

The Myth of “Broken Britain”: Welfare Reform and the Production of Ignorance

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Abstract: This article takes on the challenge of what Robert Proctor calls “agnotology” (the study of ignorance) to analyse the current assault on the British welfare state by think tanks, policy elites and conservative politicians. The assault is traced back to the emergence of the Centre for Social Justice think tank, founded in 2004 by the current Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan-Smith. I argue that a familiar litany of social pathologies (family breakdown, worklessness, antisocial behaviour, personal responsibility, out-of-wedlock childbirth, dependency) is repeatedly invoked by the architects of welfare reform to manufacture ignorance of alternative ways of addressing poverty and social injustice. Structural causes of poverty have been strategically ignored in favour of a single behavioural explanation—“Broken Britain”—where “family breakdown” has become the central problem to be tackled by the philanthropic fantasy of a “Big Society”. My agnotological approach critically explores the troubling relationship between (mis)information and state power.

Keywords: agnotology, welfare reform, Broken Society, Big Society, Iain Duncan-Smith, think tanks

The “Quiet Man” Goes to Glasgow . . . or Damascus?

On 10 October 2002, Iain Duncan-Smith, the ex-military Thatcherite who led the UK Conservative Party from September 2001 to October 2003, delivered an excruciating speech to the Party’s annual conference in Brighton. After two heavy defeats in the 1997 and 2001 General Elections, the Tories were in the political doldrums, and many felt that they might be facing extinction. Duncan-Smith was fighting off numerous accusations from fellow MPs and the media that he lacked the charisma to make the Conservatives a viable challenge to the dominance of New Labour. His response in his speech was an attempt to turn these accusations into a positive attribute: “Do not underestimate the determination of a quiet man.” In the months that followed, he was never allowed to forget his remark—MPs of all political stripes made “shush” noises whenever he prepared to speak in Parliament, and he was widely ridiculed by the media. One year later, as members of his Party were grouping together to launch a vote of no confidence in his leadership, he concluded his speech to their annual conference with these words: “The quiet man is here to stay, and he’s turning up the volume.” One month later, he resigned. Very few thought that he would ever be seen again in frontline politics in Britain.

In the midst of his tortured tenure as Party leader (February 2002) he visited Easterhouse, Glasgow, in the company of social policy professor turned community organizer Bob Holman. Easterhouse is one of the poorest urban districts in Glasgow, and Holman is one of the founders of FARE (Family Action in Rogerfield and Easterhouse), a local faith-based charity that states its mission to be “a response to the lack of support and opportunities in the community, especially for families and young people”, achieved through “offering activities that improve people’s aspirations, enhance people’s standards of living, and tackle territorialism and related violence”.¹ Holman walked Duncan-Smith around the streets of Easterhouse before showing him some of projects and activities set up by FARE. Following the visit, the two remained in frequent contact and became friends. Holman (2010) commented thus on their first meeting:

I was impressed by his willingness to take local residents seriously . . . a politician who almost wept at the plight of the poor. I have observed his rare gift of being able to listen to and communicate with people crushed by social deprivation.

Duncan-Smith himself has on many occasions spoken of his first visit to Easterhouse as a life-changing experience:

Standing in the middle of an estate like Easterhouse, you know it was built after the war for a purpose, only to see this wrecked and dreadful set-up today, with families locked into generational breakdown, poverty, drug addiction and so on. And that really does confront you with the thought that we did this—we built the brave new world, and look where it’s gone. It was a sort of Damascene point. It’s not that I wasn’t thinking about these things before, but after Easterhouse I saw that we had to do something about it (quoted in Derbyshire 2010).

“We did this” is not just a reference to the society that Margaret Thatcher denied ever existed, but a surprising reference to the unequal legacy of Thatcherism, which at best showed disregard for serious questions concerning poverty and social justice, and at worst, contempt. Duncan-Smith impressed Bob Holman, and many others on the left, for his open acknowledgment of past Conservative social policy failures, and for his much-ridiculed quiet determination to address them.

Fast forward to 11 November 2010, 6 months after a new Coalition government took control of Britain. Duncan-Smith, now in his cabinet post of Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, started behaving as if his “Damascene” moment never happened. During a morning radio interview, he stated that it was a “sin” that people failed to take up available jobs (Wintour, Ramesh and Mulholland 2010). In Parliament later that day he condemned Britain’s “growing dependency culture” whilst announcing the most punitive welfare sanctions ever proposed by a British government, where unemployed people would stand to lose benefits for 3 months if they refuse the offer of a job (or “community work”) for the first time, 6 months if they refuse an offer twice, and 3 years if they refuse an offer three times. This mutation of Duncan-Smith from ex-military Thatcherite to quiet champion of the plight of the poor to the apparent ideological offspring of Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead² can be read in various ways, ranging from the impressionable character of a sheltered politician to the economic and social contexts of the

time that each mutation took place. However, a focus just on the quiet man does not provide us with an adequate understanding of the institutional arrangements that have led to such a dramatic assault on the British welfare state. This paper thus provides an account of those arrangements, specifically, the wilful *institutional ignorance* surrounding a high-profile and deeply contentious policy issue: welfare reform. In doing so I make use of an *agnotological* approach, *agnotology* being a term coined by Robert Proctor meaning “the study of ignorance making, the lost and forgotten” where the “focus is on knowledge that could have been but wasn’t, or should be but isn’t” (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008:vii).

In developing this approach I illustrate how emotive terms, phrases and concepts have been strategically deployed by a conservative think tank (the *Centre for Social Justice*) to manufacture doubt with respect to the structural causes of unemployment and poverty, and to give the impression that “welfare” is a lifestyle choice made by dysfunctional families despite the fact that considerable social scientific evidence shatters that impression. That same think tank has also directed political and public attention away from viable alternatives to punitive welfare reforms, where the evidence in pursuit of social justice is far more convincing than that provided by the Coalition in their attempts to justify paternalist policies work and welfare in twenty-first century Britain.

Agnotology

Real knowledge is to know the extent of one’s ignorance
Confucius (551 BC–479 BC).

It was while investigating the tobacco industry’s efforts to manufacture doubt about the health hazards of smoking that Robert Proctor (1995) began to see the scientific and political urgency in researching how ignorance is made, maintained and manipulated by powerful institutions to suit their own ends, where the guiding research question becomes “Why don’t we know what we don’t know?” As he discovered, the industry went to great lengths to give the impression that the cancer risks of cigarette smoking were still an open question even when the scientific evidence was overwhelming:

The industry was trebly active in this sphere, feigning its *own* ignorance of hazards, whilst simultaneously affirming the *absence of definite proof* in the scientific community, while also doing all it could to *manufacture ignorance on the part of the smoking public* (Proctor 2008:13–14).

As we shall see, the last-mentioned goal of manufacturing ignorance is especially relevant to the case of welfare reform in the UK, but in respect of the smoking public, numerous tactics were deployed by the tobacco industry to divert attention from cancer risks, such as the production of duplicitous press releases, the publication of “nobody knows the answers” white papers, and the generous funding of decoy or red-herring research that “would seem to be addressing tobacco and health, while really doing nothing of the sort” (Proctor 2008:14). The industry actually produced research about everything *except* tobacco hazards to exploit public uncertainty

(researchers knew from the beginning what they were supposed to find and not find), and the very fact of research being funded allowed the industry to say it was studying the problem. Since the 1980s, as the cancer risks have become more widely accepted, the industry’s goal has been “to control the *history* of tobacco just as earlier they’d controlled the *science* of tobacco” (16) via the employment of historians (through substantial consultancy payments) to write articles and reports documenting the supposedly “beneficial” effects of nicotine through the ages.

The tobacco industry’s generation of ignorance led Proctor to reflect upon the “serious business” of epistemology, with its “product tie-ins to professorships and weighty conferences” (1). For Proctor, the sheer volume of ignorance that exists, how many kinds of ignorance there are and how consequential ignorance is in our lives means that epistemological, “how we know” questions can become stranded very quickly. Consequently, he seeks to:

promote the study of ignorance, by developing tools for understanding how and why various forms of knowledge have “not come to be,” or disappeared, or have been delayed or long neglected, for better or for worse, at various points of history ... The idea is that a great deal of attention has been given to epistemology (the study of how we know) when “how or why we don’t know” is often just as important, usually far more scandalous, and remarkably under-theorised (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008:vii).

Agnotology is the term coined by Proctor for this study of ignorance. The etymological derivation is the Greek word, *agnōsis*, meaning *not knowing*, which Paul Gilroy (2009) draws upon to argue the following:

We need a better understanding of the relationship between information and power... a new corrective disciplinary perspective that interprets the power that arises from the command of not knowing, from the management of forms of ignorance that have been strategically created and deployed, and institutionally amplified.

As Schiebinger (2004:233) has reminded us, ignorance “is often not merely the absence of knowledge but an outcome of cultural and political struggle”. Thus it is something of a surprise that Proctor’s analyses have yet to escape from the disciplinary claws of science and technology studies and permeate social science, where the relationship between evidence and policy is always contentious and sometimes tortured. There are, of course, many different ways to think about ignorance; as John Rawls (1971) did positively in his promotion of a “veil of ignorance”³ as an ethical method with respect to his hypothetical “original position” (whereby ignorance of how we might personally gain in a society’s distribution of benefits and burdens might guarantee a kind of neutrality and balance in thinking about what a just distribution should look like). But in this paper I follow Proctor’s approach in his research on the tobacco industry and Gilroy’s plea to think *politically vis-à-vis* agnotology, and consider ignorance as *a strategic and pernicious ploy*, an active construct, something that in the case to be discussed is produced and sustained by a right-wing think tank determined to dominate the debate on welfare reform and poverty in Britain. That it has succeeded thus far, with disturbing consequences for those living at the bottom of the class structure, is reason enough to place the study—and critical expose—of ignorance centre stage in both scholarship and activism.

The Centre for Social Justice and “Broken Britain”

We did all our stuff publicly, in the public domain. We published, we sent the stuff out, had it raised in Parliament . . . If you do it in public over weeks, people are prepared for it—journalists and whatever. By the time the minister gets around to the idea, it’s already familiar. He’s won part of the battle of public acceptance (senior conservative think tank officer quoted in Peck and Tickell 2007:42).

In a pugnacious analysis of the role of intellectuals in shaping the process of neoliberalization, Peck and Tickell (2007) pay specific attention to the critical importance of think tanks in the mobilization of state power vis-à-vis the extension of market rule. In particular they focus on the free-market think tanks during the era of Margaret Thatcher, which played a decisive role in “translating foundational ideas into circulating policy knowledges, fit for governmental practice” (36). Where previous governments had relied almost exclusively on senior civil servants to produce policy briefs, Thatcher wanted to create a “market” for ideas within the policy process. This provided an impetus for think tanks such as the *Adam Smith Institute*, the *Institute for Economic Affairs*, and the *Centre for Policy Studies* to produce a plethora of widely disseminated policy packages that distilled the central tenets of (inter alia) Smith, Hayek and Friedman into accessible sound bites for ministers and the electorate:

[T]he various products of the think tanks—pamphlets, reports, policy briefs, occasionally books—were purposely circulated through the public sphere in order to generate conversation across different segments of the policy community and in the press (Peck and Tickell 2007:41).

Wacquant (2009a) provides an elaborate account of such a “conversation” with respect to the 1990s diffusion—from the neoconservative pro-market think tanks of Washington DC to their “trading posts” (think tanks and policy institutes) in European cities—of a triple-whammy of welfare cutback proposals, paternalist “workfare” programs, and “zero tolerance” policing methods. He describes how the “mental colonization of British policy makers by the United States” (34) was facilitated by the media and think tank sponsorship of visits to the UK by neoconservative figureheads (Charles Murray, Lawrence Mead, William Bratton). This was quickly followed by a torrent of widely disseminated publications:

It is through the agency of exchanges, interventions, and publications of an academic character, real or simulated, that intellectual “smugglers” (*passeurs*) reformulate these categories in a sort of *politological pidgin*, sufficiently concrete to “hook” state decision-makers and journalists anxious to “stick close to reality” . . . but sufficiently abstract to strip them of any overly flagrant idiosyncrasy that would tie them back to their originating national context. And so these notions become semantic commonplaces where convene all those who, across the boundaries of occupation, organization, nationality, and even political affiliation, spontaneously think advanced neoliberal society as it wishes to be thought (Wacquant 2009a:47–48).

Powerful and convincing as it is, Wacquant’s analysis blends rather different UK governments into the same explanatory account. Whilst undoubtedly neoliberal in both rhyme and reason, and sporting prominent politicians (eg Frank Field, Jack Straw) enamoured with the prophets of punitive governance, the New Labour

government operated in a quite different way with respect to think tanks as the preceding Thatcher and John Major governments. In contrast to the “*fait accompli*” approach of the Conservatives, the New Labour years (1997–2010) were marked by a pragmatist “What Works?” approach to public policy, where centrist think tanks came to dominate all government research activities, and subsequently, the policy process. The *Institute for Public Policy Research* and *Demos*, to take the two most Blairite examples, left market-rule unquestioned whilst they commissioned grant-hungry academics to trawl through the “evidence base” for examples of policies that might soften the sharp edges of supply-side, inflation-busting economic management, and as they conducted focus groups with randomly selected pundits from all walks of life to evaluate policy packages on the table. But at precisely the time the Blairite think tanks were at their influential apex in respect of the debate on poverty in Britain, a new think tank was born that was to change that debate completely, with dramatic implications for the British welfare state.

Following his resignation as leader of the Conservative Party, Duncan-Smith rejected the backbench anonymity that awaited him in favour of devoting all his time towards addressing what he had seen during his brief visit to Glasgow. In 2004, in an effort to get the apparently “modernizing” Party to engage with “social justice” and enter the electorally significant *terra incognita* of poverty and welfare (for which Tories had a deservedly terrible reputation), Duncan-Smith established an “independent”, not-for-profit think tank, the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) “to seek effective solutions to the poverty that blights parts of Britain”. The mission statement of the CSJ was, and remains: “To put social justice at the heart of British politics and to build an alliance of poverty fighting organizations in order to see a reversal of social breakdown in the UK”.⁴ These “poverty fighting organizations” do not include the legion of state agencies offering public service delivery: they are described as “profoundly differing and unique small voluntary organisations and charities . . . [that] provide welfare in the most broken parts of British society”. Even a very brief visit to the CSJ website will leave a visitor bombarded by two words: “breakdown” and “broken”. As we shall see, these words became critically important to David Cameron’s speeches and campaigning—and now his government’s policies.

The first of many CSJ publications was written by Duncan-Smith himself, entitled *Britain’s Conservative Majority* (Duncan-Smith 2004). Based on an “opinion poll” conducted by “YouGov” (neither sampling strategy nor sample size revealed), he argues that Britain is at heart a conservative nation, but one committed to social justice: “The marriage of socially conservative views with a commitment to social justice is, perhaps, the most intellectually interesting characteristic of Britain’s conservative majority” (15). Aside from this ambiguous assertion, particularly striking in this document is that Duncan-Smith never says what he means by “social justice”. In fact, no definition appears on the CSJ website, or in any of its publications since 2004.⁵ Only in a 2010 interview in the *New Statesman* does Duncan-Smith attempt to define it: “I mean to improve the quality of people’s lives, which gives people the opportunity to improve their lives. In other words, so people’s quality of life is improved” (quoted in Derbyshire 2010). Most scholars of political and moral philosophy tend to concur that in the context of the distribution of any society’s benefits and burdens, *redistribution* in the context of *inequality*, or “the defensibility

of unequal relations between people" (Barry 1989:3) must lie at the core of any understanding of social justice. In the same interview, Duncan-Smith's response to redistributive notions of justice was as follows: "The tax system is redistributive. We're not challenging that. Our question is to what degree redistribution through government actually works" (quoted in Derbyshire 2010).

It would be erroneous, however, to interpret this remark as a pragmatist "what works?" approach influenced by New Labour, particularly as David Cameron, by the 2009 Conservative Party conference, had already made up his mind on that last question:

Labour say that to solve the country's problems, we need more government. Don't they see? It is more government that got us into this mess. Why is our economy broken? ... [B]ecause government got too big, spent too much and doubled the national debt. Why is our society broken? Because government got too big, did too much and undermined responsibility. Why are our politics broken? Because government got too big, promised too much and pretended it had all the answers. Do you know the worst thing about their big government? ... It is the steady erosion of responsibility.

Cameron's declamatory argument is clear and unequivocal: "big government" has "broken" Britain, and encouraged everyone to be "irresponsible". "Broken Britain" in fact became the catchphrase of the 2010 general election,⁶ which many attributed to Rupert Murdoch-owned newspapers. Whilst there is no question that Tory-boasting tabloids and broadsheets did indeed devote considerable ink to this moral panic (in *The Sun*, the highest-selling tabloid in the UK, numerous celebrities were enlisted to offer their own "manifestos" for "Fixing Broken Britain"), its origins lie in the publications of the CSJ.

In 2006 the CSJ produced a voluminous document entitled *Breakdown Britain*, the end-product of Duncan-Smith being invited by Cameron "to consider how an incoming Conservative Government could tackle Britain's most acute social problems" (2006:13). Duncan-Smith convened five working groups to report back on five "pathways to poverty": "family breakdown, educational failure, economic dependence, indebtedness and addiction", for "if the drivers of poverty are not addressed an ever-growing underclass will be created" (13). Throughout the document considerable attention was given to "family breakdown" in particular, and it is in the chapter on this moral minefield where all the hallmarks of conservative think-tank motives and methods can be found. The central tenets of the infamous "underclass" thesis lie in the definition of familial strife: "We have adopted an inclusive use of the term 'family breakdown' which can be summed up in three key words: dissolution, dysfunction, and 'dad-lessness'" (29).

In an account of US think-tank intellectual practices in the wake of the 1970s fiscal crisis of New York City and of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Peck notes how conservative intellectuals "portray themselves as *lonely voices of reason*, as principled outsiders in a corrupt, distracted, and wrongheaded world" (2006:682, emphasis added). This captures precisely the tenor of the *Breakdown Britain* report, especially on "family breakdown":

The policy-making community (which includes politicians, policy-makers and academics) has been markedly reluctant to grasp the nettle of family breakdown by being clear about

the benefits of marriage and committed relationships, and the merits of supporting and encouraging them . . . [T]his issue cannot be left undebated when its associated costs, across so many measures, are so high . . . For this reason we urge readers of this report to lay to one side their own experience and consider the evidence-based case we make for meeting the challenge that is family breakdown (29–30)

Amidst the CSJ’s self-styled existence as both paragon and guardian of public morality lies its adoption of a New Labour buzzword: “evidence-based”. The CSJ message is clear: the objective “evidence” trumps any subjective/personal experience. Therefore “family breakdown” resulting in poverty must be true, and decisions must be made on the basis of that evidence. But when consulting the methodological appendices to the report, which detail some of the survey questions asked of a “representative sample” of 2166 people, the evidence was never going to show anything different with respect to the supposed causes and prevention of “family breakdown”:

“Which of the following would most help prevent family breakdown and its associated problems?”

- a) A return to traditional moral values in society
- b) Government should use the tax system to support married couples
- c) More awareness of the effects of family breakdown on children.

Source: *Breakdown Britain* report (Duncan-Smith 2006:95)

This rigged survey is a pure exemplar of what I have elsewhere called “decision-based evidence making” (Slater 2008:219) tailored to the needs of policy elites and politicians on the lookout for accessible catchphrases to woo a jaded electorate. Politicians rarely consult published social science research unless it supports the policies they want to pursue (witness, for instance, the fact that *not a single social scientist* was a member of any of the CSJ working groups studying the five “pathways to poverty”). Instead, they depend on neat sound bites drawn from surveys that measure nothing more than the worldview of the think tank that commissions them, where policy “researchers” set out to resolve false problems even though they have already been “implicitly settled in the way research questions are formulated” (Wacquant 2009a:48). These surveys provide the “evidence base” for the mobilization of state power in the extension of conservative dogma; they actively manufacture ignorance to appease their funders, buffering politicians and their audiences from viable alternatives and inoculating them against the critique of autonomous scholarship.

In a series of papers, Gerry Mooney and colleagues (Gray and Mooney 2011; Mooney 2009; Mooney and Hancock 2010; Mooney and Neal 2010) have provided an especially insightful interrogation of “Broken Britain” rhetoric, from its roots in stigmatized eastern Glasgow,⁷ to its local and national electoral significance, and now to its contemporary public policy undercurrent, where the “idea that family life in Britain is increasingly dysfunctional provides the ground for a renewed familialism”:

In the hands of the Conservative Party . . . there is a clear argument that the broken society has its roots in “broken families”. Teenage pregnancies and increasing numbers of one-parent households caught, of course, in a “dependency culture”, feature prominently in this account. The institution of the family and approaches to families become a key site for political and policy argument and a target for policy formation . . . [M]arriage and a stable two-parent family life are key to mending Broken Britain and thereby reducing levels of poverty (Mooney and Neal 2010:145).

This has more than a few echoes of Charles Murray’s (1984) think-tank-sponsored insistence that such a “dependency culture” is not caused by economic forces, unemployment or poor educational attainment, but by “illegitimacy”: out-of-wedlock births among the “underclass”, who lack sound male role-models (“dadlessness”) and are therefore destined for a life of benefit cheating, addiction and crime. David Cameron provided probably the most glaring example of “underclass” reasoning when he told his Party in 2009 that “you can’t expect families to behave responsibly when the welfare system works in the opposite direction”. But Mooney is quick to point out that it is not just the Conservatives who have gone down the *familiar familial* route with respect to anti-poverty policies. Although their rhetoric was not as overtly damning of welfare claimants, both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown resuscitated the age-old distinction between “hard-working families” and “others which are clearly not seen as such” (Mooney and Neal 2010:145) in the “roll-out” neoliberalization of welfare under New Labour. Brief discussion of this is helpful in establishing the context for the punitive sanctions now being applied to welfare claimants under the Coalition government.

Conditionality, Sanctions and Benefit Reforms

When he took over as Labour leader in 1994, Tony Blair famously instructed his senior advisors to “think the unthinkable” with respect to many aspects of social policy, but particularly with respect to welfare reform.⁸ A clear move towards a workfarist model was occurring among Labour’s policy elites well before 1997, as exemplified by the central involvement of maverick Labour MP Frank Field in promoting paternalist workfare theories imported from the United States (Wacquant 2009a). Once in office, Blair did nothing to alter the language or implications of the outgoing Conservative government’s welfare *coup de grace*: the instigation of the semantic battering ram of “jobseekers allowance” in place of “unemployment benefit”. On the contrary, his government(s) actively endorsed welfare-to-work ideology via a “New Deal” program for those “jobseekers”. Direct references to “workfare” were avoided in favour of rhetorical devices such as “equality of opportunity” eradicating “dependency”; workfarist policies were presented as “options” where “client groups” could “rationally choose” what they felt was best for them, even if to “stay at home on full benefit”, to use the words of Gordon Brown, was not an option (quoted in Peck 2001:302). Just as in the United States, removing “clients” from the welfare rolls and funnelling them into an expanding labour market was seen as convincing evidence of success for New Labour’s employment programs, even if the swelling ranks of the working poor (Connolly 2008; MacDonald 2009;

Toynbee 2003; Wills et al 2010) and what the UK Census calls the “economically inactive” were conveniently disregarded.

Conditionality—the principle that entitlement to welfare benefits should be dependent on satisfying certain compulsory conditions—has been creeping steadily into employment policy in Britain since the Thatcher era. The active endorsement of welfare-to-work ideology by both Blair and Brown moved conditionality to centre-stage in welfare debates. In 2001, Peck made the prescient remark that:

While the Blair revolution is firmly entrenched in both the Labour party and in government itself, oppositional forces are likely to grow in strength over time. Opposition to the principle of compulsion remains strong in the trade-union movement, among advocacy groups, in local authorities, among voluntary-sector providers, and not least among the unemployed themselves (331).

Such opposition to conditionality and compulsion did indeed strengthen, and was partially successful in blocking the more coercive and punitive elements of workfare that are characteristic of some programs in certain parts of America. It was this success combined with the growth in numbers of benefit claimants (particularly those claiming Incapacity Benefit) at the dawn of a major (current) recession that led to the economist Paul Gregg⁹ being asked by the Labour government to conduct a review of conditionality in the benefits system in 2008. Gregg’s report, packaged under the New Labour-esque title of *Realising Potential*, recommended a new regime of “personalized conditionality” where the “over-arching objective is to influence the behaviour of as many working age benefit recipients as possible in order to move them into work, avoid long-term benefit receipt and protect the taxpayer” (2008:10, emphasis added). Although some power and concern is arguably given to the claimant in the report, its central message and behavioural ethos is undoubtedly in concert with the “tough love” that typified New Labour social policy¹⁰. Although we now know that Gregg was writing for a government on the way out, it is necessary to mention his report in this discussion for two reasons: to show the already rather punitive context that was in place before the current Coalition government took office, and to show the lack of any genuine alternative in respect of welfare policy in Britain.

In November 2010 Iain Duncan-Smith delivered his White Paper on welfare reform entitled *Universal Credit: Welfare that Works*. Point 1 of the Executive Summary reveals the intention:

The Coalition Government is determined to reform the benefit system to make it fairer, more affordable and better able to tackle poverty, worklessness and welfare dependency ... [W]e made the commitment to overhaul the benefit system to promote work and personal responsibility (Duncan-Smith 2010: 2).

Much of the media attention was devoted to three aspects of the White Paper. First, attention was paid to Duncan-Smith’s attempt to simplify what most agree to be a very complex welfare system, with a new “integrated working-age credit”¹¹ providing a basic allowance paid monthly (as opposed to fortnightly, overtly designed to encourage more “personal responsibility in household budgeting”). Second, to Duncan-Smith’s promise to create a strong incentive to “make work

pay”, ie when people take a job, they will receive more income than if they were to remain on welfare benefits. This is to be achieved via higher “taper rate” (the rate at which a benefit is reduced to take account of earnings) so that for every £1 a claimant earns over the threshold, they will lose 65p instead of the current 70p (immediately raising the question of whether 5p is much of an incentive!). Third, to the chapter of the report entitled “Conditionality and Sanctions”, where the previous government was condemned for being so lax with respect to the growing number of people on the welfare rolls, and in not cracking down on benefit fraud: “the welfare state has become a vast, sprawling bureaucracy that maintains, rather than challenges, poverty” (2010:11). The White Paper remedy for this imagined problem was not the *withdrawal* of the state (as one might expect given the Conservative contempt for “big government”), but rather the *expansion* of the punitive elements of the state in respect of those living at the bottom of the class structure. This is precisely the observation of Wacquant (2009b) in his account of the paternalist neoliberal state management of the social turbulence created by three decades of economic deregulation and the fragmentation of wage labour. Figure 1, taken from the White Paper (Duncan-Smith 2010:30), shows the most severe welfare sanctions ever proposed by a British government.

Whilst the political creation of an undeserving welfare residuum has a very long history in British social policy (Bagguley and Mann 1992; Gladstone 1999; Thane 1978; Welshman 2006), the White Paper marks a new development in its total rejection of a European welfare system towards an American-style system, one that comes down exceptionally hard on those whose “idleness” is seen as a *creation* of the welfare state. This was to be expected, given that CSJ researchers “went to the United States to talk to the architects of American welfare reform” (Duncan-Smith 2007:3), and that Lawrence Mead¹² was invited to advise the new government on work policies immediately after it was elected in May 2010 (Standing 2010a:143). Duncan-Smith even adopted an American saying when interviewed about the sanctions: “The message will go across: *play ball or it’s going to be difficult* ... We need to get this group and bring them into mainstream society” (quoted in Porter and Riddell 2010). No mention is made of the tough economic climate in the White Paper, on the entrenched problem of low job availability, the difficulties of job creation during a recession, or of the fact that the Coalition government slashed £11 billion from the benefits budget before the White Paper was published. Instead, there is the claim that the proposals “could lift as many as 350,000 children and 500,000 working-age adults out of poverty” (Duncan-Smith 2010:52), along with the following facts hidden amidst claims of “fairness”:

- Disabled people will be forced to attend “work preparation” programmes and then expected to find work.
- Lone parents with children under five will be expected to attend “keeping in touch” interviews and show that they are preparing themselves to work.
- Those who are fit to work and currently on Jobseekers Allowance will be forced to accept any job going. If there are no jobs they will be forced onto a “Mandatory Work Activity” programme—effectively forced to do unpaid “voluntary” work in return for benefits.

Figure 8 Proposed future sanctions structure under the existing benefit system

To note that in all circumstances sanctions will not apply where there is good cause

Conditionality	Failure	Sanction		
Low Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance Work Related Activity Group	Includes failure to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attend an appointment Carry out a jobseekers direction Attend employment-related programme Attend a Work Focused Interview (Employment and Support Allowance) Carry out work related activity (Employment and Support Allowance) 	100 per cent Jobseeker's Allowance/Employment and Support Allowance open ended until re-engagement then fixed minimum period (1, 2 then 4 weeks) Advisers will retain the ability not to impose a sanction for first and subsequent failures where good cause applies		
Medium Jobseeker's Allowance only	Failure to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actively seek work* Be available for work* 	1st failure: 100 per cent Jobseeker's Allowance fixed for 4 weeks	2nd failure: 100 per cent Jobseeker's Allowance fixed for 3 months	
High Jobseeker's Allowance only	Failure to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apply for a job Accept job offer Take part in Mandatory Work Activity 	1st failure: 100 per cent Jobseeker's Allowance fixed for 3 months	2nd failure: 100 per cent Jobseeker's Allowance fixed for 6 months	3rd failure: 100 per cent Jobseeker's Allowance fixed for 3 years
For benefit recipients only required to attend Work Focused Interviews				
Income Support and Employment and Support Allowance lone parents with a child aged over one but below the age of five	Failure to attend Work Focused Interview	1st failure – 20 per cent (of the over-18 lone parent personal allowance) open-ended until re-engagement 2nd and subsequent failures – additional 20 per cent (capped at 40 per cent total for any subsequent failures) until re-engagement		

* will remain a condition of entitlement under Jobseeker's Allowance. Sanctions will follow new claim (subject to expiry period), and any loss of benefit at the point of disenitment will count towards the fixed sanction period.

Figure 1: Proposed future sanctions to be applied to UK benefit claimants (source: Duncan-Smith 2010:30). Reproduced with permission: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/>

Commenting on the White Paper, Duncan-Smith’s Glasgow friend, Bob Holman (2010), was shocked¹³ by what he saw:

My guess is that, in order to reach his costly goal of a universal credit scheme, he has had to mollify the chancellor, George Osborne—and that can only be done by being like those Tories who take pleasure in punishing the poor.

The response from the Labour opposition, however, was disappointing. Instead of highlight the devil in the detail and offer an indictment of the punitive elements of the proposals, Duncan-Smith’s opposite number, Douglas Alexander, was very sympathetic: “If we can have a simpler benefits system that removes disincentives for people to get into work, we will support them” (quoted in Wintour, Ramesh and Mulholland 2010). In 2001, Peck noted the emergence of a cross-party “radical consensus” (274–292) with respect to tearing up the Beveridge welfare state in favour of a new workfarist outlook. A decade later that consensus has solidified

around the notion of a work-shy population choosing a “life on benefits”, apart from “mainstream society”, in a welfare-dependent “Broken Britain”. As Colin Leys once wrote, “for an ideology to be hegemonic, it is not necessary that it be loved. It is merely necessary that it have no serious rival” (1990:127).

Manufacturing Ignorance

The previous section documented how welfare-to-work programmes transcended political divisions to become “common sense” among think-tank researchers, journalists, policy elites, and politicians in the UK. However, a substantial interdisciplinary empirical and theoretical literature exists that offers strong evidence that paternalist welfare reforms in the USA (seen as the progressive leader by UK politicians) involving sanctions do not lift people out of poverty, but rather remove them from welfare rolls, expand dramatically the contingent of the working and non-working poor, and affect their daily existence negatively in almost every way imaginable, aggravating extant class, racial and gender fractures in society (eg Ehrenreich 2001; Karger 2003; Midgley 2001; Newman 1999; Peck 2001; Standing 2002, 2010a; Trudeau and Cope 2003; Wacquant 2009b; Waddan 2003; Wyly 2001). With respect to conditionality in Europe, one welfare economist has assessed the alleged benefits against the burdens in exhaustive detail and finds no evidence to say that “sharp” incentives have a positive effect amongst those in receipt of welfare (van Oorschot 2000, 2006). He reports that sanctions actually serve to *disrupt* any search for meaningful activity, and *intensify* any adverse attitudes to employment. Furthermore, there is no evidence that vast numbers of people are suffering from a habit of “worklessness”. Many of those not in employment work very hard, to care for frail relatives or children, or deal with episodic disabilities. To quote Guy Standing (2010b), “building social policy on the basis of a tiny minority being ‘scroungers’ or ‘lazy’ is expensive illiberal folly”.

Critical social scientists working in the style of institutional political economy would usually approach the question about evidence/policy within the analytic register of a “politics of knowledge production”, focusing on the circulation of policy knowledges and discourses (“policy mobilities”) in the neoliberalized context of a marked acceleration in “policy transfer” (eg McCann 2007; Peck and Theodore 2010; Ward 2006). There have been considerable advances along these lines, and I have no wish to offer a critique of such scholarship, much of which is of inestimable value. But the existence of the substantial evidence calling into question punitive welfare reforms raises the question of *how* successive governments, especially the current UK Coalition, deliberately set aside that evidence and place punitive welfare reforms in a very positive light. Given that the White Paper discussed above morphed into a Welfare Reform Bill that had a rocky road through Parliament before reaching Royal Assent in March 2012,¹⁴ it seems prudent to expose and scrutinize the *institutional ignorance* that lies at its core; an ignorance that is not one of blissful unawareness or innocent absence of knowledge, but rather of rational calculation. Agnotology—the study of ignorance—thus becomes a useful framework in which to interpret the workings and influence of the CSJ with respect to welfare reform. The CSJ makes bold claims of “rigorous research” conducted by employees

who “travelled the length and breadth of the country to speak to as many people as possible” (Duncan-Smith 2007:3), yet its publications are exclusively about the *behaviour* of the poor, crystallized in this capsule from its founder:

I was shown . . . what happens when family life breaks down and when the only male role model for a boy is the drug dealer or the gang leader. Too many of our children are growing up in sad communities where failed education is hereditary and worklessness is a way of life . . . [W]hether you are a single parent or a married couple, the only real way out of poverty for your family is work. As the fabric of society crumbles at the margins what has been left behind is an underclass, where life is characterised by dependency, addiction, debt and family breakdown . . . [T]he inner city wasn't a place; it was a state of mind—there is a mentality of entrapment, where aspiration and hope are for other people, who live in another place (Duncan-Smith 2007:4–5).

Tempting though it is to read this “broken society” narrative as the reflections of a sheltered millionaire politician who has suddenly found a moral conscience on his road to Damascus, such a reading would miss the mark analytically. Viewed through an agnotological lens, the CSJ publications recast the public debate on poverty, welfare and unemployment in three ways. First, they divert public attention away from the structural and institutional failures that lie behind poverty, and from the nature and extent of inequality in Britain. Second, they exploit public doubt (“not knowing”) with respect to the causal agents of poverty and inequality, in an attempt to make the uncertain certain, and to reduce and simplify a complex history of political economic shifts into a series of easily digestible behavioural catchphrases. Third, they ignore any alternative approaches to the problem of poverty (and welfare) in Britain.

The strategic deployment of ignorance is best exemplified by the CSJ’s insistence not on job availability or economic malaise but on *family breakdown* as the principal root of all poverty in Britain:

If there were less family breakdown and lone parenthood, there would be fewer children taken into care, less homelessness, less drug addiction, less crime, less demand on the health services, less need for remedial teaching in schools, better average educational performance and less unemployment. *All of these would save the taxpayer money and some would contribute to better economic performance in the country as a whole* (Duncan-Smith 2006:33, emphasis added).

Correspondingly, it seems as if there is no social problem for which promoting marriage is not the CSJ answer. It is desperate to guard against any views to the contrary; for example, when welfare historian Pat Thane (2010) authored a British Academy-sponsored pamphlet arguing that the CSJ present a misleading and empirically inaccurate portrait of a British past filled with “happy families”, the CSJ responded very quickly with a 24-page rebuttal written by two legal scholars (Probert and Callan 2010:4) purporting to offer “robust evidence” that “a child growing up in a fractured, chaotic or fatherless family is far less likely to develop the pro-social skills essential for success later in life”. Over two decades ago, Charles Murray (1990:41) visited London¹⁵ and recommended to policy elites, journalists and think-tank officials that the “civilising force of marriage” be the treatment for the “spreading disease” of an “underclass” of single mothers (for whom “sex is fun and [having]

babies is endearing”) and absent fathers (“essentially barbarians”). Today, the fact that *marriage is the official anti-poverty policy recommendation* of the CSJ to the Conservative Party speaks volumes about the pernicious truncation and distortion of the ongoing articulation of poverty, social class and space in British society.

On the question of the alternatives that are ignored, it is instructive to consider what is never considered or mentioned in any of the CSJ publications. For instance, there is no discussion of the ongoing efforts to secure “living wages” in London¹⁶ and beyond (Fairris and Reich 2005; Wills 2008; Wills with Kakpo and Begum 2009), wages that would provide more of an incentive to work than any paltry tax reward for marriage; and that have stimulated improvements in job quality, productivity and service delivery, with very little increase in employer costs. Nor is there any reflection on the momentum surrounding probably the best known and widely acknowledged global NGO on welfare reform, the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN). A basic income effectively “decouples income security from the labour market” (Standing 1993:57), guaranteeing unconditionally an adequate income to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement. Advocates of basic income have long challenged the assumption that bringing people back into the labour market will reduce poverty, and instead they argue for the severance of subsistence from work, and of income from paid labour.¹⁷ Critics of basic income argue that this is a “something for nothing” strategy, one that would encourage even more idleness and dependency among the poor. But as one of the founders of the BIEN has argued, “conventional policies also give something for nothing ... mega-bailouts [of 2008–2009] were given largely to sectors and firms that had actually done harm” (Standing 2011:19). He continues: “we are told that people want to work and are ‘happy’ when in jobs. If so, giving everybody basic security should at most induce only a tiny minority to be less hardworking than otherwise” (19).

As we are living at a time of state-induced social *insecurity* (Wacquant 2009b), it would seem that basic income *security* is the logical remedy, and could provide the crucial stability to create the “incentive” to work that the CSJ argues is so lacking. However, a central goal of the CSJ appears to have been to shield the public from such progressive ideas, which are completely ignored in every publication, article, press release and policy package they have ever produced. For an organization that boasts comprehensiveness and rigour at every opportunity, we cannot assume that such ignorance is the outcome of simple oversight.

The CSJ also makes declamatory claims that are entirely false. Take, for instance, this statement its founder:

I have no hesitation in claiming that Britain is broken. This claim is factual. During the last five years my think-tank, The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), has presented evidence of the entrenched poverty that traps millions of people, in the world’s fourth largest economy ... Our recent *Housing Poverty* report concluded that Britain’s social housing estates, once stepping stones of opportunity, are now ghettos for our poorest people. Life expectancy on some estates, where often three generations of the same family have never worked, is lower than the Gaza Strip (Duncan-Smith 2009).

The “generations who have never worked” image is very useful in garnering support for drastic welfare reforms; indeed the CSJ’s former Director recently pleaded with

Guardian readers that families “often make the choice not to work as a result of the current byzantine welfare state this government has now committed to reforming” (Poole 2012). But the image is a spectre—a recent quantitative study that explored whether “worklessness” is intergenerational found even “two-generational worklessness” to be very rare, as workless parents and grown-up children are found together in only 0.9% of households (Macmillan 2011). In respect of “three-generational worklessness” the fraction drops further, to less than 0.1% of the total. Different methodologies produce the same conclusions, as recent qualitative work conducted in Glasgow and Teesside (Shildrick et al 2012)—two parts of the UK that are regularly stereotyped to present a case for punitive welfare reform—produced these findings:

We argue that the idea of intergenerational worklessness is a myth—despite an extensive search in areas of high unemployment, we failed to find any families where three generations had never worked and only found two families where two generations had never worked (although there was extensive worklessness within all of our families). We also failed to find evidence of a culture of worklessness: our respondents wanted to work and hated being on benefits. The commitment to work was not simply driven by money, they also thought of work as a source of self-esteem and pride and some engaged in voluntary work. Parents who had spent much of their lives out of work tended to have very strong views about their children’s careers, making sure that they were aware of the importance of work and trying to ensure that they did not follow their own example and “waste” their lives (Furlong 2012).

The intergenerational reality, then, is not at all a case of parents and their children and grandchildren being “trapped” by dependency on welfare or making the choice not to work, but rather one of permanent insecurity and precarity created by a very hostile entry level labour market, which leads people of all generations to flip between low wage and temporary work and unemployment.

Deflecting the Reality of a Broken State

In 1966, the literary critic Kenneth Burke provided us with the concept of the *terministic screen*¹⁸ to illustrate the remarkable power of language, particularly how certain terms “direct the attention into some channels rather than others”: “Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (45).

It is instructive to consider this conceptualization in the context of the publications of the CSJ, and in particular their profound influence on current government policy. Amidst the hullabaloo surrounding “family breakdown”, a sixth working group was convened to “explore how the third sector might be supported to do more to assist vulnerable people escape poverty”. It called this third sector the “Welfare Society”, which David Cameron later dubbed the “Big Society”, something apparently needed to fix a “Broken Society”. The common denominator here is the key: the hallmark of the Thatcher revolution was that society did not exist (“there is no such thing as society”), so the frequent, obsessive references to it today are a tactic designed to

convince a jaded electorate that this is a “modernized”, compassionate Conservative Party, one that will facilitate any benevolence to help vulnerable people:

[I]t is hoped that the British public can be helped not just to better appreciate the centrality of combating poverty in creating a better and fairer society—but also how through increased volunteering and philanthropy they can help win this battle. With proper training, a few hours relationship counselling or providing childcare support can help keep a vulnerable family together—in circumstances where its breakdown could send the children into long-term social exclusion. A volunteer can work those hours, can stop that family breakdown, can save lives—and be proud of themselves.

... [We need to] develop innovative and effective ways of helping Britain’s most vulnerable—in a way that a controlling state paymaster is incapable of allowing. A philanthropist (whether a taxi-driver, a nurse, or a hedge-fund manager) can make that difference (Duncan-Smith 2006:87–88).

At the heart of the “Big Society” agenda is a deep-seated belief that the welfare state has run its course—the new obligation of British citizenship is to volunteer and donate (regardless of the ability to do so) in order to help vulnerable people change their ways. “Broken Britain” would thus appear to be an archetypal and especially cunning terministic screen: it is a *selection and deflection of reality* (bolstered by the strategic deployment of ignorance), which encourages all who encounter the screen to view society through its behavioural filters of family breakdown, out-of-wedlock childbirth, worklessness, dependency, anti-social behaviour, personal responsibility, addiction, and teenage pregnancies.¹⁹

Right-wing think tanks in the UK continue to gain in power, and their influence is hard to avoid in any assessment of how the contemporary neoliberal state is aided and augmented. Their glossy and authoritative publications, their fast channels of access to authority and opinion-makers, their speechwriters and backroom “researchers” have together successfully deflected attention away from the reality of the problem to be addressed: a *broken state*. National states and their local extensions have long exerted a powerful remedial influence over the nature and scale of inequalities and the sociospatial distribution of poverty (for example, through their positive actions in the realm of housing, education, healthcare and the formal labour market, which serve to cushion the urban poor from economic turmoil). But in contemporary Britain it makes sense to speak of a *broken state* not simply as a hyperbolic counterpoint to the “broken society”,²⁰ but because the state is making a steady switch from a remedial to a *generative* force in respect of marginality, inequality and precarity. Drastic and punitive welfare reforms arguably constitute the centrepiece of a severe fiscal austerity package, where possibilities for a redistributive path are drowned out by the rhetoric of “welfare dependent troubled families” causing society to crumble at the margins. This rhetoric then serves as the justification for massive public expenditure gutting as the appropriate course of crisis management. Wittgenstein (1977 [1931]:18) once remarked that “language sets everyone the same traps: it is an immense network of easily accessible wrong turnings”; the agnotological approach advocated in this paper may help social scientists “erect signposts at all the junctions where there are wrong turnings, so as to help people past the danger points”. When future histories of the British welfare

state are penned, studying the production and circulation of ignorance appears all the more crucial as part of a collective effort to rescue the British welfare state from the clutches of those political elites²¹ determined to consign it to history.

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Endnotes

¹ <http://www.fare-scotland.org/>

² Charles Murray, a political scientist currently employed by a neoconservative think-tank (the *American Enterprise Institute*), is widely regarded as the principal "scholarly" voice amongst advocates of cutting welfare spending to stem the growth of an "underclass". Lawrence Mead, Professor of Politics and Public Policy at New York University, was a very influential scholarly voice behind 1990s welfare-to-work legislation in the United States, arguing that paid employment is an "obligation of citizenship".

³ As Rawls (1971:12) put it, "no one knows his [sic] place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like".

⁴ <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/default.asp?pageRef=44>

⁵ "Social justice", of course, has never been part of Conservative intellectual history. Conservatives are most concerned with avoiding social breakdown, not achieving an abstraction like "justice", and this has always underpinned their view of the welfare state. Conservative politicians, historically, only take an interest in poverty/inequality in so far as it assists social cohesion to do so, and does not ferment revolt where the wealthy might be required to relinquish their private property rights.

⁶ During that election, the Conservative Party produced countless posters where voters of all ages, sexes and ethnicities were shown to be thinking "I've never voted Tory before", followed by a reason to do, and the rhetoric of mending a "broken society" was especially dominant, reproduced on several posters that saw very wide distribution.

⁷ Gray and Mooney (2011) offer a compelling illustration of how the intense stigma attached to certain districts of UK cities (particularly disinvested tracts of council housing with high unemployment) becomes the desired activation for a set of policy proposals that are resolutely anti-urban. Although welfare reform targets marginalized groups regardless of where they live, the localist rhetoric of the "Big Society" to "mend" a "broken society" deploys communitarian rural and village symbols that make the appearance of urban poverty even more jarring and offensive to an electorate far removed from it.

⁸ There is no space here for an elaborate account of the changes (and of their crucial Conservative precursors) that took place during the New Labour years (see Peck 2001 for such an account).

⁹ Gregg is by no means the prototype neoliberal apologist. He was in fact the architect of tax credits under Gordon Brown's chancellorship and these arguably did more than any other intervention to reduce poverty from 1997 to 2010. However, the *Realising Potential* report is without question a "soft" version of US welfare-to-work, couched in a rather obnoxious paternalist moralism.

¹⁰ Indeed, such is the abysmal record of income inequality in Britain from 1997 to 2010 that those years are most accurately read as a continuation of Thatcherism (Dorling 2010).

¹¹ This integrated (universal) credit replaces all of the following schemes: Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, Housing Benefit, Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance.

¹² Mead's view of welfare claimants is that "the government must persuade them to *blame* themselves" (1986:10) by making benefits as unattractive as possible.

¹³ In June 2012, Holman published a short piece in *The Guardian* calling for Iain Duncan-Smith to resign.

¹⁴ In January 2012, many peers and bishops in the House of Lords defeated eight parts of the Welfare Reform Bill, especially its proposal that, regardless of circumstances (disability, family size etc), no household should receive more than £26,000 a year in welfare benefits. The Bill then "ping-ponged" (the official language) for several weeks between the House of Lords and the House of Commons, but in the end MPs overturned the concerns and the votes of the Lords and passed the Bill, principally because they managed to turn specific amendments encouraged by the House of Lords into vague ministerial commitments to undertake some form of "review".

¹⁵ See Wacquant, 2009a, p.7–54 for an elaborate account of Murray's visits to the UK.

¹⁶ Remarkably both Conservative London mayor Boris Johnson and David Cameron applauded the London Citizens living wage campaign during the 2010 UK General Election. Upon reflection, this was shameless electioneering.

¹⁷ Wacquant (2008:252–256) argues that basic income is the "revolution in public policy" that is needed to stem the rise of advanced marginality on both sides of the Atlantic.

¹⁸ I am indebted to Loïc Wacquant for introducing me to this fascinating concept. In France and elsewhere in Europe, Wacquant (2006) shows there are three terministic screens to divert attention away from the causes behind the rise of advanced marginality: the *spatial* (it is a problem of neighbourhoods, housing, segregation); the *ethnic or cultural* (it is immigration, integration, diversity); and the *criminal* (it is youth delinquency, violence, insecurity).

¹⁹ One might reasonably assume that "Broken Britain" refers to Britain's financial sector and its entire regulatory apparatus, but it speaks volumes about the state of public debate on poverty in Britain that it refers to poor people and poor districts.

²⁰ Since this article was penned (in May 2011) for the *Grammars of Urban Injustice* conference from which this special issue emerges, the theme of the broken society has become even more dominant as a catch-all explanation for all that is wrong in twenty-first century Britain, an outcome of the English riots of August 2011 (for a lengthier commentary, see Slater 2011).

²¹ In a November 2011 speech at the LSE, Duncan-Smith stridently denounced reliable measures of child poverty and argued that giving more money to "dysfunctional families" will not help the issue because "feckless parents will spend it on drugs and gambling" (quoted in Winnett 2011). At the time, Duncan-Smith was smarting in the wake of a 19 November letter published in *The Guardian* and signed by 18 Church of England bishops, written to express their concerns about the "profoundly unjust" impact of child benefit being included in an overall cap on the sum any household can receive in welfare benefits: "We feel compelled to speak for children who might be faced with severe poverty and potentially homelessness, as a result of the choices or circumstances of their parents."

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