The National Childcare Strategy: The social regulation of lone mothers as a gendered reserve army of labour

Chris Grover

This paper analyses the introduction of the National Childcare Strategy. It argues, in the context of workfareism and through a new evaluation of the 'women as reserve army' thesis, that the National Childcare Strategy can be understood as one of a number of administrative mechanisms in New Labour's welfare reform agenda that aims to release lone mothers from social reproduction, in order to increase their effectiveness at competing for paid employment. This approach to the provision of childcare means that the state is heavily involved in subsiding childcare markets, benefiting capital through socialised reproduction, and through the rewards of what can be lucrative childcare markets.

Introduction

New Labour’s National Childcare Strategy (NCS) was outlined in Meeting the Childcare Challenge (Secretary of State for Education and Employment et al., 1998). The NCS was introduced by New Labour as a market-led approach to addressing the lack of childcare provision in England. As such, it might be held up as a ‘Third Way’ approach to the delivery of childcare, for it is structured through several features—including the state working in ‘partnership’ with the private and voluntary sectors; the state regulating, but not directly providing, public goods; and the state ‘working to provide public goods (such as childcare, education and training) to underpin greater equality of opportunity’—that are held to be part of a ‘third
way approach to public policy’ (Driver & Martell, 2002: 78). However, it has been observed (for example, Callinicos, 2001) that while ‘Third Way’ is used to describe an approach said to be beyond both the old left and the new right, it is actually concerned with buttressing neoliberalism. This paper develops the Callinicos argument by examining how the NCS as an area of social policy is aimed, at a general level, at consolidating neoliberalism while, more specifically, encouraging newly-important childcare markets through various forms of subsidisation.

The importance of childcare in allowing women with dependent children to take paid employment has been observed for many years (Martin & Roberts, 1984; Brown, 1989; Bradshaw & Millar, 1991; Ford, 1996; Dex & Joshi, 1999); and while it has been pointed out that there are still problems with the costs of, and access to, childcare (Rake, 2001), and more fundamental issues related to the assumptions that frame the design and delivery of the NCS in its wider context of New Labour’s welfare reform agenda (for example, Duncan & Edwards, 1997; Wheelock & Jones, 2002), there is also recognition of the potential of the NCS to improve the well-being of particularly children. Pacey (2002), for example, focuses on the potential of the NCS to help New Labour in its aim of abolishing child poverty, a point also made by Rowlingson and McKay (2002: 117).

What these analyses do not capture is the importance attached to the NCS in terms of managing economic stability. The aim of this paper is to address this issue, and to provide a political economy of the NCS by focusing on the regulatory functions of the NCS in the management of neoliberalism. It does this by examining the introduction and development of the NCS through a regulation approach analytical framework, in which it is possible to explore the role of social policy in the governance of capital accumulation. Before examining the analytical framework, we need to briefly examine the components of the NCS.

The National Childcare Strategy

Meeting the Childcare Challenge argued that there were three problems with childcare in England: it was not of consistent quality, there was not enough of it, and it was not affordable. The aim, therefore, was to ‘ensure good quality, affordable
childcare for children aged 0 to 14 in every neighbourhood’ (Secretary of State for Education and Employment et al., 1998: 6). While defining ‘quality childcare’ is deeply problematic (see Moss & Pence, 1994), New Labour felt that it could deal with the issue of quality through a combination of the integration of early-years education and childcare provision; a more consistent regulatory regime covering early-years education and childcare; the provision of Early Excellence Centres to disseminate good practice; and the development of a less complex training and qualification framework for childcare workers (ibid.). Over the past five years, there have been developments in relation to these. So, for example, the regulation of early-years education and childcare has been brought together at the Department of Education and Skills, and there has been work ‘to rationalise and simplify the many existing qualifications [for childcare workers] into a new framework of nationally accredited qualifications’ (Moss, 2000: 73). However, it is recognised that early-years services are still structured through a fragmentation of thinking which separates education from care (Moss, 2000).

While the issue of quality has some importance for our purposes—parents will not use childcare services if they do not have confidence that they are of a good standard—what is of more concern is the amount of childcare and its affordability. To increase the amount of childcare, the government has focused upon both supply- and demand-side policies. On the supply side, funding has been made available through the NCS for ‘pump-priming’ childcare services (investing in the hope of inducing self-sustaining expansion), particularly for out-of-school care and more recently, as we shall see, for nursery provision in poorer neighbourhoods. Much of this funding has come from the National Lottery-sponsored New Opportunities Fund. On the demand side, developments have come through New Labour’s ‘making work pay agenda’, for the mechanisms—increased child benefit and the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) (now the Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit)—are held to have made childcare more affordable (Secretary of State for Education and Employment et al., 1998). As part of the ‘making work pay’ agenda, New Labour also introduced the Childcare Tax Credit CCTC as a subsidy for registered childcare. As we shall see, the CCTC was introduced as a financial incentive for lone mothers to take paid
employment. However, it is also the main demand-side stimulus for increased childcare provision, since it aims to put childcare within the financial reach of parents with lower incomes, thereby creating further demand for childcare services.

Whether the NCS has been successful in creating more and more affordable childcare is debatable. The government claims that by 2004 it will have created a million new childcare places for 1.6 million children (Department for Education and Skills, 2000), although its basis for calculation is unclear. That said, there is evidence of market-specific increases in childcare provision, but the increases tend to pre-date the introduction of the NCS. So, for example, it is estimated that there were 2,900 day nurseries providing 87,500 places in 1990, increasing to 7,800 providers and 285,100 places in 2001 (National Statistics, 2001: 5). This increase has been driven by an increase in the number of private day-nursery providers, since the number of local authority-provided day nurseries actually decreased between 1990 and 2001. The other main source of full day care—childminders—has seen a dramatic fall in the number of providers and places offered in recent years. This decline started in 1996, and has therefore not been checked by the NCS. The number of out-of-school providers has increased from around 350 in 1992 to 4,900 in 2001 (National Statistics, 2001: 5).

There are spatial issues in relation to the distribution of childcare. The main concern is whether the private sector can ‘deliver affordable, high quality and sustainable childcare in every part of the country, including to the two-thirds of poor children who do not live in the most deprived areas’ (Land, 2002: 1). Land does see grounds for optimism. However, the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative (NNI) makes it clear that New Labour sees the private sector as being the childcare saviour of poorer parents.

The aim of the NNI is to fulfil the ‘Government’s ambition ... for every lone parent living in a disadvantaged area to have a childcare place when they enter work’ (Department for Education and Skills, 2001: 1), thereby meeting the needs of ‘thousands of lone parents and low income families [who] still feel that their childcare commitments stop them from working’ (Department for Education and Skills, 2000: 1). The NNI aims to create 45,000 places in 900 neighbourhood nurseries with £303 million made available by the Department for Education and Skills and the New Opportunities
Fund (Department for Education and Skills, 2001). However, McCalla et al. (2001: 72) question whether the private sector can resolve the childcare problems of poorer neighbourhoods, for the ‘assumption remains unchallenged that with a little pump-priming, the market, in all its diversity, can be manipulated to meet government targets for childcare places’.

There is also little evidence to suggest that the NCS has actually made the cost of childcare more affordable. So, for example, the Daycare Trust has calculated that between 2001 and 2002, the cost of childcare increased by 10 per cent (Bolton, 2002). This should not be particularly surprising, for the price of childcare is being maintained by the high level of demand for it and, some evidence suggests, an upward adjustment in the charges of childcare providers because of the ability of parents to claim CCTC (cf. McCalla et al., 2001: 28).

The success or otherwise of the NCS should not be a distraction for us. What is clear is that New Labour sees the NCS as being an important social policy mechanism. Our task is to understand, in the context of the ‘workfarist’ shifts that have been visible in British social policy for a decade or so, the reasons for its introduction.

Social regulation and workfarism

It is now widely recognised that economic regulation is firmly embedded in social institutions and processes. Drawing upon the French regulation school, Jessop’s approach (1991, 1994a, 1994b, 1999) has been crucial in developing this understanding. He uses regulation theory as a methodological framework with which to analyse the profound socio-economic changes that have occurred since the 1970s, and the location and role of the state, as a site of regulation, in these changes. Jessop’s approach is important for our purposes, for it recognises that the social and the economic are inextricably linked through relationships between modes of regulation and regimes of accumulation. Jessop (1994a, 1994b) demonstrates this in his theorisation of the shifting state form and role from the Keynesian Welfare State (KWS) to the Schumpeterian Workfare State (SWS) or, more recently (Jessop, 1999), from the Keynesian Welfare National State (KWNS) to the Schumpeterian Workfare Post-national Regime
This approach suggests that the shift from Keynesianism to neoliberalism has involved a re-regulation of economy through mechanisms felt to be more ‘in tune’ with the neoliberal strategy, rather than its wholesale deregulation (Jessop, 1994a). In this sense, the idea of ‘workfarism’ provides a useful way of interrogating developments in social policy, by focusing upon the way in which the SWPR subordinates social policy to the demands of labour market flexibility, and structural or systemic competitiveness. Thus, while the KWNS tried to extend the social rights of its citizens, the SWPR is concerned to provide welfare services that benefit business, and it thereby demotes individual needs to second place (ibid: 355).

While it has been observed (Grover & Stewart, 2002) that this argument runs the risk of overstating short-term change at the expense of longer-term continuity, the idea of ‘workfarism’ or ‘workfarist shifts’ has structured recent work on the regulation of labour markets through employment and social security policy (Peck, 1996, 1999; Peck & Theodore, 2000; Grover, 2003). Peck and Theodore (2000), for example, highlight ‘supply-side fundamentalism’ (a focus upon the characteristics and behaviour of non-employed people) as an important form of continuity between New Labour and its Conservative predecessors. New Labour’s interest in the supply side is widely recognised (Thompson, 1996; King & Wickham-Jones, 1998), and has led to the claim that the ‘new orthodoxy in labour market policy’, involving ‘both incentives and pressures to work in the context of a laissez-faire approach to the demand side of the labour market’ (Peck & Theodore, 2000: 734), has been consolidated under New Labour.

Grover and Stewart (1999, 2002; see also Grover, forthcoming) conceptualise this combination of financial incentives and disciplinary measures to make non-employed people take paid employment as ‘market workfare’, in order to demonstrate the ways in which social security and labour-market policy are being used to help reconstruct the reserve army of labour.

They (Grover and Stewart, 2002) argue that this was necessary because of a concern, mediated through ‘underclass’-type arguments, that non-employed people were becoming so detached from labour markets that they no longer had the economic effect of maintaining downward pressure on wages that they were supposed to have.
It is in this context that we can begin to explain the introduction and development of the NCS, for it is held to be central to the government’s welfare reform agenda, particularly in relation to lone mothers (Harriet Harman MP, then Secretary of State for Social Security, Social Security Committee, 1998, question 52). In this context, we can understand the NCS as an important element in the workfarist shifts described by Jessop and others. In other words, the NCS can be understood as being of benefit to capital, demoting any appeal to individual ‘need’ to second place. The main way in which the NCS is held to do this is through its role in the re-structuring of a gendered reserve army of labour.

**Gendering the reserve army of labour**

The industrial reserve army, during the periods of stagnation and average prosperity, weighs down the active army of workers; during periods of over-production and feverish activity, it puts a curb on their pretensions. (Marx, 1976: 792)

What Marx meant by the ‘industrial reserve army’ was non-employed people (those described as the ‘surplus population’ by classical political economists), who were displaced by various economic processes, but who were available to labour given the right economic circumstances. The reserve army, Marx argued, had the specific function of keeping wage levels and demands in check.

In conceptualising the reserve army of labour, Marx made no distinction according to gender. From the 1970s, however, a number of feminist researchers began to question the ways in which the reserve army might be structured through gender. So, for example, in studying the supply of labour during the Second World War, Summerfield (1977) argued that the employment of women to meet the demands of the war effort represented the mobilisation of the reserve army of labour. In now-familiar arguments, the development of day nurseries was held to be a means of mobilising the floating reserve as the state attempted to some extent to become ‘housewife’ (ibid.).

Beechey (1977, 1978), focusing upon the relationship between ‘the family’, the labour process and the reserve army,
suggested that married women represented a reserve army, because they could be paid a wage below the value of their labour power, since they were partly reliant on sources of income (i.e. their husbands) other than wages. She also argued that married women provided a flexible form of labour that could be brought into production and dispensed of, as and when economic conditions dictated: ‘married women have a world of their very own, into which they can disappear when discarded from production without being eligible for state benefits’ (Beechey, 1977: 57). Bruegel’s (1979) focus upon ‘disposability’ had resonances of Beechy’s work. Bruegel’s argument was also that married women could be dispersed (disposed of), in times of economic slow-down, to ‘the family’. Her evidence was that in industries where both men and women worked, women faced higher and increasing rates of unemployment compared to their male colleagues.

However, the view of women as a reserve army of labour was increasingly questioned from the 1980s. Walby (1990) summarised the criticisms when she argued that the ‘women as reserve army’ thesis was structured through internal contradictions. So, for instance, if women were cheaper to employ compared to men, why would capital undermine its own interests by disposing of their labour (rather than more expensive male labour) during periods of economic slow-down and recession? She also suggested that it was difficult to empirically sustain the ‘women as reserve army’ thesis, citing the recession years of the 1980s as an example of a period of expansion in the number of females in paid employment, while the number of employed men fell. Rees (1992: 27; see also Rubery & Tarling, 1988) argued that, because of the ways in which labour markets are gender-segregated, with women predominantly employed in certain occupations in the services sector, and men dominating manufacturing, the idea of ‘women as reserve army’ is difficult to sustain.

In later work focusing on part-time employment, Beechey (Beechey & Perkins, 1987: 133) revised her position to argue that the reserve army ‘concept is too imprecise, and has been overloaded with too many different meanings to be particularly useful’. The focus of Beechey and Perkins was on women and part-time employment. They examined the ways in which employers construe part-time employment as being ‘women’s work’, and concluded that part-time
The social regulation of lone mothers

employment was a gender-specific means of gaining flexibility. Beechey and Perkins’s research suggested that part-time employment was the result of employers’ practices that are structured through gender. In other words, employers demand part-time female labour in order to meet their own requirements for flexibility. In this interpretation, women do not represent a reserve army of labour, but a form of labour power that is to be exploited in different ways to that of men. Given the evidence of gender segregation in employment, it is clear that the different strategies of exploitation take place in well-defined labour markets.

Critics of the ‘women as reserve army’ thesis essentially argue that, on its own, it lacks the sophistication to be able deal with the complexities of contemporary labour markets (cf. Rubery, 1988). Such arguments, however, should not distract us from the conceptual usefulness that the reserve army idea still holds in relation to particular groups of women. The main problem with the thesis is that it is too broad. It has attempted to explain why women as a social group are, on average, more likely to be employed in low-paid and/or part-time sectors of labour markets compared to men. It has also tried to do this when, often in contradiction to their arguments, the importance of female labour to the accumulation process, as measured by the number of women in paid work, has increased. The ‘women as reserve army of labour’ thesis is based upon the assumption that women’s labour is not an established part of the accumulation process, but is merely an adjunct to male labour power. However, the experience of the post-World War Two period has shown how the growth in female employment means that such assumptions are unfounded. Massey (1984), for example, demonstrates how, over the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, women’s labour was sought out by British industry. This meant ‘actively using spatial differences in gender relations and between groups of women in their attempts to get out of what has become the seemingly perpetual weakness [in international competitiveness] of the British economy’ (ibid: 347). In particular, she demonstrates the importance of the cheapness of female labour to emerging accumulation strategies in areas where there was held to be a plentiful supply of it (in mining areas, for example), and in areas where wages were often supplemented by seasonal work and/or self-employment among women (for example, in Cornwall). Massey argued that females were increasingly
becoming part of the core of the workforce. It is also the case that economic restructuring towards the service sector has increased the importance of female labour, ‘both because of gender segregation by job task and because the often lower pay and more flexible contracts found particularly in private services favour women’s employment’ (Rubery et al., 1999: 22). Female labour is clearly a crucial element in a neoliberal accumulation process that is premised upon flexibility and internationalism (cf. Jessop, 1994a, 1994b).

The fact that there are well-established markets for female labour has several implications for analysing the relationship between women and the idea of the reserve army of labour. First, it means that in relation to women, the reserve army needs to be re-conceptualised in order to re-capture its original meaning as outlined by Marx.

Whole social groups should not be seen as members of the reserve army. Only those people who are not employed should be considered as part of the reserve army. In our case, it is of little conceptual use to think of women, as a social group, as a reserve army of labour, for many do have stable employment (although it is more likely to be part-time and lower-paid than men’s). Only those women not employed in the formal economy and receiving out-of-work benefits—most notably lone mothers—should be considered as the female reserve army. In other words, in analysing the female reserve army a distinction must be made between women with dependent children (mothers) and women with no dependent children, for the latter are far more likely to be in paid employment and working full-time (see Paull et al., 2002, table 4.1).

A distinction must be also made between mothers with a partner and lone mothers, for the latter are less likely to be in paid employment at all, and if they are in employment they are less likely to be working full time than the former (ibid.). In addition, the state finds it difficult to commodify the labour power of partnered mothers because of their assumed dependency upon their partners. Such mothers will only be attracted into paid employment if, given their socio-economic context, they feel that it is worth working in a financial and/or social sense.

In contrast, and as we shall see, the state has discursive and administrative levers (of which the NCS is one) through which it is able to regulate the labour of benefit-dependent lone mothers.
Second, the female reserve army should be thought of as a reserve army for labour markets that predominantly employ women. This point relates to the issues raised by Beechey and Perkins (1987) discussed above, and to those raised by Layard (1997), which are discussed below. Beechey and Perkins argued that female labour markets are constructed by employers’ views of gender, while Layard argues that one of the most important facets of the reserve army is the closeness of its relationship to labour markets. In the broadest sense, gender can be interpreted as an element in that relationship between labour markets and the reserve army. In other words, non-employed women do not have the reserve army effect of placing downward pressure on wages in labour markets predominantly employing men because, as we have seen in the work of Beechey and Perkins (1987), employers use labour in different ways according to its gender. In other words, non-employed lone mothers should be considered as a reserve army that helps to ensure that labour markets in those sectors predominantly employing females do not witness wage inflation.

Related to this point, and addressing another problem with more ‘traditional’ configurations of the reserve army, we also need to understand that the reserve army is not a fixed group of people: it is fluid, with a constant flow of individuals in and out of it. Understanding this is important, because it *changes the focus from a concentration on the status of individuals to a concentration on the relationship between the reserve army and labour markets*. This allows a more critical approach, questioning the closeness of the relationships between the reserve army and the labour markets, and the ways in which those relationships are manipulated in order to maintain economic stability, particularly through state-organised social policies.

Using this re-focused approach to understanding the gendered nature of the reserve army of labour, it becomes possible to argue that forms of long-term absence from labour markets, other than just unemployment, also undermine the reserve-army effect. Such absence most obviously includes lone motherhood.

With overall levels of employment among women increasing in contemporary Britain, there is an economic imperative to continually find ways of regulating the closeness of the relationship between benefit-dependent lone mothers and the labour markets that predominantly employ women.
Before discussing this issue in relation to the NCS, it is necessary to make the case that New Labour’s welfare reform agenda is concerned with regulating the reserve army of labour.

**New Labour and the reserve army of labour**

While Marxist analyses are now seen as analytically worn out by many social policy analysts (cf. Mullard & Spicker, 1999), the idea of the reserve army of labour’s having the effects that Marx described in relation to industrial capitalism are still recognised by economists. So, for example, the New Labour-favoured economist, Lord Layard (1997), notes how unemployed people have a role to play in the suppression of wage levels. However, his thinking takes him beyond the idea that all that is required in order for the reserve army to have its desired economic impact is its existence. In other words, just having non-employed people is not enough to guarantee downward pressure on wage inflation. What is as important as having a reserve army is the closeness of the relationship between non-employed people and labour markets. He makes the point in relation to short-term and long-term unemployment:

> In any economy there has to be some short-term unemployment to ease mobility and restrain wage pressure by providing employers with a pool of workers able to fill vacancies. But long-term unemployment appears to be largely useless as it exerts very little downward pressure on inflation. (ibid: 190)

Philpott (1997: 20) argues that this is because employers are reluctant to hire long-term unemployed people, rendering them ‘virtually unemployable’. In such interpretations, it is only short-term unemployment or economic inactivity that has the effect of maintaining downward pressure upon wages. Longer-term inactivity has no such effect in the contemporary informational economy. The skills of inactive people are held to become obsolete, as their basic work discipline and commitment to work are held to decrease.

In order to be effective in its historical role in the management of wage inflation, what seems to be more important in contemporary society is the closeness of the relationship
The social regulation of lone mothers

between the reserve army and labour markets, rather than just the phenomenon of non-employment. This is an important point, used by New Labour as a critique of Conservative government policy in the 1980s and early 1990s. Under Conservative regimes, and for various reasons related to the skills and attitudes of non-employed people and the failure to reform of the welfare state, New Labour believes that non-employed people became increasingly detached from labour markets (Brown, 1999: 11).

According to Brown (ibid.) this increased the Non-Accelerating Inflation Rate of Unemployment (NAIRU). The aim of New Labour, therefore, has been to reduce the NAIRU in order to enable more people to take paid employment without increasing inflation. To do this, ‘the labour market [is required] to work more effectively’ (HM Treasury, 1997: para. 2.04). An effective labour market is one in which labour is flexible and adaptable, and protected by ‘minimum standards’ (ibid: para. 1.08). It is in this context that it has been observed that New Labour’s welfare reform programme can be understood as consolidating the regulatory mechanisms thought to be required in order to maintain stability in neoliberal accumulation, since ensuring that labour markets work ‘more effectively’ in this way has involved widespread change to social security and employment policy (Peck, 1999; Grover & Stewart, 2002). New Labour sees its welfare reform agenda as improving the ‘effective labour supply’.

With resonances of the work of Layard, New Labour has been concerned with increasing both the size of the effective labour supply, and the closeness of its relationship to labour markets. The idea of ‘reattaching’ non-employed people to labour markets is crucial to understanding this approach (HM Treasury, 1997). New Labour relates the re-attachment of non-employed people to labour markets through the idea of ‘employability’. For New Labour, ‘employability’ is related to the skills and experience that individuals require in order to ‘keep in touch with the labour market when they lose their jobs, [to] continue to remain part of the effective supply of labour and avoid long-term dependency’ (HM Treasury, ibid: para. 4.13). However, Grover (2003) argues that the idea of employability is more concerned with lowering the costs of employing the reserve army through the subsidisation of entry-level wages, in direct—placement fees from the various New Deals—and indirect ways (tax credits, including
the childcare tax credit). What is clear, though, is that New Labour assigns the same role to ‘effective labour supply’ as Marx did to the reserve army:

The economy does not contain a fixed number of jobs. One person’s employment should not be seen as another’s worklessness. Instead by bringing workless people closer to the labour market and making them more effective at competing for jobs, total employment can be increased. With a more effective supply of labour, employers can fill their vacancies more easily and the economy can grow without hitting skills shortages or running into inflationary pressures. In a dynamic labour market, that growth leads to higher employment. (HM Treasury, 1999: para. 4.10)

However, New Labour realises that different strategies are required in order to enable non-employed people of different social groups to take their places in the reserve army. In other words, while the aim is to increase the size of the reserve army and its closeness to labour markets, there is recognition that there are barriers preventing specific social groups from joining it.

As we have seen, in the case of women with dependent children, it has been argued for many years that a lack of childcare has represented a formidable barrier to them making themselves available for employment. It is in this context that we turn to focus upon the role of the NCS in the regulation of the reserve army.

New Labour and the National Childcare Strategy: Supply-side regulation, gender and the reserve army of labour

A generation of parents has waited for the Government to introduce a national childcare strategy. From this Budget onwards, childcare will no longer be seen as an afterthought, or a fringe element of social policies. From now on, it will be seen, as it should be, as an integral part of our economic policy.

The Chancellor’s comments place the National Childcare Strategy firmly in the realm of economic policy and, as Harker (1998: 459) observes, it ‘now stands alongside other major labour market issues’. The NCS is held to be an important element of economic policy because it is concerned with the regulation of a gendered reserve army:

For many families—especially lone parents—the costs of childcare are a major obstacle to work. ... In the past, the problem of cost and access to good-quality child care had denied many parents the opportunity to rejoin the work force. Not only has that had an effect on parents’ confidence in their own abilities, but it has denied Britain a major pool of talent and potential. ... We are determined to ensure that no one is unable to take up work through lack of access to affordable, quality child care. (Dawn Primarolo, Paymaster General, in Hansard, 1999: col. 154)

For the Paymaster General, a lack of affordable childcare has essentially restricted the effective supply of labour (reserve army) and, in the context of New Labour’s welfare-reform programme, this restriction needed to be addressed if particularly lone mothers were to be able to more effectively compete for paid employment. Lone mothers can only be considered to be part of the effective supply of labour if, in the view of the government, the main barrier to their employment—their childcare needs—can be addressed.

From the 1970s, the official view was that lone mothers should have a choice as to whether they work or not in the formal economy (Department of Health and Social Security, 1974). However, a combination of social factors—for example, the ‘decline of patriarchalism’ (Castells, 1997) since the 1960s, coupled with increases in divorce, cohabitation and single motherhood—and economic factors, such as the importance of female labour power to neoliberal accumulation (Grover, forthcoming), has led to a discernible shift in attitudes towards lone mothers working in the formal economy. While, in the 1990s, the rhetoric was still about choice, policy developments moved in the direction of ‘encouraging’ lone mothers into paid work, in what we have seen Peck and Theodore (2000) describe as the new orthodoxy in labour market policy: the development of in-work relief, latterly including the Childcare Tax Credit, as the financial incentive to take paid employment, and the
development of very direct forms of labour discipline, such as the Single Work Focused Gateway (SWFG). The introduction of the SWFG means that, for the first time in the post-World War Two period, lone mothers are under the threat of benefit refusal or reduction if they do not discuss paid employment with agents of the state. As we have noted, this combination of financial incentives to take paid employment and labour discipline has been described as ‘market workfare’ (Grover & Stewart, 2002; Grover, forthcoming), in order to denote the importance assigned to income maintenance and labour market policy to neoliberal markets, and the increasingly disciplinarian nature of such policies. The importance of this argument, for our purposes, is that if income maintenance and labour-market policy is to support neoliberal accumulation, the financial incentives on offer have to be conjoined with compulsion in order to convince those not in paid employment that they should be working to secure their subsistence. In this context, the NCS should be viewed as both a complementary policy to, and also part of, market workfare, for it is aimed at creating more childcare provision (complementary), but it is also aimed, through the CCTC, at reducing the wage at which lone mothers might consider working—a crucial element of the market workfare agenda—by subsidising their childcare costs (see Grover & Stewart, 1999).

There should be little doubt that in the workfarist shifts in British social policy that have accompanied the development of neoliberalism, lone mothers are now defined as a reserve army of labour. This view of lone mothers can be found in Labour documents from the mid-1990s. For example, the Commission on Social Justice’s fifth condition for maintaining full employment was ‘a reintegration of the long-term unemployed into one labour market’, requiring ‘Help with childcare (especially for lone parents)’ (Borrie, 1994: 156). Lone mothers are merely ‘long-term unemployed’ and, like the rest of the unemployed, their relationship to labour markets was argued to be in need of being tightened:

The long-term aim should be to bring more parents within the ‘availability for work’ rules.

At present, although men with children and working-age adults without children are required to be available for employment before they can claim benefit, lone parents are not required to be available for work until their
The social regulation of lone mothers

youngest child reaches the age of sixteen. The same is true for partners in families with children receiving Income Support or Family Credit. (ibid: 239)

The report goes on to note that:

[Once] our comprehensive strategy is in place to offer parents the help they need in returning to employment—including, most important of all, good childcare facilities—it would be both appropriate and desirable to expect parents of older children to register as available for at least part-time employment if they or their partners wished to claim means-tested benefits. (ibid: 240)

While New Labour has not, as yet, gone as far as the Commission on Social Justice Report suggested, in that lone mothers are not expected to register as being available for paid employment, policy developments such as the swfg reflect New Labour’s desire for labour discipline (Gray, 1998) and its extension to an increasing number of client groups (Grover, 2003). The development of the NCS also demonstrates the importance that New Labour places upon the need for childcare in order to release the labour power of lone mothers (cf. Harman, in Hansard, 1997: col. 1085). The Neighbourhood Nurseries initiative is particularly aligned to the childcare needs of lone mothers through its ambition to offer a childcare place to every lone parent entering employment in the most disadvantaged areas.

There are at least two reasons for this alignment of childcare with the needs of families headed by lone mothers. The first relates to the main theme of this paper: that the NCS is essentially about the re-regulation of a gendered reserve army of labour. In this sense, there is greater scope for increasing the size of the reserve army through focusing policy developments on lone mothers, because a greater proportion of them, compared to partnered mothers, are not employed, a trend that became increasingly visible from the 1970s (see Moss et al., 1999, table 4: 586).

This difference in employment rates between lone and partnered mothers was one of the justifications given by New Labour for helping lone mothers with childcare and job-search activities through the NCS and the New Deal for Lone Parents (see Harriet Harman MP, then Secretary of State for Social Security, Social Security Committee, 1998:
question 45). The government has set the ‘target that 70% of lone parents [are] to be in work by 2010’. (HM Treasury, 2001: para. 4.31)

The second concern with lone mothers is a longer-term concern with the social reproduction of labour power. Duncan and Edwards (1997) argue that the two most potent discourses constructing lone motherhood are lone motherhood as ‘social threat’, and lone motherhood as ‘social problem’.

In the former, lone mothers are seen as ‘active agents’ in the creation of the so-called ‘underclass’: ‘a developing class that has no stake in the social order, is alienated from it and hostile to it, and thus is the source of crime, deviancy and social breakdown’ (ibid: 56). In the case of the latter, ‘it is social circumstances that are seen as placing both lone mothers and their children in economically and socially disadvantaged positions’. (ibid: 57)

From what we have read about New Labour so far, one could be forgiven for thinking that it reflects upon, and helps to construct, the ‘lone mother as social problem’ discourse. However, Duncan and Edwards (ibid: 59) rightly recognise that the two discourses are not mutually exclusive, in that, in the social problem discourse, ‘the absence of fathers not only causes social disadvantages, but also results in social deviancy, crime and hooliganism’. (ibid.)

It is this issue, which is essentially about the absence of particular role models in families headed by lone mothers, that links concerns about lone mothers to their labour-market position. Of particular concern to policy-makers has been the absence, in many households headed by lone mothers, of a role model in paid employment (see Grover & Stewart, 2002; Grover, forthcoming).

Without this role model, it is felt that the worklessness of households headed by lone mothers will merely be transmitted to the next generation, thereby reproducing the socio-economic disadvantage and threat of lone motherhood. In other words getting lone mothers into paid employment is held out as having longer-term effects in disciplining children into the ways of the free market:

The evidence is that a young girl who is brought up by a lone mother who is working is less likely herself to become a young lone mother than a young girl who is brought up
by a lone mother who is not working. You can understand why, of course, because it seems to be that life appears to be like getting yourself up and getting yourself off to work and that is the role model and example they set. So I think there is a short term issue about returns, but then there are also the long term issues about tackling a cycle of dependency and parents being able to be role models. (Harriet Harman MP, Education and Employment Committee, 1998: question 198)

While Harman may have justified her comments through references to social exclusion (the social problem discourse), in our context there are also direct concerns about future possible constrictions upon the supply of labour, which are linked to the social threat discourse. In this sense, and using Hayekian ideas on the importance of families in the transmission of traditional moralities, it has been noted that:

Reproduction of labour goes beyond the merely physical. In neoliberal thought, ‘the family’ is crucial for the transmission of the rules and roles which individuals will need as adults in the free market: in particular, children should learn their role as labour. In lone parent families headed by women, only the women can teach their children that role. (Grover & Stewart 2002: 93)

This focus upon social reproduction is important for thinking about the longer-term aims of the NCS, and its position within New Labour’s wider welfare reform agenda. However, it also provides an opportunity to focus on wider relationships between capital and childcare, including the development of childcare as a capitalist enterprise.

**Childcare, social reproduction and capitalism**

Through focusing on the role of childcare in producing a gendered reserve army of labour, this paper has outlined the importance assigned to the NCS in the neoliberal accumulation process. This has demonstrated the importance of childcare to production. However, it is possible to argue that the NCS is also important to production because of its role in the socialisation of social reproduction through state-sponsored benefits and services.
The socialisation of reproduction in this way benefits capital, because it once again helps to make labour as cheap as possible to employ. This point is related to Gough’s (1979: 44-45) argument that one of the two roles of state welfare benefits and services is ‘to modify the reproduction of labour power’ (original italics) and Picchio’s (1992: 97) observation ‘that the more labour is embodied in its reproduction the less it costs the employer’.

In the case of childcare, there are at least two benefits that come from the intervention of the state via the NCS. First, the costs of reproduction are subsidised by the state, meaning that employers do not have to consider increasing wages in order to ensure that their female employees can afford childcare. Second, the involvement of the state in the childcare aspects of the reproduction process actually means that capital is relieved of the need to invest in its own childcare services to recruit and retain staff.

Meeting the Childcare Challenge (Secretary of State for Education and Employment et al., 1998: 6) notes that: ‘Employers are key to the success of the National Childcare Strategy and we want to ensure they are fully aware of the business benefits of family friendly policies’. Employers do seem to be aware of the benefits of such policies, with 90 per cent agreeing that ‘people work best when they can balance their work with other aspects of their lives’ (Secretary of State for Education and Employment, 2000, cited in Strategy Unit, 2002: 29).

However, when it comes to providing childcare support, ‘efforts to increase their [employers’] involvement have so far met with limited success’ (Strategy Unit, 2002: 16). It is now recognised that the main ‘stakeholder’ missing from debates about childcare are employers with, for example, only 2 per cent of employers providing workplace childcare facilities and only 1 per cent subsidising nursery places (ibid.).

This means that those sectors of capital that are reliant upon female labour are benefiting from having their production costs subsidised by institutional and individual taxpayers, and National Lottery game-players, the poorer of whom we know to spend more of their income playing such games (Sproston, 2001, tables 4.6 and 4.8). In other words, the funding arrangements for childcare mean that those sectors of capital employing mothers with dependent children are essentially being subsidised by those sectors of
The social regulation of lone mothers

capital that do not have large numbers of such employees, and by those individuals that do not have children.

In some analyses, this might be welcomed as a transference of resources from men to women, and from those without dependent children to those with children. However, it is equally the case that female workers, including those who are mothers and paying for formal childcare themselves, are subsidising the production costs of capital through NCS which, along with New Labour’s wider welfare-reform agenda, helps to institutionalise the split between the costs of production and reproduction.

So far, this paper has been concerned with the role of the state in the socialisation of childcare as part of the social reproduction process, and the benefits to capital that this brings. However, with the emphasis being upon the private sector as the main provider of childcare, we can also examine childcare as part of production, for it is a commodity produced in competitive markets for the consumption of parents who want, or who are ‘encouraged’ by the state, to take paid employment. Through the NCS, the state has been heavily involved in the promotion and subsidisation of childcare as a commodity, the production of which can be highly lucrative.

It is estimated that in 2001, the UK childcare market (day-nurseries, childminders and nannies) was worth some £3 billion per annum (Sketchley, 2001, table 12: 19). There has been particularly rapid growth in the nursery sector, where it is estimated that the market was worth £360 million in 1990, rising to a little over £2 billion by 2001, with growth of around 20 per cent per annum in the first half of the 1990s, and between 10 and 15 per cent in the second half (Blackburn, 2002: 22-23). It is predicted that ‘[g]rowth in the children’s nurseries market is likely to remain strong’ because ‘childcare demand remains high, and the government is committed to further funding’. (ibid: 23)

The majority of children’s nurseries are stand-alone enterprises operated by sole traders or partnerships. It is estimated that, in terms of the number of places, only about 15 per cent of the nursery market is controlled by what are defined as ‘major providers’ (those owning or managing three or more nurseries). (ibid: 31)

However, it is thought that future growth in nurseries is likely to come from such providers as they seek to exploit economies of scale and scope, through expansion by
consolidation and/or the building of new nurseries (ibid: 40-41). Related to this point, evidence of global interest in the UK’s childcare markets is beginning to emerge. So, for example, in the year 2000 the American company Bright Horizons Family Solutions Inc. entered the day-nursery market in the UK, through the purchase of the Nurseryworks chain of nurseries (Blackburn, 2002), while Asquith Court School Ltd (the largest provider of day-nurseries in the UK) was bought by West Private Equity, a global investment bank, in 2001 (Sketchley, 2001).

There is confidence that childcare markets are worth investing in. So, for example, venture capitalists, who typically look for a ‘return on equity of approximately 25-30% compounded over a 3-5 year period’ (ibid: 36), have taken an increasing interest in the nursery market. They are encouraged by the profitability of some of the main providers. In 2000/2001, for instance, the Happy Childcare group of nurseries reported pre-tax profits of 37.8 per cent of revenue, while Asquith Court reported pre-tax profit of 8.9 per cent of revenue (ibid: table 5.4: 34-35). Not all nursery chains reported such healthy levels of profit in 2000/2001, but losses made by major day-nursery providers were due to the relatively high start-up costs of opening nurseries in a period of rapid expansion. However, it is noted (Blackburn, 2002: 37) that in the ‘current climate, investors, and nursery businesses are optimistic about future financial and operational performance’.

As with most capitalist enterprises, the main cost to childcare providers is wages. It is estimated, for example, that between 50 and 55 per cent of revenue in day-nurseries is used to pay wages (Blackburn, 2002: vi), while the Daycare Trust (cited in Sketchley, 2001: 22) estimates that 80 per cent of the running costs of day-nurseries are accounted for by wages.

However, given the profits, as outlined above, which some nursery providers are making, it is clear that capital is able to extract a fairly healthy level of surplus value from childcare workers. The childcare sector is notorious for its low rates of pay, a fact emphasised by market analysts for potential investors (for example, Sketchley, 2001; Blackburn, 2002). There are two, related reasons for this. First, the vast majority (98-99 per cent) of the childcare workforce is female (Cameron et al., 2002), and we know that female employees are poorly paid compared to men (Equal Opportunities
Commission, 2003: 6). Second, Cameron et al. (ibid: 575) link the predominance of women working in childcare to what Singer (1993) describes as ‘attachment pedagogy’: ‘the idea that mother care is needed for secure development and argues that, in its absence, non-maternal care needs to be modelled on a dyadic mother-child relationship’. In this line of thinking, what children in childcare require is substitute mothering.

What attachment pedagogy actually does though, is to help to reproduce the idea that caring work is ‘natural’ for women and that, being part of their biological profile, it is not a very valuable commodity. This translates into very low levels of wages for childcare workers. Using Labour Force Survey data, for example, Cameron et al. (2002) found that the average earnings of childcare workers, at £4.19 per hour, was only about two-thirds of the average (£6.29 per hour) for all female workers.

New Labour has set a target (6 per cent by 2004) for getting more men employed in childcare. However, the idea that childcare work is ‘women’s work’ was reproduced in the literature outlining the NCS in discussion of the potential use of welfare reform to commodify the labour power of lone mothers:

Parents, particularly lone parents, are a key potential source of childcare and play workers. Parents should be encouraged to recognise the skills they acquire as parents as they bring up their own children. These skills stand them in good stead to take up training as childcare workers. (Secretary of State for Education and Employment et al., 1998: para. 2.22)

There was recognition that potential childcare workers might need some persuasion that childcare work was for them, and it was therefore suggested that up to 50,000 childcare workers could be supplied to employers through the New Deals (ibid: para. 2.21). In other words, the government was contemplating creating a supply of labour for childcare enterprises from the very group—lone mothers—that it thought had the most to gain from the NCS. While the government did recognize that childcare work was a skilled occupation, those skills were held to be gender-specific to mothers, and in this particular case, more specifically lone mothers.
Conclusion

Capital has a great deal to gain from the introduction and development of the NCS. We have seen that the NCS should be analysed as part of the shift towards workfarism that we have witnessed over the past two decades or so, for it aims to help consolidate neoliberal accumulation by helping to commodify the labour power of particularly lone mothers, thereby helping to ensure effective competition in the labour markets that mainly employ women. In addition to the benefits this brings such sectors of capital in restraining wage costs in a general sense, the socialisation of reproduction through the NCS also helps to constrain wage costs, by divesting capital of any responsibility that it might be felt to have towards the longer-term reproduction of labour power.

In addition, because it is held by the state that the private sector is the best source of delivery for the socialised aspects of childcare, the NCS has been particularly beneficial for childcare enterprises, which are effectively being subsidised by workers and other working-class people.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Simon Duncan and Elizabeth Harlow of the Department of Social Sciences, Bradford University, and Keith Soothill, Sue Penna and Carole Truman of Lancaster University, for their helpful and stimulating comments on earlier drafts of the paper. Thanks, also, to the two referees for their observations, which helped focus the arguments of the paper.

References


Equal Opportunities Commission (2003) How can suitable, affordable childcare be provided for all parents who need to work? (Equal Opportunities Commission) Manchester.


