

Unemployment in 1930s Britain



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Examine the problems facing families living in areas of high unemployment in Britain in the 1930s

Introduction

The inter-war period is truly one of a double-edged transition. On the one hand, this period was to see the beginnings of revolution in many social institutions (such as marriage, family and the Church) that the men and women of the late Victorian era would have taken for granted. The inter-war period (which provided the necessary societal bases for the post-war creation of the Welfare State) also saw economic expansion and an improvement in welfare and living standards; infant mortality steadily decreased during the inter-war period, from 108 per 1000 live births in 1913, to 53 by 1938 (Thorpe, p. 57, 1994) and the advent of mass consumerism and the wide-spread potential for leisure and tourism amongst Britons, in other words, hall-marks of a society in the process of modernisation (Stevenson, 1984).

On the other hand, there is a darker side to this vision of untrammelled progress. The inter-war period has been characterised sinisterly as “the devil’s decade” (Stevenson, p. 266, 1984). This epithet was bestowed on account of the image this decade has of general unemployment, which led to wide-spread impoverishment and Hunger Marches. The Wall Street Crash of 1929, which halted the American economic upsurge of the 1920s, led to a world-wide economic slump, and is the watershed for the mass unemployment that was to pervade Britain in the 1930s; for the eighteen years between 1921-1938, the official figure for unemployment never fell below one million (Harris, p. 203, 1994). Britain’s worst years for

unemployment were after 1931, a crisis year, because the disaster of the Wall Street Crash of 1929 had had time to take effect. In the winter of 1932-3, unemployment reached its highest peak, with just under three million workers (representing a quarter of the registered workforce) unemployed (Thorpe, p. 88, 1994). As with any period of economic stagnation, unemployment brings with it a range of knock-on social problems for the family unit.

Structural Unemployment

Unemployment can be categorised as either cyclical or structural. The former is the type of unemployment that comes and goes in phases. It is linked with the economic cycle of boom and bust; when the economy is in boom, then unemployment in certain sectors will temporarily reduce, though the converse also holds. In the 1930s, which saw quite a dramatic economic cycle of boom and bust, cyclical unemployment was always a large and difficult problem. However, the problem of cyclical unemployment, being more immediately noticeable, is one that can easily mask an underlying problem of structural unemployment. This is the unemployment that still obtains, despite any periods of high economic activity. For example, even in those years of peak economic activity in the inter-war period, there was still a high level of unemployment in the staple export trades. For example, even before the world-wide economic crisis of 1929-1931, the traditional heavy industries, such as ship-building and coal-mining, also faced high levels of unemployment. By 1929, a fifth of all coalminers were unemployed, and likewise for those workers in the iron and steel industries (Stevenson, p. 269, 1984). The structural unemployment in these kinds of heavy industries,

perhaps where a mine was abandoned or disused, for example, brought about the typical pattern of localised unemployment during the 1930s. The era saw depressed regions, where the local economy was dependent on heavy industry. In a region such as the north-east, with a strong and steady history of heavy industry, unemployment hit hard, as can be seen from the emotive Jarrow March to London, organised in 1936 by the local council, to draw attention to the problem of high unemployment, particularly in the heavy industry of ship-building (Thorpe, p. 176, 1994).

Poverty

Contemporary commentators on 1930s Britain regarded the high unemployment of their time as a frightening new development. As a result, their anxieties reveal themselves in the large number of social investigations into the causes of poverty (defined as not having enough income to maintain health) and the impact of unemployment on families, and thence on societies. These studies helped to raise awareness of the plight of the unemployed, and to a large extent, provided the momentum for the social change that dawned after the Second World War (Harris, p. 213, 1994).

Poverty was not necessarily an immediate consequence of unemployment: some unemployed workers found that their benefits provided a more consistent wage compared to what they used to earn from insecure, seasonal labour. However, this was only a minority. The majority found that unemployment brought with it a drop in income. Thus, in order to supplement their income, many workers relied on their savings, or found themselves increasingly reliant on other methods in order to make ends meet. At the same time, it was found that unemployment was the major

contributing factor towards the poverty of a household: in 1936, Seebohm Rowntree found that 86.4 per cent of the unemployed families living in York were living below the poverty line (Harris, p. 214, 1994).

Health and Malnutrition

As might be expected, one of the more immediate consequences of living below the poverty line is worsened health and malnutrition. Rowntree also made detailed investigation into the health and diet of unemployed families, and compared them with that of the populace as a whole. He concluded that the families of the unemployed survived on a diet which was to all extents worse than that of those employed (Rowntree, p. 182-5, 1941). Other studies of this period showed that unemployment had led to a higher incidence of childhood diseases (Harris, p. 214, 1994), though it was difficult to prove conclusively that unemployment was significantly affecting infection rates of poverty-linked diseases (such as TB or anaemia). All in all, it could only be conclusively shown that unemployment did have a profound effect on the standards of nutrition, leading in some cases to severe malnutrition (Stevenson, p. 283-4, 1984).

Mental Health

Though the main focus of much contemporary commentary was on the adverse effects unemployment placed on physical health, the deterioration of the mental health of the unemployed was also noted. At a time when the study of psychology was incipient, commentators still took account of the stark impact being out of work could have on self-esteem, and they also characterised the period following unemployment as falling into stages ranging from optimism that a new job could be found, to pessimism and

possible suicidal feelings, when work was difficult or impossible to come by: Home Office Statistics of 1930 showed that two unemployed men were committing suicide every day (Stevenson, p. 287, 1984) though care should be taken in attributing unemployment as the *sole* factor in suicide. No doubt unemployment had a part to play in the decision of a few to commit suicide, though this is only the extreme of a general feeling of malaise, boredom, hopelessness and shame that accompanied the status of unemployed. Many workers, especially the more skilled middle-classes who found themselves unemployed, reported a feeling of shame at finding themselves in that condition. Some men disliked to reveal their unemployment to their wives, and tried to conceal it for a while as best they could (Stevenson, p. 286, 1984).

Conclusion

In dealing with a diffuse social problem such as unemployment, it is imperative not to draw hard and fast historical conclusions. Certainly, generalisations can be made, in that unemployment had a profound and long-lasting effect on those who were forced into this economic circumstance. However, unemployment, and the coping mechanisms used to deal with it, meant different things to different people. It is also the case that the related social problems linked to unemployment, namely those of poverty, malnutrition and depressed mental health, are all relative measures. It is true to say that the effects of unemployment were felt so keenly precisely because living standards had generally been on the increase since the dawn of the twentieth century. It was, however, the shocking social experiences of 1930s Britain that provided the catalyst for

the creation of the Welfare State and other social reconstructions after the Second World War, and ignited the post-war aspiration to create a better, more equitable, society for all.

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