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In Pursuit of the Underclass*

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ABSTRACT

The 1970s saw a wide ranging debate in Britain, initiated by Sir Keith Joseph, on the apparent existence of a 'cycle of deprivation'. Most participants viewed this debate as having originated in the 1960s, but in fact versions of the general concept of an inter-generational 'underclass' have figured prominently in social debates during the past one hundred years. In particular, in the inter-war period there were several investigations of an hereditary 'social problem group', investigations which were crucial to a wider conservative social reformist strategy. These investigations produced inconclusive results, however, because ultimately the underclass is a statistical artefact, the existence of which can only be argued by the use of several serious methodological contradictions.

INTRODUCTION: THE RECENT DEBATE IN BRITAIN

On the 29th June 1972, Sir Keith Joseph, then Secretary of State for Health and Social Services, delivered a speech to the Pre-school Playgroups Association. 'Why is it' he asked, 'that, in spite of long periods of full employment and relative prosperity and the improvement in community services since the Second World War, deprivation and problems of maladjustment so conspicuously persist?' Deprivation, he acknowledged, could be found at all levels of society,

but the most vulnerable are those already at the bottom end of the economic and social ladder. The causes are many and complex. There are economic

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> factors—persistent unemployment and low income: living conditions play a part—bad housing and overcrowding and few opportunities for recreation. There are personal factors arising from illness or accident or genetic endowment ... Perhaps there is at work here a process, apparent in many situations but imperfectly understood, by which problems reproduce themselves from generation to generation (Joseph, 1972).

Joseph identified this phenomenon as the 'cycle of deprivation'—a process whereby multiple deprivation and social disadvantage was transmitted inter-generationally. The solutions he initially offered were vague—more family planning, 'preparation for parenthood'—but the analysis was repeated in a number of speeches between 1972 and 1974. Most notably, in a speech in Birmingham on the 19th October 1974, Joseph maintained that because an excess of births was apparently occurring in mothers of social class V, 'the balance of our population, our human stock, is threatened', and that the ultimate solution should be to extend birth control facilities to such mothers who were 'producing problem children, the future unmarried mothers, delinquents, denizens of our borstals, subnormal educational establishments, prisons, hostels for drifters' (Joseph 1974).

This final speech aroused such controversy that the original thesis propagated by Joseph became for a time submerged beneath a torrent of criticism to the effect that the ex-Secretary of State was virtually advocating the compulsory sterilisation of the poor. However, the concept of a cycle of deprivation was taken up by the social science community in the 1970s and subjected to close scrutiny. Nearly every textbook on poverty contained some reference to it, even if the verdict was dismissive (Holman, 1978, Chapter 3); and both Bill Jordan and Peter Townsend mounted spirited attacks, the latter calling it 'a mixture of popular stereotypes and ill-developed, mostly contentious, scientific notions' (Jordan, 1974; Townsend, 1974, p.8). In particular, Sir Keith Joseph himself, while Secretary of State, established in June 1972 a DHSS/SSRC Joint Working Party on Transmitted Deprivation which commissioned 23 empirical studies plus several reviews of literature. In all, a grand total of £750,000 was allocated to fund this research and over the subsequent dozen years the results began to appear.

By and large, they have pronounced highly sceptical verdicts on the original concept. Every conceivable aspect of deprivation has been examined—in health status, income across generations, educational attainment, child-rearing, housing, employment, mental health and crime—and ultimately the term has proved difficult to define and impossible to operationalise (for a summary, see Brown and Madge,

1982). No simple inter-generational pattern can be demonstrated: many families and individuals manage to break out of the cyclical process.

For example, one research team examined in extraordinary depth the circumstances of four apparently 'multi-problem' families. Sir Keith Joseph had confidently asserted that 'social workers, teachers and others know only too well the sort of situation I am referring to' (Joseph, 1972), and had been told by a Director of Social Services that 'we have 20,000 households in this city. Nearly all the problems—delinquency, truancy, deprivation, poverty and the rest—come from about 800 of them. And I think that most of the families have been known to us for five generations' (quoted in Jordan, 1974, p.48). Yet the research team found that remarkably *few* families in the area chosen for investigation were known to social workers as suffering multiple deprivation over three generations, and thus they had to settle for an examination of only four such families (Coffield *et al.*, 1981, p.6).

Put under scrutiny, with even the most intimate aspects of their behaviour revealed, none of the four families presented a clear case of cyclical deprivation: while they did appear to be caught in a complex web of disadvantage, the inter-relationship of 'personal' and 'structural' causes was so subtle that it cast doubt on such simplistic distinctions—or, indeed, on the possibility of meaningful analysis by the conventional tools of social science: 'the particular combination of adverse circumstances which made up the web of deprivation varied from family to family and varied within any one family at different times in the life cycle' (Coffield *et al.*, 1981, p.6). Though they appeared at first sight to conform to a 'cultural deprivation' stereotype, the families soon revealed sharp behavioural exceptions: for example, in contrast to Lewis's and Banfield's assertion that individuals caught in the culture of poverty display a strong present-time orientation with little ability to defer gratification or plan for the future (Lewis, 1965, p.xlviii; Banfield, 1970, p.125), the Barker family maintained a life insurance policy for its male breadwinner and a fire and accident policy for the house. In general, therefore, the research team were unable to unlock that age-old riddle of which behavioural characteristics were pathological and which were functional or adaptive—as when trying to decide whether Vince Barker's aggressive playfulness towards his children reproduced anti-social violent behaviour in them or, alternatively, equipped them well for the hard world in which they lived (Coffield *el al.*, 1981, pp.45, 60–5).

In all this painstaking and expensive research, surprisingly little cognisance was taken of the history of the concept. Some authors paid brief lip service to earlier constructs: for example, Coffield recognised that

similar ideas had been discussed in Jamieson Hurry's *Poverty and its Vicious Circles* (1921) (Coffield *et al.*, 1981, p.1). But most located its origins in the policy debates of the 1960s. In a limited sense, of course, the cycle of deprivation concept can be seen as a specific product of the 'rediscovery of poverty' during that decade with, in both Britain and America, resultant policy outcomes in programmes of positive discrimination towards the deprived and excluded. The ideological thrust of this rediscovery had consisted of a curious combination of reformist social engineering (particularly over the issue of educational disadvantage) and a conservative 'social pathology' perspective which emphasised cultural deprivation. Both models were, for example, contained in the 1967 Plowden Report on *Children and their Primary Schools*, where an essentially genetic view of the child's intellectual development and a conflation of the issue of social class disadvantage into the relatively innocuous problem of parental attitudes was combined with a call for social engineering through Educational Priority Areas. By the end of the 1960s, the two approaches were jostling with each other, with some policy experiments (notably the Community Development Project) providing a forum for open conflict. At one level, therefore, Joseph's initiative was part of a broader governmental attempt in the early 1970s (at its strongest in the Home Office) to push the balance in favour of the 'social pathology' interpretation (Loney, 1983).

However, in a wider sense Sir Keith Joseph was unwittingly articulating a perspective that has had a long history. The concept of an intergenerational underclass displaying a high concentration of social problems—remaining outwith the boundaries of citizenship, alienated from cultural norms and stubbornly impervious to the normal incentives of the market, social work intervention or state welfare—has been reconstructed periodically over at least the past one hundred years, and while there have been important shifts of emphasis between each of these reconstructions, there have also been striking continuities. Underclass stereotypes have always been a part of the discourse on poverty in advanced industrial societies.

RECONSTRUCTION OF THE CONCEPT

As historians such as Stedman Jones and Treble have shown (Stedman Jones, 1971, Pt. III; Treble, 1983, pp. 110–13), the social literature of the 1880–1914 period contained frequent discussions of the apparent existence of an economically unproductive residuum of social outcasts.

However, pre-1914 discussions of the residuum tended to be highly impressionistic and speculative, such as Alfred Marshall's interesting

verdict, pre-dating modern theories of cultural deprivation, that the residuum had 'little opportunity for friendship; they know nothing of the decencies and the quiet and very little even of the unity of family life; and religion often fails to reach them' (Marshall, 1890, p.2). There were some systematic attempts to identify the likelihood of degeneracy or social eminence being transmitted across generations: Charles Booth investigated over one thousand cases of pauperism in Stepney (Booth, 1902b, Appendix B); highly selective family histories were published, such as R.L. Dugdale's study of the Jukes (Dugdale, 1985); and under Karl Pearson's direction, research staff at the Galton and Biometric Laboratories, University College, London, gathered evidence on the inheritance of both positive and negative social qualities (Kevles, 1985, pp.38–9). But the methodology tended to be crude and the genetic evidence unconvincing.

In the inter-war years, however, the concept was reconstructed as the 'social problem group' and a more precise hereditarian causation attached to it. As will be shown, investigations by the Wood Committee on Mental Deficiency, E.J. Lidbetter, David Caradog Jones and C.P. Blacker were but more systematic examples of a wider debate among eugenists over the hereditarian basis for a variety of conditions, ranging from mental deficiency through alcoholism, criminality and unemployment, to 'mild social inefficiency'.

In the 1940s it was recast as the problem family concept. Initially, this arose out of the alleged medical condition and anti-social behaviour of some of the inner city school children evacuated to rural reception areas during the Second World War (Macnicol, 1986); particularly within the voluntary social work sector such evidence was proof that

> the 'submerged tenth' described by Charles Booth still exists in our towns like a hidden sore, poor, dirty and crude in its habits, an intolerable and degrading burden to decent people forced by poverty to neighbour with it.
>
> Within this group are the 'problem families' always on the edge of pauperism and crime, riddled with mental and physical defects, in and out of the courts for child neglect, a menace to the community of which the gravity is out of all proportion to their numbers (Women's Group on Public Welfare, 1943, p.xiii).

The problem family concept which emerged in the 1940s was less pessimistic than its social problem group predecessor, in the sense that such families were seen as amenable to character reform through social work therapies designed to socialise them back into accepted norms of behaviour, instead of as victims of poor genetic endowment, to be sterilised or segregated in institutions. For example, Stephens argued that 'a large part of the solution will have to consist of personal treatment

for the individual families, for these are pre-eminently the misfits who fail to benefit from the provisions which suffice for average people' (Stephens, 1947, p.7).

Nevertheless, there were strong assertions that an inter-generation process existed and could be empirically proved; yet the case studies carried out produced verdicts that were highly inconclusive (for example, Blacker, 1952).

Finally, in both the American war on poverty and the British rediscovery of poverty of the 1960s there can be detected the influence of the 'culture of poverty' thesis first propagated by the social anthropologist Oscar Lewis. In both countries, concern over deprived groups who had apparently missed out on the benefits of economic growth or were victims of demographic trends or technological changes (such as unskilled blacks in the United States) led to the construction of artificial avenues of economic self advancement through community action, citizen participation, work training schemes and compensatory education. Among conservative observers such as Sir Keith Joseph or Daniel Moynihan (who concluded that 'the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community at the present time' was 'the deterioration of the Negro family') (Moynihan, 1965, p.5), the existence of such deprived groups was primarily the product of subcultural factors, family breakdown, personal inadequacy, etc., all of which combined together to socialise affected individuals and their offspring into an outlook of low expectations. As John Wofford, a member of the President's Task Force on the War on Poverty, later attested, 'little thought, if any, was given by those of us who helped administer CAP (the Community Action Programme) to a distinction between poverty (a lack of money) and the "culture of poverty" (the lifestyle that goes with poverty)' (Wofford, 1969, p.71).

The British discussion of the cycle of deprivation in the 1970s had thus been preceded by similar debates in America the previous decade. For example, Michael Harrington's influential *The Other America* (1962) had claimed that

> there is, in short, a language of the poor, a psychology of the poor, a world view of the poor. To be impoverished is to be an internal alien, to grow up in a culture that is radically different from the one that dominates society.

And he warned that since the new poor were 'immune to progress' despite the economic growth and welfare expansion,

> the nation is therefore beginning the sixties with a most dangerous problem: an enormous concentration of young people who, if they do not receive immediate help, may well be the source of a kind of hereditary poverty new to American society (Harrington, 1964, pp.9, 17, 188).

THE CONCEPT'S MANY MEANINGS

Clearly, in a paper of this length it is impossible to do full justice to the complexities of the underclass concept. A full examination would need to unravel many of the fundamental problems in social science, such as the confused debate between heredity and environment, the relationship of the concept to wider definitions of social class, or theories of stigma, labelling and deviance—the kind of holistic approach pioneered by Barbara Wootton in her seminal *Social Science and Social Pathology* (Wootton, 1959, esp. Chapter 2). For example, at an obvious level the concept has been sustained by a large measure of simple class prejudice (involving the fetishisation of middle class social *mores*) legitimised, in the inter-war years, by a 'biologisation' of class through theories of heredity and, thereafter, by psychological models of personal inadequacy. Yet many of the concept's proponents have seen the underclass as *distinct* from the working class—in effect, a rootless mass divorced from the means of production—definable only in terms of social inefficiency, and hence not strictly a class in a neo-Marxist sense.

Three definitional problems stand out in particular. Firstly, populist versions of the concept have been espoused and internalised by ordinary working class people as the behavouristic obverse of 'respectability'—say, in making distinctions between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor in the nineteenth century, or in perceiving problem families or 'problem estates' today. For example, Donnison has even made the interesting observation that pronounced regional variations can be detected in the degree of severity of punitive attitudes to the poor and welfare-dependent on the part of low-wage earners (Donnison, 1982, pp.61–5). Secondly, there is the difficulty of separating the specific underclass concept from wider assumptions about the inheritance of intelligence, ability and positive social qualities that were much more commonplace before the gradual discrediting of I.Q. testing in the 1950s and 1960s, and which were formalised in the 'types of mind' argument that reached its apogee with the 1943 Norwood Report: the wartime Board of Education official who, on finishing a telephone conversation with a member of the public, concluded 'I may add that judging from his voice he is more intelligent than the ordinary public elementary school parent' (PRO, 1939) was merely articulating a view which, albeit reinforced by education policy, was quite widespread in society at large.

A third problem is that although in a robust version the concept has generally been propagated by those of a conservative social outlook, the general notion of an 'underclass' has—from Marx's comments on the 'lumpenproletariat' onwards—also been deployed by those on the left to describe the casualties of capitalism, those suffering acute economic

disadvantage. Hence in the mid 1960s Richard Titmuss argued that positive discrimination was required within a universalist welfare state in order to 'solve the problems of the underclass in our cities' and Peter Townsend has more recently discerned 'a kind of modern underclass' of those increasingly denied access to paid employment (Titmuss, 1965, p.357; Townsend, 1979, p.920). Indeed, such has been the loose usage of the term that Ralf Dahrendorf has even applied it to the problem of soccer hooliganism (Dahrendorf, 1985).

Given these analytical problems and the occasional vague usage, this paper will examine, with respect to the inter-war years, the construction of the underclass concept 'from the top'—from the point of view of those who tried to systematise the concept, invest it with respectability and thus encourage its propagation and acceptance. It will show that sustaining its viability was only possible by the use of a suspect methodology, but that it had enormous symbolic importance as part of a broader reformist strategy within conservative social thought.

THE ORIGINS OF THE 'SOCIAL PROBLEM GROUP'

First of all, it is important briefly to identify why in the 1920s there was a renewed interest in the residuum or social problem group, with repeated attempts to prove its existence and evolve new methods of classification. The post-war recession and mass unemployment convinced many eugenists that the long term dysgenic effects of differential fertility were manifesting themselves in poor economic performance and an expanding army of unemployables, causing the Unemployment Insurance Fund to slide further and further into debt (reaching £75.5 million by March 1931). The achievement of virtual mass democracy in 1918 and the rise of the Labour Party (even in its moderate Parliamentarist form) seemed to be ushering in a situation in which existing class privileges might be threatened. Typical of these fears was the warning of the eugenist Charles Wicksteed Armstrong that:

> Now all three parties vie with each other in the ignoble struggle for votes, bought with bribes for the great crowd of the unsuccessful, for which they search the pockets of the efficient. Under democracy, what hope is there of changing this, even though the wiser among us begin to see whither it is leading? The inefficient will always outvote the efficient (Armstrong, 1931, pp.17–18).

The rise of the medical, psychiatric and social work professions brought into discussions on social problems an ideology of therapeutic intervention by experts; a conservative aspect of this was the application of Mendelian laws of inheritance to social phenomena and the positing of interventionist remedies such as sterilisation. Whether or not eugenics

was precisely a 'professional middle class ideology', as some historians have argued, it did offer to certain newly-professionalised groups a seductively plausible and self-aggrandising strategy of conservative reform, suggesting a means of effecting economic modernisation and removing social problems while leaving unchanged the existing distribution of wealth (Ray, 1983, p.213).

To these broad causal factors must be added the concern in the 1920s over the apparent increase in the incidence of mental deficiency, since to many it appeared that mental defectives were but the hard core of a much larger group of social inefficients. As the 1929 Wood Report on Mental Deficiency put it: 'If we are to prevent the racial disaster of mental deficiency, we must deal not merely with mentally defective persons, but with the whole subnormal group from which the majority of them come' (*Report of the Mental Deficiency Committee*, 1929b, p.81). By the early 1920s it had become clear that the process of ascertainment of mental defectives, as laid down in the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act, was not being consistently applied by local authorities: the Board of Control believed that existing official returns seriously underestimated the actual incidence (Jones, 1972, pp.212–3).

MENTAL DEFICIENCY AND STERILISATION

Accordingly, a 'Mental Deficiency Committee' (the Wood Committee) was appointed in 1924 under the joint auspices of the Board of Education and Board of Control. It offered the strong eugenic propagandists who served on it (particularly Cyril Burt, Douglas Turner and A.F. Tredgold) an excellent opportunity to stress an hereditarian interpretation of mental deficiency and raise the wider question of a degenerate underclass. The Committee reported in 1929 and among its many recommendations and findings two need be noted. Firstly, it considered that there had been a significant increase in the incidence of mental deficiency, from 4.6 per thousand in 1905 to 8.56 per thousand in 1927. Though in the wider medical community there was much uncertainty over whether this was merely a statistical artefact produced by improved registration, it was presented in the Report as cause for grave concern. Secondly, in the light of this apparent increase, the Wood Committee discussed the inadequacy of existing institutional care for mental defectives (in 1927 in England and Wales there were 61,522 ascertained mental defectives but only 5,301 institutional beds for them) and suggested three possible remedies—socialisation, segregation and sterilisation.

As part of its task of ascertainment, the Wood Committee commissioned Dr. E.O. Lewis to conduct a survey of mental defectives and from this came the intriguing conclusions that 'low grade defectives' (idiots

and imbeciles) were fairly uniformly distributed throughout the social strata, but 'higher grade feeble minded' were concentrated in the social problem group at the bottom of society and distinct from the bulk of the working class. In a famous passage, which was to be quoted frequently by future supporters of the underclass concept, the Wood Report stated that if the latter group could be identified,

> we should find that we had collected among them a most interesting group. It would include, as anyone who has extensive practical experience of social service would readily admit, a much larger proportion of insane persons, epileptics, paupers, criminals (especially recidivists), unemployables, habitual slum dwellers, prostitutes, inebriates and other social inefficients than would a group of families not containing mental defectives. The overwhelming majority of the families thus collected will belong to that section of the community, which we propose to term the 'social problem' or 'subnormal' group. This group comprises approximately the lowest 10% in the social scale of most communities (*Report of the Mental Deficiency Committee*, 1929, p.80).

The Wood Report pronounced a number of contradictory verdicts that were to be a feature of the ensuing discussion of the social problem group. Firstly, there was the same assertion that Sir Keith Joseph was to make in 1972—that social workers and others with experience in welfare work knew such a group existed; yet, said the Report, 'we have comparatively little reliable data relating to the mental endowments and characteristics of this "social problem group"' (*Report of the Mental Deficiency Committee*, 1929b, p.80). Secondly, it maintained that although mental deficiency was primarily inherited, and thus a biological phenomenon, it could only be defined in terms of social inefficiency: mental deficiency was 'a condition of incomplete development of mind of such degree or kind as to render the individual incapable of adjusting himself to his social environment in a reasonably efficient and harmonious manner and to necessitate external care, supervision or control' (*Report of the Mental Deficiency Committee*, 1929a, p.10). Thirdly, the hereditarian analysis was blurred by a cautious acknowledgment of environmental factors: the social problem group's social and economic failure was 'primarily due to their poor mental endowment', but 'at the same time it is necessary to recognise that this is not the only consideration and there are many other social and economic factors involved. Low mentality and poor environment form a vicious circle' (*Report of the Mental Deficiency Committee*, 1929b, p.81).

In effect, therefore, the message conveyed by the Wood Report was that the predetermined solution of sterilisation could only attain legitimacy and reach the statute book if the social problem group could be quantified and its condition ascribed to heredity. This was the tantalising problem

to be overcome, since sterilisation offered an appeal on several levels. It was seen by eugenists as a crucial measure, the successful implementation of which would lead to the spread of a 'eugenic consciousness' throughout society. It would cost little to implement (by contrast, institutional segregation was prohibitively expensive) and thus appealed to the fiscal retrenchment mentality of the professional middle classes to which eugenists tended to belong: for example, Professor Julian Huxley argued that even with about 10 per cent of ascertained mental defectives in institutions, the cost was 'a heavy burden on the rates' (Eugenics Society Archives, 1930a). In offering a radical solution in the form of a comparatively safe and simple operation it legitimised medical intervention. Indeed, the enthusiastic claims of eugenists to have found an alternative to the custodial approach of the psychiatrist caused some unease within the Board of Control (the government department responsible for mental institutions), and George Gibson of the Asylum Workers' Union was always cautious on the issue of sterilisation (Macnicol, 1984, pp.8, 16). To more extreme eugenists it was also a policy that could be introduced by stages: at first voluntary and hedged in with legal safeguards, it could over time—with increasing public acceptance—be made compulsory for more and more categories in the social problem group. Thus in introducing his House of Commons motion in favour of voluntary sterilisation Major A.G. Church, MP, explicitly stated that he hoped that the eventual result would be 'a Bill for the compulsory sterilisation of the unfit' (*House of Commons Debates*, Vol. 255, 21 July 1931, Col. 1249). Paradoxically and somewhat unrealistically, eugenists also believed that although public opinion would initially find sterilisation repellent (associating it with genital mutilation or castration), it could quickly win converts among the mass of voters by being presented as a humanitarian enhancement of the liberty of the individual: 'subnormal types' would be able to live in the community and lead normal sex lives, uninhibited by the fear of propagation; the state would generously extend to them what the rich could already obtain privately in Harley Street.

A detailed account of the campaign for voluntary sterilisation is obviously outside the scope of this paper (see Macnicol, 1984). Like eugenics generally, voluntary sterilisation was a complex issue, and support for it sometimes cut across conventional political loyalties: although the Labour movement was by and large strongly opposed, certain reformist groups such as the Women's Co-operative Guild and the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship passed motions in favour of it. Briefly, a campaign developed in the late 1920s, headed by the Eugenics Society, which managed to persuade the Ministry of Health to

set up a Departmental Committee. This, the Brock Committee, recommended in 1934 that voluntary sterilisation should be legalised. The Ministry of Health and Board of Control were reluctant to take the matter further, however, for a number of reasons: there was uncompromising opposition from the Roman Catholic Church and many sections of the Labour movement; medical opinion was divided; and there were problematic legal issues (for example, whether a mental defective was *compos mentis* and thus able to grant valid consent). Most of all, there was great uncertainty among expert opinion on the hereditarian basis for mental deficiency. Estimates of the proportion of mental defectives owing their condition to inherited defect varied from 5 per cent to 80 per cent and some who were otherwise strongly sympathetic to eugenics, like A.F. Tredgold, became incensed at the exaggerated claims made by supporters of sterilisation, pointing out that much still needed to be discovered about the mechanics of transmission (Eugenics Society Archives, 1930b). Scientists like L.S. Penrose, who were sceptical of eugenics, maintained that mental deficiency was 'not a fixed entity: the diagnosis depends partly on medical grounds and partly on social and legal considerations' (Eugenics Society Archives, early 1930s).

Thus in the pro-sterilisation lobby, who moved with ease between Whitehall, the Royal Colleges and Eccleston Square, there was an acute appreciation of the need for convincing empirical studies proving the inheritance of degeneracy. As Sir Lawrence Brock, Chairman of the Board of Control, minuted:

> I feel sure that if we were to take the population of a big mental deficiency institution and trace their family history we should find a number of inmates with parents or collaterals who had suffered from mental disorders ... If we are to secure a sufficient body of public opinion in favour of some measure of sterilisation, we must be able to show that there is a demonstrable probability that the offspring of persons suffering from mental disorders of deficiency will themselves exhibit mental weakness ... I am not prepared to go all the way with the eugenic enthusiasts, but the appalling family histories which I so often have to read here, do impress on me the folly of allowing the slum population to be increased in this fashion (PRO, 1932).

To many eugenists, this appeared to be a fairly straightforward task. After all, the Wood Report had identified the social problem group as the bottom 10 per cent or, as the Eugenics Society put it,

> 4 million persons in England and Wales, who are the great purveyors of social inefficiency, prostitution, feeblemindedness and petty crime, the chief architects of slumdom, the most fertile strain in the community! 4 million persons in a socially well-defined group forming the dregs of the community and thriving upon it as the mycelium of some fungus thrives upon a healthy and vigorous plant (Eugenics Society Archives, 1932).

THE EUGENICS SOCIETY'S INVESTIGATIONS

The Eugenics Society had been conducting haphazard investigations into family histories for some time. In 1910, for example, a research worker from the Society interviewed inmates in Chelsea Workhouse and compiled brief case histories. Indulging in one of its favourite activities—what Lancelot Hogben called 'ancestor-worship'—the Society had also distributed to its members special family record forms on which they could demonstate the brilliance of their own pedigrees (Eugenics Society Archives, files EUG F 1–5). But what was needed was a series of systematic studies of the social problem group to emphasise both its distinctness from the rest of the working class and its biological causation. Accordingly, in May 1923, the Society decided to establish a committee to supervise research into the 'social qualities and health of a sample of our population'. The chairman was Cyril Burt (later replaced by Professor Julian Huxley) and the Committee included Miss Ruth Darwin (Board of Control), Professor R.A. Fisher (the statistician), Professor A.M. Carr-Saunders (Professor of Social Studies at Liverpool University) and Harold Peake (Vice-President of the Royal Anthropological Institute) (Eugenics Society Archives, mid 1920s).

For the rest of the 1920s and early 1930s this Committee considered possible research projects. Its aim was to examine groups of Poor Law applicants in selected representative areas (rural and urban), tracing back their family histories to establish that pauperism was inter-generational, then comparing them with a random sample of 'normal' citizens. Indicators of social failure and social success were drawn up. On the negative side, in order of importance, would be: receipt of Poor Law relief or public assistance, mental deficiency, lunacy, criminality, epilepsy, tuberculosis, infant mortality, blindness, deafness and dumbness and 'other disorders'. On the positive side were 'social position of the parents; payment of income tax; support of dependants; personal achievement'; and 'superior intelligence; degrees, if any; scholarships; prizes; attendance at Central School; voluntary attendance at evening classes; WEA, etc.' (Eugenics Society Archives, mid 1920s and 1923).

By juxtaposing recognised medical categories with vague indicators of social performance the Committee were hoping to ascertain 'the actual value, social and racial, of the people from the lowest to the highest' (Eugenics Society Archives, mid 1920s), so that ultimately the whole population would be classified and the operation of Mendelian inheritance proved conclusively. But in the meantime, the more limited aim was to show that destitution was hereditary and that

> a considerable proportion of the destitute represent a fraction of the community who are lacking in innate powers mental and physical, to the extent of being

incapable of self support, quite apart from any contribution to the assets of the community at large: they are in fact a group which generation after generation survives only by public support and this maintenance secures similar recurrent misery in the next generation (Eugenics Society Archives, 1927).

Such a conflation of biological causation with 'administrative' criteria was, of course, an essential prerequisite to proving the existence of the social problem group. As a class, or more accurately, as a classification, the group could only be defined in terms of contacts with welfare agencies such as the Poor Law, criminal records, incarceration in institutions, official ascertainment of mental deficiency, and so on: a member of the social problem group was only a 'problem' in so far as he or she consumed public resources through welfare services. Thus, as will be shown, E.J. Lidbetter defined the social problem group by the criterion of Poor Law 'chargeability'. The weakness of such a tautology of classification was the most serious obstacle to be overcome. Early on in the Committee's life its chairman, Cyril Burt, pondered over the problem in a rather garbled way when he wrote that

there are so many different forms of mental deficiency, epilepsy, lunacy, tuberculosis, criminality and nervous disorders generally, that we would rather expect, in the light of modern knowledge, to find the lines of inheritance often cutting across the simple classification as it stands—e.g. one might find what I might call 'temperamental deficiency' running through a whole stock and appearing variously as so called mental deficiency (moral imbecility), nervousness (hysteria), criminality and so forth (Eugenics Society Archives, 1923b).

Nevertheless if, as the Wood Report maintained, the social problem group was 'socially well defined', such doubts had to be overlooked. The Committee decided to launch a number of investigations in different types of area. A variety of rural and urban locations were chosen in order to demonstrate that different qualities of environment had little significance on the statistical incidence of degeneracy. At one stage, it appears that plans were afoot to examine population samples in the East End of London, Oxford and Berkshire villages, Cambridgeshire, Liverpool and North Wales, Glasgow, Hull, Southampton, Newcastle, Reading and a typical small fishing village (Eugenics Society Archives, 1925b and 1931b). From the surviving evidence, it is impossible to say how far each of these studies progressed, but the fact that only one was ever published seems to indicate that, despite the Wood Report's confident assertion, even the most enthusiastic eugenic ideologue found it impossible to collect family pedigrees of a quality sufficient to prove the case. The one exception was E.J. Lidbetter's study of pauperism in East London and it was on this that hopes were pinned.

THE LIDBETTER SURVEY

E.J. Lidbetter (1877–1962) had been a Poor Law Relieving Officer since 1898. Interested in heredity, he had researched into inherited blindness and had even published a paper on that subject in 1913, jointly with one of the leading authorities in the field, E. Nettleship. In his day-to-day contact with Poor Law applicants Lidbetter had formed the opinion that many of them showed identifiable signs of physical or mental degeneracy and from the frequency with which certain family names appeared in the records, he concluded that pauperism was largely inherited (*Eugenics Review*, pp.191–3). In his spare time he began collecting and tabulating pauper pedigrees and published short papers on the subject in the *Eugenics Review* of 1910, 1911 and 1917.

From 1910 he had been collecting case histories more systematically (though still it was a self financed spare time activity), and thus the Eugenics Society Committee regarded his project as well worth official support. By the late 1920s it seemed the most promising: because of the relatively static community in the East End of London, it was claimed, Lidbetter 'has been able to run back four, five and sometimes even six generations—back to the reign of George IV': his was to be a 'vast geneological and statistical study', including careful examination of 100 non pauper families living in identical environmental conditions (to prove that heredity was the prime causal factor and that therefore 'city life, even in the worst conditions, does not itself cause deterioration') (Eugenics Society Archives, 1925a). So promising did the study look at one point, indeed, that there were plans to publish it in six volumes with the assistance of the Department of Social Biology at the London School of Economics (Eugenics Society Archives, 1931a).

Eventually in 1933, only one volume appeared, *Heredity and the Social Problem Group, Vol.1*. After the promise of a few years earlier, it was a disappointingly paltry outcome. But nevertheless the book stands as an important historical example of an attempt to prove conclusively the existence of an inter-generational underclass. Although only 26 pedigrees were used, they were presented in the form of highly detailed tables on outfolding sheets of paper (which incidentally made the book very expensive to produce). The wealth of empirical material was both impressive yet tantalising, for in the final outcome Lidbetter was only able to offer the reader an inconclusive verdict, hedged in with reservations. The ambivalence of the results seems to have inhibited Leonard Darwin (President of the Eugenics Society), who contributed an introduction to the book: while claiming that the pedigree charts presented by Lidbetter made it 'certain that every present-day defective is descended from

several similar ancestors who collectively share the hereditary responsibility', Darwin at the same time concluded that Lidbetter's evidence in no way resolved the 'nature-nurture' debate (Leonard Darwin, introduction in Lidbetter, 1933).

The material published in *Heredity and the Social Problem Group* is far too complex to be summarised here. What is of concern, however, is the vagueness of Lidbetter's evidence after 23 years of painstaking research. Although declaring that no attempt would be made to draw firm conclusions until all the volumes had been published (Lidbetter, 1933, p.11), he went on to make two sweeping assertions. Firstly, he declared that although 'degenerate tendencies' could take a variety of forms (and in the tabulated pedigree charts Lidbetter took these to include high infant mortality, blindness, insanity, 'non-moral qualities' (cohabitation and illegitimacy, drunkenness, mental deficiency, tuberculosis and even intermittent resort to the Poor Law), 'many of' such tendencies were due to the *single* underlying cause of biological weakness transmitted through heredity (Lidbetter, 1933, p.14). Secondly, he offered the quite contradictory conclusion that members of the social problem group had a 'sufficiency of common characteristics such as to constitute a class by themselves' (Lidbetter, 1933, p.18). Sustaining this contradiction was, of course, essential if the social problem group thesis was to have plausibility: the group had to appear large enough to include a wide variety of 'defective' conditions and hence appear to be a serious problem in numerical terms; yet at the same time it had to be presented as a homogenous, identifiable unit produced by a single cause so that the problem could take on a precise meaning and remedial action (in particular, sterilisation) could be forthcoming. Indeed, Lidbetter appears to have held the social problem group in such awe that at times he invested its members with almost mystical powers: for example, he declared that their tendencies to assortative mating were so strong that they were able to seek each other out even *prior* to a congenital defect manifesting itself:

> For example, in families where insanity occurs, the members are often closely intermarried with other families similarly affected. This occurs, in the majority of cases, before the onset of insanity and often without the parties being aware that there is insanity on either side (Lidbetter, 1933, p.19).

Despite token references to the influence of environment, Lidbetter made no mention of the social conditions pertaining in East London in the 1920s, particularly the serious effect the economic recession was having. Two factors had to be admitted, however, and together they revealed the inherent weakness of the criterion of 'chargeability' for social problem group membership. Firstly, he admitted that during the

First World War the dual factors of military call-up and improved employment opportunities had led to such a decrease in the pauper population that his investigation 'was not so much abandoned as that it fell to pieces'. That the social problem group could have been so suddenly and effectively reduced in number by external economic forces perturbed Lidbetter not at all: the fact that the family histories re-established themselves in the post-war recession was proof to him that heredity was the prime cause of pauperism (Lidbetter, 1933, pp.13–14). Secondly, the recession forced the local Boards of Guardians to relax their administration of outdoor relief to the able bodied (after 1921) with the result that the number of 'persons chargeable' rose rapidly—clear proof that ultimately the social problem group was merely a statistical artefact produced by varying admissions procedures by Boards of Guardians (Lidbetter, 1933, pp.16–17). Lidbetter admitted that on resuming the research in the 1920s he had to remove from consideration 4,750 claimants who were, in his opinion, 'persons not normally resorting to the Poor Law' (Lidbetter, 1933, p.17). Thus could the criterion of chargeability be altered at will.

A final noteworthy feature of *Heredity and the Social Problem Group* was that despite its volume and apparent substance, the empirical material that formed the basis for the family case histories contained only the flimsiest information on particular family members: frequently, the phrase 'no information available' was attached to key individuals in the elaborate pedigrees (for example, pedigree no. 5, Lidbetter, 1933, pp.65–6).

It is clear that Lidbetter's book aroused some unease among the more cautious and liberal minded individuals who were beginning to push the Eugenics Society towards the safer waters of positive eugenics (in particular, Dr. C.P. Blacker (the Society's General Secretary), Professor Julian Huxley and Professor A.M. Carr-Saunders). In the lead-up to publication, Blacker warned Lidbetter of the need to demonstrate 'your ability to discriminate between different kinds of pauperism, in particular between that which implies social inadequacy and that which implies misfortune without social inadequacy' (Eugenics Society Archives, 1931b). After the book was published, Blacker and Carr-Saunders felt uneasy about the 'questionable assumptions' made by Lidbetter, hoping that future volumes would be 'adequately supervised' (Eugenics Society Archives, 1933). And several years later, on re-reading Lidbetter's introduction to the pedigrees, Blacker felt that he had 'rarely come across such a clear instance of the reader's mind being muddled or even prejudiced against a piece of careful work by a bad general presentation' (Eugenics Society Archives, 1944).

This disquiet was more than just Harley Street fastidiousness towards an over-enthusiastic amateur. By the early 1930s Blacker, acutely sensitive to shifts in prevailing opinion, was realising the extent to which eugenics was being discredited by the attacks made on it by 'legitimate' scientists such as J.B.S. Haldane and Lancelot Hogben. (This was increasingly so after 1933, with evidence of eugenics in practice in Nazi Germany where the 1933 Eugenic Sterilisation Law had introduced compulsory sterilisation of those judged to be suffering from hereditary disorders, including feeblemindedness, and was part of the social philosophy that led to Dachau, Buchenwald and Auschwitz.) As Blacker was to write rather more charitably many years later, 'by 1933, the inconstant winds of change were beginning to blow from the direction in which they have since set, so that Lidbetter's pedigrees, the results of prolonged and pertinacious inquiry, have never received the attention they deserve' (*Eugenics Review*, 1936, p.192). By the mid 1930s the Eugenics Society was turning its attention to pro-natalism, positive eugenics and the wider quantitative population problem; there were even suggestions that its name should be changed to 'Institute of Family Relations' (Eugenics Society Archives, 1935). But Blacker was still mesmerised by the tantalising possibility of finding clear proof of the social problem group's existence. He thus gave support and assistance to a second and more academically respectable figure—David Caradog Jones.

THE CARADOG JONES SURVEY

Caradog Jones (1883–1974) was born into a lower middle class family, from 'good Welsh farming stock' as he later put it, and attended public school, whence he won a scholarship to Cambridge to study mathematics. After a variety of teaching posts, including Lecturer in Mathematics at Durham University, his career suffered a severe set back: a committed Quaker, he was imprisoned as a conscientious objector in World War I and, although relatively leniently treated, it was only with difficulty that he re-entered academic life after the War. But thanks to the success of his *A First Course in Statistics* (1913) which became a standard work in the field, he was invited in 1924 by the newly appointed Professor A.M. Carr-Saunders to join the Department of Social Science at Liverpool University. It was an appropriate meeting, for Carr-Saunders introduced his younger colleague to the Eugenics Society, and Caradog Jones threw himself with enthusiasm into the application of statistics to social phenomena. By background and temperament, therefore, Caradog Jones was in many respects the archetypal inter-war eugenist: newly professionalised, he had worked his way up by considerable effort; to a

strong religious faith was added an interest in social policy (for example, he had conducted for Beveridge a survey of labour exchanges in 1913) and a non-socialist reformism. All in all, he was anxious to find by biometrical analysis the extent to which an individual's position in society was determined by hereditary factors (Caradog Jones, 1973).

'Of all the social and biological questions which urgently await solution', wrote Caradog Jones, 'one of the most important is how to identify those persons who outwardly are normal but who inwardly carry defective "genes", seeds which if transmitted will inevitably produce defective stock some time in the future' (Caradog Jones, 1934, p.394). In 1929 he had his opportunity to demonstrate this: in that year he was appointed director of the social survey of Merseyside, a project part financed by the Rockefeller Foundation and intended to complement Llewelyn Smith's *New Survey of London Life and Labour*. Between 1929 and 1934, Caradog Jones and a team of researchers conducted a comprehensive survey of Liverpool and its environs, examining every aspect of social behaviour.

Volume three of the survey contained several chapters on 'sub-normal types'—the blind, the deaf, mental defectives, physical defectives, alcoholics, criminals, 'the immoral', the chronic unemployed and so on—the evidence which led Caradog Jones to conclude 'that in any large centre there exists a social problem group, the source from which the majority of criminals and paupers, unemployables and defectives of all kinds are recruited' (Caradog Jones, 1934, p.546). The presentation of the evidence was complex—there was, for example, a chapter on the spatial concentration of defect—and Caradog Jones seemed at times unwilling to separate hereditarian from environmental factors. A full critique would thus need to be lengthy, but for the moment it is worth noting that in the final analysis Caradog Jones was forced to employ exactly that arbitrary, administrative criterion used by Lidbetter and the Wood Report when he defined the group as

> a section of the population which is largely dependent upon others for support. It is made up of various types, and it is to be understood that they are described as sub-normal only in the sense that, if left to themselves, many, if not the majority of them, would be in danger of destitution (Caradog Jones, 1934, p.345).

The weakness of this definition was evident throughout. For example, some of the social problem group were said to be those who were 'persistently addicted' to immorality, crime or drink. Information on 'sub-normal types' was collected on record cards by the researchers and in practice it was 'not possible to give an absolutely clear definition of what should constitute persistent addiction to immortality, crime or

drink. This must be left to the intelligent judgement of those who fill in the cards' (Caradog Jones, 1934, p.348). Perhaps the most revealing of all was the discussion of inheritance of mental deficiency. Caradog Jones quoted with approval the Wood Report's conclusions on the nature and distribution of mental deficiency and thus presumably shared the Report's view that of all the categories in the social problem group the mentally deficient were most likely to owe their condition to heredity. Yet his survey revealed that out of 912 children attending special schools for mental defectives,'only 11 had a parent recorded as ex-special school or suffering from a more serious grade of defect (Caradog Jones, 1934, pp.394–5, 403). Having recorded this statistic in a few lines Caradog Jones went on to devote ten pages (including detailed pedigree charts) to the argument that nevertheless 'pathological germ material' (in Tredgold's terminology) could exist unnoticed over several generations until it had increased sufficiently to cause identifiable mental deficiency (Caradog Jones, 1934, pp.403–13).

Caradog Jones relentlessly pursued the issue of the social problem group in a number of publications, had frequent contact with the Eugenics Society on the matter, and co-operated extensively with Blacker on the Society's problem family investigations of the 1940s. His writings on the subject tended to display repetitious features: a brief acknowledgement of the difficulty of separating heredity and environment, followed by copious references to the Jukes study, the Wood and Brock Reports, Lidbetter, etc. There were assertions that the social problem group definitely existed, yet evasiveness over the group's precise numerical strength ('while few who are qualified by practical experience to judge would be found to doubt the existence of a social problem group, the Brock Committee are probably right in saying that agreement is less general as to the size of the group and they urge the desirability of further research on this important issue') (Caradog Jones, 1939). Finally, there were impressionistic descriptions of the anti-social traits that characterised social problem group members.

These features were all to be found in the symposium of studies edited by Blacker and published as *A Social Problem Group?*, (1937). Clearly uneasy about the quality of some of the contributions, Blacker wrote a cautious introduction, emphasising the uncertainties in the concept (for example, whether the social problem group was 'a mere statistical aggregate consisting of the tenth (or indeed any other arbitrary fraction) of the community which, at a particular time, is lowest in the scale or, in other words, least well-endowed with the world's goods') (Blacker, 1937, p.95). But other contributors were less restrained. Once again,

convenient administrative definitions tended to be used, such as Mrs. Neville Rolfe's assertion that 'the social problem group, for the purpose of this inquiry, is taken to mean that section of the population which claims the attention of society by requiring in a broad sense care, protection, or control' (Blacker, 1937, p.37); yet this would be linked to biological causation, as when Eliot Slater stated that the social problem group families identified by E.O. Lewis,

> were among the poorest of the community, had indifferent work records, tended to herd together in slums, etc.—in other words, had social characteristics of a particular kind. These characteristics were directly traceable as the result of the biological abnormality. The hereditarian defect, showing itself in some of the children as feeble-mindedness, showed itself also in the parents and other members of the family as an inferior degree of intelligence productive of pronounced social inefficiency (Blacker, 1937, p.37).

By the late 1930s, therefore, the existence of a social problem group was no more proven than it had been 20 years earlier, and participants in the debate were still calling for more research. The concept had been sustained by a small group of eugenists; but their concerns reflected wider insecurities within conservative professional middle class opinion in the inter-war years. In particular, the problem had been constructed in relation to the envisaged solution of sterilisation, which held an appeal on both symbolic and practical levels. Proving the existence of the social problem group involved the cavalier resolution of serious contradictions of methodology—most of all, the linking of a vague and subjective criterion of social inefficiency (often expressed in highly pejorative terms and based on the crude yardstick of welfare dependency) to the apparent scientific precision of Mendelian inheritance. By the late 1930s, various factors were combining to weaken the credibility of negative eugenics and the legitimacy of sterilisation: in particular, an emerging Keynesian 'middle way' consensus was holding out an optimistic and convincing strategy for non-socialist reformism. After World War II the concept was reconstructed in the form of the problem family approach, retaining many of the earlier features but replacing the pessimistic hereditarian analysis with a 'socialisation' model of transmission which was more in keeping with the interventionism of the 1940s. With subtle shifts in emphasis, versions of the concept have reappeared periodically: for example, a 1975 study by the Royal College of Psychiatrists on problem families referred back approvingly to the work of Lidbetter and the Wood Committee when discussing historical antecedents (Tonge *et al.*, 1975). Thus despite their inherent weaknesses and inconclusive results, the investigations of the inter-war years became part of the intellectual tradition of conservative social science.

CONCLUSION: CYCLES OF REDISCOVERY

It appears that in America the underclass concept is currently experiencing one of its periodic revivals. Having lain rather dormant for much of the 1970s in the aftermath of the controversy over the Moynihan report on *The Negro Family* (1965), it resurfaced in the political climate of the Reagan years. Conservatives, disenchanted with what they perceived as the profligate Great Society experiments, argued that welfare had 'created a new caste of Americans—perhaps as much as one-tenth of this nation—a caste of people free from basic wants but almost totally dependent upon the state, with little hope or prospects of breaking free' (Anderson, 1979, p.56). Particular concern was expressed over the 'feminisation of poverty'—the fact that the A.F.D.C. caseload had risen from 3 million in 1960 to 10.4 million in 1979 and over half those in poverty (that is, some 12.8 million people) lived in female-headed households.

Once again, personal inadequacy and behavioural defects were identified as the cause of this apparently new phenomenon of intergenerational welfare dependency, which found its Boswell in Ken Auletta, a reporter on the *New Yorker* magazine. Auletta's articles and subsequent book unwittingly followed the path of previous surveys—an introduction emphasising the complexity of the problem and accompanying evidence, yet confident assertions that, nevertheless, there existed a clear underclass of 9 million American who 'do not assimilate' (Auletta, 1982, p.xvi). Auletta was curious as to 'why antisocial behaviour grew as government efforts to relieve poverty also grew' (Auletta, 1982, p.xii) and gathered participant-observer evidence from clients of the rehabilitation programme in Manhattan (the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation). It was evidence which, like Oscar Lewis's, was, at best, colourful but only cross-sectional and, at worst, impressionistic, selective and highly misleading. Like previous underclass proponents he lumped together an enormous variety of human conditions—'the passive poor' (long term welfare dependent), 'the hostile street criminals', 'the hustlers' and 'the traumatised drunks, drifters, released mental patients', etc.—into one homogenous group (Auletta, 1982, p.xvi).

Against this view, liberals have deployed longitudinal evidence, such as that from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, to argue that long term welfare dependency is an insignificant problem and that there is considerable movement on and off welfare rolls (Hill *et al.*, 1985). Duncan, for example, has shown that while 25.2 per cent of the United States' population received welfare in at least one year between 1969

and 1978, only 6.5 per cent received welfare for six or more years. Nor is there much evidence of inter-generational transmission: only 19 per cent of a representative sample of black women coming from highly welfare-dependent parental homes were themselves observed to be heavily dependent on welfare in adulthood, while an additional 39 per cent received some welfare income, but not more than one-quarter of family income (Duncan, 1986, pp. 37, 43). The interpretation of such data is hazardous, of course, and there has still been cautious support for the underclass concept in liberal circles: Wilson, for example, has argued that as urban social structure has changed (primarily, the exodus of black middle class professionals from the ghettos) there has been left behind in particular areas 'a heterogeneous grouping of inner-city families and individuals whose behaviour contrasts sharply with that of mainstream America' and who are reliant on welfare or crime for their income (Wilson, 1985, pp.545–6).

Once again, proponents of the underclass concept seem only half aware of its conceptual flaws and completely ignorant of its long and undistinguished pedigree. Indeed it is they who have displayed the strongest present-time orientation, with little ability to defer gratification until the past debate has been examined. In its periodic reconstructions, the underclass concept has tended to consist of five elements. Firstly, it is essentially an artificial 'administrative' definition relating to contacts with particular institutions of the state—welfare agencies, social workers, the police, etc. As such, it is a statistical artefact in that the size of the underclass will be affected by a great variety of factors—criteria of eligibility, efficient registration, take-up of benefits, for example—including, crucially, external economic factors that dictate levels of unemployment. It is rare for proponents of the concept to take proper consideration of these economic factors. Secondly, in order to attain scientific legitimacy, such a definition has to be conflated with the quite *separate* question of inter-generational transmission (through either heredity or socialisation)—otherwise the underclass could simply be those 'at the bottom of the pile' at any one time. And it is the transmission of alleged social inefficiency rather than structural inequality that is the focus of attention. Thirdly, there is the identification of particular behavioural traits as antisocial and the ignoring of others; and, as part of this exercise, it is necessary for proponents of the underclass concept to lump together a wide variety of diverse human conditions (in order to make the problem appear significant), yet attribute to them a single cause (so that it appears a problem amenable to solution).

Fourthly, the underclass 'problem' is essentially a resource allocation

problem, summed up in Lidbetter's use of the criterion of Poor Law 'chargeability' or Banfield's assertion that

> in St. Paul, Minnesota, for example, a survey showed that 6 per cent of the city's families absorbed 77 per cent of its public assistance, 51 per cent of its health services, and 56 per cent of its mental health and correction casework services (Banfield, 1970, p.172).

As such, there is a highly selective focusing on particular sectors in the social division of welfare as problematic: fiscal subsidies to the intergenerationally wealthy are ignored. Indeed, evidence of an apparently growing underclass may simply mean that welfare programmes are successfully meeting their targets in a time of worsening economic recession. The fifth feature of the underclass concept, therefore, is that it tends to be supported by those who wish to constrain the redistributive potential of state welfare and it has thus always been part of a broader conservative view of the aetiology of social problems and their correct solutions. A final enduring—and rather endearing—feature of the debate is the frequency with which proponents of the concept have called for more research—from Charles Booth's statement that 'a study of the sources of pauperism, by means of an analysis of paupers, would be very interesting, and might lead to valuable and suggestive results' (Booth, 1902a, p.176), to Auletta's declaration that 'before America can begin to deal more effectively with its underclass, it must try to agree on the nature of the problem' (Auletta, 1981c, p.117).

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