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Give them Dignity: A Review of *I, Daniel Blake*

Andrea Gibbons (2017) *Urbanisation* 2(2), 1-4

[*I, Daniel Blake* | Ken Loach, Director | UK/France/Belgium | 2016]

I, Daniel Blake is a searing indictment of austerity—a structural adjustment via government cuts and privatisation long imposed on most of the world and now fully turned onto Britain itself—through powerful intertwined stories that embody the rawness of austerity’s human cost. Based on hours of interviews and time spent in food banks and community centres, it emerged through the collaboration of director Ken Loach, producer Rebecca O’Brien and writer Paul Laverty who have created a powerful reminder of the growing poverty and despair in Britain. The film displays the fault lines within the Global North between its people and the elite pushing forward a punitive regime to increase their own wealth no matter the cost. Through migration and shared oppression, the hybridities of race and class in the UK displayed here invite new ways of thinking about North and South, and involve the viewer in the need to develop this potential for solidarity and struggle.

It opens to a dark screen. You can only listen, and your own frustrations mount as Dan (Dave Johns) tries to find patience to deal with the young woman conducting his eligibility assessment for Employment Support Allowance. She insists on ticking every box no matter the obviousness of the response, no matter that he has already filled out a 52-page form. He asks her for her qualifications, and it is clear she has none, even as she clings to the title of Health Care Professional. He is a carpenter who has suffered a heart attack and has been ordered to quit work by his doctors. The film chronicles the costly absurdity of his journey as he is still declared fit to work by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and ordered into the time-consuming, humiliating process of looking for a job he cannot take while waiting for his appeal to be heard. In the process, he will lose everything.

Like every Ken Loach film, this is so much more than a harrowing tale of struggle. Loach’s description of his work of almost 50 years ago continues to explain how his films aim to share both the tragedy and the love and humour in working-class life:

[B]ecause out of it comes a sense of solidarity and also a sense that people are important. It shows that people have a value, which is political, I suppose, because, by and large, working-class people are not given that value and that dignity and that respect. We are all equally important and drama is not the preserve of the middle class. (Fuller, 1998, p. 17)

This fundamental belief in the value, dignity and respect of all people continues to drive Loach’s films, working to counteract every narrative of hate and blame wielded as political weapons to justify austerity. In doing so, they explore the humanity and the supportive, caring relationships created within the working-class communities in the face of the disrespect that comes with poverty and bureaucratic indifference.

This is everywhere visible in this film. Along with the story of widower Daniel Blake, it shows that of Katie (Hayley Squires) and her two children. Katie has been moved up from London by the council’s housing department after living for two years in a hostel, where the three of them shared one room. The lingering trauma of this is portrayed in the behaviour of both children: Daisy’s remoteness and focus on reading, Dylan’s hyperactivity and constant playing with a small ball, his

refusal to engage with adults or to listen to what he is told. Through their friendship with Dan and the security offered by a council flat despite its poor condition, they slowly emerge from their shells.

In the background—yet very intentionally portrayed—is the broader social context in the Northern city of Newcastle. Loach shows us Dan's relationship to his work and his desperation to return to it, his love of wood and his skills in creating beautiful things for his own pleasure and that of others. It shows the respect of his colleagues and their sincerity of worry in asking after his health and offering support with groceries or with loans. Loach shows us Dan's easy, almost paternal relationship with his young neighbour China (Kema Sikazwe). Their friendship actually deepens through Dan's illness and sudden need for help in accessing government forms online. Here, housing estates are seen as a world created by, getting by and getting along in close proximity. They contain conflict, plain speaking, hybridity, hustle, hard work, every day frustrations as well as kindness, solidarity, pride. Also visible is the world of petty crime and prostitution, those who prey on others—and that is what is seen to flourish when poverty becomes desperate.

Loach also provides an angle on the conflicted aspects of technology and globalisation, the way that working-class solidarities can extend across borders as China receives direct (illegal) shipments of trainers from a fellow football fan he has met online and who works at the factory where they are made. Dan's own monumental efforts and monumental failures in using a computer for the first time to try and fulfil the DWP's requirements display the cost of the digital divide, even as the laughing threats of the Chinese worker over Skype highlight the problematic nature of building worker solidarity through risky business deals. The no-contract, on-call nature of remaining factory work in the UK, particularly in the post-industrial North, is also brought briefly centre stage.

Beyond this broad portrayal of everyday life, the film shines a light on the intersections of the housing crisis in the UK—a result of decades of housing policy under both Tories and Labour beginning with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's selling off of low-cost and government-built and government-owned council housing in the 1980s—and the new regime of welfare conditionality instituted by the Tory's coalition government after taking power in 2010. Some have questioned the extent to which the film is representative; yet the record speaks for itself.

The UK's housing crisis has hit London hardest of all, where residents describe a process of social and ethnic cleansing—in 2015, a leaked government document stated that over 50,000 families in social housing had already been moved out of London entirely, and many more were being forced from the centre to the outskirts (Taylor, 2015). This process has continued. Katie is only one of many moved far from her family and support networks. In 2015, it is believed that 15,000 died over the previous winter because they could not afford heat (London, 2017). In April 2017, a report from the Trussell Trust stated that from their food banks alone, 1,182,000 three-day emergency food supplies had been given to people in crisis in past year—436,000 of these to children (The Trussell Trust, 2017). Studies show that spikes in suicides and mortality rates, particularly in poorer, post-industrial areas like Newcastle, are connected to austerity (Dorling, 2017; Pring, 2017). In an interview with *The Independent*, Ken Loach said in relation to the politics excoriated by his film:

Iain Duncan Smith¹ and his regime, they wanted to make the poor suffer and then humiliated them by telling them that their poverty was their own fault and, to demonstrate that, if you're not up to mark then you're sanctioned and the money stops. How does he think people will live? They know the cruelty of it. I think what's different now is that knowing suffering that they are imposing on people. (Aftab, 2016)

The cruelty of this knowledge is perhaps the central difference between *I, Daniel Blake* and the television film that first really put Ken Loach in the spotlight and that it has often been compared to *Cathy Come Home* (1966). Fifty-one years ago, this heartrending portrayal of a family's spiral down into homelessness showed the dire ignorance and pompousness of social services. Watched by 12 million people when it was first broadcast, it caused an uproar and a demand that something should be done. The newly formed charity Crisis received a wave of support, and a second charity Shelter was formed in response. While fully supporting both, Loach highlighted nearly 20 years ago his structural view of the nature of poverty, and homelessness as an aspect of it: 'What's inadequate is the idea that homelessness is a problem that should be solved by a charity. It boils down to a structural problem within society: Who owns the land? ... So it is a political issue' (Fuller, 1998, p. 24). An issue that remains to be solved.

A final word about the craft of the film itself: *I, Daniel Blake* is typical Loach naturalism—some long takes, relatively static camera, non-professional cast, location shooting. It focuses attention on the dialogue, where the characters slowly try to come to terms with what is happening to them and the limits of their ability to individually change things. As Loach said about his films: 'They're often about people's attempts to be articulate or come to some understanding of their situation; their attempts to develop a class consciousness toward collaboration and accepting their lot or toward fighting and struggling' (Fuller, 1998, p. 12).

His camera techniques are as implicitly political to Loach as the content. For example, this use of the static camera and the fixed lens:

I like the placidity of a fixed lens and the fact that it doesn't jolt the audience.... I don't like using a wide-angle lens because it will also tend to push up from below the actors and distort their features and turn them into objects.... If you give people space, it gives them a dignity. (Fuller, 1998, p. 41)

Again and again, Loach's work is about portraying and fighting for people's dignity, through the stories he tells and their manner of telling down to the camera shots and lenses that he uses. Everything about this film is purposeful, even though much of the realism comes from a combination of scripting and improvisation from the actors themselves carefully contained within each scene, which Loach tends to shoot in its entirety to keep its sense of flow and meaning.

Ultimately, this is a story of dignity in the face of a system designed to humiliate, and a call to action. Loach still believes a different world is possible, is still fighting for justice through the medium of film and his vocal support for the campaigns to support the National Health Service (NHS) and the politics of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.² The 2017 Labour manifesto 'For the Many Not the Few'—which cemented Corbyn's position in Labour and popularity in the UK—outlines a Socialist programme: an end to austerity; nationalisation of rail, water, energy and the postal service; the mass building of social housing; protection of the environment; a return to free education; strong regulation of banks and markets globally; taxation of the rich; a new target of development support to support human rights and justice movements. It is a politics of hope that resonates with why Ken Loach hopes the film connects with everyday people: '[W]e need to fight back' (Aftab, 2016).

Notes

1. George Iain Duncan Smith is a member of the British conservative party, and a driving force behind austerity measures in the welfare system as Secretary of State for the Department of Work and Pensions between 2000 and 2016.

2. Jeremy Corbyn became the leader of the British Labour party in 2015, steadily pulling the party away from the neoliberalism introduced by previous Prime Minister Tony Blair despite intense resistance from more conservative members. His position remained uncertain until a resounding leap in the polls in 2017 after publication of the new manifesto that established his capacity to win power for Labour.

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