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Administration as Confinement:
The Politics of Deferral in Benefits Street, Paul Graham's Beyond Caring, and Ken Loach's I, Daniel Blake

Introduction

In 2002, Prime Minister Tony Blair claimed in a speech on welfare reform that "[w]e are now seeing the beginnings of a sea-change in how people view our welfare state." This sea-change, Blair attests, is the result of successful New Labour Policies. "Instead of the old benefit mentality," Blair asserts, "individuals are treated as customers and potential employees" (Blair 2002). They are supported by "front-line staff" in the war against unemployment and dependency. Despite neo-liberal buzzwords like "potential," "responsibility," and "dynamic market economies" the central keyword of Blair's speech is a rather inconspicuous pronoun: "themselves." And the designated subjects of this pronoun are rebranded as "customers" and "clients."

Blair's speech is an expression of a reformed welfare state that implements a "creeping conditionality" (Dwyer 2004, 265). In this logic, benefits are not unconditional. "Deservingness" is established on the condition that those in need prove their willingness to adapt to the realities of said dynamic market economies. In Blair's words, the "benefit mentality" has to give way to a "can-do mentality" (2002).

In this article, I will discuss how the logic of conditionality in the British welfare system serves as a means of control. The unemployed are reframed as fully and solely responsible for their failures. A range of administrative tasks is intended to 'nudge' and shape the behaviour of those in need. Soss, Fording and Schram argue in their study Disciplining the Poor (2011) that "[t]he 'left hand' of the welfare state and the 'right hand' of the carceral state now work together as integrated elements of a single system" (6). This ideology translates into the following political and governmental practice, in the words of Sharon Wright:

UK policy reforms over the last 15 years have followed two core principles: the individualisation of responsibility and marketisation of delivery. These principles share a behavioural change logic, which dictates that motivation and action of individuals (both benefit recipients and front-line workers) is the source of the problem […] (2016, 241-242)

I will discuss the representation of these tools in the TV show Benefits Street (2014), Paul Graham's photo-series Beyond Caring (1986; 2010) and Ken Loach's film I, Daniel Blake (2016). On the one hand, I want to outline the incremental implementation of conditionality. On the other hand, I will examine how the related disciplinary measures affect jobseekers, governmental help-staff, and the public alike. By disciplining the unemployed, I will claim, the welfare state controls everyone. The fact that these three texts belong to different genres – reality TV, documentary photography
and film – needs to be kept in mind. What does connect these examples, apart from their topic, is their pushing the expectations of their respective genres: Benefits Street, as will be discussed below, walks the line between reality TV and documentary forms of television. Graham’s use of colour photography in Beyond Caring did upend contemporary expectations of what documentary photography should and could do. Loach’s I, Daniel Blake may tell a fictional tale, but Loach’s idiosyncratic style of filmmaking includes authentic settings such as the Benwell food bank or former employees of the jobcentre like Amanda Payne.

To return to Tony Blair’s initial statement from 2002: “We are now seeing the beginnings of a sea-change in how people view our welfare state.” Ten years later, the public perception of welfare recipients was identified by a YouGov survey. The survey asked: "In general, do you agree or disagree with this statement 'The Government pays out too much in benefits; welfare levels overall should be reduced?'" (Kellner 2012). The answer: 74% of participants agreed with this statement and only 17% disagreed. Austerity, it seems, breeds resentment. This resentment against the poor is one perceptual frame that explains the success of a TV show like Benefits Street.

How are discussions of social security and welfare linked to Foucauldian notions of confinement? Rather than drawing on Michel Foucault's notions of ‘governmentality’ or ‘bio-politics’ I would like to refer to Foucault’s discussion of "the machinery of social coverage" (1988, 159) in a 1983 interview with Robert Bono. At the heart of his considerations lies the precarious relationship between dependency and freedom, as implemented by social security: "on the one hand," Foucault argues, "more security is given to people and, on the other, they are being made increasingly dependent" (1988, 160).

While this observation verges on the obvious, Foucault's discussion on how exactly this dependency translates into a form of confinement is relevant for an analysis of welfare in the age of austerity. Foucault claims that dependency is of two kinds: dependency by integration and dependency by marginalisation or exclusion. It is especially the former kind of dependency that is increasingly discernable in neo-liberal welfare systems: "A whole machinery of social coverage, in fact, fully benefits the individual only if that individual is integrated, whether in terms of family, work place, or geographical area" (Foucault 1988, 162). Such a statement can be read in two ways: firstly, pre-existing integration is a pre-condition for receiving social security. And this pre-existing integration is often precipitated on normative social categories such as the family, work, class or geographical integration. Secondely, and this category will be discernable in the examples below, recipients of welfare are increasingly integrated into the system by "keeping them in an administrative straightjacket which […] becomes ultimately unbearable" (1988, 161). In the following analysis, I focus on how the subject, in Foucault's terms, is subjugated and how the administration of welfare results in an all-encompassing form of integration and confinement.
**Benefits Street**

In 2014, Channel 4 introduced this reality TV show to great success – with 4.3 million viewers, which translates to a 17.9% market share. The show was popular and controversial, which of course is not mutually exclusive, rather the opposite. *Benefits Street* chronicles the lives and struggles of the residents on Birmingham's James Turner Street, 95% of which, the trailer informs us, are on benefits. The first episode represents the street as a British microcosm with a markedly multi-cultural and diverse group of people: we are introduced to White Dee, the caring ‘mother’ of the street, to Black Dee, her unemployed neighbour, and we get to know Fungi, who has repeatedly been convicted for petty crime.

When it comes to control, two realisations thereof are especially noteworthy in *Benefits Street*: firstly, the representation of governmental control, secondly, the residents' self-control. In the show's first episode, the government is largely absent and a rather disembodied entity. Governmental agencies are present only in the form of administrative communication, that is, letters, phone calls and text messages. And these notifications are represented as strictly disciplinary measures foreshadowing impending sanctions. What is more, not only are these notifications represented as completely dissociated from their authors; the TV show also presents them as literally impossible to understand. It is only with the help of somebody like White Dee that Fungi is able to make sense of these administrative messages. This illustrates a central lack of mutual understanding between state and welfare recipient. Additionally, the responsibility is handed to those who can mediate between the parties involved.

The government and the members of its executive branch become visible the closer the residents of James Turner Street come to Birmingham's city centre. When two of the residents go shoplifting on Birmingham's High Street one of them is apprehended and literally taken out of sight by the police. Four members of the police fixate him on the ground before taking him into a windowless police-van.

What is more interesting than the show's representation of different kinds of control, however, are the reactions and controversies caused by *Benefits Street*. Where the show may or may not have failed in 'realistically' documenting the lives of society's poorest outsiders, it certainly helped to document a wide range of perceptions of the welfare state. And the controversies exposed the respective perception and imagination of the poor on both political sides. Conservative commentators like Ian Duncan Smith felt confirmed that benefits are the cause rather than the solution of poverty. Commentators on the left decried *Benefits Street* as poverty porn. Imogen Tyler argues:

> And there is not only 'political capital' to be made here. Reality television production companies like Love specialise in exploitative production processes, harnessing the labours of unwaged participants as 'human capital' to produce immense wealth for global media tycoons like Rupert Murdoch. Indeed *Benefits Street*, achieved peak viewing figures of 6.5 million, making this one of Channel 4's most popular, and most profitable, television programmes of the year […]. (2014)

Such criticisms, while not unwarranted in their substance, often fail to mention two important aspects. Firstly, Love Productions was bought by Rupert Murdoch after the
release of Benefits Street, and the fact that Love also produces the widely successful TV show The Great British Bake-Off (2010) also may have influenced this deal. Secondly, earlier examples of similar shows like The Estate (2012), which is set in Dublin, Ireland, or The Scheme (2010), set in Kilmarnock, Scotland, were both produced by the BBC. These shows sparked similar criticisms but on a smaller scale. This is not an argument against the show's exploitative tendencies, but it is noteworthy that Benefits Street's style and ideology are not merely and exclusively the product of Murdoch's media empire, but rather part of a larger trend in depicting the poor and destitute.

In combination, all of these reactions confirm what Sharon Wright identifies as the two current models and discourses concerning the unemployed:

The dominant model emphasises moralised individual responsibility for 'wrong choices' and mandates behavioural change to become active. The counter model situates benefit recipients in the present as disempowered creative, reflexive and resourceful beings. (2016, 235)

Ironically, a central bone of contention was the representation of the unemployed in the show as active people. How does White Dee dare to claim benefits? As seen, she takes care of those around her, makes calls for them and sometimes cleans their clothes. And how does Fungi dare to claim benefits? He pretends to be unable to work, yet we see him scheming, shoplifting and selling stolen newspapers.

The show, with its intimate insight into the lives on James Turner Street, serves the function of a public 'means test.' Traditionally, the means test establishes the needs of unemployed applicants. In the current system, the applicant needs to complete the means test in form of a personal interview. The jobcentre staff has about 25 minutes to ask various sensitive questions: How much savings do you have? What are your education and job experience? Relationship status? When did your marriage end? When did your wife die? What is your health status? Based on the answers the jobcentre will establish the dependency of the applicant's and decide whether they are eligible for a particular type of support.

This current version of the means test almost takes the form of a confessional. In Tony Blair's words: "Ask them why they think it is that they are not working" (2002). Depending on the results and the applicants' willingness to adhere to an agreed-upon "Claimant Commitment" the benefits are being decided upon by the jobcentre. Failure to document the commitment is met with sanctions, such as benefits being reduced or withheld entirely. On average, 5% of claimants receive sanctions.

Benefits Street mediates the means test. It is the viewers who judge the deservingness of the unemployed. The Guardian's Deborah Orr, one of the few supporters of the show, states: "Everyone's skint, but everyone smokes. Quite a few people have iPhones, laptops, computer games. They pick up bits of work, sometimes criminal work, and don't declare it" (2014). Especially White Dee, Deidre Kelly, had to bear the brunt of these judgements. As Katherine Runswick-Cole and Dan Goodley highlight, "White Dee's actions are not only depicted as acts of kindness, they are also offered as evidence of her capacity for paid work, and evidence that she is, in fact, a
malingerer" (2015, 646). Unemployment thus becomes a performance of being destitute. And if this performance does not align with a specific kind of expected behaviour, then the medicalised sanctions result in public shaming.

In this regard, especially, White Dee is caught in a double bind: the only agency she is being allowed to work towards finding employment. The fact that she cannot hold a job because of her history of mental illness does not matter. Viewers turned from laymen and laywomen into psychologists and decided, based solely on the programme, on the extent and consequences of Dee's mental health. And why shouldn't they? This is exactly what the welfare programme does: the government, after all, did outsource some medical assessments to an American company called Maximus, having previously been run by a company called Atus. And Maximus itself employs 'health care professionals' rather than certified psychologists or physicians. The 'fit to work test' or Work Capability Assessment was first introduced in 2008. Yet, the system's failure rate is controversial. Figures reported by The Independent show that more than half of the appealed decisions were found to be wrong and consequently overturned: "Figures released by the DWP show tribunals overturned 52 per cent of Employment and Support Allowance appeals claims in the given period" (Stone 2016).

Parallel to these tribunals the public seems to turn into a separate courtroom. This impression is supported by a broader linguistic corpus analysis of Twitter posts on Benefits Street, conducted by Paul Baker and Tony McEnery, which highlights the vitriolic nature of online responses. The linguists also found a remarkable similarity between the various political positions: whether Twitter users belonged to the 'idle poor' discourse or the 'rich get richer' discourse, both groups not only shared the incendiary language but also "a sense of anger and outrage that somebody else is benefiting unfairly from the common wealth distribution system" (Baker and McEnery 2015, 262; original emphasis). Baker and McEnery also stress that, especially regarding the reactions on Twitter, these were largely concerned with the appearance of certain protagonists, which in turn was used to judge their deservingness. After the finale of the first season, Channel 4 aired a panel discussion, including White Dee. The subsequent Twitter discussion of her participation in the round table discussion was largely based on her chosen clothing – especially her decision not to wear a bra – rather than anything she said or expressed.

All in all, it was especially the element of voyeurism and the public display of the residents on James Turner Street that were reasons for the show's success as well as some major points of critique. By implicitly presenting the street, its residents and their individual challenges and chances as a deviant microcosm of Great Britain at large, the show was turned into a synecdoche, representing a perceived failure of the welfare system at large. Consequently, the depicted residents were transformed from individuals into types and taken as proof of either the dangers or the necessity of a welfare system that is increasingly based on self-reliance and harsh sanctions.

To illustrate the drastic change, not only of the perception but also the representation, of the welfare state and its subjects, I would like to compare these discourses and underlying ideologies with a photo series that was published 30 years before Benefits Street.
Paul Graham, Beyond Caring

In Paul Graham's photo series Beyond Caring the idea of control and confinement appears to be of a more spatial nature than in Benefits Street. Beyond Caring depicts the derelict waiting rooms of Great Britain's Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) between 1984 and 1985, at the height of Thatcher's Conservative government, which saw an unemployment rate of 11.9%. Where Benefits Street was critiqued for being overtly voyeuristic, Beyond Caring was produced with an understanding that the unemployed are rendered invisible by the state and its agencies. Amidst a period of a high and destructive unemployment rate, Graham intended to bring those on society's margins into the eye of public perception, the implied intention being that visibility may result in solidarity.

The question of the unemployed's agency in being represented is, however, equally tricky. The filmmakers of Benefits Street were required to get the consent of the street's residents – the main argument being that this was a show about a community in the face of adversity. Graham depicted his subjects without asking for either their consent or that of the responsible agency. Being aware that the DHSS would not permit the photo shoot, all images were taken without consent. Neither the depicted people in the waiting rooms nor the DHSS were aware of being documented.

This question of consent and voyeurism becomes more interesting considering the respective media and their cultural connotations. Where Graham and his work – despite the fairly recent innovation of using colour photography – are firmly fixed in the realm of documentary photography, the case is more complicated with Benefits Street. The show's contentious nature may also have had to do with the difficulty of clearly defining its genre. Kieran Smith, the show's creative director, claims that

One of the pitfalls of making a documentary series that rates well is that people don't think that 'proper documentary' can get such huge audiences. Had Benefits Street pulled in 700,000 viewers rather than 7 million, people would have had no problem describing it as a gritty observational documentary. Once it gets into the millions, people start to see it as a reality show, a piece of entertainment. (Smith 2015, 37)

The implied correlation of a cultural product's success with viewers or lack thereof and the expectation of what is allowed or not is quite a noteworthy observation – documentary voyeurism, the argument implies, is perceived as appropriate as long as it does not result in a "piece of entertainment."

Where does that leave Beyond Caring? Does its artistic habitus or its political impetus allow greater freedom when it comes to depicting its hopeless and helpless subjects? At the very least, one could argue that Graham invites empathy rather than scrutiny. By placing the camera and the related focus on the level of those waiting around him, Beyond Caring takes on the gaze and surroundings of those in waiting, rather than choosing a more detached and distant gaze from a position that is socially higher. At the same time, this perspective only seemingly dissolves the asymmetrical power-relation between those in waiting and the photographer. The fact that the former are unaware of their being documented stresses their authenticity but also their depicted vulnerability. This is yet another contrast to the protagonists of Benefits Street who
were constantly aware of their being filmed and documented, which, alongside the numerous interviews, gives them at least some semblance of agency.

In contrast, Graham's subjects in *Beyond Caring* are mostly depicted as silent and silenced. *Beyond Caring* documents the deterioration of a nation at large. In the waiting rooms, those who wait are alone together, personal contact is rarely discernible despite the spatial proximity of the waiting people. Everybody is isolated and absent-minded. And the contact to the DHSS staff is depersonalized by glass-windows.

The control presented in Graham is spatiotemporal. David Chandler writes on the employment centres of the Thatcher era: "Often housed in neglected civic buildings designed for a different purpose, they were already cast-off spaces, hastily and cheaply remodelled, but still woefully ill-equipped for the human sensitivities of their new function" (qtd. in Graham 2010). Graham depicts a kind of control of the poor Henry Giroux calls "the politics of disposability" (2007, 305) or Zygmunt Bauman identifies as an expression of "the acute crisis of the 'human waste' disposal industry" (2007, 28). This type of regulation, for Soss, Fording and Schram, is not to end "poverty; it is to secure, in politically viable ways, the cooperation and contributions of weakly integrated populations" (2011, 1).

The spaces in *Beyond Caring* express that the unemployed citizens failed the state rather than that the state is unable to help the citizens. By plastering the walls with Orwellian leaflets – we are in 1984 after all – (Graham 2010, P16) about "Good News," these waiting rooms constantly alert the waiters that they are too idle and not active enough, rather than admitting to the fact that there are no jobs to take. Especially one leaflet on the wall is indicative of this guilt-inducing environment. The leaflet reads as follows: "We have many new vacancies each day. If you are still looking for a job, call again tomorrow" (P40). The sign makes the DHSS appear as if it provided endless choices. The "still" sounds passive-aggressive in questioning the waiting person's willingness to accept a job offer. And it does so by offering a spark of hope. But hope is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, hope offers relief; on the other hand, hope prolongs a painful present. This dialectic is expressed, e.g., in a poem by Catherine Tufariello called "The Waiting Room." For Tufariello hope is a mythical punishment unleashed upon humankind: "Looking around the room, I understand / What Hope was doing in Pandora's jar" (2004, 61, ll. 23-24). Pierre Bourdieu argues similarly, but in more sociological terms: "Absolute power is the power to make oneself unpredictable and deny other people any reasonable anticipation, to place them in total uncertainty […] The all-powerful is he who does not wait but who makes others wait" (2000, 228).

Two decades after the implementation of Thatcherism, Tony Blair will resort to these waiting rooms seen in Graham's *Beyond Caring* for his own argument and agenda:

The state of most benefit offices was testament to the previous Government's approach – take your money and get out of our sight. In their view claimants were there because it was their fault – so it didn't matter if they had to wait in queues for hours on end, in tatty offices, having to shout their private business at staff through screens. How inspiring to be able to contrast that old picture with our new Jobcentre Plus. (2002)
These older waiting rooms, claims Charles B. Goodsell in the context of U.S. American waiting rooms, were intentionally derelict and decrepit. Goodsell’s taxonomy of these welfare waiting rooms is quite evocative in the metaphorical naming of the respective type of room: the "Dog Kennel" (1984, 470), the "Pool Hall" and the "Business Office" (472), the "Bank Lobby" (473) and the "Circus Tent" (474).

From the 1980s to the 2000s, the waiting rooms may have been re-designed and personal contact between the client and caseworker may have increased. Yet, the logic of the unemployed being solely responsible for themselves has actually increased and the ideology of self-care is manifested, yet again, by the waiting rooms. In this regard, Sharon Hay's assessment may be directed at the U.S.-American welfare reform but applies in equal measure to the U.K.: "And all the public areas in that welfare office were newly decorated with images of nature's magnificence – glistening raindrops, majestic mountains, crashing waves, setting sun – captioned with inspirational phrases like 'perseverance,' 'seizing opportunities,' 'determination,' 'success'" (2003, 3).

Ken Loach, *I, Daniel Blake*

Ken Loach's film *I, Daniel Blake* from 2016 uses such a waiting room for one of its expositional set pieces. Where Paul Graham depicts the unemployed as nameless masses, Ken Loach presents characters that are round and dynamic. Graham shows the unemployed as passive, static and sitting. Loach depicts his characters as active, mobile and walking – the film's protagonist Daniel is quite literally always on his feet and mobile. Ultimately, Loach's film intends to show that the carceral design may have changed but the paternalistic logic and the resulting sense of confinement at its heart remains as fixed as ever. And an unwillingness to adhere to the demands of this design is perceived as a pathological disorder rather than the result of a systemic failure to provide work. As Laurie Penny argues, with regard to erstwhile British Prime Minister David Cameron:

> As part of Cameron's changes to the welfare system, unemployment was rebranded as a psychological disorder. According to a study in the Medical Humanities journal, in the teeth of the longest and deepest recession in living memory, the jobless were encouraged to treat their 'psychological resistance' to work by way of obligatory courses that encouraged them to adopt a jollier attitude toward their own immiseration. They were harangued with motivational text messages telling them to 'smile at life' and that 'success is the only option.' (2016)

In *I, Daniel Blake*, the film's main protagonist, a joiner-carpenter from Newcastle, is fighting for his benefits after a heart attack leaves him unable to work. While his doctors deem him unfit for work, the jobcentre's own Work Capability Assessment claims Daniel can and should work. Consequently, he is forced to apply for Jobseekers Allowance rather than Employment and Support Allowance. This application requires Daniel by law to spend 35 hours a week looking for a job and to document this search. As such, the job search is structurally designed to be a job in and by itself. The jobcentre's requirements force the jobseeker not only to stay as pro-active and motivated as possible. What is more, every step and every attempt at finding
employment must be documented in detail. While these requirements may be appropriate for a job seeker that is able-bodied, they put the sick Daniel Blake under immense physical and psychological pressure.

On Daniel's journey, which will lead him to a second, fatal heart attack, he becomes friends with Katie, a single mother of two, who after two years of homelessness in London is being forced by the jobcentre to move to Newcastle. Here, Katie is immediately faced with sanctions because she comes late to her first appointment at the local jobcentre. As a newcomer to Newcastle, she is unable to reach the centre in time for her mandatory meeting with the institution. The responsible caseworker proves unwilling to accommodate the desperate mother of two and interprets her late-coming as a sign of insubordination to conform to the demands placed upon the jobseeker. Consequently, the security of the jobcentre Plus escorts the exasperated woman from the premises.

These employees, like the administrative staff or the security, represent what Michael Lipsky famously called "street level bureaucrats" (1971, 391). Katie being reprimanded and evicted from the jobcentre in front of everybody's eyes exemplifies sociologist Rainer Paris's statement that: "Gerade die dumme und kleine Macht ist besonders launisch" (2015, 141). These individuals not only represent but also enact the policies implemented from above, which, as I will argue below, places them in a very peculiar situation themselves. The enactment of policies of control shown in this scene stands in stark contrast to what Wright claims would be a more viable and individualized process of taking care of the unemployed:

In particular, it is essential to incorporate, rather than ignore, welfare recipients' immediate and differentiated lived experiences of relative powerlessness and the active role played by the agency of others […] in triggering collapses of agency. This could allow more effective policies and practices to be developed. (2016, 250)

Where Graham shows the jobcentre as a space people cannot seem to escape from, Loach shows a jobcentre where people need to constantly prove themselves to get in. The effect, however, is the same. Yet, as the film implies, by means of administrative requirements the unemployed are never really out, unless they opt out of the system entirely. I, Daniel Blake shows a welfare state that is not beyond caring but translates caring into a Kafkaesque system of administrative control. As a result, "dozens [have] just given up," as Daniel Blake claims. Consequently, the poor are not the Dickensian social pariahs of old, hidden and forgotten. Rather, they are controlled by the welfare system's intricate demands. Daniel's journey through the institutions – including forms, letters, emails, phone-calls, workshops and interviews – is intended to keep the jobseeker active, docile and occupied.

Referring back to the initial statements of Michel Foucault on the system of social welfare, one can detect here a perverted implementation of Foucauldian ideas. To avoid a total integration, that is subjugation, of the dependent welfare recipients, he claims, the state should "undertake a process of decentralisation, for example, to bring the decision-making centers and those who depend on them closer" (Foucault 1988, 165). The optimal proximity between state and client, which Foucault calls "decisional
distance” (1988, 168) is ideally one where decision-making becomes transparent and intelligible and the administrative institutions have a human face. This proximity, Foucault avers, would increase the personal freedom and the agency of the client, by giving the individual “a say in what is done and in such a way that this decision is intelligible to him, while at the same time being geared to his situation, without having to go through an inextricable maze of regulations” (1988, 169).

In I, Daniel Blake, one sees the dystopian realities of Foucault's utopian ideas. While Daniel Blake is very much face-to-face with the decision-makers and while these often explain their verdicts, the effect is the following: Daniel Blake is constantly made to realize who is in power, and is made to experience a total lack of agency on his part, rendering his journey through this "maze of regulations" fruitless, tiring, and in Daniel's case, ultimately lethal.

In the case of I, Daniel Blake, the protagonist's administrative odyssey includes, amongst other stops, his health assessment by the jobcentre's health care professionals, a visit to his private physician, several letters and phone calls, an application for mandatory reconsideration of his case, visits to the library for access to the jobcentre's online database, workshops, a visit to the food bank, and so forth. And in-between these stages, Daniel is forced to spend long periods of time waiting, waiting for replies, waiting for admission, waiting for a phone to be picked up, waiting for a decision and waiting for old computers to unfreeze. Daniel Blake expresses this experience in the following terms: "I feel like going round in circles." This statement echoes and ironically deconstructs David Cameron's promise from 2015 that he would "end the welfare merry-go-round" (Cameron 2015).

All of this is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's claim that the "more life is regulated by administration, the more people will have to learn to wait" (qtd. in Ehn and Löfgren 2010, 35). Loach seems very intent on stressing that Daniel is actually able and willing to wait. Despite his numerous setbacks and his repeated, enforced downtime Daniel is never presented as idle or passive. While waiting for almost an hour on the phone for the jobcentre's helpline to pick up his call he is shown sitting at his kitchen table and completing woodwork and listening to classic radio. As said, Daniel – despite his recent heart attack – is constantly moving either because he is forced to do so or because he is unwilling to waste the time he is forced to wait.

Daniel's constant and almost frantic activity illustrates two things: firstly, the film attempts to deconstruct the image of the unemployed as idle scroungers who seek benefits because they are unwilling to work. Secondly, Daniel learns early on that the sanctions for an unwillingness or inability to conform to the demands of the jobcentre are harsh, come quickly and leave no room for negotiation or reconsideration. After all, Daniel first encounters Katie after her public and humiliating removal from the jobcentre as a result of her coming late. Any emotional and personal reaction to any of the administrative punishments is met with the jobcentre doubling down on the sanctions. Regarding this dynamic, Frances Ryan illustrates in The Guardian that

Dr Daniel Edmiston at the University of Oxford – who has researched welfare reform for the past four years – tells me how he has found an expectation in Jobcentre Plus that
claimants are "subservient, compliant and grateful." Many of the people he interviewed were so worried that their benefits were subject to the whims of jobcentre staff that they actively moderated their behaviour to be more pleasing. Others who didn't risked [sic] severe financial hardship; one woman who verbally confronted her benefit adviser, and was subsequently sanctioned, ended up searching bins for food." (Ryan 2017)

Consequently, the behavioural control implemented by the constant threat of sanctions and punishment is all-encompassing and extends the premises of the jobcentre's waiting room. With the help of the phone, the internet and constant deadlines the unemployed are kept on a very tight temporal and administrative leash that – as opposed to the citizens who are employed – does not allow them any downtime, privacy or relief from the pressure of the situation.

When the protagonists eventually lose their self-control, they often do so in public, which only adds to their shame and sense of failure. An especially heart-breaking scene that highlights these limits of self-control is set at the Benwell food bank in Newcastle. Due to the jobcentre's sanctions, Katie for the first time in her life is forced to seek the help of a food bank. Once inside the food bank – after a lengthy wait in the cold outside – a caring volunteer hands out various items of food to a literally starving Katie. Ravished by hunger Katie fails to maintain any control herself and rips open a can of cold beans which she attempts to eat with her bare hands. The resulting mess as much as the public presentation of the dire situation she is in is followed by a nervous breakdown. Katie, the woman the jobcentre deems as undisciplined and worthy of sanctions, is controlled enough to starve herself to provide food for her children.

Intentionally or not, the depiction of the waiting line at the doors of the food banks is strongly reminiscent of the Conservatives' 1979 campaign poster with the slogan: "Labour isn't working." The poster – designed by the advertising company Saatchi & Saatchi – shows a long line of a hundred-plus citizens waiting in front of an 'Unemployment Office.' As such, the symbol of the waiting line is of course highly adaptable to the given political background which is further illustrated by UKIP's anti-immigration poster that shows a long line of refugees with the slogan "Breaking Point – The EU has failed us all." Whereas Loach and the Conservative Party – despite their antagonistic political views – employ the signifier of the waiting line to invite sympathy and empathy with those in waiting, UKIP's xenophobic poster depicts those in waiting as a faceless entity to be feared and dreaded. In UKIP's logic, the immigrants swarming the gates of Great Britain are as faceless as the administrative body of the European Union the campaign warns against.

Although I, Daniel Blake – as opposed to Benefits Street and Beyond Caring – does not represent the government as a faceless power, it does fail – for political reasons or because of narrative considerations – to present the employees at the jobcentre Plus as individual humans. While I, Daniel Blake invites empathy for most of its protagonists and presents them as round, individual and dynamic characters, the caseworkers of the jobcentre are left largely nondescript and are mainly used as a foil that antagonises these characters. With one exception – a caseworker called Anne – the staff is presented as petty, vindictive, disinterested and aloof. This is problematic, I feel, for the following two reasons: firstly, a sense and the experience of abuse and frustration can go both
ways (cf. Tzafrir, Enosh, and Gur 2015). Caseworkers often are equally caught and tied to the administrative demands they have to enact. And caseworkers can be equally frustrated by the experience of being unable to help those they are tasked to support. Unsurprisingly, caseworkers at the jobcentre in Newcastle that served as the model for the film did not feel that they were fairly represented. Steve McCall, a manager at this jobcentre, objects to Loach's approach: "McCall says Loach's depiction diverges dramatically from his day-to-day experience of Newcastle's employment services. 'My team and I try to treat people as individuals, and we care about the work we do,'" he told The Guardian. "There will be times when we get it wrong, but I don't believe we are ever as wrong as how we are portrayed in this film" (Seymour 2017).

Secondly, the expectations the unemployed are faced with – to be active, disciplined, positive, etc. – also apply to the caseworkers themselves. What Soss, Fording and Schram identify as a central element of the neo-liberal welfare state is equally applicable to some of those that enact its policies:

They distribute relief to ease suffering and quiet disruptive political demands. They restrict aid to encourage the poor to take up work. They create incentives and services to smooth the path to preferred behaviors, and they police and imprison the poor for violations of law. They design social programs to teach prevailing norms, and they use surveillance and penalty systems to keep aid recipients moving along their designated paths. (2011, 1-2)

This welfare state's mode of control is not one based on the opposition between the unemployed and the state. Rather we observe a system of power that trickles down and implements its ideology on all levels in the hierarchy. This makes the neoliberal welfare state so dystopian and all-encompassing in its means of control. In 2017, The Guardian published a series of articles called "Public Servant: My Letter to the Public." One anonymous letter is entitled: "I Worked at a jobcentre – I'm So Sorry for the Way We Treated You." This letter highlights the pressure to conform and to perform accordingly: "As my manager subtly reminded us at every weekly meeting, we had to prove to senior managers that our cost was justified." For the caseworkers, the threat of unemployment or sanctions is a constant experience as well. While the jobcentre's employees are in a powerful position vis-à-vis the unemployed they encounter, the caseworkers are nonetheless embedded in a system whose paternalistic and neo-liberal means of control apply to themselves in equal measures. And neither Paul Graham nor Ken Loach attempt to resolve the supposed binary between the unemployed and those working at the jobcentre. For Loach those working in jobcentres are largely complicit with the government's policies and while not the explicit target of the film they are still undeserving of sympathy. In Loach's own words: "They're imposing a system that is unjust. If you impose a system at the government's behest that is wrong, of course you'll be stigmatised" (Seymour 2017).

The question of non-representation or invisibility also applies to Loach's decision to use a 'white old man' as his main character. A concern with identity politics becomes important considering that, as The Guardian argues, austerity wears a female face (McVeigh 2013), which is quite similar to the US where the face of unemployment is
black and female (Hays 2003). Given the film's attempt to offer a documentary and realistic insight into the contemporary experience of unemployment, the central position of Daniel Blake may not be controversial or a mere misrepresentation, but it does invite some further considerations. To be fair, Loach's film does represent a range of characters of different genders, ethnicity and socio-economic background and age groups, including Katie and her children, as well as Daniel's Black British neighbour who is nicknamed China. In a sense, this film – despite its title – is about a community rather than an individual. The film constantly reminds its viewers that – not unlike the perceived message of Benefits Street – people stick together and support each other in the face of adversity. As such, I, Daniel Blake stands in direct opposition to Margaret Thatcher's infamous assessment of the welfare state expressed in an interview in Woman's Own magazine on 23 September 1987. Here Thatcher indicates that the derelict state of public welfare institutions was a direct translation of her political convictions. Despite Thatcher's insistence on the importance of charity, she believed: "there is no such thing as society" (Thatcher 1987). In Loach's 2016 film, however, the singular first-person pronoun is a 'we' made up of all the different members of the depicted communities.

Concerning the film's 'face of unemployment', the characterisation of Daniel Blake is even more interesting when one looks beyond his gender and ethnicity. Daniel Blake, in a sense, is too good to be true: he is motivated, helpful and supportive, he is emphatic, he proves to be frugal, he is self-reliant as much as he can, he is affable and communicative, loved by his older former co-workers as well as by Katie's younger children, he listens to classical music and is willing to learn. Daniel Blake, it seems, is the most unrealistic element in a film that intends to be as naturalistic as possible. As opposed to the multi-dimensional residents on Benefits Street, Daniel Blake has hardly any traits that make him unlikeable. And here Ken Loach, I would like to argue, falls into the trap of conditionality and of manipulating the viewer to feel a sense of unreflected sympathy. Yes, Ken Loach's message may be the following: even a deserving, willing, motivated, and likeable man like Daniel Blake is unable to navigate the requirements of the contemporary welfare state. If he can't, who can? But in a sense, this representation of the film's protagonists, notwithstanding the respective actors' talents in bringing them to life, does feel like a missed chance. The film tells its viewers that despite being highly deserving of the welfare system's support, Daniel Blake is unable to receive any help. As a consequence, the film does not really question the very ideology of conditionality but only its implementation. Here it might have been bolder to represent a character that is partially or fully responsible for his or her own misfortune while making an argument that such a character still has the right to receive unconditional support. Or it might have been bolder to create a main protagonist who does not invite the kind of sympathy Daniel Blake does and still make the point that such a person deserves unconditional support by society and the welfare state. In the end, I, Daniel Blake depicts a very contemporary trade-off: charity for sympathy. Yet, charity as a form of exchange is not only implemented top-down – as opposed to tax-funded welfare – it is at its heart conditional. This connection between charity and dependency recalls Foucault's demand to "free ourselves of a logic that links charity
and confinement" resulting in an "alienating" rather than communal system of social security (1988, 163).

Conclusion
What connects Benefits Street, Beyond Caring, and I, Daniel Blake is not only their representation of a welfare state that reconceptualises its dependents as responsible for their own fate. They also show the different means of control such as tight schedules, administrative surveillance, the implementation of workfare, and so forth. What is more, the normalisation of the neo-liberal, self-reliant subject is transferred onto the viewers. Representing the coercive realities at hand does send a clear message. I would like to end this paper with a quotation by Hays:

Like all laws, the law reforming welfare operates as a mechanism of social control to deter would-be transgressors and to discipline those who are measured as deviant according to its standards. By punishing those who break a society's moral code and supporting those considered worthy, laws can also serve to strengthen and affirm the values prescribed [and] reinforce a system of beliefs about how all of us should behave. (2003, 9, original emphasis)

The ideology of conditionality vis-à-vis the dependent welfare subject is an ideology that permeates society's fabric. A show like Benefits Street, and even Paul Graham's photography and Ken Loach's film may imply a sense of distinction between the unemployed and the salaried masses. But ultimately the modes and techniques of control are the same throughout.

What is worse, these modes and techniques modelling the idea of an 'ideal' citizen who, while fully dependent on the political system, is understood as fully responsible for the outcome of his or her actions and decisions are discernible in a number of discourses. The notion of conditionality as a central pre-requisite for offering help is as central in the discussion of immigration – as seen in the Windrush scandal – as in the representation of EU citizens fearing eviction from the post-Brexit UK. Rather than asserting or even implying an unconditional right to remain and to receive the benefits that come with residency or citizenship, discussions fall back on the notion of the deserving, able and willing immigrant, refugee, or resident.

Works Cited


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