

*Why a basic income, and why is now the time? Field-notes
from Ireland during the Covid-19 pandemic*

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Picture this: June 1832, and one Mr. Majendie is giving evidence to a Royal Commission into the Operation of the Poor Laws, which employed twenty-six Assistant Commissioners to collect evidence from some three-thousand parishes in England and Wales. The topic under discussion is ‘bastardy’. Although a mere footnote in the genealogy of what would much later be known as ‘the welfare state’, what Majendie (and many others who gave evidence) had to say about this ‘problem’ goes some way towards illuminating the extent to which welfare has (again) become a form of stigma, an instrument of division, and a mechanism of compulsion targeting those who bear the burden of inequality under neoliberal capitalism. With this historical arc in mind, let us dwell for a moment on how the figure of the ‘unmarried mother’ – also described as a ‘fallen’ woman by Catholic moralists at that time – figured in this discussion. The evidence laid before the Commission was extensive and resounding in its core conclusion: public assistance to unmarried mothers was the cause of the very problem it was intended to ameliorate. More specifically, from the perspective of the propertied class, it was the *certainty* of public provision that posed the greatest threat, because this would ensure that the mother of an ‘illegitimate’ child could count on being taken into the workhouse where she would be ‘better lodged and fed than in any period of her former life, and maintained...in perfect idleness’. This was apparently the crux of the matter, as emphasised by a Colonel J. P. A’Court: that unless checked, the mother of a bastard child was encouraged *by the logic of the system itself* to use public assistance as ‘a sort of pension to herself’ (Checkland and Checkland, 1974/1834: 264-6).

In the thick of this discussion, though at that time it was being reconfigured by the growing influence of liberalism, was an age-old distinction between a ‘deserving’ and an ‘undeserving’

poor. The architects of the Royal Commission, which laid the foundations for the British (and Irish) welfare state, were disciples of the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, and it was his principle of ‘less eligibility’ that would shape the trajectory of public assistance.¹ The basic idea rests on the assumption that we all act on the basis of rational choice. In other words, faced with a choice between earning (in today’s money) 200 Euro per week or availing of 250 Euro a week on welfare, then the rational thing to do is to opt for welfare, because that affords a better level of security and comfort than what can be earned by working for a living. How then to ensure that the poor are ‘deserving’ of public assistance?

The answer to this question, past and present, is to put them to the test. In the past this meant enduring the degradation of the workhouse, because the organising principle of the Poor Law was that an honest pauper would opt for the misery of the workhouse only if he or she genuinely couldn’t find work, meaning any kind of work, no matter how little it paid or how bad the working conditions. Today the welfare state has come up with other types of tests, yet regardless of whether we look to the past or to present, the register of *desert* encapsulates the malleable properties of ‘negative’ freedom as advocated by liberals. For the rich and powerful, negative liberty, or freedom from external interference, means avoiding taxes while availing of opportunities to benefit from unearned income, with one example being – in the words of Guy Standing (2017: 32) – ‘the commercial plunder of the commons’, by which he means ‘rental income derived from the commercialisation and privatisation of public goods and amenities’. If the poor do anything even remotely comparable, then it is called either ‘dependency’, which apparently erodes their willingness to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, or ‘fraud’, which I will come back to shortly. As framed by (neo-) liberalism, public assistance to the poor must function as a mechanism of compulsion, ensuring that those who survive by enduring exploitative labour practices actually commit to selling their labour and their time in exchange for a life of independence, and if this entails hardship, then so be it. If welfare fails to function in this way, then it will (allegedly) increase the numbers of work-shy and shiftless free-riders who use welfare as a ‘sort of pension to themselves’ (in the words of Colonel J. P. A’Court). Hence – and this is no mere ‘unintended effect of intentional actions’ as sociologists are wont to say, because this is the result of a long and focused assault on the commons – it is no longer accurate to speak of welfare ‘entitlements’. What until recently could, at least with some degree of accuracy, be called social *rights*, have increasingly become *conditional* and hence

¹Bentham presents his principle of less eligibility as follows: ‘If the condition of individuals, maintained...by the labour of others, were rendered more eligible than that of persons maintained by their own labour, then [they] would be continually withdrawing themselves from the class of persons maintained by their own labour, to the class of persons maintained by the labour of others ... The destruction of society would...be the inevitable consequence’ (2001/1797-8:39).

also *contingent* supports. You and I may well share the same precarious situation, but that doesn't mean we can both count on accessing the same supports. Why does any of this matter right now, and why should we look to the past as a way of illuminating the present?

I am going to present some notes from the Republic of Ireland during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic by way of answering that question. In response to the Covid-19 crisis, and shortly before the country went into its first full lock-down, the Irish Government introduced a Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) of 350 euros per week, available to workers who had lost their job as a result of the pandemic, and to self-employed people whose income had ceased due to Covid-19, with eligibility commencing on March 13th 2020. Three weeks later (week one of the initial lock-down in Ireland), during a televised briefing, the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar replied to a journalist's question concerning alleged abuse of the emergency welfare payment:

“I have heard stories of people who have asked their employers to lay them off, because they'd be better off on the 350 euro payment than maybe working twenty hours a week for eleven euros...do the maths yourself. And I would just say to anyone who's thinking that...that we're all in this together, and no one in any walk of life should seek to be better off, or to make a profit out of this crisis.”

It's worth noting that Varadkar was previously Minister for Social Protection (social welfare), and in 2017 he oversaw a campaign called 'Welfare cheats cheat us all', calling on members of the public to report people suspected of welfare fraud (see below).



At the centre of the 2017 campaign, and reprised in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, is the distinction noted above: between a ‘deserving’ and an ‘underserving’ poor. What would it take to erase the conditions of existence for this type of dividing practice?

Viewed through the radical egalitarian argument for a basic income (see Standing 2017, and I acknowledge that this is not the only argument for a basic income), the answer to Varadkar’s accusation is certainly not one of denial, but neither is it a simple ‘yes, you caught me out and I’m sorry’. On the contrary, it goes something like this: ‘Are you using the PUP as a substitute for an honest wage?’ Answer: ‘No, we are using the PUP as a way of laying claim to social justice and as a means of refusing exploitative labour, and in a situation [the Covid-19 pandemic] where we are being pressured to put our very lives on the line in the name of ‘essential work’. Context is crucial here, because the pandemic has revealed the lie behind Varadkar’s refrain that ‘we are in this together’. The naked truth is that it is the worst paid and most precarious among us who have proven to be the most ‘essential’ – and expendable – workers. So, in answer to the Taoiseach’s accusation, it could be argued that what was happening following the introduction of the PUP – not in a co-ordinated way comparable to Fridays

for Future or Black Lives Matter, but what was happening nevertheless, was that recipients of the PUP were transforming an emergency welfare payment into a basic income. That last point needs to be written in the past tense, because the Irish Government has since been busy dismantling the PUP by wrapping Bentham's less-eligibility principle around it.² Nevertheless, there was, albeit briefly, a moment in time at the start of the pandemic that the ancient Greeks knew as *Kairos*— a specific type of momentary conjuncture where futures (plural) are up for grabs, and everything hinges on which potential future is grasped as an opportunity to be actualised (see Foucault 2010: 224-5).

Might it be possible to reclaim that moment, and more importantly perhaps, would we want to do so? This is arguably *the* pressing question that needs to be (re-)activated as debate shifts to the efficacy of the Irish State's vaccination strategy and the re-opening of the economy, which will almost certainly result in a return to neo-liberal policy, thereby ensuring a future characterised by precarity for the majority.

References

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²The PUP has been broken into three tiers: €300, €250, €203, which each intended to correspond to pre-pandemic earnings (see Citizens Information: https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/social_welfare/social_welfare_payments/unemployed_people/covid19_pandemic_unemployment_payment.html#la6b50, accessed 25th September 2020).