

‘Deserving’ vs ‘undeserving’

By Ros Wynne-Jones, Senior Feature Writer, *Daily Mirror*

Reporting poverty of any kind is riven with dilemmas – are you a voyeur or a genuine force for change? Are you highlighting the issues or selling papers? Are you reflecting a hidden reality of inner-city Britain or glamorising a culture of crime?

Since the concept of the ‘deserving poor’ emerged in Victorian times, editors – and, as importantly, readers – have assigned different types of morality to different types of poverty. The ‘undeserving poor’ are the Asbo kids and the hoodies, the drug-addicted and long-term unemployed. On the other hand, the ‘deserving poor’ look a lot like middle Englanders fallen on hard times.

When Damilola Taylor died in 2000, I remember spending time at the North Peckham estate and its environs, talking to kids in hoods before they had become collectivised as ‘hoodies’. I met a girl there who, at 14, was one of the angriest, most violent, most foulmouthed people I have ever met. She threatened me with violence and told me how she enjoyed mugging people on the street for kicks.

In the week I spent visiting the estate, the girl became a kind of volatile guide, turning up every day and hanging around and asking questions and then storming off in a rage. After a friend of mine had been mugged close to the estate and terrorised by a girl gang, I asked whether she ever felt anything for the people she mugged with her gang of girlfriends.

“No,” she said. “The way I see it, no one ever gave a fuck when my mum got kicked down every flight of stairs in our tower block. And no one ever gave a shit when I went into care. So don’t expect me to give a fuck for anyone else.”

Yet she clearly did. She radiated loneliness. The problem was a gap in experience – how to explain to people that this girl in a hoodie, with a face made ugly by violence, wasn’t all she seemed on the surface. That life had made her that way.

You knew that even the photograph of her, in a dirty tracksuit, would immediately bring up the label ‘undeserving’. There was the sense that the purpose of the piece had simply been to stare at the poor as if it were a Bedlam sideshow.

The Vicky Pollard stereotype of the feckless, stupid, badly dressed girl, and its myriad versions by Catherine Tate and others, reveal exactly how threatened Middle England feels by our ‘undeserving’ poor. This ‘comedy’, after all, is where our society’s ‘underclass’ is castigated these days.

And smug Middle Englanders laugh loudly from discomfort that such people – presented as poorly educated with bad teeth and thin vocabularies, people blighted by the poverty of aspiration – still exist in the Peckhams and the Moss Sides and the St Ann’s. Seven years later we are still failing people like the girl on the North Peckham estate, damaged so badly by life that their only empowerment is to attack others. It is a vicious circle in which the media also plays its part.

We need to report poverty in all its ugliness, yet without exploiting it. It is the dilemma of the photographer in a famine zone facing an emaciated child. And it is a dilemma in UK poverty terms that we are only starting to explore now.