

“I, Daniel Blake”: The struggle of the working class against neoliberal bureaucracy

“Eu, Daniel Blake”: A luta da classe trabalhadora contra a burocracia neoliberal

“Yo, Daniel Blake”: La lucha de la clase obrera contra la burocracia neoliberal

“Moi, Daniel Blake”: La classe ouvrière lutte contre la bureaucratie néolibérale



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Abstract

This critical review analyzes the feature film “Eu, Daniel Blake”, released in 2016 and premiered in January 2017 in Brazil. Directed by Ken Loach, the drama tells the story of a carpenter from Newcastle-England who, after suffering a heart problem, is advised by doctors not to return to work. By portraying Blake’s health degradation, the work illustrates some aspects of the social determinants of health, such as age, lifestyle, social support organizations, as well as issues regarding unemployment and lack of care. Alongside the narrative, the film addresses the decadent trajectory of Katie who, being responsible for supporting two children and without job opportunities, is forced into prostitution. The work portrays the workers’ march towards poverty and despair while they wait and fight to guarantee their rights in a moment of incapacity, thus demonstrating how the fragility of the services established to provide the worker can lead them to a condition of misery. The story is a good reference for professionals in the areas of health and social assistance, as well as for those interested in contemporary labor and collective issues.

Keywords: bureaucracy, neoliberalism, workers health

Resumo

Esta resenha crítica analisa o longa-metragem “Eu, Daniel Blake”, lançado no ano de 2016 e estreado em janeiro de 2017 no Brasil. Sob direção de Ken Loach, o drama conta a história de um carpinteiro de Newcastle-Inglaterra que, após sofrer um problema cardíaco, é desaconselhado pelos médicos a retornar ao trabalho. Ao retratar a degradação da saúde de Blake, a obra ilustra alguns aspectos dos

determinantes sociais sobre a saúde, tais como a idade, estilo de vida, organizações sociais de apoio, assim como questões a respeito do desemprego e falta de assistência. Paralelamente à narrativa, o filme aborda a trajetória decadente de Katie que, sendo responsável pelo sustento de dois filhos e sem oportunidades de emprego, se vê forçada a prostituir-se. A obra retrata a marcha do trabalhador rumo à pobreza e o desespero enquanto aguarda e luta pela garantia de seus direitos em um momento de incapacidade, demonstrando, assim, como a fragilidade dos serviços estabelecidos para prover o trabalhador pode levá-lo a uma condição de miséria. A história constitui boa referência aos profissionais das áreas de saúde e assistência social, assim como aos interessados em questões laborais e coletivas contemporâneas.

Palavras-chave: burocracia, neoliberalismo, saúde do trabalhador

Resumen

Esta reseña crítica analiza el largometraje “Eu, Daniel Blake”, estrenado en 2016 y estrenado en enero de 2017 en Brasil. Dirigida por Ken Loach, el drama cuenta la historia de un carpintero de Newcastle-Inglaterra que, tras sufrir un problema cardíaco, es desaconsejado por los médicos para volver al trabajo. Al retratar el deterioro de la salud de Blake, la obra ilustra algunos aspectos de los determinantes sociales de la salud, como la edad, el estilo de vida, las organizaciones de apoyo social, así como cuestiones relacionadas con el desempleo y la falta de atención. Paralelamente a la narrativa, la película aborda la trayectoria decadente de Katie quien, siendo responsable de mantener a dos niños y sin oportunidades laborales, se ve obligada a prostituirse. La obra retrata la marcha del trabajador hacia la pobreza y la desesperación mientras espera y lucha por la garantía de sus derechos en un momento de incapacidad, demostrando así como la fragilidad de los servicios establecidos para prestar al trabajador puede llevarlo a una condición de miseria. La historia es una buena referencia para los profesionales de las áreas de salud y asistencia social, así como para aquellos interesados en temas laborales y colectivos contemporáneos.

Palabras clave: burocracia, neoliberalismo, salud del trabajador

Résumé

Cette revue critique analyse le long métrage « Eu, Daniel Blake », sorti en 2016 et présenté en première en janvier 2017 au Brésil. Réalisé par Ken Loach, le drame raconte l'histoire d'un charpentier de Newcastle-Angleterre, qui, après avoir souffert d'un problème cardiaque, est déconseillé par les médecins de reprendre le travail. En décrivant la détérioration de la santé de Blake, le travail illustre certains aspects des déterminants sociaux de la santé, tels que l'âge, le mode de vie, les organisations de soutien social, ainsi que les problèmes liés au chômage et au manque de soins. En parallèle de la narration, le film aborde la trajectoire décadente de Katie qui, étant chargée de subvenir aux besoins de deux enfants et sans perspectives d'emploi, est contrainte de se prostituer. L'œuvre dépeint la marche du travailleur vers la pauvreté et le désespoir alors qu'il attend et lutte pour la garantie de ses droits dans un moment d'incapacité, démontrant ainsi comment la fragilité des services mis en place pour fournir le travailleur peut le conduire à une condition de misère. L'histoire est une bonne référence pour les professionnels des domaines de la santé et de l'assistance sociale, ainsi que pour ceux qui s'intéressent aux enjeux sociaux et collectifs contemporains.

Mots clés : bureaucratie, néolibéralisme, la santé du travailleur

“I, Daniel Blake” is a feature film directed by Ken Loach (2016), a filmmaker recognized for his political background and view of the working class. The film presents a clear critique of the dismantling of public policies aimed at the social welfare of workers in England. Written by Paul Laverty, the work has won several recognitions from the film industry, such as the Cannes Film Festival (2016) and BAFTA Awards (2017). Accustomed to narratives about the working class, the similarity of this feature film with other narratives by Loach is notable, especially the one entitled “*My Name Is Joe*”¹ (Loach, 1998).

The story follows the life of Daniel Blake, a 59-year-old widower from Newcastle, England, who, after suffering a heart problem, is advised by doctors not to return to work. Dan, as he is known to those closest to him, seeks to receive the benefits granted by the government to those in this situation. However, he comes up against extreme government

¹ The film tells the story of an unemployed former alcoholic and his romance with a healthcare worker.

bureaucracy, amplified by the fact that he is old and digitally excluded², in other words, as shown in the film, Blake cannot use computers and therefore faces difficulties in operating information systems, requiring assistance from third parties.

On one of his many visits to the government department, he meets Katie, an unemployed single mother of two who had recently moved to the city and did not have the financial means to support herself and her children, nor the professional qualifications that would allow her to get a job. After defending her during an argument at the English Social Services department, Blake approaches Katie and they begin a friendship.

In the search for social benefits, the protagonist encounters technological and bureaucratic obstacles at various times, revealing the dysfunctional structure of the procedures imposed to access the material resources (theoretically) available to workers. The obstacles become even more complicated when the individual is digitally excluded (Sousa, 2017), as in Blake's case.

The constant need to fill out forms is present in several scenes. Among the various embarrassing and exhausting situations, Blake is subjected to interviews with standardized questions that do not address his heart weakness, in addition to the requirement of numerous documents that can only be sent over the internet, completely disregarding his physical conditions and technological knowledge. We observe a scenario that emphasizes the Kafkaesque absurdity of paperwork circles (Kafka, 2005) and, at the same time, the degradation of the worker's living conditions.

By portraying the deterioration of a worker's health, the work illustrates some aspects of the social determinants of health, such as age, lifestyle, social support organizations, and even issues such as unemployment and lack of assistance. The health problem portrayed in the protagonist's story was a heart attack. Acute Myocardial Infarction (AMI) is a type of condition that causes the individual to be temporarily or permanently unable to work. In addition, such an event requires different types of rehabilitation actions, with a view to the functional recovery of the sick (Leal et al., 2014).

Director Ken Loach makes it clear how the rigidity and absolutism of rules and procedures cause injustices to those who depend on services, making them practically unattainable. Although doctors recommend that he stay away from work, government representatives, upon noticing that Blake could lift his arms, suggest that he look for a job while he awaits the judgment of his request for assistance. This aspect, represented in the film, clearly denotes the difference between prescribed work and real work, as pointed out by Dejours (2005). As well stated by Areosa (2019, p. 9), prescribed work is "always incomplete" and criticism of the understanding of this work is something very present in the worker's life since it is when doing the real work that he notices aspects that do not work well, that is, that are not feasible or applicable to the performance of pre-established tasks.

In the film, injustice is represented by different facets, contemplating the dimensions indicated by Fraser (1997): economic, when the characters are denied adequate material assistance to maintain their quality of life; and symbolic, when they are not recognized as citizens, transforming them into beings practically invisible to the authorities.

The film portrays a worker's path towards poverty and despair as he waits and fights for his rights to be guaranteed at a time of incapacity, which demonstrates how the fragility of the services established to provide for the worker can lead him to a state of misery. While waiting for the outcome of his situation, Blake finds himself forced to sell furniture and personal objects to earn money for his subsistence. In this process, the protagonist ends up weakening and distancing himself from his friends. Despite the protagonist's status as a working man, this identity takes a back seat throughout the film, with the figure of the citizen demanding his rights and dignity taking center stage. According to Lukács (2012), work is the phenomenon that marks the ontological structure of the social being. The man emerges as a generic being, but work and production relations in the capitalist context shape man. In this sense, it is noticeable how much Blake reveals a feeling of frustration for not being able to work and doing what he has done throughout his life.

Parallel to Blake's narrative, the film addresses the decadent trajectory of Katie who, having two children (Dylan and Daisy) and no job opportunities, finds herself forced into prostitution. Dylan presents a hyperactive profile and is resistant to interacting with adults, as well as pretending not to hear what they say to him. The boy's behavior may suggest a case of autism, which is not explored throughout the film.

Katie was relocated by the London Housing Authority from a hostel to an old house in Newcastle with her two children. Katie is likely to represent residents affected by the housing crisis in the United Kingdom that has hit London, forcing people to seek housing on the outskirts (Taylor, 2015) and move away from family and support networks. It is no coincidence that suicides and mortality in areas such as Newcastle have been linked to austerity, that is, government actions to reduce costs, whether through spending cuts or tax increases (Dorling, 2017; Pring, 2017). Austerity and government budget cuts

² Literacy is linked to the most diverse dimensions of life, from education to the exercise of citizenship (Hamilton, 2014), and technologies have influenced the ways in which we interact and create texts. As noted in the film, (there are forms of literacy practice that present) particular forms of literacy practice present challenges for those (who are) vulnerable to austerity policies (Jones, 2017). In Daniel's case, as a worker who works in more artisanal work, such as carpentry, the use of technological and digital devices was not part of his routine. Thus, when he was placed in front of information systems, he found a major barrier to using them, revealing a social exclusion through a digital divide (Sousa, 2017).

in the United Kingdom were driven forward from 2010 onwards, exacerbating inequality between local governments and increasing territorial injustice (Gray & Barford, 2018).

Before entering prostitution (due to desperation and lack of assistance, it should be noted), Katie goes through two defining moments. In one of them, Daniel accompanies Katie and her children to a food bank, where for the first time they are treated with dignity and attention. Exhausted by hunger and lack of sleep, and disarmed by the sympathy of those social actors, Katie hurriedly opens a can of food, devouring the contents in great haste, while at the same time hiding and crying profusely.

Katie's reality is very similar to that of Brazil, where in recent years there has been a growing number of single mothers with low qualifications and income who find themselves in a situation of social vulnerability (Cavenaghi & Alves, 2018). The film reminds us that in neoliberal austerity, one cannot expect the State to promote social welfare, that is, a set of actions and institutions aimed at quality of life and social services (Laurell, 1995). As the film portrays well, there is great distance and a constant struggle between the social assistance system and the worker, who becomes just a number. As Petković (2018) rightly points out, with the expansion of neoliberalism in the United Kingdom, there was a leveraging of the punitive State.

In the work, the Social Assistance Center is portrayed as a place where people do not have any kind of empathy with the public, but this scenario is broken by one of the characters, Ann, a kind employee who demonstrates, in addition to empathy, a certain understanding and respect for the citizens who seek out the Center. Ann's behavior is not well received by her boss, which makes it clear that there is too much pressure on the team, which is tied to performance targets, scripted questions and high insecurity regarding job retention. In addition, the stigmatization of the beneficiary who seeks assistance is observed.

Likewise, the forms of treatment applied suggest that the State blames the individual for not being able to get a job, suggesting that the citizen is dysfunctional because he does not know how to fill out a resume, does not have access to technological tools or was not able to follow one of the numerous rigidly imposed rules. This situation is portrayed in the film when Blake is directed to a resume-writing workshop. In the words of director Ken Loach, "The most vulnerable people are told that their poverty is their fault. If you don't have a job, it's your fault you didn't get a job" (York, 2016). According to Kramer (2017), it is inherent in the neoliberal model to blame the worker for his success or failure. This arises from a scenario where, due to the growth of neoliberal ideals, the State, by introducing new forms of relationship, also generates a new conception of the individual, with his subjectivity internalized by ideas of competition, which naturalizes risk and makes him solely responsible for his destiny (Dardot & Laval, 2016). This aspect can impact on the individual's mental health, because he or she does not have a formal job and is not seen as an "active and productive citizen" (Pinheiro & Monteiro, 2007, p. 42).

One of the film's most memorable moments concerns the protagonist's final rebellion against the welfare workers who refused to respond to his demands. With a can of spray paint in his hand, he writes a message on the walls of the Welfare Center, receiving much applause from passers-by: "I'm Daniel Blake, appeal data before I starve" and change the shite music on the phones". This episode illustrates the clear manifestation of his existence, in the face of a system that makes him invisible.

As much as Ken Loach's work deals with typically English laws and rules, it is impossible not to identify in some way with the saga of the title character and even draw a parallel with the political reality in Brazil.

Despite the various criticisms that can be drawn from the work, there is a clear examination of privatization, since the social assistance professionals that Blake had to deal with are outsourced. In this situation, while on the one hand the citizens seek effective service, on the other there is a search for operational efficiency, which seems cynically structured to defame, humiliate and frustrate the citizen-clients, in this case the workers, who end up giving up, thus saving time and money for the company that provides the service. In the view of Prado and Duarte (2015), rationalization is a characteristic of capital, which in the political sphere has been used to exploit labor. In the words of Loach: "(...) *the truth of what the film says, which hundreds of thousands of people in this country know, is that the most vulnerable and poorest people are treated by this government with a callous brutality that is shameful*" (Loach, 2017).

Something like this scenario has been seen in Brazil. For Druck et al. (2019), globalized capitalism has been transforming the economy and imposing a logic of volatility and flexible accumulation, based on the flexibilization and precariousness of work, fueled by a neoliberal rationality of the State. The Brazilian labor reform, which took place in 2017 with the approval of Law 13,467, demonstrated the offensive of capital in the dismantling of social and labor rights, possible in Brazil due to three aspects: class-based action of capital over the working class; it occurs at a time of democratic fragility and with the approval of the Judiciary; and, finally, through the challenge of the protective paradigm of workers and the denial of their insufficiency, that is, the lack of recognition of their vulnerable and subordinate condition (Druck et al., 2019).

The search for workers' rights is becoming increasingly difficult and is becoming an increasingly common scenario. In Brazil, many workers experience various humiliating situations when they are absent from work due to accident or illness.

Because of this, they need social assistance from the National Institute of Social Security (INSS). Studies show that in Brazil, many workers suffer moral harassment during judicial investigations (Lima et al., 2014); moral damages during the Social Security expert examination (Barros, 2019); neglect, distrust and inadequate care by INSS experts (Zavarizzi & Alencar, 2018); and experience contradictions between decisions made by INSS doctors and doctors outside the institution regarding the health status of workers (Schlindwein, 2013).

The rationalization of work and state bureaucracy portrayed in the film are not far from those seen in the national context. As some studies have shown (Prado & Duarte, 2015; Stopa, 2019), access to benefits through the INSS has been characterized by a lack of information and rigid criteria that make the beneficiary's journey difficult, while at the same time the restriction on benefits is visible.

Another story that appears in the film is that of Blake's neighbor, "China." In the background, Loach portrays the historical change in labor relations. "China" works under a flexible working hours regime, endorsed by the discourse of entrepreneurship. The young man works in the informal market, where he is selling sneakers from well-known brands at reduced prices, which he obtains directly from the factory through an intermediary who works in a factory unit in Asia. Once again, the working class is only demonstrated in the economic sense, by the position that these individuals occupy in the relations of production. However, there is no class in the sociological sense: there is no explicit struggle or class organization. The "turnaround" (Telles, 2006) is presented as a concrete alternative and not as a class struggle. At this point, it is important to note that the film presents a clear change in labor relations. While Blake is an example of a worker in the blue-collar model, "China" works informally, with flexible hours and earnings, as an entrepreneur.

The entire plot of the film takes place within the framework of a strong and highly punitive neoliberal state. Control mechanisms of contemporary society and relations of power and domination are observed in the work. Thus, by portraying the forms of action of the neoliberal state, the film refers to the concepts of disciplinary society by Foucault (1998), as well as of control society by Deleuze (1992). The surveillance and continuous interventions of the neoliberal state and its institutions, as portrayed in "I, Daniel Blake", are portraits of the coercive power of institutions in the neoliberal model.

In neoliberalism, the figure of the citizen tends to dissolve, due to the breakdown of the historically constructed relationship between the subject and the State, in which the latter does not guarantee basic rights to most citizens (Brown, 2015). Thus, what Daniel Blake portrays is the figure of the State in the neoliberal model and the role it plays in the reproduction of capital and the degradation of justice and the well-being of citizens. The situation of Blake's neighbor, "China", represents well the causality of wage labor and the promotion of the idea of the entrepreneur of the self (Oliveira & Sampaio, 2018).

Loach uses Blake and Katie's stories to expose the difficulties faced by the most vulnerable in the neoliberal model, demonstrating how, through imposing state actions, subjects are forced to remodel themselves within standards considered acceptable, gaining notoriety, the homosexual economicus³. It is noted that in "I, Daniel Blake", the citizen as the bearer of social and political rights becomes merely the "homo economicus"; Keynesian welfare is transformed into the coercive apparatus to facilitate the free-market capitalist economy.

However, despite the neoliberal model being a catalyst for individualization and isolation among workers, including repercussions on their illness processes (Antunes & Praun, 2015), in the film, it is possible to notice, in different situations, solidarity emerging among workers. In addition to the mutual help between Blake and Katie, both are blessed with micro-solidarities throughout the film, such as, for example, "China" (Blake's neighbor) who, at a certain point, helps him fill out a form on the internet, the same attitude of Ann from the assistance sector, who goes beyond protocol and takes risks to help him overcome bureaucracy. Thus, the film subtly presents small groups of cooperation and solidarity among people who are seeking opportunities or facing problems due to the lack of them. It is normal for workers in any position to develop defensive strategies (Dejours, 1999a; 1999b) to be able to carry out the activity, ensure their maintenance and/or make the suffering tolerable. In this sense, it is noted that the subject or group is unable to move into a space of action, of discussion as proposed by the work clinic, remaining covered by the defensive system (Amaral et al., 2021). There is concern about "ethical suffering" that the suffering is not only psychological, but also concerning social exclusion (Bertini, 2014). In addition, this "ethical suffering" impels the worker to practice certain actions that he morally condemns, however, due to work, he practices them even over the disapproval of his moral conscience (Areosa, 2019).

Director Ken Loach's work has been characterized, from the beginning, by reproducing the misfortunes of the working class and showing how people find themselves trapped in certain situations. For some critics, the film lacks subtlety and exaggerates the situations depicted, while others defend this approach as a means of attracting the viewer's attention and demonstrating the cruelty of the State towards its citizens. In the meantime, the story takes an effective path toward involving the audience emotionally and politically in the problems represented.

³ For Güläcan (2015), homo economicus acts exclusively in his interest and seeks to maximize his individual utility, which is generally understood as net economic gain, characterized by rationality.

The film succeeds in portraying the great difficulties that citizens may face when seeking their rights, given the huge differences between those who have well-paid jobs and those who find themselves in vulnerable situations. Thus, the film presents a perverse reality that allows the audience to understand the extent to which policies, rules, and processes can cause harm to those who need government assistance and benefits, especially workers.

The main characters are white, and there is no discussion of how racial issues also interfere in social injustice. However, the film does address this issue when Blake's neighbor ("China") enters the scene, a young black man who, without much direction in life, works in the shoe business as a way of starting a business, but under Blake's suspicious eye regarding the origin of the products. In addition, Daisy, Katie's daughter, is clearly of mixed race.

One of the aspects that weakens the film's plot is the fact that the main characters' stories are not told. Thus, it is observed that Blake and Katie are presented only as victims and/or heroes, leaving hidden any traumas, challenges or failures that they may have had during their life journeys. For example, the protagonist is a widower, and his wife had mental problems, but this subject is not clarified throughout the film. Katie's relationship with her family and the parents of her children, who clearly do not offer material or emotional support to the children, is also not addressed.

Finally, the work constitutes a good reference for professionals working in the areas of health and social assistance who address issues related to worker health, as well as for those interested in contemporary social and labor issues.

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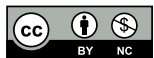
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