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I, Daniel Blake (Ken Loach, 2016)

*I, Daniel Blake* is a unique and impassioned film but has been criticised for its lack of subtlety and its over-stating of the problems people face when they are poor or trying to get benefits. I disagree. For me, it allowed me a level of emotional and political engagement which I usually only experience when viewing 'art house' cinema such as Buñuel's *Los Olvidados* (1950) and De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948). It isn't subtle, but neither are the policies and processes which have put thousands in similar positions (White, 2016) to the character of Daniel Blake, with the punitive and contemptuous hands of the state moving people away from precarity to destitution and death, often through suicide (Ryan, 2015). The telling of a more 'nuanced' story, open perhaps to alternative readings, would fail to do justice to the brutalism and Orwellian truths of the ways people experience the UK welfare system. The provision of an unwavering, counter-ideological depiction of life at the margins of society seems imperative in an era where popular media seems to wage a daily battle to demonise those in need, from the sensationalised scrounger stories in the tabloid press (Briant et al, 2011) to TV 'poverty porn' such as *Benefits Street* (Jensen, 2014). Given the chasm of experience between those who have well-paid jobs and material resources and those in poverty, including increasing numbers of those in work (Belfield et al, 2015), it is unlikely that many of those who are not reliant on benefits can begin to comprehend the extent and depth of the damage that recent policies, rules, and processes have on those who need assistance from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). And questions on the 'accuracy' of this film have invariably been posed by those, such as Toby Young (2016), who have little or no direct experience the benefits system.

As a disabled single parent who faced employment discrimination, periods of unemployment and a much-delayed career, due in part to a dearth of qualifications and social connections which are typical of someone from a working-class background educated in an 'under-performing' school, I recognise the people and characters in the film. I found the depiction of inaccessible, and often hostile, job centres, Kafkaesque telephone conversations about decisions, and soul-destroying appeals (where the claimant is always in the wrong regardless of the errors and contradictions of the system) very familiar – even before the more recent welfare reforms. The damage wrought by new policies and processes, built on a sanctions system is clear in this film. Indeed, my biggest criticism of the film is of its benign view of Jobcentre staff, showing one member of staff, Ann, as having empathy, understanding and respect for the claimants, seemingly to her own detriment. However, vignettes of Ann's compassion make this a more polyphonic film, allowing us glimpses of other perspectives, but only hint at the pressure being put upon Jobcentre staff, through limited meeting times, performance targets, scripted questions, inadequate training and job insecurities – another film perhaps.

Like most films, we are encouraged to make identifications with the central protagonist, Daniel, rather than the collective experiences of 'the dispossessed.' But we are allowed to see the effects of social marginalisation from a number of perspectives, especially Katie, a young single mother who is fellow claimant, a newcomer to the North; with her children, Dylan and Daisy, she has been exiled from their family and former community in London as a result of the 'social cleansing' of those on lower incomes. We catch glimpses of dents in their trust and happiness, such as Dylan refusing to communicate when he first meets Daniel. His sister believes this is due to few people listening to

him, a theme which reverberates through Daniel's own story, especially in the final scene where Katie reads the words which he never got to say, as his epitaph. Thus, an intersectional view of poverty, in provided, painting a portrait which seems faithful to key aspects of the gendering of poverty, such as the proclivity of mothers to go to extreme lengths in 'going without', whilst also allowing us glimpses of the cruelty society imposes on children in poverty. Katie's trip to the food bank had me rocking with sobs in my seat on both occasions I saw the film, taking me back to some of the most harrowing experiences in my own life, where malnutrition is seen as preferential to becoming a 'bad mother'. Her determination to keep a roof above their heads and food in her children's bodies did not shy away from the ugly results of such grinding inequalities; how many of those who commentate on the 'romanticism' of this tale (discussed by Steel, 2016) have been forced into prostitution to stop their child being bullied by children, as the social consequence of having broken shoes?

It could easily be argued that the film presents a very white view of social injustice, with both of these central protagonists being white. If these characters had not been positioned clearly as white British claimants, the film may have fed contempt for benefit claimants and non-white/British people, exacerbating increases in racism (NatCen, 2014) and amplifying racist discourses post-the Brexit referendum (Forster, 2016). Ethnicity and 'race' are represented subtly throughout the film, including the portrayal of Daisy as a gentle, thoughtful girl (who appears to be 'mixed race'), and a mix of people in food bank queues and Jobcentre clientele. Daniel's neighbours are Black but are depicted as aspiring entrepreneurs who are doing everything they can to survive. Daniel's distrust of them is made evident, and the film plays with carefully with audience expectations of Black men as criminals. They are placed them outside the frame of welfare recipient status, yet aiding Daniel with his benefit claim when no other agency could or would.

Criticisms of these micro-worlds of co-operation, harmony and solidarity are also likely to come from people who have little direct experience of strengths and weaknesses to be found in such communities. This is not all we see – conflicts and anti-social behaviour also feature in this film, much as they do in everyday life. But critics such as Toby Young (2016) miss the point when they complain that this is not a representative portrait of welfare recipients, an approach mired in individualism; this is social realism which illuminates the damage wrought by society upon those it has excluded. As a social realist film, *I, Daniel Blake* excels, and it is possible that the backlash to the film lends weight to its power of audience 'surrender' and (sadly unfounded) fears that people may leave the film so angry that they graffiti their resistance on job centres, as Daniel does.

If the principles put forward in Richard Sennett's book *Respect: The formation of character in an age of inequality* was used as a provocation for a film, *I, Daniel Blake* would be the result. The themes of respect and human value are unashamedly explicit, especially in Daniel's lines and actions, such as 'You lose your self-respect – you're done for', ripostes to Jobcentre staff, the attempts to challenge Katie's feelings of shame, and the decision to sell all his possessions rather than to go through further indignities at the Jobcentre in the face of futility. Nonetheless, counter-ideological themes such as respect, and the challenging of discourses of neoliberal ideologies of 'choice' remain, as they should, subordinate to the job of storytelling. The ideology of choice is embodied by the more vicious Jobcentre worker, Sheila who frames all Daniel and Katie's responses to obdurate DWP regimes as rational choice, when they have none, disregarding 'pervasive 'asymmetries' in the

specious 'co-production' of 'service' performed by Jobcentre staff and their 'customers' (Wilde, 2014).

My response to this film was visceral. My immediate response was to be torn between crying and deep anger, followed by despair about how a collective anger can be harnessed to make change. Although the film had a number of comedy moments, this was probably the least pleasurable film I have ever seen (apart from *Love, Actually*); this may well be a problem for the film's reception, who may struggle to 'restore affective balance'; as this is theorised to create a 'heightened defence' in viewers (Tan, 2011, 19). Sadly, it is possible that the anger this has ignited, and the debates which have followed, may dissipate in the face of the formidable barriers to political action in current era. I fear that *I, Daniel Blake* may have a similar legacy (Allen, 2016) to *Cathy Come Home* (Loach 1966) in creating short-term public furore and an increase in charitable giving before further damage ensues. I hope I am wrong.

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