

Constructing Unemployment: Britain and France in Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Unemployment emerged as a specific social issue in the late-19th century, but the nature of the threat it posed and the governing instruments available to address it varied widely. Using Britain and France as strongly contrasting cases, this article demonstrates the variable and historically contingent constructions of unemployment as a problem, and demonstrates how policy to address it was developed using administrative agencies that embodied specific, normative visions of how society and employment should operate. The different governing trajectories through which the issue was tackled is analyzed in terms of the context within which the problem of unemployment originally emerged. The article demonstrates the socio-political nature of unemployment's construction and, with reference to recent labour market change, questions its utility as a means of assessing economic or social well-being.

Keywords

Unemployment; French unemployment; British unemployment; Unemployment policies; Comparative historical policy

Introduction

Over the last 30 years, unemployment has re-emerged to haunt Europe. Rising levels of social dependency are translated into financial burdens, adding to problems of public debt. Policy responses have focused on the reform of social protection systems; European social policy is reoriented towards labour market activation, the promotion of employability, flexibility and lifelong learning. The meaning of employment is moving away from the lifelong career in a single profession or with a single employer and towards more chequered patterns requiring the individual to retrain, to adapt personally to new technical and economic imperatives. The standard employment contract today appears to be in decline: a product of a post-1945 socio-political compromise now lost to living memory, founded on Keynesian principles that are now abandoned, undermined by growing international pressures and

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economic uncertainty. In some respects, we appear to be returning to employment systems reminiscent of a much earlier age. In consequence, the categorical distinction of the 'unemployed' has become increasingly hard to delineate. This article, by examining how unemployment has been constructed over a prolonged period in two contrasting countries, Britain and France, argues that the concept is inherently fluid; this is clear from the variable ways it has been conceived. The article reveals how unemployment is constructed as a socio-political product, directly reflecting normative political ideologies about how labour markets should operate – and, thereby, the treatment of those who cannot find work.

The concept of unemployment or *chômage* entered public discourse in the late-19th century; its appearance required the identification of the 'unemployed' as a social group separate from the mass of the poor and destitute. By the early 20th century, debates on the unemployment question were taking place throughout western Europe and the USA. This required a delimitation of the problem's boundaries: where joblessness could not be explained by personal shortcomings. This promoted policy solutions to ameliorate the situation. The general issue at stake was the stability and success of the industrial system in economic and political terms, as new doctrines of socialism and the growing organization of workers challenged industrial capitalism. The unemployment problem was firmly located within what became known as 'the social question' – a term reflecting a combination of political, economic and social issues commanding official attention. This identity framed the way in which unemployment – its victims and its treatment – was understood and the role government policy was expected to play in mediating the threat it posed. In this respect, the objectives of policy in different countries contrasted substantially. In Britain and France, these differences are particularly clear. Similar normative judgements (to distinguish the 'real' unemployed from the layabout, the drunk, the petty criminal and the tramp) were applied in specific historical contexts, using different policy instruments, leaving a legacy that belies easy comparisons being made about the state of the labour market in each case.

This article addresses how unemployment was constructed as a problem and how this construction was modified over time, to accommodate changing social and political circumstances. It reveals how the contrasting powers of government sustained by republican and liberal polities created different official instruments to address the issue, generating different statistical appraisals as a result. The conclusions return to the issue of modern unemployment and the insights comparative historical analysis can offer. Many appraisals of official unemployment statistics assume a 'real' rate of unemployment exists, to be calculated through greater precision and calculation. This article argues that this assumption is mistaken. The period of relative economic growth in the decades following the Second World War gave the concept a greater degree of stability than it had previously (or has subsequently) enjoyed, creating a false sense of permanence. Historically, we confront reconstructions of how unemployment was understood and of the role government or other agencies played supplying relief. Normative ideas about proper labour market operations identified the 'real' unemployed, to secure compliance with general policy objectives.

Policy and Labour Markets in the Late-19th Century

Socio-political contexts

Different political contexts shaped how unemployment emerged as a problem. In France, following defeat in the Franco-Prussian war and the collapse of both the Second Empire and the Paris Commune (the latter amidst much bloodshed) an interim government in Toulouse declared the foundation of the Third Republic in 1872. The runes were not good: neither First nor Second French Republics had survived for very long. Two monarchist factions (Orleans and Bourbon) and the Bonapartists stood in open opposition to this new settlement – as did the Catholic Church. On the other side of the political fence, a revolutionary syndicalist movement had been massacred in the capital by troops under the command of the future Republic's leaders. The labour movement was therefore not among the prominent supporters of the new regime and, from 1880, strikes and protests signalled its alienation (Godineau 2012: 200–6). Winning grass root support for the new republic required re-establishing civil rights and democratic representation along republican lines, granting legal recognition to the trade union movement, liberating the *mutuelles* from Parisian tutelage and extending worker protection under the *Code Civil*, to determine the duration of the working day, rights to rest, restrictions on the work of juveniles and protection against accidents. In so doing, salaried work had to be defined and the contractual rights of the employed determined (Gueslin 1987: Chapter 7; Dreyfus *et al.* 1999: Part 2, Chapter 1; Didry 2002: Chapters 2–3). The object was to revive republican government: the principles of *solidarisme*, articulated by Leon Bourgeois, underpinned political reform. By the turn of the century, under the guidance of radical republicans, such as Alexandre Millerand, state powers were decentralized and restored to the *départements* and the *communes*: labour law was defining contractual relations between employers and employed. The question of unemployment was addressed in a context of revived democratic principle within a new constitution designed to re-establish a republican socio-political order. After 1918, internal debate over the Third Republic's future quietened, but the subsequent rise of fascism isolated France in the mid-1930s as the sole major continental power defending political democracy. Throughout the period under review, issues of labour market organization in general and unemployment in particular were determined in contexts of political instability as politicians sought to defend the Republic from its enemies, internal and external.

In Britain, the context was less constitutional (few challenged the sovereignty of the Crown in Parliament) than economic. Official concern centred on the twin issues of poverty and pauperism, interpreted as symptoms of industrial inefficiency, social degeneration and imperial decline. Under the poor law, all able bodied men were viewed in the same light and were subject to the same punitive treatment. Those destitute for lack of employment were condemned as insufficiently motivated to find it: incarceration in the workhouse would instil habits of industry in the habitually idle and act as an incentive to others to retain self-sufficiency. Pauperism, officially understood

as a drain on local resources, fostered criminality and immorality that could be mapped onto Britain's major cities (Topolov 1994: Chapter 10).¹ Such perceptions stimulated professional debate as, quite evidently, the incidence of pauperism responded to fluctuations in economic activity; during such downturns, regular workmen were being forced to resort to poor relief alongside the drunk, the petty criminal and the habitually idle (Harris 1972). The situation appeared almost perverse. Statistical appraisal demonstrated that industrial wage rates were rising, yet the late-19th century witnessed growing social unrest in major conurbations. Moral imperative allied to fears concerning Britain's commercial future and this became increasingly articulated in social scientific debate. Workers at risk of destitution must be taught how to manage their lives – to invest in a skill and to save against the risk of job loss, illness and declining income in old age. This agenda and its associated political strategies required the identification of the 'unemployed': to rescue regular workers thrown out of work for reasons beyond their control from absorption into a growing pauperized 'residuum' from which category they were unlikely to re-emerge, thus remaining a permanent burden on public funds.

Hence, while 'want of work' had long been understood as a cause of poverty, unemployment as a problem emerged in very different contexts in these two countries. Different analytical perspectives shaped political debate: in France, constitutional jurisprudence and the paternalist theories of Le Play dominated, while in the UK social statisticians shaped policy discussion. Thanks in part to different intellectual frameworks, in France solutions were inscribed within local deliberation; those with an understanding of local conditions gained the authority to determine local action, thus accommodating employment practices followed by specific trades in particular localities. In the UK, in contrast, a more normative view was adopted. Social scientific analysis codified poverty's causes in universal terms, creating a national perspective that made British unemployment policy exceptional. In many northern European countries, including France from 1905, the Ghent system (where public authorities subsidized trade union unemployment schemes, sometimes including an elective municipal fund) dominated unemployment protection until the mid-20th century. Here, unemployment reflected job loss within specific trades and professions. In Britain, powerful skilled unions in construction, metal working, engineering, shipbuilding and printing had, by the late-19th century, also developed unemployment benefits designed to support members refusing work on non-union terms. Higher earnings compensated for intermittent employment; trade agreements underpinned apprenticeship rates and manning levels. Union benefit systems did not distinguish those out of work due to a dispute with their employer over wages or working conditions from those unemployed for other reasons. State intervention insisted on such distinctions and required a recalibration of union practices – provoking dissent within the union movement and opposition to state initiatives as a result (Whiteside 1980). In other sectors (such as textiles and coal mining) work sharing – short-time or split-shift working – was commonplace (Board of Trade 1893–4, 1909). Work sharing was also widespread in France: the *patron* in small workshops was expected to protect his workers against hardship

during a downturn. Under such circumstances, the possibility of defining a 'real' level of unemployment disappears.

In this way, prevailing conventions of labour management influenced how unemployment was constructed. Employment relationships in small establishments that dominated French production well into the 20th century entailed stable hiring links that rarely translated into redundancy. Even in the 1930s, less than 50 per cent of the working population was salaried and 30 per cent of the salaried sector worked in enterprises employing ten workers or fewer (Castels 1995: 352). Artisanal modes of production dominated in textiles, leather goods, clothing, foodstuffs and various *produits de luxe* that remained subject to seasonal variation. Here, mechanization was uncommon, master worked alongside men and mutual sacrifice was expected when times were hard, with available employment shared between many hands. Unemployment, as a means of managing recession, was not an option as the master had his reputation to consider: dismissal of surplus workers was simply not a principle of economic management (Salais 1994: 491–2). Within more urbanized districts, skilled workers moved repeatedly between small masters, to raise their income and extend their experience and skills. In this environment, no law underwrote the employment contract and many sectors remained untouched by the new social insurance schemes that were introduced between 1928 and 1932 (Dreyfus *et al.* 2006: 102–9, 133–56). Distinctions between employer and employed – essential for the collection of contributions and the establishment of benefit rights – remained inappropriate thanks to the prevalence of family enterprise, seasonality and the problems of distinguishing the waged worker, the self-employed and the subcontractor in different regional economies and at different times of year (Renard 1995).

Defining unemployment

By the late-19th century, the labour market and its organization had become central to official and unofficial enquiries into the unemployment issue on both sides of the Channel that sought to identify its causes, dimension, duration and effects (Office du Travail 1893; Board of Trade 1893–4; Select Committee on Distress from Want of Employment 1895; Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress 1910). Different results in part reflected the contrasting economic profiles of the countries concerned. Earlier British industrialization and urbanization fostered a higher degree of reliance on waged employment than that found in France at that time, where large-scale industrial production was confined to the north-east and the Parisian basin in a country whose economic profile reflected the strength of artisan skill in the creation of luxury and technologically advanced products of international repute. Lower levels of urbanization and continued links of even Le Creusot workers with the land meant that any shrinkage in the demand for labour tended to hit the British urban worker harder than it did his French counterpart, exacerbating the risk of destitution consequent on the loss of waged work.

In pre-1914 France, defining unemployment and classifying its victims proved complex and ultimately inconclusive. Debate took place on multiple

levels; no single definition dominated, no statistical series was generated and, in consequence, no single history has been written (Luciani 1992; Topolov 1994: 269–351 for general classification problems). The earliest attempts to quantify a national incidence of the problem were in the 1896 census where ‘unemployed’ appeared as a separate category, enumerating those suffering an unexpected rupture of a permanent employment contract (Salais *et al.* 1986: 31–42). Subordination to a single employer endowed workers with protection under the *Code Civil* (Didry 2002: 143–61). Central authority sought to distinguish unemployment that was predictable (due to regular slack seasons, to be accommodated by means of personal savings or collective *prévoyance*) from unforeseeable job loss that provoked domestic crisis. This legal definition excluded those working on sub-contract (whose legal situation was defined by the task to be completed) who did not ‘count’ as unemployed when that contract terminated. It was also adapted to distinguish the *ouvrière à domicile* (female home worker) dependent on a single employer from the out-worker who had several masters. Here, paradoxically, permanent subordination was to be the foundation of a worker’s liberty as this offered social rights guaranteed in law (Mansfield 1994: 17). The census definition, however, proved problematic as the predominantly artisanal and agricultural nature of the French economy fostered ambivalent distinctions between ‘employed’, ‘self-employed’, ‘*petit patron*’ (Reynaud 1986; Didry 1994) and home workers who might work in domestic service, textiles or garments. The clothing industry, for example, supplied 41.5 per cent of all home workers, but only 10.5 per cent of employees (factory workers). A home worker might be desperately poor, taking any work she could get, or a professional skilled milliner, whose elevated pay did not force her to work regularly. Neither ‘counted’ as ‘unemployed’ when idle. Domestic industries generated 17.5 per cent of female ‘unemployed’ and 39 per cent of women whose situation was ‘unknown’, signifying women working for different employers who did not conform to census regulations (Salais *et al.* 1986: 270). Male workers in construction posed similar problems because of the presumption that personal *prévoyance* should see workers through the winter months when outdoor work was scarce.

This pure juridical definition was thus extremely narrow. It offered redress in law against summary dismissal but no financial support. Local constructions of unemployment varied, help remained confined to local charity (*bureaux de bienfaisance*), sometimes subsidized by the municipality. Here the ‘real’ unemployed were distinguished by their willingness to take work – any work: those who refused being directed to *dépôts de mendacité* (Conseil Supérieur du Travail 1895; Guitton 1994). A third construction is found in the operation of the *bourses du travail*: urban placement agencies largely run by local trade unions. From 1900, political attempts to convert revolutionary syndicalism into republican virtue promoted trade union organization of local labour markets: to place suitable men in jobs that respected union terms (Mansfield 2009). Here, unemployment was cast within the locality. Keeping local men in local jobs discouraged drift into major urban centres where the desperate might undercut native labour and provoke unrest. In this way, political motives determined how unemployment was interpreted in terms of locality and profession.

Voluntary unemployment insurance received both municipal and national subsidies from 1905, but was hardly widespread (Hesse 1998: 201–2). French trade unionists retained the revolutionary tradition of the 1871 Paris Commune: social insurance, associated with the authoritarian regimes of Napoleon III and Bismarck, was designed to prop up capitalism and was widely opposed. Workers should not be expected to pool income to secure this end. Outside the print industries, trade union benefit funds hardly existed (Dreyfus *et al.* 2004). From 1905, those whose destitution was due to old age, invalidity or insufficient income for a large family could claim tax-funded assistance from the commune or municipality, which absorbed the role traditionally performed by the church (Renard 1994). National subsidies for local unemployment funds were created in 1914; during the 1930s, adding up the numbers relieved locally became the main method for estimating a national total of unemployed (see ‘Towards Full Employment: The Slump and its Consequences’). In this way, a national problem was calibrated statistically through local assessments, not through the central imposition of a single definition (Hesse 1998).

Between the years of 1880 and 1914, British labour market policies underwent a complete revolution. In the 1880s, *laissez faire* principles were still dominant. Laws existed governing hours, wages and conditions of employment, which protected women and children but not adult males, and their enforcement was haphazard. Legislation governing trade unions was passed in the late 1860s, liberalizing their activities by defending them against prosecution for breach of public order. Overall, the labour market was assumed to operate best when left to its own devices: an assumption apparently justified by the prosperity of the British economy in the mid-19th century. By 1914, however, this situation had been transformed. The voluntary settlement of industrial disputes by official arbitration had been established; employers were made legally liable for injuries caused by accidents at work or specified industrial diseases. Government had introduced trade boards to prevent ‘sweating’ (the employment of workers – largely domestic workers – at below subsistence wages) in specified trades. Career guidance to school leavers had been advanced. The first nationally coordinated system of labour exchanges in the world was in place and two new schemes of social insurance, covering health and unemployment, had been created. Although exchanges and health insurance mimicked Bismarckean Germany, national unemployment insurance, introduced in 1911, was a pioneering measure.² The principles of *laissez faire* had apparently been abandoned; state regulation of labour market operations had become not merely acceptable, but positively desirable.

Faced with growing foreign commercial competition and sporadic industrial unrest, official attention in Britain focused on the close relationship between chronic poverty, physical incapacity and irregular (or casual) employment that fostered rising levels of pauperism and poor law financial crisis in major cities (Charity Organisation Society 1908: 15–17; Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress 1909: paragraph 1150). Labour market experts employed by the Board of Trade Labour Department analyzed the labour problem; a professional diagnosis could prescribe the cure. Creative impetus largely sprang from this government department where men with

training and experience in social investigation and statistical analysis collected wide ranging information about Britain's labour market, exposing its defects. A logic of rationalization, based on a normative definition of working life, underpinned policy development, replacing earlier systems of public works that had, since the mid-1880s, combined municipal employment with charitable help (similar to their French counterparts), now regarded as encouraging intermittent work and casual aptitudes. Instead of seeking to spread available work to provide short-term jobs to worthy job-seekers – hitherto the underlying policy objective – policy now sought to rationalize available work into the hands of the most productive workmen, to promote industrial efficiency and sustain Britain's economic and commercial pre-eminence in world trade. This agenda had marked implications for conventions of labour management in major commercial centres.

In the UK's main ports, urban building sites and gasworks, the heavy nature of the work, the competition for jobs and daily fluctuations in labour demand made job security impossible (Phillips and Whiteside 1985: Chapters 2–4). Casual labour was viewed as expensive and inefficient. It made men incapable of regular work and was a source of social and moral degeneration (poverty bred criminality, sickness and incapacity), threatening Britain's industrial (and imperial) pre-eminence. According to the young William Beveridge:

Irregular work and earnings make for irregular habits; conditions of employment in which a man stands to gain or lose so little by his good or bad behaviour make for irresponsibility, laziness, insubordination . . . The line between independence and dependence, between the efficient and the unemployable, must be made clearer. Every place in 'free' industry, carrying with it the rights of citizenship – civil liberty, fatherhood, conduct of one's own life and government of a family – should be a 'whole' place involving full employment and earnings up to a definite minimum. (Beveridge 1906: 326–7)

Under-employment bred unemployability: if treated like a pauper, the unemployed regular man would eventually become one. To break this cycle, the regular man must be protected and his treatment distinguished from that of the pauperized 'residuum'. Inter-linked labour exchanges could rationalize the labour market: to remove the idle, the vagrant and habitually irregular, to offer work to the most efficient. Far from relieving unemployment, policy was thus designed to create it.

This strategy underpinned the Liberal government's reform agenda between 1908 and the outbreak of war. Unlike the *bourses du travail*, designed to keep unemployed workers in their localities, British labour exchanges aimed to offer a national network, to promote labour mobility between as well as within trades and towns (Harris 1977: 126–8). State officials could select the best applicants for any vacancy, isolating the inefficient. Contributory national insurance reinforced this strategy: it was in the employer's interest to avoid hiring day labourers, as each required a weekly contribution for insurance purposes. Actuarial calculation identified the regular worker. Limitation

of benefit to 15 weeks p.a. meant that long-term unemployment did not exist: when benefit rights were exhausted, the claimant re-entered the pauper class. Rules disqualified claimants dismissed for misconduct or involved in industrial dispute. From the legislative detail the British unemployed emerge: a select group of regularly employed men whose services were temporarily surplus to immediate requirements.

While both countries sought to classify the unemployed, little conceptual equivalence is evident. In 1910, an international conference in Paris opened up unemployment as a subject for professional discussion; it attracted delegates from 27 countries, including Beveridge (Topolov 1994: Chapters 3–4). However, British delegates distanced themselves from subsequent meetings, arguably because national insurance legislation commanded their attention (Topolov 1994: 113–5), but possibly because the national approach adopted by the UK was at odds with local municipal perspectives dominant elsewhere. British proposals to promote labour mobility on a national scale were incomprehensible in France, where politicians tried to incorporate trade unions into local labour market management (Birck 1992). British administrative trajectories shifted from the local to the national: French policy moved in the opposite direction. Unemployment presented as an issue on different agendas. In the UK, the solution to economic decline was to be found in rationalizing the distribution of work, to remove the unproductive and to protect workers needed to meet economic fluctuations. In France, the key issue was the security of the Republic. Juridical reform offered an employment contract as a compact between state and worker, legal obligations required employers to guarantee basic protection (against accidents, over-long hours and so forth). Republicans democratized social institutions, introduced state protection against hazards that provoked destitution while offering trade unionists institutional representation designed to promote their control over local labour markets – fostering local diversity in employment practices. This agenda was highly politicized. Unemployment produced political radicalism; the security of the Third Republic required democratic guarantees and sustained social rights, to forestall unrest and any return to authoritarian rule.

Towards Full Employment: The Slump and Its Consequences

Conceptions of unemployment differed radically, but policy never fully translated into practice. In the UK, pre-1914 visions of centralized labour market management never materialized. As unemployment rose in the 1920s, attempts at labour market rationalization were abandoned and policy switched to fostering work sharing and short-time working as the official gaze shifted from casual labour markets and towards the ‘depressed areas’ (Whiteside and Gillespie 1991). In France, the restoration of Alsace Lorraine as French territory in 1918 changed political attitudes towards social insurance; insurance-based family allowances, old age pensions and sickness benefits were introduced between 1928 and 1932 (Dreyfus *et al.* 2006: 57–61; Dreyfus 2009). German unemployment policies, however, remained unacceptable; the network of labour exchanges centred on Strasbourg disappeared. Subsequently, as the Slump bit and numbers out of work rose,

municipal assistance funds and voluntary insurance, subsidized by national government, were revived to meet the emergency as official attention reverted to labour market problems in the mid-1930s. Thus, while the First World War had necessarily required the extension of central state control over manpower resources, there is little sign that this left any lasting legacy once peace returned and the chronic labour shortages that characterized the conflict had disappeared.

The Slump years of the 1930s challenged this situation. The depth of the crisis pushed unemployment back into the policy limelight while encouraging changes in managerial practice, forcing employers to abandon common strategies of spreading work in slack periods. In heavy industry, employers cast off elderly, physically impaired or otherwise unproductive workers in an attempt to cut costs (Royal Commission on National Health Insurance 1926: Appendix A, 660; Government Actuary's Department 1932–38). In adverse economic circumstances, the advocates of rationalized employment won a new audience. On both sides of the Channel, F. W. Taylor's work on scientific management commanded more attention: in car manufacture and aeronautics in France, in textiles and food processing in the UK. The use of new management techniques to modernize industrial practice translated into work intensification for some and redundancy for others (albeit that, as the Slump bit, new management strategies were introduced in an era of falling demand, making it hard to delineate cause and effect). Such systems of speed-up under tighter managerial authority, promoted through payment-by-results, provoked resistance and strikes (Price 1986: 175–208).

Progress in this direction was, however, slow and partial. In comparison with the UK, Germany and the USA, the Slump apparently affected France later and less severely, but appearances are deceptive. The 1931 national census counted 452,000 unemployed – a number that almost doubled in 1936 to 864,000 – mostly industrial workers aged 25–59. Over the same period, the total classified as 'economically active' fell by 1,760,000 (Salais *et al.* 1986: 77). Numbers claiming assistance as unemployed in major conurbations rose – and municipal unemployment funds expanded accordingly from 244 in 1931 to 852 in 1935. Largely found in towns of over 10,000 (embracing c. 39 per cent of the population) (Salais *et al.* 1986: 117–8, 128), these funds offered help to workers under 65 who possessed a note of dismissal from their previous employer and who signed on twice daily. Help was offered to families, not individuals, so job loss among married women went unrecorded. Unmarried juveniles living in the parental home were also excluded. While regulations governing access to state funds were supposed to be uniform, local politics, the nature of the local economy, accessibility and the provision of alternative employment shaped registration patterns.

Classified unemployment as such was overwhelmingly confined to major industrial areas in the north and east of the country. Even here registration did not reflect the numbers losing work as, in response to popular opinion, Poles, Italians and other migrants working in French industry were repatriated. Immigrants from North Africa and other Mediterranean countries in the south received similar treatment in a context of growing xenophobia and tighter controls on immigrants. All over the country, the plight of female

out-workers remained largely untouched; the amount of work on offer fell, but we know nothing about how this affected home-based workers whose personal relationship with their employer could not involve dismissal notes as no contract existed, and to ask for such a note was to risk not being taken on again should business improve. In agricultural districts the picture remains equally unclear. Many industrial workers retained an interest in the land. In Lorraine, labourers worked in the mornings in local textile factories and in the fields in the afternoons (Salais *et al.* 1986: 87–102). Urban workers faced with redundancy might return to the family smallholding rather than queue for a place on menial public works or apply for minimal assistance. Lastly, neither census nor relief agencies took much notice of agricultural work or of those who did it. Here, above all, the status of workers (frequently both employed and self-employed in accordance with the season of the year) remained beyond classification.

In France, as elsewhere in southern Europe, the unemployment question was addressed through channels that the British would characterize as belonging to the realm of industrial relations. Official regulation of employment and systems for industrial negotiation (guaranteeing a minimum income and specifying legal obligations of employers and employed) offered the means to tackle unemployment within a new politics of economic modernization. The teachings of Taylor and Bedaux were seized by a rising generation of French employers and state managers in the 1930s as a modernization blueprint, to create larger production units using the latest technologies. Taylor and his followers advocated the standardization of employment posts, pay scales and the separation of intellectual from manual tasks – allowing scientific management to plan materials and procedures in accordance with price controls and the objective assessment of time and motion in production, to gain economies of scale. This involved raising labour productivity and the rationalization of employment – creating new threats of work intensification and removing the established ladder from journeyman worker to *petit entrepreneur* that had long characterized small establishments. Pioneered in the French automobile industry by Renault, Citroen and Peugeot, these strategies became increasingly popular among state officials in the 1930s. Public ownership helped propagate new ideas – notably in the metallurgical industries of the Paris basin. In the nationalization of the aeronautical industry, the foundation of Air France (in 1933), increased state involvement in armaments production, as well as the foundation of SNCF (in 1938), official promotion of ‘modern’ employment grew from scientific investigation designed to raise productivity (Margairaz 1998: 36–41). Such initiatives were the direct forerunners of the wave of nationalizations in gas, electricity, coal, the Renault factory, the Bank of France, four large deposit banks and two-thirds of leading insurance companies that followed in the mid-1940s, forming the foundations for postwar economic planning (Margairaz 1991; Hall 1986: Chapter 6).

Such transformations threatened traditional working hierarchies and practices, fostering opposition that culminated in 1936 in a wave of strike action in metal working, aeronautical engineering and car manufacture that hit the Paris region. A newly elected Popular Front government introduced a 40-hour week and two weeks paid holiday for all permanently employed: by

1937 over 90 per cent of those employed in workplaces of 100 plus employees were covered by this measure (Salais *et al.* 1986: 143). The right for trade unions to negotiate terms and conditions of employment was established: compulsory arbitration was revived and government empowered to extend *conventions collectives* over specified industrial sectors, to standardize training, levels of professional qualification, apprenticeship ratios as well as rates of pay and working conditions. Under *les accords de Matignon*, first mainly on the Seine and subsequently covering regional (later national) collective agreements, conditions of hiring and firing, the codification of employment, nomenclature of work posts and salary scales were established by negotiation and subsequently extended by ministerial fiat to cover specific industrial sectors (Salais *et al.* 1986: 112–4). For example, a collective work agreement signed in September 1936 between the master printers and the CGT *Federation du Livre* was extended in May 1937 to the whole of France. It stipulated weekly work schedules, overtime rates, indexed salaries and apprenticeship regulation: all reinforced by law. The implementation of such *conventions collectives* frequently provoked disputes and strikes as it privileged agreements in favour of skilled male workers, Work rationalization also reinforced gendered divisions of labour within metal factories in particular, confining women to unskilled jobs at lower rates of pay (Zancarini-Fournel 1998: 178–93). Work agreements pioneered in the Parisian metal industries by the arbitrator, subsequently extended to other metal-working districts, guaranteed the reinsertion of local unemployed back into the factories, as the 40-hour week was respected and overtime banned. Such negotiated industrial practices fostered standardized employment while also, by stipulating the exact personnel covered by each agreement, endowing the ‘unemployed’ with a more uniform identity. Nascent under the Third Republic (and constrained by its institutions), this emergence of *planification* under strengthened state power represented a decisive shift from the politics of the 1890s, a shift reinforced in the 1940s by the war (the Occupation and Vichy), the foundation of a new constitution and the postwar commitment of French governments to the merits of central planning.

In Britain, the official identity of the unemployed was initially shaped by regulations governing access to state benefits under the Unemployment Insurance Act 1921: a six-day waiting period (to disqualify casual workers), a contributory record of at least six months and a maximum duration of 15 weeks’ benefit in any one year. From the first extension of the scheme in 1920 to all blue collar workers, regulations were continuously revised to accommodate high unemployment in old industrial heartlands: in the coal mines, iron foundries, engineering and shipbuilding plant, on the docks and in textiles. Temporary extensions in benefit were initially supposed to be reversed when trade revived. Unfortunately, as revival never materialized, it proved politically impossible to rescind or abolish extended (‘uncovenanted’ or ‘transitional’) benefits and the British statute book is littered with modifications to the basic unemployment scheme throughout the 1920s and well into the 1930s.

This had several consequences. First, the better-organized irregularly employed (both casuals and short-time workers) supplemented reduced incomes with unemployment benefit, as employers and unions viewed the

Unemployment Fund (financed by their contributions) as a wage supplement for those working short-time.³ Men in partial employment continued to pay contributions, thereby sustaining benefit rights. Second, in contrast, those claiming 'extended' benefits, who had exhausted statutory rights, became subject to additional requirements concerning work-seeking and their household arrangements, official regulations designed to remove the rights of married women.⁴ Lastly, while extending cover to organized male workers, the British government removed such rights as female workers possessed. Domestic work remained outside the scheme; from 1922, the labour exchanges offered female claimants domestic service. These women were trapped. If they accepted the position, they left the unemployment scheme (domestic work not being an 'insured trade') and if they refused it, their claim was disqualified.⁵ Behind an appearance of uniformity, political circumstance, industrial practice and conventions of family responsibility reshaped the construction of unemployment.

As the Slump bit and unemployment rose, so work-sharing strategies (as in France) diminished and long-term unemployment moved centre-stage in political debate. Following Britain's financial crisis of 1931, the whole unemployment scheme was recalibrated in a renewed attempt to accommodate different aspects of joblessness, to distinguish the temporarily unemployed (who retained benefit rights) from long-term claimants. In 1934, reform separated unemployment insurance from unemployment assistance to reinforce this distinction. The imposition of household means-tests (associated with the disgrace of pauperism) on skilled men in the depressed areas provoked hostility, demonstrated in the Hunger Marches of the early 1930s. To avoid means tests, older workers with little hope of re-employment transferred from unemployment to health insurance, to claim sickness or invalidity benefits (Llewellyn Smith 1930–32: Volume III, 160–5).⁶ The ensuing quarrels between Ministries of Labour and Health about whether (or not) a claimant was 'physically capable of work' when he or she suffered from bronchitis, varicose veins, flat feet and a host of other middle-range infirmities – led to pointless but prolonged bouts of claimant shuffling. Sickness and disability rates rose during the Slump only to collapse again with the labour shortages caused by the war.

In contrast to France, however, official interventions in industrial management remained off limits. The Coal Commission, for example, created in the early 1930s to rationalize production, encountered fierce opposition from both sides of industry. In 1939, Britain entered the war encumbered by a long chain of small, economically unviable collieries with no hope of restored productivity. Although suspended for the duration of hostilities, the rights of industry (particularly, but not exclusively, private industry) to manage its own affairs remained sacrosanct. Unlike France, where *planification* took root, the commitment to restore pre-war practices meant that Britain's postwar politics of full employment remained divorced from industrial modernization; state intervention in labour management remained unacceptable. Far from a planned, modern industrial future, reconstruction depended heavily on voluntary incentives. Postwar reforms focused on a renewal and rationalization of social protection, but left industrial modernization and working practices to

industrial agreements determined by free collective bargaining. Excluded by these processes, state social policies remained confined to rescuing industry's cast-offs, but had little influence over manning levels, job demarcation or hours of work. British Keynesian strategies had less to do with planning than with deficit budgeting, regulating domestic demand in accordance with macro-economic policy, but not addressing labour management issues that would determine how work was structured or the number of jobs on offer.

Conclusions

With a dominant focus on how conceptions of the problem were founded and developed, this account has demonstrated the contingent nature of unemployment's construction. National classification was embedded within conventions of labour management as well as policies of relief, shaped by time, circumstance and prevailing normative assumptions about who should be expected to take on waged work. Such factors came to determine who 'counted' as unemployed in terms of gender, time out of work and cause of joblessness. Two points follow. First, such judgements were (and remain) to some extent arbitrary: there is no self-evident reason to suppose that the person out of work for three months in six is 'unemployed' while the person jobless for three days in six is not. Equally, we should note the arbitrary nature of judgement passed on the situation of married women – for whom job loss in the period covered here did not necessarily translate into official inclusion on the statistics of the 'unemployed'. Second, the ability of government to reshape management practices to conform to political expectation was (and remains) circumscribed. Here the countries display very different trajectories: official interventions in pre-1914 Britain designed to rationalize labour markets failed to achieve anything very much, while official initiatives born in 1930s France established the foundations for a postwar planned economy. Even here, where labour law reinforces the *convention collective*, the extension of post-1945 settlements took decades to reach full fruition. The translation of new settlements into real social change is slow, sometimes partial and dependent on prevalent interpretation.

In analyzing unemployment, we thus address a double helix: not only how unemployment was constructed as a problem, but also the state's institutional capacity to address the issue and secure change. Here, different trajectories created different policy instruments. In France, policies to establish social protection were grounded in official regulation of collective work agreements: in Britain, by contrast, the state remained excluded both from processes of free collective bargaining and from any enforcement of agreed terms. Postwar French governments underwrote workers' rights to consultation in the determination of pay and working conditions that, under *conventions collectives*, were guaranteed in law. Such agreements commonly covered working hours, seniority payments, family allowances – even pensions. The extension of state powers over the economy in the late 1940s and postwar *planification* allowed the propagation of common standards (of training, remuneration and work organization) reflecting the precepts of F. W. Taylor, but with negotiated settlement replacing the scientific manager. This also offered the administrative

model on which unemployment insurance was founded in France in 1958, as a national *convention collective* agreed between the employers and principal trade unions. In keeping with the principles of the Ghent system and the *securité sociale*, trade unions were represented in the administration while the state neither contributed to the unemployment fund nor, initially at least, helped determine its benefits (for debates on union *paratarisme* on governing councils, see Valat 2001: Chapters VI, IX).

In Britain, unlike France, state welfare was inscribed into an agenda designed to mediate market effects rather than secure their efficient operation. Official influence on collective bargaining remained minimal. Beveridge's social insurance scheme introduced by the Labour government in the late-1940s did not touch the organization of the labour market, remaining strictly confined to rescuing its casualties. Working agreements determined wages and hours; private schemes for superannuation, sick and redundancy pay developed outside state influence, eventually allowing private welfare to outstrip its public counterpart and to render state benefits irrelevant to anyone but the poor (Titmuss 1976). Memories of mass unemployment and the Slump reinforced trade unionists' determination to retain their autonomy, to defend traditional work arrangements covering recruitment, pay differentials, manning levels and working hours – the 'restrictive practices' widely held responsible for Britain's postwar industrial decline (Crafts 1995). In the wartime writings of Beveridge and his acolytes, the object of full employment was to secure productive capacity lost by idle labour that threatened collective prosperity. Such idle capacity was evident not only among the unemployed, but also in traditional work practices designed to protect jobs and spread work. If full employment and decent public support became central tenets of state policy, then unions might be persuaded to change their bargaining strategies, to accept work rationalization and to raise productivity. In the event, such expectations were not realized. Past experience of mass unemployment proved salutary, forming a fulcrum around which reformers fashioned their new political vision and around which trade unions rallied to reinforce shop-floor bargaining as the template of job control. Nor were employers any more responsive to the siren calls of British governments to accept state intervention in what they considered as their private business. Here we can identify the distinctive differences between the lineages of a republican and a liberal state, which resulted in persistently higher productivity performance in France over Britain, both at the time and since.

This perspective invites us to address current constructions of unemployment, throwing into question exactly what it means. The stability of postwar settlements in each country endowed unemployment with a degree of conceptual continuity that closer inspection suggests that it does not merit. Born of a management science rooted in rationalized industrial production, mid-20th century conceptions of unemployment do not adapt easily to the circumstances of post-industrial economies which, as other commentators have noted, show signs of reverting to employment systems reminiscent of the Victorian era (e.g. Williamson 1995). Although only addressed in the margins of this article, the issue of gender is pertinent here, as expectations about

married women's employment stand transformed. Under today's labour market activation programmes, the good mother, far from being the guardian of children, hearth and home, is expected to place pre-school offspring in the care of someone else and look for work. In the UK in particular, this trend is well developed. The decline of skilled industrial work and the rise of unstable employment (notably in the lower tiers of a service sector economy) has encouraged part-time jobs to proliferate. Growing self-employment also helps to disguise a casualized labour force that condemns a proportion of its participants to a life of insecure and intermittent waged work (Marsden 2007). A detailed examination of recent changes lies well beyond the scope of this article. However, it is worth noting how public expenditure, through working tax credits, subsidizes the consequences of casualization in a manner remarkably similar to the way Britain's poor law did in the 19th century – and with similarly uncontrollable outcomes. In France, as in much of continental Europe, permanent job contracts retain their legal protections, but such contracts have become increasingly hard to obtain: a proliferation of temporary contracts and schemes for those unable to find work and a growing tide of informal temporary jobs points towards a labour market threatened by casualism that is largely swept under the carpet. The trend towards liberal employment is fiercely resisted, but has made substantial inroads over the last decade.

Such developments should cause us to question exactly what unemployment rates tell us in this day and age. Currently, the European Labour Force Survey (the EU's basis for comparative assessment) understands anyone undertaking one hour's waged work per week as 'in employment'. The more casual and unstructured the labour market, the lower the unemployment rate is likely to fall: but this conveys nothing about economic growth or social well-being. The return of late-19th-century labour markets to Britain, where the unemployed could not be readily distinguished from the general pauper host, threatens the return of similar problems to those confronting Beveridge in his youth: how to distinguish 'deserving' and 'undeserving' cases, how to contain the burden that intermittent employment places on the public purse and how to promote economic efficiency and social justice. Viewing policy development historically allows us to understand how the context within which this particular social threat was conceived shaped the identity it adopted and the policies used to tackle it – and how these changed over time. This should enable us to understand that current developments are equally fluid. For finally, unemployment is a socio-political product, shot through with normative assumptions and political sub-texts – belying the economic profile it so frequently assumes in policy debate.

Notes

1. Charles Booth's East London maps demonstrated correlations between casual work, slum housing, criminality, school truancy, etc.
2. Initially confined to five trades, this was extended to all blue collar workers bar domestic servants and agricultural workers in 1920.

3. Regulations required registration continuously for three days out of six – with two periods of such registration within a period of six weeks ‘counting’ as one week unemployed.
4. Those living with a person in work were disqualified under the 1921 Household Means Test (Deacon 1976: 24–6).
5. For refusing a job they were capable of doing (Cabinet Office 1922).
6. ‘Widespread unemployment’, remarked the Royal Commission on National Health Insurance in 1926, ‘would be expected to have its most pronounced effects on the weakly and debilitated class who supply the major part of the claims for disablement benefit’ (Royal Commission on National Health Insurance 1926: 660).

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