

Chapter 1: Paradoxes of Welfare

[pg 1-17 *The Reformation of Welfare*: Tom Boland & Ray Griffin, Policy Press, 2021]

Welfare policy is both in crisis and stagnant, a chronic stasis. Occasionally there are moments of change and transformation – times of reform – yet repeatedly, these yield to the return of familiar tensions and frustrations. This is because there is a contradiction or paradox at the heart of the welfare state; it both ‘giveth and taketh away’ (Job, 1: 21) With one hand it supports the unemployed, yet simultaneously it demands certain things of them, mainly that they seek work, but also attend meetings, undergo assessment, write CVs, work on themselves, retrain, and strive continuously to redeem themselves. These demands are usually made with threats of sanctions for non-compliance, reduced payments or being cut off completely. This is known as ‘welfare conditionality’ or ‘activation’ in recent academic or policy terms, and obviously the welfare state also provides for others in a different manner, for instance, the retired, but the extension of the impulse towards ‘reform’ has been extended in recent decades, for instance, towards single-parents.

Intermittently, how the unemployed are treated is a contentious public issue, with interest waxing and waning as the dole-queue lengthens, and policy-makers, scholars and critics incessantly debate the issue and produce research supporting their arguments. Strikingly, key ideas seem to persist over time, for instance, the contemporary idea of ‘rights and responsibilities’ echoes older ideas of morality or good character. There is a notable confluence of right and left: Conservatives argue for more state investment in getting the unemployed back to work, despite their historic antipathy to the ‘big state’; Socialists argue for policies which ensure that everyone is supported into work.

Even the big ‘revolutionary’ ideas have advocates across the political divide: The idea of a ‘Universal Basic Income’ – basically tax-funded supports for everyone – is supported by radical leftists like Guy Standing (2015), and right-wing polemicists like Charles Murray (2006). Taking little heed of such radical alternatives, policy-makers continue with ‘welfare reforms’, tinkering with systems of support and activation, to ‘get people back to work’ at almost any cost. Meanwhile, the looming threats of roboticisation and automation or ecological unsustainability are acknowledged but scarcely addressed: What matters is the present, the current rate of unemployment, the effectiveness of existing activation measures. Politicians occasionally announce sweeping ‘new reforms’ but under inspection, this is ‘old wine in new bottles’, the repetition or reiteration of strikingly familiar impulses.

Why? In this book we argue that welfare reforms are derived from cultural models within modern society which are decisively influenced by the Judeo-Christian inheritance. Both the impulse to give, to alleviate the suffering of the poor, and the attempt to reform or redeem people have theological or religious roots. These ideas exist in tension, in varying strengths and combinations in modern states, which are the inheritors of the ‘pastoral power’ of the medieval church. Recognising and understanding our ideas and impulses towards reform can help us understand social policy in the present.

Herein, we will explore unemployment, work, careers, jobseeking, CVs and more, through strange yet familiar religious ideas – purgatory, vocation, providence, confession, pilgrimage and so forth. This is not an exercise in obscurity – theological or historical expertise is not needed to read this book – but a matter of reflexivity, of recognising the presence of half-forgotten ideas at the heart of how we think about the world, both at the micro and macro level – individual life and the wider world. Of course, there are many intellectual inheritances, beyond the theological, but these are perhaps the most neglected, due to modern claims to live in a ‘secular’ world or a ‘post-religious’ society. Ironically, the claim to have gone beyond superstition is an idea rooted in theology, the rejection of tradition or iconoclasm – literally the breaking of idols – is a constantly retold story in the West. Our work here is neither for nor against religion nor does it suggest we should ‘believe’ in anything. Rather, it attempts to recover an awareness of how certain ideas, cultural models and attitudes towards life are derived from religion and shape our lives and institutions, most particularly welfare policy and unemployment.

Our Approach

Our approach is best described as ‘Archaic Anthropology’ – an attempt to ‘historicise the present’ – to recognise the presence of the past in the present. These initially incongruous terms, archaic and anthropology are combined to provoke a rethinking of modern phenomena, to cultivate a sense of the contingency and historicity of everyday society, not of secret origins or underlying structures, but to restore a long-term perspective on state, society, economy and culture, things hidden in plain sight. Archaic in its original, Greek sense of ‘*arche*’ means central and persistent ideas rather than the contemporary image of lost fragments of the ancient world. Anthropology entails participation and observation; an ‘ethnography’ of our shared experience. Our work draws on almost a decade of ethnographic engagement in the curious world of unemployment, interviews with the unemployed, explorations of welfare offices, media discourses, policy making, policy submissions, statistics, jobseeking advice and digital platforms, there is no scientific white-coat which separates us neatly from our data. These explorations are then illuminated by the ‘genealogical’ method of Nietzsche, Weber and Foucault, who challenge us to recognise the ‘historicity’ of things and ideas that appear to have no history – key ideas like choice or work or selfhood.

This method does not mean searching for ‘origins’, but recognising our deep entanglement in history, and that therefore religious ideas have shaped supposedly secular modern phenomena; even economic categories like unemployment, welfare or the labour market. Nietzsche suggested that even though ‘God is dead, and we have killed him’ religious ideas permeate our contemporary morality and attitudes towards suffering. Weber reveals how religious ethics inform our contemporary economic practices – most famously, the Protestant work-ethic provides the ‘spirit of capitalism’. Foucault’s studies of governmental power illuminate the welfare state as an echo of pastoral power of the church over its flock. Agamben identified how the economy and the state are interpreted as providential mechanisms within modernity, imprinting a theological model despite secularisation. Taken together, these theorists provide an approach to history which allows us to recognise how official policy-speak and academic scholarship create the very things they seek to describe.

Reader beware! This book is not a history of the welfare state or unemployment, nor a contribution to policy, nor a detailed case-study of contemporary experiences of jobseekers. Nor is it an excoriating critique of neo-liberal ideology and the contemporary ‘dismantling of the welfare state’; it will not suddenly awaken policy-makers or politicians to the futility or cruelty of their policies, nor inspire resistance or prompt revolution. Nor does it propose any new solution to the intractable problems of welfare. Such-like books already exist, some of which are reviewed herein. Instead, this book is a call to recognise the presence of history in the present, how religious ideas animate the contemporary world. Such a reflexive and philosophical undertaking is open to any reader, specialist or otherwise, who is open to considering that their ideas may be derived from society, from history, and often in uncomfortable ways – and that even critics may have common-ground with their opponents. Recognising the persistence of history, especially our disavowed religious inheritance is vital to understanding why perennial problems seem so intractable and offers a clue as to why utilitarian policy solutions do not fix society. Work and welfare are more foundational, perhaps even primordial to Western lives than is commonly imagined.

Most critics of welfare insist that the capacity to contest widely accepted definitions of how the world works are important political tools, and any historical approach asserts that the world was not always thus, and might be remade. Certainly, our approach joins them in rejecting trite generalisations about the inevitability of certain political and social arrangements. An alternative and less comforting implication is that we can only think at all by using historically inherited ideas, and therefore, thinking differently is difficult indeed. Importantly, composing alternative histories or launching critiques or gathering anthropological evidence are practices with a long intellectual history. Rather than changing the world, we emphasise understanding our culture and society, with the acknowledgement that how we think about our world matters. Recognising neglected historical influences on the present and the tensions and contradictions within them is a crucial precursor to trying to think anew, indeed another meaning of ‘radicalism’ is returning to roots.

The new trials of Job

Recent times have seen the emergence of the neologism ‘Jobseeker’, basically meaning ‘the unemployed’. Words may seem like mere labels for an unchanging economic ‘reality’, yet, the terms used to describe something shape it. Indeed, ‘unemployed’ is derived from the statistical category of ‘unemployment’ which emerged in the late nineteenth century, as states began to keep national records of the numbers claiming poor-relief (Burnett, 2002, Walters, 2000). This implied that not having work was a temporary economic situation, in contrast to medieval categories of ‘pauper’ or ‘poor’ which indicated a permanent state – or terms like ‘idler’ or ‘vagabond’ which implied immorality or even criminality (Mollat, 1986).

While the term ‘unemployed’ evokes the gathering of individuals together into a society-wide category of unemployment, ‘Jobseeker’ envisages a person as a single economic unit. They are imagined as an active participant in the labour market, searching for opportunities, investing in their skills; an entrepreneur selling their labour to employers. Yet, simultaneously, they are unemployed, dependent on

the welfare office, enduring months of frustrated jobseeking. The logic of jobseeking and welfare activation is that unemployment and welfare should be arranged so that an individual is compelled to engage in the labour market. The market competition for work has moral significance.

A revealing parallel to jobseeking is the Old Testament Book of Job. Job – Iyov in Hebrew is a pious and prosperous man who is tested by God at the instigation of the devil in a quixotic story. Catastrophically, his livestock, servants, children die in turn, yet distraught Job still blesses God in his prayers. After further torments Job wife beseeches him to curse God. Job's friends suggest that he must have done wrong to receive such a fate, and eventually Job accuses God of being unjust. One of Job's friends chastises Job, saying God is never wrong, and that we cannot comprehend all that God does. God appears in a whirlwind, demonstrating his reality and power, and restores Job's good fortune, granting him long life and children. Suffering here appears not as something to be overcome or circumvented by action or ignored in passivity, but as a refiner of faith, a purifier of the soul.

The *Book of Job* presents a poetic parable of suffering and faith – widely read to this day – and addresses the theological conundrum of theodicy – why an all-powerful, all knowing and benevolent God allows bad things happen to good people. Religions offer justifications, whereas political realism simply says; 'And the weak suffer what they must?' (Varoufakis, 2016). The sufferings of Job are also distinctly economic; his fortune depends upon God who then tests his faith by ruining him, yet without harming him personally.

The poetic myth of Job, commonly dated sometime between the 6th and 4th century B.C. is a persistent source of food for thought, inspiring reflection on more immediate philosophical and political concerns: Negri (2009) argues that Job reflects labour resisting capitalism. Deleuze (1994) suggests that Job demands recognition and accountability from a capricious deity. Spivack (1958) sees the parable as the development of an inner conscience and personal relationship to God. Darker hints of sacrifice are detected by Girard (1987). For Jung (2010), the story of Job reveals the devilish dimension of God, despite Christian and Enlightenment banishments of evil – considered simply as the absence of God or reason.

Each theorist attempts to explicate a 'hidden' dimension of the parable, yet really the message is familiar and suffuses Christian, Western and Modern culture. Misfortune is a test which tries our fortitude. What doesn't kill us makes us stronger. The sufferings of Job are a trial of faith; those who persist in hope despite everything will eventually succeed. Implicitly, suffering is a way of purifying, purging individuals of their sinful tendencies.

Growth through adversity is not only part of our philosophy of life; it suffuses our policies, and it is institutionalised in how the unemployed are treated. The 'Economy' is our primary test, where the invisible hand of the market replicates the 'hand of God' (Cox, 2016). Those who need state support, especially the unemployed, are forced to suffer and put to the test of seeking work. Effectively, the state becomes the incarnation of providence, testing individuals to the limit (Agamben, 2011). Yet, like Job, the Jobseeker must not despair, but hopefully and interminably seek salvation in the form of employment (Pechenino, 2015).

Strikingly, Job's good fortune is attributed to him being favoured by God – he is selected or elected by God's pre-determined will. Just as swiftly, he is cast out of God's favour, a reversal of fortune

faster than economic recession. Yet, he remonstrates with God, demanding justice, a fair test, a second chance (Deleuze, 1994). This enigmatic relationship of fate and faith, tests and trials, purging and redemption animates the modern economy and welfare state to this day.

The problem of unemployment

Politicians, policy-makers and the public at large view unemployment as a problem to be solved, principally by jobs, delivered by economic growth, in the pursuit of ‘full-employment’. Despite occasional recessions, temporary interruptions to continuous and compounded economic growth, almost every year, more people work globally to create more goods and services than ever before. Yet since World War II, every decade has seen rates of unemployment edging upwards gradually almost everywhere, somehow, despite repeated economic recovery and growth – there were still people who needed a job. Modern capitalism is a work-culture of unlimited growth, but also haunted by a nostalgic dream that once, everyone had work, and that the economy was stable and functional; States across the OECD work tirelessly to reduce unemployment to almost nothing; from their perspective the economic shocks simply temporarily enlarged the problem.

Through boom and bust states manage unemployment continuously, not just through providing financial supports to alleviate poverty, but through ‘active labour market policies’ (ALMPs). These ALMPs have replaced ‘alms for the poor’ – supports are no longer charitable, but exist to support work. ALMPs are varied, but basically they are attempts to ‘reform’ or ‘transform’ the individual; either by giving them training or education – ‘human capital building’, or by putting pressure on them to find work, sometimes known as ‘welfare conditionality’. Rather than simply being supported, the unemployed must engage with case-officer meetings, group engagement, psychological and algorithmic profiling, motivational or CV workshops, and carry out extensive monitored job-searches, and accept almost any employment or training they are offered. Failure to comply will eventually or immediately lead to sanctions; cuts or suspension of welfare payments, leaving individuals with no support.

Contemporary academic research has explored welfare conditionality extensively in different jurisdictions, for instance, the Danish system is more oriented towards flexible working, the French to rights-based administration, the Irish towards local adaptations and caprice, and the UK system towards increasingly harsher and punitive approaches (Boland & Griffin, 2015, Dwyer, 2016 Hansen, 2019). Across this research, it is clear that welfare sanctions sometimes push people into poverty, debt, homelessness, black-market activity and even suicide, with mental and physical health impacts which are hard to measure. Indeed, even those who are never sanctioned are pressurised and stressed by the ever-present threat of sanctions.

Officially, ALMPs, conditionality and sanctions exist to ‘get people back to work’, and there is some evidence that they may shorten the average period of unemployment, although such statistical findings have been contested (Card et al. 2015). Critics have suggested that ALMPs simply accelerate a cycle of low-pay/no-pay by pushing individuals to take up precarious work (Shildrick and McDonald, 2012). While the threat of sanction may be a motivation, the actual impact of sanction on an individual may render them less likely to gain employment.

Despite these criticisms, the effort to ‘reform’ the unemployed intensifies: There is increased psychologised testing and behavioural economics style ‘nudges’ to ‘activate’ jobseekers (Friedli & Stearn, 2015, Frayne, 2019). Pressure is applied to more and more groups, for instance, the chronically ill, migrants, people with disabilities, single parents of increasingly young children and those in part-time work (Dwyer, 2019, Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018). Entitlements become increasingly ‘conditionalised’, for instance, the increased use of ‘Conditional Cash Transfers’ (CCT) in South America and elsewhere, which make support dependent on certain behaviour, re-education or even health or life-style choices (Humpage, 2019). Welfare conditionality has gone digital, with jobseekers required to register on certain websites and complete supervised on-line searches, having their CVs rewritten by motivational coaches.

Beyond examining the largely negative experiences of unemployed people subjected to welfare conditionality, scholars have analysed the political and media debates around these policies, researched the inner workings of welfare offices and organisations and traced the impact on the experience of work (Demaziere, 2020, Dwyer & Wright, 2014, Fletcher & Wright, 2018, Jensen & Tyler, 2016, Jordan, 2018, Whelan, 2020). All this cannot be summarised here, but broadly what emerges is that rather than simply supporting the unemployed, contemporary welfare offices intervene in the lives of individuals; basically, states govern the lives of jobseekers.

Governing the Unemployed

The relationship between the welfare office and the unemployed may seem simple, it is even described by policy documents and official forms as a ‘contract’; the welfare provides welfare payments and offers support and guidance, in exchange for compliance with requirements for jobseeking by so-called ‘clients’. Critics point out that this ‘contractualisation’ of welfare entitlements is effectively an ‘offer you can’t refuse’. Clearly, this is not a free market arrangement, but a power relationship, which we describe herein as ‘disciplinary’ or ‘governmental power’.

This approach is associated with the field of ‘Governmentality studies’, inspired by the work of Michel Foucault. By joining ‘govern’ and ‘mentality’ this approach refers to how states think about society, using academic disciplines, statistics, policy and so forth, to conjure up a series of institutions which shape individual lives (Dean, 2010). This is not a simple ‘dystopian’ nightmare of government control – though historical liberal thinkers have frequently criticised state tyranny – this form of power is taken on by individuals, literally empowering them. For instance, without the governmentality of education, this book would scarcely be written or read. So, governmentality has multiple effects, its knowledge re-defines reality, its disciplinary power pervades society and it shapes individuals’ conduct and selfhood.

For Foucault ‘governmentality’ implied a certain ‘governing rationality’, an orientation towards transforming the lives of individuals and entire societies in pursuit of various ends. Broadly, governmentality assumes that it is always possible to improve and reform, to govern better, and attempts to survey the population and produce interventions and policies which ‘optimise’ people in specific ways, in an ‘eternal optimism’ that things can be made better (Miller & Rose, 2013). Yet, this governing

‘rationality’ is not universal reason or infallible logic, but a particular approach, expressing certain values and pursuing particular ends.

‘Governmental’ power is most visible at the ‘street level’, for instance, the lives of jobseekers are shaped by requirements to attend meetings, account for themselves, prove job-search efforts, undergo assessment, retrain and so forth (Brodkin and Marsden, 2013). Such power is clearly ‘disciplining’ – shaping people’s conduct by exercising intermittent surveillance and demanding compliance. Beyond this, academic *disciplines* shape how unemployment is interpreted as a problem (Bacchi, 2016). A combination of ideas from Economics and Sociology – explored in chapter 4 – suggests that the unemployed will fall into a poverty trap and draw the dole rather than work unless incentivised by welfare conditionality, that they will lose their skills and ‘work-readiness’ if they are not compelled into job-seeking, and incrementally enter a downward spiral of ‘subjective deterioration’ because work provides various social and individual goods. Consequently, jobseekers tend to blame themselves for failure to secure employment, rather than the lack of suitable openings or the number of candidates (Sharone, 2013).

Strikingly, two meanings of ‘discipline’ meet in the welfare office: Firstly, policy is created by academic ‘disciplines’ – forms of knowledge which define social phenomena in key ways – ‘posing the problem’ of unemployment in specific ways (Bacchi, 2016). Secondly, the unemployed are subject to ‘discipline’ interventions into their personal conduct, as though joblessness were a sickness or moral failing. Of course, the problem of widespread job shortages are acknowledged, yet ALMPs never create jobs, only reshape individual conduct. While in 1909 Beveridge published *Unemployment: A Problem of Industry*, the underlying assumption since then and long before is that ‘unemployment is a problem of government’.

Cruel to be kind?

Why must the unemployed be made to suffer? ALMPs primarily seek to free the unemployed from their situation – even considered ‘emancipation’ (Hansen, 2019). Welfare conditionality clearly has negative impacts, yet officially it is only ‘cruel to be kind’, tough love, a sort of testing or challenging of the unemployed to motivate them to find jobs, despite being ineffective (Fletcher and Flint, 2018). How can we explain this ‘government rationality’? Why is suffering essential to the system? Elsewhere we have described this impulse metaphorically as ‘chemotherapy’ (Boland & Griffin, 2016), highlighting the medical model imposed upon unemployment, as though it were a pathology to be cured by tough but purifying measures. Yet, there is more at play, ALMPs are not just invasive treatments and Work Coaches demand not just better conduct but also that the unemployed examine themselves. Furthermore, the test of the transformation of the unemployed individual is the labour market.

Unsurprisingly, many critics diagnose capitalism as the root problem; for instance, Grover (2012) suggests that these emergent forms of harsh conditionality serve the purpose of ‘commodifying labour’ – that is, turning individual lives into labour a useful resource for employers, capitalists who exploit the productivity of real work to accumulate wealth. Furthermore, Grover (2019) argues that the state is

complicit in these processes, as it exerts power over citizens, imposing precarity, austerity and inequality through the machinery of the welfare state – the very institutions which were supposed to alleviate these difficulties.

Supposedly capitalism is ‘liberal’ in the sense of cultivating market freedoms, yet welfare conditionality is authoritarian: a paradoxical hybrid of ‘liberal authoritarianism’. In *Punishing the Poor* (2009), Wacquant describes the emergence of a hybrid ‘centaur state’, which deregulates and allows liberties to business and especially finance capitalism, but simultaneously imposes a starkly authoritarian rule upon the poor. This is most noticeable where states are ‘tough on crime’, through the growth of prisons and militarisation of policing, but largely stems from ‘welfare reform’ – dismantling and conditionalising the welfare system which drives poverty and racial ghettoisation, considered as problems of ‘law and order’ rather than economics and social policy. While there is something to this ‘punitive’ turn thesis, it scarcely accounts for the extensive governmental attempts to transform or reform jobseekers.

For decades researchers have examined the shaming and stigmatisation of welfare claimants, and particularly the use of moralising concepts of the deserving and undeserving poor (Whelan, 2020). Such ideas are expressed in the media, increasingly as a form of popular entertainment (Jensen & Tyler, 2016), in politicised policy-making (Gaffney & Millar, 2019), and are even expressed in the very processes and architecture of welfare activation (Wright, 2016). Strikingly, those who are unemployed often tend to reproduce stigmatising discourses about other, ‘real’ unemployed people – the ‘skivers / shirkers / spongers’ who have supposedly ‘never worked a day in their lives’ (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013).

Indeed, stigmatisation can be considered as a form of social control: Imogen Tyler’s *Stigma* (2020) argues that beyond temporarily spoiling the identity of individuals through social shaming, concerted political and institutional efforts to stigmatise welfare claimants work precisely to re-shape behaviour and leave psychic and even physical marks on the unemployed. Moving beyond the well-established ideas of Goffman about social-role stigmatisation and the individual negotiation of shame, Tyler argues that stigmatisation is a distinctly political and governmental project which produces docile – and damaged – jobseekers, and can only be resisted through collective solidarity.

Yet beyond the logic of the ‘stigma machine’ clearly welfare reform has a broader project than simply ‘punishing the poor’. Specifically, activation aims to re-train, reform and improve the unemployed, making them better jobseekers and eventually workers. From policy-makers to street-level bureaucrats, the ambition is to reform the unemployed, and while moralising judgements and harsh decisions are part of welfare conditionality, the system is not simply capriciously cruel. To understand this ‘rationality’ of purifying people through suffering, we must turn to theology.

Theology resurrected

For centuries the West has proclaimed its ‘secular’ nature, yet there is something ironically religious in proclaiming a new age. Many social sciences are experiencing a ‘theological turn’ (Juergensmeyer, 2013; Schwarzkopf, 2020) which examines the religious roots of meaning, belief and the sacred in modernity

(Habermas, 2008). The contemporary ‘reformation of welfare’ is the result of states incrementally institutionalising theological ideas through welfare policies, and thereby transforming the lives of individuals – something churches did more directly for centuries.

Most scholars of the welfare state consign the influence of religion to the past: The standard story of the influence of religion on the welfare state is largely confined to the idea of charity. Before there were workhouses and poor-houses, medieval Europe gave alms to the poor and supported the destitute within the parish out of Christian obligation. Early theologians such as Pelagius and Dominus variously debated the morality of riches and obligations to the poor, for instance, St. Francis insisted on the idea of personal poverty and many apocalyptic preachers demanded the radical redistribution of wealth. Yet, for millennia, Augustinian ideas of charity held sway: All humankind, rich and the poor, are fallen sinners, continuously straying from God’s commandments and therefore always in need of redemption, thus, charity should be a regular yet voluntary obligation (Holland, 2019). Welfare effectively occurred via the religious practice of expiating sins by giving alms to the poor. Eventually, the state took over the care of the poor from the church and parish authorities, along with the moral ideas of Christianity – the condemnation of idleness and the idealisation of work.

Crucially, reforming welfare policy is not simply a matter of fine-tuning rules, processes and institutions within the state, but follows cultural models. While political discussions often focus on the costs of welfare payments and their impact on the economy, these numbers describe deeper concerns; the lives, the behaviour, the very being of those who claim welfare payments. Ideas like ‘incentives’, ‘culture of dependency’ or ‘human capital’ may initially seem like academic abstractions, but they reflect inherited ideas. Policies which are abstractly described as ‘labour market reforms’ or ‘activation’ are attempts to transform individuals: whether through sticks and carrots of incentives or education and training, the aim is to reshape the attitudes, behaviour and decisions of individuals; this is an attempt at ‘reform’ – to purify and save the individual.

Architects of welfare conditionality are not coy about this goal; they tend to carefully avoid moralising and religious language, but they explicitly aim to transform the unemployed into active job-seekers. Obviously, there are different approaches: Some focus on incentives – which implies the unemployed are lazy, feckless and greedy, or too proud to take humble work and therefore need reformation; Others formulate arguments around the ‘culture of poverty’ or ‘welfare dependency’ which imply the unemployed need to be re-educated in the ‘work-ethic’. Recognising that these ideas are shaped at least partially by religious ideas may help us to understand them better – and the hold they exert on the imaginations of policy-makers and populations.

Yet, this book is not simply a critique which identifies others as ‘ideological’ but a reflexive interrogation of how our Judeo-Christian culture shapes our thoughts and lives today. Theological ideas are adapted and adopted by economics, but also sociology, anthropology, psychology and so forth. Specifically, the crucial idea here is that humans can be transformed by their experiences, yet they make their own choices and actions. This is the idea of socialisation, but also of salvation. These ideas suffuse Western society beyond the ivory tower – which was hardly their origin in any case – and influence how states govern their subjects.

Crucially, states assume that individuals are transformable and that suffering and challenges will make them stronger. Therefore the state *reforms institutions to reform individuals*, historically by

containing them within actual spaces – poor-houses, asylums and even work-camps (Fletcher, 2013). Yet now, these are diffused throughout society, and the individual pressurised, enticed and empowered to reform themselves in line with the priorities of governance. Perhaps these governmental projects are often ineffectual or may also be partially resisted by those subject to reformation, but what matters is how it permeates our contemporary thinking, almost to the eclipse of any other ideas, as the only way forward.

What is at stake in this book?

This book is intended to be thought-provoking, exploring new avenues for understanding the contemporary transformations of welfare. Yet, it is relatively accessible, not requiring the reader to have an expert understanding of the sociology of unemployment, welfare policy, labour-market economics or esoteric theological knowledge. Rather than exposing secret hidden histories, this book restores connections, allowing us to recognise how the relatively well known ideas of the Judeo-Christian world animate the modern world. These are usually discounted as fairy-tales, but the argument is not that policy-makers believe in metaphysics or superstitions, but that underlying ideas – models of human choice, versions of self-transformation, idealisations of work – inform and animate the welfare state. As such, the book is inevitably centred on the distinctly western Judeo-Christian inheritance which matters mostly in Europe and in the Americas; the ideas presented here will be less resonant or even irrelevant for other places.

The phrase ‘reformation’ inescapably evokes Protestantism, which marks the rejection of alms and charity alongside the growth of reformatory institutions. Yet, new modes of ‘policing the poor’ anticipating the welfare state predate Luther and Calvin (Michielse and Van Krieken, 1990). Indeed, Catholicism had its own ‘reformatio’ which equally set out ways of reforming individuals, for instance, inventing purgatory and penitential pilgrimages or regular confessions. Thus, the book is about the tensions between different principles which exist within Christianity rather than for or against its various versions. Any religion or culture has competing demands and ideals within it, rather than a simple coherent ideology, and to an extent this book is an attempt to redress the current imbalance where we have drifted towards a punitive rather than forgiving ethic.

Thus, the book is clearly neither for nor against religion – indeed, the whole idea of assessing ‘religion’ as if from outside is absurd. Claims to being post-religious, atheistic, secular and so forth rely, ironically, on Judaic or Christian models of iconoclasm, anti-idolatry and the separation of church and state. Rejecting religious ideas ironically reiterates the gesture of Moses and subsequent prophets who denounced idol worship as vain superstition – our aim is to recognise how these ideas shape us. Our Archaic Anthropology suggests the importance of recognising that contemporary culture exists in the aftermath of millennia of organised belief which not only contributes to how we organise the state and economy, but constitutes the deep background of our philosophical ideas – not just in the abstract – but how we experience the world and interpret our lives.

This book attempts to expand the horizons of existing scholarship; there is extensive and excellent research on welfare and unemployment, on individual experiences, social organisation, cultural

ideas and policy. Yet, the actual impact of this research is somewhat disappointing – certainly we were disappointed by the impact of our own research which was highly critical of welfare activation in Ireland. Whether in academic papers, the popular press or even in parliament, criticism does not have the desired effect of reversing the turn to activation and instituting a more humane treatment of the unemployed. Perhaps the ideological proponents of welfare activation are more convincing, or governments may be adherents of neo-liberal ideology. Or perhaps, things might be even worse were it not for these critiques, which restrain other impulses in a plural public sphere. Perhaps we need more resonant cultural ideas.

We suggest that that contemporary critique does not do enough to understand the deeper political and cultural impetus towards welfare activation. Critics often ‘reveal’ neo-liberal ideology in politics or policy which unfairly suggests that others are delusional or evil. Such an approach not only tends to provoke policy-makers into defensive positions, but also frames the debate in terms of truth and illusion, so that rival think-tanks and academics can return the criticism – decrying ‘left-wing propaganda’ or ‘bleeding-hearts group-think’. The capacity of words to ‘reveal the truth’ and ‘change minds’ is often over-estimated; indeed, criticism suffers from the ‘law of diminishing returns – the more there is, the less effective it is – or the perverse logics of an arms race, the more one side critiques, the more they are critiqued in turn during an endless culture war. This book is not a revelation of other people’s illusions, but ruminates upon our shared culture.

Outline

Rather than starting at the next chapter, readers should note that many of the chapters of this book work as stand-alone analyses, particularly from chapter four to seven, and readers are welcome to sample these first. These focus on particular elements of economic life – work, welfare, jobseeking and CVs - and how deeper theological and religious ideas considerably shape our modern practices. These are not obscure ideas, but remarkably familiar for Western ‘post-Christian’ readers, and largely still circulate in popular culture today; ideas of redemptive labour, purgatorial purification, pilgrimages of self-transformation and penitential conversions. Each of these appear initially as arcane superstitions, yet we will argue that they are part and parcel of contemporary thought – how we model ‘human nature’ and ‘society’ today.

So, in Chapter four we revisit Weber’s famous ‘Protestant Ethic thesis’, to examine the centrality of work in modern culture. Beyond the idea of frugal living and relentless reinvestment of profits, we suggest that work is also considered as a mode of self-transformation. While Weber turned to Benjamin Franklin as his exemplar of capitalism, we analyse Maslow and his idea of self-actualisation, wherein to work is to test yourself and grow. From there, we examine how the absence of work in unemployment is considered in the popular imagination and sociology. Curiously, the absence of a job is figured as the opposite of monastic life, not just lacking discipline, but implicitly damned rather than saved.

Extending an earlier article ‘The Purgatorial Ethic and the Spirit of Welfare’ our fifth chapter outlines how contemporary welfare activation derives inspiration from purgatory, imposing purifying and redemptive suffering on individuals. Dismissed as mere superstition in modernity, purgatory returns in the numerous institutions of modernity which manage transformation, from penitentiary to poor houses.

These buildings are now replaced with individualised treatment, so that jobseekers carry a sense of perpetual obligation to redeem themselves; purgatory pervades their lives.

Initially more hopeful, our sixth chapter focuses on pilgrimage, the ritual of penance through travelling to a shrine as informing the process of jobseeking – for the unemployed and job-changers or the perpetually precarious. Pilgrims seek out signs of favour and face personal challenges along their road, and thus, economic outcomes are converted into a moral drama of faith in the face of adversity, a balance of hope and despair. Such metaphors persist in modernity, where almost anything can be characterised as a ‘journey’, yet the idea that it would reform one’s character or reveal the truth is a distinctly religious idea. Interestingly, pilgrimage is markedly individualistic, even in supposedly communal medieval culture, so salvation is a personal matter, despite the collective problems of economics.

In chapter seven we focus extensively on the CV or resumé, the key document of the labour market, desired by employers and required by welfare officers. Such a practical document nonetheless has a religious history in the obligation to confess, to reflect upon oneself, to tell the truth about oneself, to transform oneself in order to profess oneself to the world. Each tailored CV is a statement of faith in oneself and the labour market, yet in a world of proliferating jobseeking and compulsory applications for the unemployed, these supplications are made over and over again.

Our theoretical position and methodological approach are outlined in Chapter two, a combination of the sociological and the historical which we term ‘Archaic Anthropology’, an exploration of the presence of the past in the present. Drawing inspiration from key figures, particularly Nietzsche, Weber, Foucault and Agamben, we outline an approach which allows us to recognise how older, ancient, even archaic ideas echo, persist, animate and give meaning to the present. While our concern is welfare in particular, the broader roots of modern states in the pastoral power of the medieval church and the providential interpretation of the economy as the ‘hand of God’ are introduced, to contextualise the impulse towards reform.

Informed by this method, our relatively self-contained chapters combine together into a larger argument centred on the idea of reform; which is explored in depth in our third chapter in regard to both ‘policy reform’ and the ‘reformation’ of individual unemployed people through welfare activation. Key ideas which are developed throughout the book are introduced here, particularly the idea of the transformative effect of suffering, imposed by governmentality in an effort to reform, and the idea of the economy as a test or even life itself as a trial, which reveals the truth. While punitive and stigmatising impulses are part of the process, the governance of welfare is oriented to reform; demanding work-discipline and personal transformation, but also incorporating individual choices and positioning the market as the final judge; a providential expression of divine will. Combining detailed social policy analysis and theological sources, this chapter is perhaps more challenging, but it is the key to our thesis, and also to our recommendations which are summarised in our conclusion, that reform can be excessive, and welfare would better be unconditional, especially in the face of contemporary challenges.