

Intervention Symposium:

“The Sanitization of/via Populism during the COVID-19 Pandemic”

Double Sanitizations via Universal Basic Income during the Pandemic

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Do ruling-class appeals to populism via Universal Basic Income (UBI henceforth) during the pandemic represent techniques for sanitizing the capitalist ills that they themselves created? What is the parallel between these acts of sanitization of socio-economic ills and medical illness? What does populism have to do with this process of sanitization?

In March 2020, the South Korean government committed approximately 100 million dollars for the nationally established UBI during the COVID-19 pandemic under the label of Emergency Disaster Assistance Fund or Disaster Basic Income (DBI henceforth). This represents the largest amount allocated for the pandemic UBI among nations implementing UBI *vis-à-vis* their GDP. DBI was paid to individual households via their primary credit cards or debit cards. Since its inception, progressive entrepreneurs and politicians have targeted DBI as a key strategy to handle the worsening socio-economic precarity arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Jae-Ung Lee (Lee JU henceforth) is a founder of Daum (a most successful web portal in South Korea that, like Google, offers email, messaging, forums, news), a venture capitalist for social enterprises, and, since 2018, CEO of Socar (a rental car and automobile sharing service in South Korea). He has also been an advocate of UBI, supporting various enterprises of the younger generation. Young people have been the most devoted users and workers for Daum’s products since their inception, which

overlapped with the Asian financial crisis (1997-2001). In the aftermath of the financial crisis, an era marked by magnified neoliberalization in South Korea, the younger generation has experienced unprecedented levels of vulnerability due to a shrinking stable job market. This is even true of those youths with privileged university degrees, which in the past represented a ticket to enter stable employment. Yet, they also became the most equipped with digital literacy as the “netizens” of the information-technology-based economy and politics. On behalf of this precarious yet optimal clientele for social media, whose financial security plummeted still further during the COVID-19 era, Lee JU made his public request for increasing the amount of DBI. He asked for an additional 100,000 won (about 100 USD) per person, following the Korean government’s setting of the universal rate at 400,000 won (about 400 USD) per one-person household each month during the pandemic in 2020.[1]

Following Lee JU’s call, politicians such as Jae-Myeong Lee (Lee JM henceforth),[2] the current elected governor of Gyeonggi-do Province, adopted DBI in their municipalities for popular support in the domain of distributional justice.[3] For example, in Gyeonggi-do, the wealthiest and most populated provincial municipality that encircles Seoul (although the municipality is independent), Lee JM spearheaded the first and second distributions of the provincial DBI by depositing 100,000 won (100 USD) per person in the spring of 2020 and February 2021, respectively, through provincially issued local currency (*jiyeok hyapye*).[4] Lee JM’s reason for paying the DBI via a provincial currency and mandating that the provincial currency be exchangeable with Korean won in the provincial consumer market was rationalized by its support for struggling local businesses by limiting usage of local currency to small businesses and shops.[5] While Lee JM’s office champions the provincial policy as a sign of being the most progressive and considerate *vis-à-vis* citizens – stoking rumours that he aims to be the next president of South Korea – the policy provoked resistance from local businesses that became the target of suspicions for commercial law infringements, such as overcharging consumers when paid with DBI in provincial currency.[6] Also, it became controversial when Lee JM ordered special audits for township municipalities that paid DBI in cash and complained in governmental portal chat rooms about regulating DBI only in provincial currency. The township officers in question contested the

interrogation by submitting a grievance at higher governmental levels, questioning the adequacy of the provincial municipality's interference in the lower-level municipalities' authority to determine how to boost the local economy.[7]

Both Lees, the entrepreneur and the politician, appeal to populism to achieve an accountable state and venerable leadership. They made their prominent efforts to sanitize societal ills – i.e., disparity of income for households of working poor class and domino effects of the decreasing consumption for (local small) businesses – and sided with the socio-economic minor/ity. Yet, the ground of their campaign as a corporate philanthropist and an elected officer is inseparable from the ways in which they target the fame of UBI populism within the structure of the consumption and production circuit and electoral cycle. As a recent government research institute report states, the number of purchases through consumer credit cards significantly increased due to the national and local DBI (Kim and Oh 2020).

South Korea is not the only place to witness the rapid implementation of UBI as a populist state response to the circumstances of COVID-19. Some countries, such as Canada, became the objects of envy due to the existence of UBI on top of a sound medical care system. Yet, this overlooks how Canada's good medical care is not available to migrant laborers, even when they are "essential" workers. Only recently, through significant advocacy efforts, did Ontario decree to temporarily expand coverage to include migrant laborers.[8] If migrant workers did not bear the brunt of indispensable farm work during the pandemic, such an extension of medical care would not be readily regarded as part of universal health care.

In a similar vein, UBI initiatives are gaining legitimacy under COVID-19 in different formats. Southern African countries aside, the majority are limited to temporary pandemic measures. This is revealed in the measures' names – for example, the Emergency Response Benefit (Canada) and Emergency Disaster Assistance Fund/Disaster Basic Income (South Korea). In the case of Turkey, it seems there was a temporary loan program open to any citizen during the first wave of the pandemic, which I deem as a parallel to UBI. Both UBI and Turkish national loans are made available to all citizens without requiring a credit check, relying on the logic of universality.[9] By providing these temporary programs,

nation-states are signalling their recognition of the dire needs of vulnerable populations. Nevertheless, they re-channel this drive as an opportunity for investment in the consumer market directly.

The benefits of disbursement in the form of UBI in terms of immediate relief to meet the subsistence needs of everyday life are undeniable. I also do not consider the state the sole culprit of any crisis, contra views that suggest that eradicating the state form would bring about emancipation from all barriers.[10] However, it is a tricky matter to champion UBI populism and, more broadly, ideas of redistribution as primary sites for achieving economic justice. It is tricky because it involves double sanitizations. These represent attempts to sanitize the moral and medical ills of capitalist society by boasting of their practicality for direct-action and generosity of care for the population – whether it be temporary disaster provision to all citizens or exigency credit available to the working poor. At the same time, this very sanitization deters dreams and dramas of building a world where surplus goods are produced neither for profit nor for a hierarchical system. By engaging in such double moves of sanitization, UBI contributes to extending the perpetual motion of capital by reproducing potential labor-power and consumers. In parallel, UBI promotes voters who sustain the system through biopolitical sovereignty – make the population live (as consumers of the market), instead of letting it die.

What are these philanthropists and venerable states hoping to achieve by appealing to UBI populism during COVID-19? Are these double sanitizations a necessary course for overcoming capitalism, a crisis-ridden system that has been pronounced during the pandemic? Resonant with Sophia Jaworski's piece in this collection on sanitation stations cases and Nicholas Abrams's on Karenization as a double movement in populism, the popularization of UBI makes me wonder: If this double sanitization reminds us that philanthropists and biopolitical sovereignty are not only antidotes to social and medical ills but also the creators of them, what do we do with forms of populism that seem to be key instruments for making the double movement possible?

Endnotes

[1] http://sports.khan.co.kr/bizlife/sk_index.html?art_id=202003011649003&sec_id=564001

For four-person households, the maximum amount of national DBI is 1,000,000 won (1,000 USD).

[2] Lee JU and Lee JM are not related by kinship.

[3] Distributional justice refers to a domain and mode of economic justice sought through welfare states (see Song 2019).

[4] Note that the municipal DBI is not a monthly payment.

https://www.chosun.com/national/national_general/2021/01/28/Y3A76Y63PBC2NG3VTCNIRSNMVQ/

http://biz.khan.co.kr/khan_art_view.html?artid=202102250600005&code=920100

[5] For the reason why the UBI is paid in the form of the provincial currency, see

<https://www.gg.go.kr/contents/contents.do?ciIdx=1174&menuId=2935>

[6] <https://www.hankyung.com/politics/article/2020121711717>

https://biz.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2020/05/06/2020050602464.html

[7] http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?artid=202011261626001&code=940100

http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?artid=202012281214001&code=940100

[8] <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/56401/ontario-expands-coverage-for-care>

[9] The universality is not actualized in reality, as Turkish banks didn't follow. For more about the Turkish household loan context, see Ferda Demirci's essay in this collection.

[10] See also Toscano (2020), for an ambivalent position about state intervention in the capitalist system.

References

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