

'Saints and scroungers': constructing the poverty and crime myth

Lynn Hancock and Gerry Mooney question the supposed links between poverty, immorality and crime.

According to the old adage, 'the devil makes work for idle hands'! For many, the connections between poverty and crime are a matter of common sense; little scrutiny is required. Our concern is to look at how common sense understandings are re-made and to challenge some common misconceptions about poverty and crime.

We have used the word 'myth' in our title, but we are not referring to simple falsehoods about poverty and crime – although de-bunking these is important. Rather, we wish to apply Flood's (2002) discussion of 'political myths' in this context. As Flood (2002) puts it: 'a political myth can be said to exist when accounts of a more or less common sequence of events, involving more or less the same principal actors, subject to more or less the same overall interpretation and implied meaning, circulate within a social group'. We are concerned with how political myths are circulated, the authority and the pervasiveness of the messages, and the functions of these myths.

Principal actors

The 'principal actors' in this case are working-class people, including those in receipt of welfare benefits, who are frequently assumed to be more feckless, immoral and criminally-inclined than more affluent groups in popular discourse; and such assumptions are often gendered, racist as well as classed (see Smith et al., 2010). In the context of contemporary anti-welfarism assertions based on these ideas are particularly potent and

both inform and are reproduced in media portrayals of disadvantaged social groups and places.

The growing literature on crimes of the powerful (corporations and states) however clearly illustrates how actors with the most economic and political power routinely cause financial loss, harm and suffering on a much larger scale, and how the law so frequently fails to encompass or punish powerful offenders (see Tombs and Whyte, 2010, and references). Studies of corporate crimes demonstrate the crucial role of the market economy, and the state's role in its nurture, for understanding both the commission of crime and the avoidance of blame for these perpetrators. In a related vein, Karstedt and Farrall (2007) argue that transformations in the market economy are pivotal for understanding how 'the seething mass of morally dubious and outright criminal behaviour is embedded in an erosion of moral standards amongst the respectable middle classes of England and Wales'. Routine practices such as paying cash to avoid tax, 'padding' insurance claims, selling faulty goods and lying to obtain a child's school place and other 'anti-civil' practices and criminal behaviours (Karstedt and Farrall, 2007) do not regularly feature in the pages of the popular press or speeches made by politicians. They are silent on the 'scourge' of middle-class criminality.

Academic criminology remains quiet on middle-class criminality too (with notable exceptions). Far more familiar to students of criminology, policy-makers and practitioners are the right-realistic accounts of Charles

Murray and the emphasis placed on working-class 'cultural' explanations of crime that revolve around parenting practices, especially among single-mothers, benefits dependency and the 'failures' of welfare (Murray, 1990). These narratives find reflection in the publications of Ian Duncan Smith's Centre for Social Justice, and were mobilised in David Cameron's speeches on the 'broken society' before the 2010 general election.

The 'problem' of poor families and communities are frequently retold in the print and broadcast media as wreaking havoc on those directly affected, but also on wealth and security of the 'law-abiding majority'. But ideas about the 'deserving' and 'undeserving poor' and the trouble the latter create, involving the 'same principal actors, subject to more or less the same overall interpretation and implied meaning' (Flood, 2002), are deeply rooted historically. They have, however, been given renewed currency in the wake of the worldwide financial crisis in 2008 and, in particular, in the response of governments to this crisis: the justification for spending cuts. Media coverage both follows and shapes official discourses; exaggerated stories and extreme examples used by newspapers are often employed uncritically in official pronouncements to justify their claims.

Justification for cuts

For one example among many, in his justification for cuts to housing benefit during his emergency budget speech on 22 June 2010, George Osborne (Chancellor) said: 'today there are some families receiving £104,000 a year in housing benefit'. A spokesperson for the Department for Work and Pensions conceded later that 'we don't have any figures on how many people are claiming that rate'. However, 'a search of *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun* newspaper websites would throw up stories of people being paid the same if not more' (Booth, 2010). There were, of course, many challenges to the use of extreme and false examples to illustrate Osborne's

case. *The Telegraph's* (30 October 2010) investigation, involving 24 London boroughs, revealed just three households claiming this amount, but the idea that benefit claimants are 'takers' not 'contributors', 'problems' rather than 'victims' and 'others' and not full citizens was already deeply embedded.

We are not arguing that people experiencing poverty do not commit crimes; nor do we want to portray the idea that working-class communities should be especially idolised or revered. We do, however, wish to highlight that criminality occurs and harm is perpetrated by actors located throughout the social structure. That working-class communities are seen as generators of so many contemporary social problems, including crime and anti-social behaviour, highlights the importance of the authority and pervasiveness of political and popular messages about working-class family/community deficiencies as well as their potential to be mobilised in the pursuit of political projects. This in turn informs numerous and diverse policy interventions including, currently, cuts to welfare to reduce the UK's budget deficit.

Aspiration

Concerns that working-class people lack aspiration, are lazy, drain national resources and that the poor lack the appropriate moral fibre to lead a crime-free life are not confined to the tabloid press but find their reflection in fiction and film and on the blogs and commentaries of social networking sites. They are pervasive. The BBC TV series *Saints and Scroungers* (in 2009) is one such programme which, as the title suggests, is centred on the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor distinction. Its web pages tell us: 'Dominic Littlewood follows fraud officers as they bust the benefits thieves stealing millions of pounds every year, while charities and councils track down people who actually deserve government help'. We are reminded that it is 'us' the taxpayers that are being 'robbed' by 'them'; we gain the impression that the benefits system is easy to defraud.

Saints and Scroungers focuses on individuals who 'merit' help via the welfare system and other TV programmes such as Channel 4's *Secret Millionaire* highlight the plight of the 'deserving' poor. *Secret Millionaire* is concerned with groups and causes thought worthy of charitable donations from millionaires who research their potential beneficiaries covertly in disadvantaged communities. Although the morally dubious practice of deceiving would-be recipients about the donor's true identity might deserve some discussion here, we wish to focus on the 'tutelage role' that programmes such as these play. 'Tutoring' takes place in numerous ways, including through policy programmes, forms of expertise and through the state's influence on the mass media and other 'cultural systems' (Hall et al., 1978). The ways working-class families and communities are frequently portrayed in the mass media can be read as part of an educative process; the 'normality' of middle-class lives and values are contrasted with 'dysfunctional' working class ones; 'backward looking' attitudes among the poor are rendered shameful; middle-class values associated with self-improvement and aspiration are revered. These messages reflect and forge anti-welfarism and justify other 'special measures' towards these 'problem populations'.

In August 2010, *The Sun* ran the headline that 'Cam's [David Cameron's] a £5bn Scambuster'. Well informed commentators in the broadsheets and on internet blogs quickly pointed out that the £5bn includes 'fraud and error': administration errors, computer systems and claimant error (e.g. filling out the forms) and that, of total benefits claimed, fraud represented a tiny fraction of the welfare bill. Fraudulently claimed benefits and tax credits (combined) accounted for £1.5bn. The Prime Minister's clampdown on benefit 'fraud' announced in *The Sun's* article can be read as political mythmaking; it also demonstrates the functionality of such myths.

Political myths are routinely and vociferously challenged. There are examples too numerous to mention here of resistance to the way working-class lives and communities are portrayed in the media, as well as mobilisation against government proposals and policies and the broader ideological framework in which they nestle. Counter-messages that protesters are behaving in a manner that is unreasonable and extreme are frequently mobilised against such acts of resistance, but these struggles nevertheless illustrate not only that the poverty and crime relationship is deeply contested but that understandings around the meaning and causes of poverty, like definitions of crime and criminality, reflect the operation of power. ■

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