

Self help

Clinton, Blair and the politics of personal responsibility

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What, then, should the new relationship between society and individual consist of? First, it involves a new concept of citizenship, in which rights and responsibilities go together... As is so clear the more you examine the rise in crime and social disorder in Britain, the problem has been that the Left has tended to undervalue individual responsibility and the Right has ignored the influence of social conditions...

A modern notion of citizenship gives rights but demands obligations, shows respect but wants it back, grants opportunity but insists on responsibility.

Tony Blair, 8 July 1993¹

This morning we want to talk about teen pregnancy, because it is a moral problem and a personal problem and a challenge that individual young people should face and because it has reached such proportions that it is a significant economic and social problem for the United States...

This is not a problem that can be solved in Washington...

Ultimately, I believe what is needed on this issue is a revolution of the heart. We have to work to instill within every young man and woman a sense of personal responsibility.

Bill Clinton, 29 January 1996²

The language of personal responsibility has come to occupy a prominent place in the political discourse of the American and British centre-Left, at least since Bill Clinton borrowed the rhetoric of family values and personal responsibility from the Republicans during the 1992 US presidential campaign. Now employed by both the Right and much of the centre-Left, this language conservatively shapes how social and economic problems are conceived, including their causes and solutions.

We ignore political discourse at our peril. What may seem like hot air to citizens and political ana-

lysts alike has concrete political effects. The terms of political debate determine which issues are perceived as political – and thus put on the agenda – and what role government will play in addressing these issues. Murray Edelman, for example, writes that particular definitions of problems and enemies reinforce particular ideologies, subject positions and exercises of authority.³ Others influenced by Gramsci's theories of hegemony and common sense, such as Stuart Hall and Anna Marie Smith, insist on the importance of looking beyond narrow definitions of political discourse to the politics operating within cultural and moral debates. They point out that a political party or movement becomes hegemonic when it succeeds in normalizing (or naturalizing) its conception of the world – in making its world-view part of the cultural and political common sense, while simultaneously discrediting alternative world-views. In this way, the movement's political framework becomes the unquestioned interpretive background against which everyday politics is conducted and perceived.⁴

Modelling my study of the language of personal responsibility on Smith's and Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon's analyses of political discourse, I argue that this keyword⁵ both permits and excludes – to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the extent of its hegemonic status – certain types of policy approaches and certain types of defences and criticisms of these policies.⁶ Although discursively framing political issues in a particular way, this rhetoric tends to portray its interpretations and solutions as obvious and commonsensical, thereby 'conceal[ing] its own partiality, historicity and contingency' and 'pretend[ing] to perform merely the a-political and innocent recognition of "facts"'.⁷ The assumptions and norms operating in the language of personal responsibility, especially as articulated by Clinton and by those on the American

and British Right, are often sexist, heterosexist, racist and class-biased. Furthermore, in conjunction with typically weak conceptions of employer and government responsibility, this rhetoric works to individualize political problems by attributing them to the moral (or character) failings of individuals. This directs attention away from the structural – whether social or economic – factors contributing to such problems.⁸ The language of responsibility consequently enables leaders and citizens to appear justified in shifting the burden of solving political problems from government to individuals.

Responsibility according to Clinton

During the 1992 US presidential campaign, vice-president Dan Quayle not only decried television character Murphy Brown's lack of family values; he also claimed that many of the country's social problems were caused by a lack of values such as personal responsibility. In a speech in which he discussed the 1992 Los Angeles riots, Quayle bemoaned the 'poverty of values' and claimed that 'the lawless social anarchy which we saw [in the riots] is directly related to the breakdown of family structure, personal responsibility and social order'.⁹ While the language of personal responsibility was not absent from the Bush administration, Quayle amplified its usage, and Bill Clinton enthusiastically adopted it for his own Democratic election bid.¹⁰ Eight years later, the Democratic and Republican candidates in the 2000 US presidential campaign are still utilizing the rhetoric of personal responsibility.¹¹

In Britain, Tony Blair has employed this rhetoric at least since 1991. In 1995 John Pilger complained, 'Labour is being Americanised. Much of Blair's rhetoric seems to have been taken word for word from Clinton's early speeches.' Blair's language and vision, Pilger says, 'endorses Thatcher's view of the "bootstraps" society', according to which the 'unemployed, the low paid, single parents, the sick and the homeless are to assume "responsibility" for decisions in which they have taken no part'.¹² Clearly Blair's language of personal responsibility represents a move to a more individualistic approach, as noted by Andrew Gamble: 'The significance of new Labour is not so much an endorsement of explicit items of Thatcherite policy, although this is extensive enough, but the acceptance that if socialism is to regain its appeal then it has to reconnect with the radical egalitarian individualism of the Enlightenment from which it was born.'¹³ Yet, as theorists as diverse as Steven Lukes and Fred Dallmayr have argued, the individualism of the Enlightenment was 'a mixed blessing'.¹⁴

In many respects, the language of personal responsibility, and of values in general, reflects a type of cultural politics found not only in the rhetoric and policies of a previously long-triumphant Right, but also in the scholarship of both conservative and leftist scholars. According to such cultural politics, the solutions to social and economic problems lie only partly, if at all, in government action; they also lie in cultural transformation – that is, a reform of citizens' values and characters.¹⁵ For example, scholars studying inner-city poverty, such as Christopher Jencks, Lawrence Mead and William Julius Wilson, call for more personal responsibility and/or moral renewal. Despite their seeming theoretical and ideological distance from individualism, communitarian scholars concerned with the family similarly cite a shortage of personal responsibility. It has been argued that such academic arguments are partly behind at least Clinton's adoption of the language of personal responsibility.¹⁶

The individualist nature of both Blair's and Clinton's cultural politics is readily seen in their speeches. Claiming that the 'only way to rebuild social order and stability is through strong values, socially shared, inculcated through individuals and families', Blair asserted in a 1995 speech that 'a communitarian philosophy' is needed for Labour 'to move beyond the choice between narrow individualism and old-style socialism'.¹⁷ In his 1997 Labour Party annual conference speech, Blair asserted that Britain 'should be a compassionate society. But it is compassion with a hard edge.' In addition, he argued that improving the nation and solving its problems were 'a task for a whole people, not just a government'.¹⁸ Similarly, Clinton declared in his 1994 State of the Union address that the 'American people have got to want to change' their values and habits in order for government programmes to have any effect. After listing various government initiatives concerning crime, health care and welfare, he immediately tempered his calls for government action with the assertion that the problems of the USA 'go way beyond the reach of Government', because they are 'rooted in the loss of values, in the disappearance of work, and the breakdown of our families and our communities'.¹⁹ In Clinton's speeches, this alleged loss of values most significantly involves a loss of personal responsibility.

Although Blair clearly views teen pregnancy as a problem and worries about family breakdown and the lack of role models, Clinton's rhetoric and policies concerning teen pregnancy are framed even more explicitly in terms of personal responsibility.²⁰ Clinton portrays teen and unwed pregnancy as serious social

problems in part because he insists that an important aspect of responsible behaviour is getting married before having children and thus being part of a traditionally defined family – that is, a two-parent family headed by a heterosexual, married couple.²¹ In one speech, Clinton claimed that the ‘single biggest social problem in our society may be the growing absence of fathers from their children’s homes, because it contributes to so many other social problems... Without a father to help guide, without a father to care, without a father to teach boys to be men and to teach girls to expect respect from men, it’s harder.’²²

Clinton proposed to solve the problem of teen pregnancy through a ‘revolution of the heart’ and a national campaign to ‘instill within every young man and woman a sense of personal responsibility’. Given Clinton’s analysis of the problem, government’s role is limited to educational programmes teaching teens the value of personal responsibility and welfare ‘reform’ provisions. According to Clinton, the old welfare system undermined personal responsibility by providing, without condition, benefits to unwed teen mothers. Hence, welfare needed to be reformed, Clinton claimed, so that it would not encourage young women to have children outside marriage or to establish separate households apart from their parents or grandparents.²³

Yet, in focusing on personal responsibility, Clinton fails, with one exception, to consider the structural factors behind young women’s childbearing, such as poverty, rape and incest, and the larger sexualized social and cultural settings in which children and teens grow up, including the societal patterns of adult behaviour. In addition, by defining responsible behaviour as requiring that pregnancy be postponed until women are married, Clinton fails to take into account the difficulties some, especially African-American and poor, women face in finding suitable marriage partners. With declining black marriage rates paralleling a decline in the percentage of employed black men, Judith Stacey argues that marriage may be becoming ‘a form of racial privilege’ due to African-American men’s high rates of unemployment and incarceration.²⁴ Insisting that women with few potential marriage partners delay pregnancy until they marry is thus racist and class-biased, as well as sexist and heterosexist in demanding that women raise children with men.

Clinton did propose a government programme to address one structural factor contributing to teen pregnancy: many young women’s lack of access to a college education.²⁵ Because women with more promising educational and career prospects tend to delay

childbearing, Clinton’s programme of tax deductions and credits may help decrease pregnancies among some lower- and middle-class teens.²⁶ But this policy – like other Clinton programmes such as unpaid family leave – is unlikely to help the most economically disadvantaged.²⁷

In addition to insisting that welfare be ‘reformed’ so that it does not encourage teen pregnancy, Clinton argues, as does Blair, that welfare ‘reform’ must move mothers off welfare and into ‘work’ – that is, paid employment. In making this argument, they invoke the language of personal and parental responsibility: one must take responsibility for economically supporting oneself and one’s children. Clinton also explicitly insists that one must take responsibility for showing one’s children the ‘dignity of a real job’ and instilling in them the values of work and responsibility.²⁸

Denied in the rhetoric of responsibility and work, though, is the acknowledgement that child-rearing and domestic labour *are* work, as opposed to idleness or nonproductive activity. In fact, they are forms of labour that many Western industrialized democracies remunerate with government payments. Although they offer different solutions to the problem of welfare, both the Right and much of the Left assume, according to Eva Kittay, ‘a conception of the citizen based upon a male model of the “independent” wage earner. Both see the person on welfare as someone who can be incorporated as a full citizen only by fulfilling the role of the “independent” wage earner’. This conception of citizenship and responsibility ignores the necessary and valuable labour of dependency or care workers and renders them invisible. Gwendolyn Mink rightly argues that ‘lacking earnings for their economic and social contributions, women who work full- or part-time as care-givers for their children [or for their elderly, disabled or sick relatives] are ideologically unequal in a political culture that prizes income-producing work as the currency of virtue’. Moreover, welfare reform that cuts women’s benefits or forces them into jobs paying poverty wages increases some women’s dependence on male partners, including abusive ones, and/or employers, even particularly exploitative ones.²⁹

Moreover, Clinton’s explicit claim that responsible behaviour requires that pregnancy be postponed until women are financially able to support their children is also problematic because it obscures the gender-related structural factors behind women’s poverty. Such factors include gender and racial discrimination in the labour market and in career advancement, a shortage of affordable and quality child care, and the lack of universal health care benefits.³⁰ Consequently,



because of either short-term economic hardships or long-term poverty, a significant number of women fail to meet Clinton's financial criteria for the entire eighteen or so years it takes to raise a child.

In addition to gender-specific causes of poverty, Clinton's description of welfare as a temporary source of assistance and 'a second chance' ignores the extent and severity of poverty in the USA.³¹ As poverty rates and the decline (until very recently) in real wages indicate,³² there are whole classes of Americans who

can expect 'hard times' more or less permanently and/or have never had a 'first chance' allegedly to squander.³³ By demanding that poor women wait until they are securely middle class before having a child – an unobtainable position for many – Clinton's rhetoric and policy proposals effectively deny poor women, who are disproportionately women of colour, the right to have children.³⁴

Clinton's class bias and racism can also be seen in his contradictory application of the language of responsibility to the issues of family leave and welfare. On several occasions, Clinton referred to his signing of the Family Leave and Medical Leave Act as promoting personal and parental responsibility.³⁵ Under the family leave definition of parental responsibility, employed parents get to exercise their parental responsibility by taking time off from their jobs to care for their children. Yet, under welfare 'reform', welfare recipients are denied the opportunity to abstain from paid employment in order to care for their children, since they are forced to exercise their parental responsibility by taking jobs outside the home. According to the family leave definition, the only citizens who can easily be 'responsible' parents are the economically secure middle and upper class who can afford to take unpaid family leave.³⁶

As with teen pregnancy and welfare, Clinton's language of personal responsibility stresses individualistic, moral explanations of African-Americans' social and economic problems and de-emphasizes explanations that point to racial discrimination and structural racist factors. In one speech on racism, Clinton asserted that the problems of black people cannot be remedied by government 'social programs unless there is first more personal responsibility'.³⁷ Moreover, Clinton disingenuously claimed that he and other whites are not being racist when they insist that personal responsibility is a precondition for solving such problems as welfare dependency, out-of-wedlock pregnancy and absent fatherhood.³⁸

Clinton also views racial discrimination as a problem of responsibility, as seen in his assertion that 'at its base, this issue of race is not about government or political leaders; it is about what is in the heart and minds and life of the American people. There will be no progress in the absence of real responsibility on the part of all Americans'.³⁹ Smith points out, though, that political discourses like Clinton's that seek to end racism simply by changing individual attitudes are still working within a racist framework. Clinton's portrayal of racism as a problem of individual psychology and prejudice – to be overcome

through responsible reflection and dialogue – is racist because it obscures the non-psychological, non-attitudinal sources of racism. The latter exist in economic, political and social structures, as well as in the ‘racist representations and logic ... thoroughly intertwined with’ various political and cultural discourses.⁴⁰

The historical roots

The size and scope of government expanded dramatically during the twentieth century with the creation of the British and (smaller) American welfare states and the adoption of Keynesian macroeconomic policies. This expansion represented a departure from the *laissez-faire* models of government found in the classical liberal theories of Adam Smith and the American Founders. But popular support for the welfare state and Keynesian policies meant that it was largely accepted – something close to common sense, at least among many segments of the population – that government should have a significant role in regulating the market and addressing social problems, with the British accepting this to a greater extent than Americans.⁴¹ Yet Blair’s and Clinton’s language of personal responsibility and policies clearly continue a several-decades-long movement away from such Keynesian, social-democratic and New Deal conceptions of the role of government. Like their immediate predecessors, Blair’s and Clinton’s actions and rhetoric echo the British and American political traditions of classical liberalism dating back to the seventeenth century.

Seventeenth-century liberal political theorists viewed government as a constructed, artificial device for the protection of property and for the maintenance of an orderly relation of exchange. Following Hobbes, they conceived ‘of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them’, and thus free from dependence on the wills of others. Despite this conception of the (abstract) individual, these theories denied the independence of (white male) wage labourers, who were considered to be dependent on the will of employers. Moreover, both Puritanism and Locke held that, due to the natural equality of men, all men were equally capable of ‘shifting for themselves’ and thus only had themselves to blame for their poverty. As is often the case today, to be poor and/or without property was perceived to be a sign of moral corruption.⁴²

Concerning the relation between economics and politics, Locke argued that property, market exchange, and even men’s consent to an unequal accumulation of property were all prior to the institution of civil society.⁴³ By grounding individual freedom in property

over oneself and one’s possession, Locke’s theory amounted to an argument for limited government. Furthermore, his justification of economic and political inequality relieved government of the responsibility to address the social and material deprivation of the poor. But it was only with eighteenth-century theories like that of Adam Smith that the economy was viewed as self-regulating. While Smith himself did not completely reject a role for government intervention in the economy, his notion of an ‘invisible hand’ paved the way for more radical *laissez-faire* theories. Such conceptions of the economy reinforced liberalism’s tendency to see economic relations as private and nonpolitical. In the *Wealth of Nations* Smith argued that the natural effort of every individual to better his own condition is sufficiently capable of carrying on the society of wealth and prosperity. Social good comes from the pursuit of private interest, guided as this interest is by the hidden hand.⁴⁴ As a result, Smith and other late-eighteenth-century liberals increasingly assumed that government regulation potentially interfered with the smooth functioning of the economy and infringed on individuals’ ability to pursue their interests freely. This essentially depoliticized the concept of property. For while property had previously been linked to sovereignty and thus to power over other humans, it came to refer only to power over things. This redefinition consequently obscured the power inherent in property – that power over things is a form of power over people.⁴⁵ In these various ways, Locke’s earlier depoliticizing of economic relations was compounded.

At roughly the same time, several developments were contributing to a transformation in liberalism’s conception of independence: the increase in wage labour due to industrialization; radical Protestantism’s arguments against dependency and hierarchy; and the extension of political rights to white male workers.⁴⁶ For example, several decades after the American Revolution, Tocqueville described (white male) Americans as overwhelmingly characterized by their independence and individualism: ‘Freed from the king, feudal traditions, roots, and connections, he [the American citizen] saw himself simply as an entity rather than a part of a larger social or moral whole’, and thus ‘owed nothing to any other and expected nothing; he stood alone, confident he controlled his whole destiny, thrown back forever upon himself alone.’⁴⁷ Adam Smith had argued, as early as the 1760s, that the spread of commerce and manufacturing gave workers a new-found independence vis-à-vis the dependence of servants.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Fraser and Gordon argue



that '[w]hen white workingmen demanded civil and electoral rights, they claimed to be independent. This entailed reinterpreting the meaning of wage labour so as to divest it of the association with dependency.'⁴⁹ Such a redefinition clearly had the effect of making the notion of independence less tied to considerations of economic power and equality – thereby doing much to depoliticize the economic relation of wage labour.

This redefinition was facilitated, though, by the construction of new forms of dependency, that of women, paupers and non-whites (e.g. colonial subjects and slaves). Fraser and Gordon argue that in addition to the growing association between wage labour and independence, “‘dependency’ need not always refer to a social relation; it could also designate an individual character trait’ – that is, an individual moral or psychological shortcoming. Then, beginning in the late nineteenth and through the mid-twentieth centuries, ‘a distinctive welfare-related use of “dependency” developed’, at least in the USA, which was ambiguous in its meaning. Dependency ‘slipp[ed] easily, and repeatedly, from an economic meaning to a moral/psychological meaning’. But with the official end of the socio-legal and political dependency of women and non-whites during the twentieth century,

‘it became possible to declare that equality of opportunity exists and that individual merit determines outcomes’. This meant that structural sources of dependency were (and are) commonly thought to have disappeared. Henceforth, dependence was considered to be the result of some moral or psychological – that is, *individual* – failing.⁵⁰ This most recent transformation in the meaning of dependence represents the most radical depoliticization of the independence/dependence distinction. It is most clearly from this vantage point that the liberal, individualist conception of personal responsibility might be seen to represent the conjunction of a depoliticized notion of independence and of economic relations: according to the norm of personal responsibility, individuals are required to support themselves and their family financially by engaging in wage labour and to solve their social and economic problems on their own.

In the US context, the language of responsibility can also be linked to two developments during the 1950s and 1960s: the white middle-class fear of moral degeneracy and the related ‘discovery of poverty’. Like earlier in American history, the white middle-class image of

the poor, who were (and are) disproportionately people of colour, came to ‘represent what the middle class feared most in itself: softening of character, a lack of firm internal values’. The poor were (and are still) assigned character traits opposite from those that the middle class claimed for itself: ‘the poor person lived for the moment, unable to think ahead, to save or plan for the future’, while the middle-class person was imagined to have ‘self-discipline, a strong superego, an ability to plan ahead to meet self-imposed goals’. Such images have a significant impact on how poverty and social problems, particularly those associated with the poor, are conceptualized and addressed. Ehrenreich states that because the poor are seen as lacking the inhibitions and drive required for economic success, ‘[i]t was not poverty that had to be cured, only the culture of poverty. Before the poor could be made affluent, they had to be made “human beings”’, meaning they had to be inculcated with middle-class values.⁵¹

Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, conservatives and eventually many liberals began to argue that most social problems were caused by a decline in ‘traditional values’ among certain portions of the popu-

lation. Moreover, this loss of values could be traced back to government and, more specifically, to government aid to the poor. Charles Murray, for instance, argued that 'the expanded social-welfare measures of the 1960s created poverty by undermining the fragile assumption ... that adults are responsible for the state in which they find themselves'. Welfare caused poverty by encouraging a culture of 'dependency', in which the poor saw no need to form stable families, work for a living, or otherwise honour America's 'traditional values'.⁵² Clearly such an emphasis on 'culture' and values can be seen in both Clinton's and Blair's calls for welfare reform. In fact, Clinton described the (old) welfare system in almost identical terms as Murray: how it was grossly at odds with the American values of work, family and responsibility and how it actively *contributed* to the decline of these values.⁵³

The language of responsibility is also linked to current economic common sense. In his study of capitalist common sense, Fred Block traces contemporary economic common sense to Christian, especially Puritan, religious traditions teaching salvation through discipline and self-denial. Block cites Ronald Reagan's rhetoric and policies as an obvious example: Reagan

described the primary sin as the abandonment of the traditional American ethic of self-reliance. The collective individual had prospered for many years through hard work and self-discipline, but at a certain point this person had become lazy and looked to government to solve problems through regulations and benefit programs.... The only solution was for the body politic to return to the path of the straight and narrow by dramatically reducing its dependence on the state.⁵⁴

By focusing on individual agency and responsibility, such economic common sense plays an important ideological function in diverting attention away from structural conditions and differential power relations. It instead blames bad economic conditions on the vice of individuals.⁵⁵ In this light, Clinton's (and Blair's) rhetoric and policies have much in common with Reagan's (and Thatcher's) in terms of locating the solution to economic and social problems in the reform of individuals' character and not in government or community efforts to alter structural conditions or relations.

The political effects

The language of personal responsibility primarily associates responsibility with employed individuals in traditional family structures and with the activities and opportunities typically open to white men, rather than to women or non-white men. Simultaneously, it

defines irresponsibility in terms of familiar demon figures: those supposedly lacking in values such as responsibility and thus failing to conform to traditional family arrangements and to support themselves financially through paid labour. Disproportionately poor, non-white and female, these demon figures are particularly credible targets for two closely related reasons. First, they resonate with past demonizations and constructions of British and American identity. Ronald Takaki argues that simultaneous to the construction of (white male) American identity and norms around rationality and individualism was the portrayal of blacks as embodying the opposite traits. Whereas whites were 'self-made men' oriented toward work and achievement, black people lacked 'incentive to industry', 'moral restraint', the principle of 'accumulation', and control over the 'animal part'. Functioning also as a warning to white people, historic (as well as current) images of black people 'defined deviancy and served in effect to discipline whites, especially working-class and immigrant groups', who were sometimes described in almost identical terms to blacks.⁵⁶ Second, these contemporary demon figures (supposedly) embody those character traits the white middle class has historically been most anxious about finding in itself. Because the vilification of teen mothers, welfare recipients and irresponsible blacks is apparently credible for a significant number of people, the efforts of politicians like Clinton and Blair to hegemonize their neo-liberal politics and to discipline those violating white middle-class norms of hard work and family values are more likely to succeed.⁵⁷

That demonizations of (allegedly) irresponsible African-Americans enable the construction of white identity and norms of responsibility appears starkly in Clinton's language of personal responsibility, especially in his discussion of racism and the social and economic problems of blacks. In a speech given on the day of the Million Man March, Clinton argued that the 'great potential for this march today, beyond the black community, is that whites will come to see a larger truth, that blacks share their fears and embrace their convictions.... This march could remind white people that most black people share their old-fashioned American values.'⁵⁸ Not only are white people more virtuous than black people ('remind white people that *most* black people...'), but 'old-fashioned American values' are white values and thus the standard or norm against which black people are measured ('most black people *share*...').⁵⁹

In addition to being credible demon figures, these historic and contemporary demonizations position

poor people, people of colour, and teen mothers as the greatest threats to the social order by connecting them, both explicitly and implicitly, to a range of social and economic problems that are a source of anxiety among ordinary citizens. Such problems include economic restructuring and globalization, changes in family structures and gender roles, changes in the racial composition of the country, and resentment over affirmative action. Consequently, demonizations of these alleged figures of irresponsibility serve a crucial role in the legitimization of neo-liberal policy measures that claim to solve such social and economic problems through the restoration of responsibility among these wayward segments of the population.⁶⁰ Accusing the poor of a lack of responsibility, for example, obscures the structural causes of poverty and consequently enables political leaders to minimize the role of government in solving the problem. The language of personal responsibility thereby reinforces a depoliticized conception of the economy, a conception which often serves to justify governments' half-hearted efforts to achieve social justice or equality.

Defining responsibility largely in terms of engaging in paid labour is also dangerous for the Left, in the sense that it suggests that a well-ordered society requires all of its citizens to participate in paid labour. Furthermore, defining good citizenship largely in terms of personal responsibility reflects an impoverished and ultimately pathological notion of democratic citizenship. As scholars such as Michael Sandel have argued, self-government and the ability to deliberate democratically require far more from citizens than an ability to support themselves through wage labour. More specifically, liberal conceptions of citizenship and freedom – and political institutions informed by such conceptions, like those in the USA – actually undermine self-government.⁶¹

By moving the political centre to the Right, the language of personal responsibility politically mobilizes and demobilizes various parts of the public, affecting elections and other forms of political pressure on leaders. Because the main parties of the Left and Right are increasingly similar, if not indistinguishable, on some issues, the increasing absence of political alternatives seems to exacerbate some citizens' sense of apathy and/or cynicism.

The privileging of particular versions of the values of family, work and responsibility implies a denigration of those other values which provide a basis for challenging neo-liberalism. Equality, community and dignity, as well as certain forms of independence, are ignored or given insufficient consideration. While both

Blair and Clinton pay extensive lip service to the value of community, their commitment to it is called into question by their more common rhetoric of personal responsibility.

Notes

1. Tony Blair, *New Britain: My Vision of a Young Country*, Westview Press, Boulder CO, 1997, p. 218.
2. Bill Clinton, 'Remarks Announcing the National Campaign to Reduce Teen Pregnancy', 29 January 1996, *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents (WCPD)*, vol. 32, no. 5, pp. 127–9.
3. Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988, pp. 12, 82.
4. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, International Publishers, New York, 1997, pp. 330–31, 335; Stuart Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show', in Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, eds, *The Politics of Thatcherism*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1983, pp. 28–9; Stuart Hall, 'Gramsci and Us', *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, Verso, London and New York, 1988, pp. 167–8; Anna Marie Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain, 1968–1990*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 28–9, 31, 36–7, 63.
5. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1985, p. 15. Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon explain: 'A crucial element of politics ... is the struggle to define social reality and to interpret people's inchoate aspirations and needs. Particular words and expressions often become focal in such struggles, functioning as keywords, sites at which the meaning of social experience is negotiated and contested. Keywords typically carry unspoken assumptions and connotations that can powerfully influence the discourse they permeate – in part by constituting a body of doxa, or taken-for-granted commonsense belief that escapes critical scrutiny.' Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, 'A Genealogy of "Dependency": Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State', in Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition*, Routledge, New York, 1997, p. 122.
6. Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, 'Contract versus Charity', *Socialist Review*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1992; Nancy Fraser, 'Clintonism, Welfare and the Antisocial Wage: The Emergence of a Neoliberal Political Imaginary', *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1993; Smith, *New Right Discourse*; Anna Marie Smith, 'Why Did Arney Apologize? Hegemony, Homophobia, and the Religious Right', in Amy E. Ansell, ed., *Unraveling the Right: The New Conservatism in American Thought and Politics*, Westview Press, Boulder CO, 1998.
7. Smith, *New Right Discourse*, p. 36.
8. Fraser, 'Clintonism, Welfare and the Antisocial Wage', pp. 12, 18. See also Zillah Eisenstein, 'Theorizing and Politicizing Choice in the 1996 Election', in Clarence Y.H. Lo and Michael Schwartz, eds, *Social Policy and the Conservative Agenda*, Blackwell, Malden MA, 1998, p. 259.
9. Quoted from Judy Keen, 'Values Issue Comes Full Circle', *USA Today*, 22 September 1992, p. 2A.
10. George Bush, 'Remarks at the 1992 President's Din-

- ner', 28 April 1992, *WCPD* vol. 28, no. 18, pp. 724–5; E.J. Dionne, Jr. 'Guess Who Lost Bush's Agenda? Bush – And Clinton Found It', *Washington Post*, 2 August 1992, p. C1.
11. For Bill Bradley's usage, see Steve Kraske and Scott Canon, 'Gore, Bradley Trade Barbs', *Kansas City Star*, 9 January 2000, p. A1; for Al Gore's, see Ceci Connolly, 'Candidates Stake Claims to Middle: Values May Be Out Front in Campaign Wars', *Washington Post*, 12 May 1999, p. A3; for George W. Bush's, see Richard Cohen, 'Clinton's True Legacy', *Washington Post*, 8 October 1999, p. A29; for Quayle's, see Toby Eckert, 'Quayle Opens Bid for 2000: Calls for Social Conservatism', *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 15 April 1999, p. A2.
 12. John Pilger, 'Behind Blair's Mask', *New Statesman & Society*, 3 February 1995, p. 16.
 13. Andrew Gamble, 'The Legacy of Thatcherism', in Mark Perryman, ed., *The Blair Agenda*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1996, p. 35.
 14. Fred Dallmayr, *Twilight of Subjectivity: Contributions to a Post-Individualist Theory of Politics*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1981, p. 9; Steven Lukes, *Individualism*, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1973, pp. 149–53.
 15. Thomas Meyer, 'The Third Way at the Crossroads', *International Politics and Society*, March 1999; Stuart White, 'Which Way? The Third Way and the Puzzle of New Labour', *Harvard International Review*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1999, pp. 55–6.
 16. 'The Underclass: Absent Men', *Economist*, 22 August 1992, p. 22; Jean Elshtain et al., 'A Communitarian Position on the Family', *National Civic Review*, vol. 82, no. 1, 1993; Judith Stacey, 'The Right Family Values', in *Social Policy and the Conservative Agenda*.
 17. Blair, *New Britain*, pp. 208–9.
 18. Blair, 'Labour Party Annual Conference Speech', 30 September 1997, <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/textsite/info/releases/index.asp/speeches/speechlist>. Unless noted otherwise, Blair's speeches are cited from this website.
 19. Clinton, 'Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union', 25 January 1994, *WCPD*, vol. 30, no. 4, p. 156.
 20. See, for example, Blair, 'Labour Party Annual Conference Speech'; 'Valuing Families', in *New Britain*.
 21. Bill Clinton, 'Remarks to the American Nurses Association', 18 June 1996, *WCPD*, vol. 32, no. 25, p. 1070; 'Remarks at Georgetown University', 6 July 1995, *WCPD*, vol. 31, no. 27, pp. 1197–8.
 22. Clinton, 'Racism in the United States: The Responsibility of Fatherhood', 16 October 1995, *Vital Speeches*, vol. 62, no. 3, p. 78.
 23. Clinton, 'Remarks on Receiving the Teen Pregnancy Report', 13 June 1996, *WCPD*, vol. 32, no. 24, pp. 1056–7; 'Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union' 25 January 1994, pp. 150–51.
 24. Stacey, 'Right Family Values', p. 280.
 25. Clinton, 'Remarks on Receiving the Teen Pregnancy Report', p. 1057.
 26. Mike Males, 'Adult Liaison in the "Epidemic" of "Teenage" Birth, Pregnancy, and Venereal Disease', *Journal of Sex Research*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1992, p. 543.
 27. Anna Marie Smith, 'Feminist Activism and Presidential Politics: Theorizing the Costs of the Insider Strategy', *Radical Philosophy* 83, May–June 1997, p. 29.
 28. Clinton, 'Message to the Congress Transmitting the "Work and Responsibility Act of 1994"', 21 June 1994, *WCPD*, vol. 30, no. 25, pp. 1320–21; 'The President's Radio Address', 10 December 1994, *WCPD*, vol. 30, no. 50, p. 2491; 'Letter to Congressional Leaders on Welfare Reform', 6 September 1995, *WCPD*, vol. 31, no. 36, pp. 1508–9. Blair, 'Labour Party Annual Conference Speech'; 'New Deal for Young People'; 'Beveridge Lecture'.
 29. Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency*, Routledge, New York, 1999, pp. 29, 118–19, 121, 124, 142; Gwendolyn Mink, 'The Lady and the Tramp (II): Feminist Welfare Politics, Poor Single Mothers, and the Challenge of Welfare Justice', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1998, p. 58; Iris Marion Young, 'Mothers, Citizenship, and Independence: A Critique of Pure Family Values', in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1997, pp. 121–2, 125; Fraser, *Justice Interruptus*, pp. 42–50; Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*, 2nd edn, Vintage Books, New York, 1993.
 30. Young, 'Mothers, Citizenship, and Independence', pp. 118–23; Kittay, *Love's Labor*, p. 142.
 31. Clinton, 'The President's Radio Address', pp. 2491–2; 'Statement on Signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996', 22 August 1996, *WCPD*, vol. 32, no. 34, p. 1489.
 32. 'Approximately 50 million Americans – 19 percent of the population – live below the national poverty line. Those in poverty include one in four children under the age of 18, one in five senior citizens, and three of every five single-parent households.... In constant dollars, average weekly earnings for workers went from a high of \$315 in 1973 down to \$256 in 1996, a decline of 19 percent.' Editorial, *Nation*, 12–19 January 1998, p. 3.
 33. Fraser, 'Clintonism, Welfare and the Antisocial Wage', p. 17.
 34. In his list of 'social problems of profound implications' in one particularly revealing speech, Clinton included 'declining birth rates among successful married couples': 'Remarks at Georgetown University, pp. 1190–91. Unfortunately, Clinton did not explain what makes this 'problem' a problem.
 35. Clinton, 'Interview with Mike Siegal of KVI Radio, Seattle, Washington', 3 November 1994, *WCPD*, vol. 30, no. 45, p. 2289; 'Remarks to the American Nurses Association', pp. 1068–9.
 36. Fraser, 'Clintonism, Welfare and the Antisocial Wage', pp. 14–15.
 37. Although Blair does not appear to talk about solving racism or the problems of minorities in terms of responsibility, he has made two speeches in which race and responsibility are oddly and suspiciously linked. In both, he seems to suggest that in fighting prejudice, the old Left rightly strove for equality and opportunity, but did not demand enough responsibility. *New Britain*, p. 206.
 38. Clinton, 'Racism in the United States', pp. 76–7.
 39. *Ibid.*, pp. 77–8; see also 'Remarks to the NAACP National Convention in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania', 17 July 1997, *WCPD*, vol. 33, no. 29, pp. 1090–91; 'Remarks on Receiving the Teen Pregnancy Report', p. 1055.
 40. Smith, *New Right Discourse*, pp. 144–5.
 41. Concerning Britain, see Hall, 'Gramsci and Us', pp. 163–4; regarding the USA, see Evan Watkins, *Every-*

- day Exchanges: Marketwork and Capitalist Common Sense, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1998, pp. 11–21.
42. C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1962, pp. 1–3, 61, 134, 222–7, 243–5.
 43. *Ibid.*, pp. 197–8, 208–9.
 44. See here Mark Neocleous, *The Fabrication of Social Order: A Critical Theory of Police Power*, Pluto Press, London, 2000, ch 2.
 45. *Ibid.*
 46. Fraser and Gordon, ‘Genealogy of “Dependency”’, pp. 126–7.
 47. Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th-Century America*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1990, pp. 3–11, 74, 72; see also Lukes, *Individualism*, p. 13.
 48. Neocleous, *The Fabrication of Social Order*
 49. Fraser and Gordon, ‘Genealogy of “Dependency”’, pp. 126–7.
 50. *Ibid.*, pp. 126–31, 136.
 51. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, Harper Perennial, New York, 1989, pp. 29–41, 50–56.
 52. *Ibid.*, pp. 168–9, 173–83, 185.
 53. Clinton, ‘Message to the Congress Transmitting the “Work and Responsibility Act of 1994”’, p. 1320; ‘President’s Radio Address’, p. 2491; ‘Letter to Congressional Leaders on Welfare Reform’, pp. 1508–9.
 54. Fred Block, *The Vampire State, and Other Myths and Fallacies about the US Economy*, New Press, New York, 1996, pp. 15–17; see also Watkins, *Everyday Exchanges*, 11–22, 19–20.
 55. Block, *Vampire State*, p. 18; see also Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, pp. 25–7, 78–9.
 56. Takaki, *Iron Cages*, pp. 11, 125–7.
 57. Smith, *New Right Discourse*, pp. 31–2.
 58. This statement is also problematic in suggesting that it is important that African-Americans do things to placate whites’ (supposedly) justified fears and suspicion, thereby putting the burden of ending racism on African-Americans. Clinton, ‘Racism in the United States’, p. 77.
 59. Clinton’s racism is less blatant than traditional forms of racism because, rather than condemning all blacks, his language of responsibility only explicitly criticizes (supposedly) irresponsible blacks. This language thus attempts to appear moderate by differentiating between ‘good blacks’ who share white Americans’ values and ‘bad blacks’ who do not. Smith, *New Right Discourse*, pp. 115, 19–21.
 60. Smith, *New Right Discourse*, pp. 31–2, 216.
 61. Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent: America In Search of a Public Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1996; see also C.B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977.