

## Book Review

# Race and the Undeserving Poor: From Abolition to Brexit

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Shilliam, R. (2018). *Race and the Undeserving Poor: From Abolition to Brexit*. Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Agenda Publishing.

Within the field of Critical Race Studies, questions regarding the relation between race and class, race and nationalism, and, relatedly, how best to define the concept of race, have a long and tortuous history. While not attempting to address these complex analytical questions directly, nonetheless Robbie Shilliam's *Race and the Undeserving Poor* provides a valuable contribution to the field and may remind some of Hall et al.'s formulation that race 'serves to "reproduce" [the] working class in a racially stratified and internally antagonistic form' (2013: 340). Nevertheless, Shilliam's claim goes further: 'there is not a politics of class that is not already racialized' (2018: 180).

This book explores the contexts, antagonisms, and reformulations of 'the undeserving' (Shilliam, 2018: 4) in the context of the distribution of social goods. The category, Shilliam argues, is not simply rooted in class, but instead constituted through folk notions of race and class together.

The racialization of class is by no means new, a point Shilliam makes and contextualises by way of a remarkably accessible survey of British history from the Poor Laws of the Eighteenth Century through to Brexit and the present day. Today's "white working class" is neither an indigenous or natural constituency, but one (re)constituted in multiple forms as an artefact of political domination, operationalized in multiple contexts and struggles throughout modern British history in order to construct 'the undeserving poor' and maintain the position of the elite. Indeed, the un/deserving distinction operates in relation to the concept of the 'English genus', which, through a hereditary logic, functions to naturalise the moral and normative values of the elite order.

Shilliam introduces his analysis with the return of the language of class as a racialized phenomenon following the 2008 financial crisis. In the decade prior to this event, he argues, the language of "social exclusion" had predominated. Post-crisis, however, the pathology of "white working-class" re-enters public and political discourse as a means for morally constructing as 'undeserving', those left behind by neoliberalisation. For Shilliam, this occurs primarily through racial analogy, a point he makes with reference to the like of historian David Starkey's infamous comments wherein he alleged that 'whites have become the new Blacks' (2018: 132).

While initially, this constitution racialises the 'white working class' as undeserving in order to legitimise neoliberal reform, Shilliam notes that with and around Brexit, the political emphasis shifts to the neglected but deserving white, working class male, ignored in education and employment. For Shilliam, the 'white working class' enters and is constituted within discourse 'as a forgotten indigenous constituency, independent of colonial pasts, and unfairly displaced by multi-coloured newcomers.' (2018: 6). The shift re-frames the 'white working class' as the victim, in turn, mobilising this 'group' against the immigrant and ethnic 'threat' to their already minimal privilege.

Having introduced the central arguments of the book, Shilliam turns to reconstructing the history of the un/deserving through an examination of the 'English poor' alongside the 'African slave' in the Eighteenth Century. Under English common law, the English poor could, at least in principle, be regarded as a minor patriarch through the allowance of private property, inheritance, and paternalistic guidance by elites. Economic and political shifts tied up with emerging capitalism, such as the use of enclosures to consolidate landholdings of the elite, ultimately severed such paternalistic links between elite and poor. 'The slave', on the other hand, under commercial law, was already removed from such forms of acculturation into the dominant economic regime, generating concern and fear amongst the elites which manifested in the 'anarchic' and ungovernable nature of the African slave.

In essence, Shilliam's point is that not only did severing the means by which the elites were able to inculcate the dominated English poor create the moral concern over 'masterless men', but further enabled the analogy with 'the slave'. Constructed notions of the deserving poor, or the 'good servant', were those with the characteristics of 'industriousness, prudence and patriarchy'. Put simply, the 'deserving' were those with the capacity to enrich their proprietors and a willingness to accept paternalistic moral guidance according to the values of the propertied elite. Simultaneously, the undeserving poor, through likening to the characteristics of 'the undeserving' slaves, became 'blackened' and positioned outside the English genus, associated with 'idleness, licentiousness and anarchy' (Shilliam, 2018: 10).

With the core concern developed, *Race and the Undeserving Poor* continues to trace the changing form of the un/deserving distinction in a similar and digestible vein. Shilliam charts the reconstitution of the undeserving through the shifting contexts of abolition and colonial rebellion in chapter 3, before turning his attention to eugenics, welfare, organised labour and commonwealth migration in chapters 4 and 5. In chapter 6, the focus is on Thatcher and New Labour's paternalistic social conservatism and the arrival of the 'underclass', chapter 7 concerns Brexit and the re-constituted and deserving 'white working class', before Shilliam concludes with Grenfell Tower.

The empirical and historical subject matter of *Race and the Undeserving Poor* is employed to skilfully and forcefully reposition race at the centre of the formation of England, Englishness, and class. Yet, I would argue, that perhaps the book's most insightful contribution is found in Shilliam's artful mapping of the intersection of race and class through the un/deserving distinction, both moving beyond and countering reifications of these analytical categories. The concept of un/deserving develops beyond notions of racial inferiorisation, emphasising the ideological necessity of the unwanted residuum for the legitimisation of privilege.

At the core of Shilliam's argument is the notion that race and class operate together in the political and cultural imaginary, emerging in and reproducing the political and economic organisation of the day. In the on-going, non-linear negotiation of social organisation, its privileges and hierarchies, the un/deserving distinction operates as a tool of power and legitimisation, drawing on and re-constituting groups and categories in order to shore up and reproduce the social order. Such negotiation does not simply occur through 'race' or 'class', nor can any grouping be simply posited as a formation of race or class alone. Rather, for Shilliam, these groupings are capitalism's unwanted and excluded which may be homogenised or divided, and constructed as deserving or not, through the mobilisation of racialised logics.

## REFERENCES

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