



He was not mine: Demonizing the "Undeserving Poor"  
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*One of my anthropology teachers, Paul Bohannon, used to tell a story from his fieldwork in Nigeria. In sight of a river he saw a man struggling in the water fairly close to shore. As he ran toward the river he saw a man standing on the river bank, watching. It was a man he had come to know well. By the time Bohannon reached the river's edge it was too late for anyone to help—the man in the water had been swept along by the current and had apparently gone down for the last time. Bohannon said to his acquaintance, "Why didn't you do something? You can swim!" The man replied, without emphasis as if it were obvious, "He was not mine" (meaning that the drowned man was not from his kin group).*

Bohannon used this illustration to point out that clash of value orientations and the experience of culture shock are inevitably faced by anyone who engages in intercultural research. But his story also applies to our present situation of political discourse.

As I watch the current increase in intensity of political arguments from the right—especially those that blame the poor for being poor—I find myself just as troubled as my teacher was when he heard the words "He was not mine." We realize that in all human groups people make a basic distinction between "us" and "them," ingroup and outgroup, and that the boundary between "in" and "out" is not something natural or inherent. Rather it is a cultural construct—a dividing line that is drawn differently from one group to the next. Over the past forty years, while economic inequality has been increasing in the United States, within political discourse we have seen a gap widening between the ways in which the rich and the poor are characterized. It is becoming again respectable to talk about the poor, especially those who have parents and grandparents who were poor, as if they were all lazy, stupid, and immoral—undeserving "freeloaders."

The linguist George Lakoff, in a series of short books (one of which is engagingly titled "Don't Think of an Elephant") has identified this as fundamentally rhetorical—image-making with an intent to persuade. He says that certain metaphors, framed within narratives, evoke intense reactions and that these differ depending on whether one is politically committed to the left or to the right. He attributes this to contrasting approaches in child rearing—tough and punitive or mild and "democratic." (Did your

parents spank you or did they “reason” with you? If tough you become right wing, if mild you become moderate or left wing.) I agree with Lakoff that the rhetorical force of certain metaphors differs depending on whether the perceiver is politically conservative or liberal. I am not persuaded that this difference has to do with early childhood experience. Rather, it seems to me that a simpler and better explanation lies in intellectual history—in the cultural origins of the rhetorical image of the “undeserving poor.”

This image has deep roots in Western history, in both religious and secular thought. The ancient Church had already by the second century begun to qualify the teachings of Jesus about generosity toward the poor and the marginalized. The early text of practical maxims for the Church titled “The Didache” made a distinction between deserving and undeserving strangers, arguing that those who were not truly in need should not be asking for alms. This hedging on generosity was later criticized in the fourth century by John Chrysostom: “For why does he not work, you say? And why is he to be maintained in idleness? . . . Are all poor through idleness? Is no one so from calamity or shipwreck? None from lawsuits? None from being robbed? None from dangers? None from illness? None from other difficulties? . . . Stretch out your hand; let it not be closed up. We have not been constituted examiners into others' lives, for then we should have compassion on no one.” (Homily on Hebrews 6. 19-20)

By the late middle ages it was generally recognized that some of those who sought alms were fakers. The English “Statute of Labourers,” enacted by Parliament in 1388 during the reign of Richard II distinguished between the “impotent beggars” (deserving of help) and “sturdy beggars” (undeserving). This echoed a distinction made in the previous “Statute of Laborers” from 1349/51 which addressed the shortage of labor that developed immediately after the Black Plague: “And because many sound beggars do refuse to labour so long as they can live from begging alms, giving themselves up to idleness and sins, and, at times, to robbery and other crimes--let no one, under the aforesaid pain of imprisonment presume, under colour of piety or alms to give anything to such as can very well labour, or to cherish them in their sloth, so that thus they may be compelled to labour for the necessaries of life.”

Alms had been systematically administered by both monasteries and by parish clergy with the support of church taxes. As the Reformation began to eliminate monasteries Martin Luther had published a pamphlet in 1528 titled “Liber Vagatorum” (The Book of Vagrants) in which he listed categories of itinerants who wrongfully sought alms. In England under Henry VIII in the Poor Law of 1531, the “impotent poor” were allowed to be licensed to receive alms by the mayor or justice of the peace, while the “able bodied poor” were to be publically whipped. The Poor Law of 1535 assigned the responsibility of seeking voluntary contributions for poor relief to justices of the peace and churchwardens, who were to “find and keep every aged poor and impotent

Person . . . and also shall compel every sturdy Vagabond to be kept in continual labour . . .” By 1552 the parish council had been given the responsibility to raise money for poor relief and distribute it.

On the Continent John Calvin, writing in 1536, took a very strong position on the obligation to relieve the poor, and he echoed John Chrysostom in arguing that the “deserving/undeserving” distinction should not be applied to those who asked for aid: “But Scripture subjoins a most excellent reason, when it tells us that we are not to look to what men in themselves deserve, but to attend to the image of God, which exists in all, and to which we owe all honour and love. Therefore, whoever be the man that is presented to you as needing your assistance, you have no ground for declining to give it to him. Say that he is unworthy of your least exertion on his account; but the image of God, by which he is recommended to you, is worthy of yourself and all your exertions. But if he not only merits no good, but has provoked you by injury and mischief, still this is no good reason why you should not embrace him in love, and visit him with offices of love. (From J. Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book 1, Ch. 2, sections 5-7)

Yet in other teaching Calvin opened up a matter that later would bear on the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. He differentiated those God had chosen for favor (the elect) from those God had chosen for disfavor (the damned), seeing this choice by an all wise and all powerful deity as necessarily taking place at the beginning of time, before individual humans existed. This is the notion of “predestination”—some have been destined for redemption and some for damnation. Enter Calvin’s followers in subsequent generations, as his original teachings received even stronger systematization in the development of “Calvinism.” By 1613, at a conclave in the Dutch city of Dort, Calvinist divines stated that while baptism produced a new nature in the predestined elect, this was not fully so for those who had been predestined to be damned. They remained “unregenerate.” In other words, all those who had been baptized were not on the same footing, as had been believed since Christianity had become the official religion of all in the West, shortly after the time of Constantine in the fourth century.

What this meant was that a fundamental metaphysical distinction—a line of difference--was being drawn between two kinds of people, those predestined to be saved and those predestined to be damned. Formerly, from just after the time of Constantine through the middle ages, people in the West had all seen themselves as metaphysically in the same boat—rich or poor, literate or illiterate, young or old--all together under the big tent of inclusion in the community of the baptized. Infant baptism was universal, and all persons who had received that sacrament had experienced spiritual rebirth—“regeneration.” But after the Synod of Dort that sense of unity in community was broken among Calvinists. And it was just that theology of

baptism that was promoted by the English Puritans, who during the English Revolution made it in 1646 the official doctrine of the “purified” Church of England in the Westminster Confession (Ch. 28, section 5): “although it be a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance [of baptism], yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated, or saved without it; *or that all that are baptized are undoubtably regenerated* [italics added for emphasis]

And these also were the beliefs of the Calvinist Puritans who had left England just before the revolution had begun, settling in New England. They too held to the assumption that there were two basically differing kinds of people in the world—the elect, who baptism regenerated, and the damned, who baptism did not. Over time, both in New England and in old England, especially among the later descendants of the Puritans, the distinction between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor got mapped over the elect/damned distinction, with the result that many hard-working, sober-living, and financially well off people (read “the elect”) came to believe that not only did they have no responsibility for helping the undeserving poor (read “the damned”) but that to try to do so was to interfere with the will of God. The suffering of the undeserving poor in this life was a precursor to their suffering after death—and who could presume to question God’s wisdom and the workings of Providence?

By the end of the eighteenth century in England and America the full blown Calvinist system was softening somewhat among those dissenters who in England had been called the “free Churches”—Congregationalist, Baptist, Presbyterian. But the distinction between “undeserving” and “deserving” poor continued even as its theological underpinnings were dissolving. And at the same time secular intellectual support was developing for the notion that many of the poor were undeserving. In 1798 Thomas Malthus published “An Essay on the Principle of Population,” arguing that it was inevitable that population would increase faster than the capacities of agriculture to produce more food, thus making famine and social chaos inevitable. Hunger, disease, war, and the vicious habits of the poorest classes functioned to curb overpopulation: “The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction, and often finish the dreadful work themselves. But should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and tens of thousands. Should success be still incomplete, gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow levels the population with the food of the world”. (T. R. Malthus *An essay on the principle of population*. Chapter 7, p. 61.) Malthus opposed publicly funded support for the poor (which had survived in England since the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the Poor Laws) and advocated for private charity instead. He argued that public support for the poor, by increasing the

price of commodities and increasing dependency in the recipients of public relief, resulted in creating more poverty rather than in reducing it.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Dickens parodied this view in the first chapter of *A Christmas Carol*, in an interchange between Ebenezer Scrooge and a solicitor of charity: "I don't make merry myself at Christmas and I can't afford to make idle people merry. I help to support the establishments I have mentioned [prisons and workhouses]: they cost enough: and those who are badly off must go there."

"Many can't go there; and many would rather die."

"If they would rather die," said Scrooge, "they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."

The utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham (1789) and John Stuart Mill (1848), identifying moral actions in public policy as those which produce the greatest good for the greatest number, could also support the contention that, while in the short run the interests of the poor would seem to be supported by public relief, the ultimate result of relief is detrimental to their interests. And soon after, Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism, with his dictum "the survival of the fittest," provided further support for the view that the vices of the lowest class in society make such persons undeserving of help from those who were financially privileged. ["Us" are the fittest: "Them" are not.] It is but a short step to the Eugenics movement of the twentieth century, and the radical individualism of Ayn Rand, the latter's popularity on the right continuing to support a libertarian celebration of selfishness—"Nobody is mine."

There is also a special American intensity behind our contemporary distinction between undeserving and deserving poor. One source of this is the Calvinism of New England, as previously discussed, even as that became de-theologized. Another source is the nineteenth and twentieth century emergence of the "American Dream" as a symbol of hope. For so many, whether immigrant or native born, the belief has been that with enough hard work and talent, individuals in successive generations could—and would—improve their financial and social standing. Differences in income and prestige could be justified *if the United States were truly a meritocracy*. (It follows that if one did not succeed, that was due to lack of individual effort or ability. ) The evidence that intergenerational poverty persists in America and that poverty appears to be increasing over the last 30 years is a direct threat to belief in the American Dream—the national self image as a genuine meritocracy. Ironically, the intensity with which one clings to belief in the American Dream may increase the tendency to blame the poor for being poor. As an unquestioning believer in the American Dream, one can only attribute the existence of intergenerational poverty to moral failure or lack of intelligence on the part of those who do not succeed. In that system of sense-

making, the poorer your family is and the longer that has been going on, the more blame you get for it. This is an ideological refusal to face a preponderance of disconfirming evidence that is akin to the persistence of belief in the literal truth of every word in the Bible or to the continuing denial that human activity is a cause of global warming. And we know that Biblical literalism and denial concerning global warming is alive and well in America.

A third source of American intensity in labeling the poor as undeserving comes from the deep roots of racist belief about the intellectual and moral inferiority of African Americans. (Never mind the evidence that there are more white people who are poor than there are African Americans who are poor.)

Together these factors supported the powerful resonance of Ronald Reagan's racially coded imagery of the Cheating Welfare Mother—a fictional creation of his 1980 presidential campaign. The Welfare Mother example went viral and was taken by his supporters as “proof” that recipients of public assistance were preponderately undeserving—lazy and dishonest. This demonizing image has been reanimated in the Tea Party's racially coded invocation of “freeloaders” and in Newt Gingrich's recommendation during the presidential primary campaign that inner city students be required to work as assistant janitors in their schools, in order to instill in them a “work ethic” that is absent in their homes.

So here is another way in which George Lakoff is right. Evidence will not persuade those who believe that poverty in America is the result of either lack of individual effort or lack of individual ability. (And that belief can always find some support—one can always identify specific instances of poor people who cheated, were lazy, or stupid—never mind that rich persons can also cheat, be stupid, and be shiftless.) Rather than attack directly the American Dream as a false narrative, that narrative can be re-framed, so as to co-opt the “deserving poor” image for service in a narrative of fairness. That is what President Obama did in the presidential campaign, by invoking the hard work and patriotism of ordinary citizens, including the families of his wife and himself. This to say, “Although there may be some freeloaders out there, an overwhelming majority of Americans, even those who are poor, work hard, are not stupid, and deserve a government that affirms this in programs that increase opportunity fairly and provide an appropriate and necessary safety net.” This is a tough sell, given the demonizing potential of the American image of the “undeserving poor,” coupled with the narrative of “government is the problem not the solution.” But this re-framing is worth the attempt, and it needs to be done through storytelling. All Americans—the entire 100%--are mine. All of us are ours, together.

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