

Welfare State - The New Dependency

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I suspect the New Right was on to something in the 80s when they complained that Britain was creating a 'dependency culture'. They only got it half right, and for all the wrong reasons. The welfare state is and never was to blame for our contemporary culture of anxious, enfeebled individualism. That is the consequence of historical changes reflected in, among other things, the therapeutic bent in the welfare philosophy that has come to the fore with the collapse of the politics of left and right, and the end of the welfare consensus.

Though the electoral success of the Thatcherites was built primarily on the failure of the pre-Blairite Labour Party to propose a viable alternative, it was the celebration of individual aspiration that resonated with voters. The robust go-getting individualism of the 1980s may have been a caricature then, but it is a complete anachronism now. The kinds of values that encourage people to strive for more and better are relentlessly undermined by a post-political celebration of the psychologised, diminished and entirely dependent individual forever seeking the 'support' of officialdom.

While the Left continue to blame today's social problems on the supposedly selfish 80s, rather than blaming the welfare culture as such; there is agreement that one way or another, we are living with the consequences – moral decay. Nightmare visions of council estates and tower blocks populated by knife-wielding teenagers stalking unlit stairwells and teenage mothers in tracksuits hanging around

off-licences, haunt the imagination of a disoriented and out-of-touch Left-Liberal elite even more than their New Right predecessors.

However outraged the Left might have claimed to be at the time, Tory talk of a 'culture of poverty' lives on in the dubious notion that the poorest are trapped in 'cycles' of multiple-deprivation from which they cannot escape. The difference this time around is not that such people are 'welfare scroungers' dependent on state 'handouts'. Rather, we are told that unless the presumably feckless dependents accept the help of the 'caring' state, they will never break free of the degrading circumstances they find themselves in. This outlook expresses more than just a contempt for the masses, or a disappointment with the failure of the welfare state on the part of its one-time architects. It is also indicative of a profound pessimism about where society in general is going.

In place of ambition, affluence and aspiration are an army of counsellors and dubious 'experts' dispatched to save us from ourselves. Parents are deemed inadequate or else irresponsible, children increasingly vulnerable, and all of us described as a risk to ourselves and each other as we indulge in behaviours (e.g. eating, drinking and smoking) once thought unremarkable and certainly not the business of the state. The Left-Liberal elite, from the commentariat to the Cabinet, are not only ill at ease with the positive aspects of capitalism, but are the most strident apologists for the persistence of poverty as well.



Such is the topsy-turvy world of our post-political culture that it is they, rather than the cut-out-political villains that came to power over a quarter of a century ago, who are to blame for a pervasive culture of dependency that is more entrenched, widespread and debilitating than even the pre-Cameron Tories could imagine.

