What ontological assumptions underpin David Cameron’s ‘modernisation’ of Conservative Party welfare policy?

Jack Newman

Abstract
This work seeks to explicate the ontological assumptions that underpin the development of Conservative Party welfare policy from 2005 to 2010. The assumptions will be discussed in four themes: structure/agency, social change, human nature and gender. The work shall begin by discussing the ontological assumptions of neoliberalism through the work of Hayek, Friedman, Mead and Murray, using examples from British government. Though dominated by rationalism, intentionalism and gender essentialism, these ideas contain a variety of contradictions and incompatibilities. The modernisation period will then be assessed with analysis of two key policy documents, identifying an experimental range of ontological assumptions in the first document, and a more focussed traditional neoliberal assumption set in the second. When the change is assessed against the Coalition Government’s first welfare policy document, it will be argued that traditional neoliberal ontological assumptions dominate, and although some of the newly appropriated discourses remain, the modernisation period has ultimately produced a refinement of traditional neoliberal ideas.
Acknowledgements
I would like to thank Stuart McAnulla for his dedicated supervision and invaluable expertise. I would also like to thank Will Langdale and Clare Whitfield for the hours of fascinating conversation and for the proof reading. A special extra thanks to Clare for providing such a shining example for me to follow. Above all, I would like to thank Jenny Pinder, for without her love, support and patience not a word would have ever been written.

Introduction
“Critical social research begins from questions such as these: how do existing societies provide people with the possibilities and resources for rich and fulfilling lives, how on the other hand do they deny people these possibilities and resources?” (Fairclough 2003: 202). In Britain, “labour market policies have been based on a supply-side policy paradigm according to which economic inactivity and unemployment are not caused by a lack of demand, but by the individual characteristics of the economically inactive” (Garwaite 2011: 371), a paradigm that leads to people being denied the ‘resources for rich and fulfilling lives’ in two ways: abstractly, through “the ontological concealment of life and its possibilities” (Joronen 2013: 358); concretely, as the state “uses the provision of basic needs as both carrot and stick to regulate the behaviour of welfare claimants” (Barker and Lamble 2009: 321). It is within this paradigm that this work hopes to contribute a critical reflection on the “neoliberal subjectivity [...] that normalises the logics of individualism” (Leitner et al 2007: 1), by questioning the underlying ontological assumptions of welfare policy.

Ontological assumptions, philosophies about the nature of being, play a vitally important yet under-exaggerated role in the development of welfare policy. Welfare in its broadest sense “refers to the well-being of individuals” (George and Page 1995: 1) and so it would seem impossible to understand ‘well-being’ without first understanding ‘being’. Fairclough identifies three types of assumptions: “existential, assumptions about what exists; propositional, assumptions about what is or can be or will be the case; value, assumptions about what is good or desirable” (Fairclough 2003: 55). Ontological assumptions fall into the existential category but we must acknowledge that this schema is not concrete and that a degree of overlap exists. In order to maintain the focus on ontology as much as possible, four themes will be used to identify specifically ontological assumptions:
structure/agency; social change; human nature; gender. These themes do not provide a strict structure for the analysis that is to come because they overlap and interrelate in many different ways. For example, a structuralist position in the structure/agency debate is itself an explanation of social change. However, the themes will guide the analysis and provide direction to the discussion.
The actual focus of the analysis is on the ontological assumptions made by the Conservative Party during David Cameron’s period of ‘modernisation’, specifically in relation to welfare policy. By focussing on ‘Cameron’s modernisation’, we are not identifying Cameron as the only or even most important causal agent; instead, we are using his leadership of the party as a timeframe within which to analyse the nature and change of the ontological assumptions that underpin welfare reform. When we refer to Cameron, we are referring to a team of politicians in and around the Conservative Party. The real interest of this work is the ideas, rather than the actors, in the development of welfare policy. Understanding this period is of particular interest for three reasons: firstly, it can be seen as the theoretical precursor to the present government; secondly, the formation of policy in opposition is a more open process, making for a more fruitful analysis of ontological assumptions; finally, the discourse of ‘modernisation’ claims to move away from the more extreme neoliberal ideology of previous Conservative governments, so it important to assess whether this is indeed the case.

There are three important steps to this analysis: firstly, we must identify and explain Cameron’s ontological heritage; secondly, we must look at what assumptions were made during the modernisation period itself; thirdly, we must look at the outcome of the modernisation period and the significance of the resultant change. These steps will form the three main chapters of this work and overall it will be argued that the modernisation period represented an exploration and experimentation, but ultimately, the ontological heritage remained largely unchanged.

Chapter 1 will discuss this heritage in relation to Fredrick Hayek, Milton Friedman, Lawrence Mead and Charles Murray, using examples from the governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, before concluding with a brief assessment of the ideas in relation to New Labour. In this first chapter we will see a variety of ontological assumptions that all broadly ascribe to a neoliberal world-view but exhibit internal tensions and external incompatibilities.

Chapter 2 will look at the broader literature on Cameron’s modernisation, which tends to argue that a change in discourse has supported a continuation of ideology. Two primary texts will then be analysed: Breakdown Britain (SJPG 2006) and Breakthrough Britain (SJPG 2007). The first text is seen to contain a range of diverse ontological assumptions that occasionally go beyond the neoliberal paradigm, while the second text is seen as a movement back towards the ideas of Chapter 1 through the deployment of the key concepts of ‘choice’ and ‘responsibility’. 
Chapter 3 will analyse *21st Century Welfare* (DWP 2010), finding that the traditional neoliberal ideas of Chapter 1 have been refined into a model that does combine various strands but ultimately prioritises ‘rationality’. The chapter will conclude by assessing the transition through the three texts, from diversity to consensus, as traditional neoliberal assumptions are reaffirmed and reinforced using newly appropriated discourses and more refined combinations of the various neoliberal strands of thought.

**Literature Review**

This review of the literature will focus primarily on the abstract theory and the marginally more concrete conceptual framework that is deployed in the analyses of the primary texts. A range of literature will be used to discuss the origins of the welfare debates that historically and theoretically underpin Cameron’s modernisation, but in order to give these ideas the prominence and focus that they require, they will be the focus of Chapter 1, rather than a part of this review. Similarly, academic work focussing on Iain Duncan Smith’s and David Cameron’s broader ‘modernisation’ project will be discussed in Chapter 2. Organising the relevant secondary resources in this manner will allow a better flow to the text and provide greater clarity on the key arguments by laying an abstract foundation for the more concrete discussion that is to come. That this work is focussed on ontological assumptions is indicative of the critical realist approach deployed for their explication. Therefore, although we are attempting to identify and discuss the ontological assumptions of Cameron’s ‘modernisation’ of Conservative welfare policy, a set of ontological assumptions also underpin the analysis itself, leading us to concede that such analysis is inherently biased and the conclusions are inevitably fallible. In order to make this caveat into a strength, it is important to make explicit the critical realist view of ontology upon which this work will proceed.

Resulting from disagreements with positivism, critical realism supports “three kinds of ontological depth which may be summarised by the concepts of intransitivity, transfactuality and stratification [original emphasis]” (Archer et al 1998: xi). The intransitivity premise holds that questions of ontology are not reducible to questions of epistemology, leading us to three assumptions: firstly, that there is a concrete social reality for us to know about; secondly, knowledge of this reality is always a representation through the interpretive layers of human understanding; thirdly and consequentially, *knowledge of reality and reality itself* are not one and the same. Transfactuality gives us “three overlapping domains of reality: the empirical realm, which consists of experienced
events; the actual realm, consisting of events and experiences (not all events are experienced); the real, which consists of mechanisms which may be unobservable” (McAnulla 2005: 31).

Finally, stratification is the notion of a layered ontology, where each level of reality emerges from its constituent parts and, in doing so becomes causally efficacious (Elder-Vass 2007: 29). The most prominent emergent relationship is the emergence of social structures from the level of individual agents, where structures are more than the sum of their parts and, therefore, gain causal powers in their own right. Critical realism does share an ontological position with positivism, and it is perhaps the most basic ontological issue, of “whether there is a ‘real’ world ‘out there’ that is, in an important sense, independent of our knowledge of it” (Furlong and Marsh 2010: 185). On the issue of intransitivity, positivists would oppose the distinct separation between the intransitive objects (those which we study) and the transitive objects (the ways we understand them).

Therefore, in the positivist world view, direct knowledge of the social world is possible through observation, induction and deduction. The primacy of observation as a route of access to reality leads positivism to deny the realm of the ‘actual’ and the realm of the ‘real’, subscribing to a singular view reality, where the empirical realm is all there is. The positivist position on the idea of stratification and, more generally, the structure/agency debate, is less clear. In order to give some clarity to this alternative understanding of political analysis, we can discuss the two major positions that subscribe to a positivist ontology and epistemology: behaviouralism and rational choice theory.

Behaviouralism is the approach to political analysis that looks to the natural sciences for the method of empirical observation in order to discover causal patterns in social reality, and thus provide explanations of political events. Behaviouralism is focussed on human behaviour (agency-centred) and the observable patterns it exhibits (structure-centred), which leads Sanders to argue that “observable behaviour” is the focus regardless of “whether it is at the level of the individual or the social aggregate” (2010: 23). Behaviouralism leaves the structure/agency question open, classifying it as part of the “core propositions”, which “often take the form of highly abstract assumptions that are not susceptible to empirical testing” (Sanders 2010: 28). Despite this characteristic claim to neutrality, the behaviouralist import of the naturalist method means that the approach has traditionally lacked a concrete notion of human agency, with David Easton arguing that an inadequate understanding of the individual has taken the form of an ‘input equals output’ model (Easton 1997). Easton saw the shift of focus from structure to agent as one of the major shifts from behaviouralism to post-behaviouralism (Easton 1997), with the actor placed central to the
explanation of observable behaviour. However, others argue that behaviouralism has always fundamentally been focussed on the individual as the unit of political analysis (Watkins 1968), a position that is therefore then magnified by the postbehavioural movement. While behaviouralism is more interested in falsifiable theories than “abstract assumptions” (Sanders 2010), the assumptions do seem to be moving (further) towards an agent centred view of causality, with little discussion of an emergent social structure.

The increasingly agent centred approach of behaviouralism has been central to the development of the second major positivist mode of analysis, rational choice theory (Hindmoor 2006: 8). Focussing on deduction rather than induction, and taking a strong influence from the more logical and mathematical sphere of economics, rational choice theory posits the rational, self-interested nature of human beings as the most fruitful model for political analysis. While rational choice theory is indicative of the post-behavioural assumptions about an agent centred world, it exhibits a latent structuralism, which has been observed by a number of critics. For example, Hay (2002: 103) argues that if each individual acts rationally to fulfil their self-interest, there is only one course of action for each person to take, making the actor’s environment the real focus for explanation. Hay argues that this latent structuralism deliberately removes the complex questions about human agency, so that rational choice theory can use the same holistic methods found in the natural and formal sciences, where human free will does not complicate the generation of universally applicable scientific models.

From a critical realist point of view, the failure of both approaches to be fully explicit about their ontological positions is particularly prominent when we discuss the structure/agency issue. Positivist approaches to political analysis seek an objective explanation of the social world, which leads them to sideline the complex question of human free will and, particularly with rational choice theory, ultimately results in a latent structuralism. Simultaneously, the one dimensional view of reality, in which the empirical realm is all there is, leads to a methodological individualism where unobservable social structures are not considered to be real. The internal incoherencies and incompatibility of these two positivist approaches to political analysis will be central to the welfare debates outlined in Chapter 1 and the discourse analyses of the welfare policy documents in Chapters 2 and 3. However, in order to study these texts in detail, we require a framework for discourse analysis.

Broadly, there are two prominent schools of discourse analysis: firstly, postmodern discourse theory, developed by the Essex School from the ideas of Laclau and Mouffe’s magnum opus Hegemony and
Social Strategy (1985) (Howarth et al 2000); secondly, critical discourse analysis, which takes a critical realist foundation, and works from the ideas of Norman Fairclough (2001, 2003). Bryman (2008) labels the former simply as ‘discourse analysis’ and the latter as ‘critical discourse analysis’, identifying foundationalist ontological assumption as the basic distinction between the two. Anti-foundationalist ‘discourse analysis’ “denies that there is an external reality awaiting a definitive portrayal by the researcher” (Bryman 2008: 500) while foundationalist ‘critical discourse analysis’ affirms the existence of an external reality. The impossibility of ‘a definitive portrayal’ is an idea shared by both approaches, with Fairclough arguing that “we should not assume that the reality of texts is exhausted by our knowledge about texts” (2003: 14). Therefore, despite some epistemological and methodological commonalities, there remains a deep disagreement between the two schools about the most basic ontological question of whether “there is an external reality” (Bryman 2008: 500).

While the critical realist assumptions that underpin this work make Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis the obvious choice for coherence and compatibility, this disagreement also highlights the reasons why critical realism is a suitable foundation for studying ontological assumptions in welfare policy. The approach of Laclau and Mouffe and the Essex School collapses the distinction between the material and the ideational, a move which would not allow for two important elements of the analysis that follows: firstly, the understanding of how ideational existential assumptions relate to material political policy and, secondly, the distinction between ontological assumptions about how the world is and normative assumptions about how the world should be, with a focus on the former. Finally, it is expected that positivism will underpin the texts that this work will analyse, providing a commonality on the question of foundationalism between the analyst, the analytical framework and the subject material. This most basic of agreements will provide a platform from which a more complex discussion of the disagreements can be entered into.

“Critical discourse analysis emphasises the role of language as a power resource that is related to ideology and socio-cultural change” (Bryman 2008: 508), with particular focus on “[t]he neo-liberal project of removing obstacles to the new economic order”, which is “to a substantial degree led or driven by discourse” (Fairclough 2003: 204). Therefore, the use of critical discourse analysis not only allows the linking of texts to broader social change, but it places this piece of analysis in the broader project of critiquing neo-liberal hegemony.

Critical discourse analysis allows us to understand the texts as points of intersection between ontological assumptions, power structures and public policy, with the broader aim of understanding
“the ontological violence of the neoliberal state and the economisation of everyday life” (Joronen 2013: 358).

Chapter 1 | Neo-liberal ontology and welfare

Volumes could be written under this heading so it is important to start by specifying the scope of this chapter and the reasoning that leads to the selection of content. To garner a more fruitful understanding of Cameron’s welfare modernisation, this chapter will look at the ideas and ontological assumptions of four key thinkers, assessing each in their own terms before illustrating their beliefs with examples from British government. The roots of neo-liberal welfare policy go back as far as an author is willing to look, with the reign of Elizabeth I and the works of Adam Smith both being popular starting points. This chapter will follow the lead of George and Page (1995) and begin with Hayek and Friedman, because “[t]he writings of these two authors, which span more than half a century, jointly bring out the essentials of the New Right ideology very satisfactorily” (George and Page 1995: 15). The ideas of Hayek and Friedman will be illustrated with examples from Margaret Thatcher’s time as Prime Minister, without attempting to assess the thorny issue of their direct influence on welfare policy. This approach will be repeated with the ideas of Lawrence Mead and Charles Murray assessed and illustrated with examples from John Major’s government. The choice of these two thinkers is influenced by Alan Deacon’s Perspectives on Welfare, where Mead and Murray are seen to give “particularly persuasive or influential exposition[s]” of “welfare and paternalism” and “welfare and self-interest” respectively (Deacon 2002: 1-2). The chapter will conclude by assessing whether the ontological positions identified continued to be accepted by the New Labour government. The ideas of especially Hayek but Friedman also, developed in reaction to the post-war consensus, a time which “implied a general acceptance of broadly social democratic ideals” in the field of welfare (Bochel and Defty 2007: 1). While the mainstream polity was building welfare policy around social justice, “the New Right, under the intellectual leadership of Hayek, deny that the concept has any meaning” (George and Wilding 1993: 18). In the 30 years following the Second World War “all political parties in most advanced capitalist societies accepted that the state had the ability, the resources and the moral duty to promote the collective welfare of its citizens”, which leads some authors to the conclusion that “collectivism had ousted individualism as the guiding principle of state affairs” (George and Page 1995: 8). The extent of the state provision of welfare suggests recognition of structural causes of poverty, which are demonstrated by the discourse of the “five giants on the road to reconstruction” (Beveridge 1942: 8). The Beveridge report identifies the cause of the primary giant of ‘want’ as being the “interruption or loss of earning power” (ibid: 11), which could be solved by
“avoidance of mass unemployment” and provision of adequate unemployment benefit (ibid: 14). The idea that the state should avoid unemployment where it can and provide benefits where it cannot, suggests that unemployment was seen as the product of broader social structures.

Therefore, the ‘five giants’ are not themselves social structures, they are the effects of social structures, which the state is responsible for controlling. To avoid the false implication that Britain was entirely gripped by structuralist thinking, we must make two qualifications to this argument. Firstly, the post-war settlement did take individual agency into account, as the third guiding principle of The Beveridge Report demonstrates: “social security must be achieved by co-operation between the State and the individual” (ibid: 9). Secondly, while these ideas held the mainstream, a wide variety of dissenting thinkers, activists and organisations were developing. Prominent amongst the dissenters was Hayek, who argued that “the more the state provides benefits, the less people are inclined to provide for themselves” (Taylor 2007: 76). This idea became central to a broad shift in government policy, as “[a]fter 1976 there was unquestionably an historic break in the development of Britain’s postwar welfare state” with a significant reduction in “the direct responsibility of government for individual welfare” (Lowe 1993: 328-329).

In contrast to Beveridge, Hayek’s position implies that the welfare state assists individuals with their own problems, which in turn implies that unemployment is largely a result of individual failures. Hayek does also seem to identify governmental structures, which inhibit the full realisation of human agency. Therefore, the natural exercise of agency requires the removal of state welfare provision. However, his suggested radical transformation of the welfare system stands in tension with his view on social change, which venerates tradition and rejects mechanical or rational interference with the organic evolution of human society. Tomlinson argues Hayek’s proposed “radical reforms of existing arrangements” are “seemingly based on the constructivist rationalism that Hayek so abhors” (1995: 21). With regards to human nature, we can see a continuation of the same tension, as Hayek’s conceptualisation of individuals operating in a self-interested market displays a rationalist tendency, which he vehemently opposes. The tension seems to originate in the propensity to see state institutions as oppressive structures, which, once removed, allow a flourishing of free agency, while simultaneously denying the existence of economic power structures, or the more deeply rooted social structures that seem to constitute his notion of ‘tradition’.
In contrast, Friedman does not share Hayek’s Burkean opposition to rationality and veneration of tradition. According to Barry (1995), Friedman operates entirely within the positivist framework, prioritising rationalism and empiricism. Barry also argues that “germane to his welfare philosophy is a perhaps optimistic faith in the ability of individuals to use effectively that liberty which a market society grants them” (Barry 1995: 34). This gives Friedman more clarity than Hayek on the issue of structure/agency, as he subscribes to an intentionalist position, and the issue of human nature, which he sees as rational and selfmaximising. Blyth argues that “rationalists’ theories predict a world in flux”, where “institutions are both formed and changed according to rapidly shifting contract curves and cost/benefit trade-offs” (2002: 19). The failure to account for society’s relative stability leaves Friedman with an incomplete notion of social change, which is indicative of a simplistic vision of human nature. His empiricism would lead to him avoiding such abstract concepts, but Barry suggests that this creates a further tension, as there is “a curious and uneasy combination of (ultimately unjustifiable) ethical values and empirically based utilitarianism” (1995: 34). This strong, un-questioned ethical base and the assertive, simplistic view of human nature supports George and Wilding’s remark that “there is a dangerous ‘essentialism’ about much New Right thinking about the market” (1993: 41). While internal tensions exist in both thinkers, it is also important to note that there are also clear tensions between the ideas of Hayek and Friedman.

Friedman’s intentionalism and rational, selfish view of human nature lead him to a vision of social change that accounts for the flux but not the stability in society. In contrast, Hayek sees a form of structuralism in the political sphere that must be removed for people to realise their agency in the social and economic spheres, while his vision of human nature is characterised by a tension between individuals as players in a rational market economy, and a strong opposition to rationalist thinking. A similar tension plays out in a view of social change that prescribes a radical reduction of the welfare state, yet also opposes radical or ideological reform. While both thinkers ultimately assert the primacy of the individual agent, they do so for different reasons and to different extents. This leads us to the understanding that the neo-liberal approach to welfare is based on a mixture of different ontologies.

The influence that these thinkers had over Thatcher’s Conservatives is a complex and contested issue that is not the concern of this work. The issue at hand is whether their writings give us an insight into the assumptions made in government policy. While Thatcher said Hayek’s works “would well be read by almost every honourable member” (Thatcher 1981 in Tomlinson 1995: 25), the ideas themselves seem to have more in common with Friedman. The “individualisation of the social”
(Ferge 1997: 12) saw the sale of council houses, symbolising “the ethos of the post collectivist society” (Marsland 2004: 217). “[T]ough benefit penalties on those who failed to participate” (Land 2004: 258) were the product of the intentionalist belief that “we should judge people on merit and not background” and “back the workers and not the shirkers” (Thatcher 1995 in Marsland 2004: 216). Though Friedman is perhaps a clearer exponent of such extreme intentionalism, the veneration of tradition, an important element of Hayek’s thinking, was also part of the Thatcher government’s welfare reforms. The use of nationalist discourse is perhaps a broader example but on the issue of welfare, the traditionalism manifested itself in a Victorian notion of the family (Land 2004).

“Reluctant to abandon the male breadwinner model” (ibid: 2004: 260), the Conservatives eroded the benefit entitlements of young people (ibid: 258), forced lone mothers to name and seek assistance from the fathers of their children, and “did nothing to increase childcare provision” (ibid: 260).

“What seems to have happened in the late 1980s and early 1990s is that the New Right have laid less stress on the supposed economically damaging effect of welfare state policies and put more emphasis on its socially damaging impact” (George and Wilding 1993: 30). This move, from concerns about the freedom of tax payers, which are often the focus of Hayek and Friedman, to concerns about the wellbeing of the welfare recipients, allows welfare policy to be justified using a ‘for your own good’ argument. Deacon (2002) points out that this breaks with the classical liberal tenet that power should only be exercised over a citizen to prevent harm to others, “his own good, physical or moral, is not sufficient warrant” (Mill in Deacon 2002: 53). Yet it is this claim of concern for welfare recipients that underlies the differing positions of Lawrence Mead and Charles Murray, whose ideas we will now turn to.

For Deacon, “there could scarcely be a greater contrast than that between the ‘new paternalism’ of Mead, and the libertarianism of Murray” (2001: 4). Mead’s position on welfare is primarily concerned with behaviour. To Mead, people are seen to be in receipt of welfare because of personal failure to fulfil obligations to themselves, their families and to society (Deacon 2002), which is largely a product of “their obdurate refusal” to work (Bryne 2005: 25). This seems to exhibit a clear agent-centred standpoint that is only slightly complicated by Mead’s suggestion that the solution to the behavioural problem is to offer welfare conditionally to encourage desired behaviour. This system of behavioural coercion, labelled paternalism, can be interpreted as the agency and power of the ‘functional’ non-poor being activated against the “puzzling reluctance of the poor to do more to help themselves” (Mead 2000: 111). We could interpret Mead’s system of behavioural manipulation as a social structure that emerges from the collective actions of government officials, but the recasting of ‘the government’ as a social agent rather than an emergent social structure seems itself a part of
Mead’s argument, and a move away from Hayek’s thinking. Whichever view we take, a further tension arises with the focus on behaviour, as “any programme that sees the problem in terms solely of individual behaviour” inevitably includes a moralist element, suggesting that “economistic rationalising is disingenuous” (Bryne 2005: 25). Therefore, the idea that rationality is an objective view of human nature can be seen to be false as soon as one starts overtly manipulating the behaviour of others. Murray takes this rationalism as the central pillar of his argument by beginning “with the proposition that all, poor and non-poor alike, use the same general calculus in arriving at decisions” (Murray 1984: 155). On top of this assumption he suggests that having less money leads to short-term decision making, corrupting the functionality of the poor. In Murray’s view, self-maximising government politicians, interested only in expanding their own budgets and offering increasingly ambitious election promises have caused a huge expansion in welfare that has simply increased this short-termism amongst the poor.

Abolishing state welfare would therefore make employment the only rational choice for the poor. To Murray, a selfish rational human nature is the driver of social change, but while he attempts to develop an agent-centred position, he instead seems to evoke the latent structuralism of rational choice. The idea that all people use the same rational ‘calculus’ in arriving at decisions suggests that they do not have any agency at all, and that their situation is the product of input, rather than output. Such extreme structuralism “implicitly precludes the possibility of people being able to shape the course of history” (McAnulla 2002: 276). Therefore, although Murray continually focuses on individuals, his belief that humans “are self-centred and they will only exert themselves for individual gain or to avoid punishment” (George and Wilding 1993: 23) actually removes any notion of human free will, leaving him without an explanation of the underlying causes of social change. Murray and Mead seem to share more in common than Deacon suggests, but there are differences between them. Starting from a rational choice model, Murray ends up with a position that oscillates between extreme structuralism and extreme intentionalism, whereas Mead starts with a model based on behaviour, deviates little from his intentionalist understandings, but ends up with a moralistic rationalism. The two thinkers do share views about gender but exhibit them in different ways. Mead argues that gender “discrimination in any overt form has disappeared” (Mead 2000: 110) but goes on to name his approach ‘paternalism’, evoking an authoritative, dominant and righteous view of men, who presumably must prevent the “proletariat hanging on the nipple of state maternalism’ (Barnett, 1986, p. 304)” (George and Wilding 1993: 32). “[T]he collapse of the family” (Mead 2000: 112) does play an important role in Mead’s ideas as an effect of poverty, but to Murray, the loosening of family structures is the primary cause of poverty. Murray uses similar gender
binaries to discuss how undesirable family models lead to a perpetuation of social problems. “[T]here is the commitment of the New Right to ‘traditional family values’, illustrated by the moral panic around young single mothers (Murray 1990)” (Williams 1995: 268). On the one hand, giving birth to children when in poverty is the fault of women, while on the other, failing to work is the fault of men; “low-income males choose not to take jobs” (Murray 1996: 38). A society without ‘paternalism’ is akin to a family without a dominant male: “in communities without fathers, the kids tend to run wild” (Murray 1996: 33).

The ideas subscribed to by both authors are visible in the policies of the Major government. For example, Mead’s paternalism was at work as the government oversaw the “increasing pressure applied to benefits claimants, including the powerfully symbolic transformation of Unemployment Benefit to the Jobseeker’s Allowance” (Marsland 2004: 219), a policy based on the idea that “claimants should be compelled to work for their benefits” (Sullivan 1996: 240). “Particular categories of claimants, such as young single mothers, were pilloried” (Fraser 2003: 287). This suggests a crossover of Mead’s macro-level gender politics of state paternalism and Murray’s micro-level gender politics of the family. The idea that “single teenage parents could be led into a life of poverty stricken dependency by the state’s provision of what [Portillo] called over generous benefits” (Sullivan 1996: 241) seems closely aligned with Murray’s notion of the family and the disincentivising welfare system as the drivers of poverty. An example of Murray’s focus on the rational agency of individuals came with the recasting of citizens as consumers with “the Citizen’s Charter”, which persuaded “consumers to demand higher standards” (Fraser 2003: 285). This was used in the NHS where “the government now attempted to introduce some elements of consumer pressure to improve performance” (ibid: 286).

The views of the four authors discussed in this chapter, share one assumption above all, the idea that human nature is inherently self-interested. This in turn leads to the priority of the individual agent and the affirmation of their causal power to achieve that which they intend. The model of rational agents is shared by all but Hayek, who favours an organic and evolutionary view of human nature and society. However, this rationalism exhibits contradictions in two ways: firstly, it leads to the latent structuralism of rational choice theory, despite the agency-centred approach and, secondly, it leads to a moralistic priority of ethical values, despite a positivist framework. This moralism is particularly clear in the discussion of gender and the family, where traditional gender essentialism and family structures are reaffirmed. The moralist dimension is particularly associated with Mead, who sees welfare conditionality as the solution to social problems. Increasing
conditionality requires an increase in state control, opposed by the other authors, but it also requires an increased notion of ‘who deserves what’, which in turn puts more weight on the explanation of cause, and ultimately increases the centrality of ontological assumptions to welfare policy.

Though Murray and Friedman favour an extremely reduced welfare state, in contrast to Mead’s larger bureaucratic and conditional one, their ideas are broadly compatible, as New Labour demonstrated. Prideaux (2009) argues that Murray’s ideas remained central to welfare policy throughout the New Labour years, while paternal conditionality became an increasing element of welfare reform (Powell 2000), with Barker and Lamble suggesting that the move “towards more disciplinary, contractual, and consumer-based models of service delivery” has actually sped up under Labour (2009: 321). Labour politicians such as Frank Field MP have strongly emphasised the rational self-interest model of Murray (Deacon 2002: 43), and at the same time, the behavioural coercion of welfare policy under New Labour leads Larkin to claim that the primary purpose of welfare is moving rapidly from support to the enforcement of “socially acceptable behaviour”, a process we can understand as the “criminalisation social security” (Larkin 2007: 299). New Labour did not overtly reinforce the same essentialist role on gender, but instead brought issues such as teenage pregnancy into their broader assumptions on society and social change. “To this end, teenage pregnancy was depicted not as a consequence of moral deficiency but as the result of a failure to exercise agency” (Arai 2009: 119). Overall, the integration of these models does not extinguish the internal tensions and external disagreements of the four authors discussed in this chapter; rather it demonstrates that governments are capable of mobilising a variety of contradictory and incoherent ontological assumptions within welfare policy.

Chapter 2 | Cameron’s Conservatives in Opposition and Welfare Policy Development

As Chapter 1 illustrates, a complex mix of ontological assumptions is at work in the welfare debates of the New Right. There are tensions and contradictions within the writings of particular authors and a further, more pronounced layer of tensions between authors. There are of course dominant positions, such as the idea that human nature is selfish and rational, but these are highly contested conceptions even within New Right ideology. Chapter 1’s discussion of diverse and incompatible ontological positions does not provide a coherent consensus against which we can assess Cameron’s modernisation of Conservative welfare policy, but it provides an understanding of the major strands of thought and some perspective on which were the more dominant elements of his ontological heritage. This chapter will look at the initial period of ‘modernisation’ in three main sections: firstly,
we will discuss the broader discourse of ‘modernisation’ and the importance of the ‘compassion’ discourse; secondly, we will undertake an analysis of *Breakdown Britain* (2006) in order to explicate the ontological assumptions of the welfare ‘rethink’; finally, we will carry out an analysis of *Breakthrough Britain* (2007) to assess the continuation of these assumptions and their manifestation into key concepts.

We can understand ‘modernisation’ as a discourse rather than a process, as it is a method for depoliticising change (Bryne et al 2012). Bryne et al (2012) argue that “modernisation rhetoric has functioned to enable Cameron to entrepreneurially reinvent and renew the neo-liberal state project which began under Thatcher and continued under New Labour” (ibid: 17). When David Cameron was voted leader of the Conservative Party in December 2005, his acceptance speech offered a “modern and compassionate conservatism” (Cameron 2005), a language that has roots in the One-Nation Conservatism of the post-war consensus. However, in more recent years Iain Duncan Smith, Oliver Letwin and David Willets have used Thatcherite ideology to reconstruct the ideas that underpin the compassion discourse (Bochel 2011). At its most basic level, ‘compassionate conservatism’ implies a concern for the most vulnerable, without a contestation of traditional hierarchies.

This approach implies a greater concern with social policy as a whole, but more importantly it implies a shift from seeing the welfare system as part of the Treasury’s balance book, to understanding welfare in terms of its recipients. This can be seen as a continuation of the shift that occurred between Thatcher and Major, as identified in Chapter 1. However, if we look at ‘compassionate conservatism’ as part of a ‘decontamination’ of the conservative brand rather than a significant shift in ideology, we can see how this resurrection of an old Conservative discourse supports a continuation of Thatcherite ideology. Bale (2010) argues that the focus on compassion was a tactical manoeuvre, which involved a wall of silence on the traditional Conservative Party issues of immigration, Europe and tax cuts. Simultaneously, the policy vacuum was filled with a new focus on traditional Labour Party issues such as social justice, the environment and health. Therefore, a change in rhetoric and the resurrection of old discourses, especially the discourse of compassion, allowed the Thatcherite ideas to lie dormant and unchanged until the political climate would favour them once more.

Hayton (2012) takes a slightly different approach, arguing that the traditional Thatcherite ideas were not entirely dormant but were being woven into the newly appropriated discourses of compassion and social justice. Being compassionate had come to mean giving individuals and families
responsibility (ibid), as can be seen in Cameron’s claim that his “central mission is to give people more power and control over their lives ... because we want people to rely on their family, not the state; because you can’t take responsibility for something unless you have control over it” (Cameron 2007). Therefore, Cameron’s project involved silence on traditional Conservative Party issues, reloading ‘compassionate’ discourses with neoliberal ideology, and weaving both into a public concern with social justice. On this basis, we can argue that the change has largely been a change in discourse, while the stability has been a stability of core ideas, with the former used to maintain the latter. McAnulla, Hayton and Bryne et al all see Cameron’s approach as a reaction to Blair’s successful deployment of the modernisation discourse. Modernisation is a depoliticised and depoliticising discourse, because the term itself can be classified as an empty signifier (Laclau in Bryne et al 2012); ‘modernisation’ is forceful in its implication that change is urgent and necessary, yet the nature of the change itself is left entirely open. Blair’s persistent and widespread use of the modernisation discourse successfully cast the Conservative Party as outdated, forcing Cameron to battle Labour over the meaning of this key empty signifier (Bryne et al 2012). We can summarise Cameron’s approach as threefold: firstly, he sought to focus on traditional left wing issues, while remaining silent on traditional Conservative issues; secondly, he sought to weave traditional neoliberal ideas into newly created and newly appropriated discourses; thirdly, he sought to take part in a struggle over meaning for New Labour’s empty signifiers.

So far, the picture painted of Cameron’s modernisation is of a changed language and a stable assumption set. The rest of this chapter will focus on how this language has changed and what this change suggests about the stability of the core ideas, more specifically the extent of continuation from the ontological assumptions discussed in chapter 1. As previously discussed, when we refer to Cameron’s modernisation project, we are referring to the broader team of politicians driving ‘change’ in the Conservative Party, and with the case of welfare, an important member of that team was Iain Duncan Smith. Hayton (2012) traces the Coalition Government’s welfare reform directly to the ideas of Duncan Smith and the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), the social policy think-tank that Duncan Smith established in 2004 after losing the Conservative Party leadership. Hugh Bochel (2011) discusses the influence that the CSJ had over David Cameron’s modernisation project, arguing that it was the source of the two central ideas of ‘broken Britain’ and the ‘big society’. Gerry Mooney gives further support to this point by suggesting that “the kinds of ideas advanced by Smith and Cameron are now central to Conservative Party thinking” (Mooney 2009: 445). In December 2005 Duncan Smith was named chair of the Social Justice Policy Group (SJP), one of 6 policy groups that were established to reposition the Conservative Party (Bale 2010). Although the policy groups were
reworked into a final seven, the SJPG remained unchanged and Duncan Smith remained its leader. The SJPG hosted the CSJ and together they published both *Breakdown Britain* (SJPG 2006) and *Breakthrough Britain* (SJPG 2007).

Before looking at the content of the documents, it is worth making a brief point about genre, identified by Fairclough as one of the three forms of meaning making, along with discourse (representation) and style (identification) (Fairclough 2003). Throughout the analysis, we must bear in mind that a text “is not ‘in’ a particular genre – it is likely to involve a combination of different genres” (Fairclough 2003: 66). Genre strongly influences the discourses and styles found in a text, but it is not entirely determinate of the content. Fairclough argues that “genres can be identified at three levels of abstraction: pre-genres, disembedded genres and situated genres” (ibid: 86). The two texts analysed in this chapter include the *pre-genres* of argument, narrative, description and explanation, and the *disembedded genres* of report, academic paper, consultation document and manifesto. There are very few *situated genres* in the texts because the very act of destabilising, disembedding and redeploying genres is a feature of neo-liberalism and a form of control over particular social practices (Fairclough 2003). Therefore, the open and hybrid nature of the genres within these two texts is part of a broader social change and has the effect of providing both theoretical space and authoritative legitimacy to the authors. Both texts work on the assumption that they are objective assessments of welfare delivery, and so involve a “three pronged-process of evidence gathering” (SJPG 2006: 19), consistently qualifying the term ‘evidence’ with modal adjectives. Examples include “overwhelming evidence” and a “growing body of evidence” (SJPG 2007: 8-9). The discourse of evidence and objectivity is synonymous with a positivist epistemology, and so readers of *Breakdown Britain* (SJPG 2006) are urged “to lay to one side their own experience and consider the evidence-based case” (ibid: 30). As the texts claim not to be promoting the beliefs of the authors, any attempt to discuss the ontological underpinning must critically assess the framework of classifications and representations used to communicate the supposed ‘objective evidence’. The discourse of evidence gathering is partly a product of the ‘disembedded’ genre of a ‘report’ “in the sense of a factual narrative about actual events” (Fairclough 2003: 68). Apart from being a feature of genre and an indication of a positivist epistemology, we must finally consider the use of the evidence discourse as a deliberate depoliticisation of the welfare debate. Supplementing the ‘modernisation’ discourse, this move away from explicit moralism allows normative questions to pass unchallenged as factual statements (Slater 2012: 8).
After this brief discussion of genre and epistemology, we can now discuss how the discourse reveals ontological assumptions in the texts, beginning with *Breakdown Britain* (SJPG 2006). Social democratic discourses of ‘social justice’ and ‘social exclusion’ are seen to “have significant bearing on the proper functioning of the market economy” (ibid: 18), and so are used to support a neo-liberal belief in the primacy of the market. Similarly, the social democratic beliefs that “persistent poverty is complex and deep-rooted” (ibid: 13) and “society must remain interconnected or social dislocation would result” (ibid: 18) are represented by a neo-liberal discourse: “if the drivers of poverty are not addressed an evergrowing underclass will be created” (ibid: 13). While these two ideologies are combined, they are combined within a hierarchy, with social democratic discourses incorporated into, and therefore dominated by, a neo-liberal world view. The incorporation of social democratic discourses and ideas also plays another role within the text: it allows the report a conceptual freedom beyond the traditional neo-liberal framework. However, this unsurprisingly leads to contradictions and ambiguities.

We can argue that the discourse of the post-war consensus is used to texture the neo-liberal argument for rolling back the state because the hybrid concept of “the welfare society”, described as “that which delivers welfare beyond the state” (SJPG 2006: 14), is an intertextual reference to the concept of the ‘welfare state’. “At the heart of the welfare society is the family” (ibid: 14) with “the voluntary and community sector” providing “a form of extended family to those who have none” (ibid: 14), but “the welfare society has been breaking down on the margins” (ibid: 14). It seems that the best way to explicate the ontological assumptions of this text is to understand the cause of this breakdown, but here is where the ambiguity is most pronounced. Four different positions in the structure/agency debate seem to be at work in the text, each leading to a different explanation of social change. Therefore, we will look at each of the following four views in turn to assess their prominence: structuralism, intentionalism, elision and oscillation.

Firstly, we will look at the structuralist tendencies in the text. “[T]he five pathways to poverty” (SJPG 2006: 13) is an intertextual reference to Beveridge’s ‘five giants’, but these notions share more than just a discourse. Both ‘pathways’ and ‘giants’ are nominalisations, processes represented as entities, which has the effect of concealing the causal agents (Fairclough 2003: 144) and the use of metaphor exaggerates this concealment. Therefore, while it is tempting to see ‘pathways’ as social structures that cause poverty, it makes more sense to interpret them as effects of poverty, or indeed examples of poverty itself. Further weight can be put behind this point by noting that a ‘pathway’ must be walked, which provides some allusion to causality, but to causal agents, rather than causal
The representation of poverty as a social structure and the simultaneous obfuscation of causality is a device used repeatedly throughout the text to create the impression that social structures are a part of the text’s ontology. For example, “the absence of appropriate employment” (SJPG 2006: 35) implies structural concern, but it is simply an elongated way of describing unemployment. The actual cause of unemployment is rarely discussed in the text, while the main effect of unemployment is summarised as follows: “employment opportunities appear to play an important role in influencing the supply of marriageable men” (ibid: 35). This pattern continues throughout the text, with nominalisation and structural discourse used to describe poverty itself, while cause is largely ignored.

An alternative method based on the same premise is the use of feedback loops. The ‘five pathways’ are linked together in causal chains that eventually loop, creating the impression of causal social structures, without actually allowing structures to enter the chain. For example, “substance misuse is likely to trigger truancy, truancy triggers educational failure, educational failure triggers unemployment and unemployment is a very high risk factor for increasing substance abuse” (SJPG 2006: 43). This sentence implies an explanation of the causes of poverty, but gets little further than explaining that one form of poverty can exacerbate another. However, this is a step away from the rational models discussed in Chapter 1 towards a more holistic, organic and complex understanding of society. There is one chapter that genuinely seems to accept the role of social structure. Chapter 6, Indebtedness, explains how the liberalisation of the credit markets and their current institutionally predatory nature draws people into “the debt spiral” (ibid: 67). The chapter goes to a more abstract level arguing that “modern society is too materialistic” (ibid: 71), pressuring people into taking credit to meet material norms. Both examples demonstrate that a strand of structuralist thinking is at work in this text, despite the dominance of the hollow structuralist discourse discussed above.

The intentionalist position was the dominant strand identified in Chapter 1 but it plays a minor part in this text. We can identify a discourse of individualism within the text: “people centred” (SJPG 2006: 14); “personal circumstances” (ibid: 15); “individuals moving into jobs” (ibid: 25); “individuality” (ibid: 59). The intentionalist strand is perhaps better encapsulated by the concept of “a second chance” (ibid: 13, 14, 20, 73-88). ‘Second Chance’ is an example of the compassion discourse in action, but the notion of a second chance implies that people have already had and squandered a first chance. However, although these indicators suggest an intentionalist position is present, the scarcity of such examples implies that this is a minor strand in the text, rather than the dominant one. The more explicit denials of such assumptions underline this point, with the text
affirming that “lone parenthood is not a lifestyle choice” (ibid: 15), and that we must “stabilise and strengthen society, rather than blaming those whose lives are the product of the self same causes that have been ignored for too long” (ibid: 15). “[S]elf same causes” does seem to identify some cause at an individual level, but it is the opposition to blaming individuals that seems the central point of this sentence. Therefore, intentionalism has a place in the mixture of assumptions, but individuals are not seen as the primary causal force in society. The text attributes that role to the family. This leads to two possible understandings of structure and agency within the family: elision and oscillation.

We will look first at elision. The family is used throughout the text as both a structure and an agent, resulting in a conflation of the two. “Family breakdown” (SJPG 2006: 1, 2, 4, 9) is continually used as the primary cause of social problems. “The intergenerational transmission of family breakdown” (ibid: 31) is caused by “a cycle of psychological distress”, leading to “‘damaged’ individuals going on to create more dysfunctional families” (ibid: 31). We can therefore interpret the family as a structural mechanism causing continued poverty and social problems, while simultaneously being a collective agent, the product of parents “failing to form a durable bond between a mother and a father”, leading to “abuse, neglect or insufficient nurture” (ibid: 31) and eventually a social unit that “cannot offer core needs to their offspring” (ibid: 32). However, this suggests that the unity, or ‘elision’, of structure and agency is only skin deep, leading us to understand the “family breakdown” discourse as another method for discussing social problems without directly identifying a causal agent. This allows the text to avoid the neo-liberal blaming of the individual, without subscribing to a holistic structuralism. Conflating structure and agency into a singular concept of ‘family’ is a way in which the text avoids engaging directly with the structure/agency question. Once we look within the concept of the family, we can see a model that oscillates between the extremes of structuralism and intentionalism. As we shall now see, this is achieved by separating children from adults and applying a different concept of human nature to each.

Of vital importance to the text’s explanation is the notion that children do not have any agency. By focussing on children, the text is again attempting to avoid the structure/agency debate, but the agency of parents is regularly implied: “the pattern is one where one or both parents are drinking or taking drugs and are being abusive or neglectful to their children” (SJPG 2006: 43). The implication is that parents cause poverty by exhibiting undesirable patterns of behaviour or by failing to adopt the correct family structure. A cycle is created as parents bring up children in “broken homes” and “dysfunctional families”, and these children go on to perpetuate social problems. Within the family
unit, parents are seen as the causal source of social problems, which are understood as “patterns of behaviour” (ibid: 16). But as these behavioural patterns “are repeated by successive generations” (ibid: 16), it becomes unclear at what age an individual becomes a causal social agent. This issue is not resolved, which is unsurprising given the gulf between parents as agents and children as structure bearers. Therefore, we can understand the text as oscillating between adults as free human agents and children as structural dupes, without any consideration that adults were once children or that children will one day be adults. Even, where children are considered in the future, they are not attributed agency, while at no point are parents considered in the past tense, marking an absence of their structural inheritance. Most of the discussion in the text revolves around this notion of the family, leading us to identify it as the dominant ontological position in the text.

The dominance of the family model is also heavily gendered, with the text continually assuming that a family unit consists of two parents, a mother and a father, with one or more children. However, same sex-couples have legally been allowed to adopt in the UK since 2005, meaning that, with this report published in December 2006, an ontological assumption is being made about gender in the repeated concept of “dadlessness” (SJPG 2006: 28). It is also worth noting at this point that “Duncan Smith faced a parliamentary division on the adoption of children by unmarried and same-sex couples” while leader of the Conservative Party (Hayton and Heppell 2010: 432). He “imposed a three-line whip and demanded that the PCP endorse a strongly socially conservative position” (ibid: 432). In this context, the ‘dadlessness’ discourse indicates a gender essentialist position, within which a man and a woman are required for the effective raising of children. Reminiscent of Charles Murray’s line of argument, the text goes further by suggesting the lack of male role models is not limited to parenthood; “fewer primary school aged children ever encounter a male teacher at school” (SJPG 2006: 17). By repeatedly emphasising the centrality of ‘male role models’ to the solution of social problems, the text affirms a gender binary and prioritises the absence of men as a cause and their presence as a solution.

*Breakdown Britain* (SJPG 2006) gives us an insight into the mixture of ontological positions that are concealed by the nominalisation of social change, but ultimately dominated by a notion of the family that splits structure and agency between children and parents. As well as asserting that adults and children have different human natures, the text largely avoids the rationalist selfish view of human nature, which was the dominant strand of Cameron’s ontological heritage. However, the gender essentialism and the priority of men as causal social agents are as present in this work as they are in the ideas of Charles Murray. These ideas are constructed by incorporating rival discourses and beliefs into the text, without allowing them to significantly shape the overall conclusion. Fairclough
(2003) argues that a policy document moves from conflict to consensus, and so we shall see the conflict exhibited in *Breakdown Britain* (SJPG 2006) moving towards consensus in *Breakthrough Britain* (SJPG 2007).

We will begin by briefly looking at which of the four structure/agency positions are continued in *Breakthrough Britain* (SJPG 2007). Firstly, the structuralist position seems to have disappeared, with ‘indebtedness’ only mentioned once as part of the ‘five pathways’. Secondly, the conflation of structure and agency continues to exist as a discourse and not an ontological assumption. Thirdly, the idea of parents as social agents and children as structure bearers is still at work as an underlying notion of the family. Fourthly, however, the intentionalist position is hugely expanded, where even children seen to have some agency. Children are offered “‘pathways to success’ so that there is every opportunity for them to maximize their potential” (ibid: 8). The biggest indicators of the dominance of individualism and intentionalism in this text are the concepts of ‘responsibility’ and choice’, which are central to this analysis. To understand this intentionalism and to explicate the other ontological assumptions in this text, we can look at how these key concepts draw together the fractured positions in *Breakdown Britain* (SJPG 2006). *Breakthrough Britain* (SJPG 2007) outlines two traditional positions: the first is where “poverty is always the fault of the person who makes the wrong choices” (ibid: 7); the second is that “if a person is in poverty it must be the government’s fault” (ibid: 7). This synthetic binary replaces ‘structure’ with ‘government’, and goes on to discuss ‘government’ as an agent; “government has to be committed” (ibid: 7), “government action” (ibid: 4), “government has created” (ibid: 5). The text then looks to transcend this binary of two agents with the “belief that people must take responsibility for their own choices but that government has a responsibility to help people make the right choices” (ibid: 7). The ‘responsibility’ of government is to “support the role of marriage and initiatives to help people live free of debt and addiction” (ibid: 7). With debt and addiction not mentioned again in the text, the main proposal of the document is “to remove the fiscal disincentives to couples staying together” (ibid: 10). In a continuation of the separation of human nature between parent and child, the government does take more responsibility for children, but does so via parents by removing “financial constraints” and supporting their “desire to choose” (ibid: 9).

We can summarise the government’s ‘responsibility’ as correcting behaviour using financial (dis)incentives. This shares some assumptions with Mead’s paternalism, as the government must bring about behavioural corrections, such as preventing divorce or ensuring parents care for children. However, changes to behaviour are proposed using financial incentives, implying that the
rational self-maximising model of human nature is being brought back into Conservative ontological assumptions. Following the discussions at the end of Chapter 1, we can see a combination of behaviouralist and rational choice models forming the basis for the ontological assumptions underpinning contemporary welfare reform. We can identify this combination occurring through the notion of ‘choice frameworks’, where individuals are largely seen as rational, economic and selfish and so they have a hierarchy of options available to them. Each ‘pathway to poverty’ contains a hierarchy of choices, and these hierarchies interrelate and interact to form a broader framework of choice. The successful manipulation of these ‘choice frameworks’ will bring about the correct behaviours that are essential to solving poverty. In this model we can see the rational, selfish concept of human nature taking centre stage, with any more complex behaviour such as the interrelation of the ‘pathways to poverty’, resulting from the combination of choice hierarchies. This model combines Murray’s libertarianism and Mead’s paternalism, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Sunstein et al. (2003), proponents of this combination, claim that, “equipped with an understanding of behavioural findings of bounded rationality and bounded selfcontrol, libertarian paternalists should attempt to steer people’s choices in welfare” (Sunstein et al 2003: 1159), an approach that has become known as ‘nudge theory’.

McAnulla explains how “Cameron established a ‘Nudge’ unit” to look into encouraging healthy eating, quitting smoking, organ donation and environmentally friendly behaviour (McAnulla 2012: 171-172). While ‘nudge theory’ has not been an explicit part of welfare policy, the ideas discussed above in relation to choice frameworks and correcting behaviour do share a theoretical foundation with nudge theory, and exhibit many similar concepts. While ‘nudge’, ‘paternalism’, ‘libertarianism’, ‘choice architecture’, ‘behavioural coercion’ and ‘choice frameworks’ are terms absent from both texts analysed in this chapter, the ontological assumptions discussed suggest that ‘nudge theory’ is already a central part of Conservative welfare policy. In Breakdown Britain (SJPG 2006) children are seen to copy the behaviour of parents and the idea of ‘copied behaviour’ is one of the main deviations that ‘nudge theory’ makes from traditional libertarianism (Sunstein and Thaler 2008). In Breakthrough Britain (SJPG 2007) the ‘correct’ behaviours, described as “the right choices” and “positive life choices” (ibid: 7), are linked into the family discourse throughout the text, implying that the ultimate solution to social problems is not the improving of state welfare provision, but correcting family structures. Welfare has the role of bringing about the correct behaviours that lead to the correct family structures. Thus, the causal mechanisms in society are localised in the family, with social structures becoming family structures and agents becoming parents. However, because parents are seen to be directly responsible for the family structure, the dominant strand of
ontological thought becomes intentionalism. The only complication to this intentionalism is the focus on children as lacking agency, but in this text the agency of parents is much stronger, acting directly upon children and affecting them via the creation of particular family structures. This means that children are not at the mercy of social structures, but at the mercy of their parents’ agency. The idea of government paternalism provides a further complication to agency, but as discussed in relation to Mead in Chapter 1, the government has been recast as a social agent, preventing ‘nudge theory’ from relying on any notion of emergent social structures.

Throughout the two texts, we have largely supported the suggestion made towards the start of this chapter that Cameron’s modernisation sought to weave traditional Conservative ideas into newly created and newly appropriated discourses. The structural discourse and social democratic discourse used in Breakdown Britain (SJPG 2006) are largely used to support a traditional concept of the family. However, there are exceptions, such as the structural impact of markets via ‘indebtedness’, and the lack of agency attributed to children at the expense of their broader social environment. Nominalisation is used throughout to disguise agents, but it is also used to reaffirm traditional gender roles and prescriptive family structures, prioritising men as causal agents. Focussing on gender and on children, Breakdown Britain (SJPG 2006) largely avoids a rationalist conceptualisation of human nature, but this returns in Breakthrough Britain (SJPG 2007), making up an important part of the overall argument. The gender essentialism and reaffirming of traditional gender roles continues but the dominant concept of human nature is a rational and selfish one. The combination of behaviouralist paternalism and rational choice theory in this second text uses an almost entirely intentionalist position to construct a notion of social change where choice frameworks can be used to manipulate behaviour in order to solve poverty, via the correction of family structures. The social environment of children is recast as the agency of parents, an idea that forms the cornerstone of a neo-liberal set of ontological assumptions.

Chapter 3 | The Coalition on Welfare
This last chapter will use a discourse analysis of 21st Century Welfare (2010) to look at how ontological assumptions have changed over the three texts, allowing us to comprehend more fully the nature of Cameron’s modernisation of welfare policy. With this final text published after the 2010 election, we must be aware that the Conservative Party came to power as part of a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, somewhat complicating the purpose of the analysis. However, there are two points to be made to suggest that the issue of the Coalition Government will not problematise the focus of this work. Firstly, part of Cameron’s modernisation strategy was to ‘woo’ the Liberal
Democrats in order to win their voters (Bale 2010), have their parliamentary support once in power, and open the possibility of coalition if necessary (McAnulla 2012). Therefore, we can in fact understand the Coalition government as part of the modernisation project itself, making it less important that we attempt to separate the ontological assumptions of Conservatives from Liberal Democrats. Secondly, the make-up of the Department of Work and Pensions that published 21st Century Welfare (DWP 2010) was as follows: Iain Duncan Smith MP as Secretary of State; Chris Grayling MP (Minister for Employment) and Steve Webb MP (Minister for Pensions) as Ministers of State; Maria Miller MP (Minister for Disabled People) and David Freud (Minister for Welfare Reform) as Parliamentary Under Secretaries (DWP 2012). Of these, only Webb is a Liberal Democrat and his portfolio of pensions has not been within the purview of this work.

21st Century Welfare (DWP 2010) was the first welfare policy document released by the Department for Work and Pensions after the General Election, allowing us to see how the assumptions discussed in Chapter 2 faired once the Conservatives came into government. The most prominent discourse in the text is the discourse of “incentives”, within which two collocations are used throughout: “work incentives” and “financial incentives”. Within the incentives discourse, the interchangeability of the concrete concept of “work” and the abstract concept of “financial” creates a link that represents work in purely financial terms. The lack of incentives in the current system and the creation of incentives in the proposed new system forms the primary argument made within the text: “there are two key problems: work incentives for some groups are poor; the system is too complex” (ibid: 7).

This second problem, the complexity of the system, is occasionally discussed as a problem of “negative experiences of the general service” (ibid: 15) but is mostly seen as a problem because it “makes it difficult for people to know what benefits and Tax Credits they can get” (ibid: 14). Therefore, it ultimately prevents the effective working of an incentives system. Explaining social problems as the result of inadequate systems of “financial incentives” gives us an insight into how the text interprets human nature. Returning to the ideas of Friedman and Murray, human nature is seen as rational and selfish in the pursuit of financial reward. People are ultimately seen as economic beings, motivated by cash incentives, while rationally assessing the risks of short-term loss for long term gain. The incompetence of poor people to think rationally (Mead 2000) and Hayek’s opposition to mechanical government models of bureaucracy are two strands completely absent in this text. We can understand the rational, selfish, economic view of human nature as a trend that runs throughout the three texts. Effectively non-existent in Breakdown Britain (SJPG 2006), an important part of the ideas in Breakthrough Britain (SJPG 2007) and the centrepiece of reform in
21st Century Welfare (DWP 2010), the notion of an economically driven, rational and selfish human nature seems to grow throughout the modernisation period. This notion can be supported with another prominent discourse in the text, the corporate discourse of “the customer”, which relocates a discourse of the private sector within a government document. This allows dominance to be exerted over the more traditional discourses of welfare. For example, “underpayments are a problem, leaving customers without entitlements” (ibid: 9). Here the traditional notion of ‘entitlements’ is recast as a pursuit of consumer rights, allowing the problems in the welfare system to be ‘corrected’ using models from the private sector. Including footnotes, the word ‘customer’ is used 46 times in the 44 pages of this document. In Breakdown Britain (SJPG 2006) customers are only discussed as customers of credit companies and in Breakthrough Britain (SJPG 2007) the word is not used at all. This supports the transition towards an economic understanding of human nature and is another indication of the libertarian paternalist position.

When we turn to look at what impact this has on the structure/agency debate, we can see a continued use of a structuralist discourse to reinforce the choice framework model discussed in the previous chapter. “Structural reform” is a phrase used repeatedly throughout 21st Century Welfare (DWP 2010) and its usage is best encapsulated in the following quote: “structural reforms could enable us to deliver some fundamental changes to ensure that work always pays and is clearly seen to pay” (ibid: 2). Therefore, the solution to the lack of clear incentives is to restructure the financial environment in which people make their rational decisions. ‘Structure’ is seen through the eyes of a singular individual and is thus understood as a framework of choices. Social structures are not seen to take part in the construction of an individual’s decision making faculties because these are pre-existent and determined by the rational model; neither are they seen to emerge from the collective actions of individuals, because social structures are understood from the position of a single individual. Therefore, social structures become the frameworks of choice through which one agent is affected by other agents, reaffirming the primacy, if not ubiquity, of human agency.

The idea of the family as the great causal force in society has almost entirely disappeared, with a new family discourse taking its place. “Family’s gross entitlement” (DWP 2010: 19, 24), “family allowance” (ibid: 25) and “family benefits” (ibid: 25) associate the family with financial income, reinforcing the importance of incentives and the rational human agent. One of the “principles for reform” (ibid: 18) is to “promote responsibility and positive behaviour, doing more to reward saving, strengthening the family and, in tandem with improving incentives, reinforcing conditionality” (ibid: 18). We can see the concepts of ‘family’ and ‘behaviour’ decreasing in importance, and sitting
alongside the real theoretical meat of ‘financial incentives’. As a result, ‘responsibility’ changes from something that the government has (SJPG 2007), to something that the government ‘promotes’. While family is conceptualised only as a financial institution, ‘positive behaviour’ is taken to mean actions that benefit the individual in the long term, “such as saving for retirement or buying your own home” (ibid: 5). Although their importance is much diminished from Breakthrough Britain (SJPG 2007), ‘behaviour’ and ‘family’ are concepts that complicate the idea that 21st Century Welfare (DWP 2010) is purely an exercise in rational choice theory. Breakdown Britain (SJPG 2006) attempted to understand the human world as an evolving organism, rather than an economic mechanism, an idea central to Hayek’s thought, and an echo of the more traditionally conservative ideas of Edmund Burke. The survival of these discourses without their underpinning ideology neatly displays how Cameron’s modernisation project is linguistically inclusive but ontologically exclusive, filling the former with meaning that reaffirms the latter.

The ontological simplicity of the argument put forward in 21st Century Welfare (DWP 2010) contrasts with the complex and fractured nature of the ontological assumptions made in Breakdown Britain (SJPG 2006). Fairclough (2003) sees a policy document as a progression towards consensus, but it is perhaps more applicable to see the modernisation period in its entirety as a move towards consensus. Bale (2010) and Hayton (2012) both see the period as one in which the Conservatives were seeking a route to power that did not require the abandoning of Thatcherite ideology. However, while this may be the dominant trend, there is also an element of genuine philosophical exploration and experimentation in the early modernisation period. Despite a return to a more traditional neoliberal assumption set once in power, the competing strands within Breakdown Britain (SJPG 2006) give an insight into various influential ontologies within modern Conservative thinking. Breakdown Britain (ibid) can be seen as “an attempt to resolve or overcome difference” (Fairclough 2003: 42) because it incorporates a number of different discourses and ontological standpoints. Breakthrough Britain (SJPG 2007) can be seen as “a bracketing of difference, a focus on commonality, solidarity” (Fairclough 2003: 42) because the differing ontological positions are drawn together into the concepts of ‘choice’ and ‘responsibility’. Finally, 21st Century Welfare (DWP 2010) can be seen as “a consensus, a normalisation and acceptance of differences of power which brackets or suppresses differences of meaning and norms” (Fairclough 2003: 42), because a degree of discoursal diversity remains in order to underpin a singular set of ontological assumptions.

In an analysis of Breakdown Britain (SJPG 2006) alone, we may have concluded discussing the diversity of ontological standpoints. Although Breakdown Britain (ibid) contains many contradictions
and hidden assumptions, it is certainly an exploratory exercise. However, once we see the trajectory of ‘modernisation’ through *Breakthrough Britain* (SJPG 2007) and into *21st Century Welfare* (DWP 2010), we can see the reaffirming of traditional neoliberal ideals, and their remodelling into a notion of ‘choice frameworks’ that obfuscates agency, while simultaneously centralising it as the causal force in society. In this way, the intentionalist ontology of a rational, selfish and economic human nature is an implicit assumption that is taken as an objective fact by *21st Century Welfare* (DWP 2010), and given new weight through the appropriation of rival political discourses and private sector discourses. The idea that “we live in an age where human capital is increasingly important” (*Breakthrough Britain* 2007: 5) supports the proposal that “neoliberalisation is a process of ontological violence, which does not merely govern the conduct of individuals by encouraging a particular form of subjectivity, but also enframes all entities for the use of market forces” (Joronen 2013: 357), which in turn supports “the notion that policy developments are primarily driven by ideology, and that policy outcomes will largely reflect the interests of the dominant power holders” (Burden et al 2000: 38).

**Conclusion**

The positivist epistemology of all three texts presents ontological assumptions as objective facts, the nominalisation of processes and appropriation of rival discourses allows social causality to be obfuscated, and the notion of rationality disguises a prescriptive model of human action. All three of these methods are synonymous with the discourse of ‘modernisation’, within which welfare policy is depoliticised and ontological assumptions are universalised as undisputed realities. Simultaneously, increased conditionality of welfare, growing reliance on rational models, and a new focus on ‘nudge theory’ and the manipulation of choice, all increase the importance of ontological assumptions in the creation of welfare policy. The depoliticisation of discourse is occurring alongside the increased politicisation of welfare policy, with ontological assumptions becoming more important, yet less explicit.

Central to Cameron’s modernisation of Conservative welfare policy is the combination of behaviouralist assumptions and rational choice assumptions into a model of choice frameworks, where a selfish, rational human nature is nuanced with behaviouralist ideas such as ‘copied patterns of behaviour’. This then forms the basis for understanding how individuals choose from interrelated hierarchies of options. Resulting from individual choice is (un)desirable behaviour, which causes the poverty of both the actor and their family. The choice framework that each actor faces may be structural in form, but the responsibility of choice ultimately lies with the agent, and while choice frameworks are susceptible to manipulation, such manipulation is seen as the result of other agents,
rather than an emergent social structure. Essential for this final point is the recasting of the government as a social agent, rather than an emergent social structure. Because the government becomes part of this choice manipulation, it inevitably increases the moralist element of welfare policy. The modernisation period began with a variety of explanations centred on the family and an attempt to develop more organic and complex notions of social change, but the Conservative Party entered government with a set of assumptions focussed on mechanical rationalism. Therefore, this combination of rational choice and behaviouralism has swung in favour of rational choice over the modernisation period.

While focussing on behaviour and family structure, the Conservatives presented a mixture of diverse ontological opinions. The attempt to understand the complexity of social life led to comments about the materialism of modern society and the interrelated nature of social problems. However, this focus on behaviour also led to the prominence of traditional models of social life, such as gender binaries, male dominance and prescriptive family structures. The move towards rationalism allowed the creation of a more stable set of ontological assumptions, within which the prescriptions of social life could go unmentioned and unfronted. Similarly, locating the family at the heart of social change created a problematic divide between the nature of children and the nature of adults. Rather than confront this problem, the Conservatives decreased the centrality of family structures and recast them within a model of incentivisation.

The modernisation period can be characterised as an initial exploration of ontological assumptions that slowly moved back to the ontological heritage discussed in Chapter 1: simply summarised as an intentionalist position in the structureagency debate, a rational, selfish view of human nature and an individually driven mechanical view of social change. The issue of gender has swung the other way, with an initial continuation of gender essentialism and male domination, replaced by a seemingly deliberate attempt to ignore the issue altogether once in government. Despite the shifts and variety of ontological positions discussed in this work, the vast majority fall within a neo-liberal worldview, suggesting that the New Right have universalised their ontological assumptions, achieving hegemonic dominance in the welfare debates. The maintenance of this neo-liberal hegemony requires the reworking, disembedding and appropriation of discourses, and a seemingly healthy layer of disagreement and difference that rarely contests the basic economised ideology, which is “fundamentally based on the ontological concealment of life and its possibilities, the openness of being” (Joronen 2013: 358).
Bibliography


Happiness, London: Yale University Press.


