

# Welfare Commonsense, Poverty Porn and Doxosophy

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Sociological Research Online, 19 (3), 3  
<<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/19/3/3.html>>  
DOI: 10.5153/sro.3441

Received: 30 Apr 2014 | Accepted: 11 Jul 2014 | Published: 15 Aug 2014

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## Abstract

This article critically examines how Benefits Street and the broader genre of poverty porn television - functions to embed new forms of 'commonsense' about welfare and worklessness. It argues that such television content and commentary crowds out critical perspectives with what Pierre Bourdieu (1999) called 'doxa', making the social world appear self-evident and requiring no interpretation, and creating new forms of neoliberal commonsense around welfare and social security. The article considers how consent for this commonsense is animated through poverty porn television and the apparently 'spontaneous' (in fact highly editorialized) media debate it generates: particularly via 'the skiver', a figure of social disgust who has re-animated ideas of welfare dependency and deception.

**Keywords:** *Classificatory Politics, Welfare Reform, Worklessness, Poverty Porn, Doxosophy, Media Culture*

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## Introduction: the year of poverty porn

- 1.1 2013 was the year when public debate about the welfare state apparently exploded - in the form of a new genre of television which has been tagged 'poverty porn'<sup>[1]</sup>. In July, and as part of its *The Cost of Living* season, the BBC broadcast *We Pay Your Benefits* (BBC 1, 2013), a programme which invited four 'taxpayers' to analyse the spending habits of four 'welfare claimants'<sup>[2]</sup> in order to assess whether the current rates of unemployment support are too high. In August, Channel 4, 2013 broadcast *Benefits Britain 1949*, setting benefit claimants the challenge of living by the benefit rules of 1949, the first year of the welfare state. Poverty in these two examples was rendered as a challenge, an experiment or an opportunity for voyeuristic tourism. Life on the breadline was transformed from a profound social injustice to an opportunity to scrutinise the habits of the poor and assess how deserving they are. In October, *On Benefits and Proud* (part of Channel 5's 'and proud' series, which also included *Shoplifters and Proud* and *Pickpockets and Proud*) presents claiming benefits as suspicious, akin to theft - the 'and proud' works as an ideological hook, suggesting that the only 'correct' feeling towards benefit receipt should be shame. Productions recently broadcast *Gypsies on Benefits and Proud*, signaling a clash of several fantasies in the politics of welfare disgust. In November 2013, the BBC broadcast *Britain on the Fiddle*, a series exploring what the programme makers termed 'the runaway problem of benefit fraud'. The voiceover stated that twenty billion pounds a year are lost to benefit fraud, although where these figures come from is never clear, since the Department for Work and Pensions' own figures are significantly lower than this<sup>[3]</sup>. Such programmes repeat imagined connections between welfare recipients and moral laxity, greed, and even criminality.
- 1.2 It was into this tumultuous media landscape that the recent *Benefits Street* was broadcast by Channel 4 in the first weeks of 2014. The programme maker described the six-episode series as an 'observational documentary' of James Turner Street in Birmingham, a street of ninety-nine houses where 'the majority of residents are unemployed'. In this short article I critically examine how *Benefits Street* and the broader genre of poverty porn television - functions to embed new forms of 'commonsense' about welfare and worklessness. The rapid generation of such television content - and subsequent media commentary that responds to it - has a

flattening effect on public discourse, crowding out critical and alternative perspectives with what Pierre Bourdieu called 'doxa'; 'that which goes without saying because it comes without saying' (1972: 167) and which has the effect of making the social world appear as self-evident and requiring no interpretation. These new forms of commonsense themselves signal how far the social democratic model of social security has been corroded under neoliberalism and replaced with a more punitive and limited model of welfare, littered with sanctions and restrictions and characterized by conditions to be satisfied, rather than by universal entitlements. Consider how consent for the new welfare commonsense is animated through poverty porn television and the apparently 'spontaneous' (in fact highly editorialized) media debate it generates: particularly via 'the skiver', a figure of social disgust who has re-animated ideas of welfare dependency and deception.

## 'Becoming commonsense'

- 2.1 Since 2008 and the global financial crisis and subsequent recession, we have seen across Europe a process of intensive ideological work that has been termed 'the alchemy of austerity' (Clarke and Newman 2012). Through this alchemy, the social problems of deepening poverty, social immobility and profound economic inequalities are magically transformed into problems of 'welfare dependence', 'cultures of entitlement' and 'irresponsibility'. What are the tools of such alchemy? Clarke and Newman consider the 'social imaginaries' of austerity, the discursive repertoires (such as the Big Society or Broken Britain), which are repeatedly enacted across domestic and international political speech and debate. They argue that through this alchemical investment in magic - if we say it enough, it will become true - 'austerity' has become firmly entrenched across mainstream economics as the only answer to the 'question' of welfare. In his fascinating study of agnotology in think-tank organisations, Tom Slater (2012) maps the willful and deliberate cultural production of ignorance about welfare and poverty across think-tank activity (notably the Centre for Social Justice), usually without the input of any social scientists and often recycling stigmatizing ideologies about bad choices, bad culture and irresponsibility. There is a rich emerging scholarship that examines how these welfare discourses circulate through the pages of consultation papers, policy briefings, pamphlets, reports and ministerial speeches, despite an absence of supportive social research (Connor 2010; Wiggan 2012; Garthwaite 2011). Such discourses effect a powerful narrative of state and personal failure around welfare, which is re-cast as an expensive, lumbering and ineffective system that rewards willful worklessness.
- 2.2 In order for such discourses to move off of the pages of policy reports and into public discussion, and to generate wider legitimacy for notions of 'welfare dependency', welfare reform enthusiasts need a populist language in which to articulate this story of state and personal welfare failure. It is through the explosion of 'poverty porn' television that welfare discourses of political elites have become translated into authoritarian vocabularies. Poverty porn television is not simply voyeurism, but performs an ideological function; it generates a new 'commonsense' around an unquestionable need for welfare reform; it makes a neoliberal welfare 'doxa'. To make sense of the production of new 'commonsense' I draw extensively on the work of Stuart Hall, a cross-disciplinary pioneer who opened up critical exchanges between sociology, cultural and policy studies. In *Policing The Crisis* (1978), Hall and his colleagues Jefferson, Critcher, Clarke and Roberts were concerned with the emergence of a new cultural figure - 'the mugger' - and a new kind of crime - mugging - upon whom street crime was racialised and against whom social anxieties around youth, urban space and control become projected. Figures like 'the mugger' are essential at times of crisis, when new formations of 'commonsense' are condensing. The figure of the mugger and repetitions of mugger discourse, across news media, courtrooms, public commentary, everyday conversation, gossip and other formal and official sites of disquiet, came to solidify a new 'commonsense' consensus around authoritative policing.
- 2.3 What, then, are the new forms of 'commonsense' that are solidifying around welfare, work and social security? What emergent figures are helping to drive this process of new commonsense making, of transforming the current crisis of neoliberal excess and inequality into a crisis of welfare dependence? Such figures are complex and multiple - some recycled and reanimated from the zombie category of the 'underclass' (so-called because despite sociological attempts to 'kill it off' with evidence, it keeps returning: see MacDonald, Shildrick, and Furlong 2014), while other terms are relatively new. The preferred figure of crisis in today's welfare debate is 'the skiver', a term of social disgust which has gained traction because of its connotations with criminality and fraud. Through imagining/ inventing anxieties about the scheming deceits of those entitled to social protection, such entitlements become easier to undermine and dismantle. The distinctions between 'skivers' and 'strivers' - the rhyming binary which imagines that the population can be cleaved into two clear groups, those who work ('put in to the system') and those who don't ('take out of the system') - first began to be drawn in Conservative party conference speeches of 2012:

And throughout, let's hold in mind who we do it for. That corner shop owner, that teacher, that commuter, that pensioner and that entrepreneur. They *strive* for a better life. We *strive* to help them. (George Osborne).

Those we should have been helping [ . . . ] the *strivers*, the *tryers* [ . . . ] too many of them lost most of every pound they earned in work [ . . . ] I ask you, what kind of message does that send out? I will tell you - that it's not worth working - that it's not worth trying - that you're better off *playing the system and taking the money*. Shameful! (Iain Duncan-Smith)  
[emphasis added]

'Skiver' did not appear in the official transcripts of the conference, though it formed a key part of subsequent discussion and it saturated media coverage, written by journalists who saw the unspoken couplet and knew a good soundbite when they saw one. Perhaps one of the clearest moments in the rewriting of the current crisis as a crisis of welfare spending on 'skivers' came when Cameron spoke under a banner 'For Hardworking People' in the 2013 party conference.

**2.4** But the willingness to conduct welfare debate by dividing worker from workless - rather than examining the deeper problems of work in a neoliberal economy - has not been limited to the Conservatives; Labour shadow minister Liam Byrne discussed 'workers and shirkers' in his 2011 conference party speech, and Labour leader Ed Miliband experimented with the term 'grafter' that same year. Indeed it was New Labour that introduced punitive welfare policies, designed to manage 'failed citizens' through limiting financial and material aid, in the belief that this would make citizens 'take responsibility' for their own welfare by finding work and 'being more aspirational'. Within the space of a decade the potent national myth had become established that poverty of aspiration and failure to make the 'right choices' were to blame for poverty and stagnant social mobility. In 2008, positioning his Conservative Party as the party of renewal, but shamelessly plagiarizing New Labour, Cameron launched his campaign for what he called 'a new morality' to fix 'Broken Britain'. Coalition policy is more rightly seen as a continuation, an intensification of New Labour's project to reconfigure poverty as a matter of poor choices and bad culture. There is cross-party consensus that the scandal of 21<sup>st</sup> century poverty will be remedied by reforming welfare. Such reforms are centred on 'responsibilising' claimants, increasing the use of conditionality and sanctions, and moving more people into work, faster. There has been precious little critical reflection on the declining quality of work for those at the bottom of the labour market, or of the declining value of the wage at the bottom rungs (see [MacDonald, Shildrick and Garthwaite 2012](#)). No mainstream political party has cogently questioned the terms of this reform.

**2.5** The new commonsense around welfare functions by cleaving the body politic into two: those that put in and those that take out, those who get 'something for nothing' (welfare without work) and those that get 'nothing for something' (work without welfare). The immensely powerful binary of 'skiver' and 'striver' conceives of its citizens as one or the other, occupying different spaces, oriented by different morals, aspirations and values. Skiver/striver creates two nations, re-imagined as static testimony to a perverse welfare system that rewards irresponsibility and punishes commitment. This rhetoric shows a new willingness to recycle divisive vocabularies of virtue and waste, deserving and undeserving, rather than to examine the common costs of neoliberalism. Coalition rhetoric around welfare has hardened the commonsense here but has also demonstrated an appetite for intensifying the stigmas attached to worklessness and receipt of welfare. Work and worklessness is the moralised site of doxic neoliberalism, where new commonsense is most rapidly solidifying.

**2.6** The conjunctural analysis developed by Hall et al (1978) around policing - mapping out public and official disquiet, 'trying to catch public opinion, unawares, in the very moment of its formation' (2013: preface, xiii) - can be usefully applied to the part played by 'poverty porn' television. 'Poverty porn' animates and re-circulates the 'commonsense' notions of welfare contained within the figure of the skiver. The subject of this television genre is presented as undisciplined, lazy and shameless, neither legitimate citizen nor consumer, exiled from the routine of the working day and forever trying to grasp yet more from the very benefits system which has created their condition of dependence. Imogen Tyler (2013) proposes the term 'national abject' for figures who exist as symbols of marginality, and who are seen to occupy positions of deviancy. The skiver inherits the ideological baggage of preceding abject figures; the single mother, the troubled family, the unemployed, absent or feckless father. It is not surprising therefore to see a similar pejorative shorthand used in *Benefits Street* as that used in earlier waves of 'underclass' media mythologizing - the sofa abandoned in the street, piles of windswept rubbish, the satellite dish, cigarettes, tins of cheap lager, kids loitering in the street after dark. These figures have a televisual and cinematic history stretching back to the 1990s and the post-Thatcherite nostalgic mourning for the working class (see [Biressi and Nunn 2010](#)).

**2.7** Underclass media mythologizing has been at times ambivalent, even celebratory of the entrepreneurial zeal and inventive survival strategies of the most socially marginalized in Britain's 'post-working class'. *Benefits*

*Street* presents momentary glimpses of resourcefulness, such as the character of Smoggy 'the 50p man' who sells household items to his neighbours door-to-door. The introductory voiceover of each episode promises to show how residents will come together in mutual support through hard times as benefit cuts become implemented. But in broader terms, and in spite of these more complex and contradictory moments, the national objects of poverty porn serve to transform precarity into a moral failure, worklessness into laziness and social immobility and disconnection into an individual failure to strive and aspire. The recent swathe of poverty porn does not only play on existing shameless curiosity about poverty, it also positions the lives of the poor as a moral site for scrutiny, something to be peered at, dissected and assessed. It reinvents the underclass for the purposes of welfare reform 'debate' which is set to immiserate the most marginalized and precarious of the 'post-working-class' even further. It presents the 'others' on the screen as dysfunctional in their choices and behavior, *as well as* presenting a dysfunctional welfare state which rewards such 'lifestyles'. In such a framework, the poverty porn viewer is compelled to understand social insecurity (her own and that of others) as a problem of self-discipline, resilience and responsibility, rather than as a consequence of the extensions and excesses of neoliberalism.

### Fast Media, Fast Policy and Doxosophy

- 3.1** Responding to critiques of *Benefits Street* and particularly to the description of it as 'poverty porn', director Richard McKerrew argued that 'shining a light on poverty [. . .] paying attention to poor people' is not pornographic (see [Plunkett 2014](#)). In this pre-emptive sleight of hand, McKerrew dismisses the critics of *Benefits Street* as prudish, unwilling to consider the obscenity of poverty. But the label of 'poverty porn' does not simply refer to the obscenity of poverty; it also refers to the practices of directors. Such programming is 'porn' in the sense that it aims to arouse and stimulate the viewer, to provoke an emotional sensation through a repetitive and affective encounter with the television screen. Poverty porn is an all-surface, no-depth visual culture of immediacy and its semiotic cues - its red flags of moral outrage - require no interpretative work from the viewer. The burst of this genre is testament to the production processes of 'fast media', whose currency is outrage, scandal and attention, and fast media careers, which are made through ratings figures, column inches and hashtags. The media currency produced by *Benefits Street* has been so plentiful that the production team have already been re-commissioned for the latest poverty porn example, *Famous, Rich and Hungry*.
- 3.2** The parasitical nature of fast media culture can be seen in the zealous re-use of *Benefits Street* to create satellite 'event TV'. Channel 5, keen to cash in on the attention currency, set up *Big Benefits Row* while Channel 4 broadcast its own *Benefits Britain: the Live Debate* after the final episode of *Benefits Street*. Both debates featured social commentators - journalists and politicians - but neither included a single social scientist. Pierre Bourdieu (1999) referred scathingly to 'doxosophy' - the closed circuit of political discourse engaged in the vague debates of philosophy but without any technical content, a social science reduced to journalistic commentary and opinion polls - whose primary function is to comment on representations as if they were real. Doxosophers saturate public discourse with ready-made phrases and soundbites and make it hard for critical intellectuals to get purchase with critical analysis and debate (see [Stabile and Marooka 2010](#)). They fail to recognise that the terms of the debate have already been constructed and are unable to counter dominant consciousness. As a result this parasitical satellite media was largely an exercise in 'talking fast while saying nothing' (see [Slater 2012](#); [Crossley 2014](#)) The extensive in-depth, ethnographic, rich, sociological analysis of precarious lives, which demonstrates the insecurity that characterises those most marginalised under neoliberalism and the constant shuttling between poorly paid precarious work and benefit receipt ([Standing 2009](#); [MacDonald, Shildrick, Garthwaite 2012](#)) had no place in such a doxic framework. This knowledge is always/already dismissed under neoliberal commonsense formations of skiver/striver.
- 3.3** Poverty porn, circulating in fast media culture, everyday conversation and across informal sites of disquiet, also feeds back into political conversation and into the restless reform of 'fast policy' ([Peck 2002](#)). When Conservative MP Philip Davies raised a question around *Benefits Street* and *On Benefits and Proudfit* in the House of Commons, he lacked the sociological imagination to consider how problematic such representations are, and assumed that the semiotic cues offered up reflected the reality of living on benefits. In his reply, Iain Duncan-Smith (founder of the think-tank, Centre for Social Justice, which specializes in doxosophy) does not miss a beat and references the public who - seeing the programme too - of course see it as exemplifying the urgent need for welfare reform. When Conservative MP Simon Hart remarked at a Prime Minister's Questions session that 'sadly there is a street like this in every constituency in the land', he was not required to provide any evidence for such a claim; Cameron simply agreed in his reply that 'welfare dependency' was at the root of unemployment<sup>[4]</sup>. Such highly editorialized 'debate' between fast media and fast policy recycles skiver/striver rhetoric in a mutually constitutive feedback loop - and documents the revolving door between politician and 'social commentator' where new forms of welfare 'commonsense' start to congeal.

3.4 Clearly there is a broader project at work across poverty porn around who will have a claim to social protection in the welfare landscape of the twenty-first century, and such programming is essential to embedding public consent for the rollback of welfare entitlement. The ideology of the new austere welfare state is premised on a number of myths; that 'skivers' don't want to work and are encouraged to remain workless by a perverse system that rewards them; that full employment is possible in a fully marketised neoliberal economy; that paid work is always the best route out of poverty. All three myths are rampant across the new commonsense of welfare, and are key narrative threads in poverty porn. However, as always there are interruptions to the congealing of this commonsense - the participants of poverty porn themselves have proved to be contradictory and even resistant subjects (see Tyler, Allen and de Benedictus, *this Issue*), and some viewers of the programme have challenged the crystallization of welfare commonsense, reversing the direction of the gaze from precariat to elite. There was at the time of broadcast a flurry of viral mocked-up images of *Benefits Street*, staged in the House of Commons and Buckingham Palace which served to highlight other costs to 'the public purse'. Other interruptions overturn the doxa of welfare reform by using the prescribed hashtag #benefitsstreet to connect Twitter users who are critical of the programme and curating a vibrant mix of responses. Some of these 'doxa warriors' responded to the programme with disgust, while others shared links to statistical documents which show how paltry benefit levels are in the UK, how few households are 'intergenerationally workless' or how in-work poverty now exceeds out-of-work poverty. Such interruptions merit further research; they seem to disrupt the very moment of commonsense formation in quite powerful and inventive ways. These are anti-coagulants - they slow and perhaps could even prevent the thickening and hardening of commonsense, and could give us a space as critical sociologists to prise open and fracture welfare doxa.

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## Notes

- 1 The term 'poverty porn' has uncertain origins, though its roots appear in critiques of fictional representations of developing nations, notably of the 2009 film *Slumdog Millionaire* (see Miles 2009). More recently, the term has been used to critique documentary television in post-recession Britain which focuses on people in poverty as a-political diversionary entertainment, though as we might expect it remains a highly contested term. Abigail Scott-Paul (2013) of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation remarked how 'depressing' it was that 'people in poverty are objectified on TV for the gratification of others' and in the pursuit of a bigger audience share, while Ralph Lee, head of factual commissioning at Channel 4, stated that he was 'uncomfortable' with the term, that it was 'patronising to the people who take part in the programmes [and] offensive to the people that make them.' (see Collier 2014).
  - 2 I put both 'taxpayer' and 'welfare claimant' in quotation marks to signal the arbitrariness of such divisions, which forms the basis of the argument in this article. Everyone is a taxpayer (everyone pays Value Added Tax for example) and the category 'welfare' does not in fact exist in UK expenditure (the more accurate term would be 'social protection recipient')
  - 3 DWP figures for 2011/12 are £1.2 billion for fraud, £3.2bn for error, £12.3 for unclaimed benefits and all these figures are dwarfed by various estimates for tax avoidance and evasion by the wealthy.
  - 4 A video clip of this question is available on the BBC Politics web page, see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-25746824>.
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BENEFITS BRITAIN - THE LIVE DEBATE (Channel 4, 2014)