

GENDER AND AUSTERITY IN POPULAR

CULTURE

Femininity, Masculinity
and Recession in Film,
TV and Literature

EDITED BY
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'Thatcher's Bloody Britain!': Unemployment and Gender in Neoliberal Britain in *The Young Ones* and *Men Behaving Badly*

Lauren Pikó and Evan Smith

Even as the goal of full employment was reluctantly conceded by 1970s Labour governments, it was only in the 1980s – under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government – that unemployment was reconfigured as an inevitable – even, ironically, a desirable – aspect of a thriving, post-industrial British economy. This radical change in government policy was not merely a shift in political direction but was accompanied by a transformation in cultural values around the role of work and unemployment. Through an examination of the ways that popular English television programmes from the 1980s and 1990s reflected and constructed ideas of unemployment as inevitable (and almost desirable), this chapter will explore the evolving acceptance and normalisation of unemployment on British television between 1979 and 1997, the Thatcher to John Major years.

Focusing on two specific popular British comedy programmes, *The Young Ones* (1982–1984) and *Men Behaving Badly* (1992–1998), we trace how attitudes towards work and unemployment shifted from the early years of Thatcherism to the Major years, moving from something undesirable and controversial with the electorate to something unavoidable and necessary in order to keep other parts of the economy afloat, such as

inflation rates. In *The Young Ones*, the high unemployment of Britain in the 1980s is portrayed as a political disaster and a symptom of a country on the brink of collapse. For the students of Scumbag College, the future looks bleak, with the only jobs available for Rick (Rik Mayall), Vyvyan (Adrian Edmondson), Neil (Nigel Planer) and Mike the Cool Person (Christopher Ryan) being in the police or the army. Similarly, *Men Behaving Badly* is situated in the era when the students of the 1980s have become adults. Now in their mid-thirties, they are stuck at the lower end of the social mobility ladder supposedly offered by Thatcher's 'popular capitalism'. Under John Major's Conservative Government (November 1990 to May 1997) which succeeded Thatcher's reign, the socio-economic situation stagnated after the 80s, with the limited economic 'choices' on offer being only dead-end middle management desk jobs as occupied by Gary (Martin Clunes), or unemployment, shown to be a sheltered yet pleasant experience for Tony (Neil Morrissey), but depressing and threatening for Deborah (Leslie Ash).

By tracing representations of young male unemployment from Thatcher's election in 1979 through to the 1990s, we see the depiction of unemployment increasing as a cultural norm on British television to become a newly acceptable feature of the economic and social landscape. Yet in *Men Behaving Badly*, the neutralised and carefree male experience of unemployment is haunted by Deborah's darker, more threatening experience. Through the portrayal of gender and unemployment in these British comedy programmes, we see a retreat from outright political resistance to the individualism of the lounge room; in other words, the depoliticisation and neutralisation of unemployment. Via this longer historical lens and emphasis on cultural construction, these programmes reveal the normative anchors that underpin the gradual political acceptance of radical policy changes instigated by the Thatcher government.

Work under Thatcher

One of the lasting legacies of the Thatcher governments was a fundamental shift in how Britons work. Government policy from 1945 to 1979 was marked by bipartisan support for 'full' employment and an assumption that this was a viable economic target which would ensure utmost productivity and international competitiveness. In practice, this meant that governments

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regulated in favour of supporting existing economic patterns such as majority full-time employment provision, a national economic emphasis on manufacturing and heavy industries, and ensuring stable and continuous patterns of job provision. The Thatcher government was elected in 1979 on a policy platform which constructed the economic crises of that year as a 'Winter of Discontent', wherein the failings of the existing economic order had enabled over-powerful trades unions to hold the Callaghan government to ransom on wage claims (Tomlinson, 2000, p. 49). Throughout the subsequent Thatcher governments, this almost apocalyptic narrative of state crisis was repeatedly deployed to justify drastic changes to state economic policy in favour of neoliberal and monetarist ideologies. Cuts to state welfare provision and increasingly confrontational industrial relations policies were central to this process. Part of the intended effect of these changes was to alter cultural expectations and practices around employment, with unemployment now presented in monetarist terms as a necessary condition of a competitive marketplace, and with casual, part-time and insecure work becoming more widespread.

Under this new economic regime, the ideal of full employment was dismissed as a form of interventionist socialism, while substantial policy deregulation opened up the British economy to an especially drastic transition to post-industrialism. This process was not only celebrated by Thatcher governments but was specifically leveraged to weaken organised labour while creating conditions more favourable to globalise financial capitalism. While Harold Wilson's Labour government (1964–1970) had championed the idea of a post-industrial Britain, this had been part of a wider technocratic enthusiasm for the 'scientific revolution' (Wilson, 1964, p. 14), and was in tension with the party's avowed support for domestic heavy industry. Under the Conservatives from 1979, however, post-industrialism helped facilitate an already ideologically desirable shift away from a heavy-industrial economic base, while framing the resistant remnants of that base as 'the enemy within' (Haviland, 1984, p. 1). This divide-and-rule approach exacerbated wider global economic shifts and effectively devastated the local economies of Britain's industrial regions in a short space of time (Evans, 2013, p. 33.)

The human cost of these policies was compounded further by the use of monetarism to cut inflation during the government's first term. This contributed

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to a sharp rise in unemployment, which peaked at 3.2 million in 1985 (Evans, 2013, p. 47). The introduction of policies which exacerbated unemployment levels at the same time as deregulating the private sector and decreasing state support for individuals contributed to a situation where millions became unemployed, wages for those in work stagnated in comparison with corporate profits, and formerly unionised heavy industries went into terminal decline, from which parts of the country have never recovered.

Into this climate *The Young Ones* was broadcast; it first appeared on BBC television in late 1982. At this time, Britain had experienced two monetarist budgets by the Chancellor Geoffrey Howe and the ramifications of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) which had been unveiled in the 1980 budget. This economic and industrial agenda resulted in a far-reaching steel strike in January 1980, riots across Britain in the summer of 1981, the launch of the People's 'March for Jobs' campaign and a revolt of 'the wets' (those who opposed Thatcher's monetarist policies) within the Conservative Party. However, the greatest material, social and cultural effect that Thatcher's early monetarist policies had on Britain was the rapid rise in unemployment.

'Unemployment haunted British culture in the early 1980s', wrote Richard Vinen (2010, p. 125), something which is evident in *The Young Ones*. The Conservatives had campaigned successfully in 1979 on the high level of unemployment under Labour (1,299,300 in May 1979), but the figures increased significantly under Thatcher during her first term in office, so that by January 1982, it had reached 3 million (Levitas, 2005, p. 44). Remaining high until 1986, an elevated level of unemployment was seen as a necessary evil and the price to be paid for curbing inflation by the Thatcher government. In her autobiography, Thatcher herself wrote about this:

Other ministers [...] believed that unemployment over three million – the figure now predicted – was politically unacceptable [...]. My own analysis was entirely different: the way to achieve recovery was to ensure that a smaller proportion of the nation's income went to government, freeing resources for the private sector where the majority of people worked.

(Thatcher, 1993, p. 148)

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While unemployment reached high levels nationwide, it was especially damaging for ethnic minorities, women and young people, with unemployment for those under the age of 24 rising to 1.2 million in 1981 (Stewart, 2013, pp. 85–86). *The Young Ones* was very much aimed at this demographic and it portrayed the limited choices facing British youths in the early 1980s, with unemployment referred to continuously throughout.

***The Young Ones* and Unemployment in the Early 1980s**

Janine Uttell has written that *The Young Ones* 'challenge[d] the hegemony of Thatcherism', using laughter to highlight the 'profound ruptures and transformations in society' under Margaret Thatcher's Prime Ministership (Uttell, 2009, pp.152–53). *The Young Ones* debuted on the BBC in November 1982, but it developed from the evolution of the 'alternative comedy' scene that emerged in the late 1970s and gained momentum in the early 1980s.¹ The 'alternative comedy' scene emerged as a reaction to the leading styles of comedy that existed in Britain in the 1970s largely characterised by racist and sexist comedians who had toured the country's working men's clubs, as well as the Oxbridge-educated and middle-class sitcoms that dominated British broadcasting at the time. The idea for *The Young Ones* came from Rik Mayall – a graduate of Manchester University, alongside Edmondson and co-writer Ben Elton – who imagined a traditional sitcom scenario (four students sharing a flat) injected with political edge, slapstick violence and surrealism. Within this dynamic, *The Young Ones* offered insights into how the seismic shifts already discussed were popularly perceived while parodied from the 'margins of society'.

In *The Young Ones*, the issue of unemployment is referred to in several episodes. In the episode 'Demolition', the 'yoof' TV programme *Nozin' Around* includes a segment on unemployment. The female presenter Maggie explains it this way:

more young adults are becoming unemployed on account of they can't find work! Basically, the problem is this: if you haven't got a job, then you outta work! And that means only one thing – unemployment.

(*'Demolition'*, series one, episode one)

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This simplistic reduction of unemployment to being 'outta work' resembles the cynical thinking of the Conservatives that viewed it as unrelated to underlying structural issues, such as the shrinking economy or the effect of monetarist policies. Rather, it was depicted as a naturally occurring phenomenon, which chiefly afflicted the unmotivated, while those who looked for work would be rewarded for their efforts. This sentiment drove Norman Tebbit's comment at the 1981 Conservative Party conference that during the Depression his father had not rioted due to unemployment, but rather '[h]e got on his bike and looked for work' (Haviland, 1981, p. 1). Both Jones (2012) and Tyler (2013) have shown how under Thatcher employment was transformed into a measure of a person's worthiness and moral standing, and that those who were unemployed were seen as abject entities readily discarded by the state.

Unemployment and the search for work is the main focus of the episode 'Cash', when the group decide unilaterally that Neil must get a job. After looking through the 'situations vacant' section of the newspaper, it emerges that the *only* job advert is for the Army. The advert says:

JOIN THE PROFESSIONALS, IT'S GREAT! YOU CAN HAVE
A GUN IF YOU WANT! AND THERE'S MONEY IN IT (NOT
THE GUN). H.M. ARMED FORCES.

('Cash', series two, episode two)

This advert is a parody of the advertising campaign of 'Join the Professionals' by the UK armed forces in the late 1970s–early 1980s, which sought to attract significantly more recruits to the Army. In reality, the campaign attempted to emphasise 'more of the distinctive professional volunteer ethos in a similar way to the pre-First World War Army' (Lamonte, 2010, p. 33), but when depicted in *The Young Ones*, the campaign reduces it to the seemingly important things for young unemployed men in the 1980s – money and the chance to fulfill a typical boyhood fantasy of using a weaponised gun. The parody advert in the show satirises the appeal to this fantasy, but the actual campaign was also criticised by the UK armed forces for its 'Hollywood' approach (Chappell, 2005, p. 9).

'Cash' emphasises the dire economic situation of the time and the lack of suitable employment for many youth. The Army and the police were state

institutions that did not experience the same spending decreases as other government agencies under Thatcher.² Traditionally these professions were avenues for jobseekers with few qualifications and/or limited experience, so were seen as an option for the young within the unemployed population.

Importantly, employment in the Army and the police were also considered masculine and socially acceptable expressions of state power within the new neoliberal landscape. As deindustrialisation and unemployment swept through the north of England (and Scotland and Wales), the notion that unemployment was causing a 'crisis of masculinity' was widespread with the effect that the traditional identity of the British working class man was being eroded (Bruegel, 2000, p. 79). Since the end of the World War II, manufacturing (and similar industrial jobs) were seen to offer 'viable if restricted options for working-class males' and, as Nayak indicates, '[h]owever arduous these jobs were, they were seen to provide stability, life-long labour, masculine camaraderie, and a pride in either "craft" or "graft"' (2003, p. 7). In the 1980s (and throughout the 1990s), deindustrialisation removed the economic importance of many men who had been employed in a skilled, manual labour capacity and, for many, deindustrialisation also removed a sense of identity and notions of 'manhood'. As Gibson-Graham says of the similar depiction of unemployed steelworkers in the award-winning film *The Full Monty* (1997), 'Not merely unemployed, the men are impotent and politically immobilized' (1999, p. 63).

Although the students in *The Young Ones* and the older unemployed men in *The Full Monty* represent just two sections of British society considered marginal within the new neoliberal political/economic framework, the students of Scumbag College *resisted* the status quo by avoiding submission to the dominant gender paradigms of the time. While employment in the police and the armed forces *were* refuges for men whose traditional employment options were cut off by the changing economic landscape, entrance into these hyper-masculine vocations required conformity to their practices; deviation was generally not tolerated. This notion is explicitly satirised in 'Cash' when Neil is pushed into trying to join the armed forces. After getting his long hippy-ish hair (half) cut by Vyvyan and donning an ill-fitting suit grudgingly rented from Mike, Neil – on his way to enlist – is told by Vyvyan's hamster, Special Patrol Group, 'Don't tell them

you're a pacifist' ('Cash', series two, episode two). After being pushed through the doors of the Army Careers Information Office by the other three, Neil is then forcibly thrown out and onto the pavement (and into a line of 'normal' young men looking to enter the office), remarking, 'I only said I was a pacifist!' ('Cash', series two, episode two). Following rejection by the Army, Rick then spots a recruitment poster at the front of a local Metropolitan Police station that says 'We take absolutely everyone', and so the group pushes Neil into the building. Here, Neil is welcomed by the comedian Alexei Sayle who is dressed as Benito Mussolini (parodying the left-wing concept of the police as 'fascist' [Smith 2014]). Despite informing him that he did not think he was 'correctly job motivated' to join the police, Neil is told that the only thing you need to know how to do to become a police officer is go 'CCCCCHHHH' (the sound of static over a police radio) ('Cash', series two, episode two).

With a lack of new manual labour roles being created across the 1980s and 1990s and a large number of job losses in manufacturing in the 1980s, academic qualifications were seen as a path to more stable employment (Bruegel, 2000, p. 88). But even if you had a qualification, finding a job in the 1980s remained difficult, something demonstrated in the episode 'Summer Holiday', also the final episode of the series. Here, Rick, Vyvyan, Mike and Neil find themselves homeless, living on the streets, and Rick blames Thatcher directly for this:

Thatcher's Britain. Thatcher's bloody Britain! Look at me. I'm young, I'm pretty. I've got 5 O Levels. Bloomin' good grades as well, considering I didn't do a sod of work cause I'm so hard. And look at me now! Homeless, cold, and prostitute.

('Summer Holiday', series two, episode six)³

Rick's words highlight the precarious position that young people started to find themselves in under Thatcher's government, particularly as the high level of unemployment increased in conjunction with a squeeze on available and affordable housing, the effect of which was a sharp rise in the number of youth on the streets of British cities, especially London. In 1980, the Thatcher government introduced the Housing Act, which allowed councils across the country to sell off much of their existing housing under the so-called 'right to buy' scheme,⁴ but as Richard Vinen has noted, while

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more than a million council homes were sold in the 1980s, only around a sixth were bought by their tenants, with most being bought as investments (Vinen, 2010, pp. 202–03). This policy exposed many lower-class Britons, especially young people, to crooked landlordism and exploitative rent increases, and combined with high youth unemployment, a greater number of British youth were made homeless in the early 1980s as a result.

The Young Ones ends with the four young men attempting to escape their current destitute situation through crime. After successfully robbing a bank and escaping on a double-decker bus, Rick is more optimistic about the future and looks to throw off the shackles of Thatcherism:

Who needs qualifications? Who cares about Thatcher and unemployment?! We can do just exactly whatever we want to do! And you know why? Because we're Young Ones. Bachelor boys! Crazy, mad, wild-eyed, big-bottomed anarchists!

(‘Summer Holiday’, series two, episode six)

The four of them sing Cliff Richard's popular hit ‘Summer Holiday’ (a song that celebrates taking time off work), even though they are all homeless, unemployed and, effectively, on the run. In the concluding scene – also the last of the series – Rick's optimism turns out to be short-lived as Neil drives the bus through a billboard plastered with a Cliff Richard poster and then off an actual cliff a few seconds later. This final symbolic moment, which marks the death of the young ones, functions as a heavy-handed message which suggests that the only way out of the miseries of Thatcherism and unemployment were crime or death.

Portrayals of Women in *The Young Ones*

Considering gendered experiences of unemployment in 1980s Britain, Beatrix Campbell asserted that ‘women are the poorest of all’ (Campbell, 1984, p. 57). Although the period follows the momentous gains of the 1970s and the second wave of feminism, women largely remained victims in both the private and public spheres – facing exploitation or unemployment in the workplace while still being the major contributor to uncompensated domestic work in the household. Yet, for all its radical critique, *The Young Ones* was male focused in its treatment of gender and unemployment, and

hardly considered how Thatcherism affected women. This not only reflects the masculine focus of the alternative comedy subculture at the time, but also a wider shift in how progressive movements in Britain viewed women and women's liberation. By the 1980s, the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s had splintered into many different guises. Some forms of feminism in the 1980s were derided in otherwise progressive or radical circles as 'middle class', 'bourgeois' or 'identity politics', and thus feminism was, in many instances, effectively ignored as a side issue (Weir and Wilson, 1984, pp. 74–103; Bruley, 2014, pp. 155–72).

Such attitudes towards women by ostensibly 'progressive' men are evident in *The Young Ones*, particularly in the show's narratives and the limited number of characters played by women in the series. The lip-service paid to feminism is also apparent in the micro politics of numerous scenes and particularly when Rick, the student lefty 'right on' stereotype, tries to emphasise his anti-sexist credentials in front of the group. In the episode 'Bambi' (series one, episode one), for example, when Rick, Vyvyan and Mike are discussing why a woman named Mary does not go to parties and Vyvyan describes her as 'the one with the enormous tits', Rick tells him off for 'being so sexist'. On the surface this seems like a feminist critique of sexism, but Rick's calling out of Vyvyan is undermined by the facetiousness of the following exchange:

RICK: They're called breasts, and everybody has them.

VYVYAN: Well, I don't.

RICK: Yes, and nor did Adolf Hitler!

('Bambi', series one, episode one)

Vyvyan then describes Mary as 'Ol' Yellow Pages',⁵ and Rick, in his usual sanctimonious 'right on' manner, says 'I believe some of the more politically unsound members of the University call her that'. But, once Vyvyan explains to Mike how Mary gained her nickname, Rick relishes gossiping about her anyway, snivelling 'Anyway, Mary decided not to go to the party, for the obvious reason' ('Bambi', series one, episode one). Here, Rick admonishes Vyvyan for his use of sexist language, but then contradicts his 'feminist' perspective by indulging in gossip about women's sexual activities. This highlights that while many 'progressive men' made an effort to publicly make pro-feminist statements and pay lip-service to the notion of

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treating men and women equally, the same men often fell back into traditional sexist habits and judged women on their sexual behaviour, a double standard they rarely applied to (other) men.

The difference in attitudes towards the sexual behaviour of men and women can also be seen in the episode 'Time' (1984), when Rick pretends that he has slept with a woman who he finds in his bed one morning. Even though he brags about this non-existent conquest, he tries to balance male bravado with a superficial non-sexist attitude:

NEIL: You mean, you, like, scored with a chick?

RICK: Well, of course, I wouldn't put it in such sexist terms, Neil, but yes [...]

Even when I'm unconscious, I can pick up the birds. I mean, forge meaningful relationships with birds ... chicks ... tarts ... women. Women!

('Time', series two, episode four)

Here, Rick tries to resist lapsing into sexist language, but it is only with the last lines of the exchange that his anti-sexist attitudes are foregrounded as a façade, reverting back to traditional sexist language of the young male under peer pressure.

'Time' further shows that even for 'progressive' men, sexual conquest has often been seen as a testament to their masculinity. After the woman, Helen Mucus, reveals that Rick did not, in fact, sleep with her, Vyvyan describes Rick as a 'girly virgin' and proceeds to violently berate Rick for this ('Time', series two, episode four). Indeed, throughout the series, the term 'girly' is used frequently as an insult between the male students. However, the episode 'Nasty' (series two, episode three) also features a scene where sexual conquest is seen as *the* defining quality of manliness. Fearing being bitten by a South African vampire (actually an enterprising electronics salesperson played by Sayle), Vyvyan announces that vampires only attack virgins and that if anyone does get bitten, then everyone will know that they are a 'sissy virgin'.⁶ Each of the group, even when facing death, seeks to maintain their 'manly' façade by declaring that they are not virgins. Mike, who passes himself as a 'ladies' man' throughout the series, is put under pressure here; he is shown to

be as scared as the rest of his housemates about their virginity being revealed, but he confronts the issue directly saying 'OK, guys! There's only one way out! We've all got to lose our virginity!' ('Nasty', series two, episode three). However, the young men are ultimately saved from revealing their seeming emasculation as virgins as well as from having to lose their virginity to each other when the sun comes up and the vampire is killed.

For the most part, women were alien to the male world that the group occupied. This is obvious in 'Time' when the presence of a strange woman in the student house causes the students to act manically as they each try to impress her in their own strange ways: Rik dances to monks chanting on the radio, Vyvyan does push-ups, Neil loses the ability to speak properly, and Mike jokes about Helen taking off her clothes. But another example of the 'foreignness' of women to the group can be seen in the episode 'Interesting' (series one, episode five) when Rick goes through a party guest's handbag and thinks that a tampon is a toy mouse, which he proceeds to dip in the woman's drink, while the rest of the party look on disgusted. Significantly, then, the presence of women further infantilises the men, whose experiences of unemployment and economic precarity have already placed them outside traditional male adult economically functional roles.

Although many famous female comedians and actresses appear in *The Young Ones* – including Jennifer Saunders, Dawn French, Helen Atkinson-Wood and Emma Thompson – the roles they play within the show are small. *The Young Ones* was, effectively, a male-orientated show and reflected the concerns of young men as Britain underwent significant economic, political and social change. It shows that even for men who viewed themselves as 'progressive', women continued to be objectified as sexual 'things' and as something to measure one's status and masculinity by, particularly when other factors, such as employment, were no longer available. Through keeping this primary focus on men's experiences, *The Young Ones* satirises the emotional immaturity of its characters while implicitly linking this to their regressive leisured experience of unemployment. The main characters are both satirised and celebrated for existing outside traditional economic roles, and for the way in which this experience confuses their relationship to conventional masculinity.

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***Men Behaving Badly*, Work and Unemployment**

By the time of the Major and Blair governments in the 1990s, the abandonment of full employment policy was complete and substantial unemployment rates were now accepted as a feature of the political landscape. As Hugo Young writes, 'How to stop worrying and live with unemployment was one of the principal lessons Thatcherism administered to the country, and it achieved a permanent social shift in the process' (1990, p. 534). By 1987, the Thatcher government's economic policies were more widely accepted and it was that year in which the government returned its largest electoral mandate, as well as a stock market crash following a brief inflationary boom. The ensuing recession officially lasted until 1992 and not only fed the increasing precariousness of a neoliberalised workforce, but destabilised the increasing numbers of lower- and middle-income mortgagees who had purchased homes under the Chancellor Nigel Lawson's drive to increase home-ownership.

In October 1990, the month before Thatcher's resignation, unemployment rose to 10.9 per cent from its November 1989 level of 7.7 per cent, rivalling the levels of the early 1980s (Campbell, 2009, p. 453). Unemployment reached another peak of 10.6 per cent (3 million) in the first quarter of 1993 (Jenkins, 2010, p. 35). While these figures slowly declined by 2004, and were far from celebrated, the political and media response to such fluctuations was distinctly more muted than had been the case when unemployment figures approached one million in the early 1970s (Turner, 2008, p. 103). It was into this environment that the BBC sitcom *Men Behaving Badly* rose to prominence. Based on his 1989 novel of the same name, Simon Nye's first television series premiered on ITV's London franchise Thames Television in 1992. The programme followed housemates Dermot (Harry Enfield) and Gary (Martin Clunes) as they negotiated contemporary sexual politics. Following Enfield's departure at the end of the first series, Neil Morrissey's character Tony was introduced as a more bohemian, carefree foil to Gary's reluctant embrace of traditional economic responsibilities. When the programme moved to BBC1 in 1994, it was given a post-watershed timeslot, allowing it greater scope to cover adult content. This pushed the programme to greater success and increased audience numbers.

As the programme become more popular from 1994 onwards, it began to engage substantively more with the binary gender dynamics with which it had experimented in series one. Despite Clunes' protestations that '[the show's] not about anything', plotlines repeatedly debated specific topics covering differing gender attitudes to pornography, monogamy, fitness, sex and financial responsibility (Abbott, 2013, n.p.). Through explicitly debating contemporary masculinity and femininity, *Men Behaving Badly* became understood in British media as typifying the rise of 'lad culture'. Peaking in popularity as a concept in the mid-1990s, 'laddism' was loosely understood as a juvenile, hyper-consumerist form of masculinity reacting against women's increased presence in public life, and usually attributed to working-class or newly affluent young males (Gill, 2003, p. 47).

Lads at Play? *Men Behaving Badly* and Unemployment

Despite its association with 'laddism', *Men Behaving Badly*'s central male characters are in their thirties and they locate themselves explicitly as outside mainstream youth culture. Emphasising 'laddism' as a descriptor for the show has tended to limit focus on its other main preoccupation: the relationship between employment and leisure, both forced and unforced. Within the limitations of its overtly cisgendered and heteronormative binary logic, *Men Behaving Badly* sets up the experience of work and unemployment as fundamentally informed by gender roles and expectations, but also as a space of real and pervasive anxieties and uncertainty.

During its most popular series, running story arcs focused on the differing experiences of unemployment experienced by Deborah and Tony, and the tensions between the tedium of enforced leisure and the unfulfilling nature of secure work. Tony's past work life is itinerant; in 'Rich and Fat' (series five, episode six), he announces that he has had 72 jobs since leaving school. When Tony's character is first introduced in series two, he runs a used record stand at a local market; by series three this business has 'collapsed', not due to the recession, as Deb suspects, but rather due to being quite literally knocked over by a strong gust of wind ('Bed', series three, episode two). Tony eventually gets a job as bartender at the local pub, but then he loses it only to successfully reapply, thus

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creating a pattern of recurring unemployment interspersed with spells of underemployment.

Tony makes a rare political comment about this experience during a brief stint volunteering with elderly people, suggesting they are 'both regarded by an uncaring world as an underclass' ('Infidelity', series four, episode two). He also attempts briefly to embrace a 'new age' money-free lifestyle before being laughed out of that choice by Dorothy. Yet further critiques of capitalism or of the precarious job market is precluded by Tony's generally enjoyable experience of unemployment as an extension of his leisure time. His time is spent mainly watching children's television and drinking on Gary's sofa (for example, 'Lovers', series three, episode one). His enjoyment of idly 'having a sit' during the day is thus ridiculed but nonetheless presented as luxurious and enjoyable ('Stag Night', series six, episode one). Tony's unemployment is portrayed as a perpetual state of child-like abandon, where his 'laddish' alcohol consumption and refusal of emotional adult responsibility are compounded by his gleeful enjoyment of lacking an adult economic social role.

Tony's emotional regression is a major target of satire in *Men Behaving Badly* yet this experience of unemployment is consistently presented as safe and even luxurious. Tony nominally pays rent for living in Gary's flat, however it is implied (heavily) that this rent is never paid. Indeed, Tony goes backpacking around Europe while unemployed, with no suggestion of how this trip is subsidised ('Hair', series five, episode one). It is constantly assumed that Gary will support Tony financially, meaning his unemployment never carries any implied risk to his future prosperity or relationships. This depiction of unemployment as essentially benign indicates men's unemployment could be represented as an apolitical concern of the private sphere, where the relinquishing of adult responsibility is both harmless and pleasurable. Significantly, Tony and Gary's supportive financial relationship is never feminised, but serves only to reinforce the masculine associations of their favoured forms of leisure: drinking, talking about women's bodies and watching television.

Despite this depiction of Tony's working life, *Men Behaving Badly* presented an alternative depiction of unemployment which hinted at the precariousness of Britain's post-recession recovery and its potential to damage individual lives. This was explored through Deborah (Deb), Tony's

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neighbour and love interest. After she loses her job as a restaurant manager in series three, Deb experiences a deep and lasting depression. She loses interest in her appearance, becomes anxious and withdrawn, and is wracked with uncertainty about her future, both financial and personal ('Bed'; 'Hair'). Deb is a homeowner, wondering how to pay her bills and her mortgage; she describes herself sitting endlessly on the couch worrying about finances and how to survive. These divergent experiences are frequently juxtaposed for comic effect:

DEBORAH: I haven't worked for ages, I don't do anything all day, if it wasn't for worrying about bedsores I probably wouldn't get out of bed at all.

TONY: Me too. Brilliant.

('Casualties', series three, episode three)

Deb's unemployment is a recurring theme from this point onwards and it is suggested that her bouts of depression, escapist obsessions with astrology and pursuit of unsuitable men are driven by these circumstances. The storyline is resolved through Deb's decision to start an undergraduate degree, though whether her psychology degree is intended as a career change is unclear ('Your Mate v Your Bird', series five, episode four). As Bruegel (2000, pp. 88–89) has described, increased access to university education helped drive women's increased participation in the workforce during the 1990s, though graduate female unemployment rates remained higher than those of men. *Men Behaving Badly* ended while Deb was still a student, and therefore never resolved the issue of how Deb returns to work. However, the silence on the issue of how Deb plans to use her degree – if at all – indicates that the tension surrounding Deb's employment status is not easily resolved.

Deb's position as a single female homeowner also exposes her to macroeconomic forces that Tony avoids. The notion of a 'property owning democracy' was central to numerous Conservative policies in the late 1980s in particular, with the effect of greatly increasing consumer debt through mortgage lending (Evans, 2013, p. 164). Deb's mortgage opens her up to increased financial instability, yet is presented as part of her more 'responsible' character. When Deb and Tony finally *do* form a relationship, she is consistently frustrated by his domestic irresponsibility which has been facilitated by Gary's ongoing subsidy.

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While Tony’s situation is uniquely insulated from economic instability and financial responsibility, Deb’s experience indicates that far from being completely celebrated, unemployment can only be presented as ‘true’ leisure when it is privately subsidised. Unemployment in *Men Behaving Badly* is therefore incompletely normalised, with Tony’s benign enjoyment haunted and offset by Deb’s experience of loss, instability and genuine risk. The gendered dimensions of this experience of risk are profound; Tony’s leisured, safe and irresponsible joblessness is contrasted explicitly with Deb’s precarious and threatening experience of unemployment as a psychological as well as an economic burden. This problematises the depiction of unemployment to a much greater extent than in *The Young Ones*; alongside the pure satire of irresponsibility, *Men Behaving Badly* uses women’s experience as a foil and contrast to more accurately depict the realities of Britain’s increasingly precarious economy.

Lads at Work: Private Welfare, Silent State

Stable employment and financial security, however, are not presented as unproblematically desirable. While the leisure of both Tony and Gary is contingent on Gary’s job security, his stable employment is not presented as fulfilling or inherently desirable. Gary’s experience of a job-for-life is unique in the programme; he took an office junior position straight from school and has consistently been employed by the same security firm ever since, hoarding the majority of his pay, with his only significant expenditures being a home purchase and his excessive beer consumption. His employees, George and Anthea, are caricatures of harmless but tedious middle-aged people; they function as a constant reminder that Gary awaits their fate later in life. He endures his work life by offsetting the tedium of employment with beer and TV at the day’s end; career climbing or career change are not options available to him, since work exists only to pay for his leisure. The stasis of this daily cycle is presented as inescapable and sedating, obscuring Gary’s frustration while precluding any alternative to it.

Gary’s unfulfilling work not only provides the capital which facilitates the main characters’ leisure, but also Tony’s ‘privatised’ welfare. Throughout the show, in both Deb and Tony’s experiences of unemployment, the idea of state support of any kind is not mentioned or even hinted at for either

character. The only potential recipient of state support is the affluent, stably employed homeowner Gary, who sarcastically comments that his subsidy of Tony's unemployment makes him 'eligible for a grant from the council' ('Rich and Fat', series five, episode six). Not only is there no expectation of state assistance for the unemployed, Gary's private bankrolling of Tony's lifestyle is suggested as more deserving of reward, hinting at the 1990s growth of middle-class state support at the expense of traditional welfare.

The only other hint of state service provision in the show is through another female figure, Dorothy, and her job in nursing. While it is not confirmed that she works at a public hospital, Dorothy's interest in documentaries on the NHS and workplace fundraising hint at her possible employment by the state. In the episode 'Rich and Fat', Dorothy fundraises for operating tables. But rather than questioning why a hospital could not afford such basic equipment or why private subsidy by individuals is the appropriate response to this financial support, the episode uses this incident purely to represent Gary as miserly. As such, through Dorothy's work the state's under-resourcing of welfare provision becomes an acceptable given and responsibility for welfare is wholly individualised. In this context, then, it is unsurprising that Deb's experience of unemployment is so fundamentally distressing; without the safety net of a well-paid friend, she has nowhere to turn.

From the Alternative to 'No Alternative'

The portrayal of the silencing of the state and the redefinition of state involvement in welfare provision was central to the redefinition of political narratives through and after the 'crisis' of 1979 (Hay, 2010, p. 452). The significance of this for the 1990s is that despite Labour's unexpected political loss in the 1992 election, the Conservatives' ongoing electoral dominance was broken only when Labour reconfigured its policy base towards that of the Tories (Turner, 2013, p. 272). This rightward shift into 'New Labour' involved embracing market-friendly 'flexibility' by eroding workers' entitlements, the devolution of government responsibilities to the private sector, and acceptance of unemployment as a driver of economic growth (Hall, 2011, p. 717). It was from 1992 to 1997 in particular, then, that the process of the reconfiguration of the British state begun in 1979 was completed, with the final silencing of mainstream party opposition to the new configuration

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of state power. *Men Behaving Badly*'s explicit engagement with work and leisure as well as binary gendered relationships not only reflects but also replicates this process of redefinition by hiding the state's involvement and by privileging escapism, which the show presents as chiefly accessible to men, while women experience the brunt of the withdrawal of state support.

Unlike in the youthful homosocial world of *The Young Ones*, which explicitly opposed a new 'status quo', *Men Behaving Badly* positioned itself as reflecting the realities of 1990s life for men and women in their thirties. While *The Young Ones* wrote its characters out of society and culture by throwing them off a cliff, *Men Behaving Badly* leaves its male characters in perpetual stasis on the couch. At the same time, it posits an unhappy alternative in female characters that resist that deadening; they are no happier for seeking responsibilities and securities which are not available to them, and they too gravitate back to Gary's couch (more and more) as the series roll on. *The Young Ones* had grown from the prospects of an 'alternative' comedy scene; by the time of that *Men Behaving Badly* was broadcast, however, there seems to be no alternative. The show suggests that the best that can be achieved in life is temporary oblivion in front of the TV with a can of lager.

In this sense, the domestic framework of *Men Behaving Badly* demonstrates most fully the retreat from satirical structural critique which *The Young Ones* had modelled so consistently. During the period between the two programmes, unemployment moved from being understood as a political and collective structural problem, to a purely individual struggle. This individualism remained deeply gendered, with women shown to be more vulnerable and more deeply threatened by unemployment than men for whom unemployment can become a privately subsidised extension of leisure. Ultimately, however, for all, the rebellion and anger of *The Young Ones* was supplanted by sedentary consumerist escapism, and by an uneasy acceptance of the new precariousness of British economic life.

Notes

- 1 For more on this see Wilmot and Rosengard (1989), MacDonald (2002), and Peters (2013).
- 2 Between 1978/79 and 1989/90 there was a 62 per cent increase in public spending on police services in the UK, which paid for a 16 per cent increase in police

manpower and a 22 per cent increase in civilian personnel (Loveday, 1992, pp. 297–98).

- 3 It is interesting to note that Rick mixes up the words 'destitute' and 'prostitute' in this line, which is a throwaway joke for his male character, but it may also refer to the precariousness of homeless women at the same time, whereby prostitution is often a means of survival for many young destitute women.
- 4 The 'right to buy' scheme was introduced by the Housing Act 1980 which allowed tenants after three years to buy their house or flat from the local council, with a discounted sliding scale depending on the length of tenancy. Although if sold within five years, the owners would have to share their capital gains with the council, many of these houses fell into the hands of property developers and landlords rather than the aspirational working class.
- 5 The business telephone directory in the UK was called the Yellow Pages and in the 1980s had the slogan, 'let your fingers do the walking'.
- 6 It is also worth noting that homophobia was common in left politics at this time (see Robinson 2011) and terms like 'sissy' and 'poof' were used as insults in *The Young Ones*, revealing that progressiveness only went so far in the alternative comedy scene of the early 1980s.

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