1 Unemployment in Britain and its psychological and political consequences for the unemployed

A minority, that is to say a group that finds itself in opposition can submit itself and obey when it feels that the majority represents and is building a national community. Otherwise one big gang has power over a small gang, that is all. This, I must warn you is the philosophical approach. But without this you cannot understand politics. And what is philosophy today becomes reality tomorrow.

C.L.R. James At the Rendezvous of Victory

1.1 The context: unemployment

In the last ten years, unemployment has grown significantly in many sections of the world, reaching a high point of approximately 3,237,154 in Britain in November 1987. However, other calculations suggest that an estimate of 5 million out of a potentially economically active population of 25 million would be a more accurate figure (Labour Research, December 1982).

Unemployment in Britain rose from 4.9% to 10.6% of the economically active population between 1977 and 1982, an increase of 104% (Economic Trends Annual Supplement, 1987). It was in November 1982 that the method of counting the unemployed was changed to include only those who were claiming benefit and not those registered at Job Centres. This excluded approximately 250,000 people at the time: that is, those who register, but do not claim. In addition, the base from which the percentage totals are calculated has changed from a base of Employed Labour Force to a base which consists of the ‘Working Population’, this latter including an estimate for the self-employed. Between August 1977 and August 1987, the numbers of the officially unemployed, seasonally adjusted, rose from 1,413,800 (Economic Trends, October 1977) to 2,832,900 (Department of Employment Gazette, October 1987). The Unemployment Unit, has, however, estimated that the true figure for August 1987 would be 3,302,100 – a difference of 469,200 (Unemployment Unit Briefing – Statistical Supplement, August/September 1987). Thus, the number of those defined as unemployed has increased by approximately 235% in the past decade.

Clearly, there are regional variations. Official unemployment levels in the South East of England, in August 1987, seasonally adjusted, were 7.2%, (8.2% in Greater London, 7.5% in East Anglia) while they were 12.8% in the North West, 12.6% in Wales, 11.5% in Yorkshire and Humberside, with a level of 18.2% in the North of Ireland. The Department of Employment

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1 The Unit has pointed out that the methods for counting the unemployed have included at least nineteen changes since 1979, and argues that the Unemployment Unit Index measures a ‘truer’ level of unemployment.
2 Talking politics

Gazette (October 1987) statistics show that the national rate of unemployment in August 1987, seasonally adjusted, was 10.2%; amongst women, however, it was 7.6% and 12.0% amongst men. This apparently lower rate of unemployment amongst women has been considered by Hirsch (1983) in a framework which includes issues of eligibility for registration, ‘discouraged’ workers, as well as women’s lower participation in the workforce. For example, between June 1979 and September 1982, the number of women in employment fell by 650,000, whereas the numbers of women signing on as unemployed increased by only 410,000.

For women with children, there have always been social pressures against being employed outside the home. In addition, women’s responsibility for the domestic sphere, including child care, has meant that these social pressures are intensified when unemployment levels are rising so rapidly. Also, there is a high propensity for women not to register as unemployed because of their ineligibility for benefit, often due to their lack of National Insurance contributions. A married woman in this position has no separate entitlement to benefit, and has to rely on her husband’s income. The General Household Survey in 1981 found that for 100 registered unemployed individuals, another 16 did not register because they were not entitled to benefit; 86% of these were married women. Another difficulty which women who live with children may experience is to prove their availability for work when claiming benefit. They have to demonstrate that they have adequate child-care arrangements, and are not otherwise entitled to benefit. Thus, this group of women would not be included in the count of the unemployed.

As a result of these points and a number of others besides, Labour Research (December 1982) suggested that there is a total of 540,000 people who do not register, and estimates another 700,000 of ‘discouraged’ workers. This number, if added into the official figures would increase unemployment by 1.24 million, approximately a third as much again of the registered total.

Brittan (cited in Deacon 1981) has suggested that between 1945 and 1970, whenever unemployment rose above 500,000, remedial measures were instigated to keep the number below this level. This ‘acceptable’ unemployment figure had risen to one million by 1974, something that can be deduced from Blackaby’s comment in 1974 when he told a conference that:

There is a risk that politicians will discover that they can

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2 The issues surrounding job discouragement are further discussed in the Employment Gazette of October 1985 and August 1986.
Unemployment in Britain

run the country with one million unemployed without committing political suicide.

Cited in Deacon 1981: 67

Up until 1970, this ‘suicidal level’ was an unemployment level of 500,000; by 1974, the level had been raised to an unemployment level of one million, and, more recently, Gudgin (1983) has suggested that when the number of the unemployed is 6 million, then, the figure would be ‘too large’ to be contained or ignored. The point seems to be that there is no absolute figure which indicates when unemployment is unacceptable and considered to be a source of political anxiety. As can be seen from the above examples, this figure has been revised upwards by a significant amount in the last decade.

Historians and others have made comparisons between the 1930s and the 1980s (e.g. Seabrook 1982) whilst Garratty (1978) has documented the development of unemployment as a public issue over the last two thousand years. Blackwell and Seabrook (1985) have, more recently, discussed the ways in which the working class has undergone a profound reconstruction, the reasons for which they locate within a global restructuring of the division of labour. Gorz (1982) argues that as a result of mass unemployment, work is already being abolished, and that restoring skill and creativity to work is no longer an option. In his book, he explores the potential disappearance of the working class in the context of his objectives, which are ‘the liberation of time and the abolition of work’. He discusses his nine theses on these themes, and argues that the working class only possesses an organic unity when viewed from above. This challenging argument has not been without its critics, including Cooley (1980) who suggests that Gorz has not considered carefully enough the possibilities of future reorganisation of employment and the desire of many workers to develop a creativity in their work, this possibly resulting in satisfaction for the worker. Sociologists have discussed the impact of recent unemployment levels in a number of different ways such as its presupposed effect on the ‘informal economy’ (Gershuny and Pahl 1979/80), on women’s presence in the labour market (e.g. Beechey 1984), on the entry of school leavers into the labour market as employed or as unemployed (e.g. Hirsch 1983), on the transition from school to work (Willis 1984a; Brown 1986) on the relationship between unemployment and racism (e.g. Brah 1984), on the consequences of unemployment for marital and family relations (McKee and Bell 1983), on the possible restructuring of gender roles (Wallace 1986), and for young black people, with the concomitant implications for social policy.
4  Talking politics

(Solmos 1986). In addition, Griffin (1985b), a psychologist, has explored the ways in which young women are experiencing school to labour market transition in the context of unemployment.

1.2 Consequences of unemployment: the contribution of psychology

Psychologists, have, on the whole, concentrated on mental well-being and its relationship to unemployment. Warr and his colleagues in Sheffield have developed ways of demonstrating that, in general, mental well-being decreases with unemployment. One of the standard tools of measurement used by the workers at the Medical Research Council unit in Sheffield is the General Health Questionnaire, and they have investigated the effects of unemployment on individuals’ scores on this measure. They have also noted that the degree of negative feelings associated with unemployment was greatest for those middle-aged men who had a strong commitment to work (Warr and Jackson 1984). Banks and Jackson (1982) have also demonstrated that unemployment is causally responsible for psychological change, rather than simply associated with it.

Jahoda’s (1979) discussion of the latent functions of employment is an interesting theory which has generated empirical work on the relation between psychological change and unemployment (e.g. Miles 1983). Her theory, which Fryer (1986a and b) suggests is a Deprivation Theory, argues that there are five latent functions of employment:

(a) It imposes a time structure on the working day;
(b) It compels contact and shared experiences with others outside the nuclear family;
(c) It links an individual to goals and purposes which transcend their own;
(d) It imposes status and social identity;
(e) It enforces activity.

This outline of the latent functions of employment has an intuitive appeal. However, the theory has been criticised by, for example, Coffield (1983) and Fryer (1986a and b). Coffield argues that these latent functions are only crucial for the psychological well-being of individuals if the employment is satisfying, and the conditions of employment are not too stressful. Thus, the implication of his argument is that an individual who is employed, say, on a factory production line, or in a service industry, may feel that their time structure is too rigid, may have little social contact with other workers, may feel no desire to share in the goals of their employer and may wish to conceal the identity that that particular occupation may confer. That individual may, indeed, only be in that employment for the purposes of
Unemployment in Britain

individual may, indeed, only be in that employment for the purposes of earning a living.

Fryer’s (1986a and b) systematic critique of Jahoda’s theory suggests that it confuses cause and effect; he argues that to extrapolate from the evidence which links inactivity or social isolation with unemployment is not justified for it implies that it is employment alone which enforces such social contact or activity. Fryer considers Miles’s (1983) study which argued that it was the individual’s access to these five latent functions of employment which determine the adaptation to unemployment. This study, of 300 men in Brighton, used interviews, time-budget diaries and self-completion measures to establish these results. This empirical evidence, which appears to support Jahoda’s theory, is commented upon by Fryer:

it seems best to interpret (Miles’) study as showing further evidence that unemployed people suffer psychological problems, rather than [being] convincing evidence that it is deprivation of employment imposed structure which is responsible.

Fryer 1986a: 12

Fryer continues by outlining his ‘agency theory’ of the psychological impact of unemployment stating that his assumptions are that people interpret their social environment so as to take into account a range of possible outcomes. Jahoda’s (1986) concise reply to Fryer’s analysis, Fryer’s response to that, and Jackson’s comment on both Jahoda and Fryer’s approaches, alongside his own reservations about the work by Kelvin and Jarrett (1985), are presented in one issue of a journal. Jahoda states:

Fryer’s critique... can be summarised in one sentence: he stands for a cognitive social psychology that refrains from systematic analysis of social institutions.

Jahoda 1986: 27

Thus, latent functions of employment, and ‘agency theory’, are the main themes which inform the limited theoretical debates about the psychology of unemployment.

Whilst the question may be discussed in a number of ways, it seems important to bear in mind that there is one central point at issue. The majority of psychological research on unemployment has documented the despair, gloom and fatalism which often accompanies unemployment. It is important that this should be documented. However, it can also lead to a stigmatisation of the unemployed: not only are they without a job, they are
6  

Talking politics

also, by implication, probably unable to cope with their lives (Bhavnani 1985). Fryer makes this point in a different way:

The employed become less and less likely to risk unemployment by industrial action and, hence, their working conditions and living standards deteriorate... The deprivation theory can act, irrespective of the wishes of its supporters, as the tool of a reactionary world view.

Fryer 1986a: 20

Fryer, in classifying Jahoda’s approach as a ‘deprivation theory’, has, however, created a problem. Deprivation theories, over a decade ago, were criticised by those who asked ‘who is deprived of what?’ (Keddie 1973). It was argued that deprivation theories, in particular the concept of cultural deprivation, tended to end up ‘blaming the victim’ (Ryan 1971). It is this implication to which Fryer objects – an implication of immobilisation and inadequacy amongst those who are defined as deprived. However, following Jahoda’s comments, there is a parallel danger within agency theory: the theory could be interpreted as arguing that all individuals should be able to rise beyond their situation, despite the social, economic, political and ideological contexts. If this does not appear to be happening, individualistic explanations are sought out, and a ‘victim-blaming’ explanation arrived at. In other words, ‘agency theory’ tries to avoid being deterministic, but ends up by being voluntaristic. Thus, both latent functions and personal agency may end up as ‘tools of a reactionary world view’. The task would seem to be, rather, to examine the ways in which individuals, and groups of individuals are interpreting their material reality: defining the task in this way necessitates an analysis of both the material reality as well as an analysis of its interpretation, and hence contributes towards an understanding of human agency in a context of social institution analysis.

Platt (1983) is a psychologist who seems to be aware of such dangers. He has analysed the demographic, clinical and other characteristics of parasuicide patients admitted to Edinburgh’s Regional Poisoning Treatment Centre from 1968-82. In a preliminary report he suggests:

These findings undoubtedly point to a significant relationship between parasuicide and unemployment, and suggest that long term unemployment, rather than recent job loss, is the key factor.

Platt 1983: 3

He acknowledges that the existence of an association does not constitute
proof of a causal link, and continues his article with an examination of other possible explanations. However, he concludes:

Whatever the nature of the association between unemployment and parasuicide, it has been shown that these long-term jobless currently run more than 18 times the risk of parasuicide than the employed...But while (more resources) might make unemployment more bearable, these measures do not address the fundamental underlying problem namely the depressed state of the economy. 

_Urgent government action is required to reduce the level of unemployment..._

Platt 1983: 5 (my emphasis)

The studies of the impact of unemployment on those who are unemployed have been, in general, a demonstration of the poverty, despair and resignation which can often develop as a consequence of unemployment. Given my comments on Fryer and Jahoda, it is clear that to understand how unemployment may be contested, the political responses of the unemployed need to occupy a more central position in these studies.

1.3 Consequences of unemployment: political responses of the unemployed

1.3.1 Early empirical evidence

A search of the literature on the impact of unemployment (Showler and Sinfield 1981; Hayes and Nutman 1981) reveals that there is, in general, very little reference to empirical evidence on political reactions to unemployment; it appears that very little work has been carried out to date on this issue (see Fraser 1980 for his comments on this).

The work that has been done has, on the whole, been conducted in North America, and in periods when levels of unemployment were not at the levels they are in the mid 1980s. As Marsh, Fraser and Jobling (1985) point out, it is not possible to translate the full meanings of survey results from North America to Britain. However, a closer consideration of North American work may permit the development of some insights into their meaning for the British context.

The general findings of much survey work in North America since the 1960s implied that unemployment produced political cynicism and apathy. When the research reports are read carefully, however, it is found that there is _not_ a unified set of results. This work will be initially discussed by examining some of the more general studies, and will then move on to look
8 Talking politics

at black people’s responses to unemployment. The reason for looking at black people’s responses is that the evidence from these studies suggests that political cynicism need not be synonymous with political apathy.

Rosenstone (1982) has considered the data from the November 1974 Current Population Survey in the U.S. He examined the literature on economic adversity and voter turnout from the perspective of whether the former:
(a) increases voter turnout (mobilisation);
(b) decreases voter participation (withdrawal);
(c) has no relationship to voter turnout (no effect).
He argued that the ‘conflicting and weak empirical findings make it difficult to choose one over the others’ (p. 29). The rest of his paper is a well-documented analysis of economic adversity, which he defined through an examination of:
(a) those worse off financially;
(b) unemployment levels;
(c) poverty.
He pointed to the notion that economic adversity is correlated with age, sex, marital status, ‘race’, ethnicity, education and occupation – all characteristics which will affect whether an individual will vote or not. From the results of his statistical analysis he argued that voter turnout decreases at times of economic adversity and that this is manifested by the lower voting levels among the unemployed. He accepts that in part, this decrease may be due to those who become unemployed consequently moving to, for example, cheaper housing. Thus part of the impact of unemployment on voting behaviour is through the effects of mobility. He concludes that economic adversity is most likely to lead to a withdrawal from politics.

Theories of democracy generally view political participation as a way for citizens to constrain elected officials and influence public policy. In most instances, intensity of concern increases the likelihood that people will become politically active; but when people suffer economic adversity, the very process that is foremost in their minds impedes their participation in the political process.

Rosenstone 1982: 44

Whilst this position is convincingly argued, the assertion that political participation is synonymous with voting is not plausible. The experience of those who have voted who find that their personal situation has not changed as a result of their voting, could lead to a decision not to vote. This does not
Unemployment in Britain

automatically imply a low commitment to political analysis and action, and could, indeed be indicative of protest.

The issue of voting behaviour, and whether personal concerns affect an individual’s voting behaviour has been explored by Brody and Sniderman (1977). However, in amongst a number of inhibition and activation hypotheses, it could be suggested that the argument they present is circular, such that their predictions can only be upheld. They state, for example,

We suggest that personal problems are likely to affect political choices to the extent that citizens hold government responsible for helping them cope with the problems they face.

Brody and Sniderman 1977: 539

This circularity can be highlighted by arguing that if citizens hold a government responsible for their individual (personal) problems, then, these problems, by definition, are no longer personal; they have been defined by the citizen as being located in the public sphere. Thus, once the individual defines their own problems as originating from governmental action, or, that the solution lies in government action, it should not be surprising then that personal problems affect political choices. For example; if I define the cause of my fears of walking out at night due to poor street lighting, then my personal fear may lead me to vote for a party which claims that it will improve street lighting in the vicinity. However, if I have the same fear, but see it as a consequence of an early childhood experience, I am unlikely to attribute the cause of my fear to the lack of street lighting. If so, it is not unexpected that, having defined the issue as a personal problem, I do not consider the government as able to help me, and so do not recognise the view of a particular political party towards street lighting as a basis for preferring that party. What their paper does point up, however, is the importance of considering voters’ personal perceptions of issues; thus, if a political party takes on board the centrality of potential voters’ perceptions of issues, it could deal with apparently personal anxieties by demonstrating the political roots of such anxieties. In this way, issues could come to be redefined by demonstrating to individuals that their concerns are not ‘isolated’, and that there are political solutions for such concerns.

One interpretation of this study is that the authors do not demonstrate ‘the relevance of personal concerns for voting behaviour’, but rather, they demonstrate how strongly personal concerns are consistently seen as having

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3 The subtitle of their paper.
Talking politics

individual solutions. An interesting question which follows from such a demonstration is to ask why this should be so. Buss, Hofstetter and Redburn (1980) have presented some data obtained from redundant steel workers in Ohio. They argue that workers who are permanently laid off will experience:
(a) a sense of powerlessness in respect of the political system;
(b) a sense of cynicism which involves distrust and disaffection with the political system;
(c) a sense of anomie such that the basic principles of the social and political system no longer work effectively.

In the study, they try to explore why this passivity should occur. Rather than implicitly accept such passivity as part of the ‘natural order’, they outline some possible reasons which could underly it: aspects such as fear of ‘black’-listing, age, (‘too young to retire, but too old to work’), the belief that it was not ‘really happening’, and so on. In addition, much public emphasis was being given to potential community economic developments, with the consequence that many of the workers thought that more jobs were about to be created in the region. Buss et al. acknowledge that much of their argument is specific to Youngstown, Ohio, and are aware that they have not looked at how strong the above aspects are for workers who have ‘sat in’ when they have lost their jobs. However, their discussion of the greater anomie of the younger workers due to their differential occupational socialisation merits some consideration. This issue is discussed in chapter 2.

Further, the instruments used to investigate ‘anomie’ and ‘cynicism’ in the study have been developed without enough consideration being given to the theoretical underpinnings of these concepts. That is, the operationalisation of such concepts requires, initially, a careful definition before measurement scales are developed. The weakness of the paper appears to lie in the reliance on a range of scales to measure and quantify anomie and cynicism. If scales are operationalised from an inadequate theoretical discussion, there is a danger that the quantitative analyses which follow will mask the paucity of the theoretical basis for the scales. In other words, measurement, and its refinement comes to be seen as a goal in itself, rather than as a means to understand aspects of human behaviour and thought.

This is not a problem in Heffernan’s early 1970s paper. In this, he discusses the political behaviour of the poor, and argues that the concepts of political participation used in earlier work are ‘fuzzy’. Indeed, he goes further and says that such conceptions are ‘middle class in orientation and structure’.

Political participation is many things – the old men talking