (Chase and Walker, 2012) 'demonstrates how these assertions have infiltrated cultural values and norms over time and become inculcated in the public psyche' (Walker and Chase, 2013: 134). Disentangling continuity and change in contemporary discourses is a challenging task to say the least, particularly when examining historical survey data that does not capture the nuance of historically specific contexts. Nonetheless, the historical data we examine does raise some questions about how far attitudes have shifted since the 'golden age'.

Concerns about welfare 'dependency' and related issues such as the impact of social security on work incentives could be clearly found in surveys dating back to the 1960s and 1970s. The 1967 *New Society* study uncovered a good degree of skepticism about the operation of the Supplementary Benefit/National Assistance safety net, with a large majority (73%) agreeing there were 'many people drawing supplementary benefit/national assistance who could really be earning enough to support themselves if they wanted to', but a similarly large

majority (71%) agreeing 'there are many people who need to draw supplementary benefit/national assistance but who are not doing so' (Wedderburn 1967a). In the same survey, amongst people who felt too much was being spent on a social service, 'National Assistance is too easy' was the most commonly cited (17% of this group) reason (Wiseman, 1967). Widespread concerns about the impact of the welfare state on work incentives were suggested by an ORC poll conducted for the Conservative Party in 1968 where 89% agreed 'Too many people don't bother to work because they can live well enough on the dole', 78% agreed 'We have so many Social Services that people work less hard than they used to' and 87% agreed 'Too many take advantage of benefits by taking time off work' (Klein, 1974). The 1977 LUCMC survey similarly reported 80% of respondents agreeing 'Nowadays too many people depend on welfare' and 70% agreeing that 'There's so much welfare now it's made the people of this country lazy' (Golding and Middleton, 1982)<sup>4</sup>.

Jensen and Tyler (2015: 479) argue that media construction of large 'benefit brood' families have been a 'central mechanism through which anti-welfare commonsense is crafted' and key in the 'shift from welfare imaginaries of the 1940s to the anti-welfare consensus of the political present tense (Jensen and Tyler, 2015: 485). Historical survey data suggest there may be a greater continuity between these periods than commonly presumed in this regard too. For example, polling and survey from the early days of the Beveridge welfare state regularly identified family allowances as an area many people wanted to cut. A Gallup poll in April 1953 43% supported less spending on family allowances, comfortably the highest of all policy areas surveyed; the corresponding figure was only 6% for pensions, 81% wanting more spending in this area (Gallup, 1976). PEP's 1956-7 survey also highlighted Family Allowances as the part of the welfare state most commonly seen as that where the government spent *too much* money: 20% saying this was so, particularly interesting given this survey collected the views only of households with children (PEP, 1961). Indeed, polls and surveys across this period consistently pointed to a hierarchy of support with provisions targeted at the poorest or at families with children the least popular and pensions usually the most popular; with remarkable consistency over the years, there is a very large majority which favours raising pensions and a very large minority which is highly critical of family allowances (see Klein, 1974: 411) likely reflecting moralistic attitudes about families with larger numbers of children being undeserving of government support (see Welshman [2013] on 1940s debates about 'problem families'). Of significance here is the design of family allowances, which were targeted at families with more than one child.

The links between these survey responses and 'deserving'/'undeserving' poor stereotypes are clear. Indeed, commenting on the 1967 *New Society* survey's findings on National Assistance Wedderburn (1967a: 516) argued 'we do not have evidence who the respondents had in mind here, but it is quite likely that it was the old who were being considered in need. What the replies do suggest, however, is that the concept of the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor is still very much alive'. Other surveys around this time provide support for Wedderburn's view. For instance, a 1968 survey conducted by Market Investigations Limited for the then newly established Department for Health and Social Security (DHSS) found 'old people living alone' were the 'vulnerable group' most people would pay more tax to provide additional support for (PRO 1967, T227/3094), while two large postal surveys conducted in 1972 and 1976 that explored which groups people thought should and should not be helped demonstrated a clear 'deserving' and 'undeserving' division, ; Norris (1978: 18) noting 'such words were often used'. A slightly later EEC (1977: Table 28) survey on public perceptions of poverty carried out in May/June 1976 suggested attitudes were rooted in behavioural explanations of poverty much more in the UK than elsewhere: the UK was the only of nine European countries covered in the report in which respondents ranked 'laziness' as the top cause of poverty (some 45% of respondents choosing this from a list of nine options) and the UK had by far the highest

proportion of people (20% compared with an average of 7% across all countries) saying 'the authorities do too much' by way of contribution to combatting poverty (EEC, 1977: Table 32).

This seems to suggest that even in the 'golden days' of the Welfare State, the broad willingness to endorse higher spending was qualified by a high degree of public skepticism towards some aspects of the Welfare State and a suspicion amongst many that some services were being abused and particular groups were marked out for public disapproval. Earlier reviews of attitudes to welfare made similar observations. Reflecting on public attitudes data (including their own) from the post-war period up to the very early 1980s, Golding and Middleton (1982: 229) concluded 'the so-called 'welfare consensus' has never taken deep root, and was therefore relatively easy to dislodge'. Klein (1974: 411), reflecting on polling data from the 1940s to early 1970s, concluded 'The nineteenth-century distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor seems to be alive and kicking – despite the efforts of social reformers to abolish it over the past 70 years – in the minds of the majority of people'.

### **The Widening of the Moral Lens**

Closely related, but more difficult to explore using the data at our disposal, is the third theme, which also relates to processes of othering, but focuses on the widening of the 'moral lens' to include groups, such as disabled people, that until recently were not subject to the same amount of stigma as other groups of benefit recipients. Approaching the issue from a cultural political economy perspective, Jensen and Tyler (2015: 484) argue that 'The hardening of public attitudes towards working-age benefits claimants in particular, such as families living with poverty and disabled people, marks a significant shift in public attitudes towards the welfare state'.

Surveys from the 1960s and 1970s clearly placed disabled people in the 'deserving' group. The 1968 survey conducted by Market Investigations Limited for the DHSS (PRO 1967, T227/3094) found 65% of respondents willing to pay more tax in order to help specific 'vulnerable groups' and, of this group, 65% would do so for 'mentally handicapped people' and 64% for 'People who are seriously handicapped by physical disabled or illness', exceeded only by the 76% willing to pay more to support 'old people living alone'. By contrast there were much lower rates of support for 'men who are homeless because they are alcoholics' (8%), 'deserted wives (without children)' (12%), 'men who are homeless because they are ex-prisoners' (14%), 'unmarried girls with children' (15%) and 'children of unmarried mothers' (19%). Similarly, two large postal surveys conducted in 1972 and 1976 which Norris (1978: 18) reports findings from, found people who were 'very old', 'physically handicapped', 'epileptics', 'homeless' or 'mentally handicapped' elicited most support, while unsympathetic answers were most common for 'gypsies', 'drug users', 'tramps', 'the unemployed', 'coloured immigrants', 'young people in trouble with the law' and 'alcoholics', with 'those awaiting trial' and 'ex-prisoners' not far behind.

These surveys clearly showed a willingness to pay more for services for disabled people in the 1960s and 1970s; have attitudes towards disabled people hardened with a widening of the undeserving distinction? BSA data suggest that, in 2015, 61% respondents would like to see more government spending on benefits for disabled people who cannot work (down from 72% in 1998), and only 3% of respondents would like to see less government spending on benefits for disabled people who cannot work (Clery, 2016). These figures perhaps suggest not. However, survey responses alone cannot accurately capture how attitudes may have evolved. The mechanisms whereby sickness, illness and disability are re-defined and crafted, involving policy-makers and media, is a key insight that we can draw from Jensen and Tyler's work (2015). Thus whilst there is continued strong support for those who are seen as



‘deserving’ – disabled people who cannot work – there is an ongoing political and media crafting about who is defined as having continued membership of that group.

### **‘Othering’ by the ‘othered’**

Finally in terms of the four key themes identified, to what extent can we discern a process of self-othering and cracks in social solidarity in the post-war Consensus period? Golding and Middleton’s 1977 survey was the only one we found that was explicitly designed to compare the views of recipients and non-recipients of ‘welfare’, the latter defined as those with current or previous experience of receiving supplementary benefits, unemployment benefit or family income supplement (Golding and Middleton, 1982: 184 f/n 11). For the most part, the views of the two groups did not noticeably differ. Recipients and non-recipients responded in much the same way to questions probing pejorative attitudes: 78% of benefit recipients (cf. 81% non-recipients) agreed ‘Nowadays too many people depend on welfare’; 71% (compared to 70%) agreed ‘There’s so much welfare now it’s made the people of this country lazy; 39% (compared with 41%) agreed ‘If there wasn’t so much social security people would learn to stand on their own two feet’. The views of the two groups clearly differed only with respect to questions about the process of claiming or the adequacy of benefits, recipients much less likely to agree benefits were too generous (50% of recipients, 66% of non-recipients), too easy to ‘get’ (55% v 62%) and of a level that would allow people to live well (55% v 65%).

In unpacking the process of ‘othering’ by the ‘othered’ Patrick’s (2016a; 2016b) longitudinal qualitative research with out-of-work benefit recipients highlights the regularity with which her respondents would ‘emphasise the non-deservingness of some ‘other’ while – very often – simultaneously defending their own entitlement’ (Patrick, 2016b: pTBC). While the historic quantitative survey data in Golding and Middleton’s survey cannot match the richness of Patrick’s data, that the views of welfare benefit recipients largely matched the rather pejorative views on non-recipients for all questions bar those directly related to the experience of claiming at least hints that similar processes of ‘othering’ by the ‘othered’ were evident in the 1970s too. In their own analysis of their data Golding and Middleton suggested that economic insecurity combined with sometimes stigmatising experiences of welfare created a situation where many of those with the lowest incomes found ‘their fears and resentments readily channelled into a bitter and divisive contempt for those alongside them at the bottom of the economic ladder’ (Golding and Middleton, 1982: 181). Indeed, with further echoes of Patrick’s (2016b: pTBC) work, in which ‘Immigrants came in for frequent censure, and there was often significant anger about what was seen as the government’s continued support for immigrants, which was sometimes explicitly contrasted with their apparent lack of support for British out-of-work benefit claimants’, Golding and Middleton (1982: 166) similarly argued that their 1977 survey showed that attitudes sharpened further when ‘mingled with racism and xenophobia’. As one of their respondents said, some forty years ago but with remarkable similarities to contemporary debates, “This welfare spending’s all wasted. They give these handouts to natural scroungers, especially foreigners” [Age 24, male decorator]’ (Golding and Middleton, 1982: 166).

Though one-step removed from the focus on social security recipients, Golding and Middleton (1982: 170) noted too that ‘The low paid more than any other income group were likely to think that many claimants do not deserve any help’. This echoed some earlier surveys. Wedderburn (1967a: 514) for example reported that one-third of the *New Society* sample thought too much money was being spent on some social services with the largest item mentioned (by 11% of the total sample) being family allowance, but manual workers were more likely to criticize family allowance than were non-manual workers (1967: 514). Similarly, those responding to the *New Society* survey who thought national assistance was too easily available were more likely to be manual workers (1967: 514).

## Avoiding Nostalgia Narratives

‘Nostalgia - it's delicate, but potent [...] in Greek, ‘nostalgia’ literally means ‘the pain from an old wound’. It's a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone’.

*Don Draper, Mad Men, Season 1 Episode 13 'The Wheel'*

One danger in adopting a long view is that of falling into the trap of emphasising continuity on the basis of similarities in debates occurring across generations, ignoring the changed meanings of key terms or key arguments advanced at different moments with different contexts. This issue is particularly acute when exploring ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor debates that have a provenance stretching back many centuries (Walker and Chase, 2013). This is a challenge we face here in trying to examine the meaning of 20<sup>th</sup> century data from the perspective of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; but it was also a challenge faced by analysts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century data too. Indeed, when Wedderburn (1967a) suggested the *New Society* survey data showed that notions of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor were very much alive, she was rebuked by TH Marshall (1967: 603) who argued ‘these terms are loaded with associations derived from their use in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and any suggestion that the attitudes they describe exist, in the same form, today is misleading’. Wedderburn (1967b: 643) herself rebutted Marshall’s view, arguing ‘I would not be so naïve [...] as to suppose that these attitudes exist today in the same form as in the late nineteenth century. What I wished to imply [...] is that these attitudes are *derived* historically from nineteenth century attitudes’

Moreover, we must recognise that there are limits to what we can learn from historical survey data. Here and in work published elsewhere (Hudson, Lunt et al., 2016) we acknowledge data limitations, including design and sampling, and that responses to survey questions reflect the context of the time in which they were asked, precise wording of the questions presented and the answer options offered (Smith, 1987, 76). In presenting a fourfold argument for there being greater continuities in public attitudes than is typically recognised we concede that our evidence is strongest when pointing to earlier examples of anti-welfare state sentiment and qualified support for social security and social services. There is also we believe robust evidence pointing towards continuities in attitudes about there being groups that are variously deserving and undeserving. When seeking to establish that contemporary targets of pejorative attitudes are not new targets of disapprobation we face greater difficulties. Although historical public attitudes regularly identified family allowances as an area many people wanted to cut, we do not know whether this was about concerns of large families or that support should only be retained for those seen as having particular moral or work characteristics; while there are echoes of contemporary ‘benefits broods’ debates (see Jensen and Tyler, 2015), we cannot say with certainty how deep the continuities are based on the historical survey data that is available. We also concede that there are subtle processes related to the crafting of welfare commonsense that make the interpretation of definitions and data, relating for example to disabled people, particularly problematic. Similarly, the evidence of ‘othering’ by the ‘othered’ is limited by our inability to probe below headline figures to allow comparison across groups, including those in receipt of different social security benefits.

Despite such caveats we believe that tracing the historical sweep of welfare attitudes usefully brings a presumed ‘golden age’ of welfare into sharper, more critical, focus. There is growing scepticism of what we call the ‘nostalgia narrative’ of the Keynesian welfare state (see Wincott, 2001, 2011, 2013; also Lawler, 2014). Wincott argues persuasively that contemporary

welfare state analysis focuses on identifying epochs and that shoehorning welfare states into a particular periodisation ignores both the diversity of country experiences and complexity of welfare state development (Wincott, 2013: 806), allowing a 'general Golden Age of the welfare state to congeal into a kind of epochalist conventional wisdom' (2011: 375). Seabrook (2016) even goes so far as to suggest that the UK's political left, once scornful of a perspective deemed deeply conservative, is now rooted in a nostalgic view of the pre-Thatcher period. Nostalgic views are rarely explicit in academic work, but it might be argued that analyses of contemporary welfare (state) discourse are often rooted in an implicit presumption that the tone and nature of popular and political debate today is different from that found in the past. In particular, there is often a presumption that a more positive view of the welfare state existed in the post-war consensus era. Questioning how far attitudes to welfare differed in the past is not, therefore, merely an historical exercise; it matters for contemporary understandings and responses too. As Lawler (2014: 702) writes it is important to be 'looking at the ways in which the past may be *mobilized* as a critique of the present'.

The historical polling and survey evidence presented above points acts as a counterbalance to the argument that there has been 'a stunning reversal of the 1940s welfare imaginary' (Jensen and Tyler, 2015: 3), suggesting instead that widely held pejorative attitudes to welfare have long co-existed alongside widely held positive attitudes to welfare, including during the 'golden age of the welfare state'. A strong hierarchy of preferences around social spending has always persisted almost throughout the period being examined. Health is overwhelmingly the most popular area, with education and pensions also typically high in the list of social spending priorities. Support for working age cash benefits, particularly for the unemployed, tends to be lower than support for services. There does appear to be a moralistic tone reflected in much of the data. Surveys conducted in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s often betrayed very clear notions of there being distinct groups of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. While there has clearly been a hardening of at least some attitudes to welfare since the 1990s, it may be that this in part is because there was some degree of 'softening' of attitudes during the 1980s. This, in turn, may have followed an earlier period of hardening of attitudes in the late 1960s and 1970s. Rather than a simple linear decline in support for the welfare state since the 'golden age', support may well have fluctuated over the decades since the 1940s.

None of this is to challenge the veracity of arguments about the often hostile nature of contemporary debates<sup>5</sup>. Instead, we argue that if, within the complex and at times contradictory bundle of attitudes that make up 'public opinion', widespread pejorative attitudes to welfare were present during the golden era of welfare state expansion then it suggests that the existence of similar views today need not be a barrier to expanding social policy provision today.

In other words, the social solidarity of an earlier era may well have rested on terrain more hostile to the welfare state than we often imagine was the case from today's perspective. There is a danger that, in the absence of robust time-series data, we 'fill in' the missing data from before the BSA using presumptions about public attitudes to welfare which reflect a stylised periodisation of the past in which a 'post-war welfare consensus' gave way to a more hostile agenda at some point in the late 1970s. Even if such a periodisation was true, it seems likely that it at best captured the attitudes of *political elites* rather than those of the wider public.

For those advocating stronger social policy interventions, nostalgia for an era when the welfare state appeared to be much more widely supported can indeed be strong. But nostalgia for an idealised version of the past risks adding to feelings that today's 'machine of welfare commonsense' presents a political hurdle that cannot be overcome. While, as Jensen and Tyler (2015) rightly note, it is important to be critical of the current day 'social imaginary', we

equally should ensure that our analyses of the current 'state of things' is not misled by the 'social imaginary' of a different era.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly, public concern for housing benefit is directed towards those who have made poor choices and are 'less deserving' (Keohane and Broughton, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Few attitudes surveys were conducted in the 1940s; those that were suggested strong support for the welfare state, but there was not the 'unanimity' sometimes suggested, with cuts in some areas supported and there was a clear hierarchy of support with health and pensions the most popular areas (see Hudson, Lunt et al., 2016)

<sup>3</sup> We can only offer a brief review of the data here. Some Gallup polling (Gallup, 1976; Tyler, 1990) on related issues provides some additional support for the bounce thesis. A series of questions on the causes of poverty asked respondents whether poverty was a consequence of lack of effort or circumstances (or both); in 1964 28% said lack of effort compared to 38% saying circumstances, by 1968 the balance had shifted towards more individualist explanations (35% lack of effort v 30% circumstances) and similar figures were found in 1977 (33% v 30%), but by 1985 there was a strong swing back in the opposite direction with just 21% citing lack of effort compared with 49% citing circumstances. A series of questions on support for increased NHS spending also suggest the 1980s was a comparative highpoint of public support, without, though, a 1970s dip, the proportion saying there is 'too little' NHS spending rising from a significant minority in the 1960s (30% in 1961 and 23% in 1965) to a majority (54%) in 1975 and a very strong majority (70%) in 1980 (New Society, 1980). For a fuller discussion of the 'bounce thesis' see Hudson, Lunt et al (2016).

<sup>4</sup> Given the subject of the article we focus here on pejorative attitudes, but it may be worth flagging that this survey underlined that pro- and negative-views could be held at the same time; alongside pejorative attitudes 67% felt 'the welfare state in this country is still something we can be really proud of'

<sup>5</sup> We have focused here on public attitudes but related and wider debates focus on how a hostile media are a central part of 'a technology of consent' fuelling welfare reform agenda. Past debates on attitudes to welfare often expressed concern about impact of the media on attitudes and there may well be more continuities between the past and present here too than is often acknowledged. For example, Golding and Middleton (1982) suggest a hostile mass media has existed since the 1920s. Interestingly, the Labour Party's submission to Sir Henry Fisher's 1971 Committee of Enquiry into Abuse of Social Security Benefits said 'It is unfortunately a widely held belief that abuse of social security benefits takes place on a large scale. This belief is reinforced by some sections of the 'popular' press, which make much of any incidents of abuse and uses highly emotive words such as 'scroungers' for people suspected of abuse. A good example of this type of reporting can be found in The Daily Mail of June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1971. Under the title 'The Hushed-Up Scandals of Social Security' (sub-head "How you

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are Being Robbed by the Dodgers”) the article gives a highly coloured and subjective picture of so-called abuse.” (Labour Party Archive, 1971 RD 197: p1) .