

Unemployment, Welfare, and Masculine Citizenship: 'So Much Honest Poverty' in Britain, 1870-1930

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In *Unemployment, Welfare, and Masculine Citizenship*, Marjorie Levine-Clark assesses the regime through which British working-class men, and their families, were granted access to welfare in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Much of the literature on welfare regimes has emphasized the extent to which for much of this period working-class dependence on state assistance was framed as shameful, and as evidence of 'scrounging'. Levine-Clark argues, in contrast, that during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a regime emerged which enabled working-class men to obtain state assistance without compromising their character or claims to citizenship. The dual criteria of the 'work imperative' and 'family liability' (p. 2) were used to establish a distinction between 'poverty' and 'pauperism' (p. 5), and men who were able to demonstrate either evidence of a work imperative or family liability (or both) fell into a category of deservedness, rather than shameful pauperism.

Organized in three, roughly chronological sections, each chapter addresses a particular theme. Part one, entitled 'Unemployment and the continuities of honest poverty', is divided into three chapters, addressing the nature of the work imperative, the concept of family liability, and the creation of national unemployment benefits, respectively. Part two, 'Honest poverty in national crisis', moves forward in time to address both the First World War and inter-war strikes, with three chapters on the 'service imperative', relief for ex-servicemen, and relief in the context of 1920s trade disputes. 'Honest poverty and the intimacies of policy', part three, chiefly deals with the inter-war period up to 1930, with chapters on inter-generational responsibility and the welfare of older citizens, and the politics of neglectful husbands and dodging maintenance. The period traced by Levine-Clark moves from the period of economic decline in the 1870s, through the creation of a national system of unemployment relief in the first decade of the 20th century, to yet another period of economic crisis in the inter-war period.

According to Levine-Clark, one of the key developments of this period was the emergence of an understanding of economic change which challenged existing wisdom about social structures and systems. The concept of 'honest poverty' emerged in part from a shift from thinking about unemployment as reflective of a moral failing, to thinking of it as the consequence of structural economic problems. From a practical perspective, the inadequacy of local resources was a crucial prompt in generating demands for a

comprehensive national system. However, once it was established that a man was not morally responsible for his inability to find sufficient employment, it remained to be determined who to assist in their times of suffering, and how often. In order to prevent the welfare system from being overrun, and to attend to lingering convictions about the prevalence of individuals set upon exploiting the resources of the state, assistance was in the first instance provided to those who were still willing to offer labour in exchange for support, either in the last gasp of a system of outrelief premised upon the 'work imperative', or by demonstrating a genuine effort to obtain paid employment. In the second instance, it was premised upon the belief that those men most desperately in need of assistance, and most deserving of state resources, were those with families to support. Levine-Clark observes that 'The male breadwinner ideal was certainly the norm when Britons confronted the problem of unemployment in the late nineteenth century' (pp. 6–7), and as a result the notion of 'family liability' carried great weight in determining an individual's deservedness.

The system in which married men who demonstrated a willingness to work, and who therefore had not relinquished the masculine duties central to their role as citizens, were at the pinnacle of a deservedness hierarchy, was thrown into question by the events of the First World War. The tremendous demand for soldiers shifted the definition of good masculine citizenship, from an emphasis on the 'work imperative' to a 'service imperative'. Those who did not enlist were seen as shirking their responsibility, even though they may have continued to hold paid employment. The concept of family liability, however, was not so easily overturned, even in wartime. Married men with families to support were far more likely to be exempted from military service, while single men were expected to volunteer on the grounds that they had no, or at least fewer, responsibilities on the home front. Upon the cessation of hostilities, however, the service imperative fell by the wayside, and in the face of continued large-scale unemployment, 'local authorities felt it unjust that the newer politics of preference trump the older system of honest poverty' (p. 155), particularly in cases where married men were supporting families. Single men, then, even if they were ex-servicemen, fell back down the hierarchy of deservedness. Levine-Clark concludes with an assessment of how the reversion from a service imperative to the previous criteria for honest poverty affected extended families, including aging parents, wives, and adult daughters.

It would be misleading to frame this narrative as one solely emphasizing the actions of elites. Levine-Clark's sources indicate that not only did officials emphasize a regime of honest work in exchange for relief, but many of those who applied for relief also preferred 'work not doles' as reflective of their 'masculine status' (p. 89). Despite the efforts of a certain section of elites, the transition to a shame-free conception of relief was never complete. Levine-Clark usefully observes that the question of relief is particularly freighted given the impact it had upon an individual's right to exercise the franchise, perhaps the most basic tenet of citizenship in the modern period. Indeed, her work emphasizes the extent to which modern standards of citizenship have been contingent upon and framed by attitudes towards work and assistance. She also highlights the stakes entailed in defining a restrictive regime of assistance, noting that the anxieties placed on 'failed' breadwinners could, in the worst circumstances, result in suicide, with many less tragic cases ending with significant social and familial disruption.

Among Levine-Clark's historiographical interventions is an insistence upon the relevance of the Poor Law to studies of this later period. Previous scholars have argued that the Poor Law was rarely used as a source of relief for unemployed men after 1870, and that working-class self-help organizations such as friendly societies, benefit clubs, and trade unions were more important, or at least more interesting, than the Poor Law. Levine-Clark argues, however, that the Poor Law remained relevant to 'dealing with the problem of unemployment' (p. 11). Levine-Clark's chief purpose is to emphasize that the transition to a 'better' system of modern welfare provision was not straightforward, and that the continued existence of the Poor Law alongside a relatively restrictive central system of unemployment benefits in fact resulted in an uneven and contingent delivery of relief, in which local Poor Law officials picked up the slack left by the more narrowly defined provisions of the national system. The Poor Law also provides Levine-Clark with her periodization, beginning in the early 1870s with the 'crusade against outrelief' (p. 17) and concluding with the abolition of the Board of Guardians in 1929. Levine-Clark further insists upon bridging periods and concepts of welfare deservingness, emphasizing the need to see particular welfare regimes not solely as a reflection of

contemporary circumstance or philosophy, but as part of a much longer trajectory and set of ideas about who is deserving of others' assistance, and when.

Levine-Clark's work sits at the intersection of literatures on gender, welfare, and citizenship, and draws upon recent advances in each of these fields. She positions her study as aiming to understand, in part, 'welfare heteronormativity' (p. 10), by exploring the ways in which patriarchal regimes and privilege not only positioned men as superior to women, but also some men as superior to other men, serving to entrench the central role of heterosexual marriage. Levine-Clark also outlines how the masculine citizenship regime in place during this period impacted, and prompted responses from, women. Evidently the concept of 'family liability' necessarily entailed official consideration of the appropriate role of a wife and mother, which Levine-Clark argues was as a home maker and child carer, rather than as a breadwinner, despite the fact that in some families women did engage in work outside the home. In her chapter on inter-generational liability Levine-Clark underscores that this emphasis on women as carers rather than workers functioned to produce a relief system that refused to make claims on daughters to financially support their parents, but which expected them to open their homes and provide physical and emotional support to aging parents.

Levine-Clark utilizes a partial case study approach, in which she uses 'the Black Country region of the West Midlands to put flesh on the [national] policy skeleton' (p. 11). She indicates that this area is a particularly strong exemplar of the phenomenon of 'honest poverty' due to high levels of 'chronic un- and underemployment', which 'eroded men's ability to support their families and led them to seek help' (p. 11). Levine-Clark also notes that the population of the region was predominantly male even in a period when women outnumbered men across the country as a whole. She attributes this imbalance to the nature of local industries, which emphasized male employees over female ones. The Black Country's rise through the 18th and early 19th century occurred as it became home to some of the foremost specialists in coal and iron production, and particularly the making of chains, nail, glass, bricks, and tools, and other iron industries. These industries went into sharp decline in the 1870s, resulting in a massive and widespread jump in unemployment, at which point Levine-Clark begins her study. The bulk of her primary research comes from the records of the Dudley and Stourbridge Poor Law Unions, covering parishes in southwestern Staffordshire and northern Worcestershire, with additional reference to three local newspapers, and to the records of parliamentary debates and committees, as well as the files on appeals brought to the Crown-appointed Umpire in the 1920s, which are variously to be found in the papers of the Ministries of Labour, Health, and Pensions, and of the Treasury and War Office, all at the National Archives. The imperial context is addressed only briefly in the final chapter, but this is a sensible methodological move in a study that by definition uses the British state and its domestic activities as its chief frame of analysis.

The structure which Levine-Clark adopts reflects the challenges of addressing such a complex topic. Since the process that Levine-Clark describes entails the temporary abeyance, followed by the re-emergence, of a particular welfare regime, albeit with a certain degree of alteration, it is perhaps inevitable that there is some amount of repetition as she highlights the extent to which certain ideas had traction even through periods of great social and political change. Levine-Clark emphasizes the creation of a national unemployment benefit as a moment when the concept of deservedness could have been expanded to better include women and unmarried men, but was instead designed to entrench the concepts of the work imperative and family liability. The structure of her argument serves, in part, to underscore the extent to which inter-war welfare regimes were a reflection of older convictions, rather than representing the creation of a brave new world of welfare. By extension, Levine-Clark indicates the limitations of a view of the early 20th century as a predominantly progressive era which signalled new respect for the rights of the individual as supported by active state intervention in the daily lives of citizens. While this argument works in concert with those of previous scholars who have argued for the limitations of the welfare state as inherently gendered, she also contributes to debates about the political culture of the Edwardian period in particular.

Levine-Clark's section on inter-generational liability is particularly fascinating in its description of the ways in which the transition from breadwinner to dependent altered older men's sense of their own masculine identity, and how the intimate politics of elder care became intertwined with state policy. Her observation

that the contributions of adult children to the maintenance of parents indicated the parents' respectability further demonstrates the state's endorsement of a particular type of family dynamic, and a specific set of ideas about the appropriate and desired behaviour of adults in middle life, both in an economic and social sense. This line of argument is a useful addition to existing literatures on the family, and particularly on the way the state has shaped family creation and relationship; such literature has chiefly emphasized this phenomenon as it affected parents in young and middle age, and their young and adolescent children, rather than elderly parents and their adult children.

While Levine-Clark's case study approach offers unique opportunities for a fine-grained account of the human response to the 'industrial decline, environmental degradation, and endemic poverty that the region suffered by the last quarter of the nineteenth century' (p. 11), a more explicit discussion of the extent to which the Black Country region serves as representative of the nation as a whole, or perhaps as emblematic of the most extreme iteration of these problems in a way that highlights the most salient issues extant across the country, would be of use. This is particularly so because Levine-Clark emphasizes the interplay between 'central government policy and local discretion' as central to the creation of an 'unpredictable context' that shaped welfare negotiations (p. 21). It would be interesting to hear more about the reasons why Levine-Clark selected this region as a case study, and perhaps of the limitations, or advantages, this particular case, and the case study approach more generally, might place upon her research. As the case study approach becomes more prevalent in academic project design, it is always of value to hear from senior scholars about how they come to choose the methods that they do, although this kind of self-reflection does not always integrate well into a published monograph.

Levine-Clark demonstrates that the criteria by which we determine an individual's deservedness for welfare assistance can change in periods of great social and political flux, but also highlights the limitations of these changes in the long term. The introduction of a service imperative during the First World War reflected the dramatic shifts occurring within British society, but the cessation of war and the relative decline of social upheaval after 1918 curtailed the willingness of officials to consider alternative designations for deservingness; they instead returned to the older standard of family liability. Through references in the preface and conclusion to 21st-century statements by politicians in both the United Kingdom and United States on unemployment and welfare, Levine-Clark underscores the extent to which we still cling to the notion that there is a good or right way to be poor, and a wrong way which does not merit our assistance or compassion. *Unemployment, Welfare, and Masculine Citizenship* will appeal to those working in fields across the history of modern Britain, as well as scholars working on histories of the welfare state, gender, and other topics in international perspective. It seems likely that future research in the British context will help to highlight the myriad ways in which this particular system of welfare worked itself out across regional and social differences, and that Levine-Clark's work will serve as the first step in this new direction.

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