John Macnicol, 'Reconstructing the Underclass'

In late 2011, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government announced the launching of a new initiative on 'troubled families' – a term used to describe the 120,000 most behaviourally anti-social families (2 per cent of all families with dependent children). This caused something of a sharp intake of breath on the part of many social scientists and poverty researchers because it seemed yet another obvious recycling of the broad 'underclass' concept that has run like a thread of analysis through the UK poverty debate for at least one hundred and fifty years and has been subject to periodic and fascinating reconstructions.

Indeed, it may be possible to trace its origins even further back. A striking example of an 'underclass' analysis of poverty and unemployment can be found as far back as 1834, with the famous *Poor Law Report* of that year. It stands as an ambitious if deeply flawed example of neoclassical economics as applied to welfare, particularly in its claims for the effect of the 'Speenhamland' allowances-in-aid-of-wages on the work ethic and fertility behaviour of agricultural labourers and their wives in the depressed southern counties of England. In a very 'rational choice' analysis now largely discredited by economic historians, the Report claimed that the allowance system destabilised the wage-price equilibrium and resulted in the growth of a new pauper class.

In the 1880-1914 period the 'underclass' concept was vaguely formulated as the *residuum*, which figured in the writings of several social observers (including Alfred Marshall) and may well be what Charles Booth envisaged when he made his disparaging comments on classes A and B at the bottom of society. Concern over the existence of an alleged 'residuum' was very much an urban discourse, associated with male casual labour, social disorder and political volatility in the overcrowded labour market of the time (particularly in dock areas). Then in the inter-war years, the concept was recast yet again as the *social problem group* and infused with the scientific claims of eugenics: the persistence of mass unemployment was taken to be evidence of a genetically-flawed group at the bottom of society which was growing in size. In essence, eugenics involved the biologisation of poverty, and appeared to give the concept greater scientific rigour. However, the main survey of the time, E. J. Lidbetter's *Heredity and the Social Problem Group* (1933) was methodologically flawed and, as a result, unconvincing.

The Second World War appeared to have discredited eugenics (given the Nazi experiments, and of course the holocaust) yet during the War another reconstruction appeared in the form of *problem families* – seemingly more optimistic, yet also a shift of emphasis from economic to non-economic poverty allegedly caused by behavioural factors. In the 1960s and 1970s, both the *culture of poverty* and the *cycle of deprivation* were quite influential on poverty discourses: the former was initially used to describe those in the USA displaced by automation, technological innovation and broader labour market changes, but subsequently it was used in a much more

conservative way. Finally, the *underclass* concept of the 1980s and 1990s arose against a background of mass unemployment and labour market restructuring. It was more pervasive in the USA, where it was associated with attacks on 'welfare' (Aid to Families With Dependent Children, or AFDC) and the decline of inner cities caused by deindustrialisation. This concept was more racialised and gendered, and at times some remarkable claims were made for it (such as the view that the 'underclass' had been largely responsible for the Los Angeles riots of 1992). New Labour's concept of *social exclusion* was, on the face of it, an attempt to steer the debate away from underclass presuppositions, but many consider it very close – for example, in Prime Minister Tony Blair's support for the idea of 'problem families'.

Today's 'troubled families' initiative thus stands in the long tradition of 'underclass' reconstructions, but, in addition, it has been shaped by two broader trends that have affected all social policies since the 1970s. First, there is the macroeconomic strategy of expanding labour supply in order to achieve sustained, non-inflationary economic growth (most famously outlined in the theories of Richard Layard in the 1990s) – on the face of it, a social democratic strategy, but one very much in accordance with the tenets of neoclassical economics. Second, there has been an increasing emphasis in the aetiology of social problems and the analysis of economic change on supply-side factors - culture, behaviour, choice, human agency, motivation, personal responsibility, moral autonomy, and so on. All economic problems are being recast as attitudinal. This is very apparent in the way that joblessness is now regarded by the Department of Work and Pensions as caused mainly by the individual characteristics of the unemployed, rather than by economic restructuring. Labour market participation is now viewed as the key to upward social mobility and, at the aggregate level, economic growth. (One problem that remains unclarified is whether the upward social mobility is envisaged as absolute or relative: if it is the former, the implication is that all can rise to the top; if the latter, we need to know exactly who will have to suffer downward social mobility to make room for the newly-risen.) Hence all welfare benefits have come under attack as allegedly disincentivising work. This is the broad ideological background against which the 'troubled families' initiative has emerged.

The most obvious historical parallel is with the 'problem family' concept of the 1940s and 1950s. It was in many ways surprising that such a concept should have taken hold at this time, given the upswing in the national mood during and after the Second World War. The late 1930s had been years of considerable pessimism over several social and economic trends – imperial insecurities with the emergence of colonial independence movements, the threat of war, the long-run fall in the birth rate since the 1870s and possible dysgenic tendencies arising from differential fertility, the need to reform the UK's social security system, the continuance of mass unemployment, and so on. By contrast, the prevailing postwar mood was one of optimism, characterised by economic growth, low inflation, full employment, a rising birth rate and intact families (after a brief postwar spike in divorce and extra-marital births) and the founding of a relatively comprehensive welfare state. The Second World War had of course caused a massive stimulation to labour market demand.

During the War, all groups previously marginal to the labour market – and many considered the hard core of the 'unemployables' – found work and became, by that criterion, useful citizens.

John Welshman and I have suggested four immediate impulses behind the problem family concept, based on the different interest groups involved. First, the evacuation of schoolchildren just before the start of the War (and continuing in subsequent waves) had the effect of revealing much more widely the condition of inner-city children. Many of the stories of the children's condition (particularly their anti-social behaviour) were highly exaggerated - in part, a consequence of the febrile atmosphere of the first months of the War - but even allowing for this the revelations came as a great shock. The effect was, as the Women's Group on Public Welfare put it, 'to flood the dark places with light'. Second, social work with evacuee and bombed-out families was conducted by the Pacifist Service Units, who tended to be non-judgemental and practical in approach: the outlook of PSU workers towards 'problem families' was amateurish, optimistic, rehabilitative and avowedly unideological – quite the opposite of 1930s eugenics. However, after the War (and once there had been a name change to Family Service Units) some leading lights in the FSU (notably, David Jones) espoused eugenics as an overall explanation for these examples of 'family failure'. The third interest group was the Eugenics Society, anxious to rehabilitate itself and present the newly-revealed problem families as the logical reconstruction of the inter-war social problem group. Full employment seemed to have lifted everyone else up, revealing more clearly than ever those problem families incapable of economic self-reliance and owing their condition to hereditarian defects. Seebohm Rowntree expressed it thus: 'As the economic level of the poorest class is raised and their standards of welfare are improved, the problem families stand out more clearly as a minority who do not benefit from the improved conditions, but remain a menace and a disgrace to the community.' Finally, some Medical Officers of Health had been involved in the settlement of evacuees, and were anxious to carve out a sphere of influence in the postwar National Health Service.

This, of course, led to conflicts of perspective: the Eugenics Society sought to reinforce its genetic model of social failure, and held a broadly pessimistic outlook regarding the possibility of social work redemption. By contrast, the Family Service Unit workers were uninterested in the arcane mysteries of pedigree charts and laws of heredity. Their view was broadly optimistic – that problem families could be socialised back into economic usefulness.

The main outcome of all of this diverse interest was the slim volume edited by C. P. Blacker of the Eugenics Society, *Problem Families: Five Enquiries* (1952). It has to be said that the book was very speculative in approach and quite arbitrary in judgement. The incidence of problem families was found to be very low. They were but a small proportion of all families in the localities studied: in North Kensington, 0.26 per cent of all families; in Bristol, 0.14 per cent; in West Riding, 0.12 per cent; in Rotherham, 0.35 per cent; in Luton, 0.62 per cent. In other words, the 'problem' was manifest in less than 1 per cent of all families surveyed - an insignificant

proportion. Archival research conducted by this author in the past revealed considerable private uncertainty over definitions and quantification. Interestingly, the focus was highly gendered – on the domestically incompetent mother. Male heads of families made little appearance: in a full-employment labour market, they were nearly all at work (Blacker found that only 10 per cent of male heads of problem families were unemployed). Problem family definitions were in practice highly impressionistic, often consisting of lurid descriptions of household squalor, domestic chaos, incontinence, dirty children and so on. 'Family failure' was hard to define with any precision: it was *not* births out of wedlock, since the overall extra-marital birth ratio was low at this time; it was *not* child neglect, which was seen as a separate problem; it was *not* lack of parental affection or emotional deprivation. Instead, reliance was placed on highly subjective and sensationalist descriptions of domestic chaos and squalor, or nebulous concepts such as 'immaturity'. In essence, the process of defining a problem family involved conflating what is often called the 'administrative' definition (for example, contact with social services, police, law courts and so on) with eugenic assumptions regarding inherited social qualities based upon highly partial accounts of dysfunctional family dynamics.

The problem family debate of the 1940s and 1950s is fascinating to social scientists, perhaps because it encapsulates so many interpretative controversies. However, three caveats need to be made: First, we simply do not know how 'influential' the concept was in social work. Many caseworkers rejected the underlying assumptions, be they eugenic or behavioural: for example, they might be happy to gain from the social work training offered by PSUs, but remain out of sympathy with the ideological underpinnings. It has never been claimed that this was the dominant paradigm in the 1950s – merely that it is a strong thread of analysis running through past poverty debates, and one that has been the subject of intriguing reconstructions. Second, in the problem family literature there is a tension between 'structural' and 'behavioural' analyses of poverty and, indeed, much overlap between the two. Third, the top-down gaze and social distancing of many who supported the problem family idea was not necessarily out of line with much 1950s ethnographic research (for example, Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden, *Education and the Working Class* (1962)). Britain was a highly class-stratified society in the 1950s. All in all, though, there were remarkable similarities between the 'problem family' concept of the 1950s and 'troubled families' today.

What have been the recurring features of the broad 'underclass' idea? In a paper of this length, only a brief summary can be offered: First, there is obviously a process of ***social distancing, based on class, gender, ethnicity and age.*** Class is immediately apparent. Behavioural condemnation of underclass lifestyles involves a 'top-down' gaze on lower class life. Yet many of the characteristics said to be exclusive to the underclass - for example, Oscar Lewis's list of the behavioural traits displayed by those inhabiting the 'culture of poverty' - can be presented as shared by the aristocracy. The social distancing based upon gender is also striking, involving depiction of what Michael Harrington ironically called 'violent men and immoral women'. At times, there has even been a prurient gaze at the alleged sexual

profligacy of the underclass, involving what has been called 'the eroticisation of social problems'. This is particularly the case with George Gilder's *Visible Man* (1978), in which fears of black male sexuality are interwoven with condemnatory accounts of the alleged sexual profligacy of welfare mothers, all wrapped in apprehensions over miscegenation. Social distancing based upon ethnicity was a feature of the 1980s 'underclass' concept in USA, which was in many ways a racialised metaphor (although this dimension disappeared completely when Charles Murray turned his attention to the British underclass). On the other side, in the 1980s and 19990s many black radicals in the USA believed that the underclass concept was yet another chapter in the long history of covert genocide against African-Americans. Age distancing may appear surprising, but it is worth considering: retired people are never members of the underclass, only those with direct present or future labour market value. At the outset, Charles Murray, in *Losing Ground* (1984), dismissed retirees and the cost of social security from consideration, and children emerged relatively blameless. The focus was on non-work on the part of those of working age.

The extent to which underclass behavioural stereotypes reflected ***prevailing norms of working-class 'respectability'*** needs of course to be considered, in order to balance the view that it was only ever a 'top-down' gaze: the distinction between the 'roughs' and the 'respectables' is woven into much working-class culture. This leads one to another long-standing issue: is it ***an economic underclass – or a behavioural one?*** Some on the political left used the concept, and even the term, to describe the blameless victims of economic restructuring. (The first modern usage of the term was by Gunnar Myrdal, in *Challenge to Affluence* (1963)). However, more often the concept has been used to personalise issues that are primarily economic. There have been clear examples (notably, the 1930s and the 1980s) when it has been applied to the unemployed. Today, however, the 'troubled families' concept focuses on the impediment to labour supply that arises from an alleged reluctance to engage in paid labour. Interestingly, the 1950s exist as something of an outlier – a time of full employment and economic confidence.

An enduring feature is that the underclass is said to be ***intergenerational.*** Sometimes the model of transmission has been based upon heredity, and sometimes on socialisation. In practice, there has always been a considerable overlap between the two: they blend into each other, with the end result being a highly deterministic, pessimistic model of poverty and its effects. This can be seen in the current vogue for tracing the origins of social failure to early-life factors. Interestingly, such a deterministic analysis raises the question of whether subsequent policies (for example, the labour market activation of adults) are too little, too late: the damage has already been done, and cannot be undone. It also raises the question of whether individuals can be held responsible for their actions, and therefore whether action by the state is morally justified.

There has been endless debate over what causes an alleged underclass to be formed, and most critics of the concept argue that it is in fact ***weak on precise causation*** – particularly on how, why and exactly when these dysfunctional intergenerational

processes commence. Recently, there have been allegations (for example, by the Labour M.P. Graham Allen) that three-generation welfare-dependent families exist. An interesting question to ask is: what happened in the mid-1950s to start this trend? At least the eugenists of the 1920s and 1930s offered a logical explanation – that differential fertility plus falling infant mortality permitted the survival of increasing numbers of babies with inherited defects. However, had their prognosis been correct, we would now be submerged by the social problem group.

A big unresolved contradiction is the tension between **rational choice and subcultural** analyses. At times, the emphasis has been on the former, which is clearly rooted in neoclassical economics: rational, Hobbesian men and women adjust their behaviour logically in response to the policy incentives on offer (particularly with regard to welfare benefits). This was the basis for the 1834 *Poor Law Report's* analysis, just as it was for Charles Murray (who maintained that, in the 1960s, there had occurred a 'change in the rules' top render claiming AFDC more attractive. However, at other times the model of behaviour has been derived from a biological determinism over which individuals have no control: their behaviour is said to be irrational. This brings one to a very important tension between interpretations of seemingly-dysfunctional behaviour: are those modes of behaviour **pathological and causal, or functional and adaptive?** Some (such as Eliot Liebow, or Douglas Glasgow) view allegedly dysfunctional behavioural traits as part of a 'survival culture' in the inner-city areas; others have argued that it is those very behaviours that cause such areas to decline and become dangerous places.

The tension between **behavioural versus administrative criteria** has been alluded to already: it is often said that members of the underclass are united by shared modes of dysfunctional behaviour, but in practice the 'administrative' definition has predominated, relating to receipt of benefits, contact with social services, having a police record, an so on – in other words, coming to the attention of the local or central state. This, of course, is deeply flawed, since it is a construct of the availability of those services and agencies. It does not have any necessary connection with modes of behaviour. By the standards of conventional social science empiricism, proponents of the underclass concept have operated from a **contentious evidence base.** For example, Lidbetter's sample disappeared in the First World War, when wartime prosperity resulted in virtual full employment. So also did the social problem group disappear in 1940. The 1980s underclass debate was characterised by arid empirical debates over welfare spell duration, but at heart was the inconvenient truth that the total number of mothers and children in households receiving AFDC remained more or less constant between the early 1970s and the late 1980s (c.11,000,000). Of course, it is worth bearing in mind that devotees of neoclassical economics operate from what is essentially an *a priori* position based on eternal principles of human nature, and then the evidence is adjusted to fit those principles. In practice, definitions of the underclass have been **vague on precise quantification** and have instead relied on **impressionistic, composite definitions** which generally consist of essentially descriptions of degraded social life in a kind of ethnographic overload.

Finally, it is instructive to return to 1960s sociology and ponder on the truism uttered by Howard Becker in 1966 – that 'the definition of a social problem usually contains, implicitly or explicitly, suggestions for how it may be solved'. In other words, social problem definition ***anticipates particular policy solutions***. This has been true of every reconstruction of the 'underclass' concept, and it is a feature of the current debate. Today's anticipated solution, for macroeconomic reasons, is to expand labour supply, and the definition of troubled families is constructed to fit that.

All in all, therefore, when one examines the troubled history of the 'troubled family' concept, one has to conclude that today's politicians have learned nothing and forgotten nothing.