Violent proletarianisation: social murder, the reserve army of labour and social security 'austerity' in Britain

Abstract

This article examines social security policy for working age people in Britain in the 'age of austerity'. Drawing upon critical approaches to understanding social policy and violence, the article argues that severe cuts to benefits and the ratcheting up of conditionality for, and the sanctioning of, benefit recipients can be understood as 'violent proletarianisation' – using socio-economic inequality and injustice to force the commodification of labour power, and a consequential creation of diswelfares that are known and avoidable. The article suggests that violent proletarianisation is a contradictory process, one that helps constitute the working class, but in a way that socially murders some of its reserve army members.

Keywords: class; commodification; death; labour power; poverty; surplus population

Introduction

> Let's start with the welfare system… It was fundamentally broken… benefits so
>
> generous, that people found they were better off on the dole than they were in work.
>
> …That's why we're building a benefit system that means you're always better off in
>
> work.1

In this speech, the Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, argued that
the extant social security system (described as 'welfare') was morally indefensible because it
trapped people in poverty, penalised wage-labour and was too costly when the economic
imperative was budget deficit reduction. The veracity of Osborne's claims is not important
for this article, although they are problematic. What is important is his critique of the social
security system as discouraging working age people from doing wage-labour and his
proposed solution, cutting social security provision. His pronouncements can be understood
as an example of 'story telling', an 'exercise in misdirection and revivification', that
structured the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government's approach to social security
policy (Wiggan, 2012: 385). In this instance, the poverty of people outside of full time wage-
labour would be tackled by their further immiseration via severe cuts to benefits to force
them into such labour.

Since 2010 much has been written about social security (including, Kilkey, *et al*.,
2012; Ramia *et al*., 2013; Royston, 2017). This literature is primarily in the social
administrative tradition that suggests ameliorative action is all that is needed to counter cuts
to public spending. Such approaches, however, do not consider social security policy as being
rooted in the social relations of capitalism. In this article, recent social security policy is
understood as reproducing wage-labour relations through the commodification of labour

power. Drawing upon literature from radical political economy, as well as that conceptualising violence, the article examines how social security policy for working age people can be understood as violent proletarianisation, the consequence of which is social murder.

The reserve army of labour

Marx (1976: 794, originally 1886) argued that 'every worker' belonged to the reserve army of labour 'when he is only partially employed or wholly unemployed.' While this view of the reserve army of labour suggests a static situation and a particular role of men within it, Marx indicated through a stratification of the reserve army that it was, in fact, a more fluid category of people. He argued it could be understood as being made up of three strata. the 'floating' represented those people who were thrown out of wage-labour because of capitalist developments and economic rhythms; the 'latent' were those who were yet to be proletarianised (discussed below); and the 'stagnant' were those who were 'very irregularly employed and difficult to mobilize' (Marx, 1976: 279).

Since his original writing, the fluidity of the reserve army has been recognised through an emphasis upon the intersectionality of class with gender and 'race'/ethnicity, and disability (Wiggan, 2015; Soederberg, 2016). It is also time and place dependent (Wiggan, 2015). Soederberg (2016: 40) argues it is the 'floating' and 'latent' segments of the reserve army that are "'embedded' in the industrial reserve army and thus are linked to the process of capital accumulation.' For Soederberg at least, it is through those two segments that the reserve army fulfils its role, according to Marx (1976: 792), in curbing the pretensions of the 'active army of workers'. This suggests that the 'stagnant' segment might be seen as being 'surplus' to capital accumulation. There is a hint of such a view in the idea some groups are

'dead weight' – who do 'not make up an employable "reserve army"' (Wray, 2001: 526). Wray confuses his analysis through a misuse of 'surplus'. The idea, however, that some groups are outside of having an economic impact has had some traction in social security policy. Since the 1990s, for instance, the desire of the British state has been to increase the 'effective labour supply' by increasing the size of reserve army and its closeness to labour markets (HM Treasury, 1999: para. 4.69). The aim of this was to increase the number of people in wage-labour without igniting wage inflation.

In this article, it is argued that through 'austerity' social security policies the reserve army is constituted through structural violence. Given the above observations about the fluidity of the reserve army, the article does not make distinctions between its various segments and does not view the consequence of violent proletarianisation – what is described as social murder – as only affecting the 'stagnant' segment of the reserve army. To do so would deny its fluidity and the policy dynamics that have been designed to extend the violence of proletarianisation to increased numbers of people and social groups, including, lone mothers, and disabled and under-employed people.

Structural violence and 'austerity'

Cooper and Whyte's (2017a) edited collection, *The Violence of Austerity*, focuses upon various dimensions of social policy. It highlights the 'toll of death and illness and injury that so-called austerity policies have caused' (Cooper and Whyte, 2017b: 1) since the leader of the Conservative Party in Britain, David Cameron, announced that: 'The age of irresponsibility is giving way to the age austerity'.[2]

Cooper and Whyte (2017b) frame the contributions to *The Violence of Austerity* through 'institutional violence'. They use this as a juxtaposition to 'interpersonal' violence to highlight the "'ordinary' and 'mundane' bureaucratised face of violence" and the fact that it is 'organised and administered through *legitimate* means' (Cooper and Whyte, 2017b: 23, original italics). While the chapters analyse various policies within this framework, they are also replete with reference to other notions of violence, including 'structural' (Canning, 2017, McCulloch, 2017); 'symbolic' (Bond and Hallsworth, 2017), 'epistemic' (Emejulu and Bassel, 2017); 'inward' and 'outward' (Paton and Cooper, 2017); 'physical' and 'psychological' (McCulloch, 2017). This demonstrates that experiencing and understanding violence is multidimensional and includes a range of institutions, actors and behaviours. It is also problematic because it confuses what is meant by 'violence'.

In this article, the work of Johan Galtung (1969) is used to inform understandings of violence. Galtung's work also points to violence as being a broad range of action/inaction by a range of social actors and institutions, and something that can impact upon both physical and mental 'realisations'. Galtung (1969: 168, original italics) defines violence as being the '*difference between the potential and the actual*, between what could have been and what is'. 'Austerity', therefore, can be understood as violence, not because it is mundane or done by 'smartly dressed people sitting behind desks' (Cooper and Whyte, 2017b: 23), although it often is, but because, it has led to *avoidable* physical and mental diswelfares. Violence, Galtung (1969) argues, can be committed when there are both actors ('personal' or 'direct' violence) and no actors ('structural' or 'indirect' violence). The latter is most important for this article – 'violence… built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances' (Galtung, 1969: 171).

Galtung's conceptualisation of violence has been criticised for providing such a wide definition that its adaption is 'likely to be… disappointing' (Coady, 2008, p 35). Coady offers various problems with Galtung's work. Most important are his arguments regarding the implications of Galtung conceptualising both personal and structural violence. Coady (2008) suggests any similarities between them are too few and general to address their differences, and that the morality of personal and structural violence is different. Vorobej (2008), however, argues that these claims reflect a lack of scholarship and understanding that misconstrue and over-simplify Galtung's conceptualisation of personal and structural violence.

For this article, it is some of the very things for which Coady criticises Galtung that are the most interesting. Notable, is Galtung's (1969) conceptualisation of social injustice as structural violence. As highlighted above, this is a form of violence contained in social systems and processes. In traditional and some less traditional (Wiggan, 2015) social policy analyses these systems and processes are problematised for their socio-economic impacts, but not for their violence.

In 2010, yearly savings of £18 billion were announced to the 'social protection' of working age people and a further £12 billion per annum in 2015 (HM Treasury, 2010a, 2010b, 2015). An element of these cuts was a 'punitive turn' in conditionality governing benefit receipt (Fletcher and Wright, 2018: 329). This led to an increase of 69 percent in Jobseeker's Allowance sanctions (recipients having their benefits withheld or reduced) between 2008 and 2014, and an 84 percent increase in Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) sanctions (cited in Edmiston, 2017: 261). These cuts and changes have contributed to increased poverty rates (Hood and Waters, 2017); falling living standards (Corlett and Clarke,

2017); the expansion of precarious wage-labour, notably, zero hours contracts (Resolution Foundation, 2017); deepening disabilised, gendered and racialised inequality (Kaye *et al.*, 2012; Emejulu and Bassel, 2017; Hall *et al.*, 2017); increases in rough sleeping (Wilson, 2018), and food and fuel poverty (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015; Snell *et al.*, 2015).

Given these observations, social security 'austerity' can be understood as structural violence. It is informed by, and helps reproduce, unequal distributions of power and financial resources, and its detrimental consequences are both known and avoidable. Understanding 'austerity' as a 'system designed to humiliate and intimidate. Where once again hunger is used as a weapon' (Laverty, 2016: 3) as an example of structural violence provides an intellectual connection to Engels's (1993, originally, 1845) view that the consequence of the socio-economic condition of the English working class in the mid-19th century was social murder.

Social murder

Engels argued that the conditions which killed and maimed working class people in Victorian Britain were a result of capitalism's social relations. In the case of manufacturing, Engels (1993: 175) noted, there was a 'pretty list of diseases engendered purely by the hateful money-greed of the manufacturers! Women made unfit for childbearing, children deformed, men enfeebled, limbs crushed, whole generations wrecked, afflicted by disease and infirmity, purely to fill the purses of the bourgeoisie'. For Engels, the bourgeoisie was responsible for enforcing such poor working conditions and wages, and as a consequence, poor diets, housing and detrimental leisure activities (such as the consumption of alcohol), that it was responsible for the early deaths of working class people. As the effects of the actions of the

bourgeoisie were foreseeable and avoidable, Engels (1993: 106) argued, they could be understood as social murder:

> When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another such injury that death results, we call the deed manslaughter; when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would be fatal, we call his [sic] deed murder. But when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessaries of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live – forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence – knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual...

There is a confluence of Engels's notion of social murder and Galtung's analysis of violence. As seen above, for Galtung, violence can be understood as being the imposition of known and avoidable harm, visible, for instance, in social injustice. Engels (1993) was alluding to similar concerns – how the lives of working class people were foreshortened by avoidable injustices upon which capitalism was premised and which were expressed in wage-labour practices. In Engels's analysis, social murder through such violence could have been prevented through a different economic structure and social relations. The bourgeoisie knew this, but they benefitted from the use of working class people as the 'means of profit' (Engels, 1993: 90)

Engels's observations were not especially novel. Birn (2009), for instance, highlights similar conclusions about working class people's immiseration in the work of French surgeon and social researcher, Louis-René Villermé and utilitarian civil servant, Edwin Chadwick. What made Engels's work different was his use of the idea of social murder and his locating of this in the social relations of capitalism. Birn (2009) notes Villermé's solution to class-mediated differences in mortality was moral education and laissez-faire industrialism, while Chadwick pointed to the potential of better sanitation, rather than improving the working conditions and wages of working class people. For Engels, however, their social murder could only be addressed through their revolutionary potential, by a fundamental challenge to the architecture and imperatives of capitalism.

The idea of social murder has continued to be used in the social epidemiology vein of the work of Villermé and Chadwick. Birn (2009), for example, draws upon it to help inform her analysis of the World Health Organisation's report, *Closing the Gap in a Generation: Health Equity through Action on the Social Determinants of Health* (Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, 2008). Conceptually, she uses social murder, first, to demonstrate the longevity of theoretical and ideological perspectives in understanding and explaining links between poverty and ill-health. And, second, to argue how health-related action/inaction is framed by the analysis of health inequality data, which is shaped by 'salient political forces and state, class and other institutional interests' (Birn, 2009: 171).

Although Birn's analysis does not avoid the role of capitalism in creating health inequalities, others more directly use social murder to understand the consequences of capitalism's practices. Chernomas and Hudson (2007, 2009), for instance, use it to critique conservative economics. They argue (2009: 111) that: 'Drug, automobile, tire, cigarette, lead

and cosmetic companies reliably kill a proportion of their customers as a result of defective design or toxicity of their products, despite warnings from their own studies, government agencies, professionals and consumer protection agencies.'

Tombs (2017a, 2017b) makes similar observations through focusing upon worsening business regulation regimes in Britain. As a consequence of an ideological objection to regulation, the impact of 'austerity' cuts on local authorities and privatisation (allowing regulation to become a form of self-governance), Tombs argues social diswelfares have increased in recent years. He argues that businesses harm individuals by, for instance, exposing them to detrimental work environments, poor food hygiene standards and pollution. Tombs (2017a: 3) notes these harms are 'routine, systematic and, crucially, avoidable'.

These contemporary examples share with Engels a concern with the impact of practices rooted in capitalist imperatives upon working class health. Tombs (2017b), for instance, argues that it was the conditions, such as those identified by analysts like Engels in the 19th century, that led to class struggle for regulation to mitigate the harmful effects of capitalism. However, Tombs (2017b:139) points to the recent 'undoing [of] social protection', which he argues 'is a story about social inequality and avoidable business-generated, state-facilitated violence: that is social murder'.

While the idea of social murder provides a critique of capitalist forms of production, the work of Rummel (1994), points to 'death by government' of various ideologies through the concept of democide. It includes acts, such as genocide, politicide, mass murders, massacres and terror by or sponsored by governments. For Rummel, intention is crucial. There must be the intent on the part of the government to kill. His work suggests that this can

be through commission (intentional killing) or by omission – through a 'reckless and wanton disregard for the lives of those affected' (Rummel, 1994: 42). The latter is of most use for this article, because it has resonance with Engels's (1993: 106) argument that social murder is an 'offence... more… of omission than commission.' In the case of 'austerity' social security policy, social murder is an act of omission. The desire on the part of the state, despite Mills's (2018) observation that 'Dead people don't claim', is not death, but death is a known and, therefore, avoidable, consequence of its actions.

In terms of how social murder might be addressed, the implication of both Chernomas and Hudson's (2007, 2009) and Tombs's (2017a, 2017b) work is a need for state action for tougher regulatory regimes. The implication of Tombs's (2017b) argument, for instance, is that if there was an ideological commitment to strong regulatory regimes, if the (local) state had the financial resources to do it and it did not involve the private sector social murder could be avoided. Similarly, the work of Chernomas and Hudson (2007, 2009) suggests that, if it had the will, the state could resist capital's pressure for regulatory regimes that give it the freedom to kill.

It is here that difficulties emerge with contemporary analyses that draw upon the notion of social murder because of contradictory roles assigned to the state . It is both the protector of working class people from harm and the facilitator of social murder. This arguably reflects a more general understanding of the pressure for, and interests served, by state social welfare policies. Lavalette (2006), for instance, demonstrates, that while there are examples of working class struggles and resistance leading to the introduction and development of social policies, the British state pursues pro-capitalist policies. As Jessop (2002) notes, the capitalist state is central to the accumulation process. For various reasons,

for example, the reproduction of labour power cannot be left to markets, creating space in which state activity is important. It is within this context that relationships between structural violence, social murder and the commodification of labour power can be understood.

Violent proletarianisation and the commodification of labour power

In social policy, the most notable analysis of the role of the state in proletarianisation is that of Claus Offe (1984). For Offe, proletarianisation is concerned with the ways in which the working class is constituted through the pressure it is put under to commodify its labour power for the enrichment of a small elite. Proletarianisation is particularly important to social policy analyses, Offe (1984) argues, because such policy is often interpreted as being reactive to class struggle, rather than helping to constitute the working class.

Offe's (1984: 92) arguments are premised upon the hypothesis that 'social policy is the state's manner of effecting the lasting transformation of non-wage-labourers into wage-labourers'. This hypothesis is arguably based upon the tensions that capitalism creates for workers. So, for instance, the capitalist dynamic of wage-labour destruction through economic crises raises the issue of why workers, despite resistance (Wiggan, 2015), continue to offer their labour power for sale. Offe (1984) argues the reasons why they do this should not be taken as self-evident, for they could devise ways of subsisting outside of wage-labour.

To demonstrate the point, Offe (1984) distinguishes between 'passive' and 'active' proletarianisation. 'Passive' proletarianisation describes the destruction of existing forms of labour and subsistence (essentially being without wage-labour). In contrast, 'active' proletarianisation involves the offering of labour power for sale in labour markets. It is the process by which, despite it being a fictitious commodity, labour power is commodified. The

taken-for-granted assumption is that deprivation caused by passive proletarianisation

provides the explanation of why people seek to commodify their labour power. That

assumption, Offe (1984) argues, confuses the consequence of passive proletarianisation with

the reasons for active proletarianisation. Afterall, there are ways out of passive

proletarianisation that do not involve active proletarianisation – for example, various forms of

crime, begging, charity, migration and so forth.

It can be argued social policies are central to active proletarianisation by, first,

defining circumstances in which people can legitimately be considered outside of the

demands of active proletarianisation – for instance, in notions of 'childhood', 'retirement'

and 'disability'. And, second, and more importantly for this article, in imposing

conditionality and sanctions that actively proletarianised people are forced to endure to

ensure they commodify their labour power.

Literature discusses various dimensions of conditionality and sanctioning, including

their antecedents, (in)effectiveness in getting people into wage-labour and their impacts

(Reeves and Loopstra, 2017; Fletcher and Wright, 2018). With a few exceptions (for

example, Burnett and Whyte, 2017; Pring, 2017), this material does not take the observations

made about conditionality and sanctioning in the enforcement of active proletarianisation to

their logical conclusion – that such activity is a form of violence.

Structural violence, Galtung (1969: 170) argues, involves 'stick or carrot strategies'.

Both are visible in active proletarianisation. The 'stick' is represented by various

mechanisms, such as keeping benefit levels low compared to wages and measures of

subsistence and poverty; the threat to sanction benefits if the wage-labour-related behaviour

of recipients is held to be wanting, and the disgust through which benefit receipt is constructed (Jensen, 2014). 'Carrot strategies' include 'incentivising' people to take low paid wage-labour through the subsidisation of earnings via in-work benefits and holding out the hope that 'welfare-to-work' interventions will support the reserve army in securing wage-labour.

Given these observations, it can be argued that active proletarianisation has been a theme of the activities of various scales of the state in Britain for many years (Author, 2012). Edmiston (2017: 262), however, argues that there are two issues that denote contemporary social security policy as being different to past years – 'the scale and regressive cuts to public spending and the elevated role of welfare withdrawal and sanctions'. Both are crucial to contemporary configurations of violent proletarianisation.

It is well rehearsed that the 2008/09 North Atlantic financial crisis and the 'austerity' reaction to it has erroneously been constructed as being a consequence of profligate public spending and a resultant creation of a so-called 'dependency culture' (Wiggan, 2012). Social security spending was central to such constructions. David Cameron, for example, argued that 'welfare' 'encourages the worst in people – [it] incites laziness, …excuses bad behaviour, …erodes self-discipline, …discourages hard work… people thinking they can be as irresponsible as they like because the state will always bail them out.'3

Such arguments about the potential of social security spending for passive proletarianisation ('discourages hard work') informed justifications for wholesale change (the introduction of universal credit) and severe cuts to social security spending. Social security benefits were defined, not only as being too expensive, but also acting to trap people in

patterns of economic (in)activity that were inconsistent with the needs of the 'modern economy [which] moves and changes quickly' (Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (SSWP), 2010: 6). Hence, a need was declared for social security 'to support people to be flexible in taking work' (SSWP, 2010: 6).

The extant social security system was premised on similar grounds of the need for active proletarianisation (SSWP, 2008). Since 2010, however, such arguments have been used to cut the real and nominal value of benefits for working age people and increase the scope and depth of conditionality to 'reduce benefit dependency and promote work' (HM Treasury, 2010a, para. 11). Such ideas led, as was seen above, to massive cuts in social security benefits for working age people in 2010. They were taken forward in the 2015 Budget, which George Osborne argued, would move 'Britain from a low-wage, high-tax, high welfare society to a higher wage, lower-tax and lower-welfare economy' (House of Commons Debates, 2015, col. 332). Osborne argued there was a need to reduce the value of benefits compared to wages to maintain a financial incentive to take wage-labour. A cash freeze of the vast majority of benefits for four years for working age people Osborne argued would help 'earnings growth… catch up and overtake the growth in benefits' (House of Commons Debates, 2015, col. 334). This was in addition to a benefit cap introduced in 2013 and cut in 2015, and the announcement that from April 2017 households would not receive social assistance benefits for more than two children, developments that were a 'shameless, unmitigated attack on... poor [people]' (*The Independent*, 8 July 2015).

Osborne's comments should be read more as a condemnation of low wages for many workers in Britain than a comment on the levels of its social security support. Despite his arguments, benefits in Britain were already paid at a level that kept households well below

measures of subsistence (Padley *et al.*, 2017) and poverty.4 The reserve army was already living in an environment of structural violence. 'Austerity' has deepened and extended it through greater levels of immiseration. Un- and under-employed people are enduring the violence of deepening inequalities and social injustices as a consequence of capital's need for commodified labour power. Violent proletarianisation is the process that enforces this imperative. The outcome is social murder.

Violent proletarianisation and social murder

It was seen above that Chernomas and Hudson (2009) argue that capitalist enterprises regularly kill a proportion of their customers. Similar arguments can be made about 'austerity' social security policy. Through it, the state kills a proportion of the reserve army. Cooper and Whyte (2017b: 24) describe the 'slow violence' of 'austerity' – "that the most damaging effects… will take years to be fully realised because of the time lag between the implementation of 'austerity' policies and the way in which they impact". What they describe might be better called 'slow social murder', but even this would be insufficient, because as well as long-term impacts, 'austerity' can have much more immediate effects upon those people living with violent proletarianisation.

Social murder by suicide

The literature demonstrates a 'significant association' between economic crises, 'austerity' and suicide rates (Mills, 2018). This is seen in the UK where 10 people per 100,000 died by suicide in 2007, increasing to 11.1 in 2013.5 While the overall rate has fallen since, to 10.4 in 2016, research points to a significant proportion of people enduring violent proletarianisation having suicidal thoughts and/or having attempted to kill themselves. So, for example, in qualitative research with ESA recipients Marks *et al.* (2017) found that the experience of

receiving it in the context of hostile political and popular discourses had worsened the mental distress of its recipients and in some cases led to suicidal thoughts. '[F]eeling… judged', Marks *et al*. (2017: 17) note, and of 'having to [justify] their condition to a stranger, and feeling that there is a possibility of being made to return to work – whilst still feeling very unwell – was very destructive for participants'.

In a quantitative analysis, Barr *et al*. (2015) found that for every 10,000 people reassessed using the ESA's Work Capability Assessment (WCA) there was an additional six deaths by suicide, 2,700 reported cases of 'mental health problems' and 7,020 antidepressant items prescribed. The Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey for 2014 (McManus *et al*., 2016: 3) demonstrated that the majority (66.4 percent) of ESA recipients had thoughts about killing themselves, while nearly a half (43.2 percent) had attempted to do so. This compared to 21.7 and 6.7 percent respectively of the general population. Such figures are reflected in the WCA being highlighted in inquests and coroners' reports (O'Hara, 2017) as an explanation of what this article is describing as social murder. In this context Mills (2018) argues that suicide should be understood as being framed by economic, cultural and social factors, rather than, as occurs in mainstream explanations, it being pathologised and depoliticised as the consequence of individual crises. Hence, her conceptualisation of 'austerity suicide' (Mills, 2018: 302). Suicide, as Mills's work highlights, is complex. However, the evidence suggests that the changes to disability benefits introduced in 2008 for new recipients and rolled out for existing recipients from 2011 creates foreseeable economic and social injustices. It can, therefore, be understood as a form of structural violence, the consequence of which is social murder by suicide.

Social murder by destitution

Violent proletarianisation is premised upon the idea that labour power can be commodified through penury. As noted above, since 2010 cuts to benefits and the ratcheting up of conditionality have contributed to increased food and fuel poverty, rough sleeping, precarious forms of wage-labour and stagnating wages. The consequence of these can be described as social murder by destitution, as the following examples demonstrate:

> A 38 year old mother was found dead after her benefits were stopped because she missed a Jobcentre Plus meeting. She was in hospital. In a letter published on Facebook her mother noted that: 'In the cold with her coat & scarf on. Because she wouldn't put her heating on until her kids came home from school. Why?? Because she couldn't afford it. … was deemed not ill enough for ESA. Had her benefits stopped numerous times, which in turn stopped her housing benefit. No income but expected to be able to pay full rent. Was told being in intensive care was not sufficient reason for failing to attend a universal credit interview. I went to the job centre to inform them that she couldn't attend. But benefits stopped again' (cited in *The Independent*, 9 November 2017).

> A 44 year old man died, according to his doctor, with a body mass index that 'was not compatible with life' (*The Guardian*, 28 February 2014). The doctor told the inquest into his death that benefit changes (including him being found fit for work following a WCA and the stopping of his housing benefit) had accelerated his health decline and eventual death. While the coroner noted that it was not possible to identify a reason for the man's death, he felt that 'it was probably "caused or contributed to by [him] being markedly underweight and malnourished"' (*The Guardian*, 28 February 2014).

According to the Environmental Services Association, 11 homeless people were killed after taking shelter in waste bins between 2010 and 2016. The use of bins as shelter is increasing. The waste management company, Biffa, found homeless people in bins on separate occasions 31 times in 2013/4 and on 175 occasions in 2015/16 (cited by the BBC, 1 March 2016).

The number of homeless people dying on the streets or in temporary accommodation doubled between 2013 and 2017, and was running at least at one death per week in 2017 (*The Guardian*, 11 April 2018).

It is estimated that 391 people died from malnutrition in Britain in 2015, representing an increase of 27 percent compared to 2006 (*The Daily Mirror*, 11 August 2016).

The commonality of the above examples is the destitution of the people who have died. They are instances of the long-standing association between poor material circumstances and social murder. It and social murder by suicide are linked in various way. First, those people who have died by suicide and who have attempted to kill themselves as a consequence of the procedures for establishing their entitlement (or not) to social security benefits are also likely to have been income poor. Second, they are both the consequence of violent proletarianisation, of attempting to delineate who can be considered legitimately passively proletarianised and who can be expected to commodify their labour power, and the use of various mechanism (conditionality, penury and sanctions) to enforce this.

Violent proletarianisation, social murder and contradictions in social security policy

This article has argued that benefit changes since 2010 can be considered a form of violent proletarianisation, the consequence of which has been, and will be into the future, social murder. Given the importance of active proletarianisation to capitalism, notably in its role of helping to manage wage inflation through the effects of the reserve army, this is arguably contradictory. This should not be surprising, for it reflects the contradictory nature of social policy in capitalist economies. O'Connor (1973), for example, points to contradictions between, on the one hand, the role of state social welfare in the reproduction of the conditions for capital accumulation and, on the other hand, the legitimation of capitalism. Similar observations, although rooted more closely in a critique of conservative economics, led Offe (1984: 153, original italics) to claim that 'capitalism cannot coexist *with*, neither can it coexist *without*, the welfare state'.

The first part of this claim is visible in contemporary justifications in 'austerity' for cutting spending on social security benefits and the punitive turn in conditionality – that existing provision was unaffordable and had detrimental impacts upon financial incentives to do wage-labour. Such analyses though, tend to ignore the legitimation function of social welfare policies. Offe (1984: 153) suggests that this is a familiar problem with conservative economics, which ignores the argument that the 'sudden disappearance of the welfare state would leave the system in a state of exploding conflict and anarchy,' highlighted, for instance, in various forms of collective and individual resistance (Farnsworth and Irving, 2012; Wiggan, 2015). As Offe (1984) highlights, the contradictory role of social policy in capitalist economies reflects the broader importance of contradiction to Marxism – that the conflicting social relations of capitalism frame the structure and operation of its institutions. Social security policy is no exception.

Such analyses have detractors (for example, Jessop, 1999), it is, however, difficult to get away from the idea that contemporary social security policy is framed by contradictions for capitalism. In the case of the issues discussed in this article the contradictions lie in the ways in which attempts have been made to commodify labour power through violent proletarianisation. This is rooted in a long, classical liberal tradition that suggests people will only do wage-labour if forced to do so through penury (see Poynter, 1969). It was seen above, Offe (1984) criticises such arguments for confusing the consequences of passive proletarianisation with the aim of active proletarianisation. Nonetheless, recent British governments have seen poverty and destitution as means of commodifying labour power, rather than merely being a consequence of people not being in wage-labour.

This though, is a contradictory process. It makes alternatives to active proletarianisation, such as survival crime (Dwyer, 2018) or begging (Lenhard, 2014) more necessary. It acts against desired economic efficiencies and productivity gains (Srnicek and Williams, 2016). And, inter-linked with these, the poverty upon which violent proletarianisation is premised has a number of deleterious impacts upon the potential reproduction of labour power. As was argued above, violent proletarianisation results in the social murder of some members of the reserve army. For those not killed by it, violent proletarianisation undermines the ability of the reserve army to seek wage-work and to do it at the required pace, rhythms and intensity. It, for instance, acts to detract people from its aim of commodifying labour power. As Patrick (2014, p. 712) argues, the 'work involved in managing on benefits was often time intensive including hand washing clothes… and going to several shops to make sure you paid the lowest price possible for your day-to-day essentials' (see also Garthwaite, 2016). Second, violent proletarianisation starves people of

the resources to help aid their search for wage-labour (Stewart and Wright, 2018). Third, and, as was noted above, violent proletarianisation has the effect of worsening health, notably mental distress, that pushes people further away from the wage-labour, rather than, as intended, moving them closer to it (Dwyer, 2018).

The potential undermining of the ability of some people to do wage-labour – the impact of the 'slow social murder' of violently proletarianised people – will mean continued cost to the state. There will, for example, be a potentially greater cost to the National Health Service, to which increased conditional funding was recently announced.6 However, even with this development a focus upon commodification is visible, albeit of people's health-related needs (on which see Sturgeon, 2014). Between 2009/10 and 2015/16, for instance, the proportion of the NHS budget spent on private sector provision increased from 4.4. to 7.7 percent.7

In social security terms, violently proletarianised people should be less costly in the future as a consequence, first, of 'austerity' cuts to benefits and, second, their continuing subjection to violent proletarianisation may foreshorten their lives even further. The economic support they do receive will, however, consolidate the view that it is a cost of production to the detriment of international competitiveness (Jessop, 2002). This will act to confirm the contradictory position of the reserve army of labour as both central to capital accumulation, but contemporaneously, a burden to it.

Ending violent proletrianisation

To address the violence of active proletarianisation, a fundamental shift is required in regard to wage-labour. In their analysis of post-work futures, Srnicek and Williams (2016), for

instance, argue that four 'minimal demands' are required for a world without work – a reduction in the working week; a basic income; a diminishing of the cultural importance of the work ethic and full automation. The first two are most pressing for this article.

There have been arguments for many years since the essay, *The right to be lazy*, by Marx's son-in-law, Paul Lafargue (1883), in support of shortening the work week. Not all have come from heterodox sources. John Maynard Keynes (1931), for example, thought the future working week would be 15 hours. His concern, that 'we have been trained for too long to strive and not to enjoy' (Keynes, 1931: 368), was echoed in Bertrand Russell's (1935) argument for a four hour working day that could only develop once the middle-class's attachment of virtue to the wage-labour of the working class had been eroded. Reducing hours of work, however, does not remove the need for proletarianisation and its violence. Labour power would be commodified, albeit for a shorter working week, something that arguably universal credit and its relationship to 'mini-jobs' already does (Author, 2016).

Violent proletarianisation will only be abolished when the need to commodify labour power is abolished. For some anarchists and 'quasi-anarchists' (for example, Kropotkin, 1913, Gorz, 1982, Black, 2011), this will come only with the abolition of capitalism. Alternatively, Srnicek and Williams (2016: 108), argue it is possible to make demands that have a 'utopian edge that strains at the limits of what capitalism can concede'. They argue a universal basic income (UBI) is one such demand, providing it is sufficient 'to live on' (Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 118), universal and unconditional, and supplements, rather than replaces, the welfare state. Only through fulfilling these criteria, they argue, can a distinction be made with libertarian support for a UBI as a means of eroding social rights.

In addition, it would need necessary to divorce UBI from arguments that highlight its potential role in violent proletarianisation. Examples of UBIs are often portrayed as an incentive to do wage-labour, mostly as a defence against critics (Torry's, 2013 analysis of citizen's income is a good example). However, in making this argument the economic importance placed upon wage-labour is reinforced. Srnicek and Williams's (2016, p. 120) argument is that UBI should be understood as a way of making work voluntary, meaning it 'unbinds the coercive aspects of wage labour, partially decommodifies labour and thus transforms the political relationship between labour and capital.' While they may not be suggesting an end to capitalism, their argument is close to Gorz's (1982) and Black's (2011) view that it is the forcing of wage-labour that is problematic. All suggest a need for radical rethinking of the nature and the social relations of wage-labour.

Conclusion

Drawing upon critical approaches in social policy and understanding violence, this article has argued that cuts and damaging changes to social security policy in 'austerity' Britain can be understood as a form of violent proletarianisation, a brutal approach to forcing people to commodify their labour power. Its violence takes two forms. First, it involves the further immiseration of already income poor people. It causes social inequalities and injustices in the short term and in longer term by forcing people to engage in an activity (wage-labour) that reflects and reproduces economic and social inequalities. Second, the diswelfares that violent proletarianisation creates are both known and avoidable.

The article has argued that the consequence of violent proletarianisation is social murder. Violent proletarianisation involves reductions to benefits, and constant threats to, and the actual removal of, benefits with the aim of forcing people to commodify their labour

power. In this sense, the immiseration of the reserve army through austere social security policies is concerned with constituting the working class through structural violence. It is, however, a contradictory process, for such policies arguably push people further away from commodified labour power and, in some instances, socially murders them.

The commodification of labour power, however, is central to capitalism. This suggests that critiques of contemporary social security policies within the social administration traditions of social policy analyses will be found lacking. To address the violence of active proletarianisation what is required is not the tweaking of existing policies, but fundamental change that removes the economic need for the commodification of labour power through social security policy.

Notes

1. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chancellor-speech-on-changes-to-the-tax-and-benefit-system (accessed 6 April 2018).

2. https://conseravtive-specches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/601367 (accessed 6 April 2018).

3. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-on-the-fightback-after-the-riots (accessed 3 April 2018).

4. http://cpag.org.uk/content/what-causes-poverty (accessed 6 April 2018).

5.
   https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/suicidesintheunitedkingdom/2016registrations (accessed 6 April 2018).

6. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-sets-out-5-year-nhs-funding-plan (accessed 10 August 2018).

7.	https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-

statements/written-question/Commons/2017-12-18/120099 (accessed 10 August

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