

Response to Gesa Stedman's Paper on *Benefits Street*

Not as Bad as its Early Reputation?

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First of all many, many thanks for your paper which gave us a very lively and convincing example of how Cultural Studies can contribute to “austerity” studies by analysing significant representations. My interpretation of the series is not quite as negative as Gesa Stedman's, but before I come to that, I would like to begin my response with a few words about the concept of “representation”, as it might not be quite clear to everybody from other disciplines..

1. The Concept of ”Representation”:

“The concept of representation has come to occupy a new and important place in the study of culture”, writes Stuart Hall in his book *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practice* of 1997.¹ Hall, so to speak a founding father of Cultural Studies of the second generation (after Raymond Willimas, Richard Hoggart, E.P. Thompson) and much more theoretically oriented than they were, more or less invented the concept –though, of course several others have contributed - and has developed it in great detail in many publications.

In his understanding (and by now in that of the whole discipline)

“representation” has to do with social reality and the *creation of meaning*, which is seen as a political process. Meaning, Hall argues, drawing on linguistics and semiotics, is not an essential quality of social phenomena, but only *produced through languages*, i.e. language proper, but also musical, pictorial, sign languages, applied in a *variety of media* and in what Hall calls “*discursive practices*” (high and popular literature, journalism, film, photography, the visual arts, etc.) Meaning is never fixed, but contested and constantly changing and exists only in these representations. As the decisive forces determining meaning Hall names *ideology and power*. A further important aspect of the theory is that

representations do not only mirror social reality and power relations, but in their turn impact on them. Let me finish with a longish quote, in which he gives advice to the interpreter of discursive practices: “the *discursive approach* is more concerned with the effects of and consequences of representations, - its ‘politics’. It examines not only how language and representation produce meanings, but how the knowledge, which a particular discourse produces, connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities [...]” (6)

Documentary films like photography are specially interesting representational media (and discursive practices), having a particularly close relation to reality. They require the discursive approach most urgently, for though they *may appear as objective representations* (in contrast to painting for instance), in fact *they are subjective representations*, transporting certain political meanings.

2. The British Documentary Tradition

I would now like to remind you briefly of the British documentary tradition and finally try to position *Benefits Street* and its (possible?) political meaning in this context. As is well known, Britain has a long and rich tradition of documentary representations, especially of problematic social situations. The first were written ones. William Cobbett’s *Rural Rides* (1822-1826) focused on the life and plight of the rural population, while works published later in the century explored the precarious situation of the industrial working class and the urban poor under the conditions of high capitalism. Most famous examples are Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851 and 1861) and Charles Booth’s *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1892-1897, 1902-1903). In the 1930s, another period of grave economic problems and much hardship, documentary writing went on, but films now offered new possibilities. The *Documentary Film Movement* experimented with different approaches. Most of the famous John Grierson films (*Drifters* 1929, *Coal Face* 1936, *Night Mail*

1936) depicted hard working conditions, but presented them in a slightly glorifying, almost poetic light (workers as heroes), while his *Housing Problems* (1935) and Humphrey Jennings' *Spare Time* (1939) more realistically showed difficult everyday life and the appalling housing situation in the slums. After the war, in the 1950s and 60s, only few documentary films proper came out, e.g. Tony Richardson's *Momma Don't Allow* (1956) and Karel Reisz's *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (1959), while socially committed directors preferred to approach social problems by feature films ("new wave films"), offering the advantage of a stronger emotional impact through identification (examples are Tony Richardson's *The Loneliness of the long Distance Runner* 1962, John Schlesinger's *A Kind of Loving*, Lindsay Anderson's *This Sporting life* 1963, Ken Loach's *Kes* 1969, all based on novels, etc.). Ken Loach's TV drama *Cathy Come Home* (1966) proved the most successful of fictionalised portrayals of underprivileged life. Set in Birmingham like *Benefits Street* and clearly a reference point of that series, it deals with the home shortage crisis in the UK caused by war damage and slum clearance and is a mixture of a touching story and documentary style parts: Cathy, a young mother of three, is forced by the circumstances (lack of money, shortage of affordable housing, cruel house-owners, inhuman regulations and unfeeling social servants) to move to ever more uncomfortable shelters until she becomes homeless and her children are taken away. Though watched by a quarter of the population and causing a public outcry, according to Loach, it did not have much effect on governmental housing policy, though it seemed to have helped to reform the 19th century workhouse style behaviour of the social services then the rule.² Since then "no over-arching movement in documentary film has emerged", writes *screen online* (Bfi) website, though there were some experimental socially committed documentaries in the 80s, often focusing on racial minorities or youth groups, e.g. John Akomfrah's *Handsworth Songs* 1986, Isaac Julien's *Territories* 1985, TV series *This is England '86* (2006). When looking back at this long tradition,

I think it is fair to say that all those works have something in common: they unmistakably side with the underprivileged against the forces of power, whatever the class position or the precise political stance of the authors and directors may be.

3. *Benefits Street* and the Tradition

(After our meeting I have read up on the various public reactions and have reworked the following part of my text under the impression. To my relief I have found several serious comments that support my not so negative view of the series.)

How does *Benefits Street*, which Gesa Stedman has analysed so clearly, relate to the British documentary tradition? How can we decode the message that may have been the intention of the film makers to encode (to use another of Stuart Hall's concepts)? It seems necessary to take some time before judging. We have heard about the furore in the media, both from the Right and the Left, some of the latter condemning the series as "demonising the poor" and "poverty porn". But there have also been other, less hasty and polemical reactions. Deborah Orr, respected Scottish journalist and a leading social and political commentator, for instance, wrote in *The Guardian*: "Primed to expect a ghastly 'poverty porn', I saw instead a sad and touching documentary, which takes the time to offer a nuanced depiction of people usually talked of as troubling, unwelcome statistics, and only put under the microscope when some great tragedy occurs."³ And Gareth Price, also in the *Guardian*, wrote in the same tenor: "Yet the narratives in *Benefits Street* have a human and poignant quality, often presenting decent and compassionate people disenfranchised by an unfair society."⁴

I think it is important to realise that a very special section of the lowest stratum of society is focused, not a comprehensive view of the whole working class intended: the series documents the precarious living situation of the weakest and most vulnerable members of society, who apparently have no good

professional qualifications, are sick (drug and alcohol addiction, nervous disorders, etc.) or generally too weak to shape their own lives and thus depend on benefits, which are in the process of being seriously cut. Fraser Nelson in an article in *The Spectator* writes: “But the show depicts the workless class, which is the point. These people are people who otherwise don’t have a voice. They don’t vote, so for many years they have just not mattered.”⁵ He assumes an educative intention of the film makers, pointing out that *Love Production*, the company that made the series, is not run by a Tory, but by Richard McKerrow, a friend of Ed Milliband, and rejects the reproach of sensationalism: “*Benefits Street* did not single out the worst ward in Britain. There are scores of areas where deprivation is higher.” One might add that the sympathetic treatment of the Rumanians represents a clear stance against Tory politics, as the government openly discusses repealing the free movement within the EU to keep out poor immigrants from the Balkan. Nelson further guesses a reason for *Benefits Street*’s big echo: “[...] the average Brit barely recognises the life lived by those at the bottom. This perhaps explains why *Benefits Street* has been such a hit: it offers a glimpse into what has now become, to most British people, another country”. (A modern echo of Disraeli’s “two nations” in the mid-nineteenth century!) Famous American documentary filmer Roger Graef, equally defending “much-maligned documentaries such as Channel 4’ *Benefits Street*”, also praises the enlightening effect of the undertaking: “the role of programme-makers play in opening up the wider audience’s eyes to people they don’t normally get to see is a valuable one.”⁶ Thus criticism that other inhabitants of the street, who are in work and a better position, are not included seems to miss the point.⁷ Orr argues that “whatever the proportion of jobless people there are on this street, there are enough to form a critical mass that establishes living on benefits as normal.” And a spokeswoman of the Department for Work and Pensions admitted that in 2014 there were circa 3.5 million families with no one working. (see Walker). It seems justifiable for

reasons of a concentrated filmic to focus on a group of people affected in one street.

On another level, however, I think – and this seems only my idea – that this very portrayal of the weakest might also be seen as a symbol of the declined state of the once proud working class, for over 150 years an important pillar of society. It is certainly not by chance that the film makers chose as location a traditional street of terraced houses, where neighbourly life can still take place (if in changed forms) as it used to in the past, rather than one of the notorious housing estates, isolating people and breeding conflicts, that figured in several social novels and films of 80s and 90s. In fact, compared to *Cathy Come Home*, the situation seems almost idyllic, as eviction is not a big threat in the mostly dilapidated houses, which somehow seem doomed anyway.

One observation which triggered this –admittedly a bit speculative - idea was that despite their deprived circumstances many inhabitants of James Turner Street show a lot of traditional working-class social habits and virtues, especially solidarity and humanity: they help each other in many instances (with mother figure “White Dee” being the most helpful) as Gesa has mentioned, celebrate birthdays and weddings with neighbours; violence is remarkably absent and race relations are harmonious. (with a the exception of some resentment to the new arrival of the Rumanian group). Social researcher Paul Baker, applying an academic classification, calls it “a typical ‘terraced melting pot.’”.⁸ Nelson shares Orr’s and Gareth’s compassionate and favourable impression of the people depicted (s.a.): “As quickly becomes clear, they are overwhelmingly kind, neighbourly and surprisingly upbeat given that they are, in effect, inmates of a social prison.” He also notices that they are not idle, even attests them “entrepreneurialism”: “One man sells sachets of washing powder.[..] A former drug addict picks up magazines from a hotel foyer and sells them on the street. Someone else finds discarded metal to sell for scrap. These people are working - but outside the system.” Even Paul Baker, whose

intention is to judge the series as giving “a biased and misleading picture which is damaging to a *fragile community*” (my italics) indirectly confirms the existence of a traditional neighbourly working-class community, though under threat. Is the picture we get of the milieu in James Turner Street, when we think about it in cool blood, really anything else than that of a “quiet, non-threatening, not particularly untidy, just a bit-rundown - and obviously very low-income” neighbourhood, that Baker found in 2008?

A word about the film's aesthetics seems necessary, as the film makers have been accused of exploiting reality film methods for the sake of sensationalism. There is, however, an important difference between this series and shows like *Big Brother* or *Jungle Camp*. Those are experiments, deliberately staged with (lay) actors selected in casting shows, while *Benefits Street* pictures real people, who actually live, or have lived, in James Turner Street, in their real life circumstances. Of course, the film material has been cut and arranged (Gesa specially noticed the jumpy structure), and thus meaning is constructed as in every representation. But the grade of constructedness is miles apart. Further, just as the portrayals of the people have been interpreted differently according to the viewers' subject position, so the setting has caused differing reactions. Many viewers have looked with disgust at the shabbiness and disorder in some homes (much of it caused by lack of money for furniture, curtains, kitchen appliances etc.) and the garbage in the street (actually not a permanent state, but due to the refusal of the garbage collectors to remove the filth after scrap metal collectors had torn open the bags). This reaction may have a lot to do with the viewers' own position as middle-class people used to orderly, comfortable homes and clean streets. (Orwell's confession that he grew up with the prejudice “the working classes smell” comes to mind). Orr writes: “The real problem is that in some observers that knowledge inspires compassion, while in others it inspires contempt.” It seems also worth noting that while the interiors, gardens and the street may not always be well looked after and aesthetically

unappealing, the people keep their own bodies and those of their children remarkably tidy. Nobody, not even the junkies wear torn clothes, the young women dye their hair, dress up, wear fashion jewellery and even go to nail studios. Thus neglect, where it seems to happen, appears caused by the circumstances (lack of money, perhaps depression, lack of prospects etc.), not by a defect in people's characters.

Who then is blamed for the social and cultural decline of this particular group of people, possibly carrying a wider metaphorical meaning? Gesa Stedman has shown that the message seems a mixed one. The series, cheaply and admittedly a bit shoddily produced (no sustainable statistics as Gesa remarked, no exact information on the extent of cuts etc.), seems to waver between criticism of the system and criticism of the people portrayed. Although the government cuts, which make life on benefits even more precarious, are mentioned again and again, and although the inhabitants of James Turner Street come over as more helpless than lazy and sympathetically neighbourly, one cannot help occasionally thinking that individuals could make a little more effort, to clean up their surroundings and get a grip on their lives. Ambiguity rules, and thus the audience can find arguments for very different positions, as has been proved by the hot public debate. The series may have intensified some watchers' views or, on the contrary, triggered a change, opening people's eyes to a social problem so far suppressed, as Nelson and Graef have suggested. Thus the series and the reactions form an excellent example that representations do not only reflect, but impact on reality. In other words, representations matter in the construction of political and social reality.

But is the relative openness of the perspective due to the film makers' incompetence or perhaps intentional? Is it possible to think that after the decline of Britain's left in the last decades a clearly biased documentary about the underprivileged, as produced in the past, would have no chance to work for change under the present cultural and political circumstances? Is the only way

to interest the public - or part of the public - for problem cases, to present them offering multiple perspectives, at the risk of confirming some people in their reactionary positions? Then *Benefits Street* would represent a new type of documentary, typical for our multi-voiced communication society, a documentary which does no longer take the viewer by the hand, but presents a challenge for him to form his or her own opinion. In fact, a second series, in all likelihood produced along the same lines, is under way, this time produced in Stockton-on-Tees, but it will – rumours will have it – only be released after the next Election.

P. S. A curious effect of our media- mad world is that the great public attention has proved positive for some of the participants despite the shitstorm in the media against the series and their own earlier complaints.⁹ Some have profited in the long run, clever “White Dee”, Deirdre Kelly, in the first place. She made £ 100.000 for appearing on the show *Celebrity Big Brother* and is now charging for taking part in parties. She also spoke at the Tory Conference and has become a well-known public figure, while her daughter has started a career in the police. Stephen ‘Smoggy’ Smith, the “50 p man” was less lucky: though Millionaire Charlie Mullins offered to help him open his own cheap discount shop, they fell out and their plan did not materialise. The young parents, Becky and Mark moved away, and Mark works now as a labourer, no longer drawing benefits. Of course, not everybody has profited. The less fortunate can only hope that the great public attention will move the government to rethink some of the cruellest cuts, for instance for the sick and disabled, – which is not very likely. Ken Loach’s experience will probably be repeated.

¹ Stuart Hall (ed.), *Representations. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Open University Publications, London-Thousand Oaks-New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1997, p. 15.

² Loach remembered in 2006: “We saw Anthony Greenwood, the housing minister, two weeks after the film. He was very nice, but it was plain that the government was not going to do anything substantial [...] We had raised the storm but it wouldn’t necessarily change anything. [...] The experience pushed me away from social democracy to a socialist analysis.” Laura Smith, “Interviews. ‘It’s Probably the most Influential Hour and a Half of Television There Has Ever Been.’” *The Guardian* 15 February 2006.

<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2006/feb/15/2>. (Accessed 20 March 2015)

³ Deborah Orr, „Benefits Street Has Caused Controversy, but Let’s Hope It Has a Worthwhile Legacy“, *The Guardian* 24 January 2014.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/24/benefits-street-caused-controversy-worthwhile-legacy>. (Accessed 17 March 2015).

⁴ Gareth Price, „Decoding Benefits Street: How Britain Was Divided by a Television Show, *The Guardian*, 22 February 2014.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/22/benefits-street-how-tvprogramme-devided-the-nation>. (Accessed 17 March 2015)

⁵ Fraser Nelson. „Benefits Street Exposes Britain’s Dirty Secret – How Welfare Imprisons the Poor”, *The Spectator* 18 January 2014. www.spectator.co.uk/features/9116701/britain-dirty-secret/. Reprint: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/10577987/Benefits-Street-the-real-scandal>. (Accessed 16 March 2015)

⁶ Mara O’Hara, „Filmmaker Roger Graef Puts Social Justice in Focus“, *The Guardian* 7 May 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/may/07/filmmaker-roger-graef-puts-social-justice-in-focus>. (Accessed 17 March 2015)

⁷ Several early commentators have criticised *Benefits Street* arguing that ghettos of the poor do not exist in Britain, that there are always mixed communities. See for instance Peter Walker, “Benefits Street Culture: Study Rubbishes ‘Joblessness as a Lifestyle’ Claim”, *The Guardian* 11 September 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/sep/11/benefits-street-study-no-proof-joblessness-claim>. (Accessed 16 March 2015) The study referred to is: Robert McDonald et.al. “Benefits Street and the Myth of Workless Communities”, published by Social Research Online 19 (3).1. <http://www.socreonline.org.uk/19/3/1.html>. (Accessed 20 March 2015)

⁸ Paul Baker, „Benefits Street? It’s Nothing like the James Turner Street We Researched”, *The Guardian* 20 January 2014.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/20/benefits-street-james-turner-birmingham-channel-4>. (Accessed 16 March 2014)

⁹ The following information is taken – beside other internet sources – mainly from Dan Bloom, “They Were the Scoundrels Who Became Stars on TV’s Benefits Street – But Where Are They a Year on?” , Mail Online, 4 January 2015. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2896037/They-scoundrels-stars-TV-s-Benefits-street-a-year-on.html>. (Accessed 14 March 2015)