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Article starts

COVID 19 in Ireland: Historical contexts and the widening of the social safety net

An opportunity to foster a pro-welfare imaginary?

In the face of continuing global developments arising out of the COV, SARS 2, COVID-19, CORONA Virus pandemic, the social contract is quickly being rewritten and the social safety net expanded as emergency welfare payments are being rolled out across jurisdictions. In this respect, Ireland has seen the introduction of a 'COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment' for those whose employment has been disrupted by the crisis. This particular measure appears to contain the vestiges of a social, alongside a health and economic response to the crisis. Other measures introduced under emergency legislation include, amendments to the Residential Tenancies Act to prevent evictions and rent increases for private renters during the period of the crisis. On the owner-occupier side of things, The Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland is offering a payment break to affected customers for up to three months and has

adjourned all court proceedings for the same period. Many more measures, from both government and civil society, will undoubtedly be needed as unemployment is expected to rise to levels exceeding 10% in the coming weeks and months. This raises questions about how welfare provision will be further widened and, moreover, about how increasing levels of reliance on state welfare will be received in the public consciousness.

There *is* a historical precedent in Ireland for widening the social safety net in a time of burgeoning health crisis, although it is necessary to go back 123 years to the Poor Laws to find it. In Britain a new poor law, which replaced the Elizabethan Poor Laws, was introduced in 1834. Under this law, Poor Law Unions were established to administer relief. Each union was tasked to establish a workhouse and all forms of 'outdoor relief' and subsidies, which were viewed as undermining the work ethic, ceased to be available. Coupled with this, the application of the 'workhouse test' was to be applied uniformly. In practice, the abolition of outdoor relief meant that relief would only be available inside the workhouse. Alongside this, the workhouse test meant that conditions inside the workhouse should never be so good as to deter the poor from seeking work. Ireland, a colony of Britain at that time, saw the introduction of a Poor Law in 1838. The Irish Poor Law was based on the British model and involved the establishment of Poor Law Unions and the initial building of 130 workhouses which were to be run by boards of Poor Law Guardians and overseen by a London based Poor Law Commission. It is clear from how the Poor Laws were both conceived and actualised that they were underpinned by questions of deservingness. However, the Great Famine of 1845-52 in Ireland, during which over a million people died and a further million emigrated, effectively 'broke' the Poor Law system through exponentially increasing levels of demand. Conditions outside the workhouses were undoubtedly appalling as people literally starved to death in country lanes and city streets. As a result, the effectiveness of the workhouse test was completely eroded and this saw the (re)widening of the social safety net via the eventual re-

introduction of outdoor relief in 1847, albeit in strictly limited form. This meant that relief was once again available outside of the workhouse, a facet of welfare provision that remains in Ireland to the present day. Nevertheless, despite loosening restrictions, the considerable social stigma that attached to the Poor Law and to the workhouse remained alive in the Irish welfare imaginary and this is where the parallel with the current health crisis ceases on the basis that stigma, in the context of emergency welfare or 'poor relief', appears to be largely absent at the current juncture.

If sustained, this represents a serious about turn. Work in the global north, in the sense of paid formal employment, is something that is strongly linked to feelings, experiences and inherent ideas of self-value and self-worth. This type of thinking also includes and incorporates a tendency towards the 'valorisation' of work, and overwork, which together dominate popular and political discourses surrounding what it means to be of value and to be valued in modern western societies at least. Conversely, being in receipt of social welfare, of various types, is considered almost as the antithesis of being in work and is therefore seen as a deeply shameful social position. Despite this, and perhaps understandably given the present unprecedented global circumstances, welfare; that most stigmatised form of social altruism, is being welcomed and even demanded in the Irish context. The value of a strong social safety net in the form of universal welfare provision is being recognised. The social stigma that usually attaches to unemployment related benefits is nowhere to be seen, at least for now. Does this then represent an opportunity to establish the value of a functioning welfare system in public consciousness and in doing so foster a pro-welfare imaginary? Furthermore, will changes introduced now be easy to row back on once and if the crisis subsides? In a time of uncertainty, the opportunity to foster a positive sense of welfare that returns it to its altruistic roots and the ethos of a 'welfare commons' seems a vivid possibility. The Irish example of the COVID 19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment may be part of the catalyst for this. However, cracks may also quickly

appear, and, in some respects, this has begun already. Initially established at a rate of 203 Euros per week for those who lost their employment due to the pandemic, the payment has since been increased to a rate of 350 Euros. The first figure of 203 Euros mirrored the basic adult rate of payment for welfare recipients across payments. The second figure is entirely novel. This is telling. In the first instance it tacitly acknowledges that the basic rate of social welfare was never enough to live on comfortably. In the second, it raises, once again, the spectre of deservingness by drawing a distinction between those who 'work' and those who don't or at least weren't before the introduction of the emergency payment. The establishment mask is also slipping, with questions of 'fraud' in respect to the emergency payment being evoked in parliamentary debate. This suggests that fostering a positive sense of welfare, one based on solidarity and an ethos shared risk, is far from certain, despite the initial positive response.