



The  
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Sheffield.

**Economic Martyrs and Moralised Others:  
Mass Media Constructions of Social Class in the  
'Age of Austerity'**

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## **Declaration**

I, the author, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means ([www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means)). This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

*“If public attitudes are informed by inaccurate, ideological and stigmatising representations of the poor, then policies preferred by the public (and political elites) are unlikely to seek to tackle the structural causes of inequality [...] In essence, this works to ensure that the working / underclass are positioned in a top-down society created for them, and they are expected to involve themselves in that society under those prearranged social constructs” (Power, 2011 p3).*

*“For a long time the quarry was full of snowdrifts and nothing could be done. Some progress was made in the dry frosty weather that followed, but it was cruel work, and the animals could not feel so hopeful about it as they had felt before. They were always cold, and usually hungry as well. Only Boxer and Clover never lost heart. Squealer made excellent speeches on the joy of service and the dignity of labour, but the other animals found more inspiration in Boxer's strength and his never-failing cry of "I will work harder!" (George Orwell: Animal farm, 1945 p80)*

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## Abstract

This study critically explores media constructions of social class within the context of austerity, focusing on the link between class and inequality. Data were drawn from 240 newspaper articles (2010-2016) covering 6 major topics: emergency budget, welfare reform, workfare, bedroom tax, food banks, and zero-hour contracts. Thematic analysis of ideological debate, policy enactment, and policy impact established key patterns of class construction. Selected newspaper extracts were then analysed in greater depth, following the principles of critical discourse analysis, with the aim of establishing *how* class is constructed, and also what *operative function* media constructions of class may perform. Findings show the portrayal of class through the frame of economic crisis, with an emphasis on notions of ‘unavoidable scarcity’ (due to market forces), ‘necessary austerity’, and the reigning in of ‘wasteful’ spending. Implied in this pro-austerity stance is a ‘moral divide’ between an exploitative underclass and the vague ‘ordinary people’ - the (classless) ‘rest of us’ - which is used to justify punitive policies and to mask their effects. Alongside this, a nostalgic *idealised* working class identity is engendered, which hyper-visualises the ‘*selfless sense of duty*’ to which ‘we’ should aspire. However, as the impacts of austerity become more apparent, a more critical ‘alternative’ discourse emerges, placing issues of structural inequality - the ‘struggle’ inherent to social class - back on the agenda. Concomitantly, class begins to be constructed as an ‘anxious concept’; the potential to fall down the ‘slippery slope’ to precarity open to all. The thesis concludes by suggesting that the position of the commercial media within the competitive capitalist system pre-disposes them towards an elite-serving ideological stance. As this stance comes into conflict with the social realities of austerity, its legitimacy becomes strained, leading to challenges from sources including the media themselves.

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## 1. Introduction

The economic crisis of 2008, which swept across much of the western world, began when the US housing bubble burst (Kitson et al, 2011; Sapir, 2008). This bubble had in large part resulted from house prices being inflated beyond their value by virtue of demand creation in the form of sub-prime lending. In the absence of adequate regulation, the resulting toxic debt was then bundled together into collateral, against which further lending was ‘secured’ - on a global scale. This formed the basis of an unstable financial market (Lavalette, 2017), fuelling consumption levels which - in light of existing inequalities in income - were out of proportion and unsustainable (Kitson et al, 2011; Rustin, 2009; Sapir, 2008; Stockhammer, 2015). In essence, through this ‘innovation’, the global financial sector was increasingly attempting to trade in, and profit from, the value of future labour.

The UK was amongst the countries hit hard when the bubble burst (See Kitson et al, 2011). In the wake of the credit crunch which ensued, the then Labour government promptly bailed out the banks, declaring them to be ‘too big to fail’ (Lavalette, 2017: 32); incurring significant public debt in the process: £850bn according to Grimshaw and Rubery (2012: 43) and Lavalette (2017: 32). It was this issue of public debt that formed the key focus of the 2010 UK election (Stanley, 2014), and the incoming Conservative-led government immediately settled upon a narrative of ‘unsustainable state overspending’ and vowed to balance the books through a programme of austerity (Stanley, 2014: 903). The ostensible effort to do so, set out in the 2010 ‘emergency’ budget, consisted of widespread cuts to public spending and welfare. As described extensively within the literature, these cuts have had a disproportionate impact upon the poorest members of society (e.g. Hastings et al, 2015; Farnsworth and Irving, 2015; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; Kitson et al, 2011; Lavalette, 2017; O’Hara, 2015: 4; Ridge, 2013), not only contributing to increasing levels of inequality, but in many cases pushing people into poverty (e.g. Blane and Watt, 2012; Dowler, 2014; Lavalette, 2017; Loopstra et al, 2015; O’Hara, 2015).

This study fills a gap in the current literature by conducting a systematic, critical examination of portrayals or ‘constructions’ of social class in the mass media during the ‘age of austerity’ (see Farnsworth and Irving, 2018; Stanley, 2014) that has followed the economic crisis. It focuses not just upon *how* the concept is portrayed, but also *why* it may be portrayed in this way, and *to what potential effect*. Given its impact upon inequality, social class is a pertinent

perspective from which to approach the issue of austerity. Taking Tyler's (2015: 496) view that inequality is the fundamental essence of class, or the 'problem that class describes', its relevance in the context of austerity becomes immediately clear. Indeed it is arguably difficult to separate the issues of inequality and class. As Tyler (2015: 496) argues:

Sociological writing about social class invariably returns to the question, 'What is class?', but this is the wrong question. Instead, I want to begin by asking 'what is the problem that "class" describes?' The answer is a surprisingly simple one, the problem that 'class' describes is inequality. Indeed, in whatever historical and geopolitical context they are uttered, class names (i.e. the elites, the rich, the middle classes, the working classes, the underclass), are names that variously reveal structural conditions of inequality.

If inequality is the essence of social class, then class is an important perspective from which to approach the *discourse* of austerity. From the viewpoint of critical discourse analysts, discourse is communication that takes place *as part of a social practice* (Wodak and Meyer, 2015: 5). Central to this idea is the dialectical relationship between discourse and the social context in which it occurs. Discourse, according to this perspective, is both conditioned by, and constitutive of, society (Wodak and Meyer, 2015: 5). In other words, it is produced within a particular social context, and itself plays a part in shaping society, as Fairclough and Wodak (1997: 259) state:

CDA sees discourse -language use in speech and writing -as a form of 'social practice'. Describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it. A dialectical relationship is a two-way relationship: the discursive event is shaped by situations, institutions and social structures, but it also shapes them. To put the same point in a different way, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially shaped: it constitutes situations, objective knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people.

In keeping with the focus on "social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people", constructions of social class are of central importance in the context of austerity since, as Waterton (2003, cited in Tyler, 2015) points out, classifications are *operative*; they perform a social function in and of themselves. The way in which social class is portrayed, or 'constructed', has the potential to shape understandings of inequality, and ultimately, attitudes towards policies that exacerbate it.

Importantly, whilst inequality may be its foundation, the difficulty in objectively defining class (Kerswill, 2018) leaves the concept open to construction (Bourdieu, 1987). In its most general sense social class refers to the hierarchical stratification of people based upon socio-economic factors, and several theoretical accounts have been proposed which attempt to

account for and explain this stratification (see Grant, 2001; Kerswill, 2018; Savage, 2016). Karl Marx, the ‘first class theorist’ (Kerswill, 2018: 294) explained class in terms of ones relationship to the means of production: “Capitalists own the means of production, while the proletariat sell their labour to the capitalists” (Kerswill, 2018: 294). Marx’s conflict model therefore views class both primarily in economic terms, and as a relational concept in that one group benefits directly at the expense of the other. Max Weber, another early class theorist, sought to explain social stratification in terms of life chances, accounting for social and cultural aspects such as status and prestige in addition to economic aspects (Kerswill, 2018). Contemporary class theories have increasingly taken the form of ‘composite models’ (Kerswill, 2018: 295) in that they acknowledge the primacy of inequality and the importance of economic relationships, but also attempt to account for cultural and social aspects and the potential of these to contribute to and perpetuate class disadvantage.

Whilst this takes into account the possibility of several factors *potentially* contributing to class disadvantage, it also makes it difficult, if not impossible, to identify a single ‘defining feature’ of class (Kerswill, 2018: 294). In other words, The difficulties that arise when trying to define class - or indeed ‘classes’ - in concrete terms stem from the difficulty in establishing the relevance, and the relative importance, of several factors, especially social and cultural ones (see Bourdieu, 1987; Kerswill, 2018; Rubin et al, 2014). As Bourdieu (1987) notes, any attempt to define classes, even when made with genuine intentions, can only ever achieve a best fit to the idiosyncrasies of the social reality. Whilst emphasising the importance of inequality to class, in particular unequal access to various forms of capital - economic, social, cultural, and symbolic - Bourdieu argues that placing greater emphasis upon particular forms of capital has the effect of manipulating the ‘boundaries’ of classes, and therefore the ways in which class is commonly understood – something which can be exploited in the course of ideological and political argumentation:

What is at stake in the struggles about the meaning of the social world is power over the classificatory schemes and systems which are the basis of the representations of the groups and therefore of their mobilization and demobilization (Bourdieu, 1984: 479).

As Savage (2016) suggests, such manipulation has the potential to mask the operation of class altogether by naturalising inequality and justifying disadvantage. In light of this, Tyler’s (2015) recommendation of viewing class in terms of the ‘problem it describes’ (p496) is particularly useful given the aims of the present study. This is because viewing class in terms of its essential problem places this very problem at the centre of the analysis, and in doing so

offers a reference point against which portrayals of class can be evaluated. In other words, by viewing class in terms of the problem it describes, it is possible to draw upon external evidence with regards to the causes of inequality, and to question whether portrayals of the concept accurately reflect, or rather obscure these.

As Bourdieu (1987) notes, the ability to shape such understandings is itself dependent upon the holding of sufficient capital to do so. The very *means to construct* are unequally distributed. The ability to construct class is itself related to class position. This creates the potential, as Power (2011) notes in the introductory quote, for ‘inaccurate, ideological and stigmatising representations’ to inform public opinion with regards to policies which directly impact upon the structural causes of inequality. Furthermore, it renders those most affected powerless to challenge these representations.

The focus upon the mass media discourse reflects this unequal distribution of power within ‘struggles about the meaning of the social world’ (Bourdieu, 1987: 497). The mass media occupy a privileged position in relation to the public discourse, and are therefore well positioned to ‘classify’. Whilst the media have been shown to exert significant influence upon public perception and opinion (McCombs, 2005), their neutrality has often been called into question (see e.g. Ellman and Germano, 2009; Entman, 2007; Herrman and McChesney, 2001). In light of this, I approached this study from a critical perspective, aiming to explore not merely *how* class is constructed within the discourse, but also *why* this may be, and to what likely (or intended) *effect*.

As well as being pertinent in the context of austerity, such a focus is timely. Following Tyler’s (2015) assertion that inequality is the fundamental essence of class, its relevance at a time of rising inequality is of course clear. Further, social class has made something of an academic comeback in (relatively) recent times (Haylett, 2001), as rising inequality has called into question the view that the concept is outdated, or even ‘dead’ (Bradley, 2014: 430). This study therefore builds upon an extensive body of recent work that has followed the ‘revival’ of class. In doing so, this study provides an opportunity to reflect upon the media treatment of the concept within the context of social change that the economic crisis and the adoption of austerity represent - a change from ‘boom’ to ‘bust’.

As Savage (2016) notes, class has a long and somewhat chequered history within social study, with emphasis upon it both peaking and waning at particular times and within particular social and political contexts. According to Savage (2016), the concept is arguably *the* basis upon which sociological critique was founded. Indeed, Marx (1848) famously asserted that "[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles". In its 'golden age' (Savage, 2016: 58), class was the lens through which the inequalities and injustices of society were viewed, with the working class, in particular, being regarded as the harbingers of social transformation (Savage, 2016: 58). This was to change, however, with the 'postmodern turn' within sociology (Susen, 2015: 1) and its emphasis on other categories of identity (Haylett, 2001: 354). Haylett suggests that with this focus upon other aspects of identity, class came to be seen as 'unfashionable', with attention given to other, at the time more novel, categories of identity, and new ways of viewing social advantage and disadvantage. As Haylett notes however, an unfortunate effect of the dumping of class from the agenda was the loss of a useful lens through which to view social inequality. Further, as McKenzie (2018) points out, in the case of those for whom class is the only (or main) disadvantage faced, the turn away from class amounts to an effective abandonment.

Robinson et al (2017) argue that the rise of individualism - which can be traced back to broad, far reaching cultural and moral changes in the 1960s and 1970s - had led to post-structuralist views of identity, and that these, along with the empowering security afforded by the post-war consensus, had created a public mood of believing 'anything is possible', and that the social order was therefore a constraint on *individual freedom*. As Robinson et al (2017) suggest, it was this public mood which was capitalised upon by the Thatcher administration in its enthusiastic embrace of 'neoliberalism' in the late 1970s-80s – an embrace which has continued to this day, with subsequent governments subscribing to the view that there is no alternative (see Brady and Leicht, 2008). The academic abandonment of class, almost complete by the late 1980s, was therefore mirrored by a political abandonment, with the 'New Labour' government of 1997 turning away from its traditional working class roots in favour of targeting the 'upwardly mobile'. Yet just as individualist, meritocratic discourse seemed to have consigned class permanently to the history books, the contradiction of the growing inequality inherent to neoliberal capitalism (e.g. Fairclough, 2013: 12; Hall et al, 2013; Harvey, 2007a: 17-19; Tyler, 2015) led several academics (many from working class backgrounds themselves (Haylett, 2001: 353-354)), to question the view that class was no longer relevant, pointing instead to its *implicit* hyper-visualisation in spite of it rarely

being *explicitly* referenced and discussed (see e.g. Bradley, 2014; Haylett, 2001; Lawler, 2005; Tyler 2008, 2015; Skeggs, 2005; Weltmann, 2008). This is perhaps best illustrated by the increasing prominence of the ‘chav’ figure. The ‘chav’ is, as I discuss in greater depth later (see p31), a derogatory stereotype of the (disrespectable) working class that works to decouple class from its structural basis by emphasising instead a lack of taste and morality (Haywood and Yar, 2006; Le Grand, 2015; Tyler, 2008).

Much of the recent literature has thus focused upon class in the context of ‘neoliberalism’: a term traditionally used to describe a form of capitalism based upon an ideological commitment to free-markets, privatisation, deregulation, and the rolling-back of the state (Harvey, 2007b: 2-3). Yet decades of ‘evolution’ and inconsistent adherence to these ideological tenets (Hall, 2011; Navarro, 2007; Nunn, 2012; Peck, 2010), have resulted in a more pragmatic form of capitalism - one which Harvey (2007b: 19) suggests is aimed at restoring the dominance of economic elites *by any means*, or as Harvey (2007a: 29) puts it; a ‘class project’. Arguably, for this reason, the term ‘neoliberalism’ has become unclear (Hall, 2011; Weller and O’Neill, 2016), and when applied uncritically can lead to the ‘processes driving economic, cultural and social change’ being missed (Weller and O’Neil, 2016: 85). Nevertheless, given that austerity has been described as a neoliberal response to the economic crisis (Aalbers, 2013; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; O’Hara, 2015: 4-7; Tyler, 2015; Farnsworth and Irving, 2015; Windebank and Whitworth, 2014), and given that the media have been accused of displaying a neoliberal bias (e.g. Berry, 2016; Fenton, 2011; Herrman and McChesney, 2001: 38; Preston and Silke, 2011), the importance of a critical focus upon the media discourse is clear.

In order to achieve this research aim, I applied the principles of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to newspaper coverage of six key topics related to austerity, focusing upon the period of 2010-2016. This period fell between two prominent events of recent times - the adoption of austerity in the UK, and ‘Brexit’ -the referendum on the United Kingdom’s membership of the European Union - and saw a rise in public dissatisfaction, owing in large part to the austerity measures and their disproportionate impact (see Antonucci, 2017; Jessop, 2017; Lavalette, 2017; McKenzie, 2017, 2018). This further underlines the relevance of the social class perspective. The topics studied, selected with reference to the wider literature (e.g. Cooper et al, 2014; Davies, 2015; Dowler, 2014; Friedli and Stearn 2015; Gibb, 2015; Heyes, 2013; MacLeavey, 2008; Moffatt et al, 2016; O’Hara, 2015; Stanley, 2014), were: the

‘emergency budget’, welfare reform<sup>1</sup>, the ‘bedroom tax’<sup>2</sup>, workfare<sup>3</sup>, and the issues of food bank reliance and zero-hours contracts. These were chosen to provide a temporal range that spanned the whole period; allowing consideration of the theoretical debates regarding austerity, the enactment of austerity measures themselves, and their subsequent impacts.

In an effort to capture the media discourse as faithfully and comprehensively as possible, I used a relatively large data set of 240 articles, selected from both the print and online versions of the 8 most popular news publications<sup>4</sup>: *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Express*, *The Guardian*, *The Mirror*, *The Sun*, *The Times*, *The Daily Star*, and *The Telegraph*. To reduce, or ‘condense’, the data before any in-depth analysis could be performed, I employed the use of thematic analysis initially, with an emphasis upon not only the themes themselves, but also the relationship between them, which together form a *thematic network*: a ‘map’ of the data guiding further in-depth analysis (see Attride-Stirling, 2001). This in-depth focus was then achieved by applying the principles of CDA.

CDA is a *problem oriented* approach (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 2), with the starting point to any analysis being the identification of a ‘social problem’: an injustice of some kind which is in part shaped by discursive practice. Having identified such a problem, Van Dijk (1993: 254) argues that it is the duty of the critical discourse analyst to take an explicitly critical stance in order to advocate on behalf of those who suffer injustice as a result. Applying this logic, I started from the assumption that inequality - the very condition underpinning class disadvantage - is inherently problematic, and that austerity, with its disproportionate impact upon the poorest members of society, could only serve to exacerbate this problem. Furthermore, I assumed mass media constructions of social class to have the potential to contribute to this problem, given: (a) the inherent link between social class and understandings of inequality (Tyler, 2015), (b) the potential for class to be constructed (Bourdieu, 1987), and (c) concerns regarding media bias (e.g. Ellman and Germano, 2009: Entman, 2007: Herrman and McChesney, 2001).

In keeping with the critical aspect of CDA, the focus of this project was not limited to the discourse itself; instead I approached the discourse as what Fairclough (2013: 19) calls a ‘point of entry’ into the wider social problem, attempting to situate the discourse within the

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<sup>1</sup> In particular the Welfare Reform Act, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Officially the ‘removal of the spare room subsidy’.

<sup>3</sup> Comprising various policies, e.g. ‘mandatory work activity’, and the ‘community action programme’. See chapter 5 for more detailed discussion.

<sup>4</sup> National Audit of Circulations.



broader social context in which it occurred. As Fairclough (1995: 747) argues, it is through this critical approach that the ‘interconnectedness of things’ is made visible, revealing the dialectic relationship between the discourse and the wider context both in which it is produced, *and which it itself plays a role in producing*. This is important given that, as stated above, the aim of this research was not simply to explore how class is constructed, but to focus upon why, and to what potential effect.

As a final point before concluding this introduction, I will take the opportunity to acknowledge my own personal stance. This is particularly important given that the interpretive nature (see Creswell and Miller, 2000; Willig, 2014: 136) of discourse analysis places the researcher at the centre of the research (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 7). I have approached this project from a critical angle, owing in large part to my own working class background. Born and raised in post-industrial Sheffield, I have spent the majority of my life living in Gleadless Valley; an estate which, according to Rae (2011), is amongst the most deprived in the city. In keeping with the focus of the study, this subjective and critical viewpoint may be seen as an advantage, since my lived experience has brought me face to face with social injustice. I, have experienced personally the ‘low-pay no-pay’ cycle described by Shildrick et al (2010), and have seen firsthand what O’Hara (2015) calls the ‘sharp end’ of austerity. Furthermore, completing this study as a self-funded part time PhD student has meant that I have had the time and opportunity to witness the damaging effects of austerity as I have lived and worked amongst a working class community typical of those which have largely bore the brunt of the impacts. Whilst this has provided an insightful perspective, it is nonetheless important that any analysis, critical or otherwise, is based upon sound research principles (Wodak, 2011), and in chapter 3 I set out the steps taken within this project to ensure that - as far as possible - this was the case.

This thesis is broken down into 7 chapters, including this introduction. In the next chapter I present and review the relevant literature in order to provide the necessary theoretical and conceptual framework and the empirical evidence informing the study, focusing upon the areas of social class, austerity, the mass media, and critical discourse analysis. In the third chapter I describe and discuss the methodology employed in the study, setting out the method of data collection and analysis, as well as reflecting upon the strengths and limitations of my

approach. In the three analytical chapters that follow, I divide the coverage of topics into three categories: austerity in *theory* (the emergency budget and welfare reform), austerity *inaction* (the bedroom tax and the workfare policies), and the *impacts* of austerity (zero-hour contracts and food bank reliance). Within these three chapters I provide some brief background to the topics before outlining the themes within the data. I then present a more in-depth analysis of the key discourses following the principles of CDA. I conclude each of the three analysis chapters with a consideration of the findings. In the final chapter I bring together the patterns of class construction that emerged from the analysis, describe them in more detail, and interpret them in an effort to situate the findings within the wider social context. Finally, I draw conclusions, and make recommendations for future research.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

As I state in the previous chapter, the aim of this study was to investigate the portrayal, or construction, of social class in the UK media during the period of 2010-2016 - a period that formed part of the 'age of austerity' (Farnsworth and Irving, 2018; Stanley, 2014) that has followed the economic crisis of 2008. Furthermore, I approached this research from a critical perspective: the aim was not simply to investigate *how* class features within the discourse, but also *why* and *to what potential effect*. It is important to note that, for reasons I discuss below, this study was not concerned so much with what class *is*, but rather with how class is made to seem.

This study builds upon, and, in doing so, contributes to, the literature that has been produced following the 'comeback' of class within social science (see Haylett, 2001). The renewed emphasis upon social class has been explained in terms of rising inequality and a subsequent questioning of the view that class is an outdated concept (Bradley, 2014). The programme of austerity implemented by the Conservative-led coalition government (2010), and followed by successive governments since, has involved large-scale cuts to public spending, which have disproportionately impacted upon the poorest members of society. Despite official (political) narratives (O'Hara, 2015: 4; Stanley, 2014) emphasising the need to cut state spending, the austerity measures have been criticised on economic grounds, leading to suggestions that they are ideologically motivated (Aalbers, 2013; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; O'Hara, 2015: 7, Tyler, 2015). In particular they have been described as a neoliberal response to a crisis of neoliberalism (Aalbers, 2013; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012: 54-55; O'Hara, 2015: 4-7; Tyler, 2015; Farnsworth and Irving, 2015; Windebank and Whitworth, 2014).

Given its fundamental relationship with inequality, social class has arguably taken on a new relevance given the change in social context that the economic crisis and subsequent adoption of austerity represent. The way social class is portrayed is of great significance here, since, as Savage (2016) argues, this can impact directly upon understandings of inequality and therefore upon attitudes towards policies which exacerbate it. In view of this, the construction of class within the mass media discourse is clearly an area that warrants critical attention. The mass media hold a privileged position in regards to their access to public discourse and thus have the potential to influence public perception and opinion (McCombs, 2005). Yet

concerns regarding neutrality of the media have often been raised (e.g. Ellman and Germano, 2009; Entman, 2007; Herrman and McChesney, 2001). This is of particular importance given that constructions of class can often serve political and ideological ends (Bourdieu, 1987).

Surprisingly no studies appear to have been conducted which analyse the media construction of class in this context. Although, as discussed below, some have focused upon closely related issues and therefore provide a good foundation upon which this study can build. A limitation of the current literature is a general lack of engagement with the data. Where the media discourses have actually been engaged it is often the case that only a small amount of data has been discussed in order to provide ‘illustrative’ examples of points being argued. Additionally, despite the interdisciplinary nature of this area of research, there has been a distinct lack of cross-referencing. For example, whilst recent studies in the area of social class have considered the role of the media to be of great importance, they have tended to view it rather one dimensionally, reducing it to simply an extension of a dominant ‘neoliberal discourse’ without reflecting upon any actual sources of bias. Indeed, the extensive body of literature regarding media bias has, surprisingly given the context, been largely ignored. In light of this, the interdisciplinary nature of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013: 231; Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 2) is advantageous in that it encourages not just a focus upon discourse itself, but upon the social context in which it is produced.

In accordance with the research aims, the review of the literature presented in this chapter is organised into four sections. In the first of these, I focus upon the social setting of the study - the financial crisis its aftermath, and the implementation of austerity. In keeping with the critical aims of the study I draw upon the literature to highlight the disproportionate impact of austerity, its contribution to various social injustices, its ideological basis, and the subsequent relevance of social class. In the second section, I describe and review the literature regarding social class itself, starting with a brief history of the concept, before discussing the difficulties of defining class and the resulting ambiguity of the concept. I then look at more recent developments following the resurgence in academic interest, paying particular attention to previous studies that have focused upon portrayals of social class, since the findings of such studies form an important backdrop to the present study. In the third section, I focus upon the literature relating to media influence and its role in democratic society and review the theories and studies pertaining to media bias. Consideration of this literature is important given the critical focus of the study, since it provides important insights into the media that are useful when attempting to explain the findings. Finally, I consider the literature relating to

the methodology employed in this study - critical discourse analysis -highlighting some of the key epistemological debates as well as the strengths and limitations of the approach.

## **2.2 The Social Context**

The financial crisis of 2008, began with the collapse of the US subprime mortgage market, and quickly spread throughout the mortgage market more generally (Sapir, 2008; Stockhammer, 2015; Rotheli, 2010; Verick and Islam, 2010). Owing to the interconnected global nature of financial networks, the collapse of the US housing market soon led to an economic crisis which spread across much of the world (Kitson et al, 2011; Stockhammer, 2015). The root causes of the crisis have largely been attributed to the excesses of free-market capitalism (MacLeavey, 2011; Rudd, 2009), in particular: financialisation, deregulation of the financial sector, financial ‘innovation’ (in reality the use of ‘toxic’ debt as collateral), excessive pursuit of profit - driven by competition within the financial sector - and predatory lending (see e.g. Kitson et al, 2011; Murphy, 2008; Rotheli, 2010; Rudd, 2009; Sapir, 2008; Verick and Islam, 2010; Wray, 2008). Additionally, it has been argued that high rates of income inequality served to fuel the profitability of the financial sector in the lead up to the crisis (Rustin, 2009; Sapir, 2008; Stockhammer, 2015; Verick and Islam, 2010).

The UK was, along with many other countries, significantly impacted by the economic crisis (Kitson et al, 2011), leading to direct hardship for many resulting from job losses and lowered incomes (Farnsworth and Irving, 2015; Kitson et al, 2011; MacLeavey, 2011). In the wake of the crisis successive governments, beginning with the Conservative-led coalition of 2010, have followed a programme of austerity which has taken the form of cuts to public spending - resulting in further job losses (O’Hara, 2015: 3) - and welfare reforms (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; Kitson et al, 2011; MacLeavey, 2011; Stanley, 2014). In addition there has been a further move towards ‘flexible’ (insecure) work (Farnsworth and Irving, 2015; Heyes, 2013; Lavalette, 2017) in an ostensible effort to boost employment in response to job losses (Heyes, 2013).

Coming at a time when inequality had already been steadily rising in the UK for the past three decades (Gray et al, 2015; Manstead, 2018; Nunn, 2012; O’Hara, 2015; Savage et al 2013), austerity has exacerbated this situation by having had a disproportionate impact upon the poorest members of society (Hastings et al, 2015), at times leading to extreme hardship (Blane and Watt, 2012; Dowler, 2014; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; Kitson, et al, 2011; Lavalette, 2017; Loopstra et al, 2015; O’Hara, 2015: 4-11; Ridge, 2013). For example, Kitson

et al (2011) demonstrate, with reference to data from the institute for fiscal studies, that it is low income families that suffer the most from spending cuts. Similarly, O'Hara (2015), in *Austerity Bites: a journey to the sharp end of the cuts*, documents the disproportionate impact upon those such as the working poor, children from poor families, and the disabled - supporting her case with ethnographic research amongst deprived communities. Ridge (2013) demonstrates that cuts to services have severely impacted upon children from low income families. Dowler (2014), Loopstra et al (2015), and O'Connell and Hamilton (2017) highlight the link between austerity and the rise in UK food poverty. O'Hara (2017) demonstrates the impact of austerity on mental health. Mack (2017) points to the impact of austerity on child poverty. Grimshaw and Rubery (2012) argue that with the austerity measures represent an abandonment of the commitment to reducing inequality and poverty. This argument is especially pertinent given the important role investment in society plays in redressing disadvantage, and thus levelling the playing field (see Hastings et al, 2015; O'Hara, 2015: 17-18; Streeck and Mertens, 2011).

Again, the effectiveness of austerity measures has been criticised from an economic perspective (Holland and Portes, 2012; Kitson et al, 2011; Krugman, 2015; Marshall, 2013; McBride, 2015; O'Hara, 2015: 4-7). The key arguments in this respect are as follows: firstly, that debt could more effectively (and fairly) be addressed through taxation (Kitson et al, 2011). Secondly, that reducing public spending during an economic downturn is counter-productive in that it compounds the impacts and in doing so impedes economic recovery (Holland and Portes, 2012; Kitson et al, 2011; Krugman, 2015). And thirdly, that austerity may ultimately end up costing society more that it saves (Holland and Portes, 2012; Cooper and White, 2017a; McBride, 2015). This third argument references the fact that investment in society, especially in areas such as education, can often return more in the long term (through *fiscal multiplication*: see Holland and Portes, 2012). Conversely, and perhaps intuitively, reductions in public spending not only negate this return, but also serve to 'move' existing problems into other areas, as well as creating costly future ones (Cooper and Whyte, 2017a; McBride, 2015). Studies across several professional fields support this view (e.g. Barr et al, 2015; Blane and Watt, 2012; Iacobucci, 2014; Majeed et al, 2012; Millie, 2014; Turnbull and Wass, 2015). For example, Blane and Watt (2012) demonstrate, through case studies, how austerity has increased the demand upon healthcare services, which essentially function as a last resort where other services have been cut. They suggest that the inability to meet this demand will ultimately result in a greater economic burden being placed upon society.

Majeed et al (2012), also writing in the context of healthcare, argue that cuts to primary care budgets will have costly long-term consequences for the NHS. Barr et al (2015) present data suggesting that austerity measures have contributed to a rise in mental health problems and thus an increased demand upon services. Millie (2014) argues that this demand has spilled over where it cannot be met, increasing pressure upon police forces.

Such criticisms have given rise to claims that the austerity measures are driven less by genuine economic reasoning and more by political ideology (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; Kitson et al, 2011; MacLeavey, 2011; O'Hara, 2015: 5) and in particular a commitment to the neoliberal ideal (see O'Connell, 2007; Harvey, 2006) of free-markets, limited state, and a general roll back of protectionist policies (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012: 41-56, MacLeavey, 2011). Yet given that the financial 'free' market was rescued with £850bn of public money following the crisis (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012: 43, Lavalette, 2017: 32), austerity is inconsistent with any such 'commitment', in that it effectively nationalises the losses of financial elites at the expense of society. A possible explanation for this is that offered by Harvey (2010) in *the enigma of capital*, who argues (pp10-12) that in times of crisis, neoliberal capitalism 'evolves' and restructures itself, and that the current changes can best be understood as part of a larger class project, aimed at restoring the dominance of financial elites by any means possible (see Harvey, 2007b: 19). If austerity is indeed ideological in nature, then it is worth mentioning that the importance of ideological discourse within the changing social context has been noted (Fairclough, 2013: 26; MacLeavey, 2011; O'Hara, 2015: 6; Rice and Bond, 2013) along with the centrality of social class (Fairclough, 2013: 25-26, Harvey, 2010: 10-12; Nunn, 2016).

Indeed, as the literature here demonstrates, the economic crisis and subsequent austerity have clearly brought issues such as inequality and poverty - which are inherently linked to social class (Dorling, 2013; Tyler, 2015) - to prominence (see Nunn, 2016; Savage et al 2013; Tyler, 2015). Given that the way in which class is constructed can, as I discuss above, impact upon the way such issues are themselves viewed (Savage, 2016) a critical focus upon the mass media treatment of the concept is clearly warranted. Importantly, despite the renewed interest in social class and its apparent centrality (Fairclough, 2013: 26; McKenzie, 2018; Nunn, 2016; O'Hara, 2015), there appears to be no large scale study focusing upon how social class is constructed in the mass media within the context of austerity. It is this gap in the literature that this study seeks to address. The existing literature in the area of social class is extensive and diverse, however, and as such forms a rich resource for the current study. In

the following two sections, I examine this literature, starting with a brief overview, before moving on to look at how the ambiguous nature of social class leaves the concept open to construction. I then focus upon the literature that has examined previous portrayals of social class in order to highlight the patterns which have been noted as well as the key sites of struggle which have been identified.

### 2.3 Social Class

As I state in the introduction, social class can broadly be described as the hierarchical stratification of people based upon socio-economic factors (see Grant, 2001; Kerswill, 2018; Savage, 2016). Whilst social class is closely related to the concept of *socio-economic status*, it can be distinguished by its relative stability and links with identity (see Lawler, 1999; Manstead, 2018; Rubin, *et al*, 2014). Class has long been an area of academic interest with arguably the most prominent perspective, historically, being Marxism (see Savage 2016; Kerswill, 2018; Rupert, 2007: 35). From a Marxist perspective, social class is determined by relation to the means of production: the *ruling class* own these means and profit from the *surplus value* produced by labour (see Kerswill, 2018). Marx's perspective on class has been criticised on the basis of it being grounded in the economic context of Victorian Britain - and thus less relevant to other contexts (Kerswill, 2018). Despite this, Marx's conflict model remains influential (Savage 2016; Kerswill, 2018; Rupert, 2007: 35), with several contemporary scholars pointing to the continuing importance of economic relationships to social class (see e.g. Nunn, 2008; Robinson, 2017; Standing, 2012, 2014).

Max Weber's theory of social stratification is another early attempt to understand class, albeit from a more nuanced perspective, taking into account not just economic factors but also social and cultural factors such as political power and *prestige* (Giddens, 1971: 166-168). Weber's work on class can be seen as a precursor to contemporary theories, which have increasingly taken the form of 'composite models' (Kerswill, 2018: 294). Such theories acknowledge the importance of economic relationships to social class, but also seek to account for the role played by social and cultural factors in terms of perpetuating inequality (see e.g. Le Grand, 2015; Tyler, 2015). The works of Pierre Bourdieu have been greatly influential in this respect (Savage, 2016). For Bourdieu, social class is a product of unequal access to capital in its various forms (see Bourdieu, 1987). Perhaps most importantly, and as I discuss in greater detail below, Bourdieu (1987) also points out how, owing to its vague



nature, social class is open to construction through the placing of greater or lesser emphasis upon particular factors.

Social class has historically been a central theme for sociological analysis (Savage 2016). Indeed, as Savage (2016: 59) notes, throughout much of the history of sociology social class was *the* lens through which inequality was viewed.

From the late 1980's onwards however, the concept came to be seen as somewhat out of date, archaic, and no longer relevant to modern society (Haylett, 2001; Savage, 2016; Tyler, 2008, 2015). Raisborough and Adams (2008) suggest that discourses of 'individualism' played a major part in this, citing Beck (2004: 107) who argues that "Society can no longer look in the mirror and see social classes. The mirror has been smashed and all we have left are the individualized fragments". Haylett (2001) suggests that in the context of the 'postmodern turn' within social study (see Susen, 2015: 1) class came to be viewed as less relevant, or at least less 'fashionable' than other categories of identity, such as race and gender, and that this has led to a general closing down of spaces of representation for working class people:

The 'others' which have been accorded such high symbolic status within critical academic theory, for example, are definitely not the white working-class poor. Might they be too ambiguous as victims? Too unfashionably nonexotic? (Haylett, 2001: 353).

The essence of Haylett's argument is that other categories of identity (such as race and gender for example) were seen as comparatively 'exotic' and 'fashionable' by virtue of introducing new ways of looking at inequality, and that was to lead to the dumping of class from both the academic and the public agenda (see also Jones, 2012: 1-2) as the idea of explaining inequality through the lens of class came to be seen as overly simplistic and outdated. As Haylett notes, an unfortunate consequence of this 'dumping' of class is a move away from considering the effects of the social structure upon inequality. To be clear, the reference to the *white* working class that Haylett makes should not be read as an attempt to confer 'special status' upon this group by virtue of their race, but rather as an acknowledgement of the abandonment faced by those for whom class position is the only, or at least main, form of disadvantage faced (see McKenzie, 2018). This is of course a consequence of the fact that the white working class in the UK does not face disadvantage conditioned by racist discrimination. Yet it is worth keeping in mind that, logically, the effect of class being dropped from the agenda is that an entire perspective from which to examine (and challenge) disadvantage is lost to *all* members of the working class irrespective of race.

As I state previously, social class has made something of a ‘comeback’ within academic study in relatively recent times (Haylett, 2001; Savage et al, 2013), with several academics becoming critical of the view that ‘class is dead’, especially in light of rising levels of inequality (see Bradley, 2014; Savage et al, 2013; Tyler, 2015). Much of the recent literature draws upon the works of Pierre Bourdieu, and in particular his work on class distinction (Savage, 2016; Tyler, 2008). For Bourdieu, class is a product of unequal access to ‘capital’, in its various forms: economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. Yet as he notes in *‘What makes a social class? On the theoretical and practical existence of groups’* (1987), class is a vague concept, and one that is therefore difficult to objectively define. This difficulty, he suggests, stems from the fact that several factors could, within any particular context, contribute to class inequality. Thus any attempt to define class can only really achieve a ‘best fit’, which accounts for the most people possible using the least amount of variables - hence the traditional trend of linking class with more easily defined categories such as income or occupation. Regardless of the difficulty in defining class, Bourdieu recognises that, in real terms, it very much exists in people’s individual lived experiences; the very criteria that might be used to define a class being the same factors that bring together people who share sufficient common ground to be united in their life experience or *‘habitus’*. In other words, regardless of the difficulty in defining class it nonetheless exists objectively, paradoxically by way of existing subjectively in the shared ‘sense of one’s place’ (Bourdieu, 1987: 5-6).

Bourdieu (1987) suggests that the ambiguous nature of class leaves it open to construction; by placing greater or lesser emphasis upon particular forms of capital, the defining features, and therefore the ‘boundaries’, of classes can be manipulated. The result is that ‘classes’ consist of different members depending upon the criteria used to define or ‘construct’ them. As Bourdieu (1987) notes, however, the ability to construct class in this way is itself dependent upon having sufficient capital to do so. Accordingly, the way in which class is portrayed can be at odds with the social reality and, instead, in line with the political or ideological perspectives of those with sufficient capital to be in a position to speak for class.

Bourdieu’s approach has the advantage of linking any analysis of class to its cultural and social context, something Dorling (2014) argues is essential if the concept is to have any real world relevance. Yet the distinction must be made between consideration of the role cultural and social factors might play in terms of contributing to class disadvantage, and the use of these factors in actually *defining* class. Otherwise there exists a danger of class being reduced to such considerations. Such a reduction not only risks masking structural disadvantage, and

the genuine hardship faced by those at the lower end of the social hierarchy (see Bradley, 2014; Dorling, 2013; Tyler, 2015), but also reinforcing class stereotypes and fuelling individualised narratives which blame poor people for their own fate. For example, McRobbie (2004) argues that the culture of those who are poor is always portrayed as poor culture, in that it deviates from the dominant middle-class norm. Thus where culture is allowed to become the defining feature of class, the failure to adopt the 'correct' culture can all too easily become *the* explanation for inequality itself.

The difficulty in accounting for the importance of social and cultural factors to the concept of class without trivialising the issue of inequality therefore means that defining the class 'system' within society is not only a difficult task, but one which is often fraught with controversy. This is well illustrated by the debates surrounding one such recent attempt. The Great British Class Survey (GBCS), conducted in association with the BBC, represents the largest survey ever to focus upon social class, with over 161,000 responses (Devine and Snee, 2015: 243). In addition to the high response rate, the GBCS generated much academic debate, as well as extensive media coverage (Savage *et al*, 2013). Pointing to the difficulty in contemporary society of placing people within the traditional three class system, the GBCS, itself influenced by Bourdieusian theory, assigned a score to participants for economic, cultural, and social capital based upon their responses to questions, before analysing patterns within the data. The results suggest that seven distinct classes exist within modern British society, with polarisation towards the 'extremes' as well as 'fragmentation' within the middle (Savage *et al*, 2013: 220). Whilst Savage *et al* (2013) do acknowledge the centrality of inequality to social class, the use here of cultural and social aspects for the purposes of *categorisation* has led to criticism that doing so reduces class to transient features. For example, Bradley (2014: 431) argues that the seven 'classes' are merely *descriptive* and thus fail to account for *relational* aspects, and that this ignores the true importance of the concept; the dominance that can be exerted by those in privileged positions, not only over those lower down the hierarchy but also over the social legitimacy of culture itself. This is, of course, a similar point to the one made by McRobbie (2004) above. Dorling (2013) warns of the risk of trivialising the inequality that underpins class, and in particular the issue of genuine poverty. Citing responses to the GBCS Dorling (2013) argues that the real issue of class is the leverage that elites can exert over others, and that therefore relationships such as employer-employee are still the more relevant, as these essentially constrain access to cultural and

social capital. Likewise Bradley (2014) argues that an updated system based around the relationship to the means of production is still the truest reflection of class standing.

### 2.3.1 Depictions of Class

A distinction must be drawn between attempts to *categorise* class according to cultural and social factors, and studies which have focused upon the role these play in portrayals of class. Whilst the latter have generally approached class from a cultural perspective they have nonetheless been critical of the view that culture *determines* class. Instead, they have focused upon how cultural aspects are used as ‘markers’ of class position (Devine et al, 2005) and how culture therefore becomes the *site of struggle* where constructions of class are played out - especially in the absence of explicit reference and discussion (see e.g. Lawler, 2005; McRobbie, 2004; Skeggs, 2005; Tyler, 2015).

Much of the recent literature following the ‘comeback’ of social class has followed this path, and it is worth focusing upon this literature in order to highlight some of the key patterns that have been noted therein. Given that it identifies previous sites of struggle in the context of class construction, the literature in this section is especially pertinent to the current study since, as Wodak (2001) points out, all discourse has a historical element; it makes sense of the world through reference to previously established discourses and their associated understandings. In order to make sense of the ways in which class is portrayed within the current analysis, it is therefore important to take into consideration the findings of previous study in this area.

Key to more contemporary discussion of class have been Bourdieu’s theories of distinction (1984) , focusing upon the ways in which portrayals of social class draw ‘boundaries’ between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ and how this can both perpetuate class discrimination, and obscure the operation of class. For example, Skeggs (2005: 970) argues that in times of anxiety over social standing<sup>5</sup>, people seek to define borders between themselves and the ‘proximate stranger’. Culture therefore becomes a marker for what one *ought not to be*, a symbolic ‘othering’, with lower class culture being reduced to a ‘foil’, or a cultural ground zero. In this respect, the struggle over culture becomes a struggle over *value*. Similarly

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<sup>5</sup> The point regarding anxiety over social standing is of course especially relevant in the current context. Whilst Skeggs discusses this proximity in the context of neoliberal individualisation, the issue of *downward social mobility* (owing to the economic crisis) is perhaps more relevant here.

McRobbie (2004) argues that popular television programmes perform *symbolic violence* in holding up ‘lower class’ culture as deficient; portraying it as lacking in comparison to the dominant middle class norm. McKenzie (2013) demonstrates, through ethnographic research, how members of the working class poor are aware of this ‘othering’, and the resulting discrimination, and thus reactively form their ‘own’ culture based around re-appropriated value systems.

Much of the literature suggests that discourses of class draw strongly upon the emotive response of disgust. For example Lawler (2005) describes visceral descriptions of the working class poor that serve to highlight their perceived lack of taste and morality. Drawing upon Miller’s (1997) account of disgust, Lawler suggests the emotion is evoked when the undesirable becomes too proximate. In other words the disgust response is a direct consequence of being too close for comfort. This echoes the argument made by Skeggs (2005: see above) regarding the *boundary work* performed by class discourse. Tyler (2008: 23) argues, in the context of the ‘chav’ figure (discussed below), that ‘feigned disgust’ is important in drawing distinctions between the ‘self’ and the lower class ‘other’:

Newspaper accounts of chavs employ a “combination of parody and serious intent” to produce a disgust which is not simply reactive but is constitutive of social class. Laughing at chavs is a way of naming, managing and authorising class disgust, contempt, and anxiety. The expression of class disgust within newspaper articles on chavs is deliberate and self-conscious, it is a feigned disgust performed both for our entertainment and as a means of asserting middle-class identity claims.

Mockery is another mechanism identified within the literature through which the poor are ‘put in their place’ (see Raisborough and Adams, 2009; Tyler, 2008). Raisborough and Adams, drawing upon Billig’s (2005) theories of mockery, suggest that humour has the effect of performing social lifting, i.e. taking what is essentially a serious point beyond reproach by relying upon the defence that ‘it’s only a joke’:

Humour creates moments and spaces in which a suspension of social criticism is expected. The qualifier ‘it’s only a joke’ is a prime example of the ways humour seems to lift itself beyond social reproach (Raisborough and Adams, 2009: 4)

Likewise, Tyler (2008: 23) notes that:

Economic inequality, class-based discrimination and open snobbery are made palatable through claims that this vicious name calling is “ironic” or has a “satirical” function.

Raisborough and Adams (2009), analysing classed depictions in children's comics, further theorise that such use of humour may in part reflect an uneasy acknowledgement of arbitrary class advantage which must somehow be mitigated against, and invite the reader to ask whether the humour kicks 'up' or 'down' - and what this reveals about the social structure.

Alongside the 'culturalisation' discussed above, many note a more explicit 'moralisation' of class (see e.g. Bennett 2013; Tyler, 2008, 2015; Valentine and Harris, 2014). For example, Tyler (2008) argues that depictions of the poor are often reduced to exaggerated caricatures of existing stereotypes which focus upon a lack of morality. Skeggs (2004) suggests that these stereotypes serve to make the peripheral central, or in other words to make these issues (of morality) central to the concept of class - its distinguishing feature. Lawler (2005: 437) takes this reasoning further, arguing that rhetoric of 'the poor' is *always* moralising, and that even descriptions of physical appearances and places are morally loaded:

Everything is saturated with meaning: their clothes, their bodies, their houses, all are assumed to be markers of some 'deeper', pathological form of identity. This identity is taken to be ignorant, brutal and tasteless. As in eugenically-inspired (often retouched) photographs popular at the turn of the Twentieth Century white working-class people's actions and appearance are made to *mean*: they are made to indicate signs of ignorance, stupidity, tastelessness. An assumed ignorance and immorality is read off from an aesthetic which is constituted as faulty.

The essence of Lawler's (2005) argument is that those of higher class are able to assert a monopoly on 'good taste', and to thus mark anything associated with the 'lower class' as tasteless – as that which appeals to a type of person who is unable to appreciate higher culture, a type who is supposedly drawn toward 'the facile pleasures of the flesh' (p439). This, Lawler (2005: 440) suggests, leads to a "slippage between 'facile' in terms of aesthetic dispositions and (morally) 'easy'".

Yet in spite of the tendency to discuss class in terms of morality, Lawler (2005: 437) argues that, in the course of class being driven off the agenda, what has changed is "less the sentiments than the explicit naming of class". Similarly, Weltman (2008) asserts that class has become something of a paradox within the media in that it is invisible and yet ever present. Weltman's argument, supported by anecdotes, is that whilst class is rarely explicitly discussed, it is nevertheless constantly implied by reference to culture and morality, with particular focus upon the poorest members of society. The striking similarity with previous discourses of the 'underclass' is immediately obvious; take, for example, Myrdal's (1963) description of a "class of unemployed, unemployables, and underemployed who are more and

more hopelessly set apart from the nation at large and do not share in its life, its ambitions and its achievements". Moralising discourses within the media have not only been noted within academia (Hayward and Yar, 2006; le Grand, 2015; Tyler, 2008; Tyler and Bennett, 2010; Valentine and Harris, 2014), but also more generally. For example, Jones (2012) argues in his book *Chavs: the demonization of the working class* that the mainstream media have moved from a salt of the earth rhetoric concerning the working class to a fixation with the apparent moral failings of the poorest members of society and, in particular, the figure of the 'chav'.

The chav figure is a derogatory stereotype of the working class which became common in the early 2000s and has since featured prominently in the media, online blogs, and everyday speech (Hayward and Yar, 2006; Tyler, 2008). Hayward and Yar (2006) suggest that the increasing prominence of the chav figure, coinciding, as it did, with a rise in insecure low-quality employment, works to further de-couple the concept of class from its economic basis (see also Weltman, 2008, on this point). Instead, the chav figure is portrayed as lacking in taste and morality (Hayward and Yar, 2006; Le Grand, 2015; Tyler, 2008), and serves as a 'moral euphemism' that casts the lower classed other as "shiftless, tasteless, unintelligent, immoral or criminal" (Tyler and Bennett, 2009: 379). The increased prominence of the chav figure can thus be seen as a continuation of the implicit moralisation of class (Tyler and Bennett, 2009), in that it is a stereotype which serves to place the emphasis upon what is 'wrong' with those of 'lower class' as opposed to the structural conditions that lead to them coming to be. In this sense, the chav is the embodiment of a supposed decline in the respectability of the working class, and the apparent threat to 'decent society' that results (Le Grand, 2015).

Indeed, several scholars have noted a narrative emphasising the 'decline' of the respectable working class (e.g. Haylett, 2001; Lawler, 2005) alongside an emphasis upon the supposed rise of an underclass defined solely by its failure to adhere to normative middle class standards (Haylett, 2001; Lawler; 2005; Tyler, 2008, 2013). Tyler (2013: 2) notes the rise in 'scum semiotics' and (2008) the focus upon excessive sexuality, idleness, criminality, and vulgarity, amongst other supposed moral failings. Furthermore, Tyler (2015) argues that as a result, the working class identity has been drained of any meaning - eroded to the point where it no longer represents "a political identity category deployed by people in everyday struggles against exploitation" (Tyler, 2015: 498).

Bennett (2013) and Tyler (2013) provide a relatively recent example, demonstrating how the riots of 2011 - which erupted across the UK - were framed in terms of morality, to the exclusion of alternative explanations. Le Grand (2015) argues that the fixation upon moral aspects of the poorest members of society can be compared to a *moral panic*, and demonstrates how these people are portrayed in the media as a threat to the social fabric, and as a regulator of acceptable behaviour in that they are held up as examples of what one ought not to do, lest they lose any claim to respectability. In addition Le Grand (2015: 1) argues that such moralised discourses often focus upon the ‘injury’ caused to society by these people; thereby portraying society at large as the ‘victim’. It has been argued that this extends beyond merely casting moral judgement upon ‘the poor’ to *criminalising* poverty (e.g. Bennett, 2013; Le Grand, 2015; Tyler, 2008; Waquant, 2010). Waquant (2010) summarises this by arguing that the criminalisation of poverty is a feature of the ‘neoliberal’ state, one which legitimises a move from welfare to social control.

As I state previously, many academics in the field are critical of the notion that culture *determines* class standing, yet recognise its importance as a site of struggle - especially in the absence of explicit discussion of class (e.g. Dorling, 2013; Le Grand, 2015; McRobbie, 2004; Skeggs, 2005; Tyler, 2015). For instance, Skeggs (2005) argues that the cultural tends to reflect the economic, pointing out that not all people are in a position to adopt the ‘correct’ culture. Similarly Dorling (2013), Jensen and Tyler (2015), and Tyler (2015) point to rising levels of inequality which have set apart ‘the poor’ from the rest of society. Yet with the focus on structural inequality missing from the discourse, critical attention is, necessarily, turned towards culturalised and moralised depictions of class; and it is perhaps here that the importance of separating what class *is* from what class is *portrayed as being* is greatest.

Several theories have been put forward which attempt to explain why discourse of class is often culturalised or moralised. The most common reasoning within the literature is that doing so ‘explains away’ and thus legitimises inequality by ‘levering’ class issues off the agenda (Gillies, 2005: 836) and replacing them with a discourse of *compulsory individualism* (Skeggs, 2005: 974) in which the poor are held culpable for their own circumstances (see e.g. Haylett, 2001; Gillies, 2005; Tyler, 2015). For example, Gillies (2005: 836), writing in an educational context, argues that:

The ascendancy of theories describing a new age of ‘reflexive modernity’ in which individuals produce their own biographies, was highly instrumental in levering class off



the academic agenda. Consequently, a period marked by record levels of inequality coincided with virtual silence from sociologists on the subject of class.

And Haylett (2001: 361), in the context of welfare, states:

The rhetoric of 'welfare dependency' is imbued with meanings of a cultural and particularly moral kind, which bear a historical relation to the notion of 'cultures of poverty'. Seminally developed by the anthropologist Oscar Lewis in the 1960s, the notion was first used as a way of explaining the cultural differences of groups living on very basic material resources outside of the West (Lewis, 1966). The misuse of Lewis's thesis became widespread in the USA during the 1960s when it was specifically applied to the 'dysfunctional Negro family', and during the 1970s in Britain under the auspices of Conservative minister, Keith Joseph, who was intent on explaining unemployment via 'cycles of deprivation' theory (Moynihan, 1967; Rutter and Madge, 1977). Both those applications represented attempts to rationalise blaming poverty on the poor.

Le Grand (2015: 5) situates this within the context of neoliberal discourse, arguing that discussions of 'individual moral failings' are used rhetorically to justify systemic inequality:

The current demonisation of chavs can be linked to an historical context of neoliberal economic restructuring and deindustrialisation leading to the rise of 'flexible' and poor work. This led to the increasing marginalisation, poverty and fragmentation of white working-class communities, particularly in the north of England. Moreover, their marginalisation became largely portrayed as due to individual moral failings or a culture of poverty, rather than structural conditions.

Similarly, Tyler (2015: 505), drawing upon Brown's (2006) theory of the *culturalisation of political struggles*, argues that the culturalisation of class and its reduction to individual 'choices' serves to legitimise the structural inequalities inherent to 'neoliberal' capitalism by 'depoliticising the political':

In order to 'realize' the social relations required by neoliberalism, namely acquiescence to a form of financial capitalism which benefits the rich at the expense of the rest, it was imperative that 'collective representations' of the structural causes of inequality were transformed. What distinguishes neoliberal media culture is that class inequalities are rescripted to appear a consequence of individual choices, wealth is 'earned' and poverty is 'deserved'. Wendy Brown (2006) describes this shift as the *culturalization of political struggles*: 'a mode of dispossessing the constitutive histories and powers organizing contemporary problems and contemporary political subjects – that is, depoliticization of sources of political problems.

Tyler (2015: 506) notes that such discourse may, in addition, serve to maintain distinction on cultural and moral grounds from those 'below' during times of economic uncertainty; thereby mitigating anxiety by affording some sense of control. This mirrors Skeggs's (2004, 2005) argument regarding the act of 'pushing away' the proximate stranger, albeit in a different

context. Whereas Skeggs refers to the perceived threat of proximity resulting from neoliberal discourses of individualism, meritocracy, and social mobility, Tyler refers to the threat of proximity resulting from economic anxieties during unpredictable times.

Sayer (2002), demonstrating that people generally avoid talking about class explicitly (and particularly in economic terms), goes on to reason that this is because to do so is to either call someone's worth into question, or to acknowledge the uncomfortable truth that society is based upon unfair distinctions afforded by the accident of birth; according to this view, the avoidance of explicit talk of class and inequality serves the purpose of hiding what is essentially an 'embarrassing topic':

Class is an embarrassing topic. 'What class are you?' or 'What class are they?' are not easy questions, particularly if those who are asked ponder the implications of their answers, or if the questioner is of a different class from the person being asked, and especially if there are others of different classes present who can hear the answer. They can be unsettling because they could be taken to imply further disturbing questions, such as: What are you worth? And do you think you're worth more/less than others? Even if we want to say that class has nothing to do with worth, that only makes the existence of class inequalities more troubling. What is at stake is the disjunction between economic valuation and ethical valuation. (Sayer, 2002: 1)

What all of these theories have in common is that they emphasise the ways in which the issue of injustice is avoided. The appeal of such discourse can possibly be explained with reference to the *just world hypothesis* (Lerner 1970). Developed to explain the phenomenon of victim blaming, the JWH refers to people's general tendency to view the world as fundamentally fair, and therefore as less threatening. Such a view is based upon the reassuring belief that bad things only happen to bad people. As Lerner and Miller (1978: 1030) put it:

Individuals have a need to believe that they live in a world where people generally get what they deserve. The belief that the world is just enables the individual to confront his physical and social environment as though they were stable and orderly.

Discourse which explains away disadvantage with reference to personal choices and moral failings therefore sidesteps the issue of injustice by suggesting that such a fate is both *deserved*, and furthermore, that such a fate could *not* befall those who do not deserve it.

Given the patterns demonstrated within the literature it is not surprising that some (e.g. Manstead, 2018; Tyler, 2008; Warren, 2017) have drawn parallels between the discourse of class and discourses of 'meritocracy'. The idea of meritocracy has itself been identified as a means of legitimising inequality within capitalist society (Littler, 2013; Manstead, 2018,

Nunn, 2012). Such discourse is a powerful tool in that it allows questions of unfair advantage/disadvantage to be replaced by the idea that ‘talent rises to the top’ (Littler, 2013: 52), and that ‘people can achieve what they want if they have enough talent and are prepared to work hard’ (Manstead, 2018: 267). Yet the notion of meritocracy and earned privilege has been repeatedly called into question (e.g. Breen and Goldthorpe, 1999; Gillies, 2005; Radnor et al, 2007; Manstead, 2018; Warren, 2017). For example, Sliwa and Johansson (2014) demonstrate (in the context of education) how cultural advantage can be converted to actual material, and eventually economic advantage, thereby perpetuating class inequality. Similarly Breen and Goldthorpe (1999) and Radnor et al (2007) show how social class can affect the opportunities available to school children more so than merit, whilst also arguing that the idea of ‘merit’ itself is often constructed along classed lines; to the extent that ‘potential’ becomes synonymous with (higher) class position. Warren (2016: 115) goes as far as to suggest that the discourse of meritocracy is fundamentally classist in that it suggests that being lower class is a direct result of being less capable and less ‘bright’.

In a more general sense Dorling (2013) argues that financial insecurity and poverty remain significant barriers to social mobility, trapping people in poverty. This view has been supported by several studies, for example McKenzie (2013) demonstrates, through ethnographic research within a deprived community how the life chances of the working class poor are essentially shaped around the economic situation in which they find themselves - one largely beyond their control. Shildrick et al (2010) demonstrate how poor people effectively become trapped in the ‘low-pay no-pay cycle’, in spite of their best efforts to escape. Indeed, if ‘the poor’ lack the means to transform their economic situation then the literature suggests that changing aspects of their culture is equally futile. Lawler (1999, 2005) argues that when the poor attempt to adopt aspects of the dominant middle class norm they are often viewed as fake, whereas when they resist they are viewed as deviant. ‘The poor’ are therefore essentially faced with a no-win situation, since regardless of what they do, they are defined purely by their ‘lack’ of value (see Skeggs 2005: 970).

What this demonstrates is both the central importance of inequality to social class, and the potential of the reframing of class differences as individual, cultural, or moral differences to push structural causes of inequality from view (Savage, 2016). In light of this Tyler’s (2015) view of class as the naming of the problem of inequality is particularly useful when critically analysing the ways in which class is depicted. Devine and Savage (2005: 16) suggest that a problem faced by class analysts when critiquing understandings of class is that doing so

requires the identification of a ‘correct’ understanding; a task which risks mirroring the researcher in the complexities of objectively defining class (see Kerswill, 2018). Yet Tyler (2015) suggests that to ask what *is* class is the wrong question. Instead she argues that one should view class in terms of the problem it describes - inequality. This perspective is especially pertinent to the aims of the present study, since placing the issue of inequality at the centre of the analysis provides a useful reference point against which constructions of class can be evaluated. In other words, by taking this perspective it is possible to focus upon such things as the ‘groups’ that are defined, the criteria by which they are defined, and the relationship that is implied between them, and to ask whether this accurately reflects, or rather obscures, the issue of inequality.

A potential criticism here might be that, on the face of it, Tyler’s (2015) perspective essentially *reduces* class to inequality, or that, at the very least, it can say nothing with regards to what class *is* beyond this. By extension, it could further be argued that whilst such a perspective can raise critical questions with regards to class construction, it can offer no answers, since it remains silent on the actual *causes* of inequality. Whilst it must be acknowledged that a limitation of Tyler’s (2015) perspective is that it cannot answer the question of what class *is* in concrete terms, it is not so much the case that this reduces class to its essential problem, rather, it leaves scope for the researcher to identify, for example through engagement with the literature, factors that are current causes of inequality.

The inherent limitation that follows from taking this perspective was thus not problematic in the context of the present study for two reasons. Firstly, the aim of the present study was not to offer a ‘correct’ definition of class at all - indeed, a central premise of the argument presented here is that the concept is inevitably open to construction (Bourdieu, 1987; Rubin et al, 2014; Savage, 2016) precisely because it has no single defining feature (Kerswill, 2018) and is, in any case, grounded in its context (see Bourdieu, 1987; Dorling, 2014). Secondly, the need to engage with the literature in order to evaluate discourse through reference to evidence is actually in keeping with the principals of critical discourse analysis. As Fairclough (2013: 8-9) points out, any analysis of discourse is *itself* discourse, and any claim to truth made on the part of the analyst must therefore draw upon sufficient evidence in support.

To sum up this section, the literature here demonstrates some of the key patterns that have been identified with regards to previous portrayals of social class, and as such it is an

extremely useful recourse for the present study. One of the notable aspects of the literature is the level of detail in so many areas of the topic, as well as the varied perspectives taken. One issue, however, is that the much of the literature predates the change in context that the economic crisis and austerity represent (e.g. Tyler, 2008; Raisborough and Adams, 2008). Elsewhere the focus has often been upon a relatively narrow context, or upon just one aspect of class. For example, Bennett (2013), examines depictions of class in the media in the context of the 2011 riots and the *Occupy* movement. Jensen and Tyler (2015) focus upon the classed figure of the ‘scrounger’ in the context of welfare reform, but this leaves open the question of how class is portrayed more generally within this context, and how this figure *relates* to others in society - a particularly important point given the relational nature of class (Bradley, 2014). At other times, the amount of data analysed is small, for example Raisborough and Adams (2008) base their conclusions upon a very in-depth study of children’s comics, but only analyse two examples. This is not meant as too harsh a criticism of these types of study, as often they are intended to be ‘illustratory’, in that the limited analysis is conducted in support of an argument, and to point to areas of interest for future study.

A final point regarding studies focused upon media depictions of social class is that frequent reference is made to the ‘neoliberal’ media or to media that uncritically reproduce a neoliberal discourse (e.g. Bennett, 2013; Tyler, 2013, 2015). Yet without further reflection upon what factors may lead any such bias, and what *effect* such reporting may have, the critical potential of such studies is limited. In other words, even if a ‘neoliberal bias’ can be demonstrated within media depictions of class (and this is leaving aside the vague nature of the term ‘neoliberal’), without reference to the large body of literature regarding media influence and bias it is difficult to situate the findings within the wider social context and to trace the lines of ‘interconnection’ (Fairclough, 1995: 747). Given that discourse is viewed within CDA as being both conditioned by, and constitutive of, society (Wodak and Meyer, 2015: 5), it is important to engage with relevant literature in order to highlight key theories and findings that help to situate the discourse in context (see Billig 1999). For the present study, issues such as media influence and bias are of particular relevance when moving from considerations of *how* class is constructed to questioning *why* this may be and to what likely *effect*. With this in mind, I examine this literature in the following two sections.

## 2.4 Media Influence and Media Bias

Interest in the power of the mass media to influence public opinion has a long history. As early as 1922, Walter Lipmann argued that since the media are the main source of public information, they are able to filter this information and thus shape public opinion (McCombs, 2005: 552, see also Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988; Preston and Silke, 2011: 50). This set the scene for McCombs's and Shaw's (1972) influential study of the American presidential election coverage and its effects on voters, which gave rise to the *agenda setting theory* of mass media. Several studies have followed up on this and demonstrated the widespread power of the mass media to influence the public agenda (e.g. Funkhouser, 1973; Shaw and McCombs, 1977; Wanta, 1997; Weaver et al, 1981; Winter and Eyal, 1981), leading McCombs (2005), reviewing the evidence, to conclude that the effect is well established and continues to be of relevance. Castells (2007: 241), summing up the importance of the media to the public discourse, states that: "What does not exist in the media does not exist in the public mind, even if it could have a fragmented presence in individual minds".

Whilst the initial theory echoed Cohen's (1963: 13) Argument that the media are less successful at telling people *what* to think than they are at telling people what to think *about*, more recent developments of the theory point to second-level or *attribute priming* effects which have been demonstrated to affect *how* the public perceives an issue as opposed to merely its salience (Wolfe et al 2013). Whereas first-level agenda setting puts an issue itself on the agenda, second-level agenda setting gives prominence to particular attributes *within* that issue, thereby affecting how the issue is viewed and understood. These second-level effects share considerable overlap with *framing theory*, which suggests that the way in which reporting is framed can have significant effects upon how the public perceives the issue and ultimately acts. The psychological foundations of framing theory are well established, having been studied in a wide variety of contexts (see Iyengar, 1994; Shah et al, 2009). Additionally, several studies have investigated and demonstrated the persuasive power held by the mass media over their audience (see e.g. Dellavigna and Kaplan, 2007; Ladd and Lenz, 2009; McCarthy and Dolfsma, 2014).

Wolfe et al (2013) argue that whilst the effect of media coverage on public opinion is well studied, the mediating role the media play between public opinion and public policy is an area that requires further consideration. Jones and Wolfe (2010) argue that the media perform

a mediatory role in three ways: firstly, by ‘setting the tone’ for policy change (putting it on the agenda); secondly, by amplifying the importance of policy change, through coverage which supports the argument; and, finally, by providing feedback between public opinion and policy makers. Cohen et al (2008) provide some supporting evidence, demonstrating that policy makers’ decisions are influenced not just by media coverage but by the mere *anticipation* of it. This would suggest that the media, and their perceived response, are an ever present consideration in the course of political judgement.

Several prominent academics have expressed concern at the power held by the media. For example, Castells (2013) argues that within democratic society, control of the means of mass communication is the principal source of power, pointing to the struggle between power and ‘counter power’ for control of the public discourse. Preston and Silke (2011) argue that the media shape social reality by shaping the common-sense beliefs upon which society is structured. In *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Corporate Capitalism*, Herman and McChesney (1997: 3, 198) acknowledge the importance of ‘free’ media within democratic society, but suggest that the very idea of such ‘free’ media is difficult to sustain (see also Ellman and Germano, 2009: 680). Pointing to factors such as increasingly concentrated ownership of the media by transnational corporations, they suggest that the significant amount of influence that the media hold grants them the power to forward an agenda which may serve the interests of economic elites whilst being fundamentally at odds with the public interest.

Most often, concerns raised regarding the power of the media focus upon this issue of bias. This is seemingly intuitive; after all unbiased media cannot truly be regarded as a threat but simply a means of communicating information. The neutrality of the media however has repeatedly been called into question (see Berry, 2016; Herman and Chomsky 1998; Ellman and Germano 2009; Entman, 2007; McChesney, 2001; Herman and McChesney, 2001). Prat and Stromberg (2013) distinguish between inherent media bias - bias resulting from the structure of the media - and *media capture* whereby outside pressure is exerted upon the media, for example by governments or private corporations. Given the influential power of the media, the issue of bias raises democratic concerns, for example McChesney (2004) argues that media bias can lead to only a limited range of views becoming acceptable, whilst Ellmann and Germano (2009: 681) point to the general ‘dumbing down’ and subsequent political apathy resulting from biased media failing to acknowledge contradictory viewpoints.

Many theories of media bias have been put forward. These are obviously wide ranging and thus span several disciplines. Pratt and Stromberg (2013), reviewing the literature, suggest that theories of media bias can generally be grouped into two categories; *supply-side* theories and *demand-side* theories.

### 2.4.1 Supply-Side Media Bias

Supply-side theories attempt to explain bias in the supply of news, and as such focus upon the inherent structure of the media, as well as potential external influences. This is in contrast to demand-side theories that seek to explain bias resulting from audience demand (see below). In further contrast to demand-side theories, which generally focus solely upon the presence and amount of bias, supply-side theorists often argue that the media, by virtue of their structure, are biased towards a particular ideological stance. Often the distinction has been drawn between liberal and conservative or left wing and right wing bias, and as such there exists a large body of research and literature in this area (e.g. Eisinger et al,2007; Sutter,2000, 2011; see also McChesney,2004; McChesney and Foster, 2003). Those who argue that the media display a liberal bias argue that journalists tend hold views which are to the ‘left’ of the general population. Whilst acknowledging this contention, McChesney and Foster (2003) counter this by suggesting that the left/right, liberal/conservative distinction is an oversimplification, pointing out that whilst journalists tend to be to the ‘left’ on some issues, they often hold views to the ‘right’ on other issues, especially on economic matters<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, McChesney and Foster (2003) question the impact that individual journalists themselves can have upon the agenda. Given that journalists are essentially under pressure to conform to the expectations of media bosses, McChesney and Foster argue that systemic bias is likely to have a much greater effect.

Some (e.g. Andersson, 2012; Berry, 2016; Fenton, 2011; Grantham and Miller, 2010; Herman and McChesney, 2001; McChesney, 2003, 2012, Preston and Silke, 2011) suggest that the media display a neoliberal bias, and tend towards forwarding corporate interests. These arguments point to the increasing concentration of ownership resulting from buy-outs

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<sup>6</sup> The most obvious critique, and the one I would raise here, is that the idea of *left* and *right*, or *liberal* and *conservative* are themselves unclear, and indeed contested terms.



and takeovers in a private, competitive market, as well as links to business - for example, through advertising (see below). Essentially this is the type of 'neoliberal' bias referred to in the social class literature. For example, Tyler (2015) points to the corporate ownership of the media and the implication for coverage of issues relating to class. McChesney and Foster (2003) suggest that the structure of the corporate owned media creates a situation where this bias 'filters down' from the top, suggesting that journalists only progress through the ranks of the corporation if they display the 'correct' attitude and opinions:

In commercial media, the owners hire and fire and they determine the budgets and the overarching aims of the enterprise. Successful journalists, and certainly those who rise to the top of the profession, tend to internalize the values of those who own and control the enterprise. Sophisticated scholarly analysis examines how these commercial pressures shape what become the professional values that guide journalists. (McChesney and Foster, 2003: 4).

McChesney (2004: 71) argues that report sourcing, upon which the media are dependent, creates a link with business leaders and politicians, which in turn serves to function in much the same way as direct ownership, predisposing the media to an elite bias. McChesney and Foster (2003) point to anecdotal evidence of a subversion of the professional journalistic standards that supposedly serve to protect neutrality, and argue that 'official' (and credible) sources have therefore become synonymous with elite sources.

Advertising has also been widely acknowledged as having the potential to create media bias (Bagdikian 2000; Baker 1994; Boykoff and Boykoff 2004; Ellmann and Germano 2009; McChesney, 2004: 138). Advertising revenue makes up a significant proportion of the funding of many media outlets. Indeed, Baker (1994) and Ellman and Germano (2009) note that this often exceeds revenue from sales. There are essentially three main arguments within the literature as to how this bias may occur: through media outlets slanting coverage towards the most profitable consumers, through self-censorship, and through advertisers contributing revenue to the extent that the media outlet adopts an ideological pro-corporate bias.

Self-censorship resulting from advertising has long been a concern; the essential argument being that the factual reporting of an issue that is in the public interest can be compromised where there is a *conflict of interest* with advertisers (Blasco and Sobbrío 2012). For example, Baker (1994), Bagdikian (2000), and Warner and Goldenar (1989) note how suppressed reporting of the health effects of tobacco correlates with tobacco advertising revenue. Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) demonstrate the effect of automotive advertising on climate

change reporting. Ellmann and Germano (2009: 681) argue that this broadly supports the ‘regulatory’ view of corporate involvement in the media, whereby bias is introduced due to corporate ‘regulation’ of reporting<sup>7</sup>. Some academics (e.g. Bagdikian, 1997; Parenti, 1986) take this reasoning further, arguing that advertising forms part of the overall corporate structure of the media and that this, along with increasingly concentrated ownership and close links to big business, combine to further strengthen corporate bias at the ideological level.

Whilst these arguments make logical sense, a potential criticism of supply side theories is that they tend to assume a somewhat passive audience who are simply ‘spoon fed’ the media agenda. The theoretical basis of much of the literature is another potential criticism. Some studies do point to supporting evidence, but it is often anecdotal (see Blasco and Sobbrío, 2012) and thus the ability to generalise this evidence is somewhat limited. That is not to say that more direct evidence does not exist, indeed several studies have found partisan bias in news reporting (Brandenberg, 2006; Cushion et al, 2014; Groeling, 2013; Harper, 2014). Likewise there has been evidence of a general corporate or ‘neoliberal’ bias (e.g. Blasco and Sobbrío, 2012; Byrne, 2012; Temple et al, 2016). The problem lies, however, in linking the evidence to the theory, especially in light of competing, and often contradictory, demand side theories.

#### **2.4.2 Demand-Side Media Bias**

Again, in contrast to supply-side theories of media bias, demand-side theories attempt to explain bias resulting from the media catering to the pre-existing biases of a partisan audience. Such theories generally share the following characteristics; the assumption of media outlets as *profit maximising* (with media consumption accounting for the principal source of profit), and an audience with a range of pre-existing views and biases (see Stromberg and Pratt, 2011). Studies based upon these theories make extensive use of mathematical formulas in an effort to demonstrate how media outlets may (or may not) benefit from slanting coverage within a free-market situation (see e.g. Baron, 2006; Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2006; Mullainathan and Shleifer, 2005). Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006) demonstrate that readers of news tend to regard coverage as more accurate and trustworthy where it confirms their prior beliefs. Similarly, Eveland and Shah (2003) suggest

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<sup>7</sup>In contrast to the *liberal view* (Ellmann, 2009).

that people tend to be blind to their own biases and thus regard coverage that supports their own views as less biased than coverage which challenges them. This *hostile media phenomenon* therefore predicts demand driven bias even where the audience favours neutral, factual coverage (Mullainathan and Shleifer, 2005).

Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006) present a model whereby increased competition predicts a reduction in bias as media outlets compete to offer the most accurate coverage. Similarly, Burke (2008) argues that increased competition exposes the audience to differing perspectives and therefore leads to an *overall* reduction in bias. Stone (2011) argues that instead of reducing bias, increased competition may actually cause media outlets to polarise in order to exploit niches within the market and therefore reduce price competition. Obviously, the distinction must be drawn between a genuine reduction in bias and a simple ‘balancing out’ of what may be increasingly biased coverage, notwithstanding the fact that *overall* bias in any one direction (regardless of how this is measured) may decrease due to a cancelling out effect. Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006) suggest that increased competition may lead media outlets to slant coverage towards the majority perspective in order to gain the highest share of the largest proportion of the audience; something Pratt and Stromberg (2011) suggest may amount to a form of bias itself. Gal-or et al (2012) propose what is essentially a combination of supply and demand side theories. They present a theoretical model whereby the media are inclined to slant reporting towards the section of society with the greatest potential for consumption in order to attract advertising revenue. This model differs from traditional demand-side theories by considering the supply-side aspect of advertising, and the resulting importance of not just the size of the audience, but also the profile.

One potential criticism of these types of studies is the theoretical formulas relied upon for drawing their conclusions. The frequent lack of empirical evidence means that making sense of the (often contradictory) predictions is difficult. In addition, these types of study seem to rely upon what is essentially a circular reasoning. Presumably the concern with biased media is that the media can influence how the public thinks (and ultimately acts), but the bias of the audience itself is assumed to be the main source of media bias, with the original source of this bias left unexplained. The lack of attention paid to the supply-side is therefore a serious limitation. For example, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006) argue that in a competitive market, media outlets have a motive to expose bias in other reporting. Whilst this seems plausible, it does not allow for the situation where the bias stems from the supply-side and affects several competing media outlets – an example being where a large corporation contributes

advertising revenue to *several* media outlets. In this hypothetical scenario, the media outlets could find themselves caught between two courses of action in the case that a competitor skewed coverage to appease the advertiser: expose the biased coverage in order to emphasise their own credibility, or remain silent to avoid antagonising an essential source of funding.

As with social class, the fields of media influence and bias are extremely large and diverse, and owing to their long histories an extensive body of theoretical literature exists. There are however well documented difficulties in testing theories, especially in the case of media bias, where the lack of any objective definition of such severely limits the ability of researchers to draw conclusions (Groeling, 2013). As Groeling points out, the *hostile media phenomenon* may well apply to researchers, and this becomes of particular concern given the interpretive nature of studying media reports. Nonetheless, as stated previously, it is important to take the literature within this field into consideration, since the theories and findings in this area are key considerations when interpreting media discourse. That said, the current study is not a study of the media *generally*, but rather a critical examination of the media construction of one concept, social class, within a specific context, austerity. As such, the findings here represent relevant factors to keep in mind when analysing the discourse (see Billig, 1999), but the analysis itself is better served by applying the principles of CDA. In the following section, I focus upon the literature relating to this methodology in order to explore epistemological issues and to highlight key strengths and limitations.

## 2.5 Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA, being primarily concerned with the relationship between discourse and power relations, is well suited to the study of mass media discourse, and shares significant common ground with many of the issues discussed in the previous section. CDA however, takes a differing approach, which avoids some of those limitations and criticisms, although it does, of course, raise others. Instead of attempting to draw objective conclusions with regards to media bias, CDA encourages an embrace of critical research based upon an explicit moral and ethical stance (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 7), and aims to uncover ‘embedded’ or ‘naturalised’ ideology that shapes social injustice (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 8). This is balanced with an emphasis upon detailed engagement with the data and reference to supporting evidence (Wodak, 2014: 311).

The key difference of a CDA approach in relation to a study of the media is that the discourse is not treated as data that is useful in establishing theories regarding the media *per se*, but rather as something that is central to a social problem *in which the media play a part*. The overlap between media theories and CDA is useful however, in that the critical discourse analyst seeks to situate the discourse in its social context. In this respect the literature on media influence and bias can be used to expand upon the analysis of the discourse by offering explanatory theories for both the context within which media discourse is produced, and the likely influence (and therefore the potential wider effects) of such discourse.

Beginning with a series of meetings in the late 1980s and early 1990s between a group of academics interested in how discourse shapes and maintains power relations within society, critical discourse analysis began to take shape as a discipline (Wodak and Meyer, 2015: 4). Drawing upon traditional discourse analysis, as well as taking inspiration from critical theory (Wodak and Meyer, 2015: 6), CDA is not an actual method in the strict sense, but is best understood as a series of principles applied to the study of discourse (Wodak and Meyer, 2015: 13, 21). Firstly, it is a ‘problem oriented’ approach, viewing discourse as central to shaping and maintaining power relations, and more specifically domination, and the *abuse* of power (Fairclough, 2009: 163, Van Dijk, 1993: 249-251; Wodak, 2011: 54, 2013: 306). The starting point, or *point of entry* (Fairclough, 2013: 5), of a CDA is therefore a social wrong - an injustice that results in part through the discursive legitimation of (unjust) social structures and practices (see Fairclough, 2013: 5-9).

Secondly, CDA is - out of necessity - interdisciplinary: ‘social problems’ involve many aspects of society and thus CDA must cut across several disciplines in order to make sense of any findings (Fairclough, 2013: 5), paying particular interest to the ‘interconnectedness’ of discourse and the social context (see Fairclough, 1995: 747, 2009: 169; Wodak, 2011: 54). To quote Fairclough (1995: 747), “in human matters, interconnections and chains of cause and effect may be distorted out of vision. Hence ‘critique’ is essentially making visible the interconnectedness of things”.

Thirdly, it is a *relational* approach, viewing discourse as having a dialectic relationship to social structures and institutions. From this perspective, discourse is regarded as not only being shaped by these, but also shaping them itself (Fairclough, 2013: 4; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 259, see also Van Dijk, 1993: 279-280). In this respect, the CDA perspective is that discourses are social practices, both constituted by *and* constitutive *of* society. CDA

therefore requires that the analysis of discourse itself must always be conducted with reference to the wider social context (Fairclough, 2013: 4-5; Wodak 2011: 54). Finally, and closely related to its interdisciplinary and relational nature, CDA is flexible with regards to methods. Fairclough (2013: 5) suggests that *any* method available within the social sciences may be used provided it addresses the research aims.

A couple of issues must be noted at this point. The first relates to the interdisciplinary aspect of CDA, and in particular its emphasis upon going beyond the discourse to investigate, and reveal, wider interconnections. Doing this *necessitates* engagement with the broader literature, and - importantly - going beyond the area in which the researcher is familiar. The risk here is that the critical discourse analyst is increasingly forced to take the literature at face value, since they lack the expertise to apply rigorous critique. Secondly, since CDA is an approach as opposed to a method, the researcher is offered little guidance in terms of the practicalities of *doing* research. As Fairclough (2001: 126) recognises, this is especially so when it comes to performing detailed linguistic analysis. Taken together, these two points mean that the critical discourse analyst must essentially function as something of an all rounder; being competent in evaluating and formulating social theory, *and* in performing linguistic analysis, without necessarily being an expert in either.

As I stated above, the predominant interest of CDA is the role discourse plays in power relations, abuses of power, and domination. As such, a central area of interest is ideological discourse (Fairclough, 2013: 8; Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 8). Of particular interest to scholars of CDA are not so much the explicit examples of ideological discourse but rather the ‘hidden’ ideology embedded within the ‘everyday’ (see Van Dijk, 1993; Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 8, 2015: 19). Wodak and Meyer (2009: 8) argue that it is this that shapes the common-sense beliefs upon which relations of power are founded, making them appear ‘natural’. In this sense ideology is closely related to the Gramscian concept of *hegemony* in that it naturalises, and thereby legitimises, unjust power relations (Van Dijk, 1993: 279-280; Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 8).

One of the main departures from more traditional forms of discourse analysis is the explicitly critical stance taken by proponents of CDA (Fairclough 2013: 7), a stance which is of course consistent with the problem oriented nature of the approach. By taking this perspective the researcher effectively takes the view that something is ‘wrong’ with the current social order, and takes an advocacy role based upon an ethical stance (Fairclough, 2013: 7; Van Dijk,

1993: 254; Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 7). The researcher is thus ‘embedded’ within the research from the outset (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 7), and the onus is therefore upon them to set out why the social problem they identify is indeed problematic. Baker (2012) makes the argument that within social research, this ‘embeddedness’ is *always* the case, and that practitioners of CDA are therefore simply being forthcoming in acknowledging their own personal viewpoint. Van Dijk (1993: 254) takes this logic further by arguing that it is the *duty* of the researcher to take an advocatory role, and in doing so to make an ethical stance, further arguing that to fail to do so is to risk becoming complicit in social injustice:

Unlike other discourse analysts, critical discourse analysts (should) take an explicit socio-political stance: they spell out their point of view, perspectives, principles and aims, both within their discipline and within society at large. Although not in each stage of theory formation and analysis, their hope, if occasionally illusory, is change through critical understanding. Their perspective, if possible, that of those who suffer most through dominance and inequality. Their critical targets are the power elites that enact, sustain, legitimate, condone or ignore social inequality and injustice. [...] scholars have been shown to discredit such partisanship, and therefore show how partisan they were in the first place, e.g. by ignoring, mitigating, excluding, or denying inequality. They condemn mixing scholarship with ‘politics’ and thereby they do precisely that. Some, even more cynically and more directly, collude with dominance e.g. by ‘expert’ advice, support and legitimation of the (western, middle class, white, male, heterosexual, etc.) power elites. Van Dijk (1993: 254).

CDA has, perhaps unsurprisingly, been criticised for this stance<sup>8</sup>, with concerns being raised that it blurs the line between ‘scientific’ research and political argumentation (e.g. Schegloff, 1997; Widdowson, 1995). Critics such as Schegloff and Widdowson have argued that taking an a priori critical stance is problematic in that it can lead the researcher to collect, or ‘cherry-pick’, data or features of data which support this stance and, further, to interpret these features in line with prior beliefs. This issue has been one for which CDA has faced particular criticism, especially given the tendency of critical discourse analysts to work with small amounts of data due to the intensive, in depth mode of analysis.

Widdowson (1995) argues that critical discourse analysts fail to differentiate between the texts they analyse and the discourse they claim to analyse. As Widdowson points out, discourse is not just language, it is the use of language as part of a social practice. As such, Widdowson argues that language in itself can reveal little about its discursive function if one does not consider both the intention of its author and the way in which the audience perceives it. Widdowson suggests that by approaching the analysis of texts from a critical angle the

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<sup>8</sup> Unsurprisingly in that, for better or for worse, it *does* effectively place CDA at the very boundary of social research/theorising and political argumentation (see Wodak, 2014: 311).

analyst essentially interprets both of these factors in line with their a priori stance, and proceeds to focus solely upon features of the discourse that support their interpretation. In this respect, Widdowson argues, the critical approach can unduly narrow the scope of the analysis, making the researcher blind to other possible interpretations.

Schegloff (1997) makes a point similar to that made by Widdowson (1995) regarding the tendency of critical discourse analysts to take an a priori stance. Schegloff (1997) argues that, by virtue of this stance, the critical discourse analyst is prone to seeing features of discourse *on their own terms*, at the expense of considering what is *actually* happening within the communication, and to drawing upon external theories that may be irrelevant and thus distort the analysis. This, he suggests, can occur even where the analyst attempts to engage with the data by working at the sentence and word level. Schegloff is, however, keen to point out that this is not an insurmountable hurdle to the critical approach; rather, he argues that the critical approach would benefit from suspending a priori assumptions whilst establishing what is happening within the discourse through the use of more traditional discourse and conversation analysis techniques.

Widdowson (1995) and Schegloff (1997) thus make valid points regarding the importance of engaging with the data, and further, remaining open as to what might emerge from the analysis. Following Van Dijk's (1993:254) suggestion that the critical researcher should take an advocatory stance, it *could* be argued that the seeking out of features of discourse that contribute to social injustices is justified. Yet what must be acknowledged is that doing so does, as Widdowson (1995) suggests, narrow the scope of the analysis to certain features of the discourse that the analyst feels are relevant. Furthermore, and perhaps more important from a critical perspective, by wading into the discourse in such a way there is a risk that subtle features of the discourse - ones which do indeed contribute in some way to social problems - are missed.

The suggestion made by both Widdowson (1995) and Schegloff (1997) that the critical approach precludes thorough engagement with the data, however, is worth considering more closely. Widdowson suggests that critical discourse analysts tend to find what they look for due to the cherry - picking of data, whilst Schegloff suggests that this is an issue of interpretation. What must be considered, however, is that even if the analysis *is* approached with an open mind as to what might emerge from the data then it follows that - at least some of the time - it will indeed appear to be the case that the discourse is contributing in some



way to a social problem. Furthermore, since critical discourse analysts focus upon language use in the context of social problems, the finding of discourse which plays a contributory role is arguably not a result of researcher bias at all, but rather a result of this context. In other words, it could be the case that the findings are shaped not so much by what the researcher looks *for*, but by *where* they look.

I use the term 'appear' above, since it is the contention of Widdowson (1995) that the wider impact of discourse cannot be read off of the text alone, owing to the fact that neither the intent of the author nor the perception of the audience can be known. Here a fundamental contradiction in Widdowson's argument becomes apparent, however, since his suggestion that the text - the written or spoken element of communication - is only part of the wider communicative process rests on the premise that it only *needs* to be. People are, as he points out (p165), apt at 'reading the signs' and correctly interpreting the broader meaning of language - such that misreadings are comparatively rare. If this is the case then there is little basis for the claim that the critical analyst is uniquely prone to such misreading, and thus unable to point, at the very least, to the *likely* contribution of language to social injustices. Of course the critical analyst cannot demonstrate such with *absolute certainty*, yet this limitation is also true of any approach to discourse analysis.

Indeed, many of the criticisms levelled at CDA by traditional discourse analysts apply equally to the approach they espouse. This is the point made by Billig (1999) in his reply to Schegloff's (1997) claim that the critical stance taken by proponent of CDA leads them to see features of discourse on their own terms. Billig suggests that it is implausible to suggest that discourse analysts, critical or otherwise, can ever view data *other than* on their own terms. In support of this, Billig points to the act of translating the vernacular into academic terms that even 'traditional' (i.e. non critical) discourse and conversation analysts engage in when 'recognising' features of discourse. These terms, he argues, imply or assume certain contextual factors - whether rightly or wrongly. For example, Billig points to the distinction made between natural 'conversation', where 'participants' (supposedly) engage as equals, and 'interaction', where the assumption is that there exists an unequal relationship of power; although, as Billig notes, it is the contention of critical scholars that embedded relationships of power often play out in seemingly ordinary communication (see also Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 8 on this point). At best therefore, such attempts at 'objective' analysis still draw upon sociological understandings, and at worst risk neglecting important contextual factors. Thus, whilst Billig acknowledges the validity of Schegloff's point regarding importance of first

attending to *what* is happening within the discourse, the essential point of his argument is to question whether this can ever really be done *without* bringing in external knowledge and with it the subjective viewpoint of the researcher as to its relevance.

This, of course, is to frame the debate within the terms of the more general epistemological question of whether social research itself can ever be performed ‘free of a priori value judgements’:

..is it possible to perform any research free of a priori value judgements, and is it possible to gain insight from purely empirical data without using any preframed categories of experience? As for the first question, CDA agrees even with dogmatic positivistic methodology which permits value judgements in the process of the selection of objects and questions under investigation (‘context of discovery’), but forbids them in the ‘context of justification’. As for the second question, the CDA position fits well with most epistemology in Kant's tradition which denies the possibility of ‘pure’ cognition. (Wodak and Meyer, 2001: 17).

Critical discourse analysts themselves argue that the critical stance taken is not of itself problematic, provided the analysis is based upon sound research principles. For example, Wodak (2014: 311) takes a somewhat balanced view, suggesting that the CDA researcher must take a critical stance, but be aware of their own ‘embeddedness’ and aim to always maintain a reflective scientific viewpoint<sup>9</sup>:

In the tradition of Critical Theory, CDA investigates the discursive aspects of societal disparities and inequalities. CDA frequently detects the linguistic means used by the elites in power to stabilise or even intensify the inequities in society, in public and in private domains, frontstage and backstage. All CDA research entails systematic linguistic analysis, self-reflection at every point of one’s research, and distance from the data that are being investigated (Wodak 2014: 311).

Similarly, Fairclough (2013: 8-9) acknowledges that any critique of discourse is *itself* a discursive act, and therefore suggests that any claim to truth must rest upon reference to superior evidence - which, to link to the points made above, *necessarily* involves drawing upon the wider context and engaging with theory and literature towards this end. From this

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<sup>9</sup> Although Widdowson (1995) argues that this amounts to a fundamental contradiction in terms of research aims in that it proposes to *objectively* demonstrate how discourse contributes to that which is in effect *subjectively* problematic. I would argue that this is not a contradiction in the epistemological sense, but rather an issue of *accepting* whether the ‘social problem’ exists (or not). For instance, it is perfectly valid to say ‘A is problematic, and B contributes to A arising’. Even if it is argued that A is not problematic, the contribution of B can still be established – subject of course to the usual limitations that apply to all social research, critical or otherwise.

perspective, therefore, a chief aim of critical analysis becomes that of exposing ideological discourse through reference to evidence, in order to expose the naturalisation of unsound logic that serves the purpose of maintaining unjust relationships of power (Fairclough, 2013: 9).

The principles of CDA form a useful perspective, therefore, from which to examine the mass media treatment of social class in the ‘age of austerity’ that has followed the economic crisis. Inequality, the very basis of social class (Tyler, 2015), had already been rising for several decades prior to the crisis and the adoption of austerity (Manstead, 2018; Nunn, 2016; Savage et al, 2013), yet austerity has had the effect of worsening this problem (Lavalette, 2017). Given the influence of the mass media, the portrayal of the concept of class has the potential to contribute to this problem, since to ‘understand’ class in a particular way is simultaneously to ‘understand’ inequality (Savage, 2016). Such ‘understandings’ have the potential to influence support for (and opposition to) social policies that impact directly upon inequality itself, with far reaching consequences (MacDonald et al, 2014).

CDA, with its freedom and flexibility of methods, therefore allows for a critical, yet evidence based, approach to exploring not just *how* social class is constructed within the media discourse, but also *why* this may be, and what *effect* the discourse may have upon society more generally. Finally, as an approach that, owing to its ‘problem oriented’ perspective, is interdisciplinary in nature, CDA is well suited to a project that cuts across several disciplines and research areas; for example, media studies, sociology, economics, and politics.

In the following chapter I discuss the methodology that was followed for this study, paying particular attention to the practical aspects such as data collection, in more detail.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Aims

As stated in the introduction, the aim of this research was: to critically explore *how* social class is constructed within the mass media in the context of austerity and, with reference to the wider social context, to question *why* class constructions might take the form they do; and what *effect* these constructions may have.

Following these aims, I was concerned here not so much with constructions of class for their own sake - a sizeable body of literature has already been dedicated to this aim (e.g. Haylett, 2001; Lawler, 2005; Le Grand, 2015; Jones, 2012; Skeggs, 2004, 2005; Tyler, 2008, 2015), but with how class is constructed in this particular context, and with the *operative function* this may perform. By ‘operative function’ here I mean what class constructions might *do*, or to put it another way, the constitutive role they might play in the wider context. In accordance with the *problem oriented* nature of CDA, I approached these aims from a critical perspective. Starting with the view that austerity is problematic owing to its disproportionate impact on the poorest members of society, and that class, by virtue of its relationship to inequality (Tyler, 2015), is of central importance, my aim was to establish not just *how* class is constructed, but what role that such constructions may play in terms of contributing to (or challenging) this social problem.

The timeframe of the study, 2010 to 2016, is particularly relevant in that it fixes attention to social class at a time between two significant defining events in recent British history: the adoption of austerity by the then incoming Conservative led coalition government and the ‘Brexit’ referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union. As regards this time period, the adoption of austerity was a logical starting point for the study given the research aims, yet the decision to set the end point at 2016 perhaps requires further explanation, given that the ‘age of austerity’ (see Farnsworth and Irving, 2018; Stanley, 2014; Streeck and Schafer, 2013) has continued beyond this date. In this respect, the end date was decided upon owing to the ‘Brexit’ issue. Brexit has itself been linked to the concept of social class (rightly or wrongly), and in particular to a growing public discontent resulting in large part from years of austerity (see Antonucci, 2017; Inglehart and Norris 2016; Jessop, 2017; Goodwin and Heath, 2017; McKenzie, 2017, 2018). As such a sound argument can be made that the issue of class, and its portrayal within the media, feature in a different (albeit related) context post-

referendum. With this in mind, the period between these two events appears to be relatively distinct and thus worthy of close attention.

### 3.2 Theoretical Approach

In order to explore the stated research aims, I applied the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and in particular, although, as I will discuss later, not exclusively, Norman Fairclough's *Dialectical-Relation Approach* (see Fairclough, 2009, 2013). Since I discussed the theoretical principals of CDA at length in the preceding literature review (see p 39), I will only summarise them here for clarity. CDA is a *problem-oriented* approach, meaning that the starting point, or *point of entry*, to the analysis is the identification of a social problem that causes, or has the potential to cause, an injustice of some kind (Fairclough, 2009: 163; Van Dijk, 1993: 249-251). A key concept within CDA is therefore that the researcher should take an *explicitly* critical stance in order to reveal the role of discourse in shaping and maintaining this injustice (Fairclough, 2009: 163-164; Van Dijk, 1993: 254). Accordingly, CDA concerns itself primarily with issues of dominance, exploitative social relationships and abuses of power (Fairclough, 2009: 163; Van Dijk, 1993: 254; Wodak, 2011: 54). As would be expected from the term, CDA assumes that discourse plays a central role in such 'social problems'. Within the dialectical-relational approach, discourse is assumed to be dialectically related to the social structure: the latter both shaping, and being shaped by, discourse. According to this approach, there are three levels to this process: the *social structure* itself, *social practices*, and *social events* (Fairclough, 2003: 21-22). The social structure, through its institutions and customs, gives rise to social practices, which have their associated discourses. These discourses then give meaning to, and make sense of, social events, thereby effectively constructing understandings of the social world itself. The critical aspect is attributed here to identifying the ways in which exploitative and unjust social structures allow those in dominant positions to further consolidate this dominance, to the detriment of others, through control of the discourse. From this perspective, discourse is a point of entry (Fairclough, 2013: 5) in that it is not simply a means of communication, but rather communication produced within a particular social structure. Furthermore, it is communication aimed at *doing something*: at performing some operative function in furtherance of shaping (or maintaining) the social structure and its associated relationships of power.

In order to apply the principles of CDA in such a way as to make sense of the discourse, it is therefore necessary to consider the wider social context (Fairclough, 2013:4; Wodak and

Meyer, 2009: 20-21). Again, this necessarily involves cutting across several disciplines, or as Fairclough (2013: 5) puts it, working in a way that is *transdisciplinary*. It is by working across disciplines that the critical discourse analyst is able to make visible ‘the *interconnectedness* of things’ (Fairclough, 1995: 747) in such a way as to reveal the ideological and political aspects behind the ‘common sense’ assumptions which shape our understanding of society (and ultimately therefore, society itself).

### 3.3 The Social Problem

It was inevitable that the adoption of austerity, and the significant reduction in public spending which it entailed, would impact upon much of the population. It was perhaps equally inevitable that austerity would have the greatest impact upon the poorest members of society - since these are the very people who rely upon, and therefore benefit most from, public spending and the redistribution of wealth (Hastings et al, 2015; Streeck and Mertens, 2011). The disproportionate impact upon these people has been well documented within the literature (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; Hastings et al, 2015; Kitson et al, 2011; Lavalette, 2017; O’Hara, 2015: 4; Ridge, 2013). Meanwhile, critics of austerity have pointed to the flawed economic logic on which it is based (e.g. Cooper and White, 2017a; Holland and Portes, 2012; Kitson et al, 2011; Krugman, 2015; Marshall, 2013; McBride, 2015). Indeed, Cooper and White, (2017a) suggest that it may, in the long term, create many problems, and therefore end up costing society more than it saves; a view which is supported by several studies within diverse fields (Barr et al, 2015; Blane and Watt, 2012; Iacobucci, 2014; Majeed et al, 2012; Millie, 2014; Turnbull and Wass, 2015). Again, the combination of the disproportionate impact and economic criticisms has led some to argue that austerity - far from being necessary - is an ideological project (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012, Kitson et al, 2011, O’Hara, 2015: 5-7).

Given the disproportionate impact of austerity, and its contribution to inequality, a strong argument can be made that austerity is inherently problematic. Even if one were to counter this by suggesting that inequality itself is *not* inherently problematic, and, drawing upon the ideals of meritocracy, argue that it is only *equality of opportunity* which matters, it is worth noting that austerity fails this test too, since spending cuts have eroded vital services which improve the life chances of the most disadvantaged (Hastings et al, 2015). For example, Payne (2017: 6) and Heyes (2013: 77) note that cuts to youth opportunity schemes, Sure start

centres, and the scrapping of the Educational Maintenance Allowance have reduced opportunities for young people from lower income families. In addition, the spending cuts have seen relatively secure public sector jobs lost, to be replaced by a proliferation of insecure work (Davies, 2015; Heyes, 2013; O'Hara, 2015: 3-4) which, far from providing opportunity, tends to trap people in perpetual poverty (Shildrick et al, 2010).

Following Tyler's (2015: 496) assertion that inequality is the 'problem which class names', social class is of central importance here. Drawing upon Bourdieu's (1987) view of social class as a concept which is open to construction in accordance with ideological and political arguments, the mass media construction of class in the context of austerity has the potential to contribute towards the social problem; the media have significant potential to influence public discourse, and thus public understanding and opinion. What is at stake in the media construction of class, therefore, is the public understanding of inequality itself: its nature, its causes, and, most importantly in this context, the appropriate response.

### **3.4 Method**

#### **3.4.1 Data Collection**

Whilst I set out the rationale for a focus upon the mass media construction of class in the context of economic crisis and austerity, it would clearly be beyond the scope of any single study to investigate this in its entirety. For the purposes of this study, I therefore focused upon the coverage of six topics that are related to austerity, within the eight most popular newspapers (by circulation). The topics, selected with reference to the existing literature (again see Cooper et al, 2014; Davies, 2015; Dowler, 2014; Friedli and Stearn 2015; Gibb, 2015; Heyes, 2013; MacLeavey, 2008; Moffatt et al, 2016; O'Hara, 2015; Shildrick et al, 2010, 2012; Stanley, 2014), being: the 'emergency budget' of 2010, welfare reform (in particular the welfare reform act (2012), the 'bedroom tax' (Or the '*under occupancy penalty*', to give it its official title), 'workfare' policies (which comprised a series of policies, of which the main two were the 'mandatory work activity' programme and the 'community action programme'), the issue of increasing food bank reliance, and the debate regarding 'zero-hours contracts'.

The first two topics represent the early stage of austerity, when many of the measures were yet to be implemented; a time when the focus was upon austerity as an 'idea' (Stanley, 2014:

896). Here, the emergency budget set out the proposed spending cuts, within which welfare reform featured heavily (Stanley, 2014). The second two topics, the bedroom tax and workfare, represent two of the key austerity policies (see Friedli and Stearne, 2015; Gibb, 2015). The bedroom tax has led to rent arrears, extreme financial hardship, and the breaking of essential community support networks (Gibb, 2015; Moffatt et al, 2015), whilst workfare policies undermined paid workers, normalised the idea of sub-minimum wage work, stigmatised the unemployed, and led to hardship through increasingly harsh welfare sanctions (Friedli and Stearn, 2015). The final two topics, zero-hour contracts and food bank reliance, represent the most visible aspects of the poverty and insecurity that has resulted from austerity (see Brinkley, 2013; Loopstra et al, 2018). As spending cuts have seen the loss of relatively secure public sector jobs, these have largely been replaced by less secure ‘atypical work’ (Davis, 2015, Heyes, 2013, O’Hara, 2015: 3-4). Insecurity itself has been implicated as a contributing factor, alongside welfare cuts and sanctions, in food bank reliance, which has increased significantly following the adoption of austerity (Cooper et al, 2014; Dowler, 2014). In addition to capturing the essence of the austerity debate, the topics chosen also reflect the need to cover the whole time period of 2010-2016, from the early theoretical discussions of austerity, through the implementation of austerity policies, and their wider impacts. This provides an opportunity to look at how social class features within the discourse at each stage.

With regards to the publications, I examined the eight national newspapers with the highest circulation (as of 2010): *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Star*, *The Mirror*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Daily Express*, and *The Telegraph* (Audit Bureau of Circulations). The rationale for selecting the most popular publications was that whilst publications vary with regards to their political leanings, selecting those with the highest circulation essentially cuts through this variable, resulting in a sample which best reflects the mainstream media discourse. I included the online versions of these publications - the Nexis database I used (see below and Appendix) allows both print and online versions to be searched - in an effort to capture as much of the coverage as possible, especially given concerns over completeness of databases (Deacon, 2007) and the possibility, therefore, that an article may feature in the database in *only* one form, even where it originally featured in both. As a final point here, the inclusion of



online news is pertinent given that an increasing number of people now read news in this format<sup>10</sup> (Nel, 2010; Thurman and Newman, 2014).

Newspapers are, of course, not the only form of media where class and related issues are discussed (and constructed) (see Harper, 2014; McRobbie, 2004; Tyler, 2015), yet a focus upon this form of media has some important advantages. Firstly, newspapers tend to cover political content prominently, and often more directly than other forms of media (see e.g. Cushion et al, 2018; Deacon and Wring, 2015; Harper, 2014). Secondly, in spite of the changing nature of the media landscape challenging the dominance of ‘traditional’ forms of media such as newspapers, they remain influential. As some (e.g. Araguete, 2017; Cushion et al, 2018; Meraz, 2009, 2011) note, more traditional forms of media are often seen as more credible and are therefore able, notwithstanding the loss of ‘monopolistic’ status, to strongly influence the agenda of other, newer forms of media such as online blogs and independent websites.

Finally, from a more practical perspective, newspapers are largely (though not exclusively) in text format, meaning there is no need to transcribe the data - as would be the case with televised news for example. Having the data ‘available’ for analysis was useful as it allowed for more data to be handled than would be the case if the data required transcribing first (a particularly labour intensive, and thus time consuming activity). This ensured, as far as possible, that the data collected represented the wider discourse from which it was taken. What was also helpful in this respect is that newspaper coverage can be searched for key words and terms in databases, further facilitating the collection of a large sample (Deacon, 2007; Stryker et al, 2006). This is important as CDA has previously attracted criticism regarding the cherry picking of small data sets which support the critical stance inherent to the approach (Widdowson, 1995).

In order to collect the articles I used the *Nexis* database, as mentioned earlier. This database is useful in that it allows for key words and terms to be searched, and search results to be limited to only the publications of interest. Whilst others (e.g. Wells and Carraher, 2014) have limited searches to articles with at least three mentions of any search term, I found this to be too restrictive, as it was often the case that articles which only mentioned the term once tended to discuss it in great depth - something also noted by Deacon (2007). In order to avoid

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<sup>10</sup>In practical terms, there was seldom any appreciable difference between the print and online versions of articles, at least not in the ‘text only’ form in which they are stored in the Nexis database.

missing data, I used the most inclusive search terms possible and, where appropriate, multiple search terms, to avoid introducing a selection bias through the use of only one term, which may itself have (positive or negative) connotations. Having performed the search, I selected the first 5 articles from each of the 8 publications, resulting in a total of 40 articles per topic. I then repeated this step for each of the 6 topics, resulting in 240 articles altogether.

The amount of articles was based largely upon a balancing of the need to collect a representative sample, as discussed above, with practical considerations, particularly the time available to analyse the coverage in sufficient detail and depth. The intense, engaging process that CDA entails has the unfortunate tendency to make data collection difficult. This has meant that traditional approaches have attempted to focus upon a small amount of ‘typical’ discourse (Wodak and Meyer 2009: 23). However, it is the collection of a small amount of data that has understandably opened CDA up to accusations of ‘cherry picking’ (see Baker and Levon, 2015: 222 for a discussion). The approach I take to data collection here, whilst being subject to the limitations inherent to the use of online databases (which I discuss below), avoids this problem. The amount of articles, however, meant that a data reduction method was needed, or, more accurately, a way of ‘condensing’ the data in a way which captures the richness and nuances whilst giving a clear overview of the key features and patterns. The analysis, following the collection of data, was therefore performed in two stages, beginning with a thematic analysis, before moving onto a more engaged discourse analysis, using the themes themselves as a guide when selecting data for more in-depth consideration.

### **3.4.2 Thematic analysis**

Thematic analysis is a well established method of extracting the key features of a large qualitative data set (Nowell et al, 2017). The thematic analysis I employed in this study is of the type described by Attride-Stirling (2001). This particular type of thematic analysis is useful in that it goes beyond merely describing the themes present within a data set and includes describing, in addition, the relationships between the themes, which together make up the ‘thematic network’. Such networks are particularly useful for guiding further in-depth analysis by setting out a map of the data (Attride-Stirling, 2001), and therefore allowing articles and extracts to be selected for further analysis on the basis of their displaying the key features of the wider discourse.

In order to keep the amount of data manageable, I first divided the articles into three groups, each comprising two topics, and proceeded to conduct the analysis upon each group in turn. These groups reflect different phases of the time period, and as such make up the basis of the following three chapters:

- Social class and austerity *in theory* (Topics: the emergency budget, welfare reform)
- Social class and austerity *in action* (Topics: the bedroom tax, workfare policies)
- Social class and the *impacts* of austerity (Topics: food banks, zero-hour contracts)

To conduct the thematic analysis, the following steps were followed. Firstly, I thoroughly read the articles. This may sound like an obvious and trivial point, yet it is important to appreciate that whilst the aim of a thematic analysis is to give an overview of the whole of a dataset by exploring its constituent parts, these ‘parts’ can only make sense in the context of the whole<sup>11</sup>. Thus, the true meaning of smaller parts of the data can be missed if the context is not first considered. Secondly, I set about coding the data. I approached this with the research aims in mind. That is to say, I coded specifically in a way that reflected the construction of social class and related issues.

Whilst coding the texts, I attempted to capture the semantic meaning of the data as fully as possible. This meant going beyond the basic concepts that appeared within the text. For example, the extract below could simply have been coded as ‘workers’ and ‘shirkers’, yet this fails to capture the oppositional sentiment and therefore the actual message of the statement. Instead I coded this as ‘workers *vs.* Shirkers’:

He promised to 'get behind the workers' and crack down on the shirkers [**workers vs. shirkers**]

I have deliberately chosen a basic example here in order to illustrate the point succinctly. The following is an example of the type of data that became the theme of ‘fairness’ within the coverage of welfare reform and the emergency budget. Here, I code not only for ‘fairness’, but for *who* the ‘fairness’ is aimed at (note I also add an additional code for the reference to those who ‘strive’):

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<sup>11</sup> The *hermeneutic circle* (see Willig, 2014)

It's not fair or right that benefits claimants receive higher incomes than hard-working families who are striving to get on in life [**Fairness: hardworking families vs. welfare claimants.**] [**strivers**].

By coding the data in this way I was able to develop both the themes and the relationships between them. Where several codes that ultimately made up a theme were linked to codes which comprised another theme it became clear that the interaction between these themes was itself a key feature of the data which must be accounted for. The example above demonstrates the link between fairness (and similar codes, e.g. *unfairness*) and the 'hard-working', and is a good example of one such recurring pattern.

Ensuring as much detail as possible was preserved during coding was also helpful in terms of capturing variance within themes; consider the following examples:

This working single mum fell sick, and her working tax credits were stopped as a result. She was forced to turn to a food bank. [**poverty: in work, unavoidable**]

More than a fifth of food bank clients went after their benefits were stopped or cut because they had broken the rules [**poverty: self-caused, deviance**]

There have always been poor people in this country. You could have gone back ten, 20, 50 years and there would always be people who don't get enough good food [**poverty: normalised**]

These extracts form part of the data that made up the theme of *poverty in the UK* in the third analysis chapter (see p 139). The relevant point here is that by assigning the code 'poverty' alongside the additional information it is possible to group together these codes in order to reveal the ways in which poverty is discussed within the data, thereby capturing the detail present within the coverage.

Having coded the data, the third step of the thematic analysis involved grouping together codes which were related in order to organise the data into provisional themes. Having done this, I returned to the data in order to check that the themes accurately reflected the coverage. Where themes did not fit, I modified and rearranged the codes before repeating this step until I was satisfied that the themes gave an accurate account of the data. I then named the themes, and presented them along with examples. In addition, I described the relationship between themes that together make up the thematic network described above.

### 3.4.3 Discourse Analysis

Having performed the thematic analysis, and therefore having identified the key themes and the relationships between them, I was able to use the resulting thematic network to guide the more in-depth discourse analysis. Owing to the intensive process that CDA entails, a relatively small amount of the overall data set was used in this second part of the analysis. Yet by using the findings of the initial thematic analysis, I was able to select articles, and extracts from articles, which featured in depth discussion of key themes, demonstrated important features within themes (such as variance), or illustrated the ways in which the themes interact and relate.

One potential problem associated with CDA is the lack of explicit guidance regarding the actual method of analysing discourse. Whilst several leading scholars within the field have commented extensively upon the *theoretical* approach to CDA (e.g. Fairclough, 1995, 2003, 2009, 2013; Gee, 2004; Van Dijk, 1993; Wodak, 2011; Wodak and Meyer, 2009, 2015), none appear to have gone as far as to set out an actual method which can be followed. This is perhaps understandable, given that the research aims and features of the discourse are unlikely to be the same from project to project - somewhat precluding a 'one-size-fits-all' type method. Indeed, as Fairclough (2013: 5) and Wodak and Meyer (2009: 27) note, it is for this reason that CDA is not considered a method so much as an approach to analysis. Indeed, a flexible approach to the analysis is important in preventing the researcher becoming trapped in a 'methodological straight-jacket'. Yet it is nonetheless worth pointing out that the focus upon theoretical aspects of CDA, and the relative lack of attention paid to the practical aspects of 'doing' analysis<sup>12</sup> can leave newcomers to CDA feeling somewhat cast adrift at times. This is especially true when it comes to the more detailed linguistic analysis performed at the word and sentence level (or 'micro-analysis'). This very difficulty is acknowledged by Fairclough (2001: 126) who notes that: "One problem facing people who are not specialists in linguistics is that there are many different aspects of the language of an interaction which may be relevant to critical analysis".

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<sup>12</sup> Gee (2005) provides something of an exception in that he suggests a more pragmatic 'toolkit' for conducting discourse analysis. However, this is still fairly general and cannot be applied rigidly without adapting it to the project at hand.

Since my aim at this stage was to explore the features of the discourse in much greater depth, this often meant focusing on the sentence - or even word - level of the extracts at times. It is worth stating that the 'level' at which analysis is performed within CDA varies greatly depending upon the particular approach, the research aims, and the features of the discourse (see Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 24-27). Since the critical discourse analyst takes a 'social problem' as a starting point, and seeks to reveal the ways in which discourse contributes to this problem (see above), the relevant level of analysis is that which best achieves this goal. At times this may be the macro-level: the general features of the text, such as the progression of themes and topics, and their broader connection to the social context. As Wodak and Meyer (2009: 27) note, the *dialectical-relational approach* is perhaps the most theory bound of all the major CDA approaches, and as such lends itself to such a focus upon the general meaning of the text and (particularly) its place within the 'bigger picture' at the expense of more detailed linguistic analysis. Here, however, I depart somewhat from this particular approach, not in terms of the theoretical stance, but because sometimes the ideological message of the text, which is central to the critical analysis, can be best revealed by looking at the fine details of the discourse (see Wodak, 2007 on this point). In light of this I also draw influence from the approaches of Van Dijk (1993) and Wodak (2001) with their greater focus upon the discourse pragmatics and linguistic features.

Van Dijk's (1993) approach, drawing heavily upon socio-cognitive theories, treats the human element, the creators and recipients of discourse, as an important intermediary between the semantic element of the discourse and social practices and structures. Here, inherent cognitive processes and biases play a part in shaping both the understanding of the social world, and the way in which it is coded into discourse. In this sense the linguistic features are of importance in that they can be understood to both reflect and invoke cognitive processes. Examples include social schemas, stereotypes, in-group biases, and the use of metaphors. Wodak's (2001) *discourse-historical* approach situates the discourse being analysed within its 'historical', inter-discursive context. In other words, this approach stresses that the features of a particular text can only be truly understood with reference to other discourses (and the corresponding 'understandings' and assumption contained therein) prevalent at the time. What both these approaches to CDA have in common is that, starting with a focus upon the linguistic features, both expand the analysis by treating features, such as word choice, as serving a particular rhetorical purpose; for example evoking social schemas or drawing upon existing discourses to build up the meaning of the text.

A final point is important to note at this stage. Within CDA the data must be approached with an open mind as to what features are relevant and thus worthy of attention, and working in this manner requires a degree of reflexivity. As features become apparent, they must be considered in light of the wider context; the question of what is happening within the discourse, and what relevance this has in terms of the research aims must be continually kept in mind. Referring back to the broader literature was especially useful here, in that it helped to make sense of the findings, and often opened up new lines of enquiry. Where particular features appeared to play a central role within the discourse, therefore, I followed up these patterns, collecting additional data where necessary.

### **3.5 Limitations**

In the discussion above, I have set out the rationale behind the method chosen for this study as well as the measures taken to ensure that the research aims are addressed whilst avoiding, as far as possible, any foreseeable methodological issues. Of course, as with any method, some limitations can nonetheless be identified. Many of these limitations are epistemological in nature, whilst others relate to more practical issues. In this section, I highlight these issues and limitations, and explain the steps I took to minimise and mitigate them.

Firstly, there are inherent issues relating to the use of any qualitative research design, which naturally raises questions regarding the relative advantages and disadvantages when compared with a quantitative design. This is a long-standing debate within social study, and in comparison with its quantitative counterpart, qualitative research has often been viewed as being less rigorous, valid, and credible (Krefting, 1991). I would suggest that this is somewhat unfair; whilst statistical research can be useful, overreliance on the statistical testing of theoretical hypotheses could lead the researcher to ‘shoehorn’ the findings into theoretical frameworks whilst ignoring or glossing over the idiosyncrasies inherent within social life (see Baker, 2012). An advantage of qualitative study in this respect is that it does not treat the richness and nuances of the social world as problematic, and as something which must therefore be explained away or controlled for, but rather as a useful aid when exploring the data and developing explanatory theories. Yet, as Baker (2012) and Willig (2014) note, the richness of the data can reveal little in itself unless it is interpreted by the researcher. Again, it could well be argued that the qualitative researcher is, by necessity, simply more open regarding the interpretive nature of their work, but be that as it may, this naturally

places the researcher, complete with his or her world view and biases, directly at the centre of the research.

Another potential criticism relates to the problem-oriented nature of CDA, and the explicitly critical stance subsequently taken. In and of itself this critical stance is not problematic, provided that it is backed up by supporting evidence, and that subsequent analysis engages thoroughly with the data (Wodak, 2007). A theoretical paradox becomes apparent here, however: the more the critical discourse analyst seeks to make explicit the interconnections, and to work in the interdisciplinary manner required to support their perspective, the greater the potential for them to be drawn into research areas with which they are less familiar. The researcher must necessarily rely upon findings from external research and associated theoretical frameworks in this respect, and must be careful therefore to avoid simply taking these at face value without applying critique. A related concern is the scope of CDA to reveal ‘findings’: whilst the critical discourse analyst can draw upon their analysis of the text, and point to the relevant context and literature in drawing conclusions, what they cannot do is be sure that their interpretation is indeed correct. In other words, the critical discourse analyst cannot be sure that the meaning they give to the text is the same meaning as that which was intended when it was created. This is of course an issue of scope, and one which I kept in mind throughout.

Data collection within CDA, as discussed above, has always been an area that has (perhaps fairly) attracted criticism (see Baker and Levon, 2015; Widdowson, 1995). Widdowson (1995) argues that the problem-oriented nature of CDA leads its practitioners to cherry-pick data that supports their critical stance. Some, such as Van Dijk (1993: 254), counter this criticism by making the somewhat persuasive argument that it is the *duty* of the critical researcher to seek out discourse that shapes and maintains social injustices. Indeed, Van Dijk goes as far as to argue that failing to do so makes the researcher themselves complicit in social injustice. This intuitively seems to be a valid point; after all, cherry-picked or not, few would argue that discourse which is blatantly racist, sexist, or otherwise discriminatory should be exempted from critical analysis just by virtue of it not being fully ‘representative’ of the wider discourse (see Baker, 2012). Yet in the case of discourse that is less blatantly problematic, the criticisms levelled by Widdowson (1995) make more sense. On balance therefore, critical discourse analysts should perhaps take heed of these points, if for no other reason than the fact that critical theories are better supported where it can be shown that every effort has been made to engage with the data as a whole. Again, the steps taken within this



study ensure that a degree of confidence can be had that the data collected faithfully capture the main features of the wider discourse from which they are taken, and that they are, for want of a better term, a representational ‘snapshot’. These steps include the collection of a relatively large amount of articles (at least by CDA standards), from across a range of popular publications, and the use of thematic analysis to reduce the data prior to final analysis.

The use of online news databases for data collection raises some specific issues and limitations. Online news archives are a useful tool to the social researcher, making a vast collection of data not only easily accessible, and thus facilitating the collection of a representative sample, but also easily organised and searched (Deacon, 2007; Stryker et al, 2006). Yet concerns have been noted regarding consistency, completeness, the use of search terms, and the fact that the articles, at least in the case of the Nexis database, are stored in text only format, rather than in their original format, complete with pictures, word sizing, font etc. Here I will briefly discuss these issues and their implications for my own research.

With regards to completeness and consistency, concerns have been raised regarding articles ‘disappearing’ from such databases, as well as appearing on some but not others (Deacon, 2007; Stryker et al, 2006), thus making replication difficult. In addition, identical search terms can sometimes return different results. Neither of these concerns have an appreciable effect in the case of the current study given the relatively large data set gathered, yet they are nonetheless worth acknowledging as a general issue regarding data sets gathered in this way.

Issues regarding the use of search terms are somewhat more relevant to the current study. Deacon (2007) notes that care must be taken to avoid using loaded search terms, as this can lead to the collection of biased news coverage. In order to mitigate this concern, I used neutral search terms where possible, and where there was more than one term that could be used, especially where the terms were contentious or controversial, I used all possible terms. The most obvious example here is the coverage of the bedroom tax, which is a widely recognised, yet somewhat derogatory title for what is officially called the ‘removal of the spare room subsidy’. In this case, I used both terms to avoid, as far as possible, collecting biased coverage. This has an additional advantage. As Stryker et al (2006) note, narrow use of search terms can have the effect of missing a lot of data that refer to the searched item by another term. A limitation that must be acknowledged here, however, is that whilst care has been taken to be as inclusive as possible, what the use of search terms cannot collect is coverage where something is discussed *implicitly* without the use of any term which could reasonably

be expected to return results (see Baker, 2012; Deacon, 2007). It is not implausible therefore that coverage of this type exists in this instance, and that, importantly, the way in which the topics is discussed, e.g. implicitly, may be related to the stance taken within the coverage.

A final point concerns the text only format of the data; whilst this allows the data to be handled easily, it comes at the expense of detail. A problem here is that nothing can be said regarding the *prominence* of the coverage in its original format; since there is of course a big difference in terms of the contribution made to the public discourse between a large font headline complete with pictures, and a small article which appears several pages in. The Nexis database usually, but not always, includes page numbers in which articles appear, but this can hardly recapture the actual prominence of the article in terms of how it would have appeared to the reader.

In spite of the limitations inherent to online databases, on balance, the advantages they bring in terms of allowing for the easy collection and organisation of large amounts of data would seem to justify the use of one such database within this study.

In the following three chapters I present the analyses themselves. These are arranged, as per the discussion above, into three chapters focusing on austerity in ‘theory’, in ‘action, and the ‘impacts’ of austerity. In these chapters I discuss the featured topics in more detail, and present the themes that occur within the coverage. Using these themes as a guide I then focus critically, and in greater depth, upon the discourse, before drawing brief conclusions within each chapter.

## **4. Social Class and ‘Austerity in Theory’: A Discourse Analysis of Media Coverage of the Emergency Budget and Welfare Reform**

### **4.1 Introduction: Austerity and the Importance of Class Construction**

In this chapter I examine the construction of social class within the media coverage of the first two topics: The ‘emergency budget’ (2010) and the issue of welfare reform (in particular the Welfare Reform Act of 2012). As such, this chapter focuses mainly upon the first two years of the overall time frame of the study; falling between the Conservative minority ‘victory’ in the 2010 election - based upon an explicit promise of implementing austerity (Stanley, 2014) - and the actual implementation of the austerity measures. Stanley (2014: 896) argues that during this period, debates about austerity were largely theoretical in nature, and focused upon austerity as an ‘idea’, since many of the measures were yet to be enacted, and certainly the true impacts were yet to be felt. This stage can therefore be considered the ‘theoretical stage’ of austerity. Stanley (2014: 895) discusses the importance, at this stage, of alignment between ‘elite narratives’ - for example, ‘official’ political narratives - of the economic crisis, and the public ‘mood of the times’. A critical focus upon the mass media coverage of these two topics is therefore important, given that the media occupy a privileged position in relation to the public discourse, and have the potential to act as an influential mediator between political debates and public opinion (Jones and Wolfe, 2010; McCombs, 2005; Wolfe et al, 2013).

Following Tyler’s (2015) view that inequality is the very essence of social class - the problem which the concept names (p496) - a critical consideration of the mass media coverage from the perspective of social class is especially pertinent here. The austerity measures that were ultimately enacted, with their emphasis upon cuts to public spending and welfare (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; Lavalette, 2017; Stanley, 2014), have impacted disproportionately upon the poorest members of society, exacerbating inequality (e.g. Grimshaw and Rubery 2012; Kitson et al, 2011; Lavalette, 2017; Nunn, 2016; O’Hara, 2015: 4). Class is, as Dorling (2014) notes, a concept inextricably linked to the social and political context, and the adoption of austerity represents a significant change this context. The way in which class is constructed, and ultimately viewed, is therefore central to the legitimacy of this change.

To recap here, class is open to being portrayed in ways that support ideological and political perspectives (Bourdieu, 1987). And this is a particularly relevant consideration in light of concerns raised over the neutrality of the media (e.g. Ellman and Germano, 2009; Entman, 2007; Herrman and McChesney, 2001). The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to critically investigate not simply *how* class is constructed, but also *why* it may be constructed in this way, and to what likely effect. This is especially important at this early ‘theoretical’ stage of austerity, since the coverage here essentially sets the agenda for later debates.

The remainder of this chapter is set out as follows: firstly, I describe the key themes within the data, along with the relationships between these themes, which collectively make up the *thematic network* (Attride-Stirling, 2001: 385). Following this, and using the themes themselves as a guide, I conduct a critical analysis of the discourse. Finally, I interpret and discuss the findings of the analysis, focusing in particular upon the patterns of class construction that emerge.

## 4.2 Themes

### 4.2.1 Necessity

The argument that austerity is necessary forms a key theme within the data at this stage. Although the connection to class is not immediately obvious, the idea of necessity underpins the discourse, which *is* more directly related to social class. This is especially true given that the narrative of *economic* necessity evolves into one of *moral* necessity, which then forms the context in which subsequent constructions of class take place.

There are numerous references to economic necessity throughout the coverage of both topics, and in particular the need to cut the deficit through reduced government spending:

He [then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne] also explained the need for £83billion spending cuts - to be unveiled in two weeks - saying Gordon Brown's administration took Britain "to the brink of bankruptcy". *The Sun* (emergency budget, 05/10/10: 8-9).

...business leaders ... said cuts to public spending were urgently needed to boost private enterprise. John Cridland, deputy director general of the Confederation for British Industry said that for every £1 in tax increases, public spending should be cut by £4. *The Express* (emergency budget, 22/06/10: 1).

Often, very little explanation of the economic logic is offered, but where it is the 'unavoidable' nature of austerity is framed within a context of 'market forces', particularly one which emphasises the UK's place within the 'global market':

Last night Mr [Nick] Clegg launched the charm offensive by emailing [Liberal Democrat] members. The Deputy PM urged them to back the tough Budget - and blamed Labour for plunging us deep in the red. He said: "Labour left our country with a mountain of debt. Every minute that goes by the Government spends a staggering £80,000 on interest, that's over £800million a week. If we don't take action now, the markets will force us into even more drastic measures as they have in Greece and Spain." He claimed "Liberal Democrat values" had ensured the cuts will be fair adding: "This is one of the hardest things we will ever have to do." But I assure you, the alternative is worse: rising debts, higher interest rates, less growth and fewer opportunities. *The Sun* (emergency budget, 22/06/10: 9).

This builds a narrative of austerity being an inevitable reaction to external forces. As Billig (1991: 143) notes, discourse often serves the purpose of taking a stance against alternative perspectives, and the importance of the necessity frame in this respect is that it implicitly undermines any suggestion of austerity being a (political) choice. Instead, the economic 'inevitability' foregrounds the finiteness of recourses (see Katz 2013: 3-4), and within this context public spending is problematised. In particular, welfare is portrayed as the epitome of wasteful, unsustainable spending:

Britain's bloated welfare bill – now costing the country nearly £200billion a year – is the Chancellor's top target for cuts, with housing benefit and other benefits to be curbed. Mr Osborne said further welfare savings beyond his planned £11billion squeeze would ease the pressure to make cuts averaging 25 per cent on public services. *The Express* (emergency budget, 24/06/10: 5).

...a benefits bill that increased by 60 per cent in the times of plenty under the last government. *The Sun* (Welfare reform, 08/08/12: 9).

And as that which is exploited by the dishonest:

Ministers yesterday warned fraudsters that they will 'have to pay back their ill-gotten gains' as the Department for Work and Pensions revealed that the benefits fraud bill topped £215million last year. *The MailOnline* (welfare reform, 17/10/12).

Up to £60m was lost to fraudulent claims last year alone. And official figures show that the number of bogus claimants has rocketed by 50% since 2004. *The Daily Star* (emergency budget, 25/08/10: 2).

In this way the issue of welfare is framed in moral terms. Here welfare is portrayed not merely as wasteful, but as that which is actively harmful to the wellbeing of society – and therefore as an 'obvious' target during a time of 'necessary' spending cuts. Thus the idea of necessity transcends the purely economic, and takes on a moral dimension:

Britain's welfare state was established after the Second World War to support the genuinely vulnerable and needy but now it is an engine of social destruction. Swallowing ever-larger sums of taxpayers' money it promotes mass idleness, provides perverse incentives for family breakdown and acts as a magnet for foreign spongers. *The Express* (welfare reform, 23/01/12: 12).

...locking people into the benefits system is not just costly and wasteful: it is also socially destructive and immoral. *The Telegraph* (welfare reform 17/09/12: 21).

An unreformed welfare structure will continue to act as a drag anchor on the UK economy and consign too many families to the wretchedness of welfare dependency. *The Telegraph* (welfare reform 17/09/12: 21).

As David Cameron said launching the Welfare Reform Bill, failure to act now will condemn another generation to the scrapheap. With £1 in every £7 spent by the Government going on welfare, delay is not an option. *The Sun* (welfare reform, 18/02/11: 8).

The only challenge to this necessity narrative comes from *The Mirror* during the coverage of the emergency budget, which at times warns of the potential for spending cuts to lead to a double dip recession, for example:

Economist Kitty Ussher said deep spending cuts were now “not necessary in economic terms”. She added: “Moreover their harsh nature could push Britain into a double-dip recession. *The Mirror* (emergency budget, 15/06/10: 10)

Such isolated challenges are, however, simply drowned out in the face of an overwhelming emphasis upon the necessity of spending cuts. The necessity narrative is thus a dominant feature within the discourse, and as such it serves as an important frame for subsequent commentary. In particular, and as I demonstrate in the analysis below, it is the idea of ‘moral necessity’ that forms the basis of the subsequent portrayals of class.

#### 4.2.2 Fairness

The issue of fairness follows on from the framing of austerity as ‘necessary’, and therefore unavoidable. With spending and welfare cuts framed as inevitable, the question can only shift to where the ‘inevitable’ impact ought *fairly* to fall:

We need welfare protection for people who fall on hard times, of course. But you cannot ask low income working people to pay through their taxes for people who aren't in work to live more comfortably than they do. *The MailOnline* (welfare reform, 17/12/12).

When most of us are working our socks off to provide for our families, why should others get to sun themselves on easy street? A safety net must remain for the most vulnerable.

But we must end the something-for nothing society. *The Daily Star* (welfare reform, 29/01/12: 6).

As can be seen in these extracts, questions of fairness lead to a ‘grouping’ or ‘classification’ (Bourdieu, 1987: 10-11) of certain people in relation to others. Note the emphasis upon ordinary, hard working people, who are contrasted with the ‘people who aren’t in work’. Just as class is a relational concept (Bradley, 2014) so too is fairness, and it is clear in the extracts above how the issue of fairness brings the idea of relationships between ‘groups’ into the discourse of austerity. Of particular interest here is the way in which boundaries of groups are drawn, where they are drawn, and on what terms of distinction, and as such I explore these questions in more detail in the discourse analysis below.

The idea of the ‘ordinary hardworking people’ becomes a major theme (as I describe below) not just across the coverage of the topics within this chapter, but across all topics. Indeed, it is a theme that *increases* in prominence across the topics. This vague group is portrayed here as those who ought to benefit (at least relatively speaking) from any ‘necessary’ changes to society:

The truth is most people are fed up with paying for a system that punishes the hard-working and rewards the irresponsible. *The Express* (welfare reform, 23/01/12: 12).

#### 4.2.3 A ‘Broken’ Welfare State

The theme of a ‘broken’ welfare state is related to, and largely follows on from, the first two themes of necessity and fairness. This is evidenced by the numerous references to an out of control, or ‘bloated’ welfare state, which must be tackled, not only out of ‘necessity’ but also in the interests of ‘fairness’. To support this narrative, several references are made to the amount paid to welfare claimants. Note again the contrast between welfare claimants and the ‘average’ earner:

Figures released by the Department for Work and Pensions show there are now 100,000 households in receipt of benefits in excess of the average wage – £23,244 a year. *The Express* (emergency budget, 07/09/10: 12).

Two important sub themes are apparent in this theoretical stage of austerity: firstly, a ‘*crackdown on the workshy*’; secondly, ‘*welfare as an incentive*’. These sub-themes are important, since they form an early basis for constructions of class, which endure throughout the later coverage.

The first subtheme of a ‘crackdown on the workshy’ is explicitly moralising in that it places issues of conduct and behaviour at the centre of the discourse, casting judgement in the process. Often, stereotypes of the underclass (see e.g. Garthwait, 2012; Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Patrick, 2016; Tyler, 2008; Valentine and Harris, 2014) - ones which have largely come to be accepted as common-sense (Jensen and Tyler 2015) - are drawn upon within the discourse. There are, however, important nuances related to the context, which I explore in the analysis below.

The following examples demonstrate the moralised portrayals. Note the references to dishonesty, idleness, and exploitation:

A benefits cheat who claimed it took him five minutes to walk seven yards was secretly filmed jumping over a garden fence. *The Mirror* (welfare reform, 03/04/12: 27).

George Osborne went to war on workshy wasters and well-off welfare claimants yesterday to make the benefits system fairer for all. *The Sun* (emergency budget, 05/10/10: 8-9).

An ever-growing population of scroungers is feeding off people who work and pay their taxes. *The Express* (emergency budget, 07/09/10: 12).

The direct reference to fairness, as well as the implied *unfairness* evident in the contrast made between ‘scroungers’ and taxpayers both demonstrate the relationship of this theme to the previous one.

Explicit moralisation is only one side of the matter here however. The sub-theme of ‘welfare as an incentive’ portrays it as an encouragement of moral deficiencies such as idleness, and therefore as a *disincentive* towards paid work. Here welfare is portrayed as that which, operating at the societal level, facilitates moral breakdown - and in particular undermines the ‘national work ethic’ by keeping (or even trapping) people in dependency. The discourse references not only incentives and dependency, therefore, but also the need to improve lives by ‘rescuing’ people:

Housing benefit, income support, incapacity benefit and dozens of other payments will be swept away in a major programme intended to break the cycle of welfare dependency. *The Daily Mail* (Emergency budget, 06/11/10).

For generations, Governments have ducked the challenge of ending welfare addiction, where millions of fit people are paid by the State to idle their lives away. The Coalition deserves credit for confronting one of the evils of this age. Welfare Secretary Iain Duncan Smith will be remembered as the architect of a revolution aimed at restoring self-respect to millions stuck in the benefits rut. *The Sun* (welfare reform, 18/02/11: 8)



This sub-theme therefore portrays ‘welfare addiction’ as a problem which society must address, one caused by an overgenerous and indiscriminating welfare state, which encourages (certain) people into choosing welfare over work. But- and this is an important point to note in terms of understanding the way in which class is portrayed within the coverage-it is not the choice that all will readily make. Rather, it is the choice of those unconstrained by morality; the choice of a particular ‘type’ who is predisposed to taking what is, from a personal perspective, the easiest path regardless of the moral implication or the cost to society.

#### 4.2.4 Ordinary Hardworking People

The theme of the ‘ordinary hardworking people’ is already evident in the contrasts described above. Such people are portrayed as both the moral benchmark and as the supposed beneficiaries of the ‘restoration of fairness’ emphasised within the discourse. Frequently, this group is constructed in very broad, vague terms: as ‘hardworking taxpayers’ for example, in an apparent attempt to appeal to as many people as possible. Such people are often described as those ‘squeezed’ by the effects of the economic downturn, reinforcing the idea of being ‘in it together’, as in the following extract:

The threat of further tax increases will stun millions of hard-pressed middle-income families already struggling to come to terms with the loss of child benefits, higher university fees and rising living costs. *The Daily Mail* (Emergency budget, 21/10/10).

The effect of this is that the net is cast as widely as possible when defining the ‘ordinary’. The ‘struggling worker’ narrative can feasibly apply to the working poor or the middle class. After all, despite the greatest impact being upon the working class, the effects of the economic crisis were nonetheless felt across society (see Lavalette, 2017; Warren, 2017), as incomes fell and the cost of living increased. Here a downplaying of *in-group* difference (especially economic difference) can be seen which stands in contrast to the work performed in defining the moral boundary of this group.

The combination of the moralised contrast at the ‘boundary’, and the broad, vague construct of this ‘group’ itself may reflect an attempt to build consensus for the notion of moral distinction. By downplaying all distinction *except* the moral type (which is vital to the pro-austerity argument) the group who is ‘appealed to’ is as broad, and therefore as numerous, as

possible. Importantly, by downplaying *economic* differences, individual stakes in austerity are masked. Those in insecure work for example, despite benefitting most from the reassurance of the welfare safety net, are nonetheless included, and appealed to, as part of the ‘ordinary hardworking people’.

Many of the themes and patterns established at this early stage are recurrent throughout the coverage of all topics. This early coverage therefore lays some of the foundations for the subsequent coverage of issues relating to austerity. In light of this, it is worth reflecting upon a few points before examining the discourse in more depth. The first relevant point to note is the framing of necessity: this framing is almost entirely unchallenged and serves as an important background to any subsequent construction of class. The necessity narrative portrays austerity as the *only logical reaction* to external forces, and this removes the question of choice altogether. Before turning attention to how class features within the discourse, it is therefore important to focus upon how this framing is established. Other important considerations are the role that constructions of class play in the shift from *economic* necessity to *moral* necessity, and the relationship between this shift and notions of fairness. Vague references to the ‘ordinary hardworking people’ are clearly recurrent within the coverage, and as such the role of this ‘group’ within the discourse must also be considered. In the following section, I conduct an in-depth analysis of the discourse with these considerations in mind.

### **4.3 Discourse Analysis**

#### **4.3.1 *Austere Times*: Establishing the Context**

As I state above, the theme of necessity is recurrent throughout the coverage of both the emergency budget and welfare reform. Although the connection between this theme and social class may not be immediately obvious, it forms the key frame and thus serves as the context in which class is constructed. The dominance of the necessity framing not only serves to highlight the ‘inevitability’ of austerity, but also lays the foundation for a narrative of ‘moral necessity’ to be developed, a narrative which is tied to particular understandings of class. In order to critically examine the discourse, it is therefore important to start with a focus upon the narrative of economic necessity. The extract below, taken from the coverage of the emergency budget, is a good example of the way in which this contextual narrative is

developed. In particular, this extract demonstrates how the argument that ‘balancing the books’ must take the form of cuts to ‘wasteful’ spending is advanced:

George Osborne yesterday launched a historic attempt to turn around the juggernaut of state spending. After decades of relentless expansion, the Chancellor set out plans for nothing less than a dismembering of the welfare system and a rolling back of the bloated public sector. Unveiling his ambitious reforms, Mr Osborne told MPs: 'Today is the day when Britain steps back from the brink, when we confront the bills from a decade of debt. *The Daily Mail* (emergency budget, 21/10/10).<sup>13</sup>

The supportive stance taken with regards to the issues of austerity, and welfare reform in particular, is immediately clear; demonstrating the way in which the political and media discourses converge. The appraisals ‘historic attempt’ and ‘ambitious reforms’ contrast with the ‘decades of relentless expansion’ to signify a laudable effort to tackle something that is portrayed as a long-standing problem. The use of the ‘juggernaut’ metaphor expands upon this, suggesting something which is out of control, and which, in the absence of determined effort, risks taking us over the aforementioned brink. The urgency of the problem is portrayed as so great that ‘nothing less than a dismembering’ will suffice.

The more subtle metaphor of the ‘bloated’ public sector is interesting in that it not only hints at the ‘cure’ through reference to the ‘symptom’, but also makes the suggestion that the public sector is suffering from something akin to a physical affliction. To be ‘bloated’ is not simply to be ‘too big’, but rather means to be swollen to an *unhealthy* size, in other words, to be *diseased*. Musolff (2012: 303) suggests that medical metaphors such as this, which draw upon the symbolism of ‘politics as a body’, are often employed in political discourse, particularly when attempting to establish a *problem* and therefore a *cure*, since they draw upon pre-existing knowledge regarding the nature of illness:

What is relevant in this analysis [of the ‘body’ metaphor use] from a CDA viewpoint is the argumentative advantage that the metaphor gives its users when they want to (dis-)qualify political developments, social groups or even individuals as threatening the identity or continued existence of a nation state. Instead of laboriously having to demonstrate and back up their claims with facts, which could be critically tested and challenged, the speaker/writer invites the hearer/reader to access knowledge about the undesirability of illness and the necessity for therapy by referring to generally known illnesses and agents of disease. The respective conceptual items (cancer, parasites, decomposition) also carry social, emotional and aesthetic values that influence the interpretation of the utterance. (Musolff, 2012: 303).

As the article progresses extensive use is made of quotation:

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<sup>13</sup> The *Nexis* database does not give page numbers for *The Daily Mail*, or *The Guardian*.

To back down now and abandon our plans would be the road to economic ruin,' he (George Osborne) added. 'We will stick to the course. We will secure our country's stability. We will not take Britain back to the brink of bankruptcy. We have made the decision to take the hard road, but it is the right road to a more prosperous, fairer Britain. The cost of government borrowing fell as business leaders and the financial markets welcomed the 68 billion-a-year cuts package. *The Daily Mail* (emergency budget, 21/10/10).

The example here is based on a quote from George Osborne, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer. An effect of quote-heavy coverage such as that seen here, is that on an uncritical reading the report can appear as an unbiased 'recounting' of the opinions of others. Yet the choice of quote, as well as the positive appraisal of the author would seem to suggest that the aim here is to reproduce and further disseminate the elite narrative of the crisis (see Stanley, 2014).

The black and white nature of the 'need' for cuts is discursively worked up in this example, and it is therefore worth focusing in detail upon how this is achieved. The metaphorical 'road' employed here represents a choice, as in a junction with only two options, the 'road to economic ruin' or the 'hard road' to 'a more prosperous, fairer Britain'. Musolff (2012) argues that metaphors within discourse serve to oversimplify abstract concepts within a debate, reducing the potential for critique by removing all but the basic elements needed to formulate the point being argued. Furthermore, Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 156, cited in Musolff, 2012) suggest that, through this over-simplification, metaphors can become self-fulfilling prophecies, as the debate is 'constrained' by the subsequent framing. Here, the use of the road metaphor presents what is essentially a complex economic issue (see Holland and Portes, 2012) as a simple choice between the 'road to economic ruin' and the 'hard' (but nonetheless 'correct') road to prosperity. The use of the metaphorical '*brink of bankruptcy*' (emphasis added) serves a similar rhetorical purpose, building upon the 'road to economic ruin' in a way that escalates the gravity of the situation. After all, a road can be travelled both ways, whereas a brink is something which one risks 'going over' and having no way back; an 'edge at the top of a steep place' and therefore 'a threshold of danger'. Stanley (2014) notes a similar employment of metaphors within the political commentary. In particular, he notes the portrayal of the economy as if it were a household budget, in order to reduce the need for cuts to a common-sense matter where money spent is money lost, or worse, wasted. Yet, as I discuss below, despite having the appeal of being seemingly intuitive, the logic of this oversimplification has been criticised (see e.g. Cooper and White, 2017a; Holland and Portes, 2012; Krugman, 2015; Marshall, 2013; O'Hara, 2015: 3-7).

The inclusion of ‘fairer’, in the ‘road to a more prosperous, fairer Britain’ is noteworthy in that it implicitly presupposes that not only is the current level of spending impeding ‘prosperity’, but that it is also leading to *unfair outcomes*. This mirrors more explicit references to a ‘moral necessity’ seen elsewhere in the discourse (see below).

Returning to the issue of quotation, it is clear that when analysing media coverage of political issues, which tend to rely heavily upon quotes from politicians and other prominent figures, close attention must be paid to the authored parts which link the quotes and structure the report, lest the analysis become an exclusive examination of fragmented political discourse. With this in mind, the second part is worthy of close attention owing to the fact that the author flows directly into an implicit appraisal.

The cost of government borrowing fell as business leaders and the financial markets welcomed the 681 billion-a-year cuts package. *The Daily Mail* (emergency budget, 21/10/10).

The somewhat vague reference to ‘business leaders’ can perhaps be considered as an appeal to authority (see Berry, 2016), one which fits with the impersonal language used to present the statement as one of self-evident fact rather than one of opinion. Yet it is the authority given to ‘the financial markets’ that is most relevant here. Such a statement must be considered in the context of an economic crisis caused by the fundamental failure of these very markets (Kitson et al, 2011; Lavalette, 2017; MacLeavey, 2011; Peck, 2010; Rudd, 2009). In light of the significant public debt incurred through bailing out the financial sector in the wake of the crisis (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; Lavalette, 2017), the reference to market forces being the driving factor ‘necessitating’ cuts to public spending appears to be both selective and ideologically motivated.

Rice and Bond (2013) argue that the crisis had the effect of undermining that which was previously viewed as economic common-sense, and therefore calling into question that which had previously been unquestionable. Analysing newspaper coverage of economic issues after the crisis, they note (p224) a concerted effort to re-establish the hegemonic ‘nature’ of free-market discourse. Clearly, a similar attempt to re-establish the primacy of market forces is made here; only now that the financial markets have been rescued with public money must these forces be obeyed, and allowed to dictate that ‘wasteful’ public investment be reduced. In effect, what is normalised here, through selective and pragmatic reference to free-markets (see Farnsworth, 2015), is a situation where the profits of financial elites are privatised, yet any losses are nationalised, with the cost of paying them borne by society. Once established,

however, such narratives of market driven necessity obscure alternative viewpoints by making them appear to go against the ‘nature’ of things (Jessop, 2002: 468; Rice and Bond, 2013: 224), framing austerity not as a political choice, but as the *only logical response* to the crisis.

#### **4.3.2 On Whom Should the Impact Fall? Moral Distinction and ‘Moral Necessity’**

Regardless of the potential for economic criticism, the ‘necessity’ of austerity forms the key frame of the discourse, and therefore the frame within which constructions of class take place. Austerity, in the form of cuts to public spending and welfare, is problematic from a class perspective because state spending and welfare are important factors in levelling the playing field, and therefore in countering class inequalities (Hastings et al, 2015; Korpi and Palme, 2003; O’Hara, 2015: 17-18; Streeck and Mertens, 2011). Yet the framing of austerity as inevitable, ‘unavoidable’ scarcity has implications for how concepts such as poverty and inequality are viewed (see Katz 2013: 3-4). Not only are critical questions regarding the impact of austerity avoided where there appears to be no choice, but the idea of being ‘in it together’ during a time of scarcity raises a particular moral question: to what degree does one contribute to or take from society?

This is important to note, since with the necessity narrative established, the issue can only become one of fairness: e.g. “But, amid the facts and figures, the question everybody will be asking is: are the plans fair? This is the challenge set for the coalition by Mr Osborne himself when he said "we're all in it together” (*The Times*, 04/12/12: 17). Discussions of fairness, an inherently relational concept, lead to comparisons being made between different sections of society or ‘groups’, paving the way for classifications to be made in accordance with this moral standard:

In an unprecedented move, the Chancellor capped how much the unemployed can get from the State. [George] Osborne told Day Two of the Tory Party Conference in Birmingham that no household will be able to claim more than £500 a week in total in handouts - the average family's take home pay. It will spell an end to the scandal of the *work-shy* getting rich on *taxpayers'* sweat for doing nothing. (emphasis added) *The Sun* (emergency budget, 05/10/10: 8).

This extract clearly demonstrates how, in the context of difficult economic times, the issue of contribution is moralised and made central to the drawing of distinction between different ‘groups’. This drawing of distinction clearly has implications in terms of whether austerity is

made to appear fair. Note the comparison between the loaded term ‘handouts’ (see Garland, 2016: 2), and the ‘average family's take home pay’. This allows the author to label the situation as a ‘scandal’, whereby the ‘work-shy’ are supposedly ‘getting rich’ at the expense of the taxpayer. Two things are evident here: firstly the construction of a ‘parasitic’ group based around highly moralised terms, and secondly the broad construction of a group comprising of the ‘rest of us’, the ‘taxpayers’; ‘the *work-shy* getting rich on *taxpayers'* sweat for doing nothing’. As a result, the discourse is able to ‘speak for’ as wide a group as possible; the ‘boundary’ being constructed here *exclusively* on moralised grounds - the shirking of responsibility, the reluctance to pull ones weight, and the contentedness to benefit unfairly at the expense of others - since the idea of the welfare recipient being economically disadvantaged is explicitly denied. Indeed, this parasitic ‘class’ is portrayed as being, until now at least, *too wealthy*, by virtue of being too able to exploit ‘us’.

Bourdieu (1987: 13) discussing the boundary work performed within portrayals of class, suggests that the ‘borders’ of different classes are discursively constructed through emphasis being placed upon differing criteria of distinction, often in the furtherance of political and/or ideological arguments. The boundary work performed here, through reference to workshyness and exploitation, draws inter-discursively upon the widely recognised tropes of welfare scroungers and of welfare as a ‘lifestyle choice’ (see Mayo, 2013; Romano, 2015; Valentine and Harris 2014), to reinforce the idea of a group that stands in moral contrast to the rest of society, even - and this is an important point - those closest in economic terms.

Expanding upon this point, Van Dijk (2003) identifies the ideological strategy of emphasising the positive attributes of the ‘in-group’, and the negative attributes of the ‘out-group’. Here the ‘taxpayers’ are constructed so broadly as to amount to anyone *but* the ‘work-shy’, whilst the fact that they are indeed taxpayers portrays them as a selfless group whose hard labour, implied by the term ‘sweat’, is done for the good of society. This is contrasted with the personal gain implied on the part of the ‘others’ in spite of their moral shortcoming. Of course, moralised discourses of this type are nothing new (Romano, 2015). What is notable here, however, is the recasting of these ‘moral failures’ in economic terms. Thus the ‘others’ within the discourse become those who are draining society through idleness and greed precisely at the time when ‘we’ as a society must recognise the ‘need’ to work harder and cut down on spending.

The implicit reference to ‘selfless labour’ is itself worthy of consideration. Lawler (2014: 712) suggests that the idealised image of the ‘respectable’ working class is that of a group who remain ‘poor but pure’. The modestly-paid ‘taxpayer’ is constructed in such a way as to foreground their work ethic and sense of duty. That they are portrayed as economically no better off than the welfare scrounger only serves to strengthen the idea of a moral divide, one which supposedly has resulted from society itself rewarding and encouraging immoral behaviour - ‘scandalously’ allowing the ‘work-shy’ to ‘get rich’ at the expense of the taxpayer. The resulting narrative of justified anger is therefore directed not just at those on the wrong side of the constructed moral divide, but also at society itself for *allowing* such a divide to occur *to its own detriment*. It is thus a rallying cry for austerity, not only in the interests of ‘fairness’, but in response to a supposed threat to society’s fundamental values and therefore the wellbeing of all; an absolute *moral necessity*.

Discourse that emphasises this supposed moral divide occurs extensively throughout the coverage and works to obscure the systemic causes of issues such as unemployment (see MacDonald et al, 2014; Tyler, 2015; Valentine and Harris, 2014). This is perhaps no coincidence given the pro-austerity sentiment seen within the coverage: acknowledgement of such causes would be problematic in that it might risk provoking sympathy with the ‘deserving poor’, and in doing so invite critical questioning of the impacts upon such people. Indeed to acknowledge the deserving poor *at all* would be to acknowledge the victims of job losses in the wake of the crisis. The potential implication of doing so cannot be overstated here, since this acknowledgement would draw attention to the fundamental failure of the ‘free’ market at a time when the hegemonic status of this ideal is already threatened (see Rice and Bond, 2013). The construction of a moral divide, and with it the necessity to tackle a moral decline, is thus essential to the progression of the ideological argument here, in that the legitimacy of the pro-austerity argument stands or falls upon the way in which different groups are understood. To put it another way, a particular view of class is essential in the move from a purely economic necessity which ‘requires’ that *something* be done in response to the crisis - and where ‘fairness’ might dictate any such impact ought to fall on those best placed to absorb it - to a moral necessity of dealing with the idlers and parasites holding society back.

Consider the following extract:



William Beveridge envisioned a welfare system as a safety net for those temporarily down on their luck. It was not designed to fund the lifestyle choices of a feckless Jeremy Kyle generation whose idea of hard work is getting off the sofa to get another can of lager. In 10 years of Labour our welfare bill ballooned by £60billion to a staggering £192billion. *The Express* (welfare reform, 05/02/12: 40).

The ‘type’ of person constructed here bears similarity to the figurative ‘chav’ stereotype (Jones, 2012; Le Grande, 2015; Tyler, 2008; Valentine and Harris, 2014). Discussing this stereotype, Tyler (2008) argues that contemporary class distinctions are marked by an emphasis on the perceived rise of the ‘underclass’ which threatens to undermine the values of decent society (see also Le Grand, 2015 on this point). Here the type of person constructed is one who displays the trappings of poor culture (see Haylett, 2001; Tyler, 2008; Valentine and Harris, 2014) such as idleness, bad taste, and alcohol abuse. In portraying a group who are supposedly less inclined towards actual ‘hard work’, and more inclined towards watching daytime TV - only leaving the sofa to ‘get another can of lager’ - they become a group upon which help is squandered when society becomes too soft, too non-judgemental, and thus too ready to ‘fund’ immoral ‘lifestyle choices’.

As a side note, the term “feckless Jeremy Kyle generation” warrants further explanation here, since its use draws upon an assumed understanding on the part of the reader (see Cameron 2001: 111): the Jeremy Kyle show, a popular daytime TV show at the time, often featured ‘guests’ selected to resonate with the underclass ‘chav’ stereotype (see Harper, 2014). In light of this, the use of the phrase not only evokes such stereotypes, it further reinforces them, since it essentially builds consensus with the reader, suggesting that ‘we’ ought to instinctively recognise the ‘type’ of person who is referred to here.

The reference to a ‘generation’ is of particular significance in that it has a temporal aspect, suggesting that things are worse now than they were before; that this generation does not possess the values held by those of previous generations, and that by extension the decline will continue *unless something changes*. Lawler (2005: 434) notes that references to a nostalgic idealised working class are often accompanied by narratives of ‘decline’, which suggest that the contemporary working class is losing, or indeed has lost, its ‘respectability’. Yet the idea of decline is less straight forward in the present coverage, since as I discuss above, the *working* poor are often held up within the coverage as shining examples of moral resilience, maintaining their work ethic even where it goes unrewarded. What is suggested here is rather a decline in society’s willingness to impose such values, resulting in those of

*lesser moral integrity* being encouraged, by a welfare state which has exceeded its role as a ‘safety net’, into making irresponsible, costly ‘lifestyle choices’.

In this respect, it is relevant to note that the moral failings themselves are again framed in terms of their *economic* cost to society: for instance, ‘our welfare bill ballooned by £60billion to a staggering £192billion’, further demonstrating the way in which class constructions bridge the gap between economic and moral ‘necessity’. The economic situation becomes, according to this perspective, a catalyst for change. An inescapable fact, driven by the unrelenting power of the market which forces our hand, yet at the same time presents an ‘opportunity’. An opportunity in that it opens our eyes to ‘wasteful and unsustainable’ spending, and to the ‘fact’ that we have been complicit in our own undoing - thus allowing us to salvage some ‘positive’ from the situation by turning around the moral decline.

The moralisation in this extract (and indeed much of the coverage) is very explicit, achieved largely through a discourse of individual choice and individual failings, albeit one of *encouraged* choice and *accommodated* failings. Whilst ‘our’ part in the situation is hinted at above - with the reference to ‘funding’ - it is made much more explicit elsewhere in the coverage, with the moral decline portrayed as being the result of welfare acting as an ‘incentive’:

Once people start claiming benefits there is every incentive for them to carry on doing so, knowing that if they got themselves a job they would end up, perversely, poorer. If the Government is ever going to tackle the benefits bill and welfare dependency it needs to start by placing an absolute cap on the monetary value of benefits which can be claimed by any individual or household. *The Express* (emergency budget, 07/09/10: 12).

Whilst talk of scroungers places the blame at the individual level, the discourse here explicitly places the onus upon government policy to change this situation: for example, ‘Once people start claiming benefits there is every *incentive* for them to carry on doing so’, ‘if *the Government* is ever going to tackle the benefits bill and *welfare dependency*..’ (emphasis added). On the face of it, the pro-austerity argument is incoherent in this respect, in that it at once draws upon the idea of individual choice *and* the idea of ‘socially created misbehaviour’. Yet it is the construction of a particular ‘type’ of person that serves to reconcile this contradiction; a type who is prone to slipping - with great ease - into their self-serving, exploitative nature; a type who will readily abandon morals and duty *altogether*, whether knowingly and deliberately or otherwise. Indeed, a key feature of the discourse is that the degree to which the moral failings are deliberate (or not) is often left vague.

This vagueness lends flexibility to pro-austerity arguments, since, as I discuss in the concluding chapter (see p184) it allows the idea of moral necessity to be framed not just in terms of fairness and justice, but also *compassion*. Logically (and importantly), the ‘type’ described above can, potentially at least, be ‘steered’ back onto the ‘correct’ path. Donoghue (2013) argues that the passivisation of poor people is a common feature of discourse about welfare. Donoghue traces this pattern from the 1980s, through the discourse of New Labour and onto the ‘big society’ mantra of the Conservative-led coalition government (2010). Such discourse, Donoghue (2010) suggests, legitimises policies aimed at behavioural modification that ostensibly have the goal of instilling the attributes necessary for inclusion within the market economy. Rose (2000) criticises this individualised focus upon behaviour and attitude, suggesting that it further detracts from structural causes of poverty (and the need to address them), moving the political to the social, but not in social terms (Rose, 2000: 1400). In other words, it frees the state from its responsibility to those who might otherwise be termed the ‘deserving’ poor (Romano, 2015) by redefining the type of help these people need.

Returning to the present discourse, the use of the term welfare ‘dependency’ in the extract above draws parallels with discourses of addiction, again suggesting an oversimplified problem-solution formula (see Musolff, 2012: 303): the dependent must be weaned off, or otherwise removed from that on which they ‘depend’, and which is supposedly harming them. Redistribution is therefore cast not as vital financial help for those in difficulty, but as that which ‘traps’ people in dependence. Accordingly, those who lack the integrity to break free must be ‘helped’ to do so. Despite the context of widespread job losses at the time, this narrative of ‘facilitating’ lifestyle choices casts an implicit judgement of character on such people since it suggests them to be either unwilling, or, due to personal failings, unable to help themselves. They are-as above- of a particular ‘type’ who will readily tend towards the ‘easiest choice’ regardless of the consequences for society, or even their own long term interests. As such, it is ‘the government’ who must intervene, supposedly in the interests of those ‘trapped’ in welfare; and furthermore, it is the duty of the morally sound, upstanding citizen to recognise the moral (and economic) necessity of this.

The reference to the ‘benefits bill’ here situates the discourse in context, serving as a ‘reminder’ of the national interest at stake in this ostensible effort to tackle waste and squander. This pattern is also evident in the extract below:

Thanks to indiscriminate payouts the work ethic has been grievously undermined. Incredibly, even during the boom years of the last decade, there were more than five million people of working age living on benefits, an appalling waste in a nation that was once known as “the workshop of the world. *The Express* (welfare reform, 23/01/12: 12).

The phrase ‘Thanks to indiscriminate payouts’ not only presupposes that such payments are indeed ‘indiscriminate’, i.e. granted regardless of need or ‘deservedness’, but also demonstrates the passivisation discussed above. Such a phrase suggests that it is these ‘payouts’ that are the *cause* of a supposedly declining work ethic. The use of past tense in ‘an appalling waste in a nation that *was once* known as the workshop of the world’ again suggests a decline (see Lawler, 2005: 434). Moreover, that decline is approached here as a moral panic: whereby “A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (Cohen 2004: 1, cited in Garland 2008). The failure to address our ‘encouragement’ of ‘idleness’ at the individual level is cast in terms of its cumulative effect upon the wellbeing of society, highlighting the danger of a spreading, growing threat.

This pattern is perhaps better demonstrated in the following extract:

Through (then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith’s) own in-depth analysis he saw that the benefits system is breeding poverty, unemployment and irresponsibility. As Work and Pensions Secretary his heroic crusade is to revive the work ethic. *The Express* (welfare reform, 23/01/12: 12).

Duncan et al (2002: 241) note previous media narratives of a welfare ‘dependent’ underclass which is ‘breeding’. Here the term is used in a way that, perhaps deliberately, can be interpreted either as a metaphorical ‘breeding’, the spreading of a value system (albeit one marked by its *lack* of value), or alternatively as *actual* ‘breeding’. The term breeding is most often associated with animals, and dehumanising discourse such as this is often employed in an effort to portray an out-group as being *fundamentally different* from ‘us’, as a breed apart which is devoid - even incapable - of the morals and values that ‘we’ possess (Goodman, 2007; Rowe and Goodman, 2014).

The use of the term ‘breeding’ thus hints here at the ‘existence’ of a division on the grounds of what Katz (2013) calls the ‘hard problem of persons’, a deficiency which has its roots in genetics, in “inherited deficiencies that limit intellectual potential, *trigger harmful and*

*immoral behaviour*, and circumvent economic achievement” (Katz 2013: 3, emphasis added). What is suggested is thus an animal like nature amongst ‘the poor’, who are assumed to lack the capacity for moral reasoning, and must therefore be subjected to control. Given that an emphasis upon control, coercion, and ‘behaviour modification’ features heavily in the coverage of the austerity measures themselves, especially the ‘workfare’ policies (see following chapter), it is significant that such concepts are woven into the discourse at this early stage.

What is striking at this point is how class constructions facilitate the seamless evolution of the narrative, from one of reacting to economic markets, to one in which the blame for the economic downturn is laid squarely at the feet of an exploitative underclass who, having been inadequately ‘controlled’, is undermining the fundamental values of society. Yet amidst this narrative of ‘necessary’ reforms, aimed in large part at tackling a ‘decline’ in the values of respectable society, it is worth pausing for critical reflection. Whilst the argument for spending cuts - especially cuts to welfare - base their legitimacy upon the construction of a moralised ‘target group’, the existence of this ‘group’ is undermined by the findings of previous studies (e.g. MacDonald, 2014; Mayo, 2013; McDowall, 2011; Shildrick et al, 2010, 2012; Patrick, 2014). Shildrick et al (2010) and MacDonald et al (2014) demonstrate, through case studies within poverty stricken communities, that despite valuing and actively seeking work, members of these communities often become trapped in ‘low pay, no pay’ cycles of poor quality employment and reliance upon welfare. This, they demonstrate, happens through factors beyond the control of those affected; namely insecure work, low wages, and the lack of opportunities to progress. Once such reforms are enacted therefore, they are not ‘targeted’ at all, but apply across the board, impacting equally upon all members of society who might reasonably be termed vulnerable irrespective of personal morals (or lack thereof), and therefore irrespective of deservedness.

#### **4.3.3 We the (Ordinary Hardworking) People: Constructing the ‘Moral In-Group’**

Since class is a *relational* concept (Bradley, 2014; Dorling, 2014), it is important to focus in detail upon the group with which the ‘parasitic underclass’ is contrasted in order to fully appreciate the way in which portrayals of class feature within the coverage. The following extract, taken from an article which discusses the capping of welfare, shows these ‘ordinary hardworking people’ placed at the centre of the discourse, as part of the wider ‘us’. The

narrative of ‘making work pay’ in order to reward and encourage the ‘correct values’ is in keeping with the emphasis upon a moral threat to ‘our’ national integrity:

...the Welfare Reform Bill is about more than reining in public spending or chipping away at the national deficit. It’s not even about giving the Frank Gallagher’s of this world a good kicking in the vain hope they might get off their arses and muck in. Nope. This is about reassuring us working people. That’s why David Cameron [then Prime Minister] has vowed to press ahead with these welfare reforms [...] he’s given the millions who graft for a living a reason to get up when the alarm goes off. *The Star* (welfare reform, 29/01/12: 15).

The divisive rhetoric of ‘justified anger’ can be seen here, where it is used to pit the vague ‘working people’, against those in receipt of welfare. Whilst the vague reference serves to play down differences within the broad in-group, it can logically be deduced that this extract refers to the low-paid worker in particular. The suggestion that welfare reform will give these people ‘a reason to get up when the alarm goes off’ suggests that such a reason is currently lacking by virtue of the welfare claimant being economically ‘too proximate’.

Yet the narrative of making work pay is entirely illogical. Obviously, reducing the income of those receiving welfare does not *in any tangible way* improve the situation for those in low-paid work. Whilst it is tempting, owing to the clearly erroneous logic, to simply make this point and move on, the narrative is relevant in that it can only make sense *relationally*. In other words, reducing the income of one ‘group’ can make the (unchanged) income of another ‘group’ higher *in relation*. From a class perspective this (clearly divisive) rhetoric is especially relevant given the relational nature of the concept itself (Bradley, 2014; Dorling, 2014). The notion of ‘making work pay’ is therefore less about furthering the interests of the working poor, or indeed the working class, than it is about creating the illusion of putting those who are supposedly a class below back in their place, in order to justify the impact of austerity. Thus, despite the assertion to the contrary, ‘this’ (welfare reform) is ‘justified’ here precisely by being cast as a means of ‘giving the Frank Gallaghers<sup>14</sup> of this world a good kicking’. The denial simply being a rhetorical ‘disclaimer’ (see Van Dijk, 1992: 87): where an anticipated interpretation is pre-emptively denied in order to make the argument appear less objectionable. Given that this rhetoric does not reflect the social reality - where many low paid workers are forced to survive by alternating between poor quality work and welfare (Shildrick et al, 2010) - it follows that many of the supposed beneficiaries here are likely to

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<sup>14</sup> Frank Gallagher is a satirical representation of the stereotypical underclass figure (Creeber 2009) who appeared on the television show ‘*Shameless*’ (Channel 4, 2004).

find themselves, at various times, on the wrong side of this ‘kicking’. The construction of those who are a ‘moral class’ below the ‘worker’ is important, therefore, in sidestepping critique that might arise from the indiscriminate impact. The parasite figure is thus the equivalent of a straw man, a constructed target who resists pulling their weight, and who is (fairly) punished as a result.

The extract above demonstrates two recurrent patterns within the coverage; the emphasis upon a clear moral divide, and the downplaying of differences *amongst* those on the correct side of this divide. Whilst the extract above implicitly references the working poor, the same backgrounding of differences, especially ones that would risk highlighting issues of structural inequality, can be seen regardless of who is actually being referred to. This is achieved through the use of such vague terms as ‘taxpayers’, ‘hardworking families’, or as in the follow examples, the ‘squeezed’ or ‘hard-pressed’ middle:

The debate about the coalition's cuts has concentrated on the curbs on housing benefit and on those who can claim child benefit. But more families in the "squeezed middle" will be affected by the changes in tax credits. *The Guardian* (emergency budget, 08/11/10: 12).

The threat of further tax increases will stun millions of hard-pressed middle-income families already struggling to come to terms with the loss of child benefits, higher university fees and rising living costs. *The Daily Mail*(emergency budget, 21/10/10).

The people discussed here build upon the narrative that ‘we’ are all ‘in it together’ with regards to the economic downturn (Raynor, 2017), and must therefore accept the inevitable belt tightening. Such references to a ‘squeezed’ or ‘hard-pressed’ ‘middle’ occur frequently within the coverage, and would appear to be an implicit reference to the middle class. However, the vague terms are in keeping with the general pattern of consensus building, ‘inclusive’ discourse. This lack of explicit reference to class has been noted previously (e.g. Bradley, 2014; Lawler, 2005; Weltman, 2008), and is suggestive of an attempt to avoid the uncomfortable (Sayer, 2002) issue of structural inequality altogether (Tyler, 2015). Instead the people referred to here are discussed in generalised terms, which are seemingly chosen to avoid definition as far as possible. For example, the ‘hard-pressed middle income families’ in the second extract could well apply to much of the population. As Lavalette (2017) and Warren (2017) note, in spite of the greatest impact being upon the working class, the economic crisis was nonetheless felt across society, thus ‘squeezing’ the budgets of many people.

A related, and noteworthy, feature of the discourse is that even in instances where higher income groups are explicitly discussed, the issues of advantage and disadvantage are played down regardless, leaving intact the construction of a (vague) group united in being the supposed beneficiaries of the ‘restoration of fairness’ that austerity will ostensibly bring. Consider the following example where the ‘hardworking and enterprising’ ‘middle Britain’ is discussed, with reference to a relatively high income group:

...make no mistake it is still going to hurt. Those on salaries above £45,000 will be squeezed by a combination of higher national insurance, less favourable treatment of pension contributions, higher capital gains tax on any assets sold and the freezing of the threshold for 40 per cent tax. And that is before the coalition has unveiled its plans for parents whose children are off to university in the next few years. Middle Britain is right to feel that it is too often treated as a cash cow by governments of all political complexions. [...] Once he [then Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne] has completed the grisly task of clearing Labour's mess this newspaper will be first in the queue of those pressing him to give the hardworking and enterprising people of Britain some more of their own money back. *The Express* (emergency budget, 23/06/10: 14-15).

The assertion of these people being ‘hardworking and enterprising’ not only sets them on the ‘correct’ side of the ‘moral divide’, but also serves to explain away privilege as something that is earned. Such narratives further mask the difficulties faced by poorer members of society, and thus class inequalities themselves by portraying society as a ‘meritocracy’ (see Gillies, 2005, Littler, 2013, Manstead, 2018, Nunn, 2012; Warren, 2017). In light of this, the reference to giving these people some of ‘their own money back’ is a clear ideological challenge to the fairness of wealth redistribution, which fits in with the notion of ‘earned privilege’. The use of the ‘cash cow’ metaphor is significant in that it implies an unfair ‘milking’ of this group which, having been allowed to happen, has led to a grave ‘injustice’. Again this ‘farming’ metaphor performs a simplifying function (Musolff, 2012) here, in that it reinforces the ideological view of the wealthy as producers. It aligns then with the cow that produces milk, which is then *exploited*.

Importantly, the net is cast as widely as possible by portraying the in-group as one defined by shared morals and values: a group united by their recognition of the importance of giving to, as opposed to taking from society. The discourse is thus able to appeal to as many people as possible when emphasising the ‘injustice’ of redistribution, sidestepping questions of economic inequality altogether. A critical question can be asked at this point however: can those earning upwards of £45,000 really be considered squeezed in the same sense as those on much a lower income - especially given the genuine poverty faced by the working poor in



the aftermath of the crisis? And can they really be expected therefore to have the same stake in debates regarding austerity, public spending, and redistribution?

The decoupling of class from its economic underpinnings is evident even in the rare instances where the concept *is* explicitly mentioned, as in the following extract:

We have reached the absurd situation in which, thanks to generous benefits and high taxes, many of the "poor" are effectively better off than middle income groups. And it will get worse, thanks to the Government's decision to concentrate education and health spending in poorer areas. It is time that our politicians started to recognise and reward the values of hard work and independence cherished by the middle classes. Those in the middle are more than happy to pay their fair share to reduce the deficit, but not to be fleeced so that others can be spared. *The Express* (emergency budget, 31/08/10: 12).

A lot is revealed in this extract, beginning with the description of the situation as 'absurd' the author sets the tone for the intended reading. The 'poor' being set out in speech marks is an example of what Fairclough (1993) calls *manifest intertextuality* whereby a feature of the wider discourse is referred to, but marked as distinct from the authors own words in order to challenge the meaning. The irony is worked up through *echoic mention* of the original claim (Sperber and Wilson, 1981: 306-307). Here the idea of the 'poor' as a recognisable group, at least in the financial sense, is cast into doubt. Indeed, with the assertion that such people are 'effectively better off than middle income groups', they are portrayed as a group that enjoys *too much* influence, and attracts too much sympathy. In other words, efforts to level the playing field, such as 'the Government's decision to concentrate education and health spending in poorer areas', are portrayed as disrupting the 'natural' order of things. Resulting in those who ought to enjoy the privilege earned through their 'hard work' instead being 'fleeced' (note again the use of another farm metaphor here). The poverty implied here is thus not one of economic poverty at all, instead it is a poverty of the 'values of hard work and independence cherished by the middle classes' - a poverty of aspiration (McKenzie, 2015: 20). A sense of outrage is therefore expressed, and invited, at the economic proximity of those who supposedly lack the correct values (see Valentine and Harris, 2014).

Despite the explicit mention of the middle class, what is not explained is exactly *why* these people belong to this class other than through their appreciation of the value of hard work. From a critical perspective it is worth pointing out that this is the very same value assigned to the low paid worker when building up the contrast with the 'welfare claimant'. For example, "It's not fair or right that benefits claimants receive higher incomes than *hard-working families* who are striving to get on in life" (*The Daily Mail*, 18/11/12). In other words, for all

the problematisation of economic proximity despite a supposed gulf in values, the discourse remains silent on the issue of economic divide in spite of shared morals.

#### **4.3.4 “The Truth is”: An Example from the Coverage of Welfare Reform**

So far, the examples considered have mainly been taken from the coverage of the emergency budget. For the sake of balance, it is therefore worth considering the welfare reform coverage in more detail. As the core themes and patterns have already been explored, this represents a good opportunity to focus upon a larger extract in order to analyse discourse as it occurs within the coverage. The extract is presented in full below, followed by the analysis.

The truth is that, as a country, we have lost sight of the importance of every citizen striving to contribute to society, however modestly, as opposed to making a claim upon it. As a result, perversely, those who won't contribute are treated the same as those who do. This injustice means that they are given the right to live handsomely off the labour of the rest of us.

To sustain this grotesque state of affairs, which is an abnegation of society's most fundamental values, would be unacceptable even in times of plenty. But in a time of economic crisis, it is simply outrageous.

Following this week's Lords rebellion against the Coalition's plans to cap the cost of benefit payments, the Mail has highlighted families living on small incomes who are determined to be self-reliant and to avoid becoming trapped in a cycle of welfare dependency.

Sadly, it has also been easy to find examples at the opposite end of the moral scale -- people who are perfectly capable of work, but refuse to take or even look for it. *The Daily Mail* (welfare reform, 28/01/12).

The opening statement - “the truth is” - reveals much about the type of argument the writer is making: with this reference to a seemingly self-evident ‘truth’ the writer is able to deny, or at least downplay the fact that they are expressing an opinion and instead make a ‘claim to truth’ (Chouliariki, 2008: 1), Chouliariki (2008: 1) discussing the ways in which ‘truth’ is established in social practice argues that:

Every move to meaning-making comes about from a position of power, both structuring and structured by the social positions available within the practice. And every move to meaning-making makes a claim to truth precisely from that power position.

With this in mind, what the author appears to be doing here is exploiting the credibility afforded by their position, one that allows them to speak for society through having access to the public discourse. The ‘claim to truth’ made here is one which obscures the subjective

stance and thus frames the argument, from the outset, as a statement of indisputable fact. The factual, 'self evident' tone continues on from this assertion, with 'the importance' implied to be such that the reader ought instinctively to recognise it. In other words, the reference to 'the importance' draws upon knowledge that the reader is expected to possess. As Cameron (2001: 111) argues:

In successful communication, what is said is merely the tip of the iceberg. Even the most seemingly straightforward interaction actually depends upon a great deal of shared, tacit knowledge, both cultural and linguistic.

Applying this here, what the article apparently refers to is the expectation of *conditionality*; the increased emphasis upon which has been a feature of political discourse following the UKs embrace of neoliberalism (see Donoghue, 2013; Rose, 2000). What is emphasised here is a threat to the expectation of conditionality, such that 'we' no longer discriminate between those 'striving to contribute to', and those 'making a claim upon' society. Note the black and white nature of this 'either-or' formulation, with no consideration being made for the possibility of someone doing *both*. This is important when considered in the context of the time. Given the widespread job losses which followed the economic crisis, it is not implausible to suggest that a great many people would indeed be 'striving to contribute' (by looking for work), whilst at the same time 'making a claim' upon society out of sheer necessity. The omission of any reference to this possibility results in a constructed divide between two distinct groups of people defined along the moralised grounds of whether they either 'give to', or 'take from' society. The emphasis upon conditionality makes the assumption that those who 'make a claim' upon society do so largely as a result of their lacking the 'correct attitude' required to help themselves.

Expanding upon this, the ideological stance presented here can be inferred from the inclusion of the word 'striving' in the phrase 'the importance of every citizen *striving* to contribute to society'. Rice and Bond (2013) suggest that a useful tactic when critically analysing discourse is to consider why one variation of a statement is chosen over other, hypothetical, alternatives. Following this suggestion, it is useful to consider the difference between the actual phrase that is used: 'the importance of every citizen *striving to contribute* to society' (emphasis added), and one such hypothetical alternative which could have been used; 'the importance of every citizen *contributing* to society'. What becomes clear is that the latter, hypothetical version of the term puts an onus upon not just the individual, at the moral or behavioural level, but also upon society itself at the structural level, since one cannot possibly

‘contribute’ (or cease to ‘make a claim’ for that matter) unless the chance to do so exists. The inclusion of the term ‘striving’ can therefore only serve to further shift the onus onto the individual, whereby the failure to ‘strive’ is portrayed as symptomatic of a more general moral deficiency (see Valentine and Harris, 2014). Again, considered in the context of job losses following the crisis (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; O’Hara, 2015: 3-4), ensuring that all were indeed able to contribute to society would entail a fundamental restructuring of the social order- one which would likely require an *increase* in social investment as opposed to spending cuts (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012). On the other hand, the moralised version of the statement merely legitimises a renewed, and indeed intensified, emphasis upon behaviour management (see Friedli and Stearn, 2015: 41-42).

Clearly such references draw upon what have become ‘common-sense’ narratives of ‘welfare scroungers’, and ‘skivers’ (Jensen, 2014; Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Valentine and Harris, 2014) to ‘group together’ the morally deficient into a costly ‘class’ which then forms the legitimate target of coercion. It is worth noting again here that the idea of such a group has been cast into serious doubt by previous research (e.g. MacDonald et al, 2014; Mayo, 2013, McDowall, 2011; Shildrick et al, 2010, 2012; Patrick, 2015). In particular, the idea of ‘the poor’ failing to ‘strive’ is contradicted by McDowall (2011), who demonstrates through research amongst poor communities that great emphasis is placed upon the value and importance of finding work, even (indeed *especially*) where the opportunity for gaining meaningful, quality employment is limited. Whilst such studies cast doubt upon the idea of a moral distinction between such recognisable groups, the construction of this divide - whilst speaking for society, e.g. “*as a country, we have lost sight*” -ensures that the ‘problem’ itself, and therefore its solution, comes to be seen in moral terms.

This problem is again framed in terms of a ‘decline’ (Lawler, 2005: 434); ‘The truth is that, as a country, *we have lost sight...*’. Clearly, for ‘us’ as a society to have ‘lost’ sight implies that we *once had* sight of this importance. The important nuance described above is again evident here, in that the ‘decline’ is not limited to the working class, but rather takes the form of a more general decline in the willingness of society to impose its values. This can perhaps be explained in terms of the social context, and the pro-austerity sentiment running through the coverage. Framing the ‘decline’ in this way puts the onus upon ‘us’, ‘*as a country*’ (emphasis added), to act lest we encourage those who should be ‘striving to contribute’ into making the immoral choice to exploit us instead. It also leaves intact the idealised ‘poor but pure’ worker who comes to represent the ‘moral benchmark’ in terms of work ethic and sense

of duty; the hyper-visualised embodiment of those who, despite the lack of encouragement on the part of society, fall on the ‘correct’ side of the ‘moral divide’.

The issue of fairness becomes increasingly evident as the article continues. Note the way in which the issue is inextricably linked to the construction of different groups:

As a result, perversely, those who won't contribute are treated the same as those who do. This injustice means that they are given the right to live handsomely off the labour of the rest of us. *The Daily Mail* (welfare reform, 28/01/12).

The term ‘perversely’ is loaded with meaning here, denoting a situation that is entirely removed from the expected, the acceptable, and the ‘normal’. The moral divide is again drawn upon in support of this view; the use of ‘won’t’ in ‘those who won't contribute’ draws upon a narrative of ‘lifestyle choice’ (see Jensen, 2014: 4), and in doing so constructs a clear distinction based upon attitude. Again no reference is made to those who ‘can’t’, either as a result of job losses or some other reason beyond their direct control (illness for example). The over-simplistic grouping evokes sentiments of unfairness; with ‘those who *won't* contribute’ being compared directly to those who ‘labour’, bringing to mind images of hard, thankless work done for the good of society (see Kitch, 2007). Yet it is the emphasis upon society’s part in allowing this ‘unfairness’, by virtue of both ‘distinct’ groups being ‘treated the same’, which is foregrounded here. The resulting narrative is thus one in which ‘we’ have failed to discriminate between ‘our’ interests and those of an immoral parasitic underclass, to the extent that ‘they’ have been ‘given the right’ to exploit ‘us’, to ‘live handsomely off the labour of the rest of us’. The ‘perverseness’ thus refers to a disruption in the ‘natural order of things’, in that the least deserving are supposedly in a favourable position compared with those who *ought, fairly* to be ‘above’ them.

Ironically the idea of one group benefiting from the labour of another has historically been a ‘classed’ issue. Yet here it is one which is recast as ‘our’ labour being exploited not from *above*, but from *below*, by a morally bankrupt underclass. Indeed, the idea of unfairness or exploitation *within* the ‘in-group’ is implicitly denied, along with all difference, such is the effect of the broad construction: ‘the rest of us’. This group is thus treated as one in which the interests of all members are the same, and in which their stakes in the issue are also the same. This is in spite of the fact that, logically, this group is comprised of the low-paid worker (who ‘labours’) alongside those much higher up the social hierarchy (and who often benefit from such labour). Yet again, whilst the idea of economic proximity despite moral difference

forms the basis of a narrative of injustice, the idea of economic difference despite shared morals is rendered completely invisible.

Incidentally, the term ‘this injustice’ is noteworthy in that it reads like a ‘summary’ of the argument made so far, inviting the reader to draw upon pre-existing knowledge of what an injustice *is* rather than critically question the situation at hand (Van Dijk, 1983: 33). This ‘summarisation’ therefore has the effect of condensing the preceding information into a single label, which not only guides the audience towards the intended reading, but in doing so slips the process under the level of conscious thought - thereby avoiding the potential for critique.

A similar pattern is evident as the article continues:

To sustain this grotesque state of affairs, which is an abnegation of society's most fundamental values, would be unacceptable even in times of plenty. But in a time of economic crisis, it is simply outrageous. *The Daily Mail* (welfare reform, 28/01/12).

Note the reference to ‘this grotesque state of affairs’. This again brings the reader ‘up to speed’ on the point being made without inviting any conscious critique, whilst further emphasising the issue of (un)fairness. Meanwhile the reference to ‘society's most fundamental values’ reinforces the centrality of said values. The most relevant aspect of this extract however is the way in which the economic argument is woven into the discourse; ‘To sustain this grotesque state of affairs [...], would be *unacceptable even in times of plenty. But in a time of economic crisis, it is simply outrageous*’ (emphasis added). What occurs here is the author draws upon the economic context to ‘upgrade’ the appraisal: ‘unacceptable’ becomes ‘outrageous’ as the economic situation is used as the *basis* for a moral crackdown. To put it another way: in the face of unavoidable external forces, that which was ‘costly and wasteful’, and which therefore *should* never have been acceptable previously, becomes that which is now simply *no longer an option*.

This pattern continues as the article progresses, note the way that the ostensible effort to ‘cap the cost’ of benefit payments is quickly, (and explicitly), framed in moral terms here:

Following this week's Lords rebellion against the Coalition's plans to cap the cost of benefit payments, the Mail has highlighted families living on small incomes who are determined to be self-reliant and to avoid becoming trapped in a cycle of welfare dependency. Sadly, it has also been easy to find examples at the opposite end of the moral scale -- people who are perfectly capable of work, but refuse to take or even look for it. *The Daily Mail* (welfare reform, 28/01/12).

This final part shows the coming together of several patterns discussed so far. Firstly the emphasis upon individual moralised attributes, e.g. ‘the Mail has highlighted families living on small incomes who are *determined* to be self-reliant’ (emphasis added). The reference to ‘determination’ is relevant in that it is something that can be attributed directly to the choice of the individual (actually *being* self-reliant depends upon external factors of course). Furthermore, such a reference implies its direct *opposite*; those who are *not* determined to be self-reliant. In other words, what is implied here is the threat posed to the national work ethic by those who, to put it bluntly, *do not particularly care* about being self-reliant. Whilst such people are suggested to naturally tend towards the ‘wrong’ end of the ‘moral scale’, it is telling that the welfare state is given as the driving factor ‘allowing’ them to conform to their true nature. Lacking the ‘determination’ to be self sufficient, this group, once constructed, forms the legitimate target for coercion - or at the very least *punishment*.

Another point warranting particular attention here is that while the ‘families living on small incomes’ fall on the ‘correct’ side of the constructed moral scale, the fact that they nonetheless remain *financially* poor is treated as uncontroversial. Instead such people serve almost as economic martyrs, for whom the achievement of self-reliance is an *inherent and intrinsic* reward (see Kitch, 2007). Furthermore, such people are cast here as islands of ‘respectability’ in a sea of decadence; so much so that these ‘examples’ must be ‘highlighted’, whereas those at the other end of the aforementioned ‘moral scale’ are simply ‘easy to find’, such is the supposed extent of the moral decline.

One final point to note is the fact that the extract here addresses an ‘opposing view’, which is described as a ‘rebellion’. This labelling of alternative perspectives as ‘extreme’ is, as I discuss in the following chapters, something which becomes intensified in the coverage of the remaining topics. Here, casting an opposing view as a ‘rebellion’ brings to mind images of something radical, disruptive, and even *unlawful*; an unreasonable stance against that which is commonly accepted.

#### **4.4 Discussion**

The adoption of austerity, beginning with the 2010 ‘emergency budget’, represents a significant change in society (MacLeavey, 2011; Stanley, 2014), one which brings issues directly related to social class, such as inequality and wealth distribution, directly to the

forefront of the public agenda. Within the context of ‘inevitable hardship’, the key questions arising are those of fairness: where should the impact fall, and why? In other words, questions of fairness between different ‘groups’ within society. A critical focus upon the way in which portrayals of class are woven into the discourse is therefore important at this stage. The ambiguous nature of the concept allows it to be constructed in ways that ‘mobilise’ support for political action (Bourdieu, 1987: 497). Furthermore, the patterns of class construction seen in the coverage of this early theoretical (see Stanley, 2014: 896) stage of austerity are important in that such constructions form part of the background which frames the arguments and debates seen within the later topics.

Before focusing specifically upon the patterns of class construction that occur within the coverage here, it is useful to consider the dominant framing of ‘necessity’ itself. This framing, echoing what Stanley (2014: 895) calls the ‘elite-driven narrative’ of the time, emphasises a need to balance the books in the face of unsustainable state spending, and forms the contextual framework for class constructions in that it sets the tone for debates regarding the fairness of where the ‘inevitable’ impact ought to fall. Stanley (2014: 895) suggests that these elite (political) narratives must align with the public ‘mood of the times’ if they are to gain legitimacy (and ultimately acquiescence). This makes intuitive sense: after all in democratic society such ‘alignment’ is obviously vitally important.

Any focus upon this alignment should, however, carefully consider the role of the mass media. Whilst the actual relationship between the media, public opinion and social policy may be complex (Pratt and Stromberg, 2013), both the influence of the mass media on public opinion and the mediating role they play in regards to public policy have been widely demonstrated (e.g. McCombs, 2005; Cohen et al, 2008). With this in mind, it is relevant that the ‘necessity narrative’ is not only reproduced within the media (as discussed above, the coverage features many direct quotations from political figures) but also actively *developed* within the discourse. This occurs to such an extent that austerity, in the form of spending cuts, is presented as the *only* logical response to external economic factors. This perspective is, in the absence of any serious challenge, presented almost as if it were commonsense. If acceptance of the ‘necessity’ of austerity is crucial to any alignment of public opinion and political policy (Stanley 2014), then it is significant to note the effort expended by the mass media in establishing the idea of such necessity. Stanley (2014, 2016) demonstrates that this idea appears to have largely been accepted, and it seems reasonable to conclude that the media discourse may have played a significant role in this acceptance.



The alternative explanation, drawing upon demand-side theories of media bias (see Prat and Stromberg, 2013), would be that the media are simply producing what the public wants to hear, and that the ‘public mood’ (Stanley, 2014: 895) regarding the economic crisis and austerity is what drives the coverage here. This seems unlikely, however, for two reasons: the first of which being the complexity of the economic factors underlying the crisis. Indeed, it is testament to the complex nature of these economic factors that the crisis was largely unforeseen, even amongst economists. It seems implausible, therefore, that the public, generally lacking advanced knowledge in the field of economics, would understand the principles underlying the crisis in sufficient depth so as to form, collectively, an explanatory narrative which then formed the basis of ‘official’ narratives. Secondly, there is the question of how such a coherent understanding could arise amongst the public from ‘fragmented understandings in individual minds’ (see Castells, 2007: 241). In light of these considerations the ‘media driven’ acceptance of an elite narrative certainly seems more plausible.

The idea that austerity is unavoidable is, as shown in the analysis above, based largely on the suggestion that it is simply a ‘reaction’ to external ‘market forces’. In spite of this seeming attempt to re-establish the primacy of the market, and in doing so portray it as part of the ‘natural’ order of things (see Rice and Bond, 2013: 224), the very idea of ‘free markets’ is, as Farnsworth (2015: 2) notes, largely an illusion however.

The more closely we examine the public sector within the most successful economies, the more apparent it becomes that public services and the whole welfare state is as much about private businesses as it is about guaranteeing the wellbeing of citizens. Subsidies and grants have enabled businesses to continue to expand, invest and make profit when the ‘free’ market has tested them to the verge of extinction.

A pertinent example here is the bailout of the financial sector following the crisis at a cost to the public of £850bn (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012: 43; Lavalette, 2017). When considered in light of this, references to market forces seem selective, pragmatic, and *ideological*. What is removed<sup>15</sup> by virtue of the necessity narrative is any question of the *desirability* of a situation where the state must nationalise the losses of financial elites, but must in turn submit to the dictates of the ‘free’ market, even where this leads to rising inequality, and in some cases a failure to provide for even the basic needs of the most vulnerable (Cooper and White, 2017a; O’Hara, 2015; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; Lavalette, 2017; Mack, 2017; O’Connell and

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<sup>15</sup>It could be argued that by removing this question from the scope of the debate, the ‘Overton window’ of ‘acceptable political thought’ is narrowed; it should be noted that following the 2010 election all major political parties proposed, austerity measures such as spending cuts, at least to some degree (Hall and O’Shea, 2013).

Hamilton, 2017 ). In effect, what is normalised here is that which Green (1974) refers to as ‘lemon socialism’: where the profits of financial elites are privatised yet the losses are borne by society. In other words, through selective reference to market forces, whilst omitting any reference to the failure of the market itself, the idea of capital flowing ‘upwards’ to the beneficiaries of financial markets is rendered uncontroversial, whilst re-investment in society is made to appear costly and wasteful. It is worth recalling that austerity, having been criticised on economic grounds (e.g. Holland and Portes, 2012; Kitson et al, 2011; Krugman, 2015), has been described as an ideologically driven ‘neoliberal’ response to the crisis (see Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012).

Whilst, as I note in the introduction, the term ‘neoliberalism’ is arguably somewhat vague (Hall, 2011; Weller and O’ Neill, 2016), the media discourse seen within the coverage here resonates with the form of ‘neoliberalism’ which Harvey (2007: 19) describes as a ‘class project’ aimed at restoring the dominance of financial elites *by any means*:

The evidence strongly suggests that the neoliberal turn is in some way and to some degree associated with a project to restore or reconstruct upper-class power. We can therefore examine the history of neoliberalism either as a utopian project providing a theoretical template for the reorganization of international capitalism or as a political project concerned both to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and the restoration of class power. [...] the last of these objectives has dominated. Neoliberalism has not proven good at revitalizing global capital accumulation but it has succeeded remarkably well in restoring class power. As a consequence, the theoretical utopianism of neoliberal argument has worked more as a system of justification and legitimation for whatever had to be done to restore class power.

For Harvey, neoliberalism functions as a self-perpetuating means of concentrating wealth and power in the hands of economic elites, permeating through institutions such as government and the media in the process<sup>16</sup>. From this perspective, the convergence of ‘official’ political narratives of the crisis and media accounts certainly raises critical questions regarding the nature and source of any ideological bias, and as such I attempt to address these questions in the concluding chapter(see p199).The importance of such a stance within the media coverage at this stage is that given the centrality of class, any construction within the discourse must be congruent, lest an inherent contradiction becomes apparent. In other words, it must be a construction which bridges the legitimacy gap between the claim that one needs to do *something* in response to the economic situation, and the idea that austerity is the *fair* thing to do.

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<sup>16</sup>It is worth noting at this point that many within the field of social class study have previously argued that the media displays a ‘neoliberal bias’ in its construction of class (see e.g. Bennett, 2013; Tyler, 2015).

In the analysis above, the focus has been upon how class is constructed *within the context* of the emergency budget and welfare reform coverage. For the final part of this chapter, it is worth focusing in more detail upon the two patterns that emerge from the discourse: ‘*Class as a political project*’ and ‘*Class as an ideal*’.

#### **4.4.1 Class as (part of) a Political Project**

The general pro-austerity sentiment within the coverage of the emergency budget and welfare reform is clear, with even the more left-leaning publications accepting (or at least failing to challenge) the idea of necessary spending cuts. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, to see class constructed in accordance with this political perspective. Class, somewhat ambiguous and difficult to define objectively, is open to being portrayed in ways that lend support to ideological arguments (Bourdieu, 1987). Therefore, whilst I refer to class *as* a political project, it would perhaps be more accurate to describe its construction here as *part of* a political project – or even as *justification of* a political project. A key feature here is the discursive boundary work (see Bourdieu, 1987) performed: the drawing of distinctions between ‘classes’ (real or imagined). According to Bourdieu (1987: 13), these ‘boundaries’ are, owing to their contested nature, like the edge of a ‘flame’, blurred and always moving in the context of social change, and it is largely through manipulation of these boundaries that classes are constructed.

The most obvious component of the boundary work performed here is that it is almost entirely based upon the notion of *moral* distinction. The backgrounding of economic factors serves here to make morality *what class is about*. In other words, the ‘lower classed others’ are constructed here as those who suffer a poverty of morals as opposed to a poverty of the material kind. This avoids confronting the ‘embarrassing’ concept that class becomes when one is forced to view it as unfair inequality (Sayer, 2002) and also avoids drawing critical attention to the social order that produces this inequality. Savage et al (2001: 880), analysing interview transcripts on the subject, note that people tend to be ‘defensive’ regarding class, preferring to view it as something which exists ‘out there’, as a concept removed from everyday life. The moralising rhetoric is thus very powerful in that it abstracts class as a collection of people who share an individualised moral tendency as opposed to a position within the social hierarchy. In effect, therefore, the focus upon morality represents as much of a *deconstruction* of class as it does a construction.

Applying this logic to the discourse here, it becomes clear that the broad, vague construction of the ‘moral in-group’, e.g. as ‘taxpayers’, ‘ordinary hardworking families’, the ‘squeezed middle’, avoids drawing any distinction between the majority of people, portraying them instead as ‘united’ in their possession of the correct values, their work ethic, and their aspiration. This holds true whether the coverage is discussing the working poor, high earners, or indeed the wealthy capitalist elite. This further demonstrates that the foregrounding of individualised moral aspects is accompanied by a backgrounding of economic aspects, especially the structural inequality which is central to social class (Tyler, 2015).

Perhaps most importantly, however, this allows for the *interests* of this group to be treated as if they were the same, so that when the discourse advocates on behalf of those *within* this group, the ‘moral majority’, it supposedly matters not whether they are members of the working poor, the wealthy elite, or anything in between, since such differences are obscured entirely. This is an important point when considered in terms of relative access to the public discourse. Theoretical perspectives on the source of structural bias in the media have highlighted the potential of social elites to influence the media agenda; either through direct ownership, or through professional links (see Hermann and McChesney, 1997)<sup>17</sup>. Clearly, those at the ‘top’ of this ‘group’ occupy a more powerful position in this regard, whilst those ‘lower down’ are rendered voiceless; their interests drowned out as they are absorbed into a supposedly classless and ‘united’ group.

On the other side of the supposed ‘moral divide’ is something akin to the ‘underclass’. Yet, reflecting the context of the time, it is an underclass marked by its *costly* moral deficiency. Furthermore, as demonstrated above, this ‘group’ is constructed in two distinct ways within the discourse. Firstly as the explicitly immoral: the ‘feckless’, the ‘scroungers’, those who *know full well* that their actions are both costly and immoral but simply *do not care*, preferring instead to continue their parasitic ‘lifestyle’, for which the rest of ‘us’ pay.

[Welfare reform] will spell an end to the scandal of the work-shy getting rich on taxpayers sweat for doing nothing.” *The Sun* (Emergency budget, 05/10/10: 8-9).

And secondly as those who are ‘encouraged’ into dependency by an overly lenient welfare state. This nonetheless involves an *implicit* moralisation, since the insinuation is that such people are inclined towards such behaviour; that they are of a type who is pre-disposed to

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<sup>17</sup>It is perhaps worth recalling here the authority given to ‘business leaders’ in the discourse considered earlier: “The cost of government borrowing fell as *business leaders* and the financial markets welcomed the 681billion-a-year cuts package” (see p77)

abandoning morality altogether and - in the absence of sufficient coercion - conforming to their natural tendency, one of unfettered self-interest regardless of the implications for society. This is especially clear when considered in light of the recurrent contrast made with the idealised low paid worker (see below).

In the post crisis context, therefore, the ‘lower class others’ are portrayed as being not only the deviant, but also those who lack the intelligence or integrity to act in accordance with the (constructed) moral standard of contributing more whilst simultaneously expecting (and accepting) less in return *unless made to do so*. Thus, taken together, the broad construction of the in-group, and the contrast with both the explicitly immoral who refuse to pull their weight, and those who *might* be encouraged into such immorality, allow the discourse to read as a ‘mass appeal’: a warning in the face of a ‘mass threat’ to our fundamental values, which will continue to grow lest ‘we’ take action to stop it. This fits very well with the ideological argument of austerity, since, from this perspective, redistribution and state spending can *only* ‘reward’ the deviant, or be ‘squandered’ upon those who are prone to dependency.

It is here that the relevance of the economic framing of an ‘unavoidable’ reaction to external forces’ becomes most apparent. The idea of ‘unavoidable scarcity’ makes ‘wasteful and unsustainable’ spending impossible to ignore. It forces us to face up to it, to tackle the problem supposedly caused by those on the wrong side of the ‘moral divide’. The placing of this divide, and the ‘classes’ that ‘result’, not only further the pro-austerity argument, but also serve to outflank criticisms regarding impacts. This is because those who seek to challenge the disproportionate impacts of austerity must effectively demonstrate why those who apparently fall short of the expected moral standard are deserving of any help at all.

Again, it is worth noting that despite the emphasis upon a ‘moral divide’ within the discourse, the idea of any such distinction is undermined by research focusing upon those who exist at the sharp end of the insecure labour market (Shildrick et al, 2010; MacDonald et al, 2014). Evidence from these studies suggests that these people often become trapped in cycles of low-paid work and unemployment, and thus effectively ‘move’ across the (constructed) ‘moral divide’ through circumstances entirely beyond their control. In effect therefore, these people arguably have more in common, in terms of their lived reality, with those whom they are directly contrasted with, and therefore, by extension, the highest stake within the austerity debate. Yet paradoxically, whilst the portrayal of this group is central to the way in which austerity is understood, and whilst they have the greatest stake in this process, they are also

the most powerless to challenge their portrayal within the discourse; since they lack what might be termed the *means to construct*. They lack any meaningful access to the public discourse. Similarly, they lack the wealth and connections necessary to complain loudly enough to be heard. And perhaps most importantly, being caught up in the necessity of making ends meet (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2012: 169), they lack the time to even try.

#### 4.4.2 Class as an Ideal

As noted above, previous work in the area of social class has pointed to a narrative of the ‘decline’ of the ‘respectable’ working class (e.g. Jones, 2012: 7, Lawler, 2005: 434). As demonstrated in the analysis, a similar narrative of decline runs through the coverage here. This is perhaps most evident in the quote from earlier: “The truth is that, as a country, *we have lost sight* of the importance of every citizen striving to contribute to society, however modestly, as opposed to making a claim upon it” (*The Daily Mail*, 28/01/12). A subtle, yet important nuance is evident within the present discourse, however, in that the ‘decline’ in question is not a decline of the working class per se, but rather a threat to the *values* of this group caused by a *decline in the willingness of society to impose them*. This subtle nuance serves to place the onus upon ‘us’ to act, and as such fits well with the pro-austerity stance. Framed against this decline, the low-paid worker, who (in contrast to the parasitic other) *already* knows and accepts their ‘duty’, is idealised. The figurised low-paid worker therefore becomes the moral ‘yardstick’ in that despite being the most economically proximate to the ‘other’, they nonetheless remain distinct by virtue of their moral integrity. In this sense the idealised low-paid worker comes to represent a moral standard against which all are measured.

Lawler (2014) and Weltman (2008) argue that narratives of decline often draw upon nostalgic, yet unrealistic, representations of the traditional working class. Within these nostalgic representations emphasis is placed upon self-sacrifice in the interest of society, and recognition of the ‘intrinsic reward’ of work. A pertinent example from the literature is the study conducted by Kitch (2007). Analysing the ‘media repair’ found in the coverage of the failed rescue of workers trapped following an explosion in the Sago mine (West Virginia), Kitch notes the idealised portrayal of the working class miners as mindful of their duty to society, and as accepting of the hard (and dangerous) work as part of this duty. Yet this portrayal was at odds with the account of the lone survivor, who stated that he only took the

job as he was desperate for money, and that he was never going underground again (Kitch, 2007: 123). Whilst it may seem somewhat hyperbolic to compare the current context with a fatal tragedy, the essential point remains valid in that it is a clear example of an idealised portrayal of working class identity, one which is at odds with the social reality, being employed to further an ideological argument. In the Sago case, Kitch (2007: 127) suggests that the portrayal of the workers as being accepting of their 'duty' to perform dangerous work was in part to detract from criticisms of the safety regulations in place.

Returning to the current analysis, the treatment of class as an 'ideal' is seemingly used in a similar way to the media repair noted by Kitch (2007). Whilst the previous pattern of class construction served to put class 'out there', as an abstract moral concept, the downplaying of economic difference, especially between the working poor and those receiving welfare, is also potentially problematic. The 'working poor' are useful in building up a contrast with the underclass figures of the 'workshy' and 'welfare scrounger', falling, as per the discourse, on the 'correct' side of the 'moral divide' and therefore highlighting an 'injustice', namely the fact that they are financially no better off. Yet the acknowledgement of a group who, despite possessing the 'correct values', and being in work, remain *financially* poor seriously undermines the notion of 'earned privilege' that is central to the obscuration of structural inequality. It also potentially raises critical questions about the rising level of low paying, low quality work (see Briken and Taylor, 2018; Heyes, 2013; Lavalette, 2017; Shildrick et al, 2010). The treatment of class as an 'ideal' militates against this by portraying such people as 'economic martyrs', as the embodiment of those who Lawler (2014: 712) suggests are 'poor but pure'. Thus the intrinsic reward for their values is emphasised, as in the example on p95 where 'self-reliance' is the 'reward' for 'determination', and their ability to stand on their own feet *in spite* of their struggle is cast as something akin to a badge of honour. This emphasis upon reward, even intrinsic, also keeps alive the *hope* of future material reward (see Friedli and Stearn, 2015: 43) for such individualised qualities as 'determination'; suggesting that those displaying such qualities *may* yet 'overcome the odds' of the structural inequality they face, and transcend their position within society.

To conclude this chapter, the coverage of the emergency budget and welfare reforms came at a time when many of the cuts and reforms were yet to be implemented, or their full effects yet to be felt (Stanley, 2014). The current analysis therefore gives an important insight into the theoretical and ideological arguments regarding austerity. Whilst the economic argument in favour of said measures has since been critically questioned, what the analysis here shows

is that the coverage at the time not only reproduced the elite narrative of a *moralised crisis of state spending*, but actively developed it. Just as Stanley (2014) argues that official, or elite narratives must resonate with the public mood, the media coverage appears to have been aiming to play an active role in ensuring such an alignment, and therefore an acceptance of the need for austerity. Furthermore, the ambiguous nature of social class (Bourdieu, 1987) appears to have been capitalised upon in the course of the coverage, in order to create a social ‘understanding’ of the concept which is congruent with an ideological argument in favour of austerity.

The recurrent emphasis upon an economic necessity dictated by ‘the market’ is peculiar from a critical perspective, given that the crisis itself resulted from a failure of the financial market itself which was then rescued at significant cost to the public (Lavalette, 2017). Yet in spite of this, the economic ‘necessity’ forms the ‘common-sense’ context in which class is constructed here. Rice and Bond (2013) note the concerted effort amongst the media to re-establish the (elite serving) economic status quo in the face of the uncertainty caused by the crisis. What can be seen when approaching the discourse from the perspective of social class is the recasting of the economic as a moral issue, with the effect that austerity becomes not *merely* necessary, but fair, and even *desirable*.

As much as the constructions of class seen within the coverage here are contradicted by evidence, they may still hold strong rhetorical appeal. In the context of difficult times, references to a moral distinction not only allow for a ‘justified’ anger at a ‘legitimate’ target but also mitigate against fears of *economic* insecurity (Tyler, 2015; Valentine and Harris, 2014). As Valentine and Harris, reflecting upon their study on class prejudice, note:

Some of those earning low incomes and living on council estates were keen to draw moral boundaries between themselves and their unemployed neighbours. These participants strongly dis-identified with those who do not work and were fearful of having the identity ‘Chav’ imposed upon them because of where they live and their proximity to those perceived to have moral and personal failings. For these working-class participants their own agency, values and way of life, predicated on self-discipline and hard-work, were constructed as a defence against the possibility they might slip into poverty and dependency. As such, their prejudices serve to distance them from demonised groups who might be a threat to their own identities and provide a sense of security that they will not end up in the same position. (Valentine and Harris, 2014: 88).

Whilst these ideas may therefore have gained traction within broader society, any ‘clash’ between the discourse and reality will eventually become apparent (Bourdieu, 1987; Stanley, 2016). In the following chapter I focus upon the coverage of two of the key austerity policies:



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the 'workfare' policies and the 'bedroom tax'. And in doing so, I focus upon the media discourse as austerity is put 'into action' and its impact begin to becomes clearer.

## 5. Social Class and ‘Austerity in Action’: A Discourse Analysis of Media Coverage of ‘Workfare’ and the ‘Bedroom Tax’

### 5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I demonstrated the ways in which the ambiguous nature of social class was exploited so as to ‘fit’ the concept into an ideological pro-austerity discourse. A recurrent feature of the discourse was the narrative of ‘necessity’, which in the absence of serious challenge, portrayed austerity as the *only logical response* to the economic downturn. Whilst this dominant narrative initially emphasised the *economic* necessity of austerity, discussion then turned to the *moral* necessity of tackling a growing epidemic of worklessness, fecklessness, and irresponsibility. Drawing upon previous discourses of the ‘underclass’ (see e.g. Romano, 2015; Skeggs, 2005; Tyler, 2008), this move from economic to moral necessity saw hardship and poverty - resulting in large part from market failure in the course of the economic crisis - recast as an economic threat resulting from a *poverty of morals*. Emphasis was placed upon a supposedly eroded work ethic, and an apparent decline – one worsened by the purported unwillingness of ‘us’, as a society, to tackle the ‘problem’. The structural (economic) inequality that is central to class (Tyler, 2015) was obscured completely, reduced instead to (many) individuals’ moral ‘failings’. Indeed, any serious discussion of economic inequality and its causes and effects was conspicuous only in its absence. Instead, a homogenous group of ‘ordinary hardworking people’ was contrasted on moral grounds with a parasitic group comprising the ‘scroungers’ and the welfare ‘dependents’. An idealised view of working class identity was nostalgically recalled, but only to the effect of explaining away inconsistencies, such people becoming ‘economic martyrs’, upholding the values of hard labour and self-sacrifice in the face of a wider moral decline.

The focus of this chapter is formed by two key policies within the coalition government’s austerity programme: ‘workfare’ and the ‘bedroom tax’. Together, these represent two key features of austerity: a move towards greater *conditionality* concerning welfare, and the reduction of welfare payments themselves - ostensibly to reduce public spending (Friedli and Stearn, 2015: 40; Stanley 2014: 903). Since the actual implementation of austerity measures follows on from the theoretical debates that made up the focus of the previous chapter, the discursive patterns identified within the theoretical debates form an important background to the coverage here. To make full sense of the present discourse, therefore, it must be

considered in light of this context (Meyer, 2001: 15). In particular, it is important to consider what is taken as ‘given’, or assumed to be ‘common knowledge’ by this stage when engaging with the features of the present coverage.

This chapter is set out similarly to chapter 4. First, I briefly describe the two topics, workfare and the bedroom tax. Following this, I present the findings of the initial thematic analysis, describing the key themes and the relationships between them, along with examples from the coverage. Following this, and again using the findings of the thematic analysis as a guide, I conduct a critical discourse analysis of selected relevant extracts in order to focus more closely upon the discourse. Finally, I interpret and discuss the findings.

### **5.1.1 Workfare**

Workfare under the coalition government was introduced as the ‘work programme’ in 2011 and ran until its discontinuation in 2015. It included several schemes, such as ‘mandatory work activity’ and the ‘community action programme’, all of which shared the characteristics of mandating the unemployed to work in return for welfare payments (Friedli and Stearn, 2015). The work program itself was outsourced to a series of private for-profit contractors, with the intention of creating a ‘competitive market’, whereby financial incentives would supposedly lead to greater efficiency in moving the ‘hard to help’ into stable (6 months continuous) employment (Jordan, 2017: 584).

The stated aim of the programme was to tackle a ‘supply-side’ problem of unemployment, one stemming from individual or cultural roots (MacLeavey, 2011: 362). In other words, the failure of the unemployed to find - or even to look for - work owing to a supposed lack of individual attributes such as discipline, motivation, and responsibility. Clearly, the idea of unemployment resulting from such failings draws upon the notion of e.g. the workshy, the welfare scrounger, and the skiver (Romano, 2015; Valentine and Harris, 2014).

Alongside the unpaid work aspect, ‘participants’ in the work programme were required to undertake additional activities, at the discretion of an assigned caseworker, aimed at ‘improving attitudes’ towards employment, and in particular their preparedness for the flexible (insecure) labour market (Friedli and Stearne, 2015; Jordan, 2017). Compliance with the programme was ensured through a series of increasingly punitive sanctions, ultimately

leading to the withdrawal of payments for up to three years (Briken and Taylor, 2018; Friedli and Stearn, 2015; MacLeavey, 2011).

In spite of the stated aims, MacLeavey (2011) argues that workfare instead simply served to stigmatise the unemployed by demanding greater conditionality at a time of job losses resulting in part from austerity itself. The stigmatisation that comes with an emphasis upon personal failure, alongside the ever-present threat of sanctions, often resulted in a negative impact on the mental health of those affected (Friedli and Stearn, 2015: 44-45). Friedli and Stearn (2015: 44) note that the punitive sanctions were often been meted out arbitrarily on the basis of subjective criteria, such as jobseekers displaying the ‘incorrect attitude’ or failing to display an ‘employability mindset’, resulting in those already living on the breadline being plunged even deeper into poverty. Reflecting upon the findings of several case studies, Friedli and Stearn (2015: 44) argue that:

Deficits in attitude and motivation can and do trigger sanctions. Psycho-coercion of this kind is directly contributing to the escalation of the number of sanctions being applied, forcing people off benefits and plunging growing numbers into poverty: eligibility for both out-of-work and in-work benefits is contingent not only on certain behaviours but also on possession of positive affect; conditionality is linked to the ‘employability’ mindset. For example, one of the criteria for being sent on Community Work Placements (unpaid work for 30 hours per week, for 26 weeks) is ‘lack of motivation’, although this is never defined.

The workfare programme, according to activist group Boycott Workfare<sup>18</sup>, proved to be largely ineffective. Indeed, it repeatedly failed to meet its targets for moving people from welfare into work. Although acknowledging debates regarding the statistical measurements, Jordan (2017: 585), citing the evidence from the Public and Commercial Services Union (2014), suggests that the work programme was successful in as few as 3% of cases. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that previous research has cast the narrative of a ‘supply-side problem’ of unemployment into serious doubt by demonstrating that even those trapped in cycles of low paid work and welfare reliance nonetheless place great value upon finding work (McDowall, 2011; Shildrick et al, 2010; Patrick, 2014). Indeed, as McDowall (2011) demonstrates, the value assigned by such people to paid work has, if anything, *increased* at the same time as genuine career opportunities have declined. In keeping with the arguments regarding the ideological nature of austerity (Farnsworth and Irving, 2018; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; O’Hara, 2015: 4-7), Friedli and Stearn (2015: 42) argue that the primary purpose of the work programme appears to be that of furthering a ‘neoliberal’ discourse in

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<sup>18</sup><http://www.boycottworkfare.org/workfare-eu>, Accessed: 02/07/2018.

regards to the issue of unemployment, one which reduces it to the individualised issue of one's mindset. Similarly, Daguerre and Etherington (2014: 47-48) suggest that:

Much of the philosophy underpinning the Conservative welfare to work programme represents a resurrection of the moral underclass discourse which portrays poverty and unemployment as being caused by individual behaviour such as alcohol and drug addiction, chaotic lifestyles, and lack of purpose. The structural causes of poverty such as lack of available jobs in the aftermath of the recession tend to be overlooked or marginalized, or, when they are identified as collective social issues, they are immediately attributed to the failure of the welfare state which has focused on income transfer rather than employment promotion.

Briken and Taylor (2018) argue that the intensified focus upon workfare in times of austerity has led to the state functioning as a facilitator of the market for low-paid insecure labour. In a similar vein, Friedli and Stearn (2015: 42), argue that:

Workfare furthers the separation of work and livelihood and normalises the idea that certain groups of people are not entitled to payment for their labour and that lengthy periods of unpaid labour (e.g. internships or 'volunteering') are a precondition for employment. In this way, it undermines the security, pay and conditions of all workers and non-workers.

The argument regarding such normalisation is especially pertinent given that insecure work has become increasingly common following the economic crisis (Heyes, 2013; Lavalette, 2017), especially as spending cuts have led to the loss of (relatively) secure public sector jobs (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; O' Hara, 2015: 3-4).

### **5.1.2 The Bedroom Tax**

The Under-Occupancy Penalty, or 'bedroom tax' as it is commonly known (Gibb, 2015: 149; Meers, 2014: 85), was a key policy within the wider welfare reforms of the coalition government. First proposed during the 2010 spending review, it was passed into law as part of the 2012 Welfare Reform Bill and introduced in April 2013 (Clarke et al, 2014 Cited in Gibb, 2015; Meers, 2014; Moffatt et al, 2015). The stated aim of the policy was to reduce the under-occupancy of social housing and thus reduce overcrowding elsewhere by encouraging under-occupiers to downsize (Gibb, 2015: 148). The policy applies to working-age social tenants, and those affected – an estimated 660,000 at the point of introduction - lose 14% of housing benefit payments for having one unoccupied bedroom, and 25% for two (Gibb, 2015: 148, 158). Two-thirds of that number have a disability (Moffatt et al, 2015: 197), and whilst an exception exists for rooms that accommodate overnight carers, there is no automatic

exemption for other reasons relating to disability. Tenants are expected to make up the shortfall in rent payments through their own finances, with the government of the time advising those unable to do so to: take in a lodger, gain employment, and for those already working, take on more hours (Moffatt et al, 2015: 197). According to Gibb (2015: 159), only 41% of tenants have been able to make up this shortfall.

The measure has proven to be one of the most controversial of all the reforms (Gibb, 2015: 148, Moffatt et al, 2015: 197), with the high point of the controversy coming in 2013, when the government became embroiled in an argument with a United Nations Special Rapporteur on housing, who criticised the policy on the grounds of its unfair impact upon the vulnerable (Gibb, 2015: 161). Arguments regarding the inherent unfairness of the policy have often centred on the lack of affordable smaller properties. This effectively puts tenants in a position where they are expected to ‘downsize’, but are in actual fact unable to do so. Indeed, Moffatt et al (2015: 198) note that the bedroom tax has had a disproportionate impact in areas that lack suitable smaller accommodation. In light of this, it may be understandable that the policy has been branded a de-facto tax by its critics. Discussing the term, Gibb (2015: 149) states:

The policy has a number of titles: spare-room subsidy, social sector size criteria, under-occupation charge and bedroom tax, to name but four. Just as the Government of the day never used the term poll tax, so the Coalition does not recognise the negative implication of the bedroom tax epithet. However, it is the widely used term and has rightly or wrongly become the generally recognised term. The idea stems from the argument stressed by Lord Best during the welfare reform bill’s passage through the Lords that, since most could not in practice down-size or move to escape the charge because of a lack of alternative and other inhibitors to moving, *it is a de facto compulsory levy*.

Owing to the inability of affected tenants to downsize, and their requirement to make up the shortfall in housing benefit, the bedroom tax has put pressure upon the already limited budgets of those in receipt of housing benefit. This has led to severe hardship for many as they struggle to pay for basic essentials such as utilities and, in some cases, even food (Moffatt et al, 2015). Additionally, after studying interview data with affected tenants, Moffatt et al (2015) have concluded that the policy has had the effect of causing severe anxiety, impacting upon mental health and - where people *have* moved to avoid the penalty - breaking up essential support networks at the very time when these networks are needed the most.

Again, the policy has been shown to be difficult to justify in economic terms. As Gibb (2015) notes, it has often had the effect of increasing housing benefit payouts where social tenants

have simply moved to the private sector (where the policy does not apply). Indeed there is an inherent paradox in that the ‘success’ of the policy - in terms of under-occupying tenants downsizing - is likely to cost more rather than save money. This means the greatest potential savings in housing benefit rely upon the policy failing by its own criteria. In addition, local councils have often been forced to set up payment schemes to offset the effects, further negating any savings (Gibbons et al, 2018). This has led Gibb (2015: 157) to argue that the policy is evidence of “a government *ideologically* committed to radical cutbacks and restructuring of welfare benefits in the midst of a ‘great recession’” (emphasis added).

### 5.3 Themes

The themes described below feature within the media coverage of workfare and the bedroom tax. Given that, as discussed above, the discourse established at the ‘theoretical’ stage (Stanley, 2014) of the coverage forms a contextual background to the present coverage, it is not surprising that the themes that emerge are indeed very similar to those seen in the previous chapter. What appears to be happening here is something of a continuation of the discourse, in very similar terms, as the austerity measures are actually enacted. Yet, as I discuss below, there are some key changes at this point. Most notably, and in contrast to the coverage of the previous topics, discourse that is more critical of austerity begins to emerge, somewhat disrupting the hegemonic status of the pro-austerity narrative.

#### 5.3.1 Fairness

As in the previous chapter, the theme of fairness runs strongly throughout the present coverage, drawing largely upon the constructed contrast between a moralised underclass and the ‘rest of us’ described in the previous chapter. Within the coverage of the ‘workfare’ policies, a narrative of restoring fairness to the ‘hardworking’ people predominates, as in the following extract:

...as for "workfare" for the long-term unemployed - polling shows that one's a "massive winner." "Something for nothing" has to end. Benefits aren't free - hard-working people pay for them. The recipients should work to earn them. You can pick up litter in parks and by roads. You can do computer work or stack shelves. It's not meant to be a comfortable life. Workfare gives both skills for future employment and returns the taxpayer some value now. *The Sun* (workfare, 06/10/13: 27).

The idea that workfare, and increased conditionality generally, will restore 'fairness' is dependent upon a portrayal of the current situation as *unfair*, as one which benefits a group who are set apart by virtue of their lacking the values and attitudes that 'we' possess. A group who will not 'pull their weight', preferring instead to exploit 'us'. Despite the context of job losses, drawing distinction on the grounds of a supposedly lacking work ethic has the effect of creating a 'legitimate' target of justified anger:

The anger and hostility that the working population feels towards those who are apparently happy to be supported by the rest of us is an untapped electoral resource which has now been legitimised by economic crisis. *The Telegraph* (workfare, 25/01/14: 26).

In the case of the bedroom tax coverage, fairness to those in over-crowded accommodation is referenced at times, yet far more often the issue is framed in terms of fairness to the (vague) 'taxpayer':

The Government, which estimates that the average affected household will lose £14 a week, says the policy will save taxpayers £500million a year. It will also encourage people to move and free up larger properties, helping families currently crammed into homes that are too small. *The Daily Mail* (bedroom tax, 13/11/13).

But Mr Duncan Smith, writing on the Conservative Home website, said: 'We've ended the thoroughly unfair subsidy that saw the taxpayer forking out for almost one million spare bedrooms in the social rented sector.' *The Daily Mail* (bedroom tax, 13/11/13).

Again, the issue is moralised in that the taxpayer is contrasted with those who 'expect' to live at others' expense, and who make the 'lifestyle choice' to do so:

There's a good deal of misinterpretation on the spare-room subsidy or 'bedroom tax'. The reality is that no one is called upon to pay the tax, except, perhaps, the poor old taxpayer. What the tax really means is that tenants can no longer expect to enjoy unused space at others' expense. *The Express* (bedroom tax, 11/06/15)<sup>19</sup>

Britain may be fed up with low pay and high prices. But we also generally support Government efforts to cut the benefits bill and return the system to its original purpose as a fallback in hard times instead of a lifestyle choice. *The Sun* (bedroom tax, 09/11/13: 6).

As I state above, the main difference compared with previous topics is the emergence of coverage that is more critical of austerity, and this becomes evident within the theme of

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<sup>19</sup> Although a side point here, a temporal aspect is again evident in the term 'poor *old* taxpayer'. This possibly hints at a younger generation who do not possess a work ethic comparable to 'older' generations, preferring instead to live comfortably (in 'big houses') at others expense.



fairness. While the dominant narrative characterising the coverage of the emergency budget and welfare reform was marked by an absence of genuine challenges, the coverage now becomes less unanimous. The extracts above show arguments advocating the inherent fairness of the austerity policies in a way that flows almost seamlessly from the dominant narrative seen previously, yet in other publications the first genuine challenges to this narrative begin to appear.

The following example shows an emphasis on the *unfairness* of the workfare policies. Given the interdependent nature of narratives of fairness and constructions of class seen up until this point, it is unsurprising to see class constructed in a way that is fundamentally different:

Unemployed electronics specialist, John McArthur, 59, says he is living off 16p tins of spaghetti and has been without heating, after being sanctioned by the jobcentre when he refused to work without pay for Scottish social enterprise, LAMH Recycle in Motherwell. While he says he was happy to work for LAMH under the now-defunct future jobs fund for the minimum wage between late 2010 and 2011, he now refuses on principle to do the same job without any pay. *The Guardian* (Workfare, 03/11/14: 10).

This particular extract is considered in more detail below, yet it is worth briefly noting a couple of points here. The description of the subject as an ‘electronics specialist’ who is ‘happy to work’ (even ‘for the minimum wage’) can be interpreted as a direct challenge to the idea of a ‘moral divide’ between those who are employed and those who are not. The use of the term ‘specialist’, immediately following the description of the subject as unemployed, suggests that, notwithstanding *current* circumstances, the subject is someone with a history of significant commitment to their work (see Barley et al, 2016).

The reframing of workfare as a ‘working conditions’ issue is common within the more critical coverage. This reframing forms a key challenge to the dominant moralising discourse in that it brings the low-paid ‘worker’ into the scope of those affected. The unfairness is thus implied through the emphasis on the potential impact on the working poor- a group lauded for their virtues within the dominant discourse:

Private firms have been given lucrative contracts to force people into unpaid work that denies others full-time work for a fair wage. And employers have taken advantage of this system, using anti-union laws to get away with it. Labour must protect the rights of workers and the unemployed and fight for a living wage. *The Mirror* (workfare, 18/02/13: 36).

The contested nature of the coverage of the ‘bedroom tax’ is more obvious than it is in the case of ‘workfare’, where the ‘alternative’ or dissenting discourse is largely confined to the

more left-leaning publications (namely *The Guardian* and *The Mirror*). Within the bedroom tax coverage, there appears to be little such consistency. In other words, this ‘alternative’ discourse, whilst not sufficient to challenge the dominant status of the pro-austerity discourse, nevertheless appears sporadically across most of the publications. Within this alternative discourse the inherent *unfairness* of the bedroom tax is emphasised, often with reference to the impact on those who are facing financial hardship through reasons beyond their control. Note again the grouping together of the welfare recipient and the low paid worker:

Oh well, an icy fiscal wind might get these folk off the sofa, you might think. Except half of "bedroom tax" cases are people who are employed, but in low-paid or in zero-hours-contract Jobs that don't cover hefty housing costs. Even if those living in under-occupied properties wanted to move out, one and two-bed council flats are rare. This seems the ultimate Kafka-esque injustice: being penalised for not doing the impossible. *The Times* (bedroom tax, 14/09/13: 23).

### 5.3.2 A ‘Crackdown’ on Welfare

Across both topics, there is occasional reference to the ‘benefits bill’, and the potential for economic savings, which appear to build upon the, by now established, idea of economic necessity:

Ministers say the "under occupancy penalty" is intended to ensure that the best use is made of social housing and reduce the housing benefit bill, currently more than £20billion a year. *The Telegraph* (bedroom tax, 16/10/13: 18).

Since, as I demonstrate in the previous chapter, the ‘necessity’ of spending cuts formed a dominant (and almost entirely unchallenged) contextual background against which the discourse was shaped, such references to the welfare ‘bill’ at this stage would appear to be aimed at an audience which is *expected* to recognise the ‘unsustainable cost’. Such references therefore function as the mere ‘tip of the iceberg’ (Cameron, 2001: 111), drawing upon assumed knowledge and shared understanding as a ‘foundation’ for further argument. Indeed the degree to which the earlier discourse frames the current discourse is evident in the two sub-themes that emerge here; those of ‘welfare scroungers’, and ‘welfare as an incentive’, both of which clearly follow on from the ‘theoretical’ discourse established during the coverage of the emergency budget and welfare reform.

Drawing on the unsustainable cost narrative, the figurised welfare scrounger again becomes a key focus of the discourse. The context of economic crisis therefore becomes an ‘opportunity’ to address an injustice through ‘tough but fair’ policies:

Tory chairman Grant Shapps insisted the move is "common sense" and will encourage people to stop sponging off the state. *The Daily Star* (bedroom Tax, 01/04/13: 2).

Once again, the emphasis upon moral distinction is clearly evident, as in the following example where the targets of austerity are those on the wrong side of the ‘moral divide’; those who make ‘feckless lifestyle choices’:

"Earn or learn" - why should feckless, healthy young people be in housing benefit or get payments? They can get a job or they can train. Those of us who studied hard and then took any job we could find can't believe the desire to leave school and go straight on the dole. *The Sun* (workfare, 06/10/13: 27).

As in the previous chapter, the welfare state is portrayed as that which encourages such moral failings, thereby undermining and threatening the national work ethic. The workfare measures, in particular, are thus cast as a practical means to ending welfare ‘dependency’:

Being expected to work in return for payment is not demeaning. It is what the vast majority of us have to do every day. Work gives shape and meaning to our lives, however much we might gripe about it on occasions. Far more heartless is how the unemployed have been treated for decades: doled out weekly payments with minimal conditions attached. For too many people the result is that they have been allowed to settle into a life of welfare dependency, with no experience of work even to help them find employment. *The Express* (workfare, 01/10/13: 14).

Such discourse is not limited to the workfare coverage however. In the following example, taken from the coverage of the bedroom tax, the notion of redistribution *generally* is cast as a ‘perverse incentive’:

...there is another side to the welfare state, one that continues to provide perverse incentives towards fecklessness and idleness on an epic scale. *The Express* (bedroom tax, 02/04/15: 12).

Whilst the explicit moralisation of the ‘target’ of the austerity policies *and* the idea of welfare encouraging immoral choices are both clearly evident within the coverage, it should be noted that there is again significant interplay between these ideas. In light of the fact that the idealised low-paid worker does not, in spite of their economic situation, succumb to the welfare incentive, the discourse *can only* refer to the encouragement of supposedly *pre-existing tendencies* of, for example, ‘fecklessness and idleness’. The discourse here is thus

again suggestive of a particular ‘type’ of person who, given the chance, will readily choose an exploitative lifestyle, whether knowingly and cynically, or simply through not knowing any better.

### 5.3.3 An Attack on the Poor

This theme essentially mirrors the previous theme of a ‘crackdown on welfare’, and demonstrates the breaking of the media consensus that occurs at this stage. Whereas the discourse in the previous theme clearly follows the ‘common-sense’ narratives established in the earlier coverage, the emergence of this theme demonstrates how the coverage becomes less unanimous across these topics.

Within the more critical coverage of the workfare policies, the issue is often reframed as one of workers’ rights. Such discourse is, of course, inherently ‘classed’ in nature, and presents the issue as an attack upon the opportunity of the low paid *in general*, i.e. as an issue affecting not only those forced onto workfare programmes but also those losing out to what are effectively conscripted workers:

...what incentive is there for employers to take on young adults if the Government is sending them compulsory free labour? *The Mirror* (Workfare, 31/08/12: 31).

The competing ‘alternative’ discourse therefore challenges the prevalent narrative of a moralised ‘crackdown’ on welfare scroungers by suggesting that far from restoring fairness to working people, the workfare programme is a general affront to the concept of the minimum wage, and therefore the very idea of ‘making work pay’. A ‘slave labour’ narrative is a common feature of the discourse in this respect:

It was economist William Beveridge, founder of the welfare state, who named “idleness” as one of the great evils in society. He understood better than anyone the importance of work to someone’s self-respect. But Beveridge would never have sanctioned a scheme that stigmatised the unemployed by turning them into the equivalent of a prison chain gang. *The Mirror* (workfare, 09/11/11: 8).

In presenting workfare as a ‘working conditions’ issue, it becomes an issue affecting *both* the (currently) unemployed and the working poor; with both being portrayed as victims of an unjust policy. Note the way in which the term ‘idleness’ is marked here as distinct by the use of speech marks. Billig (1991: 143) suggests that discursive acts can often be understood in terms of the viewpoint they oppose. In this respect, the use of speech marks seems to hint at

the frequent references to idleness seen within the pro-austerity discourse, and suggests that the discourse seen here is largely aimed at *countering* the dominant narrative.

Whilst the critical reporting of workfare is largely limited to the left-leaning publications: *The Guardian* and *The Mirror*, the coverage of the bedroom tax is much less consistent. Indeed no clear pattern emerges here: critical coverage appearing across most publications - albeit as a 'dissenting' discourse - and highlights the unfair impact of the policy. This may reflect the fact that the policy is difficult to justify logically, given the inability of many people to downsize (Moffatt et al, 2015), something which is acknowledged within the coverage itself:

How can you fine people for staying in a big flat they don't need when there are no small flats for them to go to? A lot of those people have been put in large flats that nobody else wants, just so the buildings are not left unoccupied. Now the Government is fining them for a decision they didn't make and can't change. It's not only barbaric and vicious, it's nuts. *The Sun* (bedroom Tax) 21/07/14: 8).

The inconsistent coverage may reflect a genuine breaking of the media consensus, and a willingness to reflect upon the true impact of the policy as it became clearer:

Disabled dad's suicide after benefits axed; Behind with his rent, hit by the bedroom tax and hounded for cash. *The Sun* (bedroom tax, 27/12/13: 13).

Alternatively, it may be that the more critical coverage is simply an acknowledgement of a wider public backlash against the policy, given that much of the coverage that is critical of the bedroom tax refers to its unpopularity both from the general public and prominent figures within society:

The 'bedroom tax' proved particularly unpopular, with protests staged against it up and down the UK last year. The reforms have continued to attract criticism. Last week David Cameron came under renewed attack from religious leaders as 26 Church of England bishops condemned benefits cuts. The bishops claimed there is a 'national crisis' that is causing malnutrition and poverty that they blamed on 'delays' and 'punitive sanctions' against benefits claimants. *The MailOnline* (bedroom tax, 22/02/14: 6).

### **5.3.4 'Ordinary Hardworking People'**

The theme of the 'ordinary hardworking people' continues within the coverage of both of the current topics. In keeping with the breaking media consensus within these topics, the issue of *who* constitutes the 'ordinary hardworking people' is more contested here. On the one hand,

the now familiar pattern of describing this group as broadly as possible is once again evident, as in the example from above:

Being expected to work in return for payment is not demeaning. It is what the vast majority of us have to do every day. *The Express* (workfare, 01/10/13: 14).

The thinly veiled allusion to a ‘sense of entitlement’ on the part of those who are not like ‘the vast majority of us’ shows the pattern of drawing a distinction solely on moral terms continued here – a distinction based upon the possession of the correct attitudes, values, and work ethic *in contrast to* this apparent sense of entitlement:

The reaction to the [workfare] scheme shows a clear divide in Britain. On one side are the majority who often work long hours for little reward, pay taxes, try to save and look after their families. They believe you shouldn’t get something for nothing. And if they are unemployed they do everything to get a job. On the other side are those who think that a life on benefits is a lifestyle choice we are all entitled to make and that the rest of us have a moral duty to finance that choice. *The Express* (workfare, 22/02/12: 12).

Little doubt is left here that the ‘boundary’ of this ‘respectable’ group lies in the *moral*, not the *economic*: for instance, ‘On one side are the majority who often work long hours for little reward’. This again demonstrates how the emphasis upon moral distinction is sharpest precisely where economic proximity is greatest. The downplaying of difference amongst the ‘majority’ on the correct side of the ‘moral divide’ is clear - since *all* are implied to gain ‘little reward’ for their efforts. They are thus united precisely by the fact that they strive to make these efforts nonetheless.

As a side note, one thing that is clear in this extract is that it is public opinion that is contested here. Note that whilst an implicit injustice is referenced, the ‘problem’ here is ‘those *who think* that a life on benefits is a lifestyle choice we are all entitled to make’. This is subtle yet relevant: the fact that reference is made to those who would allow such ‘choices’ - rather than those who would supposedly make them - suggests that the discourse here is likely aimed at countering emerging critical perspectives.

The idea of the ‘ordinary’ hardworking people also features within the alternative discourse that forms within the more critical coverage. Yet within this discourse the emphasis is placed not on morality, but rather upon the struggle such people face, and the ways in which the austerity policies are worsening this struggle:

Councils helped themselves to half-a-million hours of unpaid labour in the same period, as did scores of household-name companies. Not only do such "placements" do little to help the unemployed into work, they are clearly replacing and undercutting paid employees. *The Guardian* (workfare, 19/11/14).

Notably, within some of the more critical coverage, the 'moral contrast' between 'ordinary' people and the 'underclass', is replaced by similar contrasts with 'out of touch', and entitled social elites (such as the politicians and business leaders in the following example), hinting at unfair class advantage. Note the way in which moralised discourse is further countered here, with 'misfortune' (i.e. circumstance as opposed to moral failings or *choice*) leading people to 'the dole queue':

A decent workfare programme would give the jobless the skills, experience and training they need to find proper employment. And it would pay them the going wage. This is very different to using the unemployed as slave labour to plug the services left bare by the Government's cuts. David Cameron [then Prime Minister] would not do his job for £67.50 a week, nor would Barclay's chief executive Bob Diamond. Why should anyone else, just because they have the misfortune to be part of the growing number in the dole queue since the general election? *The Mirror* (workfare, 12/03/12: 8).

Clearly then, on a general level, two things are occurring within the coverage here. Firstly, there is a continuation of the dominant discourse that was established within the coverage of the emergency budget and welfare reform. Accordingly, the narratives established there now form a contextual background to the coverage of the austerity policies as they are enacted. Secondly, there is the emergence of coverage which is more critical in nature, and which leads to the establishment of an 'alternative' discourse. A breaking of consensus or discursive 'split' can therefore be seen within the coverage of these topics. This is in contrast to the discourse examined in the previous chapter, which presented as much more coherent, with the absence of genuine challenges leading to the dominant narrative's being presented as if it were common-sense. It is worth noting that in the case of the 'workfare' coverage, the alternative discourse is largely limited to articles from *The Mirror* and *The Guardian*, both traditionally considered to be left-leaning in their political stance. This may explain the fact that coverage critical of the workfare measures tends to reframe the issue as being one of working conditions and workers' rights. Within the coverage of the 'bedroom tax', the coverage is less coherent still, with critical coverage appearing across a range of publications. This may reflect the controversial nature of the policy (Gibb, 2015: 148, Moffatt et al, 2015: 197).

In the following section, I analyse the discourse whilst keeping in mind the fact that two distinct (and competing) discourses are evident across both topics. Given the importance of class constructions at the theoretical stage, especially in supporting assertions of ‘fairness’ (see previous chapter), the key objective here is to investigate how such constructions feature, as the dominant theoretical narrative is applied to coverage of austerity policies ‘in action’, and how these constructions are challenged within the more critical coverage. In order to do this, the following analysis is broken down into three sub-sections. In the first and second of these sub-sections, I focus upon the dominant pro-austerity discourse within the workfare coverage and bedroom tax coverage respectively. In the third sub-section I focus upon the more critical coverage, its key features, and how these relate to - and challenge - the dominant discourse.

## **5.4 Discourse Analysis**

### **5.4.1 “Something for Nothing Has to End”: From Theory to Policy**

The following example, taken from the workfare coverage, demonstrates the continuation of the dominant pro-austerity discourse. By focusing upon a larger extract here (from which some of the extracts above are taken), it is again possible to see how the themes come together within the coverage.

You could almost see the ghost of [former Prime Minister, Margaret] Thatcher nodding in satisfaction. Finally, Cameron got tough on welfare - a policy the silent majority of Britons have been demanding for decades.

"Earn or learn" - why should feckless, healthy young people be in housing benefit or get payments? They can get a job or they can train. Those of us who studied hard and then took any job we could find can't believe the desire to leave school and go straight on the dole.

As for "workfare" for the long-term unemployed - polling shows that one's a massive winner. "Something for nothing" has to end. Benefits aren't free - hard-working people pay for them. The recipients should work to earn them. You can pick up litter in parks and by roads. You can do computer work or stack shelves. It's not meant to be a comfortable life.

Workfare gives both skills for future employment and returns the taxpayer some value now. As MP for the low-wage town of Corby, I was forever hearing the bitter resentment from hard-working constituents seeing others on benefits getting better houses than they



could afford and sitting at home all day. I sympathised. Both Workfare and "earn or learn" will be massive vote-winners for Mr Cameron. *The Sun* (workfare, 06/10/13: 27).<sup>20</sup>

Again, an important consideration when analysing discourse is the wider context in which it features (Meyer, 2001: 15). The discourse established within the previous coverage - of the emergency budget and welfare reform - is therefore relevant in making sense of this extract. Within that coverage, the idea of 'necessary' austerity was established. Furthermore, drawing upon constructed 'understandings' of class, this 'necessity' was portrayed as not merely being an economic necessity, but rather a *moral* necessity. In light of this, the opening statement of the extract communicates much more than is immediately apparent, since it draws upon the common-sense narratives established previously, and therefore upon assumed knowledge (Cameron, 2001: 111).

Finally, [David] Cameron got tough on welfare - a policy the silent majority of Britons have been demanding for decades.

The use of the term 'finally' suggests that the reader is expected to be familiar with the narrative of a moral decline - one arising largely from society's failure to impose the correct values (see previous chapter, p92) - and will therefore recognise that 'getting tough' on welfare is something that is long overdue. The phrase 'get tough' is itself revealing of a similar intertextuality. 'Getting *tough*' implies a strong and determined<sup>21</sup> response to some problem, as in 'getting tough on crime' (see Reiner, 2008: 123). The idea of 'getting tough' is also often used to imply fairness, e.g. 'tough *but fair*'.

The author attempts to mask personal opinion, and to build consensus further here by attributing the demand to 'get tough' to the majority of the population, or to 'speak for' the people (see Bourdieu, 1987: 14-15). Despite it being difficult to imagine quite how a '*silent* majority' can demand anything, this description is itself noteworthy in that it not only serves to build consensus, but can also be interpreted as an attempt to undermine alternative discourses. This 'silent majority' can be contrasted here with its implied opposite, a 'vocal' or 'loud' 'minority'. The statement thus reads as the 'reasonable' and 'accepted' view, in contrast to alternative views, which, being supposedly held by only a minority, are somewhat 'far out', removed from what is accepted or indeed *acceptable*, and thus 'shouted' out for

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<sup>20</sup> To give some contextual background here, the author of this article is Louise Mensch, who was a Conservative MP for Corby between 2010 and 2012.

<sup>21</sup> According to the Cambridge Dictionary one definition of 'tough' is 'strong and determined'.

precisely this reason. This point is particularly relevant given the breaking media consensus seen within the coverage at this stage. Indeed, similar patterns are common across both topics here and perhaps suggest an awareness of the potential backlash, as the impact of such policies begins to be felt.

As the article progresses, implicit classifications are employed in such a way as to further emphasise the fairness of this ‘tough’ approach:

"Earn or learn" - why should feckless, healthy young people be in housing benefit or get payments? They can get a job or they can train. Those of us who studied hard and then took any job we could find can't believe the desire to leave school and go straight on the dole.

Following directly on from the assertion that the views of the ‘majority’ are represented here, the rhetorical question ‘why should feckless, healthy young people be in housing benefit or get payments?’ draws a clear divide between this ‘majority’ and the ‘feckless’. The existence of this feckless group is presented as a given fact, possibly in the assumption that the reader will uncritically recognise the stereotype (see Jensen 2014; Tyler and Jensen 2015). Yet what is worth noting here is that the author further adds to the construction of this stereotype in referring to ‘feckless, *healthy young* people’ (emphasis added). By making a subtle ‘concession’, the ‘targeting’ of this group is again made to seem reasonable and measured. After all, the ‘unhealthy’ and ‘old’ are removed from the scope of the attack. Here it appears that the author is aware that an impact upon those who cannot reasonably be said to deserve it might undermine the argument being made, so moves to pre-emptively counter any such objection (see Allen, 1991)<sup>22</sup>. The reference to ‘feckless, healthy young people’, however, only serves to *further* moralise the issue of unemployment, since it suggests that in the case of the healthy and young there can be *no other* explanation for their situation than their own moral deficiencies and poor choices - their ‘*desire* to leave school and go straight on the dole’ (emphasis added). Such discourse clearly resonates with the idea of a ‘supply-side problem’ within the labour market, one supposedly stemming from individual and cultural roots (MacLeavey, 2011: 362), and therefore obscures the difficulty faced by young people, especially in post-industrial areas, in finding secure employment upon leaving education (McDowall, 2011).

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<sup>22</sup> What is presented here is something resembling a *two-sided argument with refutation* (Allen, 1991), whereby a counter argument is acknowledged and pre-emptively refuted in order to strengthen the point being made - although here this is achieved through implicit suggestion rather than being explicitly argued.

The reference to the ‘ordinary’ members of society, those on the ‘correct side’ of this supposed divide is clear: ‘Those of *us* who studied hard and then took any job we could find’. Once again, the description here avoids drawing distinction on anything but moral grounds; after all everyone ‘studies’ to some extent, and ‘any job ‘we’ could find’ does little to clear up the vagueness. Yet it is the implication of what *unites* these people that is most important here; the selfless sense of duty (Kitch, 2007). They are the idealised moral yardstick, in that they recognise not only their duty to ‘strive’ (see Valentine and Harris, 2014), but also the need to be content with ‘any job they can find’ - in stark contrast to the ‘self entitled’ welfare claimant, they ‘know their place’. Their struggle is thus normalised, making the ‘comfortable life’ of the feckless seem all the more unfair:

As for "workfare" for the long-term unemployed - polling shows that one's a "massive winner. "Something for nothing" has to end. Benefits aren't free - hard-working people pay for them. The recipients should work to earn them. You can pick up litter in parks and by roads. You can do computer work or stack shelves. It's not meant to be a comfortable life.

Clearly the contrast between ‘hard work’ and the supposedly ‘comfortable life’ on benefits is used here to both further the sense of injustice, and to deny the genuine poverty felt by many around this time (see e.g. Blane and Watt, 2012; Cooper et al, 2014; Dorling, 2013; Dowler, 2014), instead treating the issue as one of fairness between the two constructed groups; ‘Benefits aren't free - *hard-working people* pay for them. The *recipients* should work to earn them’.

From a critical perspective, the very idea of a clear cut distinction between the employed and unemployed runs counter to the social realities of the precarious labour market (Shildrick et al, 2010). Furthermore, whilst the unemployed could *theoretically* ‘pick up litter in parks and by roads’ or ‘do computer work or stack shelves’, the result of job losses following the economic crisis (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; O’Hara, 2015: 3-4) means that, logically, *less* of them could do this as *paid* employment. Indeed, if socially useful (paid) jobs were to be created by the state, as is implied with the reference to ‘picking up litter’, this would require an *increase* in spending - something which is obviously inconsistent with austerity. As it stands therefore, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that the argument here is essentially one of drawing an artificial ‘divide’ straight down the middle of what is essentially *the* most vulnerable group of people within society - those whose existence is one of almost permanent insecurity (Shildrick et al, 2010) - in order to evoke sentiments of *relational* fairness. In other words, whilst the normalisation of unpaid work is obviously not in the interests of such

people, it is 'justified' here by reference to restoring fairness; not only by supposedly decreasing the burden on the vague 'taxpayer', but also by making the 'others' pay for their moral shortcomings:

Workfare gives both skills for future employment and returns the taxpayer some value now. As MP for the low-wage town of Corby, I was forever hearing the bitter resentment from hard-working constituents seeing others on benefits getting better houses than they could afford and sitting at home all day. I sympathised. Both Workfare and "earn or learn" will be massive vote-winners for Mr Cameron

In this final part, the representative anecdote - 'As MP for the low-wage town of Corby, I was forever hearing the bitter resentment from hard-working constituents' - is used to give credibility to the report, to build 'legitimate authority through identification' (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013: 167-168). With 'I sympathised', an 'alignment' is emphasised between 'real' people and the author (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013: 167-168), making them appear 'in-touch' when discussing a potentially controversial subject. The moral contrast is further built upon here to evoke (and legitimise) the same narrative of 'justified anger' seen in the previous chapter (see p80) at 'others on benefits getting better houses than they could afford and sitting at home all day'.

Yet as much as the workfare policies are cast here as a means for the low-paid to meter out some justice via the ballot box, they are at the same time portrayed as a win-win, giving the unemployed not just a metaphorical kicking, but also 'rewarding' them with 'skills for future employment'. Such skills are of little use however where the employment to be gained does little to alleviate the poverty these people face, being, as it is, increasingly low paid and insecure (Briken and Taylor, 2018; Davies, 2015; Heyes, 2013; Shildrick et al, 2010). Logically, this is something workfare is unlikely to resolve. However, the broad, presumably 'classless' group which it supposedly aims to include them in, through non-financial 'help', does at least keep alive the hope of upward mobility through 'hard work', 'discipline', 'motivation', and other such attributes. But in the wake of the crisis, and particularly as austerity measures make themselves felt, such discourse can begin to ring empty, and it is perhaps an acknowledgement of such that the idea of work being a reward *in itself* is frequently worked into the discourse.

Recalling the idealisation of working class identity on this point (see discussion in previous chapter, p102), it is worth returning to the example from earlier:

Being expected to work in return for payment is not demeaning. It is what the vast majority of us have to do every day. Work gives shape and meaning to our lives, however much we might gripe about it on occasions. Far more heartless is how the unemployed have been treated for decades: doled out weekly payments with minimal conditions attached. For too many people the result is that they have been allowed to settle into a life of welfare dependency, with no experience of work even to help them find employment. *The Express* (workfare, 01/10/13: 14).

Without retreading old ground too much, the recurrent nature of the ‘inclusive’ discourse is clearly evident in the phrase ‘It is what *the vast majority of us* have to do every day’ (emphasis added), which pitches the description directly at the reader and all whose lives are given ‘shape and meaning’ through work. Whilst the implication of such a broad construction is discussed above, it is the emphasis upon *identity through work* that is particularly relevant here, since this relates directly to the pattern of treating class as an *ideal* seen in the previous chapter. Here the reward for work is portrayed as being *intrinsic* as opposed to ‘merely’ financial. What is noteworthy here is the construction of a group who are not inclined to appreciate this intrinsic reward, a group who, by their very nature, are liable to slip into something worse than material poverty - a *shapeless and meaningless* existence - when left to their own devices. Thus, by emphasising the importance of work to (respectable working class) identity, as well as arguing that it has an *intrinsic* reward, the workfare policies can further be justified and legitimised as a form of ‘help’ - at precisely a time when genuine career opportunities have diminished (Heyes, 2013; Lavalette, 2017; Nunn, 2012).

The centrality of class to the discourse is clear from this extract. Whilst the workfare measures are, as discussed above, often cast as a means of punishing the explicitly immoral (and costly) ‘scrounger’, here the emphasis is upon ‘helping’ those who are supposedly being failed by society. In this way, those who might be seen as the ‘deserving’ poor are recast as simply the *less culpable*, as those who merely fail to appreciate, without active ‘intervention’, the inherent reward of work, which ‘we’ already understand. The construction of class is therefore essential in portraying a move towards a more punitive welfare state, and a ‘slide’ towards the normalisation of increasingly exploitative working arrangements (Briken and Taylor, 2018), as if these things were *in the best interests* of those directly affected.

The blurring of the line between ‘punishing’ and ‘helping’ perhaps reflects the increasing difficulty of ‘justifying’ a narrative of punishing the morally deficient as the impacts of austerity came to be felt, and as the lived experience of a growing number of people increasingly came into conflict with the earlier theoretic justifications of austerity. In light of

this, it is relevant to note the increased emphasis within these topics on ‘helping’, or as in the following example, ‘saving’ and ‘rescuing’ people. Note the level of passivisation; such people cannot, it is suggested, help but make the wrong choices, despite apparently being trapped in poverty through cultural factors alone:

Iain Duncan Smith's welfare reforms [...] are pushing British people off welfare and into work - just as they were designed to do. This is not only due to the specific reforms themselves, but to the change in the culture that they have fostered. It has now become possible to express disapproval of benefit dependency without being lynched, and to voice in public what has been unsayable for a generation: it is not morally acceptable or socially benevolent to have people stuck on welfare for life. [...] IDS sees his welfare plan, as he made clear in a landmark speech last week, as being in the tradition of great Tory social reformers like Shaftesbury, who devoted themselves to improving the conditions of the poor. He is not necessarily in the business of saving money, but of saving lives: of rescuing people from hopelessness and dependency, and allowing self-determination and real life choices to become a reality for as many as possible. He understands the public resentment of those who do not work for a living, but he does not want to enflame it. *The Telegraph* (workfare, 25/01/2014: 26).

Note the reference to a change in culture: “*It has now become possible to express disapproval of benefit dependency without being lynched, and to voice in public what has been unsayable for a generation: it is not morally acceptable or socially benevolent to have people stuck on welfare for life*” (emphasis added) This would seem to suggest that, anticipating a backlash as the austerity measures become increasingly controversial, the author seeks to portray the economic situation as a positive catalyst for change, and in doing so to cast those who would disagree as being ‘behind the times’ in that they *still* feel that it is ‘acceptable’ to have people ‘stuck on welfare for life’. Any claim that the economic situation calls for secure work and an adequate welfare system in the interests of ‘social benevolence’ is therefore pre-emptively countered by portraying the issue as being a straightforward choice between ‘allowing’ self-determination or ‘trapping’ people in dependency. What is taken here is what Billig (1991) calls a ‘stance in a controversy’, an expressed view that is best understood in terms of the viewpoint it *opposes*, as Billig (1991: 143) puts it:

An ‘attitude’ should not be seen as an internal schema but as a stance in a controversy. When people give their opinion or say what their attitude is, they are positioning themselves on an issue where they know there is debate and difference. In this way, an opinion takes its rhetorical meaning from its counter-opinion. If giving an opinion is an entry into a matter of argument, then it must be understood in terms the opinions it is opposing.

It is worth noting the individualistic form that the ‘help’ takes here: e.g. ‘*allowing* self-determination and real life choices to become a reality for as many as possible’. This is in

common with much of the ‘helping the poor’ narrative seen across both topics, where the ‘help’ takes the form of *removing* financial help to *encourage* self-reliance, motivation and other ‘correct’ attitudes necessary for ‘helping oneself’. Of course, the important point here is that this argument rests *entirely* upon the construction of a ‘class’ that is indeed ‘trapped’ in hopelessness through lack of said attitudes (as opposed to structural factors beyond their control). A class of people who will not be helped through financial aid or even through improvements in structural conditions, but only through a change in their own outlook – one brought about through ‘tough love’.

#### **5.4.2 ‘Perverse Incentives towards Fecklessness and Idleness on an Epic Scale.’**

The following is taken from the coverage of the ‘bedroom tax’. The extract is presented below for clarity, with the analysis following:

Yesterday the shadow Work and pensions secretary Rachel Reeves was at it again, wailing that the withdrawal of spare room subsidies for public housing tenants - misleadingly dubbed "the bedroom tax" - is "a cruel and unfair policy". But there is another side to the welfare state, one that continues to provide perverse incentives towards fecklessness and idleness on an epic scale. For all Labour's emotional blackmail the fact is the gargantuan benefits system, which costs taxpayers about £220 billion a year, still enables far too many claimants to evade their responsibilities to their families and wider society.

That truth was illustrated this week by a shocking Channel 5 documentary which highlighted some of Britain's worst dads. One featured was Keith MacDonald, from Sunderland, who has fathered 15 children - with another on the way - by 10 different women despite reportedly never having worked a day in his life. It is estimated that with benefit bills for his children he will cost the taxpayer more than £2 million. Described by one former lover as a "waste of space" MacDonald is the ultimate illustration of our something-for-nothing society. Without embarrassment he says he cannot work because of "a bad back" [...].

Those who take responsibility for their own families tend to base the number of their children on what they can afford. Such considerations mean nothing to spongers such as MacDonald. Almost as reprehensible are the women who collude with this subsidised delinquency. With government assuming the role of the provider they never have to worry about the consequences of their actions. Indifferent to the real needs of their children or their demands on the public purse they cynically exploit the system using single motherhood as a ticket for accommodation and a permanent income.

That is partly why there are so many huge families being underwritten by social security. As this paper revealed last week, 27,000 households with six or more children are getting child benefit, including 400 mothers with 10 or more children. Some taxpayers might feel that the solution to this problem is to sterilise freeloaders [...]. There would certainly have been political support for such a step a century ago when there was widespread concern

about the high rates of reproduction among the least responsible sections of society. Interestingly this concern was most vociferously expressed by the Left, many of whose leading figures became advocates of sterilisation for the feckless. *The Express* (bedroom tax, 02/04/2015: 12).<sup>23</sup>

Efforts to undermine alternative discourses are a recurrent feature across both topics, and the first the sentence of this extract is another good example; “Yesterday the shadow Work and pensions secretary Rachel Reeves was at it again, wailing that the withdrawal of spare room subsidies for public housing tenants - misleadingly dubbed "the bedroom tax" - is "a cruel and unfair policy””. The term ‘wailing’ suggests an overly emotional (see Capel, 1996: 94), irrational, indeed almost *childlike* response to what is thus implied to be a sensible and reasonable policy<sup>24</sup>. Again, taking Billig’s (1991: 143) view that discourse is often a ‘stance in a controversy’, and therefore a stance *against* opposing views, the framing of the opposing views as emotional and unreasonable has the result that the view presented in the report is implied to be the opposite: logical and well-reasoned. In explicitly attributing the quote ‘a cruel and unfair policy’, it is marked as being distinct from the rest of the article, and therefore directly set up to be challenged. In doing this the very idea of the policy itself being unfair is effectively dismissed as part of the ‘wailing’.

Attempts to undermine alternative discourses such as this may reflect an implicit acknowledgement of the controversy surrounding the policy (Gibb, 2015; Moffatt et al, 2015). But given this controversy, and the fact that the impact of the policy can only fall upon the poorest members of society (Gibb, 2015; Moffatt et al, 2015), the ‘fairness’ must then be worked up within the discourse. Once again the idea of moral necessity is used to frame the issue; In effect the ‘£220billion’ figure here is used to represent, and thereby remind the reader of the cost of the ‘moral crisis’ - the price ‘we’ pay for providing ‘perverse incentives towards fecklessness and idleness’, and thus enabling welfare claimants to ‘evade their responsibilities to their families and wider society’. It is rather difficult to follow the logic of such an argument regarding the bedroom tax - one which appears to suggest that having a spare room (in some cases an unwanted one) can lead to fecklessness, idleness, and social irresponsibility, especially given that a significant proportion of those impacted by the bedroom tax are in work (Moffatt et al, 2015). Indeed, the point of the argument appears to be

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<sup>23</sup> Owing to space constraints I have taken only the most relevant extracts from this article. Yet, given the nature of the discourse, the article is worthy of consideration in its entirety. With this in mind I have included it in the appendix (see p254).

<sup>24</sup> The use of the term may also have sexist connotations; as Capel et al (1996) note, ‘wailing’ was the role of the professional mourner of antiquity, a role fulfilled by women since it was considered ‘unmanly’ to display such ‘raw emotion’ (Arbel, 2012).



simply to problematise redistribution *generally* by linking it with moral breakdown (see Cain, 2013).

As the article progresses a real life example is provided (albeit an extreme one), in an apparent attempt to lend credibility to the argument (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013); note again the ‘claim to truth’ (Chouliariki, 2008: 1) which precedes this anecdote:

That truth was illustrated this week by a shocking Channel 5 documentary which highlighted some of Britain's worst dads. One featured was Keith MacDonald, from sunder land [sic], who has fathered 15 children - with another on the way - by 10 different women despite reportedly never having worked a day in his life. It is estimated that with benefit bills for his children he will cost the taxpayer more than £2million. Described by one former lover as a "waste of space" MacDonald is the ultimate illustration of our something for- nothing society. Without embarrassment he says he cannot work because of "a bad back" [...].

Those who take responsibility for their own families tend to base the number of their children on what they can afford. Such considerations mean nothing to spongers such as MacDonald. Almost as reprehensible are the women who collude with this subsidised delinquency. With government assuming the role of the provider they never have to worry about the consequences of their actions. Indifferent to the real needs of their children or their demands on the public purse they cynically exploit the system using single motherhood as a ticket for accommodation and a permanent income. *The Express* (bedroom tax, 02/04/2015: 12).

The assertion that the person in question is the ‘ultimate *illustration*’ (emphasis added) of ‘our something for nothing society’ serves to portray the actual existence of such beyond any doubt. Yet the use of ‘ultimate’ has greater relevance here, since it suggests something of a logical endpoint, an example which is extreme only because we have not *yet* reached the point where such ‘subsidised delinquency’ is the norm. As such the example here is held up as what Tyler (2008: 18) refers to as a ‘condensed figurative form’: a caricature, which comes to represent the supposed traits of an entire (problematic) group. This group, it is suggested, includes all the social undesirables: welfare cheats (implied through the statement ‘Without embarrassment he says he cannot work because of "a bad back"’) and welfare scroungers (Cain, 2013; Devereux and Power, 2019; Jensen, 2014; Romano, 2015), large families, and single mothers (Cain, 2013; Patrick, 2016; Tyler, 2008), all united in being a costly, wasteful drain upon society, and thereby evoking a narrative of social crisis and moral breakdown caused by our failure to rein in welfare. More specifically the ‘threat’ here - to the moral fabric of society - is emphasised through the rhetoric of a ‘breeding underclass’. Cain (2013) and Tyler (2008) refer to similar discourses of irresponsible reproduction amongst the ‘lower classes’. Such discourses dehumanise (see Rowe and Goodman, 2014) ‘the poor’, making

them appear as a ‘breed apart’, a spreading threat which must be ‘controlled’, since they are *so* deviant that they cannot even control their own reproductive behaviour. Their very ‘coming to exist’ is thus rendered problematic in that it further burdens society with yet more *people like them* (see Cain, 2013):

That is partly why there are so many huge families being underwritten by social security. as this paper revealed last week, 27,000 households with six or more children are getting child benefit, including 400 mothers with 10 or more children. *Some taxpayers might feel that the solution to this problem is to sterilise freeloaders* [...] There would certainly have been political support for such a step a century ago when there was widespread concern about the high rates of reproduction among the least responsible sections of society. Interestingly this concern was most vociferously expressed by the Left, many of whose leading figures became advocates of sterilisation for the feckless. (Emphasis added).

The suggestion, associated with eugenics, of sterilising ‘freeloaders’ is curiously attributed to the feelings of the taxpayer here<sup>25</sup>, allowing the author to effectively disown it. Nonetheless, the idea of a ‘breed’ of people, a presumably genetically inferior underclass: ‘the least responsible sections of society’, is brought to the attention of the reader. The rather unsettling conclusion that can be drawn is that in second guessing the feelings of the taxpayer here, the author is effectively implying that such a thought would be somewhat *understandable*. In putting such a suggestion to the reader as an idea that ‘others’ may have, a rhetorical move similar to the psychological concept of the ‘door in the face technique’ is employed (Perloff, 2010: 261)<sup>26</sup>. Put succinctly, having attributed the desire to ‘sterilise freeloaders’ to the taxpayer, the author’s own ideological avocation of policies which *merely* ‘get tough’ on the ‘freeloaders’ is made to seem - by comparison - reasonable, rational and even restrained.

It is difficult to miss the irony of the use of an ‘irresponsible breeding’ narrative in the context of advocating for a policy which is supposedly aimed at addressing the *under-occupancy* of social housing. The logical non-sequitur suggests that the point here is not about the effectiveness of the policy at all, but rather an ideological argument in favour of worsening the living conditions of a group, or ‘class’ who are, by their very nature, all too readily encouraged into all kinds of deviance, in order that they might be taught a lesson, whether in the positive sense or otherwise. In other words, it is suggested that, due to their very nature, only when their *moral poverty* is made to go hand-in-hand with material poverty

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<sup>25</sup> Note how the statement is further disowned by being associated with ‘the left’ towards the end of the extract.

<sup>26</sup> It is worth pointing out that in this example the ‘reasonableness’ of the *preceding* argument is implied through contrast with the later ‘extreme’ suggestion – an inversion of the classic application of the ‘door in the face’ technique.

will there be any hope of redemption. Importantly, by shifting the focus from the practical to the ideological, the reality of the impact is obscured. Gibb (2015: 154) notes that the number of working people claiming housing benefit had, by 2014, doubled since the onset of the crisis. Furthermore, the increasing tendency towards insecure work (Brinkley, 2013; Davies, 2015; Heyes, 2013; Lavalette, 2017) means that, logically, even more people have a stake in the existence of an adequate welfare safety net, since they *might* come to find themselves reliant upon it (see Korpi and Palme, 2003). But by framing the issue as a ‘solution’ to the growing threat of a moralised ‘other’, these people, who might otherwise recognise themselves as potential victims of the policy, are instead brought ‘onside’ (Bourdieu, 1987: 12).

### 5.4.3 An Emerging Critical Narrative

So far, the focus has been upon the predominant pro-austerity discourse. Given that this discourse largely follows on from, and is therefore framed by, the ‘theoretical’ arguments in favour of austerity, it should come as no surprise to see similar constructions of class drawn upon in support of the policies here; constructions which fit the theoretical narrative and are therefore useful constructs in justifying the austerity policies as they are enacted (again see Bourdieu, 1987). Unlike previously however, the pro-austerity discourse, whilst still constituting the dominant narrative, is now challenged by alternative narratives that are more critical of austerity. As I discuss above, in the case of the workfare coverage this is largely limited to the politically left-leaning publications. Yet what is immediately obvious here is the fundamental re-framing of the issue as one of workers’ rights, and in particular of workfare as an affront to the notion of a minimum wage, leading to a ‘slave labour’ narrative:

Councils helped themselves to half-a-million hours of unpaid labour in the same period, as did scores of household-name companies. Not only do such "placements" do little to help the unemployed into work, they are clearly replacing and undercutting paid employees. There is now a determined backlash. In Motherwell in Scotland, a man who refused an instruction from his local jobcentre to work for his previous employer for six months without pay had his dole money stopped as punishment. Last week, the firm pulled out of the scheme after it was the target of "slave labour" protests. *The Guardian* (workfare, 19/11/14).

Such differences in the media framing of an issue have been shown to significantly alter the fundamental message of the coverage, and therefore the way in which the audience interprets reports (Entman, 2003; Nelson et al, 1997). The framing of workfare as an issue pertaining to

workers' rights sees both those who are currently employed *and* those who are not treated as equal victims of the policy. For instance: "Not only do such 'placements' do little to help the unemployed into work, they are clearly replacing and undercutting paid employees" (*The Guardian* 19/11/14 ). This pattern is recurrent within the more critical coverage, and serves to question both the effectiveness of the policy *and* the idea of any moral 'boundary' between the unemployed and the 'workers'. To expand upon this point, it is worth reconsidering an earlier extract:

Unemployed electronics specialist, John McArthur, 59, says he is living off 16p tins of spaghetti and has been without heating, after being sanctioned by the jobcentre when he refused to work without pay for Scottish social enterprise, LAMH Recycle in Motherwell. While he says he was happy to work for LAMH under the now-defunct future jobs fund for the minimum wage between late 2010 and 2011, he now refuses on principle to do the same job without any pay.

McArthur says he is surviving on a monthly pension of £149 after the DWP stopped his unemployment benefit until January as punishment for refusing to go on the 26-week community work placement (CWP). For almost three months, McArthur has spent each weekday between 7.30am and 9.30am with a placard outside the plant reading: "Say no to slave labour" [...] McArthur, who says he has been applying for 50 jobs a week without joy, said the CWP programme was "entirely exploitative" and came at the "expense of poor people who've got absolutely no choice". *The Guardian* (Workfare, 03/11/14).

Presumably referring to the same case as in the previous example, the example here makes use of the anecdote in such a way as to challenge the supposed moral boundary between the 'worker' and the parasitic underclass. As I discuss previously, the description of the person in question as an 'unemployed electronics specialist' is of particular relevance. It has long been recognised that the development of modern society is based upon an interdependence between those who specialise in particular tasks, indeed this recognition goes back at least as far as the works of Emile Durkheim (2014)<sup>27</sup>. Contemporary society is increasingly reliant upon the technical skills and expertise of those who work in highly specialised areas (Barley et al, 2016). The description of the subject as a 'specialist' therefore evokes the idea of someone who previously performed a key social function, someone on whom society *depended*. Moreover, the term implies that the subject has dedicated a significant amount of time and effort in developing useful skills and knowledge. In short, what is foregrounded here is an example of someone who stands in stark contrast to the parasitic figure of the 'welfare scrounger'.

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<sup>27</sup> It is worth pointing out that this is a translation of Durkheim's 1893 doctoral thesis.

The example here thus demonstrates the way in which the construction of the ‘target’ of workfare as those who lack integrity, motivation and discipline is countered. In this respect, the reference to the ‘principled’ stance taken by the subject here is especially relevant in that it gives a ‘real life’ example of someone willing to accept personal sacrifice in defence of their beliefs. Again, this is in clear contrast to the construction of a ‘type’ who will take the path of least resistance regardless of the moral implications or cost to society. In this way, the person in question becomes another figurative example (Tyler, 2008: 18). The visceral, emotive language used in the anecdote mirroring (and thereby calling into doubt) the use of anecdotes seen in the construction of the parasitic underclass figure: ‘John McArthur, 59, says he is living off 16p tins of spaghetti and has been without heating, after being sanctioned by the jobcentre when he refused to work without pay’. In this way the example here serves to highlight not merely a person, or even a group, but a situation, a set of circumstances, and, above all, a resulting *injustice*.

The fact that the person in question has a history of commitment to their work, yet is nonetheless unemployed points to the unfairness of structural circumstances beyond their control, circumstances which could, as is logically implied here, befall *anyone*. In emphasising that the subject here has done all in his power to improve his situation – ‘he has been applying for 50 jobs a week without joy’ - he is presented as a figurative ‘*warning*’ regarding increasing precarity. Importantly, by undermining the idea of the unemployed and ‘the poor’ being fundamentally morally different from the ‘rest of us’, the security afforded by this distinction (Tyler, 2015; Valentine and Harris, 2014) is itself undermined. Effectively the reader is warned that they themselves could, through unfortunate circumstance alone, find themselves amongst the group targeted by an unjust and punitive policy.

In the case of workfare, the more critical coverage can possibly be explained with reference to *demand-side* theories of media bias. Whilst I discuss issues of media stance and bias in greater detail in chapter 7 (p191), it is worth briefly expanding upon this point in the context of the present discourse. In contrast to *supply-side* theories, which focus upon the role of media structure and organisation (e.g. corporate ownership, business links, and advertising), and its potential to influence the agenda and framing, demand-side theories focus on the potential for market forces and pre-existing audience biases to influence the coverage. As discussed in the literature review (see p42), demand-side theories rest on the premise that competition within the mass media market can lead publishers to target ‘niches’, especially within the coverage of controversial topics. Targeting such niches, which are essentially the

pre-existing biases of the public, can lead to polarised coverage of events and issues as the publishers gravitate towards differing, and competing views (see Prat and Stromberg, 2013 for an overview). It would certainly be plausible to suggest that in the context of the economic downturn, the disproportionate impact of austerity policies would make them controversial (see Moffatt et al, 2015). In the case of workfare, the more critical stance taken amongst the traditionally left-leaning publications may reflect an attempt to fill the niche created by a growing public backlash against the policy resulting from its impact upon those left unemployed through no fault of their own following the economic crisis and the adoption of austerity.

Whilst demand-side theories may possibly explain the emergence of coverage that is critical of workfare - given that this is almost exclusive to publications that traditionally take a political stance to the left of the centre - they cannot fully account for the critical coverage of the bedroom tax. In the case of the bedroom tax, critical coverage appears sporadically across most publications to some extent, leading to an inconsistent, unclear, and often contradictory 'message' regarding the subject. Yet where it does appear, it again seemingly counters the dominant discourse, and in the course of doing so constructs social class in a way that is fundamentally different. To illustrate these points, consider the contrast in the tone of the following two extracts, both taken from *The Sun*, a publication that is generally regarded as being right-leaning in its political stance:

So convinced are [then Labour leader] Ed Miliband's party and its cheerleaders that the rest of Britain is as outraged as they are that they bandy around their catchphrase "the hated bedroom tax" as a fact that is beyond challenge. It is, in fact, doubly dishonest, it is not a tax. And it turns out not to be hated. Britain may be fed up with low pay and high prices. But we also generally support Government efforts to cut the benefits bill and return the system to its original purpose as a fallback in hard times instead of a lifestyle choice”  
*The Sun* (bedroom tax, 09/11/13: 6).

This extract is dated 09/11/13. The key features of the dominant discourse are present: the references to the 'benefits bill, 'lifestyle choice' and therefore the implicit necessity (and fairness) of targeting a parasitic underclass exploiting 'us'. Compare this with the following extract:

A disabled dad hanged himself in a room next to his severely autistic son just weeks after his benefit payments were axed. Depressed Robert McGeachy, 42, was found dead by a neighbour at his home after falling behind with his rent. *The Sun* (bedroom tax, 27/12/2013: 13).

This extract is dated 27/12/13, yet despite appearing in the same newspaper, at around the same time period, the tone is completely at odds with the extract above. In contrast to the ‘tough but fair’ rhetoric - emphasising a proportionate ‘targeted’ response to a moral breakdown - the extract here seems to imply, through the use of the term ‘axed’, a somewhat brutal and indiscriminate attack. In support of this, another anecdote is employed which, referencing the tragic death of a father suffering from mental ill health, seems designed to drive home the issue of injustice as forcefully and emotively as possible.

Such inconsistencies within the coverage may simply reflect something of a concession, being designed to give credibility by emphasising injustices as examples of where an otherwise sound policy with good intentions has ‘overstepped the mark’, such that it impacts not just on the ‘legitimate’ moralised target, but upon the ‘deserving poor’ too. Yet this is nonetheless a break with the dominant discourse, which, as I discussed previously (see p83), effectively drives out the notion of the ‘deserving’ altogether. Indeed the very idea of financially aiding ‘the poor’ at all is problematised within the dominant discourse, with the emphasis instead being upon the need to ‘rescue’ them from dependency and, in doing so, instil the ‘motivation and discipline’ they supposedly require to help themselves. The critical coverage may therefore reflect the beginning of a genuine breaking of consensus amongst the media in terms of the stance taken on austerity. In other words, where there appeared to be almost unanimous support, or at least acceptance, of austerity in the ‘theoretical’ sense, it may be that the controversy surrounding its reality (see Gibb, 2015) has led to something of a questioning of, and thus deviance from, what was previously an unchallenged, hegemonic discourse. It is perhaps noteworthy, therefore, that the ‘clash’ between the theoretical and the practical is acknowledged, as in the example cited on p117:

How can you fine people for staying in a big flat they don't need when there are no small flats for them to go to? A lot of those people have been put in large flats that nobody else wants, just so the buildings are not left unoccupied. Now the Government is fining them for a decision they didn't make and can't change. It's not only barbaric and vicious, it's nuts. The Sun (bedroom tax, 21/07/2014: 8).

What must be acknowledged at this point, then, is the difficulty in ascertaining, with any degree of certainty, whether the critical coverage seen within the coverage here reflects a genuine breaking of consensus at the ideological level, or merely a critical view of the *practical* aspects of policies such as the bedroom tax. The following example illustrates this point in that it appears to acknowledge the contradiction of ‘helping’ people to ‘stand on their

own two feet' - a key theme of the pro-austerity discourse - whilst at the same time breaking up community bonds which facilitate doing so:

It's interesting that the repeated solution to times of economic hardship is that the working classes should become more energised and flexible. That when someone else balls up the economy, the poorest, most exhausted people should note a banking crisis on the news, cheerfully say, "I know what I must do for the sake of my country," pack up their possessions - cheap fags, market-stall jeans, kids, huge telly - and start again, somewhere cheaper. Get on your bike. If you cannot afford to live in Brighton or London, then move to Sheffield, or Ayrshire, and start again.

But there's a fundamental disconnect here. The thing we pride ourselves on in our working classes is their "sense of community". What is more working class than to have a nanna who babysits, an uncle who mends your clutch, a mate who takes your disabled brother to the shops? To be poor is to be connected to others. [...] When you are not strong or wealthy enough to sort your problems out on your own - hire help, pay repair costs - you must tap into the unpaid, unseen economy of communal goodwill. In the most basic sense, you rely - more than someone in a higher income bracket ever will - on love. *The Times* (bedroom tax, 05/10/2013: 5).

This extract is worth considering in some detail, since it features one of the few explicit references to social class within the coverage. This representation of the working class is clearly idealised to some degree here: the phrase "The thing we pride ourselves on in our working classes is their "sense of community". What is more working class than to have a nanna who babysits, an uncle who mends your clutch, a mate who takes your disabled brother to the shops?" conjuring up images of a group defined by their ability to get by in spite of their circumstances (see Hinton and Redclift, 2009; Raynor, 2017). Yet despite the idealisation (see Kitch, 2007; Lawler 2005, 2014), and the humorous (if slightly patronising) cultural references to e.g. 'cheap fags, market-stall jeans', the explicit reference to the working class, 'the poorest, most exhausted people', as *victims* of the 'banking crisis' is pertinent here. Such a reference certainly puts the discourse at odds with the predominantly pro-austerity discourse in that it portrays a group whose struggle can be attributed to (unjust) circumstances completely beyond their control; again calling into question the idea of a moralised 'other' being the target of austerity policies such as the bedroom tax.



## 5.5 Discussion

### 5.5.1 Theory into Practice: Class as a *Political Project* and as an *Ideal*

As I demonstrate in the analysis above, the discourse within the coverage of the workfare policies and the bedroom tax is marked by two key features: the intertextuality which occurs as earlier theoretical narratives are drawn upon to support arguments in favour of the policies, and the emergence of coverage which is more critical. Despite the appearance of more critical coverage, which forms a dissenting discourse, the pro-austerity discourse remains dominant here. As such the discourse seen in the present coverage builds largely upon the patterns uncovered in the previous chapter.

Accordingly, the patterns of class construction seen in the previous chapter again play a central role. As shown above, the ‘in-group’ is once again described in very broad, vague terms, for example as ‘taxpayers’, in an apparent attempt to build consensus with the audience. Again, this broad, loosely defined group is distinguished almost exclusively in moral terms, being contrasted with both the straight-forwardly immoral: those who choose an exploitative lifestyle given the opportunity and the unthinking: those who supposedly lack the *ability* to make moral choices without active coercion.

The following two examples are taken from the same article and show the way the discourse slips, between discussion of facilitated choice and insufficient control- and therefore between explicit and implicit moralisation.

Anyone who is under any remaining delusions that a large part of our unemployment problem is not down to *lazy, feckless benefit claimants who have no intention of earning a living* needs to listen to businessmen like Mr Cooper. Time and time again we hear of entrepreneurs trying their hardest - yet failing - to employ British workers

*Surely it is vital that the unemployed be kept in the practice of getting up in the morning and going out to work for money?* It is work which gives structure and purpose to life and the lack of it a sense of hopelessness (emphasis added). *The Express* (Workfare, 28/04/12: 16).

As I discuss in detail later (see chapter 7, p184), this ‘slippage’ appears to be a key feature of the discourse in terms of legitimising austerity. The increasing level of passivisation seen at this stage may be the result of attempts to maintain the legitimacy of action ‘from above’ at precisely the time when the impacts risk undermining it, by suggesting that austerity policies *help* as much as they punish. Yet such discourse still relies upon the construction of a ‘type’

of person who is predisposed towards needing such help, a type fundamentally distinct from the idealised low-paid, yet morally sound, low paid ‘worker’.

The idealised figure of the humble worker, who *instinctively* recognises the ‘structure and purpose’ inherent to (low paying) work, is frequently contrasted with the ‘parasitic scrounger’ who, it is suggested, is economically better off in order to highlight an apparent injustice, for example: “I was forever hearing the bitter resentment from hard-working constituents seeing others on benefits getting better houses than they could afford and sitting at home all day” *The Sun* (06/10/13: 27). In this respect the low paid worker is again cast as the ‘economic martyr’. The austerity policies are portrayed as both a way of restoring fairness, to these ‘hard-working people’, and of reversing a moral decline; one supposedly encouraged by society having had *too much sympathy* for those who exploit them. Thus the way in which class is portrayed within these topics not only forms part of the ‘justification’ for austerity policies, it also obscures *who* might suffer from them in reality. In framing the austerity policies as if they perform a moral function, the ‘morally upstanding’ worker is removed from their scope, since viewed in this way they become not victims, but *beneficiaries*.

If austerity is indeed part of an ideologically driven political project (Farnsworth and Irving, 2018; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; Windebank and Whitworth, 2014), then such patterns further demonstrate the important role that depictions of social class play within the influential media discourse. In particular the emphasis upon the righteous anger that the ‘ordinary hardworking person’ might, or rather *should*, feel towards those who will not ‘pull their weight’, yet who are financially ‘rewarded’ all the same, is a powerful rhetorical move, especially during difficult economic times, and it is one which is exploited to great effect in the coverage:

The Westminster class radically underestimates the fury of ordinary people over this. Last week, *The Sun* exposed the horrific case of Maggie Fisher, who was moved to a four-bedroom house. She said critics were "well [jealous]" of her ability to play the system. "Why should I work?" she laughed... *The Sun* (workfare) 06/10/13: 27)

By framing the austerity policies as a solution to a moral problem, and thereby situating them within the context of a moral necessity, they become difficult to challenge. Those who would attempt to do so face significant inertia in that they must carefully unpick the very idea of such necessity *after* it has gained acceptance. Like one swimming against the tide, they must unpick common ‘wisdom’ slowly, carefully, and methodically, whilst the waves simply crash

over them. More importantly perhaps, is that until the point is reached where a sufficient proportion of the population are affected by austerity, and thus come to view themselves as victims of it, those attempting to challenge the idea of a ‘moral distinction’ likely do so from a lonely position. This is because challenging the idea of moral distinction challenges the *security* of distinction itself, the comforting idea that people’s fate is in their own hands, and that they could not possibly fall into poverty lest by their own failing (see Tyler, 2015; Valentine and Harris, 2014). Again, this difficulty is further compounded by the fact that those most likely to be affected are the poorest, most powerless members of society; those with the least capital at their disposal with which to challenge their portrayal, and therefore its part in legitimising an unjust restructuring of the social order from which they, more than anyone, are affected (Macdonald et al, 2014; Power, 2011: 3).

### 5.5.1 A Growing Legitimacy Gap?

The emergence of coverage that is more critical is a significant finding here, and one that raises important questions regarding the media. As I state above, demand-side theories of media bias (see literature review, p42) may offer a possible explanation for the polarised coverage of the workfare policies, where in the more left-leaning publications the issue was largely re-framed as one of workers’ rights. Yet in the case of the bedroom tax coverage, demand-side theories do not provide such an adequate explanation, given the lack of any such clear pattern. One plausible interpretation here is that the critical coverage represents something of a growing unease amongst the media of taking an unquestioningly supportive stance regarding austerity as the impacts become more apparent in real terms - and importantly as more people come to realise that they are indeed victims, or at least *potential* victims of austerity. After all, the media do not exist in a social vacuum, and it may be that the impact upon the poorest members of society feeds into this unease, leading the media towards a general sense-making of the situation. This would explain the somewhat inconsistent, often contradictory, nature of the coverage. In this respect, the plight of those worst affected may see them function as the ‘canary in the mine’<sup>28</sup>, warning of a deeper malaise afflicting society.

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<sup>28</sup> Historically, canaries were carried by miners to give advance warning of the presence of poison gas, to which they would succumb before the human workers did.

In other words, just as the crisis itself threatened prevailing *economic* common-sense (Rice and Bond, 2013), the impacts of the subsequent austerity policies may have made it difficult to reconcile the dominant narrative with the increasingly apparent injustices of the social reality, opening up a legitimacy gap (Seabrooke, 2007: 796); a gap between ‘expectations and what is experienced’ (Stanley, 2016: 393). And once opened, such a gap plausibly leaves space for competing ‘alternative’ narratives to fill.

In support of this interpretation, a revealing pattern can be noted within the present coverage:

I have little sympathy with *those on the left* who make out that "US-style workfare schemes", as they call them, are demeaning. It is not demeaning to ask the unemployed to do what the entire working population takes for granted: to work in return for payment(emphasis added). *The Times* (workfare, 31/10/13: 34).

What do you think of when you hear the phrase “slave labour”? Perhaps galley slaves – rows of men, bloodied from whipping, pushing and pulling the oars of a boat. Or emaciated bodies in Nazi concentration camps and the Soviet gulags. Slave labour is a living death; an obscene act of inhumanity. *If ever proof were needed of the moral decay of the Left it is the description by Left-wing protesters* – now joined by a number of respectable commentators – of work placements, such as stacking shelves at Tesco, in return for benefits as slave labour (emphasis added).*The Express* (workfare, 22/02/12: 12).<sup>29</sup>

Note the way in which both extracts ‘echo’ the more critical discourse, whilst simultaneously labelling it as ‘left wing’: for instance, “If ever proof were needed of the moral decay *of the Left* it is the description *by Left-wing protesters* - now joined by a number of respectable commentators - of work placements, such as stacking shelves at Tesco, in return for benefits as slave labour” (emphasis added). McChesney and Foster (2013) argue that attempts to label competing views in this way perform the function of placing them ‘out there’, beyond the bounds of acceptable mainstream thought, whilst simultaneously situating one’s *own* views as being mainstream, and therefore credible and (politically and socially) acceptable. The wrangling over the ‘acceptable’ centre ground, and the implicit threat that even ‘respectable commentators’ may succumb to such ‘radical’ thought may be indicative of the common-sense nature of the dominant discourse coming under threat. At the very least, the repeated attempts to situate the acceptable middle ground suggest that it is indeed becoming harder to do so as a legitimacy gap opens up and leaves a ‘vacuum’ to be filled (see Peck, 2010: 110).

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<sup>29</sup> Perhaps owing to its links with early capitalist exploitation, the North Atlantic slave trade is conspicuously absent here.

Given the centrality of class to the dominant media discourse, it is perhaps unsurprising that a competing pattern of construction becomes evident within the more critical coverage here: that of acknowledging the inherent ‘struggle’ which class represents (Tyler, 2015). Whilst the constructions of class within the dominant narrative have the effect of hiding class behind a veil of (poor) individual choices and (encouraged) moral failings, where the discourse is more critical there is a tendency to acknowledge both genuine hardship and the worsening of the structural problems faced by people ‘on the ground’; problems such as job insecurity, low pay, and the compounding factor of the erosion of the welfare safety net (see e.g. Briken and Taylor, 2018; Cooper et al, 2014; Heyes, 2013; O’Hara, 2015; Shildrick et al, 2010).

Consider the following extracts:

The Government's so-called 'bedroom tax' has tipped nearly one in three affected council tenants into rent arrears and many face eviction, it emerged today. Since the reform was introduced in April, 50,000 households in 114 local council areas can no longer afford to pay for their accommodation. At least one in three of those affected face eviction. *The MailOnline* (bedroom tax, 19/09/13).

Of course the Tories like to boast about employment growth. But since only one in 40 of the new jobs are permanent, the number of people in enforced part-time work has doubled to 1.3 million, and there has been an explosion in artificial self-employment, the experience on the ground is something else entirely. *The Guardian* (workfare, 19/11/14).

..if a company has a job that needs doing it should pay someone to do it - not benefit from free, forced labour. What's more, according to the "Boycott Workfare" campaign, the evidence shows that these schemes reduce overtime and staff hours for the regular, paid, workforce as "free" labour takes up the slack. *The Daily Star* (workfare, 19/02/12: 19)

Importantly, this ‘group’ is not only constructed in such a way as to challenge the idea of moral distinction, but as an inclusive group comprising the very poorest (the direct victims of austerity), *and* those indirectly, or even *potentially* affected. Note again the way in which the interests of those (currently) unemployed are treated as synonymous with ‘working people’. The portrayal here is thus one of a group united by being the victims of worsening structural conditions.

This pattern is only touched upon here, since it becomes increasingly prominent in the coverage of food bank reliance and zero-hour contracts, which make up the focus of the following chapter. Since the topics of food bank reliance and zero-hour contracts represent the highly-visible, and therefore newsworthy, extremes in terms of poverty and insecurity (Brinkley, 2013; Loopstra et al, 2018), they represent an opportunity to focus upon how the media cover the *impacts* of austerity.

## **6. Social Class and the ‘Impacts of Austerity’: A Discourse Analysis of Media Coverage of Food Banks and Zero-Hour Contracts**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter largely saw a continued dominance of the pro-austerity discourse. The main features of this discourse being a strong anti-welfare stance based on the notion of ‘moral necessity’, and in particular a need to address the generalised threat to the national work ethic, caused by both the explicitly deviant (e.g. ‘scroungers’) and those who simply lack the integrity (or intelligence) to make the ‘correct’ moral choices; the unthinking *mass* (see Lawler, 2005). Constructions of class therefore centred again upon the idea of a moral divide between this costly parasitic underclass, and a vague ‘us’ who make up ‘respectable’ society. In an apparent attempt to justify the austerity measures as their impact upon society became more evident, the dominant media discourse increasingly framed austerity as a means of restoring fairness and of reversing a moral decline. To this end, elite-serving ideological arguments were portrayed as appeals to ‘ordinary hardworking people’, in order to build consensus, and stoke up sentiments of ‘justified anger’.

Whilst this elite serving discourse remained dominant within the coverage of workfare and the bedroom tax, a competing ‘alternative’ discourse also began to emerge which was more critical of both austerity and its ‘official’ narratives. Within this discourse the individualised and moralised view of poverty was called into question, with emphasis being placed instead upon structural causes of hardship and inequality, and indeed upon the potential of austerity to exacerbate these. This was perhaps most obvious in the *reframing* of the workfare issue as one of employment rights and conditions. The emergence of critical coverage therefore placed the struggle inherent to social class (Tyler, 2015) back on the agenda to some extent.

A possible explanation for the apparent breaking of the media consensus is that the media may themselves be engaged in a process of sense-making; especially given the controversy surrounding the impact of austerity policies (see Gibb, 2015; Moffatt et al, 2015). In this context, a legitimacy gap could reasonably be expected to open up, especially as it becomes increasingly clear that official narratives do not sit comfortably with the social reality, and with it a space for alternative discourse. A noteworthy observation in this respect is the labelling of alternative views as radical, and in particular as ‘left-wing’, in a seeming attempt

to discredit them. As I argue in the previous chapter, this apparent struggle over the ‘acceptable middle ground’ would indeed suggest it is itself becoming harder to locate as the crisis increasingly takes on a social aspect.

The focus of this chapter is the media coverage of the issues of increasing reliance upon food banks and zero-hour contracts. In keeping with the breaking media consensus demonstrated in the previous chapter it is worth pointing out that the prominent coverage of such topics - both of which have been linked with austerity (Cooper et al, 2014; Dowler, 2014; Heyes, 2013; Lavalette, 2017) - does not sit well with the predominant pro-austerity stance taken by the media up until this point; further suggesting that the issue had become something of a ‘debate’ amongst the media themselves.

Whereas the previous two chapters have focused upon austerity *in theory* and *in action* respectively, the present coverage can be considered to be that of the *impacts* of austerity. The articles analysed within this chapter are largely taken from the latter end of the time period (c. 2014-2016), by which point the impacts of the austerity measures were being felt strongly across society, since the associated spending cuts and welfare reforms were well under way (Cooper et al, 2014). Furthermore, it is relevant to note that by this point the austerity measures were, given their widespread impacts, becoming increasingly contentious, with evidence of serious discontent amongst the public (see Jessop, 2018; Lavalette, 2017; McKenzie, 2018; Tyler, 2015).

Food bank reliance and zero-hour contracts likely represent the mere tip of the iceberg in terms of poverty and insecure working arrangements. Insecure work has increased following the economic crisis, particularly as spending cuts have led to a widespread loss of relatively stable public sector jobs (see Davies, 2015; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; Heyes, 2013; Lavalette, 2017; O’Hara, 2015: 3-4). In addition the spending cuts have placed economic pressure upon the public sector itself to adopt a competitive ‘market driven’ approach to employment conditions (Cunningham, 2015; Cunningham et al 2016). The decrease in earnings, which a move into low-quality insecure employment entails, has also been compounded by cuts to welfare (O’Hara, 2015: 3-4), which at a time of rising living costs have driven many into poverty as a result (O’Hara, 2015: 3-4). Yet, as Brinkley (2013: 5) argues, “zero-hours contracts have come to symbolize *a wider concern* that the labour market is moving towards more contingent, less secure, and more exploitative forms of employment at a time when in many areas jobs are scarce and people have little choice over taking

whatever work is available” (emphasis added). Similarly, Cunningham et al (2016) note that zero-hour contracts are only one of the ways in which workforces have been subjected to increased casualisation, with many more subtle changes taking place which have collectively worsened working conditions for many people. Furthermore, with regards to food bank use, Perry et al (2014: 79) note that the majority of users express shame at having to turn to charity to feed themselves and their families, treating food banks as a last resort born out of necessity. In light of this, it would be reasonable to expect that for every person who walks through the door of a food bank, there are many more who are *just about* managing to put food on the table. Furthermore, as Loopstra et al (2018) point out, many of those suffering food poverty do not have access to a food bank and are thus not counted amongst the statistics. The topics covered within this chapter are relevant, therefore, in that they likely represent the highly visible, and thus newsworthy, extremes of what are in actual fact much wider social issues.

A focus upon the discourse from a social class perspective is again useful here, given the inherent link between class and problems such as inequality, poverty, and exploitative working arrangements. In this chapter, I firstly discuss the topics of increased food bank reliance and the rising use of zero-hour contracts with reference to the literature in order to provide the necessary context. Secondly, I describe the key themes within the coverage. Thirdly, I conduct a critical discourse analysis, again using the themes as a guide to where further in-depth analysis is warranted. Finally, I discuss the findings in terms of the overarching pattern of class construction and their relevance to the current context.

### **6.1.1 Zero-Hour Contracts**

Zero-hour contracts are “those in which a worker agrees to be available for work with a particular employer but without any guaranteed hours or times of work and therefore usually no guaranteed pay” (Davies, 2015 para 1). Accordingly, ZHCs can be considered an extreme form of casualised labour. Whilst zero-hour contracts, along with other forms of atypical, casualised labour, are not a new phenomenon, their use has increased in recent years, especially following the economic crisis (Brinkley, 2013; Cunningham et al, 2016; Davies, 2015; Dowler, 2014; Heyes, 2013; Pantazis, 2016). This would suggest that in spite of the hopes that private sector jobs would effectively replace those lost in the public sector due to spending cuts, what has actually occurred is that relatively secure jobs have been replaced by



jobs that are low paying and insecure (Brikon and Taylor, 2018; Heyes, 2013; Lavalette, 2015; O'Hara, 2015: 3-4). Where public sector jobs have been retained, the pressure of the cuts has nonetheless led to the adoption of market-type changes to employment contracts aimed at increasing efficiency through casualisation - including through the use of zero-hour contracts (Cunningham et al, 2016).

Proponents of zero-hour contracts claim that, like 'flexible' work more generally, they can facilitate the creation and retention of jobs during difficult economic times and that such flexibility can actually benefit some people (Brinkley 2013; Darby and McIntire, 2014; Heyes, 2013). The type of 'flexibility' inherent to zero-hour contracts, however, is an example of what Fleetwood (2007: 389) refers to as 'employer friendly' flexibility<sup>30</sup>. Flexibility, according to the literature on *work-life balance* can be *worker-friendly*, *employer-friendly*, or mutually beneficial. Whereas worker-friendly working arrangements place obligations on employers to the benefit of employees, zero-hours contracts place no obligation on the employer to provide a minimum number of hours, leading not only to financial insecurity, but also to a fundamental shift in the balance of power. Where someone is employed under this form of a contract, an employer can simply offer no hours at all, indefinitely, thereby effectively *dismissing* the employee. As such, concerns have been expressed regarding the potential of such contracts to lead to exploitation, to undermine employment protections, and to have a negative effect upon the general well being of employees - who must live with the burden of constant financial uncertainty (Davies, 2015; McGrath et al; 2015, Ryan et al, 2019).

Additionally, this employer-friendly form of flexibility allows for workers to be called on only at busy times, thereby *intensifying* their workload. In other words, the use of zero-hour contracts can lead to the worker performing the same *amount* of labour, but in a shorter time frame, leading to a de-facto reduction in pay (see Cunningham et al, 2016; Lewis et al, 2017). Furthermore, under the harsher sanctions regime, benefit payments can be withheld where someone refuses to accept, or chooses to leave, an insecure job (Brikon and Taylor, 2018; Darby and McIntire, 2014), thus effectively trapping such individuals in the *low-pay no-pay cycle*(see Shildrick et al, 2010). Finally, Davis (2015 para 14) warns that the increasing *normalisation* of zero-hours jobs risks lowering the bar in terms of what can be expected of employer-employee relations across the board, arguing that:

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<sup>30</sup> Fleetwood, (2007: 389) suggests that this employer-friendly flexibility can amount to '*flexploitation*' .

Zero-hours represent a Formula 1-speed race to the bottom, to make permanent what Marx would have recognised as a reserve army of labour, with flexibility for the employers and insecurity, stress, low wages and few rights for the workers.

### 6.1.2 Food Banks

Food banks are charitable organisations that act as a ‘service of last resort’ (Cooper et al, 2014: 4), distributing donated food to those living in poverty. Again, whilst they are not a new phenomenon, their use has increased significantly in recent times (Loopstra et al, 2015; Perry et al 2014). For example, Loopstra et al (2015: 2) state that between 2009 and 2011 the number of food banks operated by the Trussell trust (the UKs largest food bank operator) increased from 29 to 251. Perry et al (2014: 14) note that between 2013- 2014, 913,138 food parcels were distributed compared with 46,992 in 2012-13, and 128, 697 in 2011-12. Often, recipients of food donations must be referred by a professional such as a medical or social worker (Loopstra et al, 2015: 2). Loopstra et al point out that by 2014, 16% of medical professionals surveyed had personally made referrals to food banks.

Whilst it has been widely argued that austerity measures and insecure work have contributed to the rise in food bank reliance (e.g. Cooper et al, 2014; Dowler, 2014; Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015; Loopstra et al, 2015, 2018; Perry et al, 2014), Loopstra et al (2015) note that the difficulty of inferring causation has led to significant controversy regarding the rise in food bank use, with some suggesting that such a rise may be the result of people taking advantage of free goods as opposed to being in genuine poverty. The methodologically diverse study conducted by Perry et al (2014) casts serious doubt upon this ‘supply-led’ argument however. Through use of in-depth interviews with users of several food banks, as well as case studies and analysis of administrative data, Perry et al demonstrate that people use food banks only as a last resort, when other coping strategies have been exhausted or otherwise proved inadequate. Even then, the food bank users in this study expressed a significant amount of shame and embarrassment at having to rely upon charity. Whilst this does not entirely disprove the supply side arguments, it does suggest that if there *are* people using food banks to exploit the supply of free goods, then these people are the exception rather than the rule, and thus cannot explain the large increase in food bank use. Indeed Perry et al (2014: 13) suggest that food banks have opened in *response* to a genuine need, often arising from some ‘personal crisis’, for example a job loss or reduction in earnings, a bereavement, or some other sudden change in circumstances. The effects of such personal

crises have been compounded by an inadequate welfare ‘safety net’ resulting from the austerity measures (Cooper et al, 2014). Furthermore as Loopstra et al (2017) point out, the working poor make up a significant proportion of food bank users, something which (Cooper et al, 2014) attribute to increasingly low paid insecure work, demonstrating the relationship between the two topics of this chapter.

## 6.2 Themes

The emergence of an alternative discourse within the coverage of the bedroom tax and workfare policies (see previous chapter) that is more critical of the austerity programme is suggestive of an awareness of the increasingly contentious nature of austerity and the rising level of public discontent. This would explain why something resembling a ‘debate’ could be seen to play out in the coverage of those topics. Both food bank reliance and zero-hour contracts put the problems of inequality, poverty, and exploitation in the public eye, and as such their prominent coverage further suggests a breaking in media consensus. It is therefore relevant to focus upon the way in which the media, dominated until this point by an elite-serving pro-austerity discourse, handles these topics. Essentially therefore, the themes here represent key *sites of struggle*.

### 6.2.1 Poverty in the UK

Given the nature of the topics, the issue of poverty inevitably features strongly. The nature of poverty, in terms of its extent and, in particular, its causes, forms a major theme and even a focal point of the debate. Here we see a more critical discourse at odds with a pro-austerity discourse, which has, up until this point, been dominant. It should be noted here that whilst this alternative, more critical discourse is evident, it is often expressed as views held by others. The impersonal, distanced style of reporting, which relies heavily upon quotation may, as I discuss below, suggest reluctance on the part of the media to embrace it fully. Yet in spite of the impersonal style, the issue of poverty in a developed country such as the UK is nonetheless placed clearly on the agenda:

Furious anti-poverty groups and church leaders said it was beyond belief that people in 21st century Britain are going hungry and relying on charity. The number of food parcels

given out last year by the Trussell Trust alone nearly tripled from 346,992 to 913,138. And 330,205 of those went to children. *The Mirror* (food banks, 16/04/14: 8-9).

Continuing the pattern seen in the previous chapter, the more critical coverage again emphasises structural causes of poverty, such as in the following example from the zero-hour contract coverage, where the issue of insecurity is foregrounded. Note the more personal style here:

At its worst this rapidly proliferating practice reminds me of the way Dockers used to have to gather at the dock gates in the 1920s and a foreman would come out and point to those he could use and tell the rest to go home with no money in their pockets. To expect people to pay their bills and raise a family under employment conditions like this is just not on." *The ExpressOnline* (zero-hour contracts, 18/04/14).

However, demonstrating the debate-like nature which the coverage of these contentious topics takes, this view of poverty is countered within the pro-austerity discourse, where the issue is often downplayed, normalised, and at times even outright denied:

But despite the efforts of campaigners, it is wrong to see the growth in food bank usage as the consequence of supposedly barbaric Tory policies. The truth is that our society has always had vulnerable people in need but they could not go to food banks because none were in existence until the first one was established in 2004." *The Express* (food banks, 17/04/14: 14).

The entire case against the Government lacks any credibility. If our country is really so hungry then how come we are constantly told that we are facing an "obesity time bomb", with most of us eating too much food rather than too little" *The Express* (food banks, 17/04/14: 14).

Where poverty is downplayed or denied, a recurrent pattern within the coverage is to question the honesty of 'the poor', casting a moral judgement in the process. The extract below is a good example of the way poverty is moralised within the coverage:

Drug addicts are exploiting food banks by picking up goods and selling them door-to-door, it has been claimed. A mother-of-three from Nuneaton, Warwickshire, admitted that she had been using the money to buy heroin. The food bank at Manor Court Baptist church has been exploited for months, one local told *The Mail on Sunday*. "They pick up what is a donation to charity and then sell the food on for their drug money," she said. *The Times* (food banks, 14/09/15: 2).

This suggestion of society's being in danger of encouraging (immoral) conduct again serves to problematise any form of direct help, warning 'us' against worsening the situation by encouraging dependence:

Daniel uses food banks because he regularly gambles away his cash. He said: "I had to come to the food bank because the Government gave me my money all in one day which I've gambled away. It's them to blame for why I'm at the food bank. *The Daily Star* (food banks, 23/10/15: 11).

This clearly mirrors the pattern seen in regards to welfare, discussed in the previous chapter, and shows the way in which this narrative, once established, is drawn upon to frame, and thus 'make sense' of the problem of poverty here. In common with much of the pro-austerity discourse seen up until this point, The 'handout argument' again warns against trapping people in poverty by discouraging 'the poor' from working their own way out of poverty:

[Food banks] are a hand-out, not a hand-up and it's no surprise claimants are queuing up as new ones open [...] But I fear that the food banks and their tonnes of free food are part of the problem, and definitely not part of the answer. How does a food bank help a youngster get a job? *The Sun* (food banks, 17/04/14: 6).

Work rather than food banks is the solution to poverty, a business minister said yesterday as the government moved to avert a row with the Church of England over the growing use of charity to combat hunger in the UK. *The Times* (food banks, 08/12/14: 2).

### **6.2.2 The Appropriate *Response* to Poverty**

The question of what should be done about poverty is another central theme. Given that the topics of this chapter raise the issues of insecurity and poverty, the question of what should be done about these issues naturally arises. Of course, the 'answer' here is strongly dependent upon whether poverty is viewed as resulting from problems within the social structure *or* as something that is 'natural', normal, and/or largely the result of individual choices.

Where the coverage is more critical, reference is made to the state having absolved itself of responsibility in respect to poverty, and of actively worsening it through austerity. The reference to austerity as a political choice in the second example – 'it is not being caused by a natural disaster. This is man-made hunger' - shows a clear break from the hegemony of the necessity narrative. Note also the reference to 'Britain's poorest families', which portrays the victims of this situation as ordinary people - people just 'like us'; demonstrating the struggle (see following section) to represent, and thus to speak for such people:

Tory ministers have been challenged to work a week on zero-hours contracts after figures revealed that the number of people on the "no work, no pay" deals rose by almost 20 per cent in a year. TUC general secretary Frances O'Grady threw down the gauntlet as the

Office for National Statistics revealed 744,000 people were trapped on the contracts between April to June 2015. *The Mirror.co.uk* (zero-hour contracts, 03/09/15)

UK hunger is at emergency levels. This is all the more shameful because it is not being caused by a natural disaster. This is man-made hunger, caused by the destruction of the welfare safety net and a refusal to tackle the issues affecting Britain's poorest families. *The Mirror*. (food banks, 16/04/14: 8-9).

Related concerns are expressed regarding the shifting of responsibility for the vulnerable away from the government and onto communities themselves. Here the issue of food bank reliance is suggested to be the 'thin end of the wedge' in terms of normalising poverty:

My real concern is that food banks will become an accepted way that we take care of our most vulnerable members of society. I fear we will no longer be outraged that our country has to resort to such desperate measures." *The Sun* (food banks, 19/10/13: 11).

Such concerns are directly challenged within the pro-austerity discourse however, with the roll-back of state assistance being described as not just a necessary, but indeed a *positive* development. An attempt to reframe the austerity debate in terms of an economic *and* moral 'necessity' is clear in the following extract, with its references to welfare dependency, and the cost thereof – 'Labours' mess'<sup>31</sup>. Such references imply that far from helping 'the poor', financial aid will simply 'fund' a decline in work ethic:

The implication of the campaigners is that the Government should abandon welfare reform and instead provide every claimant with enough cash to live a comfortable life style without having to work. But it is precisely that attitude that got Britain into such a terrible mess under Labour. *The Express* (food banks, 17/04/14: 14).

Arguments of this kind, which warn of incentivising 'lifestyle choices', again serve to warn of a particular 'type' of person who will readily exploit any assistance given to them. Yet a feature of the pro-austerity discourse here is that voluntary help in the form of charities (here food banks) is, *at times*, cast as the lesser of two evils in this regard, and even as a sign of a 'decent society':

Iain Duncan Smith today defied criticism of the government's welfare cuts, insisting he 'welcomes' food banks in Britain. The Work and Pensions Secretary said the rise in the number of charities handing out food parcels was evidence of 'decent' people helping those who have 'fallen into difficulty". *The MailOnline* (food banks, 25/06/15).

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<sup>31</sup> As Stanley (2014) notes, the coalition Government of 2010 repeatedly blamed the economic downturn upon the previous Labour Governments 'reckless' spending.

As a side note, it is perhaps significant that the author of this extract is seemingly aware of the contentious subject matter, and makes strategic use of inverted commas to maintain distance from the quote.

Whilst something of an exception is, at times, made for charitable assistance, the idea of ‘handouts’ still remains, as I discuss above, somewhat problematic, and is often cast as being at odds with the idea of encouraging people to work their way out of poverty. In this respect, the issue of flexibility within the labour market is often portrayed as a way of creating jobs in difficult times in order that the unemployed can be ‘reached down to’, and offered the chance to help themselves:

Labour claims to be on the side of working people against those evil Tories. But the plain truth is that if Labour does indeed legislate so that employers can only offer fixed-hours contracts, some businesses will simply opt to take on fewer workers. How is that helping the economy or those looking for work? [...] The only way we all prosper and the economy grows is if business prospers and grows. *The ExpressOnline* (zero-hour contracts, 03/04/15).

Note also, the inclusive in-grouping in this example: ‘working people’ and ‘the only way we all prosper’. Such attempts to speak for the people are increasingly common in the coverage here. Indeed the ‘struggle’ over who represents, and speaks for, the ‘ordinary people’ is itself a key theme.

### **6.2.3 The ‘Ordinary People’: Who are they? And Who ‘Represents’ Them?**

The concept of the ‘ordinary hard-working people’ has been a continuing theme across the coverage of all topics up until this point, and as such has been discussed at length in the previous two chapters. What is noteworthy in the coverage of food bank use and zero-hour contracts is that, perhaps owing to the controversial nature of these topics, the act of speaking for ‘ordinary’ people becomes almost synonymous with expressing credible and indeed *acceptable* views. The extracts below show the appeal to ordinary people from both perspectives within the debate about zero-hour contracts. A common factor here being the increasing appeal to ‘authentic’, ‘real life’ people, who are often contrasted with an out of touch political class:

Tory Cabinet minister Iain Duncan Smith came under fire today after suggesting that zero-hours contracts should be re-named 'flexible hours'. Labour said the 'Marie Antoinette'

moment by the Work and Pensions Secretary showed 'just how out of touch the Tories are' about the lives of working people. *The MailOnline* (zero-hour contracts, 17/04/15).

We have had a jobs miracle. For [then Labour leader Ed] Miliband to argue against more jobs for the working classes shows how far removed from Labour's roots he is. *The Sun* (zero-hour contracts, 29/03/15: 16-17).

There are key differences in how the 'ordinary people' are portrayed within both discourses however. The most apparent difference between the two discourses is the emphasis placed upon potential downward social mobility within the more critical coverage. The result of which is the construction of a group united by *circumstance*; that of living with insecurity. Here *both* the working class and the increasingly precarious - or at least *anxious* - middle class are portrayed as 'ordinary people' in danger of slipping into poverty. Note how the newsworthiness of the latter two extracts appears to derive from residents of middle class areas (and 'middle of the road people') turning to a food bank:

It is the first time Jan and Lucia have used the food bank. Both lost their jobs from a catering company. *The Times* (food banks, 01/03/14: 10).

The financial plight of middle class families was revealed yesterday after one of Britain's wealthiest seaside resorts opened a food bank. The golden sands of St Annes, on the Fylde coast, have boasted well-heeled locals and visitors since its Victorian heyday. *The Express* (food banks, 06/05/14: 27).

Kim Cook, 52, of the local Trussell Trust food bank, said despite St Anne's reputation for wealth, it is susceptible to the same struggles as all British towns. "People will be shocked to hear about the opening of an emergency food bank in what seems like such an affluent area. There are quite a few people who have property but are strapped for cash. St Annes is facing the same problems as other places. It is hitting middle of the road people - people just in ordinary jobs. Lots have found themselves made redundant. (Ibid).

Within the pro-austerity discourse, however, the 'ordinary people' are again categorised with reference to shared morals, the inclusiveness of this group resting again on the exclusion of the moralised 'other'. Thus we see the now familiar pattern of a vague group, for example, the 'hard-working Brits', contrasted with a 'type' who, given the incentive, will make costly immoral choices at their expense. The relationship to the previous themes is obvious here: poverty is downplayed, and indeed called into doubt altogether, through reference to poor individual choices, as in the example below:

A benefits scrounger has blasted the Government for giving him too much cash. Daniel Shaw gets almost £1,400 a month in handouts – more than many hard-working Brits earn. *The Daily Star* (food banks, 23/10/15: 11).



Within the coverage of zero-hour contracts, the emphasis upon the hardworking nature of these people positions them as the beneficiaries of the opportunities which are supposedly created when businesses are free from the shackles of regulation:

A job is better than no job. It is the reason why, in the 1930s, people marched in their thousands to demand work. They marched for the dignity of bringing home a pay packet.

[...]

People want protection from employers? That is why there is a minimum wage and the Government legislates to prevent abuses. But two million more Britons with work? That is good for them and for their families. And it is good for our highly indebted country. *The Sun* (zero-hours contracts, 29/03/15: 16-17).

And in contrast to the emphasis upon downward social mobility seen within the more critical coverage, here an emphasis is placed upon possible *upward* mobility:

Starting in a "low-quality" job does not mean you have to stay there for the rest of your life. But you need to start somewhere. *The Sun* (zero-hours contracts, 29/03/15: 16-17).

What the themes demonstrate, then, is a clash of competing discourses within the coverage of these controversial and contested topics. Since the issues here bring the deeper problems of rising poverty and insecurity into the public eye, social class is again a useful perspective from which to critically analyse the coverage. It is important to keep in mind that the topics of food bank reliance and zero-hour contracts likely represent the mere tip of the iceberg in terms of these problems (see Brinkley, 2013; Loopstra et al, 2018).

The prominent coverage of such issues is of course relevant from a media perspective, given that up until this point the media had tended (as shown in the previous two chapters) to not only reproduce, but actively develop elite-serving narratives of austerity. As could be seen in the previous chapter, however, the hegemonic status of this discourse began to be challenged, something which is intensified here. The prominent coverage of the topics of this chapter may reflect the increasingly contentious nature of austerity. Indeed the very nature of the topics puts the previously dominant pro-austerity discourse on the back foot for the first time here. For this reason, I focus first on the more critical coverage, before turning attention to how this is countered within the pro-austerity discourse.

## 6.3 Discourse Analysis

### 6.3.1 Poverty, Insecurity, Precarity: Putting *Downward Mobility* on the Agenda

Whilst critical coverage occurs much more frequently across these topics, it should be noted that it often draws heavily upon quotation. For example:

The [Trussell] Trust said rising numbers were turning to food banks because their incomes are "squeezed". Its chairman, Chris Mould, said the figures were "shocking". He added: "This figure is just the tip of the iceberg of UK food poverty. We have seen things get worse, rather than better, for many people on low incomes. "Unless there is determined action to ensure the benefits of national economic recovery reach people on low incomes, life won't be better for the poorest any time soon". *The Sun* (food banks, 16/04/14: 4).

Wells and Caraher (2014: 1437), themselves analysing media coverage of food bank reliance, suggest that the heavy use of quotes may be a result of increasing commercial pressures on journalists leading to uncritical reproduction of source material (*churnalism*). Another plausible explanation, however, would be that the impersonal style which results may be an attempt to maintain a degree of 'distance' from what is printed. In other words, the quote-heavy coverage may reflect an attempt by some within the media to acknowledge the challenge to what has, until now, been a dominant pro-austerity discourse without *directly* calling this discourse into question.

Attributing views to others, who are in a position to speak with authority, lends credibility to the argument (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013), and it would therefore be a mistake to write off the discourse as simple factual reporting (on the views held by others), since the quotes themselves seem to be included in such a way as to make specific points within the text as a whole; points which touch upon both the nature and causes of poverty. Consider the extract above, attributed to the chairman of the Trussell Trust. The reference to people being 'squeezed' could, in the context of economic downturn, apply to much of the population (Lavalette, 2017; Warren, 2017), and therefore resonate with the much of the audience. In this respect, the choice of quote appears to build consensus for a sympathetic view of those facing hardship by referring to problems with which much of the population can reasonably be expected to identify.

The example below is interesting in that it discusses the insecurity of zero-hour contracts as a contributing factor in food bank reliance, making explicit the link between the two:

Zero-hours contracts have been criticised because staff have no guarantee of regular work, and get no sick pay or holiday pay. The contracts have been the focus of an election battle

between Tories and Labour. Trussell Trust manager Ewan Gurr says: "The number one driving factor for people at food banks is low income. An increasing number describe the pressure zero-hour contracts have put on them and their families." *The Sun* (food banks, 06/04/15: 7).

Again the style is somewhat impersonal; the use of the term 'have been criticised' avoiding both attribution *and* appraisal. Yet, by highlighting the 'debate', the controversial nature of the topic is made clear (see Wells and Caraher, 2014: 1435). Most relevant here, however, is the aforementioned linking of insecure work and food poverty, since this puts the link *itself* on the agenda. In making this link, the idea of the working poor suffering extreme hardship is foregrounded. The working poor are, as I demonstrate in the previous two chapters, idealised within the dominant discourse to the extent that they are largely beyond moral reproach, being held up as something of a moral yardstick - lauded for their work ethic and selfless sense of duty. The emphasis here upon such people being victims of food poverty is thus significant in that it appears to use the idealisation of the low-paid worker to undermine the pro-austerity discourse *on its own terms*. The reference to the pressure that such insecurity has put upon 'them *and their families*' (emphasis added) further invites empathy, since it alludes to the innocent victims of circumstance, and in doing so serves to re-construct the idea of the deserving poor to some degree.

Note also the description of those affected as 'increasing', hinting at the danger of casualised work becoming normalised. The foregrounding of spreading precarity, and the idea that unforeseen *personal crises* (such the loss of a job, as in the example below) can land almost *anyone* in poverty feature heavily within the coverage, and are often supported by anecdotes. Again the use of 'real life' examples, in the context of contested and controversial issues, lends credibility and authority to the discourse (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013):

It is the first time Jan and Lucia have used the food bank. Both lost their jobs from a catering company. Jan, 59, arrived at the food bank in tears. "It's been a bad day," she apologised. "It takes a lot to come somewhere like this. My son was appalled. I've worked since I was a teenager, but once you go on to benefits, everything falls into arrears." *The Times* (food banks, 01/03/14: 10).

It is worth keeping in mind that the use of such exemplars tends to have meaning beyond the individual case; representing instead a 'typical' example of a whole group (see Atkins and Finlayson, 2013; Tyler, 2008). The emphasis upon extreme poverty amongst those possessing the 'correct attitudes', the motivation, discipline, and work ethic to have - as the subject of the extract puts it - "worked since I was a teenager" is used to highlight injustice here. Aspects of the 'traditional' (respectable) working class identity (Kitch 2007; Lawler, 2005,

2014) are foregrounded to undermine moralised views of poverty, and instead emphasise systemic failure. In other words, the problem of economic inequality which *cannot* be explained away through moralising discourse - the very 'problem which class names' (Tyler, 2015: 496) - is put back on the agenda.

It is worth recalling that in the previous chapter I suggested that the plight of the poorest may have influenced critical sentiments within the media, with these people serving as a warning regarding general trends towards insecurity (see p139). The frequent use of anecdotes within the present coverage would seem to suggest that something similar is occurring. In this respect it is perhaps noteworthy that the following extract features extensive direct quotation of someone whose family was forced to rely upon a food bank: the article begins as follows:

As a report reveals one million food parcels have been handed out including 330,000 to hungry children, a professional working couple tell how they had to rely on food banks to feed their baby. NHS PA Hannah Chadwick, 31, and her engineer husband Dean, 27, ran out of money to feed themselves and their 16-month-old son Hunter after their car needed £700 of repairs.

Before handing over to the family in question:

We are a hard-working family and never buy anything on credit. We are proud of being able to provide for ourselves and didn't want to beg off someone else. So going to the food bank was our only option. We were a bit embarrassed but in August we turned up at our local centre. There was a real mix of people there. We expected to see homeless people or those fighting addiction. But there were also professional workers, older people and families. The Mirror (food banks, 16/04/14: 4).

Again the emphasis upon 'sound morals', such as a strong work ethic, responsibility, and determination to be self-reliant, is clear, both in the description: 'a professional working couple', and in their own words: "We are a hard-working family and never buy anything on credit. We are proud of being able to provide for ourselves". The genuine nature of the hardship faced by such people is also emphasised; note how the subjects, despite being 'embarrassed' and not wanting to 'beg off someone else', describe turning to a food bank as their 'only option'.

The idea of increasing insecurity, and *unpredictability*, is developed further through contrast with the previous *expectation* on the part of the subject as to what type of person might be encountered at a food bank, and the reality: "We *expected* to see homeless people or those fighting addiction. *But* there were also professional workers, older people and families" (emphasis added). With this reference, the true situation is portrayed, through the words of

someone with firsthand experience, as somewhat shocking. Indeed the central theme of the article is one of ‘normal people’ facing what is not, and should not be seen as, a normal situation. From the personal descriptions, to the reference to a situation that many might be expected to relate to -‘their car needed £700 of repairs’ -the discourse in this example appears to be aimed, in large part, at building empathy (see KhosraviNik, 2009: 484).

Whilst the previous extracts reference the dangers of far-reaching insecurity from which few are genuinely ‘safe’, the extract below takes this reasoning much further.

People in affluent middle-class areas like Cheltenham, Welwyn Garden City and North Lakes are increasingly turning to food banks after running out of cash, according to a new charity report published today. The study claims that the numbers referred to food banks to feed themselves and their families has nearly doubled in these areas. They include an increasing number of working people unable to make ends meet, particularly those on zero-hours contracts. *TheTimes.co.uk* (food banks, 09/06/14).

The very ‘newsworthiness’ of this extract appears to derive from the fact that residents of ‘affluent middle-class’ areas are facing poverty - that *even* those who *ought not* to be in such a position nonetheless are. The emphasis placed upon the residents of ‘affluent’ areas facing struggle is noteworthy, as it seems to suggest that *now* we ought to be concerned, now that that *even* those who were previously secure are finding themselves amongst the victims of an increasingly unpredictable and precarious social order (Standing, 2014; Stenning, 2020).

Just as moralised discourses of ‘the poor’ hold rhetorical appeal, by providing a safe distance (Skeggs, 2005), and therefore a sense of security when economic distinction is threatened (Tyler, 2015; Valentine and Harris, 2014), the discourse of *unexpected insecurity* may tap into underlying anxieties. Given the economic context, such discourse could evoke intrinsic fears of slipping down the social order (Lawler, 2005; Stenning, 2020; Tyler, 2015).

Furthermore, such discourse could reasonably be expected to find *increasingly* fertile ground as the impacts of insecurity become both more apparent and more widespread – transcending those traditionally affected. In this respect, it is indeed significant that those facing poverty are cast as a warning of an impact which has been too deep. Discourse such as that shown above may therefore reflect an increasingly strained acceptance of pro-austerity narratives, and an increased reluctance to reproduce them. This further suggests that a process of sense-making is occurring as the ‘debate’ plays out within the media coverage of what are essentially the most visible extremes of much wider issues.

The following extract, taken from the coverage of zero-hour contracts, is also critical in tone, highlighting the potential for exploitation. This example again references effects that have gone ‘too far’; somewhat curiously being supportive of ‘free enterprise and competition’, but not where ‘big players dominate’:

I have spoken a lot recently about the cabal of big business and big politics that has become too dominant in the way our country is run. You will find no keener champion of free enterprise and competition than me. But where a few big players dominate things, competition can fail and people can end up getting exploited. So today I want to blow the whistle on an issue that concerns multinational companies exploiting employees. I am talking about the recent trend towards zero-hours contracts for working class jobs. *The ExpressOnline* (zero-hour contracts, 18/04/14).

The setting apart of the ‘people’ from societal elites: ‘big business and big politics’, ‘a few big players’, draws a dividing line in terms of interests, effectively grouping together *all* those who might be exploited *from above*. Of course this is in stark contrast to divisions constructed on moral terms, which set apart an exploitative underclass from ‘us’, ‘the (ordinary) people’. The rare occurrence of explicit class reference seen here can thus be interpreted as an attempt to highlight those worst effected by exploitation, owing to concerns regarding a broader impact. Yet it is the uneasy way in which the author draws upon two distinct, contradictory discourses which is most striking here. Note the way in which the more critical discourse is constrained by a free-market discourse, in a way that neatly sums up the often confused, chaotic nature of the coverage. Here the explicitly mentioned working class are suggested to be a group which benefits when ‘free enterprise and competition’ function correctly. This logic however betrays a profound lack of understanding of the interaction between competitive markets and class. As Davies (2015), drawing upon Marx’s concept of the *reserve army of labour*, argues, this ‘race to the bottom’ in terms of working conditions is not a sign of ‘failed’ competition at all. On the contrary, it is a necessary *requirement* for competing in an unregulated market, one where insecure work is rapidly becoming the norm (see Cunningham et al, 2016; Davies, 2015; Heyes, 2013). In other words, unless such exploitative working arrangements are regulated against, competitive pressure to maximise profit (and thereby survive within the market) will lead all those ‘competing’ to drive down labour costs as far as possible – in large part through the imposition of such ‘employer-friendly flexibility’ (see Fleetwood, 2007: 389). This contradiction is perhaps telling of a difficulty in seeing beyond an hegemonic neoliberal frame of competitive markets (see Rustin, 2009; Cerny, 2008), one which holds critical narratives in check by forcing them to reject the system *in its entirety* (and thus risk being themselves rejected for appearing too

‘radical’) or else to ‘play ball’; to critique *only to the extent* that the fundamental social structure remains unchallenged<sup>32</sup>. In spite of this inherent contradiction, it is noteworthy that as the article continues, reference is made to the anxious existence faced by those in insecure employment:

At its worst this rapidly proliferating practice reminds me of the way dockers used to have to gather at the dock gates in the 1920s and a foreman would come out and point to those he could use and tell the rest to go home with no money in their pockets. To expect people to pay their bills and raise a family under employment conditions like this is just not on. *The ExpressOnline* (zero-hour contracts, 18/04/14).

### **6.3.2 An ‘Achievement at Risk’: Re-establishing ‘Common-Sense’ Narratives**

The topics of food bank reliance and zero-hour contracts clearly invite a more critical view of poverty and insecurity. Considering once more the dominance of pro-austerity discourse across the previous chapters, their prominent coverage *in itself* seems to suggest an awareness of growing unease and that, possibly in reaction to this unease, the media are being drawn into the ensuing debate as the legitimacy of official narratives become ever more strained. Yet in times of crisis, the elites - those who benefit most from the status quo, and who hold the greatest influence within the social order - will attempt to maintain, and even reinforce it for their own benefit (Hall et al, 2013; Peck 2010). In terms of media position, it is perhaps revealing to see a determined ‘counter-attack’ on behalf of those subscribing to the (until now dominant) elite discourse. Whilst this discourse may have initially been put on the back foot by such salient - and newsworthy - examples of poverty and insecurity that appear to have opened the door to more critical perspectives, within this ‘counter-attack’ these issues are framed in ways which are fundamentally different. Here, many of the narratives established within the coverage of the previous topics are rehashed, in an apparent attempt to undermine critical perspectives and thereby maintain the ‘common sense’ nature of the elite-serving discourse. Consider the following:

A central theme of Left-wing politics over the past four years has been the supposed callousness of the Tory led coalition. Ministers have been subjected to a barrage of condemnation about the brutal impact of their measures, especially welfare reform. In one typical hyperbolic accusation, the Labour MP Tristram Hunt claimed that “the approach of the Tories to the welfare state reeks of the 1800s” where some young people “were so starved that they gnawed on rotten bones and putrid horseflesh to stay alive”. *The Express* (food banks, 17/04/14: 14).

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<sup>32</sup>See chapter 7 (p192) for a more in depth discussion.

The first thing to note here is the continuation of the pattern of labelling alternative, competing discourses as ‘out there’ beyond the realms of what is ‘acceptable’ political thought (again, see discussion section of the previous chapter, and McChesney and Foster 2003 on this point). The opening statement in the extract above refers to a central theme of ‘Left wing politics’, and in doing so sets the scene for subsequent criticism. By labelling a view as ‘left wing’ (or right wing for that matter) what is achieved is to pre-emptively position the view away from the accepted mainstream ‘centre’ and therefore label such a view as somewhat extreme (McChesney and Foster 2003), and therefore as a *minority* view. This facilitates any subsequent critique, as the reader is invited to conclude that there is a flawed logic to the discourse in question, which prevents it from enjoying majority consensus. This further allows the author to exploit social inertia, since the ‘minority’ view must in effect prove itself worthy of mainstream acceptance, whereas the counter argument is portrayed as already having widespread acceptance.

Here, the attempt to discredit opposing viewpoints foreshadows a radically different perspective on the nature of poverty, and the appropriate response to it. In this example the author uses the breaking consensus itself to frame the subsequent argument, portraying the opposing perspective as completely irrational and unreasonable through the use of ‘extreme’ terms: for instance, ‘Ministers have been subjected to a *barrage* of condemnation about the *brutal* impact of their measures [...] in one typically *hyperbolic* accusation’ (emphasis added). This ‘hyperbolic accusation’ – ‘Labour MP Tristram Hunt claimed that “the approach of the Tories to the welfare state reeks of the 1800s” where some young people “were so starved that they gnawed on rotten bones and putrid horseflesh to stay alive”’ -is presented as if it were meant as a literal description of the present day situation, thereby subjecting it to ridicule. By subjecting the quote to such ridicule, the issue of poverty is itself, by extension, called into doubt. The fact that such a statement is ‘typical’ of the left allows the author to go on the attack as the article progresses, with those taking a critical view of poverty being simply grouped together as part of ‘the left’; a group marked not just by its extreme, implausible views, but also by its excessive sympathy:

Nowhere has that kind of hysterical propaganda been peddled with more enthusiasm than on the question of food banks. According to the Left growing numbers of the poorest in society are resorting to these centres because of the Tories’ ideological determination to impose benefit cuts. “Britain isn’t eating,” proclaimed one recent poster from the pressure group Church Action On Poverty, which argues that the British Government has violated the basic human right to food. The emotional blackmail was cranked up another few notches yesterday with the release of figures showing an increase in the use of food banks.



And later in the article:

But despite the efforts of campaigners, it is wrong to see the growth in food bank usage as the consequence of supposedly barbaric Tory policies. The truth is that our society has always had vulnerable people in need but they could not go to food banks because none were in existence until the first one was established in 2004. If an organisation offers something for free, inevitably people will take it. That is human nature. *The Express* (food banks, 17/04/14: 14).

Having built up the ‘left wing propaganda’ narrative, the author makes an ‘assertion of truth’ (see Chouliariki, 2008: 1) regarding the nature of poverty: ‘The truth is that our society has always had vulnerable people’. Despite being portrayed as the ‘voice of reason’ in contrast to ‘hysterical hyperbole’, this view is troubling for the level of normalisation. Genuine concerns regarding poverty are downplayed through something resembling an appeal to tradition. Clearly, the idea that a problem can cease to be such simply by having existed for a long time is flawed in its logic, and it is worth recalling that precisely the opposite logic is implied in the case of the ‘welfare problem’, which is portrayed as something which has been going on for too long, and must therefore be tackled as a matter of urgency (as I demonstrate on p121). Yet in making this assertion the author implies that nothing has changed and that, as such, there is nothing morally objectionable about current poverty. This is important since framing the issue solely in terms of the *existence* of poverty distracts from the fact that poverty has *increased* following the economic crisis precisely because of austerity policies<sup>33</sup> (Cooper et al, 2014; Lavalette, 2017; Perry et al, 2014).

The second part of the extract demonstrates how class constructions are exploited to further the argument. Again, ‘the poor’ are portrayed as an unthinking ‘mass’ (see Lawler, 2005), prone to taking the easiest path regardless of the moral implications; ‘If an organisation offers something for free, inevitably people will take it. That is human nature’. The portrayal of the ‘lower classes’ as an unthinking ‘mass’, one defined by its abjectness, yet threatening by its proximity, has been noted previously (see Lawler, 2005: 441, Tyler, 2013: 3). When the author speaks here of ‘human nature’ an implicit moral judgement is cast regarding the motivations, and the honesty, of such people. Despite the reference to ‘human’ nature, therefore, what is actually referred to here is a debased instinctive animal like ‘nature’, lacking what Lawler, (2005: 439-441) refers to as the ‘pure mind’ of the full human condition - the very basis of moral reasoning. In other words, those constructed here are prone to an

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<sup>33</sup> Note that these policies are sarcastically referred to here as the ‘*barbaric* Tory policies’, in what appears to be a further reference to the supposedly ‘hyperbolic’ tendencies of ‘the left’.

immorality that simply results from their inability to transcend their immediate desires, and to act *other than in accordance with unfettered self-interest*.

As the article progresses the issue of poverty is more explicitly denied:

The entire case against the Government lacks any credibility. If our country is really so hungry then how come we are constantly told that we are facing an “obesity time bomb”, with most of us eating too much food rather than too little. Nor can it be pretended that all food bank users are in desperate need. The majority are, of course – and it is a tribute to our tradition of compassion that they are given help – but there are undoubtedly others who exploit this generosity. One reporter, on a recent visit to the Hastings food bank, encountered a couple who arrived by taxi, even though there was a bus service between their home and the centre. A disillusioned volunteer has stated that a lot of the clients “are heroin addicts who use the food as a form of street currency. *The Express* (food banks, 17/04/14: 14).

The contradiction at the start of this extract suggests that the article is ideological in nature, based not on making any coherent point in itself, but simply on *discrediting* alternative views. This contradiction, which could easily be missed on an uncritical reading, starts with the author asking ‘If our country is really so hungry then how come we are constantly told that we are facing an “obesity time bomb”’, before asserting ‘Nor can it be pretended that all food bank users are in desperate need. *The majority are, of course* – and it is a tribute to our tradition of compassion that they are given help’ (emphasis added). Leaving aside the reference to ‘our tradition of compassion’ for a moment (although I will return to it later), what is clear is that the central point of inequality is, perhaps deliberately, being missed by reference to the ‘obesity time bomb’. Clearly the presence of an obesity problem within the UK does not, *in any way*, preclude food poverty from *also* occurring. Notwithstanding the flawed logic, this denial of poverty is ‘supported’ through the use of anecdote, again bringing ‘real life’ experience into the report. Such ‘real examples’, as discussed above, lend credibility by putting those best positioned to know at the heart of the discourse (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013). Here the image is conjured up of a well-meaning volunteer who *once* sympathised, and who thus supposedly once formed part of the referenced ‘left’. Yet this person has since seen the ‘true’ situation first hand, where charitable help is exploited by the morally bankrupt and parasitic element of society.

This of course removes any question of responsibility for the plight of ‘the poor’. After all, if even charity is supposedly exploited and ultimately wasted, then it is implicitly suggested that any genuine effort to assist this ‘type’ of person would meet with the same result. If anything, even the ‘culture of compassion’ is suggested as being *too generous* here. The idea of

‘perverse incentives’ - common within the pro-austerity discourse – therefore serves as a *warning* here regarding excessive sympathy undermining that which austerity has achieved:

The implication of the campaigners is that the Government should abandon welfare reform and instead provide every claimant with enough cash to live a comfortable lifestyle without having to work. But it is precisely that attitude that got Britain into such a terrible mess under Labour. The benefits system not only became unaffordable but also provided perverse incentives towards mass idleness and personal irresponsibility. Thankfully, due to the tough decisions taken by the coalition, this disastrous culture of welfare dependency is at last in retreat, with the result that the economy is recovering and unemployment is falling. But that achievement would be put at risk if the siren voices of the Left, full of synthetic indignation, had their way. *The Express* (food banks, 17/04/14: 14).

The combination of a moralising narrative of ‘lifestyle choices’ (MacDonald et al, 2014: 202; Patrick, 2014: 709), and passivising discourse, for example: ‘perverse incentives towards mass idleness and personal irresponsibility’, ‘this disastrous culture of welfare dependency’, is again used to portray a ‘type’ of person - epitomised here by the aforementioned dishonest heroin addict. This ‘type’, being prone to making erroneous lifestyle choices when enabled to do so through ‘misguided’ help, is employed as a warning against an emergent anti-austerity discourse, which, in the context of the controversial topics here, threatens to undermine the hegemony of elite-serving discourse. This could be interpreted as an attempt to ‘shift’ the scope of the debate away from the impacts of austerity altogether - the concern of the ‘hysterical, hyperbolic left’ - and to ask instead whether *any* help is appropriate, given the risk of exploitation. The emphasis upon the ‘parasitic tendencies’ of those who exploit society’s sympathies bears a clear similarity to the idea of the welfare scrounger, and thus draws upon what has essentially become a common-sense understanding (Jensen, 2014; Jensen and Tyler, 2015) of the ‘type’ of person referred to.

The extract from earlier (p152) sees this ‘link’ being made explicitly, through use of a real life ‘exemplar’:

A benefits scrounger has blasted the Government for giving him too much cash. Daniel Shaw gets almost £1,400 a month in handouts – more than many hard-working Brits earn. But the serial convict complains it’s not his fault he hasn’t worked for two years. In a shocking new TV documentary Daniel says: “It’s the Government’s fault because they’re making me pick the easy way. *The Daily Star* (food banks, 23/10/15: 11).

To give some context here, the subject of this extract features in the article having appeared on television, and is said to rely upon food banks as a result of squandering benefit payments. Clearly, the subject is held up as a flesh and blood example of a ‘welfare scrounger’. Before proceeding with the analysis, a curious point must be noted however, a point which makes

clear the ideological nature of the report. As the subject of this extract had appeared on a television programme, his story was covered by several publications, including *The Daily Mail* where a similar (if slightly less extreme) moralised depiction is employed<sup>34</sup>. However, in the *Daily Mail* it is revealed (towards the end of the article) that the subject is actually in full time employment: “Despite his earlier comments on work not being worth his time, by the end of the programme, it was revealed Daniel has gained full-time employment after moving back to Manchester”. (*The MailOnline* 26/10/15).

Returning to the current extract, and putting aside the rather liberal approach taken with regard to facts, the subject is used here to put a face to the figurised ‘scrounger’. A picture is included in the original article, featuring the subject looking dishevelled, wearing a baseball cap backwards whilst rolling a cigarette. This is likely no coincidence; as Lawler (2005: 437) suggests, in classed depictions appearances are ‘made to mean’, and to signal a deeper pathology. Here the threat is spelled out to the reader, complete with a flesh and blood example, of a particular type - who not ‘giving a toss’ (see below) - is prone to making immoral choices *at the slightest encouragement*. The fact that the ‘hard-working Brits’, despite the suggestion that many are no better off economically, do not succumb to such moral failings works to set them apart purely in moral terms. In other words, they are grouped in with the ‘rest of society’, being almost celebrated here in a way that glorifies their struggle (see Kitch, 2007). The suggested difference between these two proximate yet contrasting figures being that the ‘hard-working Brit’ knows their *duty* and will thus struggle on, whereas the parasitic scrounger (at best) does not, or does and chooses to ignore it all the same. Thus, the warning here is that the moral battle, so close to being won, is in danger of being lost; that too much sympathy for ‘the poor’ will ultimately encourage the latter and discourage the former.

As the article continues, the reader is invited to recognise the exact type of person who benefits from such misguided sympathy, as a whole host of moral failings are listed: idleness, irresponsibility, addiction, and perhaps most notably a *sense of entitlement*. Putting the words of the subject directly into the report only serves to make the insult to the low-paid worker seem all the more personal, further inviting feelings of resentment and anger:

In one shocking scene he splashes £140 of his benefit money in a casino after claiming he is hooked on gambling. But he is adamant he is doing nothing wrong when he squanders

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<sup>34</sup> To give an example: “I don’t want to be known as a lazy benefits scrounger but they are dishing all these benefits out left, right and centre and so I am going to take it.” (*TheMailOnline* 26/10/15).

cash from the taxpayer on betting. Daniel, right, said: “Technically there’s no rules to say what I should spend that money on. “I couldn’t give a toss what anyone thinks. Regardless if you’re on benefits or working, my money is my money and I’ll do what I want with it. As it stands I’m on more money than someone working on minimum wage in a shop makes. Why should I get a job when I earn more money on my benefits?” *The Daily Star* (food banks, 23/10/15: 11).

The subject of the article therefore comes to exemplify (Tyler, 2008) those who are so far removed from ‘us’, in terms of morals, and even the ability to reason morally, that they simply *cannot* attract empathy. This effectively drives out any idea that anger towards them may not be wholly deserved, reinforcing instead the common-sense view of the scrounger (Jensen, 2014; Jensen and Tyler, 2015) who can only be helped through coercion or, failing that, punished. Indeed, it matters not one bit whether austerity is understood as ‘helping’ - by removing ‘incentives’ - or punishing. It matters only that the reader recognises the ‘need’ (and fairness) of giving such people the metaphorical kick up the arse, whether in the motivational sense, or simply to vent rage.

### **6.3.3. ‘Hand-outs’ vs. ‘Hand-ups’: Reaching Down to ‘The Poor’**

Despite the many ‘warnings’ regarding excessive sympathy for ‘the poor’ and the potential for exploitation, the idea of charitable help in the form of food banks is at times portrayed as the lesser of two ‘evils’, as in the article considered above, with its reference to our ‘tradition of compassion’, to recap:

Nor can it be pretended that all food bank users are in desperate need. The majority are, of course – and it is a tribute to our tradition of compassion that they are given help – but there are undoubtedly others who exploit this generosity. *The Express* (food banks, 17/04/14: 14).

This may reflect the fact that charity is discretionary and grants no ‘entitlement’ upon its beneficiaries. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, it places the recipient in a deferential position. In contrast, the reversal of austerity policies that have in large part fuelled the rise in poverty (Cooper et al, 2014; Lavalette, 2017; Perry et al, 2014) - the very reversal warned against - would involve restoring an *obligation* upon society with regards to poverty; an obligation which would effectively grant entitlement to those who would supposedly then exploit it (Gilbert, 2013). The softer stance taken on charitable help therefore puts a veneer of ‘compassion’ upon the abandonment of this obligation.

Yet whilst such ‘compassionate’ help is cast as the lesser of two evils, in that it ensures the exploitative underclass is put firmly back in its place, it nonetheless remains problematic in that it comes too close to highlighting the need to act upon genuine poverty. This would explain why charitable help is, at other times in the coverage, problematised for supposedly providing the wrong *type* of help:

So what's the truth? Are people going hungry? I don't believe so. Our children are suffering from obesity, but that's another story. Let's remind ourselves of one basic fact - if something worth having is being handed out free, there will be many willing takers. There are more users because there are more food banks. It's obvious. They are a hand-out, not a hand-up and it's no surprise claimants are queuing up as new ones open, vouchers in hand obtained from almost anyone in authority. And don't tell me claimants will be refused - the good souls in charge seldom have the means to check hard-luck stories, and they don't. *The Sun* (food banks, 17/04/14: 6).

I fear that the food banks and their tonnes of free food are part of the problem, and definitely not part of the answer. How does a food bank help a youngster get a job? How does it improve literacy, and numeracy, or fit the jobless for the modern world of IT? Answer: It doesn't. It can't. *The Sun* (food banks) 17/04/14).

It is worth noting the use of the ‘obesity’ argument again for denying poverty here, not least since it is perhaps easy to see how such an argument could appear to be logically sound to the casual reader. The (somewhat patronising) term ‘good souls’ conjures up images strikingly similar to the volunteer discussed above, images of those who are well meaning but naive, uncritical, and all too quick to believe ‘hard-luck *stories*’. The use of ‘stories’ is significant here, in that it begs the question whether these stories are fact or fiction (the very question that the ‘naive’ good souls supposedly fail to ask), and thereby questions the honesty of those in poverty. In denying poverty, what is constructed here is again a group of people marked by both dubious morals, and the ease with which they are incentivised, not simply towards *reliance* upon the help of others, but *exploitation* of this help: “Let's remind ourselves of one basic fact - if something worth having is being handed out free, there will be many willing takers. There are more users because there are more food banks. It's obvious”. The reference to ‘handouts’ has negative connotations (Garland, 2016: 2) and is used here to further evoke an incentive-dependence narrative very similar to that of welfare ‘dependence’.

According to the discourse, the type of ‘help’ needed, therefore, is, firstly *coercive*, i.e. removing the ‘incentive’. Note that ‘food banks and their tonnes of free food’ are described as ‘part of the problem’. Secondly, it is *corrective*: the rhetorical questions ‘How does a food bank help a youngster get a job? How does it improve literacy, and numeracy, or fit the jobless for the modern world of IT?’ assume that all food bank users are indeed ‘jobless’, and

furthermore that they are jobless precisely because they lack the necessary attributes to help themselves. Given the emphasis upon the ‘dubiousness’ of such people, the implication here is that they lack such attributes precisely because they have never needed them, being content to ‘get by’ at the expense of others. The ‘poverty’ portrayed here is thus a poverty not of the material type, but of aspiration (see McKenzie, 2015: 20).

It should be noted that such a view is not supported by the evidence. As Loopstra et al (2017) and Purdam et al (2016) note, a significant number of food bank users are in work.

Garthwaite et al (2015, 2016), Perry et al, (2014), and Purdam et al (2016) demonstrate that, far from being content to maximise personal gains in any way they can, users of food banks often express shame and embarrassment at having to turn to charity, often doing so only as a last resort following an unforeseeable personal crisis. More generally, the idea of a underclass existing which aspires to nothing more than getting by at the expense of others is itself undermined by research (MacDonald et al, 2014; McDowall, 2011, Patrick, 2014; Shildrick et al, 2010), yet it is this very construct which ‘legitimises’ the argument here, an argument in favour of ‘helping’ these people to help *themselves*, of preparing them to work their own way out of their situation *and nothing more*.

Of course for these people to pull themselves up ‘by the bootstrap’ in this way, the opportunity to do so must exist. It is perhaps telling in this respect that the critical view of insecure working arrangements seen within the coverage of zero-hours contracts is itself countered by a discourse of ‘opportunity’. Here such insecurity (or ‘flexibility’) is portrayed as a means of freeing up employers from the shackles of regulation, so that they might ‘reach down’ to ‘the people’. For instance:

Labour claims to be on the side of working people against those evil Tories. But the plain truth is that if Labour does indeed legislate so that employers can only offer fixed-hours contracts, some businesses will simply opt to take on fewer workers *The ExpressOnline* (zero-hour contracts, 17/04/15: ).

For many business owners, zero-hours contracts let them flex their labour force to scale up when it is busy and scale back down when it is quiet. They also enable employers to hire people without the worry of big ticket items such as long term sick leave, maternity leave or holiday pay. *The Sun* (zero-hour contracts, 03/04/15: 11).

The following extracts are taken from an article that is typical of the pro free-market stance on the issue. This article is of particular interest owing to its explicit discussion of social class:

Ed Miliband [then Labour leader] is harming the very people he is supposed to help with his repellent message that certain jobs are demeaning. Miliband's first job in politics was working for his dad's mate [Labour Politician] Tony Benn. Lucky him to have such helpful parents. As a teenager, Ed was reviewing films and plays for LBC Radio. At that age, like many, I did a paper round. Privilege begins early. Most of us start in more humble work - washing hair in a hairdressers, stacking shelves in Tesco or frying chips at McDonald's. I had a Polish cleaner, Isabelle, who came to the UK and started at the bottom, cleaning City offices for the minimum wage. But she got an English boyfriend and her language skills improved. She moved up, got a job at Sainsbury's and within six months was manager of the bakery section. Starting in a "low-quality" job does not mean you have to stay there for the rest of your life. But you need to start somewhere. Miliband wants to stop that first step that he didn't need. But most others do. How patronising *The Sun* (zero-hour contracts, 29/04/15: 16-17).

As I mention previously, populist appeals to 'the people' are littered throughout the coverage of these topics, often contrasting them with 'out of touch' politicians. Given that the representation of the 'ordinary people' is a key site of struggle within the coverage of these contested topics it is significant that the author here assigns an *opposing* view to one such 'out of touch' politician: '[Ed] Miliband wants to stop that first step that he didn't need. But most others do. How patronising', whilst aligning their own view with 'ordinary people'. Note the effort made to resonate with this group, and thus to appear qualified to 'speak for' them<sup>35</sup> (see Atkins and Finlayson, 2013; Bourdieu, 1987: 14-15): 'At that age, *like many*, I did a paper round. Privilege begins early. *Most of us* start in more humble work' (emphasis added).

The contrast between 'privilege' and more 'humble beginnings' is clearly classed in nature. Yet the reference to such humble beginnings is doubly relevant to the construction of class here. Firstly, the very idea of being 'humble' is, when contrasted with undeserved privilege, as it is here, portrayed as something of a badge of honour, and a sign of working class 'authenticity' (see Reay, 2001: 337; Rhodes, 2011: 365-367); to be 'humble' in this sense is to be respectable by virtue of knowing ones place (Rhodes, 2011: 360), to be 'poor but *pure*' (Lawler, 2014: 712), and to embrace the glorified struggle of the economic martyr.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, the reference to 'beginnings' - a 'start' - draws upon neoliberal ideals of meritocracy (Littler, 2013; Manstead, 2018; Nunn, 2012; Warren, 2017) and works to cast zero-hour jobs as an 'opportunity'. This 'opportunity', to begin upon a

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<sup>35</sup> Although I would argue that the author nonetheless 'slips' several times by revealing their (relative) privilege; e.g. "I had a Polish *cleaner*", "A boring, repetitive task such as working in a factory is deemed insufficiently fulfilling by the Labour elite. *That may be so*", "Cleaning out blocked toilets, *I imagine*, is not much fun" (emphasis added).



fairytale rags to riches journey, is lent credibility through the use of yet another anecdote, interesting for its emphasis upon the development of ‘skills’, in a way which echoes the rhetoric employed in the coverage of the workfare policies (see previous chapter, also Friedli and Stearn, 2015). That the author explicitly mentions the fact that the subject of the anecdote is Polish may suggest a subtle hint at the supposedly threatened work ethic of the British working class. This interpretation would fit well with the references to opportunity discussed above, since the implicit suggestion here is that insecure work *ought* to be seen as a place to start - a ‘first step’ - and that it is only those lacking the motivation and work ethic who would not see it as such.

The final point to note here is the ‘ladder’ metaphor; ‘[Ed] Miliband wants to stop that *first step*’. Recalling Musolff’s (2012) argument about metaphors reducing complex arguments to a simple ‘model’ and thus reducing the potential for critique (see p76), the ‘ladder’ here is imagined as reaching down into the class structure itself. Therefore, under this understanding, the lower it reaches the more *inclusive* the opportunity. Yet the fact that low quality work tends to trap people in poverty as opposed to ‘lifting’ them out of it (Briken and Taylor, 2018; Shildrick et al, 2010; Nunn, 2012) clearly does not support this narrative. Indeed, a more accurate metaphor, if one were needed at all, might be that of a ‘ledge’ upon which the low-paid workers sit. Lowering this ledge simply lowers the life chances of those already ‘on’ the ledge *as well as* of those joining it.

As the article continues an idealised and nostalgic reference to the working class (see Kitch, 2007; Lawler, 2005, 2014; Rhodes, 2011) becomes clear. Note the emphasis upon the sense of duty to do undesirable, yet ‘socially useful’ work, and the reference to the intrinsic reward - of ‘dignity’ in this case - for doing so.

Are zero-hours contracts "low-quality" because of their conditions? No guaranteed hours, no pension, no holiday pay or sick pay. Anyone working for themselves gets none of that. But plenty of people still choose to be self-employed. Does the nature of a job make it "low quality"? A boring, repetitive task such as working in a factory is deemed insufficiently fulfilling by the Labour elite. That may be so, but UK business has a demand for such staff. Cleaning out blocked toilets, I imagine, is not much fun. But it still needs to be done. Is a "quality job" one that is socially useful? In that case, I wonder if [David] Cameron, [Ed] Miliband or [Jeremy] Paxman have quality jobs. One could argue that dustmen are far more beneficial to society. A job is better than no job. It is the reason why, in the 1930s, people marched in their thousands to demand work. They marched for the dignity of bringing home a pay packet. *The Sun* (zero-hour contracts, 29/04/15: 16-17).

Ironically, despite the nostalgic references to an idealised, romanticised sense of duty and identity, what is made clear in the above extract is that the *contemporary* working class must recognise the ‘need’ to adapt to the market for low quality precarious work. The fact that such working arrangements provide ‘no guaranteed hours, no pension, no holiday pay or sick pay’ is effectively de-problematised here, in that it is eclipsed by the emphasis upon the ‘opportunity’ provided to fulfil one’s duty; doing societies ‘dirty work’ and thereby gaining the intrinsic reward of ‘dignity’. By portraying the expectation of decent and fair working conditions as being fundamentally at odds with the creation of such opportunity, this very expectation is itself rendered problematic, not simply to the economy, but to working people *themselves*.

The portrayal of the nostalgic, idealised working class is therefore very selective in that it glorifies work ethic and sense of duty, but leaves ‘in the past’ the struggle for fair working conditions and pay; granting value to such people *only* in terms of their benefit to the economy (in reality big business). The fact that the working class are portrayed as those who stand to benefit from the removal of rights upon which they, more than anyone, depend succinctly demonstrates Pied’s (2011) point about how appeals to the ‘ordinary hard-working people’ often serve to ‘conceal the operation of class’ (Pied, 2015: 15), and in doing so legitimise ideas and policies which in actual fact serve elite interests.

Note how, for all the emphasis upon the honourable poor, inequality and structural disadvantage are completely obscured here through a discourse of meritocracy and earned privilege (Littler, 2013; Manstead, 2018; Nunn, 2012; Warren, 2017); one that keeps alive the hope that something better is at least *possible*.

Not everyone will climb their way up. But that is life. Some people are born with more brains than others. Some are born with entrepreneurial flair and drive. Some are born slim and beautiful and are paid to wear clothes. Life is not fair. Jobs differ and the people doing them differ. [...] We have had a jobs miracle. For Miliband to argue against more jobs for the working classes shows how far removed from Labour’s roots he is. *The Sun* (zero-hour contracts, 29/04/15: 16-17).

Indeed, such discourse suggests that whether you ‘make it’ or not is the result of *anything but* the social structure. The resulting message is that it really matters not where one ends up, because each individual will naturally rise to their ‘true’ position provided they have the ‘opportunity’ to take the first step; the one *most people* (see above) have had to take. The implication that no job is ‘demeaning’ is therefore lent credibility through the suggestion that some people are simply harder to demean, they will slot into their ‘role’ according to their

abilities and talents. The message thus becomes that those who perform low quality work should take heart in being honourably ‘poor but pure’, but also, and perhaps most importantly here, they should remain *hopeful*. Yet this may largely be a forlorn hope, since as Nunn (2012: 101-102) notes, the modern economy increasingly produces jobs which, whilst ‘socially useful’, are low paying and far from providing an opportunity are instead often an *endpoint*. In this context, the *illusion* of social mobility distracts from that which Nunn argues is necessary if inequality and lack of social mobility are to be redressed; an improvement in working conditions, pay, and security for those in lower-end jobs.

#### 6.4 Discussion

On August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014, during a televised football match in Middlesbrough, a group of fans unfurled a banner that read ‘*Being poor is not entertainment. Fuck Benefits Street!*’ (Tyler, 2015). They were protesting the controversial documentary of the same name, which featured deeply moralised depictions of those living in poverty. This creative act of resistance not only gave a voice to those who are normally voiceless, but also provided a glimpse of the anger simmering beneath the surface; the same anger - at the injustice of inequality - which had erupted into open rioting three years previously (Bennett, 2013; Slater, 2011; Tyler, 2013), only this time aimed at prevailing narratives which ‘justify’ the situation. Such acts of resistance are of course outliers, notable precisely because they give a voice to those who are ordinarily muted. Yet when they occur, protests and riots call into question the very legitimacy (see Taylor-Gooby, 2013) of politics which have not only seen inequality widen, but have plunged many into such desperate poverty that, despite living in one of the richest nations on earth, they have been forced to rely on charity simply to feed themselves and their families.

It is perhaps this question of legitimacy that is the key issue here. Whilst the impact of spending cuts, and welfare reforms have fallen disproportionately upon the poor, the effects of the crisis and austerity have nonetheless been felt throughout society (Lavalette, 2017; Tyler, 2015; Warren, 2017; Stenning, 2020). To some extent, barring genuine elites, it may well be fair to say we are indeed ‘all in it together’, even though, as the topics of this chapter clearly show, some of us are more ‘in it’ than others (to borrow from George Orwell). The fact that not all of those affected have ended up at a food bank, or living with the chronic uncertainty of never knowing if they will get enough hours’ work to pay essential costs, is

somewhat beside the point, since for every person who has there are many more that are just about getting by (see Brinkley, 2013; Loopstra et al, 2018) - something O'Brien and Kyprianou (2017) demonstrate through a series of interviews with low paid working people.

It is therefore easy to see why issues such as zero-hour contracts and food bank reliance are so contentious, and why the sense of injustice transcends those directly affected. Whilst they are obvious targets for critique, they are newsworthy as a result of being merely the visible extremes of insecurity, inequality, and poverty (Brinkley, 2013; Loopstra et al, 2018). In this sense they are the visible manifestations of wider problems affecting much of the population, and it is the very nature of these problems that is struggled over within the present coverage. To put it another way, they are natural focal points in a debate about the general direction in which society is moving with regards to security and equality. The media coverage of such contentious topics therefore presents an opportunity to look at how legitimacy is fought over as an increasing amount of people begin to 'feel the squeeze'.

Again, social class is central to this struggle, since classifications are not merely descriptive, they also perform an operative function (Tyler, 2015). Understandings of class are inextricably linked with understandings of the issues central to the current debate. To 'understand' class is to understand inequality: its nature, its causes, and most importantly in this context, the appropriate response to be taken. And it is worth recalling that within the coverage of the previous chapters, the dominant media discourse has tended to construct class in such a way as to obscure inequality and instead portray it as a moral concept - stirring up divisive anger in the process. This is a powerful rhetorical tool in terms of explaining away structural disadvantage, and therefore in bridging a growing legitimacy gap. Yet the controversy surrounding the topics of this chapter, however, appears to have reached something of a critical point, a point at which narratives which justify and legitimise the situation are as likely to be rejected as accepted, and this appears to be reflected in the coverage here. Indeed, as I argue above, the prominence of the coverage of food bank reliance and zero-hours contracts, possibly driven by political debates in the course of the 2015 election, and the commentary of prominent public figures, appears to have put the dominant elite discourse on the back foot here. The prominence of such controversial and contested topics may have further opened the door to those who hold more critical views, *including* some amongst the media. As such, the acknowledgement of the 'struggle' inherent to class (see Tyler, 2015) that became apparent previously (see previous chapter) is somewhat intensified here. Indeed, this pattern appears to evolve within the present coverage to reflect

the wider impacts of growing insecurity, precarity, and the *threat* of poverty, leading to a fourth and final pattern of class construction: class as *anxiety*. Here the ‘lower class’ is portrayed as a threatening abyss; something into which (any)one can fall, whether gradually or otherwise.

#### 6.4.1 Class as a ‘*Struggle*’ and Class as ‘*Anxiety*’

Both of these patterns appear where the coverage is more critical regarding poverty and insecurity. Two quotes from earlier are worth reconsidering here:

“It takes a lot to come somewhere like this. My son was appalled. I’ve worked since I was a teenager, but once you go on to benefits, everything falls into arrears”. *The Times* (food banks, 01/03/2014: 10).

“We are a hard-working family and never buy anything on credit. We are proud of being able to provide for ourselves and didn’t want to beg off someone else. So going to the food bank was our only option”. *The Mirror* (food banks, 15/04/14: 8).

Both passages draw upon ‘real life’ examples, possibly to lend credibility (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013) in the context of a controversial issue. Yet it is *what* is said that is most relevant, in that it seems designed to cast doubt upon narratives which explain away poverty through reference to individual failings. The quotes seem to be chosen so as to give the people themselves the chance to speak out against such classification and, in doing so, foreground issues of unfairness. What is especially interesting here is that the discourse goes further than implicit references to structural inequality as an issue affecting some ‘other’ and hints at the danger of ‘ordinary people’ falling (or being pushed) down the social order. This anxious view of social class thus portrays it as a ‘slippery slope’, down which *anyone* can potentially fall. The emphasis upon insecurity going *further than expected* calls into question the insulating layer of security which is constructed when poverty is moralised (Tyler, 2015; Valentine and Harris, 2014). What is striking in this respect is the emphasis upon the sudden ‘fall from grace’, despite (and this is important) possession of the correct morals and values.

The anxious allusion to social standing is perhaps best captured in the emphasis placed upon hardship amongst those previously considered secure, such as “[p]eople in affluent middle-class areas like Cheltenham, Welwyn Garden City and North Lake” *TheTimes.co.uk* (food banks, 09/06/14), where the fact that these people reside in ‘affluent middle-class areas’ is foregrounded in an apparent attempt to add shock value to the discourse, making it read

almost as a warning to the reader that poverty may well be *much* closer than expected. In place of the moralised *underclass*, what is referred to here is something akin to the *precariat* (see Standing, 2014). The factual basis of such a construction is supported by Payne (2013) who, interpreting the findings of the *Great British Class Survey* (see Savage et al, 2013), suggests that a rising number of people are indeed becoming trapped in financial insecurity, or as Shildrick et al (2010) put it: in the ‘low-pay no-pay cycle’. Furthermore, as Stenning (2020) shows, rising insecurity has transcended the low-paid, and become a general trend across society. Similarly, Standing (2014) notes that alongside the ‘traditional’ working class, pushed into the precariat by rising levels of insecure low-paid work, there are also those from higher up the class scale who represent the ‘losers’ in an increasingly volatile and competitive job market. The discourse within the more critical coverage may therefore reflect the growing insecurity felt amongst the population *more generally*, including those not ‘traditionally’ considered prone to economic difficulty. To some degree, this sense of unease may be shared by some of those working in the media. Such an explanation is lent support by Jetten et al (2017), who demonstrate that during times of economic instability, those of higher socio-economic status are more prone to feelings of anxiety over social standing; in essence the fear of falling is likely to be greater the further one has to fall (Jetten et al, 2017: 63; Standing, 2014: 9; Stenning, 2020: 203). Of course, the observable impact upon the very worst off, those suffering absolute poverty and those living with constant insecurity, would only serve to feed into this anxiety (see Pentakari, 2016; Stenning, 2020), and this may explain the more sympathetic media portrayal of ‘the poor’.

Of course, the critical coverage, and the patterns of class construction that form part of it, amount to only half of the story here. Alongside, and often in response to, the critical coverage, proponents of the dominant pro-austerity discourse attempt to counter this emerging perspective. As I discuss above, this countering discourse rests largely upon re-hashing now familiar narratives, ones I discuss in chapters 4 and 5 above, which have served to ‘justify’ austerity thus far. It is not surprising, therefore, to see the patterns of treating class as a ‘political project’ and as an ‘ideal’ reappear.

### 6.4.2 Class as a Political Project

Given that this pattern of construction featured as a justifying narrative throughout both the theoretical debates surrounding austerity, as well as the coverage of the austerity policies once they were enacted, it follows that this pattern features here as a justification of the impacts.

Once again, class is constructed along cultural and (especially) moral terms, leading to a 'divide' between an ambiguous - and presumably classless - 'us' who make up 'respectable' society, and those marked by their individualised failings. Of course the moralisation of class is something which has been noted extensively within previous research (see e.g. Bennett, 2013; Le Grand, 2015; Romano, 2015; Skeggs, 2005; Tyler, 2008). Yet in the context of the economic crisis and austerity, these failings are emphasised in terms of their *cost*. In this view, the moralised 'other' is an economic *burden* in so much as the economic situation itself is the supposed result of a *moral decline*; an eroded work ethic, and a growing tendency to exploit, both enabled and encouraged through the failure of society to act.

As such the food bank user is similarly cast as the dishonest scrounger, who will readily exploit *any* assistance given. The argument, in its most basic terms, goes as follows: if such people will tend, at the very slightest 'encouragement', towards parasitic lifestyles, then even charitable help is more than they have a right to expect. In the case of zero-hour contracts, the others are those who, being content to live off the means of others, do not recognise the 'opportunity' that a 'humble start' represents. They are, in stark contrast to the idealised 'poor but pure' figure, afflicted with a poverty of aspiration (McKenzie, 2015: 20). It is worth briefly returning to the workfare coverage here, since as the extract below demonstrates, it is these people who must be made to recognise, and thus take, their 'opportunities':

Anyone who is under any remaining delusions that a large part of our unemployment problem is not down to lazy, feckless benefit claimants who have no intention of earning a living needs to listen to businessmen like Mr Cooper. Time and time again we hear of entrepreneurs trying their hardest – yet failing – to employ British workers. [...] Britons are failing to take up these jobs for a very simple reason: it is too easy for them to remain on benefits. *The Express* (Workfare, 28/04/12: 16).

Just as the 'chav' figure represents the embodiment of the underclass stereotype, marked by exaggerated departures from social norms (Tyler, 2008), the recasting of moral 'failings' in terms of their cost to society, in the context of economic downturn, is used to the effect of

establishing a classed other which ‘respectable’ society must both recognise and guard against. Thus whilst Tyler (2008: 28) notes descriptions of ‘dole-scroungers, petty criminals, football hooligans and teenage pram-pushers’ and ‘gym slip mums who choose to get pregnant as a career option; pasty-faced, lard-gutted slappers who’ll drop their knickers in the blink of an eye’, what becomes relevant in the present context is the *cost* to society of this ‘moral decline’. This cost is suggested to be both direct and *indirect*: in effect, this ‘group’ robs us twice, firstly through their parasitic existence, and secondly by neglecting to take up the opportunity to contribute to society. In this sense the figure that is constructed can perhaps best be described as the ‘*economic chav*’, and in portraying this ‘class’ as one that thrives when we accommodate (or encourage) moral failings, the threat is generalised. In other words, that ‘we’ must guard against is not so much the ‘lower class’ itself, which it is suggested can, and indeed *should* be controlled, but rather the vague and ever-present threat of our failing to do so and thereby becoming complicit in our own downfall.

Just as this pattern was ‘fitted’ into arguments for coercion in the earlier coverage of austerity, here, in the coverage of the impacts of austerity, it serves as a warning, especially in the face of more critical accounts. It warns against reversing ‘progress’, through ‘misguided sympathy’ – which, as we are reminded here, we cannot and *never could* afford:

The implication of the campaigners is that the Government should abandon welfare reform and instead provide every claimant with enough cash to live a comfortable lifestyle without having to work. But it is precisely that attitude that got Britain into such a terrible mess under Labour. The benefits system not only became unaffordable but also provided perverse incentives towards mass idleness and personal irresponsibility. *The Express* (food banks, 17/04/14: 14).

#### **6.4.3 Class as an Ideal (and as a ‘Possible Stepping Stone’)**

Romanticised nostalgic references to the ‘respectable’ working class (Kitch, 2007; Lawler, 2005, 2012; Rhodes, 2011) again feature strongly in the coverage of these topics, and mitigate what remains a major contradiction within the pro-austerity discourse. The constructed moral boundary between the ‘classed other’ and the ‘rest’ of society cannot, by definition, be related to *economic* structures. Hence the tendency to downplay (or outright deny) any notion of economic disadvantage, as in the example considered above: “A BENEFITS scrounger [...] gets almost £1,400 a month in handouts – more than many hard-



working Brits earn” (*The Daily Star* 23/10/15). In this way the discourse ‘highlights’ the apparent injustice of the morally deficient being, economically, no worse off. Yet the emphasis upon this moral contrast still has the potential to be problematic, in that it might also raise the question of why the morally sound low-paid worker is *no better off* than they presently are. This is especially so in the context of the topics covered here. The insecurity and struggle faced by an *increasing* amount of people has the potential to derail the pro-austerity argument, as more people come to recognise *themselves* as victims, or at least *potential* victims, of this injustice.

Yet, the injustice of the ‘morally upstanding’ remaining materially poor is masked within the elite-serving pro-austerity discourse through emphasis upon the ‘honour’ of standing on one’s own feet, working hard, and getting by (see Hinton and Redclift, 2009; Rhodes, 2011). People with these attributes would not unnecessarily put upon society by ‘expecting’ free goods, and they certainly would not demand that the ‘taxpayer’ be burdened with their upkeep so that they might idle away their lives. By hyper-visualising the morality of such people, they are ‘brought inside’ (Bourdieu, 1987). Indeed, they are not merely counted amongst ‘us’, they come to symbolise the higher morals that *define* ‘us’: in particular a willingness to dutifully serve society whilst making no demands upon it, and it is this very attitude which is cast as the moral benchmark, the standard to which *all* should aspire, and against which *all* are judged.

The idealisation of these people occurs most prominently in the coverage of zero-hour contracts, where romanticised references to the work ethic and ‘groundedness’ of the (respectable) working class are used as rhetorical justifications for the increasing tendency towards low-paid insecure work. Through the use of such rhetoric, the economic difficulties these people face are trivialised. According to this discourse, it matters little *how* poor they are, so long as they are ‘reached down’ to and offered the ‘opportunity’ to work their way out of poverty (see discussion above regarding the ‘ladder’ metaphor), or at least the chance to earn ‘self-respect’. This is important in the context of an economic downturn, since it allows insecurity to be cast as a way of delivering ‘opportunity’ *even in difficult times*. Any attempt to regulate exploitative working conditions thus becomes problematic in that the ‘victims’ of such regulation are the working poor themselves, as in the example from above:

[T]he plain truth is that if Labour does indeed legislate so that employers can only offer fixed-hours contracts, some businesses will simply opt to take on fewer workers. How is

that helping the economy or those looking for work? *The ExpressOnline* (zero-hour contracts, 03/04/15).

What is important to note is that such discourse does not address the *current* deprivation of the ‘hard-working’ poor. Instead, the emphasis is on the *possibility* of a *future* return on their ‘correct’ moral attributes (see Friedli and Stearn, 2015), the possibility of upward social mobility, and therefore of escape (Lawler, 1999). In this way, the respectable working class identity is cast as a possible ‘stepping stone’, a transitional stage in a move up the ‘ladder’, and into classless (meritocratic) society; one where each person will supposedly ‘slot’ into their role according to their talents, dutifully serving society to the best of their ability.

References to both the inherent reward of work, and the sense of *duty* of the working class (see Kitch, 2007) feature strongly within the coverage; here, the portrayal of a group who derives their identity from fulfilling their duty to society, even where this involves tasks that are ‘not much fun’ and ‘boring [and] repetitive’ (see p169), downplays the importance of actual tangible rewards. In other words, for all the emphasis upon duty, nothing is said of the rights of such people to fair remuneration, job satisfaction, and security. Indeed, as the extract above shows, these very things are rendered problematic.

This idealisation, therefore, runs counter to the idea of a ‘class-for-itself’: a class that resists, and seeks to transform, the social structures which bring about its oppression (Standing, 2015). Rather, the construction here is of a ‘class *against* itself: a class whose defining features work to normalise worsening structural conditions. Yet tellingly, these people are held up as the moral yardstick, in that they display a ‘commitment to serve’ even as the reward for doing so diminishes - a selfless commitment which becomes the expectation *across society* more generally. In other words, this construction works to forward the idea that it is the moral duty of the working population to ‘realise’ that they must increase their ‘competitiveness’ (see Nunn, 2012) if they are to benefit from the ‘opportunities’ on offer.

Such narratives can go some way - but not all the way - in explaining away the social reality, where an increasing number of people are trapped in chronic insecurity and perpetual poverty (see Briken and Taylor, 2018; Davies, 2015; Lavalette, 2017; Shildrick et al, 2010). It is not unsurprising, therefore, to see their credibility strained by this point - and to see the ensuing debate played out amongst the media.

As in the previous two chapters, what I have focused upon here is class construction *in context*: on the ways in which class is fitted into discussions of the topics themselves. In the

following (and final) chapter I examine the patterns of class construction that have emerged across the analysis more specifically, in order to reveal more clearly how class is constructed *in the abstract*. I therefore turn my attention to questions such as: *what* classes are constructed, and what are the defining features and boundaries of these according to the discourse? I then discuss how this is achieved in more depth, and attempt to answer *why* this may be. In particular, I suggest what this tells us about the role of class construction within the media, and indeed *about the media*, in the context of austerity.

## ***7. Economic Chavs and Economic Martyrs: Making Sense of Media Constructions of Social Class in the ‘Age of Austerity’***

### **7.1 Introduction**

Throughout the preceding chapters I have explored the media construction of class in the context of six important topics related to the ‘age of austerity’. As I state in the introductory chapter, the period of 2010 to 2016 is a particularly relevant one for the concept of social class, given that austerity, with its disproportionate impact on the poorest (Hastings et al, 2015; Lavalette, 2017; Pantazis, 2015; O’Hara, 2015: 3-7), has contributed significantly to the ongoing rise in inequality (Lavalette, 2017). Whilst thus far I have looked in detail at the ways in which social class is worked into the coverage of the topics themselves, in this chapter I turn my attention to the more general patterns that I identify throughout the analysis: class as a political project, class as an ideal, class as a struggle, and class as anxiety. Here I explore the features of these patterns in more details, and drawing upon Fairclough’s (1995: 747) suggestion of making visible the ‘interconnectedness of things’, attempt to critically evaluate their significance with regards to the wider context in which they feature.

To begin with, I look at the most enduring pattern within the discourse; that of constructing class as part of a ‘political project’. This pattern sees class set up in accordance with the general pro-austerity sentiment dominant throughout much of the coverage. In essence, this pattern sees class portrayed in a way which conforms with, and indeed supports, this ideological stance - by hyper-visualising specific ‘moral failings’ so as to create a legitimate target, an ‘other’ which stands apart from the rest of ‘us’. Following this, I focus upon the construction of class as an ‘ideal’, a pattern which appears to serve the purpose of deflecting critical questioning of the poverty faced by those in low-paid work through a very selective idealisation of working class identity.

I then focus upon the two patterns of class construction that occur within the more critical coverage as it begins to emerge: class as a struggle and class as anxiety. These patterns are central to an ‘alternative’ discourse, which although largely absent within the coverage of the first two topics (the emergency budget and welfare reform), begins to appear as something of a dissenting voice within the coverage of the austerity policies *in action* (the workfare

policies and the bedroom tax), and later, in the coverage food banks and zero-hour contracts, forms one side of what appears to be a media ‘debate’ regarding the impacts of austerity.

Again, my aim throughout this study has been to not only explore *how* class is constructed within the coverage, but also *why* these constructions may take the form they do, and what likely effect they might have - especially with regards to shaping, maintaining, and challenging the social problem of inequality. With this aim in mind, in the discussion section of this chapter (see p199) I draw upon the wider literature in order to further expand upon the findings, to situate them in context, and to suggest theoretical explanations. Finally I draw conclusions, and suggest possible directions for future research based upon these conclusions.

## **7.2 Class as a Political Project**

### **7.2.1 “In it Together”: Inclusiveness through Exclusivity**

In order to make sense of this pattern, it is necessary to return to the coverage of the ‘theoretical’ discussions of austerity - where ‘the focus [was] on the idea, as opposed to the ‘reality’ (Stanley, 2014: 896) - that took place within the coverage of the emergency budget and welfare reform, since it is here that the narrative of economic necessity, which forms the foundation of the pro-austerity discourse, is firmly established. It is worth noting again that the financial markets had, at the time of that coverage, been recently rescued at a significant cost to the state following their collapse in the course of the 2008 economic crisis (Lavalette, 2017: 32; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012: 43). Whilst this may initially have called into question the prevailing economic orthodoxy (Rice and Bond, 2013; Wiggan, 2012), the idea of ‘the market’ acting as a ‘natural’ unavoidable force is quickly reasserted in order to highlight the equally ‘unavoidable’ necessity of austerity. This narrowing of the ‘Overton window’ - the range of ‘acceptable’ political thought - appears to have been aided in large part by the absence of challenges within the coverage, an absence that leaves the narrative of austerity being a necessary, market driven response to the crisis to read as if it were common-sense.

References to ‘economic necessity’ lend credence to the assertion - often repeated by the government of the time - that ‘we are in it together’ (Raynor, 2017). Such an assertion seems designed for the purpose of galvanising the public for what was to come. The idea of being ‘in it together’ during difficult times is nothing new. It brings to mind a government

campaign at the outbreak of World War II, whereby citizens were encouraged to donate ironworks, such as railings, to be used by the arms industry. Whilst it soon became apparent that these were surplus to requirements, the initiative was continued since the government noted the boost in morale and unity created by citizen's feelings of having made a personal sacrifice in the national interest (it is widely believed that the donated metal was simply dumped in the river Thames: Rosehill, 2017) This demonstrates the powerful effect of such discourse, and it is significant that rhetoric nostalgically recalling the 'blitz spirit' in the context of austerity has been noted elsewhere (see Hinton and Redclift, 2009; Raynor, 2017).

The significance of framing the issue as one of 'unavoidable scarcity' is that this braces society for the coming storm. Whilst austerity measures could, for reasons I discuss below, only worsen living conditions for the majority of the population, this call for unity in hard times creates a reference point for moral demarcation. On the one 'side' there are, supposedly, those who recognise and accept the necessity, and on the other side are those who do not. This allows the appeal to be as broad as possible. Thus the construction of the 'target audience', too, is as broad as possible, for example: The truth is that, *as a country, we* have lost sight of the importance of every citizen striving to contribute to society (*The Daily Mail*, 28/01/12, emphasis added). Indeed, as I demonstrate within the preceding chapters, a pattern which features throughout the coverage of all topics is the construction of the 'ordinary people' in very broad and ambiguous terms such as the 'taxpayers', the 'hardworking', or as is the case above, simply as 'us'.

It is worth recalling here that Bourdieu (1987), discussing the construction of social classes, argues that the malleable nature of class leads to uncertainty as to where the borders lie. These borders can thus be manipulated in order to bring people 'on side' in the course of political argumentation.

This symbolic manipulation of groups finds a paradigmatic form in political strategies: thus, by virtue of their objective position situated half-way between the two poles of the space, standing in a state of unstable equilibrium and wavering between two opposed alliances, the occupants of the intermediate positions of the social field are the object of completely contradictory classifications by those who try, in the political struggle, to win them over to their side. (Bourdieu, 1987: 12).

Citing the example of the riots that occurred in response to the 'poll tax' (1989), Davidson (2013: 195), argues that those seeking to implement or advocate elite-serving policies cannot risk doing so via a *blatant* 'frontal' attack on the working class, since this would likely invite hostile resistance. Instead, any such move must be portrayed so as to obscure its impact (and

its beneficiaries) if it is to maintain a facade of fairness. In this respect, the significance of constructing the in-group as broadly and inclusively as possible is that this obscures differences, including (and perhaps especially) economic differences. What is therefore obscured is the difference in terms of the impact that austerity is likely to have amongst members of this ‘group’. This is important, since many poorer members of this supposed group are likely to suffer as a result of decreased public spending and the downgrading of the welfare safety net (see Hastings et al, 2015: 114-115; Korpi and Palme, 2003; Streeck and Mertens, 2011), especially those in insecure work (see Shildrick et al, 2010, Standing, 2014). The appeal of austerity, and indeed its very acceptance, is thus dependent upon the construction of this broad target audience.

The inclusive nature of the discourse, aimed a broad, presumably ‘classless’, group means that a border must implicitly be drawn as to where this in-group ends, and where the ‘other’ begins. In other words, the inclusive nature of the discourse rests upon a principle of *exclusivity*. Lawler (2005) argues that class identity is often defined in terms of what one *is not*. Similarly Bourdieu (1984: 479) argues that: ‘Social identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted against what is closest, which represents the greatest threat’. The rhetoric of *economic* necessity, with its emphasis upon us *all* being ‘in it together’ cannot in itself form a legitimate target. Indeed, the economic necessity argument alone would be problematic in this respect, since it would not preclude critical questioning of the impacts of austerity upon those least able to take the take the blow, especially those who are blameless for their economic situation - the ‘deserving poor’ (see Romano, 2015). In drawing the boundary between those who realise and accept the *moral duty* to ‘take the hit’ of austerity and those who do not, however, the debate is moved into discussions of ‘attitude’, and any failing in this respect *can* be attributed to individuals themselves.

Thus, in the constructed context of unavoidable scarcity, whether one ‘gives to’ or ‘takes from’ society becomes a moral reference point. In a time of economic uncertainty, of job losses and increasing precarity (Farnsworth and Irving, 2015; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; Heyes, 2013; Lavalette, 2017; O’Hara, 2015: 3, Standing, 2014), what this achieves is to establish a binary *amongst* the working class, idealising those on the ‘correct’ side, and casting serious doubts as to the integrity of the others. Within this discourse, therefore, the problem class describes is inverted completely; rather than describing inequality (Tyler, 2015), it comes to describe a difference in morals, whilst economic differences are pushed from view. Drawing upon previous moralised discourses of class (see Romano, 2015), and

stereotypes of the workshy scrounger, and the skiver (e.g. Garthwaite, 2011; Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Patrick, 2016; Valentine and Harris, 2014) the debate becomes centred upon the issue of ‘work ethic’. For example: “Unless we end our chronic addiction to welfare, the work ethic will be destroyed” (*The Sunday Times*, 13/05/12).

This (almost seamless) shift from an argument regarding *economic* necessity into one of *moral* necessity therefore allows austerity to be ‘justified’ as a ‘legitimate’ attack upon those perceived to be acting in a manner that is damaging to the national interest. And in the case of welfare, as an attack on frivolous wasteful spending which supposedly indulges those who are more prone to taking than to giving anything back. And importantly it is able to do so precisely because such a ‘class’ is constructed. The extract below neatly demonstrates this ‘shift’:

In 10 years of Labour our welfare bill ballooned by £60billion to a staggering £192billion. Abandoned by Labour to a lifetime on benefits there are now a shocking 370,000 households where no one has ever worked. For the hardcore, no amount of "nudge politics" is going to shift them off the sofa and into a job. *The Express* (05/02/12: 40).

Given the fact that the poorest are naturally in the weakest position to take the impact of austerity (Hastings et al, 2015: 114-115), it might be reasonable to expect the issue of fairness, featuring as strongly as it does throughout the debates, to demand such people be insulated from the worst effects. Yet the result of this moralising shift is that it is precisely the issue of fairness which is hijacked, since by moralising those who ‘take’ from ‘us’ - at the very time when ‘we’ are ‘tightening our belts’ and working harder for less - they become the exploitative parasites who *ought fairly* to be targeted. Austerity is then cast as a way of forcing this group to pull their weight, a way of increasing - through encouragement or coercion - their work ethic.

### 7.2.2 Austerity as a ‘Magic Bullet’

By framing the debate as one of work ethic, classification occurs between three broad groups of people: those who *do not, and never will*, possess the requisite work ethic, those who *could, but are ‘incentivised’ not to*, and those of ‘us’ who already do. Together, the first two groups make up the ‘other’, and therefore the legitimised target. Indeed, this becomes a recurrent feature of the pro-austerity discourse throughout the coverage, as the following extract demonstrates:



Of course, today's undeserving poor are no longer whipped. Instead, they are kept in idleness by a state welfare system that gives them little or no incentive to work. Their weekly benefit cheques relieve them of the necessity of begging. Their children, produced regardless of their parents' ability to provide food and clothing, are used as human shields in the fight against any cuts in welfare. *The Daily Mail* (workfare, 28/01/12).

Note the way in which it is implied that only when the 'welfare incentive' is removed will we really know who deserved the metaphorical 'whipping', and who was simply incentivised not to work. Such vagueness is common within the coverage, and appears to serve an important function in terms of legitimising austerity. Given this vagueness, the 'other', who stands apart from the broadly constructed 'rest of society', is cast as a group consisting of *both* those who are morally deficient through *choice* and those who have simply been 'encouraged' to take the easy, yet immoral (and costly), path. In this way the austerity project thus becomes akin to a 'magic bullet', having a *punitive* impact only in the case of the former, where it is deserved. Whilst in the case of the latter the impact is *positive*; helping them to escape the ravages of dependence by creating the 'incentive' for them to help themselves. In this way the notion of the 'deserving poor', who fairness would, or rather *should*, dictate are shielded from the impacts are driven out of the discourse altogether, and with them any question of unjust impact. This 'driving out' of the deserving is perhaps especially pertinent in a post crisis context, since as I note previously (p83), to acknowledge the innocent victims of market failure is to risk inviting critical questions of the social order that led to them becoming victims in the first place. The replacement of the 'deserving poor' - the victims of the economic downturn - with the 'potentially redeemable' welfare dependent is therefore subtle yet important, since it removes *entirely* any critical questioning of the impact of austerity on these people.

It is important to note that the distinction between the explicitly immoral, and those simply 'incentivised' towards making immoral choices remains 'blurred' (see Bourdieu, 1987: 13). Indeed there is significant overlap between the ideas of immorality being encouraged, and the encouragement being towards pre-existing immoral tendencies. This important in terms of how class is portrayed. Previously (p176), I termed the 'others' constructed within the discourse the '*economic chavs*', since their construction bears similarity to the underclass figure of the *chav*, (see Jones, 2012; Le Grand, 2015; Tyler, 2008; Valentine and Harris, 2014) - only re-contextualised to emphasise the *economic* cost of their *moral* deviance. Yet a result of the emphasis upon incentive is that these people are portrayed as those who *might* be

‘corrected’ (see McRobbie, 2004: 106-107); through encouragement where possible, but through coercion if need be:

[A Government advisor] told me it shows there is something wrong with a system that enables part of the population who could work to choose the option to live a life on benefits. Does he want to force people to work? He preferred to talk about 'mentoring' and 'encouraging' people, but conceded that if all else fails some form of sanctions might be needed. So that's it, then? The solution is right there, staring us in the face. You cut the benefits and people who don't want to work will have no choice. *The MailOnline* (workfare, 08/08/13).

Indeed, the result of this interplay between incentive and immorality is that the ‘others’, whilst being marked by their moral failings are portrayed as being, at least *potentially*, redeemable.

### 7.2.3 ‘Economic Chavs’: the ‘*Potentially Redeemables*’

Whilst the moralisation of class - especially the poorer members of the working class - is not a new finding, it is the *type* of moral judgement cast that is significant here. Haylett (2001: 353) argues:

From the mid-19th century the poorest sections of the working classes have been reincarnated in a variety of problematic guises, terminologies shifting with the sensibilities and economies of the time.

From a poststructuralist perspective, class construction is always therefore a ‘project’ of some kind, in that explaining away inequality as ‘deserved’ involves the identification of some ‘other’ who does not, and cannot, attract empathy. This other, following the ‘sensibilities and economies of the time’, then comes to represent that which is wrong with society in any given context.

For example, Skeggs (2005) suggests that during its boom period, neoliberalism tends to blur the traditional boundaries of class through individualist rhetoric, leaving the lower classed other to become defined instead by a lack of morals, decency, and taste. This ‘other’ is therefore constructed as the very *limit of respectability*, defined by a *lack* of value, and as a threat to the moral fabric of society (Skeggs, 2005: 970). When this ‘disgusting’ other becomes too close, or too *proximate*, they must be pushed away in order to preserve distance and, crucially, to maintain distinction (Skeggs, 2005: 970). Within an individualist

perspective they are the wrong type of individual; they eat the ‘wrong’ food, wear the ‘wrong’ clothes, and buy the ‘wrong’ things (see Lawler, 2005; McRobbie, 2007). Moreover, any attempt at ‘embourgeoisement’ simply marks them as ‘fake’ (Lawler, 2005: 441). As a group defined by their failures, the lower classes are that which the respectable *is not* and *cannot be*. In times of social change it is the lower class figure that becomes symbolic of the limit of permitted variance from the imagined (middle class) norm (see Skeggs, 2005). Being supposedly incapable of higher moral reasoning (see Lawler, 2005: 439-440), this figurised, pathological other becomes symbolic of ‘contagion, pollution, danger, distaste and excess’ (Skeggs, 2005: 966). They are, for example, the overly fertile, irresponsibly reproductive young single mums, who fail to accept emerging norms of delaying childbirth until after the establishment of a career (McRobbie, 2007: 102). And, in the context of the multiculturalism debate, it is the (unrespectable) working class figure into which society’s xenophobia is channelled, as they are cast as the embodiment of a primitive backwards social conservatism, a failure to accept change, and an inability to move with the times (Haylett, 2001: 365). This is in spite of the fact that, as Haylett (2001: 356) notes, it is chiefly within working class communities that genuine multiculturalism is ‘lived and negotiated’.

As I state in the introduction, the changing economic, social, and political context changes the field in which class construction takes place. It changes what Haylett (2001: 353) describes as the ‘sensibility and economy’ of the time, and therefore, in light of the discussion above, the form which the ‘other’ must take. Whilst discourse about class often tends to mask the structural inequality which underpins it (Le Grand, 2015; Tyler, 2015), the change from ‘boom’ to ‘bust’ that the economic crisis and its aftermath represent have the effect of situating class within the economic and political domain - as the issue moves from the assignment of symbolic ‘value’ to the more overt issue of where actual material resources are allocated, and thus where impacts are to fall *here and now*.

The increased salience of the economic therefore creates something of a paradox for the portrayal of class: the obscuring veil of morality must be drawn even tighter (see Bottero, 2004)<sup>36</sup> if critical questions regarding inequality are to be avoided. In other words, not only must poverty be moralised, morality must be *economised*, for example: Workshy families helped create an annual benefits bill of £167.7billion - up £27billion from 10 years ago.. (*The*

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<sup>36</sup> Bottero (2004: 996) argues that: “at various levels, the relatively advantaged seek to establish, and the relatively disadvantaged seek to deny, the idea that their unequal positions are deserved.”. Following this, an increase in the ‘level’ of inequality would logically increase the degree to which the unfairness of this must be denied.

*ExpressOnline*, 09/05/14). The ‘problematic guise’ (Haylett, 2001: 353) that the lower class other must be imagined in is therefore one symbolic of waste, of burden, of the dead weight holding ‘us’ back. In this sense the issue becomes not merely one of disgust (see Lawler, 2005; Skeggs, 2005) at the “violent, intoxicated young men in hooded tops loitering in groups at street corners and irresponsible single mothers in tracksuits watching soap operas all day in council flats” (Clarke, 2013: 325), but one of their *cost* to society, both directly, through their conduct, and through their failure (or worse, their refusal) to contribute - a pattern which is evident throughout the analysis, for example:

That truth was illustrated this week by a shocking Channel 5 documentary which highlighted some of Britain's worst dads. One featured was Keith MacDonald, from sunder land [sic], who has fathered 15 children - with another on the way - by 10 different women despite reportedly never having worked a day in his life. It is estimated that with benefit bills for his children he will cost the taxpayer more than £2million. *The Express* (bedroom tax, 02/04/15: 12).

This particular portrayal of the ‘other’ is therefore central to the move from an emphasis upon doing *something* in response to the economic situation to the idea of austerity being the appropriate (and fair) thing to do. In other words not only do they represent a potential area for economic savings, they are an obvious, legitimate, and fair target for such:

Thousands of feckless families are off benefits and finally earning their keep a year after the Tories declared war on handout Britain. Some 6,000 people - more than 100 a week - left the dole queue and got a job after benefits were capped. It has saved the country £85million, expected to rise to £225million by next year. *The ExpressOnline* (09/05/14).

Further, being the ‘workshy’, the ‘feckless’, and the ‘skivers’, the others are those who will not pull their weight - right at the time when the ‘rest of us’ recognise that we ‘must’ do more for less. In this way the discourse invites a sense of justified anger at those seen as unfairly ‘better off’, having been rewarded for their moral failings; an anger which can be freely expressed, for as I argue above, it can *only* have a negative impact upon those deserving of it.

Note how the idea of ‘incentive’ runs through the previous three extracts, creating the very ambiguity I discuss above: the moral failings are ‘encouraged’, yet the ‘encouragement’ can only, logically, be of supposedly pre-existing tendencies. After all, the idealised low-paid workers do not succumb to such incentives, despite the apparent economic benefits to be had. Owing to this ambiguity, created through the blurring of the boundary between those who are inherently immoral and those who are merely encouraged into acting immorally, the resulting discourse has even greater justificatory potential. This is, firstly, because it suggests that the

problem goes much deeper than the ‘extreme’ examples that are presented, that these are merely the tip of the iceberg. As such, anecdotal references to the explicitly immoral - which feature heavily throughout the coverage - hint at the general type of behaviour ‘we’ are encouraging.

Parallels can be drawn here with the media coverage of the ‘Philpott case’, where an arson attack led to the deaths of several of the perpetrators family, including young children. Headlines such as “A vile product of the welfare state” implied that a link could be drawn between being in receipt of benefits and committing a heinous crime (Cain, 2013); with the extreme example being used to suggest a link between redistribution and immorality *generally*. The slippage between the explicitly deviant and those simply encouraged seen here performs a similar role, highlighting examples of the type of behaviour we risk encouraging:

There is masses [sic] of evidence that long-term welfare dependency among those of working age causes ill-health and *raises the risk of criminality* (emphasis added). The Express (welfare reform, 09/11/10: 12).

Secondly, by emphasising ‘our’ (society’s) role in allowing such a situation to occur, the decline becomes ‘our’ fault, and something we must therefore take responsibility for, and it becomes the duty of the upstanding citizen to recognise and accept this. On the face of it this makes the discourse appear somewhat more palatable, since the finger of blame is not directly pointed at the poorest members of society but rather at society itself for having, in a sense, ‘failed’ them. Yet in spite of this, the resulting moralisation is no less intense, as the result is to cast such people as incapable of moral reasoning at all, as instinctive, even animal like –as lacking the ‘pure mind’ of the full human condition (Lawler, 2005: 439-441).

Thirdly, in constructing a group of people who it *may* be possible to change, austerity is given a purpose - one that goes beyond simply hitting out at those who apparently deserve it. This is perhaps most important as the impacts are becoming apparent and as the legitimacy of the discourse is stretched, since it allows the argument to be made that the greater good is being served, that the very people targeted are actually being helped. The emphasis upon the need to ‘help’ such people *without* encouraging dependence therefore stipulates that the nature of this help should not be economic, but rather focused upon changing *attitudes*, or in other words, psychological modification (see Friedli and Stearn, 2015). This is most obvious in the workfare coverage:

Surely it is vital that the unemployed be kept in the practice of getting up in the morning and going out to work for money? It is work which gives structure and purpose to life and the lack of it a sense of hopelessness. Unions that deride obligatory work experience as “US-style workfare” are really just out to protect the jobs of their existing members. The Express (workfare, 28/04/12: 16).

The idea of an entire class of people who are all too easily encouraged into state dependence therefore serves as a convenient construct in that it legitimises the idea of coercing people into insecure low-paying work. In the case of such people the project becomes one of ‘helping’ or ‘rescuing’ them from the fate that has befallen them by changing their mindset, instilling such attributes as motivation, discipline, and (importantly) the appreciation of the inherent rewards that such insecure low-paid work supposedly brings, such as the ‘structure and purpose’ referenced above.

In other words, if the lower class represents the abject ‘limit’ of respectability, framed here against the ‘spirit of the times’, then the issue becomes one of correcting them, ‘re-educating’ them (see McRobbie, 2004: 107), and thereby bringing them in line with the rest of ‘us’. McRobbie (2004), analysing ‘self help’ and ‘lifestyle’ television shows, notes this theme, and argues that such discourse not only reinforces the lower status of those subject to correction, but also the legitimises the very criteria by which such people are judged. In this case, what is legitimised is the need for a *heightened* level of discipline and motivation, and an increased work ethic in the face of *lessened* genuine career opportunities (Briken and Taylor, 2018; Friedli and Stearne, 2015; Heyes, 2013; McDowell, 2011; Nunn, 2012; Shildrick et al, 2010).

It thus becomes clear why the concept of work ethic plays such a strong role in the discourse. An elevated work ethic *is* indeed needed if people are to be expected to work harder for less reward, hence the emphasis on the *intrinsic* reward of work and its links with identity. A similar pattern is noted by McDowell (2011). A central theme of her book *Redundant masculinities?: Employment change and white working class youth* is that the emphasis upon work ethic, and the idea of identity through work, have increased precisely as opportunities for meaningful employment have fallen. The morally ‘upstanding’ citizen, who shares the ‘correct’ attitude with the rest of ‘us’, is therefore marked by an acceptance that, given the economic situation, it is *inevitable* that the financial reward for work must be reduced. In contrast, the ‘other’ is marked by, at best, an inability, or, worse still, an unwillingness, to accept this ‘truth’. This other therefore forms the legitimate target for correction. Indeed, as Friedli and Stern (2015: 44) argue, one of the main functions of workfare, a key policy within austerity, is to perform this very function, suggesting that even critical questioning of such

orthodoxy is treated as tantamount to a thought crime, and met with punitive economic sanctions.

A revealing feature of the dominant media stance in regards to austerity is that whilst a significant amount of effort is expended in legitimising the idea that those who are already poor must, in response to the economic situation, do more and expect less, the discourse seen within the coverage of zero-hour contracts often tends to portray the issue of increasingly casualised, insecure work as an example of the market leading business to *innovate* and adapt. Thus the casualisation of labour is treated not as the affront to worker security that it is (Briken and Taylor, 2018), but as an example of *opportunities* being created, even in difficult economic times. In other words, whereas those expected to take up such jobs are increasingly expected to do more for less, in the case of big business the logic is flipped on its head, and the very act of offering less becomes equated with ‘doing’ more, reaching down and offering ‘the poor’ a chance to pull themselves up just as society can no longer afford to pay their keep.

Drawing upon discourses of meritocracy and social mobility (Littler, 2013; Manstead, 2018; Nunn, 2012; Warren, 2017), this discourse has the effect of portraying *any* ‘start’ as an opportunity. Furthermore, the idea is forwarded that the less the cost to business of creating such ‘opportunities’, in terms of financial cost (wages) and risk (employment rights), the more ‘opportunities’ can be created. Of course, it must also be noted here that shifts in bargaining power that result from the erosion of the welfare safety net greatly facilitate this process. Succinctly put, the message becomes: if those ‘reached down’ do not appreciate the opportunity, then this is because they are simply too comfortable, and too ‘entitled’:

Britons are failing to take up these jobs for a very simple reason: it is too easy for them to remain on benefits. Were they hungry, like unemployed factory workers in the Thirties Depression, they wouldn’t have a problem getting out of bed in the morning. *The Express* (workfare) 28/04/12: 16).

Austerity is thus portrayed as a means of ensuring that these people recognise the opportunity, and grasp the rope that is thrown down to them. The blatant doublethink here, of course, is that the ‘opportunity’ only becomes such provided the ‘beneficiaries’ are, relatively speaking, made sufficiently desperate to actually benefit from it.

This re-imagining of insecurity as market innovation creates a level of normalisation that is entirely at odds with equality and social mobility (Davies, 2015). This normalisation acts

much like the teeth of a ratchet, allowing movement only in one direction. Where lowered wages, weakened employee protections, and increasing insecurity become commonly accepted as *necessary*, they are free to proliferate; and proliferate they will, since in a competitive market no individual employer, regardless of their personal intentions, can then afford to put themselves at a disadvantage by offering any more than this new ‘baseline’ (see Findlay et al, 2017). Once this orthodoxy becomes accepted as such, it is bound to permeate throughout society, seeping into more and more aspects of everyday life. For example cuts to legal aid preclude employee’s from challenging injustices, yet in a society based around insecure, ‘flexible’ employment are welcomed as cutting ‘red tape’, the ‘hidden curriculum’ (Hill 2017: 42) within education, whereby working class children are predominantly prepared to serve in the ‘world of work’ must prepare them for an increasingly precarious future as this ‘world’ changes<sup>37</sup>. Perhaps most importantly, the more ingrained this process becomes, the more critiques of it come to appear disruptive, radical, and extreme. They are thus easier to disregard - on the grounds that they simply go against the ‘way things are’.

### 7.3 Class as an Ideal: *Economic ‘Martyrs’*

As I discuss in the previous chapter, a presumably unintended consequence arises from drawing the class boundary in moral terms between the working poor and the ‘parasitic underclass’. Whilst drawing the boundary in this way foregrounds the unfairness of the working poor being no better off (or, as is often suggested within the discourse, worse off) than those in welfare – thereby allowing ‘justified anger’ to be stirred up – this risks inviting the critical question of why those who possess the ‘correct attitude’ and sound work ethic are nonetheless still poor. In other words, the emphasis upon legitimised anger comes at the expense of breaking cover on the issue of *economic differences* within the (usually broadly constructed) ‘ordinary people’.

On one side are the majority *who often work long hours for little reward*, pay taxes, try to save and look after their families. They believe you shouldn't get something for nothing. And if they are unemployed they will do everything they can to get a job. On the other side are those who think that a life on benefits is a lifestyle choice we are all entitled to

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<sup>37</sup> Consider the scrapping of the Education Maintenance Allowance which had previously supported the educational progression of school leavers from poorer backgrounds. For all the rhetoric of ‘incentives’ and of gaining skills necessary to progress, the payment (of up to £30/week for each child) was considered ‘too expensive’. This is but one practical example of the mismatch between the discourse and reality.



make and that the rest of us have a moral duty to finance that choice. (emphasis added). *The Express* (workfare, 22/02/12: 12).

Before the biggest shake-up in 70 years of the welfare state last April, 42,000 jobless households were *raking in more than many hardworking families could earn*. (emphasis added). *The ExpressOnline* (09/05/14).

The problem that stems from the emphasis on economic proximity is that it risks implicitly marking these people as distinct from the broad inclusive ‘us’, and therefore of raising the problematic issue of *economic difference despite shared morals*. This of course brings the discourse close to referencing structural inequality, the very problem that class names (Tyler, 2015). Yet the potential for critical questions to arise is sidestepped through the use of an idealised construction of class. Although this ‘ideal’ is largely based upon nostalgic reference to the working class (see Kitch, 2007, Lawler, 2014; Rhodes, 2011), it should not be taken at face value as such, since - as I demonstrate throughout the analysis - the discourse is selective in its nostalgic borrowing, especially in respect of which aspects of the ‘traditional’ working class identity are emphasised.

It has been argued (see e.g. Savage, 2016) that individualist discourse, which downplays the importance (and indeed, questions the very existence) of class has led to its being portrayed as an outdated concept. Those who hold on to working class values and identity are often viewed as the backwards thinking primitive other (Haylett, 2001: 365), whose own failure to move with the times has resulted in their being ‘left behind’ (McKenzie, 2018). In this way the working class identity has largely been drained of meaning and value (Haylett, 2001; Tyler, 2015). It would appear, however, that within the context of austerity the working class identity has been ‘revived’, albeit in a fragmented form.

Perhaps the best explanation for this is that the nature of the topics, and perhaps austerity more generally, dictates that class cannot be obscured entirely, so within the pro-austerity discourse it is simply re-imagined in a form that fits the ideological stance. The main two features to be evoked by this nostalgic reference are the ideals of work ethic and a strong sense of duty. These features fit particularly well with the idea of ‘blitz spirit’ and ‘national duty’ at a time of necessary hardship: if the ‘threat’ posed by the moral failings of the underclass is one of economic burden resulting from a declining work ethic and a failure to appreciate their duty and responsibility, then the possession of the *opposite* attitude is hyper-visualised, and *celebrated*, in those most proximate, the working poor. Indeed, the hyper-

visualisation of these celebrated morals is used often to emphasise distinction from those who, supposedly, are a ‘class beneath’.

Consider the following extract:

One of Frimley Gardens’ hardest workers is dad-of-three Kevin Maguire. With one son in medical school, he gets up at 5.30am each day to buy bread for his catering van, Vinny’s Diner. He opens at 8am and works until 2.30pm. Kevin, 53, then comes home and grafts at his printing business, sometimes until 10pm. Although it can be a struggle — on Tuesday he made just £13 in his van — Kevin reckons that doing an honest day’s work is the best way to lead life.

He said: ‘I’ve always worked. I even had a heart attack a few years ago but was up on my feet a few weeks after. I don’t like being idle. Plus I think it sets a good example to my kids. I’ve told them they’ll achieve nothing without hard work. I’ve driven them to well-off areas where the footballers live to look at the big houses and told them they’ll only get them with hard work. Then I pointed out the drug addicts and beggars in Manchester city centre. I told them, ‘Those were the bullies and loudmouths in school who were cool and didn’t want to work. *The Sun* (15/02/14: 22-23).<sup>38</sup>

The sense of belonging to ‘respectable’ society, of being one of ‘us’, is thus made to depend upon the possession of these morals. This is a powerful rhetorical move, since it exploits a natural desire to belong to the moral in-group, and to distinguish oneself from the ‘other’ (Valentine and Harris 2014; Skeggs, 2005). Reflecting upon interview data on the subject of class prejudice, Valentine and Harris (2014: 91) note that:

[W]orking-class people living in close spatial proximity to so-called skivers hav[e] an investment in dis-identifying with, and distancing themselves from, their neighbours through a fear of being contaminated by having the negative identity ‘Chav’ imposed upon them.

In this sense, the idealisation of the working poor serves to make factors such as a heightened work ethic, pride in ones self-sufficiency, and an ability to ‘get by’ despite difficulties central to a sense of belonging. This works to construct a ‘class against its own interests’, since the low-paid worker comes to symbolise the moral standard; the embodiment of the working class identity re-hashed minus its ‘problematic’ aspects: the struggle for social justice and equality, and the fight for decent pay and working conditions (Nunn 2012; Savage, 2016; Tyler, 2015; Standing, 2015). Indeed, these ‘problematic’ aspects of working class identity are not only absent, the very idea of a struggle for justice is suggested to be problematic for working people themselves, e.g. “Labour claims to be on the side of working people against

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<sup>38</sup> This article is again worthy of consideration in full, since it vividly constructs and contrasts the *economic chav* and *economic martyr* figures I describe in this chapter. As such this article is included in the appendix on p255.

those evil Tories. But the plain truth is that if Labour does indeed legislate so that employers can only offer fixed-hours contracts, some businesses will simply opt to take on fewer workers” (*The ExpressOnline*, 17/04/2015). The idealised worker is thus portrayed as the person who recognises, and accepts, that they are better off with the scraps that are thrown down to them than with nothing at all.

In place of any reference to the inherent struggle that class represents is an emphasis upon two key ideas, both of which seem designed to mitigate the frustration that comes with being trapped in low-paid work (see Shildrick et al, 2010): firstly, the idea of ‘identity through work’ - an identity which centres upon the recognition of work as a *reward in itself*; and secondly, the idea of (possible) escape. In glorifying the low-paid worker, the struggle they face is itself glorified as opposed to challenged (Kitch, 2007). ‘Belonging’ to this group, and thus wearing the ‘badge of honour’ that comes with it, is made to depend upon recognition of the intrinsic reward for this struggle - to depend upon the ability to see oneself as fundamentally different from the moralised other precisely because of this struggle. And this idea of glorified struggle is made to seem less controversial still by reference to the possibility of escaping (see Lawler, 1999). The working class identity that is constructed is therefore one that is potentially - hopefully even - transitional. It is again the very same attributes that mark this group as distinct from the lower classed other which supposedly maximise this chance of escape, as can be seen above: ‘I’ve told them they’ll achieve nothing without hard work. I’ve driven them to well-off areas where the footballers live to look at the big houses and told them they’ll only get them with hard work’. Consider, also, the following extract which is taken from the same article:

In the mid-1990s Kevin was down to his last £5 but he vowed to help himself. He walked 12 miles to a warehouse in Ardwick in central Manchester to buy a shirt from fashion designers Gary and Anthony Donnelly. The brothers were the brains behind fashion label Gio-Goi and their clothes have been worn by The Stone Roses, Kate Moss and Rihanna. Kevin said: “I was haggling with them for hours and got the price down to £5. They said, ‘Right, how many do you want?’, When I told them just one they couldn’t believe it. But I was able to sell it in a pub on my way home. I kept on doing this for months.” Kevin now runs his printing company, working on anything from T-shirts to designs on vans. He added: “I chose to go down a different path of hard work as it makes you a better human being.” *The Sun* (15/02/14: 22-23).

The two patterns I describe above both occur within the pro-austerity discourse, and are seen throughout the coverage of the six topics. Unsurprisingly, the more critical ‘alternative’ discourse, which begins to emerge as the impacts of austerity become clearer, portrays class

in a very different way to that seen above. The patterns of class construction within this emergent discourse see the concept portrayed as, firstly, a ‘struggle’ and later, as source of ‘anxiety’ over social standing; the second pattern effectively being an ‘evolution’ of the first. I focus on both these patterns in the following section.

#### 7.4 Class as a *Struggle*, Class as *Anxiety*

If inequality is the problem that class names (Tyler, 2015: 496), then arguably class is, by definition, a struggle against the problem of inequality. Yet this has often been obscured through what Brown (2006, cited in Tyler, 2015) calls the *culturisation of the political*. As Tyler notes, elite discourses, including those within the mass media, have tended to obscure the structural causes of said inequality, and therefore class itself, behind a veil of cultural and moral sentiments. Tyler (2015) argues therefore, that those who wish to challenge class inequalities must reconnect the concept to the structural, systemic inequality that underpins it.

As demonstrated, the moralisation of class seen within the pro-austerity discourse serves a similar obscuring function. Yet as discourse which is more critical in nature begins to emerge within the coverage of the austerity policies ‘in action’ (workfare and the bedroom tax, see p131), it is accompanied by constructions of class that reference both structural inequality, and the potential of austerity to worsen it. This begins as an alternative framing of workfare as an assault upon the rights of workers and as an emphasis upon the potential of the bedroom tax to exacerbate hardship and exclusion by breaking the social bonds that sustain working class communities:

A decent workfare programme would give the jobless the skills, experience and training they need to find proper employment. And it would pay them the going wage. This is very different to using the unemployed as slave labour to plug the services left bare by the Government’s cuts. *The Mirror* (workfare, 09/11/11: 8).

Every time we bring in a policy that insists poorer people must uproot from families and friends - unpick their carefully woven lives, their million achingly negotiated arrangements and routines - and resurrect them in another town, or county, alone, where there is no love, we take away the most important, most crucial power in poorer people's lives. *The Times* (bedroom tax, 05/10/13: 5).

What is especially noteworthy in this respect is the way in which the working poor are referenced as being *amongst the victims* of these structural changes:

Not only do such "placements" do little to help the unemployed into work, they are clearly replacing and undercutting paid employees. *The Guardian* (workfare, 19/11/14).

..if a company has a job that needs doing it should pay someone to do it - not benefit from free, forced labour. What's more, according to the "Boycott Workfare" campaign, the evidence shows that these schemes reduce overtime and staff hours for the regular, paid, workforce as "free" labour takes up the slack. *The Daily Star* (workfare, 19/02/12: 19)

Given that the working poor are, as I discuss above, held up as the idealised 'moral benchmark' within the pro-austerity discourse, this suggests that the more critical discourse which emerges aims to counter the dominant discourse. In particular, linking the working poor and the unemployed (as in this example) together as equal victims of austerity policies has the effect of constructing instead a group *united* by being victims of worsening structural conditions. This challenges the idea of any divide based upon moral grounds. And in challenging moralised constructions, this 'alternative' discourse puts the problem of *economic inequality despite moral similarity* back on the agenda:

Separated or divorced parents are not allowed to keep a bedroom so that their children may stay over. Imagine breaking that to the kids you seldom see. Oh well, an icy fiscal wind might get these folk off the sofa, you might think. Except half of "bedroom tax" cases are people who are employed, but in low-paid or in zero-hours- contract Jobs. *The Times* (bedroom tax, 14/09/13: 23).

Or, to put it another way, it reconstructs the deserving poor, the very people who are driven out by the pro-austerity discourse.

Within the coverage of the *impacts* of austerity, what can be seen is a progression to a much more critical reflection on the causes of poverty. A noteworthy feature of the discourse here is the increased use of real life examples, for instance: "It is the first time Jan and Lucia have used the food bank. Both lost their jobs from a catering company" (*The Times* (food banks) 01/03/2014). In that these counter the previous moralised anecdotes of e.g. 'welfare scroungers', they are further suggestive of an effort to counter the moralisation of poverty. In putting a human face to the problem (see KhosraviNik, 2009: 484), and one which can hardly be blamed for their situation, not only are moralised narratives challenged, a degree of uncertainty is foregrounded. In other words, the apparent safety that distinction from the lower classed other affords (Valentine and Harris, 2014) is swept away. Such examples come, therefore, to appear as a *warning* regarding the direction in which society is heading. Indeed, this warning evolves in the coverage of food banks and zero-hour contracts (see previous chapter p173) into a construction of *class as anxiety*, where it is portrayed as something of a 'slippery slope', down which (any)one can slide - possibly even suddenly and with no

warning. It is perhaps worth recalling the degree of shock inherent in the revelation that “People in affluent middle-class areas like Cheltenham, Welwyn Garden City and North Lakes are increasingly turning to food banks after running out of cash” (*The Times*, 09/06/14). What is implied here is that in such areas poverty *ought not* to be found. Such references seem to warn, therefore, that poverty is perhaps ‘closer’, much closer, than might be realised.

As I discuss in the following section, such statements may reflect changing public attitudes in the face of the (increasingly apparent) realities of austerity. Moreover, they may resonate with a growing unease amongst the middle class (see Antonucci, 2019; Warren, 2017; Standing, 2014; Stenning, 2020; Tyler, 2015). Just as the turn from boom to bust appears to have flipped the issue of proximity, such that it is not the ‘approaching’ of those below which results in feelings of anxiety, but the closeness of oneself to this other, the increasing level of job insecurity (Brinkley, 2013; Cunningham et al, 2016; Davies, 2015; Heyes, 2013) means that this closeness is essentially unforeseeable. If previously one’s relative class position provided some indication as to how close one was to the ‘edge’, beyond which they risked slipping over, the result of even *perceived* insecurity creates a metaphorical ‘floor’ fraught with trapdoors, through which anyone can suddenly fall without warning.

This fundamentally calls into question the ‘othering’ process, since from this anxious perspective the threat posed by the lower class is not merely one of proximity, it is one of *being*. In other words the fate of the lower class comes to foreshadow the depth of the abyss into which one *might* fall. And if the ‘respectable’ working poor come to realise, often through bitter real life experience, that it is in reality only the whims of the uncertain market which separates them from the ‘lower classed other’, then the experience of uncertainty amongst those of traditionally safe standing can perhaps be expected to lead to greater empathy as well (Pentakari, 2016)<sup>39</sup>. From this perspective then, the ‘underclass’ becomes not the morally bankrupt threat to our values, but instead something akin to the *precariat* (see Savage et al, 2013; Standing, 2012, 2014), consisting not just of the lower classed (and moralised) other, but also of those from previously ‘safe’ positions. To put this succinctly, for an increasing number of people it is a *possible* destination.

I would advance a word of caution at this point, however. Whilst challenges to discourses that sustain social injustice are to be welcomed, if middle class anxiety *does* play a significant

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<sup>39</sup> Pentakari (2016) refers to this as ‘shared austerity reality’.

role here, then the logical point to note is that such challenges can only be expected once the impacts of social changes become evident to those with sufficient capital to mount them. As Bullock et al (2001: 229-230) suggest, without direct experience, audiences are ‘limited in their ability to evaluate the accuracy’ of media accounts. In view of this, such challenges may represent a way of saying ‘this far *but no further*’, and only *after* the impacts have already taken (and continue to take) a heavy toll upon those who are simply too powerless and voiceless to protest.

## 7.5 Discussion

So far in this chapter I have focused upon how class is constructed across the coverage of the six topics, highlighting the key features and patterns within the discourse. As I state in the introduction, however, from a critical perspective it is not enough to simply describe *how* class features, it is necessary to question *why* this may be. Clearly there are two distinct discourses within which constructions of class take place, and indeed form a key part of: a pro-austerity discourse, and an ‘alternative’ discourse which is more critical of austerity. In order to make sense of the findings of this study I attempt here to situate these within the broader social context, and to draw upon the literature, so as to make visible the ‘interconnectedness of things’ (Fairclough, 1995: 747), and, in doing so, attempt to explain what might give rise to these two contrasting stances taken within the media.

The pro-austerity discourse, and therefore the constructions of class that occur within it, are dominant across the coverage as a whole. The ‘alternative’ discourse is only seen to emerge during the coverage of the austerity policies in *action*, as the impact of the policies starts to become apparent -and even then it merely takes the form of a voice dissenting from the mainstream consensus. Furthermore, during the coverage of the impacts of austerity - and it is worth keeping in mind that in the case of the food bank coverage this involves the issue of food poverty in a wealthy developed nation - the alternative discourse still only forms one side within the wider debate. If the media can therefore be said to display a pro-austerity bias, then the basis of such must be explained. In other words, it is necessary to reflect on the very nature of the political project within which class is constructed, and in doing so, attempt to situate the media in relation to it.

### **7.5.1 Economic Elites, the Corporate Media, and the Push for ‘Competitiveness’**

The narrative of economic ‘necessity’ forms the foundation on which the subsequent discourse is based, and is therefore a logical starting point for critique. As the analysis shows, the media clearly took up and further developed the argument that austerity was a necessary response to a crisis of (wasteful) state overspending (see Stanley, 2014). This is in spite of both the fact that the economic crisis occurred as a result of irresponsible speculation by financial elites within a deregulated market (see e.g. Lavalette, 2017; MacLeavey, 2011; Marshall, 2013), and the economic criticisms levelled at austerity. In particular, the economic logic of reducing investment in society at a time of economic crisis has been described as fundamentally flawed (see Cooper and White, 2017a; Holland and Portes, 2012; Krugman, 2015). Whilst an in-depth economic analysis is of course beyond the scope of this discussion, in brief terms the argument against austerity rests on the assertion that investing in society can, in the long term, provide greater returns through the action of fiscal multipliers (Holland and Portes, 2012). Conversely, and perhaps intuitively, the reduced investment in society that has defined austerity will likely end up costing society more than it saves (Holland and Portes, 2012; Semmler and Semmler, 2013; Cooper and White, 2017a). Cooper and White (2017a para 7), discussing their book *The Violence of Austerity* (2017b), in which they bring together several experts in order to reflect upon the impacts of austerity, argue that:

The economic folly is that austerity will cost society more in the long term. Local authorities are, for example, housing people in very expensive temporary accommodation because the government has disinvested in social housing. The crisis in homelessness has paradoxically led to a £400 million rise in benefit payments. The future costs of disinvesting in young people will be seismic.

As I discuss in the literature review (see p22), the suggestion that reduced investment simply ‘moves’ problems onto other areas in this way, rather than solving them, is backed up by several studies, within diverse fields, which demonstrate how cuts to funding have a ‘knock-on effect’, putting increased pressure on other services (e.g. Barr et al, 2015; Blane and Watt, 2012; Iacobucci, 2014; Majeed et al, 2012; Millie, 2014; Turnbull and Wass, 2015).

Clearly, then, the dominant media narrative, whereby state spending is cast as wasteful, is greatly oversimplified. Additionally, the suggestion that it also worsens economic problems by fostering a costly moral decline is one which has been contradicted by extensive study (e.g. Macdonald et al, 2014; Mayo, 2013; McDowall, 2011; Patrick, 2015; Shildrick et al, 2010). Given these inconsistencies, it is not surprising that austerity has been described as an



ideologically driven project, and in particular as a ‘neoliberal response’ to a neoliberal crisis (Aalbers, 2013; Farnsworth and Irving, 2018; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; O’Hara, 2015; Tyler, 2015; Windebank and Whitworth, 2014). A first attempt to explain the dominant pro-austerity stance taken by the media would therefore be to suggest that it is further evidence of a neoliberal bias amongst the media (see e.g. Andersson, 2012; Berry, 2016; Fenton, 2011; Grantham and Miller, 2010; Herman and McChesney, 2001; McChesney, 2003, 2012).

A problem with this explanation however, is that the term ‘neoliberalism’ has become somewhat unclear (O’Neill and Weller, 2016: 84)<sup>40</sup>. Whilst, traditionally, neoliberalism describes a form of capitalism which ideologically emphasises competitive free-markets, deregulation, privatisation, and the shrinking of the state (Harvey, 2007b: 2- 3), decades of evolution, especially in times of crisis (Peck, 2010), and inconsistent adherence to these ideals (Harvey, 2007b: 19; Navarro, 2007; Peck, 2010) have arguably led to many forms of ‘neoliberalism’, or neoliberalisms coming into being (Hall, 2011). In effect the term retains usefulness as something of an umbrella term (see Hall, 2011: 706) for problematic forms of capitalism which privilege profit over social justice, equality, and sustainability.

Clearly austerity fits this broad definition in that it redirects public money towards paying the debt incurred in rescuing the supposedly ‘free’ financial markets, those that crashed as a result of the misconduct of financial elites. But, putting such a broad label on austerity does not explain the factors which might lead to its becoming the chosen political response to the economic crisis, and why the media would support this choice. Turning to the literature in an effort to explain this, I would suggest that certain aspects of modern, global capitalism can be identified which, taken together, would explain ideological support for austerity *both* at the ‘official’ (political) level and amongst the media.

The first relevant consideration here is the way in which global capitalism inherently translates wealth to influence. Within global capitalism, economic elites operate in an international market, and are therefore largely beyond the legal and moral restraints of nation states (Davies, 2017; Robinson and Harris, 2000; Robinson, 2017). This means that whilst economic elites hold influence wherever they operate, they are themselves largely free from

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<sup>40</sup> As O’Neill and Weller (2016: 85) put it: “definitions of neoliberalism have become so broad, so fluid and so multifaceted that the word may have become an obstacle to quality academic argument. It has become, for some, a crutch holding up weak analysis or a vague, insufficiently argued-for, one-size-fits-all explanation for a diverse range of events and circumstances. Its readily made assumptions press all manner of events into a single template and avoid detailed scrutiny of the real forces and processes driving economic, cultural and social change”.

what are, in effect, geographically limited factors (see Standing, 2015). Yet despite being relatively free from national constraints, economic elites are nonetheless constrained by competition itself. Indeed, given that they operate within an international competitive market, the pre-determined goal for which they *must* strive is one of successful competition, and therefore self-preservation, through accumulation (Robinson, 2017). In effect, these two factors lead to the formation of a dominant ‘transnational capitalist class’ (Robinson and Harris, 2000: 12), concerned with securing the ‘conditions for capital accumulation on a global scale’ (Jessop, 2004: 19). As Robinson (2017: 179) argues:

There is fierce rivalry and competition among transnational conglomerations that turn to numerous institutional channels, including multiple national states, to pursue their interests. The [transnational capitalist class] is heterogeneous and is not internally unified; its only point of unity is around the defence and expansion of global capitalism

Given the dominance of economic elites at the international level, they are able to exert pressure upon nation states to create these very conditions (Bohle, 2009; O’Connell, 2007; Robinson and Harris, 2000; Rupert, 2007). This is because, within the context of global capitalism, nation states are under pressure to compete for investment by enacting policies which serve elite interests. As Rupert (2007: 39) notes:

Insofar as governments in capitalist social systems must rely upon private investors to generate economic growth, tax revenues, and the popular legitimacy which is often associated with a growing economy, governments face a structural imperative to secure the conditions of successful capital accumulation and the stability of the capitalist system as a whole. If government fails to create a ‘business friendly’ climate attractive to private investors, or pursues policies that appear to threaten conditions of profitability, capitalists may decline to invest or send their capital elsewhere. Thus, even if they refrained from direct manipulation of public policy through the painfully familiar process of buying political influence with campaign contributions and lobbyists, the class-based powers of capitalist owner-investors nonetheless indirectly limit the scope of public policy through the constraint of ‘business confidence’ and the implicit threat of ‘capital strike’ or transnational capital flight.

To put this succinctly, the international free market creates a market for *compliant* (and *complicit*) states. It is important to appreciate, however, that pressure to comply with elite interests is not, in this context, synonymous with pressure to adopt free market policies at the *national* level, since as the economic crisis showed, unstable free markets present something of a risk, even to economic elites. Instead, the pressure is to enact policies that ensure that, *by any means* (see Harvey, 2007: 19), as much of the potential of any given society is directed toward the production of profit, which is then allowed (or made) to flow ‘upward’. Indeed, this would explain the oft-noted inconsistency between ‘neoliberal’ theory and practice

(Aalbers, 2013; Harvey, 2007b: 19; Navarro, 2007; Peck, 2010); for example, the selective nature of state intervention in supposedly ‘free markets’ (Farnsworth, 2015; Navarro, 2007).

The more pragmatic reality makes sense when the ideology of ‘neoliberalism’ is viewed as that which *results* from the workings of the global competitive system, and has as its aims the creation of the optimum conditions for wealth accumulation. Viewed this way, such pragmatism is central to the elite-serving nature of modern capitalism, in that it ensures the maximisation of profits *regardless of how this is done, or of the wider effects*. This is especially so in the context of economic crisis, since such crises disrupt the status quo, forcing capitalism to evolve in response (Peck, 2010), and this opens up the system to pragmatic change (Peck, 2010). In this respect, austerity can perhaps best be understood as part of an evolutionary process that, capitalising upon the crisis, strengthens the dominance of economic elites. Firstly by offloading the debt incurred in rescuing the financial market onto the public, ensuring that the losses are borne by society (Lavalette, 2017), and thereby insulating economic elites from the risks of the market. Secondly by reducing public spending, and therefore the proportion of capital which would otherwise be re-invested in society, as opposed to being freed up as private profit. And thirdly, by increasing the ‘competitiveness’ of the working population (see Blyth, 2013: 2; Nunn, 2008) through a combination of decreased bargaining power, the normalisation of low-paid insecure work, and coercion (Briken and Taylor, 2018; Farnsworth and Irving, 2015; Friedli and Stearne, 2015; Heyes, 2013, Shildrick and MacDonald, 2012: 200). As Jessop (2001: 3) notes, one effect of drives towards competitiveness at the national level is that “labour markets become more flexible and downward pressure is placed on a social wage that is now considered as a cost of production rather than a means of redistribution and social cohesion”.

Whilst austerity can be understood in this way, what cannot be is public acceptance of it. The media are therefore of central importance in this respect, in that they occupy a powerful position in relation to the public discourse, and at the same time have strong ties with economic elites. In order to expand upon the ties between economic elites and the media, it is worth returning to the supply-side theories of media bias that I discuss in the literature review (p40). To recap here, within the literature concerns have often been raised regarding the potential of direct (and increasingly concentrated) ownership, report sourcing, and advertising to lead to an institutional pro-corporate bias (e.g. Alger, 1998; Baker, 1994; Chomsky, 1997; Fenton, 2011; McChesney, 2003, 2004, 2012; Mcchesney and Gashney, 2000) which then filters down to the level of reporting (McChesney and Foster, 2003). The media are therefore

well positioned to act as mediator, ensuring that an elite-serving response to the economic crisis comes to be accepted as the only logical response. In other words, the media are able to shape the ‘public mood of the time’, with which political policy must resonate (see Stanley, 2014).

Once acceptance of the ‘necessity’ of such a response is established, the path is cleared for widespread changes to occur. Obvious examples of such changes are easy to identify: the emphasis upon non-financial ‘help’ for those in poverty (Friedli and Stearn, 2015), the offloading of responsibility for poverty onto society itself (e.g. food banks), and the normalisation of insecure ‘flexible’ work (Heyes, 2013). These changes have the effect of interweaving the elite-serving response into the social fabric, and this creates inertia in terms of reversing the process, since the more the process becomes rooted in this way, the more disruptive any challenge to it becomes. The result being that short of rejecting the social order in favour of seismic change, those within it must (increasingly) act within its constraints.

Combined with the power elites hold over the public discourse (Fairclough, 1999; McChesney, 1997; Van Dijk, 1993), this has the effect of narrowing the range of acceptable political thought to that which perpetuates the process; with that falling outside of this ever narrowing range being labelled as extreme, as radical, and as that which defies common-sense. This pattern is, as I demonstrate in the preceding three chapters, seen throughout the coverage, and suggests that the media are acting as ‘gatekeepers’ in regards to what is politically acceptable. Indeed, given that those involved in the political decision making process are aware of the influence held by the mass media (Cohen et al, 2008), discursive patterns such as this may well explain - at least in part - why austerity was not seriously challenged by any major political parties of the time (Hall and O’Shea, 2013). Such ‘acceptance’ could plausibly reflect a desire to stay within the realm of the ‘acceptable’ and thus to remain relevant (and electable).

Considering austerity as a project designed to increase the ‘competitiveness’ of society would explain many of the patterns of class construction that occur within the dominant media discourse. In particular, it would explain the tendency to portray the situation as a ‘difficult’ one in which ‘we’ find ourselves, yet nonetheless one in which ‘national duty’ and responsibility dictate that we must *do more*, yet *expect less*. After all, increasing the competitiveness of society - in terms of freeing up capital for private profit - can only be achieved at society’s own cost.

Indeed, it is this very sentiment that underpins the treatment of class within the dominant media discourse. The moralised distinction between those who accept this and those who do not facilitates the broad appeal to the audience seen throughout the coverage. Drawing the dividing line down the middle of those most affected by austerity serves to moralise and ‘other’ those who simply cannot afford to ‘expect less’, placing them beyond the scope of sympathy, as well as inviting anger at the ‘fact’ that ‘they’, unlike ‘us’, are unwilling to take responsibility, preferring instead to live parasitically at ‘our’ expense. It therefore follows that the divide is drawn precisely where economic proximity leaves morality as *the* distinguishing feature, and it is here that the contrasting figures of the ‘economic chav’ and the ‘economic martyr’ serve as embodiments of two extremes; ideal-types representative of the worst and best in society respectively. Yet in keeping with the drive towards competitiveness, it is always the case that the former should be pushed down, back into their ‘place’, whilst the plight of the latter is justified through idealised reference to identity, to intrinsic rewards, and to the (faint) possibility of ‘escape’.

### **7.5.2 Lived Reality: The limit of Persuasion?**

Viewed as a project that aims to increase competitiveness, and to open up society to business at any cost, austerity can only have the effect of putting increasing pressure upon the majority of the population. Yet it is the poorest who are hit first, and hardest; since it is they who depend most upon public spending in the first instance (Hastings et al, 2015: 114-115; Korpi and Palme, 2003; Streeck and Mertens, 2011). In this respect the construction of a moralised other is, at least initially, a powerful rhetorical device in that it creates a ‘legitimate target’. This explains away the worst of the impacts as ‘deserved’, whilst simultaneously constructing an insulating layer of safety by situating the ‘target’ on the other side of a supposed moral divide. However, class constructions - along with the narratives they support - must resonate with the lived experiences of the very people they seek to persuade (see Bourdieu, 1987), and where they do not, they will be rejected. As I discuss below, with reference to demand side theories of media bias this may account, at least in part, for the more critical ‘alternative’ discourse that begins to appear within the coverage of the austerity policies ‘in action’, and goes on to form one ‘side’ of the media debate that ensues within the coverage of the impacts of austerity.

An important word of caution needs to be added at this point, however. The emergence of more critical coverage should not be taken as a sign of ‘balanced’ reporting. To take this as a sign of the media’s simply approaching the topics from differing political perspectives would be to relativise the damaging and dishonest portrayals of class seen within the dominant media discourse, a discourse which has the potential to stigmatise people living in poverty (Baumberg, 2016; Duvnjak and Fraser, 2013; Jayakody and Stauffer 2000; Garrett, 2015; Hamilton, 2012; McKenzie, 2013; Stenning, 2020), to justify inequality (Haylett, 2001; Le Grande, 2015; Tyler, 2015), and to legitimise social policies which exacerbate it (Macdonald et al, 2014: 202; Power, 2011: 3). Again, several studies have undermined moralised explanations of inequality, and demonstrated instead its structural causes (e.g. Macdonald et al, 2014; Mayo, 2013; McDowall, 2011; Patrick, 2015; Shildrick et al, 2010, 2012). To reduce such discriminatory discourse, therefore, to a mere political stance would effectively validate the debate, and - importantly - the range of stances taken within it, *including* discriminatory ones. It would be to suggest that *some* degree of class discrimination might be acceptable - leaving only the question of what degree? And it would be to dismiss those who face class disadvantage as too ‘ambiguous’ to be victims (see Haylett, 2001: 353), by suggesting that such disadvantage is a matter of opinion as opposed to fact. In other words, an attempt to avoid making political judgement here would be tantamount to becoming complicit in the injustice itself. Again, as Van Dijk (1993: 253) argues:

[S]cholars have been shown to discredit such partisanship, and therefore show how partisan they were in the first place, e.g. by ignoring, mitigating, excluding, or denying inequality. They condemn mixing scholarship with ‘politics’ and thereby they do precisely that.

Such discourse should therefore be exposed for what it is; nothing less than blatant classism, irrespective of the presence of discourse which challenges it. After all, the emergence of non-racist or non-sexist discourse would not *in any way* excuse its discriminatory counterpart.

Whilst the emergence of more critical coverage does not absolve the media generally, in itself it is nonetheless a finding that requires some explanation. With reference to both the discourse itself, the wider social context in which it features, and the literature, I would suggest three factors may explain the emergence of more critical coverage: firstly, fundamental shifts in public opinion over time; secondly, dissatisfaction and anxiety amongst the middle class; and thirdly, changes within the media, particularly the increasing influence

of ‘new’ media (See Aruguete, 2017; Gillin, 2008; Castells, 2007). I explore these factors in the following section.

### 7.5.3 Possible Factors Driving the Critical Coverage

Whilst the initial arguments regarding the ‘necessity’ of austerity may well have been accepted, albeit reluctantly by a sufficient proportion of the population (Stanley, 2016), it would appear that attitudes may have changed significantly over time. A 2017 Ipsos MORI survey<sup>41</sup> shows that support for austerity measures had halved since 2010. No doubt the media coverage played a large part in initially shaping, and indeed maintaining, support. Yet discourses can only do so much to shape understandings of social ‘reality’, and where they are at odds with peoples own lived experience they will result in a legitimacy gap (Seabrooke, 2007: 796), and therefore increasingly become challenged and rejected. It is perhaps worth noting that the same survey showed that those who reported feeling the effects of austerity had also risen from 23 percent to 33 percent in the same time period.

It is not difficult to see how austerity would lose public support. Despite being sold as a means of ‘restoring fairness’, the unfair impacts of austerity have been consistently demonstrated (e.g. Hastings et al, 2015; Lavalette, 2017; O’Hara, 2015; Ridge, 2013). Vital services have been decimated, often with far reaching consequences (Barr et al, 2015; Hastings et al, 2015; Majeed et al, 2012; Millie, 2014). Meanwhile low paying insecure work, which tends to trap people in cycles of deprivation (Shildrick et al, 2010), has increasingly become the norm (Briken and Taylor, 2018; Heyes, 2013).

Diminishing public support is relevant when considered in terms of *demand-side* theories of media bias. Traditional demand side theories predict *polarisation* between publications on contentious issues as different publications appeal to pre-existing audience biases in attempts to exploit niches in the media market (Pratt and Stromberg, 2013, see literature review p42 for discussion). Whilst such polarisation can be seen in the workfare coverage however, the general pattern across the coverage as a whole is not one of polarisation, but rather one where critical coverage becomes more prominent over the time period of the study. In their traditional form therefore, demand-side theories do not appear to offer an adequate

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<sup>41</sup> See <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/public-perceptions-austerity-social-care-and-personal-data> [accessed 10/04/19].

explanation for this pattern. Yet the notion of the audience itself creating sufficient pressure to influence the media agenda should not be rejected out of hand, since a *general* shift away from acceptance of austerity on the part of the public could, logically, create an equally generalised pressure upon the media to reflect this. In other words, the incoherent, and often confused, nature of the coverage could reflect the fact that the media are increasingly caught between an ideological pro-austerity stance - resulting from supply-side biases - and a growing backlash amongst media consumers. Whilst this seems plausible, a problem here, however, is that it seems reasonable to expect that those most likely to have turned against austerity, having initially accepted it, are those who have suffered the most as a result of its impacts. Logically this would be those in low-paid insecure work - particularly those unfortunate enough to have found themselves out of work at some point, and thus on the wrong side of the imagined 'moral divide' (and firmly within the scope of the impacts).

Such people, however, are amongst the most powerless, and voiceless of all. Whilst the media may be reflecting a general turning of opinion in an attempt to resonate with their audience, it must be noted that those worst affected by the impacts of austerity are also those least likely to have the means to express their disapproval strongly enough to be heard, barring acts of creative protest, of the type described by Tyler (2015). Although one possible factor to consider here, and one which I discuss in more detail below, is that the plight of those worst affected would have become increasingly visible, especially to those engaged in work of a social nature (see e.g. Blane and Watt, 2012; Pentakari, 2016).

However, whilst the disproportionate impacts of austerity mean that the poorest were hit hardest, and most directly, these impacts are not limited to this group (Lavalette, 2017; Standing, 2014; Stenning, 2020). It may well be that increasing dissatisfaction, and feelings of anxiety amongst those 'higher' up the social hierarchy have been a significant factor behind the emergence of more critical media coverage. Downward pressure on incomes and rising levels of insecurity, normalised in the context of austerity, have had a broader impact, extending to those traditionally considered secure, namely the middle class. Indeed, there is no reason why the middle class would not be subjected to the same 'competitive pressure' I describe above. It stands to reason that this pressure would therefore lead to a growing sense of dissatisfaction amongst the middle class, especially if they perceived their status to be under threat (see Standing, 2014; Stenning, 2020). In other words, whereas the mismatch between the discourse and the reality would have immediately been apparent to those *already* in insecure work - particularly those trapped in cycles of such work and reliance upon welfare



(Shildrick et al, 2010) - it stands to reason that it would *become* increasingly apparent to those previously in a 'safe' position as time went by. For example, as increasing numbers of such people saw their own working conditions gradually worsen, were forced to take insecure work following a job loss, or witnessed their children struggle to find secure employment upon entering the employment market for the first time (see Antonucci, 2017; Standing, 2014, 2015; Stenning, 2020).

Antonucci (2017), writing in the context of 'Brexit', argues that the impacts of austerity have led to a shared sense of disillusionment between the working class and the middle class. Whilst detailed consideration of Brexit itself is clearly beyond the scope of this discussion, given that the issue became acute directly at the end of the time period considered within this study, some useful insights can nonetheless be gleaned from this literature. Whilst references to the anger of those 'left-behind' by globalisation and 'economic change' (see Antonucci, 2017: 17, Goodwin and Heath, 2016: 1, Inglehart and Norris, 2016: 5)<sup>42</sup>, has led to the issue being portrayed as something of a working class revolt (Antonucci, 2017), there is evidence to suggest that the leave vote was in large part driven by the middle-class (Antonucci, 2017; Antonucci et al, 2017; Dorling, 2016). Hozic and True (2017: 277) explain this with reference to a mismatch in expectation, driven by discourses of opportunity, and lived reality on the part of 'middle England':

It is the break-down of expected roles [...] which have been richly supported by the media pumping air into neoliberal fantasies that has led to such massive disappointment of 'middle England' and found its expression in the Brexit vote. What if not every little common girl, whose parents run a private business, can marry a Prince or, at least a hedge-fund manager [...] What if not every middle-class couple can retire in Spain or in Greece? What if not every young man can get a high-paid job in the City?

If this view is correct then it would seem that the mismatch between such discourse and the reality of gradual belt tightening, increasing insecurity, and the general sense that slipping 'down' the social order is beginning to outweigh the chance of climbing 'up' it (Standing, 2014; Stenning, 2020) may have led to concerns regarding the direction in which society is moving. To put it another way, the anger of the so-called left behinds may have been added to by that of the 'struggling to keep ups'. As Antonucci, 2017: 10) argues:

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<sup>42</sup> Although McKenzie (2017) takes issue with this term, arguing that far from being 'left behind', working class people have been victims of increasing structural inequality resulting from the policies of successive governments since the 1980s.

...the malaise of the middle classes are part of the same struggle of ordinary British families that have to face an increasing cost of living by relying on the support of family members and by working in jobs that are increasingly precarious.

Furthermore, any feelings of anxiety and uncertainty amongst this group may well have been augmented as the impact upon those at the ‘sharp end’ of austerity (see O’Hara, 2015) became increasingly apparent. As doctors and social workers, for example, come into contact with people desperate enough to seek referrals to food banks, as teachers and social workers see children living in poverty, and as those within the legal system witness tenants brought before the courts in eviction proceedings (see Blane and Watt, 2012; Pentakari, 2016). Compounding this is the fact that several members of the middle class are likely to have personally known others of similar social status who have fallen into difficulty through, for example, the loss of a job in the economic crisis (Stenning, 2020). In this respect then, the uncomfortable proximity of those ‘beneath’ becomes instead an apparent *danger*: a magnification of their own increasing precarity, and therefore a glimpse into the abyss.

This is particularly significant in terms of explaining the emergence of more critical media coverage since, as Hastings et al (2014) and Gal (1998) note, the middle class exerts disproportionate influence upon society through factors such as social connectedness, education, representation in public bodies, the tendency to vote in higher numbers, and, perhaps crucially here, representation amongst the media. Put more explicitly, the middle class can bring its cumulative capital to bear upon society in such a way that its influence far exceeds its number. Gal (1998: 47) notes that those within the media are predominantly middle class, arguing that journalists, as relatively well paid professionals, certainly are. In the context of increasingly normalised insecurity however, it is worth noting that the National Union of Journalists has raised concerns regarding “an increase of casualisation as staff jobs have been dispensed with during successive rounds of redundancies” (Stanistreet, 2011: 2 see also Bakker 2012). As such, a consequence of disillusionment and uncertainty amongst the middle class would plausibly be a more fertile ground in which critical media views could grow.

A final factor to consider when explaining the critical coverage is the changing nature of the media, and in particular the increasing challenge posed to traditional media by ‘new’ media (Castells, 2007). Castells (2007) argues that the emergence of new media has inherent democratising potential, in that it opens up the means of communication and thus provides a space for ‘counter-power’ to flourish, with the literature providing some support for this view

(e.g. Araguete, 2017; Howard and Hussain, 2010; Seib, 2007: 1-3). Of course, a logical counter argument would be that by opening up the means of mass self-communication the danger exists that each and every voice is simply drowned out in a sea of such voices (Hall, 2011: 723). However, it is perhaps the connected nature of new media, existing in a *many to many* form, as opposed to the hierarchical structure of traditional media, which lends it its greatest potential to shape the *agenda* (see Castells, 2007: 257). Once created, articles can be shared via social networks with potentially hundreds of thousands of people.

Technology has also increased the scrutiny that can be applied to claims made within traditional media (and by figures such as politicians) (Araguete, 2017). Even at the most basic level, comment sections of online news present an almost instant barometer of the level of acceptance amongst readers (Frischlich et al, 2019; Reich, 2011: 105). It is possible, therefore, that the increasing influence of new media may have made any growing backlash all the more visible, to the extent that it simply cannot be ignored. In this way the increasingly evident legitimacy gap could be further wrenched open, forcing the media to open up the debate beyond ‘official’ discourses and narratives. Again, this can be supported by the frequent attempts seen within the coverage to situate alternative discourses as being ‘left-wing’. For instance: “I have little sympathy with *those on the left* who make out that “US-style workfare schemes”, as they call them, are demeaning” (*The Times*, workfare 31/10/13, emphasis added). This struggle to place one’s own discourse in the ‘reasonable centre’ suggests that such a place is becoming increasingly difficult to locate as the presence of competing discourses calls into question, and threatens to undermine, what was previously ‘common-sense’.

## 7.6 Conclusions

When the incoming Conservative led government of 2010 made it their task to offload, onto the population, the debt incurred by the previous government in bailing out the banks at the onset of the crisis, the oft-repeated message was: ‘we are all in it together’ (Raynor, 2017). Yet whilst the crisis had resulted from the financial sector’s reckless trading in what was essentially speculated future labour (in a relentless drive for profit), austerity saw to it that the losses were then borne by those least able to afford them (Hastings et al, 2015; Lavalette,

2017). Nonetheless, the upstanding citizen was expected to accept the ‘necessity’ of this, to tighten their belt, and say “*I will work harder*”<sup>43</sup>.

Years of austerity have brought misery and suffering to many. It has led to an increase in inequality, insecurity, and poverty (Cooper et al, 2014; Dowler, 2014; Lavalette, 2017). It has also contributed towards growing feelings of disillusionment, resentment, and political abandonment (McKenzie, 2017; Antonucci 2017). Vital public services have been impacted, with far reaching consequences (Barr et al, 2015; Blane and Watt, 2012; Iacobucci, 2014; Majeed et al, 2012; Millie, 2014; Turnbull and Wass, 2015), consequences which, in the long term, will likely cost society more than has been saved (Cooper and Whyte, 2017a). And herein lies the real tragedy of austerity; the fact that it was not necessary at all. Yet the fact that it was *perceived* as necessary (Stanley, 2014, 2016) is perhaps no coincidence, given the concerted effort of the media to portray it as such. Indeed the first conclusion that can be drawn here is that public acquiescence to austerity (Stanley, 2014, 2016) can be explained in no small part by the fact that the necessity narrative was so prominent in the early coverage. As Krugman (2015) and Berry (2019 xvi) note, the economic crisis was not well understood by the public. The fact that it was largely unforeseen by economists is testament to the complexity of the factors underlying it. In this respect, it is hardly surprising that the idea of austerity being unavoidable was taken at face value (again see Stanley, 2014, 2016). Indeed, the largely unchallenged nature of such claims led to their appearing as if they were nothing less than commonsense.

The second conclusion that can be drawn is that once the idea of unavoidable scarcity was established, there was a change in the fundamental context of which social class is part. The increased salience of the economic and political issues that underpin class upped the stakes in terms of the importance of how class itself is understood. In essence, for proponents of austerity the importance shifted from justifying class disadvantage *as it is*, to justifying *worsening* disadvantage. And it is here that the importance of the context, of unavoidable scarcity, and of necessary austerity becomes clear. If ‘we’ are ‘all in it together’, all tightening our belts and all dutifully ‘taking the hit’, then a particular moral judgement is cast upon ‘those’ who are not, since those who take a free ride on the cart which ‘we’ must pull are deadweight. When we all recognise the ‘need’ to work harder for less, then the moralised others are those who don’t, and who won’t.

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<sup>43</sup>This is the standard response of ‘Boxer’ the horse (who represents the working class) in George Orwell’s allegorical novel *Animal Farm* (1945), to any problem that the farm faces.

Of course, many *couldn't*. Extensive job losses in the wake of the crisis were only compounded by the effects of public spending cuts (see Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012; O'Hara, 2015: 3-4). Yet this fact was glossed over, explained away by reference to morality. But it is not only that poverty is moralised in this instance; the supposed moral failings are themselves 'economised', framed - as per the 'economies and sensibilities' of the time (Haylett, 2001: 353) - in terms of their cost to society. Such discourse lumps together all those who make a claim on society *regardless* of the circumstances leading them to do so. It portrays what is in reality, at least for the most part, an ever changing group of people (Shildrick et al, 2010), as if they were a stable and recognisable class.

The third conclusion, then, is that the economisation of the underclass 'chav' figure is a direct result of these sensibilities - a convenient construct that draws upon well recognised stereotypes of the lower class (e.g. Tyler, 2008; Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Romano, 2015); yet framed by the economic downturn. In the case of this 'economic chav', an emphasis upon the pre-disposition towards deviance is combined with the idea that such people lack the ability of moral reasoning at all. Their moral failing is thus the ease with which they fall into a parasitic lifestyle. This construct is a useful one in terms of furthering an ideological pro-austerity argument, since it not only dispels all sympathy, it also ensures that this 'group' comes to be viewed as something of a bottomless pit in terms of public spending, one which swallows up, and wastes, all that is thrown into it. Put another way, this construct reduces the argument to one of incentives, where the lower class supposedly sits like scum in the bottom of a tank, there but for our failure to act.

This divisive moralising discourse is a powerful tool with which to stir up 'justified anger', especially where the contrast is made with 'hardworking' people who are 'no better off', yet the drawing of the boundary in moral terms, whilst downplaying economic aspects, risks inviting critical questions regarding the situation faced by the working poor. The fourth conclusion that can be drawn, then, is that the idealisation of the low-paid worker - the 'economic martyr' - is a feature of the discourse which mitigates this problem. Whilst the idyllic reference to the traditional working class marks something of a turn towards romanticism (Lawler, 2005: 443), it is nonetheless in keeping with the pro-austerity stance in that it is founded upon a very selective borrowing of the traditional working class identity. Here a self-less sense of duty and strong work ethic are foregrounded, whilst 'problematic' aspects, such as the struggle against structural inequality, which is inherent to class (Tyler, 2015), are conspicuously absent. What is not absent, however, is the idea of possible escape

(Lawler, 1999); such that the working class identity is cast as something which all must (hopefully) pass through, a stepping stone – the mere beginning of ones journey.

Indeed, the theme of social mobility runs through the class constructions seen within this elite-serving discourse, such that the boundaries that are drawn are always suggested to be permeable. The ‘underclass’ are (potentially) redeemable - able to acquire, with encouragement or coercion, the correct attitudes to count themselves alongside the respectable working class. The respectable working class themselves are ‘on their way’, having their ‘foot on the ladder’, their work ethic, acquired through their humble beginnings, standing them in good stead to succeed. The only limit to their upward trajectory is their own aspiration and talent (see Manstead, 2018; Warren, 2017)<sup>44</sup>. Such discourse could plausibly find a willing audience even in times of crisis and rising inequality, since it offers a chance to ‘escape’ from a miserable everyday reality (Lawler, 1999) - with the rich and powerful serving as reminders that ‘anything is possible’.

Yet beyond a certain point the promise of future reward becomes simply too distant, and when it does such discourse begins to ring empty, especially in the face of grinding poverty and chronic uncertainty (see Briken and Taylor, 2018; Stenning, 2020). And the final conclusion to be drawn here is that, at this point, more critical narratives appear to have found fertile ground. These appear to have subsequently gained traction as the impacts of austerity came to be felt by an increasing proportion of the population, including those traditionally considered to be secure (see Antonucci, 2017; Standing, 2014; Stenning, 2020). Hence the not so glorious reality of (increasing) struggle becomes foregrounded, whilst the figure of the destitute: the food bank user, and the insecure worker struggling to make ends meet, becomes an ever present reminder of the increasingly proximate threat. Within this discourse competing constructions of class become apparent that highlight structural, systemic causes of inequality, thereby putting the issue of economic disadvantage (in spite of moral equivalence) back on the agenda. As this pattern evolves, class is increasingly portrayed as an anxious concept - a slippery slope down which (any)one can potentially fall. Here a picture is painted of a group that bears similarity to the ‘precariat’ (Savage et al, 2014; Standing, 2012 2014), a class united by being the victims of increasing uncertainty.

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<sup>44</sup>For example, Manstead (2018) argues that; “One of the ironies of modern Western societies, with their emphasis on meritocratic values that promote the notion that people can achieve what they want if they have enough talent and are prepared to work hard, is that the divisions between social classes are becoming wider, not narrower.”

## 7.7 Recommendations for Future Research

My first recommendation concerns methodological issues. The approach taken to this study, for the most part, worked very well in terms of addressing the research aims. In particular, I found that the initial use of thematic analysis was very useful in identifying the key patterns and features of a relatively large dataset. This allowed me to select, with a good degree of confidence, extracts from the data that demonstrated these features, and that were therefore good candidates for the more in-depth discourse analysis. I would therefore suggest that the use of thematic analysis is a useful first step when conducting a critical discourse analysis, especially since it addresses the issue of ‘cherry picking’ data, which has often been a criticism of CDA. Others, (e.g. Baker and Levon, 2015) have recommended the use of corpus approaches to this end, and such approaches do have the advantage of being broader still, and thus of facilitating the consideration of even larger datasets than those afforded by thematic analysis. The corpus approach, however, with its focus upon keywords within a very large dataset does have the disadvantage of removing the researcher somewhat from the analytical process. In other words, the advantage of *breadth* comes at the expense of *depth*, meaning that a large shift in focus must be made from very general patterns, identified with little interpretation on behalf of the researcher, to detailed analysis. Whilst there are clearly advantages and disadvantages to both approaches, I would suggest that the approach taken in this study is a valid and useful alternative to corpus approaches.

Whilst the methodological approach generally proved to be sound, there was one specific issue which did become apparent during the analysis and write-up. The decision to focus upon two separate topics for each stage of the analysis proved slightly problematic at times. In the course of the analysis it became apparent that the media coverage of each topic often had its own distinct features, and as a result of this I felt at times to be balancing the need to reflect these distinct features whilst keeping the write-up focused and coherent. The obvious solution here, and one which I did consider, would have been to have split the analysis up so that each topic had its own (shorter) chapter. Ultimately, however, I decided against doing this as there was more overlap in terms of patterns and features within the coverage of the paired topics than there was distinction. Breaking up the topics would therefore have necessitated extensive (and potentially confusing) cross-referencing. In light of this, one

suggestion I would make is that six topics appears to be approaching the limit of what can be adequately handled using this method within a research project of this size and scope.

From a more theoretical perspective, the application of Tyler's (2015: 496) understanding of inequality being the 'problem that class names' proved to be extremely useful in terms of critiquing portrayals of class. Again, class is difficult to define (Bourdieu, 1987), and the resulting ambiguity has often seen class levered off the agenda (Haylett, 2001) depriving victims of structural inequality a useful lens through which to view (and therefore challenge) their disadvantage. Tyler's (2015) understanding cuts through this ambiguity by abstracting out the issue of structural inequality, affording a platform from which to critique alternative portrayals of class. I would therefore recommend that future research make use of this understanding.

On the topic of theoretical explanations, I would acknowledge here that the ones I provide in this chapter in an attempt to explain the findings of the study are, necessarily, tentative in nature, and as such point to areas worthy of future research. This is especially true where I offer explanations based upon public opinion, and upon the views of those within the media. These are obvious topics which would benefit from further research since, as Stanley (2014) points out; there is little point in speculating upon the views of those who can be asked. Whilst Stanley himself looked at public opinion in the early stage of the 'age of austerity', given the time that has now passed, the impacts that have become apparent, and indeed the findings of this study, a follow up study would greatly benefit the literature. If such a study were to focus upon the views of those who occupy differing position within the social hierarchy, as well as those within the media, then it could shed some light upon some important questions raised, but left unanswered within this study: to what degree did public opinion change with regards to austerity? To what degree did this influence the media coverage? And did those worst affected remain voiceless throughout?

Discourse that serves to *maintain* the injustices that austerity brought about would also be a relevant area for future research. I would suggest that of particular relevance in this respect is discourse within education. In the current context, those leaving education and entering work for the first time enter a world that is far more precarious than before; where working conditions are worsened and genuine opportunities to progress are fewer. Not only do they enter a more precarious world, they do so with an eroded safety net beneath them. Yet in their subjective experience this situation is, for lack of a comparison, normal. Discourse within



education has long been regarded as an area in which class disadvantage is perpetuated through the ‘hidden curriculum’ (Hill, 2017), future research might investigate the ways in which students from poorer backgrounds are ‘prepared’ to enter increasingly insecure low-paying work. As Standing argues:

..a struggle for the redistribution of education is life-defining for the precariat. Here it needs to overcome a sense of false consciousness that education has been spreading and to counter a rhetoric of ‘human capital’ that has been refined by neo-liberals. On the surface, more people are being educated to a higher ‘level’ than at any time in history. However, real education is very unequally distributed, and more of what is sold as education is fraudulent. While the affluent have access to an education enabling them to liberate the mind and be innovative, the precariat is relegated to a commodified ‘human capital’ schooling, designed to prepare them for job and habituate them to a life of unstable labour, with plebeian minds.

Also of future interest might be the stigmatisation of poverty. Discourses that moralise poverty, such as those I point to within this study, have been noted elsewhere within the literature as having the potential to lead to social stigma (e.g. Duvnjak and Fraser, 2013, Hamilton, 2012, Purdam et al, 2016). The relevance of stigma to class is that it has the potential to exacerbate inequality in three ways; firstly by leading people in hardship to not seek help they otherwise might, secondly by promoting feelings of guilt and shame, which in turn have the potential to impact upon mental health (Jayakody and Stauffer 2000), and finally, by perpetuating negative views of poor people, leading to further discrimination. Ironically, the view that people should, and indeed *could*, take responsibility for their own situation (a central theme of the pro-austerity discourse) therefore has the potential to act as structural cause of inequality in itself, preventing them from doing just that. In simple terms, future research could investigate the degree to which narratives of ‘individual responsibility’ act as a *self-defeating* prophesy.

Two recent issues: ‘Brexit’, and the (as of August 2020 ongoing) coronavirus pandemic would benefit from future research from the perspective of social class. Further, given the timings of these events, such a focus could build upon the findings of this study. In particular, a focus upon the media coverage of both of these issues would be useful in that it would shed light upon the evolution of portrayals of class during what has been, by recent standards at least, a fairly turbulent decade.

In the case of Brexit, there has been a tendency to view the issue as a ‘revolt’ of those ‘left behind’ by globalisation, and as an expression of working class xenophobia. Both of these understandings clearly draw upon negative class stereotypes. Firstly that the working class have indeed been ‘left behind’, and that it is *their* failings which have prevented them from ‘keeping up’ (McKenzie, 2018), and secondly, that the working class are indeed more prone to xenophobia (see Haylett, 2001). It is worth pointing out that any factual basis for these stereotypes is doubtful (see Manstead, 2018; McKenzie, 2013, 2017; Haylett, 2001; Valentine and Harris, 2014). Brexit is clearly a divisive issue - as the close result of the referendum, and the numerous protests and counter protests that followed demonstrate - and, again, it is beyond the scope of this discussion to weigh in on the issue itself. Yet nonetheless, what must be acknowledged is both the potential of the issue to further cement negative class stereotypes, and for explanations that draw upon these stereotypes to oversimplify the issue itself - thereby leading to wider concerns, arguably genuine ones, regarding the effects of globalisation being ignored.

With regards to the coronavirus pandemic, this ongoing issue has, of course, led to widespread upheaval. Yet there is evidence its impacts will be greatest in deprived areas (Office for National Statistics, 2020), making it another obvious area of future interest from a class perspective. For the time being at least, the sudden and extreme changes that have occurred across society appear to have been mirrored by a change in the prevailing discourse<sup>45</sup>: even to the casual observer it is clear that the logic of spending cuts and their true impact is (for now) being questioned, especially with regards to healthcare services. Equally clear is the valorisation of frontline workers, NHS workers in particular, but also those termed ‘key workers’: teachers, shop workers, delivery drivers and the like. For the time being at least, the wide impacts - the ironic fact that we are now *genuinely* ‘in something together’ - appears to have led to a wind change in the national thinking. It would seem that pandemics, like wars, provide an ‘external enemy’ (Mackay, 2002 cited in Hinton and Redclift, 2009) that facilitates ‘political and class alliances impossible in peacetime’ (Hinton and Redclift, 2009: 5).

But the situation with Covid-19 is temporary, pandemics eventually come to an end, and when this one does it will leave a trail of economic upheaval in its wake. It is not

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<sup>45</sup>Something perhaps best illustrated when the current (as of June, 2020) Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared that there “really is such a thing as society”, conspicuously contradicting Margaret Thatcher’s (1987) notorious claim to the contrary (Saunders, 2020).

unreasonable to expect widespread job losses, and if the precedent from the 2008 crisis is followed then further casualisation might be the preferred method of job retention in the ensuing 'difficult times'. The public debt incurred will be significant also. For all the valorisation of the 'key workers' then, or perhaps as this study suggests, *owing* to such valorisation, the question for future research is to what degree will these people be the ones who pay the price?

With regards to the media; technological changes are rapidly changing the landscape. Future research must therefore consider the effects of 'new' media, such as social networks, blogs, and other forms of 'many-to-many' communication. Clearly 'new' forms of media have at least *potential* in terms of balancing out hegemonic discourse, and promoting engagement and critical reflection (Araguete, 2017; Castells, 2007). Yet it remains unclear to what extent (see Araguete, 2017 for a review of the literature), indeed it may be that changing the technology does not fundamentally change the dominance elites are able to exert over the public discourse.

For this reason, future research should investigate, and seek to challenge, processes that make new technology yet another place where elite-serving discourse is disseminated. This is a particularly important point; new technologies have made it possible to spread information and ideas at a speed, and with an efficiency which up until (relatively) recently would have been considered impossible (Castells, 2007). As corporations rapidly colonise the digital world, and as governments seek to control it, however, there exists a danger of submitting a potent weapon that could be used to further injustices. All who have a stake in social justice should therefore resist control and censorship in this new site of struggle. In an era of concern over 'fake news' for example, future research might ask critical questions such as; what criteria is to be applied in defining 'fake' news (and distinguishing it from mere dissenting opinion), how is this to be decided and, crucially, by *whom*? If the digital world can be kept open and free then it can lead to better informed citizens, challenges to social injustices and to the narratives which maintain them, and also provide a means to *organise*; as Standing (2014) argues, unity between those who have suffered under the current social order is vital if they are to become a class *for themselves*'. Defending the means through which discourse can be disseminated even where it conflicts with 'official' narratives is clearly an important aim for those engaged in social critique, and one which leads neatly into a more general point I would make; those who take a critical and especially an advocatory stance, should strive to get their message across to as wide an audience as possible. If such research and theory is

only published within academic journals then it is only likely to be read by those who already take a critical view on society, resulting in a case of preaching to the converted.

I would like to end this thesis with a rather general recommendation, but one which is in keeping with the critical nature of class analysis. Future research should question whether the aims of reducing inequality and promoting social justice can ever truly be reconciled with the aim of ensuring ‘competitiveness’ within the global capitalism system (see Harvey, 2007: 72; Nunn, 2008; O’Connell, 2007). Indeed it may be that this question, being the logical endpoint of the critical approach, played no small part in seeing class levered off the academic agenda in the past. In other words, it may be that the very nature of class analysis puts it on a collision course with what is essentially the dominant global system. Still, I would argue that future research in this area should resist any appeal to consequence in questioning the sustainability of a system whereby economic elites can exert significant influence upon society to adapt to their needs, yet remain free from social constraints; after all it seems logical to suggest that the incompatibility of rising inequality and poverty on the one hand, and the inherent reliance of capitalism on growth and consumption on the other, will eventually lead to the very same ‘financial innovation’ which caused the economic crisis of 2008. And greater inequality in this context would simply serve to make the ‘toxic’ debt all the more toxic (see Marshall, 2013; Stockhammer, 2015). Those taking a critical view should, therefore, not shy away from highlighting, where necessary, the need for fundamental, even radical, social change.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Nexis Data: Article List

	<b>Emergency Budget</b>	<b>Welfare Reform</b>	<b>Workfare</b>	<b>Bedroom Tax</b>	<b>Food Banks</b>	<b>Zero-Hours Contracts</b>
<i><b>The Daily Mail</b></i>	20/10/10 06/11/10 29/11/10 16/12/10 16/12/10	28/01/12 17/10/12 11/12/12 17/12/12 30/12/12	28/01/12 17/10/12 18/11/12 17/12/12 08/08/13	19/09/13 21/10/13 13/11/13 03/02/14 22/02/14	22/02/14 09/03/14 20/11/14 25/05/15 26/10/15	30/04/14 20/05/14 25/02/15 29/03/15 17/04/15
<i><b>The Times</b></i>	09/10/10 13/10/10 15/10/10 28/10/10 16/12/10	12/10/12 18/10/12 01/11/12 02/12/12 04/12/12	31/10/13 07/04/14 28/04/14 06/05/14 17/02/15	02/04/13 14/09/13 19/09/13 05/10/13 09/06/14	01/03/14 01/03/14 24/04/14 08/12/14 14/09/15	14/04/14 15/11/14 27/03/15 12/04/15 28/04/15
<i><b>The Sun</b></i>	05/10/10 05/10/10 22/06/10 25/06/10 26/08/10	18/02/11 04/04/11 11/04/11 24/02/12 08/08/12	25/11/12 14/02/13 31/03/13 06/10/13 13/10/13	08/04/13 16/09/13 09/11/13 27/12/13 21/07/14	19/10/13 16/04/14 17/04/14 14/10/14 06/04/15	09/02/15 29/03/15 03/04/15 06/04/15 16/04/15
<i><b>The Telegraph</b></i>	01/07/10 07/07/10 10/07/10 14/07/10 18/08/10	21/01/12 21/03/12 22/03/12 14/05/12 17/09/12	30/09/13 30/09/13 25/01/14 26/01/14 17/02/15	18/03/13 14/09/13 19/09/13 08/11/13 22/03/15	30/04/14 27/06/14 27/01/15 03/04/15 27/11/15	30/04/14 01/05/14 20/05/14 15/11/14 02/04/15
<i><b>The Express</b></i>	31/08/10 07/09/10 22/06/10 23/06/10 24/06/10	23/01/12 05/02/12 14/02/12 05/07/12 02/09/12	22/02/12 28/04/12 17/11/12 01/10/13 31/10/13	17/05/13 11/09/13 12/09/13 02/04/15 11/06/15	19/01/14 17/04/14 06/05/14 08/12/14 18/06/15	18/04/14 01/03/15 01/04/15 03/04/15 17/04/15
<i><b>The Guardian</b></i>	05/10/10 05/10/10 10/10/10 12/10/10 08/11/10	03/10/10 06/11/10 12/11/10 10/06/11 03/10/12	19/10/14 25/10/14 03/11/14 19/11/14 17/02/15	12/09/13 19/09/13 20/09/13 18/07/14 19/11/14	21/03/14 02/04/14 03/04/15 28/10/15 14/12/15	10/04/14 01/05/14 25/06/14 01/04/15 17/04/15
<i><b>The Daily Star</b></i>	14/05/10 19/05/10 19/06/10 21/06/10 25/08/10	18/02/11 05/01/12 11/01/12 29/01/12 03/11/12	19/02/12 26/02/12 28/09/13 28/09/13 31/10/13	14/03/13 01/04/13 12/09/13 20/09/13 22/10/13	16/04/14 14/09/15 24/09/15 23/10/15 28/11/15	19/04/14 01/01/15 03/05/15 26/06/15 02/11/15
<i><b>The Mirror</b></i>	29/04/10 30/04/10 24/05/10 15/06/10 21/06/10	26/05/10 14/02/12 03/04/12 31/10/12 12/12/12	09/11/11 13/02/12 18/02/12 12/03/12 31/08/12	15/07/14 19/07/14 06/10/14 30/05/15 10/06/15	20/01/14 27/01/14 15/04/14 16/04/14 16/04/14	29/03/15 29/03/15 31/03/15 17/04/15 03/09/15

Accessed via the Nexis database and news research tool: <https://www.lexisnexis.com/en-us/professional/nexis/nexis.page> [viewed between 04 November 2016 and 27 April 2017].

## Appendix 2: Examples of Data Coding

### Data coding example 1.

**THE WELL FAIR STATE;  
CHANCELLOR'S WAR ON THE WORKSHY. State handouts are capped at £500 a wk Better-off to lose their child benefits**

GEORGE Osborne went to war on workshy wasters [**worskshy**] and well-off welfare claimants [**well-off claimants**] yesterday to make the benefits system fairer for all. [**fairness**]

In an unprecedented move, the Chancellor capped how much the unemployed can get from the State.

Mr Osborne told Day Two of the Tory Party Conference in Birmingham that no household will be able to claim more than £500 a week in total in handouts - the average family's take home pay. [**handouts vs average pay**]

It will spell an end to the scandal [**morality: welfare a scandal**] of the work-shy getting rich on taxpayers' sweat for doing nothing - as exposed repeatedly by The Sun. [**workshy getting rich at expense of 'taxpayer'**]

But while targeting scroungers [**targeting scroungers**], the 39-year-old Chancellor also turned his guns on well-off families, controversially scrapping child benefit for all higher rate taxpayers. [**wealthy claimants**]

Having pledged four months ago to protect the handout [**handouts**] as a universal benefit, the surprise move sparked a backlash from traditional Tory supporters.

The hugely popular cap on benefits [**popular support for welfare reform**] will effect an extra 50,000 families, on top of the thousands targeted by a £400 a week limit on housing benefit, unveiled in June's Emergency Budget.

On average, scrounging families [**scrounging families**] will lose £93 a week - though some will see as much as £2,500 go. The cap - which will come into effect in April 2013 once local authorities have built schemes to administer it - will see some of the most notorious scroungers evicted from rented mansions. [**scroungers: life of luxury**]

Disabled people and war widows will be the only groups excluded from the move. [**fairness: excluded groups**]

It is also hoped to act as a massive incentive to get a job. [**incentive to work**]

The cap will be lifted on anyone working 16 hours a week or more. The conference was told one in five households is entirely dependent on benefits [**welfare dependency**], with nobody working. And nearly a million people of working age have never worked. [**life on benefits**]

Announcing the crackdown, the Chancellor declared: "British people have a strong sense of what is fair. [**fairness: British peoples sense of**]

"If someone is disabled, then they should get all the care and support that we can offer. If someone is desperately looking for work, then they too should get our determined help. [**helping deserving**]

"But if someone believes that living on benefits is a lifestyle choice, then we need to make them think again. [**lifestyle choice**]

"And we need to change completely the system that has allowed and encouraged them to make such a mistaken choice." **[encouraging welfare lifestyle]** Mr Osborne faced an angry backlash last night over his plans to axe child benefit for the wealthy. **[backlash]**

From 2013, every family with a parent paying the higher rate of tax will lose the benefit **[impact on wealthy]**. Around 1.2million households will be hit - and families with three kids will lose up to £2,500 a year. **[impact on children]**

Mr Osborne said he could not justify paying the benefit to the rich. He said: "We've got to be tough but fair - we're all in this together." **[tough but fair] [in it together]**

But critics accused the Chancellor of a U-turn. In his June Budget, Mr Osborne told the Commons he would not tax or means-test child benefit. He told MPs he would keep the "popular universal benefit" and added: "I know many working people feel that their child benefit is the one thing they get without asking from the State." **[impact on 'working people']**

Last night the respected Institute for Fiscal Studies warned the plan "seriously distorts incentives for some families with children." It said a family where one parent earned £45,000 would lose all their child benefit. **[incentives]**

But a family where both parents earned just under the £43,875 higher rate threshold would still get the payments.

The Centre for Social Justice, founded by Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith, called on Mr Osborne to look at "alternative options".

CSJ chair Samantha Callan said: "We think it is probably appropriate but we want to see other options looked at." The plans were defended by Barnardo's boss Martin Narey who said it would "save significant amounts of money without affecting the poorest". **[fairness]**

But Child Poverty Action Group chief Alison Garnham said: "It's very unfair that families with children should once again be taking the hit." **[unfair to families/children]**

In his keynote speech, the Chancellor also savaged the last Labour government for building up a £1trillion national debt - which costs £120million daily to repay. **[necessity: national debt]**

He also explained the need for £83billion spending cuts - to be unveiled in two weeks - saying Gordon Brown's administration took Britain "to the brink of bankruptcy". **[need for spending cuts]** Employment Minister Chris Grayling also announced new "work clubs" will be set up with businesses to help people find jobs **[help finding work]**. He was due to speak today at a Sunemployment fringe debate on "Getting Britain Back to Work". **[getting Britain back to work]** Mr Osborne is to appear on the panel.

*The Sun* (05/10/10: 8-9)

## Data coding example 2.

### Welfare blitz

THE Sun has repeatedly called for welfare reform. [**support for welfare reform**]

Now it is happening. And it is likely to be the Coalition's greatest achievement. [**welfare reform: 'great achievement'**]

At the heart of the shake-up lies a vital principle [**principles**]: Life on benefits will no longer be an option. [**welfare: lifestyle choice**]

How will this be achieved? By ensuring work always pays better [**making work pay**] than handouts. [**handouts**]

For generations, Governments have ducked the challenge [**welfare: a long standing problem**] of ending welfare addiction [**welfare addiction**], where millions of fit people are paid by the State to idle their lives away. [**state funded idleness**]

The Coalition deserves credit for confronting one of the evils of this age [**morality**]. Welfare Secretary Iain Duncan Smith will be remembered as the architect of a revolution [**welfare revolution**] aimed at restoring self-respect to millions stuck in the benefits rut. [**restoring self-respect**] [**stuck on welfare**]

His new universal credit, replacing Labour's crazy tangle of handouts [**handouts**], simplifies welfare at a stroke [**simplify welfare**].

It is vital to remember that in these times of high unemployment, many have no option but benefits. [**no option but benefits**]

Those made redundant through no fault of their own need and deserve the State's support. [**deserving claimants**]

But loafers who turn down jobs will be stripped of their cash. So will sick note fraudsters. [**'loafers'**] [**welfare fraud**]

As David Cameron said launching the Welfare Reform Bill, failure to act now will condemn another generation to the scrapheap. [**welfare trap**]

With £1 in every £7 spent by the Government going on welfare, delay is not an option. [**economic necessity: welfare bill**]

There will howls of rage from Lefties and their BBC mouthpieces [**criticism from 'the left'**]. But this is good news for Britain [**reform good for Britain**].

The Coalition is being brave and bold. [**support for welfare reform**]

Now let it be as brave and bold with those pesky European judges.

*The Sun* (19/02/11: 8)



### Data coding example 3.

## **Unemployed will have to do community work under Tories, says Cameron; Eighteen-to-21-year-olds who have not had a job for six months will lose benefits unless they start apprenticeship or complete community work, Cameron to say**

All 18- to 21-year-olds who have failed to find a job or a place in training would no longer be able to claim jobseeker's allowance under a Tory government, but would instead be forced to undertake community work [**forced labour**], David Cameron will say on Tuesday as he continues his drive to put stricter curbs on welfare at the heart of his party's election appeal. [**strict on welfare**]

Under the plans those aged between 18 and 21 who have not had a job for six months will be barred from claiming benefit unless they agree to start an apprenticeship or complete community work. [**conditionality**]

The plan is designed to ensure that the 50,000 young people "most at risk of starting a life on benefits" [**life on benefits**] find that their first contact with the benefit system is a requirement to undertake community work and search for jobs [**conditionality**]. The claimant will be expected typically to undertake at least 30 hours' community work a week and 10 hours' looking for jobs [**conditionality**].

Anyone required to undertake community work would be paid a youth allowance equivalent to the jobseeker's allowance rate for young people. [**work for welfare**]

In a speech defending the government's changes to welfare, the prime minister will say he is in effect abolishing youth unemployment, and wants to "get rid of that well-worn path from the school gate, down to the Job Centre, and on to a life on benefits". [**welfare culture**] [**life on benefits**]

Cameron will also praise the extension of universal credit, even though it is not yet available to families with children. He is also expected to set out how some benefits would be made conditional on drug addicts and the obese seeking treatment. [**conditionality: self improvement**] [**welfare: addiction/obesity link**]

The Conservatives had previously announced plans to limit jobseeker's allowance for 18- to 21-year-olds to six months before they were required to undertake community work. [**conditionality**]

But Cameron will scrap the idea of an initial six-month period on the dole, and instead say the young unemployed should immediately be put into community work if they want to claim any benefit. [**conditionality**]

There are currently some 50,000 new claims a year from 18- to 21-year-olds who have not been in employment, education or training, about 10% of the total.

They will be expected to go on to a version of the existing community work placements programme for the long-term unemployed [**long term unemployment**], which can include making meals for older people or working for local charities, typically for three months. [**community work**]

The Department for Work and Pensions says community work placements have proven more effective in moving claimants off benefits than the normal Jobcentre Plus signing-on regime.

It claims one pilot in London specifically with day-one work requirements proved even more successful. [**‘moving’ people off of welfare**]

At current volumes the policy would cost about £20m to deliver, paid for from the initial savings generated by the rollout of universal credit.

The proposal is separate from the Work Programme, which is aimed at 18-24 year olds on jobseeker's allowance for more than nine months [**long term unemployment**]. The basic jobseeker's allowance is worth £57.35 a week for 18 to 24 year olds and £72.40 for those aged over 25.

Ed Miliband promised in a speech in June that a Labour government would also abolish the jobseeker's allowance for 18-21 year olds, although he said any dole, subject to some conditions, would be dependent on undertaking training, rather than community work.

[**conditionality**]

Cameron will say the reforms are not just about saving money [**economic savings**]. In the speech in Sussex, he will say: "We are taking further steps to help young people make something of their lives. Our goal in the next parliament is effectively to abolish long-term youth unemployment. [**promoting aspiration**]

"For those 18-21 year-olds who have not been in employment, training or education for six months before they sign on, we are going to take intensive action. [**taking action on welfare**]

"What these young people need is work experience, and the order and discipline of turning up for work each day. So a Conservative government would require them to do daily community work from the very start of their claim, as well as searching for work. [**personal attributes: experience, order and discipline**]

"From day one they must realise that welfare is not a one-way street. Yes, we will help them, but there is no more something for nothing. They must give back to their community too." [**conditionality vs ‘something for nothing’**]

The Conservatives have already announced that they would abolish housing benefit for 18 to 21 year olds.

The chancellor, George Osborne, defended ending housing benefit for under-21s during the Conservative conference, saying: "It is not acceptable for young people under the age of 21 to go straight from school on to benefits and into a home paid for through housing benefit [**benefits lifestyle**] - benefit funded by other people who are working." [**welfare claimants exploiting ‘working people’**]

*The Guardian* (17/02/15)

#### Data coding example 4.

### Labour attacked by top bosses: Karren Brady among 100 execs warning against Ed Miliband

MORE than 100 top bosses have signed a letter in support of a Conservative government, including Duncan Bannatyne and Apprentice star Karren Brady. **[opposition to regulation: 'Top bosses']**

Karren Brady signed along with producer Cameron Mackintosh and Dragons' Den star Duncan Bannatyne

Labour leader Ed Miliband is facing a fresh round of criticism from business **[Criticism of regulation: business]** as he prepares to set out plans effectively outlawing "exploitative" zero hours contracts.

More than 100 senior executives from leading UK companies have signed an open letter warning any "change in course" after the General Election on May 7 would threaten jobs and put the recovery at risk. **[regulation risks jobs and economy]**

The letter was released as it emerged Mr Miliband is to promise legislation in a Labour government's first Queen's Speech **[Labour propose to legislate]** guaranteeing employees the right **[worker's rights]** to a regular contract after 12 weeks of working regular hours. **[right to security]**

The manifesto commitment significantly strengthens its previous policy entitling workers to a regular contract after 12 months. **[right to security]**

In their letter sent to The Daily Telegraph, the executives - who come from some of the country's best known companies **[support for ZHCs: business leaders]** - praised the Government's economic policies, which they said had supported investment and jobs. **[support investment and jobs]**

Signatories to the letter include BP chief executive Bob Dudley, Prudential chief executive Tidjane Thiam, Sir Charles Dunstone, the chairman of Dixons Carphone and Talk Talk plc, and Les Miserables producer Cameron Mackintosh. **[support for ZHCs: business leaders]**

They highlighted Chancellor George Osborne's policy of progressively lowering corporation tax to 20% - which they said had been a "key part" of the Government's economic plan. **[supporting business]**

Just hours earlier shadow chancellor Ed Balls announced that a Labour government would reverse the final reduction - due to take effect later this month - in order to hand a cut in business rates to small firms.

"It has been a key part of their economic plan," the executives said in their letter.

"The result is that Britain grew faster than any other major economy last year and businesses like ours have created over 1.85 million new jobs. **[pro-business: creates jobs]**

"We believe a change in course will threaten jobs and deter investment **[risking jobs and investment]**. This would send a negative message about Britain and put the recovery at risk." **[Britain dependent upon business]**

Mr Miliband chose to seize on the issue of zero hours contracts after David Cameron admitted during his televised grilling last week by Jeremy Paxman that he could not live on one. **[ZHCs: Low pay] [out of touch elites]**

The Labour leader will say today in Yorkshire that the proliferation of zero hours contracts has come to symbolise the failure of the Conservative-led coalition's economic policies.

Ed Miliband is to announce Labour's plans to effectively end zero hours contracts today in Yorkshire

He is expected to say: "We will give working people more control of their working lives, we're going to put an end to exploitative zero hours contracts." **["working people": end exploitation]**

Labour officials said that while there would be exemptions for employees such as so-called bank nurses who specifically request a zero hours contract so they can work at another hospital as well as their usual job - more than 90% of the 1.8 million existing zero hours contracts would be banned. **[ban ZHCs]**

The proposals were strongly criticised by CBI director-general John Cridland who warned that it could prove counter productive creating more instability for workers. **[flexibility creates security]**

"Of course action should be taken to tackle abuses **[ZHCS: abuse vs use]**, but demonising flexible contracts is playing with the jobs that many firms and many workers value and need," **[flexibility suits workers]** he said.

"These proposals run the risk of a return to day-to-day hiring in parts of the economy, with lower stability for workers and fewer opportunities for people to break out of low pay." **[opportunities to escape poverty]**

The Conservatives said that just one in 50 jobs were zero hours contracts and that the Government had already acted to tackle abuses. **[ZHCs: unproblematic]**

"Labour presided over zero hours contracts with no safeguards for three terms and 13 years while they were in power.

Tony Blair even promised to ban them entirely as far as back as 1995 and then did nothing," a spokesman said. **[Labour hypocrisy re ZHCs]**

*The Express Online* (01/04/15)

## **Data coding example 5.**

### **Red Cross UK food handout shames MPs**

THE Red Cross has been busy this week making plans to collect vital food parcels for the desperately poor and hungry. **[destitution]**

It is, of course, what aid workers do to ease pain and suffering in Third World countries or disaster zones, and to help refugees who are the victims of conflict.

But now it's a whole lot closer to home **[poverty close to home]**. For the first time since the Second World War, the Red Cross will be handing out food parcels in Britain this winter. **[poverty in UK:Third World comparison]**

What an indictment on a once proud nation [**national Decline**]. Of course, we already have food banks all across the country with caring people and organisations helping those who find themselves in dire need. [**food banks: essential help**]

The city of Aberdeen might be the oil capital of Europe but it is also where people at the bottom of the heap can no longer afford to feed themselves and their families - and it is the same story in other parts of the UK. [**extreme inequality**]

Our most impoverished people are relying more and more on charities who are swamped by sheer demand [**food banks: use increasing**]. And it isn't just those on benefits using food banks.

Many despair at accepting charity People in low-paid jobs and others drowning in debt have also found themselves desperate enough to go and ask for help. [**working poor using food banks**]

Many are deeply embarrassed and in deep despair at having to accept charity. [**shame and despair**]

They shouldn't be feeling like that. The ones who should be hanging their heads in shame are the bankers and politicians who landed us all in this financial mess in the first place [**elite-caused crisis**]. This week I spoke to Frank Field, the Labour MP who is now David Cameron's adviser on poverty. He is clearly frustrated that none of his warnings about the increase in food banks has been heeded. [**poverty ignored**]

He raised the issue a year ago and is still waiting for the Government to take action. During those 12 months, those needing the help of food banks has TRIPLED [**poverty increase**]. The shockingly large increase in gas and electricity bills will inevitably make those living hand-to-mouth turn in desperation [**desperation**] to the food banks [**living costs causing hardship**]. The word from the powers that be is that food banks have become more "popular" because more of us are aware of them, and that those who turn up are usually given food without questions being asked about their financial status. [**food bank exploitation**]

This is nonsense. There might be some greedy people willing to con a well-meaning charity [**food bank exploitation**] but those sorts of scumbags are few and far between. [**majority of users genuine**]

My real concern is that food banks will become an accepted way that we take care of our most vulnerable members of society. [**food banks normalised**]

I fear we will no longer be outraged that our country has to resort to such desperate measures. [**poverty: becoming normalised**]

And that would be truly disgraceful.

*The Sun* (19/10/13: 11)

### **Appendix 3: Articles of Interest**

The following two articles are those that I suggest (on p128 and p194) are worthy of consideration in full.

#### **Feckless fathers should have all benefits removed**

Sentimentality about the welfare state has been one of Labour's key themes during the leadership of Ed Miliband. Attacking the Tories for their supposed viciousness his party has opposed every single measure of social security reform over the past five years. Yesterday the shadow Work and pensions secretary Rachel Reeves was at it again, wailing that the withdrawal of spare room subsidies for public housing tenants - misleadingly dubbed "the bedroom tax" - is "a cruel and unfair policy". but there is another side to the welfare state, one that continues to provide perverse incentives towards fecklessness and idleness on an epic scale. For all Labour's emotional blackmail the fact is the gargantuan benefits system, which costs taxpayers about £220 billion a year, still enables far too many claimants to evade their responsibilities to their families and wider society.

That truth was illustrated this week by a shocking Channel 5 documentary which highlighted some of Britain's worst dads. one featured was Keith MacDonald, from Sunderland, who has fathered 15 children - with another on the way - by 10 different women despite reportedly never having worked a day in his life. It is estimated that with benefit bills for his children he will cost the taxpayer more than £2 million. Described by one former lover as a "waste of space" MacDonald is the ultimate illustration of our something-for-nothing society. Without embarrassment he says he cannot work because of "a bad back" although this does not prevent him from having frequent unprotected sex. so lacking is he in any concern for his offspring that he has already separated from his latest pregnant girlfriend even before their baby is born. It is outrageous that as taxpayers we all have to fork out for this sexually incontinent, spectacularly irresponsible and sickeningly immoral parasite. sadly as Channel 5 revealed MacDonald's case is hardly unique. another wastrel featured was Mike Holpin, a jobless alcoholic from Ebbw Vale in Wales, who incredibly has fathered 40 kids by 20 women although he has not worked for a decade.

With that self-indulgent mawkishness so characteristic of deadbeat dads Holpin boasts: "I have got so much love for my kids." Yet most of his children ended up in care because of his drinking. It is the welfare state that makes these destructive lifestyles possible. Those who take responsibility for their own families tend to base the number of their children on what they can afford. such considerations mean nothing to spongers such as MacDonald. almost as reprehensible are the women who collude with this subsidised delinquency. With government assuming the role of the provider they never have to worry about the consequences of their actions. Indifferent to the real needs of their children or their demands on the public purse they cynically exploit the system using single motherhood as a ticket for accommodation and a permanent income.

That is partly why there are so many huge families being underwritten by social security. as this paper revealed last week, 27,000 households with six or more children are getting child benefit, including 400 mothers with 10 or more children. some taxpayers might feel that the solution to this problem is to sterilise freeloaders such as Holpin and MacDonald so they can

no longer be such a burden. There would certainly have been political support for such a step a century ago when there was widespread concern about the high rates of reproduction among the least responsible sections of society. Interestingly this concern was most vociferously expressed by the Left, many of whose leading figures became advocates of sterilisation for the feckless.

Will Crooks, the outspoken trade unionist elected as a Labour Mp in 1902, urged that drastic action be taken against "human vermin who crawl about doing absolutely nothing except polluting and corrupting everything they touch." similarly the writer HG Wells said that the nation had to tackle the "indiscriminate torrent of progeny" from the urban underclass. such action today would rightly be regarded as abhorrent. When in 1975 Tory Mp sir Keith Joseph hinted at the need for sterilisation because "our human stock is threatened" the outcry was so great he had to stand down as a leadership candidate.

Y ET there is no need to go down this road at all. rather than descending to biological intervention what we should do is strengthen the welfare and justice systems to ensure that parents fulfil their responsibilities. sponging fathers should have all their benefits removed so they are compelled to work. In the worst cases those who refuse to provide any support for their children should face prison. That is what used to happen. In Elizabethan England men who failed to provide for their children could be jailed for three months while in the 1930s about 2,000 men were imprisoned each year for not providing child maintenance. This should be the next stage in welfare reform. The present lax system is cruel to children and unfair to taxpayers. Irresponsible fatherhood should be a route to social ostracism, not the benefits office.

*The Express* (02/04/15: 12)

## **We live on....Grafting St; AFTER BENEFITS STREET, THE HARDEST-WORKING STREET**

WELCOME to possibly the hardest-working street in Britain. After the furore over Channel 4's Benefits Street, which saw scrounging residents living on handouts, we launched a search for Grafting Street - its polar opposite. We wanted to celebrate hard-working Brits who are the nation's backbone, holding down jobs and contributing to society. In Birmingham's Benefits Street - in reality James Turner Street - 90 per cent of the residents are on benefits. In stark contrast, in working-class Frimley Gardens, in Wythenshawe, Manchester 16 of the 24 former council-owned properties are home to full- time workers. Four are lived in by retired carers, cleaners and a rail worker. Two owners are off work suffering from cancer. A single mum is the only one claiming income support as she cares for her four-year-old daughter - and even she is planning to return to work. Here, STEWART WHITTINGHAM turns the spotlight from Britain's shirkers and hears from some of the nation's hero workers. 'A path of hard graft will make you a better person' ONE of Frimley Gardens' hardest workers is dad-of-three Kevin Maguire.

With one son in medical school, he gets up at 5.30am each day to buy bread for his catering van, Vinny's Diner. He opens at 8am and works until 2.30pm. Kevin, 53, then comes home and grafts at his printing business, sometimes until 10pm. Although it can be a struggle - on

Tuesday he made just £13 in his van - Kevin reckons that doing an honest day's work is the best way to lead life.

He said: "I've always worked. I even had a heart attack a few years ago but was up on my feet a few weeks after. I don't like being idle. Plus I think it sets a good example to my kids. I've told them they'll achieve nothing without hard work. I've driven them to well-off areas where the footballers live to look at the big houses and told them they'll only get them with hard work. Then I pointed out the drug addicts and beggars in Manchester city centre. I told them, 'Those were the bullies and loudmouths in school who were cool and didn't want to work'. Now one of my sons is in medical school - and we come from a poor background."

In the mid-1990s Kevin was down to his last £5 - but he vowed to help himself. He walked 12 miles to a warehouse in Ardwick in central Manchester to buy a shirt from fashion designers Gary and Anthony Donnelly. The brothers were the brains behind fashion label Gio-Goi and their clothes have been worn by The Stone Roses, Kate Moss and Rihanna.

Kevin said: "I was haggling with them for hours and got the price down to £5. They said, 'Right, how many do you want?' "When I told them just one they couldn't believe it. But I was able to sell it in a pub on my way home. I kept on doing this for months."

Kevin now runs his printing company, working on anything from T-shirts to designs on vans. He added: "I chose to go down a different path of hard work as it makes you a better human being. I don't get people who sit around claiming benefits".

COUNCIL cleaner Pauline Helsby gets up at 5.30am every day to start work for £7 an hour. She remembers when she was 16, leaving school on a Friday and going straight into her first job on the Monday. She works a seven-day week, totalling almost 60 hours, doing overtime on Saturday and Sunday.

Pauline, 60, a grandmother of eight, also juggles a second job as a dinner lady at a school for pupils with autism. Her husband Les, 71, works making wrought-iron gates and does not want to retire.

Pauline said: "I just don't understand people who want to sit around and claim benefits while they could be working. For me, working is the only way of life. It instills good values of decency and hard work. The only life for me is one that is filled with work. That's how you should live. My husband is 71 and still works. He doesn't want to give it up. I guess that we would be bored without it. Any spare time I get, I go and see my grandchildren. Mind you, I'm also decorating the house at the moment when I get a chance."

PAULINE McKEEMAN is a carer at an old people's home, having previously worked for 14 years as a cleaner. Her husband George, 62, is a gardener. He wants to carry on for a long while, and is showing no sign of slowing up.

The 60-year-old grandmother said: "He wants to work until he is 75, that's the way we've been brought up. Most of the people round here are hard workers. It's crazy, having all these people being bone idle on benefits. I think they're just lazy b\*\*\*\*\*s. I swear you see all these people down the pub every night spending their money and they're all on benefits. It's madness, having young tearaways that can work just being idle while the older folk are all working. I've hurt my back so I'm off work at the minute. It's driving me crazy. I've even



been into the old people's home to sing them a few songs as I miss it so much. Work instils good morals for life."

'Work gives you morals for life' 'These people are the salt of the earth and we should be very proud of them' THE work ethic is alive and thriving in Frimley Gardens.

Tram driver Jeff Brennan, 43, said: "It's a nice place to live. People work hard and everyone looks out for each other. We're proud to be nicknamed Grafting Street."

Matthew Taylor, 35, runs a business selling car insurance in his old bedroom in his mum's home while she works as a legal secretary. He said: "Most people are hard working. It's not like Benefits Street."

Grandmother Barbara White, 68, has lived in the street for more than 30 years. Now retired, she worked as a hospital auxiliary and admin office worker. She said: "I have worked all my life since I left school at 16. I don't know what it is about this street but it is full of workers. I think it helps that at least half of the houses are privately owned. There's a good community spirit round here. Years ago all the locals at the Silver Birch pub went to Benidorm together."

Just one resident of Frimley Gardens was confirmed to be on Jobseeker's Allowance when The Sun researched this article. But even she spoke about returning to work eventually. The brunette, who did not wish to give her name, is currently caring for her four-year-old daughter and said: "I guess I'm the odd one out as I'm on benefits. I used to work - I was a buyer's admin worker for Bupa. I want to go back to work when my daughter goes to school."

Other hard workers in Frimley Gardens include a chef, hotel worker, cleaners, carers, security guards, receptionists, two airport workers and a fitness instructor. One woman has just started a cake business after being made redundant and has turned down the chance to claim benefits.

Local councillor Thomas Judge, 57, said: "People are very proud to be part of Wythenshawe. These people are just a reflection of a lot in the area. They are the salt of the earth who keep this country going. We should be very proud of them".

*The Sun* (15/02/14: 22-23).