

# Words matter: deconstructing 'welfare dependency' in the UK

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*Should the dominant narratives of politicians such as Ian Duncan Smith influence our perceptions about the 'poor'? Have ideologically underpinned debates portraying those on welfare as being lazy and having an easy life, become part of collective public perceptions? With 2016 marking the 40th anniversary of the publication of Raymond Williams' [Keywords](#), an interrogation of the taken-for-grantedness of specific words, **Paul Michael Garrett** demonstrates how there is a pressing scholarly and political need to question and interrogate focal words and phrases within the neoliberal lexicon. Here, he looks at 'welfare dependency'.*



In the 1990s and into the first quarter of 21<sup>st</sup> century, a number of Williams' keywords have had their meanings re-worked and used in the 'war of position' waged in particular by the political Right to win consent for its often retrogressive, yet invariably 'modernising' and 'reforming' policies. The coupling of *welfare* with *dependency* provides a good illustration of the shifts taking place, given that recourse to income support was not always marinated in stigma and discursively wedded to notions of dependency and deficiency.

'Welfare dependency' circulates around the focal assumption that people are stuck in the quagmire of dependency because of personal deficits and shortcomings. For example, the individuals represented in the dominant narrative of figures, such as Ian Duncan Smith, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, remain hazy, falling short of definition as authentic human beings; their entire lives are structured and (ill) organised according to the things they lack – agency, aspiration and a capacity to meaningfully care for those around them.

My [recent article](#) illuminates the role played by neoliberalism's 'organic intellectuals' with academic 'expertise' playing a pivotal role in defining and amplifying politically and socially retrogressive ideas on 'welfare dependency'. Significant here are US academics, including Charles Murray with his '[underclass](#)' construct. Perhaps less well-known, the US-based Lawrence Mead also endeavoured to intervene in welfare politics in the UK and elsewhere in Europe to shape debates. Although the US is his prime focus, Mead's analysis in *The Politics of Poverty* (1992) encompasses a broad geopolitical framework. He contextualised his perspective on welfare by noting that the 'age of proletarian politics' was passing and with it the 'myth of the left, largely derived from Europe, [which] sees working class solidarity leading to democracy and then an ambitious welfare state'.

Despite this, global and post-'cold-war' dimension being afforded little attention in most Left critiques of the evolution of 'welfare politics', it remains significant. Although the neoliberal agenda was discernible before the 1990s, it is post-1989, with the fall of the USSR, that it became more emboldened and strident. Against this backdrop, Mead's triumphalist discourse reflects the hegemonic politics of the 'new world order' confidently spanning the presidential term of George H W Bush.

Nevertheless, Mead's coolly scornful and patronising pronouncements betray a whiff of unease about, what Foucault [termed](#), 'revolts of conduct'. The spectre haunting his book is the Los Angeles riots. In the year Mead's book was published the riots were sparked by the beating of [Rodney King](#) and the subsequent acquittal of the police officers who had been filmed committing the act. The largest uprising to occur in the USA since the 1960s, the riots were initiated by those residents of South Central LA whom Mead had deemed to be too 'passive' and indolent to rebel or constitute any serious threat to social stability.

Mead's ideas on benefit conditionality echoed and amplified the ideas of behavioural economists, Nichols and Zeckhauser [who argued](#) that cash assistance should only be available to the poor in a context of arduous 'restrictions on the choices made by intended beneficiaries'. According to these influential Harvard-based Reaganite

scholars, 'ordeals' had to become more structurally embedded in welfare benefit systems and should not simply function as unfortunate and regrettable side-effects. This understanding might also inform the perceptions of those in the UK, who have protested about the harsh impact of the 'work capability' assessments. The fact that many claimants are confused, distressed and humiliated is not an accidental by-product of such assessments or indicative of a fixable malfunction. Rather, the inconveniences caused to claimants, some immensely serious, even catastrophically fatal, are evidence that the system, purposefully laden with 'ordeals', is actually *working*.

Clearly, dependency discourses in the UK aiming to discipline, punish and shame the welfare dependent also have domestic lineages not simply imported from the US. Tony Blair was the prime definer of New Labour's politics of welfare and in this capacity he functioned as the transmission belt for ideas, partly originating with American New Right think-tanks and foundations, to be carried across the Atlantic. As part of the Brown administration, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, James Purnell, similarly played a brief, but not insignificant role. Attentive to the semantics of politics, [he observed that](#) not 'long ago' his 'predecessors were called the Secretary of State for Social Security'. For Purnell and his government, 'security' was 'something handed down', whereas the 'new title... tells a wholly different story'.

In 2013, a [report](#) from the Baptist Union of Great Britain and a coalition of churches succinctly rebutted some of the main assertions promoted by the mainstream parties and shared by a seemingly ill-informed public. For the churches, public perceptions crystallised into six embedded and related myths rooted about the 'poor'. Thus, 'they' are:

- lazy and don't want to work;
- addicted to drink and drugs;
- are not really poor, but simply are incompetent in managing their money;
- on 'the fiddle';
- have an easy life;
- prompted the 'deficit' which was causing the 'austerity' measures impacting on everyone.

Clearly, there is a pressing scholarly – and political – imperative to question and interrogate focal words and phrases within the neoliberal lexicon. By not questioning the 'welfare dependency' construct we risk solidifying dominant conceptualisations and retrogressive politics. In short, as the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Keywords reminds us, we need to continue to expose and unravel the deeply ideological underpinnings of 'welfare dependency' talk.

### Author Details

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