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The political economy of welfare in a time of coronavirus: Post-productivism as a state of exception

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Within months, Covid-19 has fundamentally reconfigured the relationship between the market and the state in Ireland. The 'Great Lockdown' has administered a shock to global patterns of production and consumption not seen since the Great Depression (Gopinath, 2020) causing unprecedent levels of job-loss. In Ireland, the hardship of this job-loss has been partially cushioned by the social security response to the crisis, and the introduction of a Pandemic Unemployment Payment. For the hundreds of thousands of citizens receiving this and related payments, welfare has replaced market earnings as their means of subsistence. This is a major adjustment not only in the economic lives of these citizens but also in the 'productivist' footing of Ireland's welfare state.

'Productivism' is 'the ideological fetishization of productivity growth' as an end-in-itself, and it is reproduced via discursive, psychological and institutional processes that subordinate social goals to market growth (Fitzpatrick, 2004: 214). Contemporary welfare states are deeply productivist in that they frequently tie social security to market participation to stimulate labour commodification and employment growth. In Ireland, the connection between welfare and employment

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has been gradually tightened by the introduction of 'mutual commitments' for claimants to seek paid work, and legislation of payment penalties for non-compliance with various activation requirements. Welfare payments have been progressively reconfigured into 'conditional payments for good jobseekers' (Boland, 2015: 168) in order to motivate supposedly 'passive' claimants to become 'active' worker-citizens who achieve self-sufficiency through employment. As then Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, proclaimed when launching the most recent *Pathways to Work*: 'I want to see people independent in work, not dependent on welfare' because 'a job is the best route out of poverty' (Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, 2016). This however conceals 'the enduring reality of in-work poverty' (Patrick, 2012: 7) and the complicity of activation in its reproduction.

Before Covid-19, Ireland had one of the highest incidences of low-pay in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development—defined as earnings below two-thirds of national median earnings—with 110,000 workers living below the poverty line and one in four working in low-paid jobs (Social Justice Ireland, 2020). Regulatory activation policies feed this cycle by how they 'ratchet-up' (Greer, 2016) competition for peripheral employment, reduce the bargaining power of workers and generally reset 'the terms for what constitutes acceptable work' (Brodkin and Larsen, 2013: 58). Hence why critics of 'low-road' activation models view them as little more than strategies for 'pimping the precariat' (Dean, 2012).

Increasingly, 'productivist' welfare states not only view market participation as the end of welfare provision. They also organise and deploy the commodifying power of the state via social services markets that extend the commodification of claimants in important ways. In Ireland, this is exemplified by Job Path, an employment service for long-term claimants delivered by two private agencies under Payment-by-Results contracts.

When employment services are contracted via Payment-by-Results, claimants are organised into purchasing lots and the 'options' to sell them into employment are bid on by agencies 'in a manner that any other commodity might be sold in "free" markets' (Grover, 2009: 501). Bidders compete for the right to try to turn claimants into profit in the very real sense of earning an outcome payment that is higher than the investments they make in building their 'employability'. Thus, marketisation itself relies on a strategy of 'double activation' (Considine et al., 2015: 29): deploying the same logic of financial incentives and contractual regulation to steer the behaviours of service providers as activation policies rely on to discipline claimants. Both govern people as if they were 'knaves' motivated by no other end 'than private interest' (Le Grand, 1997: 149).

Pandemic unemployment as a state of exception

Coronavirus challenges this political economy of welfare. The ubiquity of pandemic unemployment resists any attempt to locate the causes of unemployment

'downstream', in a deficit of individual responsibility or agency (Wright, 2012: 312). By late April, almost 820,000 Irish workers were on unemployment payments, including over 600,000 people receiving the newly created Pandemic Unemployment Payment (Central Statistics Office, 2020a). About 20 per cent of Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) claimants were previously employed in Accommodation and Food Services (Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, 2020), the economic sector with the highest incidence of low pay. The name of this emergency welfare, a *Pandemic* Unemployment Payment, has an important double meaning. It positions coronavirus unemployment as 'pandemic' not only in being widespread but also in being a 'state of exception'.

Agamben (2005) invokes the concept of a state of exception to describe how states deploy crises as a form of biopower: declaring emergences to suspend the rule of law and override citizenship rights for prolonged periods. Agamben (2020) has cited the Italian Government's 'suspension of daily life in entire regions' as an example of this kind of biopolitical deployment of pandemic. The technological 'solutionism' (Morozov, 2020) advocated by governments to automate contact tracing via smart phone apps is another example of the slippage between states of exception and authoritarian states. However, in the case of social welfare, the enacted measures have largely enhanced rather than diminished citizenship rights. They have done so by deploying social security as an alternative to, rather than as a stimulant of, labour commodification.

During Covid-19, the compensatory aspects of welfare have been amplified while the more regulatory and behavioural conditions have been reduced. Payments for a single unemployed person have temporarily increased from €203 to €350 per week, which is only a little below the average weekly earnings of Accommodation and Food Services workers for the last quarter of 2019 (Central Statistics Office, 2020b). Meanwhile, requirements for claimants to sign-on at Intreo offices have been suspended due to social distancing, while Job Path has been shuttered.

The civic duty to socially distance has momentarily eclipsed employment as 'the primary duty of the responsible citizen' (Patrick, 2012). This has allowed the temporal experience of non-employment to be partially reclaimed. 'Time' without work has been returned to claimants as their own; not something owed in mutual commitments or as 'time spent "job-seeking"' (Marston and McDonald, 2008: 260). Time-for-self and others through caregiving, volunteering and recreation has been momentarily re-legitimated while claimants and others 'stay home to save lives.' The logic of governing citizens via economic incentives has also been eschewed by political leaders, who now invite citizens to act 'not out of self-interest, but out of love of each other' (Radio Télifís Eireann, 2020).

In transitioning from a political economy of 'work, not welfare' to one of 'welfare without work', Covid-19 has offered a fleeting experience of 'post-productivist' welfare (Goodin, 2001: 13–14). However, the symbolic categories that have been mobilised to enable this window of decommodification also foreclose it as fiction.

Administratively distinguishing *Pandemic* Unemployment Payments from ordinary Jobseeker Allowances not only discriminates against those who were already unemployed on March 13th, who receive lower benefits. It also socially distances the pandemically unemployed from the conventionally jobless as (more) deserving victims of circumstance rather than passive dependents. This conceals the experience of structural unemployment *as the exception*. By so doing, it permits the continued denial and individualisation of unemployment outside coronavirus as something 'that happens only to a tiny minority of pathological people' (Eubanks, 2018: 175).

I am reminded of Baudrillard's reflections on Disneyland as an '"ideological" blanket'. As Baudrillard observes, 'Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong. . . to the order of simulation' (1998: 172). Put differently, framing Disneyland as a make-believe world conceals the possibility of critiquing how the social world is imagined. It reifies welfare capitalism as terra-firma. Facilitating decommodification through the device of a *Pandemic* Unemployment Payment likewise casts 'welfare without work' as a post-productivist fantasy to the 'real' world of liberal welfare capitalism: where social security payments for the 'conventionally' unemployed are well below the poverty line of €264 per week for a single-person household (Social Justice Ireland, 2020) and which begets its own pandemic of low-paid, precarious work.

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