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Welfare, Deservingness and the Logic of Poverty

Welfare, Deservingness and the Logic of Poverty:

Who Deserves?

By

Joe Whelan

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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For Caoimhe

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This book has been, mostly, though not exclusively, a labour of love for it tells a story that I have long wished to tell. For the last four or five years, I have been researching, reading, and musing over the materials upon which the scholarship in this book is based without ever finding a suitable home for what was assembling in my thoughts within the scope of other projects. Nevertheless, I felt that there was a story to be told and that the juxtaposition of the old and the new that this book represents was a valid and worthwhile undertaking in the context of examining the centrally social idea of deservingness in a way that shows both its pedigree and its current acquisition in the realm of human welfare and poor relief. The task of getting what is in one's head onto the page in a way that gives a sense of the thesis being conjured while still not diluting or, indeed, polluting, the words and works of those you draw upon, is often a struggle, yet, I have found that in this case, it has been a struggle I largely have enjoyed. I hope I have done the words and works of those I have drawn upon justice and if it is not obvious, it should be stated that where any confusion of interpretation arises, the fault undoubtedly lies with me.

Having acknowledged those whose words and works have informed and inspired me, it would be folly to think or suggest that the process of labour, be it of love or otherwise, is the act of any single living person. Ultimately, people are maintained and reproduced by other people and so, through both close association and by many degrees of separation, many people are owed much thanks. In the first instance, I wish to thank my family, who believe in me from a distance and put up with me up close. My parents, Kevin and Lucinda, my sister, Annemarie, and my nephew, Tadhg, thank you all. My three daughters, Caoimhe, Deirbhile, and Sadhbh, I love and thank each of you.

I would also like to thank all of my colleagues in the School of Applied Social Studies at University College Cork as well as colleagues from further afield. In particular, I wish to thank Fiona Dukelow and Pat Leahy who have encountered much, if not all, of what lies within these pages in different forms and whose counsel is ever valued.

PROLOGUE

What can welfare states tell us about social deservingness and the logics of poorness and poverty? The work presented in this book suggests that the answer is, quite a lot. Therefore, the concept of a welfare state and of how states that claim to be welfare states are constituted and actualised is of fundamental concern here. The key concept that is threaded throughout this book is the idea of social deservingness, namely, ideas about what people deserve to get and what they should have to do in order to get it. I relate this to welfare states by suggesting that how we 'do' collective welfare, that is, how a given society constitutes its specific welfare state apparatus, can and does tell us something about how that society views matters of social deservingness. The welfare state is suggested to provide a 'temperature reading' for how societies 'feel' about who deserves to get what. It is not a wholly accurate reading as many of the ideas and concepts that give the measure are continually being contested. Yet it is presented here as being reasonably approximate on the basis that it is likely to have been historically mediated. Throughout the text, this is a broadly theorised proposition and not meant to relate to any one welfare state in particular—although, where examples are drawn upon, they are primarily based in Europe and in what might be considered Western Europe, most notably in Britain and Ireland as part of the Global North. It follows then that neither is this book concerned with specific cohorts of welfare recipients or with specific regimes or schemes. Rather, the concern here is with the collective poor and impoverished both historically and in a contemporary sense. It should be noted that as someone who has lived with and experienced poorness and poverty, I use the term 'poor' here unapologetically and I don't intend to dilute it by saying anything else; poor means poor and using any other word is really only offering 'poor' comfort to people other than the poor themselves.

Having suggested that welfare states can tell us something about ideas of social deservingness, I stretch this proposition further by purposing that particular logics of poorness and poverty became more pronounced when wedded to the capitalist mode of production. I do this in the course of tracing the history of social deservingness and arrive at this specific juncture at the point of the Protestant Reformation. I show how this logic of poorness was instituted through early formal poor relief and how it echoes in welfare

states today. In doing so, I pay attention to where alternative views of social deservingness have been put forward by radical voices also.

On the whole, this is necessarily a selective exercise and, in many ways, gives but a flavour of a broader and developing thesis. Because it is a selective and developing thesis, many worthy areas of scholarship are not drawn upon. For example, there is a rich historical feminist literature that is not extensively consulted here. Indeed, in a discussion on welfare and on social deservingness it is hard not to see Mary Astell (1668-1731), or Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) as glaring omissions. It is my hope that any person reading this book whose interest has been sufficiently piqued, may seek out such authors to facilitate a broader personal understanding.

Looking at social deservingness in this way is also an attempt to unravel the political economy of deservingness. This is because when we pose social deservingness as a question it ultimately becomes a question of the distribution of resources. Who should get what and what they should have to do in order to get it are questions reflected in a welfare state, which, through the plain fact that they are not immune from and indeed are undoubtedly susceptible to politics and public opinion, also reflect our broader ideas about deservingness, generosity, reciprocity and so on.

Welfare states might also be said to represent a compromise between capital and labour, with the welfare state acting as an acknowledgement of the risks involved in selling one's labour. This has also been a historically mediated process. For example, legal recognition in Britain that work conditions, if not maintained to a certain acceptable standard, could cause illness, injury, and death, began with the birth of the Factory Inspector under the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act of 1802, introduced by Sir Robert Peel in the British Parliament and commonly known as the 'Factories Act'. It would not be until the Workman's Compensation Act of 1897 that a formal recognition of the need for income maintenance in the face of an injury or illness sustained at work would be legislated for in what then constituted Britain, which included, via colonial status, the 'Kingdom' of Ireland. Let us say that these changes indicated two things. Firstly, a growing awareness that workers perhaps 'deserve' decent working conditions, and secondly that workers injured through work potentially deserve compensation while unable to work. These legislative events represent changes to the social contract under a burgeoning capitalist mode of production. Clearly then, there are risks associated with the capitalist mode of production, and these changes arguably reflect those risks. But there is still a contradiction here which suggests something else must mediate what happens in welfare states,

something beyond a social response to risks involved in selling one's labour. It is not, for example, as easy a task to explain the many other factors of collective welfare such as the care and maintenance of the elderly through things like state or occupational pensions in the same terms. Ostensibly, there is no benefit to the capitalist in maintaining persons who have moved beyond prime working age. Likewise, collective welfare measures surrounding areas like disability or lone parenthood are harder to explain in these terms purely. Why then do welfare states generally make provision for these groups? Arguably, this is because, alongside a compromise between labour and capital, the care and maintenance of groups such as those mentioned reflect ideas around social deservingness which are in turn reflected in a welfare state.

Generally speaking, there is a feeling that the older persons who have moved beyond work and into retirement, deserve to be supported. People who are unable to work through injury, illness or disease deserve to be supported. People who are parenting alone deserve to be supported. People with physical and intellectual disabilities and who cannot work deserve to be supported. The idea of a welfare state has expanded over time to something beyond the need to maintain labour, to something which acts as recognition of and a defence against the harsher realities of the human life-course. The levels of support for particular groups are, of course, prone to fluctuate, with some groups generally coming in for more censure than others. Nevertheless, modern welfare states arguably reflect, in the main, our notions of what people deserve to get and who those people should be.

Collectively then, the welfare states of post-war Europe arguably represent some of the greatest social and political achievements that humanity has made since divesting itself of the state of nature and organising under a form of social contract. The fact that these achievements in greatness came on the back of a period that illustrated the worst that humanity is capable of is also arguably telling. When William Beveridge called in 1942 for "revolutions, not for patching", the world was shrouded in an existential darkness which has hardly been seen since.

Yet, as I have been writing this book, humanity has been in the grip of another existential crisis in the form of the threat posed by Cov-Sars2-COVID-19. Naturally, this was not something I had envisioned encountering when I first proposed writing this book. Yet, neither is it something that I would now want to ignore. This is because, in many fundamental ways, the crisis posed by COVID-19 has placed the issues at the heart of this book, issues of collective welfare and social deservingness, to the fore of debates

in respect to public and social policy. Therefore, in the epilogue, I address the question of what the future of welfare might be. Here it was my original intention to address how we might begin to change how we think about social deservingness through things like universal basic income (UBI), and a changing relationship to work. As it happens, I do not intend to stray too far from this task, however, what is written now must be read through the lens of a post-COVID future, whatever that might be.

Finally, and before beginning, I want to address briefly the style of this book. It should therefore be noted that this book is written in the spirit of a polemic. There will be no ambiguity here and while the scholarship herein is hopefully robust, the author is very much on the side of collective welfare. Therefore, this book represents a contribution to the broader critique of capitalism and of how welfare is organised under the capitalist mode of production. As well as being a scholarly work, this study has also sought to be informative and entertaining, challenging dominant societal narratives while hopefully illustrating alternatives. The chapters are designed as a set of discreet yet interlocking scholarly essays. It is hoped, therefore, that the book can be read in whole or in part with little difficulty and that while there is a common thread running through it the reader can dip and in and out as needed. Furthermore, I have tried, as much as possible, to use freely available sources when writing so that the reader, should they wish to do so, can access the texts upon which I draw. Thankfully, I have managed this in respect to many of the historical sources in particular.