INTRODUCTION

“Unemployment” is perhaps the most illusive term which confronts the student of modern industrial society.” These are the words of John Hobson in one of the first tracts to give theoretical content to the word. One hundred years later one would hardly describe the subject as illusive. On the contrary, when one considers just how extensively it has been studied by economists, econometricians, political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, social policy scholars, and of course historians, by academics and journalists alike, it seems fair to say that unemployment has been the subject of a greater variety of social-scientific investigations and theories than most social questions.

The net effect of this impressive feat of inquiry has been a considerable enhancement of our understanding of the making of unemployment policy, the social and personal experience of the unemployed, and the economic and institutional factors which are assumed to explain its incidence, its variation between places, and many other things besides. Yet at the same time, a side-effect of this relentless interrogation of unemployment and its unfortunate subjects has been that we have come to take it for granted. Unemployment has become obvious, mundane, self-evident; the eternal opposite of ‘work’, the poor relative of ‘leisure’, a familiar feature of the social and economic landscape. Unlike Hobson, no one today feels the need to place it within speech marks.

One motivation for the present study is a desire to bring a greater degree of analytical reflexivity to the study of unemployment, to disrupt this self-evidence, to make the phenomenon of unemployment somehow less familiar, less obvious. This is a challenge which has been taken up in recent years by a number of social historians, working mostly
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in France.² Concentrating mostly on the period at the beginning of this century, these scholars have examined the social, political, and industrial conditions under which an administrative and theoretical category of unemployment first emerged. Moreover, they have shown how it unsettles and ultimately transforms the conceptual universe within which the nineteenth century thought the problem of the poor, and how ‘unemployment’ became central to modern modes of poverty administration.

In terms of its attention to questions surrounding the historical formation of theoretical and administrative categories, its concern to situate these in terms of changing modes of social regulation, and its desire to foreground the ‘constructedness’ of unemployment, the present study has much in common with this literature. However, it differs in at least two important respects. First, a difference of scope. While this volume is based solely on the experience of the UK and is therefore not comparative, in covering a hundred-year period it does have the advantage of being able to compare different problematizations of unemployment. This is crucial for the purposes of the second theme of the book, which I shall elaborate below, namely its use of unemployment as a focus for investigating wider questions about the way in which we are governed, and govern ourselves.

The second way in which this book departs from most existing historical sociologies of unemployment is in terms of its methodological and theoretical framework. This study examines the question of unemployment through the lens of a burgeoning interdisciplinary literature to which, for the sake of simplicity, I shall refer as ‘governmentality’. What is governmentality, and what might it bring to the study of the regulation of the unemployed?

GOVERNMENTALITY AND UNEMPLOYMENT

The past ten years or so have seen the flourishing of work on the theme of governmentality. Its intellectual point of departure is Michel Foucault’s unfinished reflections on the emergence in Europe, sometime between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, of an art of government, and the subsequent transformations of this art.³

Foucault’s scattered remarks and lectures on government provide an intellectual counterpoint to his earlier, and better known, work on discipline, his ‘microphysics’ of power. Whereas his analyses of discipline addressed the exercise of power in terms of its deployment of the body in specific institutional sites like the school, the prison, and the hospital, with his reflections on government Foucault considers the totalizing aspect of power, how it comes to target the population, the social body.⁴
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Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller, who have been at the forefront of attempts to generate a research agenda around the governmentality theme, nicely capture what is at issue here. With his remarks on governmentality Foucault ‘sought to draw attention to a certain way of thinking and acting embodied in all those attempts to know and govern the wealth, health and happiness of populations’.

There are at least three clusters of analytical themes one finds within the governmentality literature, and which serve to establish its ambitions. A summary of these should help to frame the objectives and scope of the present study. The first is a concern with mentalities of rule. Governmentality is interested in the language of government: it investigates the manner in which the exercise of power is always discursively mediated. It does not attribute fixed, hidden, or underlying motives to the statements of political authorities and experts, as would a perspective of ideology. Instead, it takes the statements of ruling bodies at their word, so to speak. From such statements – be these speeches, treatises, diaries, committee minutes, or whatever – governmentality scholars seek to reconstruct the various ways in which questions concerning, say, the wealth of the nation, the health of the population, or the living conditions of the poor come to be posed as problems for officialdom. In other words, it aims to give an account of the forms of political reasoning that are embedded in governmental discourse, the forms of expert discourse, and the ethical concerns in terms of which social and political problems are rendered as meaningful and salient phenomena.

What does it mean to situate unemployment in terms of governing mentalities then? What this study aims to do is to understand how unemployment has been rendered as a problem for government: what sort of problem it is imagined to be, and how this changes. It will stress that there is never a general or prediscursive representation of unemployment (or any other problem); there are only problemizations in terms of particular (dominant) forms of political reason and embedded cultural assumptions. Let us take an example. We will find that from the turn of the century, when unemployment is first recognized as a pressing political concern, dominant perceptions of it are as a problem for liberal government. It is in terms of key liberal and patriarchal principles and norms that the issue is discussed: unemployment and under-employment are concerns because they undermine the assumption of the (ideally) self-governing household, of the male breadwinner supporting a family, and of the wage being a sufficient basis to support the life of the wage-earner. Such perceptions are highly significant, for they shape the rationality of proposals for tackling employment questions. For instance, unemployment insurance
was favoured precisely because it was not public relief, or a supplement to the wage, but instead, a form of financial support which was assumed to keep the social and ethical principles of the wage intact.

But this is by no means the only way in which the problem of unemployment has been posed. This study will demonstrate how conceptions of unemployment have shifted over the course of the century, how there have been competing accounts of it, but also considerable continuities – as a problem of labour markets and industrial disorganization (Beveridge); as a socio-psychological matter of ‘demoralization’ amongst industrial workers (during the 1930s); as a risk which afflicts a given population (the insurance view); as a fully economic problem rooted in the structure of the national economy (Keynes) or, more recently, the local economy; and, most recently, as a question of individuals and communities which lack the skills and the capacity to adapt to the ‘information-economies’ of the coming century. One possible reading of this study is, therefore, as a history of problematizations of unemployment.

This is of course not the first study to historicize conceptions of unemployment. There have been many noteworthy attempts to locate it in terms of a history of economic ideas, and to trace the impact of changing ideas about unemployment on the public-policy making process. There have also been some excellent social histories of the subject. However, there is an important difference between these literatures and the present volume in terms of its ontological assumptions. Following other research in governmentality, this study seeks to go beyond the rather timeworn dichotomy of the material and the conceptual, between institutions and ideas, which still pervades so much empirical work in the social sciences. It insists that the activity of posing unemployment as a problem is no less material and practical than other aspects of its governance. Problematizations of unemployment do not just happen inside policy-makers’ and other experts’ heads. Rather, we need to see problematization in terms of a heterogeneous and plural milieu which combines humans and non-human artefacts; we need to understand governmental thought as an eminently practical activity which is not possible without the existence of all manner of technologies of inscription, description, recording, and representation.

On this note we can turn towards a second analytical emphasis that one finds within the governmentality literature. This body of work is distinctive in the way it has foregrounded the technical and practical aspect of governing. Governmentality research has heightened our understanding of the regulation of social life by focusing attention on the various mundane devices and technologies which enable fields as different as education, crime control, or emotional relations to be
constituted as governable domains. If the accomplishment of social history was to found everyday life and popular experience as legitimate subjects of inquiry for historians, then governmentality research seeks to do a similar thing for the world of social technologies. These technologies are important in two ways. First, it is through technical devices that ruling bodies accumulate knowledge about the objects and processes they seek to govern. It is in terms of material inscriptions – charts, graphs, tables, and especially statistics – that reality is constituted as a programmable domain. But technical devices are also important since the ambitions of political authorities to influence the conduct of others are dependent on them. Governmentality research has suggested that such mundane devices as school registers, accountancy practices, and the architecture of public housing should be seen to have power effects because they are linked to aspirations to shape the conduct of others.

In some ways the present study could be read as an attempt to analyse historical changes in the regulation of unemployment at the level of certain key technologies of government and their relevant experts, such as the labour bureau, the insurance technique, the social survey, the employment counsellor. Within existing accounts of the evolution of employment policy, these have been treated as very much of secondary significance when compared with the wrangling of statespersons or the collision of powerful social forces. The emphasis which is placed on the world of political technologies in this study does not rest upon a claim that they are somehow more important, or primary. But it is based on an assumption that there is much we can learn about government by turning our attention to this hitherto neglected dimension of our existence.

Finally we must mention a third way in which research in governmentality offers to enhance our understanding of social and political arrangements: it insists that any account of governmental processes and practices is inadequate if it does not also consider the government of the self. As Mitchell Dean has put it, governmentality ‘defines a novel thought-space across the domains of ethics and politics, of what might be called “practices of the self” and “practices of government”, that weaves them together without a reduction of one to the other’. In other words it spans two fields which are usually treated in separation – theories of governance and regulation, and theories of the subject and social identity.

This emphasis on the subjects of government is particularly important when analysing liberal forms of government. As Graham Burchell has pointed out, one of the defining features of these forms of government is that they ‘set out a scheme of the relationship between
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government and the governed in which individuals are identified as, on the one hand, the object and target of governmental action and, on the other hand, as in some sense the necessary (voluntary) partner or accomplice of government’. In other words, there is a development here of Foucault’s argument about how we might understand the relationship between power and individual freedoms and liberties. The radical social scientist’s argument that freedom under capitalism is bogus or ideological is not always helpful. Nor is the more conventional view that freedom is the limit, the obverse of power. Instead, following Foucault, we can begin to see how government takes place through our liberties and freedoms: how, under liberalism, we are governed as autonomous individuals, possessing various capacities for self-government. Government is said to occur ‘at a distance’ from formal centres of power precisely because regulation works by harnessing the duties and responsibilities, and forms of practical know-how, which families, firms, individuals, communities, and all other manners of agents come to assume.

By exploring some of the different subjectivities and forms of ethical action which have been assumed by people without work, and presumed and/or encouraged by governing authorities, this study will suggest a new dimension to the study of unemployment. For instance, it will build on the insights of feminist theorists about the patriarchal structure of the welfare state in elaborating how the identity of the male breadwinner has been central to unemployment policies. But it will also draw attention to the plurality of subject-positions which coexist within the field of governing unemployment; it will observe that the unemployed have been governed as moral subjects, as social-citizen subjects, as enterprising, active-citizens, and in other ways besides. It will note how governmental work is done under the auspices of these forms of selfhood. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that these identities are never just top-down impositions by political authorities. In other words, I shall question the social control perspective. Government is a mobile, strategic, and heterogeneous field: official policies frequently incorporate forms of ethical identity and self-government which already existed in other spaces. This is illustrated in Chapter 3 where it is shown that many aspects of social citizenship were prefigured by forms of government improvised by nineteenth-century trade unionism.

To conclude this brief overview of certain key themes within the governmentality literature, it is necessary to offer an important qualification as to the nature of this project. This study uses historical materials for a specific purpose: to explore key changes in the way in which the issue of unemployment has been thought about, and acted
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on, by those who seek to regulate it. It does not engage in a debate about the historical truth of unemployment, that is, the way things really were. It does not seek to give a more accurate account of the causes of mass unemployment in the 1930s, or the state of the mental health of unemployed people at this (or any other) time. Rather, it is interested in the way in which authorities and social practices – contemporaneous with the periods it is concerned with – produced their own truths about unemployment, and the role that the circulation of such truths played in the government of unemployment. In other words, the use of history in this book is quite instrumental. Historical materials are employed, often quite schematically, to illustrate shifts in modes of perception and governing. The study should not, therefore, be read as a history of unemployment, at least not in any conventional sense. Instead, it could be interpreted as a sociology of the governance of unemployment which relies upon a certain use of historical materials.11

GENEALOGIES OF THE SOCIAL

While it is hoped that this book will offer new insights on the government of unemployment, it has other, wider ambitions. It is intended as a contribution towards a genealogy of ‘the social’. Given the diverse uses and interpretations of this word, I shall briefly set out how it is understood, and what its significance is within the Foucaultian literature.

The Social

For many social scientists, the meaning of the social is given by its opposition to the natural. It is the sphere of human interactions, relations, institutions, and so on. But for Foucaultian scholars it has a much more specific and finite significance. For Gilles Deleuze, it is ‘not an adjective that qualifies the set of phenomena which sociology deals with: the social refers to a particular sector in which quite diverse problems and special cases can be grouped together, a sector comprising specific institutions and an entire body of qualified personnel’.12 Or, as Nikolas Rose, Giovanna Proacci, and Pat O’Malley have all explained, ‘the social’ is best thought of as a distinctive way of governing, one that is temporally and geographically specific.13 Until quite recently, ‘the social’ has been a sort of a priori of programmes and strategies of government. Across the ‘western’ nations, whatever their differences, conservatives, socialists, liberals, social-democrats, and even certain fascists were agreed that to govern well, one had to govern in terms of the social. As O’Malley puts it,
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the principal objects of rule and the ways of engaging with them were constituted in terms of a collective entity with emergent properties that could not be reduced to the individual constituents, that could not be tackled adequately at the level of individuals, and that for these reasons required the intervention of the state. Social services, social insurances, social security, the social wage were constituted to deal with social problems, social forces, social injustices and social pathologies through various forms of social intervention, social work, social medicine and social engineering.\textsuperscript{14}

It is this field of the social that has been carefully and patiently traced in terms of historically situated studies: of schooling, penalty, the psyche-sciences and practices, popular practices such as drinking, poverty, social and commercial life insurance, and much more. Despite their radically contrasting subject-matters and diverse disciplinary backgrounds, the authors of these studies are linked by their discomfort with the generalizations and systematizations of grand theory, and by a sense that we can learn from the particular and the contextual. The question, then, is: what does this study of the government of unemployment contribute to our knowledge about social governance? A brief outline of the contents and aims of each chapter in this study shall serve as an answer to this question.

The first contribution of this study will be to address a shortcoming in the governmentality literature on the social. Arguably it has paid little attention to the relationship of the social to the economic, and to questions of economic governance more generally.\textsuperscript{15} Such questions cannot be avoided by a study of the government of unemployment, however, owing to the fact that unemployment has historically been addressed in equal parts as a social and an economic problem. This theme is addressed most directly in Chapter 1. This chapter argues that what it casts as the discovery of unemployment at the turn of the century – i.e., a shift in the locus of social inquiry from the unemployed labourer to a new object of study: the labour market – is a highly significant event. For it opens up the possibility of governing a troubling array of social concerns – from prostitution and child delinquency to malnutrition and crime – by acting on specifically economic variables such as the labour market and the wage. Chapter 2 develops this point in terms of a specific focus on the technology of the labour exchange, and how it forms the labour market as an observable, calculable, and manipulable plane of the economic.

Chapter 5 then develops our understanding of the place of ‘the economy’ within social governance in other ways. Not only does it compare the way in which the relation of the social to the economic is
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posed within different (e.g., welfarist and neoliberal) programmes for tackling unemployment. It also considers the significance of recent mutations in conceptions of the economic for the governance of unemployment – the emergence of relatively new objects of governance, such as the ‘local’ economy and the European economy.

There is a second substantial way in which this study might be considered as contributing towards a genealogy of the social. For it uses the case of unemployment to clarify what it is we understand by the prefix ‘social’. What is the difference between a social and moral problematic? What is the relation between social explanations and structural explanations? What is the relation between the social and the individual. In Chapter 3 in particular, an attempt is made to resolve some of these questions by means of a study of the technology and the rationality of unemployment insurance. Of special interest is the notion of ‘involuntary’ unemployment which is mobilised by social insurance. The idea that ‘involuntary’ forces and factors determine the fate of individuals, and that these can become a legitimate target for collective action, is a defining feature of a social approach to government.

Third, this study will explore the uncertainties which surround the project of social governance today, and some of its mutations. Chapter 6 is a case study of a recent initiative within UK employment policy – the New Deal. This scheme exemplifies the current enthusiasm amongst governments for ‘welfare to work’ programmes. This chapter situates the New Deal at the intersection of arguments about community, social exclusion, and security in an age of economic transformation. It was a hallmark of the post-war welfare state that it treated society as a totalizable object of regulation, a setting for the ‘involuntary’ and impersonal forces presupposed and constructed by technologies like social insurance. Chapter 6 suggests that today social and employment policy is characterized by its avoidance of questions about the wider social system, in favour of a focus on the ‘margins’, and its downplaying of the involuntary dimension of unemployment while opting for a very subjective and personalized approach to the problem.

A Note on Genealogy

To conclude the introduction to this book, I want to say something about genealogy, a term which features in its sub-title. What is distinctive about a genealogy as opposed to, say, a theory or a history of the social? What is genealogy as a method and a form of analysis? What implications does the adoption of this mode of analysis have for our comprehension of social, cultural, and political processes? Perhaps a good way to highlight the distinctiveness of a genealogical approach to the social is to compare it with one literature which shares some of its
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...substantive concerns, namely the area marked out by political economy and sociological approaches to welfare states.

At the risk of oversimplifying matters, we can say that there exists an influential current within these perspectives on the welfare state which we might loosely term 'structuralist'. By this I mean a will to analyse social welfare as a sort of sub-system, as one sector within a larger political, social, and economic totality. Within these structuralist approaches the task of the theorist is to draw out the linkages, homologies, supports, but also contradictions, between the welfare system and other regions of the totality – the economic, the political, the cultural and so on. Changes in the welfare system are then made intelligible in terms of changes in other regions of the totality – the globalization of the economy, the rise of post-Fordism, or even postmodernity. As an explanatory device, this approach is quite powerful. However, it tends to portray a highly systematized and rational image of the world.

Genealogy can be contrasted with this perspective in at least two ways. First, in terms of its ontological assumptions: genealogy does not cast its explanations of phenomena in terms of trans-historical or essential structures, epochs, or social forces, be these Capital, The State, The Economy, or Modernity. Instead, it is unapologetically superficial in its outlook. It suspends the question of the deep economic or other causes of a given event, because it holds that there are also interesting things we can learn about the past and the present if we focus on surfaces, that is if we trace out the imagined territories and spaces of government. Whereas it is conventional within the social sciences to treat the social, the political, the economic as given spheres, genealogy reminds us that these entities are themselves categories of government with their own history. As this particular account of governmental strategies will reveal, the distinction between the social and the economic is not, therefore, something which can be assumed, but is instead a division which itself needs to be studied.

Second, genealogy challenges the structuralist perspective in terms of the latter's interpretation of the process of social and institutional change. The structuralist approach tends to work from the general down to the particular. For instance, the rise of welfare to work programmes is interpreted in the light of general, structural changes which occur at the level of the state, capital, international economy, etc. Genealogy is more attuned to the particular, the local, the molecular. It underscores how large changes are the culmination of a multitude of smaller changes, of distinct lines of development which do not evolve simultaneously, and always combine in unpredictable ways. Moreover, it highlights the fact that many of the social forms we inhabit have contingent and accidental origins. It is predisposed to see social forms...