

Chapter 1

Introduction

Divisions and their reproduction are the themes of this work: divisions between Catholic and Protestant; between employed and unemployed; and, most centrally, between the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving'. We shall see that these divisions operate simultaneously at various levels: social, cultural, economic, and political.

By way of introduction let me point out that such divisions are of somewhat different form. The first two indicate social categories which, for the most part, have readily identifiable and reasonably unambiguous memberships. That is to say there is general consensus not only about the factual existence of these distinctions but also about who is a Catholic and who a Protestant, who is in work and who unemployed.¹

Such is not the case for the third of these divisions. In relation to unemployment and poverty, deservingness is defined by a set of moral and evaluative criteria. The deserving unemployed are considered to be those out of work through no fault of their own, keen to return to work, and on the whole willing to accept any reasonable offer of a job; they are thus truly eligible for state support. Moreover, they are deemed to be like those in employment since they share with the latter the high values placed on work, independence, individual responsibility, and the family. In this sense they are admitted into the same 'moral community' as those in employment. The undeserving unemployed are defined by an opposite set of criteria and, because they are deemed to espouse a contrary and despised set of values, they are seen as being more or less outside the moral pale.

Two features differentiate the conceptual contrast between the deserving and the undeserving from the other divisions. First, there is no consensus about whether the distinction has any real basis in fact. More correctly, while some people (including some of the jobless themselves) argue that there is a large group of undeserving unemployed, and that therefore the distinction is valid, others take the view that the actual

size of such a group is very small and hence the contrast is pernicious. The problem here is to try to explain these differences and the manner in which they are sustained. Second, whilst there is agreement about the validity of the criteria which define the distinction, there is no unanimity concerning the classification of particular unemployed people. That is to say, who is deemed to belong to the one or the other of these classes varies considerably from person to person. When branding others as undeserving it is generally anonymous others who are being labelled; one or two known individuals may be selected for special treatment, but these are used as exemplary cases of a much larger category, the objective existence of which is taken for granted. As far as employed people are concerned, these evaluations include the ideas that a large number of people don't want to work; that many don't bother to look for work; that they are content to live on benefits; and that they are better off than some employed people. As for unemployed people, one of the most interesting features of their derogatory statements about other unemployed is that these are nearly always linked, directly or indirectly, to much more positive descriptions of themselves, particularly their own strong desire for work. Here the point of such labelling is not simply to affirm that the undeserving comprise a large group but also, and perhaps more importantly, to engage in strategies of impression management (Goffman, 1971) to imply positive claims about their own status.

This can be put another way. The categories 'deserving' and 'undeserving' exist as part of the stock of cultural knowledge. Since it is widely recognized that others use such a scheme of classification to organize their understanding of unemployment, individuals who are themselves unemployed feel more or less constrained to invoke similar contrasts to try to secure for themselves deserving status. One of the means of achieving this is to brand yet others as undeserving. Given the disagreement concerning the size and significance of the undeserving group, the anonymity of those designated undeserving, the variation between those carrying out the moral assessment, and the practical use to which the distinction is put, it is clear that there is no simple correspondence between these categories and actually existing social groups possessing the features purportedly characteristic of them, or that they have memberships which can be unambiguously stated and objectively verified. In fact the relation between the distinction and the social correlate is very complex, and much of this book is an attempt to tease out the many themes which compose it. It must be made clear that I am not arguing that there is no such animal as the 'scrounger' or the 'malingerer', only that, from an analytical perspective, what is socially

relevant is the *act* of classification; the imputation of their presence counts just as much as which category particular individuals are considered to exemplify.

The importance of the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving should be clear to anyone who has conducted research into unemployment, for it induces in many unemployed strong feelings of private shame, and an almost crippling degree of anxiety concerning which category others are thought to assign them to. Much of what these unemployed do and say can be seen as almost wholly bound up with their efforts to get themselves classified in the deserving category, one result of which is the wholesale stigmatization of others as undeserving. It is this outcome which is partly responsible for the social isolation, fragmentation, and distrust so readily observable among sections of the unemployed. In other words the unemployed are not only divorced from those in work, they are also separated from other unemployed, association with whom may lead to accusations of family neglect, idleness, improvidence, fecklessness, and so on.

The division between the deserving and the undeserving is not only found at the local level, it has also been very influential in shaping social policy. According to certain political ideologies there will always be a need to assist those who cannot help themselves: the sick; the disabled; the old; the genuinely unemployed; etc. These deserving and eligible cases must be distinguished from those others (the 'undeserving') who could make private provision for themselves but prefer to rely on state support. The point is, so the argument goes, state assistance creates dependency (in the modern jargon, it creates a 'dependency culture'), and this in turn saps the will to work, erodes self-esteem and ruins initiative. In trying to ensure that only the 'genuinely' poor receive benefits, Conservative administrations often employ a rhetoric which emphasizes that resources must be 'targeted' or 'channelled' only to those who are most in need. The undeserving must be identified and eliminated, not only to husband scarce resources more efficiently but also so that the former do not demean and stigmatize the service for the deserving.

Although the research on which this book is based was carried out prior to the 1988 social security reforms, it is clear that these changes demonstrate the centrality of the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving in the formulation of social policy. In effect this contrast constitutes a major presupposition underlying a political and economic discourse which dominates the discussion and analysis of issues of welfare support. I hope to show that while of course the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving has a powerful

social meaning, it does not refer to those it supposedly describes in any straightforward fashion. The way the contrast is used, by unemployed, workers, politicians, and others, depends on the assumption that the deserving and the undeserving form clearly separated groups of people whose identification is non-problematic. As already noted, however, the correlation between label and group is not simple but very complex. This being so, social policies based on the presumed empirical existence of social groups bearing a simple correspondence to these two cultural categories are therefore seriously flawed. Any such policy will not only fail to achieve its stated aims, but it will continue to reproduce the conditions which appear to render them sensible. Should unemployment remain a significant social problem, further reforms of welfare policy which are based on ideas of this kind can only increase the heavy burden the jobless have to bear.

Unemployment, deservingness, and individualism

Current scholarship suggests that ideas about the deserving and undeserving poor go back to the fourteenth century. The preceding period viewed the poor as God's children to whom personal charitable assistance was an act of merit, and it 'did not make the easy equation between destitution and moral inadequacy' (Golding and Middleton, 1982: 7) that was later to be such a prominent feature of the Poor Law. According to Tierney, 'idleness was condemned and poverty was not automatically equated with virtue . . . but it hardly ever occurred to the canonists that the law should seek to "deter" men from falling into poverty. Want was its own deterrent, they thought' (1959: 11–12).

Rubin (1983) places the emergence of more hostile attitudes to the poor in the late middle ages, and relates it to changes in economic organization and changing demographic patterns. A growing shortage of labour, precipitated by various factors, including the Black Death, produced both a rise in the wages and standard of living of employed labourers, and also a decline in the economic fortunes of landlords, rentiers and employers. As a result, the latter began to attribute their weakening position to the supposed indolence and fecklessness of the labourers. Consequently, the able-bodied unemployed were presented as idle and criminal; putatively they preferred to beg, steal, and lie rather than to work. Even those in employment were charged with failing to work a full day, working only for subsistence needs, and neglecting their social and religious duties (Rubin, 1983: 31; see also Shepherd, 1983). Subsequently attitudes towards the poor hardened into a general denunciation of the less productive members of society.

Viewed as the root cause of economic hardship, labourers and the poor 'were judged for what was seen as wilful withdrawal from the economy and slothful reliance on others' (Rubin, 1983: 293).

Hardly a century earlier the ability to work was marginal to discussions of poverty, but now, in the fourteenth century:

As the test of productivity came to rule in determining social acceptance and moral approbation, the poor, . . . came to acquire a label, to be seen as shirkers or 'wastrels'. In the minds of employers and entrepreneurs struggling with an economy afflicted by an acute shortage of labour, poverty came to be seen more as a choice than an affliction. (Rubin, 1983: 293)

Following the change in the maintenance of the poor from acts of individual Christian charity to a function of the state, the debates about the level, effectiveness, and consequences of material support for the sturdy vagabond, the able-bodied poor or, in to-day's terminology, the unemployed, have been very contentious. The problem has always revolved around the need for policies designed to coerce the unemployed back into work by not making their situation too eligible whilst without work.

The first pieces of legislation concerning poverty, the Statute of Labourers of 1351 and the Poor Law Act of 1388, perceived the fact of people moving around the country in search of work as a problem of vagrancy and social disorder. The legislation sought not only to restrict mobility but, by forcing people to stay in their parish of origin, also to prevent wages from rising (D. Fraser, 1973: 28). Though early Tudor legislation was less harsh in relation to the impotent poor (those who could not work), it was just as repressive in regard to the able-bodied poor (Pound, 1971: 39).

The Elizabethan Poor Law Acts of 1598 and 1601 rooted poor relief in the system of local government. By levying a rate on property, each parish was made responsible for its 'own' poor. Designed to restrict vagrancy (which it generally failed to do), it produced instead a great deal of litigation between parish overseers disputing the rightful settlement of origin of 'vagrants'.

What happened over the next two hundred years is well summarized thus: the Elizabethan Poor Law 'asked overseers to provide money for the impotent, work for the able-bodied and correction for the idle; two centuries of practice created in the Poor Law a tool of social policy of infinite variety and unlimited versatility' (D. Fraser, 1973: 32).

By the end of the eighteenth century, however, outdoor relief (as opposed to the workhouse) in the form of supplements in cash or kind according to income, number of dependents, and the price of bread,

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came to predominate. But with bad harvests, growing unemployment, and an increasing population, the cost of such relief, considered a national scandal, eventuated in the passing of the 1834 Poor Law Reform Act. The two major planks of this legislation were the principle of less eligibility and the workhouse test. According to the former, support for the indigent and destitute should be at a level below that which an unskilled worker could obtain by private provision. To pass the workhouse test it was simply necessary to enter one. Conditions in the workhouse were made particularly severe so that anyone willing to seek refuge there must be a genuine case. The Poor Law Commissioners thought this a cast-iron method of distinguishing between those in real need and the feckless and idlers.

Pioneering social research into poverty and unemployment, which began in the 1870s, was also much occupied with notions of deservingness and related ideas. This early work (Garraty, 1978) consisted in counting and classifying groups of people under a 'poverty line', and explaining poverty and unemployment in terms both of a surfeit of people and their personal habits, vices, and circumstances. The feckless and improvident were deemed incorrigible, and so nothing could be done for them. But because this group did do some work, of which there was not enough to go round, they competed with the slightly less poor but more industrious type, who nevertheless had small resistance to the alleged deleterious effects of receiving charity and assistance when idle. Consequently, during recessions the perceived problem was the difficulty in discriminating between the truly eligible and the cheats and loafers. Hence the middle-class ambivalence to the poor and needy. Charity as often as not went to the 'undeserving', and when it found its way into the hands of the 'deserving' it merely encouraged the improvidence and dependency that were considered to be the causes of indigence.

As far as social policy was concerned, at the beginning of the twentieth century the overriding objective was to limit unemployment and to ameliorate its effects. Ushered in in dramatic circumstances by Lloyd George in 1911, the principle of state responsibility for aiding the unemployed was, by 1920, when about 75 per cent of the labour force was covered by an actuarially based compulsory insurance scheme, no longer a controversial issue. However, through the 1920s, and particularly after the onset of the Depression, the National Insurance Fund, unable to cope with growing unemployment, went into deficit. Subsequently benefit was cut and one of the qualifying criteria, the 'genuinely seeking work' test (Deacon, 1976), became progressively more restrictive.² As a result thousands of workless people were un-

loaded onto the mercies of the Public Assistance Committees whose harsh means-test caused great misery (M. Cohen, 1945).

In the 1930s the issue of deservingness in relation to unemployment was not a major research priority. The only study to tackle the problem at all was E. Wight Bakke's *The Unemployed Man* (1933). Based on a six-month stay in the London borough of Greenwich, he examined the effect of unemployment insurance on the willingness and ability of workers to support themselves. He found little evidence to suggest that insurance benefits inhibited either the search for, or acceptance of, employment.

Most research during the Depression concentrated instead on how the attitudes of unemployed people changed as their spell without work increased. Looking at the effects of near-total unemployment in the small Austrian village of Marienthal, Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, and Zeisel (1972; originally published in German in 1933) discovered the suggestion of a systematic change in orientations to life (shock – optimism – resignation – despair – apathy) linked to increasing lengths of unemployment and decreasing levels of income.

Only a year later Beales and Lambert (1934) published memoirs of twenty-five unemployed people. These, they argued, disclosed a pattern of attitude change similar to that observed in Marienthal, although the terms used (optimism – pessimism – fatalism) were different. Yet close inspection of the memoirs reveals quite a diversity of reactions and changes only some of which lend any support to the theory of an ordered progression. By 1938, and the appearance of Eisenberg and Lazarsfeld's influential 'The psychological effects of unemployment', this process had almost assumed the status of a general law. In their review of the available literature they concluded that there was agreement amongst contemporary writers concerning the experience of unemployment. Shock is the initial reaction to job loss; this is followed by optimism while the person is looking for work; pessimism supplants optimism when no job is found. Finally 'the individual becomes fatalistic and adapts himself to this new state but with a narrower scope. He now has a broken attitude' (1938: 378).

There was very little social research into unemployment between 1945 and 1970, but due to its increase in the early 1970s interest revived, and through the following decade a substantial amount of work was completed. Many of the studies carried out by psychologists during this period took the phase model as a major focus of inquiry (for example, Harrison, 1976; J.M. Hill, 1977; Briar, 1977; Hayes and Nutman, 1981). Yet with very few exceptions the theory received merely illustrative support rather than stringent analysis (Sinfield,

1981: 37). There were two reasons for this. First, Jahoda's finding that the transitions paralleled a decline in disposable income was largely neglected and second, the extreme circumstances of the Marienthal case were rarely acknowledged. Even though Jahoda herself cautioned against generalizing from her findings, subsequent research failed to take this warning seriously. Moreover, despite the fact that modern surveys of the unemployed (M. Hill *et al.*, 1973; Daniel, 1974) unanimously agree that one of the worst problems faced by the jobless is financial, a major criticism (C. Fraser, 1980; Hartley and Fryer, 1984) of this psychological research was that it failed to take this adequately into account.

It would be inappropriate here to make a more detailed assessment of this research, so I shall confine myself to a few remarks. Generally speaking, research in the 1970s can be classified into three, rather arbitrary, categories. The first comprises the large-scale, cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys and cohort- and area-based studies carried out by social administrators and policy institutes (see Hakim, 1982, for an excellent review). All of these studies are unashamedly empiricist in theoretical outlook, often policy orientated, and designed to 'get the facts'. They concentrated on the financial effects of unemployment, the characteristics of the unemployed (age, sex, race, health, social class, etc.), methods of job search, employment history, effectiveness of government agencies for dealing with unemployment, and similar topics.

The second category, heavily dominated by social psychologists, used one or another type of survey technique. These studies tend to be limited to particular groups of the unemployed (school leavers, adult men, women, professionals, minority groups, etc.) and their main areas of interest concern the psychological effects of unemployment (changes in affective states – particularly mental health – and cognitive abilities, changes in attitudes to work, changes in self-esteem, self-respect, time use, and so forth), and the influence of mediating variables (income levels, attitudes to work, social class, etc.).

There is now a large critical literature on this output (see, for example, Hartley, 1980; Kelvin, 1980; C. Fraser, 1980; Gurney and Taylor, 1981; Hartley and Fryer, 1984) which draws attention to various deficiencies: the general neglect of cultural and economic factors; the lack of interest in the social processes generated by the dependency of the unemployed on welfare benefits; the neglect of the implicit arguments between the unemployed and those still in work and the processes of labelling which arise from these; the indifference to the

possible importance of informal economic activity and the 'black' economy; and finally the insufficient attention paid to the unemployed's interaction with wider social institutions within which is embedded a power structure largely responsible for their predicament.

The third category of research, to which the above criticisms apply only in part, comprises a small number of more qualitatively based works (for example, Marsden, 1982; Gould and Kenyon, 1972; Seabrook, 1982) and several general studies of some sociological interest (for example, Crick, 1981; Field, 1977; Hawkins, 1979; Showler and Sinfield, 1981; Sinfield, 1981).

One of the less useful results of this research effort has been the general characterization of the unemployed as largely passive and quiescent. Unintentionally, perhaps, they have often been represented as inevitably deteriorating into apathy, indolence, poor health, and mental torpor. This is a mistake that was pointed out fifty years ago by Singer (1940: 83–4).

Fortunately, the theoretical picture is not as bleak as these criticisms imply because recent ethnographically based research is largely free of such blemishes. This research has, as its primary objective, the study of processes of social and cultural reproduction amongst working-class youth (Willis, 1977), and within this the analysis of unemployment has figured prominently. The particular issue in this literature which I want to highlight is the ideology of 'individualism', since in modern capitalist societies such an ideology has come to be inextricably linked to notions of deservingness. As defined by Jenkins, individualism denotes 'a way of looking at the world which explains and interprets events and circumstances mainly in terms of the decisions, actions and attitudes of the individuals involved' (1982: 88). It typically involves victims being blamed, and often blaming themselves, for their own misfortune (Ryan, 1976).

In their study of youth unemployment in the north-east of England, Coffield, Borrill, and Marshall note the pervasive use of individualistic themes (1986: 83–4). Endorsed by the media, the schools, other state agents, politicians, and employers, individualistic explanations of success and failure become impossible to resist, and the young unemployed focus on their own supposed inadequacies rather than on wider social forces in trying to understand their situation.

P. Brown's study (1987) of the education of 'ordinary kids' in Swansea, and Walsgrove's study (1987) of young unemployed people in Kidderminster, both further demonstrate the centrality of individualism. Such notions, moreover, are not confined to Britain as MacLeod

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(1987), writing about both black and white American working-class youth, and Watson (1985), writing about unemployed youngsters in Australia, clearly show.

According to Hutson and Jenkins the prevalent use of individualism should not be surprising: 'Individualism is one of the dominant themes of Western European culture: from the media, from education, from politicians, from our peers, from advertising and the market, the message is the same. Notions about the responsibilities and freedoms of the individual are the foundation stones of modern capitalism and liberal democracy' (1989: 115). An important reason why individualism is so influential is that it is 'commonsensically true' (Hutson and Jenkins, 1989: 115). Individuals are represented as discrete entities; Western capitalist ideology places supreme value on the individual, and subordinates society to the individual. The vocabulary of choice, decision-making and personal responsibility is ubiquitous, and constitutes the taken-for-granted framework for our dealings with other people, and the way we routinely explain how society works. But of course individualism is not something which merely frames our thought; its component themes are of great practical use in manipulating the real world and our place in it. Individualism as an ideology may well conceal some fundamental features of society, but it also reflects very significant aspects of relationships in the sense that it partly constitutes the lived reality of the everyday world.

Ideas of individualism are enshrined not only in the American Dream but also in a veritable battery of maxims and clichés: you can do anything if you set your mind to it; life is what you make it; where there's a will there's a way; etc. Success as a purely personal achievement is validated as much by the startling 'rags-to-riches' stories paraded in the press as it is by trivial, routine examples of it. Because this ideology explains the distribution of rewards and punishments in terms of voluntary, individual activity, it underpins ideas of competitiveness, entrepreneurialism, and the 'managerial ideology' (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner, 1980: 135). Amongst poorer groups in society such ideologies encourage division and isolation. By thus limiting the possibilities of collective political action the prevailing system of inequalities is both preserved and ratified.

Ideas of deservingness are a fundamental part of individualistic explanations, since they furnish an interpretive framework for the evaluation and labelling of the behaviour of unemployed people. Within individualistic accounts, the undeserving unemployed are those who prefer to scrounge, who choose to remain workless, and who do not make a big enough effort to find work. In this sense unemploy-