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From Toilet Paper Wars to #ViralKindness? COVID-19, Solidarity and the Basic Income Debate in Australia

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ABSTRACT: By examining seemingly contradictory reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic and relating these to the basic income debate in Australia, this article explores the potential that the socio-economic crisis provoked by COVID-19 presents for a transformation of welfare systems. Drawing on ethnographic observation, the article describes the emergence of grassroots forms of solidarity in response to the pandemic. Within the context of the increasing hardship experienced by Australians, ongoing failures of existing welfare systems, and inadequate government responses to COVID-19, the groundswell of solidarity may coalesce with increasing support for a basic income, creating a conjunctural movement that propels radical social transformation.

KEYWORDS: Australia, basic income, COVID-19, inequality, precarity, solidarity

Five months on from the World Health Organization declaring the COVID-19 pandemic, hundreds of thousands of Australians have lost their jobs and fallen into hardship due to the economic impacts of government-imposed lockdowns. As endless queues formed outside Centrelink offices,¹ existing social security systems were rapidly overwhelmed. At the same time, the federal government's response to the crisis has reproduced systemic inequalities and exclusions, despite Prime Minister Scott Morrison's claim that we are 'all in this together'.²

The socio-economic crisis brought about by COVID-19 reveals cracks in existing welfare systems and the need for radical transformation. At the same time – if we are to believe public discourses – the reactions of many Australians to the pandemic would appear to epitomise the self-centeredness that is commonly thought to be at the heart of our individualistic, capitalist society. Yet beyond the media hype and frequent reprimands from government authorities, grassroots movements of solidarity have flourished.

By examining seemingly contradictory reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic and relating these to the basic income debate in Australia, this article explores the potential that the current crisis presents for radical socio-economic transformation. The rise of grassroots forms of solidarity, I argue, demonstrates that we are far from incapable of caring for others – others who may be strangers but with whom we share newfound feelings of intimacy as we all face a difficult present and uncertain future. These movements in turn present opportunities to galvanise support for a transition towards welfare systems that have solidarity at their core.

Selfishness or Solidarity

Even before COVID-19 infections took off in Australia and lockdowns led to mass job losses, another crisis hit the country. From one day to the next, it seemed that the veneer of civilisation had disintegrated; the shelves of supermarkets across the coun-



try were stripped of that most prized possession fondly referred to by Aussies as the 'dunny roll'; and a Hobbesian war of all against all had erupted, as desperate individuals battled over the few remaining packets of toilet paper (Hobbes 2018).

In reality, there were no shortages of essential items in Australia (toilet paper being, apparently, an essential item). Yet the panic buying was very real and did lead to supply chain issues and empty shelves. Researchers from the University of New South Wales found Australia's COVID-19 panic buying to be the highest in the world (Keane and Neal 2020). While other countries grappled with sky-rocketing COVID-19 cases, the Australian media focussed on brawls in supermarket aisles; shops imposed rationing; and the Prime Minister chastised the nation for 'un-Australian' hoarding (Martin 2020).

Yet despite panic buying being denounced as 'un-Australian', public discourse and policy often perpetuate an image of individual Australians as selfish. In the state of Victoria, lockdowns have been accompanied by strict penalties. Police roam the streets, empowered to hand out on-the-spot fines of AUD 1,650 (GBP 900) to rule-breakers. The media convinces us that such heavy-handed measures are necessary. When, after the initial easing of restrictions, the Victorian government re-imposed lockdown in July due to increasing community transmission of COVID-19, media stories of individuals breaking the rules abounded. A KFC birthday party that ended up costing an impressive AUD 26,000 (GBP 14,350) in fines was cited repeatedly as proof that individuals' selfish behaviour was putting lives at risk (ABC News 2020a). Meanwhile, in daily press conferences, the Victorian premier, Daniel Andrews, endeavours not to alienate the population, for example demonstrating empathy for people who have tested late or failed to self-isolate because they feared loss of income from precarious jobs; but at the same time, he draws attention to individuals who are 'making a selfish choice', such as by refusing to wear a mask (ABC News 2020b). And while individuals displaying such 'selfish' behaviour are a small minority, the mainstream media creates the impression that anti-social behaviour is widespread.

However, in response to the pandemic, grassroots support networks have actually emerged throughout the country. In my neighbourhood, a group called 'Northside Melbourne CoronaVirus Outreach' connects young and healthy individuals who are able to help others with those who are vulnerable and in need.³ The group's Facebook page abounds with posts from young adults offering to deliver supplies to the

elderly; from people with sewing machines who are making free reusable masks for community members; and from others who are offering whatever time and resources they can share. This group is part of the #ViralKindness network, a movement of (at my last count) 205 community care groups across Australia that connect people in need with others who are willing and able to help.⁴ Members of these groups, initially strangers to one another, have connected through social media as part of a bottom-up swell of solidarity that has taken place beyond the media spotlight.

There are also many examples of individuals and community groups supporting those who are excluded from government COVID-19 relief programmes. In Sydney, restaurants are handing out meals to international students stranded by the pandemic. In Melbourne, individuals have been making and donating reusable facemasks for asylum seekers. In Darwin, a group of international students established 'Kindness Shake', a programme supported by local businesses that distributes free meals to temporary visa holders. And so the list goes on.

Disaster studies demonstrate that social capital and networks of care between members of society are key to resilience (Aldrich 2012). Yet common representations of many (if not all) individual Australians as selfish and as posing a threat to others can feed into a toxic 'nocebo effect', which undermines our togetherness and resilience as a nation. In *Humankind*, Rutger Bregman (2020) argues that public discourse contributes to a 'nocebo effect' – a self-fulfilling prophesy whereby, since we are led to believe that humans are selfish, we then act in selfish ways. The 'toilet paper wars' are a case in point. In their study of panic buying, Michael Keane and Timothy Neal (2020) found no correlation between drastic escalations in panic buying and increases in domestic COVID-19 cases or lockdown restrictions; instead, media coverage of hoarding in Australia was a more determining factor. The influence of the media was highlighted in many discussions I have had with Australian residents about their reactions to the pandemic. In a recent conversation with my local pharmacist, the young woman explained that it had not initially occurred to her to stock up on toilet paper; but when she watched news reports of empty shelves, she felt what Australians call 'FOMO' ('Fear of Missing Out'); and so she rushed to Woolworths and bought as much as she could.

Discursive representations of selfishness can legitimise heavy-handed governmental control and further undermine social trust. Individual members of the public become subjects as well as instruments

of state surveillance and power, with those who ‘dob in’ (i.e. report) breaches of lockdown rules recast as protectors of society. In this ‘new normal’, we risk all ending up each other’s guards in a warped version of the panopticon effect, where individuals cannot be trusted to police themselves and so police each other (Foucault 1989).

Yet as described above, COVID-19 has also triggered a surge in solidarity. Through grassroots support networks, individuals have assisted those who are more vulnerable or have fallen through the cracks of the federal government’s COVID-19 response. At a time when the failures of existing welfare systems are highlighted and ever more Australians are experiencing precarity, these movements also offer opportunities to galvanise support for a basic income.

The Basic Income Debate

The pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated trends that analysts have warned us about for years: widening inequalities within and between countries; the decrease in secure forms of employment; and the growth of the ‘Precariat’, whose grievances Guy Standing presaged could fuel dangerous social instabilities (Ferguson and Li 2018; Milanovic 2016; Standing 2010). Australia’s welfare systems were never designed to deal with these new realities. They are ‘designed for last century, with a binary way of thinking about employment that’s no longer the experience of casual, contract and gig workers’ (Baskin 2020).

In *Give a Man a Fish*, James Ferguson (2015) argues that, in a world in which many will never get a ‘proper job’, we must move away from the idea of human survival being dependent on waged labour and towards the idea of a ‘rightful share’. Citizens would have a right to an income based on a share in ownership of national wealth. In a lecture at the University of Melbourne in 2018, Ferguson then argued that *presence* rather than membership should be the basis for social obligation. Through their presence in Australia, denizens like international students or migrants would be entitled to a basic income – something that can be seen as not only morally right but also as a sensible socio-economic strategy, given the contributions that such individuals make to Australian society.

A basic income is a regular financial payment made to all members of society and not linked to specific conditions. One of the most common arguments against this is that it is too expensive – an argument that has been dismantled in many ways, which are

beyond the scope of this article to enumerate. The other typical argument against a basic income is that it encourages laziness and dependence. In Australia, this argument has come to be connected with the ‘dole bludger’ stereotype.

The term ‘dole bludger’ was invented in the early 1970s, constructing ‘welfare recipients as parasites upon “ordinary Australian” taxpayers’ (Archer 2009: 177). Through media and government discourse, the term became part of the Australian vernacular; the welfare state came to be represented as the cause of economic problems rather than their cure; and the shift towards neoliberalism was legitimised. The stereotype of the ‘dole bludger’ represents those on welfare support as shirking their social responsibilities and presents welfarism as contributing to a kind of ‘culture of poverty’ that encourages indolence. Decades after its emergence, the ‘dole bludger’ discourse remains deep-rooted in Australia, where it is now often used to argue against a basic income – if we were all to receive a basic income, without having to prove that we were at least *trying* to find a ‘proper job’, we would essentially all become ‘dole bludgers’.

Evidence from countries that have adopted cash-transfer programmes indicates that a basic income would not actually promote idleness or dependency (Banerjee et al. 2017). Moreover, a basic income enables a rethinking of how we value people’s contributions to society. After all, people can and do contribute in multiple and meaningful ways to society, without this being through waged employment – a trend that will only increase as automation replaces many lower-skilled or routine jobs in the coming years. The COVID-19 pandemic and movements of solidarity that have emerged in recent months present significant opportunities for increased recognition of the value of unpaid care work and other social contributions beyond waged employment.

As increasing numbers of Australians find themselves unemployed and in precarious positions, it is also likely that there will be growing sympathy amongst members of the public for those previously labelled as ‘dole bludgers’. At the same time, calls for a basic income have multiplied in recent months, the topic no longer being the exclusive domain of leftist advocates and now entering into mainstream public debate. With precarity increasingly recognised as contributing to Australia’s public health crisis – as in the example of individuals who do not get tested or self-isolate out of fear of losing income from precarious employment – arguments for a basic income are gaining force. Together with the movements of

solidarity described above, the present moment thus offers opportunities for radical social transformation.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has in reality led to a groundswell of solidarity in Australia. While the focus of public discourse has often been on acts of selfishness, the real danger lies in a 'nocebo effect' that denies solidarity and undermines social resilience. Conversely, the rise of grassroots solidarity movements demonstrates a drive for togetherness and caring for others. At the same time, increasing calls for a basic income in Australia stand in opposition to a deep-rooted discourse that posits welfare recipients as parasites upon society. While the 'dole bludger' discourse reinforces opposition to a basic income, the current socio-economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic presents a locus of potential transformation.

Within the context of increasing hardship experienced by Australians across the country, ongoing failures of existing welfare systems and inadequate government responses to COVID-19, it is not impossible to imagine that the networks of solidarity described above and increasing support for a basic income may coalesce into the type of conjunctural movement described by Antonio Gramsci (1971). Across a conjunctural terrain that emerges as a side-effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, discourses that posit individuals as often selfish or as 'dole bludgers' and that preserve existing social and governmental systems are confronted by oppositional movements that in coming together may gain strength. This conjuncture has the potential to propel us towards radical systemic transformation and the establishment of social welfare systems that are better adapted to our present world.

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Notes

1. Centrelink is the government service that provides social security payments to people entitled to welfare support.
2. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Hansard/Hansard_Display?bid=chamber/hansardr/247e20e8-7bbe-4712-afcb-c8833dc6a228/&sid=0013.
2. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2467532753498978>.
3. <https://viralkindness.org.au/#groupSearch>.

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