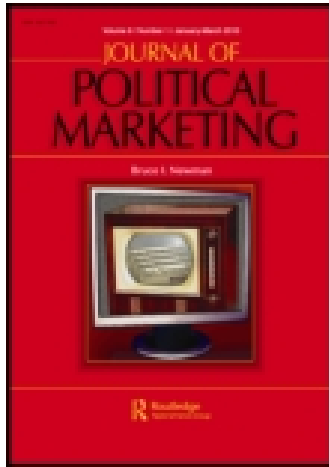


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For Whose Benefit? Fear and Loathing in the Welfare State

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This article contributes to the debate on the relationship between marketing and propaganda through an analysis of social marketing as a mode of governing in permanent campaigning. The working hypothesis is that social marketing operations are agitational rather than propagandistic. The conceptual approach stems from a comparison of propaganda and marketing with Fordist and post-Fordist modes of production and governance. The research into the role of agitation involves an empirical study of the UK government campaign against benefit fraud, the most expensive of its kind. Using a combination of methodologies, the political context is framed through a discourse analysis that charts the historical emergence of the problem of benefit fraud and the material effects of this discourse on welfare spending allocation, content analysis is used to identify correspondences between different newspapers' rhetoric and policy under different governments, and semiotic analysis helps to decode the message of the campaign against benefit fraud, as it relates to the overall government's strategy on this issue. The study offers insights into the political strategy of the government of New Labour between 1997 and 2010 and its resort to agitational techniques, exposing the limitations of government marketing and public relations in the context of an overall crisis of its political legitimacy, in both economic and political terms.

KEYWORDS *agitation, benefit fraud, legitimization crisis, New Labour, post-Fordism, propaganda, social marketing, welfare*

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In the transition to Post-Fordism, a political and economic model that carries forward and displaces Fordism, communication has become a key aspect of processes of valorization. This has often been described as the linguistic turn of political economy, making studies of language directly relevant to the analysis of capitalism, and marketing has emerged as a discipline concerned with the production of value by means of communication (Marazzi 2008).¹ This linguistic turn reflects how the economic has come to invest the whole of subjectivity, blurring the separation between business and society. In post-Fordism, our linguistic and affective abilities are put to work as much as our bodies and physical energies. This entails a phenomenology of “subsumption” with advertising at the sensible surface, ethics forming the reflexive linguistic boundaries, and strategy at the productive core. In my view, marketing captures the symptomatology of post-Fordist capitalism and the phenomenology of this subsumption.

This article seeks to examine the workings of social and political marketing as a mode of governmental intervention. After a conceptual introduction on the relation between marketing and propaganda that draws on literature ranging from critical political economy of communication to political theory, the article addresses the state’s use of marketing strategies not just as an election tool but as a mode of governance through permanent campaigning. It does so through a case study of the UK government campaign against benefit fraud, to date the most expensive marketing adventure the state has ever embarked on. Adding to the literature surveyed in the conceptual introduction, the guiding question for the study is whether propaganda is an adequate description of this campaigning practice, and if not, what is at work in marketing of this kind. To address the question, the empirical study describes the campaign, and with the aid of discourse, content and semiotic analysis, produces a record of the emergence of the discourse on benefit fraud in the past 15 years, charts the development and changes of the object of the campaign in policy and media coverage, and finally assesses the effectiveness of marketing as a political strategy to tackle the issue.

By addressing the question of social and political marketing, the article aims to explore how business redefines, manages, and incorporates otherness and forges new forms of social identity. Because of the confusion of the boundaries between business and society, all that concerns the latter becomes open to the intervention of the former, its techniques, codes, language and strategies. As marketing once drew from the aesthetics and techniques of politics in the early days of mass production and communication, political and social agents now turn to it to frame and distribute their messages. While this is most evident during periods of electioneering, when exposure to advertising from political parties is at its highest, marketing strategies are also used in the everyday business of government as the latter broadens to incorporate the realms of consumption and production to ensure obedience and compliance, by leveraging the citizen-consumer in

the sphere of political opinion making. Studies of the political economy of communication have greatly contributed to our understanding of the power structures of the mass media industry and the business of communication in Fordism.² But as communication is one among other tools of production in post-Fordist economies, marketing assumes a salient role and supervisory capacity, employing techniques of sales and advertising to secure compliance in the workplace, the market, the political sphere, and society at large.

The interoperability of marketing techniques is due to recent developments in both the politics of business and the business of politics. In the former, products or commodities are sold with decreasing reference to their use value, as objects of desire in a libidinal economy of lifestyle aspirations (Lyotard 2004). While the referent to the production of the product was already absent from or masked in the commodity, now its consumption tends to become concealed. The product is sold on the basis of the idea it embodies, which the potential buyer wishes to identify with and make their own, and the emotions it arouses, as the act of buying becomes increasingly associated with a form of therapy. When it comes to the business of politics, the encroachment of mainstream economics into political discourse, whereby all values are enshrined in the language of cost-efficiency and price, has meant that political and social projects are presented as commodities, whether as investment packages or consumables, and the marketing of ideas mimics that of commodity circulation.

The informational content of the commodity and its management is what is of concern to us in this study of propaganda and social and political marketing. By informational content, we mean the role of the knowledge embodied in the commodity, in particular where the commodity being sold is a public policy.

Counterfeiting truth was characteristic of modern politics, and with it came the art of propaganda. But due to the increasing prevalence of the ideational and affective content of the commodity, the production of images of truth or falsity once relegated to information ministries has now become a large-scale industry with a broadened base, ranging from all government departments to corporations and the third sector. The target of this form of communication is not public citizens but mass consumers, hence the use of marketing (Habermas 1989; Reid 1988).

When it comes to propaganda, persuasion, and the politics of truth, the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism parallels the shift from modernity to postmodernity. While modernity relied on the construction of truths and their translation into political regimes, postmodernity valorizes situated and relative knowledge, thus functioning as an antidote to the reproduction of totalitarian regimes based on the propagation of a particular world view and its presentation as a universal.

I will look into the function and role of propaganda and how it relates to marketing by way of a study of the UK government's marketing campaign

against benefit fraud. Crucial to the analysis is the demise of propaganda as a mode of presentation of a political project to an audience made up of citizens with voting power with the view of persuading them of its value and desirability. In its neutral sense, propaganda was a manner of disseminating information, irrespective of whether this was perceived to be partisan, neutral, or deliberately deceitful. Before focusing on the case study, it is useful to briefly refer back to the most useful literature on propaganda and social and political marketing in recent years to clarify the working definitions that will guide the empirical investigation.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: MARKETING AND PROPAGANDA

On the one hand, in Chomsky and Herman's (1988) version, propaganda is a strategy used by hegemonic forces in power aimed at preventing the circulation of information by means of its distortion or silencing. The propaganda model concentrates on the collusion of mainstream media and political forces where the latter employ filters to news production, highlighting how the ownership, size, and profit-seeking behavior of media corporations, their market-oriented values, and their institutional affiliations determine the informational content of the news (Chomsky and Herman 1988). This model is useful to describe the political economy underlying the relationship of the media as a business primarily involved in selling audiences to advertisers to institutional actors in politics. On the other hand, political scientists have highlighted the use of marketing techniques during election campaigns, where political parties make use of advertising agencies to package their message to the electorate, merging purchasing with voting power and behavior, targeting citizens as consumers. This is denominated political marketing (O'Shaughnessy 2004).

However, what this article is concerned with is another important process where political institutions use mainstream media and marketing strategies that neither entirely depend on propaganda by means of news production nor take the form of product placement in a "competitive market" at election times. This, once the remit of propaganda, has been described as social marketing. The expression "social marketing" has been highly debated (Andreasen 1994), but the article uses its definition as the adaptation of commercial marketing technologies to planned programs of social change that aim to influence behavior. In particular, this research aims to advance on the literature that has explored the relationship between social marketing and traditional forms of propaganda and build on the argument that, unlike propaganda, social marketing does not focus on the informational or educational message of a product, but rather presupposes prior research into the behavior of the target user. Social marketing scholars have argued that market research is the backdrop against which governmental messages

are crafted. For instance, in anti-smoking campaigns, the effects of smoking on health are increasingly downplayed, and connections are built between smoking and its social consequences (e.g., bad breath, yellow teeth, aging skin), as elements that exert greater influence on a smoker, where research shows users to be more concerned with appearance and social status than health. The product, smoking, and the information or awareness of what it does are secondary to the consideration of users' affective, emotional, and social being. In this, social marketing starts with market research and builds the user into the campaign, while propaganda aimed to address her behavior from the standpoint of the product and levels of consciousness of its content. As O'Shaughnessy has argued,

Key differences between social marketing and social propaganda may be summarized as follows: social marketing—at least if its exponents are fully educated in the marketing concept, which is not always the case—is based on some research defined conception of audience wants. The message can be framed accordingly. In contrast, propaganda is didactic. The propagandist is less concerned to moderate his/her message in the light of market research—he is convinced of its essential rightness and is in fact an evangelist. (O'Shaughnessy 1996, p. 58)

In addition, the term propaganda fails to account for the desired effect of the techniques employed in social marketing on the affective, emotional, and social being of the audience. This is because in the age of spin-doctoring (Franklin 2004) the informational content of the addresses of government to citizens has shrunk to insignificance. Given that the aim of social marketing is to directly influence mass behavior, to understand its techniques and operations in relation to propaganda, it is useful to go back to an old distinction first proposed by Plekhanov and later revisited by Lenin:

The propagandist, dealing with, say, the question of unemployment, must explain the capitalistic nature of crises, the cause of their inevitability in modern society, the necessity for the transformation of this society into a socialist society, etc. In a word, he must present “many ideas,” so many indeed, that they will be understood as an integral whole by a (comparatively) few persons. The agitator[,] however, speaking on the same subject, will take as an illustration the death of an unemployed worker's family from starvation, the growing impoverishment[,] etc. and utilizing this fact, known to all, will direct his efforts to presenting *a single idea* to the “masses.” Consequently the propagandist operates chiefly by means of the *printed* word; the agitator by means of the *spoken* word. (Lenin 1902/1973, p. 83)

Are we to speak of postmodern social marketing as a form of propaganda or agitation? In our view, as a result of a generalized immunization to political discourse, “agitation” better describes it because its object is the

semiotic and affective sphere and its objective is to influence behavior before consciousness or opinion. Furthermore, agitation helps us describe the lexicon of the molding of post-Fordist subjectivity as it takes place in the market place and through the selling of commodities, equally so when these are public policies. Agitation directly refers to the incitement of the masses to act on single issues. The means used to this end are semiotic and affective in character and do not target the interests of particular groups but a universal disposition to feel, interpret, empathize, and act. In the classical distinction, agitation is possible when there is a certain mass level of consciousness. As we will seek to demonstrate in our study, the government is not capable on its own of setting the political agenda which is in a large part determined by the Fourth Estate. For this reason, the agitation it uses is more nuanced than Lenin's "peace, bread, land": it tries to react to and shape a preexisting public opinion. It is a form of agitation that aims at the commensurability of a set number of all of its campaigns.

FROM PROPAGANDA TO AGITATION: THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

The demise of propaganda as a political tool of consensus formation or manufacture emerges as a result of the discourse of "There Is No Alternative" (TINA). In this context, this demise reflects that of competing world views and projects in the political arena, where governments do not operate as sovereign executives of a representative democracy but as managers of the nation's economy. TINA significantly takes the impetus out of political strategies with the neutralization of ideological struggles and the flattening out of meaningful differences. This process is also relevant to the shift toward governmentality and away from juridical notions of sovereignty and legitimacy, which reflects a crisis of representation and dislocates the scope of political debate and struggle (Foucault 2000; Schechter 2005; Hardt and Negri 2000). The crisis of representation points to a gap in the mediation between the government and people that was once filled by propaganda.

This governmentalization of the state is a singularly paradoxical phenomenon: [I]f in fact the problems of governmentality and the techniques of government have become the only political issue, the only real space for political struggle and contestation, this is because the governmentalization of the state is, at the same time, what has permitted the state to survive. It is possible to suppose that if the state is what it is today, this is so precisely thanks to this governmentality, which is at once internal and external to the state, since it is the tactics of government that make possible the continual definition and redefinition of what is within the competence of the state and what is not. (Foucault 2000, p. 221)

Although I largely agree with the above statement and diagnosis of contemporary institutional power, I would emphasize that governmentality today is not simply a defensive attempt at containing and preventing social and political conflict, but importantly a powerful instrument of proactive intervention in it.

As an example of the above, in what follows I will show how the objectives and the informational and affective contents of the UK government marketing campaign to target benefit fraud adopt this form of commensurate agitation.

CASE STUDY: THE UK GOVERNMENT'S CAMPAIGN AGAINST BENEFIT FRAUD

Unemployment is a socioeconomic reality inherent to the workings of a system based on the social relation between capital and labor. Levels of unemployment in national economies are regulated by markets and since the beginning of political economy, equilibrium between demand and supply in this sector has been either an unfulfilled ambition or an undesirable goal.³ In recent years the welfare state and strategies to address the question of unemployment have drastically changed, as has the discourse about them (Alcock et al. 2003).

Of particular interest for our purposes is to view these strategies in the context of the UK government of New Labour, which ran between 1997 and 2010 and solidified a trend, initiated by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher, that has been described as the “public relations state” (Connor 2007; Deacon and Golding 1994; Wring 2005). Arguably, the public relations state is an update of traditional forms of propaganda. It aims to “take the risk out of democracy” (Carey 1997) and is essential when the institutional structure is vulnerable to public opinion. Undoubtedly the emergence of the public relations state increased the professionalization of the production of propaganda, and the attempt to salvage this technique from its pejorative connotations was the first step toward an intensification in the use of marketing as a crucial governmental tool (L'Etang 1998).

When taking office in 1997, the New Labour Party eagerly tried to turn a language of rights or entitlements into one of responsibilities or duties. Fresh into Number 10, Tony Blair declared that the welfare state was “associated with fraud, abuse, laziness, a dependency culture, social irresponsibility encouraged by welfare dependency” (Blair 1999). Following the lead of the Clinton administration in the U.S., the new government piloted its welfare-to-work program, aimed at tackling problems of poverty through the labor market and to “lift people out of benefits” (Driver and Martell 2005). In this sense, rather than intervening in society to assuage the (destructive) effects of the market, the government “has to intervene on society as such, so that competitive mechanisms can

play a regulatory role at every moment and every point in society and by intervening in this way its objective will become possible, that is to say, a general regulation of society by the market” (Foucault 1979/2008, p. 145). Frank Field, minister of welfare reform at the time and author of *Losing Out: The Emergence of Britain's Underclass*, believed that many in this group “now simply despise those who are on the inside of the labor market in low-paid jobs” (Murray et al. 1996, p. 60). This change in language and policy explicitly shifted the burden of responsibility for unemployment rates from society onto the individual. The “New Deal” program began in 1998 and aimed at restructuring the provision of welfare to the unemployed on the basis of these principles.⁴

In line with liberal notions of entrepreneurship and human capital, through the welfare-to-work program New Labour further severed the link between wages and labor and began to promote the latter as a generic form of human activity to be developed for its own sake and irrespective of economic remuneration and disparities. This was in line with a move from a Keynesian approach to promote the growth of the labor market by intervening on the side of demand, to a more Schumpeterian approach where “state intervention is concentrated primarily upon supply-side measures to promote economic participation within relatively liberated market economics” (Alcock et al. 2003, p. 68).

This policy also generated a profitable job brokering business through the outsourcing of welfare services to private companies and the voluntary sector.⁵ In 2008–2009, a total of £364,803,853 was received by New Deal private sector providers from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), and £92,402,225 by voluntary sector providers. These providers compete to secure government funding to shift the unemployed out of the welfare program and into labor or training, whether voluntary or not. In the case of private providers, these government contracts have generated considerable revenues. The largest company benefiting from it, A4e, was allocated £6,000 per claimant and derived 63% of its revenue from services outsourced from the DWP, with a profit before tax of over £6 million in 2009.⁶

Incapable of addressing the causes of unemployment, the New Labour government claimed to address its social effects through a policy that aimed to “activate” and reincorporate the unemployed within the labor market at all costs, irrespective of demand.

At the level of communications, these measures must make work attractive as a form of social integration. In this spirit, the term “unemployed” was substituted with “job seekers” and “benefits” with “allowances,” and New Deal put claimants (now “customers”) through training, subsidised employment, and voluntary work, while couching these initiatives in the language of human capital understood as the individual’s ability to produce an earnings stream. This move is of great symbolic power, as the unemployed, rather than being “someone suffering from an economic disability” must be seen as a “worker in transit” (Foucault 1979/2008, p. 139). As the Italian political theorist Paolo Virno observes,

This is irrespective of the situation of demand in the labor market: everyone agrees, without exception, that labor is and will continue to be the main instrument of social *control* and political *legitimization* of the state. Whatever assessment is given of the volume of social spending or of the self-regulating mechanisms of the market, there is no dispute over the necessity of linking the distribution of income to labor; this necessity must not be called into question in the political debate. The reason is essential: [W]age labor represents the only possibility of systematically simplifying, and hence governing, the complexity of social relations. Labor as such, not money: In fact, this complexity is rooted in monetary flows, and it is due to them that it expands. The science of administration retains its operational centrality to the extent that it is concerned with the administration of labor. (Virno 2007, p. 39)

Geared to eliminate all externalities to the labor market and reabsorb every form of social activity within it, this process of integrative normalization and discipline turns the benefit claimant into an irreducible figure of otherness to be eventually dispensed with. With responsibility to work now shifted onto the individual's shoulders, and the added burden of the punitive threat if they should not find employment, three years into the New Deal program the New Labour government launched a marketing campaign against benefit fraud. As part of a series of "tough measures" the government started pointing its finger at the "benefit thief." My claim is that in this political context, the emergence of the discourse on benefit fraud played a crucial role in the New Labour government's marketing of its role and legitimacy, and I will now examine how this was the case before looking into the role of agitation in this campaign.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE DISCOURSE ON BENEFIT FRAUD

Subsequent to the 1998 Green Paper on social security, entitled "Beating Fraud Is Everyone's Business" (Department of Social Security, Cm 4012 1998), in 2000 the government launched a campaign called "Targeting Benefit Fraud: Everyone's Business." Government campaigning has grown to become a huge industry.⁷ At the time, this was the most expensive campaign ever (Watt 2001, p. 13). While presenting it, Work and Pensions Secretary Andrew Smith announced: "There can be no hiding place for cheats. We are now waging a more professional war on fraud and have more powers than ever to take action." In its first phase, the campaign cost £4.8 million and produced posters and television adverts.⁸ In 2006–2008, the campaign "No Ifs, No Buts" was launched. In 2008, it was renamed "We're Closing In" and adverts appeared on TV, radio, newspapers, ATM screens, online banners, and posters. The campaign was exported to Spain, Costa del Sol, and the Canary Islands, and whistleblowers' hotlines were opened there.

Between 2006 and 2009, the DWP spent £27.3 million on marketing for this campaign (Tinkler 2010). In August 2010, *The Sun* launched its own dedicated

phone line: “Today we call on our army of readers to help us crack down on welfare crime once and for all and bring the cheats to justice,” backed by new Prime Minister David Cameron, who is now also contracting credit reference agencies to “go after” the fraudsters. The important role of the tabloid press and the government reciprocal endorsement significantly broadened the avenues of the campaign. Importantly, tabloids and government adopt the same heightened, rhetorical language for effect. To contextualize the campaign in the broader political discourse in the British press, I ran a purely quantitative content analysis of the recurrence of the expression “benefit fraud” in UK national newspapers.

The results show that prior to the beginning of the campaign, between 1992 and 2000, *The Daily Mail* uses the expression 256 times, as compared to, for instance, 61 occurrences in *The Times*, 151 in *The Guardian*, and 47 in *The Mirror*. Over half of these mentions (154) are made after the 1997 elections. Prior to 1997, the populist right-wing tabloid tends use the expression in the context of talk against immigration or in favor of identity cards. After 1997, “benefit fraud” becomes newsworthy in its own right and increasingly used to cause embarrassment to the government as a symbol its failure to control what had once been its constituency.

In the media discourse, tabloids have been acting as self-elected better “spokespersons” for “good, honest[,] hard[-]working people” and, while their influence on voters is often largely exaggerated (Sanders 2003), one could hardly underestimate their influence on the government (Curran and Seaton 1981). Faced with such embarrassing accusations, New Labour had to be seen to be doing something at all costs.

Governing a household, a family, does not essentially mean safeguarding the family property; what it concerns is the individuals who compose the family, their wealth and prosperity. It means reckoning with all the possible alliances with other families; it is this general form of management that is characteristic of government. (Foucault 2000, p. 209)

Governmentality concerns the household economics of the wealth of nations, and the household is increasingly reconfigured as an enterprise (Cooper and Mitropoulos 2009). Amid a considerable amount of media pressure to legitimate itself and project its own role as the good keeper of the household, New Labour launched the marketing campaign to display its “tough” line on fraud: it could not be seen to allow crime on its watch. The language of “toughness” and “zero tolerance” and the emphasis on social policing is seen to be particularly effective at times of crisis to legitimate the role of the state, and in this case it was also New Labour’s concession to the right. Agitated by the tabloid discourse, the state needed to respond to its agenda to recapture a sense of purpose.

At the time of the Murray-led debate on the underclass in the mid-1990s (Murray et al. 1996), Labour was careful to avoid behaviorist explanations

of its causes and the stigma of a culture of poverty.⁹ After some years in government, and having failed to make significant changes to its economic conditions, they were prepared to individuate the problem and morally stigmatize a particular group. The usefulness of the sociological category of the underclass was upset by its own complications, capturing as it did the public imagination before its sociological theorization was formed.¹⁰ One of its contradictions was its perceiving the poor as devoid of political subjectivity. The category of multitude, undergoing a recent resurrection in the hands of Italian *post-operaismo*, arguably has a better explanatory power (Negri 2003) because its political legacy encapsulates the crisis of sovereignty and the attempt to re-forge the public through fear of the state. The underclass has no political subjectivity. The multitude does.¹¹ When faced with a political subjectivity that does not have a fixed representational referent in government nor obligations to a social and political pact of subjugation to a sovereign power (Virno 2007), as in this case, the state resorts to agitation.

Agitation and the Campaign Against Benefit Fraud

In 2000, Alistair Darling, secretary of state for social security, announced: “our greatest *ally* in the *battle* against welfare cheats is the public.” The early adverts and posters of the campaign do not seem to interpellate offenders but their neighbors and peers. The objective appears to be the creation of an image of poor neighborhoods being under surveillance. The campaign overtly incites and entices people to report potential suspects of benefit fraud. Through visuals, snapshot images, and short stories, the adverts show situations of what appears to be benefit fraud, for instance, a woman ironing men’s underwear suggests more than cohabitation of declared single housing benefit claimants, or a man taking cash in hand from another in a van suggests that he works while claiming. No information is provided by the voice-over or text as to what benefit fraud actually consists of or the scale of it as a problem, in fact, presenting working and claiming as fraud when under many circumstances it is not is factually misleading. Rather, the campaign creates a climate of suspicion and incites feelings of revenge in order to excavate a line in the social imaginary between tax-paying, hard-working people and people receiving benefits, coinciding with the age-old distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor. The campaign foments a war among them and urges the former into action, to pick up the phone or fill in a report form. Expressions such as “we’re all in this together” and “it’s everyone’s business” suggest that “the government needs you” to tackle a societal problem (Connor 2007). As Groves has noted,

In aligning the fraudster with the thief, burglar[,] or robber, the government is seeking to elevate the fraudulent claimant to an object of, or indeed

a target for, social contempt. The government “know[s]” that there is a common view that benefit fraud is a victimless crime since there has been important government-funded research which explored attitudes towards benefit fraud in the late 1990s (Rowlingson, et al., 1997). Again, this redefining of fraudulent action by the government has moral undertones. (Groves 2002, p. 134)

The “No Ifs, No Buts” campaign raised the toughness a notch to the level of criminalization. The emphasis is on fraud as a legally prosecutable offense and the campaign concentrates on its punishment: “No ifs, no buts, break the law and you face an interview under caution and even a criminal record,” “When we catch you, you can face a criminal record and even a prison sentence.” Images in the adverts include a man reading a car magazine in a prison cell and a woman under interrogation stressfully struggling to find words. Though “fraudsters” are consistently portrayed as “well-off,” either shopping or contemplating the purchase of luxury goods, rather than social contempt, in this phase the campaign aims to advertise punishment as a deterrent. This is done while highlighting the shock of the “benefit thief,” the anxiety at being caught, the stress of sitting at an interrogation table, and agitation.

In the “We’re onto you” phase, the campaign adopts war metaphors worthy of psychological operations techniques and reaches its most threatening tones. The government is doing more than tackling a problem: it is waging a war on it. Having advertised the punishment for the crime, it must now make a show of its ability to catch the criminal. In the adverts, a deep and raucous male voice, like that used in blockbuster war film trailers, recites a series of frightening threats (“We are closing in,” “There is nowhere to escape”) accompanied by the image of a moving circle of light, as a gun sight closing in on a red target. An advert is shot from a helicopter that hovers over neighborhoods, casting the circle of a search light over dark streets at night, and magically entering a house from underneath the door: “If you claim you’re living alone and you’re not, we can check your bills,” or stalking the invisible criminals, night workers such as a pizza delivery man who looks “suspicious”: “If we think you are committing benefit fraud, we can come out and pay you a visit.” Here, the government’s message is that it has not lost its grip, quite the opposite: like a sniper, it sees and fires without being seen, it is everywhere.

Effectiveness of the Campaign and Strategic Objectives

Data on the effectiveness of the campaign is unavailable, not surprisingly. In 2006, the National Audit Office reports that “the Department is currently spending £1.50 to identify £1 of overpayments.”¹²

The campaign does not seem to act as a deterrent: The most recent data on general levels of benefit fraud from the DWP Resource Accounts show that it fluctuates consistently with rises and drops in welfare demand

and thus reflects the state of the economy as a whole (DWP 2010, p. 43). This begs the question of whether “tackling benefit fraud” is really the strategic objective of the campaign. Why would the government spend so many resources on marketing a campaign of relatively little economic significance and even do so at a loss? Rather than to defend the public purse, our analysis of the chosen agitational form of communication of the campaign and of the evidence from National Audit Office data suggests the aim is to instil fear, suspicion, agitate, and, perhaps most importantly, to present the state as being in control and keeping its books in order. The marketing of state surveillance and its micromanagement of the population under the guise of fraud investigation is clearly presented as a clamp down on an economic crime. However, as this case demonstrates, the language of the economics here is the instrument for a discrete political intervention that by strictly economic standards of value for money alone is wasteful, disproportionate, and possibly counterproductive.¹³ In the next section of the article, I aim to further explore how this is the case and decode what lies behind the campaign.

Subsequent to the publication of a benefit officer’s expose (Page 1971) the government launched its first inquiry into benefit fraud in 1973. In 1980, it estimated that 2% of benefit spending was lost on fraud and allocated a generous budget to investigating it. This figure is widely cited but also highly contested. When pressed to explain its origins in the House of Commons, Baron Prentice (1980) declared: ‘There is no need to ring around department stores to know that they, and other large commercial organizations, assume a loss through fraud of 1[%] or 2% in their operations. Applying that to the DHSS, with its expenditure of £20 billion a year, leads to an estimated figure of £200 million’ (Prentice 1980). In any case, in 2009–2010 around 2.1% of overall benefit expenditure of the DWP was classified as fraud. This includes fraud, “customer” error, and official error (including underpayment). According to the breakdown, 1.5% is due to error and 0.6% is due to fraud.¹⁴ Something odd immediately emerges from the statistics. Calculating fraud and error in the same figure is misleading. The complicated bureaucracy of the administration of benefits can give rise to errors, and advice on welfare rights is less and less unavailable.¹⁵ Fraud is equated with confirmed overpayment, where errors of overpayment can easily occur irrespective of the claimant. In the “levels of suspicion” scale that informs the estimated figures on fraud, a simple “change of circumstances” declaration can prompt a fraud investigation.¹⁶ Moreover, to tackle overpayment, local governments use debt recovery agencies. In recent years, debt recovery has become a lucrative business as a result of the promotion of a debt-fueled consumption resulting from a prolonged period of wage stagnation, entangling welfare provision more closely with the debt economy.¹⁷

This highlights the extent of the government’s resolve to implement a “general regulation of society by the market” (Foucault 1979/2008, p. 145),

rather than acting to address problems that the market actually creates. At stake is an economy of power and the management of the unemployed and benefit claimants, irrespective of its costs. The campaign aims to create a climate of fear and suspicion and the sense that the government is in control. The issue is strictly political, that of addressing a legitimization crisis in the face of a section of society that keeps resisting recuperation into the skewed economies of the labor market where the latter, despite the largely recognized inadequacy of welfare provisions,¹⁸ still makes wage labor a hard sale. Subsequent to the privatization of utilities, which ironically were the very source of the “windfall tax” used to fund welfare reforms, in 2008 energy bills have risen by 48% and continue to rise. VAT has recently increased to 20%. The housing boom that benefited a limited section of the population with the capital at hand to invest in property has meant high rent prices for many who were not as resourceful. What the campaign hides is the level of economic hardship facing a growing underclass in Britain. Research shows that the poor would rather run the risk of being caught than go without (Groves 2002).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The article has argued that the campaign’s fear mongering tactic is predominantly agitation. Information, whether accurate or deliberately deceitful, is absent from the campaign. The government is not marketing a particular social policy. It is not engaged in propaganda or mass persuasion. No argument is being made. Rather, the government is making threats, aggrandizing itself and its own resources, waging a war on crimes against welfare, and by extension depicting welfare recipients as a whole as potential suspects. Through fear, agitation aims to discipline social relations in the workforce, irrespective of debates on economic costs or gains. These can no longer fill the void of political legitimacy. Lenin wrote that “without a clear, well thought out ideological content, agitation degenerates into phrase mongering” (Lenin 1905/1974, p. 342). But in the context of governmentality, agitation is a biopolitical tool to kick the social body into shape. The phrases are commensurate, are on message, and agitate the linguistic level, innervating it and shaping discourse by key words and spin. The case of this campaign might seem extreme, but it certainly points to another side of agitation: agitation not only as the process of agitating, urging, and stirring up but also as a state of turmoil, uneasiness, anxiety, and unrest. In a Stalinist drive, by campaigning agitation New Labour displays its own state of restlessness; it is forced to transfigure its incapacity to act into an aesthetics of the act itself, the doing something: watching, prosecuting. Agitation is its last resort.

Given the economic recession and rising unemployment, current austerity measures are already finding strong opposition. Draconian

campaigns such as the one described are unlikely to have any more success than they have had so far. If anything, they will exacerbate the crisis of representation and increase levels of resistance and disobedience. During the recent scandal in the UK, where countless Members of Parliament were found to abuse their expense claims for personal gains, people produced adverts mimicking the language, visuals, and symbols of the “We’re closing in” government campaign, this time, pointing to Members of Parliament as the real benefit fraudsters. But irrespective of the visibility and political articulation of multitudinal practices, the non-representable, non-public, and not necessarily legal form of association of non-aligned social singularities, they keep threatening the legitimacy of the state and resisting its techniques of governmentality (Bove and Empson 2002). For this, the campaign displays the government’s fear of the multitude, the government’s own agitation at the presence of an unmanageable and growing other.¹⁹

Murray warned: “We don’t know how to make up for the lack of a community that rewards responsibility and stigmatizes irresponsibility. Let me emphasize the words: we *do not know how*. It’s not money we lack, but the capability to social-engineer our way out of this situation” (Murray et al. 1996, p. 51). If you cannot change a situation, the next best thing is to make it look as if you are. The government’s approach to welfare increasingly has this character but at every point it meets, in the form of the multitude, its projected other and its nemesis, resistant to social engineering, unidentifiable, non-representable, swarming, unaccountable, criminal, noncommittal, evasive, networked, and irreducible.

NOTES

1. Value here is intended as an economic and political category that measures the worth of the output of human activity.

2. From Curran and Seaton (1981), Fiske (1987), the Toronto School, and Mosco (1996): “It is useful to see the political economy of communication as a social exchange of meaning whose outcome is the measure or mark of a social relationship” (Mosco 1996, p. 6).

3. An unemployment rate of 0% has been regarded as undesirable for its presumed “negative” effects on the labor market and inflation, with the NAIRU (non-accelerating [or non-increasing] inflation rate of unemployment) set at a “desirable” rate of 3% by classical economists. The OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) sets an estimated level of structural unemployment (or full-employment unemployment rate) at 4% to 6.5%. It is regarded as normal for national economies to keep levels of unemployment artificially high in order to keep wages from rising and avoiding the inflation that would result from workers’ pressure on wages and prices (Keynes 1936; Cho 2010).

4. The choice of name is of political significance, as the original New Deal, launched by Roosevelt as a set of recovery measures during the 1930s economic depression, arguably saved capitalism from itself.

5. Since the early 1980s, Britain has been at the forefront in Europe to implement a strategy of progressive privatisation of public services. Underpinning the agenda was public choice theory, which sees the public interest as the aggregation of private individual preferences and seamlessly replaces the figure of the citizen with that of the consumer, thus largely reconfiguring the scope of political participation from democratic voice to consumer choice (Khan 1999; Self 1993).

6. These companies employ a scheme of “job outcome bonuses” paid to staff when outcomes are deemed to be achieved, which has given rise to numerous complaints and a significant number of frauds. Participants have reported, for instance, providers’ fraud practices ranging from

timesheet abuse, dismissal abuse (dismissing participants for false or trivial reasons to receive the full 13 weeks amount), guaranteed job bonuses abuse (some participants may receive a job offer before the course starts and providers still get job outcome payments, even if they had nothing to do with finding the participant a job), and future job outcome bonuses abuse (forcing participants to enter an agreement whereby the provider has “permission” to contact any future employer after the course has ended to obtain a job outcome bonus even though the participant would have found the job after the course had finished, unaided by the provider).”

For a full dossier on the unemployment business, see Corporate Watch (2010, pp. 45–46).

7. In 2010, government spending on advertising and marketing has risen by almost 40% from the previous year to £253m. (BBC 2010).

8. In the same year, £2.2m was spent on anti-smoking initiatives.

9. Marx’s definition of the *lumpenproletariat* was in fact that it was not the working class, but the dregs of all classes of society: “The lumpenproletariat, this scum of depraved elements from all classes, vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, rogues, mountebanks, lazaroni, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, maquereaus, brothel-keepers, porters, casual laborers, organ-grinders, ragpickers, knife-grinders, tinkers, beggars—in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la bohème*” (Marx 1852/1981, p. 149).

10. As Jencks writes: “Once the term entered the vernacular, however, journalists and policy makers inevitably began asking social scientists how large it was and why it was growing. Since neither journalists nor policy analysts had a clear idea what they meant by the underclass, social scientists had to make up their own definitions. We now have nearly a dozen of these definitions, each yielding a different picture of how big the underclass is and who its members are. ... It soon became clear, however, that those who talked about the underclass had something more in mind than just persistent poverty. The term underclass, with its echoes of the underworld, conjures up sin, or at least unorthodox behavior. Low income may be a necessary condition for membership in such a class, but it is not sufficient” (Murray et al. 1996, p. 11).

11. On this, I agree with Virno (2004, p. 13): “I maintain that the concept of ‘multitude,’ as opposed to the more familiar concept of ‘people,’ is a crucial tool for every careful analysis of the contemporary public sphere. One must keep in mind that the choice between ‘people’ and ‘multitude’ was at the heart of the practical controversies (the establishing of centralized modern States, religious wars, etc.) and of the theoretical-philosophical controversies of the 17th century. These two competing concepts [...] played a primary role in the definition of the political-social categories of the modern era. It was the notion of ‘people’ which prevailed. ‘Multitude’ is the losing term, the concept which got the worst of it. [...] But we need to ask whether, today, at the end of a long cycle, [...] now that the political theory of the modern era is going through a radical crisis, this once defeated notion is not displaying extraordinary vitality.”

12. “The National Audit Office examined six of the most important counter-fraud activities to examine their cost effectiveness. In total, in 2006–2007, we estimate these specific initiatives cost the department £154 million to operate and identified an estimated £106 million of benefits which had been overpaid as a result of fraud (National Audit Office 2008).

13. As Spicker (1999) argues, “it seems clear from the examples given by the DSS that a claimant who does make an open disclosure of changed circumstances is liable to be treated as suspect; it is hardly surprising if some people are guarded about what they say (p. 7).

14. For a breakdown over the past nine years, see Tinkler 2010. Also, the DWP states: “In 2009–2010, the proportion of total estimated overpayments due to fraud and error increased from 2% to 2.1% of benefit expenditure, compared to the previous set of estimates for 2008–2009. [...] There has also been a substantial rise in total benefit expenditure from £135.9 billion in 2008–2009 to a forecasted £148.0 billion in 2009–2010, which is one reason the estimates of fraud and error in money terms have increased. *These are the first results to fully reflect the impact of the economic downturn*” (DWP 2010, p. 42). To put things in perspective, the tax gap, or evasion, in Britain is currently calculated at £ 120 billion. On the relation of benefit fraud to the tax gap, see the Public and Commercial Services Union 2010 pamphlet “There Is an Alternative: The Case Against Cuts in Public Spending.”

15. While Citizens Advice Bureau inquiries continue to rise (2010 saw an 18% increase on previous years), with benefits inquiries being the second largest service area after debt, the Comprehensive Spending Review has announced substantial cuts on Legal Aid Funds (Citizens Advice Bureau 2010).

16. In his analysis of the manipulation of statistics on the issue, Spicker (1999) has noted that

it looks as if the benefit agency has taken a bicycle pump to the figures, inflating them at every stage of the process—in the initial assumptions, the acceptance of suspicion as fact, the estimate of value, the inclusion of further material on “low suspicion,” the extension of assumptions to benefits which have not been investigated, and a liberal rounding up of all the totals. (p. 5)

17. This has seen the proliferation of fake recovery agencies randomly issuing threatening letters to UK households, to the point that the Office of Fair Trading in 2003 has issued official guidance on how to deal with these “unfair business practices.” (The document is available online at http://www.oft.gov.uk/shared_of/business_leaflets/consumer_credit/oft664.pdf.) Some of these agencies have gone as far as to set up fake “information” blogs on benefit fraud. Arguably, the outsourcing of debt recovery is an expenditure that could be used instead to address the problem of solving the error that counts for two-thirds of the wasted funds misleadingly classified as “fraud.”

18. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has published research advocating the rise of Job Seekers Allowance to match minimum standards of living at least up to the government’s declared income poverty line (Kenway 2009).

19. As Virno asserts, in contrast to “the people”:

the *multitudo* indicates a *plurality which persists as such in the public scene*, in collective action, in the handling of communal affairs, without converging into a One, without evaporating within a centripetal form of motion. Multitude is the form of social and political existence for the many, seen as being many: a permanent form, not an episodic or interstitial form. For Spinoza, the *multitudo* is the architrave of civil liberties. (Virno 2004, p. 25)

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