

Stigmatising poverty?

The ‘Broken Society’ and reflections on anti-welfarism in the UK today

A Whose Economy Seminar Paper

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Executive summary

In the context of deep economic and financial crisis, and amidst rising inequalities, blame for several of the main social problems affecting the contemporary UK is being apportioned to some of the most disadvantaged sections of society.

This blaming is driven by a strong anti-welfarism that regards social welfare provision as among the key factors contributing to a social and moral crisis in the UK today.

The media also plays a key role in producing and reproducing anti-poor and anti-welfare ways of thinking, sensationalising some of the more negative aspects of life in disadvantaged communities. This representation of people experiencing poverty serves to set them as a group apart from 'normal' and 'mainstream' society.

Anti-poor narratives, together with media misrepresentations of poverty increasingly referred to as 'poverty porn',¹ work to harden attitudes to social welfare in general and to people in poverty specifically.

Introduction: The state of welfare in the contemporary UK

We are living in a period characterised by a virulent and comprehensive assault not on poverty, but on people experiencing poverty. At one level, such an assault is evidenced by UK Coalition Government pronouncements and policies² that talk of a renewed phase of 'welfare reform', which in essence is a concerted attack on welfarism and welfare benefits. This attack is also marked by policies that will introduce even tighter controls on the recipients of welfare, more conditionality, and harsher penalties for offenders and transgressors. This is accompanied by an ideological onslaught on people experiencing severe poverty and disadvantage, constructing them as among the central 'problematic' populations in the contemporary UK.

Of course, in some respects this is not new: for much of the past century and a half, welfare, of whatever shape or form, has been accompanied by a narrative which divides 'the poor' into two groups: those whose poverty and predicament is largely due to factors outside their immediate control, a 'respectable poor', alongside another group, the 'disreputable', 'disorderly' or 'problem' poor who are held up as in some way responsible for their own position.

In the periods in which anti-poor narratives and thinking have come to the fore, the wider economic and social contexts are also of crucial importance. Today this is also the case. We are in the midst of one of the deepest and most far-reaching assaults on public services and social welfare, and on some of the most disadvantaged groups in society, with a UK government committed to accelerating and deepening the 13 years of New Labour attacks which set the stage for this current onslaught.

That this is a period of deep recession and economic crisis is also significant, in that this is being used to legitimate a series of 'austerity' measures and the wholesale restructuring and reform of welfare provision. While the economic and financial crisis gains the news headlines and much of the attention, for the UK government – accompanied an assortment of observers and sections of the media – there is another crisis. This social and moral 'crisis', captured by the term 'Broken Society', has been construed as contributing to the economic problems that the country is experiencing.

This paper highlights some of the main features and elements of the Broken Society perspective, and argues that this works to 'other' and to stigmatise people experiencing poverty. How social problems are constructed, including the language and terminology used, have always been key indicators of the form that subsequent policy interventions will take. The Broken Society is no different: driven by a language that speaks of the problems of 'welfare dependency', it works to mobilise and legitimate a harsher regime for welfare recipients, as well as encouraging a strong anti-welfarism in general.

1. The UK as a 'Broken Society'

Among the most virulent anti-welfare messages in the contemporary UK is captured in the phrase 'Broken Society' itself. Initially popularised by Iain Duncan Smith and the Conservatives' Centre for Social Justice (CSJ),³ the term 'Broken Britain' has become a recurring staple of media and popular commentaries about the social health of UK society, and has increasingly featured across a range of narratives regarding the future shape and direction of social welfare.

What helps to make the Broken Society idea so potent and pervasive that it is a very flexible notion, able to be deployed as an explanation for a range of social problems and popular social ills. For Conservatives such as Iain Duncan Smith and David Cameron, a central argument is that the broken and failing society has its roots in 'broken families'. Teenage pregnancies, increasing numbers of one-parent households caught-up in a 'dependency culture', feature prominently in this perspective. Also, according to the Conservatives, Labour's failure to defend and support marriage is a key factor accounting for the prevalence of street violence, drug addiction and a range of other social problems.

While five poverty 'drivers' are identified: family breakdown, welfare dependency, educational failure, addiction to drugs and alcohol, and serious personal debt, it is clear from the CSJ's report *Every Family Matters*,⁴ that marriage and a 'stable two-parent family life' are seen by the government as central to mending Broken Britain and thereby reducing levels of poverty.

The idea that family life in Britain is increasingly dysfunctional provides for a renewed familialism (i.e. the idea that individual and public wellbeing are increased through support for heterosexual nuclear families), with the Conservatives promising to bring back some recognition of marriage to the UK tax system if they won the 2010 general election. However, such familialism is far from being an exclusively Conservative viewpoint. New Labour before them drew a distinction between 'hardworking families' and other families, who clearly were seen as loafers. In his 2009 Labour Party Conference speech, for example, the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown spoke of 'problem', 'chaotic' and 'dysfunctional' families, 50,000 of which are seemingly a primary source of much of the anti-social behaviour across Britain.⁵

Stigmatising language is being deployed that talks of aspirational deficits, dysfunctional and deviant behaviours, an absence of social capital, and a seemingly expanding range of moral and behavioural problems. Poor people and poor communities are all too frequently talked about (and less often talked with) in terms of deficit, inadequacies and lackings (aside from their lacking an adequate income!). Much of this echoes the largely discredited 'culture of poverty'⁶ arguments of the early 1970s – now dusted down and deployed in a new format.

2. Anti-welfarism and anti-poor: 'Poverty porn'

The anti-welfare and anti-poor political and policy-making approach highlighted above is accompanied by a wide-ranging media assault on people experiencing poverty. This can be seen across a diverse range of formats in the 24/7 news media: through newspapers, television, and increasingly on the internet, in blogs etc, that seize on any case of apparent 'dysfunctionality' in poor communities.⁷ Once again, this serves to both produce and reproduce dominant attitudes to poverty – and to welfare in general – while at the same time also expressing largely middle and upper class fear and distrust of 'the poor'. These then serve to harden attitudes to poverty and to justify harsher welfare policies. Alongside these, television documentaries and 'reality TV' shows also allow 'experts' to adjudicate on the faults of working class and disadvantaged lifestyles, emphasising the need for self-improvements and self-help.⁸ Television programmes such as *Jeremy Kyle*, *Tricia*, *Secret Millionaire*, and *Saints and Sinners* are among the most notable in a seemingly growing list of what is increasingly referred to as the 'poverty porn' genre. The messages presented are pervasive –

reflecting and forging an anti-welfarism that fits neatly with, and legitimates, state agendas for welfare 'reform' and 'austerity policies'.

Together with the expressions of middle class fear and distrust of poor people, there is also a fascination with poverty and the supposedly deviant lifestyles of those affected – where viewers are encouraged to find the worst and weakest moments of people's lives funny and entertaining. This is offered up for consumption on a wider, cross-class basis – yet it is clear that it reflects middle class antipathies and angst. At the same time, it delineates working class communities as the 'real' poor who need to be controlled. In this respect it plays to wider government- and media-generated narratives about 'scroungers' and the 'undeserving poor'.

The Scheme: Misrepresenting poverty?

A key illustration of 'poverty porn' is BBC Scotland's reality television programme *The Scheme*. The first two parts of this four-part series was broadcast across Scotland in May 2010,⁹ presenting the community of a deprived housing scheme – Onthank in Kilmarnock – as entertainment for public consumption. *The Scheme* purported to offer a 'warts 'n' all' documentary account of life in Onthank. It positioned the viewer in judgement over the behaviour and lifestyles of those exhibited and showcased the 'dysfunctional' elements of family relationships, unemployment, addictions and violence.

The series provoked a great deal of debate and controversy across Scotland and beyond, reflected in considerable press coverage and presence on social networking sites and online discussion forums. One of the most forceful criticisms of *The Scheme* – and 'poverty porn' more generally – is that it provides a view of poverty, and people experiencing poverty, out of context, with no consideration of the underlying social and economic factors that work to generate and reproduce poverty over time (in this case, for example, the devastating economic change in East Ayrshire). *The Scheme* and similar programmes depend upon a largely cultural and behaviour-centred approach – one which focuses on the individual and family, and on specific lifestyles which are seen as working to keep people in poverty.

3. Conclusion: In defence of welfare

The central argument to emerge from this discussion is that, in the contemporary UK, there is a strong anti-welfare agenda that is increasingly informing policy approaches to poverty – and to poor people. Echoing through UK coalition government pronouncements is a perspective that welfare is both morally and socially corrupting. It undermines individual responsibility, encourages worklessness and fecklessness, and is associated with a range of other problematic and troublesome behaviours.

People experiencing poverty are all too often stigmatised in government, political and policy-making rhetoric. They are the targets of policy interventions, yet underpinning this is a view that welfare is, in itself, problematic.

Where does this leave those who are interested in combating such ‘otherings’ and stigmatisation? A starting point must surely be the defence of welfare itself (see Sinfield, this series of papers). In the not too distant past, ‘social security’ was seen as a bedrock of the UK welfare state. It did not carry the negative connotations that are now associated with ‘welfare’, even if welfare itself was in the past also regarded as a public good, a right. The negativity and morally disrupting sense of welfare today, initially imported from the USA in the late 1970s and increasingly reinforced by successive UK governments since, must be challenged by those of us who wish to see a progressive sense of welfare – upon which can be built a socially just and effective approach to ending poverty. Welfare is a contested idea,¹⁰ but an idea that must be defended.

Recommendations

- Those interested in defending social welfare and producing a more socially-just approach to poverty must be continually alert to the language and terminology used – and to the continuing pervasiveness of anti-poor sentiments and thinking.
- In developing a socially-just approach to poverty, attention should be refocused on the entire income distribution. This means considering the privileges and lifestyles of the rich, whose often problematic and disorderly behaviour attracts little of the antipathy attached to problematic behaviour among some of those in poverty.
- There needs to be understanding that social welfare and the creation of a more equal society brings benefits to *all* people living in that society.

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Notes

- 1 See Barbara Ellen 2010; Pat Kane 2010; and Martyn McLaughlin 2010
- 2 For example, the 2011 Welfare Reform Bill, see DWP 2011
- 3 See Mooney 2009
- 4 Centre for Social Justice (2009)
- 5 Gordon Brown 2009
- 6 See Oscar Lewis 1959 and 1966/1996
- 7 See Mooney 2009
- 8 See Bev Skeggs 2005
- 9 The second two programmes in the series were not broadcast due to a legal case involving someone who appeared in the final two programmes. The entire series was subsequently broadcast in May 2011. See also Gerry Mooney and Sharon Wright 2011 and Gerry Mooney and Lynn Hancock 2010
- 10 See Mary Daly 2011

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