

# Public Goods as a Source of Exit Power

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# Thanks

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## **Part time job holders and benefits coverage (BLS 2022, 2024)**

- 78,700,000 people paid hourly for their work
- 26% of hourly workers have access to benefits like healthcare, paid leave, and retirement plans

## **Perceptions of precarity (Pew 2015)**

- 92% of Americans would trade current economic stability for future financial gains
- 60% report experiencing a financial "shock" e.g., unemployment, high medical bills, major house repairs
- 71-83% worry about not having enough money to cover their most basic needs
- 1 in 5 say they are not planning to retire

# Publicly provisioned goods as a response to the problems of work and precarity

# Roadmap

- . How to avoid a bad job
- . How to leave a bad job
- . Public(-ish) goods: (many) arguments

# How to avoid a bad job.

Bad jobs are the result of *domination* at work (e.g., Anderson, Vrousalis, Gourevitch)

- Yes, and ...  
*Precurity* makes you susceptible to domination.
- Uncertainty around securing subsistence goods
- *Contrast with:* "the reliable master"

# Preliminaries

Modern market societies like ours are characterized by *market dependence*.

- With few exceptions: we must acquire our desired goods on the market, and this includes most subsistence goods.
- With few exceptions: most people must *work* (for others) to access goods on the market.



# The Force of Need

Participation in this market system would be optional, were it not the *special force* of our need for subsistence goods: “work, **or starve**”

- Unavoidable

- Harmful if not met<sup>1</sup>

We have no choice but to seek out subsistence goods, and therefore no choice but to participate in the market.

## Basic Needs and Labor

Because of *market dependence*, our access to subsistence goods requires us to participate in the labor market: “**work**, or starve”

- Finding, *and keeping* a job is the only way most people can continue to live.

This includes *bad jobs*.<sup>2</sup>

## Basic Needs and Precarity (I)

Market dependence makes the satisfaction of even our most basic needs uncertain. Market forces – often opaque to us – will determine:

- Whether certain necessary goods are produced at all
  - If they are produced, whether they will be produced in sufficient quantity
  - If produced in sufficient quantity, whether they will be accessible to those in need
  - If accessible, whether we will have the means to secure these goods
- It's not just being able to meet our needs, it's that we must be able to meet them *reliably*.





## Basic Needs and Precarity (II)

Precarity – one's uncertainty about meeting her most basic needs – explains workers' willingness to stay in bad jobs.

- (Unorganized) workers can't "hold out" as long as management.
- They will, therefore, be more willing to accept an unjust labor contract.

There is a special obligation to help / enable workers to avoid precarity.

Failing to reliably secure basic needs causes:

- Harms (Miller, Wiggins, Meyer 2022, Brock 2019)
- Unfreedom

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There is a special obligation to help / enable workers to avoid precarity.

Failing to reliably secure basic needs causes:

- Harms (Miller, Wiggins, Meyer 2022, Brock 2019)
- Unfreedom
- **Workers to stay in bad jobs.**

*The solution to “bad work” ought to proceed from this fact.*

# The Importance of Basic Needs for Securing Worker Exit

Lately, critiques of bad work have taken the form of critiques of *domination*, or *private government*.

This prompts many critics to focus on improving the employment relationship itself, through workplace regulations, “voice” at work, or tight labor markets:

- **Workplace regulations:** avoid domination through employer sanctions
- **Voice:** avoid domination through input
- **Tight labor markets:** avoid domination by finding a new employer

But subjection to domination at work is, at root, an outcome of *precarity*. If we want to help people avoid domination, we must guarantee to them that their basic needs will be met, and thus avoid precarity.

These solutions do too little to address precarity:

- Since 2021, labor market has been unprecedentedly tight, yet precarity (obj. and subj.) persist.<sup>3</sup>
- Even if, once in a job, workers have access to certain goods, without a *guarantee* that each person will find and keep work, they fail to address the underlying problem
  - Currently: 7 million people (who are looking for jobs) cannot find them
  - At-will employment
  - A number of practical problems:
    - Sanctions are often too low, or non-economic
    - Domination by *firms*, not just your firm

What we need is protection against *precarity* itself.

- The best way to do this is by providing robust exit options...
- ... in the form of a **guarantee** to publicly provisioned goods

*Contrast to:* Basic Income (Calnitsky 2017)

- Publicly provisioned goods are preferable to universal income transfers.
- Private provision (markets) subject people to precarity.
  - Public provisioning has a number of theoretical and social benefits.
  - Including encouraging work.



# Public Goods

# Which goods?

Possibly many, but I will limit to:

- . Food security
- . Housing
- . Healthcare
- . Education

# What kind of public goods are these?

Not *really* public goods.

These are not “pure” public goods.

- Excludable
- Rivalrous

Why draw on the public goods literature?

A few different taxonomies of public goods:

- Necessary (required by justice) vs. Discretionary (Claassen 2013)<sup>4</sup>
- Inherently vs. Contingently (non-excludable by choice) (Bieber 2023)<sup>5</sup>
- Public vs. Publicized (made public through gov't. incentives) (Anomaly 2021)

Public provisioning to meet basic needs cuts across these distinctions (e.g., housing vs. education).

## Against Private Provision: (Many) Arguments

- . In current circumstances, markets sometimes fail to deliver important goods
- . In current circumstances, markets in the provisioning of subsistence goods sometimes degrade those goods
- . In current circumstances, markets sometimes fail to improve the quality of these goods
- . The opacity of markets contributes to feelings of precarity.

## For Public Provision: (Many) Arguments

- . Public provisioning allows the state to distribute the burdens of producing these good equitably.
- . A bundle of basic, in-kind goods allows people to meet their needs without discouraging working.
- . Everyone benefits from publicly provisioned subsistence goods\*
- . Even if you already access these goods as club goods, or on the private market, you are still subject to precarity.
- . These publicly provisioned goods are, therefore, “club goods sensitive.”
- . Public goods promote a type of civic solidarity beneficial to a liberal democratic society.
- . This kind of solidarity can bolster security / stability (Miller 2004)

In current circumstances, markets sometimes fail to deliver important goods

- A firm's business is feasible only when it can respond to market competition, and that this requires firms to prioritize profit-making.
- The main function of commodities for firms, then, is not their usefulness (firms do not use their own products), but their ability to be exchanged.
- Whether a certain commodity can be exchanged is determined by demand for that commodity. It follows that firms will prioritize production of goods for which there is a high demand.
- In markets with background inequalities, demand is not the same thing as need.  
e.g., regional shortages in quality healthcare, affordable housing, safe schools



# Poor Quality and Degraded Goods

Two common arguments for UBI + preserving markets

- Market competition improves the quality of goods
- UBI enables choice

Both of these arguments fail.

- UBI does not uniquely enable choice.
  - Compare: vouchers in a socialist economy.
- Competition as a mechanism for quality control selects for the wrong values
  - Markets vs. triage vs. queuing: access to emergency medicine (Sandel)
  - Introducing competition in teacher selection

# Opaque Markets

Market mechanisms do not allow one to **demonstrate** to another that her needs will be reliably met.

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- . Frankfurt, “Necessity and Desire”; Wiggins, “Claims of Need.” ↵
  - . Gallup, “1 in 6 U.S. Workers Stay in Unwanted Job for Health Benefits.” ↵
  - . National Bureau of Economic Research, “The Tight US Labor Market.” ↵
  - . Claassen, “Public Goods, Mutual Benefits, and Majority Rule.” ↵
  - . Bieber, “The Importance of Contingently Public Goods.” ↵
  - . Heath, “Why a.” ↵

Speaker notes