

In the Hell of Street-level Bureaucracy
Administrative cruelty according to Ken Loach

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Ken Loach's latest film, which won the Palme d'Or prize at the Cannes Film Festival, charts the struggles of a carpenter trying to get state welfare after suffering a heart attack. *I, Daniel Blake* offers an accurate depiction of the dehumanisation suffered by the most destitute in a United Kingdom undermined by de-industrialisation and inequality.

Formal inventiveness is not the most pronounced feature of Ken Loach's most recent film, *I, Daniel Blake*, which seems to suggest that the Palme d'Or was awarded just as much to the director and his body of works (which have racked up no less than 13 Cannes selections) as to this work in particular. The film indisputably bears its director's highly original stamp, and, I would argue, ranks among his best works. Loach's apparent economy of means serves to make an extremely simple and emotionally charged point about the devastating effects of poverty and institutional cruelty in neoliberal Great Britain. The film offers an embodied – and maybe also idealistic – perspective on the working classes' rejection of European integration, taxed with the demise of the welfare state (and particularly the National Health Service) and with a flow of immigration that is disrupting for the country's manual workers, former manual workers, and office workers.

A denial of recognition

Daniel Blake, the eponymous character in the film, is an experienced carpenter trying to get sickness benefit (ESA) after having suffered a heart attack. In the opening sequence of the film, he makes his suffering clear as he is questioned by a 'healthcare professional' from a private company, which has been appointed by the public authorities to determine his degree of autonomy and eventually judges him ineligible for the benefit. As the film goes on, this discrepancy takes on tragic proportions. Daniel Blake finds himself confronted with the bureaucratic complexity and cruel procedures aimed at deterring the poor and the unemployed from remaining in their situations.

The film's title, *I, Daniel Blake*, resounds like a call for recognition. Sick, but denied sickness benefit, he is forced to look for work, navigating complex online systems, being kept on hold on the telephone, and sitting through humiliating interviews with the administration. He finds himself torn between the hope of obtaining Jobseeker's Allowance – the conditions of which he cannot actually fulfil (being fit for work and actively seeking employment) – and the hope of his appeal about his sickness benefit being heard, if not accepted. This discrepancy forces him into various administrative and moral convolutions. As a former manual worker, he now has to learn the bureaucratic jargon of claimants and job seekers, write a CV, market himself, and prove he is taking the necessary steps to fulfil his side of the contract he signed with the state – failing to respect the clauses of that contract will expose him to sanctions. As a fake job seeker, he is forced to approach employers who have nothing for him and when

he is finally offered work, he has to refuse because his health is too poor. The simplicity of person-to-person conversation and the characteristic claim to dignity of the working-class ‘us’¹ are crushed by this confrontation with a world where managerial-style administration of the unemployed meets soup kitchens.

Plunged into the administrative management of poverty

The erosion of personality against which the character revolts is certainly a key feature experienced by ‘service users’ in their dealings with street-level bureaucracy. In a tirade about the simple beauty of the term citizen, forgotten because so seemingly obsolete, Daniel Blake denounces both the ‘service user’ and ‘national insurance number’ labels. Confrontation with state employees takes the shape of what Harold Garfinkel described as ‘status degradation ceremonies’ in an article that has since become a classic.² When the protagonist has to go through a work capability assessment, its standardised nature inflicts violence upon him in two ways: first, it denies his suffering and euphemises the difficulties he has undergone at work;³ second, it mutilates him as a person because it refuses to hear him in his totality. The administrative division of work compartmentalises the ‘case’ into a series of boxes into which no individual ever fits.

The film describes the character’s progressive loss of autonomy⁴ as he reluctantly steps into the shoes of someone ‘on benefits’⁵ – a trajectory even more paradoxical and cruel because it is justified by placing responsibility, and sometimes even blame, squarely on the job seeker’s shoulders. The film expresses the extent to which manual workers and former manual workers are discredited in this system that has devised an abstract language, making flexibility into an imperative *hexis*⁶ and dematerialising all its procedures and protocols at the risk of excluding the most fragile from their rights as claimants. It expresses the fear and anxiety that suffocate the main character, caught up in a Kafkaesque system incapable of hearing his request and in the untenable gap between the timeframe of the bureaucratic waiting game and the urgency of hunger. It also expresses how the people ensnared in the welfare net alternate between resignation and revolt. Ken Loach expresses with force and simplicity how the large-scale return of welfare and unemployment has crushed the dignity of workers and their ability to constitute themselves as a class and claim social citizenship. He also expresses how the neoliberal reform of the welfare state, begun with Thatcher’s neo-conservatism and pursued under Blair’s New Labour, saw market fundamentalism go hand-in-hand with a deliberately dissuasive institutional system generating guilt for the poor.⁷ Finally, the film expresses the shame and humiliation that continue to characterise poverty today, in societies that maybe be modern and urban but nonetheless include massive

1 On the ‘us-them’ opposition characteristic of representations of self and others in working class cultures, see Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy. Aspects of Working Class Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957). For a recent re-reading of the empirical conditions of validity of this opposition, see Paul Pasquali and Olivier Schwartz, ‘La Culture du pauvre : un classique revisité. Hoggart, les classes populaires et la mobilité sociale’, *Politix*, n° 114, p. 21-45.

2 Harold Garfinkel, ‘Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 61-5, March 1956, p. 420-424.

3 Pascal Marichalar, “‘C’est gênant de se mettre à dos son médecin, parce qu’on en a besoin.’ Ouvriers malades de leur travail face à la médecine”, *Agone*, 2016, n°58, p. 105-123.

4 Nicolas Duvoux, *L’autonomie des assistés. Sociologie des politiques d’insertion* (Paris: PUF, 2009).

5 A label that is not pejorative here, but that refers to a social status that progressively absorbs a person’s whole identity. One is poor and not ‘anything socially except [...] poor’ wrote Georg Simmel in his text ‘The Poor Person’, in *Sociology. Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009; original German edition, 1908).

6 Linda Lavitry, *Flexibilité des chômeurs, mode d’emploi. Les conseillers à l’emploi à l’épreuve de l’activation* (Paris: PUF, 2015).

7 Margaret Somers, Fred Block, ‘From Poverty to Perversity: Ideas, Markets and Institutions over 200 years of Welfare Reform’, *American Sociological Review*, April 2005, vol. 70 n° 2, p. 260-287. See also Jacques Rodriguez, ‘From Public Charity to Putting the Poor to Work. On the Speenhamland System’, Books and Ideas.net, <http://www.booksandideas.net/From-Public-Charity-to-Putting-the.html>

inequality and display callousness towards those who lose their connection to work and, progressively, to reality and even the hope of living a normal life.

The film's accuracy and empathy also reside in its description of contemporary poverty. Daniel Blake crosses paths with Katie, a single mother, forced to leave London when, after spending two years in a homeless hostel, she was rehoused in the North. She is struggling with the isolation and distress of raising two children alone, with no money. There is also Max, Daniel Blake's young Black neighbour, who gets by with small-time scams devised on Skype with a Chinese worker who shares his passion for football and the Premier League. All these characters share a condition in which they are subject to social contempt and experience shame and fear; a condition marked by lacking food and possessing sophisticated electronic equipment. In the day-to-day, this life means negotiating between paying for food and paying the electricity bill, between prostitution, the unofficial economy, and underpaid insecure jobs,⁸ and, finally, between maintaining dignity and self-esteem and giving in to bureaucratic rules and the discretionary power of staff who can choose to loosen but also tighten those rules.⁹

A contemporary concern

Loach's film is a variation on a common theme, so common, in fact, that it testifies to a contemporary concern both with the destitute and with the dehumanising institutional treatment they receive. From Frederick Wiseman's *Welfare* (1975) about 1970s New York to Jean-Pierre Duret and Andréa Santana's *Se battre* (2014) about contemporary France, various documentaries have focused on this topic, illustrating the power and ambivalence of welfare. As Daniel Blake encounters different advisers at the Job Centre, we see welfare oscillating between empathy and sanctions, two aspects embodied in Loach's film by two contrasting adviser figures: one represents the rigid application of punitive rules, while the other demonstrates compassion trying to maintain a sliver of humanity in the interstitial spaces of the administrative system.

Fictional works have also embraced this topic and there is a striking similarity between the points made by Loach's film and those made in films by Nicolas Klotz (*La question humaine*, 2007) and Stéphane Brizé (*La loi du marché*, 2015). At a very general level, the argument is that there is objective complicity between financialised, deregulated, capitalism and its justification – verging on cruelty and lack of realism – at the frontline desks of welfare institutions. Street-level bureaucracy is aimed at turning this reality into something so self-evident that it cannot be questioned. Loach takes this argument to its extreme, showcasing the deliberate cruelty of a system designed, much like the Poor Law in Victorian England, to put the poor through such untenable material and moral suffering that any job (including the famous 'zero hour contracts' allowing employers to take on employees without providing any minimal working hours) would be preferable to remaining in such a degrading system. It is the application of the 'less eligibility' principle. Although this vision excludes all contradictions and precludes adding further nuance to the picture, it undeniably relates to a reality in the United Kingdom where punitive welfare reforms have been enacted over the last few decades. Germany could also offer a good illustration of this rise of sanctions and of a paternalist regime dealing with poverty in relation to a deregulated labour market. As for France, it is characterised by such bureaucratic complexity and an accumulation of mechanisms of such magnitude that it can make even public policy designers feel faint (see Christophe Sirugue's recent report about the reform of government-guaranteed minimums). It also has the same tendency to place responsibility on the shoulders of the poor, although not always to the same extent.

The pedagogical side to the film cannot be ignored either. The pathos of situations is clearly

8 Sudhir Venkatesh and Eva Rosen, 'A perversion of 'choice'. Sex Work offers Just Enough in Chicago Urban Ghetto', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, August 2008, vol. 37 n° 4, p. 417-441.

9 Vincent Dubois, *La vie au guichet. Relation administrative et traitement de la misère* (Paris: Economica, 1999); Alexis Spire, *Accueillir ou reconduire. Enquête sur les guichets de l'immigration* (Paris: Raisons d'agir, 2008).

staged, drawing on powerful emotional levers, particularly when the harsh reality of hunger bursts onto the screen in a compelling scene when young Katie's family goes to the food bank. The bleak picture painted by these situations is offset by Daniel Blake's resistance. This symbolic reparation of the dignity of the poor, faced with a society that no longer shows them any mercy, bypasses the ambivalence of the working classes' responses to these changes. Loach shows interracial solidarity between Daniel Blake and his young neighbour, and shows poor people helping one another: mutual aid is placed in stark contrast with a now hostile economic and institutional world. However, this solidarity is never called into question, whereas its limitations are in fact one of the most troubling sides to the contemporary working classes. Their fragmentation, or even polarisation, into groups that are as morally different as they are socially similar is thereby erased from the portrait painted by the film. The figure of the white manual worker, and his loss of status, is therefore depicted without its repercussions being fully explored.

The resistance of Daniel Blake – who embodies the white male working class – is not just a turnaround for a director whose work has previously depicted the improbable mobilisation of workers in racialised services (in *Bread & Roses*, for example), it also resonates like a kind of testament. The testament of poor white people, whose crisis is causing major political upheaval in the United Kingdom, the United States, France and elsewhere, and whose distress Ken Loach depicts with remarkable accuracy. While his portrait shows incredible sensitivity to contemporary forms of social injustice, it is a shame that the only horizon afforded by this representation of agony is that of the gallant last-stand, a sudden temporary surge before the social and physical death of an individual, of the group he represents, and of the social victories achieved by the latter (workers' rights, welfare state) which contemporary society is now crushing, whether by wickedness or simply by giving in to the order of the world. The latter is not necessarily the less dangerous of the two. As Daniel Blake teaches one of Katie's children, coconuts kill more people than sharks do.

Further reading:

- Jade Lindgaard and Stéphane Allières, interview with Ken Loach: 'Avec Jeremy Corbin, nous sommes à un moment crucial de notre histoire', on *Mediapart.fr*: <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/culture-idees/241016/avec-corbyn-nous-sommes-un-moment-crucial-de-notre-histoire>
- Emmanuel Roy, 'Comment Ken Loach fait son cinéma', sur *Mediapart.fr*: <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/documentaire/culture-idees/comment-ken-loach-fait-son-cinema>
- Emmanuel Burdeau, 'Moi, Daniel Blake, lui, Ken Loach et la peur de l'art', on *Mediapart.fr*: <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/documentaire/culture-idees/comment-ken-loach-fait-son-cinema>
- Nicolas Duvoux, interview with Antoine Flandrin in *Le Monde*, 'Idées' supplement, 21 October 2016: http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/10/20/les-pouvoirs-publics-ont-accredite-l-idee-que-les-pauvres-etaient-responsables-de-leur-situation_5017496_3232.html
- *The Guardian*'s page devoted to articles about *I, Daniel Blake*: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/i--daniel-blake>

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