November 30th, from 4-7 pm
Lester Pollock Room, FH, 9th Floor

Colloquium in Legal, Political, and Social Philosophy

Conducted by
Jeremy Waldron and Liam Murphy

Speaker: Juliana Bidadanure, NYU
Paper: Understanding Demonization

Colloquium Website: http://www.law.nyu.edu/node/22315
Dear workshop participants,
This paper is a very first draft so please excuse the lack of adequate referencing and the meandering style of some sections. I am sure that the session will be very helpful to me in identifying the parts of this paper that are most interesting/helpful/original. I look forward to our discussion very much.
Best wishes,
Juliana

Understanding Demonization

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This is how French Presidential candidate Eric Zemmour publicly presented unaccompanied child immigrants in 2020: “[T]hey are thieves, they are killers, they are rapists, that’s all they do, they should be sent back.” That was not so different, only even more virulent perhaps, than former President Trump’s words a few years before: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” These insulting words are not uncommon, unfortunately. It is typical for immigrants from the global south to be depicted by media outlets, politicians, and citizens alike as bad people with malicious and destructive intentions. One way to refer to this phenomenon is as an example of *demonization*, which most dictionaries define as the portrayal of a group of individuals as a wicked threat to the community.¹

Literally, demonization refers to the representation of persons as demons, i.e., evil supernatural spirits. They are many historic examples of persons being portrayed as literal demons - devils, witches, vampires, devil worshippers, etc. - most often to justify inhumane treatment. Thousands of persons, a majority of whom were older women, were tortured and executed for the crime of witchcraft in 16th-17th Europe. Devil worshipping and witchcraft charges were later brought to the New World and used on colonial subjects. The Nazis attributed evil and destructive intentions to Jews to justify the horrors of the holocaust. Contemporary demonization is often more secular in its explicit references and the appeal to the supernatural is rarer. The targets are typically portrayed as

³ Oxford Language defines demonization as the portrayal of something as wicked and threatening. Meriam Webster defines demonization as portraying someone as evil. Others characterize demonization as the act of regarding persons as entirely bad. The Collins English Dictionary has a more literal definition: someone (or something) is demonized when they are treated as if they were demonic.
having immoral and destructive intentions, or as being gravely deviant. Like immigrants in my starting quotes, the demonized undergo sustained attacks on their moral character and are reduced to their alleged moral deviance. They are relegated to the status of morally wicked inferiors who threaten to undermine the core values the in-group community allegedly holds dear, including the rule of law, hard work, and safety.

Cases of literal demonization (that attribute evil supernatural traits to the demonized) and cases of non-literal demonization (that attribute a wicked character to the demonized, without reference to the demonic as such) can in part be studied under the same conceptual category. Demonization, as a notion, is already commonly used to capture aspects of the negative portrayal of marginalized groups such as same-sex couples, transgender individuals, Romani adults and kids, Muslims, Black adults and youth, unhoused persons, and those addicted to drugs or mentally ill, among others. In most of these cases, the demonizer makes no appeal to the supernatural and the demonic. And yet, the similarities with historic cases are clear. In all cases, the demonized are portrayed as wicked and deeply threatening. Their identities are conflated with wicked moral personas and drastic measures are proposed. The demonized are reduced to their alleged vice and sometimes taken to be entirely bad, irredeemably. The less literal cases are simply an adaptation of the same social practice to a more secular context in which direct appeals to the demonic are less likely to stick. There are still remnants of appeals to the realm of the devil in contemporary demonization. Suffices perhaps to remind ourselves of the portrayal of Democrats by conspiracy theorists as smelling of sulfur. And more literal historic forms of demonization also contained more secular attacks on moral character. Jews were not only portrayed as being demonic and depicted with horns, they were also painted as being greedy. All of this suggests that it is perhaps worth picking out a general phenomenon of demonization while still of course recognizing important differences within it.

Demonization is a widely used term in public discourse but it is undertheorized and not well regimented. Social scientists don’t seem to pay much attention to the concept, preferring overlapping phenomena like stigmatization, scapegoating, stereotyping, as well as populism, propaganda and polarization even. While each of these concepts get to important phenomena, none of them are replacements for the concept of demonization. The widespread public use of the concept of demonization is the clearest sign that the word serves an important purpose. In the past year, demonization was searched on google twice as much as stigmatization. In comparison, the concept of stigmatization was the focus of 4-5 times more papers by researcher than demonization in the same time frame. For the most part, these papers studied specific cases and treated the notion of demonization as a self-explanatory notion. I have not seen papers who offer a theoretical framework for thinking about the phenomenon, with inclusion criteria. We are lacking an equivalent to Bruce Link and Jo Phelan’s 2001 widely cited “Conceptualizing Stigma” for the Annual Review of Sociology. One potential explanation for the lack of academic interest is that demonization is taken to be too vague or broad to be of analytic; that we are better off using concepts that refer to more specific phenomena. My contention in this paper is rather that demonization is in some respects is narrower than stigmatization and stereotyping, but broader than scapegoating. Demonization is a practice of great social importance, even in less obvious cases, and paying close attention to this phenomenon is needed to properly understand our inegalitarian world. Demonization as a

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5 Google Trends data
6 Google Scholar data
7 Bruce Link and jo Phelan 2001 “Conceptualizing Stigma” *Annual Review of Sociology*. 
conceptual category further brings together cases that benefit from being understood as part of a single phenomenon, once the term is carefully defined so as not to be overly inclusive.

In this paper, I theorize demonization as a combination of moral othering and moral panic. I define moral othering as the creation of a radically distinct immoral other. Moral panic has been studied under this appellation by social theorists since the 1960s. It refers to an intense, often exaggerated, fear spurred by the perception that some evil persons are attacking the in-group’s most cherished values and interests. Moral othering and moral panic are jointly constitutive of demonization as I understand it. I use this account to define the contours of the social practice, study its social function, and reflect on its normative status. My starting point is what I take to be a paradigmatic case of demonization - a portrayal of individuals as vicious and malevolent is developed to further specific political ends. But elucidating the wrongness of demonization requires looking at a broader variety of cases and answering important normative questions: Is demonization always unjustified or only when the allegations are untrue or inaccurate? Is self-defense demonization (the demonization of demonizers) a suitable response to demonization, or is demonization somewhat always regrettable and objectionable? I offer a series of parameters to help evaluate the comparative wrongness of specific instances of demonization.

In what follows, I mobilize what is commonly referred to as the demonization of welfare recipients to operationalize and illustrate my account of demonization. In the age of individual responsibility, out-of-work benefits claimants are subject to severe forms of vilification. Their unemployment is often portrayed as resulting from personal failings. When these shortcomings are constructed as moral failings, we enter the space of demonization. Benefits recipients are demonized when they are deliberately portrayed as lazy criminals who chose to game the system rather than work, thereby imposing unjustified economic costs on their hard-working fellow citizens. The trope of the lazy free rider living at taxpayers’ expense is remarkably uniform across advanced economies and has been an effective strategy to undermine support for welfare. And it is commonly referred to by critics as an example of demonization⁸, including in a series of recent popular books that I will introduce in this essay. The demonization of those alleged to be undeserving poor has a long history, with roots in the Elizabethan poor laws and a disciplining of the poor enabled by the protestant work-ethics, as well as with connections to 16th and 17th century witch hunts (whose primary targets were often poor older women on public assistance who resorted to begging and sometimes led food riots).⁹ I will show that it offers a potent case for our investigation.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 1, I introduce the example of the demonization of benefits recipients in some detail. In Section 2, I present four key dimensions of demonization: (i) moral othering, (ii) moral panic, (iii) strategic extrapolation, and (iv) factual manipulation. I propose that moral othering and moral panic are necessary and sufficient features of demonization. In Section 3, I examine the social function of demonization. In Section 4, I discuss what makes demonization wrongful. In Section 5, I reflect on some lessons that arise when studying demonization.

1. The Deprived as Depraved

⁸ The Collins English Dictionary, for instance, follows their definition with the example of the demonization of people on benefits as lazy cheaters as an illustration: https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/demonization.
As Martha Nussbaum notes, those at the bottom of the income hierarchy are routinely “shunned and shamed, treated as idle, vicious, of low worth.”¹⁰ The trope of the lazy free riders living at taxpayers’ expense is remarkably uniform, at least across the West. It is a tried and tested strategy to undermine popular support for welfare and justify its retrenchment. If poverty and unemployment are the result of a lack of self-discipline and virtue, then only very minimal humanitarian interventions might be called for. Here are three examples of the demonization of welfare recipients told by three authors in three books. Each of these authors refer to these cases using the notion of demonization.

In *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*, Owen Jones analyses a set of degrading tropes about the British working class that are commonplace in mainstream media.¹¹ British politicians are quoted blaming poverty on deviant and dysfunctional behaviors while tabloids and mainstream TV channels jointly paint the picture of an illiterate, inarticulate, and immoral underclass with no ambitions or aspirations. Sexual debauchery is central to the portrayal: those on benefits are described as having too many kids who grow up in neglect. Those denigrated as “chavs,” which originally comes from “child” in Romani, are also accused of being undisciplined and uncaring, wearing their pajamas to the grocery store. The dominant thread of this discourse is that of welfare addicts preferring “a lie-in to hard work”¹² and imposing astronomic costs on taxpayers as a result. One emphasis is on the moral inadequacy of benefits recipients: the vice of sloth is seen to pave the way to further immoral conducts like lying to cheat the system and having kids so as to secure more benefits. Weakness of the will and malicious intentions are taken to explain the phenomenon of able-bodied adults living on benefits. This portrayal has paved the way to punitive welfare reforms for the past three decades, including a shift from welfare to workfare, i.e., the conditional provision of welfare only to those who prove willing enough to work.

In *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen*, Ange-Marie Hancock presents the gendered and racialized American equivalent of the stereotype of the undeserving unemployed chav living on welfare.¹³ Hancock studies what she calls “the public identity of the welfare queen,” the epitome of an anti-welfare discursive apparatus decrying a culture of poverty centered on welfare “as a way of life.” In the collective imaginary, the welfare queen is lazy, economically dependent on the state, hyper fertile, and has children out of wedlock. She has developed an expertise in gaming the system to sustain her lifestyle. She is also an unfit mother whose kids are neglected and raised to cheat the system. This racist trope is pervasive and taints the language used to characterize those on benefits, especially single mothers. Some politicians have gone as far as describing them as “brood mares”¹⁴ and “a human debit.”¹⁵ This dehumanizing language is reflected in the history of public assistance, from its punitive designs to its discriminatory implementation. The figure of the welfare queen was carefully manufactured by US president Ronald Reagan and taken up in the media in the 1970s. Extrapolated from a highly mediatized case of welfare fraud, the myth of the welfare queen

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¹² Ibid., xxix.
¹⁴ Ibid., 50.
¹⁵ Ibid., 56.
still resonates with the American electorate today. It stuck to the skin of a group with a long history of moral stereotyping.  

In *Crippled: Austerity and the Demonization of Disabled people*, disability activist and journalist Frances Ryan presents a recent turn in the stereotyping of benefits recipients in the UK. Welfare had been framed in the past as a commitment to those who could not reasonably be expected to work. Even as those able-bodied were shamed for being out of work, those disabled continued to be mostly seen as deserving of public assistance. But as the distrust of welfare recipients became endemic, benefits recipients were now suspected of faking a disability to claim benefits. British politicians now promised to “root out the benefits cheats who pretend to be ill for money.” Disabled benefits recipients were thrown under a microscope and British citizens were encouraged to “beat the cheats” by calling benefits hotlines to report those they suspected were lying about a disability. The stereotype mutated to cover even those who were truly disabled but “chose” not to work when they still technically could, or as a politician put it “losing a limb should not automatically entitle people to a payout.” Suspicion and distrust now govern the screening and monitoring of disabled benefits recipients, with damaging effects. There has been a significant rise in hate crimes against people in wheelchairs. Countless disabled benefits recipients saw their benefits cut and were forced to look for work instead, even when it was against the advice of medical professionals. There were also cases of disabled individuals found dead by suicide or starvation after their benefits were cut.

The three cases just introduced were all labelled forms of demonization by the authors who presented them. In each case, the individuals in these groups were represented as a dangerous threat to the community because of their alleged reprehensible behavior. These examples share a common structure. The focus is placed on individuals’ malignant intentions: cheating the system, taking no responsibility for themselves and their children, and living off the hard work of others. Another important feature of these examples is that they stand in a close relation to practices and policy reform: they either pave the way to new punitive reforms or serve to justify existing punitive measures. Also very notable is that all three groups targeted share a history of oppression and were already stigmatized groups. Demonization is most likely to be effective when it targets groups that already enjoy a lower status and lack a strong political voice.

2. The Workings of Demonization

(i) Moral othering

A few dictionaries define demonization as a widespread negative portrayal associated with a group, thus conflating the concept with negative stereotyping. For instance, the *Oxford Dictionary of Social Work and Social Care* sees it as an “extreme negative response to a particular group of people”, with

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18 Ibid., 4.
19 Ibid., 4.
20 Ian Duncan Smith as reported in Ryan, 26.
the example of social workers depicted as misguided and inept. That definition is inadequately broad as a characterization of demonization, though. What seems to be distinctive about demonization as a social practice, as compared to negative stereotyping more generally, is that it launches sustained attacks on the moral character of the demonized, focusing on their maliciousness. The depiction of persons as immoral, wicked, evil, or malignant is of central importance. This focus on moral character also sets demonization apart from stigmatization, i.e., the devaluation of a social identity through an attribute that is perceived as tainted. In theory, we can be stigmatized for many aspects of our identity (caste, ethnic origins, physical appearance, health, disability, etc.) without being portrayed as wicked. The stigma experienced by those with learning disabilities or cancer, for instance, doesn’t typically involve an ascription of malevolent character. Demonization is thus a for of moral stigmatization. In practice, though, many if not most instances of stigmatization will involve a moral judgement of some kind.

Scapegoating, vilification, and villainizing are some other close cousins of demonization and they can sometimes be used interchangeably. They can certainly all be used to describe the case of benefits recipients just introduced. There still are some conceptual differences between these notions. When we villainize, we treat someone as if they are a narrative’s bad character. Demonization hits harder and deeper. One can be villainized for the role they played in a specific problem, for an argument that went wrong, or for a professional misconduct. With demonization, the attack is rarely about a particular action in a particular context; it is a more sustained and permanent attack on character and the demonized’s tendency to do bad things, as illustrated by the longstanding devaluation of welfare recipients. The same difference largely applies to vilification. Demonization is best understood as a social practice, whereas vilification could apply to a particular speech act. Scapegoating now is a specific mechanism whereby an easy target is blamed for a social ill they are not responsible for. Welfare recipients are clearly scapegoats: they amass negligible sums of cash and are held responsible for major systemic issues. Demonization, especially in its most paradigmatic forms, surely connects deeply with the construction of easy targets for blame. But demonization is broader in its scope: under our general definition, the demonized could be guilty and blameworthy, whereas a scapegoat is typically presupposed to be a sacrificed innocent. Plus, the demonized are ascribed a deeply corrupted moral character while scapegoats could technically be viewed as being merely causally responsible for a bad outcome. The table below briefly summarizes the differences:

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In general, demonization cuts deeper and takes things further than stereotyping, stigmatization or moral critique, because the target is reduced to their bad character and intentions. Because the demonized are portrayed as deeply wicked, the punishment, disciplining, or rights denial called for can be drastic. Welfare recipients are also subject to infantilizing (e.g., they are called chavs which stands for kids in Romani) and animalizing (e.g., they are described as “feral” and “brood mares”) rhetoric. But I believe that it is by virtue of the demonized’s malignant intentions that punitive reforms are justified. After all, why deny people who are seen as children or animals what they need for their bare survival? The case of disabled benefits recipients is telling here. The ascription of a wicked nature to disability claimants was the only possible pathway to the denial of benefits to thousands of disability claimants overnight. If stigma sticks to the skin, demonization aims for the heart and soul. It cuts deeper and corrupts the whole character of the demonized in a way that makes inhumane reforms appear more adequate.

Given all this, I think that the best way to understand demonization is as a form of *moral othering*-the creation of a group represented as radically distinct and intrinsically bad. There is a long history of philosophical work on the other, otherness and othering. Othering refers to the perception of a group as intrinsically and radically different from one’s group. Othering refers to a series of processes that engender marginality and exclusion. To conceptualize demonization, I take this concept on board but make it more specific. Demonization is a form of *moral othering* whereby a group of individuals is defined around an alleged central vice and portrayed as malevolent. Demonization picks out “bad” humans viewed as inherently depraved. In our cases, the group in question is made of “unemployed individuals on public benefits” who are portrayed as being afflicted with an almost pathological dislike of hard work and a determination to exploit others by cheating the system. A series of labels are used (the benefit cheat, the voluntarily unemployed) and a mythic persona often serves to embody the moral dysfunction of the group (the welfare queen, the chav, or

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22 Levinas, Said, Beauvoir, Fanon, to name only a few.
23 https://www.otheringandbelonging.org/the-problem-of-othering/
24 https://www.otheringandbelonging.org/the-problem-of-othering/
the slacker faking a disability). This (im)moral persona then operates as a shortcut in political discourses and in the collective imaginary for the moral shortcomings of a large group of individuals.

Moral othering is, quite simply, othering that sees others as intrinsically bad. Not all forms of othering are moral in nature, but it is hard to find groups of oppressed people who have not been morally othered at one point. The portrayal of women as needing protection, positive stereotypes about some ethnic groups, and some forms of ageism come to mind as forms of othering that are not explicitly moral in nature. Infantilization or objectification in general may also rely on othering that’s not primarily moral in nature. The other is here viewed as radically different, but not in its ability to do good or act virtuously.

Demonization degrades the moral character of those who share some underlying identity with the demonized, but the demonizer sometimes retains plausible deniability when they do not explicitly mention the larger group. Demonization often involves a form of dog-whistling. In the case of welfare recipients, a group A made of those who cheat the system is demonized and a larger group B is degraded in the process (unemployed benefits recipients in general, low-income families who received benefits, people who look a certain way, dress a certain way, talk a certain way, Black women, single mothers, young mothers, etc.). Although the target of demonization is supposedly more specifically those in group A, demonization casts a shadow on all members of the larger group B. Since anyone who is unemployed and on benefits becomes suspicious, calls for punitive reforms that prioritize deterrence over disbursement tend to follow. Such designs make it harder for anyone to claim unemployment benefits. So, although the moral othering step singles out group A (e.g., Muslim terrorists, Mexican migrants who commit crimes, etc.) as deviant, it typically has vast effects on perception, self-perception and interests of the larger group called into question - group B (e.g. Muslims, Mexican immigrants, etc.). Of course, some demonizers also stop short of making a distinction between group A and group B in the first place and attribute the moral failings of group A directly to group B (like Zemmour’s portrayal of unaccompanied child immigrants as criminals and rapists).

While the construction of a villain figure is the most noteworthy feature of moral othering, the creation of a saint or virtuous victim also plays a key role in moral othering. For each demonized group, there is a glorified group. The undeserving poor here is pitted against two: (a) hard-working taxpayers, and (b) the deserving poor. The hard-working taxpayer, on the one hand, is portrayed both as a victim and a saint. They are seen to have to work harder for less money because a significant proportion of their taxable income goes to those who choose a life of dependence; this is what makes them victims. They are depicted as choosing to work nonetheless, even when it is hard, even if this means spending less time than they would with family or resting; this is what makes them saints. The deserving poor, on the other hand, is mainly portrayed as a victim, usually imagined as either a very hard-working but still poor individual who needs assistance, or a “truly” needy and disabled individual who cannot possibly work. The deserving poor are the only rightful recipients of benefits; they are taken to be a victim of the undeserving poor because they find themselves poorer than they would be if fewer people were abusing the benefits system. Here again, it is worth noting that, as stereotypes of benefits recipients as cheats become more pervasive, they taint all those on benefits and so the discursive category of the deserving poor tends to shrink, as exemplified by the recent turn in disability assistance.
The demonized group, then, is not simply selected among existing social groups, it is constructed around a moral vice. An original sin is called upon to motivate the grouping and is juxtaposed to a chief virtue exemplified by the glorified (or exploited) group. However sharply defined the moral vices may be, the boundaries of the sociological groups they map onto are often porous. Most unemployed individuals on benefits are so temporarily, for instance: they are often in-between jobs, they had to stop working or retire early after an injury, or after they became ill. Benefits recipients are mostly just like other low-income families who currently aren’t on benefits, just taken at a different time-slice. In addition, many employed workers are on benefits, sometimes the same benefits that those out of work are stigmatized for claiming. But while the grouping is often sociologically contestable, it acts as a powerful rhetorical tool.

Demonization is essentialist. There is something about the intrinsic nature or essence of the group that is called into question. The individuals have not just acted wrongly, they have a tendency to act wrongly. They have an identity, a trait, an attribute that is at fault. At the extreme, they can be viewed as entirely and irredeemably evil. But in all cases, they are intrinsically bad. This is essential for moral othering, because we all, as humans, make mistakes and are vulnerable to vices in some contexts. Instead of recognizing our universal vulnerability, the moral entrepreneurs involved in the process of demonization successfully isolate a depraved group. It is also worth noting that, although demonization does not always rely on biological essentialism, it often indirectly does. Notice the denigrating physical descriptions that most often accompany the moral condemnation. It is almost as if the demonizers believe that the body shape and dressing style of the demonized are a constitutive part of their evil nature.

(ii) moral panic

Demonization also has to involve a form of moral panic. This phenomenon occurs when a population is made to feel an immense existential fear that some most cherished values are at risk. Stanley Cohen coined the term when studying the coverage of the “Mods and Rockers” in the 60s and 70s, and Stuart Hall famously expanded on the concept in *Policing the Crisis* by looking at the coverage of a mugging gone wrong in London. The principal agents behind the phenomenon of a moral panic are typically the media, politicians, and others organized groups powerful enough to sway public opinion (Cohen calls them “moral entrepreneurs”). The panic is moral in that the threat is viewed as offensive to the in-group’s core interests and values. The archetypical example of moral panic rests on the imagined existence of a group of individuals about to commit unparalleled violence, often with a sexual dimension.

Although the concept of moral panic has mostly been used to describe a fear of violence (e.g., the Yellow Peril), it can be used more broadly to describe the fear of generalized vices that threaten the existence of the in-group. The demonization of benefits recipients also aims to create a form of moral panic, in which the threat is economic collapse. The central image is that of a welfare state that is sinking under the weight of countless cheaters. The alleged widespread practice of benefit scrounging is taken to weaken both our economic system and one of our deepest and most important value - hard work. The economic angst this creates may seem to be weaker than a fear of violent

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crime indeed. But since a critical mass of Americans and British citizens are living in financial insecurity, the fear that their daily lives could become harder because others unduly burden the state is a powerful fear. Demonizers still often throw violence and child neglect into the mix anyway, as I will show in the next sub-section.

Demonization without moral panic is not demonization. Whether it is the bathroom panic or the great replacement, there is something about the group that is demonized that is a cause for extraordinary concern (invasion, violence, destruction, economic collapse, etc.). Demonization sets out a dystopian future that can still be averted if we take the recommended steps, however draconian they may seem. The demonized, perhaps by contrast to the infantilized, animalized or objectified, as considered to have tremendous power to hurt the in-group. They can make our boat sink by their sheer presence. They can cause the collapse of a system generations worked hard to build. They can corrupt children, emasculate men, and violate women. They have power, are to be feared and someone needs to do something about this embodied threat.

(iii)  strategic extrapolation

Demonization as a discourse typically uses strategically the behavior of group A, often criminal in nature, and extrapolates from it to describe the moral affliction of a larger social group B. But there is an even more sweeping process of generalization at play, when a couple of mediatised criminal cases come to define how an entire social group is understood and portrayed. British journalist Toynbee Polly helpfully exemplifies it: “They will look at the worst estate they can find. They will point their camera at the worst possible workless dysfunctional family and say, ‘This is working class life.’” The extrapolation is strategic in the sense that it is a conscious decision by agents in a position of power. Demonizers foresee audience take-up, either because the portrayal draws on existing stereotypes or because it provides a graphic and easy explanation for complex systemic issues.

The story of Karen Mathews, a British mother on benefits who kidnapped her own daughter to get the ransom money is an illustration of this strategic extrapolation mechanism. The “undisciplined face of Britain,” Karen Matthews was described as having a greasy face and as looking 60 when she was only 32. A neglected and neglectful mother, “vile” enough to leave her own daughter tied up in a basement for financial gain, she became a highly mediatized symbol of the moral degeneration of the British poor. Another such example is that of Mick Philpott who set fire to his family home killing 6 of his children. It was a particularly sordid case of domestic abuse and grotesque misogyny which the media soon turned it into a “vile product of Welfare UK.” The family had 10 children and was claiming benefits. It became the focal point of the media coverage, one that was understood as being tied up with the moral decay that led to Philpott’s horrible crime.

In the US, the welfare queen trope is also famously an example of strategic extrapolation from a criminal case. It is directly inspired by Linda Taylor, a Black woman who was convicted of extensive welfare fraud. Taylor committed many other crimes including assault, kidnapping and potentially even murder. The case was carefully chosen by then-President Reagan to cause outrage and resentment and galvanize support for welfare reform. The story effectively cemented racist

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27 Polly in Jones, 24.
28 Jones, chap. 1.
29 Ibid., xxiii.
30 Ibid., xxiii.
stereotypes about Blacks and welfare dependency. Even as African Americans had been excluded and denied access to benefits through discrimination, they still became the upmost symbol of welfare scrounging in the US.

Highly mediatized stories like these are essential to the cementing of the stereotypes that eventually explain demonization’s success as a strategy. They serve as a vivid illustration and shortcut for the myth that the poor are where they are because of a deviant culture, a lack of virtue and an unwillingness to make a living honestly. It is often because of existing group stereotypes that strategic extrapolation from a case to a group is most likely to have take-up among audiences.

(iv) Factual manipulation

A recurring mechanism in cases of demonization is purposeful factual manipulation. To return to the horrific Philpott case, the reporting of the news focused on his large number of kids and his welfare dependency to make it a symbol of Britain on welfare. What was omitted from the narrative was that the benefits the household was receiving were in fact in-work benefits since both Philpott’s spouse and mistress worked. This important fact was willfully omitted from the media reporting of the case because it weakened the narrative of parasitism so central to the story. Interestingly, the reporting of the criminal case of Linda Taylor, who became the symbol of the welfare queen, also occluded parts of the story. As Josh Levin puts it in his recent book, Linda Taylor was demonized for the least of her crimes – welfare fraud. But her welfare fraud was the part of the story that came to be mediatized and accentuated to create a perfect emblem of welfare fraud.

Demonizers typically manipulate facts to make a group appear radically bad and dangerous. Some of the claims advanced are contrafactual or unsupported by empirical evidence. Other claims are inspired by real and documented behaviors, but they are exaggerated or alleged to be true of a much larger group of individuals. In the case of benefits recipients, important facts are omitted or obscured by demonizers to serve a single story of moral deviance. Britain is portrayed as sinking under the weight of benefits cheats when official estimations suggest less than 4% of benefits delivery was an overpayment because of either fraud or error. Although all sorts of methodological issues arise when we estimate fraud rates, only typically about 1% of benefits seem to go to individuals who can be reasonably expected to have known they were ineligible when they applied. Half of the country’s benefits recipients are pensioners, many of whom have worked their whole lives. A vast number of benefits recipients are in work. Only a tiny fraction of households on welfare have more than four kids. Also omitted are the structural obstacles those with little education face to access and retain jobs. The reality of jobseekers handing out countless resumes each day without success, or of employers allowed to dispose of workers on short notice, or who pay such low wages that workers still need benefits to survive, are purposefully occluded from the narrative. Were these facts included, they would present a far murkier picture: one of shared responsibility for unemployment that does not align well with the exclusive shaming of unemployed individuals.

In the US, the creation of a racialized villain, the welfare queen, fed into growing stereotypes about Black women’s alleged promiscuity and laziness. The representation is particularly vicious because

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Black women as a group have always been among the most active in American history as the cotton-field laborers, maids, and now child-care workers of America. Today, Black Women are still overly represented in low-paid and back-breaking jobs. And yet, as Gilens has forcefully argued, racialized welfare stereotypes explain much of the American opposition to welfare. Once strategically manufactured, the factually manipulated stereotypes can run deep in our imaginary and explain long-lasting political opinions and outcomes.

Factual manipulation is a characteristic feature of demonization. It helps create the illusion of moral homogeneity in the demonized (and the glorified) group through the exaggeration of the deviant features and the erasure of facts that undermine the category’s pertinence. Toying with facts is often indispensable to the initiation of the kind of moral disgust about an entire social group that the demonizers aim to provoke. But it isn’t a necessary characteristic either. A group could be morally othered for evil deeds they have indeed performed.

Although the four aspects I have identified in the workings of demonization (moral othering, factual manipulation, strategic extrapolation and moral panic) can be identified in the case we started with (and are likely present in a range of other cases), not all forms of demonization contain all four features. There could be no factual manipulation: the demonized group could indeed have committed the immoral and criminal behavior (e.g., the demonization of rapists). There could be no strategic extrapolation: the demonized could be identical to those who have committed the wrong (e.g., the demonization of serial killers). The two practices are commonly found in cases of demonization, but they are not necessary features of demonization. However, moral othering and moral panic are constitutive features of demonization. The creation of a grouping around a central vice and the conveyed deep insecurity and fear about the immoral group, their alleged behavior, and the effects its spread could have on communities, are constitutive and morally significant aspects of demonization. Factual manipulation and strategic extrapolation, when they are present, reinforce moral othering and moral panic. I take it that the steps identified in the workings of demonization and the social function discussed will resonate with a range of other cases. Other social groups (including women, gays and lesbians, transgenders, Jews, Muslims, immigrants, Native Americans, Blacks, Romani, and many others) have endured forms of demonization at several points in their history that undermined their moral and social standing and served to uphold or justify unjust policies.

### 3. The Social Function of Demonization

Demonization is a status diminisher. By turning a group of people into an object of deep moral contempt, it degrades the members of a group’s standing. When a group is demonized, a social function can typically be uncovered. Something needs to be done about the object of deep fear, and the recommendations tend to be extreme.

(i) Undermining sympathy

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What demonization does first is to reduce the credibility of the demonized. It makes it hard for members of the population to see things from their perspective. In the case of the demonization of already marginalized groups, it makes it harder for others to sympathize with their plight. Welfare recipients are made to look not only blameworthy for their own situation but guilty of trying to exploit others rather than make a living honestly. If an individual vice, rather than structural issues, is responsible for the difficulties faced by the marginalized individuals, then there isn’t much need for sympathy. In fact, moral disgust might be more fitting (especially when the caricature involves child abuse, promiscuity, and violence). If poverty is the result of laziness, a culture of dependency and a degenerate morality, generous payments to those in need don’t seem warranted. If cash reinforces the vice, then that’s even more reason to refrain from disbursing it.

(ii) Fostering resentment, hatred, and self-hatred

Beyond blocking sympathy, demonization, through moral panic, can fuel resentment, hatred, and self-hatred. The basic source of resentment, in the case of welfare benefits, is well captured by this quote: “Where is the fairness for the shift-worker, leaving home in the dark hours of the early morning, who looks up at the closed blinds of their next-door neighbor sleeping off a life on benefits?” Similarly in the US, when the welfare queen stereotype was constructed, it created a sense that it was deeply unfair for some mothers to be home with their kids on welfare while other mothers who worked hard could not afford themselves that luxury. These discourses work particularly well on those who are not poor enough to get benefits but whose aspirations are frustrated by their financial situation. But even those who are unemployed and on benefits themselves, or those who have been or may soon be on benefits, might start resenting other benefits recipients. Frances Ryan recounts disabled recipients who had themselves suffered devastating benefits cuts rationalizing benefits cuts as needed to root out the benefits scroungers. The ideological construct of the benefits cheat can thus fuel resentment even from those who are targeted by it.

Beyond resentment, demonization sometimes leads to hatred. The trope of the fake disabled, for instance, which was introduced to justify welfare cuts and increase monitoring, is now believed to have caused a spike in harassment and violence against people in wheelchairs in the UK. There have been cases of disabled individuals harassed by neighbors asking them to stop lying, and, in a few documented cases, pulling them out of their wheelchairs to see if they could walk. Similarly, participants in the TV show Benefits Street, which has become a symbol of the negative portrayal of benefits recipients in the UK, reported receiving death threats and being told that they should be gassed or hanged.

Finally, demonization can cause shame and undermine self-respect among those on benefits. And in turn, shame can act as a powerful deterrent to keep individuals off benefits. This mechanism explains in part why benefits’ take-up rates tend to be low - a non-negligible number of adults would rather be extremely poor, or dependent on abusive partners, than be on benefits. Even when benefits claimants are granted benefits, therefore, it can have a negative effect on their self-perception.

34 Jones, xxii.
35 76% of Americans thought that way in 1990s, as reported in Hancock, 65.
Pitting a group against another group

Moral othering pits the in-group and an out-group. Demonizers identify and isolate a social group alleged to be fundamentally distinct - a different type of persons who are wicked and morally inferior. The lines of demarcation are often highly political in nature. Demonizers often encourage their audience to shift their gaze towards the demonized and away from those in position of power or from the structural causes underlying social ill. In the case of benefits recipients, the audience is encouraged to resent those with least opportunity, least income and the least political power. Even as representatives implement cuts that affect all those on benefits (including those in work), the benefits scroungers at the bottom are found blameworthy for it. This also serves to undermine the possibility of solidarity at the bottom. The threat of the benefits scrounger is a political apparatus that saps the kind of trust that is needed for a working class or poor people’s consciousness. Both workers and unemployed saw benefits cuts recently in the UK, but the first group was made to blame the second for it.

Weakening rights and entitlements to resources

Demonization is often used to justify inequalities, advance a punitive policy agenda, undermine the rights of a group, or weaken their claims to resources. Demonization abnormalizes others - they need to be fixed, stopped, or incarcerated. When the moral status of the members of a group is deeply diminished, rights denials that would seem inhumane or immoral can be more easily justified. Extreme examples include the inhumane treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo, which was in part made possible by the framing of Muslim terrorists as evil monsters. The fact that some prisoners could be innocents, that they anyway deserved a right to due process, and had a right to bodily integrity was weakened by the perception that they belonged to a group that was the incarnation of evil. So instrumentally, demonization is concerning because it can facilitate, at least in some contexts, human rights violations. When member of UK parliament John Ward proposed in 2008 to sterilize those who have more than three kids while on benefits, it followed well, therefore, from the disrespect and hatred of benefits recipients that had been commonplace in public discourse. Sterilizing professional scroungers who “breed for greed” was something that could be uttered by a MP.37

More directly, the demonization of welfare recipients feeds into a politics of benefits cuts. In the US and UK, it went hand in hand with welfare reforms that reduced access to benefits for those in need. These measures were justified as means to end an endemic culture of dependence and worklessness. The recent demonization of disabled recipients in the UK also went hand in hand with some dramatic benefits cuts. The construct of the falsely disabled recipient was used to justify, for instance, the expansion of work assessments for disabled recipients. This resulted in as much as a third of ill or disabled individuals being deemed “fit for work” after welfare administrators were instructed to assess claimants.38 As a result, many disabled individuals found themselves almost overnight without the benefits they needed to survive. The “bedroom tax”, which increased housing costs for those who lived in subsidized housing with an extra bedroom, also ended up disproportionately disadvantaging individuals with a disability, who often had a spare room for an overnight caregiver or to store medical equipment. They were now asked to leave their homes or pay more than they

37 Jones, 18.
38 https://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/mar/15/third-of-incapacity-benefit-claimants-ineligible
could afford each month. What the bedroom tax meant in practice was they needed to cut down on hours with caregivers, heating, food, and other necessities like incontinence pads. Now it is estimated that one in five disabled persons is living in poverty in the UK, which means having to skip meals, or going without heating. One in six disabled persons report having to wear a coat indoors. There is also the worryingly high number of people dying within a year of having been declared fit for work, which could suggest either that people who were deeply ill were wrongly denied benefits, that people died as a result of not having benefits to support themselves, or both. The demonization of disabled benefits recipients made it possible for those who were already significantly worse off to be chosen to bear a disproportionate burden of cuts. This led the Equality and Human Rights Commission to report alarming backward steps in the treatment of disabled people in the UK: “British compassion for those who are suffering has been replaced by a punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous approach.”

(v) Galvanizing support for a politician or party

Eventually, in addition to a political program, demonization often stimulates support for a political party. It cements a narrative about some politicians being there to protect the population from the demonized groups. As the conservatives say about Labour: “We back the workers, they back the Shirkers.” This line of persuasion has been a particularly successful strategy of conservatives throughout the West. In France, Nicholas Sarkozy was elected in 2011 with the promise to make it harder for those who don’t want to work hard. Donald Trump often promised to redirect welfare from those who cheat the system to those who are truly deserving. One of the reasons this strategy works is that even those who stand to experience cuts become advocates for the cuts, partly to dissociate themselves from those who are demonized. No one wants to be a benefit scrounger, and there is no better way to prove that one isn’t than by endorsing the demonization line and castigating the cheaters.

A functional explanation understands some process by the effects of that process. Without being too committed to a functional explanation, we can see that there are a range of effects of demonization that are by design. Demonization is in a way a trial and tested process to get at particular outcomes. We could attempt separating (i)-(v) in two broad categories: mechanisms and effects. Perhaps (i) and (ii) would be mechanisms that explain the effects discussed in (iii), (iv) and (v). In a way, hatred, resentment, and lack of sympathy are all powerful emotions that can be mobilized indeed as mechanisms to reach particular ends. However, separating too rigidly mechanisms and effects of demonization may not be most helpful. The chronology of demonization is complex to establish. That’s because of the long legacy of stereotypes that predate a particular practice of demonization. There will also be some diversity across cases: fostering hatred as such could very well be the pursued effect of one demonization campaign, the first stage of another.

In conclusion, as our exploration of the example of welfare recipients has shown, demonization serves an oppressive social function. When the standing of individuals is intentionally and deeply degraded, this typically emboldens a specific political agenda. There is likely a vast range of idiosyncratic social functions demonization serves. In Les Corps Vils, Gregoire Chamayou shows

40 Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, said in 2018, as reported in Ryan, 191.
41 Jones, xxiii.
how scientists in need of bodies to experiment on throughout history have demonized certain people to justify live and post-mortem vivisections and other medical procedures to learn about the human body. We can experiment on brutes what we cannot on humans, and so some humans must be turned into brutes to justify experiments. Criminals were an obvious target. They were argued to have lost their moral persona: they were humans in flesh and bodies but morally inhuman. Those on public assistance were also experimented on, with the justification that they were indebted to society, having unduly benefited from public charity: using the poor’s bodies for science was a way to turn the socially useless into helpful objects of public utility and for them to repay their debt to society in the process. Demonization is a prime technology of debasement that serves multiple political purposes.

4. What Makes Demonization Wrongful?

We are now equipped to discuss the normative status of demonization. First, one cannot separate demonization from its effects, likely effects, or intended effects. This is why the social function demonization tends to play, and has played in countless contexts in history, is essential to our normative analysis. Demonization takes things further than stigmatization. It is mobilized to justify inhumane and punitive treatments that would be extremely hard to justify in its absence. Torturing and burning women en masse would have been difficult to even imagine if they had not been portrayed as demonic witches first, even in the early modern period. The long history of demonization of Jews, sometimes depicted as having devilish horns, as poisonous murderers, exploiters of workers, and so on, was central to the genocidal Nazi propaganda. Being at war with an enemy isn’t typically enough to successfully justify extermination. Perpetrators portray and view the demonized as demons that cannot exist alongside us: they need to disappear from the face of the earth. In fact, in both of these cases, it wasn’t enough to kill, bodies had to be burnt too.

It is hard to jump from such extreme examples of dehumanization into a contemporary secular case like that of benefits recipients. But the punitive and inhumane treatment those with disabilities suffered in the UK in recent years would have been difficult to imagine absent the demonization phase that justified the introduction of fitness-to-work assessments and bedroom taxes. The sheer numbers of documented cases of suicides, death by starvation, death in abject poverty, hate crimes against wheelchair users and hate speech suggest again here that demonization needs to be understood as justifying human rights abuses. This doesn’t mean that demonization is always present in dehumanization, nor even that demonization always succeeds in dehumanizing, but that when demonization is present, there are typically corresponding punitive extreme measures also proposed. So, demonization is wrongful as a technology that enables human rights violations.

Beyond this instrumental wrongfulness of demonization, the social practice also disrespects individuals deeply. Demonization can be understood as a series of failures to treat others as equals. In the worse cases, demonization dehumanizes. It is a failure to treat others as human persons. Dehumanization occurs when we demonize individuals in a way that makes them look almost as a different kind of ontological being. In general, demonization also fails to treat persons as individuals. This is a more general problem with stereotyping that Erin Beeghly calls the “failure-to-individualize theory of wrongful stereotyping”. When we treat some members of our community

42 David Livingstone Smith, “Making Monsters”.
as individuals, and others as tokens of a group, we fail to treat our fellow community members as equals (to us and to others). This tokenization is particularly damaging when it involves degrading stereotypes about one’s moral character and when it is experienced by groups whose social identity is already stigmatized. In Patricia Hill Collins’s words, the stereotypes mobilized in demonization are controlling images that get in the way of individuals being able to develop their individuality. It constantly restricts the scope of what an individual can be or do when they lead their lives under the oppressive weight of these injurious expectations. The worse the stereotypes, the more connection to one’s identity and character, the harder they make it for persons to be free individuals.

Demonization is also a failure to relate to members of demonized groups as subjects. Sometimes demonization is wrong because the allegations are false. An important part of what we are responding to in the case of welfare recipients is that the data is misrepresented and manipulated to present a single story of fraud. Some facts are exaggerated, others are willfully omitted. This issue turns into a problem of epistemic injustice when testimonies from the group members are not taken seriously, or when words used by the demonized to voice their concerns get reinterpreted and used against them. Here our failure to relate as equals takes the form of a failure to listen to other’s testimonies, unmediated by the media or politicians, to give others the benefit of the doubt (or consider that they might not be entirely bad) in the face of their being reduced to an object of utter contempt and to challenge unwarranted beliefs. We are undermining their status as a claim-maker and knower. We see the demonized as objects of moral contempt rather than as subjects who cannot be understood fully from the outside.

Demonization is also objectionable because it blocks our ability to stand in front of each other as democratic equals. It is a failure to treat others as fellow citizens. Interestingly, the word demonization is often used over concerns for uncivil and divisive political partisan rhetoric. In polarized societies, radicalized opponents tend to view and treat those in the other camp as traitors and liars. The example of uncivil partisanship in polarized societies is an interesting case of its own, and it is arguable whether approaching it as an instance of demonization is most pertinent (is it sustained enough and are the individuals reduced to this immoral identity?). But, as polarization starkens and identity lines become more entrenched, a type of demonization is facilitated by our competitive democratic system.

Demonization, to conclude, is objectionable by virtue of its effects, likely effects or intended effects, which, in successful cases, tend to be punitive and inhumane. It is also objectionable, more intrinsically and quite straightforwardly, as a failure to relate to others as equals, that is as human persons, subjects, individuals and fellow citizens. But could demonization ever be justified? It might seem off to ask the question at this stage, having studied mostly paradigmatic cases of demonization serving highly oppressive ends. But a few hard cases deserve to be mentioned. What about self-defense demonization, in which the demonized turn back to their demonizer in a mirror fashion? What if low-income families organized and called politicians and the media evil creatures for devising and enacting inhumane policies? What about upward cases of demonization like the portrayal of the 1% of financial institutions executives as evil monsters? What about the demonization of

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44 Patricia Hill Collins, “Black Feminist Thought.”
members of White supremacist groups, who make it their life’s commitment to avoid the “great replacement” and degrade and demean immigrants and non-white Americans? And what about the demonization of politicians who hold those views? Could demonization in these cases ever be justified?

In answering this question, it is worth noticing an important difference between the topic of this paper – demonization as a social practice, let’s call it social demonization – and a single or series of demonizing language used by agents. For there to be social demonization, I would say, the practice must be sufficiently widespread and have a tangible effect on the social identity of the demonized. If I use demonizing language against Patagonia wearers, claiming that they are evil creatures, this will only count as demonization in a weak sense. We can refer to such cases as using demonizing language, to separate it from social demonization. The demonization discussed in this paper is a social practice that several agents take part in and which negatively affects, at least to some extent, the standing of a social group. This clarified, I think the demonization of white supremacists or rapists certainly counts as social demonization. It isn’t as clear that the demonization of financial executives was sufficiently widespread or long-lasting to count as such.

I have conceptualized demonization as moral othering, which involves the portrayal of a group as radically distinct and intrinsically bad. This aspect of demonization makes it a dangerous and fraught practice which understands the behavior of individuals as telling us something about their essence. Understood in this way, self-defense demonization, although understandable and in some cases perhaps even leading to positive outcomes, would still be objectionable and unjustified. One can condemn oppressors without telling a story about how people like them embody moral wickedness. In addition to further burning bridges between oppressors and oppressed, this contributes to reinforcing the very forms of essentialist prejudices that underpin the combated oppression in the first place. A critique of demonization recognizes the harmfulness of reducing individuals to their wrongful acts, even when they have indeed committed atrocities. We must be able to confront demonization without lending support to moral othering as a social practice.

However, in thinking about the practice of moral othering, we might separate a variety of types of cases which are not all as reliant on essentialism. One important axis of differentiation has to do with whether the feature of the demonized group that’s called into question is an identity, role or a function. The demonization of the police, as an institution, or the demonization even of the police force, might be in that respect different from the demonization of Trump voters, if we understand “Trump voter” as a proxy for a range of beliefs and values closely connected with individuals’ identity. It is plausible to think that, with years of intense polarization and lateral disrespect, there is such a phenomenon as the moral othering of progressives by conservatives, and the moral othering of conservatives by progressives. While the essence ascribed to Trump voters them is not that of biological inferiority, it is not uncommon to hear references to what this “basket of deplorables” looks like, dresses like, thinks like, in ways that create the appearance of a correlation between essence and badness, reduces a wide group of persons to a set of evil intensions, and denies their ability to evolve.

So, it seems that the extent of the embeddedness of the demonization in an identity rather than role or function makes instances more worrisome normatively. Another important characteristic is whether the identity of the group targeted is already marginalized. This matters morally because it makes the demonization more likely to stick, cut deep, and marginalize the group further with
respect to the opportunities they have and standing they enjoy. Whether it is rural families with little resources or individuals with no source of income, or with a disability, or already stigmatized social groups, on the one hand, or members of racial groups who enjoy a superior social standing, groups with good access to resources and enjoying a high standing, demonization will be unevenly likely to degrade, debase and cause harm.

In “Conceptualizing Stigma”, Phelan and Link opted to include power in their conceptualization of stigma. It takes power to stigmatize, they argue. Similarly, it takes power to demonize. But power can come in different shapes. I do not think that we should assume a group that plausibly counts as powerless according to some key indicators cannot be an agent of demonization. First, the most powerful moral entrepreneurs involved in cases of moral panic are typically the media and politicians. But of course, members of the general public are always key agents too. They consume news and take part in sustaining the practice of demonization. In some sense, any form of downward demonization involves some lateral demonization too. At worse, they also turn into perpetrators when the time comes. The kind of power that matters in the case of demonization, rather, is the power to degrade others. A multiplicity of agents can stand, together, as a powerful force in this context. And the targets of demonization can at once be vulnerable to that power and enjoy at least some political and social power so as not to count as a marginalized group. The example of antisemitism illustrates this. So, we should be careful not to assume that only those powerful in all respects can demonize and only those without any power can be demonized. What matters is the power to degrade members of a group whose identity, for historical reasons, is vulnerable to the debasement in question.

My normative conclusions follow from my conceptualization of demonization as a form of moral othering. Demonization as I understand it is dangerous and unjustified. There will be border cases, when demonization affects members of a group who share not a deep identity but a role and set of immoral behaviors, but it will only be because they are at the limit of even counting as demonization that they stand at the limit of justifiability. Forceful moral condemnation is always available to us when we want to decry immoral acts performed by groups of persons. Moral othering is not a justified response and it is unlikely to be productive in the long run.

5. Some Lessons for Political Philosophy

What are some lessons one can draw from this analysis? That is, what do we learn by isolating demonization as a social practice and carefully looking at its features and function?

One such lesson concerns the debate over whether egalitarians need to rely on basic equality - the claim that we are one another’s equals. If we are to be treated as equals, there must be some property or attribute that makes us equals. From rationality to intelligence, by appeal to science or religion, the history of humankind is one of the exclusion of all those who were viewed as lacking these attributes. Might we be better off giving up on trying to identify such a quality we all share given that exclusionary history? Perhaps equality is a political commitment rather than something we owe

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to each other by virtue of our shared possession of an attribute, as Anne Philips recently argued. Of course, there are issues with this alternative. We might weaken our case for equality if we reduce it to just a political commitment. It begs the question still, by virtue of what do we owe political equality to each other. There is also the problem of overinclusion: if there is no human attribute that’s the basis for equality, then why shouldn’t animals also be treated as equals? Perhaps this overinclusion problem is preferable to an under-inclusion problem, but it is a problem nonetheless.

My paper does not begin to propose a solution to this complex debate. But it points out that the popular proposal that the right basic attribute may be our moral capacity is likely to cause under-inclusion problems just like rationality or intelligence would. For Rawls, for instance, we are basically equal by virtue of our equal possession of a moral personality constituted by two moral powers: the capacity for a conception of the good and the capacity for a sense of justice. These agential capacities make us worthy of being members of the community of humans to whom equal concern is due. Taking demonization seriously reveals that portraying an agent as wicked is a powerful historic and contemporary way to dehumanize or inferiorize them. Some sustained attacks on the moral character of groups of individuals (especially when top down, when there is take up, and when marginalized groups are targeted) can severely weaken their social standing, democratic standing, and even their basic equality as persons. This should, I believe, make us worried about moral capacity as an alternative attribute to ground egalitarian commitments. It is not just that we now tend to refute people’s moral character to deny them equal rights. It is that we have done that for a very long time.

Another lesson concerns the debate between relational and distributive egalitarianism, which has animated political philosophy since Anderson’s famous Ethics essay “What’s the point of Equality?” in 1999. Relational egalitarianism alleges that the point of egalitarian justice is to establish communities whose members can relate and stand as equals. Relational egalitarians argue that members of a community must be able to relate to one another in a manner that is not mediated by social hierarchies and is unstructured by rank and status (inferiors and superiors). They propose a shift from the distributive paradigm of recent theories of justice. The point isn’t that distributions are inessential to egalitarian justice but rather that they require a relational frame to gain meaning. There has been ample debate on whether distributive and relational approaches are reducible to one another and on whether one can dispense of one or the other. My contribution to this debate is to show that even the most distributive problems that have mobilized egalitarians - ensuring the worse off get a better share of resources – cannot be fully comprehended without paying close attention to how we relate to one another. In the case of benefits recipients, demonization is a political ruse that stands in the way of the worse off getting more of their fair share. As such, it must be a source of focus for theorists and practitioners alike.

Relatively, one cannot further the ends of distributive justice if they design policies that put a target on benefits recipients’ backs. When looking at the issue from a purely distributive angle, one might be tempted to prefer means-tested benefits that target the most worse off. When France introduced a generous means-tested guaranteed income in 1988, the Revenu Minimum Insertion (RMI), it was an undeniably a fantastic effort to raise the floor. But, within a few years of implementation, one of the worst insults one could form was “rmiste” (someone who receives RMI). A rmiste became quickly

49 For instance, see: Samuel Scheffler, Elizabeth Anderson, Niko Kolodny, Sophia Moreau, Martin O’Neill, Iris Marion Young, Debra Satz, Jonathan Wolff, Christian Schemmel, and more.
associated with laziness, weakness of the will, alcoholism, and parasitism. The program was overturned 20 years after its introduction, and replaced with a more conditional, more activation-oriented workfare program, to allegedly prevent the poor from abusing the system. All of this suggests that means tested benefits can reinforce the target individuals have on their back and make them more vulnerable to demonization. That is also one reason why benefits take-up rates tend to be low across advanced democracies.\(^5\)

To remedy the widespread phenomenon of welfare demonization, new policy designs are needed. A Universal basic Income, a cash payment granted to all members of a community with no conditions or means-test seems to me a far more promising measure to raise the floor. Programs would be targeted ex-post to ensure a progressive redistribution, but UBI would normalize public assistance by turning every member of a community into a benefits recipient. Although the introduction of UBI wouldn’t on its own radically change social norms around work, it would, I believe, make it much more difficulty for politicians and the media to demonize those on benefits.

There are several other ways to reach these conclusions about relational equality and universal basic income (including by appeal to the notion of stigmatization). Still, my account of demonization offers I hope a powerful path to reach them, while calling our normative attention to a seemingly under-theorized yet prevalent, enduring and deeply inegalitarian practice – one that we will need to tackle head on if we ever want to live in a humane society.

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