

Idle paupers, scroungers and shirkers: past and new social stereotypes of the undeserving welfare claimant in the UK

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Introduction

Negative public representations of the poor have always been used by governments to legitimise their actions, from the punishment/confinement option of the early English Poor Laws to current retrenchment trajectories of 'mature' welfare states dealing with an economic downturn. The introduction of austerity measures in advanced economies and their constant legitimisation by means of a 'moral argument' has recently been accompanied by the re-emergence of negative public representations of the poor, shedding new light on the relationships between economic crisis, austerity and the criminalisation of poverty in our society.

The idle poor

The history of the welfare state is one of stereotypes and public representations of deservedness. Past and present social representations (or stereotypes) of the poor have largely resorted to a number of common elements, primarily the criminalisation of the undeserving poor. Most of those stereotypes, arguably, emerged in the public debate precisely at times of economic, financial or social crisis. One of the most discussed stereotyped representations of the welfare claimant is the one found in pre-modern Britain with the visible explosion of the *social question*: the *idle pauper* who would intentionally sponge on community charity. Such a representation was part and parcel of the widespread belief at the time that poverty was a condition essentially derived from individual negligence. Eighteenth century British literature contributed significantly to the development of a certain negative public imagery of poverty and the poor. Daniel Defoe's famous pamphlet (*Giving Alms no Charity, and Employing the Poor a Grievance to the Nation*), for example, described poverty

as being predominantly a result of 'casualty or crime'. The existence of pervasive stereotypes of idle paupers and their alleged moral characteristics, however, also had remarkable implications in terms of the effective social treatment of the poor. The predominant stereotype was gradually translated into a formal distinction between two alleged categories of welfare claimants: the deserving and the non-deserving poor. Not only did this separation go hand in hand with a strong *moral* judgements on the poor (destitute able-bodied individuals should blame their own behaviour for their conditions) but the 'idle poor' stereotype also encouraged the criminalisation of the 'undeserving' welfare claimant rather than stimulating efforts to eliminate indigence as a social problem. This process culminated in the formalization of the moral argument against the undeserving poor, brought about by the substitution of the Speenhamland system of poverty alleviation with a punitive approach towards those who failed to demonstrate their willingness to work. The repressive solutions of the new 'police' (Dean, 1991: 55) regime introduced by the Amendment Act of 1834 perfectly matched the orientations predominant at that time. The widespread resort to *confinement* (the so-called 'indoor relief') of able-bodied male individuals in the workhouses and the enforcement of the *less-eligibility* principle (social assistance should always be less desirable than labour) exemplify the extent to which British society came to discipline the undeserving unemployed poor by means of 'the threat of hunger' (Polanyi, 1944: 145).

The 'scrounger'

For many decades, the undeserving poor had disappeared as a concept in Britain. The expansion of inclusive welfare institutions, deriving from a new post-war social contract, mitigated the very

need to differentiate between diverse categories of welfare claimants. This trend was interrupted with the outbreak of the oil shocks, when a new 'anti-scrounger' campaign emerged as early as 1976. A feeling of *suspicion* towards welfare claimants was fuelled by sensational tabloid headlines devoting exceptional coverage to unemployment 'dole' fraud cases and the 'alarming proportion' of welfare abuses. The reporting of welfare fraud cases was so intensive that public concern assumed the aspect of a proper 'scroungerphobia' (Deacon, 1978: 122). Public anxiety about welfare abuses was soon personified into the mythological figure of Derek Peter Deevy, a social security fraudster 'with 41 names [...] a luxury life style', spending '£ 25 a week on cigars' and who had admitted to obtaining 'a total of £36,000 by fraud'.¹ As was the case in the nineteenth century, the new negative orientation towards the undeserving welfare claimant soon turned into an institutional concern about 'dole' abuse and into a discussion over a prospective reform of the British social security system. The need to separate the 'deserving cases' from cheaters became the subject of debate and consequently transposed into action, marking the revival of the past 'less eligibility' approach in labour market policy-making.² While it is true that the real turning point in British 'welfare retrenchment' only came in the early 1980s, it is unquestionable that the revival of the *scrounger debate* came in conjunction with the introduction of much stricter forms of control over welfare claimants. In fact, the whole scrounger 'hysteria' exploded precisely in 1976, in the midst of a deep financial crisis that urged Britain to opt for an International Monetary Fund loan, conditional upon the introduction of drastic public spending cuts. Not surprisingly, under the Callaghan government austerity measures were enforced in tandem with a massive increase in prosecutions for fraud (25,000 cases in 1977) and with the introduction of much stricter eligibility rules for welfare payments.

The new undeserving poor: the 'shirker'

The economic crisis of 2008 and the consequent increasing call for austerity played a major role in the emergence of a new public concern for welfare abuse, as well as on the political legit-

imisation of social policy reforms diminishing social entitlements. Increasing emphasis on workfare incentives in social policy and on a moral argument against *welfare dependency* were paralleled by the revival of anti-scrounger feelings in most European countries. This trend is epitomised in the recent reinvigoration of the old 'welfare scrounger myth' in the British collective psyche, amplified by the political narrative around the undeserving poor. An alleged opposition between worker and 'shirkers' became a common talking point as of 2011 not only on the part of conservative politicians but also, surprisingly enough, among members of the Labour Party. In his speech at the Labour Party Conference in 2011 MP Liam Byrne expressed his concern about the fact that 'many people on the doorstep at the last election felt that too often we were *for shirkers not workers*'.³

As was the case with the pre-modern *idle pauper* and *the scrounger* of the 1970s, stereotypes of the undeserving poor also began to be reinforced by the negative portrayals of people on benefits on the part of certain media. The recent representation and even spectacularisation of the welfare recipient population (such as in Channel 4's Benefits Street and similar programmes) has led to widespread disapproval of the stigmatising stereotype of people who need benefits in order to survive. However, the media coverage of the new welfare scrounger debate reflects, in a way, the new dominant public attitude towards the undeserving poor, if not a tacit legitimisation of the welfare cuts already enforced by the Coalition Government. The media amplification of the 'scrounger's life' only provided new material for the 'hard' workfare argument, which has been at the heart of the UK welfare debate for years. Headlines such as 'Shameful scrounger boasts she won't have to pay back a penny' echoing the attacks on the welfare scrounger of the 1970s have become increasingly more frequent in the UK press over the last five years and increasingly used by the government to prove the need to reform the UK welfare system, which is accused of being far too generous. The infamous reference of the Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne to the *anger* of 'the shift-worker, leaving home in the dark hours of the early morning' while his next-door neighbour is 'sleeping off a

life on benefits' is proof of a revival of the argument against people undeservingly receiving social benefits.

Conclusions

The current intensification of negative public representations of undeserving welfare claimants corroborates, as in the past, the emergence of a moralising shift in welfare policy-making and a not-so-new attitude of conservative policy-makers who repeatedly refer to the social perception of the undeserving poor in an effort to emphasise the distinction between socially acceptable behaviour (of the working class) and deplorable misconduct (of the able-bodied poor). Undoubtedly, media play a major role in reproducing and reinforcing prejudices and beliefs embedded in a given society. Politicians may have used the negative latent sentiments of 'striving families' towards the welfare scrounger to exaggerate the opposition between two worlds of welfare claimants: the deserving working man depicted by George Osborne and the undeserving, sleeping lazy fraud who sponge off society. Interestingly enough, the resurgence of a moralising drift in the welfare state and the new social representation of those undeservingly living on welfare – the shirker – present all the elements of the past stereotypes of the undeserving poor: the *parasitic* dimension, best summarised by the image of the welfare scrounger 'sleeping off on welfare', the criminalisation of unemployed people receiving social benefits by committing welfare fraud or by wasting their benefit payments on drugs/alcohol, the alleged luxurious standard of living of the lazy unemployed on the dole. There is also the new 'ethnic' dimension, now especially, and worryingly so, associated with emerging negative attitudes and misconceptions towards the *ultimate outsider* and welfare abuser: the unemployed migrant, who allegedly moves to the UK to exploit the system and sponge off the community.

Notes

¹The Glasgow Herald, 14 July 1976.

²The Glasgow Herald, 5 August 1976.

³The Telegraph, 26 September 2011 (emphasis added).

References

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