

The concept of the unemployable

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Current government policy documents have been concerned with reforming welfare policy, with matching rights with responsibilities, and especially with reducing the numbers of incapacity benefit claimants. This article places these debates in historical perspective, and revises the existing historiography on poverty and unemployment, by exploring the concept of the ‘unemployable’ in the period 1880–1940. Up to 1914, unemployability embraced those unable and those unwilling to work, and in the 1920s, similar anxieties were reconstructed in the concept of the ‘social problem group’. However, interwar social surveys were concerned more with the effects of long-term unemployment in creating unemployability. There are thus both changes and continuities between historical concerns with unemployability, and contemporary anxieties about incapacity benefit and worklessness.

I

Current government policy documents have been concerned with reforming welfare policy, with matching rights with responsibilities, and with reducing the numbers of incapacity benefit claimants.¹ The Green Paper, *A new deal for welfare* (January 2006) set out what it saw as a move away from a welfare state fixed to an old model of dispensing benefits, to an active, enabling system, where tailored support to help people back into work was matched by personal responsibility for people to help themselves. The aspiration was of achieving an employment rate equivalent to 80 per cent of the working-age population, by reducing by one million the number on incapacity benefits, helping lone parents into work, and increasing by one million the number of older workers. In particular, it was claimed that a large number of people coming onto incapacity benefits never got back to work, and were more likely to die or retire than to find a new job. A new Employment and Support Allowance was proposed, which would be paid to people in return for undertaking work-related interviews, agreeing an action plan, and participating in some form of work-related activity.²

While it mentioned lone parents and older people, the main focus of the Green Paper was those on incapacity benefits. By January 2006, there were over 2.7 million people on incapacity benefits. The number had risen by

¹ I am grateful to the editors and referees of the *Economic History Review*; to Tim Willis for alerting me to the Department for Work and Pensions literature review that inspired this article; to Bernard Harris for references on Rowntree and much other advice; and to participants in the EU conference at Coimbra, Portugal, Dec. 2004, where an earlier version was given as a paper.

² Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), *New deal for welfare*, pp. 2–4.

almost two million between 1979 and 1997, and around three-quarters of claimants had been on incapacity benefits for more than two years.³ The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) argued that the reforms were driven by evidence rather than ideology. In particular, it was claimed that its Pathways to Work pilots had demonstrated that, with the right help and support, many people on incapacity benefits could move back into work, reinforcing the view that labelling people on benefit as 'incapable of work', was entirely inappropriate. The pilots consisted of five strands of activity: mandatory work-focused interviews, better access to return-to-work support, improved incentives to prepare for and find work, the active involvement of employers in helping people prepare for work, and changing the attitudes of stakeholders towards illness and disability. Evaluations had suggested an increase of around eight percentage points in the numbers leaving benefits in the first six months of their claim compared to national rates.⁴

Another theme in recent debates has been the concept of worklessness. The Green Paper suggested that the groups furthest from the labour market were economically 'inactive rather than unemployed', and it also pointed to worklessness in cities, where there were pockets of persistent low employment, low skills, poor health, and weak economic performance.⁵ As with incapacity, this built on the evidence of earlier pilots. The Working Neighbourhoods Pilot began in April 2004, as a two-year pilot programme in 12 deprived neighbourhoods with very high levels of 'worklessness'. Each neighbourhood contained about 2,000 people receiving working age benefits. Working Neighbourhoods aimed to address problems of worklessness; low educational achievement and lack of skills; crime; drugs, alcohol, and substance abuse; lack of suitable affordable childcare; and difficulties with transport or 'unwillingness to travel'. Help on offer included advice, a flexible discretionary fund of £1 million per year, and quarterly work-focused interviews and action plans.⁶ In their paper *Full employment in every region* (December 2003), the Treasury and DWP had tackled the question of how to extend employment opportunities to people not currently engaged with the labour market. They pointed to groups that faced particular barriers to employment, such as people with disabilities, lone parents, ethnic minorities, those aged over 50, those with low or no qualifications, and those living in the most deprived areas. In particular, the Treasury and DWP pointed to concentrations of worklessness in very small areas, where a 'culture of worklessness' or 'poverty of aspirations' could develop, generating a 'vicious and self-perpetuating cycle leading not only to high levels of worklessness but also to crime, deprivation, and social exclusion'.⁷

³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 27–8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 76.

⁶ Trades Union Congress (TUC), *Working neighbourhoods*, p. 5.

⁷ HM Treasury and DWP, *Full employment in every region*, p. 50.

At that stage, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) commented that the belief that cultural factors lay behind some concentrations of poverty was an 'interesting break with assumptions that the culprits are either lazy individuals on the one hand or national/regional economic circumstances on the other'.⁸ Of course this belief merely reflects the broader approach of New Labour to welfare reform, where it has drawn eclectically on earlier explanations for poverty, and where the aim is both to 'level the playing field' and to 'activate the players'.⁹ Worklessness has since been defined as detachment from the formal labour market, in particular areas, and among particular groups. Thus workless individuals include those who are unemployed and claiming unemployment benefits, individuals who are economically inactive and eligible for inactive benefits, and individuals who are working exclusively in the informal economy. (The last two groups may or may not be claiming benefits.)¹⁰ Thus worklessness broadens traditional definitions of unemployment, by covering those who are unemployed or economically inactive and in receipt of benefits.

The fluidity of the concept of unemployment, and the fact that employment has been defined as much by social and political factors as by economic ones, has long been recognized. Groups deemed unemployable in one period have subsequently been incorporated into the labour market in another. Nevertheless just as much work on poverty has adopted a 'materialist' thesis, unemployability has been neglected in the historiography on unemployment.¹¹ This may reflect the fact that, as a response to the pathological emphasis of the Charity Organisation Society on the one hand, and to social casework in the 1950s on the other, analyses of social policy in the postwar period were dominated by interpretations that were highly deterministic.¹² Earlier work, for instance, has argued unemployability was not an individual characteristic alone, but related very much to the economic and social characteristics of the labour market.¹³ Similarly the 'social psychology' theory of unemployment has been rejected by both social policy analysts and historians. Sinfield, writing in 1981, argued the hypothesis had been illustrated and supported rather than tested. Writers had tended to look for social psychology patterns in the unemployed workers that they interviewed, and ignored evidence to the contrary.¹⁴ Marsh has suggested that evidence for staged responses to unemployment is based on 'unsystematic research, colourful autobiographies, memoirs, or intensive unstructured interviews with the unemployed'.¹⁵

⁸ TUC, *Working neighbourhoods*, p. 4.

⁹ Deacon, 'Levelling the playing field'.

¹⁰ Ritchie, Casebourne, and Rick, *Understanding workless people*, p. 2.

¹¹ Gazeley, *Poverty in Britain*, p. 6. Although see Whiteside, *Bad times*, pp. 13–14, 62–3, 67, 73, 85; Burnett, *Idle hands*, pp. 156, 160, 220, 305.

¹² Deacon and Mann, 'Agency, modernity and social policy'; Welshman, 'Unknown Titmuss'; Welshman, 'Ideology, social science, and public policy'.

¹³ Miller and Harrison, 'Types of dropouts', p. 478, n. 4.

¹⁴ Sinfield, *What unemployment means*, p. 37.

¹⁵ Marsh, 'Unemployment in Britain', p. 361.

This article aims to both provide an historical perspective on current debates around incapacity benefit and worklessness, and revise the existing historiography on poverty and unemployment, through exploring the concept of unemployability in the period 1880–1940. First, it traces the theory of the ‘social residuum’ in the 1880s, and the work of Charles Booth in identifying his classes ‘A’ and ‘B’. Second, it explores the appeal of the concept of the unemployable to commentators such as the Webbs and Beveridge in the early 1900s, arguing that it embraced both those unable, and those allegedly unwilling, to work. Third, it considers other social surveys, including that by Bowley, which suggest a more structural analysis. Fourth, the article looks at the interwar period, at the way earlier concerns were reconstructed as the social problem group, and at social surveys that reflected the concern that prolonged unemployment would produce unemployability. As long ago as 1987, Whiteside noted that the interrelationship between the demand for labour, the classification of the jobless, and trends in social pathology merited more attention than it usually received.¹⁶ This article agrees, arguing there are striking continuities between historical anxieties about unemployability, contemporary constructions of worklessness, and the focus on incapacity, and that the concept of the unemployable needs to be integrated into the existing historiography on poverty and unemployment.

II

In the 1880s, the theme of unemployability was an important component in writing on the residuum, which has itself been seen as an early ‘underclass’ concept.¹⁷ Stedman Jones has argued that concerns about the residuum were central to the crisis of the 1880s, and were present in the thinking of every group, from the Charity Organisation Society to the Social Democratic Federation. The residuum was dangerous, not only ‘because of its degenerate nature, but also because its very existence served to contaminate the classes immediately above it’.¹⁸ New theories of ‘degeneration’ influenced the debate and served to switch the focus from the moral inadequacies of the individual to the effects of the urban environment. The dock strike of 1889 marked a crucial turning point, since its effect was to establish, in the eyes of the middle class, a clear distinction between the respectable working class and the residuum.¹⁹ However, Harris argues that the term ‘residuum’ was used in many different ways, and a demarcation between the respectable and degenerate poor long pre-dated the 1880s.²⁰ Moreover,

¹⁶ Whiteside, ‘Counting the cost’, p. 245.

¹⁷ Macnicol, ‘In pursuit of the underclass’; Mann, *Making of an English ‘underclass?’*; Welshman, ‘Cycle of deprivation’.

¹⁸ Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, pp. 283–9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 303–21.

²⁰ Harris, ‘Between civic virtue and Social Darwinism’, pp. 76–8.

theories of the residuum had other sources in political and social thought, apart from the application of Darwinism. They were fuelled as much by issues to do with extending the suffrage to the working class, as with biological degeneracy. The debate about social reform in the 1880s and 1890s was influenced by evolutionary language, but this should be seen as 'emblematic verbiage rather than precise social science'.²¹

The work of Booth has occupied a central place in these debates. Brown, for instance, has explored how Booth considered the potential of labour colonies.²² Stedman Jones suggests that the new distinction between the respectable working class and the residuum was amplified by the writings of Booth, since he divided the residuum into two groups, his classes 'A' and 'B'. However, in an analysis of Booth's contribution to social theory, Hennock has argued that there are important elements of continuity with the 1860s that make it difficult to regard the 1880s as a period of significant theoretical innovation.²³ Moreover, Harris has suggested that Booth used evolutionary language opportunistically and rather loosely. He did not suggest that progress or degeneracy were caused by irreversible biological mutation—rather men and women were mainly the products of experience and circumstance. The solutions that Booth advocated most seriously were not dispersal and labour colonies, but the exercise of character and rational choice.²⁴

In his first paper to the Royal Statistical Society (May 1887), Booth described the 'condition of the inhabitants' of Tower Hamlets, comprising the five registration districts of Whitechapel, St George's in the East, Stepney, Mile End Old Town, and Poplar.²⁵ Booth divided the people who lived there into eight classes, ranging from 'A', the 'lowest class', to 'H', the 'upper middle class'. Class 'A' comprised some 6,882 people, or 1.5 per cent of the total population. Included in it were so-called labourers, loafers, semi-criminals, some street sellers and street performers, the homeless, and people who were both working and engaged in crime.²⁶ Class 'B', dependent on casual earnings, comprised some 51,860 people, or over 11 per cent of the total. Nevertheless, the dividing lines between these classes were blurred, and this was confirmed when Booth attempted to classify the population by employment, or 'sections', which were more 'divisions of sentiment than of positive fact'.²⁷ Section 1 did correspond to class 'A', section 2 were the true casual labourers, section 3 the irregularly employed, and section 4 those in regular work but on minimum wages. Those in section 1 were 'casual labourers of low character, together with those who pick up a living without labour, and include the criminal or semi-criminal classes'.²⁸

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²² Brown, 'Charles Booth and labour colonies', pp. 349–60.

²³ Hennock, 'Poverty and social theory', pp. 90–1.

²⁴ Harris, 'Between civic virtue and Social Darwinism', pp. 78–81.

²⁵ Booth, 'Inhabitants of Tower Hamlets', p. 375.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Their food was poor, and alcohol their only luxury, and it was they who helped to 'foul the record of the unemployed'.²⁹ Booth had no doubt that the situation of these people was in part hereditary—the children of this class were the 'street arabs', and were separated from their parents in pauper or industrial schools. More numerous were the young people who belonged to this group—loafers, prostitutes, those who drifted back from the pauper and industrial schools, and others relegated from the 'classes of casual and irregular labour'.³⁰ At the same time, the group was not homogeneous and there were some respectable individuals; Booth suggested that 'those who are able to wash the mud may find some gems in it'.³¹

Booth's analysis was complex and ambiguous. In his survey of unemployment in the same paper, Booth wrote of section 1 that 'it is not only quite certain that they do not really want work, but also that there is very little useful work for which they are fitted'.³² The offer of work was refused, or soon dropped, and the men returned to 'more congenial pursuits'. Booth noted that he did not want to make too much of 'such inferiority of skill or character' that may have cost them their place or lost them a chance when places and chances were not plentiful. But he also argued that while many 'good' men were idle, those that asked for charity did not stand the test of work; they could not keep work when they got it, indicating that lack of work was not the main problem. Booth wrote that the unemployed were 'as a class, a selection of the unfit, and on the whole those most in want are the most unfit'.³³ But in his overall conclusions, he argued that while the state of affairs revealed in his investigations was serious, it was 'not visibly fraught with imminent social danger, or leading straight to revolution'.³⁴ While the evidence of widespread poverty was serious, his findings were broadly reassuring.

In his second paper to the Royal Statistical Society (May 1888), Booth reported on his survey of the Hackney School Board Division, comprising the registration districts of Shoreditch, Bethnal Green, and Hackney. Again much of the information was collected by School Board visitors. Booth retained his eight classes, estimating that class 'A' comprised some 11,000 people, or 1.25 per cent of the total, while class 'B' numbered some 100,000 people, or 11.25 per cent. However, Booth now argued that classes 'B', 'C', and 'D' constituted the real problem of poverty, disregarding 'A', which he regarded more as an issue of 'disorder'.³⁵ He distinguished between the 'poor' and the 'very poor', and between poverty, want, and distress. In particular, in an attempt to uncover the causes of poverty, Booth analysed 4,000 cases in each district. With regard to the 1,610 heads of families in

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 335.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p. 372.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 375.

³⁵ Booth, 'Condition and occupations', pp. 276–309.

classes 'A' and 'B', 4 per cent had been classified by School Board visitors as 'loafers'; 55 per cent were in poverty owing to 'questions of employment', casual or irregular employment or low pay; 14 per cent because of 'questions of habit', including 'drink or obvious want of thrift'; and 27 per cent owing to 'questions of circumstance', ranging through large families, illness, and irregular work. In contrast, a similar analysis of 2,466 heads of families in classes 'C' and 'D' suggested that none were loafers; 68 per cent were in poverty because of 'questions of employment'; 13 per cent because of 'questions of habit'; and 19 per cent through 'questions of circumstance'.³⁶

Hennock has suggested that Booth's main distinction here was between the lack of an adequate income, and the misuse of income. Booth admitted that neither table took account of incapacity for work, other than illness. But incapacity was common, in that it led to low pay and irregularity of employment, and included within the theme of incapacity were issues of intellect, behaviour, motivation, speed, character, aptitude, illness, infirmity, and disability.³⁷ He conceded that the tables amalgamated classes 'A' and 'B', but argued the main problem was posed by class 'B'; if it could be 'swept out of existence' the work it did could be taken on by classes 'C' and 'D', which would then be much better off. Booth argued that the poverty of the poor was mainly the result of competition from the very poor, and he advocated labour colonies, writing that 'the entire removal of this class out of the daily struggle for existence I believe to be the only solution of the problem of poverty'.³⁸ Class 'A', on the other hand, represented a very small group—both in relation to the rest of the population and with regard to class 'B'. Echoing his paper of the previous year, Booth maintained that the situation was not out of control. His purpose was to reassure on the basis of his extensive social investigation, and to play down the more dramatic pronouncements of some of his contemporaries.³⁹

The ways in which Booth viewed his classes 'A' and 'B' are further illustrated in the collected volumes of the *Life and labour of the people in London*, published from 1889. These included examples of what might be termed evolutionary language.⁴⁰ Booth argued that periods of economic slump sorted out those men who were better managers or who had other advantages, writing that 'there result a constant seeking after improvement, a weeding-out of the incapable, and a survival of the fittest'.⁴¹ Nevertheless, while he advocated that class 'A' should be dispersed, and that labour colonies might be used for class 'B', the latter was not in any sense fixed, and it is not clear how seriously he viewed labour colonies as a solution. Though he termed it a 'sort of quagmire underlying the social structure',

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 295; Hennock, 'Poverty and social theory', p. 83.

³⁷ Booth, 'Condition and occupations', p. 296.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

⁴⁰ Booth, *Life and labour: first series*, p. 150.

⁴¹ Booth, *Life and labour: second series*, p. 73.

class 'B' were not paupers, but 'the material from which paupers are made'.⁴² Moreover, while he argued that class 'A' was hereditary, he hoped that it might become less so, partly through improved provision for children.⁴³ Finally, his overall message was again hopeful, since he concluded 'there are barbarians, but they are a handful, a small and decreasing percentage: a disgrace but not a danger'.⁴⁴ As Hennock has suggested, the percentages that Booth presented, far from being grounds for pessimism, were in his opinion ones for optimism.⁴⁵

Booth's use of his classes 'A' and 'B' has therefore led to disagreement between historians, notably in terms of whether the 1880s were a period of significant theoretical innovation, and with regard to his use of evolutionary language. In analysing poverty and unemployment, Booth drew on the language of fitness, but he emphasized questions of 'employment' over and above questions of 'habit' or 'circumstance'. Booth did not use the terms 'residuum' or 'unemployable', and his class 'A' was extremely small. Moreover, his analysis of incapacity for work was as much about capacity for employment as about attitudes to it. In his evidence to the 1904 Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration, Booth appeared less enthusiastic than he had been previously about labour colonies. More generally, he was cautious in distinguishing between behavioural and structural causes of overcrowding and poverty, noting that 'in all these cases the causes act and re-act in a way which makes it very difficult to trace where you begin and where you end'.⁴⁶ Overall, his argument was that it was largely casual work that promoted unemployability. In these ways, Booth's contribution was extremely important, in revising the concept of the residuum, and in creating his classes 'A' and 'B', suggesting that indeed the 1880s were a period of significant theoretical innovation. The work of Booth marked, at the very least, a significant development from the concept of the residuum. It was his eight-class taxonomy of the population, and his classes 'A' and 'B' within it, that provided a focal point for discussion of unemployability in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods.

III

Booth's work had an immediate impact on his contemporaries. Writing in 1894, Geoffrey Drage, secretary to the Royal Commission on Labour, argued that temporary unemployment was usually the result of conditions independent of the men involved, and over which they had no control. Drage conceded that there were many temporarily without work because of economic conditions rather than their 'comparative fitness', and it was the

⁴² Booth, *Life and labour: first series*, p. 176.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁴⁵ Hennock, 'Poverty and social theory', p. 75.

⁴⁶ *Report of the I. D. C. on Physical Deterioration* (P.P. 1904, XXXII), Q. 973–80.

'least capable' or the 'least steady' who were the first to be 'turned off'. Unemployment could be as a result of 'low physical and moral condition', old age, or a physical disability. But Drage argued that more often it was 'faults of character—habits of intemperance, idleness or dishonesty—which constitute their inferiority'. Casual labourers could fall into a lower class of the unemployable, which consisted of those 'who are permanently unemployed because through some physical or moral defect they are economically worthless'.⁴⁷ Booth ignored the trade cycle and unemployment, neglected the cyclical nature of poverty, and offered instead a static picture. Drage, on the other hand, took account of the trade cycle, and divided the unemployed into two classes, but neglected the economic causes of unemployment.⁴⁸ Certainly Drage was heavily influenced by the earlier work of his contemporary; his unemployables were Booth's class 'A'. Like Booth, he attached great importance to classifying the unemployed, advocated labour colonies as offering a temporary solution to the problem, and equated fitness with employability.

By the 1890s, the term 'unemployable' had become a synonym for the residuum, and this is illustrated by some of the early writings of Sidney and Beatrice Webb.⁴⁹ In their *Industrial democracy* (1897), for example, the Webbs distinguished between the unemployable and the temporarily unemployed. They argued that, while unemployment was inevitable in the lives of even the most competent and 'best conducted' workmen, the unemployable, like the poor, were a permanent social feature.⁵⁰ The unemployable comprised three groups. First were children, older people, and women of child-bearing age. Second, the sick and crippled, 'idiots and lunatics', the epileptic, the blind, deaf, and dumb, criminals and the 'incorrigibly idle', and all who were 'morally deficient'. Third, men and women who 'without suffering from apparent disease of body or mind' were unable to apply themselves continuously, or who were so deficient in strength, speed, or skill that they were unable to maintain regular employment.⁵¹ The Webbs advocated both treatment and prevention. Labour colonies would remove the unemployable from the labour market, and avoid the danger of 'parasitic competition with those who are whole', while a national minimum of education, sanitation, leisure, and wages would reduce the costs of the unemployable to the state, and begin to reduce its size.⁵² Taxpayers, it was alleged, were concerned at having to maintain in public institutions 'an enlarged residuum of the unemployable', and a national minimum would 'increase the efficiency of the community as a whole'.⁵³

⁴⁷ Drage, *The unemployed*, p. 142.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 154; Brown, 'Charles Booth and labour colonies', p. 355.

⁴⁹ Treble, *Urban poverty in Britain*, p. 112.

⁵⁰ Webb and Webb, *Industrial democracy*, p. 785.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 787.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 789.

Late Victorian and Edwardian thinking on the unemployable can be explored through social surveys and other writing. Here arguably the key survey was the first Rowntree survey of York (1901). Bradshaw suggests that it had an important impact on public understanding of poverty, it had an immediate impact on policy, and it established the British tradition of empirical social science research.⁵⁴ Rowntree's distinction between primary and secondary poverty was a critical element in convincing the public that poverty was a structural rather than merely a behavioural problem, and this consigned the distinction between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor to history. If poverty in Britain has been understood, in the main, as a structural problem rather than a behavioural one, argues Bradshaw, this is in part because of the legacy of Rowntree.⁵⁵ Gazeley has written more cautiously of this period that 'the nineteenth-century Benthamite analysis of the cause of destitution, based on individual failing, was gradually giving way to an analysis of the causes of poverty that accepted it could be the result of structural failure, largely outside the control of individuals'.⁵⁶

Impressed by the work of Booth, Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree (1871–1954) was determined to find out if the state of the poor in York was as serious as in London, and *Poverty: a study of town life* was published in 1901. At the outset, Rowntree outlined his aim as being to 'throw some light upon the conditions which govern the life of the wage-earning classes in provincial towns, and especially upon the problem of poverty'.⁵⁷ The method chosen was a house-to-house survey of York carried out in 1899, of 11,560 families living in 388 streets. The families comprised a total of 46,754 people, or two-thirds of the total population of the city. Rowntree included an enquiry into food, rent, and other expenditure, along with a study of social conditions, budgets, and diet. He estimated that 20,302 people in York (27.84 per cent) were in poverty, the proportion in primary poverty using income data was 7,230 people (9.91 per cent of the total population), and the proportion in secondary poverty was 3,072 people (17.93 per cent).⁵⁸ Primary poverty was defined as 'families whose total earnings are insufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency'.⁵⁹ Secondary poverty, on the other hand, was defined as 'families whose total earnings would be sufficient for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency were it not that some portion of it is absorbed by other expenditure, either useful or wasteful'.⁶⁰

With regard to explanations for poverty, there are two important methodological differences between the surveys of Booth and Rowntree. First, Rowntree employed a single investigator to undertake house-to-house visits,

⁵⁴ Bradshaw, 'Preface', p. xx.

⁵⁵ Bradshaw, *ibid.*, pp. xxix, xxxi, xxxviii–xl.

⁵⁶ Gazeley, *Poverty in Britain*, p. 23.

⁵⁷ Rowntree, *Poverty*, pp. vii–x.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 295, 304.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. vii–x.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

and surveyed the entire working-class population as he defined it. Second, Rowntree classified his households in poverty by appearance in the first instance, and subsequently by income and household composition rather than by 'conditions of poverty'.⁶¹ In explaining poverty, Rowntree argued that people moved in and out of poverty, and also stressed that structural factors were the key causes. He argued, for example, that few people were likely to remain in his class 'A'; that is, families with a total income under 18s. At any time the poor might sink into it, through lack of work or the death or illness of the main wage-earner, but equally they would rise out of it when work was found, or when children began to earn money. Poverty was in part cyclical, and only older people would remain in class 'A', until they died or went into the workhouse.⁶² In general, claimed Rowntree, the main causes of primary poverty were the death, incapacity through accident, illness, or old age, or unemployment of the main wage-earner; chronic irregularity of work; large families; and low wages.⁶³

Writing on Rowntree has clarified the circumstances in which his first survey came to be written, showing, for example, how his background as an industrialist led him to have an interest in the 'physical efficiency' of his workers.⁶⁴ As with Booth, 'evolutionary' language was occasionally apparent in Rowntree's description of his class 'A'. 'Unfitness' meant low wages, low wages meant insufficient food, and insufficient food led to 'unfitness' for labour. The result was a vicious circle that was perpetuated in the next generation. Even if healthy when poor, poor nutrition soon had an effect on the children of such parents, so that they grew up weak and diseased, and perpetuated the race of the 'unfit'.⁶⁵ At other points, Rowntree argued that high infant mortality in certain wards in York 'weeded out' sickly children; many of those who survived did so with 'seriously enfeebled constitutions'.⁶⁶

Nonetheless the closest Rowntree came to a behavioural explanation was in his discussion of what he termed secondary poverty. Veit-Wilson has argued that Rowntree used the distinction between primary and secondary poverty as a heuristic device to convince those who favoured a behavioural interpretation that the lifestyle of the poor was in part caused by low income.⁶⁷ Rowntree estimated secondary poverty by calculating the amount of poverty in York, and then subtracting primary poverty from the total. He conceded that the point at which primary passed into secondary poverty was largely a matter of opinion, depending upon the standard of well-being that was considered necessary.⁶⁸ Rowntree argued that the causes of sec-

⁶¹ Hennock, 'Concepts of poverty', p. 191.

⁶² Rowntree, *Poverty*, p. 47; Veit-Wilson, 'Paradigms of poverty'.

⁶³ Rowntree, *Poverty*, p. 45.

⁶⁴ Briggs, 'Seebohm Rowntree's *Poverty*'; Gillie, 'Rowntree, poverty lines and school boards'.

⁶⁵ Rowntree, *Poverty*, p. 46.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 207, 216–21.

⁶⁷ Veit-Wilson, 'Paradigms of poverty', pp. 97–8.

⁶⁸ Rowntree, *Poverty*, pp. 140–2.

ondary poverty were in part in the control of individuals, since they included drink, betting, and gambling. Nevertheless, he also included 'ignorant or careless housekeeping, and other improvident expenditure, the latter often induced by irregularity of income'.⁶⁹ Moreover Rowntree argued that the causes of 'secondary poverty' were again primarily structural, in that they reflected the wider environmental circumstances within which much of the working class lived.⁷⁰ Subsequent correspondence indicated that this was one of the main bones of contention between Rowntree and Bosanquet.⁷¹

The differences between the methods of Booth and Rowntree in part reflected differences between labour market conditions in London and York. Nevertheless both Bradshaw and Gazeley underestimate the extent to which a behavioural interpretation of poverty and unemployment has been successively reinvented in twentieth-century Britain. While the work of Rowntree marked an important shift in the analysis of social problems, a behavioural explanation continued to coexist with a structural analysis. If the residuum and the unemployable were absent from Rowntree's survey, it was to prove a temporary respite. In fact, other contemporary writing on unemployment, published after the Rowntree survey, indicates that the concept of the unemployable remained influential. The reference point for these writers continued to be Booth, rather than Rowntree.

IV

Indeed, there is much evidence that the concept of unemployability became coarsened and popularized as unemployment returned in the early 1900s. Alden, previously Warden of the Mansfield House settlement in East London, argued in 1905 that the unemployable was composed of two groups, those unwilling to work, and those unable to work. First were the 'criminals, semi-criminals, vicious vagabonds and the incorrigibly lazy'—in a word, the able-bodied who refused to work, or were refused work because of some 'defect' in their character. Second were the physically and mentally 'deficient', who could be subdivided into a further four groups—the aged; the physically weak and maimed; epileptics; and 'weak-willed inebriates and the mentally deficient'.⁷² For the first group, Alden advocated the abolition of casual wards, the introduction of identification papers, the provision of relief stations, and the setting-up of labour colonies. For the second group, his solutions included residential homes for old people, the provision of old age pensions, and the creation of farm colonies.⁷³ Alden had visited labour colonies in Holland, Belgium, and Germany, and the key theme of his book was segregation. He argued it was important to distinguish between the

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 144–5; Veit-Wilson, 'Paradigms of poverty'.

⁷¹ Harris, 'Seebohm Rowntree', p. 69; Gillie, 'Rowntree, poverty lines and school boards', p. 97.

⁷² Alden, *Unemployed*, p. 17.

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 17–31.

genuine unemployed man in search of work, and the 'vicious vagrant' who had not the slightest intention of working.⁷⁴ At the same time, many men need not be permanently 'unemployable', but could be rehabilitated—they were 'men of weak character, easily swayed and led by the baser kind'.⁷⁵ Alden's overall aim was to prevent the 'wholesale demoralisation' of the working class.⁷⁶

It is clear that much of the discussion about unemployables in the 1890s and 1900s depended on Booth's analysis; Booth's class 'A' corresponded to those unwilling to work, and his class 'B' to those unable to obtain regular work. Ideas about employability influenced broader debates and policy documents, including the 1906 Report of the Committee on Vagrancy. Appointed in July 1904, its Report was permeated by a distinction between the 'habitual vagrant' and the 'bona fide wayfarer'.⁷⁷ In this period, there was much overlap between discussions of vagrancy and debates about unemployability. However, what is arguably most striking is how vagrancy and unemployment were perceived as separate social 'problems'. Writing in the preface to Kelly's *The unemployables* (1907), Sir William Chance echoed the recommendations of the Departmental Committee, noting the importance of abolishing the casual wards, and establishing labour colonies for the unemployed and habitual vagrants. Kelly himself attempted to classify the unemployed according to physical strength, blame, and the causes of unemployment, and provided a more sustained analysis of the concept of the unemployable. He argued it was important to distinguish between the able-bodied and the non-able-bodied, between the blameless and the not blameless, and between the temporary and the permanent. Again this relied to a large extent on Booth's analysis. Kelly argued that ultimately labour colonies might solve the problem of vagrancy, reduce the cost of the 'criminal class', and rehabilitate those who could be reformed.⁷⁸ Colonies could ultimately become self-supporting, and could also prevent the current generation of vagrants from reproducing.

Changing views on the causes of unemployment were both reflected in, and informed by, work by William Beveridge (1879–1963). In her biography, Harris notes that Beveridge argued that unemployment should be seen not as a problem of social distress or personal character, but as a problem of industrial organization. He thought there were three types of unemployment—redundancy, occasional unemployment, and chronic underemployment—and these were more important than traditional explanations based on lack of skill or thrift, and moral character. Thus Beveridge cut across debates about 'character' and 'environment' by arguing that it was industrial conditions that created the character of the unemployed, and that industrial

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁷⁷ *Report of the D. C. on Vagrancy* (P.P. 1906, CIII), p. 1.

⁷⁸ Kelly, *The unemployables*, p. 10.

reorganization, not just moral improvement, was essential.⁷⁹ Yet Harris also makes clear that, as with many of his contemporaries, Beveridge's views were complex, and while at times he subscribed to an 'environmental' interpretation, at others he was swayed by eugenics, especially with regard to mental deficiency. The development of Beveridge's views on unemployment between 1903 and 1906 was in many respects ambivalent. On the one hand he was intellectually committed to a purely inductive approach to social problems, yet many of his conclusions about unemployment were derived not merely from facts but from contemporary social theory.⁸⁰

In 1904, for example, Beveridge had reflected in the *Contemporary Review* on the lessons of the Mansion House Fund for tackling unemployment. The main feature of the proposals of the Mansion House Committee, supported by the Lord Mayor's Fund, had been the offer of continuous work, in colonies outside London, to male heads of families. Between December 1903 and March 1904, 467 families received relief. Work tests and the local knowledge of the selectors had been relied upon to eliminate those deemed 'undesirable'. Beveridge argued the test had been effective, and those who had hoped to benefit from the opening of relief funds had stopped applying once they found that work was demanded.⁸¹ He suggested the main lessons from the experiment had been both the importance of classification, and the persistence of the distress. Beveridge argued that the 'material' comprised three groups—the unemployable, casual labourers, and men normally in regular work. The unemployable had to be isolated, and periods of regular work and discipline in compulsory labour colonies were essential. Beveridge wrote of the unemployable that 'they include those habituated to the workhouse and to the casual ward, and the many regular inmates of shelters who are paupers in all but name. For these, long periods of regular work and discipline in compulsory labour colonies are essential'.⁸²

The inconsistencies in Beveridge's thought are also evident in his *Unemployment: a problem of industry* (1909). On the one hand, Beveridge asked to what extent could strengths of personality prevent unemployment, and how far should weaknesses of personality be regarded as its causes. For Beveridge, there were some men who clearly did not want to work. They were the 'social parasites' represented by habitual criminals and vagrants, and they were as 'definitely diseased' as the inmates of hospitals, asylums and infirmaries.⁸³ Beveridge believed there were various 'defects of character' that increased the likelihood of a person becoming unemployed. First, were the 'purely parasitic types' who constituted a permanent vagrant class. Second, were men willing to work now and again, but not continuously. Third, among all men, were 'common faults and occasional self-

⁷⁹ Harris, *William Beveridge*, pp. 103–6.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 120–1.

⁸¹ Beveridge and Maynard, 'Unemployed'.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 633.

⁸³ Beveridge, *Unemployment*, pp. 134, 137.

indulgences' whose net effect was to increase economic waste and unemployment.⁸⁴ However, Beveridge acknowledged that the term 'unemployable' had no real meaning—the best carpenter in the world was unemployable as a printer—and the dividing line between 'this class' and the rest of the community was hard to define.⁸⁵ The problem of unemployment could only to a limited extent be solved by improvements in human character. First, the 'class of the unemployable' was small. Second, human character could best be improved by eliminating the social or industrial conditions that tended to perpetuate 'idleness and irresponsibility'. Third, no likely improvement in character would eliminate the main economic factors in unemployment. Beveridge observed that one of the main problems was that many people were living on a 'quicksand' of casual and irregular work. Therefore he concluded that while irregular work was part of industry, society could not escape its responsibility for casual labourers, treat them as criminals, or 'end the evil by rescuing individuals'.⁸⁶

Harris argues that Beveridge's views on unemployment were in many ways based on traditional economic and evolutionary assumptions, especially in relation to the issue of casual labour. The distress that resulted from unemployment was viewed as the product of a disorganized labour market, but it was also thought casual and irregular workmen were inferior social specimens. It was important to maintain the principle of deterrence, but at the same time it was thought the labour market should be regulated and unemployment reduced. The lowest class was not seen just as inefficient or improvident, but as a degenerate class, although this distinction was increasingly called into question by the leaders of the working class. However, personal criticism of the unemployed was not incompatible with a structural explanation. The solutions that Beveridge put forward embraced labour exchanges, unemployment insurance, short-time agreements and adjustments in standard wage-rates at times of depression, and the reform of the poor law. He believed, therefore, that social and economic activities were capable of rational administrative control.⁸⁷

By the publication of the Minority Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Law (1909), the Webbs had tempered their earlier ideas. The Report argued that 'character' was irrelevant in discussions of unemployment, and the unemployable were a heterogeneous group comprising those who did and did not look for work. Moreover, some of those deemed unemployable could be rehabilitated—if properly sorted, there was much that could be useful, and some 'gems' of real value.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, historians and social policy analysts have demonstrated that, from its introduction in 1911,

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁸⁷ Harris, *William Beveridge*, pp. 141–3.

⁸⁸ National Committee, *Minority report*, pp. 210–11, 236; Lewis, 'Place of social investigation'; Lewis, 'Social facts, social theory and social change'.

conditions were built into the National Insurance Act to prevent abuse, and there was a persistent desire to counter the malingerer. One was the penalty for leaving work 'without good cause', another the condition that claimants had to be 'capable and available for work', and a third that benefits were related directly to contributions. These clauses reflected concern about 'loafers', and a desire that benefits should go only to the 'genuinely' unemployed.⁸⁹ The introduction of unemployment insurance served to divide the unemployed from the unemployable. The unemployed were those normally in regular employment (with a record of regular contributions to prove it) who suffered short, temporary spells without work, as a result of fluctuations in trade or other circumstances outside their control. Respectable workers were allowed benefit as of right when ill or out of work. Those without regular employment, on the other hand, formed part of a residuum of inefficient workers surplus to industrial requirements.⁹⁰

The concept of the unemployable was an important aspect of social thought in the period 1890–1911, and has been largely ignored in the historiography of unemployment. It had several underlying strands. First, it drew on theories of evolution and biological degeneracy evident in the earlier notion of the residuum. Second, it emphasized the theme of individual unemployability, influenced by contemporary debates about 'character', and saw the unemployable less as a class, and more as a subset of the unemployed. It is clear that much of the discussion about unemployables in the 1890s and 1900s depended on Booth's analysis; the unemployables were his class 'A'. But third, Booth's more subtle analysis became coarsened in the early 1900s. The unemployable came to be seen as a heterogeneous group, made up of those unable to work, and those allegedly unwilling to work, or put another way, the physically, mentally, and morally 'defective'.⁹¹ Fourth, the concept of the unemployable had clear policy implications, as seen in the widespread support for labour colonies, based in part on the example of other European countries, but it also coexisted alongside a more structural interpretation, which emphasized casual work, the fluctuations of the trade cycle, and the potential usefulness of employment exchanges. The main problem before 1914 was not so much unemployment as underemployment, and most periods of unemployment were short-lived. Overall, it was a debate about both capacity for work and attitudes towards employment.

V

In their history of the poor law (1929), the Webbs claimed that the First World War had demonstrated two things. First, there was no 'surplus' population for which occupation or wages could not be found. Second, the

⁸⁹ Deacon, *In search of the scrounger*.

⁹⁰ Whiteside, *Bad times*, p. 63.

⁹¹ Thomson, *Problem of mental deficiency*.

category of the unemployable had no definite boundary, since a large proportion of those thought to be physically, mentally, or morally incapable of employment did find work in wartime.⁹² Stedman Jones has written similarly that ‘once decent and regular employment was made available, “the unemployables” proved impossible to find. In fact they had never existed, except as a phantom army called up by late Victorian and Edwardian social science to legitimise its practice’.⁹³ Whether this is indeed correct can be explored through Rowntree’s 1911 survey of unemployment, writing by Tawney, and by Bowley’s social survey of working-class households in four English towns (1915). Although the main focus has been on the statistics that the Edwardian social surveys generated, the thinking behind them is receiving increasing attention. In this way they offer insights into changing approaches to the concept of the unemployable. The unemployable made a temporary disappearance from the discourse of social investigation, not so much because of broader economic trends, but as a result of changes in social theory.

If the first survey by Rowntree was mainly concerned with poverty, his thinking was further demonstrated by his examination of unemployment in York (1911). In this survey, 105 men were found to be ‘work-shy’, defined as those whose inefficiency, or unwillingness to work, was not because of age, illness, or any other physical disqualification, but primarily because of ‘infirmity of character’.⁹⁴ But Rowntree argued the line separating these men from the casual worker was a very fine one, and the state of mind of the ‘work-shy’ was ‘often the result of external conditions beyond their control’. Of the 105, for example, 50 had been previously engaged in regular work, and were ‘inferior workmen’ who, once unemployed, found it difficult to compete for work against ‘better men’.⁹⁵ Rowntree asked if, born of a ‘poor stock’, and growing up surrounded by a poor environment, with minimum education, unskilled work, and living in overcrowded housing, was it any surprise that they fell victim to the bookmaker or the publican, or lost heart and joined the ranks of those who had ‘ceased to strive’.⁹⁶ He acknowledged that even if the number of unemployables was reduced, ‘a residuum of unemployed men’ would still exist, and some form of labour colony was necessary for them. But Rowntree also argued that it was much more important to prevent the manufacture of ‘shirkers’, than to learn how to deal with them after they had been made.⁹⁷

In his point about why men joined the ranks of those who had ‘ceased to strive’, Rowntree appeared to anticipate later debates around the ‘culture of poverty’, in which culture was seen primarily as an adaptive response to

⁹² Webb and Webb, *English poor law history*, p. 668.

⁹³ Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, p. 336.

⁹⁴ Rowntree and Lasker, *Unemployment*, p. 173.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 178–9.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 185–6.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

broader structural or environmental constraints. Further insights into changing views on explanations of poverty were provided by the inaugural lecture of the Director of the Ratan Tata Foundation, R. H. Tawney, given at the London School of Economics in October 1913. Entitled 'Poverty as an industrial problem', Tawney argued that the discipline of economic history had led to a change to approach problems of poverty as problems of industry; to emphasize the fundamental economic contrasts common to social groups, rather than individual peculiarities of earning and spending; and to take the trade, the town, or the school as the unit of enquiry rather than the isolated individual or family.⁹⁸ Tawney argued that modern poverty was associated, not with personal misfortunes peculiar to individuals, but with the economic status of particular classes and occupations, and poverty should be studied, 'first at its sources, and only secondly in its manifestations'.⁹⁹ He proposed that low wages, casual employment, and juvenile labour were the most pressing areas to be studied.

Whereas Rowntree was a businessman and philanthropist, Arthur Bowley (1869–1957) was a career academic. Bowley's most important contribution to the social survey was in the use of random sampling methods, which made it possible to carry out surveys more quickly and also move beyond a single city.¹⁰⁰ In 1915, Bowley published a social survey of working-class households in four English towns. His survey was based on enquires made in 1913 into economic conditions in Northampton and Warrington, and in Stanley, County Durham. A similar enquiry had been made in Reading in 1912. The random sample comprised 1 house in 23 in Northampton, 1 in 17 in Stanley, 1 in 19 in Warrington, and 1 in 21 in Reading. Bowley calculated the weekly wage rates for adult males, ranging from under 8s. to over 40s., and compared these to Rowntree's figures for York in 1899. Bowley estimated the number of families above and below firstly, the minimum standard adopted by Rowntree, and second, a new standard. However, the modifications made to Rowntree's standard were minor (a small allowance to cover the cost of meat, and distinguishing between the needs of children at different ages) and the results for the four towns were remarkably similar. For example, Bowley found that in Reading, 128 of 622 families were below Rowntree's poverty line, and 127 families were below the new standard. This meant that 20.6 per cent of working-class households, or 15.3 per cent of all households, were below the Rowntree poverty line. With regard to the new poverty standard, the equivalent figures were 20.4 per cent and 15.1 per cent.¹⁰¹

Livelihood and poverty was far ahead of its time in explaining the methods used, and in the precision of the results. Bowley argued that what his survey

⁹⁸ Tawney, *Poverty as an industrial problem*, p. 11.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁰ Hennock, 'Concepts of poverty', p. 206.

¹⁰¹ Bowley and Burnett-Hurst, *Livelihood and poverty*, p. 33, tab. VII, p. 38; Hennock, 'Concepts of poverty', p. 208.

illustrated was that much poverty 'is not intermittent but permanent, not accidental or due to exceptional misfortune, but a regular feature of the industries of the towns concerned'.¹⁰² Overall it was estimated that the main reasons why a household was in poverty were because the income was inadequate for a large family; the main wage-earner had died, was ill, or old; unemployment; or irregular work. In fact, low wages were the most important of the causes of primary poverty.¹⁰³ Thus Bowley echoed Rowntree on the causes of poverty, but also, through the adoption of sampling procedures and refinement of a poverty line, further advanced the move towards the modern social survey. He focused on what Rowntree would have called primary poverty, and indeed Rowntree himself had by 1913 abandoned his earlier distinction.¹⁰⁴ The approach taken was precise and statistical, and one in which the moral condemnation of the unemployable had no place. Bowley concluded that 'it is often implied that the causes which bring men into poverty are within their own control, that they are the masters of their own fate and the creators of their misfortunes. In many cases this may be so, yet the extent to which it is true is exaggerated'.¹⁰⁵

Livelihood and poverty was published during the First World War, and attracted little interest. In fact, it was the sequel to the study, *Has poverty diminished?* (1925), that made Bowley more widely known as a social investigator.¹⁰⁶ In this book, Bowley compared the very different worlds of before and after the First World War, by investigating the same towns with as nearly as possible the same methods. He argued that the main changes had been the fall in the birth-rate, the loss of life during the First World War, the rise in prices and rise in wages for unskilled labour, and the re-emergence of unemployment. But again the causes of poverty were seen as falling into two groups—first, the 'broken' families in which the father or husband was dead or unable to earn, and second, those in which he was normally at work but at insufficient wages. Thus this second study again confirmed the objective, statistical tone of the earlier one, a tone in which the language of the residuum and unemployable would have seemed an anachronism.

In explaining the disappearance of the concept of the unemployable, several arguments can be put forward. First, there was a move towards a more sophisticated, objective and neutral social survey, illustrated in Rowntree's analysis of the 'work-shy' which anticipated later writing on culture as an adaptive response to broader structural constraints. Second, the ideas of evolution and degeneracy, so evident in the theme of the residuum, had receded, as had the debate about 'physical deterioration'. Third, a more structural interpretation of poverty, and by implication

¹⁰² Bowley and Burnett-Hurst, *Livelihood and poverty*, pp. 41–2, tab. IX.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁴ Hennock, 'Concepts of poverty', p. 207; Harris, 'Seebom Rowntree', p. 72.

¹⁰⁵ Bowley and Burnett-Hurst, *Livelihood and poverty*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁶ Hennock, 'Concepts of poverty', p. 209.

unemployment, was evident in the arguments of Tawney and other commentators. Whereas before 1914 it had been low wages that had been identified as the principal explanation of poverty, after 1918 it was irregular work.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless both explanations were structural rather than individual. Fourth, there was less debate than previously about the influence of 'character'—the focus was more on the group than the individual. Fifth, the advent of full employment during the First World War seemed to indicate that the boundaries of those deemed unemployable were not fixed, and there was no group for whom jobs and wages could not be found.

VI

The argument that unemployables disappeared with full employment during the First World War, familiar from the work of both contemporary social investigators and later historians, raised the question of whether they would re-emerge in conditions of economic recession and high unemployment. Whereas the problem before 1914 had been not so much unemployment as underemployment, after 1918 unemployment became more clearly defined and the duration of unemployment increased, especially during the 1930s. This led to important changes in the concept of unemployability. One aspect of this was the way in which unemployment insurance was administered during the 1920s, when the requirements were added that claimants should be 'genuinely seeking whole-time employment', and that they must make 'all reasonable efforts to secure employment'. By then, unemployment benefit had been extended to a much larger group of people, dependants' benefits had been introduced, and the link between contributions and benefits had been undermined by the introduction of uncovenanted benefit. In the words of Deacon, those who administered unemployment insurance in the period up to 1931 were 'in search of the scrounger'.¹⁰⁸ The 'genuinely seeking work' test was only removed in 1930, after major changes to the unemployment benefit regime, and these concerns have continued to underpin understandings of unemployment to the present day.

There are also echoes in the interwar period of the contemporary concern about the dramatic increase in incapacity benefit claimants. Claims to sickness and disablement benefit rose steadily in the interwar period, bringing into question the financial self-sufficiency of the health insurance system. Whiteside has observed that the figures were subject to the vagaries, not only of changing administrative procedures, but also of subjective assessment. What is clear is that the health insurance statistics show growing numbers of the industrial workforce were becoming dependent on publicly subsidized systems of social support. Whiteside argues that evidence demonstrated that claims were genuine, while conceding that some workers

¹⁰⁷ Bowley and Hogg, *Has poverty diminished?*, pp. 1–26; Gazeley, *Poverty in Britain*, pp. 35, 79.

¹⁰⁸ Deacon, *In search of the scrounger*.

could get more money with less fuss from their approved societies and other sources than from the local employment exchange. She has argued that, as unemployment rose in the 1930s, many of those who found themselves unemployed 'settled into semi-retirement on disability benefits and public assistance'.¹⁰⁹ Categories such as the sick, the disabled, the invalid, and the mentally defective have expanded and contracted in accordance with varying levels of market activity, reflecting contemporary judgements about the relative employability of the individuals concerned.¹¹⁰

Nevertheless, the concern with unemployability went beyond the search for the scrounger in the 1920s, and rising claims for sickness and disability benefit. In the first place, it is clear that the term 'unemployable' persisted in social thought well after the First World War. In their history of the poor law (1929), the Webbs argued the unemployed could be classified into six groups, with the residuum constituting a final group, who might be called the unemployable. This group included those who, through 'physical, mental or moral deficiencies', had great difficulty in finding any employer willing to take them on at any price, and those who, finding other ways of subsisting, were not really seeking work at all.¹¹¹ For the Webbs, the terms 'residuum' and 'unemployable' remained interchangeable, again covering both those unable and unwilling to work.

More significantly, the term 'unemployable' was incorporated in the new concept of the social problem group in the 1920s. At a time of recession and unemployment, when mass democracy and the newly established Labour Party appeared to threaten the existing order, and when the emerging medical, psychiatric, and social work professions were on the rise, the social problem group provided a theory of social reform for newly professionalized groups. This coincided with concern over an alleged increase in mental deficiency as highlighted in the Wood Report (1929).¹¹² The Wood Report argued that feeble-mindedness was more likely to occur among populations of a low mental or physical level, in slum districts or poor rural areas, and was more likely to be prevalent in a 'sub-normal' group. If families containing mental defectives were segregated, this group would contain a higher proportion of 'insane persons, epileptics, paupers, criminals (especially recidivists), unemployables, habitual slum dwellers, prostitutes, inebriates and other social inefficients'.¹¹³ Most of these families would belong to a 'social problem' or 'subnormal' group, comprising the bottom 10 per cent of the population.

While changes in the methodology of social surveys may have led to shifts from behavioural to structural explanations of poverty, official reports and social investigators continued to be influenced by ideology. In his social

¹⁰⁹ Whiteside, 'Counting the cost', p. 241.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

¹¹¹ Webb and Webb, *English poor law history*, p. 710.

¹¹² Macnicol, 'In pursuit of the underclass', pp. 300–1.

¹¹³ Board of Education, *Report of the Mental Deficiency Committee*, pts. 1 and 3, pp. 83, 79–80.

survey of Merseyside (1934), Caradog Jones, for instance, conceded that the unemployed were a heterogeneous and temporary group of workers, and that the main causes of unemployment were economic conditions rather than personal defects or industrial capacity. He noted that the Ministry of Labour used the term 'unemployable' to refer to any person whose industrial value was so low that an employer would never select 'him' for a job unless no other applicant was available and the job had to be done at once; in other words only in the last resort, if at all.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, Caradog Jones also argued unemployment was the result of 'personal shortcomings, in body, mind or character' which might be inborn defects or 'the evil effect produced by the perpetual action of a bad environment upon a poor hereditary endowment'.¹¹⁵ He classified the 'chronically unemployed' as one of his 'subnormal types', writing that 'persons who are so handicapped are at least sub-normal in the sense that they fall definitely and chronically below the average in the amount of employment they succeed in getting'.¹¹⁶ The Merseyside survey regarded any able-bodied man, aged 22–50, and continuously in receipt of public assistance on grounds of poverty as a result of unemployment for two years or longer, as 'subnormal in employability'.¹¹⁷

In these respects, there were marked continuities between the theory of the social problem group, and earlier concerns about the unemployable. However, compared to the writers of the early 1900s, the interwar social surveys as a whole were less concerned with the willingness of people to work, and more with the effects of unemployment in leading to unemployability. If the unemployable were subsumed within the social problem group, debates about the effects of unemployment on health were augmented by the new discipline of social psychology. The best known of these studies was based on the Austrian town of Marienthal. The study was conducted by Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, and Zeisel of the Psychological Institute at the University of Vienna, and it was published in German in 1933.¹¹⁸ With Eisenberg, of the University of Columbia, Lazarsfeld refined the earlier analysis into what became the classic account of the psychological effects of unemployment. Lazarsfeld and Eisenberg argued that unemployment made people emotionally unstable, since it disrupted time patterns. There was a loss of the sense of the passage of time, and some people indulged in irrational spending. Lazarsfeld and Eisenberg claimed individuals went through a process of stages of psychological adjustment to the experience of becoming unemployed. First came shock, followed by an active search for a job during which the individual remained optimistic; second, when efforts failed, the individual became more pessimistic; and third, the individual was broken and became fatalistic. Thus it was claimed that the unemployed progressed

¹¹⁴ Caradog Jones, *Social survey of Merseyside*, II, pp. 380–1.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, II, p. 381.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, III, p. 445.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, III, p. 449.

¹¹⁸ Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, and Zeisel, *Marienthal*, pp. 4–14.

from optimism through pessimism to fatalism, reflected in an increasing sense of inferiority, the destruction of family relationships, and a weakening of interest in politics and organizations.¹¹⁹

Interwar surveys that focused more directly on the experience of the unemployed provided evidence that cast doubt on the social psychology theory. Lazarsfeld and his colleagues had argued that ‘demoralisation’ showed itself in four ways—in the disintegration of daily routines, in an inability to devise alternative work, through the collapse of intellectual interests, and in the abandoning of political activity. But there is little evidence, from contemporary surveys, that any of these things happened. The extent to which people who were unemployed remained interested in reading, went to the cinema, were politically active or joined clubs seemed to depend to a large degree on how much they had done these things when they were employed.¹²⁰ In his study of unemployment, Bakke, for example, wrote of the mental effects of unemployment that while fatigue could easily be mistaken for laziness, it was more accurate to describe it as the physical and mental exhaustion from work (searching for a job) unaccompanied by any hope of a reward.¹²¹ The morale of the unemployed remained high, and most were fully occupied in recreation and other tasks. Bakke concluded that ‘loafers’ comprised only 7.6 per cent of unemployed men. Moreover, the unemployed were not a group of misfits, but workmen subject to the normal fluctuations of industry.¹²²

Even so, later interwar social surveys were clearly influenced by the social psychology theory of unemployment, and this led them to focus on patterns of ‘adjustment’ to the effects of unemployment. The study *Brynmawr* (1934), by Jennings, acknowledged that prolonged unemployment led to despondency, bitterness, and apathy in the minds of many of the men.¹²³ In considering both physical and psychological problems associated with unemployment, the authors of the Pilgrim Trust survey (1938) noted that one of the most frequently discussed issues was the willingness of the unemployed to work.¹²⁴ They argued that there were three groups among the unemployed—those who still thought only in terms of work; those who were beginning to accept unemployment as a normal state, but still looked for work; and those who accepted unemployment as a normal state. There appeared to be a process of ‘adjustment’ by which men moved from one category to another, explicable in part through low wages. Apart from those who had looked for work and given up, the authors of the Pilgrim Trust survey found a smaller group comprised of men who were ‘work shy’. They were usually younger men, who were involved with betting, kept grey-

¹¹⁹ Eisenberg and Lazarsfeld, ‘Psychological effects of unemployment’.

¹²⁰ McKibbin, ‘“Social psychology” of unemployment’.

¹²¹ Bakke, *Unemployed man*, pp. 70–1, 261.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹²³ Jennings, *Brynmawr*, p. 138.

¹²⁴ Pilgrim Trust, *Men without work*, pp. 143–79.

hounds, or used hawking or street singing to supplement their Unemployment Assistance.¹²⁵ Lastly, there were those who could not work on account of some physical or mental defect. Thus while major social surveys such as the Pilgrim Trust report demonstrate an ongoing concern with the willingness of the unemployed to work, and acknowledged physical and mental defectiveness, they tended to focus on patterns of 'adjustment' to unemployment.

Contemporary observers were primarily interested in the effects of long-term unemployment because they thought that it would lead to unemployability, and this was reflected in practical initiatives introduced in this period to ensure that unemployed workers remained 'fit for work' when labour market conditions improved. As part of its efforts to deal with unemployment, the government opened Instructional Centres and established physical training classes. This rested on the idea, held by senior civil servants, that the long-term unemployed required physical 'reconditioning' to successfully re-enter the labour market. The Ministry of Labour, for example, argued that prolonged unemployment 'has robbed many men both of the physical fitness and of the attitude of mind which would enable them to undertake heavy work under ordinary industrial conditions'.¹²⁶ By 1935, there were 35 Instructional Centres, and physical training classes were also established in Juvenile Instruction Centres in areas of high unemployment. The centres were pragmatic experiments, based on little evidence, and represented a collectivist arrangement compatible with liberal democratic principles.¹²⁷ Despite being dubbed 'slave camps', attendance was voluntary. But both the Instructional Centres and the physical training classes were clearly viewed by officials as a means of improving the employability of those applying for public assistance.¹²⁸

If there was concern that unemployment would lead to unemployability, concerns about a social problem group were undermined by methodological problems in proving that such a group existed. The definition of 'abnormality' employed by Caradog Jones in the Merseyside social survey was actually extremely weak—it included three main groups—those with some form of disability, others with 'moral' failings, and a third group defined through its dependence on welfare.¹²⁹ Moreover, as with the Merseyside survey, the Eugenics Society faced methodological difficulties in exploring unemployability. Its General Secretary, C. P. Blacker, conceded that whether the unemployed became 'family' or 'social' problems was determined by their access to wealthy or influential relatives, demonstrating that the social problem group was a statistical artefact. He viewed unemployability as lying

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 173.

¹²⁶ Cited in King, *In the name of liberalism*, p. 157.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 179; Hannington, *Problem of the distressed areas*, pp. 92–114; Whiteside, *Bad times*, pp. 101–2.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 163.

¹²⁹ Macnicol, 'In pursuit of the underclass'.

midway between 'medico-psychological' and 'sociological' conditions. But he admitted that the social problem group was 'a very difficult subject for accurate and impartial investigation', and this had proved insuperable as far as unemployability was concerned. There was no organization or group of experts that could answer the question of 'how much unemployment is the outcome of the economic factor, lack of work, or the psychological, lack of capacity for sustained work?'.¹³⁰ Moreover the efforts of the Eugenics Society were not helped by the fact that, as in 1914–18, those deemed unemployable were absorbed into the labour force during the Second World War.

Unemployability re-emerged as an issue in the 1920s and 1930s, but in forms that were significantly different to the debate in the period 1880–1911. First, there was the attempt to tighten-up the administration of unemployment benefits and the consequent search for the scrounger, and there was evidence of movement between the categories of 'sick' and 'unemployed'. Second, unemployability did not disappear completely, since it came to be seen less as important in its own right, and more as a symptom of the social problem group. While there was less debate about labour colonies as a policy option, there was nevertheless continuing interest in intergenerational patterns, and in reproduction, segregation, and sterilization. But third, in the major social surveys there was less concern about the unemployable as a social class, constitutionally unable or unwilling to work, and more interest in the effects of long-term unemployment on the motivation and behaviour of those who were out of work. This construction of unemployment as leading to unemployability was augmented through the social psychology of unemployment, and reflected in practical initiatives to promote the 'reconditioning' of unemployed workers. In the past, some observers had implied that the unemployables were a distinct group of people, whereas the interwar researchers were afraid that any of those who were subjected to prolonged unemployment might become unemployable. Instead of focusing on individual pathologies, these researchers concentrated instead on the circumstances that might generate unemployability, and this is an important link to more recent concerns.

VII

This article has sought to place contemporary debates about incapacity benefit and worklessness in historical perspective, and to revise the existing historiography on poverty and unemployment, by exploring the concept of the unemployable in the period 1880–1940. What is perhaps most striking is the resilience of the concept of the unemployable. In the 1890s and 1900s, deriving mainly from Booth's class 'A', the concept of the unemployable was in part the residuum reborn, shorn of its evolutionary language and connotations, and reshaped so that it could coexist with a more

¹³⁰ Blacker, *A social problem group?*, pp. 3–7, 162–93.

structural interpretation of unemployment. The Webbs believed in the existence of the unemployable, and as late as 1929 they were still including the unemployable in their discussions of unemployment. Beveridge too, argued that there were people who did not want to work, and 'defects of character' meant that unemployment was more likely for some, his points about unemployment as a problem of industry notwithstanding. Before and after the Rowntree survey, this emphasis on the unemployable was shared by a wide range of less well-known commentators, as was the advocacy of labour colonies. Moreover, in the 1930s unemployability came under the umbrella term of the social problem group, with commentators such as Caradog Jones interpreting unemployment in terms of heredity and environment, and viewing the 'chronically unemployed' as a 'subnormal type', alongside other 'defective' groups. The debate on the unemployable provides the bridge between the concept of the residuum of the 1880s, and the notion of the social problem group of the 1920s. Indeed, a focus on those allegedly unemployable has always been a strand in underclass discourses.

Nevertheless, even though the concept of the unemployable remained remarkably persistent, this was tempered by the recognition, from the early 1900s, that unemployment had structural causes. Booth had separated the residuum into his classes 'A' and 'B', and both Beveridge and the Webbs believed that the move from moral and personal to industrial and environmental explanations of unemployment was one of the main characteristics of a new analysis of the subject at the end of the nineteenth century. Being unemployable was not, in general, seen as a hereditary condition that was intergenerational in effect. Rather it was a reflection of economic forces allied to personal inadequacies. When Rowntree explored the condition of the 'work-shy', it was within the context of a structural analysis, and the work of Bowley marked a decisive shift towards an emphasis on primary poverty and random sampling techniques. Perhaps most importantly, full employment during the First World War meant there was less of a focus on the concept of unemployability. This meant that while unemployability re-emerged as an issue in the 1920s and 1930s, it was in forms that were significantly different to the debate in 1880–1914. While the administration of unemployment insurance in the 1920s was characterized by a search for the scrounger, interwar social surveys tended to focus more on unemployment as leading to unemployability, influenced in part by the social psychology theory.

Comparing earlier debates about unemployability with those about incapacity benefit and worklessness, both changes and continuities are apparent. The focus today is not so much on pathologized individuals, as on the cultural factors that might promote unemployability, and if the unemployable were expelled from the labour market in the 1900s, the desire now is to encourage or force those on benefits into work. Whereas the Instructional Centres of the 1930s were concerned with physical 'reconditioning', the Pathways to Work pilots have focused on work-focused interviews and other

forms of support, financial incentives, the active involvement of employers, and changing attitudes among stakeholders. And the semantic move away from a focus on ‘unemployment’, to what is termed ‘economic inactivity’ or ‘worklessness’, seem new features. Nevertheless, in both the past and the present, the driving force has been concern about the size of the group, and consequent costs to public funds. Although it is recognized that it is unreasonable to expect people with the most severe functional limitations to engage in work-related activity, the focus continues to be on how the gateway to benefits is managed, with people needing to satisfy a proposed Personal Capability Assessment before they become eligible for new allowances. The social psychology theory has been an important influence on the contemporary concept of worklessness, while current interest in concentrations of worklessness, and in intergenerational poverty, also carries striking echoes of earlier debates. Like ‘the unemployable’, the keywords of ‘economic inactivity’ and ‘worklessness’ are attractive to policy makers because they are umbrella terms, conveniently bracketing together those unable to work, through age or disability, alongside those allegedly unwilling to work. As with unemployability, debates about incapacity benefit and worklessness continue to be shaped as much by ideological and political factors as by broader economic trends.

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