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The Sexual Logics of Neoliberalism in Britain

Sexual Politics in Exceptional Times

Aura Lehtonen



The Sexual Logics of Neoliberalism in Britain

This book explores the relationship between sexuality and politics in Britain's recent political past, in the decade preceding the Covid-19 pandemic, and asks what sexual meanings and logics are embedded in the dominant political discourses and policies of this time.

A discursive framing of 'exceptionality' has commonly attached to the politics of austerity, crisis and neoliberalisation that have characterised the 2010s in Britain, with many noting the depoliticising effects of such a crisis politics. The book's four case studies each investigate a binary concept that has played a key role in these limited and limiting discourses: the stable family/troubled family; deserving/undeserving; public/private and material/cultural. Deploying an expansive notion of sexuality, these binaries are examined by analysing a range of cultural and political texts in which they are reproduced, from policy and legal documents to popular films and TV series.

This empirically informed and theoretically innovative analysis makes an important contribution to understandings of sexuality, identity and inequalities, as well as of crisis and neoliberalism. It will be of interest to scholars and students in gender and sexuality studies, cultural studies, sociology, politics and social policy.

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Earlier iterations of some of the arguments in this book have appeared elsewhere. Parts of Chapter 1's examination of poverty policy documents were published in an article entitled "'Helping Workless Families": Cultural Poverty and the Family in Austerity and Anti-welfare Discourse', in *Sociological Research Online*, 23(1); and in a co-written chapter (with Jacob Breslow) entitled 'Infantilised Parents and Criminalised Children: The Frame of Childhood in UK Poverty Discourse', in *Growing Up and Getting By: International Perspectives on Childhood and Youth in Hard Times*, edited by J Horton, H Pimlott-Wilson and SM Hall (Bristol: Policy Press). Chapter 2's analysis of the film *I, Daniel Blake* was first developed in a co-written article (with Jacqueline Gibbs) entitled 'I, Daniel Blake (2016): Vulnerability, Care and Citizenship in Austerity Politics', in *Feminist Review*, 122.

Introduction: Sexual politics in exceptional times and places

On Saturday 13 March 2021, I cycled to Clapham Common in South London and joined hundreds of others at the vigil for Sarah Everard, who had been kidnapped nearby and then murdered just over a week earlier – with a police officer eventually pleading guilty to her kidnap, rape and murder. Many others had paid their respects earlier in the day; and although the original organisers, Reclaim These Streets, had officially cancelled the vigil due to a lack of police approval (or outright pressure), many still chose to attend. Feminist direct action group Sisters Uncut encouraged attendees to ‘bring your sadness and your rage’ (2021), and so we did; as people gathered to light candles, lay flowers and stand in solidarity with victims of gendered and sexual violence, the shared emotions were palpable in the air. The crowd heard speeches from the bandstand in the middle of the park, with the tone shifting between sombre and angry, while rows of police officers lined the periphery of the gathering. Although it seemed that the vast majority of the crowd were following Covid-19 guidelines, eventually the police officers made a move to clear the bandstand and arrested four people for breaches of Covid-19 regulations – a rather heavy-handed response for which London’s Metropolitan Police faced significant criticism in the aftermath. The events at the vigil dominated media discussion over the following days, with many debating whether it was even really a vigil or whether it was in fact a protest; and I wondered whether in such circumstances it is ever possible to *just* mourn, without political considerations being present.

News in the weeks and months preceding Everard’s disappearance and the vigil had been dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic, and at the time the UK was in the middle of its third national lockdown. The unusualness of the first lockdown in March 2020 had by now morphed into something like tired acceptance; what had originally felt like an exceptional response to an unprecedented global crisis had become something that many of us were completely exhausted by, but also quite familiar with – a new normal. The repeated cycling between rising infection rates and tightening of restrictions on the one hand, and falling infection rates and loosening of restrictions on the other, had a kind of rhythm to it – a rhythm that

one could somewhat get used to, albeit with a certain weariness. This was the case for many despite the severe and unequal impacts of the pandemic (and the governmental responses to it) – whether in terms of health, economic losses or divisions of labour, as I discuss further below. It was also the case despite the significant consequences of the recurring restrictions for many of our intimate, and even sexual, lives: even in the periods between official lockdowns, the rules often governed where and when we could see friends or family; whether we could be there for loved ones in their significant life events; whether we could meet up with someone from a dating app; how many friends we could gather with in the park.

Perhaps it is for these reasons that the vigil in March 2021 felt to me like a collective sigh: the shared moment of political intimacy disrupted some of the ways in which many of our lives had increasingly turned inwards, become smaller, over the previous year. Anna Birley, one of the founders of Reclaim These Streets, writes in *The Guardian* a year after the vigil:

Last March feels a long time ago now. It was as cold and dark in the evenings as it is now, but we were in the middle of a lockdown too. Stuck at home in south London in tier 4 restrictions, my friends and I found that, faced with Sarah's image on missing posters on every street, we started self-imposing restrictions too. We didn't go for a run after dark; we shared our location even when we had just popped to the corner shop; we couldn't stop looking over our shoulders. (2022)

Here Birley is making a connection between the Covid-19 restrictions and the restrictions that many of us impose on ourselves when faced with the frequent possibility of sexual harassment or violence. Although the reasons for these restrictions are of course very different, there is perhaps a similarity to how they feel in the everyday, in that they both restrict our capacities to live our lives – and especially our intimate and sexual lives – fully and freely; they both make our lives smaller. It makes sense, then, that the gathering at the vigil, in countering both of these feelings of restriction, would generate shared feelings not just of frustration and anger at endemic sexual violence, but also of intimacy, community and political hope. These different kinds of restrictions to our intimate and sexual lives, as well as the coming together to counter them in a shared moment of mourning or protest, are all also examples of sexual politics in the sense it is conceptualised in this book.

Here I take up the question of the relationship between sexuality and politics in Britain's recent political past, in the decade preceding the Covid-19 pandemic, and ask what kinds of sexual meanings and logics are embedded in the dominant political narratives, discourses and policies of this time. As the book's title suggests, a discursive framing of 'exceptionality' has commonly attached to the politics of austerity, crisis and neoliberalisation that have characterised 2010s in Britain, with many noting the depoliticising effects of such a 'politics of crisis' that leaves many too exhausted to care about voting, let alone to think up other strategies for

political resistance (eg, see Bramall 2016; Coleman 2016; Gilbert 2013; Hitchen 2016; Peck 2001). So how do sexuality and intimacy feature in these dominant framings that have helped to justify the ongoing processes of neoliberalisation, welfare retrenchment and privatisation? How is the heteronormative household positioned in the discourses and policies of austerity and welfare retrenchment, and who gets excluded from such framings? How are sexualised judgements folded into dominant understandings of 'deservingness'? Do the policies of the past decade also restrict and disrupt our intimate and sexual lives, and if so how? And perhaps most importantly, how might we confront all of the above, given the overwhelming depoliticising tendencies of our time? Indeed, widespread protest has also characterised the decade – a 'decade of dissent' in David J. Bailey's (2020) words – perhaps beginning with the student protests of 2010 that I discuss briefly in Chapter 4. So, what kinds of sexual politics are being enacted in these protests, and how might they help us counter the dominant logics that have rendered sexuality and intimacy a site of restriction and moral judgement, in the service of a politics of austerity, crisis and neoliberalisation?

Thus, the chapters that follow offer original new readings of the sexual meanings and logics embedded in the politics of exceptionality that have driven austerity and neoliberalisation in Britain. The book's four case studies each investigate a binary concept that I argue has played a key role in these limited and limiting discourses: the stable family/troubled family; deserving/undeserving; public/private and material/cultural. I examine these binaries by analysing a range of cultural and political texts where they are reproduced, from policy and legal documents to popular films and TV series. By deploying an expansive notion of sexuality, each chapter investigates the sexual meanings and logics embedded in the binary, exposing its contradictions, underpinning assumptions and violences. In the rest of this introductory chapter, I first expand on my framing of the 'politics of exceptionality', outlining the combination of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis that such a politics has entailed in Britain's recent history, as well as setting out the temporal context for the book. I then introduce the geographical context of the book and highlight the other way in which exceptionality features in the logics of austerity, crisis and neoliberalism, as British exceptionalism. I go on to unpack my conceptualisation of sexuality and intimacy in more detail; and finally I end with outlines of the rest of the book's chapters.

Crisis, Neoliberalisation and a Logic of Exceptionality

At the time, the UK's first national Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020 seemed utterly unusual – at least for those of us restricted almost entirely to our homes for the duration. Today, a couple of years later it conversely seems remarkable how quickly that initial experience of something so unfamiliar – an unprecedented global crisis – shifted into a kind of 'business as usual'. Despite the exceptional origins of the Covid-19 crisis, over time the everyday experience of rising and

falling infection rates, and better and worse governmental responses to them, has come with a felt sense of banality. Scientists have lamented the normalisation of mass death (eg, see Devlin 2021); while ever-growing poverty, inequality and a sense of insecurity have become part of the regular humdrum of life for many. In other words, when crisis becomes a permanent state, a constant backdrop to everyday life, the specifics almost cease to matter; when everything is exceptional, it all becomes mundane. In this way, we might think of the Covid-19 crisis as connected to the many other crises that have characterised the 2010s, both in Britain and elsewhere. Indeed, the ‘ABC’ of austerity, Brexit and Covid-19 have been linked together in some media and political commentary as the three major crises that defined and shaped Britain politically in the 2010s and beyond (eg, see Thomas 2021). While austerity dominated the first half of the 2010s, both discursively and in policy terms, Brexit was at the centre of political debates and commentary throughout the second half of the decade, following the surprise victory of the Leave vote in the 2016 referendum.

Such commentary echoes the many scholarly analyses that have described neoliberalism’s common mode of operation as piggybacking off various crises (eg, see Clarke 2004; Jessop 2018; Jones and Novak 1999; Peck et al 2018). In this view, a crisis – whether environmental or financial for instance – is an opportunity to push for continuous neoliberalising ‘reform’: to restructure some parts of the state apparatus, to cut state provision in some areas and to privatise and outsource state functions in others. This opportunity generally arises because a crisis – regardless of whether caused by uncontrollable external factors, governmental (mis)management or perhaps most commonly a combination of the two – can be presented as leading to an exceptional set of circumstances. The usual approaches to policymaking or governance can and should be cast aside, because an unprecedented situation demands unique measures. For instance, Jamie Peck et al frame neoliberalism in this vein as ‘both a crisis-making and a crisis-managing project’ (2018: 11), in that it not only tends towards generating crises because of overexploitation, lack of regulation and so on, but can also exploit these same crises in a process of ‘adaptive reinvention’.

We can observe this type of logic in action in Britain in the wake of the 2007–8 financial crisis, which saw austerity framed as an exceptional set of belt-tightening measures needed in response to the debt crisis, recession and ‘Labour’s economic incompetence’ (Cameron 2009). David Cameron’s speech at the Conservative Party conference in 2009, titled ‘The Age of Austerity’, proposed a ‘never-been-done-before approach to the way this country is run’ (ibid). Not long after the formation of the Coalition Government between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Parties the following year, George Osborne, then chancellor of the Exchequer, presented his Emergency Budget similarly as an exceptional set of measures to be undertaken to lift the country up from ‘the ruins of an economy built on debt’ (HC Deb 2010: c167), stating that the structural deficit was ‘worse than we were told’ (ibid: c171). The first major

wave of austerity policies was then enacted in the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and included, among other things, the introduction of Universal Credit (UC), the benefit cap, and the bedroom tax, as well as changes to housing benefit, disability and sickness benefits and tax credits, and more welfare conditionality (some of these policies are explored in detail in Chapters 1 and 3). The first half of the 2010s also saw significant cuts to local authority funding and legal aid, a public sector pay freeze and increasing privatisation and outsourcing in various areas of state provision.

While the early uses of austerity rhetoric by politicians focused on the exceptionality of both the measures themselves and the situation they were intended to respond to, 2013 saw a significant shift in its discursive deployments. In a speech, Cameron argued that the past three years showed that it is possible ‘to do more with less’ and signalled the Conservative Party’s intention to build ‘a leaner, more efficient state ... Not just now, but permanently’ (2013). This discursive shift from austerity as an exceptional state to a rhetoric of permanent austerity came as no surprise to the many commentators and scholars who had all the while argued that austerity measures were, first and foremost, introduced for ideological reasons, not out of necessity. Cameron’s 2013 speech – in contradiction to his earlier insistence that he ‘didn’t come into politics to make cuts’ (Gabbatt 2010) – thus seems to confirm the argument made by many that austerity should be seen as part of a longer process of neoliberalisation in Britain (eg, see Adkins 2015; Bramall 2016; Clarke and Newman 2012; Evans 2013, 2015; Gedalof 2017; Griffin 2015; Tyler 2013; Wiggan 2012). Although the term ‘austerity’ itself largely fell out of use in the second half of the decade, cuts and ‘reforms’ in various areas of state provision have continued – perhaps constituting an extension of the same austerity logics in all but name. Thus, although austerity itself was initially positioned as a response to a crisis, over time it morphed into a kind of crisis itself, providing ongoing opportunities for further neoliberalisation in Britain.

This framing of austerity as not just a response to the financial crisis, but also a sort of crisis-making project in itself helps to explain what Maria Karamessini and Jill Rubery call ‘the most ironic outcome of the crisis’ – that the ‘recipe offered to address the aftermath of the financial collapse is simply more of the same’ (2014: 337). Similarly, Peck et al note that

the Wall Street crash of 2008, which was initially marked by a series of premature announcements of the ‘death’ of neoliberalism, led instead to a widespread turn towards devolved austerity governance and selectively applied ‘stimulus’ spending, the limitations of which were to be revealed in patterns of sluggish growth, spiraling inequalities, and increasingly restive politics. (2018: 9)

The post-2010 austerity period can accordingly be seen as an intensification or an acceleration, but not as an initiation, of the already ongoing processes of

neoliberalisation and welfare retrenchment. Thus, while this book focuses on the post-2010 context, this is not to suggest that this period is exceptional in its policy framings, for instance; to the contrary, many of the harshest examples of welfare ‘reform’ advanced by the Coalition Government in the first half of the 2010s have their origins in the politics of both Thatcherism and New Labour, including welfare conditionality and ‘workfare’ schemes, for instance. Rather than the politics or policies of the 2010s themselves being somehow ‘exceptional’, it is the instalment of ‘exceptionality’ as a key discursive and regulatory logic throughout this decade that is noteworthy.

The impacts of austerity are now well documented, with a 2018 report finding that ‘overall, changes to taxes, benefits, tax credits and UC announced since 2010 are regressive, however measured – that is, the largest impacts are felt by those with lower incomes’ (Portes and Reed 2018: 15), with some groups affected disproportionately – particularly disabled people, certain ethnic groups and women. The 2016 Brexit referendum took place in this context of deepening inequality. Its aftermath was filled with an optimistic version of exceptionality, whereby Brexit was seen to engender an unprecedented opportunity to promote a ‘Global Britain’, of which British firms and entrepreneurs could take advantage (Gamble 2018). However, given that such entrepreneurial opportunities are to be achieved via deregulation, privatisation and the ‘opening up’ of markets outside the EU, a less positive spin would be regard them as yet another opportunity for neoliberalisation. For instance, Bob Jessop argues in this vein that Brexit – which itself is at least partially a consequence of previous rounds of crisis and neoliberalisation – will lead to ‘a continuation of the organic crisis of the British state, further uneven development, and Brexceptionalism’ (2018: 1743). The Covid-19 crisis has certainly had similar implications: for instance, billions of pounds’ worth of government contracts were awarded to companies without a competitive tendering process (Goodrich 2021). Further, although initially the Conservative Government responded to the crisis by increasing spending – leading to yet another set of announcements about the ‘end of austerity’ or ‘no return to austerity’ (BBC 2020; Jordan 2019; Morales 2021; Wood and Dijkstra 2020) – the familiar warnings of the next round of cuts and belt-tightening ‘reforms’ awaiting around the corner followed soon after (BBC 2021; Charlesworth 2021; IFS 2021).

My focus in this book is on the 2010s – a decade which I argue has been characterised by a continuous back and forth between various crises and the crisis-making responses to them, usually with the effect of growing inequality. With the framing of ‘exceptional times’, I thus direct my attention to the discursive and regulatory mechanisms that have not only (re)produced this period as one of recurring ‘exceptional’ crises, but also as a solution to them installed a set of ‘exceptional’ measures, which in turn have invariably involved further neoliberalising, crisis-making rationalities. Throughout this book – and similarly to many others (eg, see Peck et al 2016), I tend to use the term ‘neoliberalisation’, rather than ‘neoliberalism’, to signal that no pure or perfect neoliberalism exists, whether

in the past, present or future. Rather, ‘neoliberalisation’ refers, in Peck et al’s words, to a ‘process of always-incomplete transformation, to a prevailing pattern and ethos of market-oriented, market-disciplinary, and marketmaking regulatory restructuring, one that is being realized, never more than partially, across a contested, uneven institutional landscape’ (ibid: 7). Neoliberalisation coexists and mingles with other political logics, and is characterised by unevenness, adaptiveness and open-endedness, as well as a perhaps unexpected level of coercive state intervention, as I discuss in Chapter 3. It also involves attempts to discipline subjects and install market logics to areas previously considered outside of them, thus comprising cultural logics and subjectifying effects as well as economic and political ones (eg, see Giroux 2004). Consequently, the justificatory and regulatory logics of exceptionality, such as the binary concepts explored in this book, tend to operate within both cultural formations, and more explicitly political and policy sites.

Brexit, British Exceptionalism and the Nation-State

In late 2020, with Covid-19 infection rates soaring and many countries imposing restrictions on travel from the UK just before the Christmas holidays, some international news outlets referred to Britain as ‘plague island’ (eg, see Mueller and Kwai 2020). As the UK both entered its third national lockdown and exited the European customs union in January 2021, images of queues of lorries filling up lorry parks and roads in Kent as a result of new Brexit-induced customs requirements seemed to compound the sense of isolation, signifying the UK’s retreat to a nationalist isolationism precisely when a pandemic (arguably requiring international responses and cooperation) was raging. Over time, the ‘plague island’ moniker transformed into a popular Twitter hashtag used by many to critique the UK government, at times with a weary sarcasm (Chakelian 2021). Akin to the connections I have made above between the pandemic and the many other crises of the past decade, the popularisation of the #PlagueIsland hashtag draws attention to similarities between the experiences of Brexit and Covid-19 in our cultural imaginaries. I have argued that – much like the 2007–8 crisis and the years of austerity that followed it – we can certainly read these crises as again providing ample opportunity for neoliberalisation, with the effect of already rapidly growing inequality (Blundell et al 2021). Further though, these crises and the hegemonic responses to them are also connected by another ‘exceptional’ logic: one of British exceptionalism.

Many have argued that the success of the Brexit vote was driven by a kind of ‘cultural nationalism’ (explored in more detail in Chapter 4): in Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever’s words, this type of nationalism is ‘defined not by imperial prowess or superiority, but by a deep sense of loss of prestige; a retreat from the damaging impact of a globalized world that is no longer recognizable, no longer “British”’ (2018: 1811; cf Evans 2017; Mondon and Winter 2019). In the context of such a sense of loss of prestige, a logic of British exceptionalism – which has

arguably characterised the UK's EU membership from its inception – has helped to foster optimism about Britain's place in the world post-Brexit, despite the economic vulnerability engendered by isolationism (eg, see Kaunert et al 2020; Tilford 2017; Vucetic 2020). Somewhat similarly, Lisa Bortolotti and Kathleen Murphy-Hollies argue that 'national exceptionalism' in Britain (and the US) 'gave rise to an assumption of invulnerability that made for slow responses to the pandemic' (2022: 1; cf English 2020; Sample 2020; Walker 2021). This exceptionalism consisted of an unrealistic optimism about the UK's pandemic preparedness, the belief that British people simply value freedom too much to tolerate restrictions and the notion of a specifically British spirit of 'keep calm and carry on'. Indeed, here we might even detect echoes of the common use of the Second World War idea of 'make do and mend' in the early austerity period, as a rallying cry perhaps intended to foster acceptance of tightened purse strings and lowered living standards (eg, see Bramall 2013).

These discursive framings of British exceptionalism have thus fostered new (or renewed) hegemonic notions of Britishness, arguably helping again to justify welfare cuts, privatisation and further neoliberalisation – not dissimilarly to the justification that the notion of an 'exceptional crisis' has also offered, discussed above. As well as reaffirming nationalism(s), however, these narratives of British exceptionalism also help to sustain and bolster the nation-state frame more generally. Indeed, the continued strength of the nation-state paradigm is also evident in the growing nationalisms in the decade following the 2007–8 financial crisis more broadly (eg, see Mondon and Winter 2019; Virdee and McGeever 2018). Despite the recurrent warnings over several decades first of globalisation and then of neoliberalism supposedly signalling the end of either the nation or the state (or both), it continues to dominate our political debates, discourses, claims and imaginaries. Accordingly, Daniel Chernilo for instance urges critical scholars keen to avoid and challenge methodological nationalism, as in the treating of the nation-state 'as the natural and necessary representation of modern society' (2011: 99), to pay more attention to the nation-state. Such attention is critical for understanding 'how the nation-state has been able to cope, rather successfully as well, with the fact that it has never been as triumphant and homogeneous as it has portrayed itself to be' (ibid: 112).

In the above section I unpacked the 'exceptional times' of the book's title, drawing attention to the discursive and regulatory logics of 'exceptionality' that have helped to justify many of the neoliberalising reforms of the 2010s. Here I am pointing out that it is another logic of 'exceptionality' that holds 'Britain' together as a coherent entity in our cultural and political imaginaries. Indeed, upon closer examination, the geographical, cultural and political borders of this book's analysis are not so clearly defined either; and what exactly constitutes 'Britain' differs from case study to case study. For instance, the policies that I examine in Chapters 1 and 3 pertain in principle to Britain as a whole (except for the Troubled Families Programme, which only applies to England), but in practice often just to England and Wales. Scotland has tended to take a slightly

different approach to welfare policy; whereas Northern Ireland has, conversely, historically followed the lead of the Westminster Parliament – although this has changed somewhat more recently (eg, see Kennedy et al 2019; McKeever 2017). The media examples explored in Chapters 2 and 4 – the films *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) and *Pride* (2014), and the series *Benefits Street* (2014) – are set in England and Wales, but they have of course had a much broader cultural resonance throughout the UK and beyond. In Brexit, there is no devolution, and the UK as a whole left the EU in January 2020; but some of the intensifying discourses of nationalism reflected in the Brexit narratives I examine in Chapter 4 have increasingly zoned in on *Englishness* rather than Britishness, as Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever (2018) argue.

The relationships between the UK, Britain and the four constituent countries are thus complex, both practically and in cultural and political imaginaries – not to mention the Crown dependencies and British overseas territories that very rarely feature in such imaginaries at all. The boundaries of what exactly constitutes ‘Britain’ or ‘Britishness’ are constantly shifting, as Nadyne El-Enany (2020) also notes in the context of immigration law. In my investigations throughout this book, I hope to reflect and even embrace this complexity. The project of austerity politics, Brexit and the other crises discussed above have created plenty of opportunities for the (re)assertion of the idea of a coherent state actor, responding rationally to various crises. Similarly to Jyoti Puri’s (2016) argument that the governance of sexuality helps to create a so-called ‘state effect’ – as in the illusion of a monolithic, coherent, rational and permanently existing state – many of the discourses, narratives and representations that I examine throughout this book contribute to this sense of coherence, helping to sustain the illusion of a clearly bounded Britain, spearheaded by a monolithic state. Examining the effort that goes into maintaining this sense of a coherent nation, ruled by a coherent state, helps to reveal the fragility of the constructs; accordingly, one of the key threads of analysis in this book is precisely how such an illusion of coherence is achieved and maintained.

Sexuality, Inequality and Their Subjects

The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic have been experienced highly unevenly across the population. Disabled people and those with long-term health conditions have been affected more severely both by the disease itself and the pandemic restrictions, reduced social care support and interruptions to regular healthcare – with some reporting that ‘do not resuscitate’ orders were given to people with learning disabilities early in the pandemic (Sayce 2021; Shakespeare et al. 2022; Tapper 2021). Ethnic minority groups have experienced both higher mortality rates and some of the most significant economic impacts; and migrants have also been more adversely affected (Hu 2020; Johnston 2021; Platt 2021). Women took on a higher proportion of additional childcare and housework responsibilities during the pandemic, as well as being more heavily concentrated in industries that experienced

the biggest Covid-19 related job losses, with nearly half of the mothers who were made redundant during the pandemic citing lack of adequate childcare provision as the reason (Johnston 2021; Orefice and Quintana-Domeque 2021). Some LGBTQ+ people have had to endure national lockdowns in outright homophobic environments; while many more lost access to important community spaces and events, with the result of significantly increasing mental health issues (Batty 2020; Kneale and Bécaries 2021; LGBT Foundation 2020). These impacts are of course not random, but rather an indication of how new crises – financial or otherwise – tend to deepen existing inequalities.

The Covid-19 pandemic's exacerbation of existing inequalities has thus proceeded along rather predictable lines, not that dissimilarly to the many other crises of the 2010s, as I already suggested above. My starting point in this book, however, is not the impacts of austerity and neoliberalisation, for instance on LGBTQ+ people or women – impacts that have been both severe and well documented (eg, see Fawcett Society 2012; Gedalof 2017; Karamessini 2014; Mitchell et al. 2013; Portes and Reed 2018; Rubery and Rafferty 2014; Smith 2016; TUC 2015; Women's Budget Group 2010). Rather, I am interested in how sexual meanings get incorporated into the logics and justifications for austerity, neoliberalisation and growing inequality. Similarly, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is not just that the inequalities generated by it have mapped onto existing ones, but also that sometimes existing inequalities have been drawn on in order to justify the highly unequal impacts. For instance, as Tom Shakespeare et al (2022) report, the strong discursive association of Covid-19-related deaths with 'pre-existing conditions' in official reporting seemed to suggest that this somehow made the deaths more acceptable, sending a very negative message to disabled people – making them feel fearful or even disposable. Natalie Langford similarly notes that some explanations for the unequal impacts experienced by ethnic minority groups drew on ideas of 'biological pre-disposition rather than ... a deeper political culture of exclusion' (2020), concealing the role of both racism and longstanding systemic inequalities.

In relation to sexuality more specifically, others have pointed out the rapid centring of the heteronormative household as a safe haven in Covid-19 discourses, with the effect of excluding or obscuring the experiences of those for whom the household is a site of danger or violence, or those whose intimate relationships cannot be contained within the household dynamic (eg, see Grewal et al 2020). Lucinda Platt (2021) also draws attention to the economic buffer that returning to the family home has provided to some young people, while poorer households have been unable to similarly absorb the financial impacts of the pandemic. In this way, not only is the heteronormative household positioned as the site of comfort and intimacy in Covid-19 discourses; but the assumption that it will provide for us in time of need (both financially and emotionally) is also used to draw attention away from, or even outright justify, a lack of adequate state support – whether for childcare, mental health support or domestic violence services. The pandemic's

severe effects on LGBTQ+ groups or single mothers, for instance, are thus at least partially a consequence of the heteronormative assumptions embedded within governmental responses to it. Overall, then, in this book I similarly explore the sexual meanings embedded in the logics and justifications that have made austerity, neoliberalisation and growing inequality palatable – or at least unremarkable – for many over the past decade; and how the intimate sphere is concurrently regulated and constricted in ways that make us turn inwards, drawing our attention away from politics.

This kind of analysis requires the deployment of a broader conceptualisation of sexuality and intimacy than one focusing just on specific sexual subjects, or even on subjectivity at all. Zoning in on specific groups can of course reveal valuable insights about the marginalisation experienced by those particular groups; but at the same time, it can also lead to the broader logics or rationalities being obscured. A focus on how, for instance, single mothers or LGBTQ+ young people have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic provides important information about the experiences of those groups, but perhaps misses something about the connections between them, due to the overall logic of heteronormativity and individualised household responsibility that has guided governmental decision making about the pandemic. In other words, when the focus is on subjects, our understanding of inequalities tends to be restricted to how different subjects are differentially affected, often according to a pre-determined set of characteristics or identities. Conversely, here I am suggesting that the significance of sexuality or intimacy, for example, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic cannot be limited to the question of the exclusion or inclusion of LGBTQ+ subjects. Gavin Brown argues relatedly that ‘the faultline of sexual politics in the UK has shifted from being placed (primarily) along the homo/hetero binary’ (2015: 976), such that what is privileged is those expressions of domesticity (whether homosexual or heterosexual) that conform to the demand that families take care of themselves, without relying on state welfare. Similarly, the rationalities of the pandemic have tended to prioritise those whose households meet the heteronormative ideal that can stand in for dwindling state support.

As the reader may have already picked up on, here I am aligning this book’s investigation with the many others who have problematised the centring of sexual or queer politics just on questions of LGBTQ+ inclusion or exclusion – not least because LGBTQ+ inclusion can of course also perform its own (particularly racialised and classed) exclusions (eg, see Brim 2020; Brown 2015; Duggan 2003; Haritaworn et al. 2014; Sabsay 2016; Taylor 2009). The homosexual/heterosexual binary cannot carry all possible sexual meanings; and my conceptualisation of sexuality and intimacy here encompasses a range of relations, narratives and subjectivities (and so on) that extend beyond what is perhaps more commonly understood to be the primary relationship between sexuality and politics – namely those political concerns and claims that relate to our being certain kinds of sexual subjects. My framing of sexuality is therefore deliberately broad, drawing on Letícia Sabsay’s (2016) use of ‘the sexual’ to refer to the broader field of sexuality that

goes beyond sexual subjectivities, as well as echoing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's positioning of sexuality as 'the array of acts, expectations, narratives, pleasures, identity-formations, and knowledges, in both women and men, that tends to cluster most densely around certain genital sensations but is not adequately defined by them' (1993: 251). Thus, in this book's investigations, sexuality is not 'first and foremost intrinsically located in the subject' (Sabsay 2016: 1); but even when the focus *is* on subjects, it is not just on those pre-defined as sexual subjects, such as LGBTQ+ people. Rather, I understand sexuality to be complexly interrelated to other axes of difference and sexualisation as often working together with, for instance, racialisation or classing to stigmatise and marginalise (eg, see Brim 2020; Cooper 2014; Gordon 1997; Sanger and Taylor 2013; Sedgwick 1993; Skeggs 1997, 2004; Taylor 2009; Wray 2006).

In the rest of this section, I briefly outline the four approaches that I take to sexuality and intimacy; or in other words, the different 'sexual meanings and logics' explored in each of the following chapters. In Chapter 1, I investigate the sexual meanings and logics found in poverty policy documents that frame so-called 'troubled families' as undeserving. Such framings operate in relation to the other half of the binary, the 'stable family', the rhetoric of which I argue positions the heteronormative, reproductive, two-parent family as the ideal, and those who fall outside of this ideal as subject to judgement. In Chapter 2, I deepen this analysis by focusing on subject representations in *Benefits Street* and *I, Daniel Blake*, arguing that a logic of sexualisation and racialisation is central to how poor or benefit-receiving subjects are portrayed as less or more deserving. Rather than focusing on specific subjects, in this chapter I unpack the sexualisation evident in the broader discursive and representational processes that mediate deservingness in the two media texts. Not dissimilarly to the Covid-19 discourses discussed above, in both chapters the sexualisation embedded in the binary discourses of deserving/undeserving and stable/troubled family is shown to position those outside of the norm as undeserving. Similarly to Davina Cooper, my analysis in these two chapters aims to let 'go of the compulsion to attach inequality to identity-based groups (or even to groups at all)', while still recognising 'the inequalities associated with racializing, gendering, and economic processes, among others' (2014: 60).

In Chapter 3, I focus on the disruptions to intimate relations, practices and spaces that arise as a result of certain welfare and housing policies, with similar restricting and containing effects on the affected individuals' lives to the impacts of the Covid-19 restrictions discussed above. This involves examining policies such as the bedroom tax for the value judgements that their everyday implementation involves about the conditions necessary for an intimate life, or what constitutes a liveable life. Similarly to Tam Sanger and Yvette Taylor, who argue that 'intimacy is shaped by, and helps shape, a variety of spatial scales' (2013: 3), and Cooper, who reads 'inequality as a problem of practices, spaces, and ways of living' (2014: 60), here I am focusing on the spatial and relational dynamics of intimacy, rather than the intimacies of specific identity-based groups. Finally, in Chapter 4, I

examine how the primacy of subject or identity-based understandings of sexual politics is maintained in various political sites via an assumed division between material and cultural political claims or ‘grievances’, and suggest instead that the material and cultural commonly operate together in the reproduction of inequalities. Using specific examples of protest as my case studies, I then argue that a political focus based purely on issues and grievances that are seen to arise directly from one’s subject position limits the legibility of other kinds of political desires, with the effect of ultimately narrowing possible political imaginaries.

The conceptual and analytical tools currently available for examining and theorising sexuality, sexualisation, intimacy and so on, beyond sexual identity or the homosexual/heterosexual binary – or perhaps beyond biology and reproduction, depending on one’s disciplinary location and attachments – are limited. As a result of these limitations, sexuality’s (expansively understood) role as a key site of political contestation, engagement and imagination in Britain’s recent political history is often obscured. In this book, I begin deliberately without assuming consequences for specific groups, to borrow JK Gibson-Graham’s phrasing, in order ‘to clear a discursive space for’ (1996: xli), and perhaps even provide some conceptual tools for theorising about, the many non-subject or identity-based ways in which sexuality and intimacy operate within the politics of crisis, austerity and neoliberalisation. Further, the following chapters also illustrate that a narrow view of sexuality, limited to its subject and identity-based iterations, can act as a depoliticising force by invisibilising political concerns that do not directly arise from one’s subject position. Therefore, each of this book’s case studies also articulates prefigurative politics that, in Cooper’s words, explore ‘the potential that resides within different nows as they gesture toward different futures’ (2014: 220). Not dissimilarly to the political solidarities, intimacies and emotions generated at the Sarah Everard vigil, discussed above, such politics can open doors to alternative ways of thinking about sexual politics and alternative political imaginaries needed to challenge the claustrophobia of the ‘exceptional’ political present.

The Chapters

The first substantive chapter of this book, titled ‘Stable/Troubled Family’, utilises policy-as-discourse analysis to examine the sexual meanings and logics, and specifically the ‘stable/troubled family’ binary, reproduced in British policy texts on (child) poverty published between 2011 and 2018. During this period, child poverty both significantly increased and became increasingly problematised as a cultural and familial issue – as well as being more recently deprioritised as an issue altogether. These discourses position the ‘troubled’ family as the origin of material poverty and the ‘stable’ family as the means through which poverty can be overcome, on both an individual and the national level. The solutions offered in the policy texts focus mostly on labour market activation measures, which generally tend to have the effect of privatising the cost of

social reproduction. Such effects have most commonly been analysed through a gendered lens, whereas in this chapter my focus is on sexuality: specifically, I argue that the first half of the ‘stable/troubled family’ binary positions the heteronormative, reproductive, two-parent family as the ideal – with those who fail to attain this ideal marked as ‘undeserving’. The valuing of certain family forms over others is thus never very far from the explicit language of the policy texts. Finally, I argue that an anti-work and anti-family political imaginary is needed to challenge the ‘stable/troubled family’ binary, as neither labour market activation measures targeting particular groups (eg, women) nor family-based solutions are well-equipped to acknowledge or address the ways in which these markers of (un)deservingness are (re)produced and circulated.

The second chapter, ‘Deserving/Undeserving’, examines the reproduction of the ‘deserving/undeserving’ binary in two different media texts – *Benefits Street* (2014) and *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) – using (and developing) a methodology of ‘narrative economies’ to examine the role that sexualisation plays in these narratives of deservingness. While many others have examined narratives that demonise and stigmatise welfare claimants across a range of media sites – frequently conceptualised as ‘poverty porn’ – my interest in this chapter is to delve deeper into their circulations, to explore the commonalities and repetitions that occur across two very different texts, due to their production and reception within the same narrative economies. Although not necessarily intentionally, many similar sexualised and racialised narrative tropes are nonetheless present in both texts – at times to the extent that the legibility (as well as perhaps the legitimacy) of their representations of welfare claimants depends on these processes of sexualisation and racialisation. I thus argue that a logic of sexual and racial subjectivation is central to the discursive and representative processes that position certain subjects as less, and others as more, deserving. The chapter then questions the efficacy of political imaginaries that (even unwittingly) reproduce these sexualised and racialised notions of deservingness – or consequently position certain subjects as more legible or legitimate political subjects. Instead, I argue that a political imaginary inclusive of sexual and racial ‘outsiders’ is needed to challenge the ‘deserving/undeserving’ binary and the logic of sexual and racial subjectivation embedded in it.

‘Public/Private’, the third chapter, focuses on the intimate disruptions that emerge as a consequence of the implementation of three different welfare and housing policies and practices of the post-financial crisis era: the bedroom tax; the increasing practice whereby local authorities house their social housing clients outside of the local authority area; and welfare conditionality, benefit sanctions and ‘workfare’ schemes. UK Supreme Court judgments from 2014, 2015 and 2016 related to these policies are utilised as sources of evidence of the decision-making and implementation processes relevant to each case – and concomitantly of how state power functions within the intimate or private sphere. I argue that these processes entail significant implicit, naturalised judgements about the value of different kinds of intimate relations, practices and

spaces – or in other words, about the conditions necessary for an intimate life, or what constitutes a liveable life – despite seemingly being not at all concerned with the regulation of sexuality or family life. Importantly, these intimate disruptions are rarely evident in the explicit intentions of the policies; rather, they materialise as a result of the processes of implementation and/or legal judgement. Thus, the chapter also contributes to debates about neoliberal penalisation, suggesting that the punitiveness of these policies and practices emerges out of the gaps and distance between national policy aims, on the one hand, and the local resources and abilities available for realising them, on the other. Finally, I argue that the intimate disruptions analysed here constitute a significant reconfiguration of the public/private divide; and investigate whether any space for political action emerges in the gaps and spaces opened up by the diffuse operation of state power that neoliberalisation entails.

The final substantive chapter of this book, 'Material/Cultural', explores three moments of protest or political action over which significant discursive battles have been, or might be, fought: the fictionalised version of the events at the 1985 Pride parade in London in the film *Pride* (2014); Brexit narratives that have tended to characterise the Leave vote as a 'protest' of the 'left behind'; and debates about the England riots that took place in 2011. These narratives are examined for their reproduction of the 'material' and 'cultural' binary: following the previous chapter's focus on disruptions in the private sphere, here my attention is directed at events in the public square, over which significant battles of meaning have been fought, which I argue both draw upon and entrench the binary division between material and cultural political claims or 'grievances'. This division contributes to a discursive separation of class-based politics from so-called 'identity politics', marking them as fundamentally different from each other – with significant effects on what kinds of political spaces, subjectivities and action are imaginable, or even legible. Finally, the chapter focuses on the broader understanding of the relationship between identity and politics that underpins this separation, arguing that identities might better understood as arising out of, rather than leading to, political participation and collective mobilisation. Finally, in the brief concluding chapter, I return to the politics of the pandemic and beyond, and consider the role of desire in politics – particularly in moments when the conventional arenas of (electoral) politics provide little space or time for the expression of political desires beyond identity or subject-based claims.

Stable Family/Troubled Family

Framing Poverty

The Child Poverty Act 2010 received royal assent in March 2010, just two months before the 2010 General Election and the subsequent formation of the Coalition Government between the Conservative and Liberal Democratic Parties. Labour's flagship policy in the area of child poverty, the Act was preceded by a period of significant reductions in child poverty between the mid-1990s and 2010 (Bradshaw and Main 2016). It followed the Labour Government's 2008 announcement aiming to completely eradicate child poverty in the UK by 2020, enshrining this target in legislation, and was passed with cross-party support. The Act established four separate child poverty targets related to relative, absolute and 'persistent' poverty, based on household income statistics, to be met by 2020.¹ It also required the UK government to publish a regular child poverty strategy and annual progress reports, and initiated the establishment of the Child Poverty Commission to independently monitor governmental progress in reducing child poverty. The Coalition Government inherited the requirements and targets set out in the act, and accordingly published child poverty strategies in 2011 and 2014.

Since the passing of the Child Poverty Act, however, there have been significant shifts in the extent and distribution of child poverty in the UK. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) highlights in its UK Poverty report that child poverty has been rising since 2011–12, with 4.2 million children living in poverty in 2018–19 (2021), while the Resolution Foundation predicts child poverty to 'rise to record levels within the next five years, and [to] be 6 percentage points higher in 2023–24 than in 2016–17' (Corlett 2019: 4). The predictions are even starker for some household groups: among single-parent households, families

1 These targets were to 'reduce the proportion of children who live in relative low income (in families with income below 60 per cent of the median) to less than 10 per cent'; 'to reduce the proportion of children who live in material deprivation and have a low income to less than 5 per cent'; 'to reduce the proportion of children that experience long periods of relative poverty, with the specific target to be set at a later date'; and 'to reduce the proportion of children who live below an income threshold fixed in real terms to less than 5 per cent' (Kennedy 2014: 5).

with three or more children, households where no one is in work and renting households, more than half of children are predicted to be in poverty by 2023–24 (*ibid*: 4). Further, the composition of poverty has shifted towards families where at least one person is in work, such that out of the 4 million children living in poverty, 70 per cent are in working families, indicating that the UK's recent record employment rates have not delivered reductions in poverty (CPAG 2021; JRF 2021). Relatedly, the UK continues to underperform in international league tables on child wellbeing, particularly in regard to material wellbeing, education and health outcomes (Bradshaw 2016). David Taylor-Robinson et al, for example, find that one-third of 'the sustained and unprecedented rise in infant mortality in England from 2014 to 2017' can be attributed to rising child poverty, with the poorest areas of the country affected disproportionately, while affluent areas remain largely unaffected (2019: 1).

The JRF (2021) attributes these increases in child poverty to the weakening of state support through tax credits and other benefits, as well as rising housing costs since the 2007–8 financial crisis – both factors that can be connected at least partially to the austerity-related drives to reduce welfare and other state provision, aided, perhaps, by the Coalition and Conservative Governments' de-emphasis on child poverty reduction discussed in this chapter. Poverty – and child poverty more specifically – provides one key discursive battleground in which not just the merits of different policies, but also the ideological and political positions of governments are constructed, reinforced and contested. Cris Shore and Susan Wright (1997) suggest that policies are usefully viewed as instruments of power – they 'contain implicit (and sometimes explicit) models of society' (*ibid*: 6). Policy texts are, therefore, prescriptive rather than descriptive discursive devices, and their primary goal is to persuade rather than inform (Apthorpe 1997). Policies do not just respond to problems that exist in society; rather, "problems" are "created" or "given shape" in the very policy proposals that are offered as "responses" (Bacchi 2000: 48). It is the *problematization* of particular issues that generally offers a useful starting point for policy analysis, rather than the problems explicitly presented in policy texts themselves. 'Policy-as-discourse analysis' (*ibid*: 52) thus involves unpacking the ways in which policies problematise certain issues over others, as well as uncovering how their operation as technologies of power is disguised.

A lot has happened in child poverty discourse, and particularly its 'problematization', since 2010. In 2012, the Government consulted on 'better measures of child poverty' (CPU 2012); and in July 2015, then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Iain Duncan Smith announced the Government's intention to change the way in which child poverty is measured and tracked in the UK (HC Deb 2015: c1504–6). The plan was to replace the child poverty targets based on the relative and absolute poverty indicators set out in the 2010 Act with a new statutory duty to report on indicators of 'worklessness' and 'educational attainment'. The Government's effort partially failed, as the House of Lords pushed for the legislation to

include a requirement to continue publishing the relative and absolute poverty statistics. While the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 subsequently passed with this reporting requirement, these statistics are no longer tied to any official poverty reduction targets. Further, the government is no longer required to publish a child poverty strategy and, perhaps unsurprisingly, no government has published one since. Additionally, the Child Poverty Commission was renamed the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission in 2012 and again the Social Mobility Commission in 2015. The cross-departmental Child Poverty Unit (CPU) – originally established in 1999 to work on meeting Labour’s child poverty reduction targets – was also scrapped (HC Deb 2016: c1322).

These political and discursive shifts indicate that child poverty has, during the decade, at least somewhat dropped off the political radar. Further, more recently we can observe a discursive shift towards targeting ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘workless’ families instead of poor ones. In 2017, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) published a policy paper titled *Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families* – ‘the first in a series of initiatives aimed at tackling the problems that prevent families from getting on in life’ (DWP 2017b). Although this paper does not explicitly target *child* poverty, it constitutes one of very few published by the DWP since 2016 that target poverty at all, since in recent years the tackling of poverty and/or disadvantage has moved more and more into the remit of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) – formerly the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) – in the form of the controversial Troubled Families Programme (TFP), discussed in more detail below. The TFP only pertains to England, however, with the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales having their own child poverty strategies (Scottish Government 2021; Welsh Government 2015). The Scottish strategy is not too dissimilar from the UK-wide commitments made in the 2010 Child Poverty Act.

In this chapter, I examine the policy and discursive climate around child poverty since 2010, first drawing on a range of key policy texts, including the 2011 child poverty strategy (DfE 2011), the 2012 consultation document (CPU 2012), the 2017 policy paper (DWP 2017a) and the MHCLG and DCLG documents on the TFP (DCLG 2014, 2015, 2016a, 2016b; MHCLG 2018, 2019).² Utilising a policy-as-discourse approach, I examine the construction of (child) poverty discourse throughout the post-financial crisis era, illustrating the degree to which poverty has been, first, problematised as a cultural and familial issue; and second, all but supplanted by the more ephemeral term ‘disadvantage’. Overall, my argument here is that the policy climate has shifted significantly in this period – away from monitoring and addressing the material and economic conditions in which poor families and children live, and towards

2 I also explore the culturalisation of poverty specifically in relation to the 2017 document in Lehtonen (2018), and in relation to the TFP in Lehtonen and Breslow (2021).

tracking, managing and intervening in a range of behaviours, practices and norms that supposedly make up the root causes of poverty; and further, in more recent years, towards localised programme delivery targeting a smaller subset of disadvantaged families deemed 'troubled'. Yet these shifts are also part of a broader process whereby the costs of social reproduction are increasingly privatised, which many scholars have examined in light of their gendered effects. Towards the end of the chapter, I shift my focus towards this broader discursive and policy climate, and argue that sexuality plays a key role in it.

The next section of this chapter focuses on the discursive moves that have, to a considerable degree, managed to paint poverty as an individual affliction and a cultural dysfunction reproduced in the family. The following section examines the further shifts that have 'localised' the delivery of policy interventions, narrowing their scope so that they pertain not to all poor families, but increasingly just to a 'troubled' subset. In the fourth section of the chapter, the focus is on the policy solutions offered in the policy papers – mostly framed through incentivising paid employment. Here I discuss some of the ways in which such solutions, as well as the range of (anti-)welfare reforms implemented in the name of austerity more generally, have the effect of privatising the cost of social reproduction. Scholarly and third-sector critiques of these processes have tended to focus on their gendered effects and impacts. However, in the fifth section of this chapter, I make the case that it is also important to pay specific attention to the role that sexuality plays. Here I unpack the other side of the 'troubled family/stable family' binary, arguing that this rhetoric positions the heteronormative, reproductive, two-parent family as the ideal – with those who fail to attain this ideal marked as 'undeserving'. The final section then argues that an anti-work and anti-family political imaginary is needed to challenge these policy framings, as neither labour market activation measures targeting particular groups (eg, women) nor family-based solutions are well equipped to acknowledge or address the ways in which markers of (un)deservingness are reproduced and circulated.

Cultural Poverty

The notion that poverty can be passed on within families, from one generation to the next, is central to the post-financial crisis landscape of poverty policy. The argument about intergenerational 'cycles' of poverty, deprivation or disadvantage is repeated in all key policy documents of the era, with many positioning the welfare system as a central factor in the reproduction of this cycle (CPU 2012: 12; DfE 2011: 4; Duncan Smith in HC Deb 2015: c1506; DWP 2017a: 8). For instance, the 2011 child poverty strategy suggests that the previous Labour Government's 'approach has been exhausted, not only failing to turn the tide on income poverty, but worse still, exacerbating the problem by suppressing incentives to work and keeping families in cycles of entrenched deprivation' (DfE 2011: 4). While Labour 'entrenched benefit dependency' (ibid: 2) by throwing

‘money at the symptoms’ (ibid: 12), the Coalition’s strategic vision was ‘focused on the powerful drivers which keep the most disadvantaged families stuck in cycles of poverty’ (ibid: 12). The 2012 consultation, similarly, aimed to ‘free families who have been trapped on benefits so they can live independently and see their lives transformed’ (CPU 2012: 12). Here poverty discourse is reoriented towards the ‘underlying problem’ of welfare dependency, of which poverty is a symptom – a common trope in austerity-era poverty discourse more generally. This discursive reorientation reveals a paradox, as Christina Pantazis (2016) points out: on the one hand, poverty is presented as a consequence of the irresponsible behaviour of individuals; but on the other, it follows from the structural deficiencies of the welfare system, which have encouraged dependency. Individual irresponsibility is here tied to the national irresponsibility of the Labour Government(s), connecting imaginaries of ‘broken families’ to those of a ‘broken society’ – discussed further below.

The latest DWP paper, published in 2017, does not explicitly reference welfare dependency; but the familiar trope of intergenerational cycles of disadvantage, deprivation or poverty is present. This iteration of the argument positions the cycle as rooted in worklessness: ‘children in workless households are considerably more likely to repeat the poorer outcomes of their parents’ (DWP 2017a: 8). This represents something of a shift from the 2011 child poverty strategy, which offers a milder version of the same argument: ‘growing up in a workless family often has persistent effects later in life and is correlated with future worklessness’ (DfE 2011: 15). Interestingly, even one of the sources cited by the DWP in support of this argument presents a much more cautious approach, highlighting the broader socioeconomic conditions rather than worklessness as the cause of poorer outcomes for the children of unemployed parents: ‘It was generally not parental worklessness per se that caused poorer outcomes in childhood and adolescence but rather the complex needs and numerous socio-economic risks faced by workless families’ (Schoon et al 2012: 2). The claim that worklessness leads to or correlates with more worklessness in future generations has also been challenged by a study conducted by Robert MacDonald and his colleagues (2014a, 2014b) that found no evidence of ‘intergenerational cultures of worklessness’ in the UK.

Nonetheless, the phrase ‘for some families, worklessness, not employment, is the norm’ (DWP 2017a: 3, 4, 7) is repeated three times across the 2017 paper. Here ‘worklessness’ is framed not just as the practical state of not having a job, but as something more insidious. It is precisely because of the normative and therefore cultural nature of worklessness that it can end up being reproduced intergenerationally. Because worklessness can become part of the cultural fabric of a family, traditional methods for dealing with poverty are insufficient: ‘because the root causes are not financial, our approach goes beyond the safety net our welfare system provides’ (ibid: 3). Here support via the welfare system is framed as simply inadequate; although this perhaps draws on earlier iterations of the argument that explicitly positioned social welfare as causing and

sustaining a culture of worklessness and dependency. Since the norm of worklessness can be transmitted from one generation to the next, entrenching a culture that fosters dependency, the suggested approach in the 2017 paper to tackling poverty and engrained disadvantage is designed explicitly to intervene in the reproduction of the norm. Thus, overall, the policy papers suggest that children of poor parents often also end up poor not because they grow up without a range of material or financial resources available to their wealthier peers, but because they can acquire the norm of worklessness from their parents.

The specific mechanism through which this ‘acquisition’ takes place is, simply, by not witnessing one’s parents go to work or not having a ‘good example of working parents’ (DWP 2017a: 3). For instance, the 2011 child poverty strategy argues: ‘the way that disadvantage perpetuates is shaped by the experiences, attainment and outcomes of children growing up in socio-economic disadvantage and by the way that negative parental activities experienced through childhood may repeat in adulthood’ (DfE 2011: 15). Similarly, in the 2012 consultation document, ‘*seeing* a parent go out to work’ is credited as an experience that is ‘vital to childhood’ (CPU 2012: 1, emphasis added). This framing is repeated in the TFP, which has a ‘renewed focus on worklessness’ (DWP 2017a: 18), with one of its key goals being ‘to make work an *ambition* for all troubled families’ (MHCLG 2019: 7, emphasis added). In these discursive framings, it is the experience of witnessing one’s parents going to work (or having the ambition to do so) that is crucial for children’s development and future outcomes – and, importantly, more so than any potential material benefit generated by parental labour market activities. As Danny Dorling argued back in 2007, in the UK children’s life chances are more strongly determined ‘by where (and to whom) they were born as compared to any other date in the last 651 years’ (2007: 5); but in his analysis, this is due to income and wealth inequalities rather than to any ephemeral notion of culture.

The discussion following the 2015 announcement of the proposed new poverty measures also referenced worklessness as an aspect of a person’s attitude and cultural values – rather than as a material consequence of, for example, unfavourable labour market conditions. Conservative MP Heidi Allen offered her support for Duncan Smith and gave an example from her own experience as a small business owner:

when I gave [a previous employee] employment and put his money up, he was still *culturally unable* to find the mental drive to go to work ... I have seen it at the other end – you can drag a horse to water – so I welcome what the Secretary of State is trying to do. (HC Deb 2015: c1515, emphasis added)

Here Allen is making the case that being offered employment alone does not work as a solution to worklessness, as focusing on the demand side leaves the culture of worklessness intact. In response to this statement from the benches,

Duncan Smith stated: ‘my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary is already engaged in driving schools to help inculcate and teach character resilience and key characteristics such as understanding what it is to go to work and to get up in the morning’ (ibid: c1515). This exchange demonstrates the positioning of worklessness as a matter of values, norms and culture – rather than of material circumstances – and cements its framing through paid work alone: Duncan Smith and Allen are here not concerned with whether people are ‘culturally able’ or have the mental drive to do care or volunteer work, for instance. The commonsensical notion that for some people worklessness is a consequence of laziness and a lack of ‘character resilience’ – of simply not understanding what it means to get up to go to work every morning – reinforces its framing as normative and therefore transmittable.

The ‘cultural poverty’ argument thus promotes the idea that there is something culturally distinct about poor and welfare recipient populations that sets them apart from the rest of society; and moreover, that these cultures are self-perpetuating, as Val Gillies (2012) and Simon Pemberton et al (2016) have also noted. This argument has tended to be deployed in the service of a politics that attributes blame for poverty and material deprivation to the cultures of poor people, rather than recognising socioeconomic factors – such as labour market conditions – as potential causes. In these explanations, poverty and unemployment are framed simultaneously as forms of individual failure and as examples of dysfunctional cultures; while the supposedly distinct behavioural patterns and value systems of poor people are, in turn, positioned as what distinguishes them from the rest of society. Paid employment is not valued primarily (or perhaps at all) because of its potential material value to poor families – although this value has also certainly diminished as a result of the increasing rates of in-work poverty, as discussed below – but rather because of its moral and cultural value. In the social world prescribed by the child poverty policy documents, parents without paid jobs are at constant risk of transmitting the norm of worklessness to their children, who can in turn acquire this norm simply by not seeing their parents go to work; and this intergenerational cultural transmission is what keeps the cycles of poverty and disadvantage reproducing.

These shifts in emphases reflect the argument made by many that discourses positioning poor people as the architects of their own (and their children’s) poverty have intensified in the last decade – with the effect of problematising poverty as first and foremost a cultural issue (eg, see Gillies 2012; Lehtonen 2018; MacDonald et al 2014a, 2014b; Main and Bradshaw 2016; Pemberton et al 2016). At the same time, the notion of ‘cultural poverty’ has a long history in the UK: the culturalisation of poverty also has the key discursive effect of separating (culturally) poor individuals and communities from the often-touted ‘hardworking families’, reflecting the much longer-standing notion of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor people (eg, see Jensen 2012; Pantazis 2016; Pemberton et al 2016; Valentine and Harris 2014; Wiggan 2012). While the former are commonly presented as responsible ‘taxpaying’ ‘strivers’ – importantly though, regardless of the level of

material poverty they might still experience – poor people are the ‘skivers’ labelled ‘as “other” and set apart from mainstream society as a result of allegedly dysfunctional values, attitudes and behaviour’ (Pemberton et al 2016: 31). The deserving/undeserving distinction also operates, for instance, in relation to the common value judgements made of immigrants’ ‘contributions’ to society, illustrating its malleability (eg, see Anderson 2013; Humphris 2019). In the next section, I examine these framings and their effects in more detail, interrogating in particular the more recent discursive and policy shifts that have focused overwhelmingly on the most disadvantaged or ‘troubled’ subset of poor families.

Troubled Families

The assumption that poverty and ‘disadvantage’ are a personal, familial and cultural affliction of the few is most notable in the context of the TFP, launched in 2012 with the aim of ‘turn[ing] around’ the lives of 120,000 families in England ‘with multiple problems’ (DCLG 2016a: 5; DfE 2011: 39), increasing to 400,000 families in the second iteration of the programme running from 2015 to 2020 (DCLG 2016a: 12).³ The separation between different groups of poor people is already present in the 2011 child poverty strategy. It argues that the previous Government’s use of the relative income measure as the main poverty indicator had ‘unintended consequences’, as ‘it did not distinguish between those families furthest from the poverty line and those just below the line’ (DfE 2011: 19). Instead, the Coalition aimed to focus specifically on ‘families with multiple problems’ (ibid: 4, 21, 39, 40, 56, 59) – or variously, on ‘the most disadvantaged’ (ibid: 4, 12, 36, 39, 43, 50, 54), ‘the most vulnerable’ (ibid: 36, 44, 55, 61), ‘the neediest’ (ibid: 10), ‘fragile’ (ibid 4), and ‘chaotic or crisis-ridden’ (ibid: 63) families. While most of the offered policy solutions are, indeed, about ‘targeted support for those in disadvantaged circumstances’ or ‘specialist intensive engagement with families facing entrenched and multiple problems’, universal support services are also mentioned, with a recognition ‘that all families need help at certain times, such as at the birth of a child’ (ibid: 21). It is even suggested that universal provision may be necessary ‘to de-stigmatise services’ (ibid: 63).

By the publication of the 2017 paper, however, such concerns have disappeared and the DWP’s approach is framed purely around tackling ‘the complex issues that *some families face*’ (DWP 2017a: 15, emphasis added). Here the focus is on providing support that enables particular – especially disadvantaged or ‘troubled’ – families to get back to work, which will supposedly also enable them to tackle any other issues they may be facing, such as material poverty. This constitutes quite a significant shift from the framings of policy papers of the early 2010s, which do explicitly address poverty – albeit through a narrow culturalised and individualised

3 The TFP’s continuation has since been announced, now renamed the Supporting Families Programme (MHCLG 2021).

lens, as discussed above. The 2017 paper reiterates the statutory poverty indicators on worklessness and educational attainment brought in by Duncan Smith in 2015, as well as introducing a whole host of new non-statutory ones, ranging from measures on homelessness and debt to parental conflict; but here the indicators are framed as aiming to ‘to track progress in tackling the *disadvantages* that affect families’ and children’s lives’ (DWP 2017a: 5, emphasis added) – rather than poverty as such. Material or economic poverty is, in fact, only fleetingly referenced in the paper, and then only in terms of its direct relationship to work and worklessness – arguably signalling the most significant discursive shift to have taken place in the child poverty policy arena in the post-financial crisis period.

In terms of policy measures, in both 2011 and 2017 the focus is thus strongly on specialist and targeted support for families most in need, rather than on broader poverty prevention or mitigation. The TFP is central to these measures, taking a ‘family intervention’ approach whereby a key worker is assigned to families with multiple problems in order to get ‘an understanding of the whole family’s inter-connected issues and of the family dynamics’ (DCLG 2016a: 6). The DCLG’s (2015) claim that the TFP managed to ‘turn around’ 116,654 families in its first iteration from 2012–15 has been the target of significant criticism, however – not least because the department’s own impact assessment later stated: ‘we were unable to find consistent evidence that the Troubled Families Programme had any significant or systematic impact’ (DCLG 2016b: 49). To explain the DCLG’s claims of extraordinary success, Ruth Levitas (2014) suggests that because the programme operated on a ‘payment by results’ basis and local authorities were encouraged to use their own criteria for identifying families for the programme, they were strongly incentivised to find and work with exactly the number of families suggested by the DCLG as an estimate of ‘troubled families’ in their area.⁴ A Channel 4 Dispatches documentary (2016) on the programme proposes further that some councils engaged in data matching – selecting families who already had positive outcomes prior to the start of the programme as part of their target figure; replacing families that were unlikely to be ‘turned around’ with ones that allowed for ‘quick wins’; and using such a wide definition of ‘anti-social behaviour’ (one of the key criteria of the programme) that families without any significant ‘problems’ were being included.

As suggested by the JRF (2021), austerity-related cuts to tax credits and other benefits are at least partially to blame for the increasing child poverty rates of the last decade, and the support participating families received via the TFP pales in comparison to the losses in material support many such families would have experienced as a result of the cuts to benefits and state provision implemented

4 Levitas further points at the Government’s usage of ‘unofficial data’ and disclaimers ‘to avoid the ethical scrutiny’ that official governmental data is subject to (2014: 6); and Jonathan Portes (2015) also critiques the MHCLG’s claim that the programme has saved the taxpayer £1.2 billion.

since 2010. Levitas (2014) also highlights the monetary incentives at the heart of the programme, as well as demonstrating the disconnect between governmental efforts to tackle poverty and the potential governmental causes of said poverty – which the culturalisation of poverty helps to obfuscate. Further, though, one key effect of a narrow policy and discursive emphasis on ‘the most troubled’ families is that it comes with rather significant exclusions in other policy areas. In the case of the TFP, the narrowing of the policy landscape not only results in a de-emphasis on those who are *just* poor, without the multitude of other problems the programme emphasises; it also leads to a discursive and policy divestment from the material poverty experienced by those who *are* selected for the programme, as the focus shifts from material support to ‘family intervention’.

To address both of these exclusions in turn – in terms of the former, the way in which in-work poverty has simply dropped off the agenda is a case in point. In the 2011 child poverty strategy, in-work poverty is discussed explicitly; and it even includes a proposed indicator for ‘the proportion of children who are in families where at least one person works yet still remain in relative low income’ (DfE 2011: 34). In the 2012 consultation, it is suggested instead that ‘income from benefits does not have the same effect as income from work’ (CPU 2012: 20); and in the parliamentary discussion following the 2015 announcement, Duncan Smith responded to the repeated questions about in-work poverty by just stating that it rose under the previous Government (HC Deb 2015: c1508, c1514). In the 2017 paper, in-work poverty does not appear at all. As mentioned above, the paper generally uses the term ‘disadvantage’, with material poverty appearing as a kind of afterthought – a negative consequence that occurs because individuals are unable to overcome their worklessness and ‘take advantage of the opportunities in a fairer Britain’ (DWP 2017a: 3) – despite the stated aim of developing ‘a new approach to tackling *poverty* and engrained disadvantage’ (ibid: 3, emphasis added). This shift in emphasis has the effect of excluding those who work but are also poor – despite the fact that in-work poverty has risen significantly over the last decade and ‘a large minority of the working poor are working full-time and/or live in a household with near-full work intensity’, as Nick Bailey (2016: 98) notes. He disputes the discursive division between the so-called ‘strivers’ and ‘skivers’, pointing instead to the huge divisions that have developed between different groups of people who work. An increasing number of working people face insecure and precarious working conditions, with few opportunities to progress beyond what Bailey calls ‘exclusionary employment’. Thus, the TFP’s focus on ‘families with multiple problems’ and on ‘worklessness’ as one of the key criteria for inclusion in the programme means that a large proportion of poor people are simply excluded from it.

In terms of the second exclusion, the TFP’s emphasis on ‘multiple problems’ and ‘troubled’ – rather than poor – families means that the material conditions in which the selected families’ live are not emphasised as part of the programme’s

‘family intervention’ approach. This is precisely because the problems are framed as cultural in nature and are therefore seen as requiring a response that shifts the cultures – norms and values – of the participating families. The criteria by which the original figure of 120,000 ‘troubled families’ was generated demonstrates this emphasis. The research that this figure was based on was conducted by the Social Exclusion Task Force (SETF), which proposed that more policy attention should be focused on ‘the complex needs of a small minority of families who face multiple and entrenched problems’ (SETF 2007: 4; cf DCLG 2012). However, there are two key differences between the measures used in the SETF research and the ‘headline problems’ chosen as key criteria for the TFP. First, poverty (represented in the SETF research by a relative income measure) was one of the key indicators included in the original research, but not in the TFP (DCLG 2016b: 8). Second, crime or anti-social behaviour was not included in the original research, but it was in the TFP.

Thus, that there is a correlation between being poor or disadvantaged and causing crime was not among the original findings – in fact only ten per cent of the children in multiply disadvantaged families had had any contact with the police at all (Levitas 2012: 10). Nonetheless, ‘crime and anti-social behaviour’ became one of the ‘headline problems’ of the TFP (MHCLG 2019: 8); and the DCLG argued explicitly that ‘troubled families are families who both have problems and often cause problems – where children are truanting or excluded, where there is youth crime or anti-social behaviour and where parents are not working’ (2014: 7). That one of the key catalysts for the programme was the 2011 England riots – discussed further in Chapter 4 – also suggests that the criminalisation of poor children and families was at the centre of the TFP from the beginning. In 2018 the MHCLG also took the discursive links between poverty and criminality further, as it announced ‘a new £5 million fund to address [the issue of youth crime] through the existing Troubled Families Programme’ (MHCLG 2018: 4), specifying that bids ‘that will support families to build resilience and confidence in recognising and resisting the dangers of crime and violence and to make positive choices’ (ibid: 5) would be supported. Overall, these examples illustrate a shift from focusing on poor families with multiple problems to troubled families who also *cause* problems.

My reading here aligns with the argument made by Levitas that the TFP makes a set of curious discursive moves from ‘families that have troubles, through families that are “troubled”, to families that are or cause trouble’ (2012: 5). The shift from ‘criteria of multiple deprivation to those of anti-social behaviour’ (ibid: 10) evident in the TFP’s implementation reflects a move from structural indicators to more easily individualised ones, as Irene Gedalof (2017) also points out. Further, though, this discursive move has the effect of strongly associating poverty and disadvantage with criminality. The use of sanctions, such as the threat of losing a tenancy, as a key mechanism to bring about behavioural change in the TFP also signals the increasingly disciplinary nature of governmental interventions targeting poor populations, whereby the success

of social policy measures is measured more and more by their impact on criminal justice agendas rather than on poverty or material wellbeing, as detailed by Sue Bond-Taylor (2014). This shift in emphasis masks the societal and economic factors behind crime, positioning it – similarly to poverty itself – as a matter of individual and cultural dysfunction. It also highlights a central tension within poverty policy more generally – between the stated aim of reducing poverty and the historical tendency for such policy to also have a concomitant purpose in managing, containing and regulating poor people (eg, see Jones and Novak 1999).

Finally, the TFP's discursive and policy focus on the poorest and most disadvantaged families, around whom a variety of social, economic and cultural problems supposedly coalesce, is also reminiscent of the notion of a not just poor, but also dysfunctional and criminal 'underclass'. This notion was popularised in the UK in the 1980s through the work of Charles Murray, who claimed to have identified a differentiated poor group 'with a distinct set of cultural values concerning worklessness, illegitimacy and criminality' (Pantazis 2016: 11). However, as Tracey Jensen points out, 'underclass' discourse did not suddenly reappear in Coalition rhetoric; instead, 'it has been continually spoken and re-spoken through an ever-expanding palimpsest of categories' (2012: 5) – from 'chaotic', 'dysfunctional' and 'problem' families throughout the Blair, Brown and Cameron Governments to the terminology of the 'troubled family' more prevalent in recent years. It also reanimates the much older separation between the deserving and undeserving poor, based on the assumption that those who are 'deserving' of state assistance can be easily identified and separated from 'undeserving' groups of poor people who are 'responsible not only for their own predicament, but also for that of the "bloated" welfare state' (ibid: 6), and for the moral malaise supposedly afflicting the nation as a whole (such as in 'Broken Britain' rhetoric). Arguably this separation is evident in the historical English 'Poor Laws'; in Eugenic thinking; and even in the 1940s Beveridge Report, which provided the blueprint for the welfare state in the UK (eg, see Gillies 2012; MacDonald et al 2014b; Pemberton et al 2016; Wiggan 2012).⁵

A key feature of 'underclass' discourse is its flexibility or elasticity, as many others have pointed out – in terms of both the shifting array of moral failings that it can be associated with and the fluctuating groups of people it can be deployed to mark and stigmatise (eg, see Jensen 2012; Jones and Novak 1999; Pantazis 2016). It should therefore be no surprise that the scope of the TFP's intervention has shifted significantly during its course, beginning with an

- 5 Although Beveridge's recommendations are commonly viewed as a key example of social welfare provision based on the principle of universalism, as Romano (2017) points out, Beveridge did not, in fact, do away with conditionality and the less-eligibility principle entirely. Thus, the Beveridge Plan has also been interpreted 'not as a break with but in terms of a continuity with the *liberal* past' (ibid: 43), where the deserving/undeserving distinction played a central role.

alleged 120,000 troubled families – 116,654 of which were supposedly ‘turned around’ during the first iteration of the programme – but expanding to an alleged 400,000 families ‘at risk’ in the second. Overall, the concentration of efforts to tackle ‘poverty and engrained disadvantage’ (DWP 2017a: 3) on a smaller subset of poor families who are both ‘troubled’ and cause trouble constitutes a significant discursive shift; to the extent that it is debatable whether such a thing as ‘child poverty discourse’, or even just poverty discourse, still actively exists in mainstream policy arenas in Britain – or more accurately, in England, as poverty has been a much more explicit policy focus in the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales. These discursive trends thus not only signal an intensification of the individualisation, culturalisation and criminalisation of poverty, but also contribute to the invisibilisation of material poverty itself, as it comes to be seen as an affliction of a criminalised and dysfunctional few, while in-work poverty is simply shuffled out of view. The next section discusses the solutions offered in the child poverty policy papers to tackle poverty and disadvantage (apart from the TFP itself), focusing primarily on incentivising paid employment.

Equalising Work

The previous two sections have established, first, the extent to which poverty has (both discursively and in policy terms) dropped off the agendas of the successive Governments since 2010 altogether; and second, that what remains of it has come to be increasingly framed through a culturalised and criminalised lens. Now I shift my focus to examining the solutions the policy papers offer – centred almost exclusively around incentivising work, apart from the ‘family intervention’ approach of the TFP (although work plays a key role there too). As discussed above, welfare dependency is a key aspect of the argument put forward in most of the child poverty policy papers of the decade, suggesting – despite a notable lack of evidence – that benefits can create an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage by disincentivising paid work. Consequently, the policies offered as solutions to interrupt this cycle tend to focus on removing ‘financial disincentives to work from within the tax and benefits system’ (DfE 2011: 23) in order to ensure that ‘there is a stronger focus on incentivising behaviours that benefit children’ (*ibid*: 63). In the 2017 paper the DWP claims that ‘great efforts to help people into work’ have already been made, ‘reforming the welfare system to make work pay and introducing Universal Credit as a major step to help people move into work quicker, earn more and stay in employment for longer’ (DWP 2017a: 15). The notion that work is the best or surest ‘route out of poverty’ is thus repeated multiple times across the policy papers under discussion here (CPU 2012: 3; DfE 2011: 2; Duncan Smith in HC Deb 2015: c1505; DWP 2017a: 8).

The papers’ discussions of the many ‘other disadvantages’ that poor families face apart from ‘worklessness’ perhaps indicate that these issues are important in and of themselves; but when it comes to the solutions, the focus is almost

exclusively on getting people (back) to work. The next phase of the TFP will be used to 'encourage a greater emphasis on tackling worklessness and issues associated with it' (DWP 2017a: 16); and employment is also to be placed 'at the centre of the recovery journey where work is assessed to be a good option as part of therapeutic treatment for [an] individual' experiencing drug or alcohol dependency (ibid: 19). In 2011, work is similarly presented as 'a goal for those dependant on drugs and alcohol' (DfE 2011: 29); and both papers also claim that work 'improves people's ... mental and physical health' (ibid: 23). A difference between the two documents lies in their discussions of people with disabilities, however. In 2011 the Government wants 'to ensure that disabled people who can work are supported to do so, while providing unconditional support to those who need it most' (DfE 2011: 29). In 2017 'unconditional support' is no longer part of the picture – now the 'Government is determined to do more to support *workless* families with disabilities' (DWP 2017a: 18, emphasis added); and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants will have access to a personal support package 'tailored to people's individual needs to support them on a journey towards employment' (ibid: 15). The positive outcomes that the papers associate with paid employment have been critiqued by many – for instance, Bailey (2016) notes that poor-quality employment is associated with worse health outcomes than unemployment.

Below I focus on the case of lone parents in more detail; but the example of disabled people similarly shows that the discourse of 'incentivising work' is not just about people traditionally considered unemployed (as in, already actively seeking work), but also explicitly about 'activating' or commodifying groups previously seen as 'inactive' or outside the labour market. Kayleigh Garthwaite (2011) notes the increasing incorporation of people with disabilities and chronic illnesses under the rubric of 'work-shy shirkers' in both political and media discourse; and points out that the ESA's separating of disabled people into either a 'support' or 'employment' group is effectively sorting them into more and less deserving groups based on a medicalised perception of illness or impairment.⁶ Overall, the shift from the terminology of 'unemployment' to that of 'worklessness' suggests a neat division of the whole population into those who work and those who do not work, regardless of the reasons behind the latter. This not only has the effect of expanding 'the purview of state activation and conditionality beyond the narrow category of "unemployment" to incorporate disabled people and lone parents, justifying their re-commodification, even if only at the margins of the labour market' (Wiggan 2012: 388), but also actively hides the high levels of movement between categories, as Bailey (2016) points out. The notion of unemployment as a temporary situation is here supplanted with a view of 'the workless' as a relatively fixed category of people who need to be (re)incentivised to see the value of work.

6 See also Connor (2010) on the proliferation of similar discourses during the previous Labour Government and Wiggan (2015) on the effects of ESA more specifically.

To consider the example of lone parents in more detail, the 2011 child poverty strategy, for instance, wants to move 'lone parents into work' (DfE 2011: 28). This is not a new aspiration, but rather part of a longer development in the UK whereby lone parents are increasingly treated as workers rather than as parents in social policy, as Damian Grimshaw and Jill Rubery (2012) note. At the same time, the argument that lone parents should aspire to paid employment has certainly been reinforced, if not accelerated, in the post-financial crisis period. The 2011 child poverty strategy specifically discusses lowering the threshold age at which lone parents are expected to look for paid work (lowered from 16 to seven in 2008 by the Labour Government, and again to five in 2012 by the Coalition), highlighting this as a key positive development. This situation has shifted further with Universal Credit, with lone parents now expected 'to attend work-focused interviews with [their] work coach' from when their youngest child reaches the age of one; 'to take active steps to prepare for work' from the age of two; and to work or look for work for a maximum of 16 hours a week from the age of three (DWP 2020b).⁷

The 2011 child poverty strategy concedes that 'groups such as lone parents and large families may face particular issues with childcare responsibilities which can make entering work seem particularly challenging' (DfE 2011: 18) – although it is important to note that even for these groups, entering work can *seem* rather than *be* challenging. The paper's suggested solution to these 'particular issues' is to 'create a culture in which it is easier for parents to combine paid work and family life. This includes access to family friendly employment as well as affordable, quality early education and childcare' (ibid: 31). 'An extra £300 million into childcare' (CPU 2012: 13) is promised in the 2012 consultation; and the 2017 paper's emphasis is on the extension of the Government's free childcare entitlement to up to 30 hours per week for three and four-year-olds – up from 15 hours (DWP 2017a). However, the scheme has not been without its problems, with some parents actually paying more than before under the new scheme of 'free' childcare due to the way in which it operates.⁸ Further, only families where both parents or the sole parent works are eligible. Thus, while lone parents are strongly encouraged to find paid work, very little is offered in the policy papers to make this feasible in practice; instead, the policy framings tend to reinforce the double burden they face. Given these increasing pressures, it is perhaps no surprise that lone parents have been some of the biggest losers from the range of

7 The now common demand for welfare claimants to spend as much time looking for work as they would spend in full-time employment is explored further in Chapter 3.

8 Contrary to the way in which the scheme worked earlier, nurseries that sign up to the scheme can no longer make up the shortfall between government funding and the actual cost of childcare by charging parents more. Consequently, many nurseries have closed and some have opted out altogether because they cannot afford to offer the free places; whereas others have started charging parents additional new charges in order to make up the shortfall (eg, see Ferguson 2017; Turner 2017).

austerity-related welfare cuts and reforms implemented since 2010 and are consequently also predicted to be among the poorest household groups in coming years (Corlett 2019).

To slightly broaden the frame of my discussion, overall, the discursive shift from ‘unemployment’ to ‘worklessness’ seems to operate as a cover for devaluing care. Lone parents and other groups increasingly brought into the purview of ‘worklessness’ engage in significant amounts of care work – and not just for their own children. For instance, MacDonald et al (2014b) found that the long-term unemployed people they interviewed tended to engage in substantial amounts of care and voluntary work. Thus, it is precisely the groups that are primed for ‘activation’ in the paid labour market who also tend to carry a disproportionate share of care and housework responsibilities. This brings into question their problematisation as ‘workless’ in the first place, as the unequal allocation of unpaid household and caring work is simply ignored or concealed – echoing Jill Rubery and Anthony Rafferty’s argument that ‘an expectation of paid work is not matched by a right to care’ (2014: 137) in the post-financial crisis context. These growing demands on lone parents thus illustrate an important shift in the discursive framings, whereby welfare provision that enables lone parents to care for their children is increasingly seen as just another example of ‘dependency’ and ‘worklessness’ (Wiggan 2012). This reinforces the assumption that (usually) women are available as informal carers; or in other words, constitutes a re-privatisation of the cost of social reproduction, as Gargi Bhattacharyya (2015) argues.

However, although these discursive and policy shifts suggest a trend towards certain gendered dynamics being reinforced, these demands are not applied equally to all women. Indeed, the 2011 child poverty strategy specifically states that ‘having *one or both parents* in work can contribute to eroding inter-generational cycles of poverty’ (DfE 2011: 24, emphasis added). Similarly, the new statutory child poverty indicators implemented in 2015 measure ‘worklessness’ at household level (DWP 2017). This suggests that the emphasis is on intervening in the number of ‘workless’ *households*, rather than in the number of ‘workless’ *people*, let alone women – as Jane Lewis (2001) argues is common with policies aimed at ‘incentivising’ lone parents. The policy climate surrounding coupled parents whose partners work has overall been much more ambivalent in the post-financial crisis period than that pertaining to lone parents. While policies such as the ‘free’ childcare offered to families where both parents work suggest a preference for second earners to also find paid work, others – such as recent tax changes – encourage them to stay at home (for more detail see Rubery and Rafferty 2014). Overall, then, the stigmatisation of ‘worklessness’ seems to be applied rather unevenly, with diverging incentives placed on different groups of people: while lone parents face a growing demand to ‘activate’ in the labour market, this demand has been at least partially relaxed for second earners in married-parent couples – both of whom are usually women.

There is thus something quite unpredictable about the ways in which different groups of women have been portrayed in the discursive climate, and affected by the policy climate, of the post-financial crisis period of austerity and welfare retrenchment. Intensifying pressure on lone parents to seek paid work (or lose access to benefits) coexists with ambivalent or even contradictory incentives for coupled parents in regard to their divisions of labour. Writing about European austerity politics, Bhattacharyya similarly labels austerity's deployment of gendered myths and expectations 'oddly erratic' (2015: 149), suggesting that 'there is a haphazardness to the map of re-/de-gendering under austerity' (ibid: 159). She goes on to make the case that these shifts are not fundamentally about gender, arguing that although 'cultures of reproduction and associated expectations of gendering play their part in this reconfiguration' (ibid: 149), 'austerity is not a project that requires a particular approach to gender roles or the status of women' (ibid: 150). I agree that it is a mistake to see these shifts as an intentional re-traditionalisation of gender roles; it is more accurate to say that traditional models of gender and the family are drawn upon here to withdraw state support from various groups, perhaps precisely in order to privatise the cost of social reproduction, as Bhattacharyya suggests. I will return to this broader discussion in the final section of this chapter; but first, I want to extend my argument to consider sexuality more explicitly. In the next section, I make the case that the discursive framings of poverty both rely on and reinforce a particular set of normative assumptions about sexuality – not just gender.

Stable Families

This chapter so far has argued that poverty has been both culturalised and criminalised in the discursive and policy framings of the post-financial crisis period; and further, that these ideas have been increasingly applied just to a smaller, 'troubled' subset of poor families. The previous section focused on the policy papers' overwhelming emphasis on paid work as *the* route out of poverty and highlighted the somewhat ambivalent gendered effects of these policy shifts. Above, I have also started to make the case that poverty tends to be increasingly seen through a familial lens, in the sense that the policy discourses position the family both as the site where poverty is reproduced from one generation to the next and as the nexus of the policy responses – after all, it is the family formation that is expected to absorb the cost of social reproduction shed by the state. However, the family is not just framed as the location where these processes take place; its internal dynamics, arrangements and practices are also centred as a focal point for the reproduction of the cycles of poverty, disadvantage and worklessness. Poor parenting and 'family instability' are seen as key factors behind children's poor development and future prospects, and consequently as root causes of child poverty. At the same time, the idea of 'family instability' never seems that far from the stigmatisation of non-normative family forms. The flipside of the 'unstable'

family is of course the ‘stable’ family, where parents – usually two parents, and more often than not a mother and a father – gently guide their children towards future prosperity and success.

First, then, ‘quality parenting’ is positioned as key to tackling poverty and disadvantage throughout the (child) poverty policy papers of the past decade. A desire ‘to see a culture where the key aspects of good parenting are widely understood’ (DfE 2011: 38) is expressed in the 2011 child poverty strategy; and the difficulty of measuring ‘parenting style and skill’ (CPU 2012: 17) is discussed in the 2012 consultation. In the 2017 paper, the focus is more on the impact of parental conflict on parenting ability, as ‘conflict is likely to drain the emotional resources required to parent adequately, putting children at greater risk of emotional and social problems (DWP 2017a: 10). Thus, ‘good’, ‘strong’ or ‘effective’ parenting is highlighted as important to children’s outcomes in all the relevant documents, linking parenting practices and behaviour to children’s emotional, social and cognitive development. The inclusion of cognitive development in many of the papers under discussion here (CPU 2012; DfE 2011; DWP 2017) echoes a recent trend of turning towards brain science for evidence in social policy. More specifically, in connecting children’s cognitive development to the quality of parenting, the framings here reflect the claim that poor parenting can lead to faulty ‘brain architecture’, as Rosalind Edwards et al (2015) discuss. They go on to point out that the notion that children’s cognitive and neurological development is intrinsically linked to the kind of parenting they receive, especially during a supposedly ‘crucial ante- and post-natal window of “1001 days”’ (ibid: 171), functions as a useful trope to push policy into a particular direction, rather than necessarily reflecting evidence for such a link. This trope arguably further draws on the longer history of notions of cognitive ability being used to stigmatise racialised, disabled and poor people (eg, see Erevelles 2011; Stoler 2010).

In terms of what actually counts as ‘quality’ parenting, the 2011 child poverty strategy states that parenting styles combining elements of discipline and rule setting with ‘warmth and sensitivity’ (DfE 2011: 37) constitute ‘good’ parenting. Altogether, the ability of children to do well is attributed to the *style* of parenting – or, to borrow Gillies’ language, ‘the minutiae of parenting practice’ (2012: 105) above all other factors. The responsibility for what happens to children later on in life is here placed squarely on the shoulders of parents – instead of considering, for instance, the impact of education, the wider social environment or material poverty. In sustaining the individualising emphasis of poverty discourses in general, this increasing ‘parental determinism’ (ibid: 90) in policy making diverts attention away from material poverty, as well as the – material and other – resources needed to parent ‘well’. This parental determinism is present in all the policy documents under discussion here, including the earlier papers that focus explicitly on tackling poverty rather than the vaguer notions of ‘disadvantage’ or ‘trouble’. This suggests an implicit assumption that poor people are worse at parenting – an assumption that stands in stark contrast to the available evidence. For instance, Gill Main and Jonathan Bradshaw’s (2016) study found no significant differences between the

parenting practices of poor and non-poor parents, and instead found strong evidence suggesting that when resources are limited, parents are likely to prioritise their children's needs over their own.

Apart from the central focus on parenting itself, a wide range of other behaviours and practices is included in each policy paper's discussion. The 2011 child poverty strategy argues that 'relationship quality' is key to children's wellbeing; whereas 'intense conflict between parents – whatever their relationship status – has been shown to be detrimental for children's outcomes' (DfE 2011: 36). The 2012 consultation's intervention is framed around 'family stability' instead, which is rather tautologically defined as 'grow[ing] up in a stable family environment without experiencing relationship breakdown' (CPU 2012: 40). The 2017 paper includes a section on 'parental conflict' (DWP 2017a: 9), in which – despite its name – broad connections are made between conflict, parental separation, worklessness and the aforementioned cycles of disadvantage. The paper goes on to argue that 'children growing up with parents who have good-quality relationships (whether they are together or separated), tend to enjoy a wider range of better future outcomes' (ibid: 9), be it in terms of mental and physical health, or educational attainment. Thus, the common-sensical view that a stable home environment is key to raising successful children is promoted; but exactly what such an environment looks like is never quite explicitly defined. In his 2015 announcement, Duncan Smith proudly asserted that 'family life has stabilised' since the Conservatives came to power (HC Deb 2015: c1512), and the national evaluation of the TFP also suggested that the programme had a major impact on 'improving parenting skills' (MHCLG 2019: 15); but similarly, neither offers much explanation as to what this has entailed in practice.

Since such a wide range of familial and parental practices, behaviours and norms are included in the papers' discussions of 'family stability', it is difficult not to draw the conclusion that parental separation and divorce – and consequently, non-normative family forms – are in themselves bad for children. While the 2011 and 2017 papers go to great lengths to assure the reader that 'relationship quality' is more important than whether parents stay together, there is nonetheless a strong focus on two-parent families – or at least a preference for parenting to be undertaken by two parents. The 2017 paper discusses the 'benefits to having a good-quality relationship between the child and the non-resident parent (most commonly the father) for children' (DWP 2017a: 10), specifying that 'we understand the importance of both mothers and fathers to children's future outcomes' (ibid: 20). The 2012 consultation includes a somewhat leading question about the role of fathers: 'how important is the presence of a father to a child's experience of poverty and life chances?' (CPU 2012: 42). This emphasis on the importance of 'fathering' – rather than on the (at least ostensibly) gender-neutral 'parenting' – echoes the 'absent father' narrative discussed by Sara De Benedictis, whereby a 'singular father figure [is] positioned as essential for authority and stability' (2012: 13). This narrative is commonly further racialised, positioning absent black fathers as the cause of a whole host of social ills (eg, see Ashe 2014). Generally, it serves to

highlight single parenting in general, and single mothering in particular, as undesirable parenting arrangements.

These discursive emphases are reproduced in the two case studies in the 2012 consultation's 'family stability' section. The first is about Jane, described as 'a lone parent living in a deprived area with her five young children' (CPU 2012: 41). She has been struggling financially and feels 'forced into debt' since her relationship with the father of her children ended. It is mentioned that Jane's ex-partner 'has not provided any practical support or paid her any child maintenance' (ibid: 41); but, for instance, state assistance in enforcing child maintenance payments or the provision of subsidised or free childcare is not explored as a potential solution. Despite the fact that her problems seem purely financial in nature, the individualising presentation of Jane's situation can easily lead the reader to the conclusion that her problems have more to do with the structure of her family – as if they would not exist had she simply chosen not to separate from her partner. Here, the lone parent is 'positioned as failing to give her children a stable father figure by selfishly placing her will to parent alone ... above them' (2012: 13), as De Benedictis argues in her examination of parenting discourses of austerity politics.

The second case study similarly reproduces a highly individualising framing. It is about Robert, who was 'kicked out of home' (CPU 2012: 42) at 16 and is quoted as saying:

Basically, my mum had a boyfriend ... I think this happens a lot: mum has a boyfriend, boyfriend and her son don't get on, end up rowing. We got into blows one day. I've got little sisters and it wasn't nice for them to see that. So, I left ... I was on my own, I was so lonely. I squatted for a while, then lived in a hostel. (ibid: 42)

The subtext is, again, about the mother's poor choices – in this case her choice to be with an abusive boyfriend and therefore to implicitly prioritise her own relationship over her children's wellbeing. Despite the case study appearing in the consultation for the child poverty measures, poverty is not mentioned in relation to Robert's situation at all. In both case studies, it is the single mother who is positioned as having caused poor outcomes for her children – not a lack of money or other resources. Not dissimilarly, although the 2011 child poverty strategy states that 'exactly how strong the correlation is, and how far there is a causal relationship between family type and child outcomes is the subject of much academic debate', it nonetheless also claims that 'what is clear is that experiencing multiple relationship transitions can be particularly damaging to children' (DfE 2011: 36–7). Since this statement follows a discussion of the many poor outcomes associated with children experiencing parental separation, the wording of 'multiple relationship transitions' seems to specifically point at lone parents – usually mothers – who have had more than one partner.

In coupling examples of violent or absent fathers with a strong emphasis on the ills of relationship conflict and breakdown, my sense is that the focus here is centrally on mothers as responsible for maintaining ‘family stability’, and consequently for safeguarding their children’s development and outcomes – rather than on the absent or violent fathers themselves, or indeed on poverty. This is of course amplified in the case of lone mothers, who are perhaps seen as deliberately destabilising the environment in which their children are growing up. While the sexual and reproductive decisions of single mothers are not explicitly discussed in the policy papers under analysis here, their framings nonetheless carry longstanding connotations of sexual immorality and lack of respectability. They position the mother who separates from her male partner, has more than one sexual partner or simply chooses to parent alone as depriving her children ‘of a “normal” upbringing through a lack of the nuclear family’ (De Benedictis 2012: 12) – echoing Jean Carabine’s argument that the ‘moral hazard’ posed by lone mothers is ‘more often than not constituted as sexual’ (2001: 306). Carabine’s comparative examination of discourses of lone motherhood in the nineteenth century and the 1990s demonstrates that the stigmatisation of non-normative family forms, and particularly of single mothers, has a long history in the UK. She argues that the implicit message in such attacks tends to be that ‘welfare benefits and housing should only be available to “respectable” married women’ (ibid: 306). Whether lone mothers are having too many children, having them too early or having them with multiple fathers – and thus, implicitly, having sex with too many different men – discourses about the poor lone mother tend to reproduce assumptions about her sexual impropriety.

Parallels of the respectability politics discussed by Carabine, De Benedictis and many others are thus certainly evident in the documents under discussion in this chapter, reflected most clearly in the positioning of lone parent families as emblematic of – or at least closely connected to – what the papers refer to as ‘family instability’; although, for instance, Esther Dermott and Marco Pomati (2016) found no evidence that the parenting practices or financial decision making of lone and coupled parents differ significantly, thus questioning the entire basis for policy making that treats lone parents as a separate group requiring specific policy attention.⁹ The euphemistic references to ‘family stability’, coupled with frequent discussions of the many challenges faced by families that deviate from the norm, mean that heterosexual coupledom comes easily to stand in for family stability, as Gedalof (2017) suggests, such that the ‘stable family’ and the heterosexual nuclear family become interchangeable – with other family

9 In 2021 it was revealed that the UK’s Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities had approached social scientists to find out ‘whether there is any evidence to support perceptions that young people living in single parent households ... experience poorer outcomes and in turn a higher propensity to become involved in risky or criminal activity’ (Chakraborty 2021), suggesting that these emphases have not disappeared since the publication of the documents under examination here.

forms and relationship types measured against this norm. The lone mother is thus excluded from definitions of 'family stability' in advance; and her distance from this ideal is, in turn, viewed as proof of the instability of the environment in which her children are growing up. It is important to note that this distance of course tends to be even greater for women of colour, women with disabilities and many others who have historically been perceived as *a priori* 'deficient' *vis-à-vis* normative notions of family life (eg, see Alexander 1994; Berlant 1997; Carabine 2001; Carby 1982; Collins 1999; Edwards and Gillies 2012).

Beverley Skeggs's (1997, 2004) argument about the role that sexuality plays in class categorisation is relevant here. For her, it is not just that class judgements tend to also contain sexualised judgements, but rather that a moral reading of women's bodies and (sexual) practices is what initiated the first class categories. Class as a social category is therefore in itself at least partially constituted through sexualised notions of morality and respectability. We can link this to the poverty discourses by considering the connections built between poverty and non-normative family forms in the policy papers. The case studies of the 2012 consultation make sense despite their lack of mention of poverty precisely because of these longstanding connotations between class and sexual respectability – a struggling lone parent family is coded as inherently unstable and lacking respectability, which in turn becomes the cause of any poverty the family may experience. Certain parental behaviours, norms and values, as well as non-normative family formations, are understood as *a priori* 'unstable' and further strongly associated with the cultures of worklessness and deprivation that cause child poverty – with the 'stable', heteronormative, two-parent family positioned as the ideal springboard for ensuring positive development and outcomes for children. The flipside of the papers' discussions of the ills of parental conflict, separation and single parenting is thus the normative, heterosexual, two-parent family that typifies what the papers term 'family stability'.

Finally, the papers' discussions of 'family stability' also make discursive connections between familial stability, citizenship norms and national stability. David Cameron's speech after the 2011 riots made these connections explicit:

I don't doubt that many of the rioters out last week have no father at home. Perhaps they come from one of the neighbourhoods where it's standard for children to have a mum and not a dad ... where it's normal for young men to grow up without a male role model, looking to the streets for their father figures, filled up with rage and anger. So if we want to have any hope of mending our broken society, family and parenting is where we've got to start. (Cameron 2011)

As Tam Sanger and Yvette Taylor highlight, 'who is properly proximate to intimacy may also be recognised as a proper citizen, a legal subject, a welfare recipient, a familial member and a coherent, legitimate "partnered" person' (2013: 3). Gavin Brown goes as far as to suggest that 'proximity to "proper"

expressions of intimacy and care has come to shape' norms of citizenship 'more than sexual identity itself' (2015: 978). The poverty discourses examined here fold familial futures into national futures precisely by tying the familial script of respectable, reproductive generationality to citizenship norms. Poor and/or 'unstable' families are to blame not only for their own poverty, but also for societal moral decay. Conversely, the 'hardworking taxpayers' and/or 'stable' families are acting appropriately to ensure a future free of poverty for themselves – even if the present is not, given the high rates of in-work poverty – and a productive future for the nation.

Thus, heterosexual coupledness and the nuclear family are here positioned as the norm that generates both proper citizens and national stability. It is only by reproducing (in) the stable family norm that poor parents can ensure that their children turn out to be functional and responsible citizens – and go on, in turn, to reproduce that very norm in and for their own children. Normative, heterosexual and reproductive coupledness is centred in imaginaries of the national future, thus also tying the survival of the nation to familial acts performed in the private or quotidian sphere. This section overall has made the case that sexuality – and particularly longstanding notions of sexual normativity and respectability – are in important ways drawn upon in the poverty discourses of the post-financial crisis period. These sexualised judgements are significant particularly for the ways in which the 'unstable'/'troubled' poor are discursively separated from the 'stable'/'respectable' poor – who of course might not have much money either, but nonetheless occupy a very different discursive position. Overall, then, it is not just unequal gender dynamics that make good fodder for the politics of austerity and welfare retrenchment, but also a range of pre-existing sexual non-normativities, positioned against the ideal reproductive, heteronormative, and perhaps white and middle-class, two-parent family.

Against Work

In the previous section, I argued that the poverty discourses of the post-financial crisis era draw not just on existing unequal gender dynamics, but also on longstanding notions of sexual respectability and normativity to privatise the cost of social reproduction. The positioning of poverty as something that only concerns the so-called 'troubled' families, whose cultures are to blame both for their own poverty and for the 'broken society', is achieved at least partially with reference to these sexualised judgements of lone mothers and other non-normative families. In other words, the last ten years have seen the rhetoric of the '(un)stable family' deployed as part of a discourse that separates the 'troubled', culturally and criminally poor from the 'respectable' poor situated just below the poverty line. While the former are viewed as responsible for their own poverty, as well as at risk of passing their cultural and criminal dysfunctions onto the next generation – therefore also potentially endangering the nation's future – the latter's experiences of poverty are time

limited and therefore undeserving of specific policy attention. In this privatised and individualised policy and discursive landscape, both 'broken Britain' and the 'troubled' families who are to blame for the nation's ills can only be mended through 'personal acts and identities performed in the intimate domains of the quotidian' (Berlant 1997: 4).

Many feminist responses to the policy shifts discussed above, both in scholarship and from charities and other civil society actors, have tended to read them as a clawing back of the welfare state victories that for a time enabled women to participate in the labour market in much greater numbers than before. While the UK welfare state was from its consolidation in the 1940s largely organised around a male breadwinner model (although importantly, this did not necessarily reflect the reality of, but rather a set of assumptions about, women's labour market participation even then), women's increasing participation in waged labour led some to suggest that towards the 1990s, the UK was moving towards a 'dual breadwinner' model – or at least a 'one-and-a-half' breadwinner model.¹⁰ For instance, Ruth Pearson and Diane Elson note that this more equitable 'reproductive bargain' – albeit fragile and limited – achieved 'some degree of financial autonomy for women, including single mothers' (2015: 21). They go on to argue that 'since the financial crisis, this bargain has been constantly challenged' (*ibid*: 21; cf Karamessini 2014; Rubery and Rafferty 2014). On the civil society side, the Fawcett Society (2012), the Women's Budget Group (2010) and the TUC (2015) have been vocal in opposing these recent shifts and what has been viewed as a kind of return to traditional, more unequal gender dynamics. Correspondingly, many critics have focused their campaigning efforts on making the case that the benefits and services that sustained the 'reproductive bargain' should be retained.

These more recent feminist arguments against austerity and welfare retrenchment of course reflect much longer-standing debates about the cost and organisation of social reproduction and the resulting unequal divisions of labour. Feminist propositions to address such inequalities have, broadly speaking, tended to focus either on policy measures that enable women to more easily enter the paid labour market, such as in the recent examples recounted above, or on arguing for unpaid caring and housework activities to be seen as work or as equally valuable as work, such as in the Wages for Housework movement of the 1970s discussed by Kathi Weeks (2011). These arguments are outlined, for instance, in Nancy Fraser's (1996) seminal work on the gendered division of labour, where the former position is named the 'universal breadwinner' model and the latter the 'caregiver parity' model. There are certainly similarities between the circumstances that brought on this older set of arguments and the more recent wave of welfare retrenchment and austerity in Britain – particularly in terms of the gendered effects of these policies; although, as noted above, such effects have also been uneven. At the same time, there are some important

10 For much more detailed explanations and discussions of these shifts, see Lewis (2001), Orloff (2009), Pearson and Elson (2015) and Rubery and Rafferty (2014).

differences between the context that enabled a fragile 'reproductive bargain' to be attained and the more recent one in which the politics of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis have flourished.

As briefly mentioned earlier, Bhattacharyya makes the case that some of the feminist arguments opposing these policy shifts have tended to misread the recent trend towards the re-privatisation of the cost of social reproduction as a re-traditionalisation of gender – even intentionally so: 'austerity may represent a concerted exiting of capital from the compromise of the social wage, but it does not follow that this signals a return to a previous era of reproductive labour in the service of male breadwinners' (2015: 160). For her, austerity is not a project based on a particularly robust narrative of social values; nor does it aim to promote and mainstream a specific gender regime that privileges masculinity over femininity or elevates men's social position over women's. Rather for her, austerity harnesses existing 'deep-seated cultures of inequality as a route to embedding diminished standards of living among populations who, until quite recently, expected much, much more' (ibid: 152). In other words, austerity is more about lowering expectations across a whole range of populations and less about a particular ideology of gender roles or dynamics; and in the process, the fragile gains of the 'reproductive bargain' of the previous decades are shown to be just that: fragile.

Here it is important to note that historically, even in the glory days of social welfarism, welfare provision was at best limited and unevenly accessible for different groups of people. Although a sense of security sustained by increased state welfare provision was certainly available to some groups for a while, others paid the price for it – whether, for instance, the single women who did not meet the heteronormative standards that mediated access to welfare in the era of the family wage or the racialised populations in Britain's colonies who provided (precarious) labour when it was needed. In Bhattacharyya's terms, the latter constitutes a 'displaced inequality, where social suffering takes place elsewhere, beyond the boundaries of the contract of national belonging' (2015: 3). For many feminist and other critics, then, the recent shifts away from the so-called 'reproductive bargain' and the relative stability granted by it constitute much less of a shift, especially to the groups whose relationships to both waged labour and social welfare provision have always been more precarious (eg, see Bhambra and Holmwood 2018; Bhattacharyya 2015; Clarke 2004; Evans 2013, 2015; Lorey 2015). For groups that never enjoyed unfettered access to welfare state supports in the first place, arguing for a return to the relative stability afforded by earlier incarnations of the welfare state does not hold the same promise.

This does not, however, mean that the current phase of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis is simply a continuation of these older dynamics. For many scholars, what separates the earlier social welfarist context from the more recent neoliberalising one is that precarity or precarisation has become institutionalised in the latter. For instance, Isabell Lorey (2015) argues that precarity was always already incorporated in liberal modes of governance, but tended to affect particular marginalised groups,

such as women, migrants or racialised and colonised populations; whereas the shift to neoliberal governmentality has meant the normalisation and centralisation of precarisation as a mode of governance. Bhattacharyya similarly argues that while there is nothing new as such about the existence of in-work poverty, particularly for marginalised groups, 'it is the rapid growth of this unhappy experience that should be recognised as a symptom of our time and one that leads to a diminishing of expectations for all' (2015: 66). Jeremy Gilbert goes as far as to say that what is specific about 'the neoliberal programme' is:

the efficacy and precision with which it engineers precisely the outcome of an economy and a society within which feeding their children and keeping them out of relative poverty remains an achievable but highly demanding task for most actors: actively producing insecurity and 'precarity' across the working population, without allowing the level of widespread desperation to pass critical thresholds. (2013: 14)

What all of these scholars are identifying (albeit in different ways) is the normalisation of lower expectations of the state-citizen contract and the spreading of a resultant negative affect.

The 'shifting up' or 'normalisation' of precarisation identified here is the consequence of many concomitant but related shifts, including the increasing rates of in-work poverty discussed above; a more general move towards the 'flexibilisation' of work, such as in the 'gig economy'; the growing use of 'zero hours' and other unpredictable, short-term contracts; and the proliferation of so-called 'pink-collar' jobs (eg, see Bailey 2016; Grover 2019; MacDonald and Giazitzoglu 2019; Wiggan 2015). It is also important to note that historically, the poor working conditions and low wages associated with some sectors of the economy, such as care and domestic work, are in fact a consequence of the devaluing of so-called 'women's work'. Because of this connotation, the more recent spread of such conditions and pay to other areas of the labour market historically associated with relative stability has been referred to as a 'feminisation' of the labour market. More broadly, as Rubery and Rafferty (2014) note, we can also think of various 'in-work benefits' – such as tax credits or more recently Universal Credit – as attempts not only to facilitate women's access to the paid labour market, but also to subsidise low wages, with the consequence of upholding systematic wage inequality. Relatedly, Robin Dunford and Diane Perrons (2014) point out that the recent 'successes' in the narrowing of the gender pay gap in Britain have, in fact, been achieved primarily via men's pay falling, rather than women's pay rising. Overall, these developments illustrate that, rather than just a matter of a withdrawal from the 'reproductive bargain', in recent decades we have witnessed a much broader and perhaps more systematic erosion of both the wage and the social wage.

Another way of approaching this set of issues is to note that capitalist economies tend to rely on a permanent margin of un- and/or under-employment – or a ‘reserve army of labour’, in Marxist terms. As Ian Greer (2016) points out, welfare state protections undermine the reserve army mechanism by raising the social wage and thereby de-incentivising competition at the bottom of the labour market; whereas welfare ‘reform’ and cuts act in a contradictory manner, by putting downward pressure on wages. For Greer, ‘welfare reform is an important lever for intensified labour market competition, especially in the low-wage and insecure segment’ (ibid: 165). The policy shifts examined in this chapter, and austerity and welfare retrenchment more broadly, thus function to expand the reserve army of labour from both ends – by shifting precarisation upwards and by (re-)commodifying groups who were previously ‘inactive’ in labour market terms, as Chris Grover (2019) also notes. That the increased emphasis on incentivising work and encouraging access to the labour market over the last ten years has delivered record low unemployment but record high poverty (and child poverty) in Britain supports this view, as an increasing number of people at the bottom of the labour market hierarchy compete for access to poverty wages to counter the effects of reduced welfare provision.

If we take the notion of the ‘permanent margin of unemployment’ or the reserve army of labour seriously, is it enough for a feminist politics opposing these shifts to argue that women’s access to the labour market should be better facilitated? Or, to ask the question in another way: which group would (or should) occupy the position of the reserve army of labour if women were no longer disproportionately represented in it? Taking this just as a question of the gendered division of labour, one might think that it could be fixed by equalising that division; but assuming that full and stable employment for everyone is not possible in our current economic structure, improving women’s position would simply transfer the relation of precarisation onto another group. This is not just a hypothetical point, as we of course know from feminist research that this is exactly what tends to happen when women’s labour market position improves: overwhelmingly, it has been racialised populations and in particular women of colour who have ended up substituting for more privileged women in precarious, low-paid work, or taking over some of their responsibilities in care work (eg, see Glenn 1992; Parreñas 2012). In the terms of this chapter’s discussion on child poverty, while I am not suggesting there would be no gains in child poverty reduction from improving women’s access to the labour market (there certainly would), at the same time it is difficult to imagine child poverty being eradicated if other groups (and their children) simply take women’s place in the ‘reserve army of labour’. Overall, then, there are broader problems with the ways in which both waged work and the work of social reproduction are currently organised than just their gendered organisation, as Weeks (2011) also argues.

The other problem with focusing on improving women’s access to the paid labour market is that such efforts also tend to leave untouched the corollary to

the ‘work ethic’ – the ‘family ethic’. As Weeks notes, ‘the ideology of the family performs a kind of mopping-up function, enabling us to accept the legitimacy of the wage system despite its shortcomings by encouraging us to imagine that it can provide for those capable of living up to its norms of family form and responsibility’ (ibid: 121). The normative family, in this sense, functions to extend wages ‘to the nonwaged, underwaged, not-yet-waged, and no-longer-waged’ (ibid: 121), relieving the state from responsibility for a large majority of the cost of social reproduction by privatising, feminising and naturalising it – even when the ‘reproductive bargain’ functions successfully. Since the family is expected to pick up the slack for those who cannot or will not work, it operates as a distributive mechanism with the help of which we can imagine surviving despite the sustained erosion of both wages and social welfare over the last few decades. The institution of the family thus helps to naturalise poverty wages and widening precarisation by absorbing the material losses generated by these processes (and stigmatising those who do not have anyone to absorb theirs). In addition to the material effects that the idealisation of the family has, we can also observe a set of effects in terms of the affective attachments and imaginaries it cultivates.

Lauren Berlant’s (2011) conceptualisation of ‘cruel optimism’ is useful here. They argue that normative intimacies play a central role in the relationships between citizen-subjects and the state under conditions of neoliberalisation and precarisation. Precarious subjects cling on to normative intimacies when they no longer have reciprocal relationships with the state, despite the fact that these investments are precisely what foreclose other political possibilities for them – a relation that Berlant terms ‘cruel optimism’. The dissatisfaction of citizens ‘leads to reinvestment in the normative promises of ... intimacy under capital’ (ibid: 170), thus enabling one ‘to imagine that having a friend, or making a date, or looking longingly at someone who might, after all, show compassion for our struggles, is really where living takes place’ (ibid: 189). Berlant’s argument suggests that while precarity may indeed be ‘shifting up’ in the context of austerity and neoliberalisation, notions of normativity continue to have a significant hold on us – and perhaps particularly on those of us for whom attachments to normativity have in the past helped guarantee certain state protections. If we continue to imagine the family or private sphere in this way – as a ‘haven in a heartless world’ (Weeks 2011: 129), a bulwark against the violences of state-generated austerity and welfare retrenchment, or the space where living *really* takes place – we will also continue to at best ignore and at worst actively demonise those who do not match its idealised forms. In other words, in Weeks’ terms, ‘the family ethic’ – or in Berlant’s terms, ‘the normative promises of intimacy’ – function to create divisions between different groups of people, despite possible shared experiences of precarisation. These divisions in turn create and maintain downward pressure on wages, and thereby help to sustain the ‘reserve army of labour’, as Holly Lewis (2018) also points out.

My discussion here has pointed at two distinct problems with common feminist propositions for reorganising the work of social reproduction: one aiming to facilitate women's access to work that already has value (ie, paid labour) and the other aiming to raise the value of work that tends not to (ie, unpaid care and household labour). Both of these approaches leave untouched not just what Weeks calls 'the dominant legitimating discourse of work' (2011: 13), but also the idealisation and normative organisation of the family. What such discussions tend to miss is a serious consideration for 'the needs of those individuals whose forms of productivity and intimacy do not line up with such restrictive institutions of social cooperation and economic distribution' (ibid: 143), such as the frequently vilified lone mother discussed in detail above. Given the unlikelihood of full employment (let alone that such employment is stable, permanent, and provides a living wage), the starting point for any discussion about the (re)organisation of work and social reproduction should be: what conditions are acceptable for the group that falls outside the bounds of stable, permanent, well-paid employment, or within the 'reserve army of labour'? If we assume that the composition of this group will change over time, depending on existing inequalities and the social norms of the time and place, then identity-based responses (eg, those focused on 'women') will not be sufficient, since they just shift the relation of precarisation onto another group – or indeed reveal that many women also experience precarisation for reasons other than gender. Rather, political responses need to challenge both the organisation of work that sustains the permanent precarisation of a group of people and the idealisation of the family that normalises that precarisation.

It is for the reasons outlined here that Weeks (2011) calls for a politics *against work*, exemplified in her discussion of proposals such as basic income. For her, a basic income would address the issues discussed above – first, in terms of challenging the valorisation and legitimating discourse of work that stands in stark contrast to the precarious and unliveable conditions in which most workers actually work; and second, by severing the link between the normative organisation of the family and the survival of those who cannot work, whether temporarily or permanently. Additionally, a basic income (and other similar proposals) would go further by expanding the range of possibilities available for organising our time outside the demands of the family. Feminist and other proposals for addressing the current organisation of work and social reproduction have tended to call for a reorganisation of work only insofar as it would free up more time for the family – or *vice versa*. For Weeks, it is important that the demand for a basic income does not come with a requirement about 'contributing to society' – even via volunteer work – as such a requirement would reinforce a disciplinary notion of 'productivity', albeit in expanded form. Rather, the removal of the preoccupation with survival for precarious populations would allow not just for the cultivation of a range of passions – from volunteering and care work to art, sports and politics – but also for more and different kinds of intimacy and sociality,

leisure, rest and idleness. Such a politics thus not just challenges the hegemonic discourses of work and family, but also opens up space for thinking prefiguratively about how we spend our time, wondering what kinds of cultures of pleasure, ease or desire, for instance, might be cultivated instead of just those of work or productivity.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined British (child) poverty discourses of the post-financial crisis period, arguing first that poverty is not only viewed in increasingly individual, cultural and familial terms, but also increasingly displaced altogether by a set of localised interventions aimed at 'troubled' families. Here I made the case that sexuality – by way of the 'stable'/'troubled' family binary, and specifically the heteronormative, generational, reproductive logic that attaches to the former – plays a central role in both processes. Second, the chapter's focus has been on the policy proposals put forward to tackle poverty and disadvantage, as well as on feminist responses to such proposals, which have tended to focus on their gendered effects. I argued that such responses can leave untouched both the valorisation of work and the idealisation of the family – both of which help to naturalise the growing precarisation of ever-larger segments of the labour market or, in other words, the expansion of the reserve army of labour. Without attention to sexuality specifically, it would be difficult to see the ways in which the work ethic and the family ethic work together to justify the poverty and precarity of those who do not successfully embody either; therefore, an anti-work and anti-family politics is needed to challenge this naturalisation. Many of the threads I have started to develop here will be picked up in later chapters; while the next chapter moves on to examine the poverty discourses investigated here, but in the context of hegemonic media representations.

Deserving/Undeserving

Narrative Economies

The camera pans across an average-looking residential street in England, lined with two-storey Victorian houses. ‘Unemployed, unemployed, unemployed,’ exclaims a young black woman – later named as Black Dee – as she points at house after house. The camera zooms in, the view alternating between heaps of rubbish piled high in between the parked cars and trees lining the road, and children playing on the road, cycling on the pavement and jumping over the fences separating the small front yards from one another. We are introduced to a young couple – Mark, ‘a father of two who’s never had a paid job’, and Becky – who live on the street with their two children, Casey and Callum. Mark and Becky are having money trouble, and Callum has missed nursery again:

BECKY: Do you know who writ to me today? D’you know who sent mummy a letter? Your school.

CALLUM: Me not feeling too well. Me not going to nursery.

BECKY: Why?

CALLUM: Because.

‘Many of the parents on James Turner Street are on benefits,’ explains the voiceover. ‘On James Turner Street, kids are everywhere. Many are raised by single parents. Despite their ups and downs, Becky and Mark are still together. And around here, that’s not always a given.’

Single mum Katie has arrived late to her Jobcentre appointment. She and her two children, Dylan and Daisy, have been recently moved up to Newcastle from temporary accommodation – a homeless hostel in which they stayed for two years – by their London council and Katie does not know Newcastle very well. Because Katie has missed her appointment, the Jobcentre employee recommends her for a sanction. ‘My kid has to go to school tomorrow. I’ve got about twelve quid in my purse,’ Katie tells the Jobcentre manager, who accuses her of ‘making a scene’ and asks her to leave. An older man who has been waiting in the queue for his appointment – Daniel Blake – gets up to defend Katie and is also asked to leave.

These scenes – the opening scene of the third episode of Channel 4's 2014 documentary series *Benefits Street* and an early scene from director Ken Loach's 2016 film *I, Daniel Blake*, respectively – provide in many ways strikingly different portrayals of welfare claimants. The latter is a feature film; the former a documentary/reality series. The latter was criticised by *Daily Mail* blogger Toby Young (among others) for its 'absurdly romantic view of benefit claimants' (2016); while the former attracted a storm of complaints both from the viewing public to media regulator Ofcom and from some of the people portrayed in the show for its demonisation of welfare recipients (Ofcom 2014; Sommers 2015). Both portrayals also highlight something important about the proliferation of narratives that stigmatised benefit recipients – and, I argue in this chapter, about the ways in which the 'deserving'/'undeserving' binary is both drawn on and reproduced across a range of media sites. Many other scholars have examined the reproduction of such narratives in specific media texts (frequently conceptualised as 'poverty porn'), as well as their crystallisation in particular 'figurations' – such as the 'benefit scrounger' (Garthwaite 2011; Valentine and Harris 2014); the 'welfare-dependent' 'skiver' (Jensen 2014); 'benefits broods' families (Jensen and Tyler 2015); and 'the chav mum' (Tyler 2008). Somewhat differently, my interest in this chapter is to delve deeper into the circulation of such narratives to explore the commonalities and repetitions that occur across two very different texts due to their production and reception within the same 'narrative economies'.

I, Daniel Blake was released in 2016 to much critical acclaim.¹ Director Ken Loach's most successful UK release ever (Wade 2016), the drama film attracted a significant amount of political debate and both positive and negative media attention. Continuing Loach's well-known critical, social realist filmmaking style – aiming, in his own words, 'to show [the] truth; to elucidate it, to tease it out' (quoted in Kermode 2014a) – the film's dramatic effect arises directly from the struggles of the ordinary people portrayed in it, similarly to his 1966 film *Cathy Come Home*, as well as his most recent release *Sorry We Missed You* in 2019. *I, Daniel Blake* was widely seen as a political intervention into the effects of the dismantling of the British welfare system under austerity. Perhaps the pre-eminent sympathetic representation of benefit claimants available in the British mainstream, it has elicited some scholarly interest (eg, see Gibbs and Lehtonen 2019; Jones 2017; O'Brien 2017; VandenBosch 2017), as well as numerous references to and discussion of its portrayal of the welfare system in parliamentary debates. Much of this discussion has focused specifically on the authenticity of its representation of benefit claimants and the benefits system, with Loach himself defending his research for the film's fictionalised portrayal as being as 'rigorous as any piece of journalism' (quoted in Seymour 2017). Most recently, in 2021 the debate about the truthfulness of Loach's work more generally, and *I, Daniel Blake* specifically, was reignited on social media, illustrating its continued salience (Gibbs and Lehtonen 2021).

1 *Palme D'Or* 2016; BAFTA – Best British Film 2017; and César Award – Best Foreign Film 2017.

The first season of *Benefits Street* was filmed in Birmingham and originally aired in 2014, resulting in Channel 4's highest viewing figures since 2012 (Collier 2014), as well as in much public discussion and media debate. The production company, Love Productions, was accused of exploitation in making the series and many condemned it as 'poverty porn' (eg, see Burrell 2014; Jensen 2014; Runswick-Cole and Goodley 2015), although Ofcom's (2014) investigation concluded that broadcasting regulations had not been broken. The success, popularity and salience of reality TV focusing on the lives of welfare claimants are reflected in the many references to *Benefits Street* and other shows like it in parliamentary discussions and debates; in the widespread tabloid coverage of the *Benefits Street* participants' lives after the series; and in the scholarly interest generated by the series itself (eg, see Jensen 2014; MacDonald et al 2014a; Runswick-Cole and Goodley 2015).² Reality TV is commonly coded as a form of 'low art', in contrast to more traditional forms of 'high art', with its allure arising from the 'analytic of artifice and authenticity' it employs (Weber 2014: 4). Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood argue similarly that in the cultural environment of reality TV, 'viewers, participants and producers are less invested in absolute truth and representational ethics, and more interested in the space that exists between reality and fiction, in which new levels of representational play and reflexivity are visualised' (2011: 6). The media furore that followed the release of *Benefits Street*, however, suggests that at least a proportion of both viewers and participants were concerned with 'absolute truth', as much of the debate the programme generated related to the truthfulness of its representations – similarly to *I, Daniel Blake*.

In this chapter, I examine these two texts together – not to suggest that they are similar as texts, but to highlight the salience of particular kinds of representations of and narratives about benefit claimants in post-financial crisis Britain. Both *I, Daniel Blake* and *Benefits Street* depict the lives of people who either receive or are in the process of claiming for various welfare benefits, highlighting their personal struggles with poverty and unemployment. Both are also examples of media culture that 'involves hegemonic processes of sense making' (Negra and Tasker 2014: 2), whereby 'fictions of the human subject are produced and circulated' (Blackman and Walkerdine 2001: 6). Although *Benefits Street* is a documentary series featuring real people in receipt of social welfare, and *I, Daniel Blake* a fictional account of people navigating the benefits system, they both involve such 'fictions of the human subject', in the sense that various editorial and directorial choices were necessarily made in order to construct recognisable and compelling narratives out of messy and complex individual lives. In order to foreground the constructedness of the stories these texts put forward about their subjects, and to indicate my

2 Following *Benefits Street*, many other TV channels have tried to replicate Channel 4's success, with various documentary and reality television series about the lives of welfare claimants; and Channel 4 itself followed with a second season of *Benefits Street*, filmed in Stockton-on-Tees.

interest in these manufactured stories – rather than in the actual lived lives of the *Benefits Street* participants – I use the terminology of ‘characters’ and ‘narratives’ in relation to both texts. Similarly, although the lives of many of the *Benefits Street* residents were also subject to significant (mostly tabloid) media discussion, my analysis below draws only from the series itself.

My juxtaposition of these two media texts – which admittedly represent very different genres – is thus intended to explore both the similarities and the (perhaps more obvious) differences evident in their representations of ‘deservingness’. I am also interested in the texts’ consequent cultural and political resonance. While the violent nature of the representations of *Benefits Street* and conversely the sympathetic nature of those of *I, Daniel Blake* may seem clear to many viewers (and readers), in this chapter my aim is to highlight that in both texts, ‘a wrestle of different frameworks of visibility’ (Sedgwick 2003: 140) is nonetheless evident. While the truth claims made by *Benefits Street* and *I, Daniel Blake* are different, they still frequently participate in the same narrative economies. My conceptualisation of ‘narrative economies’ here draws on Sara Ahmed’s (2004) use of ‘affective economies’, indicating that narratives do not originate in particular representational objects, but are instead reinforced and reproduced between them. Similarly to Ahmed’s conceptualisation of affect, different cultural objects – such as *I, Daniel Blake* and *Benefits Street* – become specific points within multiple narrative economies, rather than the origin or destination of the narratives that cluster around imaginaries of ‘deservingness’. With ‘narrative economies’, my intention is thus to draw attention to the circulation of specific, potentially stigmatising narratives, rather than to paint either text as categorically or inherently stigmatising.

In this chapter, I question whether the two texts’ circulation within the broader narrative economies of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis – which continuously mediate understandings of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ recipients of state support – limits and conditions the stories they can tell, thus also influencing the ways in which they can be read by audiences. The claims to truthfulness and authenticity that have tended to attach to both texts indicate their embeddedness in narrative economies that limit what can publicly be said – and heard – about benefit recipients in the current political moment. Thus, it is precisely the supposed obviousness of the reading of *Benefits Street* as only ever a violent and demonising portrayal, and of *I, Daniel Blake* as a sympathetic one, that masks some of the other representational frameworks at play in both. More specifically (although I am certainly not claiming intentionality on the part of the documentary/filmmakers), many similar sexualised and racialised narrative tropes are present in both texts – at times to the extent that the legibility (as well as legitimacy) of their representations of welfare claimants depends on these processes of sexualisation and racialisation. I argue here that a logic of sexual and racial subjectivation is central to the discursive and representative processes that position certain subjects as less and others as more deserving.

The following sections each investigate the deployment of specific aspects of discourses of poverty and disadvantage within the two texts' representations and narratives, drawing in part on the previous chapter's examination of the same discourses in policy texts. Throughout I suggest various different potential readings of the texts, focusing specifically on the ways in which their circulation within the broader narrative economies of exceptionality influences how they can be read by audiences in the current political moment. The penultimate section of the chapter ties these various threads together in a discussion of the multiple media and political responses to these depictions of benefit claimants – which, as mentioned, have tended to focus almost exclusively on their truthfulness or authenticity. The final section goes on to challenge the efficacy of political imaginaries that (whether unwittingly or not) reproduce sexualised and racialised notions of certain welfare claimants as more deserving – or consequently as more legible or legitimate political subjects. Here the chapter intervenes in wider debates about the 'decline of class' or the loss of class-based politics, arguing that a political imaginary that is explicitly inclusive of sexual and racial 'outsiders' is needed to challenge the 'deserving/undeserving' binary, and the logic of sexual and racial subjectivation embedded in it.

Worklessness

Each episode of *Benefits Street* opens with the voiceover introducing the main site of the series – James Turner Street in Birmingham – as 'not your average street. There are 99 houses, 13 nationalities, and most of the residents are claiming benefits'. This is followed by central character and self-proclaimed 'mum of the street' White Dee's retort, 'Probably five per cent of people on this street are working'; although in reality, in 2008–9 39 per cent of adults on the street were working – more than the 35 per cent claiming Jobseekers' Allowance (JSA) or disability and sickness benefits (Baker 2014). This opening sequence thus functions to establish James Turner Street as a highly exceptional space that can then be contrasted with the 'hardworking taxpayers' of the rest of the country – as MP Philip Davies, for instance, also does in a parliamentary discussion:

Has the Secretary of State managed to watch programmes such as 'Benefits Street' and 'On Benefits & Proud'? If so, has he, like me, been struck by the number of people on them who manage to combine complaining about welfare reform with being able to afford to buy copious amounts of cigarettes, have lots of tattoos, and watch Sky TV on the obligatory widescreen television? Does he understand the concerns and irritation of many people who go to work every day and pay their taxes but cannot afford those kinds of luxuries? (HC Deb 2014a: c579)

The representation of James Turner Street as a workless space is reinforced throughout the series with voiceover statements such as 'Without work in the

morning, some on the street stay up all night' – following footage of children playing in the road after dark – and 'It's 8:30 am. For those who have a job, it's time to go to work', both from the third episode. Many of the series' storylines also focus on work – whether following the characters in their job-searching efforts; highlighting the uniqueness of residents who are in paid employment (eg, Ewan, a council IT worker); or representing other aspects of the characters' lives as related to their lack of paid employment, such as in the discursive connection made in the excerpt above between the family receiving benefits on the one hand, and both Callum's misbehaviour and Becky's seeming inability to control him on the other.

While *Benefits Street* does not reveal much about White Dee's work history, it is mentioned that she is on anti-depressants and that her Employment Support Allowance (ESA) payments have been frozen. Together with the series' overwhelming emphasis on 'worklessness', that these themes are not explored further can easily give the viewer the impression that White Dee is, in fact, on benefits simply because of not having (or wanting) a job. Sickness and disability benefits are thus mentioned, but not extensively explored; whereas repeated references are made to 'signing on' and to various Jobcentre requirements that different characters are trying to meet. These omissions and emphases help to create the impression that the street's residents – or indeed, benefit claimants more broadly – primarily consist of those in receipt of unemployment benefits. This strengthens the already strong discursive connections between social welfare and worklessness. For instance, in a 2012 survey, half of the respondents thought that 40 per cent or more of British welfare spending was on the unemployed, when in fact this accounts for a very small proportion of overall welfare spending (Hills 2015). In 2016, this stood at 1 per cent, with 42 per cent going towards pensions and the remainder towards a range of family benefits, income support and tax credits; incapacity, disability and injury benefits; personal social services; and housing benefits (ONS 2016; OBR 2017).

Similarly, many of the James Turner Street residents are presented as having been in receipt of benefits for some time, reinforcing the commonly held notion that it is a specific group of people who tend to remain on benefits for long periods. For instance, Barra Roantree and Jonathan Shaw (2017) found that when considered over a longer time span, in reality, benefit receipt encompasses more than half of all individuals – challenging the welfare dependency narrative and the portrayal of welfare claimants as a distinct group of people, and focusing instead on unemployment or benefits receipt as a temporary situation. Research has also confirmed that fewer than half of new claims for JSA lasted for longer than two months and only 10 per cent lasted for a year (Hills 2015). Overall, then, *Benefits Street* draws on a range of commonly circulated benefits myths to frame James Turner Street as an exceptionally 'workless' space – and its residents as 'workless' people. Indeed, the explicit inclusion of sickness and disability benefits, pensions and even child benefits in the narratives of *Benefits Street* would disrupt these imaginaries of undeservingness. Arguably, this disruption is made intentionally in *I*,

Daniel Blake, which focuses centrally on Daniel's stressful and distressing quest to be recognised as deserving of ESA following a major heart attack that has ended his life-long career as a carpenter. Scenes portraying his frustrating experience with the 'healthcare professional, hired by the Department of Work and Pensions', at his work capability assessment (WCA) and waiting for an afternoon on hold to a DWP call centre deliberately place in question the audience's expectations of the responsibilities of the welfare state within the context of austerity and neoliberalisation.

While the film's central focus is on Daniel's journey to get his illness recognised by the state, work does also feature in its narratives – albeit in a slightly different way from *Benefits Street*. Katie – the single mum who develops a friendship with Daniel during the film – has been unemployed for a while but has aspirations to go 'back to the books' and finish her course at the Open University. Her financial struggles seem to stem, at least for the most part, from her being sanctioned and moved a long distance away from her family and support network – an increasingly common local authority practice explored in more detail in the next chapter. As Katie is unable to financially support her children after being sanctioned, she ends up going to the food bank for groceries, shoplifting for tampons and foraging into sex work – throughout all of which the film's narrative could be read as sustaining its focus on her longing to return to university and a 'proper' paid job. While Katie's relationship to imaginaries of work is directed at the future, Daniel's is directed at the past – his current illness appears very much as an exception to the otherwise productive life that he has led. Thus, although neither Katie nor Daniel is currently employed, undoubtedly both place a high value on work. The 'legitimizing discourse of work' that Kathi Weeks (2011: 13) discusses is certainly sustained in the film; while the possibility of a life that does not centralise work – let alone one that centralises benefits or other forms of state support – is discursively foreclosed.

While a future in which Katie remains on benefits in the long term is an impossible dream and desire in the narrative structure of *I, Daniel Blake*, for many of the residents of James Turner Street finding a paid job is a distant and unlikely – and in many cases also undesirable – possibility. Citing a variety of different reasons for why they are unlikely to find paid employment anytime soon – from histories of drug or alcohol abuse, time spent in prison and lack of work permits to mental health issues and learning difficulties – many of the residents of James Turner Street explicitly affirm the futility of maintaining an attachment to an imaginary of the 'good life' (Berlant 2011) in which paid employment is valued above all other activities. Thus, while on the one hand the overarching framing of the series tends to support the 'worklessness' discourse, on the other hand the narratives of many of the characters function to highlight how the 'worklessness' discourse obscures structural issues in the labour market, as discussed in the previous chapter. Many of the residents of James Turner Street know that finding paid employment that would enable them to live a liveable life, or that for instance would pay enough to cover the cost of childcare is, in reality, an unlikely possibility; or in other words,

they know that they are part of the 'reserve army of labour'. At best, they might be able to attain the kind of insecure and precarious employment that is unlikely to provide them with any more stability or income than benefits do.

Reading these two texts together, it is the James Turner Street residents' – at times explicit, at times implicit – acknowledgement of the hollowness of the 'good life' narrative that strives centrally to avoid 'worklessness' which also reveals the cruelty of Katie's sustained optimistic attachment to that same narrative. White Dee, the self-appointed mum of James Turner Street, provides a particularly interesting juxtaposition to Katie. Dee states that while she is 'not too old to dream', at this point in her life all of her dreams are for her children. Apart from raising her two children, Gerrard and Caitlin, she is portrayed as the person whom everyone goes to whenever they are in trouble – a sort of part social worker, part dispute mediator, one-woman neighbourhood watch. She spends her time taking care of the many needs of various neighbours (most often Fungi, a recovering drug addict), solving disputes between them and helping them with benefits forms and dealings with government agencies; in other words, her days are filled with various kinds of informal care and social work. While Katie and White Dee are both single mothers of two and both on benefits, it is precisely the kind of life led by White Dee – full of (care) work, yet supported by benefits – that is unimaginable either as a long-term life situation or a future prospect in Katie's narrative framing; although some of the film's depictions of reciprocal care relations do challenge this reading of Katie's story, as I explore in more detail below.

In some ways, then, White Dee's narrative stands in contrast both to Katie's and to the overall focus that *Benefits Street* maintains on paid employment – both of which affirm the legitimating discourse of work. While *Benefits Street* does not explicitly depict White Dee's activities as care work, this representation nonetheless highlights a potential frame through which to view social welfare and the kinds of lives that are enabled by it – or indeed, that could be enabled by a more expansive basic income, as discussed in the previous chapter. Contrasting Katie's story with Dee's also, then, allows us to imagine a different kind of future for Katie – perhaps one in which she faces a benefit system that does not sanction claimants for minor mistakes (discussed further in Chapter 3), and gets to live closer to her family in London. Were this vision of the 'good life' enabled by the narrative structure of *I, Daniel Blake*, would Katie still long for paid employment as the answer to her problems? And indeed, what other kinds of political imaginaries might be opened up by this reading of Dee more generally? It is precisely because the discourse of 'worklessness' has, in the context of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis, become so closely tied together with all possible visions of the 'good life' that a representation in which Katie is both deserving of state support and not perpetually desiring paid employment is unimaginable. In contrast, *Benefits Street* can include storylines where its characters explicitly discuss not wanting a job – but only because they have already been marked as undeserving 'scroungers' by the series' overall framing.

This discussion thus also reveals something important about the reproduction of narratives of (un)deservingness in the current political moment. Katie and Daniel appear as clearly deserving at least in part because their narratives continuously reinforce the legitimating discourse of work – whether by projecting it onto the future or the past. The audience knows that Daniel has already ‘paid his dues’, and that eventually Katie hopes to come off benefits and become a respectable, ‘productive’ member of society; although, as the discussion below highlights, this is only one possible reading of Katie’s story. Further, whether she will still be in poverty is of course a separate issue, as the previous chapter’s discussion of the rising rates of in-work poverty made clear. Conversely, White Dee appears to confirm the stereotype drawn upon by MP Philip Davies in the quote included above: she smokes, watches TV and expresses no desire to find paid employment, and can therefore be read as clearly undeserving (and indeed has been, in some of the tabloid stories published about her during and after the series). However, this reading is only possible if we ignore the many ways in which she is already a productive member of society – for instance, through the various forms of care work she performs, both for her own children and more widely.

Current narratives of (un)deservingness tend to depend on rather narrow notions of ‘work’ and ‘productivity’ that are reinforced temporally: a benefit recipient can only ever appear as deserving by continuously projecting a set of specific desires onto either the past or the future, or risk slipping into the frame of ‘undeservingness’. However, as long as the narrative of deservingness frames only paid work as an appropriate societal ‘contribution’, and therefore cannot acknowledge the work of child and neighbour care that both Katie and White Dee engage in, these two characters (and many others like them) remain stuck in a narrative jostling between the two poles of the ‘deserving’/‘undeserving’ pairing. Conversely, as long as the legibility of benefit recipients remains tied to the ‘worklessness’ discourse – either confirming it (in the case of undeserving recipients) or promising to transcend it in the past or future (in the case of deserving recipients) – different visions of the ‘good life’ cannot emerge, let alone be seen as legitimate. Importantly, these framings also position the viewer in particular ways – perhaps relying on a certain amount of distance from the detail of the narratives for their legibility. Maybe different points of identification with the narratives of both texts might be available to viewers who have had similar experiences themselves. Thus, it is specifically their circulation in the narrative economies of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis that helps to position both *Benefits Street* and *I, Daniel Blake* as sites for the reproduction of the ‘worklessness’ discourse, as well as of the common imaginaries of (un)deservingness.

Stable/‘Troubled’ Families

Episode 5 of *Benefits Street* focuses on Hannah and Simba, who live together with Hannah’s two children from a previous relationship but are having relationship trouble. Zimbabwean Simba did not apply for a new visa on time and is now

without a work permit, as well as ineligible for benefits. He has started drinking and smoking more, and Hannah wants to move out. However, in order to have the time to find a new place, her children need to move in with their father for a while. Hannah is heartbroken about not living with her kids and Simba is furious at Hannah for leaving him, as well as at mutual friend Tich for helping Hannah out during the breakup. While Hannah's story has a happy ending – she is able to find a new house fairly quickly in her sister's neighbourhood and does not have to part with her children after all – the episode ends with an altogether more melancholic note: the voiceover exclaims, 'There's a saying, "When poverty comes in at the door, love flies out of the window," and James Turner street can be a rocky road for relationships', as the camera zooms in on a used pregnancy test left on the road. The discursive links between poverty and social welfare on the one hand, and 'broken' relationships, accidental pregnancies and non-normative family forms on the other, are made painstakingly clear throughout the series, thus strongly conforming to the 'family (in)stability' discourse examined in the previous chapter.

Most of the *Benefits Street* characters who have children are either single mothers or, for various reasons, not allowed to see their children. In addition to Hannah and Simba, whose relationship we witness breaking down in the fifth episode, among the few couples *Benefits Street* introduces the audience to are Becky and Mark, mentioned above; and Ana and Abdul, whose wedding is one of the central storylines in the second episode. Ana is a Polish Mormon and Abdul an Algerian Muslim; and as a result of the cultural differences between them, Ana explains, they have to 'mix things' and 'sacrifice a little bit'. While Ana and Abdul themselves seem happy, there is a rumour going around in the neighbourhood that Abdul is paying Ana to marry him and some of the neighbours are suspicious of their relationship. Becky thinks that their relationship is 'not about love, it's about money innit'; and White Dee suspects the couple are getting married 'for a green card – is that what they call it nowadays?' The question about the authenticity of Ana and Abdul's relationship is not resolved in the episode and is instead left hanging in the air for the audience to grapple with. The placement of their storyline in an episode that centrally focuses on issues around immigration (discussed below) works to further position their relationship as entangled in issues of (in)authenticity, conjuring up images of 'sham' marriages and 'bogus' immigrants (eg, see Ahmed 2004; Gedalof 2017).

Becky and Mark are, conversely, depicted as one of the few parent-couples who have not broken up and are both involved in raising their children: 'This is a street where many kids are raised by single parents. Mark and Becky are one of the few couples trying to make a go of it together.' The representation of their relationship focuses, first, on their struggles to parent their children – particularly four-year-old Callum; and second, on Mark's job-hunting efforts. We see Mark, who has never had a paid job, go off to a CV-writing workshop and proudly tell his son: 'When daddy's finished, he'll be able to go out and work.' He eventually finds a job; but as it is commission-only, he is soon working long hours without

any financial compensation at all and ends up quitting after just two days – perhaps reinforcing the previous section's discussion about the futility of aspiring to paid work for many on the bottom rungs of the labour market. In another scene at the food bank, after Mark fails to obtain the family's food bag because the voucher is in Becky's name, he tells the camera he feels like 'the unluckiest guy on the planet'. Afterwards, Becky is on the phone to social services and we hear her say: 'No, he's a full-time dad as well', presumably answering a question enquiring about Mark's job. This answer to an unspecified question cements Mark's narrative as one of recurrent failure not just to find a job, but also to fulfil the traditional role of the breadwinner father, which is punctuated by footage of him cycling around and doing tricks on his bike.

While these three relationships are overall depicted in somewhat different ways, one key similarity is their positioning as at some distance from the ideal heteronormative parent–couple consisting of a male breadwinner and a female caregiver. Ana and Abdul's relationship is potentially 'fake'; Hannah and Simba's is broken; and Mark fails repeatedly to become the breadwinner husband to his caretaker wife. However, as well as one of the few couples 'trying to make a go of it together', Becky and Mark are also the only prominently featured white British couple on the show. The other two couples are not only marked as different by their racialisation, but also depicted as mired in struggles with immigration authorities. Further, these struggles are presented as part of their positioning as parents – perhaps suggesting that their family lives are somehow also destabilised as a consequence. Importantly, though, this presentation is achieved via a very individualising framing; and therefore, the ways in which families are frequently destabilised as a result of immigration laws, such as the recent changes to UK family reunification laws, are not touched upon (eg, see Sirriyeh 2015). Thus, despite the similarities, the couples do not all appear at the same distance from the normative family ideal: while Becky and Mark are at least trying to parent together, Hannah and Simba's relationship is already broken because of his mistake in reconfirming his immigration status, and Ana and Abdul's relationship may not be 'real' in the first place. Here common imaginaries of immigrants as deceitful, and of their relationships as always potentially 'fake', combine with the 'family stability' discourse to mark the racialised, immigrant families as even further from the ideal.

However, it is only by reading these relationships in relation to the ideal heteronormative, reproductive, two-parent family, including a male breadwinner and a female caregiver, that these narratives of failure and inauthenticity become visible in the first place. As a result of these framings, the representation of James Turner Street's three parent-couples comes to be discursively connected to that of the street's single parents, in that they all appear as deviations from the ideal family form – albeit to varying degrees. Apart from White Dee and a few other single mothers, the other parents represented in the series are mostly currently unable to see their children. For example, Fungi – White Dee's friend and a

recurring character – has three kids with different mothers but is not on speaking terms with his oldest daughter and not allowed to see his youngest child, who was adopted at the age of four. Another character, Sam, is a mother of two, but she has not seen her kids since she started taking heroin. These representations confirm not only the previous chapter's argument that the 'family stability' discourse is rarely positioned very far from the stigmatisation of non-normative family forms, but also that both tend to be discursively linked to ideas about cultural and criminal dysfunction – connecting *being* 'troubled' to *causing* trouble, as the previous chapter discussed.

The 'undeserving' benefit recipient and her family thus appear in *Benefits Street* as always already an 'unstable' family; and this instability – at least in part – as the cause of her poverty and worklessness. In *I, Daniel Blake*, Katie – also a single mother – is depicted as desperately trying to stabilise the environment in which her children are growing up after being sanctioned and left without a support network. She does not mention her children's fathers much, apart from referring to 'a bit of trouble' with Dylan's father, which led to her living in temporary accommodation in London in the first place. In Katie's narrative, similarly to the *Benefits Street* storylines, the ideal heteronormative, two-parent family only appears as a loss – in Katie's case, a loss that took place before the film's narrative even began. It is Daniel's entry into the family's life that, at least initially, fills the space left by this loss and thus also stabilises Katie's life. She is happy for Daniel to help out with odd jobs in her new house and her kids seem to enjoy his company as well. As Katie struggles more and more to cope, Daniel becomes a bigger and bigger part of the family's life. In one particularly powerful sequence of scenes, Daniel helps Dylan and Daisy to cover their windows with bubble wrap and use tealight candles for warmth. It is only with his help and support that Katie begins to slowly believe in her ability to make things work.

This rather normative framing in which Katie's life gets a new lease because of Daniel's arrival is, to an extent, reproduced in Daniel's dealings with others. He accepts packages for his neighbour China and calls him 'son'; and remembers fondly the caring relationship he had with his partner before her death: 'She was crazy, hard work. And I loved her to bits. I'm lost without her really.' Thus, early on in the film, moments of everyday intimacy and care appear through a rather conventional lens – arguably echoing Lauren Berlant's (2011) discussion of normative notions of the 'good life'. For Berlant, it is precisely 'proximity to the fantasy life of normativity' that 'remains to animate living on, for some on the contemporary economic bottom' (ibid: 167). In the film it is the older, white male figure of Daniel who repeatedly offers help and support to his younger – feminised and racialised – friends, as if his acts of neighbourly care could make up for the sustained lack of state support and material resources. Katie and Daniel's relationship suffers a break, however, when Katie starts doing sex work. Daniel finds out, storms into the house in which Katie is preparing to see a client and attempts to persuade her to leave. Katie refuses and goes back into the house, and her relationship with Daniel is put on hold. Her entry into sex work is not

mentioned in the film after this episode – as the narrative folds in on Daniel's deteriorating health and financial situation and somewhat leaves Katie's struggles behind, the audience is left to decide for themselves whether she stays in this line of work.

Katie's choice to do sex work can, certainly, be read as an error of judgement, an act of sheer desperation or a momentary blip in an otherwise clear path towards 'proper' paid employment and a life without having to depend on benefits – and perhaps her reconciliation with Daniel at the end of the film aligns with this reading. Katie's choice of work here appears oppositional to her intimate relationship with Daniel: it is Daniel's judgement of her line of work and his request for her to return to the safety and normativity of respectable femininity that endanger Katie's efforts to financially support herself and her children (on respectability, see Skeggs 1997, 2004). In this reading, Katie's ability to leave the destitution she has been thrown into by sanctioning and the loss of her support network is jeopardised by her intimate attachment to Daniel – in what is perhaps, to use Berlant's language, the clearest confirmation of the cruelty of such attachments in the film's narrative. For Berlant, it is precisely our (re)investments in normative intimacies that prevent our flourishing, as well as foreclosing political alternatives. In *I, Daniel Blake*, as in the films Berlant analyses, 'the promise of familial love is the conveyance for the incitement to misrecognize the bad life as a good one' (2011: 174). Daniel's demand that Katie leave sex work could be read as precisely such an incitement: to return to the bounds of respectability; to misrecognise it as a good life; to ignore other (political) possibilities.

However, moments of relational and reciprocal care later on in the film at least somewhat complicate its earlier sustained attachment to normative 'good life' fantasies. China helps Daniel to fill in an online appeal form after he has struggled to do it himself at a public library, warning him: 'Dan, they'll fuck you around, make it as miserable as possible. No accident. That's the plan! I know dozens who've just given up.' Daisy brings Daniel food as he sits alone in his flat following the argument with Katie, having sold his possessions to pay his bills; and Katie walks him to the appeal hearing that concludes the film. These later scenes reverse the earlier scenes' normative intimacies, positioning Daniel as the one who needs care from Katie and China. Over the course of the film, Daniel learns to accept his friends' support, thereby supplementing the diminishing support provided by the state with their own relational care practices. Such practices certainly carry the danger of facilitating (or even justifying) the removal of the state from its responsibilities to care and provide for its citizens; but at the same time, they also challenge dominant representations of benefit recipients as both singularly dependent and decidedly irresponsible – as I have argued elsewhere in more detail (Gibbs and Lehtonen 2019). We could certainly also imagine Katie continuing her career as a sex worker – perhaps what we did not see was not Katie leaving sex work in order to remain friends with Daniel, but rather Daniel apologising to Katie for judging her strategies of survival in the first place.

This reading of *I, Daniel Blake* could, in turn, also lead to a different viewpoint as to the normative ethos of *Benefits Street*'s representation of families, intimacy and care. After all, Becky and Mark's 'failings' in relation to the normative family ideal sit within the broader context of James Turner Street, where the family is part of a vast network of neighbours and friends who are repeatedly shown to care for and about each other. This care is frequently positioned as making up for diminishing state support, such as when White Dee assists her neighbours in navigating the changing requirements of the welfare system. In many cases these acts of care and support are also delivered without judgement about the recipient's circumstances – although importantly, the street's new Romanian arrivals receive a different response in episode 2, discussed below. Similarly, this care does not extend in quite the same way to Ana and Abdul, who continue to be the target of the neighbours' suspicion – thus perhaps reflecting the more enduring grasp that 'the moral pressure to identify with a small cluster of privatized normal identities' (Berlant 1997: 192) has on racialised and immigrant families. Here the James Turner Street residents exhibit a type of 'friendship ethic', perhaps akin to queer 'families of choice' (eg, see Donovan et al 2001) – which is then, however, disrupted and overpowered by a xenophobic or racist suspicion or hostility.

Thus, while both portrayals do indeed confirm the previous chapter's discussion of the 'family stability' discourse – with its close proximity to particular normative family forms – many moments in both also allow for different kinds of readings about the practices and relations of care and intimacy between characters. As above, it is the narrative economies of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis that reinforce the texts' judgement of benefit-receiving families as always unstable or not respectable, and therefore as undeserving of state assistance – also obscuring some of the more critical ways in which both portrayals challenge notions of benefit claimants as irresponsible, needy and dependent. Tellingly, Daniel is the only character in either text who – at least initially – refuses to take part in these reciprocal networks of care, clinging onto his belief that the state will provide care and support in his time of need. The other characters – Katie and China, as well as many of the James Turner Street residents – take to these practices and networks of friendly and neighbourly care more readily, perhaps revealing that their trust in the reciprocity of the state was never certain in the way that Daniel's was. A blind faith in the universality of welfare provision is an attitude historically afforded to few; and it is therefore no surprise that those marked non-normative via either their distance from the nuclear family ideal or their racialisation already intimately know the conditionality of state support.

Cultural Poverty

'On James Turner Street, children are everywhere. Many are raised by single parents,' states the voiceover in the third episode of *Benefits Street*. In the opening sequence, as well as at various points throughout the series, we see children running around, playing in piles of rubbish. After one such montage,

the voiceover exclaims, 'Kids learn a lot about life from the grown-ups of James Turner Street,' as the camera pans to Fungi and his friends drinking and being rowdy while interacting with a group of children. Later on, we see Fungi playing with Becky and Mark's son Callum, as well as giving White Dee's son Gerrard some tips on causing trouble. These scenes position Fungi – who the series introduces as 'a recovering drug addict' – both as a friendly, familiar and almost paternal presence to some of the street's children and as a stereotypical 'bad influence' on them. Although he is close to many of his neighbours' children, he is not allowed to see all of his own. He 'has held onto some mementos of their time together', the voiceover explains, as viewers see a box full of postcards, toys, trinkets and drawings. On the walls of Fungi's living room are notes he has put up for himself: a newspaper cutting that states 'We must think of kids, not ourselves' and a handwritten note that reads, 'No more smoking or u wont ave kids ever xmas.'

In episode 4, an appointment for Fungi to see his son has been set up. On the morning of the appointment, White Dee goes to bang on Fungi's front door. He does not wake up and she is concerned that he will not go – although it is not clear whether this would be by choice or accident. Eventually he wakes up but finds out that the adoptive parents have called the meeting off, without explaining why. Towards the end of the episode, Fungi goes to see Donna, the mother of his oldest child and his 'first love'. On the way back from her house, he talks about how upset he is that he is no longer part of the family – 'All that just for a fucking bit of heroin.' These heart-breaking scenes stand in contrast to Fungi's rowdy behaviour, emphasising the price he must pay now for mistakes he has made in the past. Earlier in episode 1, we are told that Fungi has been to prison many times – a 'second home' to some of the James Turner Street residents, explains the voiceover. Fungi's complex story appears at first to confirm the notion of cultural poverty, whereby poverty and disadvantage are closely linked to criminality and cultural dysfunction, and can be passed on inter-generationally. While Fungi does not have ongoing relationships with his own children, he is certainly portrayed as playing a part in creating a negative environment for the street's children.

In episode 3, 'Fungi is entertaining his drinking buddies and it clashes with an important day for Mark and Becky', who are preparing to welcome a Sure Start worker coming to advise them on parenting. As the adviser arrives, Mark is outside with the children and some of the street's other residents, one of whom shows the crowd and camera his stab wound. The adviser quizzes Becky and Mark on whether they commonly sit outside with the children and says, 'Sometimes exposing children to that type of environment does influence them as well, doesn't it?'; after which we see another resident drunkenly swearing at a group of kids. These short scenes, together with Fungi's close but ambiguous relationship with Callum, function to reframe Becky and Mark's struggle to discipline Callum as an attempt to parent him in a culturally appropriate

manner. The Sure Start worker's disapproval of the street's influences sets up its environment and culture as bad or even harmful for children, and therefore frames Callum's behavioural issues as originating in this culture – rather than in, say, material poverty or its consequences. In this way, the narrative begins with Becky and Mark facing a set of practical parenting issues, which then becomes a pursuit of the correct parenting culture and values, as explored in the previous chapter. The notion of cultural poverty is thus reflected in Becky and Mark's choice either to reproduce appropriate (middle-class) cultural values in their parenting or risk passing the street's cultural dysfunctions onto their children.

In *I, Daniel Blake*, it is Daniel who stands in for the paternalistic state, embodied by the Sure Start worker in *Benefits Street*. His assistance around the house and with the kids helps to stabilise Katie's situation, but also seems to push her along a path of appropriate parenting. He brings the children handmade wooden toys and gets Dylan – who is both hyperactive and isolated, both naughty and withdrawn – engaged in woodcarving. Daisy points out that 'no one listens to' him, 'so why should he listen to them?'; but it is Daniel's grandfatherly touch, introducing him to the gentle but masculine activity of woodcarving, that helps him concentrate like he never has before. Daniel's support is presented through a framework of middle-class parenting that combines elements of warmth and discipline, as the previous chapter discussed, echoing the assistance that Becky and Mark receive from the Sure Start employee. Both parents are helped along by these stand-ins for the paternalistic state, coaxing them to take on the responsibility of appropriately parenting their children to ensure that they grow up to be contributing members of society – as MP Fiona O'Donnell also underlines in referencing the series in a parliamentary discussion:

Like many Members, I have watched at least two episodes of 'Benefits Street.' When a Sure Start worker worked alongside some parents, it was incredibly inspiring to see how empowered the mother was ... The way to do that is not by punishing them or withdrawing benefits, but by getting alongside people, showing them that we are on their side and understand, and giving them the necessary skills. I very much hope that the children from that family will grow up happier, healthier and able to contribute to society, and that they will not need that kind of support when they are parents. (HC Deb 2014d: c341WH–342WH)

Without these interventions, the parents would risk passing their own cultural dysfunctions onto their children, preventing their future success.

Katie's vague allusion to Dylan's father further accentuates this framing by underlining the importance of 'early intervention'. As mentioned, she only refers to him once during the film – as a 'bit of trouble' – crediting him with causing the family to escape to the homeless hostel; the audience are left to fill in the gaps in the narrative. The potentially violent masculinity that Katie and her children have escaped is echoed in the storyline of SB in episode 4 of

Benefits Street. She left the violent father of her oldest child, Terrell, two years ago; and now a couple from her church, Delroy and his wife, are helping her home-school Terrell. Delroy calls Terrell ‘a difficult boy’ and thinks that the trauma that he has experienced as a result of his father’s violent behaviour has ‘left an imprint on his mind’. The struggles of Katie and SB are similar: they are both positioned as responsible for making sure that these ‘difficult boys’ overcome the imprints left by their violent fathers, such as in the ‘absent father’ narrative explored in the previous chapter (eg, see De Benedictis 2012). In order to ensure that the boys’ cultural and cognitive development proceeds appropriately – without perpetuating the dysfunctional and violent behavioural norms of their fathers – both SB and Katie attempt to replace the destructive masculinity of the fathers with the paternalistic but gentler middle-class masculinity embodied by Delroy and Daniel. Delroy underscores this reading with his statement that, in helping with Terrell’s education, they ‘have to try and let him know that not all fathers are the same’.

In this framing, Dylan and Terrell’s misbehaviour becomes an early sign of the ‘faulty brain architecture’ that bad parenting can result in, according to the arguments mentioned in the previous chapter highlighting the importance of early intervention for children’s cognitive development specifically (Edwards et al 2015). Accordingly, both texts’ focus is overwhelmingly on improving ‘the minutiae of parenting practice’ (Gillies 2012: 105), as opposed to the material conditions in which the families live. No explicit connections are made between the significant financial issues Katie faces as a result of sanctioning, on the one hand, and Dylan’s past experiences of trauma and current behaviour, on the other. Katie alone is responsible for fixing the harm caused by her ex, which she starts doing by accepting Daniel’s help with the children – that she cannot afford to buy food for the family is not part of the same narrative thread. These framings of ‘cultural poverty’ offer a straightforward vision of intergenerational cultural transmission, without attention to the complex ways in which the traumas of racism and capitalism live on in collective cultural memory, affecting subsequent generations, as many others have suggested (eg, see Cvetkovich 2003; Gordon 1997). While *I, Daniel Blake*’s embeddedness in the narrative economies of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis – which tend to blame poor parents for the cultural transmission of poverty to their children – is certainly more subtle than that of *Benefits Street*, both reproduce enough of this discourse to be legible within it.

Immigration Street

The opening scene of episode 2 of *Benefits Street* introduces White Dee as Irish, while her son Gerrard ‘has a Jamaican father, but on this road that’s nothing special’. The voiceover continues: ‘Many of the 78 occupied homes have someone born overseas in them.’ The episode in general focuses on issues around immigration and multiculturalism, positioning James Turner Street as a

long-established diverse, multiracial community – as well as introducing a number of new entrants to the street, such as recently arrived Romanian families and workers, and a group of members of the Gypsy, Romany and Traveller (GRT) community who have set up camp in a small park at the end of the road. White Dee comments on the new arrivals with sharp insight: ‘Times change innit, you know, back in the, you know, Fifties and Sixties, it was the Jamaicans and the Irish that were classed as the immigrants; it’s just now it’s the Polish and Romanians.’ She goes on to discuss the GRT group with Fungi, joking that since she is Irish, her family are ‘probably related to half of them’. This episode has the clearest theme out of the six episodes in the first season and firmly establishes James Turner Street as a both culturally and racially mixed space. It is in this episode’s representations that the narratives of (un)deservingness are most clearly established as linked to, or perhaps co-constituted by, processes of racialisation and sexualisation.

While the vast majority of the storylines of *Benefits Street* focus on benefits, or at least on the lives of people receiving benefits – as suggested by the series’ title – episode 2 features many that have very little, or seemingly nothing at all, to do with it. The newly arrived Romanians include a group of 14 men who share a house on the street. The men were initially promised well-paid work: they ‘came with hopes of the good life but found only slave labour’, the voiceover states, explaining that the men’s boss is keeping their passports and the group are yet to receive any financial compensation for their labour. After reporting their boss to the police, the group splits, fearing retribution from the boss’s men; some return home, some head to London and one or two stay in Birmingham. Many of the men express their desire just to work and send money to their families; a few even specifically state that they do not want charity or state handouts. While this storyline does follow the lives of people who live on James Turner Street, the geographical focal point of the series, it is otherwise rather far removed from the world of social welfare. This narrative jump from ‘benefits street’ to ‘immigration street’³ thus creates a strong connection between the worlds of benefits and immigration, suggesting that they are commonly found adjacent to, or intermingled with, each other.

In contrast to the Romanians, the GRT group who have moved their caravans to the park at the end of the street are never interviewed or even properly seen on camera – their arrival is framed entirely through the residents’ (mostly negative) reactions to them. While most of the episode’s storylines focus broadly on immigration – as in the stories of the newly arrived Romanians, and Ana and Abdul, discussed above – the GRT group are framed neither as benefit recipients (which they of course may be) nor as immigrants (which they are less likely to be). Instead, the episode’s narrative positions them as more generic cultural and racialised

3 *Immigration Street* was the suggested name for the proposed, but subsequently abandoned, follow-up series by Love Productions, the company that produced *Benefits Street*.

outsiders or intruders to the street, perhaps aligning with Imogen Tyler's argument that GRT groups are 'widely perceived as workless, parasitical welfare dependants, a drain on local and state resources who cheat the system' (2013: 133). The group seem to be feared and despised by many of the residents, exemplified in Becky's suggestion that her neighbours should 'close their windows'. A similar statement by Fungi – 'they're tramps' – is placed ambiguously in the episode's narrative and could refer either to the Romanians or to the GRT group. This ambiguity perfectly illustrates the episode's continuous movement between narratives about immigration, on the one hand, and references to racial and cultural difference, on the other. In this example, the newly arrived – non-British – Romanians without work permits are placed in close discursive association with the – most likely British – GRT group. Parts of the episode also explicitly focus on the multiracial nature of the James Turner Street community, with the voiceover highlighting the prevalence of mixed-race residents – such as in the comment about White Dee's son Gerrard mentioned above.

The discursive proximity between benefits, immigration and racial difference established in this episode is concluded with a final representational move: in addition to the frequent instances throughout the series where the camera lingers on piles of rubbish lining the street, in this episode references to – both literal and figurative – dirt are multiplied. Among the James Turner residents' negative reactions to the GRT group is Becky's statement that they are 'dirty' (as well as untrustworthy criminals). Some members of the Romanian family that recently moved onto the street have started a scrap metal business and now spend their days looking for bits of metal they can sell on. We see them rummaging through bags of rubbish – to the dismay of some of the street's other residents, who claim that the family are even taking things not meant for the bin. Rubbish collection day arrives, but because the bin bags left on the street have been opened and foraged through, the rubbish collection trucks refuse to take them. Some residents are furious both at the Romanians for the part they played in causing the problem and at the council for refusing to pick up the bags. In the end, the residents take action themselves, re-bagging the rubbish and defiantly arranging it in a wall the middle of the road, until eventually the trucks return to remove the barricade of bin bags.

The overwhelming concentration on dirt and rubbish as key elements in the narratives of this episode establishes a close discursive connection between immigration and racialisation with dirt or dirtiness. As the residents express their worries and anxieties about the new entrants and their 'dirtiness', they at the same time fight for the literal dirt to be removed by the council. Their – openly expressed – disgust for the rubbish left on the street is aligned with their – poorly concealed – disgust for the Romanians and/or the GRT group. For Tyler, disgust is 'a reaction to the imagined over-proximity or intrusiveness of the disgusting thing' (2013: 22); and in performing their disgust, the residents are attempting to create distance between themselves and the new entrants. Further, these discursive proximities draw on older colonial associations

between race, class, sexual morality and hygiene: Ann Stoler (2010; cf Heiliger 2015; McClintock 1995) discusses how rationalisations of imperial rule routinely incorporated notions of cleanliness and 'public hygiene'. Indeed, they became central components to the construction of degeneration and miscegenation as threats to white middle-class morality and European rule. In Stoler's reading of colonial archives, simple proximity to colonised populations could threaten the colonisers' physical and moral health; and poor whites living in the colonies were considered particularly susceptible to such harms due to their lower standing in the respectability hierarchy to start with. The anxiety of the (mostly white) James Turner Street residents about both the literal dirt and the new residents thus perhaps evokes fears of such connotations.

Some scholars have suggested that discursive moves such as those analysed here, which place poor white communities in discursive and representational proximity to colonised and/or racialised populations, function to racialise the white working class. Alison Rooke and Ben Gidley, for instance, argue that representations of 'chavs' in British popular culture and policy discourses conflate the racialised identity of GRT communities with white working-class identities 'in order to metonymically racialize the white working class as a whole' (2010). Robin Wiegman critiques such analyses, which in the US context have tended to focus on the racialisation of so-called 'white trash' communities, arguing that their consequence is 'to disarticulate racism from institutionalized practices of discrimination based on a group's designated racial status and [to craft] for poor whites a position structurally comparable to that of a racial minority' (2012: 184). It is also important to note, as Nadine El-Enany points out, that despite a level of discursive proximity, in reality, 'colonial conquest historically benefited poor white Britons, as well as the ruling classes' (2020: 215); and further, that a belief of racial superiority helped to deflect attention from their shared economically precarious position. Thus, rather than racialisation of the white working class, I suggest that the establishment of the discursive proximity between poverty/benefits, immigration, racialisation and dirt in *Benefits Street* reveals something important about the 'boundary-making strategies within whiteness that both police and produce its racial authority and coherence' (Wiegman 2012: 185). The residents' hurry to create distance between themselves and the new arrivals could be read as an example of such a boundary-making strategy – an attempt to safeguard whiteness and re-establish its authority against the threat created by association with less respectable, racialised or 'dirty' new arrivals.

Further, the establishment of these associations in the programme's framing has the effect of framing the nation in particular ways. Of course, the positioning of James Turner Street as a space particularly susceptible to such threats is only possible if we expect Britain as a whole to be a racially and culturally homogenous space in the first place. In other words, the episode's narrative focus on the exceptionality of James Turner Street, in terms of how commonly its residents are either themselves from abroad or descended from someone

from abroad, and its positioning of the new entrants as a further threat in this regard only make sense if we assume that such diversity does not exist in the rest of the country. Here we can draw on Paul Gilroy's argument that 'intrusions by immigrants, incompatible blacks and fascinating, threatening strangers have come to symbolise all the difficulties involved in the country's grudging modernisation' (1992: xxvi). Gilroy specifically explores how a British nationalism centred on Englishness is framed as racially exclusive, as oppositional to blackness – a framing that perhaps culminates in the 'politics of Englishness' that Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever (2018) view as a key driver of the Brexit vote, explored further in Chapter 4. In terms of my argument here, considering the *Benefits Street* narratives as examples of such boundary-making strategies of both whiteness and the nation, the residents' battles to remove the rubbish from 'their' street also comes to stand in for an imagined national struggle to keep out any such incompatible outsiders.

It is important to note that not everyone is considered in the same way responsible for upholding these boundary-making strategies. Stoler, for instance, argues that the colonial deployment of the discourses of sexual morality and public hygiene converged particularly on the role of European women in the colonies, who 'were to safeguard prestige and morality and insulate their men from the cultural and sexual contamination of contact with the colonized' (2010: 71). Her analysis reveals the central role that white European women played in the solidification of racial boundaries, contributing to the colonial enterprise as a whole. As many other scholars have also discussed, women – and particularly mothers – are consequently frequently positioned as responsible for reproducing the boundaries of national and racial groups (eg, see Alexander 1994; Collins 1999; Yuval-Davis 1997). *Benefits Street's* open and detailed discussion of the racial make-up of many of the families living on the street, its recurring explicit references to siblings with different fathers and the narrative's lingering not only on White Dee's children having different fathers, but also on Gerrard's father being foreign can be read as subtle deployments of such a discourse that foregrounds poor – and here, implicitly, white British – women's reproductive decisions as a matter of national concern.

While immigration and racial difference do not feature as explicitly in *I, Daniel Blake*, some similar discursive references are reproduced in the film. Daniel's neighbour China is one of the very few characters of colour in the film, and the scenes in which he features are all either about his relationship with Daniel – as mentioned above – or about his new illegal venture smuggling brand sneakers from China. Named in a way that curiously equates his identity with his criminal activity, China – similarly to Katie – finds other ways to supplement the income from his poorly paid job, choosing not to place all his faith either in the crumbling welfare state or in the promises of 'proper' paid employment. The film also – although much less explicitly – acknowledges not only that Katie's children Dylan and Daisy have different fathers, but also that Daisy's father is not white. This acknowledgement could appear either as an

innocent detail in a realistic representation of a liberal, multicultural and multi-racial Britain or as a nod to the framings in which the reproductive decisions of poor and benefit-receiving white women are seen as potentially threatening to the racial homogeneity of the nation – depending on the viewer's discursive baggage. In the case of both Daisy and China, then, *I, Daniel Blake* makes minor visual and narrative allusions to the same framings that *Benefits Street* reproduces more explicitly, associating blackness with criminality and the undeserving benefit recipient with her 'gaggle of mixed race children', as Tyler (2008: 26) argues in relation to the figure of the 'chav mum'.

Given the increasing prevalence and mainstreaming of a racial politics that pits white working-class populations against racial and ethnic minorities in a battle for both cultural and economic resources (discussed further in Chapter 4), the representations and framings of *I, Daniel Blake* certainly allow for the more sinister reading of the roles of Daisy and China to emerge. Thus, the narratives of (un)deservingness drawn upon in both texts position immigration and racialisation as threats not just to whiteness (or white Englishness) but also to the nation, as well as helping the nation itself appear more coherent. However, while *I, Daniel Blake* is almost entirely populated by white English characters, *Benefits Street* overall portrays a much more diverse environment. The narratives explored above are complemented by others, such as the '50p man', Smoggy, who goes from house to house selling small amounts of household essentials for fifty pence; and SB, an aspiring model – both Black British. While the overall framing of the series overwhelmingly reproduces common xenophobic and racist narrative tropes about immigration and racial difference, these are not the only storylines in the show – or the only possible readings of them. It is certainly also possible to view *Benefits Street* through a more benign discursive lens of cultural and racial heterogeneity – exemplified by White Dee's statement in episode 2: 'We've got Jamaican, we've got Irish, we've got English, and we've got Polish. It's like one great big family.'

Deserving/Undeserving

Among the many media responses to *I, Daniel Blake* was Young's (2016) scathing review of the film in the *Daily Mail*. The core of his critique is directed at what he perceives as the film's inauthenticity: 'I'm no expert on the welfare system, but several aspects of *I, Daniel Blake* don't ring true' he states (*ibid*), as he picks the film's depiction of the welfare system apart bit by bit:

The two protagonists are a far cry from the scroungers on Channel 4's *Benefits Street*, who I accept aren't representative of all welfare recipients. But Loach has erred in the opposite direction. For a filmmaker who styles himself a 'social realist', he has an absurdly romantic view of benefit claimants. Daniel is a model citizen. At no point do we see him drinking, smoking, gambling, or even watching television. No, he is a welfare

claimant as imagined by a member of the upper-middle class metropolitan elite. He listens to Radio 4, likes classical music and makes wooden toys for children — the kind of over-priced ‘artisanal’ tat sold in ‘alternative’ toyshops in Islington, where Loach lives. Katie, too, is a far cry from White Dee, the irresponsible character in *Benefits Street*. (*Ibid*)

The benchmark of authenticity against which Young assesses the depiction of welfare claimants in *I, Daniel Blake* is their representation in *Benefits Street*. Juxtaposing Katie with White Dee, Young suggests that Loach’s portrayal is too far removed from reality to elicit sympathy, let alone be convincing. Mark Steel (2016) responds to Young’s review in *The Independent*, blaming *Benefits Street* for inauthenticity in turn. Steel likens Young’s complaint that the *I, Daniel Blake* characters are a ‘far cry’ from those of *Benefits Street* to complaining that David Attenborough’s films about orangutans are misleading because they do not resemble the ones in *The Jungle Book*.

This back-and-forth debate about the truthfulness of the representations of *I, Daniel Blake* is echoed in the well-publicised debate between then Work and Pensions Secretary Damian Green and both Ken Loach himself and then Leader of the Opposition Jeremy Corbyn. In a response to a parliamentary question, Green stated that the film ‘is a work of fiction and not a documentary. It bears no relation to the modern benefits system. As I understand it, it is monstrously unfair to jobcentre staff’ (HC Deb 2016c: c677). Loach responded in a comment to the Press Association: ‘[I]f they don’t know what they are doing to people they are incompetent and shouldn’t be in Government. If they do know what they are doing then they are not fit to be in Government’ (Ferguson 2016). Corbyn, in turn, took a dig at Green the following day during Prime Minister’s Questions:

Could I recommend that the Prime Minister support British cinema, and takes herself along to a cinema to see a Palme d’Or-winning film, ‘I, Daniel Blake’? While she is doing so, perhaps she could take the Work and Pensions Secretary with her, because he described the film as ‘monstrously unfair’ and then went on to admit that he had never seen it, so he has obviously got a very fair sense of judgment on this. (HC Deb 2016d: c881–882)

These debates are reflected in many other references to the film in parliamentary discussions. Opposition MPs have praised the film for its ‘cold and sobering view of the reality that so many people are experiencing’ (MP Mhairi Black in HC Deb 2016a: c304), and for epitomising ‘what is wrong with the social security system’ (MP Debbie Abrahams in HC Deb 2016f: c296); while Conservative MPs and Government Ministers have argued that the film is grossly inaccurate.⁴

4 See, for example, comments by Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery Caroline Nokes (HC Deb 2016b: c417).

Parliamentary references to *Benefits Street*, in turn, are almost a mirror image: Conservative politicians have used its representations in justifications for further welfare cuts and conditionality; whereas opposition MPs have tended to dismiss the series' portrayals as both untrue and unfair.⁵

The documentary status of *Benefits Street* has frequently been presented as proof of the authenticity of its representations; conversely, many have suggested that *I, Daniel Blake*'s being a fiction film undermines its claim to accurately depict the welfare system. Despite their different genres, discussions around both texts have overwhelmingly revolved around their truthfulness and authenticity. I have presented these debates in some detail here because they highlight in an important way what is at stake in the texts' political and cultural resonance. An agenda of austerity and welfare retrenchment in many ways depends on the reproduction of negative portrayals of undeserving 'benefit scroungers'; whereas critics of such agendas certainly have an incentive to depict benefit recipients so that their need for state assistance appears to be no fault of their own, thus positioning them as clearly deserving – with both sides claiming a greater degree of authenticity for their representations. However, as I have shown throughout this chapter, the two texts' narratives are not quite as polarised or oppositional as these debates suggest. On the one hand, while *Benefits Street* is commonly known as exemplary 'poverty porn' that intentionally stigmatises welfare claimants, the series' narratives do not always support such a reading, with many quite actively challenging this view. On the other hand, although *I, Daniel Blake* tends to be viewed and discussed as a very sympathetic representation of benefit recipients, illustrating the systemic failings of the British welfare system, in many instances the film's framings also draw on the same damaging narrative tropes as *Benefits Street*.

Despite their many differences, the two texts thus participate in the same narrative economies. My argument in this chapter is not intended to criticise Ken Loach's directorial decisions or to argue that *I, Daniel Blake* is somehow inherently a portrayal just as demonising as *Benefits Street*. Rather, it is to suggest that the texts' participation in the same narrative economies is necessary – in order for their representations of benefit recipients to be legible as such. At least at first glance, neither text offers notable challenges to the poverty discourses examined in the previous chapter, thereby potentially reproducing the idea that poverty and worklessness are cultural issues that can be transmitted intergenerationally. Further, both texts confirm rather than question the stigmatisation of non-normative family forms that tends to attach to the ideas of 'family stability' and cultural poverty. Both can also be read as marking racialised and immigrant families as always just a little further from the ideals of stability and respectability, and therefore as potential

5 As well as the quotes included throughout the chapter see, for example, comments by Conservative MP Simon Hart (HC Deb 2014c: c851). For mentions by opposition MPs, see Diane Abbott (HC Deb 2014e: cols 389–390); John MacDonnell (HC Deb 2014b: cols 671–672); and Peter Dowd (HC Deb 2016e: c495WH).

threats to the coherence of the nation. It seems that claiming benefits has become so closely tied to these imaginaries of (un)deservingness in the narrative economies of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis that the texts' legibility depends on reproducing them. We can see this battle over legibility reflected in the debates outlined above – the charge of inauthenticity that has been levelled at both texts aims first to paint the text as so inauthentic to be illegible as a realistic representation of someone claiming benefits, and then to remove it from the realm of the debate altogether.

Alternatively, a more sinister reading of these 'battles over legibility' would point out that their effect is precisely to keep the debate circulating between the opposing poles of authentic/inauthentic or deserving/undeserving, never leaving this orbit. With the debate stuck on this level, no alternative visions of the 'good life' can emerge. Neither text offers much else in the (political) horizon but a 'proper' job, the heteronormative family ideal and a middle-class upbringing; while desiring anything else remains unimaginable – simply outside of the discursive frame – for all wishing to appear as deserving subjects. As we have seen, imaginaries of deservingness depend on reproducing the legitimating discourses of work and family; and one can therefore only appear as deserving of benefits by aspiring to have a paid job and a 'stable' family, and to parent one's children according to appropriate (middle-class) cultural norms – or by having met these conditions in the past. Since not continuously reproducing these discourses means slipping into the frame of the undeserving 'scrounger' instead, the deserving benefit recipient cannot, for instance, desire a life in which she can fill her life with various kinds of unpaid care work because she gets a basic income that sustains her; or one where he can access drug misuse treatment that does not have paid employment as its goal.

These discourses and narratives carry significant representational power, and neither media text examined here provides an exception to their recurring reproduction within the narrative economies of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis. The next and final section of this chapter continues to explore how these imaginaries of (un)deservingness tend both to draw and to depend on racialised and sexualised narrative tropes. Thus, it is Daniel – the older white male with a 'proper' work history and a respectable family life – who appears as the most obviously wronged and therefore also as the most clearly deserving subject in all the representations discussed in this chapter. Conversely, the single mothers, the racialised or immigrant neighbours, the sex workers and the petty criminals always seem a step behind. Finally, that the dominant imaginaries of deservingness depend so centrally on these racialised and sexualised markers has significant consequences for whether these (un)deserving subjects are intelligible as (normative) political subjects. The chapter thus ends with a discussion of longstanding debates about the so-called 'decline of class', and of what alternatives might exist for imagining class as a static category that is inherently separate from, or even oppositional to, 'other' differences such as race or gender.

Political Subjects

I, Daniel Blake presents its narrative climax when Daniel's frustration with the welfare system reaches its peak. Angry and fearful for his future, he has another altercation at the Jobcentre, after which he storms out and spray paints 'I, Daniel Blake demand my appeal date before I starve' on the Jobcentre wall. He sits beneath his political battle cry as passers-by express surprise and sympathy for his act, but eventually he is taken away by the police and given a formal warning. After this narrative peak, Daniel becomes withdrawn and isolated, but reconciles with Katie just before his WCA appeal date finally arrives. At the appeal, after an initial promising meeting with his welfare rights adviser, Daniel becomes anxious and goes to the bathroom to calm himself down. A short while later, someone runs out of the bathroom shouting for an ambulance – Katie panics and runs in to find Daniel collapsed on the floor from another heart attack. The film ends with his 'pauper's funeral' – the cheapest early morning slot – where Katie reads Daniel's appeal speech as the eulogy:

I am not a client, a customer, nor a service user. I am not a shirker, a scrounger, a beggar, nor a thief. I'm not a National Insurance Number or a blip on the screen. I paid my dues, never a penny short and proud to do so. I don't tug the forelock, but look my neighbour in the eye, and help him if I can. I don't accept or seek charity. My name is Daniel Blake. I am a man, not a dog. As such I demand my rights. I demand you treat me with respect. I, Daniel Blake, am a citizen, nothing more and nothing less.

As Katie speaks his words at the funeral, Daniel makes one final claim for his needs to be recognised by the state. Challenging his positioning as a dependent, irresponsible subject, Daniel reminds us that he is entitled to support and respect from the state. In this final reminder that he is a citizen demanding his rights, who does not 'accept or seek charity', the film ends with a rather singular claim to justice.

Daniel's claims to citizenship and to having paid his dues as the legitimate basis for his entitlement to the state's care and support position him at the centre of both the film's narrative arc and its imaginaries of deservingness. As an older white male with a long and legitimate work history, but now unable to work due to an illness that is no fault of his own, Daniel appears as a clear victim of the draconian welfare system that has caused his plight and suffering throughout the film. There is nothing ambivalent about the life he has lived and his right to state support has never been uncertain. Although his storyline ends in death, the film gives him a chance to explicitly enact resistance and to exercise his political voice twice: first, when he spray paints his battle cry on the wall of the Jobcentre for everyone to see; and second, when Katie reads his appeal speech at his funeral. Daniel thus embodies a legible political subjectivity even after his death, eliciting a sympathetic affective response from those who

witness it – in this case both the passers-by and the funeral guests in the film, and the film's audiences. Contrastingly, this kind of political subjectivity or voice is not available to either Katie or China; nor is it available to the residents of James Turner Street. As if to further accentuate this point, Katie's positionality is marginalised one last time in the film's final moments, as Daniel's prewritten words are substituted for anything she might have to say at the end of her journey.

These emotive scenes confirm the film's positioning of Daniel as an ideal benefit-claiming and working-class subject. While Daniel's past work history marks him as a clearly deserving welfare claimant, the patchy or non-existent work histories – and degrees of attachment to having one in the first place – of other characters in both texts position them as always at risk of being read as undeserving 'scroungers' instead. My point here is not that Daniel is somehow too squeaky clean to be a benefits recipient, like Young argues in his review; but rather to highlight how *our* – the film's viewers' – attachments to him as a clearly deserving welfare claimant might hinge on his portrayal as differentially entitled to other characters in the film. By positioning Daniel as the most clearly deserving subject, the film also builds a nostalgic attachment to the respectable, blue-collar subjectivities of the past – an attachment that perhaps played a part in the film being labelled as 'the film that made everyone cry' (Yuan 2016). *I, Daniel Blake* ends with a claim to this nostalgic imaginary of a clearly deserving citizen, thereby positioning the viewer in a differential relationship *vis-à-vis* the other characters. The ending thus also prises open the question that haunts both texts under examination here: does the injustice of austerity and welfare retrenchment only become legible when a subject like Daniel is centred in it?

Would the film have the same effect – or affect – if Katie or China were centred in its narrative structure? Would a disabled benefits claimant who has never worked, a migrant worker with no right to work or a racialised single mother on a zero-hours contract in the care industry elicit the same kinds of responses from the film's viewers? And further, would these characters have access to the same kind of visible and recognisable political voice that Daniel does? These questions point to the difficulty of sustaining an identification with, as well as a political attachment to, class categories in an era of flexible and precarious labour, as many others have also discussed (eg, see Clover 2019; Gibson-Graham 1996; Greer 2016; Lewis 2018; Skeggs and Wood 2011; Weeks 2011). Here the nostalgic attachment – apart from its role in turning cinemagoers into 'sobbing wrecks' (Yuan 2016) – also helps to create and sustain a division between the 'proper' working classes of the past and the expanded 'reserve army of labour' of today. While the former become the object of our sympathies, the latter remains the target of much more ambivalent attachments in the narrative economies of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis. The more ambiguous relationships that both Katie and China have to imaginaries of deservingness thus risk not only rendering them less deserving,

but also potentially making them (only) legible as members of a 'troubled' or not respectable 'underclass'. Similarly to the differential portrayals of the racialised characters in *Benefits Street*, we can note a further difference between Katie and China, with the former at least positioned as the object of some paternalistic sympathies, while the latter appears in a much smaller role altogether.

As Tyler points out, 'the underclass are imagined as being in excess of class relations proper' (2013: 5.1), corresponding conceptually to the Marxist 'lumpenproletariat'. She goes on to argue that it is imperative to question the political function of such a classification: 'the ways it is employed to persuade people to act, feel, think about poverty and disadvantage in specific ways' (ibid: 9.3). Chris Jones and Tony Novak (1999) similarly point out that historically, the separation of the respectable working class from the immoral and criminal 'residuum' has fulfilled an essential economic and political purpose, especially at times when poverty grows: to dissuade large-scale working-class identification and political mobilisation. Indeed, in the case of *I, Daniel Blake*'s narratives, we can note that Daniel is surrounded by people who *do* accept and seek charity, and who have not perhaps always 'paid their dues'. In the film's narrative structure, the breaking down of Katie and Daniel's close relationship is directly linked to his judgement of her choice to do sex work. Similarly, Daniel disapproves of China's choice to engage in criminal activity to supplement his income. Both China's and Katie's responses to their dire financial situations stand in stark contrast to Daniel's political response – a vocalised and visible act of resistance. Katie's and China's narratives are embedded in frameworks of criminality and sexual non-normativity, which perhaps discursively forecloses their chances of embodying a normatively intelligible political subjectivity, as Daniel does.

At the same time, since the film does not provide much closure to their storylines, it is possible to argue that Katie and China both simply continue their chosen paths of sex work and crime, respectively, without qualms. Indeed, their choices could also be viewed as a kind of refusal to accept the dichotomous framework of deservingness that they are both otherwise discursively stuck in. After all, it is Katie's entry into sex work that enables her to buy her children new school shoes and therefore to mitigate at least some of the effects of the state practices that have led to her dire financial situation. Similarly, China's smuggling business allows him not only to supplement his income from his zero-hours job, but also potentially to steer clear of the dehumanising ethos of the welfare system altogether. Thinking of Katie's and China's activities in this way, as creative practices of both survival and refusal, also helps to present the choices of some of the James Turner Street residents in a different light: while the series' inclusion of scenes of shoplifting resulted in significant audience criticism (Ofcom 2014), is the residents' choice to engage in criminal activity in itself that surprising, given the proliferation of state practices such as sanctioning that can cause destitution?

As Gargi Bhattacharyya points out, when the task of survival becomes more challenging, people:

relearn forgotten strategies for survival, including informal processes of lending and borrowing, rediscovered practices of micro-business, a massive growth of the shadow economy, informal processes of pooling resources within and beyond family networks, and assorted experiments spanning crime, charity, and ecologically inspired self-sufficiency. (2015: 169)

Evangeline Heiliger similarly writes about practices such as trash picking, 'creative repurposing, charity, bartering, trading, gardening, solidarity, food stamps' (2015: 195) as common ways of supplementing 'respectable' work, conceptualising such practices as 'queer economies'. These kinds of practices take place in the margins of the labour market, as those without access to stable employment move between so-called 'productive' and 'non-productive' sectors of the economy. However, they are not non-productive in the sense of being insignificant – indeed, such practices are becoming more commonplace in the conditions created by a decade of austerity and welfare retrenchment, and the associated systematic erosion of both the wage and the social wage.⁶ We can think here of not just the James Turner Street residents' and Katie's shoplifting, but also Mark and Becky's and Katie's food bank use; the '50p' business of Smoggy; Katie's sex work; China's smuggling business; the Romanians' scrap metal business; and so on. As well as sustaining survival, such non-normative economic practices certainly also have some potential to enable more liveable lives, new relations of care and intimacy, more leisure time and expanded passions and political desires – not dissimilarly to policies such as basic income, discussed in the previous chapter (Weeks 2011).

In their seminal work on the politics of mugging, Stuart Hall et al (1978) position crime both as a means of survival and as a refusal of the traditional role of the reserve army of labour – of the structure of the system that has consigned the black worker to the position of unskilled labourer. Similarly, thinking of the choices of Katie, China and the *Benefits Street* residents as refusals of the terms to which they have been reduced by the state allows them to become legible in political terms. Perhaps these creative practices of survival and refusal provide ways of imagining alternative regimes of entitlement and citizenship, given the continuous erosion of the reciprocity of the state-citizen relationship in the post-financial crisis era. When the state unilaterally withdraws support from its subjects, perhaps 'paying one's dues' could in fact consist of the alternative relations of care that we have seen characters in both texts establish with one another. When 'entitlement' loses its meaning because of the continuous

6 For more detailed discussions of the proliferation of such economic activities see, for example, Dwyer (2018) on the consequences of sanctioning and Garthwaite (2016) on increasing food bank use.

depletion of state provision, perhaps it could mean entitlement to participate in alternative economic practices instead. Indeed, ‘demanding respect’ from a state that no longer respects you could amount to refusing the very terms of this crumbling relationship, as many of the characters do. This reading also suggests a different way of reading Daniel’s political acts – which, after all, are not met with recognition by the state. His defiant act of writing on the Jobcentre wall – the narrative climax of the film – appears much less significant, even ironic, due to the patronising tone of the police officers who caution him, ultimately revealing the futility of his continued belief in the reciprocity of a state that decidedly does not care.

Finally, then, we can perhaps also glimpse other possible avenues for political identification outside of static models of social class. As the previous chapter pointed at, one issue with such models is that they ignore the role of many other oppressions in facilitating and sustaining the permanent margins of un- and under-employment and the associated erosion of the wage and social wage in conditions of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis. Racialisation or racial marginalisation is central to these processes – or, in the words of Hall et al, ‘race is the modality in which class is lived’ (ibid: 394; cf Clover 2019). Hall et al go on to position crime as one of the ways in which the working class is divided racially, as a factor in obscuring the shared relation of precarisation. This and the previous chapter have argued that sexualisation functions in a related (although not identical) way, to drive a wedge between the respectable, ‘stable’ working class and the sexually immoral, non-normative or not respectable ‘troubled’ underclass. As we have seen, the former has strong discursive connections to the figure of the classic (white and male) industrial proletariat, embodied by Daniel in the representations discussed here; while the latter struggles to attain the same degree of legitimacy as a deserving subject, or indeed legibility as a political subject. Weeks’s (2011) ‘politics of and against work’, discussed in the previous chapter, can be thought of as an alternative to such static models of class that require an identification with specific, pre-established class categories.

Similarly, JK Gibson-Graham calls for a class politics that:

might not necessarily invoke the emancipatory agency of a mass collective subject unified around a set of shared “interests” but could arise out of momentary and partial identifications between subjects constituted at the intersection of very different class and nonclass processes and positions (1996: 53–4).

Others have argued for such a politics to be based not ‘in shared labor conditions, but rather in a distance from the labor market’ (Clover 2019: 115); or in the shared experience of labouring conditions and ‘solidarities between exploited people’ (Lewis 2018: 129). I would hesitate to label Katie and China as somehow inherently resistant or revolutionary subjects, especially intentionally so; in fact, we may think of them as ‘reluctant subjects’ in the sense suggested by Gibson-Graham,

whose research participants ‘could not easily identify with the alternative subject positions it availed. Most of them got up in the morning wanting a job – and if not wanting one, feeling they needed one – rather than an alternative economy’ (2006: xxxvi). At the same time, thinking about class politics in this way – based on shared experiences of class processes rather than on predefined subject positions or categories – does perhaps also allow for different imaginaries of political change to appear. Such a relational conceptualisation of class politics thus also makes space for the expression of the political desires of marginalised groups, beyond the classic figure of the industrial proletariat.

Conclusion

In this chapter I examined two media texts – *I, Daniel Blake* and *Benefits Street* – that tell us something important about the dominant imaginaries of (un)deservingness within the narrative economies of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis. The chapter focused on the ways in which the common poverty discourses examined in the previous chapter are reproduced or challenged within the two texts, from ‘worklessness’, ‘family stability’ and ‘cultural poverty’ to the positioning of immigration and racial difference as threats to the coherence of the nation. Although not necessarily intentionally, many similar sexualised and racialised narrative tropes are nonetheless present in both texts – at times to the extent that the legibility (as well as legitimacy) of their representations of welfare claimants depends on them. Consequently, the chapter challenged the efficacy of political imaginaries that (even unwittingly) reproduce sexualised and racialised notions of certain welfare claimants as more deserving, or as more legible or legitimate political subjects – such as ones based on static models of social class. Instead, a political imaginary that is explicitly inclusive of subjects who do not meet the standards of respectability associated with the nostalgic figure of the industrial blue-collar worker – for instance, based on shared experiences of exploitation or precarisation – is necessary to challenge the ‘deserving/undeserving’ binary. The next chapter discusses processes and practices of policy implementation and service delivery that I argue engender a range of disruptions to intimate and sexual lives, relations and spaces in the affected individuals’ lives – with significant consequences for how the ‘public/private’ binary division is understood.

Public/Private

Intimate Disruptions

In 2014 T Nzolameso's five children were placed in three different foster families and care proceedings began.¹ The decision to place her children into care was not the result of an assessment of her parenting abilities or the environment in which her children were growing up; rather, it followed a two-year legal battle over housing with her local council, City of Westminster. In 2012 Nzolameso had been evicted from her home in Westminster because she could no longer afford her rent after a significant reduction in her housing benefit, following the changes to Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates earlier that year (discussed below). After she refused the council's offer of social housing in Milton Keynes because of its distance from her social and medical support networks in Westminster, the council initially placed her and her family in bed and breakfast accommodation in the neighbouring borough (Kensington and Chelsea) while the case was reviewed and heard by two different courts. Eventually her court appeals failed and the council decided to stop providing her with temporary accommodation. Since the children's services department could not accommodate the whole family together, Nzolameso was left with no other option but to request that her children be placed in care, while she herself found temporary accommodation with friends.

The disruptions to Nzolameso and her children's private and intimate lives were very significant, as well as seemingly quite punitive. At the same time, there is something quite haphazard about the various ways in which these disruptions occurred throughout her two-year legal battle with the council. The decision to place her children in care appears, at least at first glance, not so much as the intended consequence of a particular policy or even the desired goal of a particular state actor. Rather, it seems as if the situation arose almost as a side effect of recent policy changes – a (by)product of the implementation process itself. This chapter focuses on such intimate disruptions that emerge as a consequence of three

1 *Nzolameso v Westminster City Council [Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and another intervening]* [2015] UKSC 22.

different welfare and housing policies and practices of the post-financial crisis era: the bedroom tax; the increasing practice of local authorities housing social housing clients outside of their area, as in Nzolameso's case; and welfare conditionality – that is, 'claimant commitments', benefit sanctions and 'workfare' schemes. The main source materials of the chapter consist of UK Supreme Court judgments related to the three policies: the first judgment, *R (Carmichael and Rourke) and Others*, deals with seven separate cases regarding the bedroom tax;² the second, *Nzolameso*, concerns out-of-council housing placements;³ and the third, *R (Reilly)*, relates to back-to-work or workfare schemes and benefit sanctions.⁴ Although many of these cases were also subject to media discussion at the time, the details about them (and the people involved in them) discussed below are all drawn directly from the publicly available Supreme Court judgments.

The court judgments are here used as evidence of the decision-making and implementation processes relevant to each case, and concomitantly of how state power functions within the intimate or private sphere. My aim is not to assess the validity of the court's decision making or to argue that the court itself is implicated in disrupting intimate lives (although of course it may be). Instead, the documents are treated as accounts of the 'statework' (Clarke 2004: 121) involved in the processes of implementation. While in Chapter 1 I examined the intentions set out in policy documents for solving a particular problem (child poverty), in this chapter analysing the intentions of policies would not work, since very few of the intimate disruptions examined here derive directly from the letter of the policies. In fact, the stated intentions of many of the policies are in conflict with their effects – although of course these effects may still be intended, as I discuss below. My investigation therefore illuminates a key tension identified by Cris Shore and Susan Wright, who argue that 'on closer examination ... it becomes unclear what constitutes "a policy"' (1997: 4). Is it the written documents produced by governmental actors? Or the processes of implementation? Or even the interactions that service users have with street-level bureaucrats? Because policies frequently transform during implementation; policy is never just straightforwardly 'implemented', but rather is subject to interpretation – for instance, by frontline workers (and Supreme Court justices) who consequently 're-create official policy' in their work (Wright 2002: 236).

The policies discussed in this chapter are common examples of increasing conditionality in, and growing penalisation of, social welfare in Britain's neoliberalising context. As in earlier chapters, the question of intent is not so straightforward, however. Although some of the policies discussed here do

2 *R [Carmichael and Rourke] and Others v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions* [2016] UKSC 58.

3 *Nzolameso v Westminster City Council [Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and another intervening]* [2015] UKSC 22.

4 *R [Reilly] v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions* [2013] UKSC 68.

control the intimate sphere explicitly and intentionally (eg, think of the bedroom tax and its explicit regulation of who – of what age, gender and familial relation – has the right to their own bedroom), this chapter primarily investigates how the processes by which these policies are implemented themselves produce disruptions in intimate lives. More specifically, the disruptions frequently seem to emerge from the processes by which policy implementation is devolved to local councils and private corporations (and perhaps courts) – both developments considered part and parcel of processes of neoliberalisation. In other words, disruptions commonly arise in the gaps and distance between national policy aims, on the one hand, and the local resources and abilities available for reaching them, on the other. These resources and abilities are heavily constricted, and the devolution therefore rarely entails a straightforward transfer of power from the state to the local and private actors, as many others have argued (eg, see Clarke 2004; Jessop 2000; Peck 2001). More accurately, we can consider the actors responsible for implementing these policies as intimately involved in the policy-making process and therefore as also engaging in statework – albeit in a partial and fragmented manner.

One of the common critiques of scholarship on neoliberalism is that it tends to appear as ‘everywhere and nowhere at the same time’ (Peck 2001: 446). For instance, Janet Newman notes that ‘once states have been identified as the agents of neoliberal rule, there seems little left to say’ (2020: 19). In some cases, such scholarship even suggests a total and complete transformation from social welfarism to neoliberalism, or from a liberal welfarist state to a neoliberal penal state. Nicola Lacey argues that such approaches are overly generalised and calls instead for analyses to ask not only what neoliberalism is, but also ‘how it has emerged and what sorts of institutional structures are needed to sustain the policies, practices and arrangements which have come to be associated with neoliberalism; when they emerged; and where they hold sway’ (2013: 261–262). My analysis responds to her call for ‘mid-level institutional account[s]’ of neoliberalism to ‘fill the explanatory space between the macro account ... and the micro examples’ (2010: 781), providing an investigation of how three specific housing and welfare policies materialise as punitive and the institutional structures that facilitate this punitiveness. Relatedly, it is important to point out that many accounts of neoliberalism also ignore significant differences that exist within the UK. Although the policies discussed here generally apply to Britain as a whole, and Northern Ireland has historically followed Westminster’s lead, there are key differences in implementation in the devolved administrations: Scotland, for instance, has fully mitigated the financial effects of the bedroom tax.

The intimate disruptions I analyse thus emerge from, and are implicit in, the processes by which state power is being transformed and fragmented through its so-called devolution to other actors under neoliberalisation. As Yvette Taylor suggests, ‘intimate relationships are brought into being, and negated, in interaction with institutional frameworks and through intersecting legal and material (im)possibilities’ (2013: 18). The implementation processes examined here entail significant value judgements about intimate relations, practices and spaces – or, in

other words, about the conditions necessary for an intimate life, or what makes a *liveable life*; despite being seemingly not at all concerned with the regulation of sexuality or family life. In other words, they arbitrate between necessary and unnecessary, or proper and improper, intimacies, as well as rendering certain intimacies visible and others invisible. By adopting the conceptual frame of ‘intimate disruptions’, I can highlight the range of intimate relations, practices and spaces that are potentially disrupted by the policies examined in this chapter, as well as circumventing the issue of intent. My methodological approach has thus been chosen in order to centre the disruptions themselves – which may or may not be contradictory to the intentions of the policies, but which nonetheless materialise as a consequence of the policy implementation processes. Finally, as I argue towards the end of the chapter, the ubiquity of such intimate disruptions suggests that shifts in the public/private divide are central to the politics of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis – with significant consequences for how political action against such politics might be conceived.

The second, third and fourth parts of this chapter examine different aspects of the intimate disruptions engendered by the transformation of neoliberalising state power. The second section focuses on the bedroom tax cases, discussing the judgements of value inherent in the policy’s implementation, whereby different kinds of intimate relations, practices and needs are deemed less or more valuable. The third section discusses the Supreme Court judgment relating to the practice of out-of-council housing placements, using the concept of ‘liveability’ to argue that, as well as various judgements of value, this practice entails judgements about what constitutes a liveable (intimate) life. The fourth section focuses on the Supreme Court judgment on workfare and benefit sanctions, examining the significant everyday disruptions that these state practices materialise as in the lives of affected individuals. The penultimate section then pulls these threads together to argue that the intimate disruptions analysed here constitute a significant reconfiguration of the public/private divide. The final section investigates whether any space for political action emerges in the spaces opened up by the fragmented operation of state power that neoliberalisation entails, exploring both the potential in, and the challenges of, advocating for political imaginaries that do not *a priori* exclude the state.

Judgements of value

The bedroom tax was introduced as part of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 with the aim of incentivising public sector tenants with bedrooms deemed ‘spare’ to move to more suitably sized properties. Originally labelled the ‘under-occupancy penalty’, quickly dubbed the ‘bedroom tax’ in the media and finally officially termed the ‘removal of the spare room subsidy’, the tax only applies to council and housing association tenants, as housing benefit for people living in the private rented sector is calculated according to different rules (discussed below). Unless the tenant can move to a smaller property, having one or two bedrooms more

than the permitted allowance results in a 14 or 25 per cent reduction in housing benefit, respectively. The permitted allowance for a household is one bedroom for each adult couple; any other person over 16 years of age; two children of the same sex under 16; two children under 10 regardless of their sex; a couple or children who cannot share because of a disability or medical condition; and an overnight carer.⁵ Exemptions from the policy include foster carers in between placements and adult children who are students or in the Armed Forces. Although technically the tax applies across Britain, the Scottish government pledged to cover everyone's housing benefit reduction via the Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) scheme; and Northern Ireland also recently made its bedroom tax mitigation package permanent.

The Supreme Court dismissed five of the seven claims brought to it in 2016, with two that related to differences in how adults and children with disabilities were affected by the policy succeeding.⁶ In all seven cases, the affected household's rent had been covered fully by housing benefit prior to the introduction of the bedroom tax, after which each household was assessed as having one or two 'spare' rooms and faced a reduction in their housing benefit as a result. Some of the households were already in receipt of a DHP (discussed below) at the time of the Supreme Court case. The five cases dismissed include those of 'A', JD and James Daly. 'A' lived in a three-bedroom house with her son, who was born as a result of a rape by a man she had been in a brief relationship with. He had been 'exceptionally violent' and made serious threats against her, as a result of which her property had been specially adapted under a sanctuary scheme to provide a higher level of security; and she also received ongoing security monitoring.⁷ JD was the full-time carer for their disabled adult daughter, AD, and they lived together in a specially constructed three-bedroom property. James Daly's disabled son, Rian, was cared for by his father and mother in separate houses, for three and four days out of the week respectively. Rian had a room at each parent's house and the one at his father's house was considered 'spare'. The Supreme Court dismissed these three cases because it saw that 'cases of need for reasons unconnected with the size of the property should be dealt with through the DHP scheme'.⁸

The Supreme Court, conversely, ruled in favour of two of the seven cases: those of Mrs Carmichael and the Rutherfords.⁹ Mrs Carmichael needed various

5 The full allowances for couples and children who cannot share due to a disability, and for overnight carers, are the result of the Supreme Court case under discussion here.

6 *R [Carmichael and Rourke] and Others v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions* [2016] UKSC 58.

7 *Ibid.*, 4577.

8 *Ibid.*, 4570. The other two dismissed cases involved Richard Rourke, who stored equipment related to his and his stepdaughter's disabilities in their third bedroom; and Mervyn Drage, who lived on his own in a three-bedroom flat but did not sleep in any of his bedrooms, as they were full of papers he had accumulated.

9 *Ibid.*

pieces of equipment related to her disabilities in her bedroom, meaning that there was not enough space for her husband – who was also her full-time carer – to share the same bed or bedroom. Susan Rutherford and her partner were full-time carers for her disabled grandson, Warren, and respite care was provided by carers who stayed in the Rutherfords' 'spare' room two nights a week. The Supreme Court judgment discussed these two cases in relation to the exemptions already provided in the bedroom tax policy for children who cannot share a bedroom with a sibling due to the need for disability-related equipment in their bedroom and for adults who need an extra bedroom for overnight carers. The court agreed that the policy's differential treatment of adults and children with disabilities (who need either the sole use of a bedroom because of disability-related equipment or an extra room for overnight carers) was not reasonable, and therefore accepted that the needs of these claimants should be met through allowances in the bedroom tax policy itself, rather than through DHPs.

The bedroom tax cases under discussion here are not unusual. According to the government's own initial equality impact assessment, nearly two-thirds of the households to be affected by bedroom tax were estimated to have an adult with a disability in them (DWP 2012). Further, the chronic lack of smaller social sector dwellings in Britain means that most households affected by the policy have had to make do with reduced benefits, rather than being able to move to more suitably sized accommodation – the stated aim of the policy. Figures published by *The Independent* a year after the policy's implementation suggest that as many as 96 per cent of those affected by the bedroom tax were in fact unable to move due to the lack of suitable properties in their area and were consequently 'trapped' in 'too large' homes (Dugan 2013). According to the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) evaluation of the bedroom tax (DWP 2015), no more than 8 per cent of affected claimants had downsized to a smaller property within the social rented sector and less than 2.2 per cent were estimated to have moved to the private rented sector. Some claimants had looked for more work to cover the shortfall in rent, but very few were willing to take in a lodger – two of the DWP's suggestions for people affected by the policy. The reduction in income caused by the bedroom tax has resulted in significant issues for many of those affected, such as increased food and fuel poverty, and physical and mental health issues (Burman et al 2017; DWP 2015; Moffatt et al 2015).

To start with, a juxtaposition of the cases of James Daly and the Rutherfords illustrates the role that care and intimate relations played – or indeed, did not play – in the court's decisions. In both cases a disabled child was cared for by more than one person. The Rutherfords' 'spare' room was used by respite carers two nights a week; James Daly's 'spare' room was used by his son, Rian, three nights a week. As explained above, the Rutherfords won their case, whereas Daly's case was one of the five that were dismissed. The Supreme Court agreed that while it might be appropriate for the council to continue

paying Daly's rent in full – thereby ensuring that the family could stay in their current accommodation – at the same time it was not unreasonable for the shortfall in rent to be covered by a DHP, rather than the case resulting in a change to the bedroom tax policy.¹⁰ The court's decision was based on the notion that James Daly's need for the 'spare' room had nothing to do with his son's disabilities and therefore he had no basis for challenging the lower court's judgment on equality grounds. Notwithstanding the court's assessment that the decision was not in violation of the appellant's human rights, it nonetheless provides a striking contrast to the Rutherfords' case.

Since the shortfall caused to James Daly's rent by the bedroom tax was already covered by a DHP prior to the beginning of the Supreme Court proceedings, the family suffered no financial consequences – or at least immediate ones – for being subject to the bedroom tax or for losing the court case. It is important to note, however, that DHPs are paid as a central government grant to the council and are then allocated to individual households at the council's discretion. Decisions about DHPs are made based on an assessment of the urgency and significance of the varying needs of all the households affected by the bedroom tax and other housing benefit changes in a local authority area. They are usually also only paid for a limited time period and individuals in receipt of one are expected to make long-term changes to their finances. Since DHPs are not guaranteed by a law or regulation, but instead depend on council funds and a relative assessment of the needs of everyone who applies for one, they do not provide the same kind of stability and assurance as full housing benefit does – even considering that the stability provided by housing benefit is also limited. Further, the DWP (2015) found that nearly one-third of those affected by the bedroom tax were unaware of the DHP scheme, bringing into question its ability to adequately support those in danger of becoming homeless.

Importantly, then, the implications of being exempt from the bedroom tax and therefore receiving one's housing benefit in full, on the one hand, and facing a reduction in one's housing benefit because of a 'spare' bedroom and then receiving a DHP to cover the reduction, on the other, are different. In the former case, it is accepted that the room in question is not 'spare' but necessary – in the Rutherfords' case, specifically, necessary for meeting Warren's disability-related needs. In the latter case, the room *is* deemed 'spare', but the council decides to cover the affected household's rent regardless – perhaps for reasons of strong need, a particular vulnerability or because not awarding a DHP would overall end up being more costly to the council. The Rutherfords were allowed an extra bedroom for the use of respite carers, without whom they would have been unable to take care of their grandson Warren at home. Rian Daly was cared for by both of his parents at different addresses, but only one room was allowed for him between them without either parent facing a

10 *R [Carmichael and Rourke] and Others v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions* [2016] UKSC 58.

reduction in housing benefit. In the former case, the extra room allowed the grandparents to continue providing care to Warren at home; whereas in the latter case, the extra room allowed both parents to continue sharing the responsibility of caring for Rian – and ensured that Rian’s relationships with both of his parents continued.

While the Supreme Court did not explicitly adjudicate on the basis of James Daly’s relationship with his son being less valuable than that of the Rutherfords’ grandson to his respite carers (or to his grandparents), in practice, the policy’s implementation nonetheless involved a judgement of the differential value of the relationships.¹¹ Here we can draw on migration scholarship that has focused on such value judgements emerging from immigration decision making – for instance, Ala Sirriyeh argues that immigration regulation can involve ‘a hierarchical ordering of the value of ... relationship[s]’ (2015: 236; cf. Lewis 2014; Taylor 2013; White 2014). We can see such a ‘hierarchical ordering’ of value at work in the cases of Daly and the Rutherfords: without the extra room, the Rutherfords might have had to place Warren in residential care; whereas Rian would have perhaps lost out on having a relationship with both of his parents and the parents on being able to share the responsibility of parenting. Of course, had Rian been cared for by his father alone, the bedroom tax rules would have allowed not only a room for him, but also perhaps another room for respite carers – as in the case of the Rutherfords, who won their case. However, since Daly was only partially responsible for Rian’s care, even just a room for Rian himself was considered ‘spare’, with potential implications not just for Rian’s parents’ ability to continue sharing their parenting duties, but also for Rian and his father’s relationship. The processes of implementation thus produce their own hierarchies of value, which may be different from the values expressed explicitly in policy language.

These cases are also interesting because they illustrate the contradictory ways in which the normativities of family life are regulated within different policy frameworks. Sirriyeh draws a connection between the increasing governance and surveillance extended to international families via immigration regulations and the ‘normative and moralising discourse of the family, evident in pre-existing domestic agendas’ (2015: 236). In Chapter 1, I argued that child poverty discourses draw precisely on such sexualised notions of normativity and morality; and that centred in them is the ideal ‘stable’, heteronormative, two-parent family. However, the implementation of the bedroom tax has in fact had the effect of discouraging the sharing of parenting duties. Despite the strong emphasis of policy framings on the importance of fathering, discussed in Chapter 1, here James Daly’s ability to continue to parent Rian carried little value in the policy’s practical implementation. Rian’s room at his father’s house was seen as unrelated to and unnecessary for meeting his disability-related needs, illustrating that the

11 *R [Carmichael and Rourke] and Others v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions* [2016] UKSC 58.

policy's regulatory framework holds no space for considering James as fulfilling the role of a respite carer, providing respite to Rian's mother. Although perhaps an unintended consequence, in practice, the bedroom tax has the effect – with the help of a financial disincentive – of discouraging separated parents living in social council from sharing their parenting responsibilities. Indeed, there is at least some evidence of some separated parents consequently choosing to claim for full custody, because shared custody would result in a reduction in their housing benefit (eg, see Greenstein et al 2016; Moffatt et al 2015; Nowicki 2018).

Similarly, a contrast can be made between couples who are unable to share a bedroom due to one partner's need for disability-related equipment in the room (covered by the bedroom tax and highlighted by the case of Carmichael), and couples who are unable or unwilling to share a bedroom for any other reason (not covered by the bedroom tax). Whether it is shift work resulting in varying sleeping patterns, a snoring partner or simply differing preferences for sleeping arrangements, there are of course many reasons why a couple might not want to sleep in the same bed or room – none of which are taken into account in the bedroom tax rules mandating that almost all couples share. Thus, a policy that does not explicitly aim to control intimate lives nonetheless has a significant effect in determining how social housing residents organise theirs, as intimate relationships with some family members are all but imposed on social housing residents. Anat Greenstein et al similarly argue that:

through defining the family home, the Bedroom Tax works to construct the kind of family forms and ties that may be considered essential, and those that are seen as discretionary, supplementary or even luxuries and thus should be available only to those who can afford them. (2016: 511)

Simple preferences for how a family might organise its living arrangements are luxuries not extended to social housing residents, indicating a class-based division between those with and without the right to a 'home', as Mel Nowicki (2018) argues in her analysis of the bedroom tax as a 'home unmaking' policy.

Along similar lines, the policy allows siblings not to share a bedroom if they are over 16 years of age or over 10 years of age and of a different sex. The regulations related to siblings are thus based on naturalised assumptions about both sibling relationships and childhood itself. Children of different sexes under the age of 10 are viewed through a desexualised lens and it is therefore considered appropriate for them to share a bedroom. Conversely, children of different sexes between the ages of 10 and 16 are heteronormatively sexualised and consequently it is assumed that it would be improper for them to share a bedroom. 'Age and gender are considered sufficient for determining room allocation, taking no account of the size of the room, or of possible different relationships or needs of its occupants' (Greenstein et al 2016: 511) – such as needing a quiet space for completing homework or not wanting to share a room with new half-siblings or step-siblings.

Greenstein et al (ibid) also point out that the bedroom tax has significant implications specifically for blended families; and Suzanne Moffatt et al add that:

for many, “downsizing” would eradicate their ability to flexibly accommodate family within their households’, whether ‘children in part-time custodial arrangements, siblings of different ages and needs, children, grandchildren, or having a spare bedroom for carers or couples who sleep apart due to health problems. (2015: 202)

In the case of both couples and siblings then – and again, similarly to migration regulations – the bedroom tax involves the recognition and legitimization of heteronormatively intelligible intimacies.

The cases of A and JD provide a final illustrative juxtaposition. Both claimants lived in specially constructed or adapted properties: JD’s property due to the disabilities of their adult daughter, AD; and A’s under a ‘sanctuary scheme’ – accommodation that has been adapted to provide protection for those at high risk of domestic violence. In both cases the court agreed that while it may be appropriate for the relevant councils to continue paying the claimants’ rents in full through DHPs, at the same time neither claimant required the number of bedrooms they presently had, as the special modifications made to their properties were unrelated to the number of rooms.¹² First, this reading highlights that, in the context of the bedroom tax, fairness in social housing allocation is framed purely around the financial value of the number of rooms, rather than around the suitability of the property otherwise – more likely to be the council’s priority. These cases illustrate that the focus on the number of rooms functions to shift attention away, first, from the financial value of other things, such as the special adaptations made either under the sanctuary scheme or for disability-related reasons; and second, from the value of care and intimate relations. Since the same range of intimate disruptions would not have been provoked by a focus on square footage, for instance – although of course it might have produced its own peculiar disruptions – the emphasis on the financial cost of rooms alone heightens the policy’s effects in the intimate sphere, naturalising the implicit judgements of different kinds of intimacies, needs and relationships embedded in it.

Further – and similarly to the other five cases heard by the Supreme Court – JD and A lived in their ‘oversized’ properties not because of a desire for ‘spare’ rooms, but because of the lack of smaller properties in their area. Their properties were allocated to them by the council and were then modified, at great financial cost to the council, to meet their exact requirements. Additionally, in A’s case, the sanctuary scheme adaptations were made specifically so that she could continue to live safely in her current accommodation without having to move – a stated aim of the sanctuary scheme in general. The demand that A move to a more suitably sized

12 *R [Carmichael and Rourke] and Others v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions* [2016] UKSC 58.

property, made through the application of the bedroom tax, thus appears in stark contrast to her need not to move – a need recognised and met by the council via the sanctuary scheme. This tension demonstrates the impossibility of the council meeting both of these competing needs at the same time. There is thus a curious discrepancy between the local authority decision to allocate a particular property to a household, based on an assessment of available social housing and the needs of households on the council's social housing waiting list, and a national policy that then deems some of the rooms in that property 'spare' and demands that the household pay for the privilege of having them. The policy not only significantly restricts the ability of local authorities to make decisions about social housing allocation based on their knowledge and expertise about the conditions of supply and demand in their area, but also renders meaningless the government's claims about increasing localisation in decision making, as I discuss in more detail below.

These cases show that it is specifically in the distance between the national policy – with its idealised aim that Britain's social housing stock should exactly match the needs of the country's social housing claimants – and the (in)ability of most local authorities to realise this aim that the bedroom tax emerges as a punitive policy. In other words, the penalty of the policy emerges from the impossibility of its successful implementation according to its stated aim: a reduction in 'under-occupation' in social housing. Indeed, we can question whether the original reasoning for the policy's introduction – that is, fairer or better utilisation of Britain's social housing stock – is even compatible with the policy itself. For instance, Kenneth Gibb notes that 'the Government is content to save on HB rather than to actually see a better utilisation of the stock via down-sizing' (2015: 160). However, it is also unclear whether the policy has resulted in savings, because its costs have been higher and resulting savings lower than anticipated. For example, the spending on DHPs has been very high and many local authorities have topped up the government allocation from their own funds (DWP 2016), suggesting that in a large proportion of cases, the costs have remained the same but have simply been transferred to a different system – which is further likely to be more expensive due to DHPs requiring case-by-case assessment.

Gibb concludes his analysis of the bedroom tax by determining it a policy failure, suggesting that describing the reallocation of costs as a saving is simply 'bad economics' (2015: 164). While I agree that the policy has been a failure when considered in relation to its stated aims, at the same time it is worth questioning what other kinds of value such reallocations might generate. It is important to note that the policy *has* resulted in savings for the central government – even if most (or all) of this cost has simply been shifted to local authorities, housing associations, other landlords and individual households and their networks (eg, see Criddle 2015; DWP 2015; Gibb 2015). Perhaps the shifts and value judgements examined throughout this section are in themselves valuable for a state seeking to reinforce notions of undeservingness: whether, for instance, the discursive shift whereby 'fairness' in social housing allocation is increasingly defined via narrowly

understood financial value alone; or the material shift whereby the cost of the discrepancy between Britain's social housing stock and the needs of its social housing clients has been transferred to the affected individuals, housing associations and local councils. Indeed, perhaps the fixation on the financial value of the number of rooms – despite very limited, if any, overall savings – functions as a kind of alibi, both for the violent (if strange) disruptions in intimate lives and for the squeezing of council capacities for decision making enabled by these emphases.

Liveable Lives

The local authority practice of moving social housing clients out of the local authority area is not prescribed by any particular national policy, but rather has arisen in recent years due to multiple factors. First, the introduction of a national cap for LHA rates in 2011 and other changes to housing benefit rates,¹³ as well as the introduction of the benefit cap, has resulted in many housing benefit recipients residing in privately rented accommodation no longer being able to afford their rents – particularly in London and other high-rent areas. Second, significant increases in private rents caused by the housing crisis – again, particularly in low-income areas and in London (eg, see Christiansen and Lewis 2019) – have led to many councils finding it increasingly difficult to house all the homeless households that meet the criteria for statutory homelessness in their area.¹⁴ Finally, the Localism Act 2011 made it easier for councils to discharge their duty to a homeless person or household by offering them accommodation in the private rented sector.¹⁵ Altogether, these factors have resulted in many local authorities increasingly using out-of-council housing placements as a solution to tackling homelessness in their areas.

As briefly highlighted above, T Nzolameso – a single mother of five children with multiple longstanding health issues – faced a number of significant disruptions to her life as a result of the above policy changes. First, she was evicted in 2012 since housing benefit no longer covered her rent; second, after refusing

13 Previously, LHA rates were based on the median average of a sample of local rents; whereas since 2011, LHA rates have been set as the 30th percentile.

14 The practice under examination here only pertains to households accepted as statutorily homeless, in which case the council owes them the homelessness duty; or as particularly vulnerable despite not meeting the criteria for statutory homelessness, in which case councils tend to offer temporary accommodation for a limited period (usually 28 days). In order for an individual or household to be accepted as statutorily homeless, they have to be eligible for assistance; be 'unintentionally homeless'; and fall within a specified priority need group, including households with dependent children, pregnant women and people with mental illnesses or physical disabilities.

15 Previously, a homeless person had the right to refuse an offer of accommodation in the private rented sector and to remain in temporary accommodation and stay on the social housing waiting list instead. Since the introduction of the Act, refusing an offer of privately rented accommodation counts as becoming 'intentionally homeless' and results in the council no longer having a duty to house the household.

Westminster Council's offer of housing in Milton Keynes, she faced a long legal battle, during which the family remained in temporary accommodation; and third, after the council notified her that its duty to house the family had ended, her children were placed in care in three different foster families in 2014, while Nzolameso herself sought temporary accommodation with friends. She rejected the council's offer of housing in Milton Keynes on several grounds: it was too far from her friends and support network; she did not know anyone in Milton Keynes; she would have to change GPs; her children would have to change schools; and she had lived in Westminster for a long time. The Supreme Court ruled in her favour. The ruling requires local authorities to provide more detailed evidence of having adequately considered both the circumstances of the homeless household and the housing available within the council area before making an assessment that it is not 'reasonably practicable' to house them within the local authority area; and to give more information regarding the decision to the client.¹⁶

Nzolameso's case is not unique: in October 2013, 48 per cent of all temporary accommodation units in the City of Westminster were out of borough.¹⁷ Similarly, according to figures obtained by *The Independent* (2015), between July 2011 and July 2014 London councils moved almost 50,000 households out of borough, with over 2,700 families moved out of the capital entirely. In a large proportion of these cases, the receiving council was not notified of the family's move into the new council area. More broadly, in June 2019, over 85,000 households in England were in temporary accommodation, of which 66 per cent were London households (Wilson and Barton 2020). Over one-quarter of them were in accommodation in a different council area from where they applied – over four times as many as in March 2010. These figures illustrate the flow of homeless families from inner to outer London and out of London altogether throughout the decade, prompting many commentators to describe the issue in the terms of 'social cleansing' (eg, see Bloom 2017; *The Independent* 2015; Taylor 2015). Nzolameso's case reflects these trends, as well as echoing the situation of Katie, the lead character in the film *I, Daniel Blake*, discussed in depth in the previous chapter.

Local authority decision making on social housing allocation is not just about the suitability of properties in general, but also about matching those properties to the specific needs of claimants – as the City of Westminster believed it had done when it sent Nzolameso a letter with the following quote:

There is a severe shortage of accommodation in Westminster and it is not reasonably practicable for us to offer a Westminster home for everyone who applies for one. That is why we have had to offer you accommodation in

16 *Nzolameso v Westminster City Council [Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and another intervening]* [2015] UKSC 22.

17 *Ibid.*

Milton Keynes. Although it is outside Westminster, having considered your circumstances, we believe this accommodation is suitable for you.¹⁸

Notwithstanding the council's unilateral belief in the accommodation's suitability for Nzolameso and her family, the letter does not address the ways in which Nzolameso considered the property to be a poor fit to her needs. The council did not respond to her claim that her friends in Westminster helped her with childcare whenever she was hospitalised; nor did it consider what support and resources would be available for her in Milton Keynes, particularly in terms of childcare. While the council did consider her children's schooling needs and her medical needs, these were not seen as issues that would preclude her from moving. Although the council initially acknowledged that Nzolameso belonged to a specific priority group when it accepted its duty to house her, at the point of decision making about where to house the family, the specific needs that were a direct consequence of her belonging to that priority group were seemingly not part of its considerations.

In 2012, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) published supplementary guidance that strengthened the obligation of local authorities to find accommodation as close as possible to a household's previous residence. The guidance states that local authorities:

are required to take into account the significance of any disruption with specific regard to employment, caring responsibilities or education of the applicant or members of their household. *Where possible the authority should seek to retain established links with schools, doctors, social workers and other key services and support.*¹⁹

Of course, the 'established links' that Nzolameso had with medical professionals and her children's schools, for instance, would have been disrupted had she accepted the council's housing offer. The informal support and friendship networks that she relied on – for instance, for childcare – would have also suffered from the move; but they were considered neither in the official guidance nor in the council's decision. This omission reveals a value judgement implicit in the decision-making process, highlighting the differential value that *formal* and *official*, versus *informal* and *unofficial*, support networks and relationships are seen to have. While in Nzolameso's case the council did not view even the formal support and care relationships as significant enough a reason for her to stay in Westminster (or London), the informal ones were not part of the consideration in the first place.

Melissa Autumn White discusses the 'incongruence between life as lived ("reality") and its documentary representation ("papereality")' (2014: 76) that

18 Quoted in *Nzolameso v Westminster City Council* [Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and another intervening] [2015] UKSC 22, 555.

19 Quoted in *ibid*, 559.

frequently appears in immigration proceedings. In Nzolameso's case, we can similarly see a gap between the reality of her intimate life and the decision-making processes that only took official or documentable relationships into account. The disruptions to her life were based on an implicit assessment of the differential value of these relationships, rendering official relationships more valuable than unofficial ones. This does not reflect the ways in which care, support and intimate relationships tend to exist within complex networks – Sarah Marie Hall, for example, argues that care involves 'a complex assemblage of intimate relations, including combinations of kin ..., friends ... or strangers' (2016b: 1020). The decision-making processes in Nzolameso's case overlooked both 'the importance of family members and friends outside of parent/child relationships, individuals who feature as part of a broader network of intimacy' (Hall 2016a: 311), and that care develops 'within everyday routines and relationships, impossible to price apart from interdependencies, interpersonal relations, inter- and intra-generationality' (Hall 2016b: 1029). Further, the appraisal of Nzolameso's intimate and caring life through a hierarchical ordering of official and unofficial relationships also suggests a view of disability as a medical category above all: her relationships with medical professionals were part of the decision-making process, but other relationships that enabled her to live a liveable life were not.

This case illustrates that local authorities and other key decision makers are intimately involved in – apart from finding 'suitable' accommodation – making decisions about what constitutes a liveable life for someone supported by housing benefit. Judith Butler develops the concept of liveability specifically in relation to the role of gender and sexuality norms in systems of recognisability, arguing that 'certain humans are not recognized as human at all, and that leads to [an] order of unlivable life' (2004: 2). For them, recognisability may be a condition of liveability, but at the same time the terms by which one is recognised may also make life unliveable. They go on to question the 'minimum conditions for a livable life with regard to human life' (ibid: 39). Although Butler is interested in the normative – rather than material – conditions for a liveable life, their conceptualisation is nonetheless relevant here. A liveable life is made up not only of the basic conditions required for surviving, such as shelter and medical care, but also of the full range of intimate and caring relationships required to thrive – which in Nzolameso's case were excluded from consideration from the start of her dealings with the council. Here we can also think of the previous section's discussion of how the bedroom tax rules preclude those living in social housing from having simple preferences about how their accommodation is arranged. Certain conditions of liveability are thus implicit in the decision-making processes in both the bedroom tax and the local authority practice of moving housing benefit recipients out of the local authority area.

The Supreme Court ruled in Nzolameso's favour, specifically stating that the standard paragraph included in the council's decision letter was not sufficient, as it did not include information about what accommodation was available in Westminster and why it had not been offered to her; whether accommodation

closer to Westminster was considered; and what, if any, inquiries had been made to assess how practical the move would be for Nzolameso.²⁰ However, had the council letter provided this information, including a detailed assessment of the properties available in Westminster and elsewhere in London, the disruptions to Nzolameso and her children's lives would presumably have been justifiable, as well as lawful. This leads me to highlight a slightly different set of questions in relation to the case. If the guidance requires local authorities to, 'where possible', retain established links with doctors, social services and schools when securing housing, then what are the conditions in which it is permissible to sever these links and to therefore potentially make a life unliveable? Nzolameso and her children's lives were of course significantly disrupted by the initial eviction, living in temporary accommodation for an extended period of time and the children being taken into care; but since this does not constitute 'disruption' in the sense intended in the guidance, what *does* count as disruption? Furthermore, in what circumstances would moving to a distant location chosen by someone else not constitute significant 'disruption with specific regard to employment, caring responsibilities or education of the applicant or members of their household', as required by the guidance?²¹

In this reading, disruption begins to appear as something inherent to the decision-making process, rather than something that the local authority in question strives to avoid at all cost, as the wording of the guidance would suggest. Similarly, the bedroom tax seems inherently disruptive if we consider the conditions of unliveability that materialise as its consequence. Does the demand that Rian no longer spend three days per week with his father constitute an unliveable life for either of them? Or the request that A move out of her specially adapted property and lose the protection afforded to her by the sanctuary scheme? Given that these disruptions seem to be built into the ways in which the policies operate in practice – frequently in contradiction to their stated aims – are there in fact *any* situations in which liveability can be considered as part of the decision-making process? It is important to note that at the same time as the DCLG acted to strengthen the guidance for local authorities to find accommodation as close as possible to where a household had previously resided, the Government was careful to emphasise that the guidance did not prohibit placements out of the local authority area 'where they are unavoidable nor where they are the choice of the applicant'.²² The same Government had, of course, also introduced the changes to the LHA rates, the benefit cap and the Localism Act 2011, discussed above, which played a significant part in the increasing numbers of out-of-council housing placements in the first place.

20 *Nzolameso v Westminster City Council [Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and another intervening]* [2015] UKSC 22.

21 *Ibid*, 559.

22 Quoted in *ibid*, 558.

Similarly to the bedroom tax, it seems that punitiveness here arises out of the distance between national policy framings and the heavily restricted local abilities for realising them. The 2012 guidance expects local authorities to accommodate households as close to their previous accommodation as possible, carefully taking into account their specific circumstances and needs; but at the same time, many policies that have accelerated the need for out-of-council placements have been implemented and many of the previously existing barriers to them removed. Curiously then, the same Government was involved in legislating in ways that encourage this growing practice, while simultaneously making it more difficult for councils to implement it. Nzolameso's case clearly highlights the contrasting pressures faced by local authorities. These changes certainly do not constitute a simple devolution of power from the central government to local councils; if anything, local authorities appear more restricted in their ability to allocate housing within their area. My argument here is not that local authorities are blameless in the punitive ways in which the lives of housing benefit recipients and homeless households are disrupted and made unliveable (and the last section of this chapter explores some ways in which various actors can and do mitigate these disruptions), but rather that state power has certainly not been diminished or straightforwardly devolved to local authorities in this case. Instead, it appears to operate through an increasingly complex regulatory framework that, as above, squeezes council capacities for independent decision making and makes intimate disruptions and conditions of unliveability nearly unavoidable in the process.

Everyday Disruptions

'Workfare' refers to governmental programmes that require individuals to undertake some form of work or training in return for their benefits, such as Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and Universal Credit (UC). Although workfare schemes were already in use under the previous Labour administration, their use significantly increased during the Coalition Government era and a huge number of them have been in operation since 2010. These include the Coalition Government's flagship 'Work Programme' that ran until 2017, as well as its replacement, the 'Work and Health Programme' (Powell 2020). The running of the various workfare schemes and the placement of claimants tend to be subcontracted to corporations; while the work and training placements themselves are provided by a mixture of public, private and third-sector organisations. Workfare schemes are part of a broader development whereby unemployment-related benefits are increasingly conditional on meeting certain behavioural requirements and failure to meet them results in a benefit sanction (the stopping of benefit payments for a period of between four weeks and three years). Individuals can be recommended for a sanction by both Jobcentre advisers and workfare programme providers, and final sanctioning decisions are made by DWP decision makers. Twenty-four per cent of all JSA claimants between 2010 and

2015 received a sanction, and failure to participate in a training or employment scheme was one of the most common reasons for sanctioning (Beatty et al 2015; Morse 2016). UC has since mostly replaced JSA and the DWP no longer publishes statistics on the total number of people who receive sanctions. However, in 2018–19, over 3 per cent of unemployed UC claimants were subject to a sanction at any given time, with failure to attend an interview the most common reason for sanctioning (Webster 2019).

In August 2011, Mr Wilson was informed by his Jobcentre adviser that in order to continue receiving JSA, he had to take part in the Community Action Programme (CAP), a DWP scheme that aimed to help long-term unemployed claimants back to work. The programme was administered by private companies, such as Ingeus, and provided up to six months of near full-time work experience and additional weekly job search requirements. Over the following months, Wilson was sent multiple letters informing him that his CAP would begin if he did not find a paid job within a specified timeframe. He was officially selected for the CAP in November 2011 and placed with an organisation that collects and restores used furniture and distributes it to people in need. Wilson was informed by an Ingeus employee that he would need to work for 30 hours per week for 26 weeks or until he found employment of at least 16 hours per week, although these details were not set in writing. Wilson refused to participate in the scheme on the grounds that he ‘was not prepared to work for free, particularly for such a long period of time’.²³ As a result, he was subjected to multiple benefit sanctions, totalling six months.

In 2011, Miss Reilly participated in the Sector-Based Work Academy (SBWA), a DWP programme for unemployed claimants that includes ‘pre-employment training’ and a work experience placement. The scheme is aimed at those who are ready to start work but ‘may need to learn the skills and behaviours that employers in particular industries look for in new employees’ (DWP 2018), and is administered by Jobcentres. Participation in the SBWA is voluntary but becomes mandatory once a claimant has accepted a place. However, a Jobcentre adviser incorrectly informed Reilly that her participation was compulsory. The Supreme Court ruled in favour of Reilly and Wilson on the basis that the 2011 DWP regulations on which both workfare programmes were based did not contain a sufficiently detailed description of the schemes.²⁴ Had Iain Duncan Smith – then Work and Pensions Secretary – not put forward emergency retroactive legislation to introduce new regulations immediately after the earlier Court of Appeal judgment (also in favour of the claimants), the Government could have been liable to refund up to 250,000 claimants for unlawful sanctioning.²⁵ There are

23 Quoted in *R [Reilly] v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions* [2013] UKSC 68, 9.

24 *R [Reilly] v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions* [2013] UKSC 68.

25 In 2016, the Court of Appeal ruled that the retroactive legislation was, in fact, itself incompatible with human rights law, but emphasised that it was up to the government to decide what action to take in response (Butler 2016).

no official figures on the number of people undertaking work placements through the various workfare schemes at any given time, but the stories of Reilly and Wilson appear in line with many witness statements available on activist websites documenting workfare (eg, see Boycott Workfare 2021; Stupid Sanctions 2021).

The final letter sent to Wilson informing him about the start of his CAP placement stated: ‘to keep getting Jobseeker’s Allowance, you will need to take part in the [CAP] until you are told otherwise or your award of jobseeker’s allowance comes to an end; and complete any activities that Ingeus asks you to do.’²⁶ The letter notified Wilson that he must do *anything* that Ingeus (the private company administering the CAP) asked him to do, without any detail as to the hours or place of work or the type of work he was expected to undertake. Although Reilly’s programme (SBWA) was much shorter than the CAP, she had to end her volunteer position at a museum in order to take part and complete a work experience placement at Poundland. Thus, at the most basic level, workfare programmes take away the participants’ time and their ability to decide how to use it. This reflects the broader context of welfare conditionality, whereby UC claimants are expected to ‘think of jobseeking as a full-time job’ and concomitantly ‘look or prepare for work for 35 hours a week’ (DWP 2020a). Overall, then, people in receipt of unemployment-related benefits are required to spend as much time participating in DWP-mandated job-seeking and training activities as they would in a full-time job.

The ‘work search requirement’, training and work placements are set out in a ‘claimant commitment’ – a sort of behavioural contract that claimants are expected to sign (*ibid*). Failure to meet requirements set out in the claimant commitment generally results in sanctions, which commonly penalise claimants for perceived poor or erroneous use of time. There are examples of claimants being sanctioned for ‘infractions’ such as attending a funeral, a job interview or a volunteering placement instead of a scheduled Jobcentre appointment (Stupid Sanctions 2021; Trussell Trust 2014). These requirements can certainly have significant effects on claimants’ ability to meet their caring responsibilities, as well as other kinds of responsibilities, such as the volunteering work that Reilly gave up. The staff guidance on building claimant commitments states that staff need to ensure that the ‘claimant’s work availability hours will be compatible with their caring responsibilities’,²⁷ but personal testimony of sanctioning decisions available via various charities and activist groups suggests that this does not always happen in practice. Examples include being sanctioned for missing an appointment due to childcare responsibilities despite notifying the Jobcentre in advance, and for missing an appointment because of being at hospital with a partner who had just had a stillborn child (Trussell Trust 2014).

26 Quoted in *R [Reilly] v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions* [2013] UKSC 68, 464–465.

27 The staff guidance was released following a freedom of information request and can be viewed on the ‘What do they know’ website.

Demands for particular attitudes, affects and behaviours – particularly in relation to one's use of time – are thus key ways in which workfare programmes, other requirements for welfare claimants and benefit sanctions materialise as disruptions. Del Roy Fletcher and Sharon Wright discuss the rise of 'conduct conditionality' in the UK welfare system, increasingly taking the form of 'coercive behaviouralism' (2018: 324; cf Bond-Taylor 2014). Lynne Friedli and Robert Stearn similarly argue that unemployment policies 'now aim at more complete and intimate behaviour change through coercive mechanisms of greater scope' (2015: 41), including changes in attitude, affect or behaviour. These trends also include a parallel rise in the use of brain science to explain social issues and problematic behaviours, correlating 'outcomes (crime, addiction, health behaviour, educational attainment) with brain structure' (ibid: 42) – echoing the increasing use of brain science as 'evidence' in cultural poverty arguments, discussed in the previous two chapters. Finally, Yongmie Nicola Jo argues that means-tested or conditional social welfare 'constitutes a violation of the fundamental right to privacy, the applicant's life becoming an "open book"' (2016: 524), from which a caseworker can determine their eligibility to welfare or social housing; and indeed, some Jobcentre advisers have requested access to claimants' personal email accounts in order to obtain proof of their job-searching efforts (Stupid Sanctions 2021). Again, questions about the liveability of such tightly managed lives emerge: should some level of control over one's behaviour, attitudes, feelings and privacy be required for a life to be liveable?

More broadly, does, for instance, the substitution of a volunteering placement that one has chosen with unpaid work at a for-profit organisation (as in Reilly's case) constitute a necessary disruption to one's life, justifiable with reference to the perceived unfairness of unemployment benefits to those who work – the 'hard-working taxpayers' mentioned in earlier chapters? Or could value be found in the volunteering work itself, or in informal caring responsibilities, thus countering any value that such a substitution creates in the form of, for example, increased 'employability' (although, as I detail below, it is also questionable whether such outcomes are achieved by workfare programmes)? The absence of such considerations from the decision-making processes highlights that the intimate disruptions are built into the regulatory frameworks of both workfare programmes and the broader system of claimant requirements and benefit sanctions. Thus, the conditions of unliveability engendered by these practices are here seen as the direct result of a desire to control and manage the minutiae of unemployed benefit claimants' lives – a desire that is increasingly fragmented across a range of different actors and institutions, rather than necessarily expressed by a coherent state actor.

At the institutional level, workfare programme delivery is highly stratified, such that many of the programmes (eg, the CAP) are provided and managed by private corporations, which sometimes further subcontract the placement of some claimants to other corporations, with the work experience placements taking place at a range of private, public and third-sector organisations. Claimants

can be recommended for a sanction by both Jobcentre advisers and workfare programme providers; and overall, the DWP has in recent years put more emphasis on one-to-one relationships between claimants and staff, introducing greater flexibility for staff to tailor conditions to specific claimants (Morse 2016). Consequently, claimants usually depend on a specific staff member for key information, advice and 'job coaching', as well as for the continuation of their benefits. There is some evidence that those at lower levels of professionalisation tend to comply more rigorously with the law, suggesting that pushing more decision making to frontline staff could increase its punitiveness (Humphris 2019). Altogether, a dizzying array of both institutional and individual actors is involved in making decisions about claimant requirements, workfare programmes and sanctions. Such an array, together with the complexity of the associated rules and regulations, almost inevitably introduces at least some human variation or error into the system. Reilly being erroneously told that the SBWA was compulsory and Wilson's experience of requesting more information on the CAP from his Jobcentre adviser but not receiving any reflect many of the personal testimonies of sanctioning. For example, claimants have been sanctioned after being given incorrect or different information by different advisers, and because the DWP sent claimant letters to the wrong address (Trussell Trust 2014).

Further, decisions by Jobcentre advisers can be driven by imperatives other than helping people find work. Sharon Wright's study at a Jobcentre concludes that 'the work done by front-line staff was ... structured more by pressures of time, forms, computer systems and performance targets than by statements of official policy or guidance' (2002: 249). Her findings echo a National Audit Office review of benefit sanctions that found their use to be 'linked as much to management priorities and local staff discretion as it is to claimants' behaviour' (Morse 2016: 9). Sanctioning statistics show relatedly that there are significant inconsistencies in their application: referral rates vary substantially both across different Jobcentres and providers, and across time (*ibid*). For instance, a considerably higher number of sanctions referred by workfare providers are overturned after reconsideration or appeal when compared to those referred by Jobcentres: 26 per cent in the case of providers, against the Jobcentres' 11 per cent, in 2015 (*ibid*: 5). This suggests either that the workfare providers are simply keener sanctioners or alternatively that the guidance they receive from the DWP is not detailed enough. Indeed, government contracts tend not to provide much detail about the exact nature of the services that workfare providers should offer; and 'what control there is, government exerts through a tiered system of "payment by results"' (Friedli and Stearn 2015: 41–2; cf Greer 2016) – suggesting a lack of oversight or accountability for private corporations subcontracted to deliver workfare programmes.

These examples show that the delivery of both workfare and sanctions may deviate considerably from their original stated aims (helping and incentivising people to find work, or more or better work), as the large number of street-level bureaucrats and organisations involved in their implementation recreate policy

through their day-to-day work. Thus, while these processes are certainly punitive, their punitiveness does not necessarily arise from staff's desire to punish claimants (although that is certainly also possible). Instead (or in addition), punitiveness is built into the increasingly complex and fragmented nature of service delivery. Without a consideration of this fragmentation, the penalty of these policies seems to appear out of nowhere, from an ephemeral notion of neoliberalism or alternatively from the decisions of a coherent state actor or malicious employee desiring intentionally to punish poor citizens – both of which seem inadequate as standalone explanations. State power here appears diffused across different actors, suggesting that neoliberalisation tends to involve varying effects in different localities, different providers and even for different individual staff members, rather than a blanket shift towards intentional penalisation. This does not necessarily mean that the disruptive and violent effects of these policies and systems are accidental, however. As in the above two sections, it is important to consider the policies' effects, as well as their effectiveness *vis-à-vis* their stated aims; and indeed, in the case of both workfare and the sanctions system a curious gap emerges between the two.²⁸

Considering the effectiveness of benefit sanctions, although the DWP does not collect or make publicly available much data, the international evidence suggests mixed results: while sanctioning may lead to an increased chance of employment, these effects are often short-lived (Morse 2016). Indeed, applying for jobs on Christmas Day or attending a scheduled Jobcentre appointment instead of a close relative's funeral, for instance – both real-life examples of reasons for which individuals have been sanctioned (Stupid Sanctions 2021; Trussell Trust 2014) – does not appear key to the aim of helping the person in question find work. Further, in many cases, sanctioning decisions seem to run counter to the stated aim: people have been sanctioned for attending an interview for a paid job or a Jobcentre-mandated training programme instead of a Jobcentre appointment, as well as for not continuing to look for work after already securing paid employment due to start in a few weeks' time (Trussell Trust 2014). Similarly, in relation to workfare, an independent comparative review commissioned by the DWP on workfare programmes in other countries found that people who engage in workfare schemes are no more likely to find a paid job than people who do not take part (Crisp and Fletcher 2008). The DWP's (2014) own impact analysis of a workfare scheme targeting young Londoners with less than six months of paid work experience, 'Day One Support for Young People Trailblazer', found that those who completed the programme did worse in terms of finding paid employment than those who failed to complete it, with 26 per cent and 60 per cent finding paid work respectively.

Conversely, studies have found that sanctions 'do little to enhance people's motivation to prepare for, seek, or enter paid work'; but also that welfare

28 See Greer (2016) for a more detailed discussion of this distinction.

conditionality initiates and sustains for a substantial minority of claimants ‘a range of negative behaviour changes and outcomes including: ... disengagement from the social security system [and] movements into survival crime’ (Dwyer 2018: 1). Ian Greer (2016) and Amyas Morse (2016) both also suggest that claimants can be incentivised to accept jobs that pay an income similar to or below benefit levels in order to escape the dehumanising benefits system, with the consequence of permanent precarity and circular rather than upward mobility. This has the broader effect of creating downward pressure on wages, thus contributing to the systematic erosion of both the wage and the social wage examined in Chapter 1, as well as to the subjectivation effects examined in Chapter 2. Thus, while the effectiveness of these policies and systems is certainly questionable, perhaps again some benefit for someone is created by these effects. In other words, similarly to the previous sections’ discussions of the bedroom tax and out-of-council housing placements, given that workfare and sanctions do not seem to actually *work* (*vis-à-vis* their aims), their value must lie elsewhere. Jay Wiggan goes as far as to suggest that if we judge workfare programmes (and associated welfare reforms) as ‘interventions to manage labour power and buttress capital’s authority then the reforms appear to be working reasonably well’ (2015: 372).

Public/Private

Scholarly analyses of conditionality and penalisation in social welfare sometimes cast processes and policies such as those examined above as part of a totalising narrative of neoliberalism. For Loïc Wacquant (2012), increasing penalisation is central to neoliberalism, and particularly to neoliberal state power. He argues that the twin regimes of workfare and prisonfare indicate a significant expansion of the penal capacities of the state, as well as a transformation of state power overall. As Lacey (2013) points out, however, it is often unclear not only which political, economic and social institutions constitute neoliberalism, but also how exactly they are implicated in producing neoliberal penalty. Similarly, Jamie Peck argues that the distinctive features of policy making in a neoliberalising context are often ‘confused – deliberately or otherwise – with preordained or inevitable forms of state restructuring and policy change (when they are, of course, nothing of the sort)’ (2001: 446). In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate precisely how penalty is produced in the context of three different housing and welfare policies, with the consequence of significant and often violent disruptions to the affected individuals’ lives. As we have seen in relation to the implementation of the bedroom tax, the increasing practice of out-of-council housing placements and the delivery of workfare programmes and benefit sanctions, penalisation does not emerge in practice like a straightforward drive to punish by a coherent and singular state actor, expressed in the wording of a particular policy, but rather via highly complex and fragmented systems of

implementation – perhaps including local councils, private subcontractors and street-level bureaucrats, as well as the courts.

Importantly, this does not constitute a weakening of the state or a reduction in its power – sometimes assumed to be a key aspect of neoliberalism. Rather, state power (and the capacities for undertaking statework) is here dispersed across a variety of actors in a ‘thin’ form of devolution, where autonomy for local actors appears highly conditional within the new, dispersed systems of implementation and service delivery, as both Peck (2001) and John Clarke (2004) argue. These dispersed systems of ‘thin’ devolution involve various changes in ‘regulatory responsibilities, administrative capacities, financial control, political power and so forth’ (Peck 2001: 447) in such a way that the other actors’ capacity for decision making is heavily restricted. For instance, the highly stratified systems involved in delivering workfare and sanctions discussed above appear to confirm Peck’s point about a ‘new regulatory “unsettlement”’ (2003: 223) involving a set of messy, complex and uneven processes of institutional restructuring. Similarly, the incorporation of private subcontractors into workfare delivery and the shifting council responsibilities in allocating social housing, for instance, constitute such restructurings, blurring the boundaries between policy areas, delivery systems and governance and accountability mechanisms. Penalisation emerges precisely from these fragmented and complex processes of restructuring – between the central government, on the one hand, and local councils, Jobcentres, private providers and individual street-level bureaucrats, on the other – that accompany neoliberalising policy implementation and service delivery.

The local and private actors involved in these processes, as well as the individual workers within them, are increasingly expected to act according to narrowly defined managerial imperatives, performance targets and audit mechanisms, but simultaneously subjected to less and less oversight and accountability. Whether the actor involved is a Jobcentre, private provider or local authority – or an individual employee – their capacity to act is thus both heavily constrained and free from meaningful oversight. We must consider the possibility that this is, in fact, the point of such restructurings, since it is precisely the vagueness and contradictions in these processes that allow the central government to remain in control of institutional capacities, accountability arrangements, financial and other resources and so on, while also appearing at arm’s length when it comes to assuming responsibility for the consequences. Indeed, many of the gaps, discrepancies, contradictions and fragmentations within the processes of implementation and service delivery that I have examined above seem to be driven by central government action – even, or perhaps especially, in instances where policy aims appear contradictory to each other. My analysis thus in part confirms the argument made by many that the neoliberalising processes of localisation and privatisation rarely involve a direct transfer of state capacities and power to other actors (eg, see Clarke 2004; Jones and Novak 1999; Newman and Clarke 2014; Peck 2001). Instead, they tend to entail a range of *inter-scalar* shifts – in policy framings, resources, institutional capacities, delivery systems,

accountability arrangements and so on, whereby the national state remains firmly in control of the processes of ‘inter-scalar articulation’ (Jessop 2000: 182).

The common conceptualisation of neoliberalism as involving deregulation, minimal government spending and a reduction in centralised state power is thus not borne out by my analysis of the unfolding of so-called privatisation and localisation in practice. These three examples demonstrate that sub-contractor relationships rarely involve a direct transfer of power from the state to local and private actors. In addition to reductions in state power, neoliberalism is sometimes assumed to entail a reduction in the extent to which the state seeks to intrude in the private sphere, reflecting an understanding of neoliberalism as a doctrine of individualism and freedom. The above analysis has also illustrated some of the ways in which this is not borne out – in many instances, neoliberalisation seems, in fact, to involve significant increases in the extent to which the state seeks to intrude in the private sphere. The three case studies of this chapter function as examples of such intrusions, whereby various state actors are involved in making decisions about where a poor individual or household can live, both geographically and in terms of specific accommodation; who they can live with; who they can rely on for both formal and informal care and support; how many bedrooms they should have; how they should spend their time; and how they should behave. The intimate disruptions detailed here seem part and parcel of processes of neoliberalisation, with the effect that the intimate or private sphere is not quite one’s own, with other people, institutions and priorities determining how it should be organised.

Apart from the financial penalties, some of the most disruptive effects of these processes – or in other words, their punitiveness – arises from their intrusions into the intimate sphere. Although it is certainly possible that the intimate disruptions are the desired consequences of the policies and practices discussed in this chapter, they are nonetheless achieved through the processes by which state power is being reconfigured – by way of a fragmented interplay between the local and national, and the public and private, actors involved in statework. Penalisation itself is thus intimately connected to intimacy; and I argue consequently that paying attention to the latter is necessary to understand the former. Importantly, failure to act according to the demands and requirements of these intimate disruptions usually involves significant financial penalties, and can lead to poverty, destitution, homelessness, mental and physical health issues, and even death (eg, see Beatty et al 2015; Burman et al 2017; Butler 2020; DWP 2015; Dwyer 2018; JRF 2014; Moffatt et al 2015; Morse 2016). The intrusions detailed here are of course not experienced evenly throughout the population; rather, it is the poorest and most marginalised who are also subject to the most punitive effects – or as Wacquant argues, ‘actually existing neoliberalism extolls “laissez faire et laissez passer” for the dominant, but it turns out to be paternalist and intrusive for the subaltern’ (2012: 74). That the boundaries between the public and private are conditional particularly

for racialised and poor populations has also been argued by many others (eg, see Alexander 1994; Boyd 1997; Carby 1982).

The above discussion has demonstrated the shifting division between the public and private spheres, as well as how this division is made conditional in the lives of benefit-receiving people. Regulating the public/private divide thus remains a key aspect of the state's role in conditions of neoliberalisation, indicating the need for some caution about the assumption that neoliberalism is causing states to decline in relevance. In fact, we might think of this regulation, and the associated intimate disruptions, as a key contributor to what Timothy Mitchell (1999) terms the 'state effect'. He argues that the state appears to exist both 'as material force and as ideological construct' (ibid: 76); and that the boundary between state and non-state is a discursive and cultural effect, rather than a constant. Jyoti Puri adds to Mitchell's conceptualisation the notion that the governance of sexuality helps to achieve state effect by sustaining 'the illusion that states are a normal feature of social life, unified and rational entities, intrinsically distinct from society, and indispensable to maintaining social order' (2016: 5). The regulation of the intimate sphere examined here similarly helps to reproduce the notion that the state is a monolithic entity, a coherent actor and a necessary force. The final section of this chapter considers what, if any, space for political action emerges in the gaps opened up by the diffuse operation of state power, and how we might counter the state effect sustained by the intimate disruptions examined in this chapter.

Rethinking the State

Peck argues that 'by accident or design, neoliberal policy programs seem to be especially effective in undermining potential sources of political opposition' (2001: 452), via what he calls the 'micro-management of the poor' (ibid: 449). Jeremy Gilbert's (2013) argument about 'disaffected consent' is also relevant here. His point relates to precarity within the working population, but it applies to benefit recipients too (and in any case, the two groups are often one and the same): if one's time is overwhelmingly taken up by the labour of meeting the complex and contradictory demands set out in one's claimant's commitment, normalising a sense of insecurity and isolation, then perhaps not much time or enthusiasm is left for political activism. In other words, exhausted and isolated populations concentrating on the task of daily survival do not need to be convinced of the benefits of neoliberal ideology. This effect of the micro-management of poor people's lives also helps to sustain the division between the respectable and 'dysfunctional' poor discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, bringing the latter under the purview of greater state interference. Wacquant argues along similar lines that both workfare and prison-fare are needed to 'supervise the same dispossessed and dishonoured populations destabilised by the dissolution of the Fordist-Keynesian compact' (2012: 67). This chapter's examination of intimate disruptions thus illustrates how dissent is in

practice stifled in conditions of neoliberalisation, contributing to its depoliticising effects.

There is another aspect to how neoliberalisation reduces opportunities for political action. To draw on Peck again, he argues that the ‘devolution of delivery systems and the continued churning of policy strategies tends to (over) stretch the capacities and diffuse the energy of oppositional movements, rather than opening up the space for more progressive local initiatives’ (2001: 452). As this chapter’s discussion has shown, implementation and service delivery are in many instances dispersed across such a wide range of actors that it is challenging to figure out who was responsible for a particular decision, let alone achieve accountability. Although a relatively high proportion of sanctioning decisions are overturned on appeal, for instance, the appeal processes themselves are complicated and time consuming, meaning that many might choose not to appeal. In contrast, others argue that the processes of dispersal and fragmentation can also generate new spaces for political action (Newman 2013, 2014, 2020; Newman and Clarke 2014). Neoliberalisation has by no means been completely achieved in Britain (or anywhere) – and not just in terms of local variation, but also ‘the co-existence of diverse governmental, economic and political projects’ (Newman 2014: 3291). Neoliberalisation – like any set of policy imperatives – has to ‘reach accommodations with other forces and fields’ (Newman 2013: 520), including, for instance, other kinds of understandings of the purpose of social welfare or social housing, other kinds of attachments to the state and other kinds of political desires. It is here, in these other understandings, that we can perhaps locate some potential for political space and action.

The week before the bedroom tax came into effect in April 2013 – with dozens of protests and direct action campaigns against the policy also underway – Labour MP Frank Field called for landlords to take direct action in order to prevent the policy’s effects falling on the most vulnerable:

I hope landlords will brick up the doors to spare bedrooms and, where appropriate, knock down the walls, so that the properties can safely fit the tenants. I have never before asked for direct action. I do so now because I feel the measures are grossly unfair. (quoted in Morris 2013)

Despite a warning against such actions subsequently given by Welfare Reform Minister Lord David Freud – threatening to withdraw housing benefit subsidies from councils that ‘inappropriately’ reclassify properties because of the bedroom tax (Brown 2013) – some landlords and councils responded to Field’s call. In a well-publicised case, Knowsley Housing Trust in Merseyside reclassified almost 600 properties, preventing tenants from being subject to the bedroom tax (Tolley 2013). In a similar vein, Cobalt Housing in Liverpool began converting its properties in 2015 to better match the requirements of tenants in its area, literally knocking down walls (Criddle 2015). While in both cases these actions incurred costs for the landlord, the reclassifications and conversions also made

sense from the point of view of demand, as tenants are increasingly unwilling to accept properties deemed to have too many rooms under the bedroom tax (ibid). Reports of other – usually Labour-run – councils exploring the possibility of taking similar action followed (Morrison et al 2013).

These local authority and landlord actions to counter the effects of the bedroom tax echo the implications of research conducted on 1980s municipal activism in the UK, most notably by Janet Newman (2012) and Davina Cooper (2017). At the time, many councils opposing the politics of Prime Minister Thatcher's Conservatives found creative ways of, for instance, supporting oppositional projects and local groups by 'drawing on residual or unintended resources' (ibid: 348) and using 'creative accounting techniques' (ibid: 346). As well as the reclassifications undertaken by some councils and landlords to counter the effects of the bedroom tax, we can think here of actions taken by DWP employees to help claimants navigate the punitive welfare policy landscape in the wake of the Welfare Reform Act – for instance, via various Twitter accounts and websites (eg, see JobcentreMole 2021; Job Seeker Sanction Advice 2019). JobcentreMole's Twitter bio states it is 'whistleblowing to help anyone wanting to know what JCP dont want you to know' (2021). The website offered advice for appealing sanctioning decisions and challenging workfare referrals, and was reportedly run by 'three disgruntled former civil servants' who 'have been inundated with pleas for help [from] welfare claimants who believe their benefits have been wrongly docked' (Morris 2014). These examples of (alleged) current and former DWP employees sit alongside various activist-run accounts and resources that provide assistance to people claiming benefits, with perhaps the main difference being that the former tend to act anonymously.

The situations of local authorities in the 1980s and in the post-financial crisis era are of course not directly comparable – especially because of the ways in which their capacities for autonomous action have been constricted, and their capacities 'to offer an alternative base for political action' (Newman 2012: 852) restricted, in the context of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis. Even in the 1980s, the 'activist' councils were 'far from autonomous, being simultaneously embedded in national sector hierarchies, ... while leveraged and guided by central government carrots and restraints' (Cooper 2017: 342). Although these examples of oppositional action from within or the fringes of 'the state' are limited in scope, various other possibilities for such creative action are certainly imaginable. At the very least, they indicate a potential for local councils and other actors to act in ways that mitigate against the most punitive and disruptive effects of welfare cuts and housing 'reform'. They may also resignify neoliberal logics and policy imperatives, acting as 'incubators of new possibilities that may bend or adapt neoliberal logics or ... establish alternative pathways' (Newman 2014: 3296). Overall, they signal the possibility that governmental resources and capabilities could be directed to other purposes, as Newman (2013) suggests, thus also indicating some possibilities for states, or

parts of the state, 'to provide a productive terrain where progressive politics can happen' (Cooper 2017: 338).

These examples have another important function, apart from creating immediate change and mitigation in the lives of affected individuals. Even if just momentarily, they reveal states to be fragmented and fragile, poking holes in the notion of a coherent, unitary state hermeneutically sealed from the realm of 'society' or the 'non-state'. Janet Newman and John Clarke argue that 'how we imagine the state, how we feel about it, will shape the kinds of politics that are possible' (2014: 153). Here we can also think with Puri (2016) about how sexual regulation helps to sustain the state effect; and conversely, how drawing attention to such sexual regulation can help to challenge the notion of a coherent and bounded state (and its power). Considering states as thoroughly peopled institutions, fragmented and fragile in their operation, can thus open potential spaces for alternative imaginaries or political action. Cooper (2020a) points out that prefigurative state thinking has tended to occur on the neoliberal right, with various individuals, thinktanks and other organisations actively engaged in reimagining the state's functions, purpose and reach over the past several decades. In many ways, the processes of fragmentation and dispersal examined in this chapter are the result of precisely such reimaginings. Perhaps, then, as Cooper suggests, it would be beneficial not to leave prefigurative state thinking in the hands of actors seeking to reduce the space available for alternative political imaginaries or action.

Although radical politics should certainly engage in reimagining the state, it is also important not to overstate the potential for radical political change from within the state. Indeed, the state question is a challenging one: on the one hand, only engaging politically from outside the state appears to be an illusion that can actually bolster state effect, and consequently state power; on the other hand, believing in the state's transformative potential can lead to co-optation or even fetishising the state, as Puri (2016) cautions. I would add that the risk of co-optation also exists when political organisation only takes place outside of the state, however – as we have seen, for instance, in the state's co-optation of voluntarism and mutual aid in the rhetoric and practice of 'big society'. In Nikita Dhawan's words, 'progressive political projects are caught in a double-bind *vis-à-vis* the state and its coercive powers' (2020: 58) – a double bind that marginalised groups and political projects have wrestled with for a long time. Nick Gill's (2020) analysis of border abolition provides one way of thinking about, or beyond, this bind. He argues that one way to politically combine longer-term systemic changes and more short-term reforms would be to support only those short-term reforms that are commensurate with the longer-term objective. Similarly, here we might consider whether the more piecemeal micro-political struggles that take place in, or are driven from within, the state are compatible with a longer-term vision of a non-conditional, universal welfare system or a social housing environment not based on scarcity, for instance. Further, we might want to examine whether these examples of resistant action from within the state are not just compatible with, but also generative of, liveability, a range of normative and non-normative intimacies, pleasure and so on.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined three housing and welfare practices and policies frequently seen as examples of growing conditionality and penalisation in social welfare. I focused on their intimate effects, highlighting the value judgements they entail of different intimate relations, needs and practices, and suggesting that they engender conditions of unliveability in the lives of affected individuals. I then argued that these intimate disruptions emerge at least partially due to the fragmented nature of neoliberalising policy implementation and service delivery, indicating a shifting public/private divide – although perhaps not in the way commonly imagined. While state power is increasingly dispersed across a range of actors, it is not reduced in any meaningful way; and at the same time, the state increasingly intrudes in the intimate lives of benefit claimants. Finally, I examined spaces for political action that have opened up within the changing landscape of state power, arguing that imagining the state as entirely oppositional to progressive politics can strengthen state effect and therefore have a depoliticising effect. In a similar vein to how Kathi Weeks imagines basic income as a provocation of desire – ‘for more money, more time, more freedom’ (2011: 146), perhaps the spaces opened by the diffuse operation of state power can also be thought of as such a provocation. Without such imaginaries the neoliberalising state appears as total, and totally dominant, with the only possibilities for political action located entirely outside of it. In the next and final chapter of this book, I move from analysing intimate disruptions in the private sphere to examining events in the public square over which significant battles of meaning have been fought.

Material/Cultural

Protest and Politics

In 2010, at the beginning of the period under investigation in this book, I was doing my master's degree in London. As much as for the content of my course, I remember the year for the massive student demonstrations and occupations taking place all around the country opposing the tripling of tuition fees proposed by the Coalition Government, alongside a host of other austerity-related cuts and reforms, such as the scrapping of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA). The biggest by far was a march organised by the National Union of Students and University College Union on 10 November, attended by an estimated 50,000 people. The size of the march shocked even the organisers, who had beforehand been worried about not getting any press for the demonstration (Myers 2017). The tone of the event was lively, carnival-like; but after the march itself had all but ended, a few hundred protestors found their way to and occupied the Conservative Party headquarters at Millbank Tower in Westminster, London, while a much larger group watched on from the square outside. The events at Millbank dominated media discussion over the following weeks, with commentators, elected representatives from student organisations and politicians split on nearly every aspect of the story: who the occupiers were; what their motivations were; whether their actions were justifiable; what the implications were for the broader 'cause' and so on.

Millbank was not my political awakening, but it certainly helped me to intimately understand how political narratives are constructed and fought over. I was at Millbank Square for a while – not among the smaller group of protesters who occupied the building, but the much larger group that cheered on from the outside. The atmosphere was electric and, like many of the attendees, I had never quite experienced anything like it before. People on the square lit bonfires using placards from the demonstration and everyone was chanting, with the silo-like shape of the building amplifying the auditory experience. There were sound systems and dancing – it was like 'some kind of rave, but during the day' (Arnie Joahill, quoted in *ibid*: 43). I ended up staying at Millbank for some time after my friends had left. Although it felt a

little strange being at a protest alone, I could not leave – I felt surrounded by friends even though I knew almost no one there. Such an affectively charged shared political experience is a pleasure and a joy that I have only experienced a handful of times since then (as in the example discussed in the introduction). As Matt Myers suggests, ‘rather than a small minority, the whole crowd seemed to possess a “spontaneous desire” for direct action’ (ibid: 36); or as Ben Smoke puts it, ‘this was not a demonstration of career activists. It was an explosion of outrage and desperation’ (2020; cf Smith 2010).

For some time, there was no police presence at Millbank and security staff seemed overwhelmed. Then some regular police arrived, not in riot gear and not at all prepared for the size of the crowd. My experience of what shifted the atmosphere at Millbank from carnival to more violent direct action (although the carnival also continued) matches the accounts of many of the interviewees in Myers’s (2017) book on the student movement of 2010–11: they place the blame for the escalation of the events first on the aggressive actions of the (perhaps overwhelmed) police officers, and second on the mocking and jeering of the Conservative Party staffers visible in the offices above. At Millbank, some of the protestors were young college students from deprived areas who were very used to aggressive policing, whereas many of the relatively privileged university students present (myself included) had never encountered indiscriminate police violence before. It felt clear (and shocking) to me at the time that the actions of the police were what had escalated the situation. My experiences at the time thus intuitively aligned with the views of those scholars of riots who argue that what structurally creates a riot is the state’s response to protest or direct action – usually in the form of aggressive and violent policing – rather than the actions of the protestors (eg, see Clover 2019; Gorringer and Rosie 2011; Maguire 2015).

As a result, I found it even more shocking to witness the ease with which commentators on all sides of the political divide condemned the actions of the protestors at Millbank in the aftermath – or took the noncommittal route of ‘neither condone nor condemn’. Naively, I had not expected the response to be one of division – with the ‘peaceful protestors’ clearly and firmly separated from the ‘criminal’ actions of a few ‘anarchists’ intent to ‘hijack’ the protest and cause damage, and media reports even suggesting that militant anarchist groups had organised the occupation in advance (Myers 2017; Smoke 2020). Already at the time of the events, a narrative was being formed: as Clare Solomon, then president of University of London Union, states, ‘we were seeing a party, and the TV was reporting a riot’ (quoted in Myers 2017: 41). Dividing lines were drawn very quickly – ‘the battle over Millbank’s meaning was fierce’ (ibid: 50) – and most of the commentary seemed to miss the point. Myers quotes advice he received from a more experienced protestor after the events:

Look. Tomorrow and the day after a lot of people are going to be saying: ‘it means this’ or ‘it means that’ or ‘we should be in charge’ or

whatever ... Don't listen to them; it was you lot that did it, you know. You should allow yourself to go with it and be changed by it and don't let it be put in any of these boxes. (*Ibid*: 50–1)

Arguably this is exactly what many in the so-called 'Millbank generation' have gone on to do, with the events having longstanding effects on protest movements not just in Britain but also across Europe; a lasting impact on many of its participants (myself included); as well as various effects on Britain's political field more broadly, as I discuss further below (eg, see Hancox 2020; Myers 2017; Younge 2019).

This chapter focuses on three examples of protest, or moments of political action, over which significant discursive battles have been (or might be) similarly fought – one fictionalised and two 'real-life' events. First, I examine the fictionalised version of the events at the 1985 Pride parade in London presented at the end of the 2014 film *Pride*. Second, I focus on the narratives formed about the 2016 Brexit referendum that have characterised the Leave vote as a 'protest' of the 'left behind'. Third, I investigate debates about the England riots that took place in 2011 – the year after Millbank – beginning in Tottenham, London after Mark Duggan was shot dead by a police officer on 4 August. As in the above anecdote about the Millbank occupation, my focus here is on the *narratives* formed and fought over in the aftermath to the events (or in their narrativisation in a work of fiction), rather than necessarily or primarily on the 'real' events that occurred. As with earlier chapters, I am juxtaposing three events that might at first glance appear quite different from each other – but not to suggest they are similar *as events*. Instead – and similarly to Chapter 2's examination of narratives of deservingness – I do so in order to highlight the 'hegemonic processes of sense making' (Negra and Tasker 2014: 2) and the battles over the discursive framings evident in the stories told about these protests.

The previous chapter's focus was on intimate disruptions in the private sphere, engendered by state processes, which I argued have significant effects on the public/private division. Here my attention is directed at events in the public square, over which significant battles of meaning have been fought, which I argue both draw upon and entrench another key binary division: that between material and cultural political claims or 'grievances'. The final section draws together each of the preceding sections' discussions of the material/cultural division, in order to highlight the ways in which this division helps to discursively separate class-based politics from so-called 'identity politics', marking them as fundamentally different from each other – and, I argue, with significant effects on what kinds of political spaces, subjectivities and action are imaginable, or even legible. I then focus on the broader understanding of the relationship between identity and politics that underpins this separation, and argue that identities are better understood as arising out of, rather than leading to, political participation and collective mobilisation. This leads me to finally consider the role of desire in politics, particularly in moments when conventional arenas of (electoral) politics provide no space for its expression.

Pride as Protest

The film *Pride* (2014) tells the story of a group of gay and lesbian activists in 1980s London, who begin a campaign to raise money for miners and their families affected by the 1984–5 miners' strikes under the moniker 'Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners' (LGSM). The narrative follows the group gradually getting to know the residents of a small mining town in the Welsh countryside – chosen as the target of their fundraising efforts primarily because they were the first to accept, while many others refused, the group's money, tainted by its association with sexual deviance. Dubbed the 'feelgood' film of the year, *Pride* was both critically acclaimed and relatively commercially successful (Kernode 2014b; Richardson 2020). The film sits within a recent tradition of British cinema that highlights the struggles of working-class communities in the face of deindustrialisation, following other comedy-dramas in the genre, such as *The Full Monty* and *Billy Elliot*. Based loosely on real-life events, *Pride*'s narrative is one of overcoming differences towards a common goal and much of its narrative drive – as well as its comedy – derives from the awkward but warm-hearted encounters between the urban gay and lesbian activists and the rural working-class miners.

This overall narrative arc is exemplified in the storylines of two characters, one on each side of the political divide central to the film. Gethin is the owner of the Gay's the Word bookshop in London but is originally from Wales. During the film he is gradually embraced by the mining community, who start to treat him as one of their own. He has not seen his mother for over a decade, but the film's events eventually bring them back into contact with one another. Cliff is an older man from the mining town and central to the process through which the gay activists are accepted by (most of) the community. Towards the end of the film, he comes out as gay to Hefina, one of the key organisers in the town's strike action, in the following exchange:

CLIFF: I'm gay.

HEFINA: I know. I've known for a little while now, love.

CLIFF: Since the gays arrived?

HEFINA: Well, I can't speak for the rest of the village. But – speaking for myself – since about 1968.

The storylines of Cliff and Gethin mirror each other, as well as epitomising the film's overall narrative depicting a shift from a position of oppositionality to one of reconciliation. Both characters have suppressed one side of their identities while embracing the other: Cliff has stayed in the closet for decades out of fear that his working-class community will not accept him, while Gethin has run away from his working-class roots in order to live life openly as a gay man. Both characters also find a way to integrate the two sides of themselves by the end of the film.

The film's final scene takes place a few months after the end of the strike, at the 1985 Gay Pride parade in London. The LGSM activists are getting ready

for the march when they are told by an organiser that no political slogans will be allowed in the main march, and the group therefore has to march either without their banner or 'at the back, with the fringe groups'. Their disappointed mood is soon interrupted by the arrival of the miners' van, however, and the two groups have a happy reunion. Busloads of miners then arrive, having travelled to London to show their support for LGSM, forcing the organisers to allow LGSM and their many supporters to march at the front. This scene is followed by a sequence mixing footage of the film's protagonists with actual newsreel footage of the 1985 Pride march. As the group walk against the backdrop of the Palace of Westminster, the footage is overlaid with text telling us what happened to key characters, and with the following excerpts:

A year after the strike ended, a motion was tabled at the Labour Party Conference to enshrine gay and lesbian rights into the Party's manifesto.

Although the motion had been raised before, this time it was passed.

This was due, in part, to a block vote of total approval from one key union – The National Union of Mineworkers.

Finally, the camera zooms in on a Welsh miners' banner depicting two hands clasping each other – referenced multiple times throughout the film – and then the screen fades to black.

These end scenes had the same effect on me that *I, Daniel Blake* seemed to have on everyone who saw it (discussed in Chapter 2): the images of the miners descending from the buses to attend the Pride march and support LGSM made me cry not only the first time, but also the second time I watched the film, with a much more analytical eye and attitude. Craig Haslop (2018) similarly states that he was touched by the film's intersectional portrayal of class and sexuality; and critic Mark Kermode makes a related point in his review: 'I am predisposed to embrace *any* movie that celebrates the rag-tag allegiances that sprang up across class and gender boundaries during the miners' strike' (2014b). Likewise, I felt especially moved by the easy and kind-hearted solidarity between queer and class politics that the film highlights. These depictions of broad-based political alliances, as well as of the political subjectivities of the different groups involved, are powerful in part because they appear as emblematic of a different era. The affective attachments that *Pride* solicits from its viewers are – similarly to those that *I, Daniel Blake* relies on – structured around nostalgia: perhaps in this case for a time when class politics were seemingly not so firmly discursively separated from sexual (identity) politics. Importantly, though, this nostalgic attachment functions rather differently in the case of the two groups of activists.

It is telling of the differential positioning of the two groups that I did not cry when the LGSM activists descended on the mining town, but only when the miners in turn descended on the Gay Pride march: the narrative structure of the film presents the story of the gay activists as central and that of the miners as

secondary. Haslop also notes that this relationship is depicted as hierarchical – for example, in a scene he analyses, Gethin’s partner Jonathan teaches some of the Welsh locals to dance:

in a narrative move that all at once reproduces a classed cultural hierarchy where the sophisticated metropolitan visitor teaches the less well educated men to dance, and a gay male stereotype where queer men have natural dance ability, that straight men do not. (2018: 310)

This scene also points at the different temporalities in the two groups’ framings: the LGSM activists seem part of a long march towards an inevitably sexually equal future, whereas the miners’ struggle appears symbolic of the loss of working-class politics as we know it. While the film reaches its narrative climax at the 1985 Pride parade-cum-protest, the miners’ strikes provide more of a static backdrop for the film’s events, with little independent impact on the plot. Their story ends with the ending of the strikes – largely considered a victory for Thatcher and her Government, and a significant contributing factor in the decline of the British trade union movement. The miners’ story gets no progressive political ending; in fact, their struggle becomes increasingly futile in the years following those depicted in the film, with the coal industry eventually privatised in the 1990s. Former coal mining towns are among the poorest areas in austerity-era Britain (Foden et al 2014).

Conversely, the gay activists’ struggle continues long beyond the ending of the film. Ben Walters argues that *Pride* is part of a broader ‘backward turn’ in LGBT cinema, representing ‘a moment of taking stock’:

In recent years, in the industrialised world, the struggle for LGBT rights has become closely bound to the pursuit of equal access to institutions such as marriage and military service. Now that those goals seem to have been substantively achieved, there’s space to breathe and become reacquainted – or, for younger audiences, acquainted for the first time – with facets of past queer experience that might be useful in preparing for whatever is to come. (2016)

Some younger activists have gone on to do exactly what Walters suggests, with the group Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants (LGSM) founded shortly after the film’s release. In the film, however, this ‘looking back’ takes place from a position in the present where the goals of ‘the struggle for LGBT rights’ have supposedly already been achieved, thus allowing the gay activists’ actions to be read as a rather straightforward ‘progress’ narrative towards the present. The excerpts exclaiming the political victories that resulted from the actions of the LGSM activists, quoted above, confirm the reading that the film’s narrative arc is the gays and lesbians’ – not the miners’. The story closes resolutely with the steps taken towards ‘gay rights’ – without as much of a mention of the

miners' struggle – perhaps culminating in the passing of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act in 2013, as Walters indicates.

Further, though, it is specifically the white and male gay activists who are centred in the film's narrative. The young men provide the primary points of attachment for the film's audiences, while their lesbian counterparts offer mostly comedic release – and their comrades of colour barely appear on screen at all. The lesbian activists in LGSM are mostly portrayed through their relationship with Gwen, an elderly woman in the mining community, who is fascinated by both the LGSM activists in general and the lesbians in particular. When the activists first arrive in the village, Gwen shouts into the hall, 'Dai, your gays have arrived'; and soon, during introductions, she starts: 'Now. I'm hoping you can clear something up for me about lesbians ... It's something I was told in the covered market and to be honest, it did surprise me' – until being stopped by others in the group. She finally gets to ask her question much later in the film:

GWEN: Now, what I was told about lesbians really did shock me. It can't be true, can it? You're all vegetarians?

STELLA: Actually, Zoe and I are both vegans. [Gwen looks shocked]

This scene's impact (and humour) derives from the fact that Gwen's question is not centrally to do with sexuality or sexual acts, as viewers may have assumed. Over the course of the film, she finds various points of commonality with the LGSM activists as they go clubbing and discuss topics as varied as love and relationships, leotards and talcum powder.

Niall Richardson argues that Gwen's 'unassuming perspective' is a key part of the film's depiction of the gay rights politics of the 1980s, seeking to demonstrate that gays and lesbians were 'exactly like their heterosexual counterparts – apart from their same-sex, sexual object choice', surpassing 'the idea of a radical gay "revolution" of sexual expression' (2020: 10). In the final scene described above, Gwen shouts, 'Where are my lesbians? Where are my lesbians?' as she gets off the miners' van, indicating that any doubts she might have had about an alliance with LGSM have dissipated – or perhaps been replaced by an emphatic attachment based on commonalities between the groups instead. Haslop similarly points out that it is the women of the mining community who bridge the differences between the groups, as their 'willingness to be playful, carnal and carnivalesque, is shown to allow greater freedom to explore their sexuality' (2018: 311), and to find commonalities with the gay activists; although, as Haslop notes, this may be based on a rather stereotypical, romanticised view of working-class culture. Contrary to Gwen, who is a consistent (albeit mostly comedic) point of reference on the miners' side, the lesbians in LGSM never quite get portrayed in the same way as fully fledged characters. There is a brief reference to a lesbian separatist group formed among the women in LGSM (Lesbians Against Pit Closures); but overall, they do not embody the same kind of explicitly politicised subjectivity as that inhabited by the gay male activists. It is thus specifically the white gay male activists

from London who are narratively juxtaposed with the mining community in Wales, as well as centred in the film's storyline in general.

On the whole, then, the two groups that the film follows get rather different treatments: the young gay activists' struggle reads as a rather typical progress narrative, while the miners' one appears more like a straightforward loss narrative. In terms of the latter, loss narratives require the death of the lost object in the past, as Clare Hemmings notes in her analysis of feminist loss narratives, in order to 'write the present ... in negative terms' (2011: 74). In this way, the film's portrayal of the miners as engaged in a losing battle, or of their struggles as almost futile, echoes commonplace understandings of the demise of class politics since the 1980s – for instance, famously described as a 'zombie category' by Ulrich Beck (Beck and Willms 2004). Importantly, though, as Hemmings continues, loss narratives' 'temporal gaze moves both backwards and forwards, anticipating the return' (2011: 73) – as I discuss in more detail in the next section's analysis of Brexit narratives. In terms of the former, progress narratives conversely tend to be imbued with positive affect, 'told with excitement and even relish' (ibid: 35). Indeed, the overwhelming sense of unity, resolve and triumph that the film ends with only makes sense if we identify with the gay activists' story, rather than that of the miners. In this way, the film's narrative arc aligns with the common notion that class politics are dead – or that class is a zombie category – and perhaps that this is because of increasing individualisation or the growing primacy of identity-based politics.

However, progress narratives also tend to depend on certain erasures about both the political past and present, glossing over aspects of the political struggle that do not fit the narrative. It is the film's 'feelgood' sensibilities that necessitate something of a separation from the realities of the AIDS crisis raging at the time of the storyline, and as a result there are only minor nods to HIV/AIDS in the narrative. Most notably, these appear in relation to Gethin's partner Jonathan, who is HIV positive; and in the reaction of Maureen – a woman in the mining community who refuses to accommodate any of the activists in her house because of her fear of AIDS. Relatedly, the enactment of Section 28 by Thatcher's Government a couple of years after the film's narrative ending certainly disrupts the progress narrative that sees the struggles depicted in the film as leading straightforwardly to marriage equality a couple of decades later. Richardson relatedly makes the case that the film offers a 'nostalgic revision of 1980s Gay Liberation politics by conflating the current agenda of Gay Rights (especially the importance of same sex marriage and the mainstreaming of gay desire) with the struggle for Gay Liberation in the Thatcherite decade' (2020: 17). In his view, it is because of the prevalence of a rights-based framework, and an assimilationist politics that emphasises equal marriage and other forms of formal recognition by the state, in the present that the film needs to write the past as neatly aligning with such a politics.

Overall, then, while the story of *Pride's* gay activists 'becomes a repository for ... traces of hope made manifest in a utopian tale of eventual and

inexorable progress', that of the miners remains mired in 'nostalgia in a dystopian account of inexorable loss' (Hemmings 2018: 22). In both cases, the nostalgic attachments cultivated in the film tell us as much (or more) about the political desires of the 2010s as they do about those of the 1980s. It is thus no surprise – or, perhaps, accident – that *Pride* was released in the middle of the austerity era, just as the harshest effects of austerity policies were beginning to be felt and just over a year after the Marriage Act received royal assent. It is precisely in this time that it makes sense to discursively leave behind the clear-cut working-class struggles of the 1980s and beyond, as the film arguably does, with their attachments to class-based political identities that no longer match present realities, while at the same time celebrating the many political victories of rights-based gay and lesbian movements since the 1980s. As I have explored throughout this book, however, these nostalgic attachments only make sense if we hold certain, fixed, views of the subject of politics.

The kind of progress narrative of the horizon of queer politics exemplified in the film remains coherent insofar as it is just the gay or lesbian (or perhaps the bisexual) who acts as the subject of such a politics. In other words, it only makes sense to view marriage equality and the achievement of other formal rights for gay and lesbian subjects as the endpoint of sexual politics if the homosexual/heterosexual binary is expected to carry all sexual meanings and act as the basis of all sexual politics. Similarly – and akin to my earlier conclusions in relation to *I, Daniel Blake* – a loss narrative about class only survives our scrutiny if it is the Daniels and the miners who are positioned as the protagonists of contemporary class politics. In other words, this view of the demise of class politics only holds up if we accept that the real meaning of class is to be found in a set of cultural-historical markers attached in the British context to a particular (white and male) blue-collar subjectivity of the (pre-)Thatcherite era. Both viewpoints assume that it is possible to know conclusively and in advance what kinds of inequalities might attach to sexuality or class (or indeed race, gender or disability, for instance), or be encountered by sexual or classed subjects – as well as how such inequalities might be best tackled.

As Hemmings argues:

in imagining that we know how to ameliorate gendered, racial, and sexual inequalities, or indeed what gender, race, and sexuality are, it is easy to miss the profound ambivalence about these terms and the inequalities or pleasures that cluster around them. (2018: 5)

The narratives of *Pride's* gay and working-class activists are based precisely on such a notion of the knowability of how sexual or class inequalities can be ameliorated. The discursive framings of the miners and the gay activists through imaginaries of loss and progress, respectively, thus function to hide the 'profound ambivalence' that Hemmings refers to, erasing the many other possible

trajectories for both class and sexual politics, in the past and in the present. The next section examines a very different kind of protest from those depicted in the film *Pride*: that frequently incorporated in narratives about Brexit. It continues this section's analysis of the formation of class and sexual politics by examining the understandings of 'difference' drawn upon in common Brexit narratives that have tended to frame it as a protest of the 'left behind'.

Brexit as Protest

In 2016, the UK voted to leave the EU by the smallest of margins, eventually officially leaving in January 2020. The intervening period was blighted by bitter political and scholarly debate about the reasons behind, and the consequences of, the winning Leave vote. Media pundits, politicians and academics disagreed on whether the Leave campaign(s) won because of the support of working-class or middle and upper-class voters; because of racism or nostalgia for a more prosperous, imperial Britain (or indeed how closely related the two are); because of material or cultural issues; because of excluding migrants or refusing the domestic status quo of half a decade of austerity; and as the result of a well-informed choice or an emotionally charged protest vote. Although we now know more about at least some of the reasons behind the success of the Leave campaign(s) than we did in the vote's immediate aftermath, the debates over Brexit's meaning continue to resonate in both stories circulated and popular understandings about it. In this section of the chapter, I explore some of these stories, focusing in particular on the common narrative of 'left behind' communities voting to Leave as a protest. My interest here is not so much in finding out the 'truth' (or any of the truths) behind the victory of the Leave campaign(s), but rather to explore these common stories specifically to tease out some of the broader narratives about 'difference' that they both draw on and reproduce.

One of the more common narratives to emerge out of the debates over Brexit's meaning was the notion that the Leave campaign(s) won due to a protest vote of the 'left behind' – deprived and/or working-class communities feeling marginalised by Britain's economic and cultural transformations since the 1970s, particularly in the north of England, voting against the establishment and 'politics as usual'. For instance, Agust Arnorsson and Gylfi Zoega add to the impact of age and educational level that 'low level of per capita income' was a key indicator of voting behaviour, noting that perhaps 'low income makes people more willing to upend the status quo' (2018: 314). Matthew J Goodwin and Oliver Heath's version of the argument claims that Brexit was delivered by communities 'pushed to the margins not only by the economic transformation of the country over recent decades but also by the values that have come to dominate a more socially liberal media and political class' (2016: 331). Ronald F Inglehart and Pippa Norris also emphasise culture and values, positioning 'groups most likely to feel that they have become strangers from the predominant values in their own country, left behind by progressive tides

of cultural change which they do not share' (2016: 5) as key players. Michael Hartmann and Klarissa Lueg (2017) focus on the protest element, suggesting that Brexit was about voting against traditional elites, particularly in the City of London. Similarly, Eleonora Alabrese and Thiemo Fetzter argue that 'the *marginal vote* shifting the EU referendum in favor of Leave likely was a protest vote, as opposed to a vote representing a well-informed choice' (2018: 2), linking support for Brexit with being affected by austerity-related welfare cuts. News outlets relatedly commonly characterised Brexit as a 'working-class revolution', as Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter detail (2019; for an example, see Kilcoyne and Ledwith 2019).

The 'left behind' narrative thus combines the experience of economic hardship with a sense of cultural alienation, locating the harshest effects of these processes of marginalisation in working-class communities in the north of England, and hypothesising that as a consequence such communities chose to use their referendum vote to protest against 'the establishment'. The 'real' reasons behind the success of the Leave campaign(s) are of course more complex and multifaceted than what I can do justice to in this chapter. However, we do now know from the work of many others that the 'left behind' narrative is at least not the whole story about Brexit. Danny Dorling et al (2016) show that of all Leave voters, over half were, in fact, from the middle classes and lived in the South of England; and Robert Calvert Jump and Jo Michell (2021) use the English Index of Multiple Deprivation and conclude that there is no evidence of a causal relationship between deprivation and Leave voting. While many studies indicate a correlation between lower educational levels and Leave voting, Dorling et al point out that 'average levels of educational attainment are so strongly confounded with age that it is very hard to compare qualifications over time' (2016) – with age thus appearing a much stronger indicator than either class or education.

Others have taken issue with the north/south divide that has emerged as a key aspect of Brexit narratives – even becoming something of a euphemism for other key binaries such as rural/urban and working-class/middle-class. Craig Berry (2019) points out that differences in voting patterns between the north and the south are much smaller than such narratives would suggest, arguing that the north has been co-opted by politicians on both sides of the left-right divide for their own political ends. He goes on to state that it would be more accurate to talk about communities 'deliberately subjugated' rather than 'left behind', suggesting that EU membership is neither straightforwardly positive nor negative for such communities. Alexander Nurse and Olivier Sykes (2019) relatedly call for more nuanced and geographically detailed analyses of Brexit voting patterns, arguing that the emphasis on a north/south division oversimplifies the geographies at play. The tendency to label entire constituency areas (or even the UK's constituent countries) as either Leave or Remain voting in a 'first past the post' manner has reinforced the (at least somewhat) imaginary north/south binary. Against this backdrop, Nurse and Sykes's own analysis of differences in voting patterns between the adjacent and similarly

deprived constituencies of Liverpool and Wirral is an example of welcome nuance (cf Evans 2017; Rhodes et al 2019). These scholars' works highlight some of the complexities at play, perhaps heeding Calvert Jump and Michell's warning of the 'danger that the term [left behind] can become all things to all people' (2021).

If Brexit was – at least in significant part – delivered by middle-class communities residing in the south of England, rather than just working-class ones in the north as is commonly suggested, then its characterisation as a protest of the 'left behind' is certainly highly questionable. As Gurinder Bhambra and many others further note, in Britain, 'the empirical category of the "left behind" understood in terms of socio-economic disadvantage contains within it significant proportions of the Black and minority ethnic population' (2017: S216; cf Mondon and Winter 2019; Rhodes et al 2019; Roth 2018; Virdee and McGeever 2018). Dorling et al also highlight the significant numbers of eligible voters who did not vote or were not even registered, pointing out that these groups hailed disproportionately from among 'the young; flat-dwellers, especially renters; members of ethnic minorities; [and] recent movers' (2016: 1). These groups would seem to align much more closely with the 'left behind', if we understand it as an empirical category denoting socio-economic disadvantage, than the groups that voted Leave in greater numbers do. Indeed, as previous chapters have discussed, in Britain, the effects both of the longer-standing processes of neo-liberalisation and deindustrialisation and of the austerity politics of the past decade have fallen disproportionately on racialised groups, disabled people, women and lone parents. Similar groups now experience the starkest rates of poverty, particularly BAME (especially Pakistani and Bangladeshi) households, single-parent families, renting households and families where someone is disabled (Francis-Devine 2021; JRF 2021). The discourse of the 'left behind' is thus based on a misrepresentation of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, or of the 'working class' of contemporary Britain.

Notably, the 'left behind' discourse racialises the working-class as white, positioning it as separate from black and ethnic minority communities, which are in turn understood not to be part of the working class in significant numbers, as Bhambra (2017), Mondon and Winter (2019) and Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever (2018) all discuss in more detail. This positions racism as a working-class issue, letting the middle-class and elite groups that arguably spearheaded the Brexit campaign(s) off the hook. In this way, narratives of the 'left behind' draw on a much longer-standing discourse of the 'white working class', which has tended to pit class-based and other differences against each other in a battle over material and cultural resources, as Chapter 2 highlighted. This oppositional positioning is based not just on lamenting the loss of class politics, as the previous section discussed, but also specifically on their supposed substitution with a range of cultural grievances or identity politics. The notion that class politics has been slowly side-tracked by the rise of identity politics

from the 1960s and 1970s onwards is reflected not just in popular commentary (eg, see Rutherford 2018), but also in some academic analyses that explore the so-called ‘death of class’, finding its cause in the increasing prioritising of other ‘axes of difference’ (Valentine and Harris 2014: 84) or ‘identity and difference’ (Crompton and Scott 2005: 191). In such arguments, the loss of class politics is linked variously to the increasing prominence of specific identity categories, such as sexual or racial ‘identities’; of identity politics generally; or – rather vaguely – of culture.

If the storylines of the film *Pride* draw on both a common loss narrative with regard to social class and a progress narrative with regard to sexuality, as the previous section argued, then the stories told about Brexit as protest that rely on a binary division between class and cultural/identity politics could be read similarly as a straightforward return narrative. Hemmings’ analysis of feminist return narratives is again useful – as with loss narratives:

the present has to be evacuated of feminist political value (otherwise why the lament?), the past has to be that which has been lost, but also, and importantly, a good object worthy of being recovered (otherwise its loss might not be lament-worthy). (2011: 73)

Similarly, in Brexit narratives, the present is read as devoid of class politics; but such a politics is also presented as a good object worth recuperating – of course by the subject doing the lamenting. The return narratives of Brexit tap into the discursive divide between class and so-called ‘identity politics’, needing to ‘replay precisely this scene of opposition in order to produce the (new) ... subject [of class politics] in the moment of reading’ (ibid: 114). Thus, such narratives tend not just to position class-based political claims as fundamentally different from identity-based ones, but also to frame the latter as a range of personal (cultural) grievances from which we must now move on and the former as the business of ‘real’ (material) politics to which a return is awaiting just over the horizon.

Reading Brexit narratives of the ‘left behind’ ‘white working class’ as a return narrative may also shed some light on their increasing culturalisation. For instance, Gillian Evans discusses how an emerging cultural nationalism combined ‘with a hodgepodge of previously unconnected complaints against austerity, the establishment, the EU bureaucracy, and capitalism more broadly’ (2017: 219). Virdee and McGeever describe this shift as follows:

the white working class – a descriptive and analytic category whose origins lay in social science research – has over the course of this decade-long crisis been brought to life as a collective social force in the Thompsonian sense (1991), such that some working class men and women now understand and make sense of the real economic pain they suffer through such a racialized frame of white working class victimhood. (2019: 1811)

As I argued in Chapter 2, the cultural markers of working-classness have tended, in the British context, to align closely with a rather specific version of white, blue-collar masculinity. Consequently, it is perhaps not that surprising that a return narrative lamenting the loss of class politics in Britain would call for a return of prestige precisely to the groups identifying with these cultural markers from the (pre-)Thatcherite era – rather than to groups experiencing deprivation or marginalisation in the labour market today. In this way, the consolidation of the ‘left behind’ ‘white working class’ as a cultural and political identity diverts attention away from the effects of both socioeconomic disadvantage and institutional racism, as well as the role of the state in sustaining or contributing to these processes (eg, the gendered effects discussed in Chapter 1 or the intimate disruptions examined in Chapter 3).

Mondon and Winter further point out that:

in the “left behind” discourse, the post-industrial working class is not only presumed to be white, but male. White men are posited as having lost their jobs, earning power, status and ability to support and protect their family and maintain their patriarchal and masculine power. (2019: 517)

I agree – and I would add further that this discourse is heteronormative, in that the post-industrial working class is, as well as white and male, also imagined to be straight. Indeed, that recorded hate crimes against LGBTQ+ people also rose in the months following Brexit, as did those against ethnic minorities, supports this connection (Townsend 2016). In this discourse, a sense of loss of prestige, a postcolonial melancholy and a British – or increasingly *English*, as Virdee and McGeever (2019) note – nationalism contribute to an identity politics based on a victimised, straight, white masculinity. The oppositional positioning of class politics and so-called ‘identity politics’ in Brexit narratives has further commonly drawn on and reproduced a number of other binaries: rural/urban, working-class/middle-class, north/south, the ‘left-behind’/the ‘metropolitan elite’ and so on. The first part of the binary functions as shorthand for ‘real’ material politics that require our attention, with the second part dismissed as a set of frivolous, cultural or identity-based demands. In this way, the ideal subject of class politics comes to be imagined as a white, straight, male blue-collar worker; and conversely, that of so-called ‘identity politics’ as a racialised and/or queer cosmopolitan activist from the ‘liberal elite’.

The morphing of the notion of a materially deprived ‘white working class’ into a cultural identity of white, male victimhood thus misunderstands the relationship between so-called ‘identity politics’ and material inequalities. In other words, like the loss and progress narratives discussed above, the return narrative of the ‘white working class’ also depends on a number of discursive exclusions to remain coherent – not least the issue of who actually makes up the working class today. Additionally, for instance, Bhambra points out that white identity politics arguments depend on a recasting of ‘campaigns in the

UK in the post-war period to address issues of racial inequality and the US civil rights movements ... as movements of racial identity that enabled ethnic minorities to gain advantages over others in similar positions' (2017: S217). What gets labelled 'identity politics' in these narratives – whether based on racial, gendered or sexual 'identities' – often masks a long history of political organising on issues of both material inequality and cultural representation. In reading these political struggles as purely about 'identity' or 'cultural recognition', such a politics perhaps aims to legitimise its own foundation in a cultural identity based on the loss of privilege – rather than on a shared experience of inequality. To borrow Bhambra's words again, 'what is attributed as identity politics cannot be separated from an address of inequalities, while [white] identity politics are an expression of a wish to maintain those inequalities' (ibid: S220).

Finally, such understandings of the relationship between class and identity politics tend to misread the increasing prominence of the latter as a reason behind 'factionalism' in the left more generally. I would argue that more accurately we might think of the (arbitrary) division between material and cultural political claims as a reason behind the misrepresentation of the working class as white, straight and male, which in turn contributes to the disaggregation of the working class as a whole. As previous chapters have shown, the various 'other' axes of difference (eg, sexuality, race, gender, disability) play key roles in the creation and maintenance of material (as well as cultural) inequalities; and frequently class processes such as exploitation and precarisation draw on these other inequalities for their legitimacy and efficacy. The positioning of political claims related to these 'other' differences as wholly cultural – and of those related to class as not just entirely material, but also entirely unrelated to these 'other' differences – thus leads to a misreading of how inequalities are created and sustained in the context of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis.

Riot or Protest

In the summer of 2011, England saw what has been described as 'the worst bout of civil unrest in a generation' (Lewis et al 2011: 1). From 6–11 August, an estimated 14,000 people engaged in looting and violence across the country – mostly concentrating in bigger cities such as London, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool, but also affecting smaller cities and towns. A large proportion of the participants were young people: 30 per cent of those interviewed for the research conducted jointly by *The Guardian* and the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) (ibid: 13) were under 18, and a further 49 per cent were aged between 18 and 24. They were from mixed ethnic and racial backgrounds, and close to 20 per cent of them were women (ibid: 13–14). The event that sparked what have come to be known as the '2011 England riots' took place two days before the spreading of the unrest: the shooting dead of an unarmed 29-year-old black man, Mark Duggan, by a police officer in Tottenham, London. The riots – as well as the discursive

responses to them, in both the media and politics – have been the subject of much scholarly interest and my intention here is not to replicate these analyses – or indeed to find out the truth about the events. Rather, as above, my focus is, first, on how these narratives deployed the material/cultural distinction; and second, on their discursive effects on notions of difference more broadly.

Debates about the riots have certainly drawn on the material/cultural division, but in a different way from the above two examples: commentators condemning the participants (whether in politics, media or academia) have tended to frame their motivations as either excessively cultural or excessively material. To address both of these framings in turn, first, the former explanation positions the participants' actions as evidence of the dysfunctional cultures of the poor examined in Chapter 1. Here the looting, criminality and violence are attributed to bad parenting, growing up without a father and general cultures of dysfunctionality. For instance, then Prime Minister David Cameron stated in his address to the House of Commons on 11 August:

This is not about poverty; it is about culture ... In too many cases, the parents of these children – if they are still around – do not care where their children are or who they are with, let alone what they are doing. (HC Deb 2011: c1054)

In a speech on 15 August, he continued: 'I don't doubt that many of the rioters out last week have no father at home ... we need more urgent action, too, on the families that some people call "problem", others call "troubled"' (2011). Cameron's words illustrate clearly the connections made between 'cultural poverty', criminality and 'troubled' internal family dynamics that also played a part in the setting up of the Troubled Families Programme, discussed in more detail in Chapter 1.

In these types of framings, sexualised assumptions about family dynamics, family form and parenting more broadly, as well as the common vilification of single mothers more specifically, were centrally drawn upon to paint the participants as part of a both culturally and criminally dysfunctional 'underclass' (eg, see Riddell 2011 for an explicit use of the term). As well as appearing in politicians' and media commentators' analyses, such discursive framings are reproduced in the responses to a poll conducted by *The Guardian* on public perceptions of the causes of the riots, where 'poor parenting', 'criminality' and 'moral decline' were voted as the top three causes (Lewis et al 2011: 11). This narrative reproduces the 'cultural poverty' argument positing that a differentiated group of poor people can be identified with a distinct set of values around worklessness and criminality, which supposedly makes this group fundamentally different from the 'respectable' poor. I have already highlighted many issues with such narratives in Chapter 1; suffice to say here that one of the key functions of the reproduction of the cultural poverty narrative in

responses to the riots is to divide poor people into distinct groups along respectability lines – to drive a wedge between those who did not partake and those who did by painting the latter as immoral criminals. Further, as Fidelma Ashe (2014) notes, this type of analysis privatises the causes of the riots, thereby depoliticising them, as well as removing any collective or governmental responsibility from the discussion.

In the days and weeks following the riots, another key set of explanations rose to prominence, particularly among media and scholarly commentators: one blaming cultures of excessive materialism for the events. In one of the more well-known examples of this line of argument, Zygmunt Bauman frames the 'rioters' as 'defective and disqualified consumers' (2011), positioning the events as a sort of symptom of a broader culture of excessive consumerism and the participants as being motivated by their failure to successfully embody this culture and its norms. David Harvey (2011) blames 'feral capitalism', calling those who participated 'contemporary have-nots' and 'mindless rioters' – again suggesting that their internalisation of hyper-capitalist norms was a key dynamic. Although Harvey's focus is on the feral nature of capitalism, it is important to note that many others painted the rioters themselves as 'feral' or similar – from the 'underclass' framing mentioned above to the labels of 'mindless violence and thuggery' (David Cameron in HC Deb 2011: c1053), 'feral kids' (Riddell 2011) or simply 'scum' (Johnston 2011). Slavoj Žižek's framing also resonates with some of these dehumanising narratives circulated in the aftermath: 'On British streets during the unrest, what we saw was not men reduced to "beasts", but the stripped-down form of the "beast" produced by capitalist ideology' (2011).

In a scholarly version of this argument, James Treadwell et al suggest that the 'rioter' reality was dominated by 'consumer drives ... because nothing else existed – neither a transcendental ideal, nor a politicized dialectical struggle, nor resentment against state authority – that might win their hearts' (2013: 7). They go on to argue that this means the 'rioters' 'appeared not to oppose, but to be animated by the ruling ideology' (ibid: 14), illustrating well the depoliticising effect of this type of argument. The suggestion here is that while the 'rioters' may have been poor or marginalised, the events themselves were not political because the participants so identified with 'the ruling ideology' of neoliberal consumerism – rather than opposing it. Žižek also makes this point explicit in his analysis, as he states that 'the UK rioters had no message to deliver', framing the events as 'a violent action demanding nothing' and as "'irrational" outbursts of destructive violence' (2011). These paternalistic notions of 'irrationality' and 'mindlessness' remove any agency from the participants, positioning them as pawns in the hands of broader ideological forces; or, as Žižek asks, 'who will succeed in directing the rage of the poor?' (ibid). As many others have pointed out, contrary to the myth of the 'irrationality of the crowd', riot participants are typically 'well integrated into local settings and have specific concerns and grievances' (Gorringe and Rosie 2011: 13); and crowd violence is commonly

'targeted, limited, and patterned' (Ball and Drury 2012: 5; cf Clover 2019; Jensen 2013; Naegler 2014; Newburn et al 2018; Starodub 2018).

Further, I want to emphasise the notion of the human that underpins this set of explanations for the 'riots'. The portrayal of the 'rioters' as irrational, mindless and feral has the effect of dehumanising them; or as Joshua Clover states, 'the purported spontaneity of such rebellions becomes an ideological opportunity to treat rebels as reflexive and natural, lacking in rationality, unsovereign, socially determined but not determining, not fully human' (2019: 166). Here a reading of the events as spontaneous and of the violence as random combines with an older set of discursive framings of racialised and classed primitiveness to position the participants as 'pathological ... urban post-colonial primitives' (Brotherton 2014: 232) – and accordingly, not quite as human. As many others have argued, the colonial separation between 'primitive natives' and 'civilised Europeans' is based on a notion of the former as driven by irrational, animalistic, sexual urges (eg, see Alexander 1994; McClintock 1995; Stoler 2010) – an idea that is certainly evident in the racialising portrayal of the English 'rioters' as mindlessly enacting their excessive (consumer) desires. This set of explanations locates the causes of the riots within the participants themselves and thus psychologises the events, which – similarly to the 'cultural poverty' narrative examined above – works as a depoliticising force. This further helps to justify both the use of coercive force in response during the events themselves and the disproportionate sentencing afterwards.

Here we can also note how both explanations discussed so far were used to symbolically exclude the 'rioters' from the nation, drawing a line between them and 'real Britishness'. Whether understood to be expressing their dysfunctional cultures or their excessive materialistic urges, the participants' actions were not seen as an expression of their 'Britishness' – which, as discussed in Chapter 2, also tends to be imagined as oppositional to blackness (eg, see Gilroy 1992). Conversely, those who participated in the riot clean-up efforts were frequently portrayed as exemplifying the spirit of Britain or London (eg, see Peacock 2016). In response to such framings, Gargi Bhattacharyya (2013) insists on viewing the riots as part of the processes by which national boundaries and belonging are negotiated. Indeed, we can think of the common riot narratives as another example of the boundary-making strategies of both whiteness and the nation discussed in Chapter 2. Anti-blackness works here together with sexualised notions of excess and moral dysfunction to reproduce the nation as both a white space and a space of sanitised, respectable intimacy (eg, see Berlant 1997; Bhattacharyya 2013). This positioning of the 'rioters' as not part of the 'national family' also constitutes an interesting reversal of the common positioning of the Brexit 'protest' as a clear-cut expression of Britishness or Englishness, as highlighted above. Similarly, we can think here of the nostalgic alliances that the narratives of *Pride* build between the white working-class miners and the white, sanitised version of 1980s gay activism. Both can perhaps be considered examples of how the British nation is reproduced as both white and heteronormative – similarly to the riot narratives themselves.

At least partially in response to these two sets of explanations, a third explanation arose slightly later that sought to explain the participants' actions with reference to their socioeconomic circumstances. This line of argumentation has tended to focus on marginalisation, poverty and a general lack of viable futures for young people living in urban areas in Britain, following decades of deindustrialisation and neoliberalisation. For instance, Charlie Cooper (2012) argues that we should pay more attention to the structural context of the riots, emphasising processes of marginalisation based on race and class. *The Guardian*/LSE research similarly suggests that the riots expressed 'a pervasive sense of injustice' (Lewis et al 2011: 24) – whether about poverty, inequality or social stigmatisation and subjugation – with many interviewees directly mentioning welfare cuts and especially the scrapping of the EMA. A second key aspect of the material circumstances of the 'rioters' is antagonistic relationships with the police. For instance, *The Guardian*/LSE research frames 'a long-burning frustration and anger with the police' (ibid: 18) as the first key factor behind the events themselves, as well as central to explaining the link between the actions of the 'rioters' and the shooting of Mark Duggan – which the researchers argue 'symbolised the most extreme end of a spectrum of targeted, unjust and brutal treatment to which they perceive they are subjected' (ibid: 18). Jutta Kawalerowicz and Michael Biggs (2015) find similarly that rioting was less likely in boroughs where people felt they had the respect of the police, and 'rioters' in turn were more likely to come from economically deprived areas.

The opinions of the 'rioters' themselves seem to at least partially confirm this viewpoint – in *The Guardian*/LSE research, 'poverty', 'policing' and 'Government policy' appear as their top three explanations, with 'unemployment' fourth in the responses of both the 'rioters' and the 'general public' (Lewis et al 2011: 11). For those who engaged in the riots, therefore, the events appear as resolutely political, with one interviewee stating decidedly: 'I still to this day don't class it as a riot ... I think it was a protest' (quoted in ibid: 24). I agree that the material circumstances of the participants are certainly important to acknowledge and examine – particularly so because of the prevalence of explanations that paid barely any attention to them at all, and as a result claimed the events were entirely apolitical, as outlined above. Sometimes such accounts have tended towards determinism, however, as Tim Newburn et al (2018) also note. Here the actions of the 'rioters' are understood as a straightforward expression of their political grievances, grounded in their material circumstances. As Bhattacharyya (2013) points out, this type of narrative does not help us understand why this particular incident (Duggan's killing) provoked a riot, while many others did not. Similarly, we can ask why widespread rioting occurred in 2011, but not during much of the following decade – at least on the same scale – when a harsh programme of austerity was being implemented, with very significant consequences for young people's lives and future prospects.

Further, though, this third narrative has some discursive effects which are not that dissimilar to those of the above two narratives. First, a paternalistic version of this argument certainly exists too: while in the first two explanations the 'rioters' are understood to be acting out either the cultural dysfunction inherent

to their communities and families or the hyper-capitalist, consumerist norms of their broader environment, in this explanation they are perhaps simply acting out their poverty and marginalisation. Here the form that the ‘protest’ took – rioting and looting – is understood as a deviation from its *real* meaning: ‘a compromise of, the initial grievance that might have granted the riot legitimacy’ (Clover 2019: 29). Second, a milder version of this narrative involves claiming that the actions of the ‘rioters’ were simply a rational response to their material circumstances. Here their actions are, if not justifiable, then at least explainable because of the lack of legitimate avenues for political action or political alternatives. Some of the participants seem to confirm this view, with one interviewee in *The Guardian*/LSE research stating, ‘When no one cares about you you’re gonna eventually make them care, you’re gonna cause a disturbance’; and another exclaiming, ‘it’s just like a depression, man, that you sink into ... I felt like I needed to be there as well to just say “Look, this is what’s gonna happen if there’s no jobs offered to us out there”’ (both quoted in Lewis et al 2011: 25).

While I do not dispute the rationality of such motivations to participate in the riots, at the same time I do not find it particularly helpful to separate the rational from the emotional in attempts to legitimise political action. James M Jasper notes a tendency for social scientists to denigrate emotions and only to incorporate them in studies of ‘Nazis, moral panics, and other movements they dislike’ (1998: 420–1), pointing out that emotion and affect play a role in all politics, not just ‘riots’. In other words, the binary division between rational and emotional is not neutral, but is usually deployed hierarchically – to condemn political action assumed to stem from an emotional reaction or to justify political action assumed to be based on a ‘rational’ assessment of one’s circumstances. Attempts to justify the riots with reference to their ‘rationality’ thus seem to share a dynamic that is also at play in the Brexit narratives examined above: perhaps the ‘left behind’ narrative resonated with so many precisely because it deploys such a notion of ‘rationality’ to make sense of the Leave voters’ decision, with reference to their real, material circumstances. In both cases, my sense is that the role of emotions is just as important as that of rationality; I return to this role later in the chapter, after first drawing together these analyses of the material/cultural division to highlight its effects on understandings of the relationship between identity and politics.

Identity and Desire

This chapter so far has discussed three examples of protest, focusing specifically on their narrativisation in media, in political and scholarly discourse, and in a work of fiction. The storylines of the film *Pride* were shown to rely on an oppositional representation of sexual and class politics, with the former framed as a progress narrative and the latter as a loss narrative. While the gay activists’ story was presented as part of a longer-term process towards marriage equality

and other formal rights for gay and lesbian subjects, that of the miners ended swiftly with the ending of the strikes, with no indication that their political struggle might continue into the future. The common Brexit narrative of the 'left behind' was then examined as drawing on the longer-standing return narrative of a victimised 'white working class'. This narrative commonly valorises the cultural-historical markers of a specific British (or English) straight, white, male blue-collar subjectivity – rather than being based on shared experiences of material deprivation or inequality. Finally, the narratives circulated in the aftermath of the 2011 England riots were analysed as most commonly tending to frame the participants' motivations as either excessively cultural or excessively material. The material/cultural division was thus reinforced in each set of narratives, with material and cultural political claims framed as fundamentally different from each other – and sexual politics further positioned as belonging firmly to the latter category of political claims.

A key aspect of the material/cultural division examined above is thus the discursive designation of sexuality into the cultural realm. As Hemmings argues, 'culture sticks to sexuality' (2011: 117), in such a way that sexuality tends to be 'associated with superficiality and "leisure" rather than the serious business of politics' (Hemmings 2018: 15). The common underlying assumption is that sexuality is a purely cultural category that bears little relevance to issues of economic redistribution and (in)equality. Many others have also critiqued the discursive separation of sexuality from material or economic concerns – 'a move that enables the "private" and feminized realm of social reproduction not only to be broken off from the "public" and masculine realm of political and economic power, but also to be removed from inquiry altogether' (Smith 2016: 234; cf Berlant 1997, 2011; Butler 1997; Duggan 2003; Hemmings 2011, 2014, 2018). More generally, this separation also presumes 'that the distinction between material and cultural life is a stable one' (Butler 1997: 267), and ignores the various ways in which sexuality (and other supposedly purely cultural categories of difference) play a part in the creation and maintenance of material inequalities. My argument here has been instead that the cultural and the material commonly intertwine in the processes by which inequalities are created and sustained.

Curiously, however, as Hemmings (2014) points out, many such critiques continue to rely on the homosexual/heterosexual distinction in making the case for the inclusion of sexuality in analyses of material and economic inequalities.¹ At the same time as they insightfully critique the separation of sexuality from the economy – for instance, by highlighting the close connections between relations of production or consumption and heteronorms, or increasingly homonorms – they nonetheless tend to prioritise the material and economic inequalities that arise as a result of this relationship for sexual

1 Arguably this is the case, at least to an extent, for instance with Butler (1997), Duggan (2003) and Smith (2016).

minorities. Hemmings specifically examines the well-known debate between Judith Butler (1997) and Nancy Fraser (1997), where they both – despite their disagreements – continue to ‘read sexuality’s relation to political economy through a heterosexual/homosexual divide’ (Hemmings 2014: 376). Butler and Fraser (and many others) not only ignore the many other ways in which sexuality might be sutured to the political economy, but also place the weight of this relationship squarely on the shoulders of sexual minorities – as if all sexual inequalities could be resolved with reference to sexual identities. My argument here is similar to Chapter 1’s critique of feminist politics where the gendered division of labour is sometimes made to bear the weight of all political claims targeting the organisation of work. Similarly, critiques of the separation of sexuality from economic and material concerns sometimes assume that sexual inequalities could be ameliorated simply by ensuring that gay and lesbian subjects are not disproportionately represented among those experiencing deprivation.

Relatedly, the discursive framings examined in this chapter also have significant implications for how identities generally, and the relationship between identities and politics more specifically, are understood. In the case of *Pride*, the progress and loss narratives only make sense as a lens through which to understand sexual and class politics, respectively, if a specific, pre-determined subject is positioned at the centre of these narratives. In other words, viewing sexual politics as a progress narrative ending with the achievement of marriage equality relies on the positioning of a gay or lesbian as the subject of such politics; and similarly, viewing class politics as a loss narrative requires the positioning of an industrial blue-collar worker as its subject. Relatedly, in the case of Brexit, the return narrative that frames the ‘left behind’ as one and the same as the victimised ‘white working class’ only makes sense if the subject of class politics is imagined as fixed to the cultural-historical markers of white and male blue-collar subjectivity of the (pre-)Thatcherite era. Finally, although the narratives of the England riots do not rely on fixed, pre-defined *identities* in the same way as the above two, the most common explanations circulated for the events have nonetheless tended to view them as a straightforward consequence of the participants’ subject positions. In the case of each narrative, then, politics – political desires, claims, actions, communities and so on – are imagined to directly follow from the subject position or identity of the actor involved.

Importantly, my claim here is not that sexual or other identities have somehow dissipated – a notion that Heather Love argues blinds scholars ‘to the tenacity of this concept both in history and in individual subjectivity’ (2009: 44). Nor is it that other identity categories, such as class-based ones, are more important than sexual identities. Identity remains an important organising concept both in political structures and in individual experience – and clearly it also matters to me, given my strong affective reaction to the gay activists’ storyline in *Pride*. This is thus not a critique of identity politics as such, but rather, first, of the common misreading of identities as wholly cultural categories without any relationship to or bearing on

material inequalities; and second, of the common positioning of identities as something that precedes politics. As James Clifford argues, instead of preceding political participation, identity is 'made and unmade, connected and disconnected, in the interactive arenas of democratic, national, and transnational social life' (2000: 95). Stuart Hall similarly conceptualises identities as 'points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us' (1996: 6). If people become political subjects through their 'social and historical connections and disconnections' (Clifford 2000: 96), then politics is not just about mobilising existing identities, but also about the processes by which these connections and disconnections are forged in the processes of political action, participation and community building.

Leticia Sabsay's (2016) critique of identity and rights-based political frames is relevant here: for her, such frames are based on a particular, liberal conception of the subject, the primacy of which enacts its own exclusions and regulations in the political field. The liberal idea of the individual that forms the basis of sexual identity politics reifies sexual difference (and cultural difference, as Sabsay also points out in her discussion of multiculturalism), positioning it as an attribute assumed by an ontologically prior subject. Tethering all (sexual) political desires onto a set of fixed identities in turn regulates and limits 'what is conceivable as a politically valid object of struggle' (*ibid*: 65). In other words, the framing of identities or subject positions as something that precedes political participation assumes that we can tell in advance what kinds of inequalities might attach to certain aspects of difference, which subjects they might impact and what might need to be done to ameliorate them. Similarly, positioning politics as something that flows from stable, pre-defined subjectivities functions to conceal or exclude from the political realm any claims that do not follow the logic of autonomous liberal subjectivity. Sabsay notes that this commonly happens with the political claims of, for instance, sex workers and hijab-wearing Muslim women, whose 'choices are not considered as legitimate expressions of [a] liberal self' (*ibid*: 169).

The 'problem' with identity politics is thus not that it has led to a displacement of class, but rather that identities have come to bear all the discursive and political weight incurred by the various vectors of power they represent – in such a way that the operation of these vectors of power outside of the realm of identity is obscured and therefore easily ignored. In other words, rather than class politics being displaced by the increasing prominence of identity or cultural politics – or, indeed, a politics of redistribution by a politics of recognition, to use Fraser's (1996, 1997) terms – as many have suggested, I would instead argue that the full operation of both class and sexuality within the political economy is obscured by a narrow understanding of them as stable, fixed, wholly cultural or identity-based categories that ontologically prior subjects inhabit. Overall, the 'culturalisation of politics' that many have discussed and lamented (eg, see Clarke 2004) is thus at least partially the consequence of an under-emphasis on sexuality and other vectors of difference as a key part of regimes of material inequality, rather than

an over-emphasis on them overall. Importantly, I am not suggesting here that the material is more important than the cultural: Lisa Duggan points out similarly that the material/cultural distinction itself functions as 'a kind of *ruse* of capitalist liberal discourse – a *ruse* that obscures the intricate imbrications of relations of race, gender, sexuality, and class in the institutions of capitalist modernity' (2003: 83). As previous chapters have shown, the politics of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis have centrally depended on the maintenance of cultural and material divisions between differently racialised, gendered and sexualised subjects for their political efficacy and legitimacy – with this chapter illustrating how the material/cultural division then functions to obscure these processes.

If, like Ferruh Yilmaz, we understand both class and so-called 'identity politics' as 'strategic interventions at particular historical conjunctures in the fight against oppression and for equality rather than politics based on identity categories objectively identifiable in the relations of production or oppression' (2018: 213), we might also understand some of the political struggles and protests examined in this chapter differently. If political subjectivities – sexual and otherwise – are formed within political struggles, then perhaps, for instance, the England riots could be more usefully positioned as a starting point for processes of identity formation, rather than as their end point. In other words, rather than attempting to explain the events as an expression of some kind of pre-existing subjectivity or identity, we might also want to consider what kinds of political subjectivities and identifications were forged both during and in the aftermath of the events. Here I want to briefly consider the riots from this perspective – not to suggest that what follows is necessarily a better explanation for the events than those outlined above, but rather to offer a different perspective on them, with the aim of bridging some of the divisions between the binaries of rational/emotional, material/cultural, legitimate/frivolous and so on.

First, *The Guardian*/LSE research strongly disputes the government's view that 'at the heart of all the violence sits the issue of the street gangs' (Cameron in HC Deb 2011: c1054). This view – much circulated and discussed in the media in the events' aftermath – suggests that the ephemeral 'gangs' were responsible for coordinating the looting and the attacks on the police (Lewis et al 2011). However, from the participants' perspective, the days of the riots saw an unprecedented truce form between many gangs. Many interviewees expressed 'surprise, and often delight, that during the riots the postcode warfare that was for them a fact of life had – for a short time – melted away' (ibid: 22). One interviewee described his experience of the 'truce': 'there weren't no gangs. I didn't know no one there, but we all got together that day, the Asians, the blacks, the whites. It felt like we were like one big gang' (quoted in ibid: 23). As intimate relationships are formed and reinforced with friends, acquaintances and strangers, a riot creates a shared plane of experience – and even an opportunity for a momentary collective identification based on immediate, shared experience, rather than on prior social position, as both Roger Ball and

John Drury (2012) and Alissa Starodub and Andrew Robinson (2018) note. The participants expressed joy and pleasure at these new, albeit temporary, intimacies and socialities created in the space of the riots, their comments reminiscent of Berlant's suggestion that 'one "does politics" to be in the political with others' (2011: 260).

The collective experience thus reshaped the social dynamics of the actors involved. Rather than divisions between different groups of 'rioters' being dominant, the shared, emotionally charged experience instead positioned the participants as a collective force acting against the police. Hugo Gorringer and Michael Rosie (2011; cf McCosker and Johns 2013; Starodub and Robinson 2018) argue that a key cause of riots is the collective realisation that the police are powerless to stop rioting when dealing with large, mobile and unpredictable groups of rioters. For many participants, the space of the riot functioned as a sort of 'taking back control'; this momentary role reversal generated powerful feelings for them, with one stating: 'normally the police control us. But the law was obeying us, know what I mean?' (quoted in Lewis et al 2011: 23). The oppositional positioning between the police and the rioters indicates a play-like quality to the events, as Newburn et al describe some of their interviewees' experiences:

their involvement was a symbolic retaking of territory ... in a way that involved a form of street performance, games of "cat and mouse" with the police ... that many experienced more as "carnival" than "criminal" or, at least, experienced *both* as "carnival" and "criminal." (2018: 46–7)

Douglas Rushkoff's work on the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement is helpful here – he describes OWS 'not [as] a game that someone wins, but rather a form of play that is successful the more people get to play, and the longer the game is kept going' (2011). Similarly, the 'success' – if it can indeed be called that – for many of the England 'rioters' can be found in the sustained time period in which they were in control, and not the police or the government.

Here we can also start to glimpse some of the positive and joyful emotions that many of the participants seemingly experienced during the days of the riots. For instance, Newburn et al's (2015; 2018) reading of *The Guardian*/LSE interview data highlights the significant role played by positive emotions, such as excitement, joy, exhilaration and pleasure. One of the participants states that during the days of the riots, 'everyone was smiling. It was literally a festival with no food, no dancing, no music but a free shopping trip for everyone' (quoted in Lewis et al 2011: 28). Several of the interviewees use the term 'carnival' to describe their experience of taking part; and although they also described many other emotions, 'excitement was a powerful, almost overriding initial emotion during the riots. A palpable sense of possibility, enjoyment and pleasure was reported by a huge number of respondents' (Newburn et al 2018: 45). As Laura Naegler points out, the pleasurable and sensual allure of political transgression 'constitute[s] the decisive motivation which exceeds rational,

opportunistic and instrumental endeavours and make the transgressive act inherently appealing and rewarding, regardless of any other rewards deriving from pursuits of rational goal achievement' (2014: 157; cf Ashe 2014; Clover 2019; Starodub and Robinson 2018). According to Naegler, these intense emotional experiences can provide an escape from the conditions of alienation and mundanity that are pervasive in the neoliberalising, deindustrialised present – regardless of whether any 'more rational' political motivations are also present.

Here we can observe a slightly different dynamic emerging, allowing space for the emotional and affective, if not sensual and erotic, experience of rioting/protesting itself – as well as perhaps for different kinds of political identifications and collective affiliations based on these experiences. In reading the riots in this way – as certainly expressing some 'rational' political desires, but also as an unprecedented opportunity for a collective political experience – we can also start to see similarities and continuities between the riots and other political events. Both protests and riots take place in a social and political context saturated with meaning; or as Bhattacharyya points out, 'the 2011 riots are incomprehensible without reference to the longer history of riots and the interpretation of riots in Britain, because this is the symbolic arena shaping these actions' (2013: 185). Although I do not want to suggest that one straightforwardly led to the other, it is important to note the commonalities between the 2011 riots, and the 2010 student protests discussed briefly at the beginning of this chapter. Both mobilisations grew from pre-existing political communities and were shaped by those communities' prior experiences of engagements with authorities – whether universities or the police – but also resulted in new political alliances and identifications being formed during the events themselves. In neither case can the 'rational' and the 'emotional' sphere of politics be so easily separated: rather, the events provided the opportunity for both the expression of rational political desires and an emotional (often pleasurable) political experience. Indeed, Clover (2019) finds similar instances of 'the double riot' elsewhere as well, demonstrating the shared nature of the students' and the rioters' struggles.

The commonalities between the 2010 student protests and the 2011 riots should also indicate that young people are anything but apathetic or apolitical, as both were driven overwhelmingly by young people.² If we view both sets of events as part of a broader continuum of political action against the disempowering ethos and impoverishing effects of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis, then it is perhaps not that surprising that age has become the most significant dividing line in British politics since then. Similarly to the Brexit vote discussed above, in both the 2017 and 2019 general elections age was the biggest predictor of voting behaviour (Curtis 2017; McDonnell and Curtis 2019). As Dan Hancox notes, 'future

2 See Rheingans and Holland (2013) for a more thorough discussion of the implications for young people's participation in politics.

historians will look back on the 2010 protests as a harbinger, a first wave of youthful radicalism that was echoed in the wildly asymmetric age breakdowns of recent general election votes' (2020). The increasing political division based on age can thus be seen, at least partially, as a consequence of the collective mobilisations and resulting identifications that arose initially in response to austerity politics at the beginning of the decade. In other words, although these mobilisations began by expressing immediate political desires for which there was no space in the conventional avenues of (electoral) politics, they went on to have longstanding implications for Britain's political field more broadly.

Finally, then, there is something prefigurative about riots/protests, in that they not just challenge the disempowering, everyday affects of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis, but also make momentarily possible – or at least visible – a different set of affects, social relations and ways of being in the world (eg, see Naegler 2018; Starodub and Robinson 2018). Eve Cherniavsky (2017) argues that the OWS movement challenges understandings of politics as representation – in both senses of the word, as it neither seeks to stand in for an anonymous mass of participants nor casts its participants as pre-constituted political subjects. Instead, the subject imagined is 'a kind of hologram – a projection of how one might choose to move in the world' (ibid: 194). A riot can also operate as such a hologram – a projection of a way of moving in the world; in the case of the England riots, the projection was certainly violent, but also much less hierarchical, on the participants' own terms and generative of positive emotions. In the political arena sustained for almost a week, the participants had access to perhaps unprecedented levels of consumer goods, intimacies, positive emotions and political subjectivities, as well as freedom from both police interference and so-called 'postcode warfare'. Although it is important not to overstate the potential of prefigurative political practices (as also highlighted in the previous chapter's discussion of such potential within the state), equally it is important to acknowledge this almost utopian quality of riots/protests – or, in Starodub and Robinson's words, 'the glimmers of other possible worlds that shine out of any space from which the state/capitalist power has been expelled' (2018: 5).

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on three examples of protest, and argued that the common narratives about them have tended to reinforce the material/cultural division, with the key discursive effect of separating class and so-called 'identity politics' from each other. I suggested that this separation is based on a misreading of identities as fixed and stable, and as something that precedes political participation. I then considered the 2011 England riots as an example to highlight how political mobilisations can be generative of collective identifications instead. Such a reading allows for important commonalities to appear between the riots and other political mobilisations of the past decade, such as the student protests that took place a year earlier (and indeed the Black Lives Matter and other protests in more

recent years). We might thus consider both sets of events as somewhat prefigurative: Myers states in his discussion of the student movement that 2010 represented a ‘widening of the field of possibility’ (2017: 10), and perhaps so did the riots. Both prefigured some of the key shifts in Britain’s political field in the following decade, such as the ascent of age to the most significant political division. Both also expressed a set of what Amber Hollibaugh (2000) calls ‘dangerous desires’, insisting that desire and the erotic are inseparable from any political vision. In the short conclusion that follows this chapter, I draw together each preceding chapter’s discussion of political imaginaries, expanding on this conceptualisation of political desires.

Conclusion: Desiring beyond the Binaries

In late 2021 and early 2022, as I work on finishing this book, the ongoing crises of Covid-19 and Brexit have yet again morphed into a new and supposedly different crisis – this time of ‘cost of living’. The framing of rapidly increasing rents, food prices and energy costs as a ‘crisis’ forms a discursive connection to the many other crises of the past decade, from the financial crisis of 2007–8 to Covid-19 and beyond. Similarly to many of the earlier examples, this framing also helps to portray the ‘cost of living’ crisis as something occurring due to uncontrollable and unexpected external forces – rather than, say, government policy. In other words, this crisis is again being positioned as an exceptional situation demanding exceptional measures in response; and so far at least, such measures do not involve significantly better welfare provision or improved state support for the growing segments of the population experiencing poverty or outright destitution (eg, see JRF 2021). Indeed, the £20-a-week boost to Universal Credit (UC) introduced early on in the pandemic – which temporarily lifted 400,000 children out of poverty – was scrapped in late 2021, despite warnings that over 1.3 million people in the UK could be pushed into absolute poverty because of it (Butler 2022). Thus, the deprioritisation of (child) poverty that I discussed in Chapter 1 seems set to continue, with one Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) minister recently suggesting there was no longer a need for the Child Poverty Unit since its function was to support the child poverty targets that the Conservative Government abolished in 2016 (Stone 2022).

These recent developments again point towards the depoliticising function of a politics of crisis, whereby a population exhausted by the daily task of survival (whether due to precarious work or a bureaucratic social welfare system) does not have the time or energy to take political action, let alone imagine political alternatives. For example, the free school meals voucher scheme – introduced in 2020 to substitute for free school meals when schools were closed due to the pandemic – drew criticism for the difficult and time-consuming registration process, delays in receiving vouchers, the small selection of participating supermarkets and the lack of support from the private company subcontracted to administer the scheme (NAO 2020). Similarly to the welfare policies and systems discussed in Chapter 3, this demonstrates the fragmented nature of state

bureaucracies due to the neoliberalising trends of localisation and privatisation, as well as pointing to the sense of insecurity and isolation that is often normalised when dealing with them. Relatedly, early on in the Covid-19 pandemic, in anticipation of a high number of new UC claims due to significant job losses, the DWP reallocated resources and achieved a higher rate of new UC claimants receiving their first payment on time compared to before the pandemic (Mackley 2021). This perhaps suggests that some of the bureaucratic hoops that benefit claimants have to jump through to access welfare support are avoidable – or even that the complex and taxing landscape of welfare bureaucracy examined in Chapter 3 (reminiscent of the frustrating dealings that Daniel has with the welfare system in *I, Daniel Blake*, discussed in Chapter 2) is at least partially a political choice.

Further, sexuality and intimacy have remained key sites of political contestation, engagement and imagination in more recent crisis politics too. Along with the rapid mobilisation of the (hetero)normative ‘household’ as a safe haven in Covid-19 discourses (eg, see Grewal et al 2020), discussed briefly in the introduction, notions of domesticity dominated many of the cultural responses to the pandemic. For instance, the sudden popularity of baking bread perhaps relied discursively on a similar nostalgic deployment of the wartime ethos of ‘make do and mend’ that early austerity rhetoric was based on, drawing centrally on heteronormative ideas of respectable femininity – regardless of who was actually doing the baking (eg, see Bramall 2013; Palomeque Recio 2020). In Chapters 1 and 2, I discussed the not dissimilar sexualised and racialised notions of respectability and normativity that mediate understandings of deservingness in both policy discourses and popular media narratives. As well as having the effect of stigmatising those who do not meet the narrow, heteronormatively sexualised standards of respectability, such notions more generally contribute to the private sphere increasingly bearing the weight of poverty and precarity – both in the sense that the normative family is expected to absorb the costs of growing material poverty and in terms of the distraction provided by familial intimacies. As I discussed in Chapter 1, and as Lauren Berlant argues, precarity often leads to a reinvestment in the ‘normative promises of ... intimacy’ (2011: 170) when the state no longer acts reciprocally towards its citizens, even though it is precisely these investments that foreclose other political possibilities.

By tying these (hetero)normatively sexualised notions of ‘femininity’, the ‘household’ and the ‘domestic’ to the survival of the nation, Covid-19 discourses also contribute to the boundary-making strategies of the (white) nation, discussed in earlier chapters. The wartime connotations of Covid-19 discourses draw together respectable femininities, the fate of the nation and a sense of British exceptionalism. Here we can also think of how Brexit narratives deployed the sexualised and racialised notion of a ‘family of nations’ to position the Commonwealth as closer, more natural trading partners to the UK than the EU; but this was overwhelmingly based on a narrow iteration of the Old Commonwealth, comprising only the majority white nations of

Canada, Australia and New Zealand, as Eva Namusoke (2016) argues. Relatedly, the bureaucratic hoops of the welfare system, highlighted above, also contribute to 'state effect' (Mitchell 1999) – as in the illusion that the state is a monolithic actor separate from the realm of the 'non-state' or 'society'. Thus, these more recent examples also demonstrate that the depoliticising trends of our 'exceptional' times tend to go hand in hand with the neoliberalising impetus towards strengthening the nation-state, and particularly its coercive capacities (eg, see Peck et al 2016). Given these developments, it is perhaps unsurprising that the UK Government decided to put forward explicit proposals to limit the right to protest and to increase police powers during the pandemic.

These more recent examples thus indicate a continuation of the crisis-making rationalities of neoliberalisation in Britain beyond the timeframe of this book, as well as the familiar deployment of the logics of exceptionality in them. They also again demonstrate the tendency towards depoliticisation – not just because of the framing of 'exceptionality', but also because of the turn towards domesticity and the intimate sphere – or alternatively towards nationalism and British exceptionalism – as the prevalent cultural response to the traumas of the Covid-19 crisis. The private or intimate sphere is under more and more pressure, both affective and material, expected to carry our hopes and dreams as well as provide for us in times of need; while the state is bureaucratic and coercive, no longer fulfilling its part in the reciprocity bargain. These dual tendencies – prevalent in the politics of crisis, austerity and neoliberalisation – which this book has examined (and which are seemingly set to continue into the future) have the effect of limiting and constraining both present possibilities for political action and future political imaginaries. Indeed, even some of the more explicitly political battles of recent times – for instance, for the continuation of the furlough scheme during Covid-19 – have tended to be limited to a rather narrow view of 'deserving families' struggling specifically because of the pandemic, not because of the preceding decade of growing poverty and inequality. Similarly, media outrage about international students having to use food banks has focused on the situation's 'exceptional unfairness', rather than making a connection to the considerable increases in food bank use over the past decade prior to Covid-19 (eg, see Garthwaite 2016; Gibbs and Lehtonen 2021).

As well as these more recent trends and tendencies having a depoliticising effect in themselves, however, this book has also argued that they can be further obscured by the dominant understanding of what sexuality – or indeed the many other axes of difference, such as race and gender – is and how it might relate to broader political processes. When sexuality is imagined to only or primarily pertain to specific subjects, such as LGBTQ+ people or women, the key question of sexual politics becomes: are these subjects included in, or excluded from, our political vision? Of course, this is an important question to ask in and of itself – especially in the context of broader growing authoritarianisms, where many hard-fought minority rights are under threat and attack (again). However, it is not the only question that should be asked about the relationships between sexuality and

politics, as this book has sought to demonstrate. In particular, as well as the harnessing of the intimate sphere more broadly in the service of neoliberalisation and depoliticisation, there is another key role that sexuality plays in the politics of crisis, austerity and neoliberalisation that is also easily missed or obscured when it is imagined to only relate to specific subjects: its complex interrelatedness to other axes of difference and inequality (eg, see Brim 2020; Cooper 2014; Gordon 1997; Sanger and Taylor 2013; Sedgwick 1993; Skeggs 1997, 2004; Taylor 2009; Wray 2006).

In Chapter 1, I suggested that although the welfare cuts and the shift towards increasingly precarious work that have characterised the decade have certainly drawn on existing gendered inequalities in transferring much of the cost of social reproduction onto women (and therefore have significant gendered effects), our political responses should not focus exclusively on particular groups, such as women. This is because these shifts have drawn not just on pre-existing gendered inequalities, but also, for instance, on racialised inequalities based on the historical assumption that colonised populations are available as a reserve army of labour and sexualised judgements that play a key role in imaginaries of 'deservingness'. Thus, I argued that the classed processes of exploitation and precarisation commonly make use of sexualisation, as well as racialisation and gendering, for their efficacy and legitimacy. Chapters 2 and 4 argued that, conversely, imaginaries of deservingness in the British context have come to be strongly associated with the classic figure of the blue-collar worker of the (pre-)Thatcherite era, embodied by Daniel in *I, Daniel Blake* and by the straight, white, male supposedly 'left behind' in Brexit narratives. When class processes such as precarisation and exploitation are imagined to only, or even primarily, relate to subjects marginalised in no other way than class, our imaginaries of class politics remain discursively stuck in the cultural markers of a bygone historical era, constraining the possibilities for such politics being organised differently in the future.

More broadly, I have argued that limiting our political vision to claims that arise from pre-existing subject positions or identities significantly constrains our future political imaginaries – whether it is assuming that classed processes only affect the so-called 'white working-class' or that the unequal organisation of the work of social reproduction only affects women. In particular, assuming that all of our political desires straightforwardly derive from our subject positions or identities restricts opportunities for prefigurative political thinking – as in not only imagining alternative ways of engaging politically, but also finding ways of living them in the present. While of course identities continue to be important to politics, as I discussed in Chapter 4, they cannot and should not bear the weight of all possible political claims that relate to various axes of difference. In other words, for instance, the homosexual/heterosexual binary or the question of the inclusion or exclusion of LGBTQ+ subjects cannot constitute the limits of our sexual political desires. Overall, then, this book has made the case that a narrow view of sexuality, limited to its subject and identity-based iterations, contributes to the depoliticising trends that already dominate the claustrophobic

political present. Without, first, paying attention to and understanding these depoliticising tendencies, and second, creating or demanding space for thinking up alternative political imaginaries, our chances of challenging the ‘exceptional’ logics of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis remain limited.

So how do we move beyond the claustrophobia of the political present, with its tendencies towards depoliticisation – or even authoritarianism? In the preceding chapters, I provided some initial examples of how alternative political imaginaries and expanded political desires might be cultivated to challenge the dominant logics of austerity, neoliberalisation and crisis. In Chapter 1, I argued that an anti-work and anti-family politics is needed to challenge the valorisation of work and the idealisation of the family, both of which contribute to the naturalisation of precarisation in the labour market. As an example of such a politics, I discussed Kathi Weeks’s (2011) proposal for a basic income. Such a policy would not only challenge the dominant legitimating discourses of work and family, but also create space and time for the cultivation of a range of other passions, pleasures and desires – whether in the more conventional arenas of work, volunteering and care, or in relation to intimacy, leisure, creativity, rest and idleness, for instance. In Chapter 2, I likened such proposals to non-normative economic practices and strategies on the fringes of the formal economy, in the sense that such practices also have the potential to provide other avenues for survival, outside of both the dehumanising ethos of the welfare system and the precarious segments of the labour market. As well as sustaining survival, such non-normative economic practices can, accordingly, enable expanded passions and pleasures, as well as expanded political desires.

In a slightly different vein, Chapter 3 explored the potential for transformative politics within the state, given the increasing fragmentation of state power across a range of actors. Scholarly analyses sometimes treat neoliberalism as total and all encompassing, tending to ‘locate change for the better in some other and – usually for optimistic projects – future time’ (Cooper 2014: 223); and in this chapter I wanted to highlight some of the fragmented, competing rationalities that co-exist in the neoliberalising present. Of course, by locating some potential for political change within the state, we risk co-optation; but such a risk is also present in political projects that take place entirely outside of the state – for instance, mutual aid projects and non-normative economic practices can be absorbed into state logics. Thus, perhaps similarly to the other chapters’ provocations, this way of thinking about the state – as fragmented and fragile, and as requiring constant effort to maintain – can at the very least open up some alternative ways of thinking about political engagement, since accepting the image of the state as coherent, monolithic and impermeable only serves to strengthen that image. Indeed, we might turn the question of co-optation on its head and ask: how could any progressive logics that currently exist within the state be co-opted and coaxed more firmly into the realm of radical, progressive politics instead?

Finally, in Chapters 2 and 4, I explored alternatives to class politics that do not start from a predefined idea of who the ideal subject of such a politics is. Such a conceptualisation could be based, for instance, on shared experiences of exploitation and precarisation, which might then lead to collective identification and mobilisation. Thinking of class in this way – as a set of processes with the potential to generate political and collective identifications, rather than as fixed and stable categories based on pre-existing identifications – is also more likely to create or enhance solidarities across other differences. As many others have discussed, such a relational understanding of class is crucial for building coalitions that intersect across the divisions of class/identity politics, based on an understanding of material and cultural political claims as interrelated, rather than in competition with each other (eg, see Dhawan et al 2015; Lewis 2018; Yilmaz 2018). We can again point to some of the more recent alternative political imaginaries that have emerged in response to the Covid-19 crisis – for instance, the proliferation of mutual aid groups at the beginning of the pandemic or the many social and cultural initiatives aimed at bridging the isolation and loneliness generated by the regulatory emphasis on the household unit, many with an explicitly queer focus (eg, see Ammaturo and Burchiellaro 2021). The Government's proposals for limiting the right to protest have also generated fierce opposition and led to the mobilisation of a broad political collective of different groups, perhaps exactly in the sense prefigured by relational understandings of class and marginalisation. This mobilisation seems to have also gathered steam following the Sarah Everard vigil discussed briefly in the introduction, again demonstrating the forging and reinforcing of political identities through political action.

In the foreword to Amber Hollibaugh's *Dangerous Desires*, Dorothy Allison writes, 'wanting makes you vulnerable. Desire is dangerous' (2000: xv). Desire is often understood as the luxurious, excessive other to a more down-to-earth, essential set of 'basic needs'. When poor, benefit-receiving or otherwise marginalised subjects ask for things beyond what others consider necessary for their survival, they are often branded greedy or their desires labelled as excessive or perverse, as Nikita Dhawan et al (2015) also note. In this sense, when we understand desire to be the excessive cousin of need, we might consider it inherently sexual. Sexuality – when conceptualised as the full array of not just subjectivities, identities and behaviours, but also broader relations, narratives, representations, desires, pleasures, and so on, as discussed in the introduction – is always already in excess of the conceptual tools currently available for understanding it. In other words, our sexual desires themselves denote a certain excess, gesturing at everything that lies beyond the constraints of identity (or reproduction) based notions of sexuality. In this way, we might think of sexual desire as also encompassing the conditions necessary for desiring freely, and therefore already involving questions of political, economic and environmental justice, for instance (eg, see Dhawan et al 2015; Hollibaugh 2000; Sabsay 2016). Thus, sexual desire and political desire both involve at least some degree of prefiguration – of not just *imagining* but also *living* lives, worlds, intimacies and spaces that extend beyond what seems currently possible.

The many protesting, refusing and desiring subjects on the pages of this book have chosen not to place their political hopes entirely on the traditional (eg, electoral) mechanisms of politics. Indeed, sometimes they have refused such mechanisms entirely, choosing to place those hopes on protesting/rioting, crime or knocking down walls instead. Such actions, rather than constituting some kind of defeat, can also allow for a rethinking of not just survival, but also political engagement, in the neoliberalising political present. They illustrate that the present already contains avenues for creating alternative intimacies, collectives and solidarities, suggesting that sexuality and intimacy can be wrested away from both the state and the discursive and regulatory logics of exceptionality. In other words, they indicate that sexuality and intimacy are the domain not just of regulation and constraint, but also of freedom and pleasure. Such political engagements that take place outside of the paths of conventional politics – not always instantly recognisable as political; often controversial; sometimes illegal or violent – challenge the dominant logics of our time, bridging the limited and limiting binary concepts explored in this book. Thus, they at the very least illustrate a ‘stubborn ... refusal to give out, wear out, or admit defeat’ – suggesting, as Berlant does, that ‘optimism might not be cruel at all, but the bare minimum evidence of not having given up on social change as such’ (2011: 259).

One of the biggest challenges of the ‘exceptional’ political present is finding or creating the space, time and energy needed for even thinking about alternative ways of organising the world, let alone making them happen. In other words, my sense is that we often desire too little, ask for too little, demand too little; and consequently, our political imaginaries remain narrow too. Here it seems crucial, as Hollibaugh (2000) and Dhawan et al (2015) also do, to insist that desire and the erotic are inseparable from any political vision, such that – like desire – our political visions might also be multiple and generative of pleasure. Without such expanded political imaginaries, painting pictures for us of worlds and ways of being that are not yet possible, but could be, the future looks bleak. Perhaps in light of such bleak neoliberalising futures, a ‘stubborn refusal’ is more than it seems: a moment of rest or idleness; a room of one’s own; a flash of unlikely intimacy; or even just an indication that there is more to (sexual) life than what seems possible in the limited and limiting justificatory and regulatory logics of exceptionality. And thus, my desire for you, the reader of this book, is that you take away with you this provocation – to desire *more*, politically, than what seems possible right now.

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