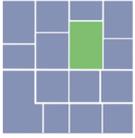


**THE SOCIOLOGICAL OBSERVER**

**RETHINKING WELFARE IN THE  
NEW NORMAL**

**EDITED BY TOM BOLAND AND RAY GRIFFIN**

**PUBLISHED BY: SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION OF IRELAND**



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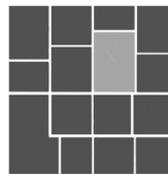
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## **EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION**

# **THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING?: BACK TO WORK AND THE WELFARE STATE AFTER THE PANDEMIC**

**TOM BOLAND & RAY GRIFFIN, EDS.**

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**S**ociology is about collective experiences, and in the fragmented, plural, complex world of the twenty-first century, these are rare. The pandemic has, of course, impacted different people and groups in different ways, yet there are some shared experiences. Most prominently, we experience uncertainty: About the virus, about how society will react and what the future holds. For many theorists of modernity, uncertainty is central – from Marx’s ‘all that is solid melts into air’ to Bauman’s ‘liquid modernity’ to Boltanski who declared ‘uncertainty is at the heart of social life.’ As citizens and scholars, researchers and potential cases, we write to make sense of these uncertain times.

Another collective experience underlies this volume, the disruption and dislocation to work and economic life: While some essential workers continued their routine, or went into chronic overdrive even in health services, most of us experienced interruption, uncertainty and the improvisation of new routines. Before the ‘new normal’ could even be considered, around half a million Irish people experience some kind of hiatus in their working lives – not quite unemployment, but certainly the suspension of work as they knew it. Even unemployment was interrupted, in the sense that ‘jobseeking’ was suspended. Several contributors herein are concerned with these transformations, and the emergence of new norms and even ideals of social welfare. Out of collective experiences of crisis come new ideals.

Aside from the concern with changes to workplace and welfare, this volume is concerned with the perennial problem of crises and routinisation. Many assume that the 'new normal' is created in the uncertain conditions of crisis, but oftentimes little changes – for instance, in the 2008 Financial crisis, where the state stepped in to ensure the survival of institutions which were considered 'too big to fail'. Likewise, during Covid, the state and international actors are extraordinarily active, yet seemingly oriented to preserving something of the previous order – the 'real existing unsustainability' of the modern world.

Of course, Modernity or *Neuzeit* is intrinsically related to time and change, both actual and expected or imagined. From the Enlightenment rejection of the 'ancien regime' to Bob Dylan's 'the time's they are a changing', modern thinkers embrace the future, both as a bright horizon, and as the escape from current problems. 'Change' is a political slogan in itself, as are 'Hope' and 'Progress', and easily co-opted and deployed by diverse parties and social movements.

Interestingly for sociology as the 'science of modernity' or a 'crisis science' this future orientation is also strongly connected to the experience of crisis. Consider Roosevelt's acceptance speech at the 1932 Democratic convention:

"Out of every crisis, every tribulation, every disaster, mankind rises with some share of greater knowledge, of higher decency, of purer purpose."

Reacting to the Great Depression, FDR took the Democratic nomination and the Presidency, and created the New Deal. This took years, and was in many ways imperfect, but without it, the post-war welfare state would hardly have seemed possible. Strikingly, the hopeful tones of this speech turn crisis into good, a lesson learned and perhaps unsurprisingly, the next few lines drift into Biblical references, reflecting FDR's Christian background and American culture.

Sociologists might well share the hope that crisis leads to social learning, reorganisation and innovation, and hopefully with a greater level of equality and justice. Yet, empirically we know that not all crises lead to positive responses: Some become mired in historical trauma, legacy issues which take generations to heal, or perhaps lingering on indefinitely. Others lead to problematic responses, for instance, the emergence of neo-liberal policy solutions after the oil crisis, offering free-market solutions to collective problems. Then there are crises for which we still await a resolution – most obviously Climate Change, an unfolding and present disaster which provokes incremental rather than urgent change.

What have we learned from the pandemic? Not enough to overcome it. Even before the emergence of the Omicron variant, the national and international effort against Delta was insufficient to either eliminate or let us live with the virus. Now that the crisis becomes prolonged and intensifies, can we learn? Perhaps the crisis measures of immense state-spending can be made permanent, as 'economic laws' can be suspended. Perhaps global solidarity will appear as a necessity, not just an option. Perhaps we can come to welcome lock-downs, periodically, as forms of hibernation that we all accept, annually, as a rest and retreat.

Hope, change and progress are all modern values which assume that society and its citizens can be transformed, enlightened, empowered. Perhaps overcoming this crisis might mean realising our limits, that we cannot transform society to make it compatible with a pandemic, nor can we run the economy at full tilt continuously. Instead, we may have to live within limits, cutting down our networks, working remotely, accepting planned circuit breakers for non-essential activities.

Encoded within the idea of crisis leading to change and progress is the peculiar idea that suffering is good in some peculiar way, that it can teach us something, that what does not kill us makes us stronger. If any good can be found in the pandemic, it is in what we learn from it, and this crisis is merely a taste of the challenges posed by climate change. We must learn now, before it is too late.

# INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH ANDERSON

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**Tom Boland:** I'll begin by asking about your fascinating new title: *The Great Reversal: How neoliberalism turned the work ethic against workers*. Could you tell me about the book?

**Elizabeth Anderson:** It's a history of the Protestant work ethic from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the present, in which I'm arguing that contemporary neoliberalism is just a renewed version of the harsh anti-worker conservative work ethic that Max Weber described in his classic, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. I'm aiming to recover another side of the work ethic that I think Max Weber missed. I call this the progressive or pro-worker work ethic. I argue that if you go back to the original Puritan texts in which the work ethic was elaborated, you could see that it's filled with contradictions. On the one hand, the Puritans saw work as a form of ascetic discipline or self-denial: if your nose is to the grindstone, then your mind will not wander off into temptation and sin. But then there's this other side. For what is work after all? It is the performance of God's will for human beings on earth. What God wills us to do is to promote the welfare of our fellow human beings--every last one of them without exception. And so work becomes exalted because you're doing God's work and that means every labourer needs to be respected. I follow in my book the history of that pro-worker view through the history of political economy and argue that Locke, Adam Smith, the Ricardian socialists, John Stewart Mill, and even Marx were developing that progressive work ethic until it culminated in social democracy in Europe.

**Tom Boland:** What I find great about that is it's not just one work ethic, it's multiple work ethics but also it's not necessarily the big bad work ethic of capitalism but it's almost a positive moral or cultural force in this way because it's embracing and, as you say, raising up work and the activities of every person. It's great to have a positive steer on the work ethic for a change.

**Elizabeth Anderson:** Yes. I also want to stress that not everything that people do to make money counts as work. Go back to Richard Baxter and Robert Sanderson, the two Puritans who I think are key figures in formulating the original work ethic. They saw there were all kinds of money-making schemes--various business models which made lots of money but did not count as work, because the only thing that counts as work is an activity that helps our fellow human beings. Whereas neoliberalism today is a form of shareholder capitalism: the idea is just to maximise profits by whatever means necessary. Whether that ends up ruining other people's lives doesn't matter as long as you can make money off of it. So, for instance, consider payday lenders in the United States. You're desperate for cash because you have to pay your landlord, but your pay check isn't coming for another week, so you go to a payday lender who charges a 300% annual interest rate, so that you can pay your landlord to avoid eviction, or pay your water utility bill to avoid having water cut off. Then you become a debt peon because all the profits come from the fact that you have to constantly roll over that loan which you can never pay off with interest mounting. That kind of exploitation of misery does not count as work in the original Puritan work ethic. Puritans had pretty sound business ethics and condemned a lot of the stuff that modern capitalist firms do today to make money and maximise their profits.

**Tom Boland:** Can you tell us more about how this progressive work ethic was transmuted or transformed into the conservative work ethic? How did this bifurcation happen?

**Elizabeth Anderson:** If you go back to the 17th century, the model worker for the Puritans was a young farmer or master craftsman. What's interesting about these two model workers is that they're simultaneously manual workers and also own property: they're working their own capital. In that context, it makes sense to combine the duties, which will have a kind of ascetic element to them, with the rights and privileges and honours--the benefits--because if you're simultaneously a capitalist and manual worker you're experiencing both sides of that and model workers are justly rewarded for the burdensome duties they discharge. Then what the Industrial Revolution did was split off the capital owners from the manual labourers into two entirely different classes of people. That afforded an opportunity, as the work ethic got secularised, to have two class-based versions of the work ethic: one for the capitalists and one for the workers. That's essentially what happened: the progressive pro-worker work ethic is developing the positive implications of the work ethic for workers since we're the ones who are doing the real work here! And

then the property owners develop their own version of the work ethic, which I call the conservative work ethic. Ironically, in the 17th century, it wasn't just beggars in the streets who were condemned. They were second in line after the idle landlords who were the real biggest targets, who the Puritans condemned as drones in the nest, doing nothing useful for the hive, but just sinfully having sex with the queen! The landlords, however, wanted to justify their position within the work ethic. So they create this very reactionary version of the work ethic according to which the landlords with all their leisure time were the fountains of civilisation and were entitled to put the lower orders, the peasants, to work in order to extract a surplus that was needed to support civilisation. You see that picture in Richard Whately, the Archbishop of Dublin in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. He developed the foundational theory of imperialism which was inherent in the British empire, including in Ireland, as I'm sure you are all vividly aware.

**Tom Boland:** I kind of encountered it before in your work in *Private Government* on “*When the market was ‘left,’*” but this position of the worker owner-occupier capitalist and labour combined in the form of the petty bourgeoisie while landowners. Just as you’re talking it occurs to me that a small holder, the small landowner—well, it just strikes me as a recipe for good ecological stewardship of a place, because if you are invested in this one place and your capital is not mobile but you own specific concrete things... it's interesting regarding imperialist exploitation...

**Elizabeth Anderson:** I agree they're defending the small holder who's a much better steward of the land than these giant mega-corporations that are taking over agriculture in the United States.

**Tom Boland:** Can I ask you about whether in your work outsourcing has a particularly strong importance? Why is it that this conservative work ethic connects to the capitalist practice of outsourcing so strongly?

**Elizabeth Anderson:** Well that goes back to Bentham. At the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, you have a kind of esteem competition between the government administrators, who are largely coming from the aristocracy, and the industrialists, who are very disproportionately Dissenters. The Dissenters went into capitalist business because they were shut out of government office under the Test Acts, which denied public employment to anyone who refused communion in the Church of England. They just despised the fact that the second and third sons of the lazy landlords were getting placed in these no-show jobs because nobody expected them actually to serve the public. Ostensibly that's what

they're doing, but they're taking bribes and collecting salaries and they're lazy just like their dads, right? These Dissenters were descended from the Puritans. It wasn't crazy in their day to think that government workers were really lazy; they were! Look where they were coming from. There wasn't a serious concept of civil service and they didn't have a professionalized civil service back then. The civil service in Britain was an innovation of the East India Company around the time that John Stuart Mill was an officer in the Company. But that's already a few decades after Bentham argued for outsourcing government work to private enterprise. So it wasn't crazy for Bentham to think that if you have an important function to be served it's probably not a good idea to assign that function to the lazy government workers. Instead, get industrious businessmen to do it and it'll be much more efficient. That's really where government outsourcing comes from. The fundamental case for outsourcing and indeed neoliberalism is just dredging up Bentham's original arguments and putting them into fancy public choice language. However, I argue that this isn't taking account of the fact that societies have developed since Bentham in two very important ways: One way is that governments acquired a professional civil service and a lot of them are highly competent people who care about doing a good job, not just about extracting profits by cutting corners on public contracts.

**Tom Boland:** Going back to Bentham, what strikes me is that this word associated with Bentham's utilitarianism it's sometimes used in such a narrow way. Maybe it's about the narrowness of my academic orbit, but "utilitarian" is almost a curse word, it's associated with Bentham's tables of pleasures and pains and this individual self-seeking. But your point historically is that utilitarianism is about the utility of the greater good as in J.S. Mill, so you have a movement from the greater good to the individual good.

**Elizabeth Anderson:** It's key and it's coming straight out of the Puritans. In one section [of the book] I describe how the Puritans invented utilitarianism. This is just one of these delicious ironies in the history of moral and political thought. You would never expect this because utilitarianism today is this ultra-secular doctrine. But here's the important thing: within moral philosophy, the biggest knock against utilitarianism is that if you're only going to be maximising total utility you can just go along and sacrifice individuals along the way for the greater good. So that's why my dissertation advisor John Rawls's big project was showing that we have justice--distributive justice is independently important. So it matters that even the least advantaged need to be benefited by the rules of the system and you shouldn't just be caring about maximising GDP at their

expense. You make sure that even the least advantaged in society are benefited by the inequalities that exist. That was exactly what the Puritans meant by utilitarianism; every particular person including the lowest worker needs to be treated with respect, have a living wage, get decent working conditions, and not be abusively ruled over by their employers. It's all there in the original Puritan texts: you have to bring everyone along, no one left behind. All their prescriptions about maximising profits were under these constraints of distributive justice. But as utilitarianism got secularised and turned into the conservative work ethic, advocates of the latter tossed out obligations to uplift the least among us, so you could just exploit them just to maximise profits. That's also what shareholder capitalism is about: you just run roughshod over the people who are too disadvantaged to effectively defend themselves.

**Tom Boland:** It is interesting because we're covering some terrain which is in a way familiar and yet from a different angle whereby we're finding most of the ideals and the economic notions underpinning them have religious roots. There are also religious roots to be found beneath the conservative work ethic because it comes from this idea of work as an ascetic discipline, which is also there in the Puritans, but it's only disciplined for these lowly workers, not for the capitalists.

**Elizabeth Anderson:** Right. I mean Elon Musk could be tweeting and having fun with his work, or as they say about Jeff Bezos, the first Amazon worker ever to get a break. My brother-in-law is an executive at Amazon. We were going to have this big family reunion and my son just adores his uncle and was desperate to see him. This was on the fourth of July weekend, American Independence Day, a day when most American workers vacation for a long weekend. On the way to the airport with the family, he phones to say 'I'm sorry, I can't, I have to cancel on everyone.' We ask why and it's because they've demanded that all the executives show up for a meeting on the fourth of July. [Laughter] I mean Bezos would make everybody show up on Christmas! It's such a work ethic, it's incredible.

**Tom Boland:** Your previous book is *Private Government*, about the tyranny of corporations or bosses; that's pretty close to tyranny all right.

**Elizabeth Anderson:** Totally.

**Tom Boland:** The Puritans and the Protestants figure very largely in your work. But some people have suggested that the monks are often criticised by them, and yet the monasteries are centres of industry and

working themselves. Do you think that that's an exaggerated polemic against monks, or do you think that there's a real difference in the Protestant work ethic versus the monkish work ethic? Famously, Weber says the monks now have to walk out as we've turned the whole world into a monastery, I think he's directly quoting Baxter.

**Elizabeth Anderson:** Yes. The biggest difference is that the monks' notion of specifically holy work is ritualistic, it's about prayer and singing chants and the performance of sacraments. So good works have to do with sacraments within the Catholic tradition, whereas for Puritans now they're consequentialists and hard-headed. What are the consequences in the world for doing this stuff? That's why they thought that the monks were useless: they might be busy, but they're not helping people in the world. That's critical; it's almost impossible to exaggerate how hard-headed empiricist the Puritans were, even though course they have their theology, so they're not total empiricists. Notoriously, they went on witch hunts in Salem Massachusetts, but they felt guilty after doing that because they realise 'uh-oh, we let this get out of hand'. So for the Puritans you know, what are you supposed to do on Sunday? Well, yeah you do have to go to services, but after that what do you do? They suggested that you perform scientific experiments as a hobby, learn about the world--it's very material and empiricist.

**Tom Boland:** That's us. We are these people - if we have any time off from teaching, we would be undertaking scientific experiments. That is a fascinating historical insight, but to return you to the present, because you have different work ethics and different possibilities for different combinations and maybe the progressive work ethic might have a comeback. Now that we're in this liminal crisis point of the pandemic and ecological problems, do you have any sort of hopes for the resurgence of the progressive work ethic?

**Elizabeth Anderson** I do have some hope for a renewal of the progressive work ethic. In the American context, as you know, we are in a crisis of democracy, because the Republican party doesn't believe in it anymore. However, from an economic point of view, it's quite surprising how far left consensus views are—keeping in mind that everything in America, politically speaking, is well to the right of everything in Western Europe practically--but I mean it relative to the U.S. political spectrum. When increases in the minimum wage are put to a referendum, including in the deepest red states, they win. That is underlying popular opinion, you could talk to most Republicans and they think we should increase the minimum wage, that it's outrageous that people could be toiling away at

two jobs and still be impoverished, which is the case in the United States because our minimum wage is scandalously low. There are a lot of other economic proposals like this that the plutocrats in the United States don't want to see happen but are broadly popular. Biden's 1.9 trillion-dollar economic plan for dealing with the pandemic is wildly popular even among the Republican rank and file.

**Tom Boland:** Right, and because it's not just a criticism of everything that there is, because there's so much about critique in the academy or in politics, but what you're suggesting, rather than criticising the single work ethic, you're mobilising the ideal of the progressive work ethic as something we can all get behind.

**Elizabeth Anderson** Exactly, and that's what I want to say, especially since the work ethic saturated the United States, to recover this positive tradition. The truth is that neoliberalism has a lot to answer for and Americans are pretty upset by a lot of stuff. You might have heard about how the big pharmaceutical companies in the United States engaged in fraudulent marketing of opioid painkillers on a massive scale and created a huge problem. I mean a scandalously vast problem of addiction which is, by the way, concentrated among white people. One thing to understand about the United States is that you can never exaggerate how much racism affects domestic policy. Racism is a fundamental cause for why the United States is well to the right of any place in Europe. It's the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow, it's racism that's driving that. However, now even whites are being screwed, as they are the principal people to whom all of these opioid pills were being prescribed. They're literally dying en-masse from this, and so the critique of capitalism has moved well beyond lefty circles and has spread across the population. What the Republican party is doing right now is they're trying to distract people with culture wars stuff. You might have heard they're talking about the cancellation of Dr Seuss, even while a lot of people are worried that their spouse is an addict. So that's where we are. For this reason, I do think the country is ripe for a revival of a progressive work ethic.

**Tom Boland:** Thank you so much for talking to me: I'd like to just invite people in.

**Audience Question:** I realised the irony of asking this question when there's a crucifix bolted to the wall behind me...I know you're talking about being hopeful about reimagining a work ethic. But is there a risk the way the world is that we're nearly too far over the edge, that it's almost like this hyper-neoliberal society at the moment? Is there ever really an

opportunity to work back to an alternative the way neoliberalism and capitalism are at the moment?

**Elizabeth Anderson:** The end of my book offers a critique of neoliberalism and an attempt to re-envision what a truly progressive work ethic would look like. I'm calling for an update of social democracy. Max Weber correctly argued that over time the work ethic got secularised, but what does secularisation mean? It means pulling goods that are promised in the next life into this life. And what was the principal good that Richard Baxter promised people who obeyed the work ethic? It's that when you're saved, you enjoy the saints' everlasting rest: you work like the Dickens in this life, but then you get an eternal vacation in communion with God in the next. And then the work ethic secularised on the progressive side. What this meant is that leisure is good and one of the principal achievements of social democracy in Europe is guaranteed paid vacations--as an end of itself, not just to recharge yourself to work again. That's a classic example of secularisation. In America, there are no guaranteed paid vacations. We're the only rich country in the world that doesn't have that. You might get it by contract with your employer, but only about half of American workers even get paid vacations through the private employment contract. And a majority of American workers don't even take all the vacation they're entitled to!

**Tom Boland:** Before the pandemic, I think there was this building conversation that certain countries were trying to implement this a four-day working week and to promote more leisure and family time and so on. I think it's really interesting to see what certain jobs and businesses that all of us always would have said we need people on-site, they need to be here, and now we are starting to realise that a lot of the things that people could be doing can be done from home in their kitchens or our front offices or whatever. I think that's interesting to see in terms of where our work ethic may end up is that I think a lot of people are kind of surprised about what they can achieve from their spare rooms. It's just really interesting to see what that'll do for certain reforms over time as well.

**Elizabeth Anderson:** I agree. I think it raises interesting possibilities, although for a lot of people it's complicated because women, in particular, have a tough job if the kids are home from school or preschool due to the pandemic. It's been catastrophic for women's employment because many of them have had to quit their jobs to take care of the kids because they can't do both. And the office does serve a lot of social functions. There's this experiment done by one firm in the United States giving people the option to stay home or go to the office. They found that the people who

stayed and worked from home were more productive, but then they wanted the sociability of the office. I think maybe a hybrid model would be good: it would be good to be able to cut back on commuting (it pollutes and wastes time), but to get back to face-to-face engagement some of the time. I miss talking with my students in the classroom, after all.

Extended Interview link: <http://hecat.eu/archive-economy-society-digital-summer-school-2021/>

# INTERVIEW WITH ILANA GERSHON

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The following is a transcript of a seminar delivered at the Economy & Society Digital Summer School 2021. In this seminar, Ilana Gershon outlined her research on neoliberalism with reference to two journal articles she has written on the subject, the two pieces bookending her exploration of how the neoliberal hiring process has pushed jobseekers to develop a conceptual framework of themselves as a CEO of Me, Inc. The transcript has been lightly edited to improve readability.

**Tom Boland:** It's my great pleasure to welcome Ilana to the summer school.

**Ilana Gershon:** Thank you, I am so pleased to be part of this very impressive line-up that you have orchestrated, the other talks also look fantastic. I want to begin by briefly giving you a little context for both of my papers. So first of all, when I was beginning to write my first article on neoliberalism -- which I guess was in 2005 or 2006-- probably 70 per cent of the papers and conference talks in anthropology had neoliberal in their title. Neoliberalism was constantly being mentioned in my intellectual world and yet I was repeatedly confounded by what people meant by neoliberalism. Much of the time it sounded like good old-fashioned capitalism to me. I felt I had a choice. I could either develop a more elaborate and precise toolkit for determining for myself when a phenomenon was neoliberalism by my standards or when it was just good old-fashioned capitalism. Or I could go off and I could study something much more fun like cosplay. I decided to figure out for myself what makes neoliberalism part of a distinct historical moment and retain studying cosplay as the dream deferred. In particular, I wanted to think about how to delineate neoliberalism as a very distinct stage of capitalism. Trying to uncover different strategies for doing so has been shaping most of my work for the past decade and a half.

So, my first attempt at this task is the article "Neoliberal Agency." At the time describing the neoliberal self as an entrepreneurial self was a fairly commonplace thing to do but I wanted to go a little bit further than that. I wanted to know what the principal assumptions are underlying an

entrepreneurial self so that I could distinguish it from generic capitalism itself.

So, what kind of agency does a neoliberal self-exhibit and what kind of relationships can a neoliberal self have? The seven-second version of what I came up with is that a neoliberal self is a bundle of skills, assets, experiences, qualities, and relationships that must be consciously managed and constantly enhanced and that this self enters into relationships with other social unities that are also structured along the lines of corporate personhood. These are relationships in which the ideal is to distribute risk and responsibility among all the participants in mutually beneficial ways when what counts as mutually beneficial is really up for grabs.

So it's a form of contractual sociality – and it turns out that other anthropologists found this model of the neoliberal self fairly analytically productive. For example, some scholars found it very useful when they wanted to think more about scale fetishism. Scale fetishism is the way in which neoliberal logics ignore differences in scale to such a degree that it can make sense for four women in Bangladesh to come together in a micro-credit scheme with a bank, and try to make sure that the bank does not bear too much risk by loaning the money. Now, before neoliberalism, any good capitalist would have considered this particular formulation in which four women are seen as scalarly equivalent to a multinational bank truly bizarre. But here you see the contracts become a legal technology for overlooking the complexities of social unities in much the same way that commodity fetishism has encouraged us to overlook labour – hence the term “scale fetishism.”

Yet this model of the neoliberal self that I developed was based on reading other people's ethnographies and theoretical analyses, not based on any ethnography of my own. And so I was left wondering: if my model is correct, what issues come up for people when they try to implement it? When do some people use aspects of neoliberal logic to argue against other parts? What are the internal tensions for people living as neoliberals that might lead to change and transformation? I'm ever hopeful that people on the ground will find neoliberalism unliveable on its own terms. Unlike Wendy Brown, Nikolas Rose and Will Davies and other critics of neoliberalism that you've all engaged with, I'm trying not to criticise from the outside, so to speak. I'm interested in the internal fissures.

To engage with this internal critique, I decided I was going to study the hiring ritual, hiring is replete with internally contradictory clashing logics,

such as when people in making a hiring decision argue for choosing the applicant with skills as opposed to the applicant with networks, for example. In the name of research, I ended up suffering through more workshops on how to craft the most appealing genre repertoire for the job market --the most appealing resume, LinkedIn profile, or personal brand --that anyone other than a very determined researcher should ever attend. I also interviewed over 150 people from all sides of the hiring ritual: the hiring managers, recruiters, HR people, and job seekers.

Now I want to say two more things about my take on neoliberalism. At the beginning of my second article, the ethnographic response to “Neoliberal Agency”, I suggested that I’m taking neoliberal logics to be oddly parallel to communism in the Soviet Union. It sounds cheeky but I’m fairly serious about this. Both approaches are based on abstract and transformative texts that provide trenchant critiques of contemporaneous economic systems, but little insight into what should come next. Just as Marx offered his readers little insight into what social life might actually be under communism, this is also a failure for Hayek, the Austrian economist, and his other colleagues in the Mont Pelerin Society when they describe neoliberalism. In the cases of both Marxism and neoliberalism, people on the ground have had to tackle a quixotic task of translation. They’ve been turning a theoretical armature packed with critique and bold overarching principles, but bereft of socially prescriptive insights, into a set of guidelines for the practical quandaries of daily life. Neither Marx nor Hayek, for example, explained how hiring should take place under communism, or an ideal free market condition respectively, but, as I hope my article helped convince you if life hasn’t already, hiring is a commonplace but fairly significant activity. Hiring is foundationally a question of what kind of person a community of workers might want to join them and even signalling possible answers to this question can help people address crucial dilemmas connecting moral philosophy, economic precepts, and everyday practices.

One last thing, I want to discuss the questions all this fieldwork left me with. My current research on Americans’ experiences when they are working in person during the pandemic has been a detour. I started off trying to explore two large questions that are still nagging at me. First, Let’s say neoliberalism has spread effectively and everyone is seriously committed to this idea that we are all entrepreneurial selves and that every business is a nest of tiny businesses contracting with a larger business for the moment as an employee. Does neoliberalism then make the age-old question of why anyone would accept a boss into a new and pressing question? What does it mean to govern and be governed at work

if everyone is in a business-to-business relationship with each other? This last question haunts me. Trump doesn't sound very much like a neoliberal, although he may act like a neoliberal at times. I have been wondering if part of his appeal is that he rejects stable contracts, and being stable within contracts. Let's face it, contractual stability is a necessary component of neoliberalism if it's going to function at all. Yet this leaves me wondering what is it about contracts that make people so unhappy that they would turn to Trump. So this is how I became interested in employment contracts and how contractual sociality functions in the workplace.

**Tom Boland:** In a world in which people say neoliberalism is just about everything, two figures loom large in your work— Foucault on neoliberalism and particularly his lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics*, and also Boltanski and Chiapello's and their work *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Can you talk about how those works inform the directions you're taking?

**Ilana Gershon:** I think Foucault acted with great integrity in tracking who was coming up with these ideas. Normally when people talk about neoliberalism, at least in anthropology, they're not always turning to the particular thinkers who originated these ideas and tracking the historical trajectory that led to the particular changes that happened. I think it's very important to think about why these ideas were emerging in the way they were. Who was thinking about them, how they were translated and then they spread.

Foucault begins by dealing with the beginning part of my set of questions by tracking the fact that there were different strands to neoliberalism. There was the Chicago school, the Austrian school, and so on and these ideas were spreading out in a variety of ways. There was an internal logic that brought everybody to the same table, but once there, people disagreed with each other. Foucault clears the path for saying there's a left neoliberal and a right neo-liberal, which I think is a very useful distinction to have. And he clears the path for thinking about the variety and what I see Boltanski and Chiapello doing is the hard work of asking how does it get implemented right which Foucault would have done if he had lived longer possibly, right?

**Tom Boland:** The emphasis on projects in Boltanski and Chiapello seems both broad and, potentially, shallow. The focus is very much about getting involved in projects and the projects are contractual. Whereas the

emphasis on the individual person as a bundle of skills or a business solution seems more Foucauldian.

**Ilana Gershon:** To me, it's a slightly different question. When you mention Boltanski and Chiapello's emphasis on the project, I have to admit I immediately think about this fabulous article, about to be published by Andy Grann who is taking Boltanski and Chiapello on. He is arguing that the project form is a form that scholars have been overly invested in as an object of study. There are other ways in which work is being organised, but ethnographers have focused a lot on the project form, which has its own collection of genres, its own repertoire for organising itself, and its own kind of temporality and way of recruiting people to participate. And that that the project form's boundedness is very important for understanding the contract that can but doesn't always lead to participating in the project form. It also leaves open the question of what do you do when you are actually living a life that is itself not a project but you are still a being that is contributing to a variety of projects.

To say "life is not a project" sounds inane and obvious, but part of what I'm asking is, if the world is being crafted in terms of this project form – that we are experiencing labour as packaged for many people in project forms but not everyone, who are the people who then have to engage with that the ambivalences of the project form? And what are the costs for moving from project to project when you've had other forms of work that have been historically present as recently as a few decades ago, with infrastructural support for that alternative still lingering? I guess that's why I'm focusing on the person. I want to know what is the self that ends up getting swept into the project, and what kind of sociality is presupposed as well.

**Tom Boland:** I always think it's great when a theory gets as far as not describing the 'other' or another world of another imaginary workspace but our academic workspace. We are in a project right now. Of course, there are no contracts involved because if you didn't turn up today, we could only send you a complaint or something like that; What could we do you know? But like everything else, serious reputational costs are riding on this!

**Ilana Gershon:** Oh I know, I know, we live in these projects, I find myself doing projects and talking about projects constantly. We're all people who are oriented deeply to projects or else we wouldn't be here. Tom, you're speaking to one of the things that I am deeply suspicious of: Which theorists become really popular in the academy. And I always wonder if

they become really popular because they speak to the academics' everyday life experience in some interesting way, right?

So I think Deleuze and Guattari got very popular around the time that we were all getting our information through databases, we found our references through databases, and so suddenly rhizomes resonate a bit too well with our everyday attempts to figure out what we need to know, what we should be reading and how we are connecting to people.

**Ray Griffin:** To take up another element of your work, you juxtapose, the central idea of the contract within neoliberalism against a Foucauldian and Marxist sensitivity to power relations. I feel, or I wonder if there is scope for tracing the historical evolution of these ideas, tracing ideas from early capitalism with its laissez-faire imagination to a more structured imagination and then this idea of the contract in neoliberalism.

**Ilana Gershon:** I completely agree. I think that this is absolutely necessary to try to figure out ways to make neoliberalism more historical. We all have ideas that we think: someone could pick this up and do something with it, but you just don't always find the right bar to walk into to convince them to do so! But one of the ways in which I've been thinking about sharpening the definition of neoliberalism historically is not actually focused on contracts. I think contracts are very important, but one of the ways to think about this distinction is to look at how new technologies get picked up. How new technologies get introduced and picked up under neoliberalism is very different from how they got picked up under Fordism. So under Fordism, you had schools and institutions and governments trying to control how people were using newly introduced media.

The very odd thing about new media or any kind of any new technology is that you have to deal with all sorts of unexpected communicative problems. We are facing this right now with Zoom – how do we seamlessly end our conversational turns and allow one other person the opportunity to speak? The classic example involves landlines. When they were introduced, people had to figure out how to answer them, how to indicate that they were now on the line. People didn't know what word to use. So, Edison wanted everyone to use hello and Graham Bell wanted everyone to use ahoy? And Edison wins, in part I think because his company was producing the phone books that then everybody was using as a guide for etiquette. But you don't have this with Facebook – or Zoom. You don't have companies or schools or manuals insisting this is how we are going to define what poke means or how best to defriend someone.

What these neoliberal technologies are trying to do, in order to get users committed to using them, is to make technology accessible that functions as a glass half full of meaning, and half-empty, and then the user is supposed to contribute the rest of the meaning.

So, I think there are a lot of interesting ways to ask historically how these shifts take place. Oh, but I want to add a tangent, one of the things that I want to say about the 'hello' versus 'ahoy' contest, which is also actually very Foucauldian, a point he talks about in Discipline and Punish. I don't know if you watch the Simpsons a lot, but Mr. Burns on the Simpsons will answer the phone 'ahoy.' It's at that moment that you see that the ragged gestures of epic changes. Not everything changes all at once, and you have the traces of earlier attempts at standardisation or control over labour emerging in various ways. And right now, well, not everything is neoliberal or fascist or whatever new era we're moving into.

**Tom Boland:** Yeah, but I think the other thing here is the definition of neoliberal because one person's neoliberal is different to another person's... I suspect that this... well I don't suspect, I firmly believe the meaning of this changes through history, and as you point out about technology and all the rest of it. And I wondered again getting back to Trump.

**Ilana Gershon:** I mean you're right I mean how can you describe Trump as a neoliberal? I mean he's more authoritarian and fits into a different model frankly so in a way that's part of that was part of his problem in America of today frankly you know he would have fitted in the former Soviet Union or any of those stands or wherever he'd fit in probably fit in better there Kazakhstan was a good model I think he would have done very well something like that, would've suited him, yeah but I mean he seems to still be doing very well like you say that's part of his problem I'm thinking that may be part of his appeal.

**Ray Griffin:** Just circle back to the contract, do you feel that contracts in some way can capture the totality of social relations, or rather do they represent a sedimentation ' of social relations? Most of the contracts we have, employment contracts exist in this long precedence of law and contestation and encoded in them is all the historical fights that have gone on in and everything that we've learned... or is it that they're just a backdrop to an authentic kind of moral economy of work where you know people don't read their contracts? Is that what's changing in the neoliberal contract with the likes of Uber and other platform gig economy

employment forms under which the where the contract is the totality of the relations?

**Ilana Gershon:** I'm so glad you're asking me about the contract because what I've been doing has been interviewing people about their employment contracts. Or rather I should say that is what I began to do. I can tell you that my fieldwork was fairly difficult, not just because of the pandemic, but because people don't actually think about their contracts. For the most part in their daily life, they don't deal with their employment contracts very much. So there have to be special circumstances in place to make the contract vivid and important for people. At the same time, I think what's actually written as an employment contract is only part of what happens with control. Let me back up. So I teach Durkheim fairly regularly and one of the ways in which I teach Durkheim is by saying that he has this major problem in imagining the social contract. He has enormous integrity as a sociologist and realises that there is never actually a moment where anybody signs the social contract. He's a good enough ethnographer to worry about this and the one space in which people are committing in some form or another to something that resembles a social contract is by joining a workplace in which they are trading away their autonomy for a certain form of security. So the social contract as an idea writ large is shaping their employment experiences and their strategies when negotiating their rights at work. I have been interviewing a lot of people about their experiences working in person during the pandemic, and it's not going to surprise many of you that people are not exactly happy with how their employers are dealing with the potential risk of the pandemic at work. Workers are constantly struggling with the question of whether they should quit their job or not and what's interesting for me in talking to them about it is they're not talking about collective action. Some of them are, but the handful of people who are talking about collective action is much smaller than the number of people who see quitting work as the only appropriate political action to the contractual sociality that dominates them. It's not that they're turning to their employment contract and saying what is in my employment contract that will protect me right now. My take is that contracts matter tremendously as a set of assumptions shaping what people's political strategies at work are but the actual contract doesn't always matter or it takes a lot of work to make it matter. At the same time, I do want to say that contracts themselves have changed in response to neoliberalism. And so we now have many more non-compete clauses in people's contracts in the United States than ever before, and for people where you wouldn't think that a non-compete clause would make sense. Yoga instructors get non-compete clauses. My favourite non-compete

clause that I learned about was for a sandwich maker at a local chain sandwich shop that was told that he had to sign a contract with a non-compete clause. He could not work for another sandwich maker or franchise for six months but he couldn't work for the same chain for six months. He couldn't switch stores in the same franchise. People are now constantly forced to imagine themselves as a business in their employment contracts.

# COMMUTING

## KENNY DOYLE

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I hate commuting. I say this at the outset as a means of declaring an interest in the discussion that follows. In the absence of a commute over the last year, I have thoroughly enjoyed teaching from home via videoconferencing software which I could do with a minimum of fuss and even on many occasions without having to arrange childcare or wear shoes. I have been able to attend conferences and seminars from the comfort of my own living room including events in other countries that would have been entirely out of my reach in normal circumstances. I have been able to teach without having to spend over an hour each way encased in a car resisting the tendency towards impatience, frustration and road rage. I have benefitted from having extra disposable income that would usually be handed over to an attendant in a petrol station and I have cherished the extra time I have had to spend with my family.

Yet the fact that I could enjoy all of these benefits is entirely associated with privilege. I have enough space in my home to set some aside as a makeshift office. I have a sufficient broadband speed to allow for videoconferencing software and I have an environment that (occasionally) is quiet enough to allow for me to work. As well as this the work I have been doing lends itself to being done at home instead of in a workplace. Had the pandemic occurred when I worked in my previous job as a bank teller this would not have been the case. The initial introduction of restrictions related to the containment of Covid 19 was a short sharp shock that instantly reconfigured many aspects of the social world. While many of these changes are fleeting and will disappear over time, there are others that will become chronic, and others still which will perhaps be a little bit harder to shake once they have become embedded into social practice. Crises are often seen in hindsight as tipping point moments where normative practices are problematised and reconsidered through the lens of the moment of crisis. The present crisis has undoubtedly highlighted some of the absurdities of working life, particularly the requirement for workers to be co-present in a designated work setting. While there are many jobs that require a specific workplace there are

many others that don't and given the various types of costs associated with commuting the discussion on working from home is long overdue.

## **THE COMMUTING SOCIETY**

The psychological and sociological evidence on commuting is mixed at best and there are similarly mixed responses in think pieces and media articles. For some the commute acts as a form of staging post towards getting to work, it is the time when they can mentally prepare for the labours ahead and get themselves in the correct frame of mind. Similarly the commute home can be characterised as a time of decompression, where one can listen to music or the radio and prepare to adjust their mood for the home. In this sense the commute can be seen as a means of facilitating the switch from one social area to another. The time spent between the social arenas of work and home are in this reading a form of liminal space which allows for the transition and facilitates the social code switching between them.

For others commuting is characterised as a stressful and frustrating extension to the working day and as such the quicker it can be carried out the better. In common parlance rush hour traffic is associated with traffic jams, rat runs and motorways described as being car parks. Traffic updates on the radio consistently call to mind the same places where traffic bottlenecks occur. Temporally speaking the shorter a commute can be made the better, this makes it competitive as drivers frequently race to avoid bottlenecks and get ahead of heavy traffic thus shortening the working day. In workplaces where arrangements such as flexi-time are possible people stagger their working hours so as to avoid peak traffic hours. Keohane et al describe commuter driving culture as having a 'particular economy of time' where people are constantly busy and find themselves 'short of time'. This is experienced in practice by 'being nudged over to the shoulder of the road by faster moving cars even though one is driving at the speed limit' (Keohane et al 2003, p. 50). In this sense the competitive elements of the commute can be seen as an extension of the competitive rat race of work.

In the mid 1990's Manuel Castells wrote about the potential for the nascent digital networks of the Internet to facilitate 'electronic cottages' where workers in the informational economy could work in a manner which was disconnected from the 'space of place' so long as they could have access to working in the 'space of flows' (Castells 1996). If we had examined this statement in February 2020 we could have easily argued

that this potential had never really been realised but in a few short months the sheer scale of work that was disarticulated and unbundled from workplaces would shock even the most optimistic techno-futurists.

To gain an accurate picture of what commuting in Ireland looks like we can consult the census data. In social scientific terms one of the casualties of the pandemic was that of the Census of Ireland which was due to take place in 2020. For this reason the data used here is taken predominantly from the 2016 census. Firstly the main mode of transport for Irish commuters is the private car with 61.4% of all commuters travelling this way with a further 4.1% travelling as a car passenger and a further 7.3% travelling by van or truck. In fact it is probably easier to break down the numbers according to those who do not travel by motor vehicle with a mere 9.3% travelling by foot, 3% by bicycle and 3.4% by train, Dart or Luas. This means that 84.3% of all commuters travel in private motor vehicles and the vast majority of these are private cars with one person in them. Fewer than 10% of all commuters avail of public transport which means that the typical commute is undertaken in a car. The mode of commuting can be influential for broader social outcomes with a Swedish study (Mattison et al 2015) finding that there was a significant association between commuting by car and broader social disengagement.

In terms of time spent the average commute is 28.2 minutes each way which is 56.4 minutes each day getting to and from work. In 2019 there were 252 working days with the minimum amount of annual leave days in Ireland being 20 meaning that full-time workers in 2019 commuted approximately 232 days. This means that the average annual commute is 13,084.8 minutes which is the equivalent of 9.086 days. While the overall average commute time is 28.2 minutes there are a significant number – almost 11% who have a commute of an hour or more. Of this group the average commute is 74 minutes which converts to an annual tally of 11.92 days. Time spent travelling to and from work is time which is not spent doing useful or enjoyable things. It is an extension of the working day, time stolen from family life, from socialising with friends. Broadly speaking the time spent commuting on average is roughly equal to half of the minimum entitlement for annual leave days. In this sense being relieved of the daily commute can be seen as gaining back roughly ten days per year that would otherwise be spent travelling to and from work. The high costs of housing coupled with urban concentrations of work have made lengthy commutes inevitable with housing price pressures in urban centres leading to a notable expansion of the commuter belt. The normalisation of lengthy commutes can thus be seen as a symptom of failure in other policy areas notably housing, labour and transport.

The most noticeable and immediate personal cost of commuting is the financial. Fuel prices are on an endless upward trajectory making travelling more expensive and with the long distances typically commuted by many people this becomes a large financial burden. In Ireland as we have seen above the vast majority of commuters travel in private cars and so rising fuel costs mean a large number of people will lose a higher portion of their net income. Thus the commute not only eats into free time but it also is a financial cost which is levied on individual workers. It is perhaps unsurprising that in the initial phases of the Covid 19 crisis people noticed the savings they were making by not having to spend this money. A UK bank <sup>(xx)</sup> recently estimated that people on average saved £29 per week during the Covid lockdown period in costs directly related to fuel or public transport and the ESRI has reported a steady increase in rates of savings for individuals and families since the beginning of the crisis.

Under these conditions there are obviously other people and businesses that will lose out. Owners of office blocks, cafés and car parks for example require a steady supply of people travelling to a workplace paying for parking and buying their lunch every day. Owners of large office blocks with expensive leases need to have workers in them. It is perhaps unsurprising that the people invested in this particular status quo have made their voices heard. In the UK last year there was a glut of newspaper articles about the joys of commuting which talked of it as being a time to zone out, to relax and listen to music or podcasts although these were mostly written by people who themselves work from home and haven't faced a regular commute in years. The most worrying cost of commuting is that of the cost to the environment, we have seen above how the majority of journeys to and from work are made in single occupant private motor vehicles and this has a negative effect on the environment. As such there is a straightforward argument in environmental terms for the reduction of commuting. In this sense commuting in Ireland is a contributory factor to what Rob Nixon (2011) terms slow violence which has catastrophic effects on our planet.

Irish people are overwhelmingly in favour of remote working. A national survey published in October 2020 found that 94% stated a preference towards some degree of remote working being in place once the Covid crisis was finished (ref xx) The State similarly seems to be broadly in favour of facilitating remote working arrangements as it is seen as a means of meeting a number of policy objectives including reducing greenhouse gas emissions, regional development and labour market inclusion. In January 2021 the Irish Government published the National

Remote Work Strategy which includes among other actions a significant investment in remote work hubs which will allow people to work in regional hubs.

## **CONCLUSION**

Looking forward it is unlikely that commuting will be done away with entirely. Firstly there are many jobs which simply cannot be done from home or from a regional hub and so the people doing these will still have to commute. As well as this there is not as yet a definitive evidence base on productivity and home working. While avoiding the commute and its attendant costs is a good thing it does throw up a range of questions the answer to which will go a long way to deciding the future of commuting for many. These questions relate primarily to the line of demarcation between work and home, will it mean that work will creep further into the everyday domain of family life? The discussion around the so-called right to disconnect is crucial in this respect yet there are also questions around how remote working is managed and the extent to which the management of home workers will lead to increased surveillance. Homeworking also raises questions of workplace culture and of collegiality and whether working from home or via digital networks causes isolation or distance from work and colleagues. However, these questions are answered there will be a lengthy period of adapting to new norms of work life and home life and the interactions between the two.

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# 'FLAWLESS': THE STAGING OF PANDEMIC-DRIVEN REMOTE INTERVIEWS AND THE POLISHING OF THE ONLIFE PERSONA

**JANOS MARK SZAKOLCZAI**

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Ireland, like many other western countries, has become a place where we may no longer detach the physical persona may from its virtual elements. This perspective has been introduced by Luciano Floridi with his neologism 'onlife' - whereas the online and the life of the subject/user have become the same thing (Floridi, 2015). This agrees with the still relevant formula 'The Medium is the Message' (McLuhan, 1967) – whereas with technological changes the deliverance of the message changes. Within waging war on the COVID-19 pandemic significant new sets of 'understanding' and 'delivering' the message have taken place which need to be addressed. Indeed, the physical entity has more than ever been required to step back and leave space for the virtual equivalent. While restricted to physical distancing, the everyday activities found a necessarily (albeit comfortably prolific) ground in the net - the virtual infosphere – where, with greater confidence than ever we could commute all sorts of shopping, searching, watching, clicking, scrolling, commenting and reviewing.

The labour market and job seekers just as well found its (forcefully) accommodating soil within its online recruitment pages. If it is decades since job seekers have scanned for work on specific search engines and web-publicised posts, with the pandemic restrictions a true novelty emerged: the necessity of interviewing candidates remotely and online.

Such condition has created a fundamentally new dynamic of self-presentation and remote judgment – and perhaps changed the very *message* of performance and presentation. This short article will attempt to make consideration on this aspect, using my personal experience as a job seeker in 2021 as a case study.

## **SKIMMING THE ONLINE FOOTPRINT**

Several aspects which are already discussed elsewhere will be necessarily left out: one well-known area is the use of optimised algorithms in the evaluation of candidates (Guerry & Feyter, 2012) and the somewhat time-consuming application forms (Zielinski, 2016), an issue that has been considered and raised already before the pandemic - though it developed to become an ever-increasingly deployed and supposedly more sophisticated in judgment (Higginbotham, 2021). Also, the issue of being misled online into believing the ‘real you’ is another person altogether can be related to the idea of catfishing (Suler, 2015) – which appears as a form of onlife hoax. Nonetheless, once the ‘real’ encounter takes place loses its ‘effect’. Instead, an aspect that is not strictly novel yet is ever more significant for applying to the job market is the dazzling effect of our online presence - the social media and networking - the quality of the information, the data involved. This is important, as with the pandemic no physical encounter with candidates is allowed: the online persona and its onlife merge - becoming central and essential elements- at least theoretically. Indeed, this piece concentrates on the personal considerations that have been raised in trying to deal with such a novel presentation of the self.

The online persona - in light of an online interview - would have become a central and unavoidable element of consideration. Thus, apart from the preparation of a clear, relevant, coherent, and concise curriculum vitae that represented my (meticulously organised) work experience - a great deal of time was perceived as necessary to ‘skim’ and ‘polish’ one’s online persona. This could concern all the internet noise and footprints a user has left around, through social networks, blog posts, reviews, articles, magazines. To do that, a satisfying (albeit frustrating) tool was to vary search engines, looking up one’s name -through different platforms, servers, and devices. Every time, new results would come up, showing different variations of the same persona. Old profiles and obsolete social platforms would appear, to which credentials were long lost and forgotten. One particular ‘selfie’ was recurring, not offensive in any manner yet not professional, to which appeared no simple mode for getting rid of. More

than that, paranoia stroke with the fear of by giving too much concern to the picture, albeit trying to cover it, would only increase its visibility ratio. Many companies offer services that indeed polish the online presence, but luckily this was in no way necessary in this case. It is important nonetheless to notice the dedication - almost equivalent to the work-related CV - to build and offer a mint, well-shaven, clean, and friendly online persona. All profile pictures were re-evaluated, with an insistent request to friends to offer an opinion. A coherent LinkedIn profile was set up, with a certain urgency in trying to connect and produce as much relevant content as possible, keeping in mind the informal advice that a 'stale' social account is possibly worse than not having one at all. But yet, in such a pandemic era, not having one at all did not seem any longer an option: the onlife persona, again, seems to be a requirement to which, in absentia, could offer no alternative of judgment. One had to be fully engaged or simply appear as a 'not economically viable' asset.

## **POLISHING THE VIRTUAL IN-PERSON REMOTE PERSONA**

With the proximity of the much-awaited interview date, much consideration was given in effectively how to present oneself to remote, on-screen judging committee - all without the use of handshakes, small talk, ice-breaking 'throat clearing', etc. Indeed, close to the appointed date, I realised that potentially the interview would not only take place remotely for me - but also for all the members of the evaluating team - who also were in separate rooms: a 'winning' vibe of a candidate's performance was to be based not on a committee - but to single, isolated individuals; who could not influence - nor incentivise - each other. Interestingly, and here this seems telling, the internet had no clear answers. Very rare, before the pandemic, 'totally remote' interviews were regularly taking place. Blog and article entries related to 'how to dress for an interview' or '10 mistakes not to make', albeit dated only a bunch of months back, did not engage in the reality of not meeting in person - not shaking ("firmly") hands, not feeling the bad-breath, or the over-abused cologne - knowing the person before you, and being known before them. Instead, one finds himself in the odd condition of having to make up one's mind all alone about what is valuable, what effective - the necessary impression - to the risk of making a fool of oneself. By everything being online, it came as a natural consideration that as one's online presence had to be flawless and conspicuously judged (again, perhaps not all - one can never know); also, my on-screen - while talking - presence had to be mint. Sharp: HD with no glitches.

Immediately the question of the 'right spot' where to have the conversation arose - with such space needing also a flawless internet connection – and furthermore to be performed with a perfectly reliable computer: Just as my interview which supposedly needed to be mint, responsive and clear – so too the tools I used. Also, the sounds were important - doorbells needed not to ring, nor phones. Perfect silence was essential. In this light, the pressure of a perfect performance appears to be as demanding as ever: a minimal voice delay in the connection, or any sort of incident, could potentially influence the entire evaluation.

This is central when realising that it was not simply a persona to be judged: it was, and still is, your onlife engagement: you as an entity on a screen - an actor who plays the part of the perfect employee. Just as in films, all lights and make-up and background could, and need, to be perfectly managed and programmed. Even the choice of the right outfit, a typical concern of any candidate, becomes more than ever central - *should I wear a tie or not? should I shave? Wear glasses or contacts?* - to the evident extent of 'what looks better on camera?'. It appeared clear that the one-shot engagement with the committee was no longer a question of that half an hour interview - but of an instant impression: a first glance of 'on-screen' dazzle - crispiness, in-synch reaction and confidence across all the technological variables.

## **FALSE PROMOTION MANAGEMENT**

*A posteriori*, trying to grasp the effect of what the first impression of you would offer, the number of variables that could have indeed modified or enhanced on the behalf of the interviewed stand out. Let's begin by considering the social media presence. A lot of effort had been put into place to try to deliver an online 'pleasant' appearance, coherent, professional. But also, friendly, sporty, healthy, 'social'- as well as international and - why not? - multi-cultural – with a required pinch of exaggeration. Profile pictures needed to show all that but may also *pretend* all that. After all, the first impression is all – and impression management, going back to Goffman (1959) is a central element of presenting oneself. Indeed, by 'manipulating' the impression of yourself, who can recriminate for falling for it? For your not being what you appeared online? While it is evident that 'you are checked out' – albeit relatively anonymously, as in the case of the LinkedIn searches – who can admit he actually *checked you out*? Having a picture with a child may be particularly misleading – though I do not suggest it is always a boost. HR

or an interviewer may believe you are a family member - and thus discriminate one as a committed individual. Particularly in case females, such child-baring pictures may offer the bias impression of having already 'done their part' - and thus have low probability of requesting another maternity leave. If the issue is raised, one could simply admit that it is a picture of a niece - a cousin: the variables are in the eye of the beholder. Likewise, the same may take place discriminating real mothers: total control of all information, again, appears as the necessary strategy.

In the case of presenting ourselves during a remote interview - through Zoom or Meet, in any case on a screen; another set of manipulating variables may come into play. The candidate may tilt the camera to appear taller than in reality. He may enhance lightning to change the colour tone of his skin. Regarding background, one may create an entire cinematic style of setting- presenting behind oneself a neat bookshelf, or an over-the-top city skyline. This is not simply suggesting the use of digital filters - still bulky and evidently fake- but in staging relatively noticeably, though not obtrusively, an entire scenery in the backdrop. The candidate may place designer lamps, luxurious musical instruments, tropical plants, blooming flowers - feeding the impression of his personal 'good taste' and confidence - but also wealth, class, and prestige; with the underlined issue of appearing quite the opposite in another context: for example, a non-visible stain on a wall may appear more evident on a screen - and thus give an inadvertently false, run-down impression to the viewers.

## **FUTURE PROFESSIONS**

If we look at the current Irish scenario, a recent article in the *Irish Independent* announced the proximity of a "Great Resignation" slowly emerging - whereas 40% of Irish workers are planning to quit and change their jobs in the next year (Lavella, 2021). It is an unsettling prediction, yet has interesting implications in light of our being still - at least throughout 2021 and part of 2022- under partial social distancing restrictions and endorsement of smart-working. How many of these new candidates within the job market will find themselves arranging for online interviews?

With the advance of such conditions of remote interviewing and online meeting, enhanced by the manipulation of background and interest, the onlife persona becomes central on an entirely new level. Its essence appears as compatible with a strict social media profile - beyond a simple 'virtual' presence. If LinkedIn offered a 'first impression' management to recruiters and scout agents on your personal and professional - albeit

filtered- qualities, to which a physical interview compensated or 'revealed' its discrepancies – today with online interviewing processes such virtual pretences are further enhanced and even more 'filtered'. The management, manipulation, 'dazzling' appears to the advantage of those who better understand, promote and enhance an on-life persona. Of course, there is also a fundamental advantage towards straightforward discrimination against candidates – especially regarding racial prejudice. For such cases, up to recently it was a fundamental 'good sense' not to attach pictures in the CV – nor request them (although it is a very common practice in South America, and south of Europe among others). Yet again, the onlife persona seems to throw all such consideration out the window, as his public persona would become at the tip of a finger be exposed with any search engine.

Not only can candidate promote a falsely arranged family-oriented individuals, but the same deviating effect also can be done with profile pictures involving dogs, cats, certain books, – but even snapshots in fancy resorts, expensive holidays – arduous and adventurous treks, even a crypto-sexy poses and mild provocation. Again, none of this is professionally relevant – strictly speaking – but arguably, and perhaps this is one conclusion this article is leading to – online interviews aren't in the first place. Beyond that, two other exaggerated scenarios may be proposed considering the reality of 'onlife' job interviews. In one, future candidates could come to the extent of renting specific background 'workspaces' - an 'Office BnB' that offers perfect internet connection, next-generation devices to connect with, and a highly professional, well set, precisely lit and framed background – just for the duration of the interview. Such an aspect, requiring a physical scenario.

To prevent such occurrence, a potential scenario is one where companies will begin to invest in a new form of scout recruitment, one trying to operate and deliver the TrueYou persona - as described in the dystopian novel *The Circle* by Eggers (2013) - whereas algorithms would judge and clarify a non-filtered version of the candidate - a 'true' self, necessary (or perhaps not at all) for creating a coherent, familiar and transparent workplace. We may suppose such system may go as far as implementing AI 'mood recognition' tools to evaluate/implement the stress or sympathy levels in the candidate, all tools already promoted for consumer evaluation (Thomas, 2018). After all, returning to the understanding of the Medium being itself the Message, it is a certain untold agreement that technologies are our befriended tools as long as they work. Any technology that does not work, from computers to internet connection – is a bummer – it is time-consuming: requires troubleshooting and extra

assistance – and ultimately costly replacement. The same appears the case with the onlife job candidate: any glitch in his performance, and hesitation on-screen – appears quite parallel to the technological bulkiness. We are fundamentally, in the slightly exaggerated scenario, ever more perceived as machines. All these conditions may suddenly change or be fundamentally endorsed, as proven by Microsoft novel proposal to conduct ‘Avatar’ meetings – as to virtually engage with interactive variations of the self (Warren, 2021). Such an approach comes hand in hand with the ‘Metaverse’ hybridising of the Facebook social media experience (Thomas, 2021). All these aspects, which seem very close to reality, if not already available, take for granted the not-so-clear condition of a 'new normality' to which we must abide by; or rather take full advantage of...

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# IS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC OVER: A COSMOPOLITAN APPROACH TO EASING OUT RESTRICTIONS

## JAFLA PONTIANUS VITALIS

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If there is anything that COVID-19 has explicitly demonstrated to us in recent times it is the fact that the world is a global village heavily interconnected in almost every sphere of human endeavour (Cohen, Kennedy & Perrier, 2013). The world has been caught up in the web of a global health pandemic in which many nations are still in a process of implementing or lifting an unprecedented number of restrictions that most governments across the world had placed on their citizens as a measure to cope with the ravaging effect brought by the pandemic (Giddens & Sutton, 2021). One of the commonly shared views during the peak period of the pandemic was the belief that the global pandemic was a leveller that had no respect for social status, religious background, the socio-economic and developmental status of any nation or state. This was because the pandemic brought to a standstill almost every nation on the planet (Ilyas, 2020). This common global experience made many people believe that we were all affected by this, the rich as well as the poor, the developed nations as well as the developing nations (Bambra, Riordan, Ford & Matthews, 2020). This understanding which was also enhanced by the shared medical and scientific data across the world (Mandal, 2020), made many people and nations assume a collective and largely similar response to the pandemic; social distancing, use of facemask, hand washing, use of alcohol based sanitisers and self-isolation or quarantine (Khosla, Mittal, Sharma, & Goyal, 2021).

As soon as the vaccine rollout began, the same problem that united humanity became an occasion for entrenchment, nationalism and

politicisation of the pandemic (Hunter, & Kendall, 2020). As states gradually began to ease out of pandemic restrictions, the socio-economic divide that has long been part of the world (Ravallion, 2018) began to play itself out as many nations are almost done with the vaccine roll-out while others have barely started. According to Bollyky (2021) the largest vaccination campaign in world history is underway, but many nations remain excluded from its benefits. At the time of his writing, among the supposedly global rollout of coronavirus vaccines, approximately 382 million doses of vaccines have been administered, but just ten nations are responsible for three out of every four doses administered. Eighty countries representing approximately 1.2 billion people were then yet to administer a single dose of vaccine (Bollyky, 2021). This concern has created such an unequal social phenomenon in which some parts of the world are almost back to 'normal' while others have no hope or idea when their citizens will return to the so-called normal life. In what follows, through a discourse analysis I examine the increasingly unequal trends of the covid-19 pandemic and how the cosmopolitan approach to easing out restrictions can be the way forward out of this health catastrophe.

## **EASING OUT COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS ON THE DAWN OF VACCINE ROLLOUT**

As much as most nations in the world are making frantic efforts to confront the global pandemic with almost similar measures, there seems to be a disparity in how the covid-19 restrictions are eased out. Apparently some states are playing the ostrich by burying their heads in the sand and pretending that the virus no longer exists or that the virus has been contained (Dobrowolski, 2020). Other states are insisting on strict adherence to the lockdown measures as they roll out the vaccine for their citizens. The World Health Organisation (2021) acknowledged that safe and effective vaccines are a game-changing tool in combating the virus and returning to a normal life, but for the foreseeable future we must continue wearing masks, cleaning our hands, ensuring good ventilation indoors, physically distancing and avoiding crowds. This expectation and recommendation seem to be more urgent and necessary in countries that are still very slow in their vaccine rollout campaign.

The truth of the matter is that the global demand for COVID-19 vaccines in 2021 is estimated to be more than 10 billion doses, two to three times the annual global demand for all vaccines (Bullyky, 2021). As of 14 October 2021, globally, a total of 6.59 billion vaccine doses have been

administered. This has been skewed hugely by the fact that most developed nations are now running the booster jab while most developing and third world nations are just beginning to find their feet on the ground in the administration of the vaccine (WHO, 2021). Singh & Chattu (2021) commenting on this observed that the pandemic has created two worlds. The world of those with the vaccines like the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, China, and India on the other hand, and on the other hand we have those without the vaccine, which invariably is the rest of the world. This disparity poses a concern for vaccine inequalities, and unequal distribution, which undermine the collective easing out measures for all. Most people in poor countries are still waiting to have the first dose of the jab, while some nations are planning for booster doses (WHO, 2021). Since the vaccines have been acknowledged by most researchers and WHO as a game-changing tool (Felter, 2020), the world leaders and the WHO surely should see to it that it is not only produced but it is also distributed and accessible to all. What formula or ratio can guarantee this?

## **THE COSMOPOLITAN FORMULA: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO EASING LOCKDOWN RESTRICTION**

In the words of Anthony Guterres ‘the global vaccination campaign represents the greatest moral test of our time (UN, 2021). He went further to reiterate that Covid-19 vaccines should be seen as a global public good; the world needs to unite to produce and distribute sufficient vaccines for all, which means at least doubling manufacturing capacity around the world and that effort must start now (Guterres, 2021). Acknowledging the urgency with which the vaccines are to be produced and distributed, the United Nations secretary general invited both the pharmaceutical companies involved in the production and all the bureaucracy around the vaccine to be global in approach and mission. Any effort to nationalise or regionalise the vaccine will only lead to a lopsided world open to a new variant of the virus which could pose a higher and more challenging task on humanity as a whole.

Since the world has become so interconnected (Giddens, 2013), this interconnection brings opportunities as well as problems. The global benefits of these interconnections must also be used to solve the global problems created as a result of interconnectedness (Beck, 2009). Covid-19 is an explicit and invariably the trending symbol of our global connectedness. The vaccine as a tool for disconnecting this global

interconnectedness must be applied globally if the world truly wants to see the virus extinct from our world and society.

The cosmopolitan argument therefore seeks to advance these views and how they can become the building blocks of a connected world in both global successes and global problems. The cosmopolitan formula carries a variety of different philosophical positions that encompass the moral, institutional, bureaucratic, political and cultural spheres (Corvino, 2019). As the Greek 'kosmopolitês' ('citizen of the world') clearly suggests, the basic idea of any cosmopolitan view is that all human beings belong to a sort of world community that goes beyond geographical and political borders (Kleingeld & Brown, 2014). This is the same understanding Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si* (2015) which invited humanity to a collective concern for our common home (earth) irrespective of our racial, national, regional, religious, and socio-political differences (Tran, and Carey 2018). This understanding resonates with the ancient Stoic philosophers who base their philosophy on cosmopolitanism held that all human beings have a common capacity to reason and share a common spiritual element (Corvino, 2019). This idea was further amplified by the Epicurean ethics which held that this capacity distinguishes human beings from other living species, and it is the primary source of the human sense of moral value and makes all people members of a global fraternal community (O'Keefe, 2021). Such a community was open to all human beings, regardless of their origins (Kleingeld, et al, 2014). Warf (2012) observed that the orthodox, liberal version of cosmopolitanism stands in sharp contrast to ideologies such as racism, religious fundamentalism, and nationalism, which emphasise and often exaggerate or oversimplify the differences among human beings at the expense of their common humanity. Liberal cosmopolitanism comprises an "imagined community" that extends everywhere. In this light, the moral community to which each person owes an obligation is worldwide, generating an obligation to "care at a distance," in which the concerns of distant strangers are held to be as important as those of people nearby (Warf, 2012).

## **WHAT IS THE WAY FORWARD?**

The easing of the covid-19 restrictions must not be looked at from any single nation's preparedness to contain the virus within that nation alone. This is because so long as the world is open to international travel, nations are bound to receive or send people who could be carrying the virus. Singh, & Chattu, (2021) in commenting on this concern observed that global solidarity is necessary to lessen the wider gaps between the

vaccination status of rich and poor nations. Therefore, they opined that through global health diplomacy (GHD), the vaccine gaps and inequities can be addressed to strengthen global health security and accelerate global economic recovery (Singh, et al, 2021). This implies that every state, nation and region must also develop a foreign policy aimed at giving a helping hand to states and nations whose vaccine rollout is slow and who are still experiencing high level of community transmission of the virus.

At the individual level, everyone must develop a sense of consciousness that we all have a duty to protect others especially the vulnerable. Modern society is a society of organic solidarity built around interdependence (Morrison, 2006). This places an obligation that people must continue to act and live as though the virus is spreading at an escalating rate especially in the area of social distancing, use of facemask, self-hygiene of handwashing, coughing and sneezing etiquettes. This could help slow the spread of the virus, support the anti-vaxxers whose psychological disposition might have been the reason why they are not ready for the vaccine. There is still a high level of conspiracy theories making rounds on coronavirus which tend to slow down the collective response to combating the virus. The restrictions easing out period must also be a time for the global community to advance more consciously an awareness campaign to enlighten the public on this crucial vaccination through the proper use of the social and traditional media formats.

During the peak period of the pandemic most states and nations introduced covid-19 palliatives (WHO, 2021) in form of food stamps, weekly pay for people who were out of job, rent discount and free medical services etc. This could be sustained at a minimal level or transformed into new institutions, as argued by Murphy and McGann (this volume). This could serve as a reminder that we are not yet in normal times therefore the need to tread with caution.

## **CONCLUSION**

The quest to return to normal does not mean the so-called normal times we lived in in the past were the best of times for humanity as a whole. The dawn of the global pandemic should only be a catalyst that will call humanity to her human and collective responsibility as carers of the earth and all its content (biodiversity). It is said that charity begins at home and there is no better time to begin this than now when our future as a race has been tried. Practising the cosmopolitan approach towards solving

global problems will be a formula that we must employ not only on things or scenarios that threatens us as specie but also a tool through which we can overcome the multifaceted problems and the precarity ushered upon us by the global risk society of climate change, famine, drought, armed conflict, and disease. As it is said in my local language 'wir dze wir be wir (I am a human being because there is another human being). This understanding can only make us better as a people sharing a common home.

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# THE SOCIAL COVID TEST: THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF REMOTE-WORKING

**TOM BOLAND**

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**T**oday, we live in a regime of tests. Testing reveals the reality: positive or negative, the presence of pathogens and the level of the viral load. Track and trace systems attest to the circulation of the virus in society. Statistics of infections, hospitalisations and deaths are not just a register of the course of the pandemic, but a testament to collective actions to curb it. The virus tests the capacity of our health services, the willingness for mass compliance, the resources of government. 'The Pandemic is a test, and the world is failing' stated the WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in July 2021. Albeit a rhetorical flourish, framing events as tests which reveal something about society is widespread and has real consequences.

All our responses are 'trial measures'. The vaccines passed their clinical trials and now they face the test of efficacy outside the laboratory. Each measure as it is implemented is tested in terms of its impact by the proxy of cases. But clinical test conditions do not prevail within society, and so multi-factorial complexity means that governments are not technicians but experimenters, conducting wait-and-see, ad-hoc, 'until further notice', provisional trials. Unpicking the different impacts of new restrictions, their gradual lifting or the mitigating effects of each regulation becomes not just an activity of testing, but a trial of expert capacity to know society -. While we may be tested as individuals to see if we have Covid, there is also a collective trial, wherein the capacity of reason, science, government and social adaptation is tested.

The experimental character of governmental power has long been noted by sociologists, often in the instrumentalist concern with 'what

works' (Bacchi, 2016). Indeed, outside of pandemics or crises, the whole disposition of state intervention is a perpetual experiment, testing the waters, trialling new measures and then trying to decipher the impact of these policies through various indicators and proxies (Stark, 2020). For centuries, there is an 'imperative for evaluation' within contemporary states (Miller and Rose, 2013), which makes a laboratory out of society, observed through social sciences ranging from demography through economics to sociology and anthropology. From birth-rates and unemployment figures to focus groups and qualitative interviewing, the 'human sciences' participate in the experimental testing of society.

Whereas political powers might occasionally engage in projects for normative reasons, regardless of the consequences, in general 'testing and the discourse of the test are increasingly prevalent in modern society.' (Pinch, 1993: 27). This is especially so for the present global pandemic and the looming ecological crises – all-encompassing events which cannot be fathomed in terms of their reach, impact and duration. Of course, sociology has long dealt with change and unpredictability, embedding it at the core of its theoretical perspectives 'Uncertainty, which is at the heart of social life' (Boltanski, 2011: 70). At the risk of simplification, with apologies to post-structural, post-modern and post-critical perspectives, sociology generally asserts that the world is somewhat unknown but that various indicators can allow us to know it better. This is not to revert to a positivism whereby data trumps interpretation, but simply to observe that empirically oriented sciences and theories partake in the testing of society to produce truth or 'power/knowledge' as Foucault's history of the human sciences suggests (Foucault, 1972). Thus, as academics we contribute to the sense of 'modernity on endless trial' in Kolakowski's phrase.

In highly uncertain times, how can tests of the 'new normal' be framed? If it is not simply the return to 'business as usual', new modes of working and living must be improvised. Social theory has long considered institutions as instituted through charismatic ideas which are then sedimented into new practices, routinised (Weber, 1992). Such trial runs and experiments are prominently manifested through the continual production of statistics and information around the economy, and especially, around new modes of working – particularly remote working (as discussed by Doyle in this volume) Indeed, from the crisis of Covid 'remote working' emerges as an experimental mode of being; the figure of the worker persisting in their profession, improvising a home-office, keeping going while struggling with constraints, isolation, poor internet coverage and so forth (Crowley, et al. 2020). While not heroic in the sense

that ‘essential workers’ took existential risks by continuing to work on site, the ‘remote-worker’ is a figure of the future, yet enigmatic and imagined. So the spread, character and persistence of remote work is measured statistically by proxy figures, but also on trial as a subjective life ethos, wherein home and work become blurred, time-structures disintegrate and the economy is everywhere at once.

## **EXPERIMENTAL GOVERNMENTALITY**

Evidently the Covid pandemic has made certain test indicators quotidian, literally every-day. Each night, the numbers of infections, hospitalisations and deaths were announced throughout 2020, data which was carried in banner form on many mainstream news websites and graphed on the Covid tracker app which all citizens were recommended to download and check regularly. From early 2021, these figures were supplemented then supplanted by numbers of vaccination, double vaccinations and a percentile tally of the vaccinated adult population. To an extent, these are solid numerical data points, but arguably they become taken as proxies for the larger collective trial of the pandemic. Falling infection rates and steady vaccination figures indicate that we (the people!) are passing the test. Yet as the pandemic waxes and wanes, the experiment becomes incoherent – too many dependent variables enter into the equation, and uncertainty reigns.

Obviously, these proxy numbers do not capture the whole picture, as we are not dealing with laboratory conditions nor a stable singular body, but a complex society. As we have all become amateur epidemiologists over the last year, we understand that simple virology of transmission occurs within a complex context of activities and practices, especially regulations, restrictions and mitigations. Thus, testing is not simply a contained experimental activity conducted by scientists within a controlled environment, rather we have moved “From test in a setting to ‘testing the setting’...Today’s tests directly and deliberately modify the environment’ (Marres & Stark, 2020: 435-6). Adapting the perspective of the Chicago school of urban anthropology, society literally becomes a laboratory for life, an experimental space. Interventions such as social-distancing, mask-wearing, limited capacity, hand-washing, self-isolating, restricted travel and so forth are tweaked over time. While total knowledge of where the disease is being incubated and transmitted is never possible, the post-hoc indicators of it are taken as reflections of the efficacy of these interventions, even though their implementation is scarcely uniform or standardised.

Results, or the interpretation of data howsoever uncertain, is recursively fed back into expert knowledges, from mathematical modelling to behavioural sciences, which also evaluates international comparisons based on different data and conditions from Ireland for comparison. While the authority of science is consistently evoked, the experimentalism of science, ad-hoc, fallible, liable to false positives, persistence with politically favoured hypotheses and so forth also animates contemporary governance of public health. The promise of knowledge, explanation and reaction, the Baconian 'scientia est potentia' is central, albeit not guaranteed, and always arrives after the fact.

Alongside public health, economic indicators attract attention; supposedly 'hard data' with robust reliability, with moving indicators of specific elements, yet suffused with emotion. The theme of recovery after crisis looms large in the Irish collective imagination – and in European and modern thought in general. Getting 'back to work' was a mantra after the financial crash of 2008 and the prolonged Irish recession of the construction bubble bursting (see Murphy & McGann, this volume). Post-Covid the 'return to work' is measured in the steady reduction of numbers on the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, increased traffic volumes on the road throughout 2021 and consumer spending. These are relatively straight-forward tests of quantity, but such numbers are merely indicative of a relatively unknown and emergent 'new normal' of the presumably transformed worlds of work, including 'remote working'.

Most simply, 'remote working' is the transfer of office or work-place based activities to people's homes, ideally imagined as a highly independent worker conducting clearly demarked and routine tasks through a personal computer in a home office with sufficient internet bandwidth, relatively free from distraction and other duties, with project work and collaboration conducted via various platforms, from simple email communication to digitised video conferencing. The specifics of 'work' are flattened by the concept 'remote working'; readers will appreciate that teaching to large and small classes, advising, supervising, pastoral care, meetings with colleagues, committee work, research, reading, theorising and much more are very different forms of academic labour. Likewise, the tasks undertaken by architects, journalists, programmers, therapists, designers and so forth are translated into 'remote working' in very different ways. Importantly, the conditions of possibility of 'remote work' are unequally distributed, having a home, a single-person office, undisturbed attention, good broadband, technological know-how, appropriate equipment, are all variable and reflect structured inequalities, and likewise, the labour

relationship which allows for ideal or satisfactory 'remote working' such as having relative autonomy over time-schedules, the capacity to disconnect, or to work unsupervised depend on labour relations.

Yet how do we know about remote working? The primary test is statistical: The CSO produces figures on its prevalence, which find that it has increased exponentially since the beginning of the pandemic, and that it is persisting. Businesses produce surveys that generally indicate that individuals would like to continue to work remotely, but also record management fears of deteriorating skills around networking or informal training. Trade unions likewise produce surveys lauding remote working, informing their negotiations with Government on the mooted 'return to work', or the inscrutable 'future of work', accommodated to ecological limits. More prosaically, measures of traffic, office usage and take-up of remote-working facilities record the growth of this catch-all category of 'remote working'.

Beyond the statistical, qualitative reports on the experience of remote working are gathered, both by academics and journalists. Many highlight the inequities of access or gendered domestic/office duties, and the differential exposure of particular sectors and professions to both the benefits and downsides of remote working (Clark et al. 2021). Here, 'lived experience' stands as the test of remote working, with all the caveats that interviewees can only speak for their own experience of change, yet such research asserts the validity of actual voices over any pre-conceived theories. Nevertheless, an incremental picture of re-structured, improvised and personalised routines, adapted and infringing on personal and family time emerges, where the remote worker avoids the commute and reaps the benefits of flexibility, yet is threatened by the creep of work expanding to fill their time or even take over their life. Differential gendered experience of balancing care and career appear, alongside inequity along class and ethnic lines of access to facilities and exposure to risk. Personal consequences of burn-out and isolation loom threateningly, yet hopes for more autonomy in reinvented work-lives persist.

## **FINDINGS AND FINDING MEANING**

The results are not all in and the picture is blurred, a photograph of a moving object. All that is certain is that things are changing, with new hybridised adaptations of work emerging, and difficult to measure. Transformations are not just an opportunity, but compulsory. Meanwhile,

the phenomenon of ‘remote working’ can scarcely be disentangled from the general experience of pandemic ‘new normality’ of more ‘socially distanced’ life in general, or the ‘Great Resignation’. Perhaps these tests of remote working could be enumerated here: How many, in which sectors, with what impact on productivity? But between the time of writing, publication and reading, all these indicators will have moved. Sufficeth to say: Our tests show that something is happening – ‘remote work’, whatever that is, is taking hold, becoming institutionalised, the ‘new normal’.

According to Weber’s model of history, crises lead to charismatic visions which lead to new institutions. This model of history is a relatively neat narrative which is often confounded by the complex genealogy of all ideas and practices: there is no charismatic hero of remote working, unless we count politicians broadcasting via webcam the message to ‘work from home’! More importantly, less ‘value-free’ historians tend to take events as signifiers of unfolding events – enlightenment and reason are evidenced by revolutions, and harbingers of progress thereby (Koselleck, 1988). Yet, Weber offers a more tragic than sanguine interpretation of history, the persistence of peculiar ideas which haunt our world, for instance, the demand for perpetual success and growth in capitalism.

What does this imply for ‘remote work’? Famously, the Protestant Ethic traces how the attitude of the monastery becomes diffused across the world, so that the interminable work of sanctification becomes a quest for salvation through enterprise and vocation within the market:

Now it strode into the market-place of life, slammed the door of the monastery behind it, and undertook to penetrate just that daily routine of life with its methodicalness, to fashion it into a life in the world, but neither of nor for this world. (Weber: 1992: 101).

Here, crisis and change leads to transference and hybridity; the ethos of the monk informs the life-conduct of the vocational worker or entrepreneur. Concurrently, institutional settings are internalised and taken up by the subject – so the self as ‘remote-worker’ carries their office with them.

As further tests of ‘Remote-Working’ we might therefore also attend to the proliferation of digital devices designed to manage and even monitor labour from a distance, whether these are intrusive surveillance or self-imposed productivity tools. Alongside the imposition of ‘work-discipline’ most evidently in the form of the ‘time-discipline’ of capitalism (Willis,

2008), there are numerous reports of the problematic drift towards work and career suffusing everyday life, with blurred boundaries between home and the office (Palumbo, 2020). Of course, these proxy indicators can only be provisional tests of the transformation underway, yet clearly there will be continuities. Despite the fragmentation of institutions, the evaluation of work as morally edifying and as a means of reforming the self seems set to persist (Anderson, 2022, Boland & Griffin, 2021). Furthermore, the factory and the office were once sites of tests and experiments, but now new practices and procedures must be trialled directly upon the remote worker; we are experimental subjects, not just improvising our practices, but the target of tests.

## **CONCLUSION: TESTS, TRIALS AND TRANSFORMATION**

Broadly, these quantitative and qualitative measures of ‘remote working’ are premised on the assumption of the possibility of transformation – what I term the ‘transformativity’ of modernity – that is the ontological assumption that society and people are malleable. Evidently, this is the assumption of the ‘human sciences’, including, perhaps especially, the ‘critical human sciences’ which adopt some version of social constructionism. Moreover, it is the working premise of modern governmentality; ongoing negotiations about the ‘Right to Disconnect’ or the institutionalisation of ‘Remote Working’ proceed on the basis of experimentalism, making life itself into a laboratory. To an extent this is ‘what works’ from social policy to business organisations to community groupings. Yet, framing the world as a ‘trial’ also carries dangers; Covid is not just a test to be overcome heroically, but perhaps a sign of the limits of the great experiments of modernity.

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# EMBRACING DIGITAL DELIVERY IN IRELAND'S NEW EMPLOYMENT POLICY: DIGITAL BY CHOICE OR DIGITAL BY DEFAULT?

ANTOINETTE JORDAN

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## PATHWAYS TO WORK

The 2016-2020 national employment strategy *Pathways to Work* (Government of Ireland, 2016) came to its end in the midst of the pandemic. The recently published *Pathways to Work 2021-2025* strategy (Government of Ireland, 2021a) is a key element of the policy framework for post-pandemic economic recovery and this short paper examines the government's intention for employment policy for the next five years, with a focus on digital service delivery. *Pathways to Work 2021-2025* will also act as the successor to the *Action Plan for Jobless Households* (2017-2020). The new policy contains both continuities and changes to welfare policy. It focuses on reducing long-term unemployment and youth unemployment, while improving labour market transitions and ensuring better labour market outcomes for all. But what is striking is the clear move in the direction of a digital-by-default approach.

Until the restructuring of Public Employment Services (PES) in the mid-1990s, Ireland provided passive income supports to unemployed people, where engagement with Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs) was voluntary (Kelly *et al.*, 2019). After the second activation reforms in 2011, the approach and delivery of supports changed, with the introduction of a new PES model, the creation of Intreo one-stop-shops, the introduction of statistical profiling, case management, mandatory ALMPs, conditionality and sanctions (McGann and Murphy, 2021; Whelan,

2021; Dukelow, 2021; Cousins, 2019; Hick, 2018; Boland and Griffin, 2015; Whelan, 2020). Another significant change was a new techno-utopian outlook and the evolution of technology as key actor in the welfare system. The datafication of welfare through the deployment of algorithmic-statistical profiling changed not only the experience of the unemployed jobseeker but also the work of the Case Officer. *Pathways to Work 2021-2025* advocates for the continued use of profiling “to deal with the challenges of delivering a personalised service”, while announcing a review of the PEX profiling algorithm on the basis that “while useful in an initial segmentation, [profiling] provides little guidance to a Case Office regarding a person’s underlying competencies or interests” (Government of Ireland, 2021a). The datafication of welfare is further expanded in the policy through a targeted push towards “innovation in the development of a digital model of service delivery to complement and augment the traditional ‘face-to-face’ model of service delivery” (Government of Ireland, 2021a: 22).

## **A DIGITAL POLICY FROM CONSULTATION TO LAUNCH**

Strikingly, the digital locus of *Pathways to Work 2021-2025* emerged in 2019, when interested parties were invited to make submissions to help define the strategic direction and development of PES in Ireland. Details of the public consultation were provided on the [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie) government website in the “Consultations” section and in an accompanying press release (Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, 2019b; a). The consultation was open from 26<sup>th</sup> August to 24<sup>th</sup> September 2019, with submissions to be emailed by 25<sup>th</sup> September 2019. Interested parties were also invited to complete an online survey. The website does not show alternative means of making a submission such as by post, in person or by telephone. Neither does it mention any face-to-face consultations or focus groups. Some of those who made submissions drew on feedback from frontline services such as Citizens Information Services and Citizens Information Phone Service (Citizens Information Board, 2019) and membership groups and organisations (National Women's Council of Ireland, 2020). Submissions have not been located on the government website, but through self-publication by some interested parties. Kjær (2004) notes that networks in public policy are viewed in a positive manner as they increase policy-making efficiency. Further research is needed to determine whether all relevant stakeholders in this network were engaged in the policy-making process and to determine the quality of participation (Stoker, 2006).

Almost two years later, on 12<sup>th</sup> July 2021 *Pathways to Work 2021-2025* was launched in-person but was experienced by most as an online event<sup>1</sup>. The Taoiseach, two Ministers and a Minister of State attended the launch at the Advanced Manufacturing & Technology Training Centre of Excellence in Dundalk, which was subject to pandemic event regulations. Through a detailed online press release (Government of Ireland, 2021b) and media reporting, the public saw a socially-distanced photo with hashtag props – a prompt to engage with an extensive social media campaign and digital content package, identified by the #PathwaysToWork hashtag. Digital content included a launch video<sup>2</sup> with all four T.D. discussing the merits of new policy with regard to their portfolio, a promotional video for the policy and five case study videos on YouTube<sup>3</sup>. The policy and accompanying technical paper can be downloaded from the Department of Social Protection website but it is not clear where printed copies can be accessed, despite the Taoiseach holding one in the launch photo.

## **CONFLICT BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND DIGITAL SERVICE DELIVERY**

Fotaki (2010) suggests that public policies are a product of social fantasy. The overall target outcome of this policy is to restore key labour market measures to their 2019 pre-pandemic levels, not an unexpected ambition for a coalition government weathering the COVID-19 pandemic. The policy is a whirlwind of four high level ambitions along with 83 commitments: an intensive programme of work over five years, with short term priorities (2021-2023) and medium to long term priorities (2023-2025). The policy determines much of what the experience of job seeking while unemployed will be like over the next five years. It points to the continuation of previous initiatives, of some pandemic-era elements specifically digital service delivery, but also illuminates plans for larger long-term digital developments. Eight key organisational challenges

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<sup>1</sup> Taoiseach Micheál Martin, Minister for Social Protection Heather Humphreys, Minister for Further and Higher Education Simon Harris, and Minister of State with responsibility for Business and Employment Damien English.

<sup>2</sup> MerrionStreet.ie [@merrionstreet]. (2021, July 12) Today @MichealMartinTD @HHumphreysFG @SimonHarrisTD & @Damien\_English launched the Government's #PathwaysToWork strategy aiming to help 75,000 long-term unemployed into work [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/merrionstreet/status/1414547555887767557?s=20>

<sup>3</sup> Dept of Social Protection (2021, July 13). *Pathways to Work 2021-2025*. [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0zViyorHL8>

facing the PES were identified, with five strands of action proposed as a response: working for jobseekers, working for employers, working for work, working for all (leaving no one behind), and working with evidence. Many commitments place the jobseeker at the heart of the process, for example a commitment to assign a dedicated Case Officer to all unemployed people and to increase the number of Department of Social Protection Case Officers by 50%.

Almost overnight, the crisis response to the pandemic accelerated transition to digital service delivery. This enabled many positive changes - application forms became much shorter, payments increased, case officers worked from home. The policy reflects on pandemic experiences and acknowledges that “online service delivery can also be effective” (Government of Ireland, 2021a: 40)<sup>4</sup>. However, the policy tries to do several things at once: modernise the public employment service by embracing digital delivery, take advantage of “remote and online service capabilities to extend the reach of and efficiencies in service delivery”, but also keep the preferred face-to-face preferred model of service delivery and use digital delivery to complement in-person contacts (Government of Ireland, 2021a: 9, 40). This poses a significant challenge in implementation and the policy conveys a sense of conflict between modern and traditional service delivery.

## **BLENDED SUPPORTS: IMAGINED PEOPLE OF THE POLICY**

Government policy sets out a plan for the future. In *Pathways to Work*, we see the imagined people of the policy: people engaging with the state, looking for work, going on training courses, learning to update their CV, looking for financial support during a difficult time. But where are they accessing services from: their home computer, a computer in the library or their phone? Do they need digital skills and equipment to do this? Or perhaps they are sitting face-to-face with a case officer. Do we know which mode of service delivery they or their case officer would prefer? Flynn (2021) looked at the perception of digital natives within the student population at third level, noting that problems with access to devices are expected, but a significant IT skills deficit is potentially a bigger issue. Extrapolating this to the job seeking population and the policy is potentially making unreasonable assumptions on the digital skills of the

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<sup>4</sup> “A number of online Job Promotion Events have also been held: each receiving positive feedback, most recently the Work and Skills week held in April 2021 with over 7000 registered attendees” Government of Ireland (2021a: 40). Perhaps this inspired KPIs such as the commitment to host 150 Job Promotion Events (virtual or in person) in each year of the new strategy (Government of Ireland, 2021a: 26).

entire unemployed job seeking population. *Pathways to Work* examines and reflects on the expectations of jobseekers, noting that use of digital and self-service technology increased exponentially during the pandemic and many people proved capable and ready to use online self-service options (p 43). But was this the expectation of jobseekers at a moment in time, mid-pandemic, with significant job losses and a new cohort of people accessing the service? The new policy aims to respond to emerging client preferences for digitally enabled interaction, with a promise to “make better use of the range of available digital channels over the lifetime of this strategy, to ensure that the supports and services offered optimise the potential of technology and virtual platforms” (p. 40). Adapting the model of service delivery to respond to client preferences is positive, but the strategy must respond to the preferences of all clients, not just the documented mid-pandemic expectations of digitally-literate temporarily unemployed millennials, for example.

Further, the policy commitment to “remodel Intreo centres, as appropriate, to incorporate self-service capacity” distinctly echoes the retail banking sector. In addition, Intreo has developed an ideation for a future digitally-enabled blended model of service delivery (p. 41). It details the proposed digital path for a jobseeker who has decided to take the self-service route. This option involves a blended journey of applying online, watching information videos, being nudged and prompted in an online system, engaging with online support if needed and finally having a 1:1 meeting at step 6 of this 10-step process. Ireland has the opportunity to learn from international experiences where this model became the default, with varying success. The system in the Netherlands evolved such that “only jobseekers who are assessed as having a high risk of long-term unemployment are invited for a face-to-face interview with a caseworker early on. Jobseekers with a low risk are initially referred to digital services only” (OECD, 2018). In addition, technology is used through a statistical profiling tool, which categorises people into high, medium and low risk of long-term unemployment. The new Irish policy uses traffic-light colours to accentuate this classification, with a person deemed at high risk (or aged <30) further classified into the “red” category and placed on a corresponding path of ALMPs and engagement frequency (p.33). Irish policy makers should note that governments investing in digital services and statistical profiling tools have been met with institutional resistance from case officers, leading to attempted deployments of such technology being abandoned, notably in Austria, the UK, Finland and Denmark (Riipinen, 2011; Allhutter et al., 2020; Department for Work and Pensions, 2013; Georges, 2007). Even in the first year of PEX implementation in Ireland, there seemed to be issues with implementation (Kelly *et al.*, 2019)

and the ESRI review of PEX due to be published in Q4 2021 will reflect on the experience over the past eight years of implementation. This review, update of PEX and potential development of a holistic diagnostic tool needs to take into consideration the repeated calls for stakeholder engagement from the OECD and others, to ensure the voice of the imagined people is ingrained in policy developments going forward (OECD, 2020; 2018; Desiere *et al.*, 2019; O'Connell *et al.*, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

Statistical profiling is promoted by the EU, the World Bank and the OECD and is implemented in one-third of OECD countries (Desiere *et al.*, 2019; OECD, 2018; Riipinen, 2011; Loxha and Morgandi, 2014). Rather than abandoning profiling like Denmark, Finland, the UK and the Netherlands (Riipinen, 2011; Debauche and Georges, 2007; Georges, 2007), Ireland is pushing ahead with further development. While France has evolved its profiling systems almost continuously (Jordan *et al.*, 2021), Ireland is only now engaging in a detailed evaluation of the system so far. With this “growing willingness to outsource decision-making authority to algorithm-based decision-making systems” (Danaher *et al.*, 2017), there are many examples in international policy and academic literature from which to draw best practice insights in welfare and many other fields (Burrell, 2016; Noble, 2018; O'Neill, 2017; Smith, 2019; Sumpter, 2018; Wachter-Boettcher, 2018; Griffin *et al.*, 2020b; Griffin *et al.*, 2020a; Schou and Pors, 2018). Many countries also pushed forward with digital service delivery even before the pandemic, with Australia and the Netherlands operating on a digital by default basis. With Irish government policy now advocating for even further datafication of welfare, Ireland faces key questions about what welfare policy stakeholders want and what lessons can be learned from international experiences of profiling and digital welfare service delivery.

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# DOLE + DOCILITY: ON THE PACIFICATION POLICY OF THE WELFARE STATE

RAY GRIFFIN

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**T**his reflection considers the perpetual return of the docile body of the unemployed. Unemployment as a construct was hewn in biopower that aspires to produce docile bodies; this biopower is now a cultural memory, lost in social policy as activation and agitation become policy goals that separate language from practice.

## DOCILE BY DESIGN

To be unemployed is to inhabit a category produced by the administrative practices of governing modern states. Normally, governments reproduce the administrative categories of other governments, but curiously, the case of unemployment started life in the thin air of intra-governing relations and supra-national institutions. One of the earliest formulations of unemployment as a problem of governing is to be found in the Annexes to the Treaty of Versailles, the document and process that brought an end to the Great War of 1914-1917, and set out the ambition for the International Labour Organisation (ILO- a body of the United Nations). The ILO finalised the formal definition of unemployment in 1954 as being not working, available for work and seeking work. It is this definition that people signing on attest to, and in doing so, it is the act of signing that makes someone unemployed. Over one hundred years after the Great War, 185 of the 193 countries recognised by the United Nations administer poverty and worklessness through the construct of unemployment. When looked at from its origins, the original purpose of unemployment welfare is clear- it is a pacification technology (Ewald, 2020), it emerged in the peace

treaty of the war to end all wars and is perhaps our only technique for avoiding revolution and social unrest, an insurance that has guaranteed European state's continued existence since the late 1940s. Docility was thus not a by-product of welfare, rather it was the explicit ambition.

## **A BODY UNEMPLOYED**

Here, and almost everywhere, the act of becoming unemployed is a journey a body makes, attending a dole office, filling out a form, signing it and handing it over. Unemployment is thus a corporeal act of a body travelling through an office and an administrative process, where the various submissions made by the person accomplish the formal recognition by the State of the status of unemployed person. Traditionally this has been a direct experience of having the time of one's life consumed and destroyed in dole offices –by queueing and waiting to be processed, but more recently by engaging in fruitless job searches, mentoring, confidence training, and other nihilistic activities of working at welfare.

If one subscribes to Milan Kundera's belief that gestures are sociological, suggesting that 'a gesture cannot be regarded as the expression of an individual, as his creation (because no individual is capable of creating a fully original gesture, belonging to nobody else), nor can it even be regarded as that person's instrument; on the contrary, it is gestures that use us as their instruments, as their bearers and incarnations', bodies here echo the gestural repertoire of the supplicant with the denigrating pose of the contemptible beggar (2020, P.8). Slumped, rounded shoulders, forced smiles, self-deprecating laughter, grim facial expressions (Dassinger, 2013). To be in a dole office is an invitation to showcase the corporeal devastation of worklessness. This stock image of unemployment is both captured and produced in the social realist films of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, in movies such as *Billy Elliot* and *the Full Monty*; *Mondays in the Sun*, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, *Two Days-One Night*, and multiple others.

Indeed the original sociological study of unemployment, Marie Jahoda, Paul Lazarsfeld and Hans Zeisel's exhaustive case study of an Austrian community, the *Marienthal* (1933), a study that dominates our conceptualisation of unemployment (Demazière, 2017)- carried photos that would not be out of place in contemporary studies. Men leaning against a wall, bodies slumped, not carrying their own standing weight, bored, alone, together. Regarding these photos today reminds us to consider the under-explored, visual, visceral and embodied work of

unemployment, as these photos, images and representations, as much as any spreadsheet produce the episteme of unemployment, are how we come to know unemployment. Fifty years later, they are echoed in Paul Graham's iconic photo essay 'beyond caring' (1986; 2021), which display the conditions unemployed women and men, often with children, endured in the dole offices of 1980's Britain- the waiting rooms, queues, the poor conditions of an overburdened system. In Ireland, we are familiar with this genre, as most newspaper and news television infographics replay iconic images of doles queues snaking outside the Department of Social Protection offices in the Hanover St., Cork and Wicklow St., Dublin buildings. Indeed, it is the powerful image of the queue that gave rise to the colloquial expression of unemployment as queuing for a living (O'Gorman, 1994).

Whilst the photos and films gaze at the queue, and waiting in queues is an everyday experience, dole queues are a specific situation. The Marienthal photos depict a waiting that is akin to loitering, idleness and daydreaming, the form of waiting so richly described in William Whyte's 'Street Corner Society' (1943), whereas dole queues are a distinctive unique social formation.

The queues tumbling out of the building were a political statement read on the surface as inadequate resourcing of an overburdened system; or uncaring attention to the provision of waiting space by comfortable public sector workers who organised their workplace to value their own time and space. This belies the work individuals do in queues as they methodically organise themselves to order their queue, collectively and continuously generating the discipline of the queue. Individuals must suppress their personal irritation at being forced to wait, or skip to the top; instead they become entangled in a situational negotiation with the space and others within it, they must manage the impression they give off as they queue with others (Paris, 2001). The distinctive social and personal cost (Schwartz, 1975) must thus be borne privately and stoically by each person in such a way that the self-organising queue enters the building rather than individuals. Here, queuing is a sociological concern because power imbalance makes the waiting situation necessary for the orderly function of a dole office, and in a remarkably practical way, the docile body becomes written back into our understanding of unemployment.

# THINKING WITH DOGILE BODIES

Pivotal here are the ideas of Michel Foucault particularly his analytics of disciplinary and biopower. In his book *Discipline and Punish* (1975) Michel Foucault focuses on how modern institutions produce discipline subtly, with little recourse to violence and coercion, where people fall into line, succumbing to institutional 'projects of docility'. In this, he continues his career long exploration of the new forms of social control that emerge in modern, bureaucratic government institutions such as schools, prisons, barracks, clinics and hospitals.

At the heart of Foucault's theory is the notion of discourse, that linguistic articulations produce and explain the world around us in powerful ways. Here certain discourses produce institutions – psychiatry produces madness, medicine produces disease, criminology produces crime- each discourse calling up a different 'scientifico-legal complex' (1984, p.170) that in turn exerts power on individuals in curious ways. At the end of each of these discourses is a body, individually or cluster into a population- a body that is subjectified through the discipline. This process of subjectification of the body comes into being through categorisation, incentivisation and learning. Categorisation is a process where a discursive identity is imposed on a body through the endless making and remaking of distinctions. Orderliness, the acceptance of categorisation is accomplished through rewards and punishments, incentives here are a mechanism to actively assist people in their own subjugation to categories, and in turn learns self organisation.

Here the unemployed body is partly determined by the discourse of unemployment, accepting the overall categorisation of worker/ unemployed, and multiple consequential categorisations (long-term unemployed, inactive, NEETs, etc.). The body avoids punishment and seeks rewards, observing how to behave in relation to the discourse, a form of self-control, monitoring the discourse to adhere to it. Through learning the discourse and practices, the body then internalises control, and thus is seeks advantage in perpetual subjectivation that makes them docile.

# BIOPOWER

A few years after articulated docility, Foucault refined his 'analytics of power' (Dean, 2013) further to capture the move between two paradigms of disciplinary power from sovereignty to bio-power, starting sometime in

the late eighteenth century. He argues in his 1975-76 Collège de France lecture ‘Society Must be Defended’ by suggesting that “we must abandon the juridical model of sovereignty” (p. 265; 2003), where power was invested in the monarch who has the power to deprive subjects of life, freedom and property through divine right or social contract. Power has been reformulated with the emergence of complex apparatus to administer the state, such as statistics that record births and deaths, diseases and accidents, which in turn call into being institutions, professions and practices to regulate hygiene, safety and health, intervening, controlling and optimising life.

Bio-power offers a unique explanatory framework around the unemployed body. Bio-power conceives the body rather than institutions as a site of power, bodies as targets —workers, pupils, prisoners, patients or bodies as a source of power — managers, teachers, prison officers, or social workers. Bodies can be individuals, but can also be collected and categorised into populations, which can then become both the controller and the controlled; akin to what Deleuze (1992) describes as “societies of control”. Biopower evolves over time, optimising and adjusting the administration a population with new emphasises over birth, health, disease, sexuality, race and death, as it aspires towards ever more efficient control over the creation, maintenance and reproduction of life.

In this formulation, the act of signing on at the dole office, queueing, waiting, captured representationally in movies and documented in photos from the Marienthal studies of the 1930s through to Paul Graham in the 1980s, to contemporary photojournalism is a form of biopower of docility. Here the bodies of unemployed people are governed by the state, made to wait, made to queue and thus rendered docile as the state constructs the places where waiting happens as carapaces for bodies. These buildings are, in the main, purpose designed, the unemployed are imagined by their designers, often digitally rendered into architectural drawings, such drawings are produced by professional disciplines that retrace existing buildings to approach each design anew. Multiple discourses feed their design- the flow of customers, the semiotics of institutional architecture, the safety of employees and clients. As in the origin of welfare, the design of buildings encodes docility.

## **AGITATION AND ACTIVATION**

Despite its original formulation in providing material supports to address poverty and the risk of unrest, and the near century of welfare office

design that encode queueing and waiting — welfare is currently focused on discourses of activation (Hansen, 2019) and agitation. Within social policy, a supposed side-effect of the welfare state was identified—that groups of citizens were becoming trapped on welfare and so deprived of agency. In forgetting that docility was the aim, a fuzzy notion active labour market policies emerged which aspire to activate people by making welfare uncomfortable and motivated. Within the discourse the metaphor of turning the safety-net of passive welfare states into a trampoline was used to guide policy formation, and attempt to transform the individual through ‘sticks and carrots’ (Howlett, 2004) of incentives and conditionality to support jobsearch, workfare, education or training, that aims to reshape the attitudes, behaviour and decisions of individuals.

Waiting and queueing in dole offices are increasingly being replaced by monitored jobsearch and mandated counselling, coaching and mentoring. The ambition for docile bodies goes further than addressing a population of unemployed through the unique social formation of the queue. Increasingly, the welfare state is delivered through personalised services, often mediated at a distance, digitally through call-centres, online services, chatbots and also individually at the caseworkers desk. Here, the constant calls within social policy for mobilising users, generating agency, are all based on prescribed practices of activation- scripted questioning, working over individuals to reduce their expectations of work, standard issue personal development projects of CVs and personal development plans— all of which boils down to discursive practices that deprive individuals of voice, agency. Here language and practice separate, inauthentic rhetoric weakens the reflective and emancipatory potential of casework in ways that renew welfare’s biopower of docility, finding new ways to subjectify individuals.

## **CONCLUSION**

As we collectively contemplate what building back better might mean, perhaps it could mean reconnect the false language of welfare activation with the practices of welfare as the biopower of docility. The various international experiments of furloughing workers and offering unconditional welfare remind us what authentic social policy looks like— policy that does what it says.

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# DOES IRELAND HAVE A WELFARE IMAGINARY? FROM PANDEMIC PAYMENTS TO PARTICIPATION INCOME

MARY MURPHY & MICHAEL MCGANN

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## INCOME SUPPORTS DURING THE PANDEMIC

**C**ovid-19 has fundamentally reconfigured the relationship between the market and the state in Ireland. The country moved to immediately strengthen its safety nets and respond to the urgent need for immediate cashflow for those impacted by pandemic. In mid-March 2020, a new emergency welfare payment, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), was rapidly administered through a one-page application form with compliance monitored ex-post. The primary focus was on speed of response and PUP was paid on an individualised basis and with no household limits, at €350 per week. This was considerably higher than the existing €203 core weekly welfare rate for single people and equivalent to the weekly jobseeker's payment paid to an adult claimant with a dependent partner/spouse and to 100% of average take home pay in the low-paid sectors most affected by job loss (Coates et al., 2020).

At the height of the first national lockdown, in April 2020, just over 602,000 people were receiving the PUP with a further 457,000 workers supported by the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (Murphy et al., 2020). For well over a million people employed before the pandemic, income supports had replaced market earnings as their primary means of

subsistence. This was a major adjustment not only in the economic lives of these citizens but also in the ‘productivist’ footing of Ireland’s welfare state, which had intensified in the period following the financial crisis. Income supports became increasingly deployed as a trampoline to bounce people from welfare to work rather than as a parachute for affording social security to those excluded from employment. From 2010 onwards, there had been a deepening turn towards a workfare-oriented activation model as payments were cut (especially for younger claimants), eligibility conditions were tightened, and penalty rates were introduced for non-compliance with a range of new behavioural obligations for claimants to participate in activation and to seek and accept paid work.

The Covid pandemic temporarily breached this political (and moral) economy of welfare. Those on jobseekers’ payments saw their mutual obligations almost indefinitely suspended, as activation was largely put on ice until late 2021. Some contracted employment services such as JobPath and the Local Employment Services continued to operate at a social distance, although the threat of payment penalties was formally removed. Moreover, until October 2021, from an administrative and legal standpoint, the PUP was entirely outside the field of sanctions and conditionality. Put simply, for much of the period from March 2020 until October 2021, the political economy of welfare in Ireland transitioned away from ‘work, not welfare’ towards a post-productivist scenario of ‘welfare without work’ (Goodin, 2001) as socially distancing momentarily eclipsed employment as ‘the primary duty of the responsible citizen’ (Patrick, 2012). For Fitzpatrick, post-productivism is a political project to reframe the nexus between welfare and work by reconfiguring income supports so that people regain temporal autonomy over their lives and can balance time between employment and participating in social reproduction – caring for people, the environment, and our social democratic institutions.

This leads to the question: How might income supports in Ireland be reconfigured in the wake of the pandemic to facilitate such a post-productivist politics of time?

## **RENEWAL OF WELFARE IMAGINATION - CALLS FOR PARTICIPATION INCOME**

Building on examples of similar responses across the world (see for example Canada’s Emergency Response Benefit (CERB)), the last year has

seen renewed debate about the political feasibility of universal entitlement and, in the context of climate transition, calls for payments that decouple income support from work activation. From a range of ideological perspectives, universal basic income (UBI) is the most common demand, as it is seen as particularly attractive to the degree that it removes conditions of both circumstance or conduct, and promotes choice, offering income, free from stigma, sanctions and control. That said, UBI is often oversold as a panacea for the crises of work, ecology and social reproduction (Lombardozzi, 2020). There are questions about its affordability and suggestions that it might supplement or substitute investment in public services (Coote 2021). There are also normative debates about whether UBI overfocuses on income and individual consumption at the expense of other collective mechanisms for meeting needs, whether it facilitates meaningful decommodification, contributes to the reciprocal commons, and how it impacts on gender inequality. For these and other reasons some have looked to other forms of income support that can be distinguished from UBI according to the type of conditions incorporated into the design of the payment, conditions about income testing (eligibility and entitlement) and conditions about reciprocity (obligations). Among a range of basic income or minimum guarantee proposals are proposals for Participation Income (PI).

The ‘half-way house’ of PI can be a goal in its own right, although the late Tony Atkinson (1996) proposed it as a political compromise between UBI and the then-emerging dominance of the ‘workfare’ model- which could leave open the door to UBI in the long-run. PI’s key difference from UBI is its retention of an element of reciprocity, making it a more politically feasible variant of income support. Critically, however, PI’s requirement for social contribution is far more encompassing than the narrow, work-related forms of conditionality of market-liberal welfare regimes. The range and variety of what can be recognised as meaningful includes education, giving care, voluntary work, political participation, social reproduction, satisfying essential needs unmet by the market and environmental reproductive work. This is reflected in, and valorises, the social and community-based acts of solidarity evidenced during the pandemic: an ethic of care is promoted while de-commodifying the conditions of conduct (McGann and Murphy, 2021).

A second key difference relates to the absence of universal entitlement to PI. Atkinson originally envisaged PI as a universal payment, to which people were entitled regardless of circumstance; other accounts of minimum income schemes like PI allow limiting access on the basis of need. Atkinson’s key objection to means-testing was its application at

household level in male-breadwinner systems. This is particularly negative for women, denying them individual entitlement, a prerequisite for autonomy and equality. Liberal welfare regimes apply means-testing to residualise welfare by targeting entitlements on those below or around the poverty line. This stigmatises claimants, leading to lack of coverage of those who most need support through limited take-up (Baumberg, 2015). Ensuring an absence of such stigmatising means-testing barriers to income supports is an important principle. One approach is to ensure universal entitlement 'free at the point of access' where recipients repay through general taxation (in the case of universal health) or targeted taxation when a specific income threshold is reached (in the case of student loans).

Certain Covid-19 income supports demonstrate how eligibility can be assessed *ex post*, at the point of access, and delivered without behavioural requirements. This was true of the relatively generous PUP, automatically paid to all individual applicants. Similar characteristics are found in Sarah Arnold's call for a guaranteed income, based on minimum-income standards, and without 'conditionalities' or bureaucratic 'jumping through hoops', paid without means-testing at the point of access, with assessment *ex post* and any adjustments made on a tapered basis should monthly earnings exceed €2,500. Such a modest-to-high income threshold is essential if the welfare payment is not to be residual or to 'other' recipients as impoverished dependents. *Ex-post* application of eligibility conditions has been most recently articulated as the design for an income support that, along with universal basic services, can provide a social guarantee capable of meeting real need (Arnold et al. 2021, Coote 2021).

While Atkinson defended reciprocity on grounds of political expediency, it also aligns normatively with principles of reciprocity in social co-operation (Anderson, 1999). PI's retention of an element of reciprocity could, if poorly designed or implemented, foster paternalism, limit autonomy and be a source of stigma. However, if co-created and delivered in partnership with citizens it can enable flourishing by promoting what Francesco Laruffa (2020) calls 'navigational agency': allowing 'individuals to refuse jobs that they do not value' and engage in reproductive activities such as care-giving and political participation instead of, or alongside, employment. While not unreservedly universal, a PI would go far towards de-commodifying and de-stigmatising welfare, balancing the dual objectives of universalism and social participation. Crucially the version of PI discussed here decouples social security from *market* participation, avoids the stigma of *ex-ante*, means-tested, household assessment and

affordably complements universal basic services, enabling men and women to live, work and care differently in a more equal and flourishing society.

## **IRISH WELFARE IMAGINATION**

The October 2021 Irish budget offered some glimpse into whether Irish politicians and policymakers might imaginatively and courageously build on the possibilities opened up by Ireland's pandemic income support responses. There is already a considerable degree of traction around the concepts informing PI, with some well-developed proposals and commitment to pilot studies that, although coming from different origins, make the politics of developing PI seem more than a theoretical pipe dream. The original system of working age income supports or institutional design of the policy architecture in Ireland was largely built around social insurance and social assistance payments (with some universal payments in childhood and old age). While since the late 1980's pay-related benefits had been de-emphasised in favour of means tested social assistance, the pendulum now appears to be shifting back towards social insurance and arguments for PI (NESC 2020, Varadakar 2021).

The emergence of a pay-related PUP has unexpectedly re-opened the possibility of income related unemployment benefits. The most recent assessment of welfare in Ireland, completed by the National Economic and Social Council during the pandemic and launched in late 2020, provides rationales and trajectories for reform: It recommends investment in services and expansion of tapered social insurance along with four trajectories for reform: ensuring income adequacy and alleviating poverty; modernising family supports to reflect gender and care needs; supporting high participation; and enhancing financial sustainability.

The account of the PUP, discussed earlier, in some respects mirrors some key features of a PI. With no means-test or contributions criteria, the administrative simplicity has meant little claimant stigma for the recipients who even public discourse distinguished as 'no fault' or deserving unemployed. While the one-size-fits-all design quickly came under scrutiny and payments were subsequently tapered to reflect previous earning levels, this type of tapering, provided it meets need, could be considered consistent with PI. While PUP was intended as a short-term measure, plans to phase out the payment and integrate into the mainstream welfare system were abandoned as the pandemic endured,

integration only began in late 2021 with a view to ending the payment in February 2022.

This PUP experiment demonstrated the administrative and political feasibility of a compliance-light, unconditional, non-means tested, individualised, ex ante assessment, and pay-related relatively generous and non-stigmatising income support payment. It has sparked welfare imagination as to what is possible and created demand for its continuance. Crucially, the principle of requiring and /or enabling meaningful non-productivist participation is already embedded in range of payments in Ireland that support social reproduction (Lone Parents Allowances for parents with young children, Carer's Allowance) or for cultural activity (exemptions for job seeking for artists in receipt of job seeker payments), and in activation programmes like Community Employment which prioritise social inclusion over economic productivity (Dukelow 2021). These foundations can be built on to inform new and ongoing campaigns for new forms of income support as in the campaign for an artist's basic income, for universal basic income and for PI, all discussed below.

The February 2020 Programme for Government includes a commitment to “request the Low Pay Commission to examine Universal Basic Income, informed by a review of previous international pilots, and resulting in a universal basic income pilot in the lifetime of the Government”. On 25<sup>th</sup> January 2021 the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment requested that the Low Pay Commission examine Universal Basic Income and make recommendations on how best to meet this commitment in the Programme for Government. The Low Pay Commission defines a ‘universal basic income’ defined as an unconditional state payment that each citizen receives and in late 2021 set out a term of reference for the required pilot.

The arts in Ireland have historically been shamefully underfunded. Nunn (2021) outlines how the pandemic laid the context for a focused campaign for an artist basic income and a subsequent commitment by the Green Party Minister (Catherine Martin) for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, for a ‘basic income guarantee’ pilot scheme for artists, as part of the Government's Covid recovery plan. Budget 2021, in Oct 2020, allocated €130 million to the Arts Council and an additional €50 million for the commercial entertainment sector (to fund a new scheme to guarantee an income of approx. €350 pw for thousands of artists and cultural workers who often otherwise rely on precarious and irregular payments). The 2021 *Life Worth Living* report outlines an artist's basic

income as a state income support guarantee, or an artist's income floor, which can be topped up through paid employment. The October 12<sup>th</sup> Budget 2022 announcement of an initial budget of €25 million for a 2022 pilot basic income guarantee scheme for artists and arts workers was welcomed by the grassroots organisation National Campaign for the Arts (NCFA).

In a parallel but separate process, the National Economic and Social Council (NESC 2020) recommended supporting higher participation by considering the importance of services and measures that help people into, and in, the labour market, focusing on people with caring responsibilities, those with less than secondary education, people with disabilities, and older workers. NESC proposed a form of PI could help deal with the complexities of the changing world of work, such as atypical work, self-employment and platform work, and recommended that a tripartite group assess the type of reforms that would achieve flexibility and security for the greatest number of workers. As well as a more inclusive public employment service, greater participation and potential progression could be supported through a PI where work which is currently unpaid but of societal value, such as voluntary or caring work, is recognised and facilitated, targeted at people not currently in employment but with the potential to contribute to their local community or society.

Taking these pilots together, we see expressions of demand for changes in income support that reform approaches to means-testing, individualisation, and conditionality while resourcing valid forms of participation and contribution. These point towards a wider valorisation of what constitutes socially useful activity, moving beyond a productivist paradigm. Through the pilots we can plot not only the possible trajectory of an Irish PI, but also explore the politics of getting there and the obstacles to progressing the reforms. Alongside the three campaigns described above, diverse actors have also used pre-budget submissions, webinars, social-media and other forms of campaigning and lobbying to call for a PI. These include the largest public/private sector trade union, SIPTU, the national representative women's group, the National Women's Council and Uplift an online campaigning vehicle. Their conscious decision to promote PI is consistent with their members' demands and assessment of the political feasibility vis-à-vis alternatives including UBI.

Social imaginary is a sociological concept referring to the set of values, institutions, laws and symbols through which people imagine their social whole. Through PI Ireland can reset values, institutions, and laws to look

towards the post-productivist lives we need to live in a post-growth epoch. Unlike UBI, PI is not neutral about the distribution of care or silent about the importance of configuring welfare to recognise myriad forms of reproductive activity essential to sustaining the environment, civil society, democracy, and other generations. If carefully configured and set sufficiently high in conjunction with access to UBS—so basic needs can be met without reliance on the market—it can incentivise participation in socially essential work while setting the welfare state upon an eco-social, post-productivist foundation.

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# RETHINKING CARE THROUGH SOCIAL WELFARE ADMINISTRATION

AISSLING TUITE

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This essay will explore the caring relationships within the social welfare eco-system as services are administered to unemployed people by both street-level workers and state processes. Care exists across all levels of society but it is rarely pulled apart and debated as a theory outside of healthcare settings, where lively and interesting debates on practices and ethics of care are prevalent. In drawing on definitions and philosophies of care this paper goes some way toward starting conversations on how state care, in the form of social welfare, might be debated in a similar fashion. A particular area of interest is the juncture between bureaucracies of state care in policy and the tensions they create for front-line public employment service (PES) workers who aim to offer practical and realistic support. This tension reflects Gilligan's (1982) distinction between women who speak of care as an ethic or moral relationship and men who speak of care as justice and rational decisions or a contractual relationship- so case workers as a feminine form of care, trying to *work with*, and state bureaucracies as a male form of care, *working on* unemployed people. Drawing on Fisher & Tronto and Heidegger's philosophically driven works on care, this essay surfaces the relationships across the social welfare eco-system- relationships that need to move closer together so as to provide sustainable, practical and ethical solutions for unemployed people.

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this brief essay is to reflect on care as a concept, a way towards deeper understandings of practices of care within and across the

complex networks that surround the social welfare eco-system. Care is a concept that is regularly used to describe certain actions of one party towards others, whether individuals or institutions. While academic research often describes relations of care or points to a relationship as a caring one, it is often done so without much deep philosophical theorisation, outside of noted disciplines.

A prevailing discourse emerging throughout the COVID-19 pandemic is that we need to take care of ourselves and each other. Across our society there is an expectation of care whether at home, in work or by the state. The schism that has emerged in the 'normal' functioning of our economy and society provides an opportunity for a deeper reflection on forms of care, as they stand and how they might look in the future. Social welfare is a vital form of care, provided by the state as a baseline for enabling citizens to maintain quality of life. There are many forms of care supplied or partly supplied by the state; from medical and social services to education, transport, housing, pensions and unemployment supports. Some of which attract more public and political attention than others, especially regarding who is entitled to their support. Such debates and opinions surface care as a complex concept that can divide and stir debate.

Often 'care' is described as what is important to us. Acts or practices of care become second nature to us, and perhaps we do not think of them explicitly as being a form of care. It is often only when care is lacking or removed that its importance is realised. In our current times the fear and anxiety surrounding the pandemic has put care into the spotlight as we think about the health of ourselves, our families, friends, colleagues, service providers and even complete strangers. Scholars from a number of disciplines have shown interest in care as it exists in organisations, institutions and society (such as; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Lamprou, 2017; Cederstrom & Spicer, 2015; Tomkins & Simpson, 2015; Mol, 2008; Noddings, 2003; Kittay, 1999). Despite this, it is largely overlooked that care exists across the labour market, not just within places of care, but as an everyday culturally embedded practice between individuals, organisations and through detailed documents, forms and rules.

Despite the prevalence of care across all aspects of society there is little in the way of deeper philosophical discussions of care or 'ethics of care' outside of the disciplines of health care, social care or family. In the health and social service disciplines and occupations there are deep philosophical, ethical and technical discussions of care; in family there are descriptions of caring practices and the consequences of poor care.

However, when looking at the labour market and its organisational actors, practices of care are often described but are rarely taken apart and explored in any depth. As a member of the HECAT collaborative research team which is exploring decision making in Public Employment Services (PES) I am drawn to how care is used across our findings, reports and in presentations.

A brief search through the reports on our findings to date indicate that care is used within these texts in two primary forms. First, to describe the general act of providing social welfare (e.g. the state provides care in the form of social welfare payments). The second is a description of how care is practiced and what it means for individuals. This second form provides a deeper glimpse into care practices in terms of how state supports are delivered. The most significant mentions of care are from interviews with both individuals and case workers where the consequences of providing care within the bounds of government bureaucracy becomes apparent, particularly at a personal and emotional level.

## **ETYMOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS OF CARE**

Contemporary studies of care often focus on an ‘ethic of care’ and stem from feminist philosophies such as Fisher & Tronto’s (1990, p. 103) description of care as “a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment”. The maintenance of life is a key component of care, whether it is health related or economic livelihood. Any disruption to the smooth and expected running of our lives causes fear and anxiety for a future ability to remain as an active member of society. This definition somewhat relates to the etymological foundations of care in pointing to something that disrupts normal life. Lexically care is described as a “suffering of the mind”, a form of grief and a concern for something or a “cause of anxiety” (Merriman-Webster, 2021). As a verb, care is described as to “feel trouble or anxiety” as it relates to caring for somebody’s safety, to be interested or concerned for something and to provide care where something is amiss (Merriman-Webster, 2021). Etymologically care appears across diverse linguistic roots including Middle English, Germanic, Old Norse, Indo-European and Middle Persian as describing sorrow, suffering, lamenting and anxiety.

There is a pattern across these definitions and its linguistic roots that align with experiences of illness and personal problems which require a form of

assistance to relieving these pains- so, care is provided. A second and related term that is of interest in discussions of care is 'cure'. Care definitions speak of recognising the suffering or problem that is disrupting normal life whereas cure is the act of relieving that suffering. Cure is said to derive from a number of roots, including the latin *cūra*, to give attention to something or to restore health, and additionally from both the latin root *curare* and french *curè* to provide a religious form of caring for the soul- the origin of curate (Merriman-Webster, 2021).

## **'MORAL' AND 'CONTRACTUAL' CARE IN PES**

As a 'species activity' care necessitates some form of relationship, generally agreed to be an unequal one with a person in need being offered help by a person with the means to alleviate suffering or remove a problem. Within PES relationships, care takes on a number of forms. The unemployed person remains as the person in need but at the PES and government organisational end there are numerous actors with diverse goals, responsibilities and autonomies. Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, p.5) notes three dimensions of relations in care that may additionally be relevant to social welfare organising; labour/work, affect/affections and ethics/politics. She notes how they do not always work in harmony and, in fact, finds the tensions between them a more interesting site to study the "ambivalent terrains of care". These tensions are present in across works exploring PES, between street-level services, personal interactions and needs and government policy.

PES officers and other support workers in NGOs or third sector organisations are often faced with the dichotomy of assessing their clients eligibility through an inflexible rule-based system imposed through government policy, while also providing face-to-face mentoring or counselling support to address individual needs. The tensions within these relationships appear to place the front line workers as carers, those who are aware of the troubles and anxieties that need resolving so as to maintain and continue to live in our worlds. The government and its fixed ruled bureaucracy can be thought of as the agent of cure, the curate, trying to administer a form of care with an imperative to cure; one that passes judgement of worth across a population and seeks to remove the problems, whether economic, social or behavioural. Such a position additionally speaks to Gilligan's (1982) much debated work which would suggest that the 'carers' take on a predominantly 'feminine' relationship of morals and ethics of care, while the 'curates' take on a predominantly 'masculine' relationship of calculated, rational and contractual care.

## WORKING-ON: MARKET CENTERED CARE

Heidegger's use of *Fürsorge* details forms and practices of care that may additionally explain the divergent forms of care provided to unemployed people. *Fürsorge*'s constituent parts *einspringen* or leaping-in and *vorausspringen* or leaping ahead surface a more detailed set of relational care (Tomkins & Simpson, 2015). *Leaping-in* is a substantive intervention where the carer takes over responsibility for a problem by substituting themselves for the target of the care until the problem is resolved. In this case the care giver would step in and solve a problem with the care receiver then re-engaging with the situation or, if desired, to disengage with it completely. A danger with leaping-in is that if it is misjudged or mishandled the care recipient could suffer a consequence of being undermined or labeled with the perception of being incapable of completing a task.

To overcome this the carer should ensure 'a way back in', according to Heidegger (1926 [1962 trns] 122, pp. 114-115), before the need for substitution has ended. In this case, it would allow the unemployed person to re-establish their autonomy in finding work. There is little evidence within research to suggest that 'a way back in' is encouraged or practiced. This is highlighted by continued views of the unemployed person as being ineffectual and untrustworthy in finding work; for example, in relationships of conditionality, when government policy and their PES agents are instructed to move unemployed people into any form of work or training whether or not it is suitable or potentially sustainable.

*Leaping-ahead*, on the other hand, has elements of mentoring and guidance where the carer shows the care recipient the way towards a number of future possibilities. In contemporary terms leaping-ahead is empowerment through encouraging development of strategies for resilience and collaborations to find solutions, rather than impose solutions. The care-recipient considers taking on these possibilities in their own way and on their own terms. Leaping-ahead should overcome any aspect of dependency (real or imagined) as it provides information towards a pathway but does not insist on the pathway being followed. It is future facing, as opposed to leaping-in which is immediate and often emerges as a result of a crisis management situation. This form of care is exhibited in the street-level relationships where individual needs and experienced are understood. In practice, these relationships of mentoring are often fragmented and overwritten by the conditional policy guidelines which impact on successful outcomes. If care is to produce effective

results, the fine line between helpful caring and harmful caring needs to be recognised.

## **WORKING-WITH: PERSON CENTERED ETHICS OF CARE**

Contemplating relationships of care through *Fürsorge* has similarities to many of the ongoing debates in 'ethic of care' across health and medical services. Mol (2008) notes how the debates in the medical profession have moved stakeholders from a position of dominant and unquestioned power to a more equal relationship of choice. Further explorations of ethics surrounding the care relationships within social welfare services could potentially open a pathway towards encouraging government policy to be centred on individual experiences and needs.

In considering democracy of care Joan Tronto draws on, and adds to, her (and Berniece Fisher's) four-stage model of care (Fisher and Tronto, 1990; Tronto, 1993 & 2015). Beginning by *Caring about*, we are made *attentive* to or become concerned for another's need for care- that is we notice that care is needed but it does not necessarily lead to a caring action. Then, *Caring for* moves a step further, towards *responsibility* for providing a form of care- but it does not necessarily mean taking direct action, it could lead to an action that would find the correct person or entity to provide care. The next stage of *Care giving* is the practice of providing care, and one which over time makes practitioners *competent* in determining the type of care required. Finally, when care is administered, as *Care receivers*, we become *responsive* to the care provided.

The care/cure tension between the street-level support workers and government bureaucracy lies within the *care giving* stage. The intersection between policy requirements and a desire to care and provide mentoring and tailored support for individuals creates a fragmented experience of *care giving* by the various stakeholders. In developing competencies street-level workers build a large store of tacit knowledge based on their training, knowledge of supports and observations of the individuals whom they support on a daily basis. This is a real-time and practical form of care competency, similar to any other form of care worker across the health and social services. The government as care giver, or curate to a large flock of souls, does not have the ability to build this bank of knowledge, instead relying on calculations of economic trends to try to understand the efficacy of their policies.

Tronto (2015, p. 25) addresses this when she adds a fifth dimension of *caring with* to overcome some of the inequalities associated with market-foremost democracies, which, she argues, creates “uncaring hierarchies among citizens”. *Caring with* places care at the centre of democracy in the hope that it will build “trust in one another and in our social and political institutions” (Tronto, 2015, p. 14). Driven by differing public opinions on who is entitled to care and increasing inequalities related to paying for care, this fifth form of care is based on reciprocity of care, the type of care we experience within relationships of family or friends. If *caring with* is placed at the centre of all forms of state care, especially social welfare, it may work towards removing judgements of worth (by public, politicians and media) and bridge the gap between systems of cure and systems of care- allowing all stakeholders in the social welfare ecosystem to become competent in providing care.

## **TOWARDS A CARING PES**

This brief consideration of care around provision of social welfare supports by the state has attempted to highlight some of the various ways in which care and caring relationships are practiced across often fragmented networks. Within the intersections of these networks are space for debating an ethic of this form of care. The existing relationships are often controlled by an imperative or mandate to find a cure. Leading to PES officers *working on* unemployed people- leaping-in and removing any autonomy for individuals to find their own pathway towards work. This materialises despite allowing front-line case workers a fleeting, but often overwritten, space in which to provide mentoring suitable to individual needs. In ignoring the voice and experiences of individuals, those who compile government policy (that is often signalled as being a form of care) can never become competent care givers, potentially leading to continued cycles of high expenditure with minimum efficacy for those effected by unemployment.

Changing the way unemployed people are treated across PES will require a considerable shift towards working with, rather than on, individuals. It has never been more important to start debating this shift as social welfare services have moved increasingly towards digital first interactions since the COVID-19 pandemic emerged. Removal of much of the face-to-face interactions between PES workers and unemployed people signals the continuation of contractual forms of care that impose inflexible conditions on individuals. In developing relations of care, understanding the experiences of unemployed people and removing anxieties over their

ability to control their own future, government policy can move toward care rather than cure- a type of caring based on principles, morals and ethics. Care is the place where the politics of social welfare administration is played out- the moral femininity and the masculine contracts, working with and working on individuals.

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# WELFARE AND THE STIGMA OF PUBLIC BURDEN: NEW VISIONS OR MORE OF THE SAME?

JOE WHELAN

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## WHY WE NEED WELFARE: CRISES TO COME?

Prior to March 2020, calls for a strong social safety net were made on the broad cusp of a crisis that was as yet unimagined; having been made in a pre-COVID world. In this respect, such calls represent recognitions of and arguments for social welfare as a positive social good in a time before the onset of a crisis during which welfare responses were required overnight and the necessity of a functioning social safety net was amply demonstrated. Recent history has only made such calls seem even more pertinent, even more pronounced. If we take the fact that the unemployment rate in Ireland during the most stringent restrictions of the pandemic hit highs of near 30% (CSO, 2021) then this clearly demonstrates the need for a functioning social safety net as a means of ameliorating hardship during times of acute crisis. We now sit at a point where exiting the Covid crisis seems a real possibility though, at the time of writing, we are not clear of the crisis yet and the global response has been patchy and uneven. On the basis that we *may* exit the crisis in some shape or form, and before we return to 'business as usual' with respect to the doing of welfare, perhaps it can now be suggested that we need to begin to consider that the crisis we are as yet experiencing may only be the first of many. So then, what about as yet unspecified crises? Could more pandemics follow this one? Returning global travel, continued urbanisation; the ongoing onslaught of climate change, along with increased contact between humans, wild animals and the natural environment certainly suggest that this is likely (see GAVI, 2021). Notably, among the reasons listed as contributing to the potential for more pandemics to follow sits the spectre of climate change, surely

the most eminent existential threat humanity faces and something which groups like the International Labour Organisation have continually pointed out will engender huge levels of job displacement and therefore the necessity for a huge welfare response in the years to come (see ILO, 2018). Given all this, it might, with some hope, be suggested that the geopolitical space in which the world finds itself along with what we have just been through are together enough to suggest that investment in welfare infrastructure *must* form an essential part of any strategy that governments, including the Irish government, put forward to ensure the continued well-being of citizenry and populations in general. Hope, however, is like a god of sorts, it both giveth and taketh away.

## **WHAT HAS THE PANDEMIC TAUGHT US? THE STIGMA OF PUBLIC BURDEN**

Pinker (1971: 175) has suggested that “The imposition of stigma is the commonest form of violence used in democratic societies”. This imposition is arguably made manifest through ideas which revolve around the notion of public burden. Undoubtedly, those who receive welfare face considerable hardship and social stigma. This is itself multi-layered and complex, manifesting through the administration of benefits themselves, which Spicker (2011: 16) has noted can be intensely “humiliating and degrading” and through wider social phenomena such as ideas around work and deservingness. Yet, when COVID-19 ‘struck’ and emergency welfare measures were introduced, the stigma of public burden was largely absent from public discourse and broad and supportive welfare measures were roundly welcomed. This was certainly the case in Ireland where the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), paid initially at a rate of €350 per week, was welcomed both publicly and politically.

What does this tell us? Arguably it suggests that when not tainted by the stigma of public burden welfare as a social good can be both desirable and almost universally approved of. However, this approval has been signalled during a time of great crisis and, as welfare states return to ‘normal’ and emergency benefits begin to be retrenched, might this mean that the stigma of public burden will once more attach to those who seek or receive welfare? Work on the historical development of social policy and welfare states suggests that the return of deeply embedded logics is likely to be the case (Powell, 2017; Whelan, 2021b; Boland and Griffin, 2021). Might there, however, be a way in which this could be offset? That is, is there a way of doing welfare which removes or reduces both the

stigma of public burden and the associated hardship? Under the next number of headings, I intend to present what I feel are some tentative answers to these questions by drawing on a report from NESC (2020) in order to begin to describe a new 'welfare imaginary'. Firstly, however, I want to draw attention to the work of Richard Titmuss and, in particular, to his conception of the stigma of public burden as being created, in the first instance, through the way in which welfare is administered in liberal welfare states. Titmuss (1968: 134), argues that:

If all services are provided – irrespective of whether they represent benefits, amenity, social protection or compensation – on a discriminatory, means-tested basis, do we not foster both the sense of failure and the stigma of public burden? The fundamental objective of all such tests of eligibility is to keep people out; not to let them in.

If we then take Titmuss's rejection of selectivity as a first principle toward the doing of welfare in a way which eschews the stigma of public burden, we are very simply left with the idea of universality within welfare states, that is; we are left with a type of redistributive justice which seeks to meet needs unequivocally and not through stigmatising tests of eligibility. It is therefore a social democratic vision of welfare in the main. It is not a new idea; it is not even an untested idea. Yet it may be an idea whose time has come outside of established social democratic welfare states, particularly as we begin to exit one crisis at a time when others may yet sit over the horizon. To make this project 'doable' the shift that would need to happen in liberal welfare states arguably requires a double movement; the first of which is a task for social policy and for how policies are designed. It is, therefore, a task in which social policy must seek to guide social experience and, in turn, shape the sociological imagination. The second movement follows and necessarily encapsulates a shift in broader public consciousness which sees welfare repositioned as a desirable, holistic, and inclusive social good.

## **CITIZENSHIP AND INCLUSIVITY**

In a report on the future of the Irish welfare system published in 2020, The National Economic and Social Council (NESC, 2020) revisited the following key principles as part of a vision for what a welfare system could and should be about:

1. Belief in the dignity and right to personal development of the individual, and in the value of bonds of mutual obligation between all members of the community.

2. The importance of fair shares within the community, including in particular the right of access of all people to adequate income, housing, education and health services.
3. The securing of these rights within a democratic framework (NESC, 2020: 76).

These principles were originally proposed by NESC in 1981 and were again reflected in the 1986 report of the Commission on Social Welfare which itself focused on three objectives for social security:

1. The prevention of poverty.
2. Redistribution—with the redistribution of income addressing the impact of distribution generated solely by market forces. This redistribution by the social security system takes place in tandem with the role of taxation and the provision of public services.
3. Income replacement—with social security to go beyond poverty relief to include replacement of income, with an earnings-related dimension.

Both sets of principles underpin the vision set out in the 2020 NESC document which focuses on adequate payments; redistributive justice; welfare as an expression of solidarity; a comprehensive social safety net and a simple system for both claimants and administrators to traverse. Ultimately, this amounts to a vision for what NESC have termed a 'Development Welfare State' (DWS, see also NESC, 2005). Of the DWS, NESC (2020: xxii) note:

A key element of the DWS is the fusion of economic and social policy: good economic performance can support good social policy, and good social policy provides a strong basis for economic development. Recognising the focus of Ireland's social welfare system on income supports, the DWS argued for the radical improvement of services such as education, health, childcare, eldercare, housing, transport and employment services.

This description of an inclusive and developmental welfare state does two things. In the first instance, it provides a vision of a comprehensive welfare state not unlike the post-war vision of a welfare commons, a vision in which economic and social policies are not at odds but, rather, are constitutive of one another. The focus is shifted away from social welfare as being about income supports only, to encompass caring, education, health and employment services. The strings of conditionality, where they do attach are more likely to be strings that foster and promote inclusivity as opposed to being punitive, labour market focused, and sanction based. What is perhaps most instructive, however, is that this report, and the work

it builds on, aptly demonstrates that imagination when it comes to how we might do welfare has not been lacking in the Irish example as evidenced by several discrete visions given over many decades and culminating in now further calls for a DWS. It should be noted also that NESC do not have a monopoly on visionary thinking in the context of welfare and I offer this here as only one example. It could be argued that the idea of a DWS as given by NESC is not the most radical departure, being mainly ‘middle of the road’ social democratic in orientation and this is perhaps best evidenced by the fact that the report stops short of a call for the introduction of a universal basic income (UBI). Utopia, this is not.

What is also striking is that much of what the report calls for echoes the historical foundations upon which many welfare states were built. For example, when read through the lens of the Beveridge Report, authored in 1942, it does not appear to stray overly far from a vision to ameliorate or eradicate, want, ignorance, squalor, idleness and disease. When read through a vision of social rights, as given by T.H. Marshall, it appears that the pendulum of progress for envisioning a modern and inclusive welfare state has not had to swing overly far. Perhaps, the fact that calls for such a vision persist tell us that it is a vision never adequately arrived at in the liberal welfare states of the Anglosphere; perhaps it tells us how far from such a vision we have wandered. Either way, what it does suggest is that though much may have changed since the inception of the post-war welfare state, a vision of welfare based on citizenship and inclusivity has not. Such visions still contain the same basic building blocks, still contain the same ideas about the social rights of citizenship, still effectively devolve upon a ‘right to welfare’ so that people can at least be said to possess the right to “a modicum of economic welfare and security,” a right through which they may be entitled to “the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing” (Marshall and Bottomore, 1992: 8).

In the remaining paragraphs, I want to take up this vision of a developmental welfare state by suggesting what might need to be considered in order to move toward it. In doing so, I concentrate on the first principle set out by NESC (2020) only which I divide into two separate strands.

## **DIGNITY AND RIGHTS**

If we take the first part of the first of the guiding principles set out by NESC (2020), seen below in bold...

**Belief in the dignity and right to personal development of the individual**, and in the value of bonds of mutual obligation between all members of the community.

...this suggests something about we ought to do welfare and do welfare conditionality in particular. Effectively, it suggests that we would honour the individuality of persons who cross the threshold of a welfare office in a way that is person-centred and not process-centred. Moving away from doing welfare on a purely procedural basis, an approach which can be more about ‘box-ticking’ and is therefore limiting, would mean honouring the hopes, dreams and ambitions of persons while also asking them what they have or what they would like to contribute.

If we are to *do* welfare differently, if we are to begin to foster better, more welcoming and more holistic welfare approaches, we also need to begin to think about how to see welfare differently, to frame it differently and here I draw attention to the second part of the first principle as given by NESCS (2021) and seen in bold below:

Belief in the dignity and right to personal development of the individual, and in the value of bonds of mutual obligation between all members of the community.

If we are to seriously move toward a space where we honour the bonds of mutual obligation and foster the vision of a ‘welfare society’ we need to (re)think seriously about how we talk and think about welfare generally. This is arguably a question of social framing. If ‘welfare framing’, is the process which makes up and contributes to the ‘common-sense’ notions of social welfare which are inculcated into public consciousness this is something that is clearly at play in the Irish example as demonstrated in an array of recent scholarly examples. Indeed, Devereux and Power, (2019); Gaffney and Millar (2020); Whelan, (2020a; 2020b; 2021a); McGann and Murphy (2021); Boland and Griffin (2021); and Finn (2021) have all variously touched on how welfare is framed in an Irish context; paying varying degrees of attention to the plethora of folk devils and caricatured characters that populate the stage in the politically crafted pantomime that makes up the cast of the welfare framing consensus.

Taken together, this vein of scholarship has shown how potent and damaging negative welfare framing can be, how it can become inculcated in public consciousness, how it can function as an aspect of stigma thus driving behaviour such as othering and impression management and how it undermines social solidarity and sow’s social division. This suggests that a campaign to ‘reframe’ welfare as a positive social good is a necessary step in reclaiming welfare in an overall sense. It also suggests that if we

are to launch a serious project which seeks to value the bonds of mutual obligation as part of a development welfare state, we need to seriously challenge how we currently think about, talk about and see welfare. While this may be a call which has echoed many times throughout history, emerging from a crisis as we are, it may be more pertinent now than ever.

This article is adapted from a passage in Joe Whelan's upcoming book *Hidden voices: Lived experiences in the Irish welfare space* which will be published by Policy Press and available in 2022. It is available for pre-order here: <https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/hidden-voices>

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# “NOBODY WANTS TO WORK ANYMORE”: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

ZACH ROCHE

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the alleged obstacles behind a return to pre-COVID normalcy can be encapsulated in a notice first seen in the window of a Burger King in Albuquerque, New Mexico in March 2021. It declared: “We are short staffed. Please be patient with the staff that did show up. No one wants to work anymore” (Hayes 2021). Since then, hundreds of other businesses have taken up the call (Gilbert 2021), with the critique lurching from the personal laziness of the youth to supposed problems in the welfare system which incentivises people to remain unemployed (Kieran and O’Shea). Evidence from a variety of countries says otherwise, with economic forecasts predicting a return to pre-pandemic levels of employment by the end of 2022 (Central Bank of Ireland 2021). Yet this moral panic over work, idleness and welfare is not new.

Like the ‘welfare queen’ before it the language of dependency and deservingness is in no short supply (Whelan 2021), and while welfare myths are rarely true, they do erode trust in public institutions. Herein, I will demonstrate that the present crisis echoes the policy approach of austere Ireland after the financial crisis (Coulter and Nagle 2015). In concluding, I will suggest that the real explanation behind the lack of immediate return to work is darker: many minimum wage workers have fallen ill or died from COVID-19. Meanwhile the pay and conditions in the understaffed industries remain dismal, providing a more material reason for the shortage.

To inform this discussion I refer to 35 interviews carried out by telephone during the pandemic (March – June 2020 inclusive) under the remit of the

H2020 funded HECAT project. These were semi-structured interviews with unemployed people living in county Carlow with a mean length of 40 minutes. All participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality as part of the research process, and informed consent was ensured by emailing an information sheet about the research to the participant and offering them the opportunity to ask any questions before the interview commenced (Hennink et al. 2011). The interviews focused on the experience of being unemployed in Carlow during the pandemic, and I tap into these interviews to inform the overall discussion.

## **NOBODY WANTS TO WORK ANYMORE**

We have been here before. A decade ago Ireland found itself devastated by the global financial crisis as unemployment surged from ~4% in 2006 to ~14% in 2010, rising to a peak of ~16% in 2012 (Boland Griffin 2015). Poverty, mental health crises, and emigration followed, but despite a massive increase in the latter this was not enough to quell the rising tide of unemployment (Coulter and Nagle 2015).

At first the policy response was supportive, and the Irish safety net caught many thousands of people. However, by 2012 the Fine Gael / Labour coalition government were set to announce their first budget, delivered under the watchful eye of the EU/IMF bailout programme. Spending was cut by €3.8bn, taxes were increased, and the Pathways to Work strategy was launched (2012-2015) to tackle unemployment (Duffy 2021). It promised to bring in state of the art active labour market policies to 'activate' those elements of the unemployed who were idle or not considered sufficiently active in jobsearch (Boland and Griffin 2015). The goal was to prevent long-term unemployment which could exclude vulnerable people (e.g., younger people, older men with limited skills etc.) from the labour market for life (often termed 'scarring'). Intreo was formed as a single contact point integrated service for welfare, dealing with everything from addiction to unemployment (McGann 2021).

A system of sanctions were implemented enabling caseworkers to reduce or cut welfare payments to those who were not considered legitimately seeking work (Finn 2019), and youth unemployment was targeted as an area of unique importance, having risen to 30.4% by 2012 (National Youth Council of Ireland 2014). The answer was to create a band of reduced payments for those aged 18 – 26 who were living with their parents. While jobseekers older than 26 would continue to be paid the full rate of €188, those in the aforementioned age band would instead be paid €100 per

week. The minimum wage (predominately paid to younger workers) was also cut, and the controversial JobBridge welfare programme was begun, which would pay unemployed people an additional €50 to work full-time on an internship. The stated goal of job bridge was for the internships to transition into full-time jobs, but for the most part employers simply exploited a government sponsored source of cheap labour and the scheme was quietly wrapped up in 2016 after numerous scandals (Finn 2019).

These measures, we were told, would encourage young people to find work, or increase the availability of work by reducing the price of labour to employers, thereby forestalling a 'lost generation' (Coulter and Nagle 2015). Despite government level claims to be tackling unemployment and 'getting Ireland back to work', these measures were probably 'dead-weight' measures, that is, jobs were created by the economy which would have been taken up even in the absence of the activation measures. Rather, these measures generated immense hardship for vulnerable younger people trying to begin their working lives in the aftermath of a global economic crisis (National Youth Council of Ireland 2015). There was little to no acknowledgement of the wide-ranging structural issues facing Irish workers. Virtually all interventions were supply side, focused on increasing the supply of workers in the labour market by sanctioning/retraining/sending them back to education, or helping them write CV's/cover letters. There was comparatively little investment in demand side interventions such as community employment or job creation.

Concurrently, there was a fear that welfare fraud was on the rise, often conveyed through stories, such as the "welfare cheats cheat us all campaign" launched in April 2017 by the (at the time) Taoiseach Leo Varadkar. This encouraged the public to report suspected welfare fraud to a confidential tip line (Devereux and Power 2019). These measures virtually never recover more money than is spent on them, though they do erode public trust in welfare and create an atmosphere of suspicion and paranoia. Indicative here is the urban myth that large numbers of migrant women are so cavalier with buggies that they simply leave them at bus stops, rather than inconvenience themselves by folding them up to take them on the bus (Doras 2021). Regardless, from 2012 onwards unemployment would begin to fall between 0.5%-1.5% per year, in lockstep with the recovery of the global economy until 2020 when Ireland was once again on the verge of full employment (ESRI 2021). The remarkable thing about this fall was its steadiness, and apparent independence from the government's micromanaging of welfare policy. Though as we now know, this recovery was not to last.

# THE PANDEMIC UNEMPLOYMENT PAYMENT

The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) was Ireland's answer to the COVID-19 crisis and formed the main thrust of the government's economic resilience strategy. Anyone who was out of work due to the pandemic could apply for PUP, and receive a payment of €350 / week, considerably above the standard jobseekers allowance rate of €203. This provided people with material and economic certainty at a difficult time, as schooling/ working from home created additional pressures, especially for women. In April/May of 2020 over 600,000 people were claiming PUP (the high point), though as of September 2021 this has fallen to 101,000 (Wall 2021). Even as it was being implemented, PUP was under fire for being too generous (Falvey 2021), resurrecting old arguments about the proper relationship between welfare and work (Whelan 2021). PUP was more resilient to these arguments as the causes of unemployment were so transparently structural.

Nevertheless, as the pandemic abates, and the number of vaccinations increase to a critical mass, calls for a complete reopening and the rolling up of PUP and similar schemes have become louder. This serves as the other prong of the 'nobody wants to work anymore' discourse; supposedly if welfare is too generous then people will not accept wages at the market rate (i.e., minimum wage). In October 2021 the department of public expenditure suggested that PUP had acted as a significant disincentive to work in the labour market, creating "scarring" which would have to be treated with additional active labour market policies (Hickey 2021: 19). Yet even as the pandemic payments come under fire, they are already in the process of being wrapped up, with most supports set to wind down from October 21<sup>st</sup>. The goal it seems is to tell workers to ready themselves for a sudden re-entry into the labour market. This critique is especially curious as the evidence shows that when the economy is open people go back to work, and when restrictions are imposed people stay at home and claim one of the pandemic welfare payments.

As in the graph below, the number of people on the live register had been trending downwards for some time, and pre-pandemic Ireland was once again on the verge of full employment. The spikes in unemployment coincide with the closure of the economy due to lockdowns, and it is more reasonable to assume that this, rather than a bout of spontaneous laziness explains the lag between vacancies and applications. This explains the general trend, but what about specific industries?

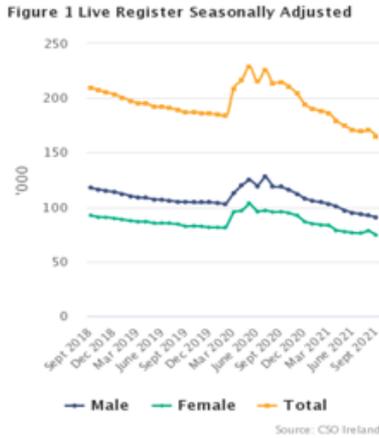


Figure 1. Source: CSO (2021A)

The businesses alleging the lack of appetite for work are overwhelmingly retailers, fast food providers, tourism & leisure, and other elements of the service economy which tend to staff younger workers who are paid minimum wage (Wall 2021; ESRI 2021). When we examine the cases of COVID-19 cross referenced with occupation we begin to find the answers. In Ireland the greatest number of cases were among health care workers, closely followed by the wholesale and retail trade category. However, B-E industries (mining, manufacturing, energy, water), and accommodation and food services also ranked highly.

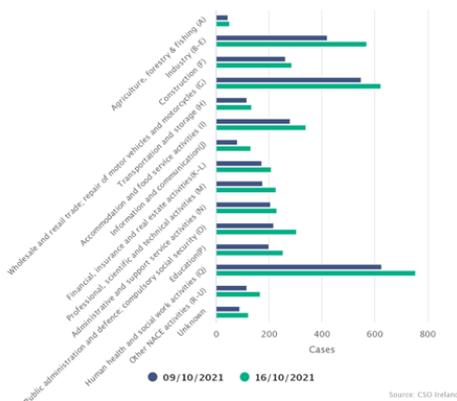


Figure 2. Source: CSO (2021B)

For comparative purposes, in the United States, the occupation with the highest risk were cooks, with a risk ratio of 1.60, closely followed by packaging and filling machine operators (1.59), agricultural workers (1.55), bakers (1.50), and construction workers (1.49) (Chen et al. 2021). This means that as a proportion of their workforce, the greatest number of deaths by occupation in the US were among cooks – an industry currently facing a massive worker shortage. These are professions which continued to operate under the rubric of essential services during the pandemic. While others were able to work in relative safety from home, service economy workers still had to go to work in person, often working longer and more intense hours than they had prior to the pandemic for the same wages. My respondents told me about the stress and burnout this caused, as when colleagues fell ill or passed away, their responsibilities were passed on to the remaining workers:

“We had two people die of COVID and there was no mercy from management. Some lip service about how sad it was and then we had to do all their work as well... and there was nobody to replace them” – Interview with Evan, 31, hospitality.

Some of the most ardent calls for the abolition of PUP have come from the hospitality industry (Wall 2021). A recent report on hospitality workers in Ireland showed significant instances of bullying (63%), workplace harassment (55%), verbal abuse (77%), psychological (64%) and physical abuse (16%) (Falvey 2021). There was also the case of a restaurant worker in Dublin whose story went viral on social media when he received his final paycheque in the form of a bucket of 5 cent coins (Moloney 2021). A more wide-ranging report by the ESRI (2021, p.46) revealed that there is a 9% gap in job satisfaction between minimum wage workers and the rest of the labour force. My respondents echoed this:

“I am fed up of the [low] pay, of the abuse, of the lack of respect you get from both customers and managers. You get hauled over the coals [punished] if you bring a fella mash with his steak instead of chips, but a customer spat in my face and not a thing was done about it” – Interview with Fry, 20s, retail.

“Life at home is hard, other people are working from home but I’ve still to go to work, the kids aren’t in school, it’s chaos but my boss doesn’t want to hear about it” – Interview with Jude, 46, chef.

“The longer this [pandemic] goes on, the less empathy there is. My wife is immunocompromised, I can’t put my feet up and take it easy. I need to be just as careful today as I was a year ago” – Interview with Kelbor, 34, hospitality.

In addition to the pay and conditions, there is also a lack of acknowledgement of the challenges of a pandemic. What their managers seem to desire is a return to normalcy, but for many there can be no such return until the virus is gone.

“My last place shut down for a few weeks because of level 5, and I won’t be going back. I am starting [a new job] and they are delighted to have me. A lot of people I know are doing the same” – Interview with Finn, 27, retail.

The pandemic has put things in perspective for them, and with so many vacancies they can have their pick of work and are deliberately avoiding employers with bad reputations.

## **CONCLUSION**

If history can be trusted, the relative generosity and benevolence of Irish welfare we have witnessed during a moment of national (and global) crisis will be withdrawn once that crisis transforms in character from acute to chronic. This was certainly the case for Ireland under austerity (Coulter and Nagle 2015), where supports were offered during the height of the global financial crisis, but gradually (or suddenly) withdrawn as austerity came into effect. This process has already begun with newspaper articles ruminating on the consequences of long-term unemployment, e.g., by critically discussing the number of people who have claimed PUP for most (or all) of its lifetime, simultaneously a new version of job bridge is being implemented (Kieran and O’Shea 2021). Yet, at time of writing the number of COVID-19 cases in Ireland has once again surged to around 2,000 per day, and ICU is at capacity, we are back where we were a year ago. Despite this, pressure is mounting for the government to wrap up the COVID-19 economic resilience strategy to get Ireland back to work.

The data suggests that this is premature and misguided. It is not the laziness of the youth or the excessive payments of a benevolent welfare State driving staff shortages. Rather, it is the ongoing grind of the pandemic, which has infected or killed a disproportionate number of workers in the industries with high vacancies, combined with the poor pay and conditions in said industries that are to blame. If the industries with shortages want to fill their vacancies, they need only improve pay and conditions, as dictated by the market they claim to believe in so enthusiastically. We may in-fact be witnessing a capital strike, where businesses withhold investment to achieve political goals or concessions. Whether they will be able to wait workers out remains to be seen, for the

first time in a long time the quantity of vacancies outnumbers the workers applying for them i.e., demand for labour exceeds its supply. Irish workers are sending a simple message that hospitality and retail are reluctant to hear: nobody wants to work for **you** anymore.

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