The Blameless and the Feckless: The Enduring Stereotypes of the Deserving and Undeserving Poor in Britain's Past and Present

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Abstract: Since the onset of the Early Modern era, which unleashed forces of unprecedented economic growth while also engendering considerable social instability, Britain has faced increased risks of mass poverty. Originally understood as a natural social condition and mostly spared from judgment, poverty gradually began to be seen as a social problem and a financial burden as the state assumed the role of the provider of poor relief in the form of so-called Poor Laws. To determine eligibility while keeping relief costs manageable, the categories of the deserving and undeserving poor were developed, based on the claimants' ability and willingness to work. In the 18th and 19th centuries, this categorization took on strongly moralizing overtones, with poverty seen as individual moral failure rather than the result of systemic forces. Combining the historical approach with Critical Discourse Analysis, the article examines the remarkable resilience of the deserving-undeserving narrative in Britain's public debate and policymaking across time. It demonstrates that the tendency to blame the poor for their plight has not disappeared but continues taking on new forms as political actors seek to justify ongoing or planned social spending cuts.

Keywords: Poor Laws; undeserving poor; welfare reform; Margaret Thatcher; David Cameron; austerity

DOI: 10.14712/23363525.2025.16

Introduction

Despite ranking among the world's largest economies, Britain has been a country of stark social divisions for much of its modern history, with a class system enabling entrenched poverty [*Warwick-Booth 2019: 38*]. The ways in which individual British governments have sought to deal with the poor have been rooted in the beliefs about poverty and its causes prevalent at the given time. In the process, few stereotypes have proven as resilient as that of the so-called deserving and undeserving poor, presupposing the existence of two distinct groups: those with a moral claim to assistance in need and those without it due to their flawed character and conduct.

In popular perception, the moralistic approach to poverty (and the resulting punitive policies to deal with the group seen as undeserving) tends to be associated with the Victorian era. However, it has in more or less conspicuous form survived to the present day, as witnessed in the rhetoric of numerous politicians, social commentators, and media outlets. While the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent cost-of-living crisis somewhat muted the outraged voices bemoaning the conduct of the "feckless poor" due to the universal

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nature of the crisis unleashed on the low-income population, there are indications that this has only been a temporary respite from the trend of judging the poor [*Tihelková 2024: 44*].

The present paper aims to provide a historical perspective on the deserving/undeserving stereotype as a persistent means of interpreting poverty in the British context as well as a tool to manage the poor. It seeks to establish connections between the origins of the concept and its more recent manifestations and, in doing so, to show a continuity of the deservingness narrative despite intermittent periods of a more systemic understanding of poverty. Special attention is paid to the period of the post-2010 Conservative cabinets, which saw a powerful resurgence of the age-old beliefs about the moral deficiency of the poor, translated into specific policies echoing the old English Poor Laws.

While largely historical in character, the paper also makes use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a transdisciplinary research method focusing on the effect of "power relations and inequalities in producing social wrongs, and in particular on discursive aspects of power relations and inequalities" [*Fairclough 2010: 8*]. With the help of CDA, the paper illustrates how recent governments have resorted to othering benefit claimants to justify social spending cuts as part of their austerity agenda.

Historical background

The understanding of poverty and its root causes has evolved substantially over the centuries. In pre-modern times, the existence of the poor was accepted as an inevitable condition of an organic, hierarchical, God-ordained society. As argued by social historian Michael M. Katz, "For most of recorded history, poverty reflected God's will. The poor were always with us. They were not inherently immoral, dangerous, or different. They were not to be shunned, feared, or avoided" [*Katz 2013: 6*]. In the Middle Ages, poverty was not considered a vice if an individual bore it with humility. Moreover, voluntary poverty, like that of the Franciscans, was regarded as a sign of virtue, mirroring the poverty of Christ [*Burleigh 2017*].

In the late medieval era, Europe was undergoing major political socio-economic, and ideological transformations, with the concept of poverty playing a crucial role. Growing urbanization and marketization, as well as the erosion of common rights once essential for hedging against resource scarcity in rural areas, spawned a new kind of poverty accompanied by social alienation, a process that went hand in hand with the onset of early capitalism. The moral attitudes toward the poor began to transform substantially – no longer a natural condition, poverty became a *social problem*.

In the English context, the changing understanding of poverty manifested in the design and implementation of the Tudor poverty legislation. The erosion of the hierarchical feudal society, the changes in agriculture (especially the practice of enclosures), and the unleashing of capitalist forces in early Modern England dispossessed many of the rural producers, with the numbers of the poor and vagabond increasing dramatically. The situation was further exacerbated by the dissolution of the monasteries, traditional providers of poor relief, under Henry VIII [*Burleigh 2017*]. The extensive network of abbeys, monasteries, and friaries functioned as a social support system for England's population. With the dissolution, numerous vital services, both social, medical, and educational, disappeared

almost overnight, creating an acute social crisis as beggars and vagrants became more noticeable across the country and crime increased significantly.

With the demise of the monasteries, the task of administering poor relief fell to the state. A series of acts, collectively known as the Poor Laws, were introduced in the latter half of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, seeking to make proper provision for the needy and minimize anti-social behaviour resulting from poverty. The Elizabethan Poor Law of 1598, modified in 1601, codified the practices of poor relief that had come into use in the previous decades. The legislation tasked every parish with the provision of basic food, clothing, and shelter for the legitimately destitute parishioners, with the funds provided by taxes imposed on the more affluent residents. The decision-making on who was eligible for help was left in the hands of the local parish officials.

As demonstrated by Marjorie McIntosh, two approaches to alleviating poverty materialized during the socially volatile Tudor era. The first, more idealistic one, advocated relief provision without the moral judgment of the needy. In 1596, following a period of widespread suffering due to rising food prices, the Privy Council instructed the parish clergy to preach "on behalf of general fasting, hospitality and individual almsgiving to the needy, regardless of the cause of their distress or the quality of their behaviour" [*McIntosh 2005, 462*]. However, by the end of the 16th century, a more discriminating approach prevailed that took the moral profile and conduct of claimants into account. This was due to a combination of reasons, such as concerns over the anti-social behaviour of some poor people, the mounting concerns over the cost of poor relief, or the growing influence of the Puritan movement, obsessively concerned with moral probity. It was already in 1563 that the categories of the poor were drawn up in legislation for the first time. First, there were those who would work but could not, i.e. able-bodied individuals willing to work but unable to find employment. They were to be given help through outdoor relief (food, clothes, or money) or by being found some form of paid work. Second, there were those who were too young, old, or ill to work (the impotent poor). They were to be looked after in almshouses, hospitals, orphanages, or poorhouses. Orphans and children of the poor were to be given a trade apprenticeship so that they would have a trade to pursue when they grew up. Finally, the third group included those who could work but would not (the idle poor, also called sturdy beggars). These were able-bodied individuals who, rather than seeking employment, roamed the country begging and engaging in petty crime.

While the first two groups were categorized as "deserving poor", i.e. deserving of assistance due to being blameless as to their impoverished status, the third group was classed as the "undeserving poor", an anti-social and morally corrupt segment unworthy of state relief. Principally, the deserving poor were defined by their *inability* to labour; they were the "lame ympotent olde blynde and other such amonge them being poore and not able to worke" [quoted in *Hindle 2004, 38*]. On the other hand, the undeserving poor were primarily characterized by their *unwillingness* to work. They included the "vagabond that will abide in no service or place", but also a much wider range of delinquents: "the riotous and prodigall person, that consumeth all with play or drinking, the dissolute person, [such] as the strumpet, pilferer, &c, the slothfull person, that refuseth to work, and all such as wilfully spoile or imbesill their work" [quoted in *Hindle 2004: 39*].

One of the factors contributing to the low tolerance of the undeserving poor was the aforementioned fact that the Poor Law system was largely funded through locally raised

taxes, a practice that differentiated England from the Continent [*Slack 1990: 9*]. The citizens now had a stake in the new poor relief system as taxpayers; thus, they were concerned that their money was well-spent and was not wasted on the "wrong" kind of people. Thus, in contrast to the best efforts made to provide for the deserving poor, the treatment of the undeserving poor was generally coercive and oftentimes punitive to deter individuals from dependency. Jurors from respectable families reported on people engaged in activities such as begging, vagrancy, gambling, squandering money in alehouses or taking wood from common hedges for fuel, or individuals "badly behaved in their bodies" [*McIntosh 2005: 465*]. Such behaviours were punishable by a wide range of measures, such as whipping, paying fines, time in stocks or pillories, or permanent expulsion from the community. In addition to the penal character of dealing with the undeserving poor, the Poor Laws also contained a corrective aspect, aimed at reforming the flawed ways of the poor by setting them to work. Thus, the early 17th century saw the establishment of the first houses of correction (also called Bridewells, after the first institution of that character), in which the idle poor were kept for a designated period and taught a trade and some useful work habits [*Roberts 1984: 83*].

The period following the Civil War was characterized by growing individualism and a belief in the perfectibility of humans, leading to the increased perception of poverty as a personal responsibility. Parallel to this, the virtues of paid work were increasingly extolled, partly under the influence of the Puritan ethic perceiving work as an end to itself, even as a form of prayer. Idleness, on the other hand, became equated with sinfulness. The widely held stereotypical view of how the undeserving poor conducted themselves was summarized by historian Jeremy Seabrook in his book *Pauperland*, a history of poverty in Britain:

> If these reasons for enduring poverty were insufficient, the most common of all was to treat the poor, those not exempt by an existential incapacity to provide for themselves, as though they were self-generating and existed for perverse moral reasons known only to themselves. This view makes them responsible for their own condition: inherent improvidence, prodigality and idleness. Accessory to their own misery, they breed irresponsibly, have no thought for the future, squander their substance in clement seasons and save nothing for hard times. They are addicted to luxury, drink and "vice". [*Seabrook 2013: 32*]

This view of the undeserving poor has shown remarkable resilience over the centuries to come, re-emerging periodically under different political set-ups but with the basic structure unchanged, the "undeservingness" involving a mixture of laziness (both physical and mental), irresponsible childbearing, substance abuse, and acquisitiveness, combined with a lack of capacity for deferred gratification [*Tihelková 2015, 124*].

Rehabilitating the feckless poor through labour remained a social priority in the 18th and 19th centuries, spawning a series of projects, from some relatively benign schemes to a number of essentially punitive ones. Few exceptions were to be made in the effort to engage paupers in productive work; as argued by moral philosopher Jeremy Bentham, nearly anyone was capable of doing some form of work and should, therefore, be made to do so: "Not one in a hundred is incapable of all employment. Not the motion of a finger – not a step – not a wink – not a whisper – but ought to be turned to account in the way of profit in a system of such magnitude … Employment may be afforded to every fragment of ability, however minute" [quoted in *Katz 2013: 6*].

Hand in hand with this trend went the growing preference for the so-called indoor relief in the form of workhouses, increasingly viewed as a device for deterring those able to find work but preferring to live off parish relief or private charity. The year 1723 saw the adoption of Sir Edward Knatchbull's Act (also known as the Workhouse Test Act) regulating the settlement, employment, and relief of the poor, which enabled the establishment of workhouses where poor relief would be provided. This could be done by an individual parish or by combining several neighbouring parishes sharing the costs. Between 1723 and 1750, around 600 parish workhouses were founded in England and Wales, many of which were built by or leased to local manufacturers "eager to avail themselves of the supply of cheap labour" [*Orsi 2017: 4*].

The growing hostility towards the poor also manifested, among other things, in the practice of "farming", whereby parishes were able to contract out the provision for all its poor or a specific group of them to third parties to reduce costs and avoid the burdensome responsibility of caring for the local claimants. Farming the poor involved applying commercial methods to the poverty problem, usually with disastrous impacts on the poor themselves.

Nevertheless, the 18th century also produced attitudes that ran counter to the punitive approaches to the poor. Despite the rapid increases in the country's wealth due to industrialization, poverty, especially in the southern rural areas, grew considerably towards the end of the century due to multiple factors, including failed harvests and food shortages caused by the French wars. Unable to compete with urban markets, the countryside suffered from high food prices and low wages. With the soaring number of hard-working households unable to support themselves, it was increasingly difficult to sustain the narrative that the cause of poverty was an individual's moral depravity. The temporary reassessment of the root causes of poverty gave birth to the so-called Speenhamland system of poor relief, drawn up at the Pelican Inn in Speenhamland, Berkshire, in 1795 and gradually implemented across the rural counties of southern England and Wales [*Patriquin 2007: 118*]. The underlying idea of the system was that labourers would have their income supplemented to subsistence level by the local parish, essentially making it a top-up on low wages. The idea of these allowances spread rapidly across the south of England, saving many households from starvation while also quelling public discontent engendered by the rising food prices. Contrary to the long-term trend, the assistance offered involved outdoor relief, with families able to continue their economic activity rather than being driven to a workhouse.

Despite its effectiveness in staving off the worst vagaries of destitution among the rural labourers, the Speenhamland system soon came under criticism as a vehicle for creating a dependency culture and trapping people in poverty, one of the most vocal critics being Thomas Malthus, who blamed it for causing population increase and disincentivizing labourers. In the same vein, the Poor Law Commissioners' Report of 1834 stated that, due to the income support provided, "Industry fails, moral character is annihilated, and the poor man of twenty years ago, who tried to earn his money, and was thankful for it, is now converted into an insolent, discontent, surly, thoughtless pauper who talks of 'rights and income'" [*Nassau – Chadwick 1834: 82*].

The combined concerns over the rising costs of poor relief and the risk of over-dependence on welfare handouts led to the most extensive shake-up of the Poor Laws since

their introduction in the sixteenth century in the form of the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834, which centralized and professionalized poor relief, replacing the old system based on decentralization and voluntarism. Inspired by utilitarian and Malthusian principles, the new legislation was based on the values of discipline and frugality. By adopting the amendment, the Whig government sought to make the poor more responsible for their well-being by terminating outdoor relief and limiting the provision of assistance to the poor exclusively to workhouses under conditions "less eligible" than those experienced by the working poor to deter as many people as possible from claiming assistance.

The early workhouse was designed as an all-purpose parish institution, usually containing an emergency ward, orphanage, geriatric ward and home of last resort. Living arrangements were simple but fairly informal, with disabled and non-disabled people staying under the same roof. However, with the Poor Law Amendment, the character of workhouses changed considerably. Less eligibility was achieved by coercing inmates to labour, enforcing a strict daily regime, limiting inmates to a meagre diet and separating family members, including the separation of mothers from their infant children. It was maintained that the workhouse had to be unbearable to make sure that people sought it only in the most desperate circumstances; in other words, the workhouse conditions needed to be worse than those that a poor labourer on the lowest possible wages could survive on outside the workhouse.

Since outdoor relief was abolished by the New Poor Laws, workhouses did also provide assistance to the "blameless", i.e. the old, the sick and children. However, the harshest conditions in the workhouses were imposed on the able-bodied inmates, who, having failed to avoid the workhouse through supporting themselves with paid work, were the true undeserving poor, assumed to be idle, irresponsible, and morally deficient. The harsh work regime inside the workhouse was intended to dislodge them from the dependency-inducing habits that prevented them from developing the virtue the Victorians prized above most others: self-reliance. As Elizabeth Bruening notes,

> Now, idleness was neither a sin against others nor an existential threat to the community, but was rather a failure of personal moral hygiene. The poor needed to be taught the virtues and habits of diligence and shorn of their vices because their poverty kept them from being fully self-reliant individuals. To be less than individual is to be less than truly free, on the one hand, and to keep others from being less than truly free on the other. In this framework, being poor, insofar as it obligates others to help you, begins to look like something straightforwardly immoral. [*Bruening 2018*]

Emerging in the 1850s, the philosophy of Social Darwinism contributed to the scientific legitimatization of the deserving/undeserving poor dichotomy. Inspired by Malthus, Herbert Spencer argued that the impoverishment and death of the poor occurred because they were less socio-economically "fit" than the wealth-accumulating classes. He advised against state-provided welfare[1], claiming that measures to improve the conditions of the poor would interfere with the natural order and lead to biological decline:

[1] A more sympathetic view of Spencer is offered by Matthew Zwolinski, who argues that, contrary to popular belief, Spencer was not opposed to charitable assistance to the poor or, indeed, to the idea of social justice itself. For more information see Zwolinski, Matthew [2016]. Social Darwinism and Social Justice: Herbert Spencer on Our Duties to the Poor. In. Boisen, Camilla – Matthew Murray (eds.).

> The poverty of the incapable, the distresses that come upon the imprudent, the starvation of the idle, and those shoulderings aside of the weak by the strong, which leave so many "in shallows and in miseries", are the decrees of a large, far-seeing benevolence. It seems hard that an unskilfulness which with all his efforts he cannot overcome, should entail hunger upon the artisan. It seems hard that a labourer incapacitated by sickness from competing with his stronger fellows, should have to bear the resulting privations. It seems hard that widows and orphans should be left to struggle for life or death. Nevertheless, when regarded not separately, but in connection with the interests of universal humanity, these harsh fatalities are seen to be full of the highest beneficence – the same beneficence which brings to early graves the children of diseased parents, and singles out the low-spirited, the intemperate, and the debilitated as the victims of an epidemic. [*Spencer 1995: 289–290*]

However, change of thought was afoot. The volatility of the mid-nineteenth-century economy, with its market booms and downturns, along with the mind-changing works of writers such as Charles Dickens, Henry Mayhew and Benjamin Disraeli, as well as artists such as Luke Fildes (whose painting "Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward" acted as a powerful wake-up call on the plight of people driven to the workhouse), challenged the prevailing dogma that those seeking poor relief did so because they consciously accepted destitution as a lifestyle choice. Pioneering research by Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree contributed to a more complex understanding of the root causes of poverty, demonstrating that, rather than individual failure, poverty was to a considerable extent a systemic phenomenon caused by low wages, unemployment and ill health. Rowntree also sought to dispel some of the stereotypical views of the "deficient" behaviour of the poor such as profligacy and reckless budgeting:

> Working people are just as human as those with more money. They cannot live just on a "fodder basis". They crave for relaxation and recreation just as the rest of us do. But … they can only get these things by going short of something which is essential to physical fitness, and so they go short … They pay dearly for their pleasures! [quoted in *Wolff 2018*]

For Rowntree, the key factor was not how people spent their money, but what they had to give up in order to have what they believed was essential to a decent human life. To determine whether a person was in poverty, the best test was not what they bought but what choices and sacrifices they had to make to do what was taken for granted by the rest of the society.[2]

The contrast between the old and the new paradigms of understanding poverty manifested during the process of reviewing the Poor Laws in 1905–1909. In December 1905, the Royal Commission on the Poor Law and the Unemployed was established to re-examine the system of poor relief provision and consider alternative mechanisms to deal with unemployment-related issues. Set up by the British Parliament, the Commission, which comprised Poor Law officials, members of the Charity Organisation society, members of

Distributive Justice Debates in Social and Political Thought: Perspectives on Finding A Fair Share. New York: Routledge, pp. 56–76.

[2] Similar attempts at dispelling popular myths around the spending habits of twenty-first century poor have been made by working-class sociologist Lisa McKenzie, who argues that the "irresponsible" purchases often represent an effort of the unprivileged to maintain or retrieve their dignity. See McKenzie, Lisa [2015]. *Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain*. London: Policy Press.

local government boards and social researchers, was also asked to consider if any changes to the existing Poor Laws were needed. The work of the Commission resulted in the publication of two reports, each with starkly different recommendations.

The Majority Report, backed by fourteen commissioners, argued for the continuation of the Poor Laws in combination with charity to manage poor relief. Basically, it was still steeped in Victorian individualism and self-help, with poverty largely understood in moral terms. As argued by A.W. Vincent, "Failure in social terms, namely poverty, was seen as failure of self-maintenance in the character of the person. The failure was a moral one since it involved the individual's inability to look to the common social good" [*Vincent 1984: 350*].

On the other hand, The Minority Report, masterminded by Beatrice and Sidney Webb, emphasized the structural character of poverty, proposing that the state should adopt preventative measures and introduce minimal social services, including labour exchanges, a national health service, educational facilities, specialized care for different social and age groups, and a system of social benefits that would replace the workhouses and the cumbersome network of inefficient and overlapping charities. In the words of Beatrice Webb, the purpose was "to secure a national minimum of civilised life … open to all alike, of both sexes and all classes, by which we meant sufficient nourishment and training when young, a living wage when able-bodied, treatment when sick, and modest but secure livelihood when disabled or aged" [quoted in *Shafik 2021, xviii*].

However, like the Majority Report, the Minority Report still made a firm distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor, with the latter now seen as comprising individuals convicted of vagrancy, neglect to maintain their family, or recalcitrancy regarding work activity. Members of this group, the Webbs argued, should be medically tested for their physical faculties to see how they could be improved by training. Subsequently, they would be "assigned either to suitable day depots or residential farm colonies, where their whole working time would be absorbed in such varied beneficial training of body and mind as they proved capable of" [*Report Of The Royal Commission On The Poor Laws And Relief Of Distress 1909: 479*]. Despite its progressive angle, the Minority Report was strictly based on the notion of mutual obligation, and an uncompromising approach to those considered to be breaking the rules was seen as justified.

While failing to generate immediate political effect, the Minority Report was instrumental in challenging the prevailing attitudes toward poverty. Its holistic approach to poverty, focusing on social reform, education and prevention, had a major impact on the discourse surrounding poverty, ultimately informing the Beveridge Report of 1942, a landmark document that served as a blueprint for the post-war Welfare State. However, as pointed out by historian Jose Harris, a biographer of Beveridge, even during the Hungry Thirties, suspicions of parasitic "scroungers" existed among the public. They were largely dispelled with the onset of the Second World War, which ushered in an unprecedented sense of common purpose and social solidarity, as well as a rationing-based egalitarian economic model and ample work opportunities for everyone. "There were no scroungers," Harris points out. "You were put to work in the Army, the pioneer corps or the factories" [quoted in *deCastella 2012*].

The temporary retreat from the deserving/undeserving stereotyping continued in the post-war era owing to the full-employment policies pursued by Labour and

Conservative governments alike, with nearly every working-age man holding a job [*deCastella 2012*]. However, following the oil shocks and economic turmoil of the Seventies, unemployment began to rise again, with economic inactivity resurfacing as a subject of debate. As observed by Joanna Mack and Stewart Lansley in their monograph *Poor Britain*,

> In the 1970s, the poor came to be blamed not just for their own problems, but also for the nation's. Britain was increasingly seen to be in a rapid decline. In the desperate search for explanations, the poor became scapegoats. Welfare spending, it was claimed, was too high. Money was being "diverted" away from the "real" economy. The incentive to work hard had, it was said, been taken away by the "generosity" of public "handouts". The poor were scroungers; their plight unrecognised. [*Lansley – Mack 1985: 4*]

It was the 1980s, however, that saw the full-scale return of the undeserving poor stereotype, as Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher pushed a re-victorianized concept of poverty, firmly convinced that excessive government intervention and over-generous welfare provision hindered economic growth and stifled individual ambition, creating a culture of dependency [*Biresi – Nunn 2013: 5*]. With the narrative of a feckless underclass simultaneously popularized by the American analyst Charles Murray, poverty was, yet again, viewed through the lens of personal accountability and framed as a consequence of poor individual choices and irresponsible behaviour rather than of structural inequalities. In addition, the sweeping deindustrialization of the Eighties resulted in massive job losses; just between 1979 and 1983, two million jobs in industry were lost, creating a large group of economically inactive individuals. Few equivalent jobs were created in place of the previous stable and secure industrial positions, and yet, the government seemed to lack sympathy for the swathes of the newly unemployed. Their economic inactivity was attributed to a lack of initiative rather than systemic causes, an attitude best summarized by Thatcher's minister Norman Tebbit, who famously told his party conference in 1981, "I grew up in the 30s with an unemployed father. He didn't riot. He got on his bike and looked for work, and he kept looking till he found it" [quoted in *Elledge: 2023*]. Thatcher herself made no disguise of her admiration of the Victorian values of thrift and self-help, as well as the high-minded culture of 19th-century friendly societies, and she fully subscribed to the idea of the deserving/undeserving poor:

> I had great regard for the Victorians for many reasons – not least their civic spirit to which the increase in voluntary and charitable societies and the great buildings and endowments of our cities pay eloquent tribute. I never felt uneasy about praising "Victorian values" or – the phrase I originally used – "Victorian virtues", not least because they were by no means just Victorian. But the Victorians also had a way of talking which summed up what we were now rediscovering – they distinguished between the "deserving" and the "undeserving poor". Both groups should be given help: but it must be help of very different kinds if public spending is not just going to reinforce the dependency culture. The problem with our welfare state was that – perhaps to some degree inevitably we had failed to remember that distinction and so we provided the same "help" to those who had genuinely fallen into difficulties and needed some support till they could get out of them, as to those who had simply lost the will or habit of work and self-improvement. [quoted in *Walker 1994: 104*]

In her romanticized view of Victorian public spiritedness, however, Thatcher and her followers failed to consider the social changes taking place, especially the erosion of working-class communities (and the resulting abundance of social problems[3]), which had already been underway in the post-war decades but which was happening at an accelerated speed as the outcome of her deindustrialization policies.

The arrival of Tony Blair's New Labour marked a change in the debate on poverty and its root causes. Seeking to project a more socially considerate image than their predecessors, the Blairites toned down the undeserving poor discourse and, instead, opted for the concept of the "socially excluded", with social exclusion understood as the "inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political and cultural life, and, in some characterisations, alienation and distance from the mainstream society" [quoted in *Biresi – Nunn, 2023, 61*]. Long-term economic inactivity and the resulting welfare dependency were construed as an outcome of economic and social forces outside the control of the poor, rather than their individual moral failure. Increased emphasis in poverty discourse was placed not only on material deprivation but primarily on "poverty of aspiration, of opportunity, of prospects of advancement" [*Blair 2006*].

Despite marketing itself as a new form of social democracy, New Labour represented, in many of its aspects, a continuation of Thatcherite neoliberalism [*Jessop 2007: 282*]. This manifested, among others, in perpetuating the Schumpeterian (rather than Keynesian) approach to tackling unemployment-related social exclusion, with the goal of social inclusion to be achieved primarily through labour market attachment and economic re-engagement of the marginalized communities. Blair pledged that his cabinet would be a "Welfare to Work government", further claiming that "the greatest challenge for any democratic government is to refashion our institutions to bring [the] workless class back into society and into useful work" [*Blair 1996*]. Benefit claimants were reframed as "jobseekers" and coerced into the increasingly flexible labour market. Various workfare programmes, such as the New Deal, modelled on existing US schemes, were designed[4]. Aimed particularly at young people but also at lone mothers, they were described by Blair as a "something for something deal", providing people "with a hand up and not a hand-out" [*Green 2014*].

In essence, the aim of the Blairite welfare-to-work programmes was not to create jobs (as Old Labour would have attempted) but to revive work ethic, i. e. to increase employability among workless individuals. In a sense, therefore, they replicated the pre-20th century strategies based on the beliefs in the redemptive function of work per se. At the same time, however, insufficient consideration was given to the ongoing precarization of the labour market and the social risks awaiting the increasingly contingent labour force.

The deserving and undeserving poor in recent discourse and policies

In 2010, a Conservative victory ended the thirteen years of New Labour rule. Led by David Cameron, the Tories swiftly abandoned their original vote-winning programme

[3] For an outline of the collapse of working-class communites in the wake of Thatcher's policies, see Owen Jones [2012]. *Chavs. The Demonization of the Working Class*. London: Verso.

[4] The first workfare schemes in the UK had already been launched during the Thatcher and Major years, but it was the Blair administration that created the first fully integrated and well-defined welfare-to-work regime.

of compassionate Conservatism and, faced with the fall-out of the 2008 financial crisis, adopted a set of austerity-driven policies culminating in a welfare reform involving extensive public spending cuts. In an attempt to justify the controversial policies, masterminded by the Minister for Work and Pensions Iain Duncan Smith, the Coalition government stepped up the deserving/undeserving poor rhetoric, with welfare dependency yet again highlighted as a manifestation of individual irresponsibility and sense of entitlement rather than a result of systemically produced social exclusion. Both the government and right-leaning media became more strident than usual in othering benefit claimants, pitting them against those in paid work. While the latter were celebrated as *strivers, hard-earning taxpayers, hardworking families, alarm-clock Britain*, or *those who do the right thing,* the former were dismissed as *shirkers, those wanting handouts, the hard-to-reach, the problem families, those having no stake in society*, etc. [*Tihelková 2015: 125*]. Considerable effort was taken by the Prime Minister to communicate the fairness of withdrawing resources from those for whom welfare dependency was a "lifestyle choice":

> Those within it grow up with a series of expectations: you can have a home of your own, the state will support you whatever decisions you make, you will always be able to take out no matter what you put in. This has sent out some incredibly damaging signals. That it pays not to work. That you are owed something for nothing. It gave us millions of working-age people sitting at home on benefits even before the recession hit. It created a culture of entitlement. And it has led to huge resentment amongst those who pay into the system, because they feel that what they're having to work hard for, others are getting without having to put in the effort. [*Cameron 2012*]

On the other hand, the "deserving" part of the economically vulnerable class, involving low-income working households, were repeatedly reassured that they were not on the receiving end of the cuts, with the government proclaiming that "We're getting behind working families who work hard and want to do the right thing" [quoted in *Meredith 2013*].

The centrepiece of the Cameronite welfare reform was a series of policies intended to make welfare claimants rejoin the labour market, principally through a withdrawal of benefits. The removal of support was framed as a beneficial move "helping" the claimants to regain agency and transition to a healthy state of personal independence. In addition to the morally restoring effect of paid employment, the benefit cuts were also proclaimed to produce a decrease in poverty levels. Cameron himself declared that "I believe passionately in reducing poverty. And the best route out of poverty is this: work" [quoted in *Swinford 2015*].

Essentially, the Cameronite welfare-to-work strategy represented a continuation of the Blairite policies. However, its practical implementation was markedly more draconic, with considerable human cost involved. This was especially the case of the withdrawal of disability benefits to incentivize the claimants to find paid work. Although the disabled had traditionally been perceived as the deserving poor (the "impotent poor", i.e. those unable to work), the new legislation was based on the assumption of extensive benefit abuse on their part, thus perceiving them as potentially undeserving. Accordingly, disability benefit claimants were exposed to health reassessments contracted out to private entities, such as the Atos and Capita corporate giants, often resulting in demonstrably unwell individuals being found "fit for work" by target-driven, profit-based assessment tests whose efficacy has repeatedly been put into question by researchers [*Pring 2022*].

In addition to the disabled, another social group became subject to stereotyping as the undeserving poor, namely young unemployed people. Their reliance on benefits was portrayed as a "culture of entitlement", involving expectations of obtaining a council home and raising state-supported children while others "do the right thing", take up paid employment and wait until they have saved up [*Padfield 2012*]. Seeking to cultivate "disciplines and skills associated with sustained employment," the government designed a 5-billion-pound flagship programme of unpaid work placement schemes, involving compulsory community work and unpaid work for private companies, predominantly supermarket chains and high-street retailers. In response to the public outcry criticizing the policy for labour exploitation and undercutting wages in the commercial sector, several major participants (including Tesco) withdrew from the scheme. On the whole, the whole project was considered a failure, with only 2.3 percent of the placements yielding permanent employment. For many, the government's attempt to force young people into unpaid placements carried all-too-familiar echoes of the 19th-century Poor Laws seeking to redeem paupers through work activity itself, regardless of whether such labour was able to support them existentially.

As shown above, an integral part of the strategy of dealing with the undeserving poor under the old Poor Laws was the idea that they were punishable for their feckless behaviour. Traces of the punitive approach can also be located in the Conservative austerity agenda, perhaps most tellingly in the policy of so-called benefit sanctions, imposed on claimants who failed to meet the stringent and sometimes labyrinthine requirements of active jobseeking. Transgressions such as not arriving on time for a job centre interview (even for defensible reasons such as having been in hospital, lacking money to travel to the interview or being given confusing information by the job centre itself) could lead to the denial of benefit payments for up to three years, leaving the claimant potentially destitute. Though described by various social commentators as "cruel", "inhuman" or "causing considerable distress" [*Demianyk 2016*], the policy was defended by the government as one instilling the work ethic into a class of essentially work-shy individuals. Work and Pensions Minister Esther McVey, for instance, compared the sanctioned claimants to badly behaved school pupils:

> What does a teacher do in a school? A teacher would tell you off or give you lines or whatever it is, detentions, but at the same times they are wanting your best interests at heart. They are teaching you, they are educating you but at the same time they will also have the ability to sanction you. [quoted in *Bulman 2018*]

The outcomes of the austerity measures proved tragic in numerous instances; it is estimated that the welfare reform claimed nearly 60,000 lives just within the first four years of its rollout. In addition, food banks, a rare sight prior to the Coalition government's welfare reform, mushroomed across the UK, with the number of their clients increasing from 41,000 in 2009 to 3.1 million in 2023/24 [*Toth 2024*]. Interestingly, food bank users, too, found themselves subject to the deserving-undeserving debate, with several government members implying that their reliance on food relief had nothing to do with the deteriorating economic situation and everything to do with their irresponsible behaviour. In 2013, for instance, Education Secretary Michael Gove stirred controversy by arguing that

people struggled to afford food and other essentials due to being unable to "manage their finances" and making wrong choices regarding money. In the same vein, the above-mentioned minister Esther McVey attributed food bank use to the inability of their clients to live within their means [*Bulman 2018*]. Some went even further in their rhetoric. Edwina Currie, the outspoken Conservative ex-minister, for example, attacked food bank users for their profligacy (a typical traditional attribute of the undeserving poor):

> I get very troubled at the number of people who are using food banks who think it is fine to pay to feed their dog, their dog is in good nick and beautiful, but they never learn to cook, they never learn to manage, and the moment they have got a bit of spare cash they are off getting another tattoo. We should feel cross about this, all of us. [quoted in *Bennett 2014*]

In general, what characterized the assumptions underlying the welfare cuts was the government's lack of trust in benefit claimants based on a-priori expectations of fecklessness, entitlement and poor lifestyle management leading to the abuse of the generous benefits system. Such deficiencies thus justified the punitive policies which, however, were marketed to the public as well-intentioned and helpful in instilling the correct attitudes in the subjects of the cuts as well as restoring "fairness" to the system in respect of the deserving poor. As seen from research into public attitudes, which has repeatedly revealed a hardening stance towards benefit claimants in recent years, including exaggerated ideas of the extent of benefit fraud [*Binder 2013*], the adversarial government rhetoric, combined with negative coverage by some (mostly tabloid) media, has in many ways proved effective.

After Cameron's departure from 10 Downing Street, the deserving-undeserving stereotyping somewhat faded from the political debate as the government priorities changed, with the issue of Brexit taking centre stage. Theresa May, Cameron's short-lived successor, made it plain in her speeches that austerity was over after eight years of cuts. Boris Johnson, having scored a landslide victory in 2019, marketed himself as a one-nation Conservative intent on reducing inequalities across Britain's regions within his much-touted "levelling-up" agenda, aiming to woo working-class voters from less prosperous regions north of London. The rhetoric of deservingness was replaced with the language of the "left-behind", with structural explanations for poverty temporarily resurfacing in the government's discourse [*Tihelková 2022: 142*]. Moreover, the universal experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting cost-of-living crisis affecting vast swathes of the British public fostered more complex attitudes to poverty and economic inactivity.

However, Britain's strained public finances and economic underperformance have recently revived the deserving/undeserving rhetoric both right and left of the political spectrum. Speaking to his party conference in Durham in 2023, Nigel Farage, leader of the right-wing populist party Reform UK, voiced his scepticism about the genuine need of disability benefit claimants: "There are many that have gone on to benefits that shouldn't be on benefits. The idea that on a Zoom consultation is hi doc, not feeling too good today, little bit depressed. – Oh you'd better go on the unemployment register as disabled. I'm sorry, this approach is wrong" [*Reform Leader Nigel Farage 2023*]. Thus, sufferers of mental health problems, which represent one of the most pressing public health issues in the UK today, have found themselves implicitly branded as the new undeserving poor. In a similar vein, former Tory immigration minister Robert Jenrick has recently applied the

undeservingness label to migrants, whom he, controversially, accused of "cannibalising" the compassion of the British public [*Gill 2023*].

Interestingly, the deserving-undeserving dichotomy has not been limited to right-wing discourse; it has also re-emerged in the rhetoric of the Labour party, though the choice of words has been more cautious. When Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves delivered her 2024 budget, she told *The Sun* newspaper, "I'm doing this for hardworking families up and down the country who have been crying out for change. […] To these people I say, I've got your back. This is your Budget. I will deliver for you. It's a Budget for the strivers" [*Reeves 2024*]. In opting for the word "strivers", Reeves was borrowing from George Osborne, Tory Chancellor at the time of Cameron's welfare reform, when the difference between alleged strivers and scroungers (the latter representing the undeserving poor) was exploited to achieve the government's austerity agenda. Given some other statements made by the current Chancellor, such as her warnings of a "painful budget", "tough decisions", and the need to end the government "overspend" [*Toth 2024*], it will be interesting to observe whether any of Labour's potential austerity measures will be explained purely as an unpleasant necessity arising from the country's economic adversities, or whether some form of othering will take place as certain groups are singled out as the recipients of prospective cuts.

Conclusion

The issue of approaches to poverty and different types of the poor in various periods of Britain's past is a complex one, and the present article has only managed to provide a general outline of the principal developments. Even from such a sketchy perspective, however, several trends stand out. With the secularization of poor relief in the Tudor era, the medieval view of poverty as a natural state of things in society changed into its perception as a social problem. Designed to address it, the Poor Laws made a clear distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor, with the distinguishing criterion being the ability and/or willingness to work. The growing numbers of individuals dispossessed and vagrant as a result of the sweeping economic changes in early modern England caused concern not only as a source of disruption but as a burden on the country's treasury. This gave rise to various measures, both punitive and corrective, to deter paupers from vagrancy and to remedy their perceived character flaws which, in the mind of the contemporaries, included fecklessness, profligacy and irresponsibility in sexual and familial conduct. Parallel to this trend, a development towards a more structural understanding of poverty was unfolding, first emerging in the form of the Speenhamland system of wage supplementation and then gaining ground in the latter half of the nineteenth century as more research into the causes of poverty became available. This trend continued in the twentieth century, with the Second World War acting as the "great leveller" and the full employment during and after it rendering the deserving-undeserving debate temporarily irrelevant. However, with the demise of the post-war Keynesian consensus and the advent of the neoliberal economic course in the 1980s, stereotyping the poor gained traction as economic inactivity due to job losses was on the rise and justification for reducing state expenditure was being sought. The view of poverty as an individual failure was rekindled, with various workfare programmes intended to rehabilitate welfare claimants through labour market participation emerging under both

Conservative and Labour administrations. The stigmatization of a group of the poor seen as undeserving came to a head under the post-2010 Conservative administrations, with the stereotypical perceptions of benefit claimants (laziness, sense of entitlement, self-destructive personal habits, etc.) actively used by political actors to garner public consensus in respect of the planned welfare cuts. The language used by the government demonstrated the underlying suspicion of benefit fraud and mistrust of the claimants. The considerable human cost generated by the austerity measures shrouded in adversarial language remains a cause for concern and a warning for future administrations seeking to apply simplistic measures in an economy riddled with precarious employment and other social risks.

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