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Capital & Class

'The sanctions are good for some people but not for someone like me who actually genuinely does their job search.' British Jobseeker's Allowance claimant views on punitive welfare reform: Hegemony in action?

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Abstract
This article shows that the unemployed are broadly supportive of welfare reforms which have led to increased poverty; exacerbated ill health; led some to engage in 'survival crime' or to disengage from the social security system. This support is predicated on the perceived need to discipline 'undeserving' groups; principally the feckless, those gaming the system and migrants. The authors argue that this reflects the success of a 'two-nations' hegemonic project that has sought to legitimise an ongoing phase of capitalist development characterised by the removal of social protections, widening inter-class inequalities and the implementation of punitive welfare reforms to submit the unemployed to insecure poverty labour. This article makes a significant original contribution to the field by demonstrating that the resonance of the 'two-nations' hegemonic project resides in both its relatability to lived experiences of the unemployed and its tendency to cast a stigmatising threat over their out-of-work status.

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Introduction

Politicians seek to build support for their policies through the cultivation and dissemination of 'common sense' ideas. Since the 1980s, successive British governments have sought to mobilise popular support for punitive welfare reforms by constructing 'moralised antagonisms' between hard-working taxpayers and out-of-work benefit claimants (Gallas 2015; Lavery 2019). This draws upon a long-standing tradition of identifying the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' poor (see Welshman 2013). Hegemonic discourses of the undeserving poor have been bolstered in recent years, as media portrayals of out-of-work claimants as lazy, feckless or immoral and emphasising the lack of effort or reciprocity of claimants have proliferated (Morrison 2019). It is in this context that the public view the unemployed as less deserving than 20 years ago (Baumberg 2012).

While British Social Attitudes surveys capture the shifting views of the general public towards out-of-work welfare provisions, few studies have examined the attitudes of those directly affected by welfare reforms in Britain (Fossati 2018; Patrick 2017). The present article addresses this lacunae by presenting evidence from the 'Welfare conditionality: sanctions, support and behaviour change' project (ESRC-funded, 2013–2018), which canvassed the views and experiences of over 480 out-of-work claimants in 11 locations in England and Scotland. The research explored the ethicality and efficacy of welfare conditionality in principle and practice. A key finding was that British unemployed claimants are broadly supportive of welfare reforms that have led to increased poverty and destitution; exacerbated ill health; disengagement from the social security system and movements into 'survival crime'. This support was premised on the view that this was necessary to punish/deter migrant, fraudulent and feckless populations from making claims on public resources. The authors seek to explain this apparent contradiction by interrogating the usefulness of Marxist theories of hegemony.

The article proceeds by outlining neo-Marxist concepts of hegemony and hegemonic projects. The focus then turns towards the growing exploitation, impoverishment and punishment of the unemployed in Britain before presenting new empirical evidence of their views towards punitive welfare reforms. The contradiction between their views and experiences we maintain reflects the overall success of a 'two-nations hegemonic project' which seeks to regulate the inherent contradictions of capitalist societies by mobilising popular support for policies that are antithetical to the interests of working-class populations (Gallas 2015; Jessop et al. 1988; Lavery 2019). This is operationalised by constructing discursive distinctions between 'productive' and 'parasitic' groups and has been translated into a series of policies to marginalise the manufactured threat of 'parasitic' groups. The authors argue that a 'two-nations' hegemonic has been intermittently revived by successive British governments over the past 40 years. This has served to mystify and legitimise an ongoing phase of capitalist development characterised by rising corporate profitability and more intensive forms of exploitation, punishment and penury for working-class populations.

Hegemony, hegemonic projects and individual responses

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time the ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it. (Marx & Engels 1998: 67)

Marx and Engels' (1998) originally conceived of ideology as a phenomenon that is generated by the capitalist class system. It serves to regulate the inherent contradictions of this system by mystifying and legitimising the exploitation of the working class. It does this by dominating the minds of working-class people, projecting within their minds an illusory relationship to their real conditions of existence to perpetuate a mistaken view of the social world known as 'false consciousness'. It is a temporary phenomenon only surviving as long as the class system that generates it survives. However, the resilience of capitalism coupled with the underdeveloped nature of Marx and Engels' theorisation led later generations of Marxists to show a greater interest in ideology.

Gramsci (1971) argues that capitalism is partially sustained by the 'hegemony' of ideas and theories of a ruling class (or classes). More specifically, Gramsci (1971) uses 'hegemony' to capture how a ruling class acquires consent to rule those it subjugates. This tends to be achieved when the ideas of the ruling class sufficiently displace rivalling ideas and become the 'common-sense' assumptions and beliefs held by subordinate classes (Gramsci 1971: 323). Common-sense ideas may present themselves 'as the spontaneous philosophy of the man in street' but are truly 'the popular expression of "higher philosophies"' (Mouffe 1979: 186). Consequently, common-sense ideas ascertain 'a validity which is psychological' (Gramsci 1971: 377). This makes them indispensable for organising subordinate classes and producing levels of consent necessary to preserve the power and wealth asymmetries of the capitalist class system.

Althusser (2014) argues that the hegemony of ruling class ideas is established through the seizure and conservation of state power, and through subsequent diffusion of these ideas through 'ideological state apparatuses'. While Althusser (2014: 245) acknowledges the role of the 'repressive state apparatus' (e.g. police, courts, military) in pacifying groups or individuals posing a threat to the established order, he stresses that the ruling class cannot hold monopoly over state power or society more generally 'over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the ideological state apparatuses'. Althusser's (2014: 79–81, 243) definition of 'ideological state apparatuses' is broad, including both public and private institutions such as schools, families, churches and the media. Despite the 'diversity' of their individual functions, according to Althusser (2014: 245), these apparatuses are all unified 'beneath . . . the ideology of the ruling class', functioning collectively to diffuse common-sense ideas across social space around correct (pro-social, economically useful) modes of living within the class system. As such, hegemony is viewed as a 'lived' process of domination, where common-sense ideas are 'subtly, pervasively diffused throughout habitual daily practices, intimately interwoven with 'culture' itself, inscribed in the very texture of our

experience from nursery school to funeral parlour' (Eagleton 1991: 114). It often remains invisible, disseminated throughout the texture of social life naturalised as custom, habit and practice (Eagleton 1991).

Poulantzas (1978) provides an important contribution to contemporary Marxist understandings of how the hegemony of the ruling class(es) is exercised through the ideological state apparatuses and over the dominated class(es). This contribution is derived from his broader theory of the capitalist type of state. Poulantzas (1973: 115, 190–192, 1978: 31) views the capitalist state as consisting of a distinctive ensemble of 'structures' and 'institutions' that do not simply act on behalf of one dominant class, but 'within an unstable equilibrium of comprise between the dominant classes and the dominated'. This means that the state possesses some autonomy from the ruling class(es) and 'therefore continually adopts material measures which are of positive significance for the popular masses' (Poulantzas 1978: 31). Consequently, Poulantzas (1978: 30) criticises accounts that see the exercise of ruling class hegemony through the ideological state apparatuses exclusively in forms that only ever seek to 'deceive, lie, obscure, hide, and lead people to believe what is false'. Rather, hegemony is also exercised through state apparatuses in 'positive' ways for the subordinate classes. Specifically, ideological allurements accompany material concessions which are beneficial to the interests of subordinate classes and can even contradict the short-term interests of the ruling class (although such concessions will not threaten the overall reproduction of capitalism). This can not only work to manufacture strategically significant levels of consent for the class system, but can also reinforce perceptions of the state as class neutral and acting in the 'general interest' of the entire body politic (Poulantzas 1973: 190–192).

Contemporary Marxists have built on Gramsci's and Poulantzas's ideas to demonstrate how political leaderships, at the apex of the state, deploy 'hegemonic projects' to produce sufficient levels of consent for and continually reproduce capitalism. Because hegemony is a dynamic process that has to be continually renewed, recreated and defended, political leaderships typically pursue more temporary 'hegemonic projects' rather than hegemony itself (Gamble 1988). Jessop (1990: 211–212) has distinguished between 'one-nation' and 'two-nations' hegemonic projects. Several academics have applied the concepts of one and two-nations hegemonic projects over the past four decades to make sense of how various political leaderships in Britain have continually legitimised the unstable relations of exploitation and domination intrinsic to the capitalist class system (Gallas 2015; Jessop et al. 1988; Lavery 2019). The former aims 'at an expansive hegemony in which the support of the entire population is mobilised through material concessions and symbolic rewards' for all sections of the body politic. Two-nations projects seek 'a more limited hegemony concerned to mobilise the support of strategically significant sectors of the population and to pass the costs of the project to other sectors'. Political leaderships are more likely to pursue the latter during periods characterised by widening inter-class inequalities, rising capitalist profitability and fewer material concessions to working-class populations (Bates 1975; Jessop 1990). They mystify the true source(s) of class inequalities and instead seek to lay the blame at the foot of deviant 'others'. Political leaderships tend to do this by utilising hegemonic apparatuses to 'consciously play on' and enhance 'divisions in society'; discursively constructing

'moralised antagonisms' between groups of good, 'productive' citizens and bad, 'parasitic' citizens (Jessop et al. 1988: 163, 88; Lavery 2019: 60). The latter groups are constructed as a threat to both public resources and the interests of 'productive' citizenry, requiring urgent 'containment and even repression' (Jessop 1990: 212).

At the psychosocial level, research has shown how discourses associated with hegemonic projects secure consent and control through the internalisation of psychological myths concerning the 'just nature' of present affairs (Prilleltensky & Gonick 1996). Individuals occupying marginal positions at the bottom of the class system may be deferential, subscribing to myths of personal blame and natural causes (Prilleltensky & Gonick 1996). Learned helplessness which refers to passivity developed in response to repeated experiences of failure, surplus powerlessness which pertains to feelings of personal impotence, obedience to authority and the internalisation of images of authority are key psychological processes (Prilleltensky & Gonick 1996). However, consent may also be secured through forms of identity management and resistance to manage stigma and shame emerging from portrayals of particular groups as 'parasitic'. A key development of the present article will be to show how individuals who are vulnerable to the stigmatising threat of 'two-nations' discourses develop ways of establishing distance between themselves and 'parasitic' others occupying similar social positioning (e.g. claimant unemployed, low-income). Managing stigma, we contend, is a key but largely unrecognised process in the production of consent among unemployed people for policies and practices that were openly acknowledged to inflict harm upon themselves and others.

The condition of the unemployed working class in 21st-century Britain

Two-nations hegemonic projects have been consistently redeployed during an ongoing phase of capitalist development, featuring a rise in corporate profitability and more intensive forms of exploitation, punishment and impoverishment for the most marginal fractions the working class. Since the late 1970s, Britain's working classes have borne an increasingly precarious relationship to the economy. The labour market has seen a marked decline of stable middle-income jobs, a 'very big increase in the number of high-paid jobs', and a sharp rise in low-paying, precarious jobs that are more directly determined by market demand and increasingly available via temporary work agencies (Forde & Slater 2016; Goos & Manning 2007: 118; Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2020). These changes have been fuelled by a combination of globalised techno-economic developments in production, exchange, consumption and distribution (Castells 2000; Jessop 2002). They have also been facilitated by a series of state-led decisions to abandon full employment policies, prioritise inflation control and eviscerate the ability of working-class populations to protect their material interests through collective means (Coates 1989; Glyn 2006).

It is in this context that the social security system has been transformed into a lever for expanding the supply of precarious labour (Grover & Stewart 2002). This has included efforts to incentivise the uptake of low-paying jobs by reducing the real value of unemployment benefits and 'depriving unemployed people of necessary income', which

has most notably taken shape in numerous benefit freezes, benefit caps and the more recent two-child limit (Fletcher & Wright 2018: 337). Intensified work-related behavioural conditionality policies (e.g. the introduction of jobseekers agreements, diaries and directions) to establish closer supervision of claimant behaviour and ensure they are actively seeking work have been instrumental (Fletcher & Wright 2018). Legislation requiring claimants to take jobs at greater geographical distances and the corresponding abolition of legislation which formerly enabled claimants to refuse work outside their normal occupation and pay have also been introduced (Price 2000). This has been enforced with a more severe benefit sanctioning regime for claimants and more stringent formal and informal job outcome, sanctioning and off-benefit flow target regimes for frontline staff (Redman & Fletcher 2022). Since the 1990s, aggregate annual sanctioning rates have increased over 100%, reaching a crescendo in 2013 with over 1 million sanctions sometimes for trivial reasons (Adler 2018; Price 2000). These reforms have created 'a "flexible" pool of employees' who not only 'have no alternative but to accept what is on offer' but, through increasing the competition for precarious jobs, exert a broader disciplinary effect on workers by 'further erod[ing] pay levels and working conditions at the bottom of the labour market' (Peck 2001: 349; 350; Umney 2018).

This has benefitted business to the detriment of the working classes in Britain. On one hand, aggregate profits have increased (Glyn 2006; Roberts 2009). This is partly because employers have managed to increase the rate of exploitation over the past 40 years, with the working classes producing more and getting less in return. This has been facilitated by major advances in information technologies (Castells 2000), state abandonment of full employment policies (Glyn 2006) and an expansion of the unemployed labour supply (Wiggan 2015) in order to simultaneously eschew basic employment securities, reduce hiring costs to the bare minimum and finely calibrate labour supplies with the vagaries of market demand (cf. Briken & Taylor 2018).

On the other hand, hardship has increasingly defined the everyday experiences of the poorer and unemployed fractions of the working class. The Welfare Conditionality (2018) project found that sanctions frequently increased poverty and destitution; exacerbated ill health and facilitated movements out of the social security system. Garthwaite (2016: 8) documents 'an explosion in the numbers of people turning to foodbanks', with 'almost half of the reasons people cite using foodbanks' being attributable to welfare reforms. There are clear racial and gendered dimensions to the enhanced hardship endured by the poor and out-of-work fractions of the working class. Dwyer et al. (2019: 145) have demonstrated how contemporary welfare reforms place further restrictions on European migrants' access to fiscal support, 'triggering severe financial and emotional hardship'. Meanwhile, Speake (2020: 193–199) has shown how the implementation of contemporary welfare reforms can mirror the abuse previously experienced by female victims/survivors of rape and sexual abuse, exacerbating health conditions and pushing them further away from recovery.

This connects with a wider body of research, which has shown how reforms to the operational framework governing frontline behaviour have made Jobcentres more dangerous places, as contemporary service delivery has been found to inflict a range of material and symbolic harms which sometimes have life-threatening or fatal consequences (Redman & Fletcher 2022; Wright et al. 2020). Punitive welfare reforms have been

identified by family and friends of the deceased as a key determinant of a number of penury induced suicides and deaths; although policymakers continue 'to deny a direct "causal" link between government policy and benefit deaths' (Clifford 2020: 158, 162). Moreover, evidence suggests that those who leave unemployment to enter work are more likely to remain in poverty and/or cycle in and out of low-paid, precarious employment (Adams et al. 2012; Welfare Conditionality 2018; White & Forth 1998). Quantitative research has shown how precarious work 'tends to reduce one's subjective wellbeing' (Kalleberg 2018: 163), while ethnographic research has shown how those who enter such jobs frequently endure overwork; abusive managerial practices; an income insufficient to meet basic needs; and, correspondingly, poor mental and physical health (Angry Workers 2020; Thomas et al. 2020). Consequently, Grover (2019) conceptualises British welfare reforms as 'violent proletarianisation'. They force the unemployed into jobs in a way that is injurious to mental and physical health while 'socially murdering' some of its most vulnerable members.

Securing consent through mystification and division

Some argue that the hegemony of ruling ideas have mystified and legitimised the expansion of these inter-class inequalities in the minds of working-class populations (Jessop et al. 1988; Lavery 2019). From the late 1970s, the Thatcher administrations set out to restore conditions favourable to profitable investment by mobilising popular support for a radical programme of political-economic restructuring. This partially entailed the dismantling of post-war Keynesian welfare policies that had helped to significantly reduce absolute poverty, reduce class inequalities and enhance the material conditions of working-class populations (Glyn & Harrison 1980). Thatcher successfully garnered support among the working classes by discursively constructing Britain as embroiled in an economic and moral crisis fuelled by a number of 'parasitic' populations (e.g. benefit scroungers; recalcitrant workers) who had leached off the wealth creating, 'productive' citizenry (Jessop et al. 1988; cf. Golding & Middleton 1982). In doing so, strategically significant groups were pitted against one another. This strengthened 'intra-class division whilst covering up inter-class antagonism' and obscured the true beneficiaries of their radical restructuring programme (Gallas 2015: 146).

The New Labour administrations adopted a different approach. Substantial material concessions were made to working-class populations to secure broad-based support, as public expenditure increases were implemented alongside some significant redistributive social policies (Lavery 2019: 93–97). This notably included the introduction of a national minimum wage and in-work tax credits for low-income groups. Lavery (2019) suggests that these concessions signified the presence of a 'one-nation' hegemonic project, whereby New Labour sought to consolidate power by ceding to low-income groups a greater portion of the total national income than under previous administrations and incorporating them into a period of considerable economic growth. Although, the 'one-nation' project interpretation is complicated by several other occurrences. Notably, real-wage growth stagnated for low- and middle-income populations during a period where

business was afforded a number of lucrative tax reductions to shore up confidence and enhance profitability. The political leadership advanced punitive workfare regimes to increase competition for low-wage, precarious jobs while committing to labour market policies which undermined stable, middle-income job creation by ensuring labour process control remained firmly in the hands of employers. Meanwhile, the political leadership was somewhat consistent with previous administrations in laying the blame for poverty and unemployment on the behavioural dysfunctions of a new 'parasitic' group which existed outside mainstream British values – specifically, the emergence of a 'workless class' which was ostensibly 'playing no role in the formal economy, dependent on benefits and the black economy' (Blair 1997 in Tyler 2013: 159). Thus, while some different policy approaches were certainly adopted, whether the New Labour administrations are best characterised by a 'one-nation' or 'two-nations' hegemonic project remains contentious.

More recently, the Coalition government once again sought to improve conditions favourable to profitable investment by constructing Britain as in crisis with 'hardworking British taxpayers' under threat from migrant and unemployed populations – whose supposed predilection for a better life in Britain and/or on out-of-work benefits were 'a parasitical drain and a threat to scarce national resources' (Tyler 2013: 9). This was reflected in declarations that migrant groups were robbing British people of jobs, as well as an intensification of negative portrayals of migrant groups as a threat to public resources and national security (Blinder & Allen 2016). Britain was also portrayed as socially broken, beset by an inter-generationally workless 'underclass, where life is characterised by [welfare] dependency, addiction, debt and family breakdown' (Duncan-Smith 2007: 4). These stigmatising hegemonic discourses were 'co-produced' by multiple ideological state apparatuses and weaved into the texture of everyday experiences and common-sense assumptions (Pattison 2022). Most notably, an explosion of 'poverty porn' television purporting to expose entire communities of inter-generational worklessness was accompanied by 'an extraordinary spike in the use of stigmatising terminology' describing claimants as scroungers, frauds, cheats (etc.) in British newspaper articles (Morrison 2019: 20–21). This legitimised the introduction of a whole battery of welfare reforms that punished these 'parasitic' populations and severed their dependency on hard-working taxpayers' money:

> Fraudsters from around the world targeted [UK benefits] for personal gain . . . it is not cruel to expect people to work; getting people into work is vital not just for them, but for all of us. . . . this Government is on the side of hard-working taxpayers. . . [who] have watched those on tax credits or benefits see their income rise, outstripping their earnings . . . [welfare reform] will benefit hardworking people across the country. (Duncan-Smith 2012)

The cumulative effect was to both obscure the true beneficiaries of the Coalition's subsequent austerity programme and galvanise popular support for punitive reforms by fuelling 'anti-welfare common sense' among the British citizenry, further exacerbating intra-class divisions and hostilities (Jensen & Tyler 2015). This was visible in both rising levels of inter-personal violence and the reproduction of hegemonic discourses on social media sites against migrant and out-of-work groups (Burnett 2017; Morrison 2019). It

was also evident in a long-standing hardening of public attitudes towards welfare provisions (Hills 2017), with the British public expressing declining support for spending more on benefits for a range of out-of-work groups.

Method

This article presents evidence from the 'Welfare conditionality: sanctions, support and behaviour change' study. The research sought to explore both the efficacy and ethicality of welfare conditionality in principle and practice and involved research teams at six universities in Britain. It comprised semi-structured interviews with policy stakeholders, focus groups with front-line welfare practitioners and three rounds of repeat qualitative longitudinal interviews with welfare recipients subject to welfare conditionality. Individuals were interviewed on three separate occasions over a 2-year period, focusing on their experiences of support and sanctions within the welfare system. Purposive non-random sampling techniques were used to recruit participants. This article draws upon empirical data from policy stakeholder interviews and the first wave of interviews with 64 Jobseeker's Allowance claimants (65% men and 35% women) in Bristol, Edinburgh, Glasgow, London, Manchester, Peterborough and Sheffield. Nearly half were aged between 25 and 49 years with a further third aged 50–64 years. Almost all (95%) were unemployed. A quarter were disabled or had long-term health conditions, including some who had been transferred to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) after failing a Work Capability Assessment for Employment and Support Allowance. Over half (53%) had been subject to a benefit sanction with two-thirds being sanctioned once and the remainder between 2 and 5 times.

Claimants were asked a series of questions about their experiences and views of welfare conditionality. All were probed about claiming benefits; the support provided by Jobcentre Plus and their views about the balance between sanctions and support. Another set of questions explored participant views regarding the tying of benefit entitlement to claimant behaviour. Similarly, their views regarding the fairness and efficacy of mandatory work activity requirements were canvassed as well as their opinions on the causes of unemployment. A key line of enquiry focused on the purpose of sanctions; personal experiences of benefit sanctions; and the impact on their subsequent behaviour. The research team also asked a series of normative questions about whether it was fair to use benefit sanctions. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. A vast amount of data was produced necessitating a highly systematic and structured approach to data management and analysis (Saldana 2003). The complex multi-site and multi-team research design offered further challenges. Consequently, a framework matrix-based method (Corden & Nice 2007; Lewis 2007) with the aid of QSR NVivo 10 was employed. All researchers who conducted interviews assigned attributes for those transcripts. Then a two-tier approach to coding was used, with a team of coding officers applying the first tier of framework matrix coding across the sample. The matrix coding was assembled inductively by a working group of the project principal investigator (PI), a co-investigator (Co-I) and researchers drawn from a range of the institutional teams involved. The second tier of coding was conducted by the authors of the Jobseeker's Allowance sub-set. Key themes were identified from a close reading of a selection of

transcripts, which were then coded across the sample. This was supplemented by text searches to verify the representativeness of findings and to identify data that did not fit the main trends.

Findings: hegemony in action?

A key strength of the present research is that it considered the views and experiences of both policymakers and the unemployed towards a battery of welfare reforms. In terms of the former, policymakers seek to build support for their policies through the dissemination of (anti-welfare) 'common-sense' ideas. An insight into this process was gained through interviews with policymakers involved in the design of contemporary welfare reform. This included two members of parliament (MPs) and two senior civil servants in the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP). The findings begin with a brief exploration of policymakers' views on welfare reform, before shifting towards a more detailed analysis of the views and experiences of unemployed people.

Policymakers

The growing intensification of welfare conditionality has drawn heavily upon narratives of 'inter-generational worklessness', 'welfare dependency' and the perceived need to activate the unemployed. A senior civil servant in the DWP opined: 'There's this feeling that there is a group in society that has become dependent on welfare and it's a way to nudge them to make that behavioural change' (K148). Similarly, a Labour MP drew our attention to the problem of inter-generational unemployment: 'I mean you're talking about inter-generational unemployment. I mean some of them will be on their third or fourth generation. I think there were people who frankly got out of the way of being participating members of society, of a community through work. And yes, to a certain extent, they have to accept their own responsibility for that' (K116). Consequently, a senior civil servant argued: 'That sort of hassle factor that has the most impact on getting people back into work'. He went on: 'Part of that is around hassle, a small part of it is around deterrent effects, but actually it's also about motivation as well' (K180). Policymakers frequently justify punitive welfare policies with reference to support garnered from the general public. This downplays the ideological nature of the enterprise. A Labour MP explicitly justified growing welfare conditionality by citing the public's increasingly hostile views towards benefit claimants: 'And I hear again and again on the doorstep where "She never does a stroke of work. There's nothing matter with her, but she gets £500 a week"'. Similarly, while highlighting the Work & Pensions Committee Report on Jobcentre Plus (HoC WPC 2014) which had a section on sanctions, a senior civil servant concluded: 'So they're interested, clearly politically people are interested, and the more we have programmes like Benefit street, the more it will become popular with the population' (K180).

The unemployed

Since the creation of the labour exchange in the early 20th century, there has been an expectation that unemployed people should seek work when claiming benefits and this

principle was accepted by virtually all interviewees. Most felt that, 'it is better to be working to being unemployed' (ED-SJ-010) and employment was the key to living a 'normal life' free of the daily privations associated with benefit claiming. An Edinburgh man spoke for many when he noted that 'you don't feel that you're having a normal life when you're unemployed on the social' (ED-AS012). Furthermore, many viewed job search as 'earning our benefit', an Edinburgh woman related this to her values instilled during childhood: 'because of the way I've been brought up. If you want a sweetie, do the dishes. If you want money [benefits] do the dishes' (ED-BW-016). Nevertheless, some disquiet was expressed about being pushed into any job. There were contrasting views among jobseekers regarding the ethicality of *mandatory work activity* and *benefit sanctions*.

Views were mixed regarding whether it was fair to require the unemployed to undertake unpaid *mandatory work activity*. Those that felt it was fair pointed to its perceived utility in providing work experience and improving employment prospects. 'I think it is fair because they've got to get back into the work scene' (ED-BW-026). Another individual indicated: 'Yes, if it's going to help them get a job' (ED-SJ-029). However, many doubted its effectiveness and highlighted its punitive function, some likening it to slave labour. 'I'm not sure how effective that is in helping anybody to get back to employment. It's just like community service' (ED-SJ-010). A Sheffield man reported: 'I don't like it, working for nothing' (SH-JM-014). Another interviewee noted: 'You don't want to be treated like a slave' (ED-AS-012).

Many interviewees explicitly rejected mandatory work activity but expressed strong support for *benefit sanctions*. A single Edinburgh female reported that she 'felt horrible going and taking the taxpayers money because that's what jobseekers is' (ED-BW-022). Nevertheless, she felt that the unemployed should not be compelled to undertake mandatory work activity: 'I think that's slave labour. I hate that'. Despite being sanctioned and put on daily signing she expressed support for benefit sanctions arguing that they were necessary to deter those dependent on benefits and gaming the system. 'It's just too easy to stay on it [Jobseekers Allowance] and not look for work . . . there are plenty of people that can work their way around the system'. She cited individuals forgetting their job search booklets (in which activity is recorded) and making false claims regarding job applications. Nevertheless, she blamed the Government for making the benefits system too lax and maintained that the authorities should root out undeserving groups.

Nevertheless, a small minority of interviewees indicated that benefit sanctions were ethically illegitimate. An Edinburgh man reported, 'you shouldn't get sanctioned for anything' (ED-BW-046). Some argued that sanctions worsened poverty and insecurity. A young London woman reported: 'I'm fairly lucky. If anything goes wrong . . . I've got my mum and dad, I've got a room there. The majority of these people haven't . . . they're physically trying to do everything they can to find work, and they get sanctioned for something so minute then excuse my language, but they're buggered' (LO-BW-013). A few individuals argued that sanctions were unfair because of the lack of good quality local jobs. 'There's nothing about in Sheffield, love, there's only part-time jobs and they are no good to me' (SH-JM-014). From this perspective unemployment was due to economic restructuring, new technology and globalisation rather than personal failings. 'The steelworks went and the rest followed . . . it's all going to China . . . Get the

steelworks back from China, then you'll get people back into work' (SH-JM-014). A Bristol man reported: 'I know technology is good . . . but all it's doing is cutting back on the workforce' (BR-AS-013).

There was, in addition, widespread discontent at the way in which sanctioning worked in practice. Many indicated that they were an 'everyday occurrence' rather than targeted at 'extreme cases'. There was a widespread suspicion, which is not unfounded (cf. Redman & Fletcher 2022), that this was due to the existence of covert sanctioning targets. A Bristol man, for example, thought that sanctions were unfair 'when you've got an agenda like a quota to fill' (BR-AS-011). A few indicated that they were a disproportionate response to relatively trivial occurrences such as a lack of punctuality. 'But the sanction is a massive sword that has been brought down on people's heads and backs, and it is totally unfair' (SH-JM-004). The threat of sanctions also encouraged a culture of counter-productive compliance: 'I'm going for jobs that I know I won't get, just to cover myself' (LO-BW-008).

Sanctions led to a range of adverse impacts including forcing individuals into chronically insecure labour, food bank usage and movements into 'survival crime' and 'survival sex'. A Glasgow man concluded: 'I think it [sanction] harms people more than anything' (GL-SW-001). A Peterborough man recounted the story of a friend that had been sanctioned for a year which led to his eviction and forced him into a zero hours contract secured through a recruitment agency. The uncertainty of not knowing from 1 week to the next what his pay would be led to a £1,400 debt. 'Agencies are the worst people for getting you into debt. They should abolish them' (PE-KJ-010). An Edinburgh man indicated 'they're going to be getting no money, no food or anything and that's going to end up going to crime and things' (ED-BW-026).

Despite the near-universal support for the principle of benefit sanctions many questioned whether their purpose was to instil agency or change the behaviour of claimants. Rather, they were often viewed as part of a disentitlement strategy linked to austerity. 'This is basically to boot as many people off as possible so more people will think it's a pain to go in every week, more people will stop going on jobseekers' (ED-BW-022). 'I think that what they're doing is trying to cut down on the benefit being paid out' (BR-AS-013). A related concern was that sanctions were ineffective at changing the behaviour of those alleged to be 'gaming the system'. A Sheffield woman opined: 'There's a whole section of society that I don't see until I come to places like this [Jobcentre] . . . there's a certain section that won't even be perturbed by sanctions' (SH-EB-015). Nevertheless, sanctioning was also justified with reference to the perceived need to discipline 'undeserving' claimants, principally:

- *The feckless;*
- *Those gaming the system;*
- *And migrants.*

The feckless workshy 'other'. The most common stereotype was of the feckless, workshy claimant content to live life on benefits. 'There's a lot of people that just stay in bed all day. They just go in once a fortnight and they can't be bothered to do

anything' (BR-KJ-023). 'All they're interested in is just getting the money and spending it on beer' (PE-JM-023). Young men were frequently demonised. A Bristol man indicated: 'I'm too old but the younger ones no, there's nothing stopping them for looking for work' (BR-AS-013). Sanctions were justifiable because in their absence: 'There would be people who would happily sit there, not looking for work and take the money' (LO-BW-007). Consequently, the primary purpose of benefit sanctions was to discipline 'those that don't want to do anything . . . it will give people a fright' (GL-SW-001). This stereotype was so pervasive it was held by those that were opposed to benefit sanctions. These views were often buttressed by subscription to pervasive (anti-welfare) 'common-sense' ideals of economic individualism, which have long maintained that each individual is responsible for their own welfare and that unemployment is predominantly a consequence of personal deficiencies: 'I think it is up to the individual person . . . their lifestyle' (BR-KJ-023).

A 28-year-old London male had joined the British Transport Police as a Police Community Support Officer after completing his 'A' levels. He had then been made redundant following an extended period of poor physical health. 'I basically had a stomach ulcer that exploded. So I was off for a year and in the end they got rid of me because they couldn't afford to keep paying me'. He was made homelessness but had then managed to get accommodation at the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). At the time of interview he had been unemployed for nearly 5 years apart from a couple of temporary jobs and some undeclared cash-in-hand work. His long-term career aspiration was to become a teacher but he was prepared to 'do anything' in the meantime.

He had been sanctioned for 1 month for failing to attend a Work Programme appointment. More recently, he had been threatened with a 3-month sanction when illness prevented him attending a Jobcentre appointment. 'I managed to blag my way through it and arrange it for the next day'. During the interview he expressed the view that Jobcentre Plus had sanctioning targets and that the social security system was heavily weighted in favour of sanctions rather than support. Furthermore, he acknowledged that sanctions had not improved his personal situation and: 'it seems like a lot of people are disciplined [by sanctions] when they genuinely are trying'. Despite this, they were deemed to be necessary to discipline the feckless workshy 'other'. 'I think people should be punished if they're just happy to claim for so long and not to do anything [to seek work]. Unemployment was caused by a deficient work ethic: 'Some people don't want to work anymore. Like that Benefits Street programme'.

Contradictions between experiences of and perspectives on punitive policies were not uncommon. Respondents would frequently relay *negative* experiences, reporting a range of harms endured from sanctions, poor treatment from frontline staff and existing on a low-income more generally. Yet these experiences were often accompanied with *positive* support for punitive policies in the case of undeserving 'others'. Interaction with the ideological state apparatuses was important in shaping positive support for welfare reforms. Respondents would sometimes draw directly on content consumed from popular media to regurgitate and conjure up a cast of 'phantom others' (Shildrick & MacDonald 2013: 299) who, unlike themselves, did not conform to mainstream behavioural norms and values and were thus in need of discipline and punishment.

The gamer of the system. There was a pervasive view that many benefit claimants were cynically manipulating the benefit system and this justified sanctioning. A Sheffield man referenced 'certain people who are deliberately wrongfully claiming benefits' (SH-JM-004). Some particular groups were singled out: 'Self-employed people doing cash-in-hand building' (BR-AS-011). A Peterborough man also reported that former work colleagues in construction simultaneously claimed benefits. However, interviewees distanced themselves from stigmatising discourses of gaming the system. Personal admissions of guilt were extremely rare and this undermines the notion of an underclass with distinct social norms.

A 27-year-old single male was living in a homeless shelter following the break-up of his relationship. He had worked as a commercial cleaner undertaking 14-hour shifts in large supermarkets and as a playground assistant. He was now looking for 'anything' but was prioritising resolving his housing situation. Previously imprisoned he had also received a benefit sanction for insufficient job search activity. Nevertheless, sanctions were deemed necessary to force individuals to work: 'There is no such thing as a free lunch'. Although some disquiet was expressed about the length of sanctions they were justified with reference to the poor behaviour of some claimants: 'because there's people that just do take the mick . . . they get paid and then they say the next day I lost my money, and they spend it on some drugs'.

The migrant 'other'. Some saw benefit sanctions as a means of deterring the claims made by migrants who, it was alleged, were putting intolerable strains on the benefits system. More commonly, migration was viewed as a source of unfair competition for poor jobs. A London woman related, 'We had a load of Polish and Romanians come over and they took jobs. . . . Don't give it to foreigners. Give us a chance' (LO-BW-007). Another Londoner highlighted increased competition from migrants: 'It just seems some of the interviews I go for there's a massive amount of non-British people going for the jobs' (LO-BW-010). Consequently migration was often cited as a key cause of unemployment: 'I would say one reason, it may not sound right, but there's a lot of foreigners in the country. They've took over the workforce and they're taking over the jobs and employers are happy to take them on. And it doesn't help people that come from here' (ED-BW-036). 'The causes of unemployment and social decline in this country is caused by being in the EU [European Union], open borders letting too many unskilled labourers in . . . government what they're doing they're encouraging big companies to employ migrant workers' (BR-AS-014).

A 23-year-old single Peterborough woman had left school at 16 years without any qualifications: 'So all I've ever had is cleaning jobs'. She had also completed a Hospitality and Catering course. At the time of interview she was living in private rented accommodation and had just secured a full-time care assistant job: 'I'm really lucky to have got accepted for this job'. A sanction for failing to attend a Work Programme appointment through ill-health had: 'made me really depressed'. The primary purpose of Jobcentre Plus was to force people off benefits with her work coach explaining: 'Basically, our aim is to try and get you to not claim Jobseeker's or any benefit, so we're going to make it as hard as possible for you'. Nevertheless, she justified benefit sanctions with reference to

the need to deter the illegitimate claims of migrants. 'There's so many people out there claiming benefits and coming into our country to claim benefits and I understand why they're doing it [sanctioning], because it's just crippling the system'. When asked about the causes of unemployment she highlighted the passivity of the poor and an 'entitlement mentality'. 'Some people just don't want to go out and work because they know they can get money [benefits] for free'.

As has been shown, respondents occasionally summoned the language of social injustice when assessing punitive welfare reforms and particularly when reflecting on the prospect of enduring them personally (e.g. mandatory work activity as 'slave labour', sanctions as 'unfair', 'harmful'). However, when explicitly factoring in 'parasitic' others in their assessments of the same polices, such language was remarkably absent. In its place was the language of ruling ideas – with participants instead drawing, almost verbatim, on the content of 'two-nations' hegemonic discourses to justify support for policies known to inflict harm upon themselves and others.

Nevertheless, while oppositional, structural perspectives on the causes of poverty and unemployment were scarce, personal experiences of coping with the privations caused by sanctions led a minority to reappraise their views. These tended to be older men aged in their fifties, some of which had lived through the increasingly punitive transformation of the benefits system and expressed a deep sense of personal injustice at the imposition of a sanction. A Bristol man had claimed JSA since 2006 and reported that Jobcentre Plus had become much less supportive. 'They've got computers up there, but that's about it, they don't help you that much' (BR-KJ-022). 'I was sanctioned because I didn't put the job I applied for onto their Universal Jobmatch . . . I thought it was petty'. He had resorted to using a food bank and had borrowed money from his sister to cope. There were no circumstances where the use of sanctions was justified because: 'they're stopping people from eating'. Similarly, an Edinburgh man had been sanctioned for a lack of job search activity which he ascribed to sanctioning targets: 'I just think they want people in and out and see how many people they can sanction' (ED-SJ-018). The adverse consequences of sanctioning were a major factor in his opposition to them: 'I think the consequences of the sanctions are not fair. People get into a lot more debt, it can lead to a whole chain of events, and their lives can be difficult'.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has shown how the unemployed are broadly supportive of punitive welfare reforms which have led to increased poverty and destitution; exacerbated ill health; disengagement with the benefits system and movements into 'survival crime' (Welfare Conditionality 2018). This has taken place in a context of concerted attempts by numerous British governments to mobilise popular support for contentious reforms through a 'two-nations hegemonic project' that constructs 'moralised antagonisms' between 'productive' and 'parasitic' populations (Lavery 2019). In light of this, we have sought to interrogate the usefulness of Marxist theories of hegemony to explain this apparent contradiction between claimants' (mostly) positive support for, and (mostly) negative experiences of, welfare reform.

The 'two-nations hegemonic project' which seeks to legitimise an ongoing phase of capitalist development featuring widening inter-class inequalities has had some success with the unemployed. This has been sought by constructing a range of 'parasitic' groups – that is, the feckless, the fraudulent, the migrant – as a threat to public resources who require immediate action in order to protect and advance the interests of 'productive', hardworking British taxpayers. It is salient to note that harmful experiences of punitive welfare reform did lead some individuals into a more oppositional stance as evidenced by hostility towards mandatory work activity and the reaction of some of those receiving benefit sanctions. Nevertheless, the present research has highlighted the important role played by the media as a hegemonic apparatus that binds the unemployed to particular ideas through their consent rather than coercion. Both policymakers and the unemployed, for example, referenced TV programmes such as 'Benefits Street' to conjure up 'phantom others' in aid of justifying benefit sanctions. The research has also underlined the notion that hegemony is a 'lived' process of political domination, with respondents frequently drawing upon their personal experiences to legitimate 'moralised antagonisms' and punitive welfare reforms (see later). Consequently, we contend that there are two key reasons why the content of 'two-nations' hegemonic projects have resonated with unemployed people:

- The stigmatising threat posed by hegemonic discourses to the identities of unemployed people;
- Their relatability to their lived experiences.

First, two-nations hegemonic projects explicitly produce and disseminate a 'stigma power' which is distinctively seductive and threatening to unemployed populations (Tyler 2020: 16–18). This is because discourses associated with two-nations projects specifically target and devalue out-of-work groups as a burden on public resources; thus posing a specific symbolic 'threat to claimants own identities' and their membership to the valued, 'productive' citizenry (cf. Patrick 2017: 161). Unemployed people frequently respond through classic forms of stigma management; dis-identifying with such discourses in their own case but concurring with and perpetuating them to censure 'other' groups. Interviewees frequently contrasted their own behaviour with 'undeserving' groups: 'Because, well I mean for me I'd rather be out there working, doing something, rather than sitting about doing nothing all day. You'll get some people that can't be bothered to work and stuff like that, but I'm just not one like that' (ED-SJ-010).

Thus, by managing the threat of stigma and attempting to establish distance from de-valued populations, the 'stigma power' produced within and disseminated through two-nations hegemonic projects manufactures consent for its agenda through forms of identity management and resistance. It does this by encouraging even those who are vulnerable to portrayals as 'parasitic' to affirm their own membership to the productive citizenry by dis-identifying with stigmatising discourses and deflecting them onto 'parasitic' others; which in turn works to establish, preserve and enhance divisions within groups that share common interests and common problems (Tyler 2020). The interviewees sometimes included former drug addicts, for example, who felt that 'junkies' should not be allowed to claim benefits. The stigma power typical of two-nations projects

therefore focuses the hostilities/discontents of unemployed populations towards socially and spatially proximate 'others' and away from the political leadership.

Second, the power of the two-nations project also resides in its relatability to the lived experiences of the unemployed. Successful hegemonic projects largely depend on their ability to link 'common-sense' ideas with real daily experiences and, compared with any other social group, the unemployed are perhaps most likely to relate to the discursive content of the two-nations project. This is not only because unemployed people are more likely to experience the harshest and most impoverishing conditions, but more importantly, they tend to occupy closer spatial and social proximity to 'parasitic' groups; who are thus more likely to be active and visible within the social milieu of unemployed populations. Moreover, two-nations projects have been successively deployed during a period where there has been a gradual 'withering away' (Shildrick & MacDonald 2013: 300) of the cultural resources necessary for working-class communities to develop more politicised forms of class consciousness and establish counter-hegemonies around poverty, unemployment and their causes (see Bagguley 1991). It is in this context that ruling ideas are more able to provide unemployed people with a *misleading* and *mis-recognisable* set of proximate scapegoats through which they can make sense of, and lay the blame for, legitimate concerns about growing poverty and insecurity.

There is some evidence to support this claim. While immigration has been found to have an overall positive effect on jobs, wages and public finances (Oxford Economics 2018), it may have a negative effect on groups who are most likely to claim unemployment benefits. Dustmann et al. (2013) found that increases in the ratio of immigrants to natives among the working age population has positive effects on native wages overall, but exerts downward pressure on the wages of workers occupying the lowest paid percentiles of the UK's wage distribution. Furthermore, a review of 12 studies conducted between 2003 and 2018 concluded that immigration is likely to have a negative effect on employment opportunities for those with an intermediate (O-level, GCSE, secondary school) education (Ruhs & Vargas-Silva 2020). When considering that increasing competition for jobs and downward pressure on wages for the poorest fractions of the working class has taken place alongside the promulgation of hegemonic discourses portraying migrating groups as a central threat, its perhaps stands to reason that such discourses are likely to hold greatest currency among those most likely to see and feel its negative effects in their everyday life. Personal narratives, for example, often referenced recruitment exercises where interviewees had lost job opportunities to migrants. A London man reported: 'they gave me the job but then withdrew it because an Eastern European was going to do it for less money' (LO-BW-010).

Moreover, while benefit fraud has remained consistently low, it does exist. From 2005 to 2018, fraud has fluctuated between 0.6% and 1.2% of the total unemployment benefit expenditure; reaching a peak of around £2.1 billion (DWP 2018: 3). Several studies have consistently found that various claimant groups engage in informal and/or illicit activities alongside claiming benefits to meet essential needs (Jordan et al. 1992; MacDonald 1994; Redman 2021). These studies conclude that the monetary gains of fraud are often very minor and more accurately reflect survival strategies developed in response to the increasingly punitive and impoverishing nature of welfare reform (Redman 2021). Nevertheless, they show that fraudulent activity is not uncommon in

the spaces typically inhabited by poor and/or unemployed people. Consequently, hegemonic discourses portraying fecklessness and benefit fraud as a central threat to public resources are likely to be most persuasive and/or subject to direct verification with those exposed to such activity. Familiarity with behavioural adaptations to poverty can generate narrative power just as much as ignorance can.

While immigration and benefit fraud may have some negative economic effects on working-class populations, these effects are comparatively minor when compared with those posed by political economic restructuring in Britain. Since 1980, the share of total national income apportioned to unemployment benefits and wages have undergone significant declines in spite of significant increases in average labour productivity and gross domestic product per head (Lapavitsas 2013; OECD 2020; Onaran 2014; ONS 2015). At the same time, the share of national income going towards business in the form of profits has increased (Glyn 2006; Roberts 2009). The top 1% of income earners now command almost double the share of national income than they did in 1980 (Harvey 2007; Onaran 2014). Moreover, the revenue lost in corporate tax avoidance to offshore tax havens alone, a growth industry since the 1980s, is roughly six times more than revenue lost in benefit fraud (DWP 2018; Zucman 2017).

It is on the basis of such evidence that we believe the participants in this study were justified in feeling and articulating a legitimate threat to the material conditions of their lives and their communities. However, the real threat to both unemployed people and the working class more generally lies not in socially proximate 'others'. Rather, it lies in the governments that not only continually fail to represent their material interests, but actively dismantle social protections to bolster corporate profitability and deploy punitive welfare reforms to submit the unemployed to chronically insecure poverty labour. It is, of course, the complexity and ambiguity of these processes that disguises and mystifies transfers of wealth and strengthens the power and effectiveness of hegemonic projects.

Acknowledgements

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