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British varieties of neoliberalism: unemployment policy from Thatcher to Blair

Bernhard Rieger

'A welfare system that puts limits on an individual's ability to find a job must be reformed. Modern Social Democrats want to transform the safety net of entitlements into a springboard to personal responsibility', Tony Blair declared jointly with German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in June 1999 as they presented a programme for the 'modernization' of Europe.¹ In Germany, this memorandum triggered a stormy debate, in which the Schröder government faced accusations of opening Germany to 'neoliberalism'.² In Britain, meanwhile, the outline attracted far less attention – and not just because the British media took little interest in a political statement that was deliberately European in outlook. Rather, Britons had been exposed to government rhetoric about excessive 'entitlement' in the social security system and a supposed lack of 'responsibility' among welfare recipients since the late 1970s, when Margaret Thatcher moved into Downing Street. Unlike in Germany, where unification's social fallout necessitated a significant expansion of existing welfare arrangements, this language was already well established and hence hardly newsworthy in the UK. Indeed, nothing highlights the contrast between Britain's and Germany's welfare landscapes more clearly than the defence put forward by British intellectual advocates of the welfare policies outlined in the so-called Blair–Schröder paper. Where the German chancellor stood accused of promoting neoliberalism, doyen of third-way thinking Anthony Giddens characterised Blair's welfare reforms as 'not a continuation of neoliberalism, but an alternative political philosophy to it'.³

Such diverging assessments of the Third Way's relationship with neoliberalism point towards what has frequently been regarded as one of New Labour's defining features. Rather than opt for a pronounced, readily visible break, Blair's and Brown's governments often adopted policies that overlapped with the solutions of their Conservative predecessors. In particular, New Labour's rhetoric about the virtues of market mechanisms has underpinned impressions of considerable political continuities across the electoral watershed of 1997.⁴ None other than Giddens counts among those who highlighted positive qualities of market mechanisms, asserting that 'markets do not always increase inequality, but can sometimes be the means of overcoming it'. Indeed, 'Social Democrats', he emphasised, 'need to overcome some of their worries and fears about markets'.⁵ Irrespective of its insistence that it offered a fundamental alternative, New Labour's relationship with the market-friendly policies promoted by its predecessors is by no means clear.

Studying social policy allows us to take a closer look at conceptual continuities and differences between Conservative and Labour governments from Thatcher to Blair. Since welfare provisions regulate myriad relationships between individuals and markets, they cast light on the social significance Conservative and New Labour politicians assigned to the forces of supply and demand. An examination of changes in unemployment policy – a prominent public issue in the 1980s and 1990s – provides an apt case study to this end. Provision for those who had lost their jobs and struggled to regain employment not only brings into view their fraught relationship with the labour market; policies to reduce joblessness also sought to turn those excluded from the job market into market participants. In other words, unemployment policy is shot through with assumptions about market mechanisms, and welfare regulations – that is, state institutions – played crucial roles in shaping the frameworks within which those out of work were expected to conduct their lives, thereby positioning themselves vis-à-vis the labour market. A key question is thus not whether British politicians sought to 'roll back the state' to make space for markets since the 1980s, but whether and how policies mobilised state institutions to promote market mechanisms in new social contexts.⁶

The new approaches to combating unemployment developed by Conservatives and New Labour unfolded as the British labour market itself underwent significant transformations, a topic Jim Tomlinson treats in more detail in this volume. It was not simply that the size of the workforce increased from 24.7 million to 28.2 million between 1970 and 2004. Rather, the structure of the workforce changed in a manner that is

frequently captured by the term 'deindustrialisation', a process that predated the time period under consideration here. Between 1980 and 2001, the national share of manufacturing jobs fell from 15.1 to 13.7 per cent while service sector jobs expanded from 62.9 to 77.6 per cent. Beyond a growing share of female labour, Britain's post-industrial labour market was characterised by an ongoing polarisation towards what the economists Maarten Goos and Alan Manning have termed 'lousy and lovely jobs'. While highly skilled work in the private sector could command rising pay, the number of medium-skilled, safe jobs offering steady incomes diminished due to a new international division of labour as well as organisational and technological changes. At the same time, the proportion of low-skill occupations that followed no set routines and could not easily be rationalised away in areas such as hospitality, cleaning and other parts of the service sector increased substantially. The latter trend underpinned a growing low-wage sector in which employees found frequently precarious forms of employment that offered meagre incomes. In short, Britain saw the rise of pronounced inequalities in terms of incomes, skills and job security between the late 1970s and the new millennium.⁷

Whether the new political recipes designed to combat unemployment in a changing labour market were predicated on promoting what Wendy Brown has called 'a peculiar form of reason that configures . . . existence in economic terms' offers the leitmotif for assessing their neoliberal character.⁸ The shifting neoliberal elements in British social policy in the 1980s and 1990s gain clearer contours through an analysis of how welfare provision for the unemployed construed relationships between individuals and the labour market. As we shall see, Conservatives and New Labour adopted different approaches to protecting those out of work from, as well as exposing them to, the forces of supply and demand. In this process, they confronted the unemployed with different expectations to configure themselves as *homines oeconomici* who were anchored in market relations. As early as the late 1970s, Michel Foucault considered a version of *homo economicus* with an 'entrepreneurial self' as one of neoliberalism's distinguishing features. Neoliberal forms of governance, according to Foucault, prompted individuals to conduct themselves as 'entrepreneurs of [themselves]', taking advantage of, and responding to, market mechanisms.⁹ Whether and how British governments set about recasting institutional arrangements that had firmly shielded those out of work from market forces before the 1980s along neoliberal lines requires an analysis of both specific political initiatives as well as their ideological underpinnings.

'Personal responsibility is key': Conservative labour market policies from Thatcher to Major

Between the end of the Second World War and the 1980s, social policy towards the unemployed was based on the premise that those out of work were victims of economic circumstances beyond their control and therefore deserved compensation for their material hardship through 'Unemployment Benefit'. This welfare provision represented a firm individual entitlement because it was funded through a worker's contributions to National Insurance and thus acted as a form of protection against what was widely perceived as the vicissitudes of the job market. Initially, Unemployment Benefit was a flat-rate benefit paid for six months, but in 1967 the Labour government extended its duration to one year and added an 'earnings-related element', a component that recognised a person's previous income and thereby acknowledged their earlier employment status.¹⁰ With memories of the deprivation suffered by workers during the interwar slump very much alive, post-war governments of both political stripes considered keeping unemployment at low levels to be one of their foremost political priorities. One scholar has observed that, until the 1970s, unemployment rates over 2 per cent had 'alarm bells ringing in . . . party headquarters'.¹¹ In the late 1960s and first half of the 1970s, British governments repeatedly combated unemployment through countercyclical spending and fiscal measures. These policies, however, not only missed their aim of reducing unemployment in a lasting fashion, but stoked inflation and exacerbated industrial strife. Similar to other Western European countries, Britain witnessed the erosion of the socio-economic post-war settlement by the late 1970s.

While British administrations had focused on preventing unemployment up to the mid-1970s, Thatcher's government pursued an altogether different economic policy from 1979. To reverse what was widely regarded as Britain's dramatic post-war economic 'decline', she and her allies hoped to re-invigorate market forces through policies ranging from reining in the trade union movement, to reducing public spending and direct taxes, to raising productivity and competitiveness. Above all, Thatcher saw a low rate of inflation as the foundation on which a prospering economy rested. To combat inflation, the government raised interest rates, cut public spending and increased indirect taxes in 1981, thereby deepening a recession triggered by the second oil crisis, which led to numerous business failures and a surge of unemployment. At 1.3 million when Thatcher took office in May 1979, the count rose to

more than three million at the beginning of 1982, remaining above this mark until spring 1987.¹²

Thatcher paid considerable attention to unemployment, not least since it ranked as the nation's most pressing issue in opinion polls.¹³ Unsurprisingly, the Conservatives around Thatcher rejected the Opposition's claim that the government was responsible for the UK's persistent joblessness. On the contrary, Thatcherites saw high unemployment as an indicator of long-standing distortions of the laws of supply and demand in the labour market. People were out of jobs, the argument ran, because the price of labour was too high. As a result, demand for labour from employers remained too weak to restore more people to work. Viewed from this angle, the solution appeared simple. Wages had to fall, or, as Keith Joseph stated in 1978, '[t]he initial [wage] flexibility has to be downward'.¹⁴ This raised the question of what was responsible for Britain's supposedly excessive pay levels. Next to the unions with their bargaining power, the welfare state inflated wage levels, according to the government. As economist Patrick Minford argued in a study sponsored by Thatcher's administration in 1982, 'the operation of the unemployment benefit system' established a 'floor' below which wages could not fall. After all, 'a man', he explained, 'will very naturally expect to be re-employed at a wage after tax and work expenses which is at least as high as this benefit'.¹⁵ Alan Walters, Thatcher's most trusted economic adviser, outlined the link between welfare payments and unemployment in a brief memo to the Prime Minister in 1981 by posing a rhetorical question: '[D]oes not everyone believe that were real wages to fall 10 to 15%, there would be the most dramatic reduction in unemployment?'¹⁶

In keeping with this line of reasoning, the Conservatives started reducing the real value of provisions available for the unemployed from 1980 onwards by levying income tax on Unemployment Benefit, by abolishing the 'earnings-related element' and by ending the uprating of benefits in line with inflation. In part, these cuts were motivated by a desire for household discipline during a recession that raised government expenditure from 45.3 per cent of GDP in 1978/9 to 48.1 per cent in 1981/2.¹⁷ This increase resulted not least from public protests about exploding unemployment, to which the government reluctantly responded by expanding schemes such as the Community Programme – a publicly funded job-creation measure for the long-term unemployed – and the Youth Opportunities programme, which raised the number of subsidised vocational training places for jobless school leavers from 216,000 trainees to 553,000 between 1978/9 and 1981/2.¹⁸ Yet as the Thatcher government saw itself compelled to alleviate unemployment

through higher welfare expenditure, it simultaneously hoped to lay the foundations for a reduction of benefit rolls once the recession ended by decreasing the real-terms value of individual benefits. Lowering the value of individual benefits would, Thatcher and her allies hoped, remove distortions in the play of supply and demand on the labour market and prompt larger numbers of those out of work to seek employment at lower pay than in the 1970s. With its belief in the efficacy of market mechanisms in the medium term, this aspect of Conservative unemployment policy bore a decidedly neoliberal imprint.

At the same time, Thatcher's government complemented the promotion of low-income work with policies that combated unemployment by helping those out of work set up their own small businesses. Put differently, Conservative welfare policy encouraged those excluded from the labour market to create their own jobs by joining the marketplace as entrepreneurs. At the beginning of the recession, recipients of Unemployment Benefit were deterred from pursuing this avenue to employment because starting up an enterprise automatically resulted in the loss of welfare payments. To remove this obstacle, the administration launched a programme that not only allowed unemployed Britons who began a small enterprise to keep their welfare payment for a year but also subsidised their private venture with a weekly payment of £40 during this period. Launched as a trial in late 1981 and rolled out across the country in summer 1983, the 'Enterprise Allowance Scheme' hoped to turn those out of work into small-scale entrepreneurs.¹⁹ The test phase of the programme in five areas across mainland Britain with high rates of joblessness revealed strong interest among the unemployed. In April 1982, local managers of the Employment Service in the test areas explained that the unemployed who wished to set up as plumbers, furniture makers, joiners and travel agents no longer operated in the 'black economy'. One of the early participants stressed the importance of the weekly £40 subsidy: 'Having the enterprise allowance makes a considerable difference . . . providing a guaranteed source of income on which to live while you get the business off the ground.' These positive assessments led *The Guardian*, which was otherwise harshly critical of the government's social policies, to commend this programme as an 'imaginative attempt' to combat unemployment. In March 1983, *The Times* also called for the scheme's national extension, condemning the prospect of another trial period of limited geographical reach as 'disgraceful'.²⁰

Given Thatcher's background as a grocer's daughter who repeatedly extolled the virtues of economic 'independence', it is hardly surprising that

ministers followed the trials with interest. The administration also paid close attention to the initiative because it linked with its measures to support small businesses through loan guarantees, tax breaks and training initiatives that aimed to invigorate Britain's supposedly underdeveloped 'entrepreneurial spirit'.²¹ Nonetheless, the Enterprise Allowance had to overcome considerable resistance when Thatcher's inner circle considered its national expansion in late 1982. Ferdinand Mount, head of the Policy Unit at 10 Downing Street, wrote in December that 'this does seem like a waste of money [and] should be scrapped', because the combined payments of Unemployment Benefit and the start-up subsidy resulted in annual costs of £2,900 per person, thereby rendering the Enterprise Allowance Scheme significantly more expensive than, for example, the Community Programme.²² Other advisers, including the former merchant banker John Sparrow, disagreed and pointed out that, unlike most publicly sponsored job-creation programmes, this initiative generated 'real jobs in the small firm sector' that would provide livelihoods beyond the period during which the government subsidised them. A recalculation revealed that annual costs fell to a mere £700 on the cautious assumption that a quarter of the businesses launched under the scheme would survive for three years. When seen in this light, the Enterprise Allowance emerged as the cheapest measure against unemployment at the time and was rolled out nationally in 1983.²³ After its national launch, the initiative enjoyed a veritable boom and was repeatedly expanded. In 1986, the government announced that it would fund no fewer than 100,000 places from June, an enthusiastic vote of confidence that reflected the finding that the scheme ran at 'zero cost', as the Chairman of the Manpower Services Commission stated, because three quarters of the start-ups remained in business after 18 months. Aided by the booming economy of the second half of the 1980s, 315,000 Britons had taken advantage of the subsidy by February 1988.²⁴

One response to rising unemployment by the Thatcher government, then, consisted in promoting entrepreneurial selves in a literal manner by encouraging Britons without a job to create their own in the form of a small business. That the government offered an initial subsidy to would-be small businesspersons did not clash with its market-friendly credentials because the scheme, like other initiatives strengthening small companies at the time, was designed to enhance the country's entrepreneurial culture. Since an auspicious economic climate ensured the survival of a high proportion of businesses founded under the scheme, the government also recouped its start-up costs and had thus happened upon a cost-neutral policy that reduced unemployment by relying on market forces.

Meeting with a positive echo among the unemployed, as well as the progressive and conservative press, the Enterprise Allowance emerged as a highly popular neoliberal social policy of the Thatcher years.

Irrespective of this scheme's boost to the small-business sector, the Thatcher government became increasingly convinced that Britain's welfare regime required fundamental reform as unemployment still stood at 3.6 million in 1986, despite solid economic growth over the previous three years. Promoting small businesses and cutting the value of benefits alone could not solve Britain's sizeable unemployment problem. The Prime Minister was unlikely to be surprised by the persistence of pervasive joblessness because she ascribed detrimental effects to existing social security regulations. Indeed, she regarded them as nothing less than a moral provocation, because institutional arrangements linked various forms of benefits, allowing those out of work to be in a materially better position than many who were in employment. As a result, she charged as early as 1980, 'to be proudly but poorly independent is to be *worse* off, and full of resentment'.²⁵ Reversing the consequences of a welfare regime that supposedly discouraged self-reliance and individual effort emerged as a central concern of a Prime Minister with a Methodist background who considered these very qualities as the True North of a conservative moral compass.²⁶ In 1982, she impressed on Ferdinand Mount that 'we really have to address . . . the values of society . . . Personal responsibility is key'.²⁷

Held in high esteem by Thatcher for his record as a businessman and appointed Secretary of State for Employment in 1985, David Young presented the Prime Minister with a plan that would 'tackle the will to work'. What Young euphemistically called in a secret note 'increasing incentives to work' required 'a combination of carrots and sticks, but', he impressed on Thatcher, 'we must exercise great care that the sticks are never seen'.²⁸ The punitive regime the government imposed on the unemployed in the mid-1980s centred on the stipulation that benefit recipients had to demonstrate that they were 'available' for work to be eligible for welfare payments. To test this legal criterion, Young instructed Jobcentres to call unemployed individuals for a formal interview at the end of which they were presented with a choice of undergoing training, signing up for a subsidised low-wage job, accepting temporary employment in the Community Programme or joining a 'Job Club', which offered help with targeted job searches. Crucially, those who failed to attend the interview or refused all four options could have their benefits withdrawn because they were not deemed 'available' for work and hence fell foul of the law.²⁹

When unemployment eventually began to fall during the 'Lawson boom' of the second half of the 1980s, the administration was quick to credit its welfare reforms for this development. It was thus consistent that, in the late 1980s, the government continued along these disciplinarian lines by further tightening the eligibility criteria for Unemployment Benefit. From 1989 on, recipients of Unemployment Benefit had to demonstrate that they were 'actively seeking' work rather than being 'available' for work, as the law had previously stated. Moreover, Unemployment Benefit could now be stopped after 13 weeks if a person declined a 'suitable' job on the grounds that it paid significantly less than her or his previous occupation. These reforms culminated under John Major in 1996. His Cabinet reduced the duration of payments to half a year and renamed the benefit for the unemployed as a 'Jobseeker's Allowance', thereby recategorising an insurance-based form of social security with a term that suggests a drastically weakened entitlement to support.³⁰

The Conservatives lowered the value of welfare payments, encouraged self-employment among a minority of the unemployed and adopted disciplinarian measures including the withdrawal of benefits to push the majority of those without jobs into wage work at lower income rates. Conservative welfare reforms thus pursued multiple approaches to combat unemployment. The promotion of small businesses aimed to nurture entrepreneurial selves by directly creating entrepreneurs. To this end, the government strengthened the market power of a minority of jobless Britons by subsidising their start-ups. The majority of those out of work, however, were turned into disempowered market participants. In addition to advancing a disciplinarian agenda, Thatcher's and Major's policies relied on lower wages to reduce unemployment by forcing those out of work to expose themselves to the laws of supply and demand in a crowded labour market. No matter whether intended to create empowered or disempowered market participants, these policies bore a profoundly neoliberal imprint because they aimed to remove barriers between the individual and the market rationalities that the government regarded as efficient tools for solving the social problem of unemployment. Overall, Thatcher and Major subscribed to a version of neoliberalism with profoundly conservative traits because not only was it predicated on a belief in the efficiency of markets, but it also affirmed fiscal discipline, individualism, self-dependence and hard work as key political and cultural virtues. In keeping with these core convictions, the Conservative reforms confronted those out of work with a far stronger obligation to find employment themselves, a trend that culminated in the Jobseeker's

Allowance's requirement to 'actively' engage in job searches. It was the unemployed themselves who had to take responsibility for their employment status on the labour market. In short, Thatcher's and Major's approach to unemployment policy was premised on a culturally conservative form of market fundamentalism.

Towards a 'risk-taking' work force: New Labour's New Deal

At first sight, there appear to be considerable similarities between the Conservatives' and New Labour's welfare regimes for the unemployed. Most significantly, the Labour government that assumed office in 1997 neither revoked the law that had recently created the new Jobseeker's Allowance nor changed significantly the conditions under which this benefit could be claimed. Policies to counter unemployment thus retained a pronouncedly disciplinarian quality after 1997. This continuity reflects a wider reorientation of the Labour Party since the late 1980s to heighten its electoral appeal to voters in the political centre ground, a process Mark Wickham-Jones treats in greater detail elsewhere in this volume. In addition to abolishing the highly symbolic Clause Four that committed Labour to nationalisation policies, Blair emphasised in opposition that a government led by him would abide by Conservative reforms of trade union legislation and pursue a firm law-and-order course by being 'tough on crime and the causes of crime'. The party leadership also repeatedly stressed its dedication to a 'competitive [economic] framework that would help [private companies] flourish in the global economy', as Robert Taylor has observed.³¹ To prevent the Tories from portraying Labour as committed to costly social programmes that would require tax increases, the 1997 election manifesto pledged to observe the spending targets of Major's government while remaining largely silent on social security issues.³² Before electoral victory in 1997, New Labour emphasised that it broke with key tenets of the 'old' Labour Party and moved closer to positions that overlapped with Conservative policies.

This reorientation, however, does not imply that New Labour entered office without a distinctive social agenda – and not just because the new administration raised the value of many benefits to alleviate poverty, which had become much more pronounced under the Conservatives. Unemployment policy exemplifies how the Labour government substantially diverged from its Conservative predecessors. Blair's administration turned the requirement to 'actively' seek work into

the platform from which it launched its own schemes to combat unemployment. New Labour could pursue its initiatives under favourable economic conditions. After the recession of the early 1990s, which had seen unemployment rise back to over three million in early 1993, the count had fallen back to just over two million in spring 1997.³³ Rather than fight rising unemployment, New Labour's task consisted in amplifying a falling trend.

Under the heading the 'New Deal', which confidently invoked Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Depression-era social programmes, the government initiated a raft of measures targeting jobless Britons by demanding that, while receiving social security payments, they enhance their employability. The 'New Deal for Young People' was the first and most prominent of these programmes. Highlighted in the 1997 election manifesto as a measure against youth unemployment, it launched as a trial in January 1998 before national implementation in June that year. For recipients of Jobseeker's Allowance aged between 18 and 24, participation was obligatory, thereby extending the disciplinarian strategy that had characterised Conservative employment policy. At the same time, the Employment Agency emphasised the programme's supportive rather than punitive intentions. Describing the initiative as a 'key part of the Government's welfare to work strategy', a widely distributed official brochure stated that 'it aims to help young people gain the qualities and skills they need to increase their employability and get and keep jobs'.³⁴ Those enrolling in this New Deal could count on personal advice from a dedicated caseworker, who would assess a jobseeker's 'needs, ambitions and options' during an initial four-month period. Young people whom advisers considered not yet ready to work could expect individually tailored assistance, including 'intensive counselling' as well as courses to boost literacy and numeracy skills. Subsequently, participants entered a six-month period of work experience and training by following an occupational skills course, by taking up a job in the voluntary or environmental sector or by working for a private business. To render the programme financially attractive, young people who remained enrolled received payments that at least equalled, but in many cases exceeded, Jobseeker's Allowance and also covered job-related expenses such as travel costs.³⁵ Crucially, those who failed to secure permanent employment after the phase of occupational training and work experience received further assistance from a personal caseworker to 'build on the progress they made during the New Deal' with the ultimate aim of finding a 'suitable job', the Employment Agency pledged.³⁶

With its upbeat tone and its emphasis on individualised assistance, the New Deal for Young People approached unemployed Britons as open to receiving help with obstacles in the labour market, rather than suspiciously focusing on the motivation to work, as Conservative social policy had done. In other words, the New Deal for Young People started from the premise that many benefit recipients were willing to work. The belief that jobless Britons drawing social security payments welcomed help with finding employment through training and work experience also characterised the programmes that targeted additional groups who suffered from disadvantages in the labour market. By 1999, the government had extended its welfare-to-work approach through mandatory training and personal counselling to long-term unemployed citizens aged over 25 as well as those looking for work who were older than 50. Moreover, disabled Britons as well as lone parents had the option of signing up to New Deals.³⁷ When the second Blair government entered office in 2001, almost 1.2 million Britons had participated in a New Deal initiative.³⁸

Yet it was not just in its basic assumption about the motivation of the unemployed that New Labour's approach differed from Conservative strategies. Blair's administration also backed these initiatives with new resources. By investing £4 billion in the New Deal, £2.6 billion of which was raised by a 'windfall tax' on the privatised utilities, the Labour government devoted considerable additional financial means to welfare-to-work programmes during a time of economic expansion, where its predecessors had overseen an erosion of the value of benefits during a recession.³⁹ That New Labour made fiscal and institutional investments in the New Deals corresponded with further measures that directly addressed the material dimensions of joblessness. Britons with limited skills, who could expect only low incomes and who made up the majority of those looking for work, stood at the centre of New Labour's efforts. To ensure that low-income employment offered a guaranteed level of material rewards, the government passed legislation for a minimum wage at a rate of £3.60 per hour in 1999.⁴⁰ In November 1997, Gordon Brown had already announced an additional £300 million to create affordable childcare places for 'almost 1 million children', in support of the various New Deals. This measure aimed to promote work among those lone parents and married couples whose low incomes had previously been absorbed by childcare costs, thereby creating a 'poverty trap' that had left many working parents worse off than their peers on benefits.⁴¹

Moreover, from April 1999, low-income families with children could supplement their wages with 'Working Tax Credits' that guaranteed

married couples with offspring and 'at least one full-time earner' a minimum annual income of £10,400 through a wage subsidy by the tax office.⁴² That tax credits were first available for families with children reflected the government's dedication to fighting widespread child poverty, with the overall aim of reversing multigenerational patterns of social disadvantages. Indeed, one month before the introduction of Working Tax Credits, Blair had committed the government to the eradication of child poverty, which formed a central concern for the Social Exclusion Unit that the Prime Minister installed in 10 Downing Street.⁴³ In 2003, the government made tax credits available to low earners without children, too.⁴⁴ These measures resulted in significant costs. Between 1997 and 2007, annual expenditure for tax credits rose from £7 billion to almost £25 billion, thereby reaching almost half the size of the defence budget.⁴⁵ New Labour thus created new baselines for earnings at the lower end of the income scale both through direct interventions into pricing mechanisms in the labour market and through fiscal transfer payments.

That Blair's government pre-empted, and compensated for, what the administration regarded as shortcomings of market mechanisms, however, by no means signalled a turn against markets per se, nor towards redistribution policies that would have characterised 'old' Labour. In the Anglo-German outline of the Third Way, Blair explicitly dismissed 'the belief that the state should address damaging market failures' comprehensively because, in the past, this had 'all too often led to a disproportionate expansion of the government's reach'. As he declared 'a robust and competitive market framework' a central policy aim, he expressly addressed the issue of those out of work. Reducing unemployment rates, he explained, 'will be easier' if 'labour markets are working properly'. A 'low-wage sector' was necessary to this end, he continued, because it 'make[s] low-skill jobs' available for a group that had long been disproportionately at risk of unemployment: those lacking training and professional qualifications. This low-wage sector, Blair hoped, would allow previously unemployed individuals to work their way towards more lucrative employment in the medium term: '[L]ow-paid work [is] better than no work because [it] ease[s] the transition from unemployment to jobs.'⁴⁶ In keeping with the left's ideological reorientation since the late 1980s, Blair explicitly affirmed market rationales as positive social forces, not just in general terms but specifically with regard to unemployment, because he hoped they would promote upward social mobility.

At the same time, Blair insisted that market mechanisms had to operate within boundaries. Since a 'market economy' should not give rise

to a 'market society', he explained, 'replenish[ing] low incomes' among those on low-income jobs became the responsibility of the tax and benefits system. Before those holding badly paid positions could embark on their upward social trajectory, they deserved help that compensated for their willingness to expose themselves to the forces of supply and demand on the labour market.⁴⁷ Blair credited market mechanisms with an economic efficiency that extended only partially to the social realm, because they could leave substantial groups in material deprivation. Blair advocated a political economy of 'redistributive market liberalism', in which, according to economist John Kay, the state has 'a dominant role in income distribution, but should discharge its responsibility with as little interference as possible in the workings of the free market' for goods and services.⁴⁸ As Peter Sloman highlights in his [chapter](#) in this volume, New Labour's variant of redistributive market liberalism focused on anti-poverty measures among the working population in the low-wage labour market. In the case of New Labour, the laws of supply and demand reached the limits of their social expediency when low-wage labour failed to offer rewards that sustained individuals' motivation to work or look for it. In effect, Blair's government promoted the laws of supply and demand in the labour market by moderating their social effects at the lower end of the social spectrum. Rather than pay people to be out of work, New Labour compensated those who exposed themselves to unfavourable market constellations, with the ultimate aim that these employees would subsequently leave the low-wage sector behind.

New Labour advanced two justifications for its approach to unemployment policy. Firstly, it emphasised the individual obligation to work, which was reflected by the compulsory nature of the New Deal for many jobless Britons. As Tony Blair explained in 1998, New Labour's employment policies were part and parcel of a protracted recalibration of the relationship between individual rights and responsibilities. 'In recent decades, responsibility and duty were the preserves of the Right', he wrote, with an eye to the Thatcher and Major administrations and their eulogies of individual independence. Blair regarded this Conservative insistence on individual responsibility as a reaction against the 'Old Left', which had allegedly 'for too long' separated 'the demand for rights from the state . . . from the duties of citizenship'. In his eyes, no other social provision symbolised this discrepancy more strongly than the circumstance that, before Thatcher's premiership, 'unemployment benefits were often paid without strong reciprocal obligations'.⁴⁹

In a 1996 speech, Blair, by contrast, started from the premise that 'duty is the cornerstone of a decent society'. Conceiving of individual

responsibilities and entitlements as mutually constitutive, he declared that ‘the rights we receive should reflect the duties we owe’. As he outlined the relationship between duties and rights that formed the core of New Labour’s approach to welfare, he linked individualism to the notion of the ‘public good’ by invoking Christian motifs: ‘[I]t is from a sense of individual duty that we connect to the greater good – a principle the Church celebrates in the sacrament of communion.’⁵⁰ Blair’s explicit appeal to Catholicism may have been unusual for a Labour politician speaking on social policy, but other New Labour figures also drew attention to welfare’s moral dimension within a market economy. Anthony Giddens, for instance, argued that markets required strong political and moral moorings: ‘[M]arkets can’t even function without a social and ethical framework – which they themselves cannot provide.’⁵¹ New Labour thus embedded the political economy of ‘redistributive market liberalism’ in a moral economy that hinged on a reciprocal relationship between individual rights and responsibilities.

While Blair’s concept of duty at first glance resembles Thatcher’s outlook, due to both leaders’ Christian faiths, there existed significant differences between them. To begin with, New Labour’s public rhetoric placed less emphasis on the culturally conservative virtues, such as thrift and self-denial, that had underpinned Thatcher’s praise of the ‘proudly but poorly independent’. Nor did it embrace the Conservatives’ habitual moral condemnation of single mothers, as the special employment initiatives aimed to support lone parents indicate.⁵² More importantly, New Labour saw the duty to work as an integral element of a long-term strategy to promote social cohesion by expanding opportunities among disadvantaged groups – a theme that had been conspicuously absent from Conservative welfare rhetoric. Junior Minister for Employment and Equal Opportunities Margaret Hodge stressed in 2000 that social cohesion required redistribution through the tax and benefits system, albeit not through ‘a politics of envy’ that had allegedly guided ‘Old Labour’ when it “punish[ed]” the rich by curtailing ambition’. Rather than pursue equality of outcome, the government characterised its approach as a ‘politics of need’ that targeted structural causes of poverty.⁵³ Based on the mantra that “work is the best route out of poverty”, Hodge explained, the ‘Welfare to Work agenda’ formed ‘a central feature of our redistribution agenda’. While the government acknowledged that for those ‘whose levels of poverty are too great or too ingrained, the hand out is their only lifeline’, it strove primarily for ‘equality based on the hand up, not the hand out’. To underline her egalitarian credentials, Hodge stressed that her party was committed to combating the unfair treatment frequently

encountered by the disabled, women and, most notably, racial minorities: '[T]he disadvantage and discrimination people face must be central to an equality agenda.'⁵⁴ In other words, New Labour hoped to put in place a welfare system that allowed all those at the bottom of the social hierarchy to pull themselves up.

As a New Labour signature policy, facilitating the entry of the socially disadvantaged into the labour market was designed to strengthen social cohesion and enhance the government's wider anti-poverty strategy. 'Opportunity for all' emerged as a key social policy phrase in the late 1990s. Beyond initiatives against child poverty to break multigenerational deprivation, the government relied on training programmes to improve the prospects of adults lacking a job.⁵⁵ For New Labour, the development of skills provided far more than an entrance key to the labour market that, if cultivated, could lead to the social advancement that began with subsidised low-wage work. Qualifications also functioned as a personal insurance policy against the vagaries of the contemporary economy that commentators characterised as demanding multiple job changes over the course of a working life. According to Giddens, both the shift towards a post-industrial labour market and 'the high rate of business formation and dissolution . . . characteristic of a dynamic society' made employment less stable than in the 1950s and 1960s, thereby creating new personal risks. Blair argued along similar lines that 'in a more insecure and demanding labour market . . . people will change jobs more often', because workers were in greater danger of losing their paid positions.⁵⁶ In this socio-economic environment, the welfare state, Giddens pledged, faced the challenge of helping individuals cope not just by offering 'protection when things go wrong' but by providing them with the 'material and moral capabilities to move through major periods of transition in their lives'.⁵⁷ The New Deal, with its emphasis on training and individual advice, was designed to allow employees to respond more effectively to the existential challenges of an unpredictable post-industrial labour market.

Giddens, for one, went one step further and urged that 'effective risk management (individual or collective)' ought to go beyond protecting individuals against the negative consequences of change such as job losses. While 'risk taking' had long been praised as an integral dimension of 'entrepreneurial activity', Giddens pointed out that 'the same applies to the labour force'. After all, ordinary workers faced numerous risks, too. He urged welfare reformers to 'harness . . . the positive or energetic side of risk and provid[e] resources for risk taking' on a larger scale. Since moving from welfare to work involved abandoning familiar forms of material security, entering the job market amounted for many to a

'risk-infused activity' that policymakers, Giddens suggested, should encourage in a similar fashion as entrepreneurialism. It was thus only consistent to regard welfare arrangements as part of a 'social investment state' that would strengthen workers' competitive position.⁵⁸ Blair resorted to the same business-inspired rhetoric when stressing the importance of 'investment in human and social capital' through training and other initiatives.⁵⁹ While Conservative social policy conceived entrepreneurial values as the preserve of the minority of Britons who responded to unemployment by starting a business, New Labour expected far more citizens – not least those in and out of work at the lower end of the social scale – to cultivate entrepreneurial selves. To this end, Blair's and Brown's governments assigned multiple roles to the welfare state: they cast it as an investor in entrepreneurial virtues to strengthen the market power of working Britons and as a compensating institution that offset the material consequences of market operations among low-income groups. In contrast to Conservative policies predicated on a market fundamentalism that strongly affirmed the social efficiency of the forces of supply and demand, New Labour's progressive version of neoliberalism embraced a more sceptical attitude to market operations in the social arena, emphasising the need to empower a broad range of market participants as well as the need to redress social inequities.

Conclusion

Both differences and similarities marked the varieties of neoliberalism promoted by Conservative and New Labour social policies between the late 1970s and the turn of the millennium. In its employment policies, Blair's government retained Thatcher's disciplinarian stipulation that the unemployed 'actively' seek work or risk losing their benefits. New Labour, however, diverged from its predecessors by offering those searching for work significantly more support in the form of training and personal advice. This contrast between New Labour and the Conservatives reflects their respective understandings of markets. While they shared optimistic assumptions about the efficiency of market rationales in economic contexts, New Labour insisted on modifying the laws of supply and demand in the social realm, where, as persistent poverty demonstrated to Blair and his adherents, this economic mechanism worked only imperfectly. Since Conservatives more readily accepted the social outcomes of market operations, they showed little concern for inequality as a social issue and expected benefit recipients to enter the labour market

irrespective of the implications for individuals' income and status. New Labour, meanwhile, emphasised the need for transfer payments for Britons in low-wage employment as a compensation for exposing themselves to market rationales on unfavourable terms. Compared with the Conservatives, New Labour displayed more scepticism about markets as socially efficient and expedient institutions.

In keeping with its strategy of expanding individual opportunity and advancing social cohesion, New Labour's unemployment policy provided additional resources for training and personal advice. Developing individual skills, policymakers expected, would grant those outside, or at the margins of, the labour market improved chances to assert themselves. By aiming to create empowered market participants with entrepreneurial traits on a broad scale, New Labour's unemployment policy also responded to a perceived need to prepare employees for a job market that offered significantly less stable employment than in the past. Conservative policy, by contrast, had restricted the promotion of entrepreneurial selves to the minority among the unemployed who were willing to start a small business. The majority of those out of work, by contrast, were faced with conservative policies that turned benefit recipients into disempowered market participants who had to expose themselves to the forces of supply and demand at the price of low incomes.

While the Conservatives and New Labour employed state institutions to promote market mechanisms in their social policies, they pursued differing approaches. These reflected their respective assessments of the expediency of markets in the social realm as well as contrasting moral economies that balanced individual duties and entitlements in different ways. Regarding the majority of those out of work as unwilling to return to the labour market, Thatcherite policy mobilised the state to enforce an individual obligation to independence through work and self-dependence. New Labour's policy initiatives revolved around notions that saw individual duties and entitlements in more reciprocal terms. Assuming that those out of work welcomed the opportunity to return to the labour market, it assigned a stronger redistributive task to the state to ensure that citizens became market participants. New Labour complemented the Conservatives' disciplinarian approach through initiatives that cast the state in the role of an investor.

In 1997, a culturally conservative neoliberalism founded on market fundamentalism gave way to a progressive version founded on a more ambivalent assessment of the efficiency of markets in the social realm. The unemployment policies of successive governments have thus implemented a neoliberal turn based on differing moral economies, as

well as understandings of the market, to expose millions of Britons to market rationales. This sustained shift yielded considerable social effects. Benefit cuts and eroding legal protection through welfare reform under Thatcher contributed to Britain's significantly rising income inequality during the 1980s, when the Gini indicator rose by 34 per cent from 0.267 to 0.35.⁶⁰ New Labour's minimum wage regulations and tax credits may have stopped this trend but could not reverse it. Reducing income inequality would have required tax policies targeting higher incomes, which New Labour explicitly ruled out. Moreover, high income inequality also derived from the polarising post-industrial labour market that, among other things, witnessed an expansion of low-skilled, precarious and low-wage jobs in the service sector. Indeed, New Labour's decision to subsidise low-income work through tax credits did little to counteract the proliferation of 'lousy' jobs. Rather, it may actually have inadvertently stoked this trend by ensuring a steady supply of workers who were required by New Labour's welfare regime to seek work in this very sector of the labour market.⁶¹ Viewed from this angle, Giddens's characterisation of the 'Third Way' as an attack on 'neoliberalism' is simultaneously right and wrong: right, because New Labour modified Thatcherite social policy significantly; and wrong, because Blair's (and subsequently Brown's) governments still placed considerable trust in market rationales to reduce unemployment. And by placing this trust in market rationales at a time when many of those out of work confronted an increasingly inauspicious labour market, New Labour contributed to the proliferation of forms of employment that have frequently been identified as a source of widespread political and social discontent in the UK for offering not just low incomes but little job security.

Notes

- 1 Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder, *Europe: The Third Way/Die neue Mitte* (Johannesburg, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 1999), 10.
- 2 See the report in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (10 June 1999), 10.
- 3 Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way and Its Critics* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000), 32.
- 4 For explorations of the relationship between New Labour and its predecessors, see Vernon Bogdanor, 'Social democracy', in Anthony Seldon (ed.), *Blair's Britain, 1997–2007* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 164–82, esp. 168–9; and Robert Taylor, 'New Labour, new capitalism', in Anthony Seldon (ed.), *Blair's Britain, 1997–2007* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 214–40, esp. 222–4.
- 5 Giddens, *Third Way and Its Critics*, 32–3.
- 6 Taylor, 'New Labour, new capitalism', 214–15. The active promotion of market mechanisms through state institutions is considered one of the key features of neoliberalism in general. For a particularly scholarly argument along these lines, see Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The end of empire and the birth of neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2018), 5–7.

- 'Rolling back the state' was, of course, central to Thatcherite rhetoric. See still E. H. H. Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism: Conservative political ideas in the twentieth century* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), 214–39, esp. 223–9.
- 7 See Office for National Statistics, LFS: In Employment: UK: All: Aged 16–64: Thousands: SA, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/timeseries/lf2g/lms> (accessed 9 September 2019); Maarten Goos and Alan Manning, 'Lousy and lovely jobs: The rising polarization of jobs in Britain', *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 89 (2007), 118–33; Geoff Mason, Ken Mayhew, Matthew Osborne and Philip Stevens, 'Low pay, labour market institutions, and job quality in the United Kingdom', in Carolyn Lloyd, Geoff Mason and Ken Mayhew (eds), *Low-Wage Work in the United Kingdom* (New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 2008), 41–95, esp. 50; and Nicholas Crafts, Ian Gazeley and Andrew Newell, *Work and Pay in 20th Century Britain* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), 39.
 - 8 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution* (Brooklyn, NY, Zone Books, 2015), 17.
 - 9 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–9* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 226–7, 267–86. For a sociological exploration, see Ulrich Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self: Fabricating a new type of subject* (London, SAGE, 2016).
 - 10 For more detail, see Bernhard Rieger, 'Making Britain work again: Unemployment and the remaking of British social policy in the eighties', *English Historical Review*, 133 (2018), 634–66, esp. 648–9.
 - 11 Noel Thompson, 'Economic ideas and the development of economic opinion', in Richard Coopey and Nicholas Woodward (eds), *Britain in the 1970s: The troubled decade* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1996), 55–80, at 56.
 - 12 James Denman and Paul MacDonald, 'Unemployment statistics from 1881 to the present day', *Labour Market Trends*, 104 (January 1996), 5–18, at 10–11.
 - 13 Richard Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain: The politics and social upheaval of the Thatcher era* (London, Simon & Schuster, 2010), 132.
 - 14 Keith Joseph, *Conditions for Fuller Employment* (London, Centre for Policy Studies, 1978), 6–7.
 - 15 Patrick Minford, *Unemployment: Cause and cure* (Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 1983), 26.
 - 16 Alan Walters, 'Unemployment measures proposed in E(81)74', 8 July 1981, paragraph 4, TNA: PREM 19/525.
 - 17 Joan Brown, *Victims or Villains? Social security benefits in unemployment* (York, Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust, 1990), 51–2.
 - 18 David Stuart Edwards, 'The history and politics of the Youth Opportunities programme, 1978–1983' (PhD thesis, Institute of Education, London, 1985), 160.
 - 19 For the initial announcement of this scheme, see *The Times* (14 November 1981), 1.
 - 20 *The Guardian* (30 April 1982), 19; and *The Times* (4 March 1983), 17.
 - 21 For an overview of these schemes, see *The Times* (3 June 1982), 18.
 - 22 Policy Unit to Prime Minister, note, 22 December 1982, 2, TNA: PREM 19/1157.
 - 23 John Sparrow to Prime Minister, note, 20 December 1982, 1, TNA: PREM 19/1157; CPRS, Unemployment Measures, note, 23 February 1983, 12, TNA: PREM 19/1161; and Ferdinand Mount to Prime Minister, note, 25 February 1983, 1, TNA: PREM 19/1161.
 - 24 *The Times* (19 March 1986), 22; *The Guardian* (23 October 1986), 24; and *The Times* (16 February 1988), 4.
 - 25 Handwritten comment by Margaret Thatcher on 'Minute to the Prime Minister', 5 December 1980 (emphasis in the original), TNA: PREM 19/523.
 - 26 Matthew Grimley, 'Thatcherism, morality and religion', in Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (eds), *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012), 74–94.
 - 27 Ferdinand Mount, *Cold Cream: My early life and other mistakes* (London, Bloomsbury, 2009), 288–9.
 - 28 David Young, 'Enterprise and employment', secret note, 1 November 1985, 4, TNA: PREM 19/1839; and David Young to Margaret Thatcher, note, 6 June 1985, 2, TNA, PREM 19/1569.
 - 29 See David Price, *Office of Hope: A history of the Employment Service* (London, Policy Studies Institute, 2000), 243–8.
 - 30 A straightforward account of the manifold changes is Brown, *Victims or Villains?* For a report on Jobseeker's Allowance, see *The Guardian* (11 January 1996), 6.
 - 31 Taylor, 'New Labour, new capitalism', 214–40, at 217. On the wider reorientation, see Bogdanor, 'Social democracy'.

- 32 For the manifesto, see <http://www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/man/lab97.htm> (accessed 28 January 2019).
- 33 For the figures, see <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/timeseries/mgsc/unem> (accessed 4 March 2019).
- 34 Employment Agency, *What Is New Deal for Young People?* (London, 1998), 1.
- 35 Employment Agency, *What Is New Deal for Young People?*, 4–6.
- 36 Employment Agency, *What Is New Deal for Young People?*, 8.
- 37 Kitty Stewart, 'Equality and social justice', in Anthony Seldon (ed.), *Blair's Britain, 1997–2007* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 408–35, esp. 409, 422.
- 38 Paul Bivand, 'New Deal jobs approach half million mark', *Working Brief*, 125 (2001), 8–9.
- 39 See Gordon Brown's announcement of funding for the New Deals on 25 November 1997 in House of Commons debate, *Hansard* (25 November 1997), series 6, vol. 301, cols 776–7.
- 40 For the legal text, see <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1999/584/contents/made> (accessed 21 June 2021).
- 41 House of Commons, *Hansard* (25 November 1997), col. 777.
- 42 Department of Social Services, *Opportunity for All: Tackling poverty and social exclusion*, Cm 4445 (London, HMSO, 1999), 58.
- 43 Tony Blair, 'The Beveridge Lecture (London, Toynbee Hall, 1999), <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/poverty/background.html> (accessed 12 September 2019).
- 44 Tom Sefton, John Hills and Holly Sutherland, 'Poverty, inequality and redistribution', in John Hills and Kitty Stewart (eds), *Towards a More Equal Society? Poverty, inequality and policy since 1997* (Bristol, Policy Press, 2005), 21–45, at 22.
- 45 Office for Budget Responsibility, *Welfare Trends Report* (London, HMSO, 2016), 126.
- 46 Blair and Schröder, *Europe: The Third Way*, 11–12.
- 47 Blair and Schröder, *Europe: The Third Way*, 2.
- 48 John Kay, 'Staking a moral claim', *New Statesman* (11 October 1996), 18–20, at 20. For an extended exploration of the concept with respect to welfare benefits for working Britons, see Peter Sloman, 'Redistribution in an age of neoliberalism: Market economics, "poverty knowledge", and the growth of working-age benefits in Britain, c. 1979–2010', *Political Studies*, 67 (2018), 732–51.
- 49 Tony Blair, *The Third Way* (London, The Fabian Society, 1998), 4–5.
- 50 Tony Blair, 'The rights we enjoy, the duties we owe', in Tony Blair, *New Britain: My vision of a young country* (Cambridge, MA, Westview Press, 2004), 236; and Tony Blair, 'Why I am a Christian', in Tony Blair, *New Britain: My vision of a young country* (Cambridge, MA, Westview Press, 2004), 59.
- 51 Giddens, *Third Way and Its Critics*, 33.
- 52 Kirk Mann and Sasha Roseneil, "'Some mothers do 'ave 'em': Backlash and the gender politics of the underclass debate', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 3 (1994), 317–31.
- 53 Margaret Hodge, 'Equality and New Labour', *Renewal*, 8 (2000), 34–41, at 36.
- 54 Hodge, 'Equality and New Labour', 36–8.
- 55 Department of Social Services, *Opportunity for All*, 1.
- 56 Blair, *Third Way*, 9.
- 57 Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The renewal of social democracy* (Cambridge, Polity, 1998), 100.
- 58 Giddens, *The Third Way*, 116.
- 59 Blair and Schröder, *Europe: The Third Way*, 8–9.
- 60 Anthony B. Atkinson, *Inequality: What can be done?* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2015), 9.
- 61 Stewart, 'Equality and social justice', 430–2; and Goos and Manning, 'Lousy and lovely jobs'.