The undeserving rich

The Victorians, with all their moral certainty and a good dose of Puritan piety, were happy to endorse the concept of the deserving and undeserving poor. Indeed Max Weber understood this distinction as one of the crucial features of the Protestant work ethic.

The idea was essentially that the cause of poverty in individuals could be a function of luck, chance, fate or feckless idleness. The deserving poor were widows and orphans, the disabled and the elderly. Essentially those who could not be expected to work and be self-supporting. The deserving poor deserved charity; but the undeserving poor – those outside the above categories – deserved nothing but contempt.

It was even posited in the Calvinist doctrine of predestination that the signs of God’s grace (and displeasure) could be seen in this life. The rich were the blessed, and the poor the condemned.

Philanthropists with a spirit of noblesse oblige were happy to devote some good PR and guilt-reducing time and effort to help the deserving poor. Hence the number of charities supporting the old, the blind and the orphaned.

But it was quite acceptable to lambast, discriminate, even to use what we now call “hate language” about the undeserving poor. They were considered to have chosen their state voluntarily; they were guilty of the sin of sloth. They were in essence lazy bums, unwilling to work for their daily bread. And they deserved their fate: they were often mendicants, beggars, contemptible leeches on society.

Governments since the Second World War have been much less happy to make this distinction openly. To some, it seems there is now an acceptable myriad of “excuses”, from mysterious illnesses to worldwide economics, to justify unemployment and in some senses to be reclassified as deserving. Deserving of a raft of state handouts, funded by those who work for their daily crust.

Others have always seen the Victorians as hard-hearted and hypocritical; as happy to live in a society with appalling levels of poverty. Condemning people to the ignominy of the workhouse and in effect both instituting and condoning what was little more than slave labor. They see the welfare state as a civilizing, just and politically stabilizing institution to be proud of.
The poor, as Christ said, will always be with us. As indeed will the argument over how they became poor and what to do about it. But what about the rich? Is there not now a moral outcry about the undeserving rich? Of course, in some eyes, all rich people are undeserving.

We used to talk about old money and new money. The former was inherited primarily in the form of land, a title or a business; the latter built up in one generation, and lost in the next. Old money had class, breeding and respect-worthiness irrespective of how the wealth was acquired in the first place. Old money was associated with status, grand houses, good royal connections. But old money seemed so often to decline, slowly but inevitably. And for many, quite justly.

The real problem is with new money. Here we see both the deserving and the undeserving rich. Entrepreneurs such as the late Steve Jobs, or the “Dragons’ Den” team, writers and composers such as J. K. Rowling or Andrew Lloyd-Webber, and inventors such as James Dyson all seem to get our approval. It is not so clear with some celebrities such as very successful actors, who appear to exploit some small feature (perhaps good looks) while leading unstable, selfish and attention-seeking lives.

Recent events have really clarified matters, however. The prototypic undeserving rich are now bankers and their buddies in the financial markets. Apologists are happy to say that the most hated prototypes, such as “Fred the Shred” – Fred Goodwin, former CEO of the Royal Bank of Scotland Group – are exceptions; that the sector attracts some of the brightest and most hard-working people; that the City brings in huge revenues for the country; that there is an international market; and that if the bankers leave (taxed out of Britain) we shall all be sorry.

The undeserving rich – the overpaid BBC newsreader, the local GP, the local council boss, for example – have one thing in common: their incomes come from public money. It seems somehow too easy, too unjust and too selfish to enrich oneself through the public purse. It is the difference between the top and the bottom levels of the public sector that seems to trigger anger against the undeserving rich. The bank boss versus the bank teller; the newsreader versus the dining room attendant; the nursing assistant versus the specialist.

The undeserving rich appear to be characterized by other features too. They seem low, reluctant and shy about charitable giving. They are prototypically selfish, not selfless. They don’t spread their wealth about at all.

Second, they are haughty, hubristic and supercilious. Very unattractive traits, which come to the fore when they are challenged about their