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## Activation policies and the changing ethical foundations of welfare

### Conference Paper

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# Activation Policies and the Changing Ethical Foundations of Welfare <sup>1</sup>

A draft for a plenary paper to be presented at a conference,  
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The foundations of 'mature' welfare states in 'developed' capitalist countries are changing. At one level such change reflects the economic imperatives associated with globalisation. Social protection for workers in rich nations depends increasingly on the outcome of international competition for capital investment and therefore the extent to which domestic labour market participation can be promoted, labour force costs can be constrained, and/or labour productivity can be maximised. At another level, however, the change reflects shifting political orthodoxies and moral assumptions. The social protectionist ethic is - to varying degrees - giving way to an ethic of self-responsibility (e.g. Bauman 1993, Rose 1999). This paper aims to explore the shifting ethical foundations of the 'welfare-to-work' or 'workfare' state (Peck 2001; Lødemel and Trickey 2001; Jessop 2002). It will be argued that the shifts entailed are more complex and multi-layered than might at first appear.

To do so, the paper starts with a discussion of the historical context, with particular emphasis for illustrative purposes on the example of the UK. The second part of the paper offers a critical analysis of competing moral discourses and ethical concepts of responsibility. The final part of the paper presents a heuristic taxonomy of welfare-to-work or 'activation' regimes and presents a critique of dominant approaches to activation, arguing that at worst they are an affront to human rights; at best they may be ethically ambiguous.

## **Evolving principles of welfare: an historical account**

Contrary to much political rhetoric, recent and current welfare reforms in countries in the English speaking world, and shifts of emphasis within the welfare policies in countries across the European Union (and indeed in the East Asia/Pacific region - see Walker and Wong 2005), reflect an incremental evolution rather than a step change in the principles that inform welfare provision. They entail in practice the accretion and refashioning of principles, rather than the replacement of old ideas by new ones. If there is a narrative thread running through the evolution of welfare provision it is in part, perhaps, the

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chaotic story of the ideological fashioning and refashioning of post-Enlightenment 'liberalism'. This is not to ignore the countervailing influence of conservatism or social democracy both within and beyond the realm of so called 'liberal' welfare states (cf. Esping-Andersen 1990). Nor is it suggested that liberalism's neo-liberal incarnation is necessarily so monolithic as to be irresistible (cf. Larner and Walters 2000). It is to acknowledge the centrality of liberal ideologies to the ascendancy of the capitalist project.

With this in mind I wish to present a schematic account of the evolution of the welfare system in the UK, as a liberal welfare regime. The account can be summarised - albeit in a highly reductive fashion - by way of the following table.

**Table 1. A schematic account of the evolution of the UK's liberal welfare regime**

	Defining concepts	Administrative basis	Mode of governance	Principle of welfare
Poor Law era	classical political economy + pauperism	local/ decentralised	utilitarian: illiberal coercion; stigma and manipulation	'old' pastoral paternalism/ case-work
Welfare State era	Keynesianism + social citizenship	centralised bureau- professional	disciplinary: rules, incentives, and pecuniary sanctions	dispensing/ adjudicating social rights
Workfare State era	monetarism + consumerism	contractualised - managerialist	'advanced' liberal: promoting self- governance	'new' civic paternalism/ welfare-to-work

The transitions here described have parallels in other countries, though they are not direct parallels. What is more, although what is presented here as a chronological narrative, describing three eras, the temporal definition of those eras is contestable. The conceptually distinctive administrative bases, modes of governance and principles of welfare that I here define are capable in practice of co-existing and overlapping. Indeed, they have done and will continue to do so.

### *The Poor Law Era*

The essence of the Poor Laws across much of Western Europe was that they were locally administered, coercively enforced and yet retained an essentially paternalistic element by which the rich and powerful acknowledged pastoral responsibilities for the poor and dispossessed. This could be observed as much in the systematised nature of the relief scheme devised by Martin Luther for Liesnig in Saxony in the sixteenth century as in the Benthamite utilitarian principles that eventually informed the Poor Law Reform Act in England in the nineteenth century (see H. Dean 1991). Polanyi (1944) famously argued that the logic of the capitalist economic system became embedded in the very fabric of social life through the invention of pauperism on the one hand and the ascendancy of classical political economy on the other (see M. Dean 1991). The terms on which relief of

the poor might be organised became central to the sustenance of the market economy and the process of liberal governance. And yet in the name of liberalism social policies were then, as often they are now, distinctly illiberal (King 1999). Utilitarianism represented a subversion of classical liberalism in that it was prepared to sacrifice the sovereignty of the individual for the greater good. Supposedly dysfunctional individuals could legitimately be subject to the disutility of 'less eligible treatment': the pauper would be relieved in the local workhouse under conditions systematically contrived to be less congenial than those endured by the poorest independent labourer. Bentham himself insisted that the state of the pauper should be 'an object of wholesome horror' (cited in Spicker 1984).

Liberal governance was supposedly more humane (or, at least, less physically brutal) than feudal or mediaeval modes of governance, but relied none the less upon coercion through incarceration and the disciplinary effects of indignity, stigma and shame. At the same time, however, nineteenth century Poor Law administration managed to harness a humane tradition that was quintessentially conservative rather than liberal. In the organisation of ever more extensive forms of 'out-relief' Poor Law Boards of Guardians worked hand in glove with middle class philanthropists and bodies such as the Charity Organisation Society (e.g. Thane 1996). Middle class philanthropy was not the same as the aristocratic philanthropy of the past since it was systematically organised. It was not overtly premised on the *noblesse oblige* principle but fostered the kind of individual casework methods that would lay the foundations of modern social work practice. Despite these differences, the essential nature of philanthropy is its paternalism. And the character of the middle class philanthropists' paternalism owed much to the pastoral traditions of the preceding era in which the 'upper' social orders embraced a sense of responsibility not only for the wellbeing of the 'lower' and less-fortunate orders, but also for their conduct and moral hygiene. Poor Law supplicants were constituted as individual cases or clients whose deserts were to be evaluated in terms of their circumstances and their obedience to moral norms.

### *The Welfare State era*

Modern welfare states differed from the Poor Law regimes that they supposedly replaced, primarily because of the new technologies of administration and governance that they adopted (Foucault 1991). It became possible for central (or federal) governments to institute national systems of welfare provision and/or to regulate the frameworks within which benefits or services were provided at sub-national level. What made this possible was the development of bureaucratic modes of administration on the one hand and the professionalisation of social service provision on the other, providing mechanisms of accountability and control (e.g. Pollitt 1993; Clarke and Newman 1997). Just as essential, were new disciplinary techniques associated with the creation of rules-based systems of entitlement. Citizenship now entailed not only civil and political rights, but social rights as well (Marshall 1950). In particular, rights to social security entailed complex conditions and principles. Twentieth century social security systems required people to frame their claims in strict accordance with prescribed rules, to submit to set procedures, to stand - both literally and metaphorically - in the right queue (H. Dean 1991). Welfare

state claimants were constituted as individual juridical subjects or citizens whose entitlements were to be adjudicated in accordance with legislative rules.

In the process such systems generated incentives for citizens to sustain themselves through paid employment and to maintain each other within families and they imposed a range of pecuniary sanctions for those who did not. Despite this, by the end of the twentieth century, the sustainability of the modern welfare state was brought into question, not only upon fiscal grounds (e.g. O'Connor 1973; Mishra 1984; Pierson 1998), but because rights to welfare were supposedly de-moralising (Himmelfarb 1995); they crowded out people's sense of individual responsibility (e.g. Roche 1992). The claim advanced by the New Right (e.g. Barry 1987) was that rights were out of kilter with responsibilities and that state welfare provision was nourishing an amoral 'dependency culture' across the developed English-speaking world (e.g. Murray 1990).

This particular claim was manifestly ill-founded. Research in the UK by Dean and Taylor-Gooby (1992) - and similar studies conducted in the 1980s and early '90s at a time when New Right governments were seeking to retrench the social security system and tighten its rules - demonstrated that long-term social security claimants did not subscribe to a distinctive dependency culture, but to mainstream values, aspirations and beliefs. Within the findings, however, lay the seeds of a deeper insight: the truth behind the myth of the dependency culture. Welfare claimants were keen, even desperate, to obtain employment, but they were reluctant to take low-paid and uncongenial jobs that would undermine their sense of self-worth and self-esteem: being forced into such jobs would undermine the value they placed on paid work. They attached considerable importance to their moral commitments and affective ties to their children, partners and other family members: being forced into financial dependency upon, or conversely denied the means materially to provide for, their families (depending on the circumstances) was seen as an affront to the quality and very meaning of their most intimate relationships. Welfare claimants did not celebrate their rights to welfare: on the contrary, they already regarded welfare as a last resort and the state as an adversary. The New Right's attempts to 'roll back' the welfare state and its critique of the ethos it supposedly engendered misconstrued the nature of changing social values and it manifestly failed to restore the traditional values of the Poor Law era. They were none the less to herald a transition to a different era.

### *The Workfare State era*

The era through which we now live has been described as post-industrial (Bell 1973), post-modern (Lyotard 1984) and even post-social (Rose 1996), but the term post-material - attributed to Inglehart (1977; 1990) - also captures something distinctive, if elusive, about the transition I seek to characterise. Inglehart's own argument is that following an era in which the welfare state saw to it that our material needs were met we have, in the developed world, become increasingly individualistic, detached from traditional class-based loyalties; and increasingly introspective and preoccupied with our needs for belonging, identity and self-realisation. Inglehart supported his argument with cross-national quantitative data drawn from an array of social attitude surveys. But Dean and Taylor-Gooby's small-scale qualitative study concerning the nature of the values demonstrated by the beneficiaries of welfare state largesse (see above) in many ways

chimes with, illustrates and even amplifies certain aspects of what might be described as a nascent post-materialist ethos: an ethos in which self-esteem, affective relationships and individual freedom take precedence over immediate self-sufficiency, customary obligations and respect for authority. What appeared to be evident as the welfare state era was being forcibly drawn to a close was that people subscribed to a work ethic that demanded more than material remuneration, a family ethic that demanded more than material interdependency and a citizenship ethic that had become sceptical as to the capacity of Marshallian social citizenship to deliver material security.

I would contend that Inglehart's argument overplays the role and the effectiveness of the welfare state and the extent to which material sufficiency was or is universally enjoyed. The argument has to an extent been superseded by Beck's (1992) contention that we inhabit a society characterised not by guaranteed material sufficiency, but by *risk*. Despite this, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2001) notion of 'individualisation' captures key elements of the cultural shift that Inglehart had called post-materialism. Insofar as we may characterise the current workfare state era as post-materialist (or, perhaps, 'post post-materialist'), I am not suggesting that we inhabit a non-materialist or selfless culture. On the contrary, it is a culture that is profoundly self-centred and consumption oriented. But consumption provides a particular source of identity and it is as free consumers rather than as class-bound producers that we negotiate the ethical basis of our lives and relationships (Bauman 1993; 1998). The struggles and preoccupations of everyday life - even amongst the poorest members of developed societies - are concerned at least as much with issues of identity and recognition as with issues of material distribution (Fraser and Honneth 2003; Lister 2004).

The so called Third Way project - espoused first by Clinton in the USA, more recently by Blair in the UK, and whose influence is evident across Europe (Bonoli and Powell 2002) - may be understood as an expression of post post-materialism. Called the Third Way because it was supposedly a compromise between Old Left and New Right (Lewis and Surrender 2004), it is arguably a project with its own immanent logic, defined by Gilbert (2004) and others in terms of a transition to an 'enabling state'. Giddens (1998), arch-theorist of the Third Way, has redefined 'equality as *inclusion* and inequality as *exclusion*' (1998: 102). Objectives of equality and social justice are no longer concerned with material outcomes, but with opportunity structures. The primary role of social policy is not the distribution of resources to provide for people's needs, but to mitigate risk and to *enable* people individually to manage risk. Old forms of liberal governance are therefore giving way to what Rose (1999) calls 'advanced liberalism' that is intent upon promoting self-provisioning, prudentialism and an individualistic ethic of self-responsibility. Post-materialist subjects are constituted as consumers whose capacity for long-term self-sufficiency and responsible self-management is to be promoted, enabled or regulated.

Advanced liberalism is critical of the erosion of liberal principles that led in the welfare state era to monolithic government on the one hand and the proliferation of welfare rights on the other. And yet at the heart of the Third Way consensus there is a renewed and distinctly illiberal desire to enforce the civic responsibilities of workers and/or citizens (e.g. Roche, 1993). Most particularly, there is a desire to enforce the responsibilities of the poor to sustain themselves. This approach has been aptly characterised - even by its supporters - as 'the new paternalism' (Mead 1997). Social

policy is characterised by a creeping conditionality (Standing 2002; Dwyer 2004). Provision of social benefits for the poor is made conditional upon their willingness to seek employment, undertake training, attend health clinics, and/or send their children to school. Neo-liberal economics is harnessed to an illiberal paternalist social agenda that associates poverty with individual irresponsibility, or with the failure to manage risk. It represents the final challenge to material dependency upon the welfare state, a renewed assault upon the chimera of the dependency culture and an attempt to establish and consolidate an alternative ethical basis for the workfare state era. The dominant element of such an approach is to be found in the kind of welfare-to-work policies that are discussed in more detail later in this paper.

### **Competing discourses of responsibility**

First, however, I propose critically to examine notions of responsibility. Political discourse is replete with attempts to (re)construct a politics of welfare obligation (Fitzpatrick 2005) and with competing notions of responsibility. The complexity of political discourse revolves principally around the reciprocal relationship that necessarily exists within any polity between the responsibilities of the citizen and the rights that may be guaranteed by the state. The transition from the welfare state to a workfare state era could be celebrated as a triumph for principles of social obligation over the principles of social rights (e.g. Mead 1997) or it might be decried as a retreat from, or the surrender of, public responsibility (Gilbert 2004). Popular discourse on the other hand (see Dean and Rodgers 2004) is inclined to engage with notions of responsibility in relation to the quotidian realities of daily life and relationships. There is a certain body of evidence to suggest that when defining social obligations and personal responsibilities, people tend neither to subscribe to prescribed codes of conduct nor to respond to the dictates of economic utility; rather they engage within their relationships and across the generations in processes of social negotiation (Finch and Mason 1993) and their decision making is informed by forms of moral rationality (Duncan and Edwards 1999).

Generally, however, little attempt is made to distinguish between different kinds or levels of responsibility, or indeed between concepts of obligation, duty or obedience. It is possible to do this, at a strictly heuristic level, by way of a taxonomic model of competing discursive moral repertoires, such as that presented in Figure 1. The taxonomy is built around two fundamental distinctions or dimensions represented by the two interesting axes in Figure 1. At its simplest, the continuum represented in the horizontal axis is concerned with ideological orientation, while the continuum represented in the vertical axis is concerned with normative expectation.

#### *Ideological orientation*

For the purposes of this model a distinction may be drawn between *contractarian* and *solidaristic* understandings of citizenship. How is the relationship between the individual and the state (or with society more generally) constructed? The distinction is related to that between liberal and republican traditions of citizenship (e.g. Oldfield 1990) though it is worth noting that while contractarian discourse can, for example, encompass

approaches that are authoritarian and illiberal, solidaristic discourse does not for its part necessarily encompass approaches that explicitly describe themselves as 'communitarian' but in which community is constituted in reductive rather than solidaristic ways (e.g. Driver and Martell 1997).

Contractarian repertoires are premised on an essentially individualistic conception of the social order in which a more or less explicit trade-off, metaphorical contract or implied covenant is required between competitive and self-interested individuals. Aspects of the individual's sovereignty or freedoms - most particularly 'irresponsible' freedoms - are surrendered in return for a measure of protection against the predations and irresponsibilities of others. The purpose is to achieve a minimum of social order. At the extremity of the contractarian pole of the continuum, human society is understood in Hobbesian terms as a war of all against all, while the human subject is constituted through the deals or bargains she must strike with other beings.

Solidaristic repertoires are premised on a collectivist view of the social order in which the priority is to sustain co-operative solidarity. Sovereignty must be pooled and responsibility shared within a society in order to provide security against external threats. The purpose is to achieve the maximum internal social cohesion. At the extremity of the solidaristic pole of the continuum, human society is understood as an association of vulnerable beings clinging together for protection in a hostile universe, while the human subject is constituted through her attachments to other beings.

It is important here to note that the repertoires exist in dialectical relationship with, and can feed off, each other. For example, the defence of market freedoms and individual autonomy demanded by contractarian repertoires may, paradoxically, have recourse to the celebration of the kinds of stable collaborative institutions that are defended by solidaristic repertoires. It should therefore be apparent that this is not a simple left *versus* right distinction, not least because neither the contractarian nor the solidaristic repertoire is *necessarily* concerned with issues of social equality or social justice. Discourses relating to principles of equality may draw as much on procedural notions from the contractarian end of the continuum as from substantive notions of equality from the solidaristic end. The primary issue, however, is the basis on which the responsibilities of citizen and state are constructed.

### *Normative expectation*

For the purposes of this model we may secondly draw a distinction between ethical as opposed to moral expectations and assumptions about human behaviour. In ordinary English usage 'ethics' and 'morality' are virtually synonymous terms, yet for some philosophers it is important to distinguish between the two; generally in terms of abstract and contested distinctions between the 'right' and the 'good'. The distinction I wish to draw is, perhaps, more sociological than philosophical. It is related in one sense to that which Habermas (1987) makes between 'system' and 'life world'. Ethics are concerned with cognitive *ethos*; morals with cultural *mores*. Like contractarian and solidaristic poles of the continuum defined above, the two are closely related and exist in dialectical relation to each other. Ethics are a reflection upon morals. Morals may entail the (re)interpretation of ethics. Ethics are systemic; their preoccupation is with values and

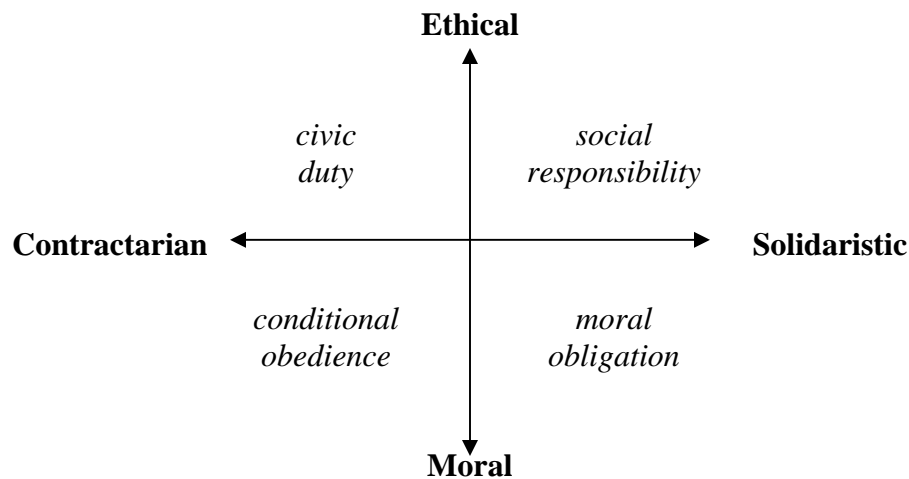


abstract principles. Morals are grounded; their preoccupation is with norms and customary practices. Ethics are expressed in terms of doctrines; morals in terms of codes.

Ethics and morality equally are concerned with the responsibilities that people bear in relation to each other, but while moral conduct is more or less required if one is to get by in any given social context, an ethical perspective is in a sense optional. Ethical discourses - born of philosophical, theological or political thinking - may inform everyday morality, but may also become ossified or subverted by customary application. Conversely, moral discourses may take on reflexive qualities and become elaborated into ethical frameworks. The primary issue, however, is the basis on which people's expectations with regard to their own and other people's behaviour are generated.

### *The taxonomy*

The resulting taxonomy is illustrated in Figure 1 (see also Dean 2002 and Dohoney 2004).



**Figure 1. Competing discourses of responsibility**

Responsibility, when it is socially constructed from within a contractarian understanding of citizenship, but from an ethical perspective (the top left-hand quadrant of Figure 1), takes the form of civic duty. Civic duty is probably the dominant discourse of responsibility within the welfare state ethos. The citizen's freedom not so much as a worker, but as an 'heroic consumer' (cf. Warde 1994) is premised on such duties as she owes to other citizens as may be necessary to ensure their freedoms are not infringed. Each person's duty to fulfil or refrain from certain actions flows from a system of expectations that are reciprocal and symmetrical. Duties, however, are individualised. They arise from the need to ensure that, so far as can reasonably be expected, one's individual interests and ambitions can be fulfilled without burdening others or unfairly prejudicing the interests of others. The observance or performance of duties becomes, ideally, a self-regulating process such as that which Adam Smith referred to as the 'harmony of sentiments and passions' (1758:72) that can be reflexively achieved within a

market economy that is truly free. Fundamentally, civic duty is about responsible self sufficiency

When an ethical notion of responsibility is constructed from within a solidaristic understanding of citizenship (the top right-hand corner of Figure 1), responsibility assumes a universalistic character. The good citizen assumes responsibility - mediated by the state - for others as much as herself. It is important to remember that this taxonomy is a heuristic device and not necessarily a wholly accurate description of discursive repertoires that are prominent or extant. The universalistic notions of social responsibility and social justice that most conspicuously informed the highly redistributive social democratic welfare states of Scandinavia have arguably been premised as much on Kantian as upon socialist principles: upon a notion of responsibility as innate to an individual having free will within her social context. In practice, therefore, they have constituted an essentially social liberal or 'reluctant collectivist' (George and Wilding 1985) concept of social responsibility. The taxonomy serves to characterise a notion of responsibility that is rational, reflexive and democratic; which recognises that members of society must share their responsibilities for each other in ways that are not necessarily reciprocal or symmetrical and that acknowledges that certain responsibilities rightly lay in the public realm. Social responsibility requires commitment to social justice.

When it is constructed from within a contractarian notion of responsibility, but from a moralistic perspective (the bottom left-hand quadrant of Figure 1) responsibility takes the form of conditional obedience. Egotistical individuals may observe their responsibilities only because they are resentfully constrained to do so by legal or administrative rules. Their expectations of others may stem from a belief that in fairness everybody should be equally constrained. Self-interested behaviour in the absence of systemic self-regulating duties is likely to result in irresponsibility and, in this context, the function of the state relates not to the promotion of responsibility, but the governance of irresponsibility (Dwyer 2000). This may require the imposition of penalties and sanctions for irresponsible behaviour or it may entail processes by which particular forms of irresponsible behaviour are identified and stigmatised - as happened during the Poor Law era and as continues to happen under welfare-to-work schemes (see below). A contractarian approach to the governance of irresponsibility is likely to have as much to do with eliciting obedience as with promoting responsibility. Conditional obedience is about getting by within the rules.

Finally, when a moralistic notion of responsibility is constructed from within a solidaristic understanding of citizenship (the bottom right-hand quadrant of Figure 1) it assumes the form of moral obligation. The members of society are characteristically passive or acquiescent and conform 'naturally' to whatever is customary. Responsibility is constructed with reference to collective loyalties and participatory customs; to moral norms and shared values; to the necessary and incontestable expectations that arise from social belonging or, indeed, clientalistic dependency. Moral obligation, by its nature, stems from social traditions (whether long established or recently emergent) and though policy makers may seek to harness moral obligation, for example, through community regeneration and civil participation initiatives, these cannot be authentically solidaristic. Moral obligation is about compliance with the social order.

### *Responsibilisation*

The ethos disclosed by the welfare dependants interviewed by Dean and Taylor-Gooby (alluded to above) valued work and family life for non-material reasons, but it had not established any deontological basis for ordering work and family life. The contention by Burchell (1996), Rose (1999) and others is that, in the context of the kind of narrative I have outlined in Table 1, liberalism's current phase has adopted an immanent strategy of 'responsibilisation'. Liberal governance is now concerned to draw individuals into accepting individual responsibility for aspects of social protection once governed by the welfare state, but to do so according to appropriate or approved ethical techniques of the self. Donzelot has referred to the procedures by which this is attempted as 'contractual implication' (cited in Burchell 1996: 29). Responsibilisation entails a notion of responsibility that is both contractarian and ethical. However, the taxonomy outlined above would suggest that prevailing discourses of responsibility are complex, diverse and contested and that they include discourses that survive from earlier eras.

To explore this further we need perhaps to illustrate the issue in relation to a specific policy example, namely the development of welfare-to-work regimes.

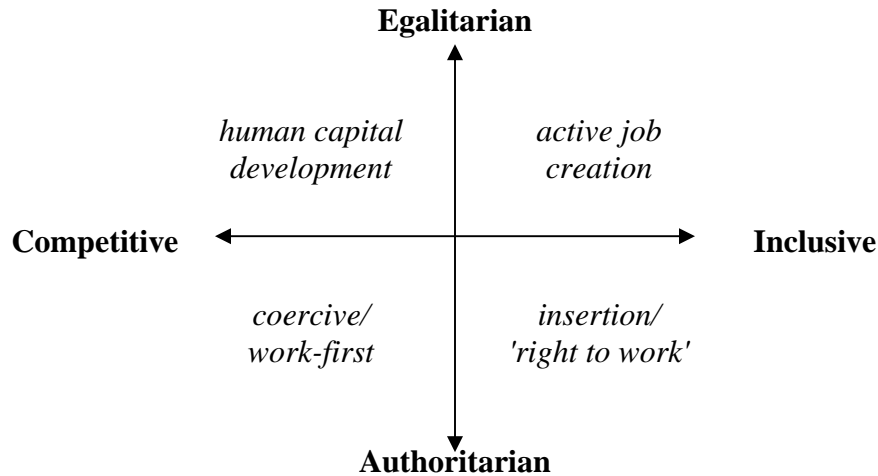
### **Contradictory welfare-to-work regimes**

The expression 'welfare-to-work' is emblematic of the transition from the welfare state to the workfare state era, and yet it has its roots in the Poor Law era. The more draconian forms of welfare-to-work or workfare have been associated with policy innovations in the United States in the late twentieth century, but the idea that social benefits or 'relief' should be made conditional upon the performance of labour - such as breaking stones or picking oakum - is one that dates back to the Poor Law era (Piven and Cloward 1974; Whiteside 1995; King 1999). In this respect the utilitarian principles of the nineteenth century Poor Law in England were a clear departure from classical liberalism, with its rejection of slavery and forced labour. It was deemed neither humane nor prudent to leave the poor to starve. In the interests of the poor themselves and society at large the poor should whenever possible be made to work. The welfare state era, however, coincided with two developments: the emergence of a human rights agenda that sought, most specifically through the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an absolute prohibition on forced labour; and a growing consensus based upon Keynesian economic theory and the idea that full employment could be achieved through the macro-economic manipulation of aggregate demand.

In the UK context, the plan that famously laid the foundations of the modern welfare state (Beveridge 1942) had assumed that the threat of Idleness would be averted by Keynesian economics. Social insurance benefits would sustain citizens who were subject to temporary unemployment and, though these were conditional upon a requirement that claimants should seek work, they were not required to work for their benefits. The assumption of the workfare state era is that the welfare state was too 'passive' (e.g. DSS 1998). By the beginning of the twenty-first century we faced on the one hand growing support across the developed world for more 'active' forms of welfare intervention and on the other a shift away from Keynesian economics in favour of a Monetarist consensus.

### *Diverse regimes and hybrid discourses*

There have been various attempts to characterise the different kinds of welfare-to-work, active labour market policy and workfare regime that have emerged (e.g. Lødemel and Trickey 2001; Peck 2001; Gray 2004). My purpose in this paper, however, is to link different kinds of welfare-to-work regime with competing discourses of responsibility. I do this in Figure 2, which like Figure 1 is built around two fundamental distinctions or dimensions represented by two interesting axes.



**Figure 2. Welfare-to-work regimes: a heuristic taxonomy**

The horizontal axis relates to the distinction that can be made between the different ideologically informed purposes of welfare-to-work policy. Policy may be geared to promoting the competitiveness of labour on the one hand or to promoting the inclusiveness of the labour force on the other. It is a distinction directly related to that between contractarian and solidaristic understandings of citizenship, since contractarian understandings will focus on the competitive nature of labour markets and the responsibility of the individual to compete, while solidaristic understandings will focus on inclusive potential of labour processes and the shared responsibilities or loyalties associated with labour participation. In the context of the workfare state era it is a distinction associated with the tension between, on the one hand, the 'new' monetarist economic orthodoxy that is pre-occupied with economic competitiveness and the supply side of the labour market and, on the other hand, the 'old' Keynesian economic orthodoxy that is concerned with the demand side and about social protection (cf. Gray 2004).

The vertical axis in Figure 2 relates to the distinction that can be made between different ethically or morally informed premises of welfare-to-work policy. Policy may be ethically egalitarian and concerned to promote procedural fairness on the one hand or substantive social justice on the other. Alternatively, policy may be morally authoritarian and concerned to promote social order, whether by compulsion on the one hand or by incorporation on the other. In the context of the workfare state era it is a distinction associated with a tension between different constructions of the motivation and agency of

the individual worker: between whether work is a matter of ethical commitment amongst subjects of equal worth or whether it is a moral requirement in a society based upon hierarchical or conventional order.

Welfare-to-work when it is conceived on a competitive/egalitarian basis (top left-hand quadrant of Figure 1) is concerned to promote human capital development. Elements of this approach have lately feature in what Lødemel and Trickey (2001) have termed the 'European centralised' model - epitomised by the Dutch Job-seekers' employment scheme, Danish activation and the UK's New Deal. The concept of human capital (see Becker 1993) is used to refer to the individual skills that vest in an individual by virtue of their abilities, education and training. The civic duty of the individual lies in ensuring that she should not be a material burden on the welfare system, but maximise her human capital. Policy therefore focuses on the opportunities that are made available to individuals to enhance their productive potential and their labour market readiness.

When it is conceived on an inclusive/egalitarian basis (top right-hand quadrant of Figure 1) welfare-to-work is concerned to promote active job creation. The active labour market policies of social democratic welfare states such as Sweden and Norway had ensured during the welfare state era that the state itself effectively became the 'employer of first resort' (Leibfried 1993: 140). The sense of social responsibility engendered by the institutionalised social citizenship model meant that citizens had to be included in productive labour. As a result of economic upheavals towards the end of the twentieth century, the Scandinavian welfare states have modified their active labour market policies (Kautto et al. 1999) and there is now greater emphasis on retraining for unemployed workers, subsidized work-experience programmes and the stimulation of private sector employment, rather than the direct creation of public sector employment - which remains, nonetheless, a conceptually important possibility.

When it is conceived on a competitive/authoritarian basis (bottom left-hand quadrant of Figure 1) welfare-to-work is concerned to promote 'work first'. This is best illustrated by workfare schemes in the United States (Peck 2001). Most recently, under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act 1996, especially as it is interpreted in more conservative states, the enforcement of the obligation to work overrides the liberty of the subject. The object is to secure conditional obedience. The primary function of the more aggressive forms of US style workfare is to prevent welfare dependency by hassling or coercing welfare dependents into jobs: any jobs, never mind how low paid, uncongenial or inappropriate.

When it is conceived on an authoritarian/egalitarian basis (bottom right-hand quadrant of Figure 1) welfare-to-work is concerned to promote the 'insertion' of those who have been excluded into the labour market; to give effect to their right and their moral obligation to work. It is an approach that has of late been most clearly evident in France where the republican tradition remains strong and insertion programmes and youth training initiatives have been developed to plug the gaps that had been left by social protections systems based on employment-based social insurance. Welfare-to-work is thereby a means to achieve social integration. The objective is compromised in practice by conservative/corporatist interests that seek to protect the security and privileges of existing workers against the possibility of erosion by 'outsiders'.

This alternative taxonomy of welfare-to-work regimes is once again no more than a heuristic device. It defines ideal types that do not necessarily exist in pure form, since

actual welfare-to-work regimes are invariably hybrid in nature, reflecting contested discourses of responsibility and the inherent instability of the ethical foundations of welfare. This can be illustrated by means of a brief but slightly more detailed account of welfare-to-work in the UK.

### *Welfare-to-work in the UK*

It has been suggested above that by the 1990s an ostensibly post-materialist ethos demanded more from work than the minimal material rewards on offer for low-skilled employment in an increasingly polarised labour market and that the Third Way project has since sought to 'responsibilise' that ethos. In the event, welfare-to-work in the UK had truly begun not under Blair's Third Way, but in the dying years of Major's Conservative administration with the introduction in 1996 of Job-seeker's Allowance (JSA). The significance of this measure was twofold. First, it was symbolically significant. JSA brought the existing social insurance and social assistance schemes for unemployed people under the rubric of a single system. Not only were the unemployed reconstituted at a stroke as 'job-seekers' with a responsibility to seek out employment, but the long established distinction between the 'deserving' unemployed (who had contributed to their benefits) and the 'undeserving' (who had not) was obscured. Second, JSA was technically significant since it introduced new mechanisms - such as Job-seeker's Agreements and Job-seeker's Directions - by which to responsibilise the unemployed (see Rogers 2004).

The New Labour government elected in 1997 supplemented these provisions with an array of 'New Deals': compulsory schemes directed to the young and the long-term unemployed and voluntary schemes directed to lone parents, disabled people, older unemployed people and the partners of the unemployed (Millar 2000). The schemes provided a variety of options including personal advice, job-search support, job placements, work experience and training programmes, with provision in the case of the compulsory schemes for the withdrawal of benefits when options were not taken up. The schemes embodied a mixture of human capital and work-first approaches (see above). The New Deals had been situated as part of a wider welfare-to-work strategy, which included policies intended to 'make work pay' (a modest National Minimum Wage and the extension of relatively generous in-work benefits or tax credits), a distinctly under-resourced National Childcare Strategy and a somewhat timid set of work-life balance policies intended to promote 'family-friendly' employment. The specific success of the New Deals, in terms of their impact on employment and unemployment rates is at worst disputed and at best modest (e.g. Field 2006), but in their wider context their impact was significant in that they laid the foundations for further welfare reform following New Labour's re-election in 2001.

In 2001 the UK government discursively reconstituted its Department of Social Security by renaming it the Department of Work and Pensions and in 2002 it began to reform the executive agencies administering social security benefits so as to constitute a new agency that would deal exclusively and specifically with all those claimants that are of working age. Initially this was to be called the Working Age Agency, but eventually it was named JobCentre Plus. In the process, nonetheless, a further step was taken in politically re-constituting popular conceptions of the life-course and of the responsibilities associated with its various stages. All claimants of working age - whether

they be unemployed, lone parents, or disabled - were to access their entitlements through a 'single gateway', within which they would - with few exceptions - be required at the very least to undergo periodic 'work-focused interviews'.

The latest chapter in this story, in New Labour's third term of office, entails further legislative reforms that were initially proposed in a Green Paper, entitled *A new deal for welfare: Empowering people to work* (DWP 2006; and see Preston 2006). The document re-iterates the mantra that 'work is the best route out of poverty' (ibid: 2) and claims that the UK government is 'building a system that recognises the responsibilities people have to get themselves off benefits' (ibid: 3). The bulk of the substantive proposals contained in the document relate to proposed reforms of the incapacity benefits system. These are advanced in the context of very high levels of economic inactivity through sickness and disability, including many of those displaced through the collapse of traditional industries and others suffering, for example, from mental illness. The government's concern, however, is that 'after two years on incapacity benefits, a person is more likely to die or retire than to find a new job' (ibid: 3). Specifically, it is proposed that a new Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) will be introduced in 2008. This will have striking parallels with the introduction of JSA in 1996. First, the ESA will bring existing social insurance and social assistance schemes for people incapable of work through long-term sickness or disability under the rubric of a single system. The implication, it would seem, is that potentially large numbers of people who would previously have benefited from a relatively generous and unstigmatised long-term Incapacity Benefit may be treated on a basis not far removed from that to which the undeserving unemployed are subject. Second, the ESA will entail a tightening of the basis on which people are assessed for their capacity for work and a refinement of the arrangements for supporting them back into work, including a requirement that ESA claimants produce action plans and engage in work-related activity, or see their benefit level reduced. The emphasis is on personalised support. The White Paper suggests similar revisions to the terms on which lone parents may claim benefits since, in return for government measures that make it easier for them to work, 'lone parents have a responsibility to make serious efforts to return to work' (DWP 2006: 7).

The reforms have been built around a language of responsibility, but central to this has been the way in which the identity of working age claimants is constituted through their putative relationship to a competitive job market. They have no other permissible status or legitimate basis for social inclusion. The object is not to decommodify as the welfare state had done (e.g. Esping-Andersen 1990), but to recommodify. And it is the government that must make this happen. It is in one sense a paternalistic project. There is ambiguity here, however. The approach to welfare-to-work is characteristically hybrid. It includes on the one hand a strong emphasis on the empowerment of claimants; on their preparation and ownership of action plans; on the utilisation of skills. This bears the hallmarks of an ethicising human capital approach. On the other hand, there is also an emphasis on compulsion, upon participation and benefit penalties or sanctions for non-compliance. These are hallmarks of a moralising work-first approach. A carrot and stick approach is clearly logical, but it is ethically ambivalent. For example, the detailed government guidance that is offered to jobseekers offers on the one hand training in what might amount to ethical techniques of the self (such that the jobseeker will internalise the nature of her civic duty), but on the other it also fuels a

remorseless pressure to compete for jobs, to the point that the guidance might be interpreted as enjoining jobseekers to engage in conduct verging on the unscrupulous or deceitful when writing CVs or performing at interviews (Rogers 2004).

### *Responsibility and need*

It is generally accepted that the UK's hybrid welfare-to-work system, though it is of value to those who are ready and able to access the labour market, works less well for those who may be less ready or who are in some way vulnerable (e.g. SSAC 2002). This is of course symptomatic of its unsolidaristic nature, but it is also indicative of its inherent contradictions. One UK based study based on the labour market experiences of working-age people with multiple problems and needs (Dean 2003) suggested that highly vulnerable individuals who had found themselves effectively unemployable in the legitimate labour market could react to a combination of human capital and work-first welfare-to-work initiatives in one of two ways. They might subscribe helplessly to the self-development ethic of the human capital approach and end up immersed in corrosive state of recrimination and self-blame. Alternatively they might angrily re-interpret the self-assertive morality of the work-first approach and seek unregulated and exploitative work in the informal economy. Either way, the system fails to engender responsibility.

The moral-authoritarianism of the work-first approach has everything in common with the utilitarianism of the nineteenth century Poor Law. As such, it sits uneasily for example with the principles expounded by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 which declares that everyone has the right to free choice of employment (Article 23[1]) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966 which acknowledges the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain her living by work which she freely chooses or accepts (Article 6[1]). Though the European Convention on Human Rights holds that work 'which forms part of normal civic obligation' does not count as 'forced labour' (Article 4[3]d) whether this was ever intended to apply to the enforcement of an obligation to undertake compulsory work experience or accept low paid employment, it is hard to say. Guy Standing has argued that 'the right to a job that is chosen for you by somebody else against your wishes .... is no right at all' (2002: 273). Indeed, though it remains a moot point, being forced on pain of destitution to take a job one has not chosen might indeed be held to amount to a violation of one's human rights.

The human capital approach, in contrast, is arguably more in tune with the emerging ethos of the workfare state era. However, the limitations of the human capital concept are well rehearsed (e.g. Piachaud 2002). The assumption is that investment in a person's skills and training may produce a return that will benefit both the welfare of the individual and the productivity of the economy. This is, however, unduly individualistic in that the ability to invest in education and skills training and the effectiveness of the outcomes are subject to the wider social context, including the effects of poverty, class background, parental and peer-group influences. It is also unduly economistic since it cannot easily account for the variable quality and substance of educational inputs and training schemes, nor, for example, for the qualitative contribution to economic benefits that may result from 'soft' or inter-personal skills. More fundamentally, the application of the term capital as a metaphor for individual productive potential has a certain ideological significance since it privileges a particular construction of what is to be valued about a



person and her abilities. From a neo-Marxist perspective one might complain that the human capital approach to welfare-to-work and the manner in which it contrives to invest in the supply side of the labour market locks people inexorably into the capitalist system of wage labour (e.g. Novak and Jones 1999). From a liberal perspective, however, Amartya Sen would also complain that 'human beings are not merely means of production, but also the end of the exercise' (1999: 296). Sen has championed the idea not of human capital, but of human capabilities. By capabilities Sen is referring not to what people can do (their functionings) but to their ability to lead a life they would choose and that they value. For Sen, poverty arises not merely when people are deprived of commodities, but when they are deprived of capabilities. Empowerment comes not merely from an ability to function, but from the freedom to function. Civic duty, including that by which it is supposed that we must sustain ourselves through labour, must be freely acknowledged and authentically embraced: it cannot be manufactured through judicious investment in human capital. The contradictory nature of advanced liberalism is that it requires us to choose but to choose the right thing (Rose 1999). For all its subtlety it is, arguably, as much a corruption of the liberal ideal as the utilitarianism of the Poor Law era had been.

It would seem in the context of the European Employment Strategy that what I here characterise as job-creation and right to work approaches to activation are - to a greater or lesser extent - being marginalised by prevailing political and economic orthodoxies. The nature of welfare governance across Europe is changing, albeit that the patterns are complex (Fenger 2006). I am leaving it to other contributors to this conference to illustrate such tendencies. Nonetheless, however imperfectly, job-creation and right to work approaches have offered and maybe still can offer alternative conceptions of the nature of responsibility and the ways in which paid employment relates to social inclusion and non-material needs. From a solidaristic perspective it can be argued that 'work' - whether it be paid or unpaid, productive or reproductive - shapes our lives (Mooney 2004). One can see that, in principle at least, both the job-creation and the right to work approaches are better focused upon people's need to work as opposed to their responsibility to do so. Job creation regimes, such as those that were until recently characteristic of certain Scandinavian countries, sought to expand the number of jobs to meet the needs of society; while insertion/right to work regimes, such as those that have been tentatively implemented in certain corporatist welfare regimes, have sought to gather up those whose need to work has not been met. But it is not necessarily acknowledged that work - including care work, voluntary work, artistic or scholarly endeavour as much as paid employment - is necessary to human identity. It is argued elsewhere (Dean et al. 2005) that what is needed is a 'life-first' approach to welfare-to-work: an approach that would place a person's life-needs, including their need to work, before their duty or obligation to take paid employment. This paper, however, is not the place to expand upon this idea.

## **Conclusion**

It has been contended in this paper that what might now be characterised as a workfare state era has entailed a long-term, but far from complete, shift from moral to ethical

preoccupations on the one hand and from solidarism to contractarianism on the other. The consequence so far as social policy and the provision of welfare are concerned can be characterised by means of the inelegant term 'responsibilisation': individuals are inculcated to an ethic of self-responsibility and assisted to maximise their personal human capital. But despite this, moralistic and solidaristic elements remain in evidence: neither the authoritarian legacy of the Poor Laws, nor the collectivist impulses of the welfare state have been entirely eclipsed. In particular, the immanent logic of welfare-to-work is complex and hybrid in nature, albeit that increasingly it is dominated by a problematic combination of 'work-first' and 'human capital development' approaches which, through their focus on contradictory interpretations of responsibility, in fact fail to meet people's non-material needs - including their need to work.

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