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How Malthusian Ideology crept into the Newsroom: British tabloids and the coverage of the ‘underclass’.

Abstract: This article argues that Malthusianism as a series of discursive regimes, developed in the Victorian-era, serves in times of austerity to reproduce an elite understanding of social exclusion in which those in a state of poverty are to blame for their own situation. It highlights that Malthusianism is present in the public discourse, becoming an underlining feature in news coverage of the so-called ‘underclass’. Our findings broadly contradict the normative claim that journalism ‘speaks truth to power’, and suggest instead that overall as a political practice, journalism tends to reproduce and reinforce hegemonic discourses of power. The piece is based on critical discourse analysis (CDA), which has been applied to a significant sample of news articles published by tabloid newspapers in Britain which focussed on the concept of the ‘underclass’. By looking at the evidence, the authors argue that the ‘underclass’ is a concept used by some journalists to cast people living in poverty as ‘undeserving’ of public and state support. In so doing, these journalists help create a narrative which supports cuts in welfare provisions and additional punitive measures against some of the most vulnerable members of society.

Keywords: Poverty, Journalism, Underclass, Critical Discourse Analysis, Britain, Newspaper Discourse

Introduction

Contrary to the normative claim that ‘journalism speaks truth to power’ (Nichols, 2014), an important body of scholarly research shows that overall the mainstream news media tends to reproduce prevalent discourses of power (Dijk, 1988; Hackett, 1984). This is more often than not the case of news reporting of poverty and social exclusion in which the narratives tend to refer to people in a state of poverty as ‘others’ who are often blamed for their own condition supposedly because they lack the skills, the knowledge and sometimes even the will to drive themselves out of destitution (i Campos, 2014:13). We argue that journalists tend to undertake this approach as they operate within the boundaries of the newsroom’s specific discursive regimes. These regimes underpin news narratives within an ideological framework from which journalists develop the deontology that they use to assess and later frame news articles on poverty from an ethical point of view. For us, the prevalent discursive regimes are

characterised by a Malthusian ideology ‘which focuses on scarcity of resources instead of unequal wealth distribution and which emphasises the need to further private property to maximise the efficiency of economic growth’ (Ross, 1998:2).

As a result of these discursive regimes, news media –generally speaking- tends to represent poverty at the margins of society and, since the end of the Cold War, increasingly more as a natural and unavoidable phenomenon. Therefore, the news stories reported by journalists are not only framed by these particular discursive regimes but enhanced by the political economy of the news media outlets –dependent on commercial revenues-, which requires invisibilising structural explanations such as ‘inequality’ within media narratives. Indeed, media outlets depend on advertising revenue from companies, corporations and governments that are institutionally committed to preserve the status quo, all of which creates a specific dynamic and rationale across the different newsrooms. Therefore, in order to deal with these contradictions, journalists working for these news media outlets have to create a social reality in which poverty is seen as marginal to mainstream society.

Another key feature of these discursive regimes is the need to displace responsibility from structural conditions towards the individual. To be sure, individualising poverty has been an elite response to the problem since the days of Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834). Malthus argued that as ‘hard as it may appear in individual cases, dependent poverty ought to be held disgraceful’ (Malthus, 1996). For him and many of his contemporaries and followers the poor lacked the intelligence and ability to control their needs or drive themselves out of poverty.

It is in this context that we have looked at the notion of the ‘underclass’ as one of the most important rhetorical devices to convey a specific meaning of poverty to general audiences. As a language resource, the notion of the underclass allows journalists to consider poverty from a non-structural perspective. This notion provokes then a different rationality of poverty among the public by means of displaying emotions such as pettiness, irony and even contempt towards those in a state of poverty. This creates a space between the spectator and the person who suffers. A process often referred to as a ‘regime of pity’ (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2013) in which spectators encounter those who suffer in the media space. Chouliaraki describes how within this regime news consumers themselves are ‘part of the news narrative’ however ‘their emotions are, in fact, shaped by the values embedded in news narratives about who the “others” are and how we should relate to them’ (Chouliaraki, 2013:11). This regime ultimately confers and reinforces a sense of power to the viewer (Lugo-Ocando, 2015:173).

In the context of Malthusianism, immigrants and benefit claimants in London, for example, are blamed in the journalistic narratives for the shortage of houses instead of a critical review of the privatisation of social housing during and after the Thatcher era. Those claiming disability benefits are often presented in these same newspapers as ‘abusers of the system’, instead of examining the shortages in the health system to diagnose and support those with disabilities that potentially could allow them to go back to work. Political and media discourses have also portrayed single mothers as a burden on society because they are linked to dysfunctional behaviour, receiving welfare and producing children who are portrayed as being likely to turn into criminals (Silva, 1996:178).

Consequently, our research has examined news coverage of poverty since the 2007/8 financial crash by some key British tabloids and the use of the term ‘underclass’ by journalists. This research examines how the use of the ‘underclass’ by journalists has a historical precedent in news coverage of poverty. We argue that its use is mostly defined in terms of Malthusianism and through the idea of the ‘undeserving poor’ that dates back to the pre-industrial era.

The article is contextualised by outlining the political debates of these eras and how these discursive regimes have survived over the years, while exploring how they relate to contemporary debates about domestic issues such as welfare reform. The findings of this study suggest that the reporting of poverty presents it as an individual issue rather than a by-product of structural forces. In carrying out this analysis, the research offers a critique of the way in which journalistic narratives legitimise and support discourses of power in relation to poverty. Indeed, the paper builds on this evidence to argue that these representations are bound up with the dominant political and economic paradigm that journalists work in, which is confined to specific discursive regimes.

Background

Our main claim is that the notion of the ‘underclass’ inscribes itself foremost within a Malthusian-inspired worldview that is adopted by journalists. The media use Malthusianism as a rhetorical device in order to reconcile contradictions between normative claims of journalism as an activity that holds power to account and the political economy that defines and censors the possible narratives that journalists are allowed to express. This might appear paradoxical to many as hardly any journalists would have read in their lives the original

works of Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834). However, in reality prevalent discourses become widely disseminated and embraced by journalists (Fowler, 1991), without them necessarily accessing the original sources. Instead, these discourses are often adopted in the newsroom as explanatory frameworks in order to facilitate reductionist approaches that support existing views within the editorial policy of the news media or set by what has been referred to as 'news cultures' (Allan, 1999).

This, we argue, became particularly evident after the collapse of *Lehman Brothers* and the subsequent financial crisis of 2007/8, mainly because of the need to justify programmes of austerity that placed most of the burden and sacrifices on the most vulnerable, together with the perpetuation of irrational rewards systems to financiers, bankers and elites alike. It was a rhetorical exercise that required a type of rationale in which the blame for the crisis could be displaced to the 'others'. It is in this context that the 'underclass' as a notion that has been embraced as a convenient language device to bring a type of emotionality into the public that could facilitate advancing a non-structural logic in the analysis of both the events and subsequent policies that took place afterwards.

While Malthusian ideology has been one of the guiding principles of how poverty is framed in the newsroom since the 19th century (Lugo-Ocando & Harkins, 2015:40), there is also the long standing social classification of the poor into categories of 'deserving' and 'undeserving'; formalised through the Elizabethan poor laws (Boychuk, 1998:8) and which has been a predominant feature of the way journalism represents poverty in Britain (Golding & Middleton, 1982).

In this context and by conceptualising poverty as a problem of scarce resources and overpopulation, Malthus was able to argue against poor relief for the 'able bodied' (Avery, 1997:62), (Daunton, 1995:447). This was to become a common stance within news discourses of the Victorian-era which argued that helping the 'undeserving poor' would lead to laziness, moral decline and degeneration (Serr, 2006). This is a discourse that has been carried out all the way into the 21st century and that now translates in our times in calls for necessary cuts and reforms to the welfare system to make sure that the money goes to 'worthy' recipients of benefits who can 'earn' what they get from society.

It is important to fully appreciate the profound impact of Malthusianism in all areas of public life during the Victoria-era. For example, Charles Darwin (1809-1882) acknowledged in his own autobiography (1876) the influence that Malthus' had on his work:

In October 1838, that is, fifteen months after I had begun my systematic inquiry, I happened to read for amusement Malthus on Population, and being well prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence which everywhere goes on from long-continued observation of the habits of animals and plants, it at once struck me that under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved, and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The results of this would be the formation of a new species. Here, then I had at last got a theory by which to work (Darwin, 1958).

Nevertheless, the use of evolutionary theory to explain differences in human society was not done by Darwin himself but by others, most notably Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). The general notion of evolution was appropriated to explain why some people were wealthy and others were poor and why some societies succeeded while others failed. All these factors were explained through a concept which was to become known as ‘social Darwinism’ (Marks, 2007:151). Social degeneration, for example, was one of the key tropes linked to Spencer’s thinking; this idea is clearly expressed in this passage from his 1851 book *Social Statistics* where he argued that:

Blind to the fact, that under the natural order of things society is constantly excreting its unhealthy, imbecile, slow, vacillating, faithless, members, these unthinking, though well meaning, men advocate an interference which not only stops the purifying process, but even increases the vitiation . . . And thus, in their eagerness to prevent the really salutary sufferings that surround us, these sly wise and groan foolish people bequeath to posterity a continually increasing curse (Spencer, 1851:323-4).

This line of ‘arch-individualist’ thinking (Willson, 1950:359), placed responsibility for poverty at the level of the individual while complementing the laissez-faire economic liberalism of the Victorian-era. The influence of these ideas was clearly summed up in 1914 by William Graham Sumner, the first professor of sociology at Yale, when he said:

Let it be understood that we cannot go outside of this alternative: liberty, inequality, survival of the fittest; not-liberty, equality, survival of the un-fittest. The former carries society forwards and favours all its best members; the latter carries society downwards and favours all its worst members (Ruse, 2009:116).

To be sure, the ideology of social Darwinism stemmed from a Malthusian premise and served to justify the legacy of inequality that had developed following the expansion of the British Empire and the subsequent industrial revolution that stood on the shoulders of slavery proceedings. As a discursive regime, it shaped the views of many and framed the most prominent news stories published by newspapers in Britain until well into the inter-war period and after.

Despite common assumptions, the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps did not seem to curb the appetite for Malthusianism; although it did tone down some of its more explicit manifestations such as Eugenics. The post-second World War II settlement meant that Keynesianism and 'welfare consensus' would dominate policymaking (Harvey, 2005; Hutton, 1996) and public discourse until the 1970s as there was the need to articulate constantly a propagandistic response to Soviet menace during the Cold War. Throughout this period, Malthusianism was less appreciated in the context of laissez-faire thinking and instead adapted to the state-interventionist mode of the era, while surviving in the discourses of 'development' and 'progress' which demanded population control of those in the Global South (Connelly, 2008) (Kasun, 1988).

However, following the economic crisis of the 1970s which led to the breakdown of the welfare consensus, Malthusianism in the public discourse was re-appropriated by those voices embracing classical economic thinking now in the face of neo-liberalism (Cockett, 1994). This consequently had a profound effect on the overall approach that journalists undertook for the following decade. As some authors point out, 'free market ideas have been the main driving force shaping media policy since the early 1980s' (Steel, 2012:167).

Described by critics as a period of neo-liberal hegemony, the 1980s and 1990s were characterised by 'privatisation, deregulation and cuts to government services' (Klein, 2007:444). This can be seen by examining one of the key political debates during the neo-liberal period which has centred around the public crisis of welfare expenditure (Golding & Middleton, 1982). Indeed, as some have highlighted, social policy usually only becomes news when there is a political or economic crisis (Franklin, 1999:1). These changes led to 'pressures to cut welfare and state benefits that had provided a safety net for the victims of economic change' (Critcher, 2003:64). In this context, Critcher argues that this caused widespread insecurity amongst benefit recipients and 'many of the moral panics that accompanied these profound social changes could well be interpreted in terms of the politics of anxiety' (Critcher, 2003:64).

According to Peter Golding, the media have subjected unemployed people in the UK to 'more blitzes than the Luftwaffe could ever have imagined possible' (Golding in Franklin, 1999:147). Golding and Middleton's seminal study into media coverage of poverty described the first of these 'blitzes' as a 'welfare backlash of cruel and massive proportions'. They argue that the economic crisis had led to a culture of 'indicting welfare and convicting the poor for the crisis of economic fortune' (Golding & Middleton, 1982:3). The 70s

'scroungerphobia' backlash set the 'rhetoric and vocabulary' for future reporting of welfare stories (Golding in Franklin, 1999:147).

Moreover, these media campaigns against welfare at this time were used as 'the occasion for a social derision of the poor so punitive in its impact' that it was to 'threaten the very props of the modern welfare state' (Golding & Middleton, 1982:5). Stanley Cohen argues that 'cutbacks in welfare state provisions during the Thatcher years were accompanied by the deliberate construction of an atmosphere of distrust' (Cohen, 2011:xi-xxi). He uses 'dole cheats' and 'welfare scroungers' as examples of 'fairly traditional folk devils' (Cohen, 2011:xxi). Deacon argues that the intensity of hostility towards abuse of the benefits system was greater than at any time since the Great Depression era (Deacon, 1978:1). According to Deacon, official government investigations into abuse of the welfare system 'unearthed virtually no abuse' and he adds that 'the costs of one inquiry into fraudulent claims for dependant's benefits were eight times the amount discovered in over-payments' (Deacon, 1973:346).

Other authors have argued that media attacks on 'scroungers' serve to 'transform the social problem of unemployment into a public crisis, if not moral panic, about welfare scroungers' (Franklin, 1999:2). These voices underline the fact that the contemporary understanding of welfare is based partly on 'the pathology of individual inadequacy as the cause of poverty' (Golding in Franklin, 1999:146), as it is far less painful to recognise poverty as a structural phenomenon in which there is collective responsibility. Indeed, this view that people 'seek individualised, rather than structural explanations for poverty' was also evident in the *Joseph Rowntree Foundation's* 2008 report into the way poverty is represented in the UK media (McKendrick et al., 2008).

The discourses of the 'undeserving poor' in the US and UK have, since the late 1970s, morphed into a discussion about the existence of an 'underclass' (Gans, 1995; Katz, 1995; Lister, 2004). The 'underclass' was created as a 'creature of journalism' and a great section of the media have frequently used the term as a synonym for poverty, thereby stigmatising the poor (Lister, 2004:107-109). The term 'underclass' is used by many journalists to describe a group of people who pose a threat to society, by arguing that they are 'immoral' and 'violent' (Gans, 1995; Katz, 1995; Lister, 2004). Indeed, poverty discourse from the 1980s onwards became dominated by the idea of a growing 'underclass' (Katz, 1990:185). One of the reasons was that in the 'culture of capitalism' people were increasingly judged in terms of 'their ability to produce wealth and by their success in earning it' (Katz, 1990:7).

In the 1980s and 1990s the hostile media campaigns were broadened to include single mothers as well as unemployed and homeless people (Franklin, 1999; Jones, 2011:67). Throughout the 1980s culminating in a peak of hostility in the early 1990s, single mothers also became ‘folk devils’ and were constructed as a ‘potent moral threat’ (Cohen, 2011:xxi). In this sense, Cohen argues that the demonization of single mothers is central to the theory of the ‘underclass’:

“Feckless mothers” get pregnant to obtain state welfare; they raise children who will be criminals of the future; absent fathers are present somewhere, unemployed and also living off the state (Cohen, 2011:xxi).

In fact, this idea of the ‘underclass’ as a ‘menace’ would become a key definer in journalistic narratives from the 1990s onwards. Indeed, Kendall argues that media portrayals of welfare recipients and homeless people frequently present them in terms of posing a threat to middle-class values (Kendall, 2005). Social class plays a strong role in framing stories about poverty. In the U.S., for example, women receiving welfare are often ‘stereotyped as lazy, disinterested in education, and promiscuous’ (Bullock, Fraser Wyche, & Williams, 2001:230). Furthermore, Baumann argues that the rise of the ‘underclass’ theory coincided with the end of the Cold War. The ‘underclass’ was used to fill the void that had been left by no longer credible theories of a foreign revolution (Bauman, 1998:67). This idea that the ‘underclass’ represents a threat to the rest of us is common throughout the literature on the subject (Bauman, 1998; Lister, 2004).

It is in this context that the notion of the ‘underclass’ in journalistic narratives needs to be understood as an enduring legacy of Malthusian ideas, which the mainstream news media tends to use to ‘support and propagate the aspect of neo-liberal ideology concerning poverty and welfare’ (de Goede, 1996:352). That, as we argue here, is the basis for the resilient presence of the Malthusian paradigm in the newsroom of today.

Methodology

This study used the *Nexis* database to search for national press articles containing the word ‘underclass’ for a five-year period between the 9th August 2007 and the 9th August 2012. The original date was chosen because it represented the beginning of the ‘credit crunch’ (Leader, 2012). A five-year period was selected because it allows us to study the transition between New Labour (which stayed in power between 1997 and 2010) and a new government formed

by a coalition of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. The sample encompasses 285 articles which were selected for a close reading to examine how the concept of the ‘underclass’ fitted into the wider ideology of the newsroom.

The main reason we have focussed on tabloid newspapers in our research is due to the fact that these media outlets play a pivotal role in shaping both the news agenda and public opinion in Great Britain, particularly in regards to popular culture (Conboy, 2002) and worldviews on poverty. Indeed, as some authors have pointed out, British tabloids have been able to create imaginary communities across their audiences in which people see the world in terms of ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’ and extend their influence beyond the boundaries of print (Conboy, 2006).

In the context of discourses of poverty and the underclass, the tabloids have played historically one of the most important roles in telling people what to think about. For example, some research on tabloids in the UK has highlighted how important they have been in perpetuating for years notions such as that of the ‘underclass’ by using alternative language such as ‘chav’ in order to reinforce historical social classification of a certain type among the public (Hayward & Yar, 2006:9). It is precisely because of this double role of being agenda shapers and public opinion definers that we have chosen to work with the tabloids in order to understand how public discourses on poverty have been articulated in the media.

The following table shows the way these articles were spread across different tabloid platforms:

Newspaper	Number of Articles
<i>Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday</i>	135
<i>Daily and Sunday Express</i>	77
<i>Sun, News of the World and Sunday Sun</i>	54
<i>Daily and Sunday Mirror</i>	19

The spread of these articles suggests that the concept of the ‘underclass’ is more likely to be employed by the newspapers who lean politically to the right rather than the left. The sole left

leaning tabloid in this sample is the *Mirror* a newspaper which employs this discourse much less often than the other three newspapers. The volume of underclass articles in the *Daily Mail* also suggests that this concept is a key part of that newspaper's ideology.

An analysis was carried out on these articles focussing specifically on the subject of the underclass and the research aimed to tackle three key questions about this group. The main purpose of this analysis was to examine the 'influential role of ideology' (Fernández Martínez, 2007:1).

1. The first question we asked was, who are the 'underclass'? That is to say, who do the news media describe and define as 'underclass'?
2. The second question asked was, how do the news media describe the social problem of the 'underclass' and how it relates to the discursive regime of Malthusianism?
3. Finally the study examines the solutions expressed by journalists to solve the 'underclass' problem in the context of their own ideologies and discursive regimes.

By examining the notion of 'underclass' we aim at answering these questions, which we hope will lead to a better understanding of how poverty is articulated in the public discourses expressed in the media in the context of Malthusianism. Although we are unable to present here the full range of articles analysed for this study, we can confirm that cases cited here are widely representative of the coverage of the underclass in the *Sun*, *Sunday Sun*, *News of the World*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Mail on Sunday* and the *Express* and *Sunday Express*. This type of story about the 'underclass' is much rarer in the *Mirror* and *Sunday Mirror* even within the much smaller sample of articles that were found in these two last publications.

Findings

One of the most important findings is that the British tabloid press has used the underclass label as a highly malleable label to describe 'jobless young men', 'single mothers'¹, 'the unemployed'² and 'delinquent youths'³ who are described as 'young thugs'⁴ or 'teen jobs'⁵. The label is also used –although far less often- to describe 'illegal immigrants'⁶ and children

¹ Fraser Nelson, A Triple Blight that Curses us All, *The News of the World*, 26-August-2007

² 1ST, Benefits of work, *Daily Mail*, 27-May-2008

³ Iain Duncan Smith, Where gangs are the only family, *Daily Mail*, 24-August-2007

⁴ Lorraine Kelly, Knife ads can't cut it, *The Sun*, 31-May-2008

⁵ News, Kid crime kings rise, *The Sun*, 10-February-2010

⁶ Bob Roberts, We'll give Migrants Amnesty, *The Mirror*, 19-September-2007

who are falling behind in school who are referred to as part of the 'educational underclass'.⁷ Overall, the underclass is mainly articulated as a pejorative term to describe both welfare recipients and criminals, who too often are also reported as being the same.

The language used is highly problematic as tabloid journalists describe the 'underclass' as 'feral'⁸, 'white chavs'⁹, 'chav types'¹⁰, 'a thuggish, feral underclass'¹¹, who are part of 'the chav class, the great unwashed', 'freeloaders', 'scrounging on the dole', who according to these reports 'keep pushing out their soon-to-be-feral offspring'¹². In the words of journalists writing these stories or their editors, members of the underclass are 'parasites', 'second- and third-generation scum'¹³, the 'feral, the feckless and the freeloaders', are also 'slappers - useless, ugly freeloaders'¹⁴. They are represented as living in 'chaotic families that loaf away their days on easy welfare benefits'¹⁵, being 'irresponsible and useless'¹⁶, 'depraved and sick', and their voices are portrayed as coming from the 'ugly mouths of the vile underclass'¹⁷, for whom, we are told, 'unemployment, drug addiction, under-age sex and truancy are an everyday way of life'.¹⁸ They are constructed as 'feral', 'scroungers' who sleep 'in their stinking pits'.¹⁹

There is also a clear trope that marks the underclass as a lazy group that 'refuse to work'.²⁰ They are described as 'welfare scrounging'²¹... 'baby machine(s)'²², and constructed through these news discourses as a 'huge, idle underclass for whom work is a dirty word'.²³ These news discourses stigmatise people by describing them as the 'the feral, the feckless and the long-term useless [who] could breed with impunity. Usually after several cans of Stella while us hardworking, tax-paying mugs picked up the bill'.²⁴ They are exemplified as 'a feckless

⁷ Martyn Brown, At last, a return to classroom discipline, *The Express*, 2-Sept-2011

⁸ Amanda Platell, The joker who's brought back spite and envy, *Daily Mail*, 29-Nov-2008

⁹ Kelvin Mackenzie, Ramsay is my telly nightmare, *The Sun*, 22-November-2007

¹⁰ Stephen Glover, The Left claim 'chav' is a term of class hatred. Nonsense. It's today's tragic underclass they should be fighting for, *Daily Mail*, 17-July-2008

¹¹ Leading Article, Dignity in torment, *The News of the World*, 20-January-2008

¹² Jon Gaunt, Karen's in a class of her own, *The Sun*, 18-April-2008

¹³ Richard Littlejohn, Land of the rising scum, *Daily Mail*, 14-November-2008

¹⁴ Jon Gaunt, Karen's in a class of her own, *The Sun*, 18-April-2008

¹⁵ Editorial, Betrayed again, *The Sun*, 5-December-2008

¹⁶ Jon Gaunt, More Shannons in Benefits R Us hell, *The Sun*, 5-December-2008

¹⁷ Kelvin Mackenzie, STOP TEEN YOB ABUSE, *The Sun*, 5-Feb-2009

¹⁸ Editorial, Holding baby, *The Sun*, 14-Feb-2009

¹⁹ Jon Gaunt, Chaos?, I can show you chaos, *The Sun*, 22-May-2009

²⁰ Jon Gaunt, Chuck it in, Mandy, *The Sun*, 13-Mar-2009

²¹ Fergus Shanahan, Slobs AND nobs are cheating taxpayers, *The Sun*, 4-August-2009

²² Fergus Shanahan, Slobs AND nobs are cheating taxpayers, *The Sun*, 4-August-2009

²³ News Front Page, Labour's lost it, *The Sun*, 30-September-2009

²⁴ Jon Gaunt, EU boss..I can't Blair it, *The Sun*, 2-Oct-2009

underclass who don't work and lay slumped in front of the TV stuffing their faces with deepfried lard'.²⁵ While developing a reputation for being lazy the underclass are also 'terrorising communities across Britain'.²⁶

The use of particular brands of lager (Stella) and types of cooking (deepfried lard) create a vivid image which has a clear dimension of class prejudice. Slavoj Zizek argues that the process of creating these modern images started during the 'back to basics' campaign of the Conservative Government that followed the 'black Wednesday' crash of September 1992, where the image of the single mother on benefits was used as an embodiment of 'all the evils of society' (Zizek 2012).

The link between individuals who commit criminal acts and the underclass is made repeatedly across these news stories. They are described as being an underclass 'whose depravity goes so low, the extent of their evil often goes undetected'.²⁷ The conflation between criminals and welfare recipients as members of an underclass allows the British tabloids to select specific cases to criminalise whole communities of benefit recipients. Descriptions such as 'feral', unacceptable if they were targeting almost any other social group, nonetheless are openly used as a metaphor to blur any distinction between crime and welfare. This discourse allows tabloid newspapers to describe the unemployed or single mothers in the same terms as they would describe a child murderer or a wild animal out of control. This link is made explicitly in the following article:

*And that's what we have to address now-this underclass, this group of deviants who've been allowed to take root in this country and who kill, maim and torture without guilt. These are people who have sponged off the welfare state their whole lives and who believe nothing is their responsibility, their fault or their problem. For too long we've tap-danced around these people because of political correctness. The problem was too sensitive to talk about-let alone handle. But handle it we must, because if we don't this underclass will become even more savage, more Feral-and more innocents will die.*²⁸

This link between individuals who commit criminal acts and the underclass is made repeatedly. The sample shows an overall Malthusian discursive regime among the tabloids in the articulation of news. In these stories we find expressions about how an overgenerous

²⁵ Lorraine Kelly, They weighed 92st and were held as examples of a feckless underclass who lay in front of the TV stuffing their faces with deep-fried lard, *The Sun*, 6-Jan-2010

²⁶ News, Kid crime kings rise, *The Sun*, 10-February-2010

²⁷ Martell Maxwell, Brandon mum still to blame, *The Sun*, 11-March-2009

²⁸ Carol Malone, Baby P: They're ALL guilty, *The News of the World*, 16-Nov-2008

welfare system has led to a ‘mushrooming underclass’²⁹, which in itself is presented as a threat that is magnified by the underclass association with ‘rampant violent crime’³⁰. Following the Malthusian rationale that charity towards the poor –welfare in this case- only perpetuates the problem. The British tabloids tend to conclude that the most serious political challenge facing the UK is ‘rooting out the persistent underclass’³¹. Indeed, the development of an ‘underclass’ is explicitly linked in these news stories to welfare provision, when these newspapers state that ‘we only have an underclass because we fund it with handouts’³².

According to these news reports, the ‘generous welfare payments’, also referred to as ‘the poverty trap’, have led to a situation where ‘billions more [are] spent, insanely, making benefits more lucrative than a pay cheque.’³³ These individuals are presented by the media as ‘a problem we can no longer ignore, because the future prosperity of this country relies on the ability of generations to come making a valuable contribution’.³⁴

Other articles bring back the notion of deserving and undeserving poor when they touch on unemployment by arguing that ‘in a country where the dole figure has just passed 2.2 million... scroungers can rot in their stinking pits, only stirring to pick up the next benefit cheque or breed the next member of the feral underclass.’³⁵ This line of argument suggests that the problem with the underclass is that they are inherently lazy while ignoring structural issues with high unemployment. Wright-Mills offered a critique of this line of thinking on unemployment when he argued:

When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual (Mills, 1959:9).

The tabloid press has inverted this logic by blaming high unemployment on the personal characteristics of the ‘underclass’. In so doing, the tabloid press has created a narrative paradox where the ‘underclass’ problem is due to the fact that ‘the unemployed have become

²⁹ Anna Smith, No glamour in a ned’s life, *The News of the World*, 23-Jan-2011

³⁰ Fraser Nelson, A Triple Blight that Curses us All, *The News of the World*, 26-August-2007

³¹ David Blunkett, Boldness only way to Victory, *The Sun*, 9-January-2008

³² Editorial, Cut ‘em off, *The Sun*, 31-Jul-2009

³³ News Front Page, Labour’s lost it, *The Sun*, 30-September-2009

³⁴ Jane Moore, Give poor kids their future back, Gordon, *The Sun*, 16-April-2008

³⁵ Jon Gaunt, Chaos?, I can show you chaos, *The Sun*, 22-May-2009

the unemployable'.³⁶ Here the Malthusian paradigm is used to solve this paradox by highlighting the 'inferiority' of those in welfare as it points out that they are 'unemployable' because they are not fit, which leads to calls to curb their numbers. Because of this pre-conception, the 2007/8 crises presented a unique opportunity to reintroduce more draconian narratives against those in benefits that echo the core of classical Malthusianism. Indeed, one proposed solution to the crisis made by the tabloids was to present benefit claimants with a stark choice of 'sterilisation or no more benefits', which echoes fully Malthusianism.³⁷

For the tabloid press, their work ethics have been destroyed by an 'overdeveloped welfare state',³⁸ which threatens the whole nation, as the *Daily Mail* questions,

*How much longer can we survive and prosper as a nation of bankers, lawyers, architects and theatrical designers, picking up the social bills for an unemployable underclass.*³⁹

Other similar articles go on to describe a 'submerged underclass' of 'ill-educated, ill-disciplined, near illiterate and innumerate unemployables' who are portrayed as 'living better than the working families next door'.⁴⁰

In many of these reports, New Labour is presented as being responsible for creating the underclass,

*For all Blair's words about Asbos, tags and banning orders, he created a benefit culture where the Feral, the feckless and the long-term useless could breed with impunity.*⁴¹

The story of Karen Matthews⁴² is repeatedly used in order to make the case for welfare reform, for example, an article in the *Sun* explains how:

*Britain's benefits culture has spawned an underclass of kids brought up on welfare. They include evil mum-of-seven Karen Matthews, who was caged for eight years for kidnapping her daughter Shannon. She pocketed £350 A WEEK.*⁴³

³⁶ Julia Hartley-Brewer, Let's be fair on welfare, *Sunday Express*, 14-December-2008

³⁷ Fergus Shanahan, Slobs AND nobs are cheating taxpayers, *The Sun*, 4-August-2009

³⁸ Patrick O'Flynn, Why our European Union membership spells doom for welfare reform, *The Express*, 19-June-2010

³⁹ Patrick O'Flynn, Why our European Union membership spells doom for welfare reform, *The Express*, 19-June-2010

⁴⁰ Education Correspondent, White and Male?, Go to the bottom of the class, *Daily Mail*, 8-June-2008

⁴¹ 1ST, Is Labour's legacy a welfare underclass, *Daily Mail*, 7-Feb-2008

⁴² Karen Matthews was convicted of 'false imprisonment and perverting the course of justice' after being part of a conspiracy to kidnap her own daughter in February 2008, the case was widely reported in the media.

⁴³ Graeme Wilson, The shambles of our shameless, *The Sun*, 7-Oct-2010

Benefit recipients are described in one article as being the ‘Karen Matthews brigade’⁴⁴, public authorities are criticised for carrying out a ‘Karen Matthews test’ to ‘skew resources further towards the underclass’.⁴⁵ Matthews is also described as a ‘one-woman advertisement for urgent welfare reform’.⁴⁶ She is also constructed as being ‘part of the chav class’,⁴⁷ which reinforces historical notions of class hierarchy (Hayward & Yar, 2006:9). The argument is that she is part of an ‘underclass’ who are represented as being able to ‘get more by scrounging on the dole rather than working’.⁴⁸ Journalists such as Fraser Nelson from *the Sun* have argued that the ‘underclass’ had developed precisely because ‘Britain is rich enough to keep them on benefits’.⁴⁹ The key point made by these stories is that the ‘underclass’ exist only because they can withdraw money from the state.

The *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Mirror* is the only publication in our sample that offers a critical perspective on the existence of an underclass. *UNITE* union’s general secretary Len McCluskey is quoted in an article arguing that the language of the ‘feral underclass’ was likely to create ‘widening divisions in society’. McCluskey asks of the political class, ‘what are they doing about the feral ruling class, who have ripped us to shreds?’⁵⁰ However, such critical perspectives are rare and almost exclusive to the left leaning *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Mirror*. These rare narratives, however, do help us to highlight the ideological and editorial nature of the use of the terms ‘underclass’ in the journalistic narratives.

Another important finding in our research is that U.S. style welfare reforms -echoing Bill Clinton’s approach in 1996- are broadly supported by the British tabloids. These reforms, under the 1996 Personal Responsibility Act, included the requirement that single mothers ‘work for their welfare’ and were given ‘no extra payouts for additional children conceived once the mothers were on benefits’.⁵¹ The tabloids approach was marked by strong support for U.S. style welfare reforms because they argue that ‘America has found an effective solution’⁵², which is:

⁴⁴ Leader, Brown’s bid for middle class support is doomed, *The Express*, 18-January-2010

⁴⁵ Leader, Middle Britain loses again, *The Express*, 14-Jan-2009

⁴⁶ Editorial, Betrayed again, *The Sun*, 5-December-2008

⁴⁷ Jon Gaunt, Karen’s in a class of her own, *The Sun*, 18-April-2008

⁴⁸ Jon Gaunt, Karen’s in a class of her own, *The Sun*, 18-April-2008

⁴⁹ Fraser Nelson, A Triple Blight that Curses us All, *The News of the World*, 26-August-2007

⁵⁰ Jason Beattie, I Predict a Riot; Union leader rages at government assaults on pensions and the NHS, *Daily Mirror*, 10-Sept-2011

⁵¹ Julia Hartley-Brewer, Spongers are soaking up our hard earned billions, *Sunday Express*, 30-Aug-2009

⁵² Sun Says: Leading Article, Just the job, *The Sun*, 9-November-2007

Paying benefits only to those who CANNOT work. The able-bodied lose their welfare cheque if they refuse employment. It has transformed lives, rebuilt families, restored the work ethic...And saved a fortune in taxes⁵³.

Overall, the role of poverty and social exclusion in creating an underclass is often dismissed in these tabloid stories. Journalists alternatively would argue that,

Poverty ceased to exist at some point over the last two decades and instead of finding ever more elaborate statistical methods of feigning a remaining underclass of several hundred thousand, we should take a legitimate, measured pride in the achievement of its abolition. Today's problems are not of poverty, they are of sustaining the once booming economy that defeated it.⁵⁴

Conclusion

As we have seen from this study, Malthusian discursive regimes have remained the most important paradigm in defining the way poverty is reported by the tabloid press in Great Britain. It is a paradigm that seems to evolve and adapt after each economic crisis and subsequent period of austerity but that nevertheless seeks to constantly displace responsibility for the crisis from those in power towards those receiving charity or state benefits. What this research shows is that Malthusianism has mutated in each period into publically 'acceptable' rhetorical forms that are nevertheless able to carry with them the same message: that is, that some people deserve to be rich, some to be poor and that the poor do not deserve to exist.

Indeed, in this study we were able to observe that in times of financial crisis and austerity, Malthusian discursive regimes tend to be used by journalists in the tabloids as the default theoretical explanatory framework for poverty and as a guide to analyse public policy. However, as we also saw, this process has been far from homogenous, particularly after World War II, during the Keynesian 'welfare consensus', in which Malthusian discourses opted for state interventionism to limit the 'expansion' of the poor by means of population control and forced sterilisation.

We also discussed how the 1980s brought about an era in which Malthusian discursive regimes returned to the more laissez-faire worldview. An era in which it was argued that cuts in the welfare budget were necessary to allow the market forces to reduce the numbers of people in poverty. The return of classic liberal economic policy through neo-liberalism also

⁵³ Sun Says: Leading Article, Just the job, *The Sun*, 9-November-2007

⁵⁴ Richard Waghorne, The CPA should crack open the champagne and close its doors, *Daily Mail*, 5-September-2007

meant a return to a more classical conceptualisation of Malthus and his ideas. The aftermath of the 2007/8 financial crisis with regards to the way the concept of the 'underclass' was employed by journalists in the tabloid press only confirms the tendency of using such rhetorical devices as a decoy to displace responsibility for the crisis in times of austerity. Indeed, our findings indicate that the Malthusian paradigm is present in the British tabloid press and that it deeply reflects the ideology and editorial policy of that segment of the media. Despite government claims of being in this crisis 'together', the austerity plans have meant instead deep cuts in the welfare budget destined to the poorest and most vulnerable individuals of our society, while the richest continue with their affluent life styles characterised by bank bonuses and real estate bubbles. In light of this, the fourth estate instead of fulfilling its normative claims of speaking truth to power, seem to remain silent in the face of these excesses, celebrating instead lavish behaviour through stories about celebrities (Johansson, 2008) and business people (Boyle & Kelly, 2012) while blaming the most vulnerable for the state we are in.

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