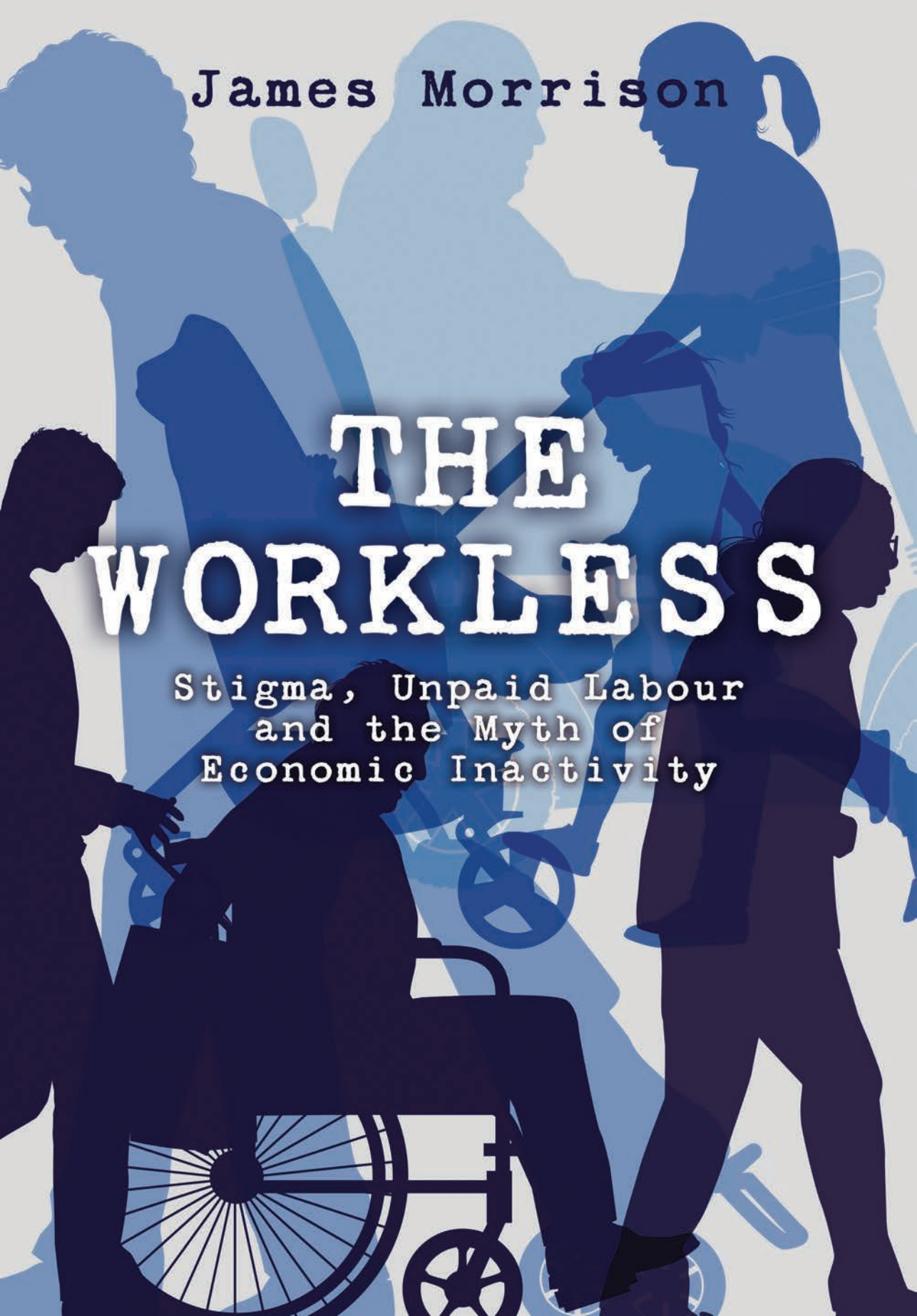


The background of the cover features several overlapping silhouettes in shades of blue and dark blue. These silhouettes represent people in various states of physical and mental distress: a man in a wheelchair, a person being supported by others, a person with their head in their hands, and a person walking with a cane. The overall composition suggests themes of disability, mental health, and social support.

James Morrison

THE WORKLESS

Stigma, Unpaid Labour
and the Myth of
Economic Inactivity

Introduction:

Corralling the ‘Workless’ – Contemporary Policy Debates in Perspective

Britain’s latest moral panic about the evils of ‘worklessness’ came of age in an airless seminar room at the Centre for Social Justice, in London’s Smith Square, on 19 April 2024. Twenty years after its launch by Iain Duncan Smith (later work and pensions secretary and architect of the most swingeing cuts to Britain’s welfare state since its inception), grave-faced prime minister Rishi Sunak chose his right-wing think-tank as a platform to call time on the ‘sick-note culture’ bedevilling the country – a tabloid trope that met the nodding approval of IDS himself (Sunak 2024). The task of ‘reforming welfare to give everyone who can the best possible chance of returning to work’, argued the soon-to-be ex-premier, was nothing less than a ‘moral mission’: to empower people ‘to contribute, to belong, to overcome feelings of loneliness and social isolation’; end the ‘over-medicalizing’ of ‘everyday challenges and worries of life’; and arrest the ‘irresponsible burden’ of a ‘spiralling increase in the welfare bill’ on ‘this and future generations of taxpayers’.

By invoking a moral lens to frame his binary distinction between ‘hardworking taxpayers’ and the ‘economically inactive’ – a grouping consistently cast in conservative circles as ‘workless’ and (by inference) worthless (Lawford and Butcher 2024) – Sunak set a tone that would cast a long shadow across Britain’s body politic over the ensuing months of pre- (and post-) election campaigning. In the sub-heading to its cutting critique of Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour Party Conference speech that September – delivered two months after he had safely ensconced himself in Downing Street – *The Guardian* posed this pointed question: ‘Serving working people, but what about others?’ The paper noted the newly elected prime minister’s rhetorical efforts to engender ‘a public morality’ guaranteeing ‘collectively funded support for the employed rather than the unemployed’ (and, by extension, everyone out of work) (*The Guardian* 2024b: n.pag.). Starmer had done so by asserting his ‘cultural and economic affiliation with working people’

and vowing to ‘prioritize the interests of those in work over other sections of society’ – a nexus of allegiances most heavily symbolized in his disingenuous peroration eliding his twin goals of tackling the disparate evils of ‘benefit fraud’ and ‘worklessness’ (Starmer 2024a).

Precise definitions of moral panic differ in terms more of wording than of substance, but one of the most widely accepted is that of sociologists Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, who famously characterized it as a scare about ‘a threat or supposed threat from deviants or “folk-devils”’ (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009: 2). The threat, in this case, was the latest iteration of that most morally corrosive and abject of figures, ‘the scrounger’ (Morrison 2019): a storied social construct repeatedly revived by politicians and the media as an object of discursive distraction, blame and ridicule at times of widespread economic hardship. In this case, the parlous backdrop was provided by the combined impact of a household ‘cost-of-living crisis’ (Francis-Devine et al. 2024) and the soaring debt-to-GDP ratio bequeathed by a perfect storm of fiscal shocks – from Brexit to the pandemic to the now-notorious ‘mini-budget disaster’ that sent shockwaves through the money markets under short-lived 2022 Prime Minister Liz Truss (Islam 2023).

At the time Sunak stood up to deliver his ‘sick-note culture’ speech, the latest available labour market data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) certainly made grim reading. According to these statistics, the number of working-aged adults classified as ‘economically inactive’ – those ‘not in employment’, who had ‘not been seeking work in the last four weeks’ and who were ‘unable to start work within the next two weeks’ (ONS 2021: n.pag.) – had risen by 850,000 since the economic quarter immediately before the pandemic (December 2019 to January 2020), taking the total to 9.4 million. Between December 2023 and February 2024 some 22.2 per cent of the working-aged population – more than a fifth of all 16- to 64-year-olds – were recorded as ‘inactive’ (Powell 2024). Most significantly, the latest spike in ‘inactivity’ was found to be ‘driven by an increase in the number of people who are unable to work due to long-term sickness’ – which hit a ‘record high’ of 2.8 million that quarter.

As one politician after another lined up to emphasize, this not only left Britain languishing beneath its competitors in terms of economic growth but also put it in an OECD league table position that was, if anything, even more ignominious: as the country with the lowest post-pandemic ‘workforce participation rate’ of all G7 economies (Partington 2023: n.pag.). Sunak’s response was blunt: ‘people are not three times sicker than they were a decade ago’, and, while anyone ‘feeling anxious or depressed’ should ‘of course’ receive support and treatment needed to ‘manage’ their conditions, this did not mean we should assume they ‘can’t engage in work’ (Sunak 2024: n.pag.). As for the right-wing press, the only logical explanation was that too many people had got so used to furloughs, lockdowns and being allowed

to work from home during the pandemic that they had succumbed to what the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* respectively dubbed ‘workshy Britain’ (Warner 2023) and ‘sicknote Britain’ (Merriman 2024) – a state of collective indolence *The Times* crystallized even more balefully as a ‘British disease’ of ‘worklessness’ (*The Times* 2024a).

A measure of the extent to which this narrative became normalized over ensuing months was its growing prominence as an accepted truth in even the more studiously neutral and impartial corners of the media. In a July 2024 edition of his BBC Radio 4 *Political Thinking* podcast, the corporation’s former political editor, Nick Robinson, persistently quizzed then newly installed Labour Work and Pensions Secretary Liz Kendall about her party’s attitude towards alleged ‘scroungers’, before posing this question:

Here’s what I think is going on – you tell me if I’m wrong. What the Tories do is give quite a lot of help and support to people, but produce headlines saying they’re attacking scroungers, and what you do is produce policies that *are* tackling scroungers but have headlines about helping people. You’re not, in reality, that different. It’s all about spin.

(*Political Thinking* 2024)

As it transpired, Robinson’s incisive diagnosis (robustly denied by Kendall at the time) proved alarmingly prescient. Once he was in office, Starmer’s very particular imaginary of a ‘Labour’ government would be confected to combine its loud and repeated disdain for ‘Tory’ labels like ‘scrounger’ and ‘shirker’ with a determination to slash disability benefits that was, if anything, even more ruthless than what had come before.

The worship of work

The seeds of this tortuous double-think were sowed in the earliest stages in the life of Starmer’s administration. Whereas his 2024 conference speech undoubtedly channelled the essence of Sunak’s moralizing discourse, other senior Labour figures had hitherto adopted a subtly different response to what the Centre for Cities and others had long-since branded Britain’s unfolding ‘economic inactivity crisis’ (Quinio 2023: n.pag.). For a party whose very name enshrines its reverence for the virtues of honest toil, it was perhaps unsurprising that the moral dichotomy Labour drew between ‘work’ and ‘worklessness’ was less about denying (or drastically downplaying) the existence of work-limiting disability, mental illness or long-term health conditions than about romanticizing the dignity of labour itself.

In her widely publicized speech heralding the publication of party elder statesman Alan Milburn's 'Pathways to Work' report – a 'deep dive' study into the drivers, experiences and potential solutions for 'economic inactivity' in Barnsley (Milburn 2024a) – Kendall spoke solemnly of the 'dignity and self-respect' work could offer people, and reeled off an over-lexicalized list of benefits she ascribed to it, from 'pride, fulfilment, relationships and connections' to 'a sense of purpose, values, and control' (Kendall 2024). Shortly afterwards, in a more personal contribution to the debate – an op-ed for the *Mail on Sunday* heralding the unveiling of Labour's long-awaited 'Get Britain Working' white paper – Starmer himself adopted a similarly misty-eyed approach. Here he drew on personal anecdote to recall how his first humble job, onerously slaving to 'clear out stones' from a local farmer's field, had left him with 'the feeling of independence and achievement that comes with earning a living' (Starmer 2024b: n.pag.).

Labour's escalating emphasis on reframing the 'economic inactivity' debate in moralistic terms would reach its apotheosis in March 2025, in the immediate run-up to a dual policy event surrounded by near-hysterical levels of media anticipation. This was the publication, within days of each other, of a much-heralded (and, for many, long-dreaded) 'Pathways to Work' green paper on the future of disability and incapacity-related benefits and an ominously presented spring economic statement from Chancellor Rachel Reeves, in which she set out plans to match the Tories' pre-election pledge to slash £6 billion from the welfare budget. Interviewed on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme on 5 March, in the days leading up to the green paper announcement, then Justice Secretary Shabana Mahmood adopted the role of outrider, suggesting that there was 'a moral case' for 'making sure that people who can work are able to work' (*Today* 2025a). Later that same day, Cabinet Office Minister Ellie Reeves (the chancellor's sister) told BBC2's *Politics Live* that ministers had 'a moral obligation' to provide work for the 'lost generation' of one million young people not in education, training or employment (*Politics Live* 2025), rather than 'incentivizing' people to remain out of work. This was an allusion to Milburn's criticism that 'perverse incentives' for people to claim disability-related support are baked into a system that 'rewarded' them more than the unemployed (Milburn 2024a: 22).

Over the coming days these arguments would be reheated by numerous Labour politicians – including loyalist backbench MP Mike Tapp, who told Radio 4 the government had a 'moral duty' to get people back to work (*Today* 2025b). It only fell to Starmer himself to set the seal on this twin-pronged approach with a no-holds-barred address to the Parliamentary Labour Party on 10 March, in which he decried the present welfare state as sowing the seeds for 'a wasted generation' of young people not in education, employment or training ('NEETS') – a situation, he declared, that 'runs contrary to those deep British values that if you can

work, you should'. 'This is the *Labour* party', he added, before invoking those oft-romanticized tribal shibboleths of 'the dignity of work' – and a belief in 'the dignity of every worker' (quoted in Elgot and Butler 2025: n.pag.).

Yet somewhere in this heady rhetorical brew there also lurked a decidedly neo-liberal conceptualization of morality: one driven as much by the cold, hard logic of fiscal realpolitik as any principled sense of fairness (whether concerning inactive people themselves or the burden they heaped on taxpayers). In expanding on his 'dignity of labour' mantra, Starmer painted a picture of a frayed social 'safety net' that no longer always gave those 'who really need' it 'the dignity they deserve' – a situation that 'people feel...in their bones' was 'unsustainable, indefensible and unfair' (Elgot and Butler 2025: n.pag.). Coming as his intervention did amid alarming predictions of global recession, following US president Donald Trump's imposition of widespread tariffs on imports and withdrawal of military support for Ukraine (a decision leaving a gap in defence spending to be compensated by the UK and European Union), there was no mistaking the meaning he attached to the economic term 'sustainability' – or to his imaginary of 'the people'. The message was clear: the UK and its hallowed moral majority, or virtuous in-group ('working people'), could no longer afford its welfare state to be a soft touch for anyone who was not in gainful employment and *should* be (that deviant out-group, 'the workless').

Between Labour and Tories, then, a bipartisan consensus had been reached around the concept of disability benefit reform (for which read 'cuts') as a moral mission – with only minor variations to distinguish one party's position from the other's. The Conservatives' emphasis was unambiguously on the immorality of allowing people who (in truth) were well enough to work to continue exploiting the generosity of hardworking taxpayers. Labour strained to adopt the contorted position of both extolling Starmer's moralizing case that 'those who can work should work' while also stressing the morality of incentivizing and enabling sick and disabled people who 'want' to work but face barriers preventing them from doing so. But in buying into the neoliberal argument that the primary obstacle consigning disabled people to the scrapheap was not prejudiced employers, inflexible working conditions or chronically underfunded health and care services but a Byzantine, disempowering benefits system, they accepted (and amplified) what sociologist Tracey Jensen terms the 'doxa' of 'welfare commonsense' (Jensen 2014: n.pag.).

Missing from both the Tories' and Labour's moralistic paeans to a narrowly defined imaginary of intrinsically virtuous, rewarding graft – a rose-tinted portrayal here conceptualized as the 'worship of work' – was any recognition of the value of forms of endeavour and social contribution that do not offer even nominal financial reward. Implicit in both was a denial of the soullessness, pointlessness and precarity of much of what qualifies as paid work in the contemporary

neoliberal economy – and the many meaningful (if less fiscally measurable) contributions made by numerous people coldly categorized as ‘workless’ and ‘inactive’ but who nonetheless work, unpaid, as caregivers and volunteers. The failure to acknowledge such contributions – and the omission of anyone not in *conventional* employment (or self-employment) from the hallowed ranks of those performatively revered as ‘working’ people – evoked sociologist George Gerbner’s concept of ‘symbolic annihilation’. This is an ‘absence’ from discourse that has the effect of denying individuals’ (or groups’) very ‘social existence’ (Gerbner and Gross 1976: 182).

As another sociologist, David Frayne, argues in his excellent *The Refusal of Work*, domestic labour, ‘along with certain forms of artistic, intellectual or care work’, often sits ‘uncomfortably on the fringes of what society is prepared to categorise as actual “work”’ – especially ‘in cases where the value of these activities cannot be explained in terms of any measurable social or economic contribution’ (Frayne 2015: 18–19). Or, to return to the language of morality, as political scientist Deborah Stone argued in *The Disabled State* (still a seminal work of disability studies four decades after its publication): ‘Why should not child-rearing, creative but unpaid endeavors, or voluntary labor count in the grand tally of moral worth?’ (Stone 1986: 176).

It is this simple proposition that forms the premise for this book: the argument that Britain’s increasingly narrow and judgmental political, media and wider public discourse around what constitutes ‘work’, value and meaningful ‘activity’ (economic or otherwise) is long overdue a fundamental rethink. In an age when unpaid carers in England and Wales alone save UK taxpayers £445 million a day (Carers UK 2024) – by plugging gaping holes in an overstretched, underfunded National Health Service, welfare state and social care system – it is surely untenable to continue denying their economic contributions. More importantly, how can we continue to tolerate narratives that glibly frame people who give so *much* of their time as caregivers or volunteers as ‘inactive’ or ‘workless’, when analysis of the latest English and Welsh census shows the number of people providing 50 hours or more of unpaid care a week rose by 152,000 between 2011 and 2021, to 1.5 million (Carers UK 2023), while three out of five adult carers in Scotland had similar-sized workloads (The Scottish Government 2023)? Then there is the widely ignored fact that the same ten-year period saw a rise in the number of unpaid carers living with *their own* disabilities – the biggest increase being among the youngest age group. ONS figures show that, between 2011 and 2021, the number of carers aged 5 to 17 who were disabled themselves leapt from 9.4 and 9.5% to 23.6 and 20.9% in England and Wales respectively. Caregivers are also more likely than non-carers to have their own disabilities (Eley 2023). Significantly, even the government-endorsed ‘Pathways to Work’ report acknowledged that 22 of the 37 Barnsley residents it profiled were managing both caring pressures *and* health conditions (Milburn 2024a).

The symbolic annihilation of these hugely important segments – and the many unrecognized, highly *active* individuals among them who would doubtless be classed as *inactive*, according to today’s prescriptive dominant definitions of ‘work’ – brings us to another of the book’s key aims. This is to recognize the complex and (more often than not) intersectional challenges and inequalities faced by many ‘inactive’ people – from caregivers and those with work-limiting disabilities to others who are simply too physically and/or mentally unwell to undertake conventional structured employment (let alone the more erratic, insecure work patterns associated with the ‘gig economy’ and ‘zero-hours contracts’). These inconvenient realities are discursively annihilated by the moralizing tropes of ‘sick-note Britain’, ‘workshy Britain’ and the supposed ‘British disease’ of ‘worklessness’. And, I will argue, just as pernicious in their way are functionalist bureaucratic terms like ‘economic inactivity’ itself: a clinical officialese that notes the price of everything and the value of nothing. Significantly, this term was rightly called out as a ‘terrible’ way to describe ‘real human beings’ by Kendall, in one of her more progressive comments in office, addressing the Work and Pensions Select Committee (Wilcock 2024).

But it is not merely symbolic annihilation that is at play in the popular construction of economic inactivity. When not being ignored, negated, annihilated, through their *absence* from media and political discourse, people classified as inactive are subject to another, perhaps even more dehumanizing, form of symbolic violence: stigma. As defined by sociologist Erving Goffman in his seminal work of the same name, stigma can best be conceptualized as a form of ‘spoiled identity’ that acts to undermine an individual’s ‘social acceptance’ and, in many cases, render them ‘deviant’ in the eyes of those who encounter and behold them (Goffman 1990: ix–x). What identity can be considered more ‘spoiled’ in today’s ableist, transactional, materialistic age – an era so singularly and universally obsessed with the acquisition and performative display of capital, image and status – than that of the ‘inactive’, ‘workless’ and/or disabled person? In one of his book’s defining passages, Goffman describes the process by which stigma is ascribed to individuals through the person of the newly encountered ‘stranger’. He argues:

When a stranger comes into our presence, first appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate his category and attributes, his ‘social identity’ – to use a term that is better than ‘social status’ because personal attributes such as ‘honesty’ are involved, as well as structural ones, like ‘occupation’.

(Goffman 1990: x)

By applying the social signifiers we habitually use to divine an individual’s honesty (or trustworthiness) and their occupation (a quality of intrinsic relevance in

the context of economic in/activity), we can discern ‘evidence’ as to whether the stranger possesses ‘an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind – in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak’. Should such evidence be discernible – for the economically inactive, through the person’s careworn or impoverished appearance, embarrassed manner or cagey reply to an innocent ice-breaker question such ‘so what do you do?’ – ‘they are thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one’ (Goffman 1990: x).

At the heart of this book is a dual concern with these twin sociological concepts – symbolic annihilation and stigma – and, specifically, how we talk and think about other (often more vulnerable) *people*: to quote Kendall, ‘real human beings’. Specifically, the book is concerned with the question of how politicians, the news media and the public(s) at large talk (and, by inference, *think*) about disability, long-term sickness, mental ill health and neurodiversity – and, more importantly, the individuals these affect. It is not a book *about* disability or work-limiting health conditions themselves – or even how these are defined. Similarly, it is not *about* carers, volunteers or definitions of what constitutes caring or voluntary work. Since the 1980s the field of disability studies has grown rapidly, and there is an expansive literature unpacking and contesting everything from the nature and efficacy of medical versus social diagnoses and labels (Bunbury 2019) to the prevalence of ableist norms – both in terms of social attitudes (and prejudices), and in relation to how society conditions and frames issues around access to/participation in the worlds of home, leisure and work (Bogart and Dunn 2019). Equally, the nature of care – and, in particular, unpaid/voluntary caregiving – has latterly come in for increasing academic scrutiny. As with disability, the charitable/third sector itself has produced a growing body of high-quality research exploring the practical, financial and emotional challenges carers face, and the valuable contributions they make (e.g. Sempick and Becker 2013) – often drawing on individuals’ lived experiences (Rainer et al. 2024).

Where this book *is* concerned about people with disabilities, long-term illnesses and caring responsibilities – facets often present in *the same individual* (as we shall see) – it is less with questions about the objective scale of these issues as drivers of economic inactivity than how these often intersecting groups are *constructed* and *portrayed* in the political public sphere (Habermas 2022). Moreover, in the extended discursive ‘moment’ that forms the backdrop for this book, these constructions and portrayals are conceived through the prism of the febrile post-pandemic debate about ‘economic inactivity’ and that often interchangeably used term, ‘worklessness’. To this extent, if there is a focal discursive object at the centre of our concerns, it is not so much disability, illness, caregiving or other factors inhibiting an individual’s ability to enter or remain in the world of paid labour *in themselves*, but dominant *conceptions* of what is (or is not)

an acceptable reason for someone *not* working – as well as the nature of how society *defines* ‘work’ and its supposed equal and opposite, ‘worklessness’. This is, then, a book that seeks to unpack – primarily through its analysis of public discourse – those barriers or challenges that are presented as sufficiently valid to ‘justify’ people being *unable* to work (in the conventional sense); ‘choosing’ not to; or either falling or opting out of the workplace. Bound up with all of this is a secondary focus: on the discursive distinctions media, political and wider public narratives draw between disabilities, illnesses and other barriers to work they judge to be *genuinely* disabling and those they consider to be exaggerated, even fraudulent. This focus entails not only examining how society seeks to construct hierarchies of deservingness *in the present*, but diving back through history to encounter age-old imaginaries around ‘fake’ injury, sickness and disability, from ‘false mendicants’ to ‘sturdy beggars’ to ‘palliards’, ‘Clapperdudgeons’, ‘counterfeit cranks’ and other fabular folk-devils of antiquity and early modern times (Row-Heyveld 2018).

Just as this is not a book *about* disability or work-limiting illness, neither is it about the various factors that lead working-aged people to become ‘economically inactive’ – from the decisions to retire early taken by a wave of what might be termed ‘new inactives’ during the later stages of the pandemic to the conscious rejection of work by a small minority who opt out of the labour market entirely, or the circumstances that drive ‘discouraged workers’ to simply give up trying to find jobs, consigning them to the ranks of a ‘hidden’ unemployed (Leaker 2009: 52–55). For an exploration of the motives of those who chose to leave the labour market early during the late-COVID period, there is much to be learned from *The Great Resignation: The New Refusal of Work* by sociologist Francesca Coin. For incisive sociological critiques of the structural problems and inequities inherent in the neoliberal workplace – and the Protestant work ethic underlying it – look no further than Frayn’s aforementioned *The Refusal of Work* and Kathi Weeks’s *The Problem of Work*.

Above all else, the book is most concerned with examining, and querying, societal conceptions of ‘deservingness’. With this in mind, its primary preoccupation is the question of what constitute deserving versus undeserving forms of ‘inactivity’ and/or reasons for being ‘inactive’: challenges society deems manageable while making oneself available for work versus those judged sufficiently inhibiting to legitimately prevent this availability. In doing so, it opens up questions around the relative levels of deservingness attributed to people who are ‘inactive’ owing to disability, illness, caring responsibilities and/or other barriers to work, versus those deemed to be ‘workless’ out of *choice*. At this point, a note: as it will be necessary to use phrases like ‘economic inactivity’ and ‘worklessness’ repeatedly from here on, the book would be labouring the point (so to speak) were it to continue overtly

problematizing them by using inverted commas on each occasion they are mentioned. For this reason, the reader is asked to take as read that inverted commas remain *implied* whenever they appear from now on.

In using Britain's hysterical current (and likely ongoing) media-political debate about economic inactivity as a prism through which to explore public conceptions of societal value and worth – not least of a sizeable proportion of our fellow citizens – this book seeks to build on classic studies that have previously addressed debates about deservingness, particularly in the context of social security and the UK's (and other) welfare state(s). In particular, like my earlier book *Scroungers*, it draws on sociologists Peter Golding's and Sue Middleton's seminal *Images of Welfare*, to whose keen historical sensibilities and respect for the origins, evolution and (dis)continuities in conceptualizations of authentic versus fraudulent illness, disability and (un)fitness for work it owes a particular debt. It also draws heavily on ideas in political scientist Deborah Stone's *The Disabled State* – most notably her argument that, while concerns about fake or fraudulent disability may often be the focus of accusatory media narratives, people judged to be *genuinely* disabled have come to occupy a position of particular 'political privilege' in latter-day welfare states. Genuine disability 'is a political privilege', Stone argues, 'because, as an administrative category, it carries with it permission to enter the need-based system' (i.e. entitling people to state-funded social protection without any expectation that they will put into the pot themselves, by working and paying taxes). This exempts them from 'the work-based system' to which everyone else is subject – which allocates resources according to contribution, rather than need (Stone 1986: 28).

Stone's arguments are important because the privileged exemption from work she ascribes to disabled people in countries like Britain (to the extent this still exists, following successive recent waves of 'welfare reform' that have made it ever harder to prove one's disabilities are serious enough to stop one working) is implicitly founded on contracts of trust. Disabled people are (or have been) exempt from the 'work-based system', and entitled to social protection solely on the basis of their financial and physical/mental needs – provided, that is, their disabilities are judged to be both genuine and chronic. This question of social trust, as we shall see, is intrinsically important to contemporary media and political discourses problematizing people out of work owing to disability, long-term sickness and/or mental ill health, as it is feelings of *distrust* that are activated by narratives portraying inactive people as 'scroungers' and 'shirkers'. Distrust is also the sentiment underpinning many of the sceptical (and, in some cases, hateful) comments posted by newspaper readers online, with numerous posters drawing on anecdotes about fake disabled people living off the largesse of the state whom they have supposedly encountered or observed in their daily lives – dubious characters this author has

previously conceptualized (drawing on Gerbner and others) as ‘familiar strangers’ (Morrison 2016).

It is with both these core concepts in mind – relative measures of deservingness and discourses of (dis)trust – that we begin our journey in Chapter 1. This opening chapter focuses on the historical evolution of cultural and media representations of what would today be labelled ‘inactivity’ – with a particular focus on popular portrayals of those claiming to be incapable of work, owing to disability, disease, mental illness and (very often) intersections between two or more of these. In Chapter 2, we return abruptly to the present, to begin unpacking the ways in which economic inactivity is conceived and depicted in Britain today, in both mainstream media and political narratives. We do this through a critical discourse analysis of national and regional newspaper articles, Hansard records (parliamentary debates) and comment threads posted beneath press content online around a series of key discursive events or moments during the life cycle of the panic over ‘sick-note culture’.

After this point, we turn to what is perhaps the book’s main focus: putting these dominant narratives to the test in the first of three chapters exploring the extent to which prevailing discourses about inactivity bear any resemblance to the lived experiences of people classified as economically inactive. In Chapter 3, we focus on unpacking the multiple, often intersecting factors that can contribute to individuals’ being or becoming inactive – from work-limiting disabilities and chronic health conditions to mental illness and full-time caring responsibilities. These strands are then further developed in Chapter 4, in which the emphasis pivots towards considering the plight of what might be termed ‘workless workers’ (or ‘active inactives’): individuals classified as inactive yet very far from idle, on account of their caregiving duties and/or other contributions to the common good through volunteering, charity work, campaigning and/or community organizing. Finally, we round off this trilogy of chapters exploring the lives of inactive people themselves by switching the focus towards a particular grouping of individuals that have come under the spotlight increasingly since the advent of COVID-19. These are the growing number of ‘elective’ or ‘new inactives’ who have voluntarily opted out of the labour market since the pandemic – whether to spend more time caring for family, to slow down and ‘downsize’, or to enjoy the benefits of early retirement, such as opportunities for travel, increased leisure time or improved quality of life generally.

But before we embark on any of this, we must first begin by setting the scene for the peculiar moral panic about inactivity that has erupted since the pandemic – the context and detail of which forms the backdrop for this book. In doing so, we will frame discussion around a handful of questions. What exactly *is* (or was) the scale of inactivity in the UK two or three years out from the pandemic, and

how did it compare to both pre-COVID rates and those of other (comparable) countries? Which are/were the main demographics affected, and what were the principal factors fuelling their withdrawal from the labour market? Perhaps most importantly, in considering the media-political response through the analytical lens of moral panics, how rational and proportionate were the discursive and policy tools deployed to characterize and contain any ‘surge’ in activity?

In opening in this vein, the book seeks to question and (where it can) contest a host of popular tropes – about idleness, laziness, fraudulence and, above all, worklessness. Above all, it aims to challenge, and perhaps reject, one of the defining fallacies of our times: the myth of economic inactivity. Whatever we might like to call people who are not in conventional paid employment or self-employment, in truth precious few of them are genuinely workless, let alone inactive. The large majority of individuals classed as such tend to subsist on such low incomes that they cannot afford to save and have no choice but to spend what little they have. If anything, then, they are highly economically *active*, and perhaps more so than many other people, as what little money they have is ploughed straight back into the system – contributing (however modestly) to economic growth. Moreover, as we shall see, many so-called inactive people spend much or all of their lives toiling, unpaid and unrecognized, in valuable ways that are nonetheless rendered invisible – or symbolically annihilated – in the hegemonic discourse around what constitutes work.

Anatomy of a ‘sick-note’ panic

The UK’s much-publicized moral crusade against ‘sick-note culture’ began life in the context of what was widely (though not entirely accurately) reported as an unprecedented rise in working-aged economic inactivity in the shadow of the pandemic. The late stages of COVID-19 witnessed a blizzard of papers from policy think-tanks (Boileau and Cribb 2022; Williams 2023), executive agencies (Murphy et al. 2022) and quangos (Office for Budget Responsibility 2023) puzzling over what appeared to be a significant (if ultimately short-lived) surge in middle aged and older workers opting for early retirement – a phenomenon quickly popularized by the news media as the ‘Great Resignation’ (Kamal 2022; Knapton 2022; Iarcurci 2023) or ‘Great Retirement’ (Wallace 2023).

Though early official analyses were sober – with both the ONS and Office for Budget Responsibility recording the uptick with concerned but clinical detachment – 2022 and 2023 saw an escalating sense of alarmism, most notably among free market think-tanks on the political Right. ‘Why is this happening?’ was the exasperated question from Karl Williams, senior researcher with a prominent

right-wing think-tank, as he pondered why Britain had become ‘an international outlier’, with ‘516,000 more inactive people aged 16–64 than was the case pre-pandemic’, in his polemical March 2023 paper *Where are the Workers?* (Williams 2023: 4). Williams’s speculative policy paper was a product of the Tufton Street-based Centre for Policy Studies: a Petri dish for fundamentalist free-market thinking ever since its foundation, in 1974, by one Margaret Thatcher and her mentor, Keith Joseph – perhaps the single most influential of a long line of post-war ‘moral missionaries’ on issues around employment and welfare (Morrison 2019: 84–85). While younger inactive people, suggested Williams (channelling Joseph), largely needed sticks to force them *into* the workplace – a heady conservative cocktail of benefit cuts, sanctions and patronizing pep-talks about responsibility and resilience – older workers tempted to quit employment to sample the spoils of early retirement needed carrots to incentivize them to *stay*. Chief among these, he argued, was an increase or abolition of the amount of money individuals were allowed to withdraw from their pension pots prior to retirement without being taxed – the so-called lifetime allowance (LTA) or ‘pension cap’ (Williams 2023: 28). Significantly, these decidedly uneven-handed recommendations for tackling Britain’s inactivity spike were to end up forming a key plank of outgoing Conservative Chancellor Jeremy Hunt’s then-upcoming spring Budget.

It was in this unfolding context that, back in August 2022, a recording had been leaked to *The Guardian* of soon-to-be Tory Prime Minister (and friend of Tufton Street) Ms Truss disparaging Britons from areas outside London as lacking the ‘mindset or attitude’ to put in the ‘hard graft’ or ‘skill and application’ typically found in foreign migrant workers (Crerar 2022). Truss’s off-the-cuff remarks to supporters (back in 2019) carried clear echoes of arguments she had made in the 2012 book *Britannia Unchained*, which infamously mocked the British as ‘among the worst idlers in the world’ – a people ‘more interested in football and pop music’ than work (quoted in Wintour 2022).

While the initial focus of politicians’ concern might have centred on premature retirees and/or older workers leaving the labour market for health reasons (including ‘long COVID’), by early 2024 attention had shifted decisively towards a second – for many, more concerning – demographic. Far from being driven by opt-outs in older age groups (generation X and the last of the post-war ‘boomer’ generation), inactivity of the post-pandemic variety had settled into what the Resolution Foundation conceptualized as a ‘U-shaped legacy’ – with people aged 16–24 and 50–64 accounting for ‘nine-tenths of the rise in economic inactivity among working-age adults since the end of 2019’ (Murphy 2024: n.pag.). Suddenly it was rising rates of mental ill health, neurodivergent conditions and (for some) caring responsibilities among the former segment – the oft-labelled ‘NEETs’ – that were held to be driving the upward trend in inactivity as much as any ongoing increase

among middle-aged and older workers. ‘The U-shaped nature of this problem is especially worrying’, observed foundation chief economist Louise Murphy, because, while ‘any spell out of work due to ill health can be damaging to an individual’s well-being and living standards’, these risks were ‘even greater for young people at the start of their working lives’ (Murphy 2024: n.pag.). Meanwhile, concern about the older workers who accounted for the second ‘arm’ of Murphy’s ‘U-shape’ curve had shifted away from voluntary downsizers and early retirees (many of whom, in any case, had been forced back to work during the unfolding ‘cost-of-living crisis’) towards those reluctantly joining the ranks of sickness benefit claimants as they queued for delayed NHS treatment for musculoskeletal disorders and other age-related complaints that had emerged or worsened during the pandemic.

By the time Murphy reached her diagnosis, the overall number of inactive working-aged adults had topped 9 million. While this inflated figure included several groups no one expected to be in or seeking full-time work – notably full-time university students – more disquieting was the fact that 2.7 million (and that number was rising) were out of work owing, at least partly, to long-term sickness. Even more concerning for ministers was the fact that Murphy’s figures showed how, by December 2023, more than a third of people receiving Universal Credit had a health condition or disability affecting their ability to work, while new claims among working-aged adults in England and Wales for the main non-means-tested disability benefit, Personal Independence Payment (PIP), had leapt by 68% in the four years leading up to early 2024. Crucially, the number of new PIP claims for 16- to 17-year-olds and 18- to 24-year-olds had surged by 138 and 77% respectively (Murphy 2024: n.pag.).

This significant increase in disability-related claims caused sufficient alarm for the Resolution Foundation to argue that governments in the 2020s ‘should be wary about having an increasingly strict unemployment benefits system (where claimants are subject to high levels of benefit conditionality), since this may be acting to encourage more people to claim health-related benefits instead’ (Murphy 2024: n.pag.). Building on this theme, Labour grandee Alan Milburn’s ‘Pathways to Work’ Commission Report observed that ‘some point to perverse incentives in the benefits system whereby claimants get higher weekly payments if they claim incapacity on the basis of poor mental health than if they are able to actively seek work’ – a carefully hedged observation that steered perilously close to suggesting vulnerable people were gaming the system (Milburn 2024a: 22). The implication of both interventions was clear: because disability-related benefits were more generous than those received by the unemployed, and recipients of the former generally came under less pressure from job coaches than the latter to actively seek work, many adults who lost jobs or fell out of the ‘habit’ of working during COVID had taken the rational decision to pursue the better deal. Added to this,

the usual in-person fitness-for-work tests had largely been suspended throughout the pandemic, to be replaced by a mix of paper-based applications and telephone appointments – making it ‘easier’ (in theory at least) for new claimants to qualify for sickness benefits.

These arguments did, however, ignore a colossal elephant in the room. This was the fact that, if there were any ‘perverse incentives’ in the system encouraging out-of-work adults to claim *disability* rather than unemployment benefits, it was not so much that the former were over-generous, but that payments received by jobseekers had plunged to such an historic low. Analysis by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) published in October 2023 highlighted the inconvenient truth that unemployment-related benefits had been worth 20.1 per cent of median pay in 1971, but were projected to plummet to barely half that value by 2030 (IPPR 2023). Perhaps more importantly, for the many long-term sick and disabled adults genuinely unable to work, and with no choice but to rely on social security, the prospect of their benefits being *cut*, rather than those for the unemployed *raised*, began to cause mounting fear – especially when allied to tabloid-stoked rumours that the new Labour government was planning to toughen and make more frequent their re-assessments (Pring 2025).

If statistics emphasizing the supposed surge in sickness benefit claims appeared baleful enough when couched in the dry statistical jargon of grey literature, by the time they had passed through the filter of Britain’s right-wing commentariat, they looked apocalyptic. ‘It’s not an honour to which any nation would aspire but Britain can now boast of being the sick note capital of the West’, declared Charlotte Lytton in *The Telegraph* in April 2024, atop an article claiming that GPs were now too intimidated (and overworked) to ‘say no’ to requests from belligerent people asking to be signed off work (Lytton 2024: n.pag.). But it took more unapologetically outspoken commentators to voice what others seemed to be thinking. ‘Where these questions point, commentators and politicians apparently fear to tread, so let this commentator rush in’, veteran *Times* columnist Matthew Parris had ventured some eight months prior to Lytton’s intervention, adding:

Are we really facing a pandemic of these conditions, or are we facing a pandemic of people reporting them as part of a claim for benefits? Every one of the list [James] Kirkup cites will contain a core of individuals who suffer horribly from the stated condition, many finding it genuinely impossible to make a full, or any, economic contribution. But surrounding this core, could there be a large and growing cohort of those who have persuaded themselves, their bosses or their benefits officers that their employability is restricted but who, were they living a decade or two ago, would have soldiered on?

(Parris 2023: n.pag.)

Through a succession of ensuing comment pieces – and the flurry of letters to the editor and talk-show phone-ins they provoked – Parris became (for a time) the standard-bearer for commentators willing to say the unsayable about inactivity. Just as public deliberation over earlier moral panics had played out across the letters pages of the popular press – not least during the early 1970s law-and-order panic around ‘mugging’ that was the subject of cultural theorist Stuart Hall et al.’s classic *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al. 1978) – so, too, was this one of the primary fields in which the ‘sick-note panic’ unfolded. ‘Sir, Matthew Parris’s thoughtful article underlines the growing number of the population who believe government has to solve their issues whether it be obesity, energy bills, mortgage support and now an inability to work’, began Jeremy Preston from Northamptonshire, two days after the columnist’s opening salvo of 4 August 2023 (Preston 2023: n.pag.). His sentiments were broadly echoed by consultant psychiatrist Andrzej Wilski, from Hertfordshire, who observed how ‘work can be a great healer of morbid unhappiness’, while ‘sloth and inaction can drive one to despair’ – albeit with the caveat that these healing properties rested, in part, on having ‘warm and sympathetic’ employers and colleagues (Wilski 2023: n.pag.).

But it would take until November 2024, and the perceived failure of the first Labour Budget in fifteen years to enact a tough enough crackdown on working-aged inactivity, for the flood of conservative copycats to cross the line into near-hate speech levels of vitriol. In one breathless broadside, Isabel Oakeshott, self-styled doyenne of the Reform-supporting Right, reeled out a string of stereotypical tropes about ‘scroungers’ on Rupert Murdoch-owned online channel TalkTV. Oakeshott’s over-lexicalized tirade accused Chancellor Rachel Reeves of siding with ‘parasites’, who

frankly, can’t be bothered to get out of bed and get themselves out, whether it’s to an office or to any kind of job, and prefer to just sit on the sofa and order their Deliveroo and drive their Motability free vehicle and take everything that the state can offer.

(Jackson 2024: n.pag.)

While few would have been surprised by the response of such a notorious right-wing controversialist, ministerial spins on the issue were scarcely less judgmental (if marginally more circumspect) – at least up to the point of the July election. In perhaps the single most widely quoted intervention, Conservative Work and Pensions Secretary Mel Stride had used a March 2024 interview with *The Telegraph* to condescendingly mull on the feebleness of young people unable to cope with ‘the normal ups and downs of life’ (Gutteridge 2024a: n.pag.).

If they go to the doctor and say I’m feeling rather down and bluesy, the doctor will give them on average about seven minutes and then, on 94 per cent of occasions, they will be signed off as not fit to carry out any work whatsoever,

he mused – to a jeering chorus of approval from below-the-line comments (and an amplifying echo chamber across the right-wing media, from the *Daily Mail* to *GB News*).

Stride's scrupulously targeted sentiments rolled the pitch for Sunak's 'sick-note culture' speech to come – not to mention a slew of further conservative interventions in the wake of Labour's landslide election victory. Of these, the most knowingly provocative was to come from Fraser Nelson, erstwhile editor of *The Spectator* magazine and long-time critic of the out-of-work benefits system. Nelson used a one-off documentary that autumn in Channel 4's award-winning *Dispatches* strand – headlined 'Britain's Benefits Scandal' – to draw attention to the supposed rise of YouTubers and TikTokers offering their followers tips on how to 'maximize their sick and disability benefits' (*Dispatches* 2024). In spotlighting the emergence of a new form of folk-devil – the 'sickfluencer' – Nelson was playing into (and inflaming) a simmering current of right-wing argument that sought to project into the digital era the concept of 'deviancy amplification' popularized by late moral panic scholar Stanley Cohen. This is the notion that 'the societal reaction' to an identified form of deviance (in this case, a supposed epidemic of work-shy young people faking/exaggerating sickness and disability to avoid work) 'may in fact *increase* rather than decrease or keep in check the amount of deviance' (Cohen 1972: 11).

In Nelson's eyes, the doubling-down of deviance was conceived as a product of inactive people's retreating into social media bubbles in which 'sickfluencers' showed them how to exploit the system – i.e. how to become *more* deviant themselves – whether by using key 'buzzwords' in their PIP application forms or avoiding 'trick questions' during assessments (Howe 2024). There were echoes, too, in his argument of a related (if largely speculative and unevidenced) strand running through right-wing think-tank literature – suggesting that young people might also have been motivated to self-medicalize by 'celebrity self-disclosure about mental health struggles'. In its *Where are the Workers?* report, the Centre for Policy Studies had sought to conflate 'the rise of the smartphone and social networking' with the emergence of a disquieting youth culture that 'glamorised mental health and inspired youths to usurp a diagnostic label as a form of identity, or in some cases to claim benefits' (Williams 2023: 34). In doing so, the CPS set the seal on the latest in a centuries-long tradition of youth moral panics – from nineteenth-century frenzies about 'hooligans' (Pearson 1983) through 1960s panics around student riots to the 1970s mods-versus-rockers furore that inspired Cohen's moral panic concept in the first place, and more recent scares about 'anti-social behaviour' (Squires and Stephen 2005).

Not all conservative commentators were quite so dismissive, however. In a more nuanced intervention by a leading thinker hailing (at least nominally) from the Right, David Willetts – president of the Resolution Foundation and a stalwart of debates about social security and 'the underclass' (Willetts 1992) stretching

back nearly as far as the Joseph era – used a blog for *Conservative Home* to give short shrift to suggestions that young people were ‘just over-sensitive snowflakes’ for whom mental health was ‘their latest excuse to skive off’ (Willett 2024). Lamenting the negative impact of social media and ‘the effects of COVID lockdowns’, he argued that ‘the rise of unhappiness and mental health issues amongst young people’ could only be arrested by improving support structures in schools and further education, and by rolling out ‘youth hubs’ offered by the Department for Work and Pensions to *all* youngsters – not just those on benefits.

Nonetheless, the image of a worrying new youth subculture of hypersensitive, ‘self-medicalizing’ hypochondriacs primed to seek diagnoses for mental health and neurodivergent conditions by a toxic diet of ‘sickfluencer’ tutorials and misinformation on YouTube, TikTok and Instagram would remain a prominent feature of the unfolding inactivity narrative well into the lifetime of Starmer’s administration. Among those entering the debate by early 2025 was a reanimated Sir Tony Blair – until recently a maligned erstwhile prime minister, but now once again an influential figure following his party’s re-election on a centrist platform heavily inspired by his ‘New Labour’ project. In an interview for former Downing Street business adviser Jimmy McLoughlin’s *Jimmy’s Jobs of the Future* podcast, Blair warned against over-medicalizing ‘the normal ups and downs’ of life that ‘everybody experiences’. He argued that ‘you’ve got to be careful of encouraging people to think they’ve got some sort of condition other than simply confronting the challenges of life’ because ‘you really cannot afford to be spending the amount of money we’re spending on mental health’ (quoted in Lawton and Neal 2025). Blair’s remarks were widely criticized – not least by his own former spin-doctor, Alastair Campbell (a long-time mental health campaigner), who used his popular *The Rest is Politics* podcast to comment that he ‘didn’t actually like what he [Blair] said’, at a time when ‘we’re struggling to keep mental health properly on the NHS agenda’ and ‘we’re going backwards in terms of the media debate around mental health’:

I think there’s a danger that he [Blair] doesn’t understand that, for a lot of people, depression is *real*, anxiety is *real* – and I think that, particularly now with the numbers of people living in poverty, millions of people that we would say now are living in pretty difficult economic conditions, I think it’s just too dismissive to say that these are people who are kind of self-diagnosing.

(*The Rest is Politics* 2025)

As scholars in this field have consistently argued (Cohen 1972; Hall et al. 1978; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009), the ultimate test of whether a societal reaction to a perceived moral threat constitutes a panic is how *disproportionate* it is when compared to the demonstrable scale or seriousness of the phenomenon itself. So

just how genuine *was* the surge in post-pandemic inactivity – and, by extension, how justified was all the ensuing hysteria? In considering this question, it is telling to note that even some of the more assertive earlier interventions by right-wing think-tanks and other small-c (and big-C) voices had conceded that Britain’s overall inactivity picture relative to comparable economies was not quite as severe across all measures as some headlines seemed to suggest. Even in its influential March 2024 paper urging then-Tory Chancellor Hunt to use a mix of nudges and nagging to drive more people back into the workplace, the neoliberal CPS think-tank had awkwardly noted that ‘the UK still has a lower inactivity rate than the OECD total (26.8%) or median (22.7%), not to mention G7 countries such as Italy (34.4%), France (26.3%) and the US (25.9%)’ (Williams 2023: 9). While it remained the case that the UK was the only G7 economy to be recording higher inactivity rates post-pandemic than those it had experienced beforehand, these were also lower than the first-quarter European Union average of 24.8% (UK Statistics Authority 2025). By the fourth quarter of that year, as the inactivity panic continued to escalate under Labour ministers, Britain’s rate still remained lower than those of Italy, France and the US – and had actually fallen back compared to the same period the previous year (dropping by half a percentage point, from 22 to 21.5%) (ONS 2025b).

More damningly inconvenient, however, was the message contained in a Resolution Foundation report published in November 2024 – pointedly entitled *Get Britain’s Stats Working*. This found that, contrary to almost all previous analyses (including the foundation’s own), in truth the overall rate of economic inactivity was likely to ‘be little changed from pre-pandemic’ (Corlett 2024: 13). The report did note that there was ‘no logical inconsistency between the overall inactivity rate falling and the number of people who are inactive because of ill-health rising’ (Corlett 2024: 14) – and that, according to data relating to rising claims for sickness benefits, illness-related inactivity almost certainly *had* risen (albeit to a lesser extent than stated elsewhere). However, it argued that a major methodological weakness in the Labour Force Survey – a plummeting response rate, leading to its understatement of year-on-year employment growth – meant that, while ‘the LFS currently says that the 16+ inactivity rate has risen by 1 percentage point from Q4 2019 to Q3 2024’, in all likelihood there had been ‘zero change’ (Corlett 2024: 12). ‘A higher employment rate would ... require that the true inactivity rate is now significantly lower than thought and – with much less certainty – it could potentially be no higher than in 2019’, wrote the foundation’s principal economist Adam Corlett. Indeed, ‘a rise in inactivity due to long-term sickness’ might, in reality, have been ‘offset, among other things, by fewer people out of work because they are looking after their children or home’ (Corlett 2024: 3). The latter assumption aligned with findings from the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) showing that, while post-pandemic inactivity rates may have appeared inflated,

levels of inactivity among ‘stay-at-home mothers’ had continued on a long-term downward trajectory (but for a brief blip towards the end of the pandemic) (Ring et al. 2024: n.pag.). This decline had been attributed to a melange of factors, ranging from increased conditionality requiring parents with young children to find work in return for continuing benefit eligibility; nominal recent improvements in the availability of free childcare for working parents (up to 30 hours in England); and a ‘significant fall in the birth rate over the past decade’, with the number of live births plummeting by 98,000 between 2010 and 2021 and a 20.1 per cent fall in the Total Fertility Rate (a measure adjusting for changes in the size and age structure of the female population) (Ring et al. 2024: n.pag.). Although the number of people withdrawing from the labour market to look after family and home had ‘started to rise from mid-2021’, inactivity for caring purposes later fell back again – ‘leaving it 285,000 lower than immediately before the pandemic and at an all-time low of 1.5 million in July 2023’ (Ring et al. 2024: n.pag.).

Just as the scale of the recent ‘rise’ in inactivity had been exaggerated, this was also true of repeated claims that the number of post-pandemic inactives was ‘record-breaking’ or unprecedented by *historical* standards. So widely accepted had this inaccurate thesis become by early 2025 that it was even repeated in a call for grant applications issued to universities that February by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), the studiously dispassionate government funding service. In its opening ‘Context’ section, the call unequivocally stated that a ‘record number of people are registered as economically inactive across the UK’, before proceeding to outline its appeal for proposals for ‘a single innovative, interdisciplinary, and collaborative project’ to ‘identify ways of supporting good quality, sustainable economic activity in places experiencing high rates of ill-health, disability, and informal care in the UK’ (UKRI 2025). This aim might have been lifted wholesale out of any of the major parties’ recent election manifestoes.

How inconvenient, then, that Britain’s true inactivity record had actually been set more than four decades earlier. According to longitudinal analysis by respected research hubs including the Economic and Social Research Council-funded Economic Observatory, the inactivity rate had been higher in 1971, when one in four working-aged adults (25%) was inactive (Machin and Wadsworth 2023). It hit its ‘all time high of 25.90%’ in April 1983 (Trading Economics 2025). This was, of course, four years into the mass de-industrialization drive of the Thatcher years, which saw whole industries closed down and many older industrial workers in declining health moved onto a new Invalidity Benefit (in part to hide the true scale of unemployment) (Stone 1986: 11). Moreover, the average inactivity rate for the *entire period* between 1971 and 2025 was 23.15%, suggesting that – far from being exceptional – the number of Britons out of work and not actively seeking it post pandemic was closer to the norm than the exception (Trading

Economics 2025). At the very least, *all* these figures are markedly higher than the 22% inactivity rate in 2022 – a proportion that, in any case, had slipped back to 21.6% by January 2025 (ONS 2025a).

Another inconvenient fact was that recent year-on-year upwards trends in numbers of inactive people could be seen, in part, as a ‘natural’ reflection of Britain’s growing population: between the peak year of 1983 and 2025, the total UK population rose from 56.33 million to 68.18 million (Macrotrends.net 2025). In recent years it has risen at an annual rate of 0.33 to 0.34% (by more than 662,000 between 2023 and 2024 alone) – increases that, in themselves, arguably help explain the growth in activity (ONS 2024b). In addition to all this, inactivity due to illness had, in fact, steadily risen since 2013, increasing by four percentage points between 2013 and 2019 alone – i.e. ‘long before the pandemic’ (to quote Milburn’s ‘Pathways to Work’ report) (Milburn 2024a: 20). Moreover, amid the flurry of data emphasized in the 2023 report by the CPS nestled the awkward truth that inactivity among the group of gravest moral concern – 16- and 17-year-olds – had actually been *higher* before the pandemic than it was afterwards. Between these years it had fallen back from 68.7 to 67.1% (Williams 2023: 14).

And yet, as Table 0.1 illustrates, none of these awkward facts deterred the news media (and politicians) from relentlessly spotlighting the issue of ‘rising’ post-pandemic inactivity. According to a high-level keyword search of the LexisNexis newspaper database – the most comprehensive available online archive of full-text press articles, and a resource that today also covers many broadcast news programmes, primarily on radio – the period between 2019 (the year immediately before COVID erupted) and 2024 (the last full year to date at time of writing) saw a significant surge in the appearance of terms relating to economic inactivity. Occurrences of the term ‘sick note’ or ‘sick-note’ almost doubled between 2019 and 2020 (rising from 539 to 1016), and then did the same again during the following four years, leaping to 2218 by 2024 – the year Britain’s ‘sick-note culture’ panic erupted in earnest. The number of mentions more than doubled between 2023 and 2024 alone, having risen steadily from a recent low point of just 541 in 2021 – a year when levels of public sympathy for those unable to work owing to the ongoing COVID emergency appears to have peaked. According to the ESRC-funded project ‘Welfare at a Social Distance’, this was a year that witnessed a significant softening of attitudes towards working-aged benefit recipients who (for one reason or another) had been put out of work by the pandemic (De Vries et al. 2021).

Just as occurrences of the term(s) ‘sick-note/sick note’ jumped between the start of the pandemic and 2024, so too did those of the officialese ‘economic inactivity’ and ‘economically inactive’. Between 2021 and 2022 the number of times the former term appeared in news coverage more than quadrupled – from

237 to 1153 – and there was a sixfold increase in the latter, which multiplied from 280 to 1687. Thereafter, both figures continued climbing very significantly year on year – more than doubling in each case between 2022 and 2024, from 1153 to 3530 and 1687 to 3646 respectively.

While the terms most closely associated with the inactivity panic rose dramatically over this period, the figures were less conclusive in relation to the word ‘workless’: a common media and political shorthand for people who are out of work, whether because of inactivity or long-term unemployment (a distinct category, as it covers ‘jobseekers’ whose benefits are conditional on their efforts to ‘actively seek’ work). Nonetheless, there was a notable uptick in the use of the word ‘workless’ between 2020 and 2021, and, after dipping slightly in 2022, it rose again sharply (from 1691 to 1920 mentions) in 2023 – the point when sick-note discourse began to gain serious momentum. Also notable was an increase in occurrences of the favourite go-to tabloid pejoratives for ‘undeserving’ benefit recipients – ‘scrounger’ and ‘workshy’ (or ‘work-shy’). After declining slowly but steadily in the years leading up to the pandemic, both of these returned to sharp upwards trajectories from 2021 onwards. It is not much of an imaginative leap to see this as reflecting dwindling levels of sympathy for inactive people as barriers to work directly linked to COVID lockdowns and furlough policies evaporated and opportunities to find or go back to work began returning to something approaching normality. This interpretation aligns with a September 2021 report combining a national survey with analysis of bimonthly YouGov data that concluded that ‘the public believes COVID-19 claimants are considerably more deserving of benefits than pre-pandemic claimants’ (De Vries et al. 2021).

We are, then, left with a patchwork picture – and one starkly at odds, in many respects, with the sweepingly generalized popular portrayal of soaring inactivity rates across the board. While overall levels of inactivity may indeed be slightly higher than in 2019 (the year immediately before the pandemic), much of this figure can be attributed to people who had already been inactive long term, including those with work-limiting disabilities and chronic health conditions – themselves, of course, a frequent target of media and political opprobrium. In truth, the widely reported ‘surge’ in inactivity rates since COVID kicked in has been wildly exaggerated. There are certainly now more people classed as inactive owing to early retirement, mental health issues, neurodivergent diagnoses and physical ailments such as musculoskeletal conditions for which they have been forced to wait prolonged periods for NHS treatment (not least owing to backlogs caused by the pandemic itself). However, these numbers are unlikely to be so significant that they would move the dial dramatically enough to constitute a wave of ‘new inactivity’.

It is this paradoxical picture – of a comparatively modest *actual* rise in post-pandemic inactivity paired with an irrationally hand-wringing media-political

TABLE 0.1: Occurrence of terms relating to inactivity in news coverage, 2017–24.

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
sick note or sick-note	812	760	539	1,016	541	954	1,062	2,218
economic inactivity	234	209	195	256	237	1,153	2,183	3,530
economically inactive	512	470	373	778	280	1,687	3,099	3,646
workless	1,855	1,999	1,579	1,780	2,006	1,691	1,920	1,825
scrounger	1,559	1,261	1,031	952	956	1,137	1,073	1,190
workshy or work-shy	861	448	447	599	532	575	624	886

Source: LexisNexis news database.

overreaction to ‘lazy Brits’ (Reilly 2022) – that forms the backdrop to the rest of this book. But before we turn to analysing the myths about inactivity circulating through contemporary media-political discourse, it makes sense to start with a longitudinal question. What are the historical precedents for panicky societal responses to perceived (but exaggerated) moral crises about wilfully indolent people who *claim* to be unable to work when, in fact, they are capable of doing so? It is to the task of answering this question that we turn next.