



The Language of Poverty

Punitivism and Criminalisation: Poverty in Britain in 2013

Geoff Andrews:

To what extent does it matter how languages of poverty are used in the United Kingdom? That's what we're discussing in this podcast from the Open University, the Languages of Poverty.

Gerry, accompanying this quite emotive language, "strivers and skivers", there've been a number of punitive measures directed at those on welfare benefits. Some suggest that this amounts to a criminalisation of the poor.

Gerry Mooney:

GM: Well I think there's considerable evidence of that, certainly under the current Liberal Democrat Conservative coalition government. If you look back to the riots that took place in some of the major English towns and cities in the summer of 2011, the response to that by courts – and politicians, and not only politicians from the right - was absolutely horrific. You had the cases of people who were convicted of, I'm not sure if its affray in England, but that's what you're convicted of; involvement in those riots, or as I prefer the term civil disorders, who were asked if they were council house tenants or tenants of social housing and who were threatened not only with court punishment, but if they were tenants of social housing, they were going to lose their social housing tenancy. I mean it's a double strike, so there's one example of the criminalisation of particular groups of people who are disadvantaged in contemporary society, and that's one and only one. We can think of many others and it seems to be a language now of, not only more punitive and harsher, but is talking about harsher sanctions for people in poverty.

Owen Jones:

Benefit fraud, according to the government's own estimates, is less than 1% of total welfare spending, it is about £1.2 billion a year, which you can contrast with £25 billion lost through tax avoidance every year. But a poll done by the TUC showed that people thought most people were committing fraud who were on welfare. People overestimated how much money people got and who actually got it. The more people actually knew the truth, the less likely they were to support what the government was doing. So this use of the most extreme, unrepresentative examples has been crucial in this demonisation of people. And that is very much reinforced by the use of politicians and journalists of the most unrepresentative and extreme examples, which are then passed off as being the tip of the iceberg. So they will hunt

down people who fit the stereotype, the caricature of the scrounger, whose own personal inadequacies have led to their situation. People who, you know, might be, you know, this idea of, I am going to use a very, kind of, extreme image, but this idea of someone, you know, a scrounger in a house made out of widescreen television sets, dribbling on a sofa, watching Jeremy Kyle on repeat whilst 50 kids run around. And anything that comes even close to that extreme example, that caricature, will be hunted down. What you end up with is a complete, massive, widespread, endemic myth, fanned by the media.

Gerry Mooney

I mean, one of the key threads that runs through all of this, Geoff, is the idea of welfare dependency, that if you are dependent on the welfare state, there is something wrong with you. You are inadequate. Now, some of us here were brought up in an era when there was something called the welfare state. Welfare was considered to be something good, if I look after your welfare surely that is a positive thing? But what has happened is, particularly in the 1980s, thanks to the Conservatives, although you can maybe trace it a little earlier than that, a much more American notion of welfare was brought in, where welfare was seen to reflect your inadequacies or inabilities in some kind of way. Now, we are focusing here on, you know, languages of poverty and I think it is important to reinforce the point that language matters because how you define a problem, how you construct a problem, the language that you use will determine what policies you end up with as a government. And what we are seeing is that under the Conservative UK coalition government today, as under the New Labour government, as under the Major and Thatcher governments before then, an increasingly punitive approach to people who are experiencing poverty.

Owen Jones:

And that is actually a point which was reinforced when I interviewed Matthew Taylor, who used to be a key advisor to Tony Blair. And I spoke to him about social exclusion, New Labour's approach to what they call social exclusion and the point he made was this; the difference with class, as he put it, was class was something assigned to you, you were born into it, there was nothing you could do about it, the difference with social exclusion is that, as he put it, you could exclude yourself, your own personal behaviour partly determined where you ended up on the pecking order. And he said it wasn't entirely about blaming the poor, but he said there was an element of that as well.

So that idea of people's own personal behaviour determining their circumstances was something which, even though New Labour spoke about social exclusion, which on the face of it seems like acknowledging the existence of inequality and poverty in Britain, actually helped reinforce that idea, the individualisation of social problems.

Geoff Andrews:

Obviously, languages of poverty are really constructed through the media and by government. How important is it that we actually hear from those living with poverty themselves, Gerry?

Gerry Mooney

I think that there is a long and noble tradition that has emphasised the importance of voices of people experiencing poverty and I think we should, where possible, make sure that those voices are heard because I think it is true that we could say there is a poverty industry in the UK, in different parts of the UK, which isn't always concerned to advance the fight against poverty and that has to be very important. There is, though, a slight problem in that if we simply focus on people's day-to-day experiences and ask for individual voices about poverty, you can lose, also, the wider structural picture and I am not necessarily saying that that is something that people experiencing poverty can't articulate, but what I am saying is there is experiential and individual, family, community level, but there is also the wider, collective aspect of poverty that we have to hold on to as well.

Owen Jones:

Yes, I would strongly agree with that. I think it is very important to hear the voices of people who live in poverty, not least because they have largely been airbrushed out of existence and that vacuum has been filled by these grotesque caricatures, these unrepresentative examples which are then passed off as being what it actually means to be poor in Britain, which is to be work-shy, feckless, taking the Mick, robbing the taxpayer and leaching off the states, and unless you have voices who actually demonstrate the reality and can articulate it in their own words, then those caricatures will de facto, continue to be seen as the actual representative picture of what it is to live in poverty in Britain.

I mean, there was a documentary a couple of years ago on the BBC called Poor Kids, which I thought was positive because it allowed children in poverty to speak about their experiences as they actually were. And I think just that one documentary punctured a lot of myths that lots of people had, simply because their only interaction with people living in poverty was these grotesque caricatures, not just in the media but fanned by popular comedies such as Little Britain, looking at Vicky Pollard, you know, this thick single parent living on an estate, so stupid she swaps one of her children for a Westlife CD. And actually it challenges that.

Also, there is an American political linguist called George Laycoff who points out that the right often use stories and the left often use facts and statistics, but people connect better with stories than they do with facts and statistics. So it is a balance of the two but, of course, Gerry is absolutely right, it is also about linking that to a far broader picture, where you actually talk about poverty as a structural issue in our modern society and our modern economy.

Gerry Mooney

I mean, we are living in one of the most severe economic crisis since, certainly, the inter-war period and I think people have to think about the current context. Why, in a period of growing inequality, not just in the UK but other parts of the world, United States in particular, there is a fantastic case study, why is it in a period of rising inequality, deepening gulf between the rich and the rest of the society, and I mean just the rich and people experiencing poverty, why is it that people who are experiencing poverty are being blamed for their own position? That is the key question.