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Rich TV, Poor TV: Work, leisure and the construction of ‘deserved inequality’ in contemporary Britain

Jo Littler and Milly Williamson

Introduction

In January 2017, the UK ITV show *This Morning* featured a woman, Deborah Hodge, who had recently appeared on the Channel 5 reality TV show *On Benefits*. Phillip Schofield, one of the show’s presenters, told Hodge that it ‘quite frankly got my back up’ that she had spent £10 on two bottles of prosecco (fizzy Italian wine) at Christmas and was filmed saying ‘cheers to the taxpayer for my gift’. The incident was widely reported as Schofield losing his temper, with headlines including ‘Schofield blasts *This Morning* guest’ and ‘Schofield hits out at mum’ (Minn 2017). The story and its wider amplification in the media worked on a number of discursive levels. It concertedly stoked pre-existing debate and moral panic about ‘benefits scroungers’. The arrival of this motif on a show previously distanced from such moral condemnation was itself an event marking the further encroaching of such discourse into the mainstream. Meanwhile, left commentators – relatively marginalized in the UK media landscape – pointed out that such ‘fauxrage’ enabled moral posturing about the fecklessness of the poor. In the memorable words of *Guardian* columnist, Phil McDuff, ‘even if they hung old sacks at their window in lieu of curtains and ate cold beans by the light of recycled candles’ to save money, any pleasurable consumption would be considered frivolous waste. Such indignation, he writes, ‘is a vicious reaction against the poor’s presumptuous insistence on experiencing life as if they were as fully human as the rest of us’ (McDuff 2017). It was also pointed out that whilst the presenter Philip Schofield was castigating the unemployed about how they spent ten pounds, he was being paid a two-million-pound salary by ITV and had a private net worth valued at twelve million pounds (Singh 2009; *The Richest* 2017).

The benefits ‘scrounger’ and the celebrified but abject reality TV performer are two central contemporary media images of working-class people in the UK media. Both are frequently depicted as ‘morally repugnant’ (Tyler 2013) and their construction resurrects elements of long-standing classed social types that are part of a ‘continuous morality play’ through which the media reasserts dominant social values (Golding and Middleton, 1982, 238). The current resurrection of the welfare ‘scrounger’ type has been joined by a new social type – the

feckless, leisured ‘ordinary’ celebrity – and we suggest that they are two sides of the same coin. Both have ideological taproots that extend back at least into the 19th century, and are contemporary mediated manifestations of older discourses of the workshy, spiv or shirker. Both are ideological responses to a broader economic and political crisis extending back to the 1960s; both are also the main fodder of reality TV today because they are cheap-to-make formats in the context of rising costs, declining audiences and declining advertising revenue. Television production companies and broadcasters have utilised reality TV since the late 1990s as a cost-cutting mechanism through the exploitation of ordinary people in the media and a means by which to attack the conditions of workers in the television industry (Collins 2008, Williamson 2016). Both of these ‘social types’ of reality TV feature working-class subjects who do not work and who are demonised, vilified and depicted as amoral and/or excessive, although in different ways, as a result. While those on benefits are usually depicted as deviant and pathological, working-class celebrities on shows such as *Love Island* (ITV2, 2015 -), *Ex On The Beach* (MTV, 2014 -) and *Geordie Shore* (MTV 2011 -) are regularly shown as ‘bad subjects’ for taking part in conspicuous leisure as part of the labour of reality TV, often fuelled by excesses of alcohol and sex. Both figures were elided together in the case of Deborah Hodge, Schofield’s guest on *This Morning*, given her role as a mother of four who had given up her job as an art teacher in order to try to ‘make it’ on reality TV and buy the house she was currently renting. Hodge was featured in a number of stories in the press, particularly *Mailonline*, which interviewed her about her plans whilst simultaneously viciously castigating her for her foolishness and recklessness (Waterlow 2016a, b).

This chapter will examine both representations of working-class ‘lack’, contrasting them with forms of glamorous ‘overwork’ recurring in representations of the rich, and connecting both to the political and cultural economy of their televisual production. For whilst configuring the working-class as an underclass through ‘poverty porn’ has expanded in this neoliberal era of a viciously widening gap between rich and poor, so too has the extravagantly favorable representation of the super wealthy. In Britain this has particularly taken the form of lavish costume heritage dramas about aristocratic culture such as *The Crown* (Netflix 2016 –), *Downton Abbey* (ITV 2010 – 2015), and *Victoria* (ITV 2016). In contrast with the shoestring production values and exploitative payment ofceletoid reality TV stars, these programmes are opulent productions which package British upper-class life for a global, and particularly a transatlantic, market. In contrast with the depiction of working- class leisure as irresponsible and reckless, aristocrats are today recurrently depicted as hardworking and responsible.

Whilst both these tropes have, to be sure, very long-standing histories, their particular visibility at the present time and the specificities of their contemporary cultural expression are important. The juxtaposition of the ‘hardworking’ rich and the ‘lazy’ poor on British television works both as an ideological justification for the continually extending chasm between wealth and poverty. At the same time their significantly different production values offer material evidence of classed investment in television production. In this short piece we unashamedly operate on a broad canvas by selecting salient examples of the rich and the poor on TV in contemporary Britain in order to provide a form of class and media analysis through what we consider to be eclectic but important juxtaposition. To begin with, we will look at the figure of the ‘scrounger’.

The Return of ‘Scroungerphobia’

The benefits ‘scrounger’ is as much a staple on British reality TV as the ‘ordinary’ celebrity. Indeed, sometimes they are one and the same, as participants in benefits ‘documentaries’ are in effect temporarily celebrified. ‘White Dee’, for example, a key character on *Benefits Street*, was the subject of extensive media commentary (Allen *et al* 2014). At a time when the Conservative government in Britain is making £12 billion cuts in welfare payments in the service of austerity, leading politicians and their allies in the media have demonized welfare claimants by stigmatising them and by linking them to criminal and anti-social activity, and to already demonized and criminalized sections of the population – immigrants, gypsies and single mums – further vilifying those groups. As Peter Golding and Sue Middleton argue in their landmark analysis of images of welfare, ‘The poor have been a nuisance, a threat and a financial burden throughout our history, and explaining their continuing and irritating presence has been a persistent problem of the ideologists of capitalism’ (Golding and Middleton 1982: 186).

The benefits ‘scrounger’ is an important figure in the project and is not a new media phenomenon. It made a spectacular appearance in the British media in the 1970s as the ‘welfare scrounger’ in order to explain, or rather, explain away, rising poverty. Three tropes were mobilised in the mid 1970s - individualism, moral pathology and efficiency - in order to blame the poor for the crisis of capitalism by explaining broader economic problems (and in particular the fiscal crisis) as the outcome of a bloated and overly generous welfare state being exploited by ‘welfare scroungers’ (Golding and Middleton 1982: 226). The media

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created a sense of moral outrage between the ‘law abiding majority and the deviant claimant’ (83) in order to supply a set of explanations and rationalisations that shifted attention away from rising unemployment and refocused, and individualised, social problems and issues. The news media played a key role in this regard. By the mid 1970s, stories of welfare abuse managed to shift the narrative from one of concerns about benefit fraud into a more general suspicion of the welfare apparatus and the values which underpinned it, as part of a process of ideologically dismantling the welfare consensus (Golding and Middleton 1982).

The image of the scrounger has been deployed by large sections of the UK media in order to popularise ‘opposition to the welfare system based on the twin themes that it was both unnecessary and an excessively costly burden’ (Golding and Middleton 109). Golding and Middleton suggest that ‘scroungerphobia’ developed in the 1970s in order to ‘remoralise the workless millions to ensure the continued vitality of the work ethic and the preservation of law and order’ in the context of economic crisis and, by 1980, the largest increase in unemployment since the 1930s (109). But the fiscal crisis (the blame for which was being dumped at the door of the ‘welfare scrounger’) was in fact the manifestation of wider structural problems facing British capitalism. Throughout the 20th century the private sector in the UK faced a crisis of accumulation, which was lower in Britain than in most major industrial nations. Capital investment was low throughout the post-war period (mostly hidden until the 1960s) and continues to be low, creating a long-term, ongoing crisis in productivity. Consequently, the ‘seeds of the neo-liberal attack on the welfare state have long been germinating in the soil of post-war economic uncertainties, even though not finally transplanted into the sunlight of popular debate until the 1970s’ (Golding and Middleton 224).

That crisis has only deepened in the subsequent decades, as Britain became the test-bed for neoliberalism in the Global North after the government made a deal with the IMF in 1976 (Hall 1998, Harvey 2005, Klein 2008).ⁱ Neoliberalism vigorously promotes corporate power, the marketization of collective forms of public provision, and the idea that competition is a ruling principle for all areas of life. This formation attempts to push forward and colonise new ground wherever it can; and just as the culture of Thatcherism tapped into pre-existing beliefs about welfare and poverty at a moment of economic crisis, so too has the economic crisis and political uncertainty of our time found right-wing expression in a new demonization of the welfare ‘scrounger’.

In 2013 Conservative politicians reanimated longstanding motifs of a ‘division between those who apparently reap the comfortable benefits of welfare dependency and those whose inadequately rewarded labours finance them’ (Golding and Middleton, 1982, 107), by suggesting, as did the then Prime Minister David Cameron, that claiming benefits was a ‘lifestyle choice’. On the eve of announcing draconian cuts in welfare payments, Cameron claimed that, ‘No-one wants to work hard every day and see their hard-earned taxes being used to fund things they themselves cannot afford or keep generations dependent on welfare’.ⁱⁱ However, while in the 1970s it was the tabloid press that amplified these views, today it is reality TV which has been at the forefront of this endeavor, with all five terrestrial channels in the UK churning out ‘documentaries’ and docu-soaps about people on benefits. From Channel Four’s notorious format pioneering *Benefits Streets* (2014) to the BBC’s *We All Pay Your Benefits* (2013), Britain’s broadcasters have whipped up anger and resentment at those depicted on ‘handouts’ in the service of audience ratings. The tabloid press both feed off and cash in on this demonization by running stories about the characters from these shows. However, while earlier incarnations of the welfare scrounger were put into service to *hide* poverty, or deflect attention away from it (Golding and Middleton 1982), one of the key ideological planks in the current construction of the ‘welfare crisis’ is the view that welfare itself is one of the major causes of poverty rather than say, zero-hours contracts and greater job insecurity, falling wages, redundancy, the contraction of traditional manufacturing industries (see Jensen and Tyler 2015; McRobbie 2018). The construction of welfare dependency as a cause of poverty circulates around ‘bad subjects’ who are constituted as abject, and as Angela McRobbie demonstrates, these representations are often focused on women (McRobbie 2018). Jensen and Tyler suggest that this is mediated through notions of intergenerational worklessness, drug dependency, anti-social behaviour, troubled families, teenage pregnancy, single mums, the workshy and ‘benefits broods’ – the portrayal of people who have large families ostensibly to increase their benefits (Jensen and Tyler 2015). Both McRobbie and Jensen and Tyler argue that the production and repetition of ‘revolting subjects’ is a central mechanism through which today’s anti-welfare common sense is crafted. These shows combine a longer-standing construction of welfare claimants as ‘taking advantage’ and as chaotic, with the more recent idea that welfare recipients are trapped in poverty *because* they receive benefits. The overall impression they engender is that welfare claimants are either undeserving and manipulative, or will be better off if their money is taken away or cut.

While all channels have indulged in this form of ‘poverty porn’, it is Channel Five that dominates the field in this kind of diet. Channel Five’s most recent offering *The Great British Benefits Handout* (2016) was preceded by at least 16 shows of this kind, each with ‘benefits’ in the title, each of which tackled the motifs of welfare dependency outlined by Tyler and Jensen above. But, unlike the BBC or Channel Four, Channel Five is an independent broadcaster whose regulatory remit is closer to ITV, so we must ask why it seems to be the channel that most enthusiastically pushes the Conservative government agenda in its aberrant construction of welfare claimants. Part of the answer is to do with the fortunes of the channel and its strategies for revenue generation in what has been a flat advertising environment for UK TV from the beginning of the 21st century. Channel Five emerged in the combined regulation-lite and increasingly commercial policy environment of the late 1990s. This policy environment (which promoted deregulation, increased competition and commercialisation) occurred simultaneously with the the introduction of new technology, channel proliferation and media convergence. The result was an international crisis in the television industry with rising broadcasting costs and a simultaneous loss of revenue (Deery 2014, Raphael 2004, Williamson, 2016). The television industry responded in several ways to this crisis, including a series of cost-cutting exercises (Raphael, 2004, Williamson 2016), and commercialising programmes as fully as possible (Deery 2014).

In the UK, the result was the Communications Act of 2003 which lifted cross media ownership caps and enabled non-European organisations to entirely own a British television company. The logic of Channel Five in this context primarily worked to offer a commercial diet of entertainment built on a developing business model of buying in cheap production formats and already tried-and-tested series in order to maximise advertising revenue. Even so, this strategy did not initially pay off for the relatively small entity that was Channel Five in an atmosphere of mergers and acquisitions that had resulted from deregulation, and which produced the growth of enormous media giants. In 2010, Channel Five was operating a loss of £48 million (Sweney 2016). That year the channel was acquired by Richard Desmond, (owner of the media group Northern Shell) for £103 million with promises of investment in new programmes and programme development (Knight 2012). Instead, Desmond and Northern Shell set about making the company a profitable investment for shareholders and future possible acquisitions. This involved beefing up its advertiser-friendly programming, including its reality TV offerings, by acquiring shows like *Big Brother* from Channel Four, as

well as poaching the life-on-benefits format from Channel Four.ⁱⁱⁱ Although the channel still lost £13 million under Desmond's ownership in the nine months to September 2014, it demonstrated that it was the kind of commercial entity ripe for acquisition by a multinational conglomerate interested in increasing the bottom line. And in 2014, enabled by the 2003 legislation, it was bought by Viacom for £463 million – more than triple its sale price to Desmond just four years earlier. Desmond reportedly paid himself and his top executives £100 million in bonuses, and Viacom set about using its size and strength to effect a 40% increase in ad revenue for the channel within the first year. Its first step was to shut down Channel Five's own sales operation, with a loss of almost 100 jobs (Sweney 2016) and outsource its £300m-plus TV ad sales business to Sky until 2020 (Channel Five Annual Report 2015). Linking up with Sky enabled Viacom to negotiate better advertising deals with media agencies because of its size in the market. Channel Five cites *Benefits Britain: Life on the Dole* as one of the channel's highlights for ad revenue (Channel Five Annual Report 2015, 215).

Through these economic and cultural channels, Channel Five has engaged in a form of right-wing populism, of giving expression to “common sense,” of voicing ‘what everyone knows’ by reanimating longstanding images of welfare abuse and dependency and thus itself helping to recreate the mythology of welfare scroungers that it seeks to evoke, and it does so as a central plank in a programming strategy that is less concerned with the quality of its content than it is with the business of attracting as much advertising revenue as possible for as little outlay as possible. These images come at a time of increased marginalisation of working-class people from public culture, the decline in the numbers of working-class actors, the decline of thoughtful, multifaceted narratives of working-class experiences, and the decline of pride in working-class identity and collectivity (Jones 2016; Friedman *et al* 2016; Skeggs 2004). We have seen the winnowing of the space for participation of working-class people in the British media both behind the screen and in front of it, and an increase in twenty-first-century ‘poverty porn’ where they are subject to ridicule, denigration and abjection – in short ‘scroungerphobia’.

Celebrity and Class in Reality TV

But this sub-format of reality TV is not the only one which benefits from the manipulation of images of working-class ‘worklessness’ to cash in on unacceptable version of leisure. Today, reality TV is populated with working-class reality celebrities who perform a version of

‘leisure’ which is depicted as ‘hedonistic, irresponsible and raucous’ (Kay 2017), and which, at the same time, denies the *labour* of these performances (Turner 2010, Wood *et al* in this volume) and hides the profitable surplus value extracted from them (Williamson 2016). Wood, Kay and Banks argue that the construction of disgust is very much a classed phenomenon that is dependent upon the denigration of working-class performances of leisure as ‘illegitimate labour’. They argue that the work of ordinary celebrities in reality TV is considered ‘not real work’ and that reality celebrity ‘has come to symbolise the antithesis of commitment to a career – rather, it signifies a particular kind of narcissistic worklessness’ (in this volume; see also Skeggs and Wood 2011, 2012).

In the UK, the three most popular of these shows are *Geordie Shore*, *The Only Way is Essex* and *Ex On the Beach*. These shows are filmed in spaces that might be more closely associated with the conspicuous consumption of Thorstein Veblen’s traditional ‘leisure class’ than with the *mise-en-scene* of working-class ‘graft’¹ – Mediterranean beaches, yachts, exclusive resorts with swimming pools and bars, nightclubs and restaurants. However, these settings and the participants who populate them are framed as imbued with a sense of repugnant excess – showing too much flesh and emotion, too much interest in sex, drinking and swearing, and too little middle-class cultural capital. Traditional spaces of leisure are also invaded by the visibility of intimate ‘backstage’ spaces such as the bedroom and the toilet, and the ‘private’ activities that occur in such spaces, including sexual intercourse, vomiting, and defecation, contributing to a sense of these celebrities as abject. But there is also a sense of troubling anxiety, as reality celebrities have become what Jilly Kay terms a new working-class-based ‘illegitimate leisure class’ (Kay 2017) that, while it is denigrated in the wider media and commentariat, also provides working-class viewers with an “opportunity structure” (Allen and Mendick 2013, p.87) at a cultural and historical moment when the creative arts are increasingly closed to the working-class. These shows and the celebrities that perform on them are denigrated because they offer a version of conspicuous consumption to working-class audiences in images that may be the inverse to Veblen’s leisure class; but are considered no less ripe for emulation.

Nonetheless, celebrities on reality TV are usually unpaid or badly paid for their performances (Williamson 2016) and instead they must generate a precarious income by promoting products online or at appearances at nightclubs (Wood 2016). Wood *et al* (in this volume)

¹ In the UK, ‘graft’ refers to tireless hard work and a ‘grafter’ is one who is industrious.

point out that this precarity is gendered, and it takes a particular toll on female working-class bodies. For example, female reality celebrities put on weight prior to the release of a fitness DVD in order to be photographed as ‘overweight’, so that they can later appear trim and ‘fit’ to promote the DVD. Rather than an ‘easy pay check’ this gendered labour involves ‘intensive corporeal toil’ Wood *et al* (in this volume). The character and terms of celebrity promotional labour differ between upper-middle-class celebrities and working-class celebrities. The wealthy celebrities of E4’s *Made in Chelsea* are less dependent on selling their labour through promotional work than are their working-class counterparts in *Geordie Shore*, and at any rate ‘tend to get more lucrative, enduring and less ad-hoc endorsement contracts’, such as *Made in Chelsea*’s Binkie Felsted gaining a contract as the new face of Reebok (Kay 2017). Unlike their working-class counterparts, the worklessness of the upper-middle-class celebrities of *Made in Chelsea* is ‘normalized’ as appropriately performed leisure through their knowledge of proper class-based conduct in the glamorous venues of leisure.

Reinventing the rich: aristocrats ‘learning to labour’

Working-class subjects on reality TV, a genre related to a specific and exploitative mode of television production, are then today insistently being presented as the undeserving poor, feckless in their leisure. By contrast, the marked trend in televisual presentations of the British rich occupies very different symbolic and economic terrain and has been expanded by a recent spate of extremely popular lavish TV period dramas devoted to the aristocracy, including the ITV dramas *Downton Abbey* and *Victoria* and the Netflix dramatic serial *The Crown*. The latter was widely reported as being ‘the most expensive TV show ever made’ with a reported budget of \$100 million for two series (Lewis 2016; Loughrey 2016).

Such shows clearly build on a longer tradition of British heritage drama, including *Upstairs/Downstairs* in the 1970s and the enthusiastic embrace of historical aristocrats by the 1980s silver screen, particularly in Merchant-Ivory films such as *Chariots of Fire* (1981) and *Howard’s End* (1992). The latter have been frequently and accurately read in the context of the rise of a 1980s neoconservative Thatcherite agenda which promoted and sold a reactionary version of the past to legitimate its present via what came to be termed ‘the heritage industry’, a complex which also includes new forms of heritage experience attraction as well as ‘heritaged’ lifestyle brands (Hewison 1987, Harvey 1991, Higson 2001, Littler and Naidoo 2004). Just as these earlier visual texts worked hard to celebrate aristocratic culture,

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so too do these current versions, which have mushroomed in appeal, cost and reach to an extent not seen since the 1980s. Given this symbiosis it could also be noted that alongside the continuation of the neoliberal agenda of marketization and competitiveness, Prime Minister May's combination of a populist, demotic appeal made explicitly to the working-class with an extremely punitive agenda and eager embrace of authoritarian despots in pursuit of financial profit is more than a little reminiscent of Thatcher's regime.

In terms of our interests in classed dynamics of work and leisure, there are several interesting features operating in these recent aristocratic dramas which seem to be both part of an extended cultural continuum since the 1980s and to offer something qualitatively new and specific both in terms of cultural production and representational dynamics in this different conjuncture. In the process of depicting aristocrats who have extensive leisure time, many of these programmes are extremely keen to emphasise the story that they work very hard: that they are tireless 'grafters' in the service of the common good. *The Crown*, for instance, starts this process early on in its first episode, where the future queen is learning from her dying father about the graft and craft of monarchy. Their talking point is the sheer volume of papers that the King has to read from his government, a task he is presented taking very seriously, and conducting in a far more adroit manner than those in the cabinet ('I turn them over so I see the ones they don't want me to see' he says of the large box of files left for him by the Prime Minister).

Indeed the whole series is in many ways the story of aristocrats *learning to labour*, focalized through an invited identification with the queen's neck-twitching repressed emotional life and no-nonsense stoicism which are necessary attributes of the job. We are encouraged to admire the extent of this emotional labour as part of, and alongside, a wider repertoire of skills the Queen is depicted acquiring. (It is notable that this largely sympathetic, dramatic portrait includes a sympathetic and romanticised framing of its relationship to imperialism, reducing imperial subjects to sentimental story-line fodder). Being monarch is portrayed as such a weighty burden it killed George VI; 'the responsibility of becoming king killed your father!', says the Queen Mother in the third episode.

As Michael Billig put it, when we are talking of the royal family we are talking of other issues too (Billig 1992), including nation, community, family and inequality. The favorable presentations of the monarchy might be part of a longer tradition which ebbs and flows, but

its marked resurgence, and the lavish effort and expenditure on it at this time of expanding plutocratic power, when eight people own the same wealth as half the world, is no accident (Oxfam 2017). The wealth of the monarchy is of course hereditary, accumulated over centuries, and the strategies of cultural legitimisation for such power have a long and undistinguished history (Clancy 2015). Nonetheless, the monarchy is used to validate the accumulated wealth of other plutocratic elites. Even the reporting of the lavish budget in the tabloid press is couched in terms of class deference – the Mirror online tells its readers that *The Crown* may be the most expensive television show ever made – ‘but we think it might just be worth every penny’ because of the ‘attention to detail’ and ‘award winning’ performances. The paper reports with glee the £200k cost of a 30 second scene of a train (Jeffries and Methven 2016). The justification of the expense of depicting the on-screen Royals has distinct echoes of those deployed on the cost of the actual Royals, and in the former case, this is funded by one of the top streaming services, Netflix, who are using their strong market position and resources to establish their ‘quality’ credentials through narratives of the monarchy in order to consolidate that market position. There are what we might term ‘feedback loops of cultural validation’ between the monarchy, the aristocracy, plutocrats and capitalists. On a practical material level, this occurs when Conservative governments agree to make the Queen exempt from tax or donate £370 million to refurbish Buckingham Palace in a time when the amount of homeless people living on the streets has risen by 16% (Davies 2016; BBC 2017). Crucially, on a cultural and symbolic level, it works to validate the principle of inherited wealth. As Andrew Sayer argues in *Why We Can’t Afford The Rich*, obtaining income from *existing assets* that yield rent, interest or capital gains, is unearned income, and people who gain this income are *rentiers* (Sayer 2016; also see Lapavistas 2013). It is a form of wealth extraction, but it becomes packaged as, and confused with, wealth creation. A neoliberal political system supports, above all, *rentier* interests, in which the 99% become increasingly indebted to the 1%. Because contemporary plutocrats, like aristocrats, often leverage their inheritance through unearned income (like Donald Trump in the US, or the Duke of Westminster in Britain) becoming *rentiers* in the search for more wealth, there is a vested interest in their mutual validation.

The wildly popular UK TV drama *Downton Abbey* (ITV/PBS 2015) is instructive here. A joint US/UK production, it depicted a British stately home in the early decades of the twentieth century and the varied, interwoven lives of its inhabitants, from cooks to ladies, butlers to lords. Fashioning British heritage for the domestic and international export market,

it had extremely and at times unprecedentedly high ratings across a wide range of countries including China, Brazil, Singapore, Denmark, Israel, Belgium and Iceland (Egner 2013). Like *The Queen*, *Downton* displayed lavish aristocratic lifestyles, whilst similarly offering some contextual historical background that depict key events within a very conservative narrative. The key difference is of course the greater amount of screen time devoted to the working-class members of the household; although in tune with the dramatic, conservative tenor, they are overwhelmingly depicted as knowing and being happy with their social station (Littler 2017).

Whilst *Downton* includes a variety of depictions of the rich, it overwhelmingly presents them as *extremely* hard-working subjects. The Earl of Grantham and his American heiress wife Cora (again, symbolizing the mutual marriage of aristocracy and plutocracy) are hard-working paternalists who construct hospitals for their village and act like kind parents nurturing their subjects. One of their daughters becomes a hard-working 'new woman' and magazine editor; another expends extensive effort branching out into the pig farming business. The majority of these aristocrats are not depicted as leisure-class scroungers but rather as noble industrious (and proto-feminist) subjects. In the process, these social and economic elites acquire the patina of cultural worth through their association with 'hard work'. Hard work is an attribute with classed connotations which has become wrenched from the working-classes and re-gifted to the rich, and it is notable that plutocrats across the spectrum use such imagery and language to justify their privilege (Khan 2010, Littler 2017). *Downton* also depicts the changing historical landscape as one where some social change is considered impossible for that moment (notably, combating racism – a 'mixed race' relationship is deemed impossible), whilst other kinds of change are embraced and depicted as inevitable, particularly that of aristocrats becoming businessmen/women and developing 'enterprise initiatives' around, for example, housing, car dealerships, and pig farming (Littler 2017). In the process, the cultural and symbolic traffic between inherited wealth and capitalism becomes revalidated.

The contemporary construction of 'deserved inequality'

Through these engaging dramas and shaming shows the divergence between rich and poor becomes validated as a historical truth and justified present. Both construct the image of contemporary inequalities as being, above all, *deserved*. The dream of a 'life of leisure' may

be expanding in the context of neoliberal 'austerity', of growing precarious working conditions and longer hours for less pay; but reality TV recurrently turns leisure into labour for the predominantly working-class contestants of such shows (and their audiences), whose convincing performance of leisure (often highly sexualized and gendered) is being exchanged for a shot at fame. Those who already *have* ample leisure are being insistently presented as hardworking, whilst those who have nothing must work at convincing performances of a leisured existence.

There are of course many other classed representations and subjects we have not discussed whose presence feeds into this wildly unequal economic order; the 'good' working or middle-class neoliberal subject, who works hard, goes the extra mile, works beyond what they are supposed to. This is part of the core message of the iconic morality play of *The Apprentice* (Couldry and Littler 2011; Littler 2007) whose mobile neoliberal meritocratic subjects validate the divergent social order and rampant inequality; they present the dream of social mobility as a possibility rather than horrendously difficult and improbable in Britain's stagnant economy. Just like the representations of rich and poor we have considered in this chapter, these depictions connect to a much wider issue of the neoliberal self in which the 'good' subject is one who overworks. Of course, the irony is that workers in the UK work longer hours for less pay than their European counterparts, and a smaller proportion are unemployed. It is not insignificant that at a time when depictions of supposed working-class fecklessness abound, in contrast to portrayals of aristocratic and upper-middle-class hard work and prudence, British workers are working harder for less pay while the unearned income of the rich rockets. These symbolic inversions of work and worklessness serve to further discipline an already overstretched working-class in an economy of declining productivity, which is due, not to a lack of 'graft', but to lack of investment and increased exploitation.

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ⁱ The much bloodier test-bed in the Global South being Chile, where the democratic socialistic government of Salvador Allende was violently deposed with US backing.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.france24.com/en/20130407-uk-america-welfare-lifestyle-choice-budget-cuts-unemployment> , accessed February 25, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Much to the annoyance of Channel Four chief executive David Abraham who was more concerned about the fact that Channel 5 had cloned the successful format than he was about the 1800 complaints received by the regulator Ofcom about *Benefits Street*.