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The Chantelles of Benefits Britain: Collective representations of the clients of the welfare state in conservative British press (2008-2012)

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the representation of Claimants, a key social actor relevant to the welfare state, as groups in two conservative British newspapers, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph*. With recourse to critical discourse analysis, in particular van Leeuwen's 2008 work on the representation of social actors, as well as to corpus methods, the paper shows how the representation of this social actor in collective terms helps entrench the discourse of (mainly class-based) prejudice, thus working to delegitimise the welfare state.

Keywords: social actors, welfare state, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Telegraph*

According to Raymond Williams, there is no such thing as masses; "there are only ways of seeing people as masses" (1960:319). Economic crises, with the social problems they cause or exacerbate, are – as noted by sociologists (see Welshman 2013:11) – times of a heightened stereotyping of those at the bottom of the social structure. Their representation in collective terms, as the "masses" in Williams, plays an important part in this stereotyping. This article outlines such representations of the clients of the welfare state in two conservative British newspapers, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph*. Part of a

broader analysis of the discursive constructions of the British welfare state in the two dailies, this article is the second part of a study (Paprota, 2015) which identified the key social actors – or participants of social practice – relevant to the welfare state and examined these in terms of role allocation and agency.

The research material comes from newspapers evincing a conservative discourse of welfare reform, proclaimed by the *Daily Mail* in line not only with that of the 2010-2015 government, but also the opinion of the general public. It can thus be considered a sample of hegemonic discourse. As noted in the first part of the study and elsewhere (see Tyler 2013, Jones 2011, Baumberg et al. 2012), the conservative discourse on welfare and welfare reform has tended to perpetuate a negative evaluation of individuals of lower socioeconomic classes. This article seeks to show how this evaluation depends on a collective construction of Claimants, “the convenient formula” utilised, in the words of Williams, to “mass them, and interpret them” (1960:319), which ultimately serves to delegitimise the welfare state.

The corpus has been drawn from the LexisNexis database and comprises articles from the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and their Sunday sister papers, in which the phrase “welfare state” appears at least once; to ensure topicality, only texts in which the word “welfare” appears at least three times were included in the corpus. The 210 texts were analysed quantitatively with AntConc software, and qualitatively from a critical discourse analytical perspective. Distinctions between the two subcorpora comprising the *Mail* and the *Telegraph* texts were noted where relevant; diachronic analysis is left out of the study since the variation between the yearly subcorpora is quantitative rather than qualitative.

The methodological framework for the article is largely based on Theo van Leeuwen’s Social Actor scheme (2008:23-54), a set of sociosemantic categories describing ways in which social actors are represented – and recontextualised – in discourse. The present study does not seek to utilise the entire network, but focuses on these representational choices which specifically enable the profiling of

social actors as groups. These will be italicised in the course of the article.

It should be noted that van Leeuwen acknowledges his categories are not always clear-cut and may overlap. While the terms discussed by van Leeuwen are chiefly nominal phrases, the analysis in this article does not disregard other grammatical forms or contextual inference, as sociosemantic categories are considered more relevant to ideological effects than grammatical ones.

1. Claimants as a social actor

Claimants, referenced in 164 texts in the corpus, is a composite social actor comprising groups and individuals constructed as being “on the receiving end” of the welfare state in its narrow understanding as a system of (social security) benefits. This construction may be explicit, when the receipt of benefits is stated by the *functionalisation* (in van Leeuwen’s scheme, a category describing social actors by what they *do*) “claimants” or similar. It can also be implicit, when an individual or group is in a position where the receipt of these benefits is likely and can be inferred from an individual’s family, financial, or employment status, or their health condition. These tend to be expressed by the *identifications* (which profile social actors through what they *are*) “single mothers”, “the poor”, “the disabled”, or similar. Arguably, they can also be stated with terms such as “the unemployed”, which can be viewed as borderline between *functionalisation* and *classification*, where the latter label, a subset of *identification*, describes “the major categories by means of which a given society (...) differentiates between classes of people” (van Leeuwen 2008:42). This ambiguity attests both to the fuzziness of van Leeuwen’s categories and to the peculiar status of both employment and unemployment, technically non-permanent but nonetheless acknowledged to be a central component of one’s identity, noted by van Leeuwen to be culturally-specific and subject to change (2008:42).

2. Collective representations of Claimants

Claimants are most frequently, although not exclusively, referred to in collective terms, or *assimilated*. If a reference to Claimants is present in 78% texts in both subcorpora, 76% of *Mail* (M) texts and 74% of *Telegraph* (T) ones refer to Claimants in collective terms; in about a half of these Claimants are quantified, or *aggregated*: 57% texts in the M subcorpus and 40% in the T one include a quantifier or a statistic concerning Claimants, most typically their count or their cost. The numbers referenced in the texts are often implied or explicitly stated to be large. Claimants are thus constructed as excessively numerous, especially in the M subcorpus; this is underscored by the presence of the word “million” is among the top 10 collocates of “claimant*”. This is particularly problematic when the statistics quoted have a referent which is not clear or easy to interpret, such as economic inactivity in the example below:

(1) Instead of a decade of economic growth, which attracted millions of foreign workers to do the jobs the native workforce wouldn't, there would be many fewer than the current eight million people of working age who are economically inactive. What's more, the Government would have had the money to pay the large cost of supporting, persuading and forcing them back into the jobs market. (Heathcoat, DM111208)

The implication here is that the quantified group should or need to be “persuaded and forced back” into the job market, indicating it consists largely of Claimants, in particular the unemployed (they are in fact a separate category), and obscures the presence among this group of (non-working) students or those who retired early¹, groups not usually considered Claimants, thus inflating their perceived number.

The use of statistic connotes precision and factuality, often to legitimise a course of action or, as van Leeuwen puts it, “to regulate practice and manufacture consensus opinion” (2008: 37). Here, this is done by treating some groups and not others as statistics: in the corpus, Claimants is the only group regularly costed. The only other

¹ Terms related to economic inactivity and unemployment, and the composition of these groups, are regularly explained by the Office for National Statistics, see for example Leaker 2009.

group typically aggregated with definite quantifiers are immigrants, while groups such as voters, taxpayers, politicians, or Conservatives are only ever given indefinite quantifiers (such as “most” or “some”), usually to relate their opinion. This framing is a choice, and not something that unideologically stems from a real social problem which must be quantified to be tackled; rather, the quantification is foregrounded over other aspects of the problem. Alternative framings of aggregation are, albeit rarely, present in the corpus:

(2) Once again we face national bankruptcy. Once again unemployment is starting to climb viciously and millions of British families are facing joblessness and poverty. (Osborne, DM020509)

Here, the problem is clearly constructed as the lack of paid employment and ensuing poverty faced by (*aggregated*) Britons. It seems notable that the compassion evident in the passage co-occurs with the construction of the group as “British families”, not as prospective Claimants, and the topos of “the burden on the taxpayer” is not invoked.

Most collective terms through which Claimants are *assimilated*, whether *functionalisations* or *identifications*, are in themselves neutral, but a minority carry a strong negative evaluation. Some examples are “the workshy”, “the idle”, or “scroungers”, terms ascribing to Claimants such failings of character as dishonesty, laziness or indolence, rendering them not “deserving” of support (see Offe 2006:73). Occurring chiefly in the M subcorpus, they are classifiable as instances of *appraisement*, and can, it seems, also be viewed as *functionalisations* (“scroungers”) or *identifications* (“the workshy”), although van Leeuwen’s scheme does not feature a nest for *psychological identification* under the latter term, a possibly useful counterpart to *physical identification* he does include. Nominally applicable to a subset of Claimants, these terms are often used in the corpus in a way which facilitates an oversight of that caveat, such as in the *Mail*’s paraphrase of a statement by Jeremy Hunt:

(3) Just over a year ago, Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt provoked a storm by saying it should not be the state’s responsibility to fund the ever-growing families of the workshy.

He said: 'The number of children that you have is a choice and what we're saying is that if people are living on benefits, then they make choices but they also have to have responsibility for those choices'. (Martin, DM090112)

While Hunt implies that Claimants are irresponsible to have children, a claim contentious in itself, the *Mail* uses the *identification* "the workshy" as a straightforward equivalent of "people on benefits" in its paraphrase, creating a clear equivalence between both terms and groups.

On several occasions, always in the M subcorpus, *assimilation* is achieved by means of *physical identification*. Always overdetermined according to van Leeuwen, it carries a strong negative evaluation in the passage below:

(4) I went to Shettleston Road, the poorest part of what is probably the poorest constituency in Britain. (...)

We might be back in the Depression and the early 1930s, were it not for the baseball caps, tracksuit bottoms and trainers which the inhabitants - all of them white - wear. They shuffle listlessly down the street, or gather to have a smoke outside the numerous pubs.

Some of the younger women are grossly fat, but the older men are thin, almost emaciated.

Their faces look pallid and unhealthy, and they usually don't have any teeth, false or otherwise. (Glover, DM230708)

The individuals described in the passage, clearly not in employment, are assimilated into a group by means of their attire, their addictions, and their ill health evidenced by their physical appearance, all of which are clearly indicative of their social status. The passage represents social actors as a group in a way which foregrounds their bodies and through them their social class; it also carries a strong negative evaluation: most if not all aspects of their appearance and their behaviour are construed as problematic. This collective evaluation is then given a spatialised dimension:

(5) On Tuesday I encountered George Osborne, the Shadow Chancellor. Wisely, perhaps, he did not venture far outside Dewar's whisky bottling plant (...). He was accompanied by a charming, well-bred young female assistant called Poppy -

Poppy! - who was rightly not subjected to the unpleasantnesses of Shettleston Road. (Glover, DM230708)

The “unpleasantness” consists not only in the shabbiness of the businesses in the street; it is also – in van Leeuwen’s terms – an *abstraction*, specifically a *spatialisation*, of its *assimilated* residents. Skeggs (2005:112) notes the tendency in political discourse to refer to an area as a virtual synonym to a social problem (or several), which she labels the “spatial fixity” of (lower) class. Thus constructed Shettleston Road is contrasted with a *nominated* elite individual, George Osborne’s assistant Poppy – a middle-class name (see Fox 2004:80-81); the class connotations of the contrast are therefore quite clear. Notable is the extension of the “problematic place” to all of the country, evident in the headlines “(...) Journey to the Heart of Feckless Britain” (Phillips, DM040110) or “Benefit Cheat UK” (Ellicott, DM050311). These headlines *abstract* indolent or fraudulent Claimants as Britain/the UK. In this way, they overstate the incidence of both indolence and fraud, the latter vaguely stated in the article to be “rife”; arguably, they also conjure up a parallel – and thus separate – Britain, as good as shrouded in the Conradian darkness alluded to in the *Mail* headline.

Particularly interesting are the cases, admittedly rare and exclusive to the M subcorpus, where the names of specific individuals classifiable as Claimants are used in connection with collective reference:

(6) Well, such ‘domestic drifters’ [as Karen Matthews] are responsible for monstrous child abuse in which the Shannons of this world grow up with no stability, no love, no moral structure, no values and no dignity. Most of these children - fed on welfare dependency - will grow up to lead the same kind of wasted lives as their parents as Britain's burgeoning underclass grows bigger and bigger. (Platell, DM061208)

(7) Whether or not Alfie is the father of baby Maisie or whether that honour goes to one of Chantelle's reputed other boyfriends, the fact is that the length and breadth of this country there are many Chantelles, having sex and often getting pregnant while under age. (Phillips, DM160209)

The traits and behaviour, or the likely life trajectory, associated in the text with one individual are deployed to represent many others. The “Shannons” (after Shannon Matthews, whose mother Karen staged her kidnapping) are children brought up in chaotic family conditions with a lack of moral values, destined to re-enact them in their homes; the “Chantelles” are teenagers represented as acting immorally (as is evident from the broader context) by being sexually active. The second example in particular appears close to *connotation* in van Leeuwen’s scheme, where the name Chantelle is utilised to represent *functionalisations* or *identifications* (here, a sexually active girl and a prospective teenage mother), in this case applying to many individuals. It seems relevant that, in this subcorpus, only the names of individuals of lower socio-economic classes are subjected to this loss of individuality. It is also relevant that – in the *Mail* in particular – it is the moral failings of women which are castigated particularly frequently, although not exclusively:

(8) Principally in the inner cities, there are hundreds of thousands of youngsters who believe that they have a hereditary entitlement to welfare benefits.(...)

Think of the contrast with Tom, the crossing sweeper in Bleak House. His kind knew nothing about public expenditure and were wise to keep well clear of it. (...)

By the time they are old enough to become serious criminals, whom the state will pay £30,000 a year to incarcerate, Tom’s modern equivalents have already notched up tens of thousands in school costs, welfare payments and NHS spending. (Anderson, ST110410)

The last sentence sarcastically positions a career in serious crime as something they aspire to, reinforcing and normalising the connection between criminality and the welfare state; further, the syntax precipitates an initial misconstruction of the pronoun “whom” as Beneficiary of “pay” rather than Goal of “incarcerate”. Notably, the male Claimants, *aggregated* and not *nominated*, are compared to a *nominated* and *functionalised* minor character from a Dickens novel, who in van Leeuwen’s terminology *symbolises* them. This fictitious 19th-century character is a favourable reference point for young men from workless families as far as state expenditure is concerned; what

is glossed over in this comparison is the character's early death of pneumonia. Ironically, the character's actual name (Jo, not Tom) escapes the writer's memory.

Individual Claimants are mentioned in a minority of texts – 12% in the T subcorpus and 18% in the M one – and even more rarely *nominated*. But even *individualised* Claimants are usually *categorised*, either by being *identified* or *functionalised*; in this way, the attributes they share with others are foregrounded, inevitably representing Claimants as members of groups: Toorpakai Saindi, “a jobless Afghan immigrant with seven children” (Peev, DM130611) is mentioned by the *Mail* and the *Telegraph* (Lefort, ST030110) not as an outlier, but as one example of presumably many foreign women with large families supported by benefits, with each of those groups critically scrutinised by both papers.

3. Social class

One aspect of collective representation of Claimants is social class. An ambiguous notion, social class has had its death announced by politicians and analysts, to see some of the latter return to examining it in a variety of contexts (see an overview in Bennett 2013:28). In the corpus, social class figures in several ways, mainly used as shorthand for “socioeconomic status”, except for the few occasions when it denotes “a commonality of interests”, usually dismissed as “class warfare”. Relevant for the discussion of Claimants are three terms used in the corpus: “middle(-)class(es)”, “working(-)class(es)”, and “underclass”, with 72, 47 and 16 occurrences respectively.

One of the strongest divides evident in the corpus is between Claimants and individuals denoted as middle class, a set largely overlapping with “taxpayers”. In its narrow sense, the welfare state is often construed as a system of benefits, but while some benefits (primarily child benefit and winter fuel allowance) can be and are claimed by middle-class individuals, and are often explicitly stated to be “middle-class benefits” in the corpus, the individuals claiming them are never described with the functionalisation “claimant”; they are also never constructed as Claimants in the sense of being subjected

to scrutiny in either moral or physical terms. In the corpus, there are virtually no middle-class single mothers or disabled individuals.

If, in the corpus, a middle-class status is constructed as incompatible with being represented as a Claimant, so is – for the most part – a working-class one: Claimants are repeatedly constructed as not belonging to the working classes. This is done in several ways. One is using the term “working class” in a positive context exclusively with a past time reference; another is via explicit claims:

(9) And this brings us to the third reason for the death of the working class in Britain: welfare. Welfare brought not well-being, but a dependency culture which sapped the wills of the formerly hard-working people of this country. (Wilson, DM191111)

(10) The welfare state has many virtues, but it has created a new social class -- the permanently unemployed. There are housing estates where successive generations have never worked and are entirely dependent on welfare and on crime for survival. (Osborne, DM020509)

Both passages – (9) explicitly, (10) implicitly – construct Claimants as having in fact replaced the working class specifically because of the welfare state. The working class has a generally positive semantic association (evaluation relating to the context, see Philip 2011:61) in the corpus; excluded from its ranks, Claimants are constructed as its opposite in moral terms, which is evident in both passages.

This exclusion and its accompanying negative evaluation is even more evident in *identifications* such as “the workless class” or “underclass”. The latter term in particular has a long tradition in the discourse of social reform (see Welshman 2013) and, while not frequent in the corpus, works to strongly delegitimise the welfare state, deemed to have created it.

In a wider context, “underclass” has been termed “a distinctly neoliberal context, designed to expunge class struggle from political vocabulary” (Tyler 2013:186), which is here achieved by obscuring class as a structural factor in social change, as pointed out in the first part of this study (Paprota, 2015). Instead, class is very much present in the corpus as an individual’s socioeconomic status, both inferrable from and determined by an individual’s occupation, which is

frequently stated, and even deemed to be a basic component of one's identity, or ascertained from an individual's name and appearance, with accompanying specific judgments on the morality of that individual as well as the "mass" he or she is *assimilated* into. Further, the references to the "hereditary" aspect of class imbue the concept with racial overtones, a point also noted by Tyler (2013:188).

4. Summary of findings

As shown, collective constructions of Claimants in conservative newspaper discourse of welfare reform in the UK, recontextualising them as an excessively numerous group, constructing undeserving Claimants as particularly salient, and subjecting them to physical and moral scrutiny not applied to other groups, frame those not in work for whatever reason – rather than unemployment itself – as a major social problem. In this way, a warrant (Hart 2010:66) is provided in reasoning schemes seeking to curtail or abolish the welfare state in its narrow understanding as a system of social security benefits, thus delegitimising the very concept of the welfare state, parodied as "Benefits Britain". Individual representations of Claimants, especially with regard to gender, ethnicity and social class, not discussed here owing to constraints of space, deserve a separate study, as does van Leeuwen's scheme itself.

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