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Where do our ideas about what people deserve to get come from?

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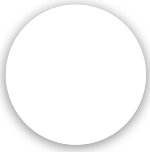
Our understanding of who deserves what can be traced back to the writings of Plato and Aristotle.

Opinion: As with many contemporary debates, those surrounding deservingness are not new. In fact, they are ancient and have occupied the minds of some of humanity's most well-known thinkers.

In my previous piece for RTÉ Brainstorm, I talked about the concepts of welfare and the welfare state. There I argued that we need to reclaim these words and concepts by moving away from their use in the pejorative in order to restore the humanity with which they should be associated. I also argued that a 'welfare state' was, in fact, something to aspire to.

Closely related to this, and to debates around welfare in general, is the question of deservingness. Who deserves to get what, what they deserve to get and what they should have to do in order to get it cuts to the very heart of collectivised welfare as a contemporary social question.

As with many contemporary debates, those surrounding deservingness are not new. In fact, they are ancient in the human sense and have occupied the minds of some of humanity's most well-known thinkers. In this respect, our ideas around 'who should get what' are historically and culturally mediated yet, arguably, still fluid and capable of change, thus bearing further scrutiny.



06:16

From RTÉ News, Explained by Prime Time: Social Housing

Deserving vs Underserving: It's ancient history!

The concept of distinguishing between ‘deserving' and 'undeserving' has existed since the earliest debates concerning people and welfare. Its intellectual heritage can be traced back to the writings of Plato and Aristotle through to the reformation with writers like Luther and Calvin, the chief architects of the religious reformation in Europe in the 16th century,

For example, there is evidence that Luther promoted the practice of distinguishing between deserving and undeserving poor, the latter to be punished and the former to be relieved. Interestingly, Luther’s doctrine moved firmly away from the Catholic practice of venerating ‘apostolic’ poverty and took a harsher view of the ‘able-bodied’ poor.

Read: **How Ireland's spending on welfare compares to the rest of Europe**

The enlightenment and the early liberalism of philosopher, John Locke, offers another widow into how the question of deservingness has been grappled with throughout recorded history. Locke is particularly interesting as he purposed three categories for those seeking relief:

- Those who can do nothing at all towards their support.
- Those who, though they cannot maintain themselves wholly, yet are able to do something towards it.
- Those who are able to maintain themselves by their own labour.

Locke's categories are largely in line with how those seeking relief under what's known as the 'Elizabethan' poor laws were 'vetted' in the context of deservingness. Locke himself proposed particularly harsh punishments for those deemed undeserving, especially the young male who he suggested 'shall lose his ears' for a first offence and 'shall be transported to the colonies' in the case of a second.

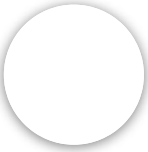
While we may have moved some distance from Locke's idea of sanctions, his categories of deservingness remain largely intact.

The New Poor Laws

In 1832, in Britain, a poor law commission was established with a view to establishing a more 'scientific' and effective method of dispensing poor relief that would replace the Elizabethan poor laws.

Arising out of this, poor law unions and workhouses were established to administer relief. All forms of 'outdoor relief' and subsidies, which were viewed as undermining the work ethic, ceased. This meant that people needing relief would have to 'prove' their deservingness by entering the workhouse. An almost identical system was then introduced in Ireland in 1838.

These new poor laws also firmly established the concept of 'less eligibility' which held that conditions inside the workhouse should not be so generous as to discourage the poor from seeking work.



21:21

From RTÉ Radio 1's The History Show, Lorcan Clancy speaks to historical researcher Fiona Fitzsimons about the fascinating social history to be found in records from the workhouse

system.

A Modern Equivalent?

The concept of less eligibility is particularly interesting in the context of deservingness, not least because it arguably gave rise to several policies and practices that are still widely visible in welfare provision today. The first of these is the notion of 'conditionality'. The second is the 'means test'.

Conditionality seeks to test if an applicant meets the necessary conditions to receive a particular benefit (e.g. Is the claimant actively seeking work? Are they habitually resident?).

Means testing purposes to take into account an applicant's financial means (e.g. savings, property ownership, other forms of income). Taken together, these two concepts combine to decide who can and who cannot receive a benefit or benefits.

Read: The welfare state we're in

In the context of welfare provision, the use of both of these 'instruments' of selectivity is arguably stigmatising to claimants as their very purpose is distinguish between who is deemed to be deserving and who is not.

It is interesting to consider that one of the original intentions behind the concept of less eligibility was also to insure that every person seeking relief should be made to descend at least one step below where they were on the social spectrum. Essentially, seeking relief would, in part, deter by the stigma attached to doing so.

Punching down: A Common Thread?

We have looked briefly here at both how issues of deservingness were debated and given a formal basis historically. We have also drawn comparisons to how deservingness is threaded through the contemporary welfare state.

In doing so, a common thread and a number of questions have merged. In all instances, historical and modern, who deserved to get what and what they had to do in order to get it seems to have been decided by those in positions of considerable affluence and power.

Furthermore, these questions of deservingness all tend to revolve around those on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder. The irony in this is that while there is 'moral panic' about what a lone parent gets or what an unemployed person gets, we condemn people over the paltry amount that is often the minimum required to live.

19:25

From RTÉ Radio 1's Drivetime, An analysis from the Revenue Commissioners is showing that if the Government brings in a 43% income tax rate for workers earning over €80,000, it could bring in €433 million.

The richest 1% of the world's population own 45% of the world's wealth yet this appears to go unquestioned; Ireland is no exception with wealth being highly concentrated here.

For example, some figures suggest that the top 10% have more than half of all the net wealth in Ireland (53.8%), the top 5% have 37.7% while the top 1% has 14.8%. Meanwhile, approximately 760,000 people in Ireland are living in poverty, of which 230,000 are children.

Amazingly, 109,000 people living in poverty are in employment. So then, ask yourself, are questions of deservingness reserved only for the less well off?

If so, do we as a society need to begin to question an understanding of deservingness that allows some to exist in abject poverty, their right to do so questioned, while others, unquestioned, enjoy extravagant wealth? Finally, is it time to stop 'punching down' and start looking up? Think about it.

The views expressed here are those of the author and do not represent or reflect the views of RTÉ.

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