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Language and myths of poverty

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> "Poverty strikes dead the very souls of all who come within sight, sound or smell of it."
>
> G.B. Shaw, *Major Barbara*

Abstract

This paper explores the popular and political myths and language used about poverty and those who are poor. These are viewed through three historical periods: the Victorian era, the period of the 1930s great depression and the contemporary world since neoliberalism took hold in the 1980s. Each period has its own language about those in poverty. The Victorians imposed a harsh system comprising transportation of poor petty criminals to the British colonies, and incarceration in workhouses for others. Writers and researchers such as George Bernard Shaw and Charles Booth deplored the cruelty of the workhouse system. The experiences of the unemployed during the depression were highlighted by Tony Simpson, and through articles and letters to the editor in local New Zealand newspapers. Contemporary thinkers such as Jonathan Boston and Susan St John continue to expose the myths of poverty and point to policies for a more benevolent system.

In 1729, Jonathan Swift wrote a satirical pamphlet with suggestions on how to deal with Irish poverty. In *A Modest Proposal* (which was anything but modest) he proposed that selling Irish babies to the rich as a source of food could solve the Irish poverty problem. This approach, he said, would solve both poverty and over-population problems. It would also reduce the number of papists (Catholics) and create jobs for butchers. It would have other spin-off benefits such as reducing wife beating because pregnant Irish women would now have a commodity value.

Swift, who was shocked by extreme forms of poverty in Dublin, was attacking the colonial English landlords in Ireland, who had stolen practically all Irish land. It was a satire of English exploitation of the Irish, and using cannibalism was the ultimate mark of savagery. By lampooning the rich, he forced people to see the terrible conditions of the Irish. In their own way, present-day writers exploring the cruelty of poverty policies follow in the tradition of Jonathan Swift.

Over the years, a lack of concern for the poor has been evident. Britain found it convenient to transport criminals to its colonies: America, the Caribbean and Australia. Between 1788 and 1868, 165,000 convicted men, women and children were transported to Australia. Records were not kept for those sent to America and the Caribbean. Many of those transported were poor petty criminals. Crimes of theft were often minor (e.g., stealing one shilling, stealing lead, iron or copper, stealing letters or stealing fish from a river), all usually done to alleviate the effects of poverty. But penalties were severe. People were exiled from their own country and family, and, in effect, became slaves for the duration of their sentence, usually between three and 14 years in Australia (Maxwell-Stewart, 2010).

The injustice is summed up in this anonymous convict poem:

> The law locks up the man or woman
> Who steals the goose from the common
> But leaves the greater villain loose
> Who steals the common from the goose.

A review of recent letters to the editor of *The New Zealand Herald* reveals people continue to have Victorian views about the causes of poverty. Here are some examples:

> "I implore Sir Michael Cullen and his tax group to be mindful of the famous quote by Sir Winston Churchill: 'You do not make the poorer richer by making the richer poorer'." (February 14, 2018)

> "It is hard to feel sympathy when we are constantly confronted with stories like that of…and her SIX children. When parents finally realise families of this size are unsustainable we will see real improvements in the poverty statistics." (March 10, 2018)

> "New Zealand could be socially, economically and environmentally intelligent if it tackled the housing and poverty crises by implementing a blanket two-child policy." (February 10, 2018)

> "…we could be brave enough to address the real problem, which comes generally from parents giving birth to children they cannot afford to have." (February 3, 2018)

> "The Government needs to make a gutsy call, be creative and bring in a regime which says, 'Become financially responsible, become accountable or be left behind'. I wonder if they have the vision and gumption." (February 2, 2018)

> "Money given to the low-income breeders will never get to the children; in most cases, it will end up in the pokies and on cigarettes. Food vouchers are the only solution." (December 23, 2017)

> "Jacinda Ardern is incredibly proud of her new package for families. She is incredibly naïve to think the money will not go on smoking, drugs, and gambling." (December 16, 2017)

> "There are parents in every case, it is their absolute responsibility to feed and clothe their children.… A hard line should be drawn to bring these people into the real world they brought their children into." (November 27, 2018)

It can be deduced that this sample of correspondents has two key views on poverty. The first that poverty is caused by having too many children, and second that the poor are incompetent or incapable of handling the money they receive for the benefit of their family, with much of it going to gambling and smoking. There were few letters defending the poor. One argued that the real cause of poverty (and crime) was a result of the neoliberal policies in the 1980s and "…ramped up in the 1990s and subsequent inequality has caused catastrophic effects on crime…" (August 23, 2018). Another reminded people to look again at the words of Michael Joseph Savage when he spelled out what 'Applied Christianity' meant. He said, "There is no way of dealing with poverty except by getting to the people who are poorly paid, poorly housed or poorly fed…. The people's wellbeing is the highest law, and so far as this government is concerned, we know no other" (December 26, 2018).

It is also worth noting that during this same period, Keogh (2018) reported on a survey of 610 online interviews (Ipsos Issues Monitor) and found that the two largest concerns for the public were housing and poverty/inequality; two issues that are closely linked. It would seem that (unlike the letter writers) the general public are aware of both of these. However, when it comes to paying taxes to relieve poverty, the public may have other thoughts. In a 2011 paper by Caroll, Caswell, Huakau, Howden-Chapman and Perry, the authors found that respondents in a 2004 survey considered people were poor due to personal deficits, and were opposed to any increased support for the poor. It would seem that attitudes may have changed between 2004 and 2018.

Contemporary political opposition to government assistance to those in most need of aid arises in various forms. Judith Collins (National MP) stated that, "…it's people who don't look after their children, that's the

problem." She went on to say, "I see a poverty of ideas, a poverty of parental responsibility, a poverty of love, a poverty of caring" (Jones, 2016).

Jamie Whyte (ACT leader) argued that, "There is no poverty in New Zealand. Misery, depravity and hopelessness yes: but no poverty" (Whyte, 2016). Not to be outdone, John Key (then National Prime Minister) argued that the way out of poverty was work, especially for sole parents on benefits. He failed to recognise that many families experiencing poverty were working full time on low wages, and that unpaid work caring for small children is essential work (St. John, 2014). Bill English, then National Minister of Finance, bizarrely stated that local councils caused poverty by regulating the availability of land for housing (Hickey, 2014).

Political commentator Barry Soper (2018) argued against a universal grant of $60 per week to meet the costs of newborn babies. Without providing any evidence, he said this would result in welfare dependency. He would prefer spending the money on contraceptive advice and educating young parents. He ignores the fact that a family benefit paid to mothers was a norm prior to the neoliberal economic policies of the 1980s. He also fails to mention other universal payments that he may consider do not cause welfare dependency, such as national superannuation paid to everyone aged 65 and over. He also comes up with a regular and unfounded complaint that poverty is caused by the poor having children they cannot afford to raise.

In 1979, National minister George Gair was parodied by poet Whim Wham for stating that the poor lack character and will, and spend their money on gambling and drink. The second and fourth verses of Whim Wham's poem, 'A Lesson to the Poor' (1979, p. 251) state:

> They are victims of their own
> Shortcomings, Guru Gair explains.
> It's not material Things alone –
> They lack the Character, the Brains.
> They've only got themselves to thank
> If there's no Money in the Bank
>
> How comes it, Sir, that Failings which
> Have kept Them 'relatively Poor'
> Keep others 'relatively Rich'
> The Affluent drink, they gamble more.
> I know a Few whom I suspect
> Of less than adequate Intellect.

Spicker (2007, pp. 111-117) has analysed the various beliefs on why some people are poor. He came up with six key classes of explanations:

1. The pathological explanation is "The idea that poverty is the fault of the poor themselves."
2. Familial. This explanation blames people's genetic or biological makeup and that poverty is transmitted to the next generation. This idea has been largely abandoned.

3. Sub-cultural. This idea arose from the now-discredited concept of family traits proposed by Oscar Lewis. His theory was based on interviews with a few poor Mexican families.

4. Resource-based explanations centre on the idea that there are not enough resources to go around. The central idea of the neo-Malthousian position is that the real problem is over-population.

5. Structural. This is a more sociological explanation that some people are disadvantaged due to class, status and power. In effect, "The game is rigged."

6. Agency. Agencies are to blame because they fail to carry out their welfare responsibilities. However, official organisations cannot be held responsible for the original condition of people's poverty with which they have to deal.

Spicker also notes the negative language used about the poor and poverty. "The welfare state has been increasingly depicted as problematic, leading to supposed 'welfare dependency'" (p. 23). One can also recognise other expressions that stigmatise people, such as 'dole bludger', which defines the character of the person in one epithet, and 'beneficiaries' rather than people in receipt of a benefit. The modern language of poverty is full of metaphors and inuendos, such as 'the work-shy', implying a culture of worklessness. Simpson (1997) explained that in the 1930s, "The vicious rhetoric of 50 years ago has crept back into our vocabularies. The unemployed are unemployable; they are 'bludgers'; they don't want to work. It is all their own fault. Like the Bourbons we have forgotten nothing and learned nothing" (p. 10). Against these expressions is a more positive one used by politicians who stress that the welfare state has to be paid for by 'hard-working families'. This language of mutiple metaphors focuses on the adults and their responsibility for the rise of poverty. Obviously children cannot be blamed for being poor, so responsibility must lie within the characters of their parents.

Boston and Chapple (2015) argue that explanations about the causes of poverty should be subject "...to the test of logic and be guided by the best available evidence" (p. 65). They then proceed to analyse popular themes in the discussion of child poverty in New Zealand.

CLAIM 1: THERE IS LITTLE OR NO REAL CHILD POVERTY IN NEW ZEALAND.

Boston and Chapple point out that many children in New Zealand experience 'relative' poverty, not the 'abject' poverty of some other countries (p. 69). Relative poverty is measured in terms of houseold income below 50 or 60% of the average income, as well as material hardship such as poor clothing, shoes, not having other children around the home, or being unable to afford school trips.

CLAIM 2: MANY PARENTS ARE LAZY OR IRRESPONSIBLE, OR MISUSE THEIR RESOURCES, AND THUS DESERVE TO BE POOR.

This argument is highlighted by the controversial Al Nisbett cartoon published

in the *Marlborough Express* (Dally, 2013). It shows a very obese Pacific family with a sign pointing to "Free School Meals". The father is saying: "Psst ! ... If we can get away with this, the more cash left for booze, smokes and pokies." Showing how strong negative attitudes are towards those experiencing social trauma, Cullen, in a 1999 thesis, explained that her "...studies revealed how unemployment is predominantly an alienating and socially isolating experience. Common social belief systems within society still stigmatise the unemployed as lazy dole bludgers" (p. iv).

Looking at the argument from a rational viewpoint, Boston and Chapple ask why poverty rates rose so rapidly in the 1990s in New Zealand. A more likely explanation than laziness was a rapid rise in unemployment and 10-30% cuts in benefit rates (p. 75).

CLAIM 3: THE REAL PROBLEM IS THAT SOME PEOPLE HAVE TOO MANY CHILDREN.

Nisbett once more attacked the poor for having children. His cartoon shows a drunk couple heading off to bed and leaving behind three small children and a newspaper with the headlines: "Working for Families. $60 each new child." The husband says "Bedtime luv! Time to try for triplets" (Newshub, 2018). This is an emotive response rather than a rational one. It fails to recognise that the state is powerless to prevent women having children. Forced sterilisation or the removal of children would be impossible. Boston and Chapple ask how we would deal with families having multiple births (p. 84).

CLAIM 4: ASSISTING POOR FAMILIES WILL SIMPLY ENCOURAGE THEM TO HAVE MORE CHILDREN.

This argument is opposed to policies like Best Start. Boston and Chapple (p. 88) explain that financial policies to control or stimulate more children are ineffective.

CLAIM 5: THE REAL PROBLEM IS POOR PARENTING.

Poor parenting can be found in both poor and wealthy families, and both may spend their money unwisely (pp. 91-2). All families want to live in healthy homes.

CLAIM 6: WE CAN'T DO ANYTHING ABOUT CHILD POVERTY.

Experience of such policies as Working for Families demonstrates that government interventions can have a positive effect on poverty levels.

CLAIM 7: WE CAN'T AFFORD TO REDUCE CHILD POVERTY.

The affordability argument is a political one involving choices about which issue takes priority for resources. Neglect of the issue of child poverty has resulted in higher costs, e.g., imprisonment rates, health problems and educational underachievement.

CLAIM 8: REDUCING OR EVEN ELIMINATING CHILD POVERTY IS RELATIVELY EASY.

While increased household income will assist in reducing poverty, there are often political limits to social assistance.

CLAIM 9: MERELY INCREASING THE INCOMES OF POOR FAMILIES WILL NOT SOLVE CHILD POVERTY.

Once again, there are political constraints to social assistance. It should be recognised that emphasis should also be targeted to affordable housing, free health care and employment training.

There is a remarkable similarity between the nine contemporary claims above and some of those listed by social reformer Charles Booth (1892) as the causes of poverty in late-19th-century London. His personal observations of the causes of poverty were: drink, laziness and large families.

However, Booth also noted more structural and personal-misfortune reasons for pauperism: irregular work for watersiders, low wages, unemployment, mental incapacity, widowhood, sickness, desertion by the husband/father, accidents and old age (pp. 135-149).

For many, poverty meant life inside the workhouse (established under the New Poor Laws of 1834). Booth described workhouses as follows: "The workhouse is at best a dreary residence.... Whilst even if actual tyranny is avoided, it is difficult to prevent harsh callous treatment" (p. 166). In his novel *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens was more damning of the workhouse system. He said:

> So, they [the Workhouse Board] established the rule, that all poor people should have the alternative (for they would compel nobody, not they), of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it. (p. 30)

The workhouse system reinforced Victorian values of social order. This is best described in the hymn 'All Things Bright and Beautiful'. The original third verse (later deleted) stated:

> The rich man in his castle,
> The poor man at his gate,
> God made them high and lowly
> And order'd their estate.

In addressing the issue of poverty, it is useful to read or reread the novel *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* by Robert Tressell, first published in 1914. It is the story of a group of tradesmen renovating a house in Brighton, England. They start debating the causes of poverty and come up with a number of reasons: over-population, drink, laziness, 'new-fangled machinery', working women, too much education that puts foolish ideas into people's heads, and early marriages whereby a man cannot afford to keep his family.

One by one, Owen, one of the tradesmen, takes each argument apart and shows its fallacy. For example, if over-population is the problem then how does one account for Irish poverty at a time when Ireland lost 50% of its population due to famine and migration. In addition, he asks the other workmen, "…what is the cause of lifelong poverty of the majority of those who are not drunkards and who DO work?" (Tressell, p. 29).

Owen then goes on to play a game (The Money Trick) with his fellow workers. Owen pretends for the sake of the game to be a capitalist who owns resources of raw materials, money and machinery. He will invest these resources and set up factories to employ workers who need jobs. To each

worker (the other tradesmen) he says he will pay one pound a week in wages and in exchange they each have to produce goods to the value of three pounds, and this will become the property of Owen. Their wages are spent buying necessities from Owen and so at the end of each week they have nothing, while Owen enriches himself from the workers' labour. After a period, Owen decides to close down the factories due to over-production, making the workers unemployed. The workers object and Owen, being a 'kind-hearted capitalist', gives them one pound in charity, which they immediately spend buying necessities from Owen.

Tressell was ahead of his time. Following the Wall Street Crash of October 20, 1929, the Great Depression of the 1930s struck. In New Zealand, the Unemployment Act required every man of 20 years and over to register and pay a levy of three pence per pound earned, to fund relief work. The impacts on workers and their families were severe:

- Wages fell 30-35% during the depression.
- Public-sector wages were cut by 10% and later by a further 5-12.5%.
- Women workers contributed to the levy fund but were not eligible for relief work.
- In 1932 unemployed riots broke out in Auckland, Dunedin and Wellington.
- By 1933, unemployment levels peaked at around 100,000, 30% of the workforce.
- Old-age and war pensions were cut by 30%. Family allowances were abolished. (Museum of New Zealand, n.d.; Simpson, 1997; Wright, 2009)

At a human level, Simpson (1990) explained that, "They...sold their household goods, and queued for charity handouts. Evictions for non-payment of rent were daily and widespead occurrences" (p. 64). He went on to explain, "Malnutrition among children was widespead; in a 1934 study, seven out of every ten Auckland schoolchildren had a physical defect" (p. 69).

Labour MP Peter Fraser stated in parliament in March, 1932:

> It is as if the farmer were struggling in the water and in danger of drowning. Instead of the government throwing him a lifebelt or sending out a boat to rescue him, it has decided to throw in the worker to drown along with him. (Simpson, 1997, p. 14)

A review of articles and letters to the editor of the *New Zealand Herald* (*NZH*) and *New Zealand Truth* (*NZT*) newspapers in the 1930s shows that debate was often at a political rather than a personal level where individuals were blamed for their poverty. One person wrote:

> ...wage tax is a vicious example of the forcible transfer of wealth from one section of the community to another. [Previous writers] all seem to agree that such forms of taxation are on a par with "banditry, piracy and burglary".... (*NZH*, 1938)

There was also debate on the impact of unemployment on individuals that resulted in "stress and worry, caused by the spectre of want hovering around the door-step" (*NZH*, 1930). Supporting this was a letter that focused on

the family: "...mothers of to-morrow's citizens should be hastened by worry and want to an early grave and their little ones denied a full and abundant childhood" (*NZH*, 1930). Further support for this position came from an article in *The Truth*: "Pursued by Wolf and Want". "Hunger and long-endured semi-starvation, disappointment and despair can have a demoralising influence on the human mind..." (*NZT*, 1930).

Another person argued that the unemployment problem was caused in part by married women continuing to work. The letter stated, "...when a woman is living with her husband who is able to work and has work to do, I certainly think she should stay at home and allow single girls to earn a living" (*NZH*, 1930).

It was not until the first Labour Government took office in 1935 that major social change occurred. Prime Minister Michael Joseph Savage called his form of the welfare state 'Applied Christianity'. He stated, "I can promise the people of this country that before very long they will have reached a condition of social security unsurpassed in any other country of the world" (Johnston, 2017). The Christianity theme was taken up by representatives in the Legislative Council. Member the Hon Rangi Mawhete stated: "...when Christ himself returns to this earth, He will say, 'Well done, good and faithful people. You have carried out my wishes'" (*NZH*, 1938). However, the very act that set up the welfare state was forcefully attacked by the National Party opposition. The Hon E. R. Davis said, "...the measure would penalise the thrifty and reward the spendthrift. It would destroy initiative and self reliance and was beyond the capacity of the country" (*NZH*, 1938).

Those politicians with negative attitudes towards the poor were, by and large, conservatives. Contemporary conservative politicians quoted in this paper include two New Zealand Prime Ministers and various cabinet ministers drawn from the National Party. Labour politicians were, and still are, more focused on improving the wellbeing of people (especially children) living in poverty.

A similar, if more extreme, stance was evident in Victorian England. Lord Melbourne (1751-1818) was Prime Minister when the New Poor Laws (1834) were enacted. This law provided for the funding of workhouses at the lowest possible cost to ratepayers. Melbourne, although belonging to the reforming Whig Party, was no reformer. He was true to the status quo of the aristocratic class of Britain. The key positions of contemporary political parties in New Zealand in relation to poverty fit the classic models of status quo conservatives (National) and social reformers (Labour) whilst being limited by the iron cage of neoliberalism.

Previous generations seemed more adept at challenging the myths and language of poverty. For example, George Bernard Shaw in *Pygmalion* showed that Eliza had nothing to show for all her hard work as a flower seller. But conversely, Professor Higgins transformed her into a lady of leisure and she led a life of luxury. Hard work doesn't necesarily bring riches. Shaw (1906), in the preface to his play *Major Barbara*, stated: "...the greatest of evils and the worst of crimes is poverty...".

A modern equivalent of Shaw is filmmaker Ken Loach. His prize-winning 2016 film *I Daniel Blake* is set in Newcastle in the North East of England and tells the story of Daniel Blake, who falls ill and tries to obtain a benefit. In spite

of having support from his doctor and a specialist, his application is turned down and, as if in a Kafka novel, he tries and fails to appeal the decision. He meets Katie, a single mother, and he assists her to improve her new house, doing simple jobs for her. She is very poor, a state that has been exacerbated by the cutting of her benefit because she was late for an appointment. She has to feed her two children and we witness a most shattering scene when she visits the food bank. Eventually, Katie turns to sex work and Daniel dies of a heart attack.

In relation to the plight of a person like Daniel Blake, Friedrich Engels (1845) argued that when a person inflicts a wound on another resulting in death, it is called manslaughter or murder. But when the politico-economic system inflicts poverty on individuals resulting in illness causing early death, it is "disguised malicious murder" (p. 131).

This paper has explored the myths and language of poverty in three timeframes: the Victorian period of the 19th century, a period of abject poverty for many; the 1930s depression that also resulted in extreme poverty that was relieved by the establishment of the welfare state; and the contemporary period of neoliberalism since the 1980s. Selecting harsh language to describe people can be damaging; language like shirkers, welfare dependents, the work-shy and dole-bludgers. Stigmatising certain groups leads to the proposition that they are in need of special measures, usually harsh treatment, because they are 'the other' and they are not like us.

Perhaps we can use the words of Daniel Blake to remind us of the power of language and of the respect that is due to all persons, in poverty or not.

> I am not a client, a customer, nor a service user. I am not a shirker, a scrounger, a beggar nor a thief. I am not a national insurance number, nor a blip on a screen. I paid my dues, never a penny short, and proud to do so. I don't tug the forelock but look my neighbour in the eye. I don't accept or seek charity. My name is Daniel Blake. I am a man not a dog. As such I demand my rights. I demand you treat me with respect.
> I, Daniel Blake, am a citizen, nothing more, nothing less.
> Thank you.
> (Loach, 2016)

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