

Work for welfare and civic equality

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Abstract: Work-for-welfare style unemployment policies have been introduced in the majority of western countries as part of an overarching contractual regime, which demands various prescribed forms of reciprocation of citizens who require government income support. Communitarian scholar, Lawrence Mead, argues that such policies are ethically justified because they demand 'civic equality' of unemployed citizens. This paper contends that the coercive dimension of work-for-welfare has the potential to reinforce public perceptions that unemployed citizens are morally inferior, which itself reinforces the social stigma of being unemployed. Based on this interpretation, the concept of civic equality underpinning work-for-welfare is inconsistent with a belief in the dignity of the individual. One could argue that this belief is an important prerequisite for designing unemployment and employment policies that take seriously the notion of civic equality. To support this paper's argument, it will briefly discuss the philosophy and practice of a Queensland-based employment agency that begins from this standpoint.

Introduction

Paternalistic income support policies that pursue a coercive work-for-welfare trajectory have become a favoured approach in solving the problem of long-term unemployment in OECD countries. Two stated aims of such policies are, firstly, to demand 'civic equality' of unemployed citizens by imposing a strict obligation to be active in their pursuit for work. The second aim of paternalistic income support policies is the re-legitimation of welfare provisions in a post-industrial world where post-war solidarities have become increasingly frayed (Latham 1998). Focusing on work for welfare policies in Australia, and in Britain where appropriate, this paper argues that the paternalistic model fails on both counts. It fails to generate civic equality because coercive policies confirm rather than challenge mainstream stereotypes. As such, they affirm the moral inferiority of unemployed citizens rather re-assuring employed citizens that welfare arrangements are just. Paternalistic welfare policies also fail to offer grounds for the regeneration of mainstream support for welfare programmes because they focus on behavioural rather than structural phenomena in relation to unemployment. Thus, coercive policies that focus on issues of compliance persuade working citizens that only other (dysfunctional) people use social welfare.

Income support programmes, which are designed to compel citizens into what is often low-paid, part-time employment (Watson 2002: 100) also appear to reinforce inequalities by conflating the concept of work with self-sufficiency; this despite the fact that work may only barely meet this requirement. Ultimately, however, it could be argued that coercive work for welfare policies are anathema to the idea of civic equality and do little to enhance the self-efficacy of unemployed citizens. By contrast, Brisbane employment agency, Bridgeworks Personnel, offers a more positive approach that places an emphasis on the dignity of the individual. This paper concludes that coercive policies, which run counter to the standpoint that all individuals are of equal moral worth cannot produce true civic equality.

Work-for-welfare regimes

Work for welfare policies are one outcome of the shift to an active labour market philosophy across the majority of western countries (Daguerre 2004: 43-44). Prescribed by the OECD as the solution to high unemployment rates in the 1980s different countries pursued active labour market policies in differing ways. Social democratic countries such as Sweden invested significant amounts of government expenditure in labour market programmes compared to the more modest amounts invested by liberal democratic countries such as Australia, the US and Britain (Daguerre 2004: 44).

Governments have imposed increased levels of compliance and coercion as part of the shift from 'passive' to 'active' welfare. Anglo-liberal welfare states, in particular, have focused on the extent to which post-war welfare provision has created 'perverse' incentives, trapping recipients in a cycle of 'welfare dependency'.

Influential American writers, Lawrence Mead and Charles Murray, have argued that welfare dependency, rather than poverty, was 'the main social problem in the USA' (Daguerre 2004: 44; Deacon 1998: 310; Mead 2000). In other words, behavioural problems rather than labour market shortages were the cause of poverty. A work-first welfare system administered at a state level emerged in the US as a result of this shift in emphasis (Daguerre 2004: 46). Various versions of work-for-welfare policies were taken up, particularly by other liberal democracies. In countries such as Britain and Australia, work-for-welfare programmes were initially introduced for young unemployed people (in the case of Australia this would be extended to other unemployed citizens under 39 years of age).

Lawrence Mead, work-for-welfare and civic equality

The work of US scholars Lawrence Mead and Charles Murray figured significantly as a philosophical influence underpinning the policy transfer from the US to Australia and the UK (Deacon 2000: 13). Mead famously argued that focusing solely on the structural causes of poverty, liberals have 'misjudged the psychology of the poor' (2000: 4). He claimed that:

The inner city-poor suffer from a culture of defeat. Adults there commonly feel so beaten down that they have great difficulty seizing new opportunities, even when they appear. New Hope [a project] did improve access to medical care and housing and generally improved its clients' financial condition. But they also suffer from clinical levels of depression. What is missing in the inner city is not so much economic opportunity as hope and belief, above all in oneself (2000: 4).

Known today as 'the new paternalism', Mead's solution to what has been reframed by conservative, and some liberal, welfare theorists as 'welfare dependency' is an approach, which promotes coercive unemployment policies as a means of demanding 'equal citizenship' from citizens on welfare benefits. Paternalists, such as Mead argue that the poor are incapable of acting in their own interest. This is illustrated by Mead's assertion that 'no incentive has shown the power to pull many people across the line from nonwork to work. For that, stronger medicine is required. Incentives assume competence; the need is to create it' (Mead cited in Deacon 1998: 309). The reference here to 'medicine' acts as a marker for the concept of individual and group pathology.

In Australia, the belief that unemployed citizens are inherently incapable is reflected in the then Minister for Family and Community Services, Jocelyn Newman's (1999: Online) assertion that, 'we do no favours for long-term and difficult-to-place unemployed people by recycling them through ineffective training programmes...nor do we do any favours for the most vulnerable member of our community by throwing money at complex problems'. In the British context, the idea that the long-term receipt of benefits has created demoralised citizens incapable of acting in their own interests is reflected in the Department for Education and Employment's claim: 'The current benefits system...promotes wasteful long-term benefit dependency, which, in turn, can lead to social exclusion, poor health, low self esteem and low personal motivation' (DFEE 1998: 5).

It is possible to agree that for a significant number of long-term unemployed citizens, a lack of self-belief is a major obstacle in a competitive employment market. However, the paternalistic *diagnosis* blurs two important concepts: that of individual motivation and culture. To suggest that poor individuals are inherently incapable because they suffer from a lack of self-belief in the face of multiple setbacks is to gloss over insecurities that are fundamental to the human condition. Loss of hope, depression and poor self esteem are surely not the unique province of poor unemployed citizens, and neither should they be treated as a primary marker of social dysfunction.

Ruth Lister (cited in Deacon 2000: 14) acknowledges that there has been a justifiable shift from an overemphasis on structuralist explanations for poverty to one, which recognises that human beings are agents in their own lives. She argues, however, that 'as actors they will make mistakes and wrong decisions, like the rest of us, and there is a fine line between acknowledging the agency of people in

poverty and blaming them for that poverty'. As Hartley Dean points out: 'Long-term social and labour market exclusion may have certain effects on people's motivation and sense of agency, but the idea that the receipt of state welfare support fosters distinctive cultural values remains unproven' (2003: 705). The initial findings of an Australian longitudinal study on intergenerational welfare receipt demonstrate the difficulty measuring any moral dimension within economic welfare dependency. As its authors admit:

To the extent that we use this term [welfare dependency], we are describing a financial state where an individual or a family's primary source of income is the social security system. To the extent that dependence is psychological or behavioural as well as financial, we cannot capture this (Pech and McCoull 1999: 185).

Despite a continued lack of evidence, the concept of welfare dependency, with its moral as well as economic overtones, figures prominently as a major justification for coercive, work-centred income support policies. What this concept tells us about politically conservative attitudes towards equality will be discussed towards the end of this paper.

Work for welfare and social stigma

According to both the British and Australian governments, the other reason for introducing work for welfare policies is to assuage the anxiety of working citizens that they are being taken for fools by their unemployed peers. Deacon argues of the British context that "New Labour has been engaged in an attempt to restructure welfare in ways which make it easier to secure public support for the requisite spending but do not jettison totally the party's traditional commitment to equality and social solidarity' (2000: 11). In Australia, the Keating Labor Government (1994) claimed that a contractual approach, which demanded more of those on income support was required because many Australians felt that unemployed citizens were not doing enough to find work:

The public consultations of the Committee on Employment Opportunities revealed a strong community concern that some unemployed people are making insufficient effort to find employment, whether through reduced motivation resulting from long term unemployment, reduced opportunities during the recession, or a perception that they would be better off on unemployment allowances (Keating 1994: 125).

The Job Compact honoured this anxiety by ensuring that unemployed citizens became more 'active' in their pursuit of work. However, it could be argued that coercive work for welfare programmes have the opposite effect to that intended by government (2004). Labor Opposition leader Mark Latham argues that the solution to what he refers to as 'downward envy' and the erosion of broad-based support for the welfare state is to maintain coercive income support policies but devolve them to the local level. This would theoretically make their processes more visible to 'middle Australia', thereby ensuring their continued support for such programmes (Hammer 2004: 146).

For British (and other western) policy makers, the Australian experience with Mutual Obligation and Work for the Dole should serve as a warning. Two recent surveys (Eardley and Matheson 2000; Wilson and Turnbull 2001) suggest that, if anything, attitudes towards unemployed people have actually hardened since the introduction of active labour market policies and coercive unemployment contracts. One possibly unintended consequence of work for welfare policies is that they confirm for working citizens the idea that recipients of income support must be coerced before they make the necessary effort to find work. Even more worrisome is the tendency of coercive income support policies to frame (and respond to) their subjects in terms of the *lowest common denominator*. One outcome of such an approach is to treat unemployed citizens as a homogenous, dysfunctional group.¹ Furthermore, the moral stigma that is exacerbated by the paternalistic, work for welfare approach cuts both ways, purchasing ontological security for employed citizens in the face of an increasingly precarious job market (Watson 2002). Consequently, it could be argued that work for welfare policies actually diminish the collective impulse, a tendency that should be the cause for some concern. As British theorist Hartley Dean explains:

The assumptions that fuel popular beliefs and the decisions of policy-makers may be premised on myths, but they have real effects. In so far as recipients of welfare services are

cast in the popular imagination as either passive clients or artful dodgers, people will not embrace their own dependency on state provision (2003: 705).

Instead of reassuring employed citizens that the system is fair, coercive work for welfare policy actually reinforces divisions between 'independent workers' and 'dependent unemployed citizens'. This tendency adds another dimension to current trends towards socio-economic polarisation created by a growing inequality of wages and working hours, which has arisen out of the shift of western societies from industrial to post industrial labour markets (Watson 2002: 88).

John Rodger agrees, arguing that 'social polarisation occurs because of the changing requirements of the labour market' (2003: 413). The growth in entrepreneurial, professional and knowledge based jobs in OECD countries has come at the expense of industrial manufacturing jobs, creating a new class of citizens who are employed in insecure part-time work in the leisure and retailing sectors (Watson 2002). Rodger asserts that economic polarisation has led to social polarisation, where a decrease of routine interactions between different classes of citizen has begun to erode the basis for social solidarity. He warns that where welfare states are not in the business of pursuing policies that highlight the interdependence of all social classes, they may inadvertently promote division and violence (2003: 412-413). However, work for welfare policies not only promote inequality through social polarisation, they also promote moral inequality by fundamentally *devaluing* non-working citizens relative to the wider working population.

Work for welfare, individual dignity and civic equality

Mead insists that 'dependency politics' is not about 'values per se' but the realisation of values. Yet it is clear that he is 'de-valuing' poorer, non-working citizens as incapable relative to the rest of the working population. It is also clear that despite the tenuous grip that they have on the status of self-sufficiency, the working poor are valued for their conformity with social norms. This comparative devaluing of unemployed citizens and the loss of equality of status is a justificatory prerequisite for the paternalistic policy solution that proponents such as Mead prescribe for the problem of long-term employment (2000:7). Mead argues that the current imperative of the welfare system is not 'to protect workers from the evils of capitalism. Rather it is to make workers out of the chronic poor' (2000: 7). Thus, Mead appears to accept, not only the increasingly stark inequalities caused by the market, but also that some citizens are more equal than others.

Firstly, to coerce unemployed citizens into low paying jobs that they might not otherwise have chosen is based on the premise that work, as a social good, trumps individual dignity, economic and moral equality. The inherent goodness of work appears to make it perfectly acceptable for some citizens to earn barely enough to meet their physical and social needs; a state that could only barely be equated to self-sufficiency. This points to the ethical imperative of considering the success of work for welfare programmes in the light of whether they confer a level of self-sufficiency that affirms human dignity. There is some evidence to show that the routine, sense of purpose and opportunities for social connection that formal employment offers can improve the well-being of individuals (Ziguras et al 2003). However, these features of formal employment do not automatically confer a sense of self-reliance and civic equality. Work may be demeaning and create different kinds of anxieties, even dependencies. As studies in America and elsewhere show, economic participation may not lead to an adequate level of self-sufficiency but, instead, to a desperate struggle to make ends meet (see Ehrenreich 2001). To ignore this point is to ignore the fact that active labour market policies were first introduced due to the sudden deterioration of the previously stable post-war labour markets (Carson et al 2003: 19). In Australia (Watson 2002), Britain (Green 2001) and elsewhere continued jobs shortfalls relative to the number of unemployed citizens and the increasing precariousness of work in the lower deciles of the workforce have weakened the link between formal employment and economic security. In this context, coercive income support programmes serve to further entrench economic inequalities.

Equally, important however, is their tendency to entrench moral inequality. A relationship where welfare professionals have the power to coerce other citizens implies that some citizens are more equal than others. Yet, as Philip Selznick points out, 'from the standpoint of social justice, the most important threat to moral equality is social subordination' (1996: 3). His argument highlights the paradox in coercing citizens to be self-sufficient. Coercive policies that target the behaviour of

unemployed citizens also run counter to the democratic ideal of equal citizenship itself. One could argue that to honour the concept of moral equality, increasing the sense of self-efficacy of unemployed citizens in a competitive job market requires a mixture of trust, positive reinforcement and support, rather than a negative focus based on an assumption of individual incapacity. As Ziguras et al (2003: 40) argue, the role of government in assisting unemployed citizens 'is undermined, even contradicted, by the emphasis on compulsory requirements and punishment'. Indeed, an approach that fosters coercion on one side and compliance on the other cannot claim to be 'mutual' in the sense conferred by the use of contractual policy language.

Employment Services and the Dignity of the Individual

Brisbane employment agency, Bridgeworks Personnel, approaches its work with unemployed citizens from the standpoint of a 'belief in the dignity of each individual' (Bridgeworks nd: Online). Their focus on the value of individual dignity emphasises the moral value of their clients as people. The Agency also uses positive reinforcement as a way of regenerating self-belief and self-esteem amongst their clients. Bridgeworks employment consultant, Michael Wood (in an email, 4 August 2004) argues that 'self-confidence is the key to getting people into work. Many [jobseekers] have not internalised the concept that getting a job is possible'. From this perspective, policies and practices that stigmatise unemployed citizens and focus on behavioural deficiencies, rather than capabilities, are counterproductive for those agencies at 'the coalface' helping their clients find work by helping them to rebuild their self-belief. A recent study that explored the nexus between Work for the Dole (WFD) and individual self-esteem supports this argument. In two interlinked studies, a cohort of 156 and 224 participants were interviewed before they commenced WFD. Of those initial participants, 77 and 51 respectively agreed to be interviewed after completion of the Programme. According to its authors, "the research used reliable, well-validated psychological measures, including the Rosenberg Self-esteem inventory, a scale measuring negative mood and a measure of psychological distress/mental health (Carson et al 2003: 21).

They found that while WFD does appear to have a positive influence on more short-term aspects of individual identity, such as 'mood/depression and psychological well-being', it did not have any effect on the overall self-esteem of participants (Carson et al 2003: 22). Furthermore, they also found a link between the coercion of participants and their levels of depression. Carson et al conclude that 'the results in relation to depression from Study Two suggest that only participants who enter the program on a voluntary basis benefit from WFD' (2003: 22). The negative impact of coercive aspects of the new work for welfare approach on claimants in Australia is underlined by another study commissioned by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and St Vincent de Paul. In a series of in-depth interviews with a range of individuals on Newstart Allowance or Youth Allowance, the authors found:

The emphasis on compulsion in the Australian mutual obligation regime appears to generate avoidance and resentment amongst those who most need assistance. While people may comply, these requirements are not a means to finding work, but a necessity for remaining eligible for benefits' (Ziguras et al 2003: 40).

Seen from this perspective, compulsion offers few, if any, positive outcomes for long-term unemployed citizens beyond a circular process of meeting requirements which are aimed at activating individual capacity but which ultimately treat them as inherently incapable.

Even Mead admits that the most intractably unemployed citizens are a small group, even amongst long-term income support claimants (Deacon 1998: 309). Yet coercive income support policies tend to frame all unemployed citizens as if they were inherently dysfunctional. This is not to imply that a significant number of individuals do not face serious issues that affect their ability to secure employment. The existence of special programmes with a more rehabilitative focus, such as the Personal Support Programme run by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (Storme and Sullivan 2003: 246) are testimony to this fact. For participants of such programmes, however, employment is often a secondary rather than a primary order goal. An important point in ensuring effective employment outcomes for unemployed citizens is that we do not blur these two approaches at the level of general text, talk and policy treatment in relation to unemployment and what works for unemployed citizens.

Conclusion

It is tempting for those who advocate for the rights of unemployed citizens to argue, rightly, that structural deficiencies in the labour market continue to represent the most significant barrier for unemployed citizens to achieve worthwhile employment. Recent labour market trends have contributed to the further polarisation of the workforce and represent a major challenge for our time. Yet while advocates and scholars must continue to remind government of this fact, such an approach does little to help those employment and Job Network professionals who struggle, in this challenging context, to achieve the best outcome for their clients. The fact that many citizens and professionals appear comfortable with the idea of compelling unemployed citizens to participate in various activities to prove their moral worth is itself an argument for subjecting related normative assumptions to closer scrutiny.

It is tempting for welfare stakeholders to resort to compulsion, arguably a 'quick fix' that does little to address the diverse range of problems experienced by long-term unemployed citizens. What is required is a far more nuanced approach that acknowledges individual agency but resists the temptation to homogenise the diverse experiences of non-working citizens under the banner of 'welfare dependency', a term that is both inherently degrading and difficult to substantiate. Indeed, if civic equality is the desired outcome, the long-term effect of policies that coerce, devalue and stigmatise unemployed citizens must be taken into account. To enable our most vulnerable citizens to succeed beyond achieving a tenuous, impermanent hold on the labour market will require positive reinforcement, support and trust from employment professionals. True self-sufficiency must ultimately be measured in terms of individual empowerment rather than individual compliance.

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Endnotes

¹ This approach echoes underclass and culture of poverty approaches, also popularised in the US and transferred to other liberal democratic countries, including Australia and the UK.