

The Moralization of the *Undeserving Poor* in Times of Crisis

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Abstract:

The book *Moralising Poverty. The ‘Undeserving’ Poor in the Public Gaze* by Serena Romano argues that the construction of moral boundaries between *deserving* and *undeserving poor* still shapes today’s institutions of redistribution such as welfare states. The book traces the origins of discourses about the ‘deservedness’ of social support in Western history and provides an analysis of current narratives about the allegedly *undeserving poor*. Romano’s main argument is that the moralization of the poor reappears in societies especially in times of crisis. Making an important contribution to the field of social policy by revealing normative orders and public narratives of ‘deservedness’, the broad study also sheds light on the moral basis of welfare states as well as social dynamics of inclusion, exclusion and solidarity.

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Who is 'excused from work' and deserves social support? Where is the moral boundary between the *deserving* and the *undeserving poor*? And how do political narratives, media representations, and modern welfare states shape these categories? According to Serena Romano – research fellow at the Department of Social Studies at the University of Naples and author of the book *Moralising Poverty: The 'Undeserving' Poor in the Public Gaze* – the construction of the *undeserving poor* not only has a long history in Western societies but still shapes today's institutions of redistribution such as welfare states. In her study, Romano seeks to understand how deservedness is constructed in different societal contexts in order to get a deeper understanding of the cultural and economic backgrounds of solidarity and poor relief actions in different periods. Her main argument is "that the moralisation, if not criminalisation, of the undeserving poor is a revolving element that occurs cyclically in societies – and especially so in times of 'moral panic'" (p. 3). By applying this argument also to new waves of hostility against the *undeserving* in the context of various crises, she offers an interesting analytical framework that locates current societal mechanisms of exclusion within the long history of the moralization of poverty.

The book contains eight chapters in three parts, which mirror three different approaches to the topic: The first part is dedicated to the moral background of social policy in Western countries. Based on a wide range of literature, Romano analyzes the history of the moral treatment of the poor from ancient Greece to the implementation of modern welfare states, comparing especially the cases of Italy and Britain. Regarding the present, she argues that in both countries a certain 'moral panic' accompanied the recent global crisis leading to a "re-enforcement (or reconfiguration) of boundaries between deserving and undeserving categories of claimants" (p. 56). This development mirrors an increasing disruption of solidarity within modern welfare states, making social benefits for those categorized as 'undeserving' less accessible.

The second part of the book addresses the representation of the *undeserving poor* and their supposed moral characteristics as presented in the media and taken up by public opinion. Romano introduces the reader to three famous “mythological personifications” (p. 62) of the *undeserving poor* in the second half of the 20th century: The “socialist parasite” (p. 63), the “British scrounger” (p. 65) and the American “welfare queen” (p. 67). These examples show how media and political narratives have driven an exacerbation of public stigmatization of the *undeserving poor*. Furthermore, Romano includes a chapter with her own quantitative and qualitative research on the emergence of “anti-scrounger sentiments” (p. 76) and the perception of the *undeserving poor*.

The third part of the book integrates another empirical study focusing on the spatial dimensions of solidarity, presenting the results of interviews with young working immigrants in Naples and London. Romano convincingly shows how immigrants experience solidarity differently in the neighborhoods of the two cities. However, it remains somewhat unclear how the empirical material is linked to the main research questions of the book since most of the interviewees are neither dependent on social benefits nor belong to the group of the allegedly *undeserving poor*. More illuminating is the last chapter of the book that deals with the construction of insiders and outsiders within society against the background of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ and Brexit. Here, Romano discusses and analyzes previous insights of the book against the backdrop of sociological discussions around social figures like *the outsider* and *the stranger*, as well as Loic Wacquant’s argument of a struggle of one poor against the other. Romano assumes that today’s scapegoating practices are mainly directed at immigrants and refugees. She elaborates that “the combination of economic factors [...] and fear for social and cultural characteristics of the ‘other’ can be said to be the main elements of new forms of ‘moral panic’” (p. 119). Here it would have been beneficial to also consider research on racism and discrimination, which question the assumption that these kinds of scapegoating practices are actually ‘new’ and predominantly based on economic and social fears. Especially in countries like Britain with a long history of colonialism, racism, and antiziganism, deservedness is a category that has certainly been shaped by racialized and nationalist ideas of belonging over several centuries.

Romano describes her book as a “journey” (e.g. p. 8) several times, and it indeed resembles a short but fascinating voyage. In less than 150 pages it takes its readers from debates on ‘idleness’ in the Bible via British TV shows like *Benefit Streets* to current transformations of the

welfare state. The reader gets insights into fieldwork in Naples and London and gets to know figures such as 'idle paupers,' 'bamboccioni' or 'fake refugees.' During this 'journey,' Romano is an ambitious and convincing guide: She gives a good overview of the field, connecting insights from different disciplines such as sociology, political science, and urban studies. However, due to this broad approach that includes examples and discourses from different periods and countries, the study sometimes lacks sufficient details to allow the reader to fully comprehend Romano's conclusions.

Overall, Romano makes an important contribution to the field of social policy and normative orders. Especially her analysis of the moral basis of poor relief programs as well as social practices of inclusion, exclusion, and solidarity shed light on current social developments and their moral and economic backgrounds. Likewise, the book is suitable for scholars and students who are particularly interested in poverty, social policy or social inequality. Moreover, the book also provides analytical instruments to readers who are interested in contextualizing and questioning their own schemas of categorization and dominant narratives about the 'poor.' By asking crucial questions, the book reveals the moral boundaries that shape everyday thinking and acting and, in the worst case, lead to the rigorous exclusion of certain groups of people.

Die Moralisierung der *unwürdigen Armen* in Krisenzeiten

German Abstract:

In ihrem Buch *Moralising Poverty. The 'Undeserving' Poor in the Public Gaze* vertritt Serena Romano die These, dass die Konstruktion moralischer Grenzziehungen zwischen *würdigen* und *unwürdigen Armen* die Verteilungsmechanismen von Institutionen wie etwa Wohlfahrtsstaaten bis heute prägt. Das Buch zeichnet die Diskurse um Ansprüche auf soziale Unterstützung innerhalb der Historie westlicher Gesellschaften nach und analysiert gegenwärtig vorherrschende Narrative über vermeintlich *unwürdige Arme*. Romanos Hauptthese lautet, dass eine gesellschaftliche Moralisierung von Armen vor allem in Krisenzeiten verstärkt auftritt. Romano legt offen, welche normativen Ordnungen und öffentlichen Narrative den Diskurs darüber prägen, wer Unterstützungsleistungen ‚verdient‘ und leistet damit einen wichtigen Beitrag im Feld der Sozialpolitik. Darüber hinaus beleuchtet die breit gefächerte Studie nicht nur die moralischen Grundprinzipien von Wohlfahrtsstaaten, sondern befasst sich auch mit den sozialen Dynamiken von Inklusion, Exklusion und Solidarität.