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The making of a category of economic understanding in Great Britain (1880–1931): 'the unemployed'

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Evidence-based policy requires measurement to trigger actions and to manage and evaluate programmes. Yet measurement requires classification: the making of categories of understanding that approximate or represent collective phenomena. In 1931, two decades after implementing the first compulsory unemployment benefits in 1911, the British Government began to carry out a census of out-of-work individuals. Why such an inversion, at odds with the exercise of rational-legal authority, and unlike to its French or German counterparts? To solve this puzzle, we document the making of 'the unemployed' as a category of scientific analysis and of public policy in nineteenth-century Great Britain. Our circumscribed contribution to the history of economic thought and methodology informs today's controversies on the future of work, the weakening of wage labour through the rise in the number of part-time contracts and self-employed workers, as well as the rivalry between the welfare state and private charities with regard to providing impoverished people with some kind of relief.

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Exact statistical measurement of 'the unemployed', or even a close estimate of the total number of those out of work at any given time is impossible at present. The miserably defective character of our statistical machinery forms an adequate basis of ignorance upon which to form discreet official answers to awkward questions.
(J. A. Hobson, 1896, *The Problem of the Unemployed – An Enquiry and an Economic Policy*, p. 11)

1. Introduction

Evidence-based policy, i.e. making decisions based upon rigorously established facts, has been the new black since the late 1990s (Parkhurst, 2017), especially among the policymakers who claim that they are shifting away from ideologically driven politics and moving towards rational decision-making. Evidence-based policy

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requires measurement to trigger actions and to manage and evaluate programmes. Controversies tend to focus on results (Bédécarrats *et al.*, 2020), methods (Angrist and Pischke, 2010) and data (Angrist et al., 2017). Yet measurement requires classification: the making of categories of understanding that denote and represent collective phenomena. The more official the upholders of these categories, the less obvious the distinction becomes between categories of practice and categories of analysis (Bourdieu, 2018). With public statistics, such confusion prevails all the more, because the same term may be used as (the modality of) a categorical variable, as a bureaucratic category and sometimes even as a politicised buzzword.

In 1931, *two decades after* implementing the first compulsory unemployment benefits in 1911, the British Government started to make a census of out-of-work individuals. Why such an inversion, at odds with the exercise of rational-legal authority, and contrary to its French or German counterparts? To solve this puzzle, our paper combines primary sources (British Parliamentary Papers, hereafter BPP, and The National Archives, hereafter TNA) with secondary sources, especially books and articles on the history of the British welfare state. Excavation of the genesis of 'the unemployed' as a category of scientific analysis *and* of public policy in nineteenth-century Great Britain informs today's controversies on the future of work, the weakening of wage labour by the rise of part-time contracts and self-employed workers, as well as the rivalry between the welfare state and private charities to provide impoverished people with some kind of relief.

Following a concise review of the literature, the second section presents the New-Poor-Law regime. The third and main section documents the making of 'the unemployed' as a social problem and a statistical category. The fourth section describes the creation of unemployment insurance. The concluding remarks compare the British, French and German cases and draw analogies with current debates on poorly paid and insecure forms of employment.

2. The quantification turn in the history of welfare policies

The welfare-state literature incidentally studies the classification of the 'unemployed' and the commensuration of 'unemployment' (cf. Bruce, 1961; McBriar, 1962; Gilbert, 1966; Harris, 1972; Emy, 1973; Fraser, 1973; Pope *et al.*, 1986; Hennock, 1987, 2007; Renwick, 2017). Topalov (1994) briefly comments on the British delay, compared to France, in counting the numbers of 'unemployed' and Harris (1972, p. 8) only gave this issue a footnote in the introduction to her seminal book. In this footnote, she points to primary sources that we present and comment on in this article, drawing from what we have coined the 'quantification turn'[1] in the epistemology of social sciences (Mennicken and Espeland, 2019).

Three key ideas structure this body of literature. First, data are never given, ready for use; they are the by-products of decisions and procedures by those who collect information, fill in variables, commensurate their interwoven dynamics and eventually interpret the results of statistical analyses. The history of statistics and the sociology of quantification (Desrosières, 1998; Gardey, 2008; Crook and O'Hara, 2011) documents the process of creating data and the latter's controversial uses by policymakers,

[1] We use the term Quantification Turn by analogy with Ludwig Wittgenstein's Linguistic Turn.

statisticians and social reformers who, during the period between 1880 and 1931, were inventing categories of analysis, designing methods of inquiry and creating institutions, i.e. setting-up 'theory-laden knowledge infrastructures' (Hirschman, 2019), in order to analyse the development of industrial capitalism and its social aftermath.

Second, there is strength in numbers. More precisely, public statistics are a source of knowledge and tools for exercising power (Foucault, 2007). For instance, censuses and public surveys do not only make information available, they participate in institutionalising categories of understanding that are critical, both scientifically and politically. In the introduction of his remarkable *Statistics and the German State, 1900–1945*, Tooze (2001, p. 6) briefly mentions the transformation, in Western Europe and North America, around the time of the First World War, of the social problem of 'the unemployed' into the macroeconomic problem of 'unemployment'. Moreover, Whiteside (2014, 2015) insists on the contingency of 'unemployment' as a political-economic category in the British and French contexts.

Third, the realist/constructivist divide among social scientists (Hacking, 2000) should not be overplayed. Statistics *approximate* the regularities that organise existing entities or *represent* abstractions that contribute to the analysis of social phenomena. If what is revealed by the observation apparatus is not dependent on it, then the 'realist' view on statistics may be valid. On the other hand, if measurement conventions tend to establish what is to be measured, then a 'constructivist' perspective may be fruitful. For instance, during the period of time we investigated, numerous working-class people found themselves out of work, before public statisticians, economists and social reformers conceived the category—of analysis and of practice—to grasp the scale of the social problem that these 'unemployed' represented for the British society. As Porter puts it: '*The invention of* […] *unemployment rates around 1900 hinted at a different sort of phenomenon, a condition of society involving collective responsibility rather than an unfortunate or reprehensible condition of individual persons*' (Porter, 1995, p. 37).

3. The New-Poor-Law regime

Understanding the history of the quantification of 'the unemployed ' in Great Britain calls for consideration of the general context in which this history unfolded: the New Poor Law (1834). Their preliminary studies and the final bill indicate how contemporaries conceived relief to individuals who did not have enough to live on (Himmelfarb, 1984, pp. 152–5). In the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, approximately 10% of the English population were receiving some kind of relief under the Old Poor Law (Clark and Page, 2019, p. 222).

The Old Poor Law (1601) established three subcategories of poor individuals: the children, the impotent and the 'able-bodied paupers'. Children and the impotent received outdoor relief from their parishes. The latter also provided 'able-bodied paupers' with hard work, with the threat of being moved to a workhouse as a deterrent (Carré, 2016). In the late eighteenth century, the combination of a growing population and shrinking arable surfaces due to enclosures increased the number of indigents (Englander, 1998) and outdoor relief was often given to seasonally out-of-work rural labourers. In this context, the Speenhamland judgement (1795) granted the right to a minimum subsistence allowance (Hobsbawm, 1977), which contributed to the increase in relief expenditure (Polanyi, 1944).

The Old Poor Law was subject to intense controversy (Harris, 2004), concerning both its cost and its legitimacy. Should any form of poor relief exist? If so, who should pay for it? Should it depend on private or public charity? And more importantly, what kind of people should benefit from it? Many books, pamphlets and discourses lamented the ambiguity of the term 'poor' and debated the opportunity and feasibility of distinguishing between categories of people who could not provide for themselves. In his 1795 *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, Edmund Burke insisted upon the distinction between those who are 'poor' because they have to work (as opposed to rentiers and capitalists) and those who are incapable of working. To help the former, Burke favoured private over public charity. Bentham (1789) drew from Burke the distinction between 'poverty' and 'indigence'. In his opinion, only the latter should be addressed by public relief.

The *Poor Law Amendment Act* of 1834 was an attempt to clarify and enforce the distinction between the 'poor' and the 'indigent', and, among the latter, between the 'impotent' and the 'able-bodied paupers'. Two years before, Parliament had set up an *ad hoc* commission to amend the Poor Law of 1601 (Hamilton, 1910, pp. 17, 22; Gilbert, 1966, p. 237; Deakin and Wilkinson, 2005) and the more recent Speenhamland System (Englander, 1998; Rodriguez, 2007, 2008). Two commission members very much influenced the final report and the resulting bill: Bentham's former secretary Edwin Chadwick and Nassau William Senior, a Benthamite Professor of Political Economy at Oxford (Checkland and Checkland, 1974; Englander, 1998, p. 9; Clément, 2000, p. 35–8; Harris, 2004, p. 45). Senior wrote the analytical section of the report, while Chadwick drafted most of the recommendations.

The *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of The Poor Laws* (BPP (44)) has more than 8,300 pages and it still is considered as one of the most important documents in British social history (Checkland and Checkland, 1974; Harris, 2004, p. 45). Despite calls for the abolition of public relief, as promoted by Malthus among others, the *Report* and the subsequent bill reaffirmed a legal claim to public relief and promoted local institutions with central supervision that would target legitimate claimants.

> Indigence, the state of a person unable to labour or unable to obtain in return for his labour, the means of subsistence (…). Poverty that is the state of one who in order to obtain a mere subsistence, is forced to have recourse to labour (BPP (44), p. 131).

At that time, the 'poor' were not defined by any level of absolute or relative deprivation: all individuals who had nothing beforehand and hence had to work to earn their living were deemed 'poor'. Among them, the 'indigents', who were incapable of earning their living, could depend upon public or private relief: either because they were physically or mentally unable to provide for themselves (the 'impotent') or because what they earned for work or services was too little (the 'able-bodied paupers'). The Poor Law Report was first and foremost about implementing similar treatment for able-bodied paupers throughout the country.

The typology (poor/indigent, impotent/able-bodied) was not made of harmless 'paper-categories', as the *Poor Law Amendment Act* of 1834 also redefined the institution to enforce them: the system of the workhouses. Its discipline functioned as a test of need, which drew the line between those who had no choice but to accept its hardships and those who would rather endure the 'iron-law of wages'. '*The instrument of relief was itself the test for relief*' as Himmelfarb (1984, p. 165) so clearly pointed out.

This categorisation (cf. Figure 1) did not label individuals who were out-of-work as 'unemployed'; they were drowned in the mass of the 'able-bodied poor'.

4. The making of 'the unemployed' as a social problem

Throughout the nineteenth century, pauperism framed the episteme of reformers, economists and statisticians, politicians and policymakers: individuals caused their own distress, due to a moral defect that did not allow them to self-manage. This remained the *mantra* of the 'crusade against out-relief' (MacKinnon, 1987; Boyer, 2004), which promoted self-help for everyone and workhouses to protect the neediest from moral hazard. In the 1870s, most cities tended to limit their relief to 'able-bodied paupers', resorting in hard times to punctual coordinated actions with private charities. By the end of the century, frequent economic downturns and subsequent labour-demand shortages had tested the limits of *ad hoc* local actions (Boyer, 2004).

Nonetheless, the focus drifted from the 'indigent' to their living conditions in a *laissez-faire* economy, which was dominant but not unchallenged by other countries (especially France, Germany and the USA) and domestically by workers' unions and parties (Stedman Jones, 1971). By the end of the century, the living conditions of the 'out-of-work' had become a social problem. In her *Bibliography of Unemployment and the Unemployed*, F. Isabel Taylor (1909) referenced 700 books published in Great Britain between 1895 and 1905. In the same period, Hubert Llewellyn Smith (Box 1), the first Commissioner for Labour at the Board of Trade (1893–1903) published three volumes *On Distress from Want of Employment* (BPP, 1895a, 1895b, 1895c).

In 1871 and 1881, individuals who did not work on the day of the census were required to declare their situation when asked about their occupation (TNA, RG 10 and RG 11). In addition, Note 22 instructed the enumerators that, '*Persons ordinarily engaged in some industry but out of employment at the same time, should be so described as* "coal

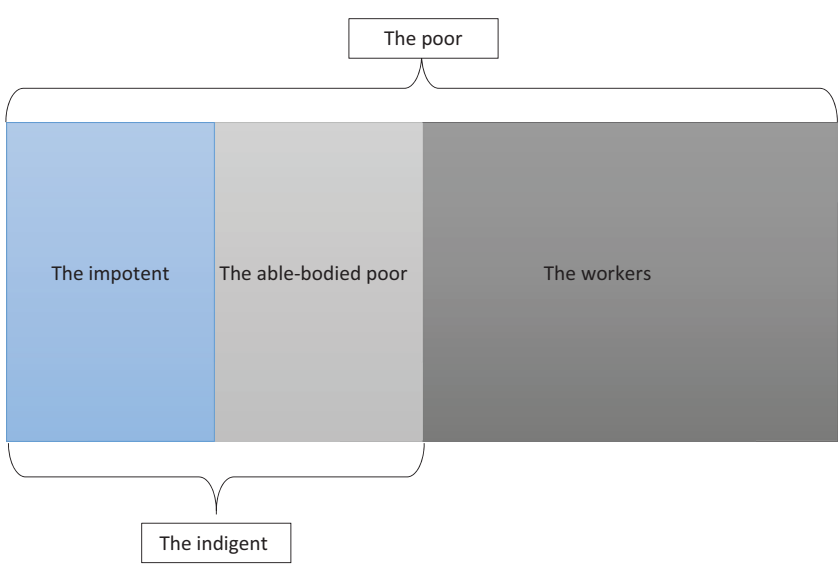

Fig. 1. *Relations between poverty and indigence; impotent and able-bodied poor under the New Poor Law (1834).*

miner, unemployed", "printer, unemployed" [our emphasis]' (Census of England, 1881, Vol. 4, pp. 704–5). Yet, this was *not* a headcount of the 'unemployed'. The head of the General Register Office (GRO), William Farr, was a demographer (Dupâquier, 1984).[2] From his perspective, the top priorities were to count people by occupation and calculate their mortality tables (Higgs, 1988, 2004a), but 'unemployed' was not a relevant category.

In the context of '*the bleakest years of depression in the second half of the nineteenth century*', punctuated by the unemployed riot of 1886 (Stedman Jones, 1971, pp. 343–6), Farr's successor at the GRO, William Ogle (Higgs, 2004b), pioneered statistical surveys on 'out-of-work' men and their families, in four eastern districts of London. In 1887, he published *Conditions of the Working Classes. Tabulation of the statements made by men living in certain selected districts* (BPP C 5228). In parallel, social reformer Charles Booth and his team (including Beatrice Webb and Hubert Llewellyn Smith) were working on the ethnographic *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1902), which documented destitution in London's East-End. This famous study and its lead author helped redefine poverty as the minimum level of income needed to meet basic human needs.[3]

Ogle's survey covered 29,451 men (4,019 single men, 24,334 married men and 1,098 widowers). According to the survey form, 'out-of-work' men or women were those not in their usual job on the day of the survey ('*out of work at present*'). In this case, survey agents were required to ask the respondents:

- *When they were last in work;*
- *The causes of their unemployment;*
- *The name and address of their previous employer;*
- *The ordinary wages of the previous employment;*
- *Their means of subsistence in the event of unemployment: parish, club or society, or charity.*

Ogle doubted the accuracy of the survey results. In a report to Charles T. Ritchie, MP and President of the Local Government Board,[4] he gave this warning: '*The publication of these tables implies no guarantee whatsoever of the accuracy of the data from which they have been constructed. The statements made by the men themselves have been accepted without further verification.* [It is] not a tabulation of sifted facts of which the general accuracy has been attested by independent and impartial enquiry [our emphasis]' (*Report to the Right Honourable Charles T. Ritchie, MP, President of the Local Government Board*, p. 2 in the same BPP: 2. See also *On Distress from Want of Employment* 1895, 3rd report: 81 C. 365). And Ogle concluded: '*after devoting much time and much labour to a careful examination of the returns, and after informing myself fully as to the conditions under which the data were collected, I have come to the conclusion that these returns are of very small statistical value*' (p. XV, op. cit.). Ogle insisted on the response bias—the tendency of informants to underestimate their resources and overestimate their expenses—and the '*imperfect education*' of the informants and the enumerators. This second limitation was not specific to this survey. In our opinion, Ogle's dissatisfaction stemmed from

[2] Founded in 1837, the GRO provide birth, adoption, marriage and death certificates. It took over parish records and organised the decennial census (Higgs, 2011, pp. 67–83). See also Szreter (1984).

[3] https://booth.lse.ac.uk/

[4] In 1871 the Local Government Board replaced the Poor Law Board and extended its prerogatives to sanitation and public health.

measuring a phenomenon without shared categories of understanding that would be common to the statisticians, the enumerators and the respondents.

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, only unionised 'out-of-work' labourers could access 'friendly benefit' that was not poor relief. Yet, union members accounted for slightly more than a tenth of the male workforce and the protection differed significantly by occupation: '*In 1911,* Boyer (2004: 414) noted, *virtually all union members in the metal, engineering, shipbuilding, and printing trades were entitled to unemployment benefits, compared with 67 percent in the building trades, 59 percent in cotton, 38 percent in mining, and only 5 percent in laborers' unions*'. Between 1888 and 1922, the Board of Trade published the proportions of members of the skilled trade unions that received out-of-work payment (Hobson, 1896, p. 11). It was therefore a partial measure (Beveridge, 1909, pp. 444–50; Dearle, 1911; Harris, 1972; Garside, 1980, pp. 10–1). As Editor-in-Chief of the Labour Department's journal—*The Labour Gazette*—Hubert Llewellyn Smith institutionalised the unions' headcounts of their 'out-of-work' members, but refused to identify the 'unemployed' in the census.

In a confidential memorandum to the Cabinet (TNA CAB 37/38, 1895), Llewellyn Smith explained his refusal. He considered it fallacious to extrapolate from the numbers provided by skilled trade unions to the whole working population, since union membership was not general and because the regularity of work varied a lot between organised and unorganised trades, the former not being necessarily the most irregular. In another confidential memo entitled 'The unemployed' (TNA CAB 38/10, 1895), the public statistician returned to the equivocality of the term:

> *A necessary preliminary to making either a numerical estimate or actual count is to agree on a common definition of 'unemployed'. But the term as commonly employed is ambiguous, being sometimes used to mean the entire body of persons ordinarily following manual labour, who, on a given day, are unoccupied; and sometimes in a totally different mean, as those persons, who, on a given day, are unoccupied; and sometimes in a totally different sense, as those persons who are actually suffering from want owing to scarcity of work. In other words, the term has one meaning from the point of view of trade, and another from the point of view of distress. For the greater number of persons out of work at a given time are certainly not in distress, and they are many who are in distress owing to casual or insufficient employment, who are not entirely out of work. And moreover (as shown in the previous Memorandum), the term 'unemployed', from a trade union point of view, is popularly used to include a great number of heterogenous classes, both the 'ins and outs' (i.e. the fringe of persons in a trade who must at any given time be out of work on passing from one job to another), the old and infirm, and those who are being unable to earn the union rate of wages are, so to speak, bought off the labour market by 'unemployed benefits' lost they should degrade the standard by accepting lower wages. It is not to be forgotten that the unemployed funds of unions are used to insure members not only against want to work, but also against the lowering of the standard wage. Against, the total number of persons in distress who ascribe their condition to want of work is made up of many different classes. In many cases, personal defects (physical, moral, or intellectual), rather than slackness of employment, are the predominant cause of distress, and often many causes are inextricably mixed up together. It is, therefore, doubtful if a very useful result is attained by attempting to add up either the total number of persons not employed on a given day, or the total number suffering from distress ascribed by them to lack of work* (CAB 38/10, 1895, pp. 2–3).

Commenting on the survey conducted by Ogle, Llewellyn Smith insisted on the vagueness of the question, 'How long have you been out of work?': '*some* [respondents] *counted it from the date of the last regular situation, some from the last day on which wages were earned*' (TNA CAB 37/38, 1895, p. 5). In his (*pro domo*) laudatory account of Booth's survey, Llewellyn Smith considered that Booth's team had diminished the response bias by interviewing social workers about their perception of paupers' living conditions instead of directly asking them about their situations.

To overcome such ambiguity, Llewellyn Smith referred to the unions' definition of the 'unemployed' they financially supported: '*with trade unions giving unemployed benefit, the term "unemployed", which is so vague in its general meaning, has a perfectly definite significance*' (CAB 38/10, 1895, p. 4). And he contrasted these estimates with the numbers of people on registers in cities that provided relief in addition to the Poor Law, to men '*in distress* attributed by them *to lack of work*' [our emphasis] (CAB 38/10, 1895, p. 11). In his report, Llewellyn Smith sketched orders of magnitude and tendencies based on accounts of institutionalised benefits, rather than absolute numbers based on an ideational definition of the 'unemployed'.

More generally, Llewellyn Smith strongly recommended that the Cabinet should not perform a census of the 'unemployed'. Not because of the people's opposition to the census, which they would perceive as an invasion of their privacy (see MacLeod, 1988 for the eighteenth century), but due to a statistical reason: '*government statistics as a rule must be records of facts or statements derived first-hand, and resting on a perfectly definite and tangible basis* […]*; and it is partly because in the case of the unemployed such a basis is quite untrustworthy, that a census in the true sense is not possible*' (TNA CAB 37/38, pp. 6–7). Llewelyn Smith publicly defended this same position, against self-declaration of unemployment and in favour of union-based figures, before the special committee of the International Statistical Institute in 1906 (Llewellyn Smith, 1906, pp. 292–3). His positivist argument reinforced the political opposition of the conservative cabinets, which were, at that time, opposed to the provision of unemployment benefit in the form of public funds, as well as the opposition, even among liberal MPs, to governmental interferences with the employers' discretion to hire and fire (Whiteside, 1993).

The 1905 economic downturn and the growing political support for the Liberals paved the way to the Unemployed Workmen Act (1905) and the liberal landslide in the 1906 general election. This gave legal recognition to 'involuntary unemployment' (BPP 306 and BPP 2624), levied a tax to run privately funded work projects for temporarily unemployed workers (Harris, 1972, pp. 157–65), i.e. anyone '*honestly desirous of obtaining work, but temporarily unable to do so from exceptional causes over which he has no control*' (BPP 306, p. 2). Moreover, outgoing Prime Minister Balfour (Fraser, 1973, p. 147) appointed another royal commission on 'the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress' (Bruce, 1961, pp. 200–10; Fraser, 1973, pp. 135–63; Cooper, 2017, p. 110). Its members were civil servants from the Poor Law administration and municipal relief programmes (8), members of the Charity Organisation Society (3, including Hélène Bosanquet), religious leaders (4), an economist (William Smart), a unionist and a social researcher (Beatrice Webb). Lord George Hamilton chaired the commission, which eventually drafted two contrasting reports.

The Majority Report, signed by Bosanquet and thirteen other members (BPP 1909 cd 4499, Vol. XXXVII, pp. 1–718) promoted the bureaucratisation of pauperism: destitution sanctions moral defects that could only be eradicated by an army of '*social healers*', trained, organised and funded by powerful charities (with limited state actions), in order to reform, control and punish individuals and families until their restoration to '*self-maintenance*'. The Minority Report (BPP 1909 cd 4499, pp. 719–1238; Sydney Webb, 1909) was endorsed by four members including Beatrice Webb. It substituted the relief of destitution under deterrent conditions for the prevention of the causes of destitution. It promoted the dismantlement of workhouses, the end of relieved paupers' disenfranchisement and the development of coordinated public programmes to tackle health, education, old age and labour-market issues.

Box 1: Sir Hubert Llewellyn Smith (1864–1945)

Hubert Llewellyn Smith was born in 1864. His father worked as a partner in a wholesale tea business in Bristol. Hubert graduated from Oxford University (1883–86), where he attended all the intellectual clubs that spawned New Liberalism. Nonetheless, he kept his distance from the Fabian Society. At his *alma mater*, he lectured in statistics. He also participated, with Beatrice Webb, in Charles Booth's survey on the East-Londoner poor and published his first essay on *The story of the dockers' Strike* (1889).

In the wake of the Liberal win of the 1892 election, Llewellyn Smith entered the public administration and soon became the *Labour Department* First Commissioner. He stayed in office from 1893 to 1903. In this capacity, he was Editor-in-Chief of the *Labour Gazette*, the Labour Department's monthly journal. Then, he became Controller-General of the Commercial, Labour and Statistical Department (1903–07) and Permanent Secretary of the Board of Trade (1907–19). Smith was awarded Companion of the Order of the Bath (CB) in 1903, was *knighted* in 1908 and received the Grand Cross of the Order in 1919. In four reports, he shaped the government take on the classification and enumeration of unemployed workers:

- *Report on Agencies and Methods for Dealing with the Unemployed*. 1893, C7182;
- 'Memorandum on a recent estimate of the number of the unemployed' 1895 CAB 37/38/2.
- 'The Unemployed' 1895 CAB 37/38/10;
- 'Memorandum on a Scheme for National Insurance', 1909 CAB 37/99/69.

During the First World War, Llewellyn Smith designed the war-risk insurance scheme and participated in the reorganisation of the munition industry. After war, he headed the British delegation to the Paris Peace Conference and got appointed at the economic committee of the League of Nations. After his retirement, he supervised a nine-volume update of Booth's survey: *The New Survey of London Life and Labour* (1930–35). Llewellyn Smith died on 19 September 1945 (he had had four sons and two daughters from Edith Weekley).

Sources: Addison (1992), Davidson (1971, 1972, 1985), Harris (1972, p. 11), Topalov (1994, p. 228).

5. Churchill's '*untrodden field*'

The promoters of the minority report did not succeed in putting their reform onto the Liberal cabinet agenda. Nonetheless, the latter enacted policies very much in line with the recommendations of the Minority report. For instance, the 1909 'People's Budget' funded means-tested pensions for the 'deserving' elderly (Thane, 2008; Carré, 2016, pp. 455–6; Cooper, 2017, p. 110).

In 1908, Winston Churchill took over the Board of Trade (1908–10). Very much influenced by the Webbs and counselled by Llewellyn Smith and William Beveridge (Kersaudy, 2009, p. 112), Churchill wrote an op-ed in *The Nation* entitled 'The Untrodden Field in Politics' (7 March 1908) in which he promoted labour exchanges and unemployment benefits on the basis that '*political freedom, however precious, is utterly incomplete without a measure at least of social and economic independence*'. In May 1909, he gave a speech to the House of Commons and announced the introduction

of an unemployment insurance (Churchill, 1909) and the deployment of labour exchanges. Llewellyn Smith, Permanent Secretary of the Board of Trade since 1907, drafted the memo that laid out the principles of the unemployment insurance (TNA CAB 37/99/69, 1909). It would cover five heavily unionised sectors (construction, vehicle manufacturing, engineering, shipbuilding and metals), so that the Board of Trade could estimate its cost based on the unions' figures that the *Labour Gazette* had been publishing for two decades.

The National Insurance Act of 1911 instituted national and compulsory unemployment insurance for female and male workers in construction, vehicle manufacturing, engineering, shipbuilding and metals (Garside, 1980, pp. 27–30; Gilbert, 1966, p. 276). It covered the risks of involuntary unemployment, sickness and disability. Its extension was incremental (from 1916 to 1920) and was never completed. For instance, agriculture remained outside the scope of the Act and the 1920 Unemployment Insurance Act differentiated between men and women, who were entitled with smaller benefits for smaller contributions (Beveridge, 1909; Tomlinson, 1984). To predict the numbers of eligible workers and of the subsidised unemployed, the government relied on the unions' numbers and the unemployment books introduced by the 1911 Act[5] (Hilton, 1923; TNA: PIN 83/6).

Casual labour, subcontracting and irregular employment were no residues of pre-industrial economy, even after the First World War. Whiteside and Gillepsie (1991) convincingly rebutted historical accounts that consider the Great War as the cut between the Edwardian economy largely defined by casualism and underemployment, and the 'modern' labour market in which (un)employment are neatly distinct. These practices were at odds with the official definition of unemployment promoted by the government and public statisticians like Hubert Lewellyn Smith. As Whiteside and Gillepsie (1991, p. 677) wrote: '*during the interwar period, the concept of unemployment became detached from its early scientific foundations and began to accommodate variations in industrial practice*'. The magnitude of short-time working imposed by employers and work-sharing organised by unions varied across regions, seasons and trades. Consequently, many unionists and industrialist representatives opposed the extension of the 1911 scheme and forced the government, in 1921 to revise the conditions for unemployment benefits, in order to extend them to short-time workers. More precisely, as Whiteside and Gillepsie concluded their 1991 article, in the interwar period, '*unemployment' embraced only a minority of the underemployed- those fortunate enough to be able to negotiate their working hours to conform to the scheme's regulations and those unfortunate enough to get so little work that they qualified anyway*' (Whiteside and Gillepsie, 1991, p. 681). By the 1920s, the provision of poor relief and of unemployment benefit institutionalised two distinct categories—'the poor' and 'the unemployed'—(Whiteside, 1994, p. 409), in a manner that echoes Simmel's relational definition of assistance (Simmel, 1965): this is the collective response to a state of deprivation that defines the latter, rather than any measurement of the lack of resources.

For the first time, in the 1931 census there is no trace in the TNA of any controversy concerning the measurement of those men who did not declare a regular occupation as 'out-of-work' (Census of England & Wales Occupational Tables, 1934, p. 680). For the women, the eligibility rules introduced in 1931—the 'Anomalies Regulations'—singled

[5] The unemployment book was a four-page document containing information on the beneficiaries (PIN 83/6, p. 1160).

out married women for unequal treatment, based on the assumption that '*in the case of married women as a class, industrial employment cannot be regarded as a normal condition*' (Royal Commission on Unemployment Insurance, 1934, p. 242). For the census, the enumerators had to choose between four types of 'out-of-work':

1. *Persons temporarily out of their usual occupation who are working at census time at some other occupation, but who have a reasonable prospect of returning to their usual occupation;*
2. *Persons altogether out of work at census time who have a reasonable prospect of returning to their usual occupation;*
3. *Persons altogether out of work who have no reasonable prospect of returning to their usual occupation;*
4. *Persons out of work at census time who have no regular trade or occupation* (TNA RG 27/11 Instructions for completing columns B, C, K, L & M, 1931, p. 25).

Whereas types 2, 3 and 4 may sound familiar to an early twenty-first-century reader, type 1 remains quite unusual, because it relates unemployment to the absence of work in a specific occupation self-declared by the workers.

This smooth implementation tends to suggest that by the 1930s 'the unemployed' had become a category of analysis for public statisticians. Nonetheless, the first type indicates that they still considered unemployment in terms of occupations. At that time, (un)employment had yet to become a crucial element in the macroeconomic analysis of society.

6. Concluding remarks

The British measurement of 'out-of-work' developed in the wake of the 'categorisation fever' that characterised western bureaucracies at the dawn of the nineteenth century (Whiteside, 1993). By then most governments had set up teams of statisticians (Porter, 1986; Rabinow, 1989; Tooze, 1999a, 2001) to analyse, among many other things, the dynamics of the labour market (Biernacki, 1995; Didry, 2016). Despite ongoing exchanges among those public statisticians and the diffusion of similar knowledge infrastructures (such as the Labour Bureau in 1886, the *Office du Travail* in 1891, and the *Kommission für Arbeiterstatistik* in 1892), the British categorisation of the 'unemployed' differed from what was happening at the same time in Germany and France, respectively, in 1895 and 1896.[6]

Whereas in the UK the measurement of the numbers of unemployed individuals required a redefinition of the 'abled-bodied' poor into involuntarily 'out-of-work' jobseekers in a given occupation (Beveridge, 1909), in both Germany and France their enumeration implied two distinct conceptions of labour subordination. The Reich Statistics Bureau adopted the criterion of economic subordination to circumscribe who could be deemed 'out-of-work' (Zimmermann, 2001). The German census of 1895 asked male and female manual employees, servants, journeymen and other workers, subcontractors and home-based workers whether or not they were in employment.

In France, the 1896 census instead promoted a legal definition of labour subordination: only those who worked in a workplace ('*établissement*'), under the direct supervision of their employer would be counted as 'out-of-work' if they had no such position

[6] For the later period, 1914–50, see Tooze (1999b).

on the day of the census. Home-based workers and casual labourers would not therefore count as 'unemployed'. French statisticians[7] tried two methods for estimating the numbers of 'unemployed'. Combining an age criterion (over 65 years old) with the length of the suspension of work (more than one year), they distinguished the 'out-of-work' ('*chômeurs*') from the adults with 'no occupation' ('*sans emploi*'). The second method relied on the characterisation of the suspension of work: 'fortuitous lack of work', 'normal off-season', 'illness or disability' and 'other causes'. Due to a lack of systematic responses, the statisticians dropped these nuances and, in 1901 adopted a broader definition of unemployment: the temporary suspension of work in a given workplace (March 1894; Salais et al., 1986, 1990 edition, pp. 33–82).

Our examination of the contested classification and enumeration of people out-of-work, in late-nineteenth-century Britain, also informs contemporary controversies about unemployment benefits and the changes in the labour market, as well as debates on the (mis)uses of data in policymaking. For instance, the promotion of a universal basic income (Coote and Yazici, 2019) is often a response to work scarcity for unskilled individuals whose work tends to be replaced by automation. Moreover, the rising numbers of individuals who are in and out of work, who work 'zero-hour contracts' or who work as subordinated self-employed workers—such as the formally independent but actually subordinated subcontractors of the platform economy (Rodgers, 2016; Daugareilh *et al.*, 2019; for an annotated bibliography, see Abdelnour and Méda (2019) —forces us to reconsider the definition, funding and eligibility of unemployment benefits, unless we accept to live in a society in which there are more working poor, relying on food banks as well as unemployed people with no compensation.

At the end of the day, the different options chosen by policymakers in Great Britain, France and Germany is a reminder that the implicit definition of work that makes individuals eligible for unemployment benefits is contingent on the mode of production, the power of organised labour and the reconfiguration of electoral alliances. In 1896, Hobson lamented '*the miserably defective character of our statistical machinery*' (Hobson, 1896, p. 11). The crux of the matter was, and remains today, less about the performance of the statistical apparatus than about the relevance of the statistical categories.

Public statisticians do not just count; they produce and analyse data, which both requires categorisation. Social scientists often take for granted the production part of the statistical work. Yet, the collection of information, their transformation into data and the implementation of astute research strategies very much depends on the researchers' mastery of the categories of analysis they handle.

The 'big data' mania (Boelaert and Ollion, 2018) and its profits tend to make us believe that given the right algorithms, technology could provide us with technical solutions to political issues (Morozov, 2013). The social history of economic classifications should remind us that effective policies requires, among other things, reliable public statistics that depend upon the construction of variables and modalities that operationalise categories of understanding invented by public officials or scientists, in order to solve what *they* constituted as 'problems' to be addressed. The knowledge of such 'theory-laden knowledge infrastructures' (Hirschman, 2019) is no *curiosa*; it

[7] After Lucien March graduated from Polytechnique, the top French engineering school, in 1892 he joined the French Labour Statistics Bureau (Office du Travail). He supervised the 1896 occupational census and then served as head of the French government's department of statistics, Statistique Générale de la France, from 1896 to 1920 (Armatte, 2008).

conditions one's ability to scientifically perform data analysis, for academic as well as policymaking purposes.

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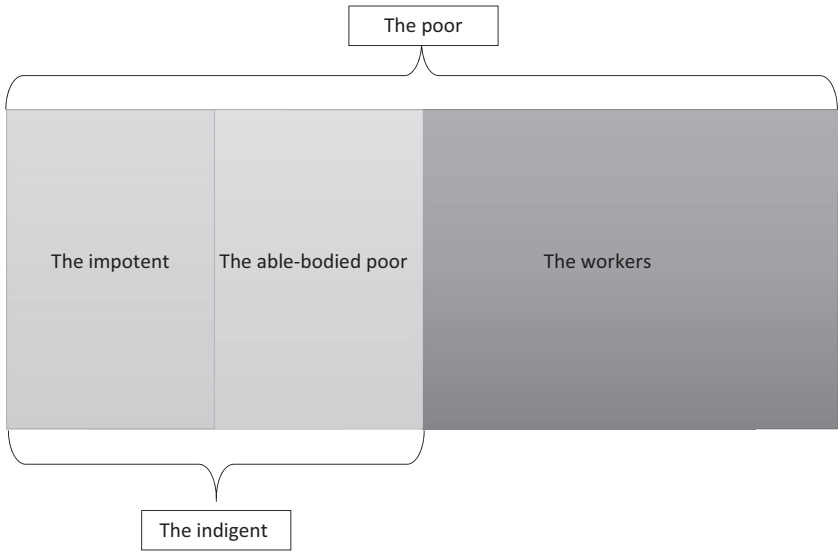
The poor
The impotent
The able-bodied poor
The workers
The indigent

Fig. 1.