

## **BİR NEO-LİBERAL DEVLET ELEŞTİRİSİ OLARAK “I, DANIEL BLAKE” FİLMİNİN SİYASAL YÖNETSEL ANALİZİ**

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### **ÖZ**

Kültürel bir alan olan sinema, belirli bir toplumsal, ekonomik ve siyasal etkenler ağı içerisinde yer alması sebebiyle, kendi dönemini temsil eder. Bu konumlanma aynı zamanda sinemanın yapısını yani filmin iletişim kurma biçimini de etkiler. Filmler tasarlanmış temsili öğeler aracılığıyla bir takım tezler ileri sürer, belirli bir bakış açısını telkin ederler.

Ken Loach da filmleriyle içinde yaşadığı dönemin eşitsizlik ve toplumsal çelişkilerini ortaya koyan ekonomik ve politik sorunları birbirine bağlı bir şekilde ele alır. Özellikle son dönem filmlerinde, kendini güçlü bir şekilde hissettiren neo-liberal süreci, onun ekonomik ve sosyal sonuçlarını irdeler. 2016 yılının sonunda vizyona giren “I, Daniel Blake” de bu ekonomik sistemin yarattığı yeni devlet yönetimi içerisinde bireysel dayanışmayı esas alan ve bir karakter olarak Loach’un politik sinema örneklerinden birini oluşturmaktadır. Toplumsal yaşamın bir kaydı şeklinde ele alınan film, kapitalist ekonomik düzenin yarattığı eşitsizliği, bürokrasiye ve onunla iç içe geçmiş özel şirketlere karşı güçlü birey dayanışmasına rağmen çaresizliği öne çıkartmaktadır.

Bu çalışmada Ken Loach’un “I, Daniel Blake” adlı filminin siyasal tezleri, bir postmodern durum olarak post-endüstriyel topluma özgü sorunları temsil ettiği varsayımından hareketle incelenecektir. Bu doğrultuda, yeniden yapılanma süreci içerisindeki devlet ile vatandaş arasındaki sorunlar, teorik bir bağlamda ele alınacaktır. Filmde ifade edilen devletin yönetme biçimi “Reinventing Government” projesi dahilinde değerlendirilerek, vatandaş Blake’in savunusu da bu neoliberal yönetim biçimi eleştirisinin dışavurumu olarak yorumlanacaktır. Loach’ın kendine özgü anlatım biçimi de bir politik sinema örneği olarak değerlendirilecektir. Araştırmada esas olarak literatür taraması ile birlikte kitap, makale ve internet kaynaklarına yer verilecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ken Loach, Daniel Blake, Neoliberalizm.

**Jel Kodu:** H5, I3, K4

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## **A CRITICISM OF THE NEO-LIBERAL STATE: THE POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE ANALYSIS OF “I, DANIEL BLAKE”**

### **ABSTRACT**

Cinema, as a cultural domain, represents its own period because it is included in a certain network of social, economic and political factors. This positioning also affects the structure of the cinema, thus, the communication style of movies. They raise certain arguments and suggest a particular point of view through designed symbolic elements.

Ken Loach, in his films, tackles the economic and political problems that reveal the inequality and social contradictions of the period that he lived. Especially in his recent films, he examines the process in which neoliberalism became influential, and its economic and social consequences. “I, Daniel Blake” released at the end of 2016 is an example of political filmmaking of Loach as a character based on individual solidarity within the new state administration created by this economic system. The film is considered as a record of social life and highlights the inequality created by the capitalist economic order, despair despite strong individual solidarity against bureaucracy and its intertwined relationships with private companies.

In this study, the analysis of the political arguments of “I, Daniel Blake”, by Ken Loach, will be based on the assumption that it represents the problems specific to the post-industrial society as the Postmodern Condition. Accordingly, the problems between the state and citizens in the restructuring process will be discussed in a theoretical context. The government style of the state in the film will be evaluated within the scope of the “Reinventing Government” project, and the defense of Citizen Blake will be interpreted as the expression of the criticism of the neoliberal form of government. Loach’s idiosyncratic expression will be considered as an example of political filmmaking. This study reviews the literature including books, articles and Internet resources.

**Keywords:** Ken Loach, Daniel Blake, Neoliberalism.

**Jel Codes:** H5, I3, K4

## INTRODUCTION

The interpretation and expression of the social world is a political preference. The similar fields regarding the individual, history and society have been dealt in different ways by different ideologies. The position and struggle of the individual in society have been regarded as a part of a collective consciousness in left thinking against the right ideological approach that imprisons the individual to private life. According to the right-wing ideology, society has been an unidentified totalitarian force that threatens the individual; on the other hand, it has been a network of relationships established for cooperation and solidarity in the left-wing politics. The right has viewed history as the source of tradition, truth, and power while the left has considered history as a struggle for equality arising from unequal social and economic relations (Ryan, Kellner, 2010: 419-420).

The political choice based on the interpretation of the social order also refers the areas related to the individual, history and society in films. The successes of directors such as Chaplin, Eisenstein, Renoir, and Godard in the history of cinema as well as the striking character of political cinema derive from their opposition to the traditional political order. Ken Loach has currently been among the most important British directors in respect of the critical content in the political cinema.

In this study, "I, Daniel Blake", one of Ken Loach's current products, has been analyzed. The political film touches on the poverty of the British working class and the administrative / political causes of poverty through the problem of bureaucracy face by Daniel Blake, a member of the working class in England that has reached the retirement age and has health problems. This study conducts textual analysis method to analyze the film and compare its topics with other films of Loach.

### 1. POLITICAL CINEMA

The dialectic between the capacity to imitate and change reality has accelerated the development of cinema as an art industry. Each film exhibits its own political nature on three levels: (I) ontologically tries to change the traditional values of culture; (II) mimetically highlights reality and (III) internally tries to establish an ideological link between the film and the audience (Monaco, 2014: 250-251). It may be possible to posit a critical relationship between social and political theories and cinema as long as films become widespread by addressing social problems. By means of cinema, we can establish empathy and identity by getting involved in the lives of others via images (Morin, 2005: 102; Diken, Lausten, 2010: 28). According to Althusser, who constructs empathy and identity through ideology, ideologies are a part of real life and their messages indirectly, not directly, reach the audience to the extent they have natural flow on cinema, the message they want to convey reaches the audience not directly but indirectly (Althusser, 1984: 33-49). In this process of increasing signs and images, reality has been gradually staged more become a product of its own period as a work of art (Diken, Lausten, 2010: 24-30).

## 2. KEN LOACH AS A POLITICAL CINEMA DIRECTOR

Ken Loach was born in Nuneaton, England in 1936. He grew up in a working class family. He started his law education in Oxford University in 1957. During this period, he successfully completed the BBC Directing course and started to work as a director in television dramas (Gül, Han, 2020: 165).

Ken Loach viewed television as an important tool like as cinema. Together with Tony Farnett, he was at the forefront of innovative social drama with television plays such as “Up the Junction” in 1965 and “Cathy Come Home” in 1966 (Nowell-Smith, 2008: 686). In his films, he has used the realistic techniques similar to television programs (Monaco, 2014: 308). His first feature-length film was sentiment-oriented “Kes”, which was shot in Barbsley in 1969 and narrated the growth of a working-class child (Nowell-Smith, 2008: 686).

During the Thatcher government in the 1980s, Loach could not make films because of censorship for a long time. However, from the beginning of the 1990s, he has discussed the end of the welfare state in England and the negative effects of neoliberal preferences on the working class through the reflections from the slices of life. Focusing on the problems of the working class, privatization and immigration, Loach has tried to draw attention to the effects of change in the approach to the state and bureaucracy (Onaran, 1997: 123). Loach has pointed out to the problems faced by citizens because of the political and managerial choices of the country in which he lived, and reflected the destruction caused by neoliberal policies to the audience in the style of documentary-fiction (Kaplan, 2017: 336-367).

Loach was influenced by the Czech New Wave and Italian Neorealism. It is a style of the Czech New Wave to reflect the struggle against the status quo on the screen as it is in real life and film real people without the intervention of the director (Cinema Verite) (Orhangazi, 2012: 56). On the other hand, Italian New Realism tried to focus on social problems such as poverty in post-war Italy, especially the contradictions and inequalities existing in the modern urban life within the framework of social justice and equality. Outdoor shooting, narration fictionalized in a documentary style and the preference of non-professional actors were the main features of this movement (Özman, Bağır, 2015: 114-116; Fuller, 1998: 114). The movement centered on the pace of everyday life reduces the distinction between screen and reality while claiming its place with a moral and ethical philosophical stance in the history of cinema. Loach, as a director, reflects the traces of both movements in documentary and fiction films, so has preferred presenting real-world stories full of despair in a plain and modest narrative rather than Hollywood's unreal stories with happy ending (Okayay, 1997: 123-133; Cardulio, 2015: 171). He has achieved great success by making more than twenty films in his forty-year directorial adventure.

### **3. THE STORY OF “I, DANIEL BLAKE”**

The film focuses on the problems between an old worker trying to survive in the poor streets of Newcastle and the state. Daniel Blake is single (his wife is dead and he has no children) man who has earned his living as a carpenter for 40 years and fulfilling his civic duties. He has a benevolent, solidarity and combative spirit without bad habits. While working as a carpenter, he has had a heart attack in a construction and become unable to work based on the advice and report of his doctor. In order to receive social aid, he has applied to a public institution managed by a private institution. However, he has to prove his disability according to the performance scale of the institution to receive a disability benefit. Despite the medical report, he cannot receive the benefit since he cannot meet the criteria. After Blake has been forced to work by the threat of sanctions under the system, he meets Katie, who is struggling for housing with her two children and wants to work. The process of cooperation and solidarity begins between them. Another character of the film is an immigrant neighbor of Daniel, China. He also has no social security. He is pinning his dreams on the income of fake sneakers smuggled from China. We witness that Blake acts in cooperation and solidarity with his neighbors in the movie. However, despite all efforts to cooperate and struggle with the bureaucracy, Daniel dies of a heart attack in the judicial phase of the struggle. The note found in his pocket after his death and read by Katie is the last scene that presents the main theme of the film (Gül, Han, 2020: 53).

### **4. THE MEANING AND VALUE OF THE FILM IN POLITICAL CINEMA**

#### **4.1. Chaos in the Relationship between the Neoliberal Government and Citizen**

In the 1970s, the perception of the state and public administration has changed due to a crisis of capital. After the World War II, the form of the “welfare state” based on social rights has been abandoned. Neoliberalism has transformed all areas of life, all institutions and social structures, from citizen-state relations to the individual subject, into an economic element in line with market rationality and cost-benefit analysis. This transformation has been internalized by people, willingly or unwillingly. Democratic principles have been accordingly trivialized, democratic institutions have eroded and the life of the modern individual and the social order has become chaotic (Petković, 2018: 169).

Non-governmental organizations have also been included in the domination of capital in conjunction with the privatization of the public sphere (Cox, 1998: 22). Market economy has been presented as the guarantee of social freedom (Harvey, 2015: 2-3). The negative effects of this transformation increased in the 1980s and 1990s, and even the most developed capitalist countries turned into a social problem<sup>2</sup>. In this process, social explosion, unemployment, unequal distribution policies in

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<sup>2</sup> These policies were first launched in England with the sale of the British telecom company in 1984. Later on, basic public services such as electricity, water and railways included in GATS have also been privatized (Orhangazi, 2012: 71). For detailed information about GATS, see Güzelsarı (2002).

the West have become controversial in the context of social equality and justice (Alden, Thomas, 1998: 8-11). Neoliberal trends, embodied in the policies of the Thatcher and Reagan era, have been put into practice in all other countries. In the process defined as the transition from the “Public Administration” to the “Public Management”, the number of public employees was reduced, restrictions were imposed on public expenditures, and government services were privatized at general and local scale (Wise, Szücs, 1996: 43).

Associated with the transformation of public administration within the framework of the “agency theory”, public services, including the social security field, have evolved into a professional corporate structure that works like an enterprise-company through the lens of cost-benefit analysis. Public services have lost their characteristics of a public good and a profit-oriented understanding regarding the subjects they serve as customers, not citizens, has become effective. Fukuyama (2005: 103) suggests that it is more appropriate for public institutions to seek a restructuring process through alternative administrative models, rather than a Darwinian competition and selection process. Due to the conceptualization of citizenship incompatible with the democratic nation-state model existing in a large part of the world, the social state paradigm, which is accused of causing bureaucracy and paperwork, has ceased to be a part of the modern state in this process (Petković, 2018: 168).

As these negative developments became apparent, the book “Reinventing Government” written by Osborne and Gaebler (1992) proposed a new administrative form accepting that the system had collapsed. Osborne and Gaebler (1992) proposed an entrepreneurial government model based on the belief that public enterprises should be guided. The entrepreneurial government model should cooperate with the private sector, hire its employees as in the business approach, act within the market economy, and give importance to performance measurements (Osborne, Gaebler, 1992: 18). The project based on the view of citizens as customers and need to provide public services in a competitive environment have crystallized the management of public administration with business logic rather than public one (Bayramoğlu, 2005: 154-155; Kiely, 2005).

Ken Loach’s movie “Bread and Roses”, shot in 2000, draws attention to the drawbacks of privatization policies. The movie “I, Daniel Blake” emphasizes the privatization of public services and public space is being replaced by the non-governmental organizations called the “third sector” that help Katie in accordance with the “Reinventing” structure. Thus, the responsibility for social problems was taken from the bureaucracy, and assigned to those who had problems. The project, which can be accepted as the main source of Blake’s problems, has excluded the most basic social rights of employees such as health and retirement from the elements of assurance.

In the film, the opinion of the healthcare professionals in the social security services privatized by the government<sup>3</sup> is valued above that of a cardiology specialist. Contrary to the professional opinion of the cardiologist, who suggests Blake not to work in case of another heart attack and have a defibrillator, the healthcare professional determine the ability of Daniel Blake to work based on the 52-page form responded by Daniel since he can walk without any help and set his clock. Blake calls the call center to object to the decision taken by the social services due to his disability. Blake is informed by a recorded message that the call is not toll-free and waits 1 hour and 48 minutes accompanied by Vivaldi's "Spring Part". The use of popular music as one of the trademark techniques is remarkable at this scene (Petković, 2018: 173).

Loach emphasizes that privatized (subcontracted) social services subject their citizens to a punitive treatment and while doing this, the employees of the system are de-identified because they do not take initiative and serve as machines. Loach also indicates that Blake, who cannot claim social rights since he received 12 points instead of the required 15 points to receive aid, is defined by the rating of the system. He explains that even an objection to the decision can be made after the review of the decision maker. This means that even a lawsuit against the system is possible at the end of another bureaucratic process (Gümüş, Öztürk, 2019: 54). As Bradshaw (2016) says, the process is an example of "perfect bureaucratic misery". Blake fights against a social security system that seems designed to be prevented rather than providing aid (Murray, 2017: 49-51) and the phenomenon of citizenship is redefined by the state (O'Brien, 2018: 83).

The clearest expression that describes the punitive function in the relationship between the neoliberal state and its "citizens" is "sanctions." Katie is a few minutes late for her appointment at the Job Center since she has just arrived in the city and asks the "Job Centre" employee whether the center imposes a penalty after being late. The employee replies: "I'll refer you to the (anonymous) decision makers and they will decide if they apply any sanction." In this particular case, the sanction means a 40% cut in aid. Moreover, the sanction may include the risk of freezing the payment for a maximum of 3 years, or even being deprived of accommodation. In another sequence, Daniel is condemned by a "Job Centre" employee for not printing his resume and forced to attend a CV writing workshop, threatened with sanctions if he refused. The CV workshop sequence emphasizes the inhuman flaws of the neoliberal ideology, which conveys the full responsibility of survival to the individual (Medovoi, 2010: 138) and does not attach importance to the deteriorating working conditions (Petković, 2018: 178).

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<sup>3</sup> In the film, a private company is responsible for the bureaucratic process of the applications to the social rights in accordance with the chosen theme of abstraction. Thus, all requests for ESA (Employment and Support Allowance) were signed with the Government private company ATOS in the UK between 2005 and 2015.

The oppressive character of the discourses of the system and the area of resistance against the practices constitute the fundamental structure of the film. Although there is no discourse about political power in the film, authority and power are presented to the audience through institutional structures (Day, Shepperd, Shaw, 2019: 17).

The condemnation of citizens to a radical despair in the system where health insurance and the right to permanent housing are endangered with the care crisis is the result of the interpretation of poverty as a crime. Institutional abuse and devaluation of unproductive citizens are evident (Giles, 2017). While Daniel Blake is a fictional character, his struggle consistently illustrates the impact of Thatcher-era administrative change on British citizens as a life experience (Ryan, 2017). This change also supports a “Social Darwinist” theory developed by Herber Spencer in political theory, which fits with the classical liberal understanding, opposes state intervention in economic and social life (Heywood 2011: 22). In the system in which health insurance and right to permanent housing are endangered with the crisis of care, the condemnation of citizens to radical helplessness is caused by the interpretation of poverty as a crime. There is an explicit expression of the institutional abuse and devaluation of unproductive citizens (Giles, 2017). Although Daniel Blake is a fictional character, his struggle consistently illustrates the impact of the change in the Thatcher administration on British citizens as a life experience (Ryan, 2017). This change also supports the “Social Darwinism” developed by Herber Spencer in political theory corresponding the classical liberal understanding and opposing the state intervention in economic and social life (Heywood, 2011: 22).

The film, which describes the struggle of Blake, as a good citizen alone in a social structure indifferent to insecure and chaotic system created by economic and technological changes (Hornaday, 2017), radically defines the state and citizens as the distinguishing features of neoliberalism on the movie screen.

In the movie "Riff-Raff" shot in 1991, Loach identifies the difficulties experienced by the working class with the political choices of the related period. Similarly in the movie “I, Daniel Blake”, Loach tries to exemplify the narration of a radical transformation from the Welfare state to the punitive super state, from the citizen as an element of social and political rights to the customer as a human capital (Petković, 2018: 168) through the ordinary citizens of the working class, Katie and Blake.

#### **4.2. Poverty of the Working and Immigrant Class**

Since the Washington Consensus first used by John Williamson at the end of the 1980s, stabilization and structural adjustment programs began to be implemented and the government’s aim to fight against poverty was pushed to the background by the market-oriented neoliberal policies (Munck, 2008: 107; Alfredo, 2008: 190).



The idea of good governance and deregulation policies, common discourse in the 1980s and 1990s (Kozanoğlu, Gür, Özden, 2008: 70), also made the conditions of claiming important social rights such as retirement, unemployment and health insurance difficult and the weight of the market in human life increased (Savaşkan, 2009: 206).

In the neoliberal period, priority was given to non-governmental organizations, known as the third sector, in the resolution of increasing social inequalities, decreasing social expenditures and poverty (Jessop, 2000: 13-20). Health and social security systems needed by the poor were rapidly privatized in this process. These policies together with the insufficiency of social security at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century accelerated the impoverishment of the population groups in need of these services after the financial crisis. The deterioration in living conditions has been reflected in the political sphere, the despair towards compromising policies has spread and the credibility and legitimacy of democracy have been questioned. This despair results in the fact that no political decision makers are included and Blake can only express him in the judicial body in the film.

The film also sheds light on the intersections of the UK housing crisis through the experiences of Katie.<sup>4</sup> In one sequence of the film, Katie highlights the inadequacy of laws protecting tenants<sup>5</sup> when she is fired from her rented apartment in London after complaining to her landlord because of a leak in the wall of her son Dylan's room that made him really sick. Katie and the kids spend the next two years waiting in a room, a hostel and an apartment. Finally, the state offers an apartment in Newcastle. The legal and coercive apparatus of the state forces Katie to leave London at the expense of separating from her mother and friends (Petković, 2018: 175).

Loach also touched upon the problems of immigration in parallel with the subject of the 2007 movie "It's a Free World". Daniel's twenty-year-old immigrant neighbor "China" is a character who is not part of an organized workforce and tries to earn his living through short-term labor and entrepreneurship. China sells fake products, which are illegally produced by Asian factory workers with low wages indicating the mobility of global capital, on the streets of England and act with personal pride and dreams of the future (Murray, 2017: 51). Both Blake's benevolent relations with his immigrant neighbors and the aid from a food bank that Katie receive with the help of a non-governmental organization exemplify the efforts of immigrants and working class living in England to solve the difficulties due to insufficient social rights through solidarity among themselves.

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<sup>4</sup> As a result of the housing policies implemented by Thatcher, more than 50000 families especially in London had to move. It is known that many families were forcibly moved from the city center to the suburbs (Taylor, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> It is thought that 15000 people died in 2015 due to heating problems. Studies show that the increase in suicide and death rates in poorer regions such as Newcastle is related to economic policies (Gibbons, 2017: 174). A report from the Trussel Trust in April 2017 states that only 1,182,000 people and 436,000 children could receive nutrition aid from food banks (The Trussel Trust, 2017).

“I, Daniel Blake”, as a social realist film that depicts the consequences of the harm on people excluded by the state, also exhibits such as to be provocative for the poor. The oppressive character of the discourses of the system and the area of resistance against practices constitute the main structure of the film (Day, Shepperd, Shaw, 2019: 15). Although there is no discourse on political power in the film, authority and power are reflected to the audience through institutional structures.<sup>6</sup>

### CONCLUSION

“I, Daniel Blake” by the director Ken Loach is beyond a sad struggle story. It has a political and social realistic form that connects the tragedy experienced by the poor classes and the sense of solidarity with the political / administrative structure. The film represents a quest to rethink and question the existing system that does not value the poor in the working and immigrant class. The film can be described as a criticism of the classical liberal understanding of Herbert Spencer, developer of the Darwinian social theory for the first time. In the film, the executive elements of the system (those working under the auspices of the public) display an attitude devoid of initiative and empathy and draw attention to the misery of a robotized ruling class. This situation is the social output of the system that has gradually abandoned human values and turned into an insensitive society. The minimalist and naturalistic documentary mode of the film clearly reveals Daniel Blake’s social rights that reduce human value to cost-benefit calculations.

The film allows us to discover the solidarity and compassionate relationships of people on a micro scale against disrespect caused by poverty and bureaucratic indifference. Although Daniel Blake was defeated in his struggle, his defense written to be read in the court is regarded as an example of a manifesto against the system by Katie after his death.

*“I am not a client, a customer, nor a service user, a shirker, a scrounger, a beggar, nor a thief. I’m not a National Insurance Number or blip on a screen. I paid my dues, never a penny short, and proud to do so. I don’t tug the forelock, but look my neighbour in the eye and help him if I can. I don’t accept or seek charity. My name is Daniel Blake. I am a man, not a dog. As such, I demand my rights. I demand you treat me with respect. I, Daniel Blake, am a citizen, nothing more and nothing less. Thank you.”*

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<sup>6</sup> The 2017 labor manifesto of Jeremy Corbyn, who became the head of the Labor Party in 2015, has been supported by Loach and has a discourse on the solutions of the problems in the film. “No more austerity, nationalization of railway, water, energy and postal services, social housing project, protection of the environment, return to free education, taxation of the rich, human rights and justice movements” (Gibbons, 2017: 175; Ken Loach interview: <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/i-daniel-blake-ken-loach-interview-cathy-come-home-benefits-cuts-a7377391.html>)

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