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Benefits Street – Representations of Poverty and Austerity in the UK Today

I Introduction

“This used to be one of the best streets in Birmingham, now it is one of the worst!” – one of the first comments the audience gets to hear about the street in Birmingham which is the setting of Channel 4’s pseudo-documentary “Benefits Street”. “Benefits Street”, produced by the film company Love Productions, was broadcast in January 2014. It sparked a great deal of media attention and a prolonged debate on a number of issues. These include the question of fair representation of people on benefits, but also the issue of welfare itself. Both right-wing and left-wing commentators have responded, as well as the residents of James Turner Street in Birmingham who feature in the 5-part series. The final episode lets the residents comment on their experience, following the surge in media attention with camera crews from all over the world camping on their doorsteps.

James Turner Street is a road of terraced housing in the area of Winson Green in Birmingham, close to Winson Green prison. It is a working-class area that has indeed seen better times. Where people in full employment used to live during Birmingham’s heyday as one of the leading industrial cities in the UK, nowadays the situation is different. But, crucially, according to Paul Baker, who undertook research in the area for his company:

I first went to James Turner Street in 2008 for my company, Vector Research. Specialising in researching what are known as "hard-to-access" groups and neighbourhoods, we had been commissioned by the city council and Urban Living, one of the government's housing pathfinder organisations seeking to improve communities in north-west Birmingham, to produce a

report on the area.

(<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/20/benefits-street-james-turner-birmingham-channel-4>, last access 28 Feb 2015)

His research results do not match with what is portrayed in the TV series. Here is his further comment:

Indeed, the programme misrepresents the true conditions of James Turner Street and ignores objective evidence. Claims of more than [nine in 10 not working and on benefits](#) ("based on informal door-knocking") are ludicrous. I appreciate that my company's data is from 2008 and 2009, but conditions locally have not changed drastically since then. Indeed the cost of an independent household survey to update our outputs would have been tiny in relation to total production costs for the documentary series. But perhaps hard data would spoil the story. Instead unsubstantiated figures are being banged out and going unchallenged. The end result is a biased and misleading picture which is damaging for a fragile community.

(<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/20/benefits-street-james-turner-birmingham-channel-4>, last access 28 Feb 2015).

TV series are not commissioned to present the truth of whatever social situation – if that is at all possible in this medium. But it is highly interesting to see that what pretends to be a documentary, fly-on-the-wall-style TV film is actually an odd combination of voyeuristic, big brother-style intrusive reality TV combined with a political and social agenda. But like all representations, there is more to it than meets the eye, and whatever the original production may have intended to be, there are subtle messages about the value of solidarity and friendship to be found if one cares to look beyond the admittedly inflammatory, stereotypical and cheap surface.

Let me first explain the main content of the five episodes and the story-lines they develop. I will then comment on the question of how the

representation of austerity and poverty works in terms of aesthetic choices and how these choices might affect the audience. I will then briefly summarize the reception of the series and end with some questions concerning the role of the media in portraying austerity measures and the resulting poverty. My main focus will lie on the role that media discourse, and cultural products play for the assessment of austerity as a political project.

II Content and Story-Lines

In five episodes, "Benefits Street" shows a number of people who are neighbours, friends or associates and how they manage their lives. The majority of people whose stories are told live on some kind of welfare benefit – housing, disability, child benefit. The ostensible reason for filming the series are the cuts in benefits and how this will affect people who are already very poor. Key characters are a drug- and alcohol addict trying to get dry and clean who is a victim of child-abuse; a shop-lifter banned from entering the city centre, a single mother with two children who has severe depression, a very young couple with two children under 4 who have no work, and a number of single mothers/young men seeking employment. Only in the final episode do we meet a working person. In one episode, we encounter a group of Rumanian men who were lured to the UK with the promise of work who are extremely poor. They leave the street again since they discover they are never to be paid.

The street is often shown with rubbish lying about and the interiors of the houses which we get to see are very run down. Appliances don't work because landlords or –ladies are unwilling to have them repaired, piles of washing lie around and a lot of the time, residents live outside their front doors which children running fairly wild, with few toys and no books. It is only in the later episodes that we see tidy and properly furnished interiors.

But rather than stick with one family or case at the time, we have a disjointed narrative that seems to focus the audience's attention on a particular person but then jumps to someone else, or includes people who appear in other episodes. Neither is the time of year consistent (it seems to be spring and summer), nor does one get the feeling of a kind of chronological development which is clearly marked by dates, times and settings. The effect of this kind of disjointed narrative is negative: one does not get the feeling that time progresses or that change is possible. Rather, the impression one is left with is one of the absence of progress, of immutability. If there is change, then perhaps for the worst. The timeless nature of the existence of people who live here is captured and that is perhaps not a bad idea. With no tasks except housework, time stretches endlessly. However, I am not sure that was the intended effect. Rather, that viewers are not supposed to analyse or think when they watch, but that they react emotionally with only few factual pointers to guide their response. The "figures" provided at the beginning of the series are just a token element which one expects of a "proper" documentary. It is not research-based figures we get but a resident commenting on the employment status of the residents. It is interesting to hear that a number of people who are in work never made it onto the programme, nor did the neighbour with hanging baskets and a wonderful front garden. We do see a white do-gooder from the church trying to get people to improve their front gardens but at the end, she is chased off by someone wielding a hammer. Whether she is the target or the camera crew is unclear. The overall impression, at least on the surface, is one of a completely dilapidated street with drug-addicts, shop-lifters and unemployed people.

III Aesthetics

The negative effect is supported by a number of aesthetic choices which underscore the effects of the story-lines we are offered. I would like to look

at these carefully because they help to set in stone a particular “look”, a visual image of poverty under austerity measures.

First of all, this is cheap TV which we are asked to watch. The number of locations are highly limited; apart from James Turner Street, we get only few forays into other places. These include a sports hall, a meeting place to discuss the gardening activities on the street, a fast-food outlet, a square in London to which the Romanian men move, sleeping rough, after leaving Birmingham, the local hospital. Most of the time, we get images of the street. Aerial shots alternate with views of the road with rubbish lying in piles on the pavements. The colour scheme of the series is drab, even in summer; the street appears colourless, washed-out, as do the untidy interiors we see. If we do enter a house which looks reasonably tidy and furnished, the scenes are in the evening and the main emphasis is laid on the rubbish-skip-style garden.

The opening sequence and during the episodes, the same kind of cheap music is played again and again, often accompanied by the commentary of the off-screen narrator. We never get to see the crew or the interviewer, nor do we know anything about the narrator except that he is male, and speaks with a pronounced, probably northern accent. The way he speaks adds a level of pseudo-drama to the proceedings, always pretending that the next cliff-hanger is around the corner. The “suspense”-aspect of the series is added to by including a twitter hashtag for people to respond to whenever a dramatic moment occurs. The editing is slightly disjointed and although each episode is supposed to have a specific topic it focuses on, the stories jump around a lot without a clear narrative goal. One gets the impression that bits of film have been joined through editing which may not have occurred in conjunction at all. It is particularly damning that the reasons for being on benefits at all mostly come out at the very end of the series and are only hinted at. Drug and alcohol problems, child abuse, learning difficulties, being a single parent, being without sufficient

qualifications to understand official letters, let alone hold down a job, are only mentioned briefly.

The overall plotline – that of steady decline – is confirmed by the aesthetic decisions, although in some cases the outcome of a particular person's story is at least ambivalent.

Interestingly, though, representations often don't work only in one direction. While it is clear from the music, the tone, the voice of the narrator, his comments, and the choice of scenes and the intrusive character of much of the camera work and editing that the producers wanted to confirm the audience's preconceptions of what poverty and living on benefits looks like, the residents on the street sometimes counteract this probable intention. In particular the mother-figure White Dee, Deirdre Kelly, who is given a lot of screen space, obviously holds values such as friendship, solidarity, support very dear and we see her not just talking about these values, but actually living them when she helps her neighbours, or disciplines her children. If one had known more about the residents' backgrounds, had a more balanced choice of people in work and without work, of visitors to the street such as health visitors or church people, of old and young residents, a much more rounded picture would have emerged. As it stands, one feels manipulated by the series and it is easy to understand why both right-wing and left-wing viewers find it easy to see their own misconceptions or thoughts reflected by the series.

IV Reception

Viewing figures were high: up to 5 million people watched the series. <http://www.channel4.com/news/benefits-street-birmingham-channel-4-twitter-row>, last access 1 March 2015) And not only did they watch it, they commented on it in social media spaces and during debates on television. The two camps consist mostly of people accusing the residents of James

Turner Street to be scroungers unwilling to work and earn their own upkeep. Comments on Twitter were so negative, people complained about their abusive nature to the broadcasting standard's commission, Ofcom. Commentators on the left criticize the salacious and voyeuristic nature of the programme, labelling it 'poverty porn', they object to the effect the series would have on viewers (and did have) and consider it exploitative television. How you read "Benefits Street" depends to a large extent on the discursive context in which you move, i.e. the process of decoding the ambivalent messages in "Benefits Street" depends on one's social, cultural, and political position.

While I agree with many critics, and also find "Benefits Street" a simplistic piece of bad television which never explains anything about social exclusion, inequality, the reasons for Birmingham's decline, the benefits system and the effects of the cuts on it etc., I was moved by the individuals shown in spite of the awful aesthetic quality and the way in which audiences were supposed to be manipulated. Some of the people in the series lead the most difficult lives imaginable, and still do not lose hope and keep relationships going against all odds, not least fighting to keep their children housed, clothed, fed and educated. This comes through in spite of the broken story-lines, the way in which only unemployed people are put centre-stage while employed people are marginalized.

Obviously, the series can be read as confirmation of a negative view of people on benefits and living in poverty if one is so inclined, or it can be read as scandalously bad television, tricking residents into participating, not realizing what this would mean for their community. Some critics also focus on the fact that extreme cases were shown, rather than the majority of people who are on benefits – pensioners. Thus a distorted image of people on benefits and the benefit problem emerged. Others find it most problematic that the participants seem to have been conned into taking

part, not even knowing what the series would be called. This is the comment of Deirdre Kelly, known as White Dee in the series:

"They said they wanted to film for a TV show about how great community spirit is in the street and how we all help each other out on a daily basis," said Ms Roberts, 32.

(...)

"They said that 'Britain was broken' but that I lived in an area where the community was very close. I participated in the show on that belief," she told the Birmingham Mail.

She added: "But this programme has nothing to do with community, which you can tell from the title. It's all about people in the street living off benefits, taking drugs and dossing around all day. It makes people out as complete scum." <http://www.channel4.com/news/benefits-street-birmingham-channel-4-twitter-row> (last access 1 March 2015)

Here is the comment of a spokesperson for Channel 4:

Channel 4 said that the documentary produced was "fair and balanced ... [and] a fair reflection of the reality of life on a street where the majority of households receive benefits - and in an area of Birmingham that has had the highest rate of unemployment in the country for the last eight years. It is a sympathetic, humane and objective portrayal of how people are coping with continuing austerity and cuts in benefits." <http://www.channel4.com/news/benefits-street-birmingham-channel-4-twitter-row> (last access 1 March 2015)

If this were really the case, what would have been the minimum requirements is providing factual background and information, research-based selection of typical residents including people of all ages, in and out of employment, a less intrusive camera, a less disjointed editing, non-sensationalist story-lines, a historical long-term perspective for the area,

and involving the people filmed to give them more influence on what is shown and what is left out. More work on the colours, perspectives, locations, commentary and even the music would also have helped.

V Conclusion

But why is all this important? I don't think the issue here is whether this representation is a fair one, or even one that is aesthetically interesting. Today's television is usually neither the one nor the other, although good-quality documentaries are possible, of course. I think the series is important for two reasons: one, it sparked a huge debate and, although in a questionable manner, pointed towards those living in poverty. Two, in a medialised political society, representation matters. "Benefits Street" is part of the wider discourse on austerity and its consequences, not least the cuts in benefits and the redefinition of who is entitled to them. Therefore, politicians, policy-makers, voters, as well as people who suffer from austerity measures are all part of the same discourse. Images are powerful and if the ambivalent image of the residents portrayed in this series is considered "typical" for people on benefits and how they react to cuts, the impact of the series can go in two directions. Either it confirms the hardliners' opinions that benefits are wrong and should be cut even further; or it makes people uncomfortably aware of the ever-growing social divide in Britain which rests, among other aspects, on the unequal division of wealth. As part of a wider political project which protects certain members of society and redistributes welfare to the cost of others, usually at the lower end of the class scale, austerity politics also depends on sympathetic media representation to shore up the notion that there is no alternative to austerity measures.

And although our interest should not be limited to questions of representation, but should also focus on actual developments affecting people, representation from a Cultural–Studies-point of view is crucial since it has an impact on policy making, on the acceptance of such policies, on

actual developments as well as on material decisions and their consequences.