

## Transcript

### Language of Poverty - 6 March 2013

*(Geoff Andrews, Owen Jones, Gerry Mooney)*

**Geoff Andrews:** The language of poverty has changed in recent years. Politicians and those involved in public policy have used language to demonise the poor in an era when the social divide in this country is widening. In this podcast we will be discussing how this change has occurred and what it means for the way we view class in contemporary society. Joining me are Owen Jones, commentator and broadcaster, author of *Chavs, Demonisation of the Working Class*.

**Owen Jones:** This idea of, as well as skivers versus strivers, work-shy and feckless, living behind closed curtains, daily diet of poison in Cameron's Britain which has, tragically, been pretty effective.

**Geoff Andrews:** And Gerry Mooney, senior lecture in Social Policy at the Open University in Scotland, who has written widely on poverty.

**Gerry Mooney:** Language matters. Because how you define a problem, how you construct a problem, the language that you use will determine what policies you end up with as a government and what we are seeing is an increasingly punitive approach to people who are experiencing poverty.

**Geoff Andrews:** You're listening to a podcast from the Open University on Languages of Poverty. We're examining the role that languages plays on the political interpretation of policy in the United Kingdom. Joining me are Owen Jones, commentator and broadcaster, author of *Chavs, Demonisation of the Working Class*, And Gerry Mooney, senior lecture in Social Policy at the Open University in Scotland, who has written widely on poverty Owen, we have heard a lot about strivers and skivers, both from government ministers and in the wider media. What lies behind this language?

**Owen Jones:** Well, what we are seeing with this language is a deliberate attempt by this government and its allies in the media to turn large sections of the working class against each other. We have seen this with the working poor against the unemployed, non-disabled people against disabled people, private sector workers against public sector workers and the argument remains the same - you have been mugged and therefore your less deserving neighbour should be mugged as well. And it has very much got to be put against the context of ever declining living standards. We are currently going through the biggest squeeze in living standards, the most sustained squeeze in living standards since the early 1920s. It is predicted by the Resolution Foundation, a very well respected think tank, that by 2020 the average Briton will be poorer than they were at the turn of the millennium. They also project, for example, that low earners will be 15% poorer by 2020 than they are currently. So what we are seeing is an attempt to redirect people's entirely justifiable anger at the ever declining living standards from those responsible for the current crisis, those at the top, to people's neighbours down the street. But of course they are exploiting fissures which exist in working class Britain, if you like. The working class is not a homogenous group of people, it never has been. Traditionally, if we are going to go way back, it was composed of people, for example, who lived in the slums, who lived in early forms of social housing, who were home owners, the Northern working class, the Southern working class, the rural working class and the urban working class and the Welsh, the English, the Scottish and so on, as well as people who were skilled workers, unskilled workers, people in very

precarious forms of employment. And those divisions have always existed to be exploited and, from the 1980s onwards, many of those internal divisions widened for various reasons, not least because of deindustrialisation, consigning many traditional industrial communities to insecure work, long-term unemployment for many people. And as a result, you have these tensions, these fissures which exist and what we have seen with strivers versus skivers is particularly an appeal to the working poor, people struggling to make ends meet, who feel resentful at this idea of someone down the road enjoying a higher standard of living than themselves without actually doing anything to deserve it, living off the state. It is resentment which is ruthlessly exploited by politicians and journalists alike and that is something which has been very central to the Cameron project. We have seen this idea of, as well as skivers versus strivers, the idea, which George Osborne popularised, of the work-shy and feckless living behind closed curtains, a daily diet of poison, in Cameron's Britain, which has, tragically, been pretty effective.

**Gerry Mooney:** But there is something else also going on, and it has become much more apparent under the Cameron government and that is a separation of the economic and the social. And people talk about it, when government ministers and the media talk about poverty now, by and large, they are making no reference to large scale economic change, they are making very little reference to economic crisis, they are making very little reference to, you know, the ongoings of economic collapse and other economic problems of that kind. So you have this, sort of, situation where poverty, highlighted as a social issue, appears to be completely separate from these wider economic trends and developments. It is to do with the inadequacies or the limitations of particular groups of people who are experiencing poverty, not to do with the wider draining of money out of local areas or the wider cuts that are taking place in the period of austerity.

**Geoff Andrews:** We are going to talk a bit about class later, you mentioned it. But it is really emotive language, isn't it? What you are saying, it is part of a wider political strategy to, well, justify welfare policies.

**Owen Jones:** Absolutely. And the culmination of this systematic campaign, and it is a systematic campaign of demonisation, was the vote over the capping of welfare. Now, what this means in practice is all forms of benefits, with some exceptions for those who are disabled, will be subject to a 1% cap which is, of course, below inflation which means a real-terms cut. That is the first time since 1931 that the income of the poor will fall as a deliberate act of government policy. Now, in practice, 60% of those affected are in work, so the majority of people working, as well as people who are unemployed, will also be affected. It is that idea of you have been mugged, therefore your neighbour should be mugged. Your boss isn't paying you properly, your wages have been cut, so why the hell are people on benefits enjoying bigger rises than you? So again, it is that idea of exploiting resentment on that basis. But, of course, it doesn't even make any sense because, in practice, it is a double mugging - people will be mugged by their boss, their employers are cutting their wages in real-terms and then, on top of that, their tax credits and other in-work benefits, such as housing benefit, will also be cut as well. But that doesn't matter for the Tories because what they are doing is, firstly, trying to airbrush out of existence the idea that people in work will be affected, but also they hope that Labour will fall into the trap of defending the so-called strivers, those in work, against the unemployed. If you are out of work, then it is your own fault, you are struggling to make ends meet. This idea of a static group of people who are unemployed, which isn't true. For example, over the last two years, over 5 million people have claimed Jobseekers Allowance. People are in the cycle of low paid work and unemployment, but nonetheless it is something which the Tories have ruthlessly used in their

arguments, particularly to cut welfare, to justify doing that by demonising those who are in receipt of benefit.

**Geoff Andrews:** Language of Poverty. This is a podcast from the Open University. We're looking at the way politicians have changed the way we describe and define poverty in an era of rising inequality. Yes, you mention, also, the importance of the historical context and I wanted to ask Gerry, where would you place the strivers versus skivers distinction in the history of post-war British welfare policy?

**Gerry Mooney:** Well clearly, there is a long history of making a distinction between what we could call the good poor and the bad poor, that is between people whose poverty was largely due to circumstances beyond their immediate control, against another group whose poverty was largely attributed to their own inadequacies...

**Geoff Andrews:** Deserving or undeserving.

**Gerry Mooney:** Deserving or undeserving. Now, you focus, obviously, you asked the question about post-war Britain but clearly we could go back even further into the late 19th Century where you begin to get an emergence of a language which was very punitive, very harsh, which talks about certain sections of the impoverished working class in horrific terms. I mean, they are conjured up as a dangerous class, the residuum, the leftovers, the outcasts, there is a whole series of very horrible terms used to describe that section of the population. But when we come to the post World War II era, we think back about the 1950s, 1960s as the Golden Age of the British welfare state. But even during that period, it is not too difficult to find a language that talks about the deserving and undeserving. So, for example, one of the key problem groups in the 1950s and 60s were the problem families. Problem families who were not raising their kids properly, who were not living life properly, whose culture was holding them back in some kind of way. And that isn't just to do with benefits or employability or working, it is also to do with things like housing. The post-war period is, you know, the period where there is a massive expansion of municipal or council housing, as it came to be known, and your local authorities, following government edicts, used to make distinctions between good and bad tenants. So, this language of strivers and skivers builds throughout the post-war period, but really begins to come into its own in the 1970s, 1980s, up until today, in 2013, where we see it working through in a whole number of ways. So, the notion of strivers and skivers has been conjured up by the UK government, under David Cameron, as a distinction between the hardworking and the feckless. It has to be said that was also a distinction that Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, in the Labour Party, used when New Labour was in power up until 2011 as well. So there is a long history of making this distinction between different sections of people experiencing poverty, groups experiencing poverty that suggests that for some of them, you know, poverty is to do with wider economic factors, perhaps, but for others, it is about a lack of morality, a lack of upbringing, a lack of standards, or simply they lack the wherewithal to actually, not the economic wherewithal, but they lack the moral fibre to live their lives like the rest of us.

**Owen Jones:** And I think what that really, particularly today, draws upon is what happened in the Thatcher period, which is the individualisation of social problems. The idea that these, like unemployment and poverty, aren't social problems, they are to do with people's individual defects. Now Thatcher, for example, just before she was elected, did an interview with the Catholic Herald and she said there was no such thing as primary poverty in countries like Britain. Instead, we are left with people who don't know how to budget and don't know how to spend their earnings properly. And she

said you are left with a basic, behavioural, personality defect. That, of course, was at the very heart of Thatcherism, that idea of these issues, if you are unemployed or poor, isn't because of wider defects with the way the economy is structured, it is down to your own behaviour. Keith Joseph, seen as actually being the standard bearer of the Tory right, key influence for Margaret Thatcher, until he made an infamous speech, in the early 70s, where he suggested that those in lower social groups were reproducing faster than the rest of the population which, he said, threatened the human stock. He was drawing on a very broad, long tradition in Britain of eugenicism, particularly which flourished in the inter-war period and actually attracted adherents on the so-called left, Early Fabians, for example, experimented or toyed with the ideas of eugenicism. So did, for example, Beveridge, the founder of the welfare state, as did the Webbs, those key founders of Fabianism in Britain and, of course, you speak about the residuum earlier on. But at the same time, in the Thatcher period, that flourished in a way it hadn't, I think, previously in post-war Britain. Norman Tebbit did a famous speech, of course, saying, "Back in the early 1930s, my dad didn't complain about the lack of work, he got on his bike and he looked for it." 'Get on your bike' became almost a cliché in Thatcher's Britain - if everyone tries their hardest, they can get work. That individualisation of social problems is something New Labour carried on and helped reinforce those attitudes because people felt well, look, if even the Labour Party, the traditional champion of the poor, if you like, are making these arguments, then no-one else was making counter-arguments about inequality and poverty and so these views became evermore entrenched.

**Gerry Mooney:** I think Owen is absolutely right to raise the issue about the individualisation of, you know, wider UK society, not just in terms of how poverty and inequality is understood, but in a wider way of understanding our society.

**Geoff Andrews:** So the language of poverty depends, to a large extent, on how they are defining it?

**Gerry Mooney:** Well I think what has happened, and again we can trace this way back to, again, the late 19th century and both of us have highlighted different aspects of this, what it tends to do is draw attention away from the economic causes of impoverishment, the economic causes of inequality more generally, to focus on individual inadequacy, family problems, family irresponsibility, kids not being brought up properly, problem communities. So, for example, if we take the notion of a broken society, which the Conservatives, under Cameron, have been running on about for the last couple of years or so, we have this notion of a broken society that focuses, almost entirely, on cultural deficit, individual problems. Where is the wider context about economic change within UK society?

**Geoff Andrews:** To what extent does it matter how languages of poverty are used in the United Kingdom? That's what we're discussing in this podcast from the Open University, the Languages of Poverty. Gerry, accompanying this quite emotive language, "strivers and skivers", there've been a number of punitive measures directed at those on welfare benefits. Some suggest that this amounts to a criminalisation of the poor.

**Gerry Mooney:** Well I think there's considerable evidence of that, certainly under the current Liberal Democrat Conservative coalition government. If you look back to the riots that took place in some of the major English towns and cities in the summer of 2011, the response to that by courts – and politicians, and not only politicians from the right - was absolutely horrific. You had the cases of people who were convicted of, I'm not sure if its affray in England, but that's what you're convicted of; involvement in those riots, or as I prefer the term civil disorders, who were asked if they were council house tenants or tenants of social housing and who were threatened not only with court punishment,

but if they were tenants of social housing, they were going to lose their social housing tenancy. I mean it's a double strike, so there's one example of the criminalisation of particular groups of people who are disadvantaged in contemporary society, and that's one and only one. We can think of many others and it seems to be a language now of, not only more punitive and harsher, but is talking about harsher sanctions for people in poverty.

**Owen Jones:** Benefit fraud, according to the government's own estimates, is less than 1% of total welfare spending, it is about £1.2 billion a year, which you can contrast with £25 billion lost through tax avoidance every year. But a poll done by the TUC showed that people thought most people were committing fraud who were on welfare. People overestimated how much money people got and who actually got it. The more people actually knew the truth, the less likely they were to support what the government was doing. So this use of the most extreme, unrepresentative examples has been crucial in this demonisation of people. And that is very much reinforced by the use of politicians and journalists of the most unrepresentative and extreme examples, which are then passed off as being the tip of the iceberg. So they will hunt down people who fit the stereotype, the caricature of the scrounger, whose own personal inadequacies have led to their situation. People who, you know, might be, you know, this idea of, I am going to use a very, kind of, extreme image, but this idea of someone, you know, a scrounger in a house made out of widescreen television sets, dribbling on a sofa, watching Jeremy Kyle on repeat whilst 50 kids run around. And anything that comes even close to that extreme example, that caricature, will be hunted down. What you end up with is a complete, massive, widespread, endemic myth, fanned by the media.

**Gerry Mooney:** I mean, one of the key threads that runs through all of this, Geoff, is the idea of welfare dependency, that if you are dependent on the welfare state, there is something wrong with you. You are inadequate. Now, some of us here were brought up in an era when there was something called the welfare state. Welfare was considered to be something good, if I look after your welfare surely that is a positive thing? But what has happened is, particularly in the 1980s, thanks to the Conservatives, although you can maybe trace it a little earlier than that, a much more American notion of welfare was brought in, where welfare was seen to reflect your inadequacies or disabilities in some kind of way. Now, we are focusing here on, you know, languages of poverty and I think it is important to reinforce the point that language matters because how you define a problem, how you construct a problem, the language that you use will determine what policies you end up with as a government. And what we are seeing is that under the Conservative UK coalition government today, as under the New Labour government, as under the Major and Thatcher governments before then, an increasingly punitive approach to people who are experiencing poverty.

**Owen Jones:** And that is actually a point which was reinforced when I interviewed Matthew Taylor, who used to be a key advisor to Tony Blair. And I spoke to him about social exclusion, New Labour's approach to what they call social exclusion and the point he made was this; the difference with class, as he put it, was class was something assigned to you, you were born into it, there was nothing you could do about it, the difference with social exclusion is that, as he put it, you could exclude yourself, your own personal behaviour partly determined where you ended up on the pecking order. And he said it wasn't entirely about blaming the poor, but he said there was an element of that as well. So that idea of people's own personal behaviour determining their circumstances was something which, even though New Labour spoke about social exclusion, which on the face of it seems like acknowledging the existence of inequality and poverty in Britain, actually helped reinforce that idea, the individualisation of social problems.



**Geoff Andrews:** Obviously, languages of poverty are really constructed through the media and by government. How important is it that we actually hear from those living with poverty themselves, Gerry?

**Gerry Mooney:** I think that there is a long and noble tradition that has emphasised the importance of voices of people experiencing poverty and I think we should, where possible, make sure that those voices are heard because I think it is true that we could say there is a poverty industry in the UK, in different parts of the UK, which isn't always concerned to advance the fight against poverty and that has to be very important. There is, though, a slight problem in that if we simply focus on people's day-to-day experiences and ask for individual voices about poverty, you can lose, also, the wider structural picture and I am not necessarily saying that that is something that people experiencing poverty can't articulate, but what I am saying is there is experiential and individual, family, community level, but there is also the wider, collective aspect of poverty that we have to hold on to as well.

**Owen Jones:** Yes, I would strongly agree with that. I think it is very important to hear the voices of people who live in poverty, not least because they have largely been airbrushed out of existence and that vacuum has been filled by these grotesque caricatures, these unrepresentative examples which are then passed off as being what it actually means to be poor in Britain, which is to be work-shy, feckless, taking the Mick, robbing the taxpayer and leaching off the states, and unless you have voices who actually demonstrate the reality and can articulate it in their own words, then those caricatures will de facto, continue to be seen as the actual representative picture of what it is to live in poverty in Britain. I mean, there was a documentary a couple of years ago on the BBC called Poor Kids, which I thought was positive because it allowed children in poverty to speak about their experiences as they actually were. And I think just that one documentary punctured a lot of myths that lots of people had, simply because their only interaction with people living in poverty was these grotesque caricatures, not just in the media but fanned by popular comedies such as Little Britain, looking at Vicky Pollard, you know, this thick single parent living on an estate, so stupid she swaps one of her children for a Westlife CD. And actually it challenges that. Also, there is an American political linguist called George Laycoff who points out that the right often use stories and the left often use facts and statistics, but people connect better with stories than they do with facts and statistics. So it is a balance of the two but, of course, Gerry is absolutely right, it is also about linking that to a far broader picture, where you actually talk about poverty as a structural issue in our modern society and our modern economy.

**Gerry Mooney:** I mean, we are living in one of the most severe economic crisis since, certainly, the inter-war period and I think people have to think about the current context. Why, in a period of growing inequality, not just in the UK but other parts of the world, United States in particular, there is a fantastic case study, why is it in a period of rising inequality, deepening gulf between the rich and the rest of the society, and I mean just the rich and people experiencing poverty, why is it that people who are experiencing poverty are being blamed for their own position? That is the key question.

**Geoff Andrews:** So can Class be separated from the poverty debate? or have politicians succeeded in demonising the poor and silencing their voice? That's what we're discussing in this podcast from the Open University: The Languages of Poverty. A lot of this language of poverty that we have discussed seems, from what you are saying, to be about class and I know that your book, Chavs, you argue that the term, really, was used to demonise the working class. What did you mean by that?

**Owen Jones:** Well what I mean by that is, I mean, if we think about the word *chav*, it is a term which means lots of different things to different people, and its meaning actually changes depending on the context. What I was arguing, as much as the demonisation, was the airbrushing out of existence of class. This idea that we are all middle class now, and that all exists of the old working class is a problematic rump, often work-shy, often defined, for example, when this idea of the white working class emerged, an obsession with immigration, of being on the wrong side of history when it came to, say, multiculturalism. Because during the New Labour period there was this idea, we are all middle class now and then the idea of the white working class emerged, towards the fag end of the New Labour period, particularly when the BNP began to emerge in traditional Labour areas like East London, Dagenham and Barking and so on. And the point about the word '*chav*' is it just summed up that idea of this problematic rump, this old remnants of the working class. I mean the term itself, obviously, can be used in an explicitly classist way when it is used as acronyms, like council housed associated vermin, council housed and vulgar, council housed and violent, for example. There's whole books which are all about the so-called *chav* phenomenon, one which dismisses all kids in free school meals as *chav* kids, another which goes through what they call *chavvy* jobs like working in a supermarket or a fast-food restaurant and so on. But for me, what was key was actually this idea of taking on the concept, the false dichotomy of a middle class overwhelming majority versus this rump and it has, to a degree, filtered out into popular attitudes in this sense although, in fact, even a very recent poll showed that most people will self-define as working class and actually that has largely remained quite stubbornly high, between 50% to 55%. But one study by the organisation Britain Thinks, a polling organisation, had 71% saying they were middle class. When they were asked to define what they meant by middle class, through imagery, the most common image that came back was the cafetiere and it was this idea it was a cultural identity, it was something to aspire to, it was classy and, when they were asked, that group, the self-identifying middle class people, to sum up what they thought by working class, they came back with very negative images, for example teenage pregnancy, antisocial behaviour, spending money in a tacky way. One was plastic surgery gone wrong, which I didn't quite understand to be brutally honest. But it was what you could call *chav* images. And the minority, the 24% who said they were working class, when they were asked to define what it meant by working class, the most common response that came back was it just means being poor. Now, I think this is the depressing but unsurprising legacy of the assault on, if you like, working class Britain which came hand-in-hand with this idea that aspiration is about becoming '*middle class*', this idea of being middle class, this cultural idea of being middle class. And therefore, if you are to remain being working class, that is almost associated with lack of aspiration, with being tacky, with being all the things which, I suppose, the term *chav* came to associate.

**Gerry Mooney:** Not only has there been an assault on people who are impoverished, there has also been an assault on the notion of class itself. We hear reference to the middle class, or the squeezed middle, to use the current terminology, but it is a very de-economised middle class, isn't it? It is not seen as rooted in any economic framework. Prior to this, we can talk about the under class. Now, the under class was a de-classed class, it was a class beyond what was seen to be normal, mainstream society. So accompanying this growing denigration of working class life, this distinction between the respectable and the non-respectable, the notion of class itself, in some ways, has been hollowed out to a status, to appearance, to identity, to culture, to lifestyle, you know, working class people get their milk delivered, other people go to the supermarket and get it. That kind of very superficial idea of class. And I think it is incumbent upon us to try and reinforce an idea of class that is about economic exploitation.

**Geoff Andrews:** So, when we talk about languages of poverty, that inevitably takes us into a discussion, really, about class and about how we live and about the other values that drive government agendas, about what kind of society we want to have and the needs of the economy. I mean, it is quite a wide discussion, isn't it?

**Owen Jones:** And what we have seen, going back to that language point, in practice, is the airbrushing out of existence of the idea of a respectable working class which used to exist. These days, in modern Britain, the idea is if you are respectable you are what they describe as middle class and if you are non-respectable then you are the under class. But that point about looking at poverty in a class context is key and rejecting the cultural framing which has become so popular, which is basically about lifestyle. Things like which radio station do you listen to? If you listen to Radio 4 then you are middle class.

**Gerry Mooney:** Which shop do you go to? Owen Jones: Which shop do you go to, do you go to, Do you read The Times or do you read The Sun or The Mirror. Do you watch ITV1 or do you watch BBC One? These are these, like, cultural conceptions of class, if you like, and I have a very traditional view of class, it is to do with your relationship, your economic relationship, if you like, which is if you are working class, then you have to sell your labour in order to live and you lack autonomy over that labour, as well as all those who are denied work because of the economic system which we live in, where unemployment is a structural part of that economic system. And it is that issue of having common shared interests which are in collision with the interests of another class. So if you are working class then, as I say, or you work for somebody else for a living, it is in your interest to have higher wages, better conditions at work, you rely on public services as well, so a good NHS, good local state school, for example. And if you are someone who is, if you like, a capitalist, then you employ other people, it is in your interest to keep their wages down if you can, their working conditions, to cut back there as well. You will rely, often, on private healthcare and private education and you will resent having to pay taxes to fund public services that you don't actually use. Those are people on a collision course. But actually poverty, again, isn't a static group of people. People move in and out of poverty throughout their lives. There is a large section in the population which is susceptible to falling into poverty. That is increasing at the moment because of rising job insecurity, because of decline in real wages, for example. So it is a class phenomenon because if you are working class you are far more likely to fall into poverty than somebody who is obviously above that.