

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Hatred, envy, fear – it's all in a day's work for British tabloids

January 17, 2014 6.25am GMT



How many more front pages like this, you mean? anorak.co.uk

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Last week, on this site, my colleague Daniel Newman pointed to a growing demonisation of the poor in British politics and asked: where would it lead?

Well, I'm not going to speculate on where it will lead – you only have to watch Channel 4's warts-and-wall documentary *Benefits Street* to see the social division it is causing. But I can tell you who is responsible for cheerleading it: our not-so-beloved tabloid newspapers, who appear to think that scapegoating the most vulnerable sections in society will somehow dig them out of a hole that plummeting circulations are rapidly plunging them into.

This year began with the by-now tediously predictable stories of hordes of Romanians and Bulgarians “flocking” to Britain to take advantage of the EU lifting of restrictions on low-skilled workers entering the UK.

That these narratives were almost entirely false hardly seemed to matter as the tabloid press once again gorged itself on a diet of supposedly full buses and aeroplanes crammed with beggars who are uniformly uncivilised, morally lacking and prone, in the words of one Tory councillor, to defecating on the doorsteps of the upstanding, long-suffering British tax payer.

Then, on January 6, Channel 4 broadcast the first of its series about the life of residents of James Turner Street in Winson Green, Birmingham. According to the publicity for **Benefits Street**, the series follows residents as they navigate their way through life on the bottom rung of Britain's economic ladder. Despite the challenges the residents face, the street also has a strong sense of community. This is a place where people look out for each other, and where small acts of kindness can go a long way.



Fanning hatred: Daily Star. Flickr

Some commentators such as Owen Jones condemned the first programme utterly: how edgy Channel 4 must think it is, he wrote, courageously reinforcing widespread prejudices, heroically hammering away at a message that is heard relentlessly already, bravely echoing the Government mantra about skivers. Others such as Fraser Nelson labelled it brilliant, saying it opened a window into the world of the people that Britain is very good at forgetting.

Folk devils

While noting the programme's provocative title, let's leave aside the polarising reception the series has had. What is without dispute is the fact that "benefit scroungers", along with immigrants, are – as I have written before – the latest

in a series of what Stanley Cohen defined as "folk devils". According to Cohen, certain minority groups (in his case, the Mods and the Rockers) become the subjects of moral panic. These are people who are perceived to exist apart from the core values of consensual society and are therefore a risk to the continued existence of accepted norms.

Consider the Daily Mail of January 15 and its startling amalgamation of Britain's twin evils: "Benefits Street child bride, 15, has baby with her husband entitling Romanian couple to £88-a-month child hand outs". The media, and in particular the press, has been instrumental in the criminalisation of the poor on welfare, depicting, as **The Sun** has done, single mothers such as Sara Hesmondhaigh as a "scrounger" who has spent her entire working life on benefits – after deliberately having kids to avoid getting a job. The accompanying picture shows her and two of her children posing happily in front of large screen TV and laptop computer -- classic 21st century trophies for what it considers to be the undeserving, feckless and wilfully unemployed.

Articles highlighting 'four million scrounging families in Britain' or the 'benefits scrounger who hasn't worked for 24 years because she's allergic to SHOES' help to create an environment where the weakest and most disenfranchised in society shoulder the blame for the UK's wider economic woes. They become the targets for our hate and resentment.

Reality check

What we are not routinely told is that benefit fraud accounts for a fraction of welfare payments. **Red Pepper** magazine points to Department for Work and Pensions estimates which show that in 2011/12 just 0.7% of benefit expenditure was overpaid due to fraud, including a 2.8% fraud rate for jobseeker's allowance and a mere 0.3% for incapacity benefit.

What we are not routinely told is that migration is of positive benefit to the economy because as Robert Chote, the chairman of the Office for Budget Responsibility, has said letting more immigrants into the UK “does tend to produce a more beneficial picture” for the public purse.

So why do we get such unbalanced, vitriolic and unsympathetic coverage of immigration and social security from our right-wing press?

Beginning with immigration: The Sun, Daily Mail and Daily Express are united in their distrust and hatred for the EU. To them the European Union exists to make continual and baffling assaults on the British way of life that has flourished for centuries. We are an island nation separated physically and culturally from a Europe that is determined to dilute and destroy our traditions. To the tabloids, migration and the opening up of our borders to Romanians and Bulgarians is simply the latest ruse designed by the EU to ensure that the Queen’s message is removed from passports and vacuum cleaners are banned.

Emma Udwin, former BBC political correspondent and European Commission spokeswoman for external relations, has written that in terms of how the UK press sees Europe, it is Britain against the rest. Britain in glorious isolation. Britain standing up for itself (at last).



On the offensive. Stephen Sumpter



And while we're at it... Flickr

As to the enduring popularity of these themes, Udwin points to an evident failure in journalism and a striking ignorance of the European Union in even the most elite journalistic circles in England. The structures and procedures are deemed to be too complex to be of interest to readers and viewers. As a result few take the trouble to get on top of them.

So we have the reliance on stereotype and lowest-common-denominator journalism – where the perceived fears about the loss of the nation’s independence and identity are projected onto immigrants. And, because immigrants generally lack the platform to answer back, the myths can be perpetually recycled and reinforced.

In terms of benefits in Britain, the press has set up a clearly identifiable binary opposition between the deserving and undeserving poor. Those “four million scrounging families” are presented as stealing from those that need it most – their near neighbours. The underlying inequalities of modern capitalism are barely explored as the chancellor announces that Britain must make £25bn more welfare cuts in 2014

The denigration of the poor matters a great deal. Mark Smith of the Open University has written of the increasingly callous disregard for the poor in the UK, pointing out that according to the National

Centre for Social Research, unemployment, homelessness, educational failure and even child poverty are increasingly regarded as the product of personal difficulties, not as social problems to be solved.

We are encouraged to see the poor as architects of their own misfortune. We are invited to be disgusted at their irresponsibility and selfishness. For one thing, it makes the welfare cuts seem somehow fairer for the rest of us.



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