



Welfare to social control: a neo-liberal transformation

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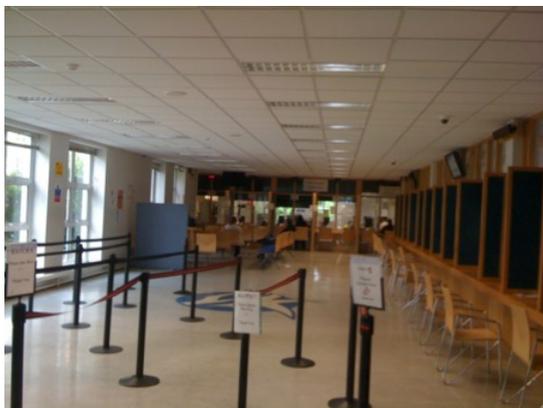
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Work is normative in modernity, therefore, non-work, construed as 'idleness' is considered problematic or even deviant. Recent neo-liberal transformations of welfare policy have increasingly constructed all welfare recipients as suspicious individuals who must be monitored and either incentivised into employment or retrained, all the time threatened with sanctions. Empirically, I look at the Irish case, from the *Pathways to Work* policy and interview data from the Waterford Unemployment Experiences Research Collaboration. I conclude that the new normative identity of 'job-seeker' is created by institutions of social control which render any 'idleness' as criminal.

'The devil will find work for idle hands to do'

Work is one of the central values of modernity (Edgell, 2006). Partially this stems from the 'protestant ethic' as analysed by Weber (1992), but it goes much further back into Christian ideas of nature as mute material which must be cultivated. Interestingly, even the opponents of capitalism put a very strong emphasis on work; for instance, Karl Marx takes work as fundamental to humanity, giving man his social being. Work is central to modern culture; it is even what we watch during our leisure time in TV series about work, from *Grey's Anatomy* to *Mad Men*.

It is unsurprising therefore that work is strongly normative. To work is good, even if labour itself is unpleasant. Roughly speaking, work equals worth. Every society has different measures for assigning different worth to different people, what Boltanski and Thevenot (2006) term an 'order of worth'. Age, beauty, strength, birth and piety may variously be accepted as 'criteria' to assign a person or institution value. In our age, the emphasis is increasingly on efficiency, market value and engagement in 'projects' – all values of work (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).



If work is normatively positive then non-work is problematic and even possibly deviant. However, what exactly is non-work? Certain forms of non-work, such as retirement after a long career or a holiday from a job are positively valued. Of course, 'work' is actually defined by social institutions, by factories and offices, and by employment law. Some forms of actual 'work' are insufficiently recognised as such, for instance, housework and caring for infants or elders. Primarily, non-work is defined by social institutions, ranging historically from the poor house to the social welfare office. Perhaps the clearest expression of the normative status of work is that the poor house was a work house; those without work were given it, both to redeem them as workers, and to punish idlers (Polanyi, 2001). Centuries earlier, those who were dispossessed through 'enclosure' were criminalised under Vagabondage Laws, and often shipped to the colonies as labour.

The New Welfare

Of course, the emergence of the welfare state in the twentieth century heralded a gradual shift away from this punitive approach towards idleness (Walters, 2000). The social welfare office emerged from the Beveridge report, offering cradle-to-grave support to all citizens; it presumed that non-workers were not 'idlers', but willing workers who should be offered retraining and educational opportunities. However, recent decades of welfare policy have increasingly incorporated neo-liberal ideas, particularly that welfare payments constitute a distortion of the 'free-market' for wages, and that 'drawing the dole' was a rational and calculated strategy by individuals unwilling to engage in the labour market. Welfare payments have been reduced in Ireland, most notably reducing the payment for the under-25s to 100 euro per week. However, what is more significant is the transformation of the social welfare office into an instrument of social control.

From the 1990s, governments around the EU, the US and Australia increasingly engaged in 'active-labour market policies', whereby a key part of employment policy is to incentivise and cajole those who are unemployed to seek work. For economists, unemployment is a mere hiatus between jobs, to be minimised by

targeted governmental action (Foucault, 2008). In fact, there are no more officially 'unemployed' people receiving benefits in Ireland; those who receive benefits are now officially 'job-seekers'. Ireland was generally behind recommended EU moves towards active labour market policies; it did little enough between 1997 and 2007 to alter social welfare policy. However, prompted by acute recession and spiralling unemployment between 2008 and 2013, politicians and policy-makers reshaped Irish social welfare policy.

This was primarily driven by the ESRI [Economic and Social Research Institute], who produced several reports suggesting that Ireland's 'passive' welfare policies were insufficient to encourage people back to work; most notable amongst these was *Carrots without Sticks?* (2011), which criticised the absence of sanctions for failing to pursue work. Another report for the ESRI by Richard Tol in 2012 suggested that social welfare payments were so high that most people would be better off on the dole than working; although the report was withdrawn it certainly had a media impact, sparking a minor 'moral panic'.

In January 2012, with unemployment standing at 15%, the government published *Pathways to Work* which proposed radical changes to existing social welfare policies. It particularly focused on long-term unemployment as a problem, perhaps because the 'long-term unemployed' is something of a euphemism for 'idlers' in much political discourse, but also because economic models suggest that the long-term unemployed are a constant drain on state resources because they draw welfare, contribute no taxes and tend to cultivate expensive health problems and/or become involved with petty crime. Indeed, if they do return to employment, those who have been long-term unemployed earn less (Cooper, 2013).

Pathways to Work links employment and entitlements, as expressed in the creation of a National Employment and Entitlements Service, (NEES) manifested in new *Intreo* offices; *Intreo* is a portmanteau of the word 'intro' with the Irish word 'treoir' which means guidance or direction. These new elements replace the 'dole-office' with a 'one-stop shop for employment, training and entitlements'. The gift of social welfare becomes explicitly contractualised:

"The signing of a rights and responsibilities contract and commitment to a progression plan by claimants."

"Individuals must commit themselves to job-search and/or other employment or education and training activities or face sanction in the case of non-compliance."

Under the new system benefits to citizens are conditional on their pursuing employment or education. While on the one hand this seems like a reasonable obligation to place on people in exchange for financial support, on the other, it makes the general lack of jobs the responsibility of each single individual.

Claimants of unemployment benefit are firstly contacted and made aware of all services and their rights and possibility of sanctions. They are to be assessed in terms of their individual needs, not just through personal contact with a professional but through a standardised Probability of Exit model (PEX), which assesses their likelihood of exiting the live register. With this knowledge, an Employment Services Officer (ESO) will give them Job search guidance, or refer them to options in training or education; including referral to private sector companies who are paid on commission for getting people a job (any job). Those whose PEX suggests have a higher probability of long-term unemployment will be brought to Group Engagement sessions with other unemployed people managed by a case worker where they will be given guidance on how to improve their job-seeking. After twelve months, further intensive one-to-one interviews and guidance are given – and if job-seeking is still unsuccessful the claimants may be directed to work-experience and training programmes. Under *Pathways*, claimants are obliged to sign up to a 'progression plan' with the bureaucrats and case-workers who are expected to implement and monitor the interventions. Non-compliance with these interventions can lead to sanctions, particularly a cut in weekly income from €188 to €146, or the suspension of payments for up to nine weeks. This is made explicit in letters to claimants:

"If you fail to attend, your jobseeker's payment may be reduced or stopped completely. Your payment may also be reduced or stopped completely if you refuse to co-operate with Employment Services in its efforts to arrange employment, training or education opportunities for you."

So, we see a range of interventions: assessment, profiling, group sessions, interviews, training, education and work placement. All of these run concurrently with the requirement of job-seeking, and evidence of this job-seeking is required. Each of these interventions seeks to motivate the individual, inciting them to greater efforts in job-seeking, and diagnosing their personal strengths and weaknesses. They will then be referred to training or education, or to available jobs, and this year to private personnel companies who receive state funds per each referral which they find a job. Effectively, there is an incentive for private companies to pressurise the unemployed. Furthermore, this February, the government announced that 3,000 half-time work placements in local government would become available, with a €20 top up to the dole, with the explicit threat that anyone refusing to take them up would have their benefits stopped entirely.



Sharon (2013) analyses American job-seeking culture as individualist; failure to secure work is taken personally, leading to negative psychological consequences; clearly *Pathways* fosters a similar culture. Clearly, these interventions have an effect in shaping the conduct of the claimant and in surveilling them creating knowledge about their efforts to find work must be documented and evidenced by the claimant – their word alone is not be enough. The

claim, existing knowledge about them, claims to this work must be documented and verified by the claimant. Their word alone is not enough. The claimant must become a 'good' job-seeker and prove that they are a job-seeker by continuous efforts (Rogers, 2004).

Being a Job-seeker

What are the consequences for individuals of this new social welfare regime? Here I will draw on interviews carried out with unemployed people by the Waterford Unemployment Experiences Research Collaboration in 2012. Many respondents reported negative feelings while applying for or signing for their welfare payments:

"Well you're entitled to your social if you work all your life, but like, going down there really, it's not a nice thing to do, and it's degrading, well it's not degrading but it's depressing".

In this quote we see a compact statement that work is normative, as it is what 'entitles' him to his welfare payment, but also that the experience of the social welfare office is nonetheless negative. When asked why the experience is so problematic he replied:

"Oh yeah, chasing work all the time, and you wouldn't be getting a letter back every time you put in an application for a job, and then the social would be getting on to you, you know, why aren't you applying for jobs and you'd say I applied for this job, this job this job, and they'd say where's your proof, you know. And I don't have it you know."

Being monitored in one's efforts, the routine subjection of an individual to suspicion is seen clearly here. The welfare office cajoles him to apply for jobs, then demands proof, implying that his word is not trustworthy. Thus, we see the problem with the identity of job-seeker; it is to be defined in terms of what one is not.



All of the unemployed persons we interviewed placed a very high value on work, and found 'job-seeking' a period of unsatisfactory idleness; even the supposed pleasures of leisure seemed to pale; one younger respondent described how waking up late and playing computer games all day 'lost its charm really fast'. After a short period, this respondent, like many others, described their time as a burden, something that had to be filled, in order to prevent themselves from going 'insane' or 'stir crazy'. The point here is that unemployment is *already* unpleasant, without the exercise of further pressure. In the absence of work which legitimises leisure, enjoyment is problematic:

"Yeah, you come home after a hard day's work like you know you're after working and like, you can sit down and you can relax or even after a hard week you can go and you can sit down and eat or you know what I mean on a Friday and go and have a few pints like and you can feel you are after putting in a week's work, you're entitled to have a few pints".

The meaning of everyday life is undermined by the absence of work. Respondents reported that they gained little or no satisfaction from a number of activities, obviously leisure, but more significantly, caring for their children, engaging in charitable work, doing odd-jobs for the older generation. I would argue that this feeling of alienation does not arise simply from having no job, but from the category of 'job-seeker' which defines all non-labour market activity as meaningless, or even failure. This is implicit in the equation of finding a job with success, and explicit in that job-seekers are not permitted to do significant amounts of voluntary work, or else they will be sanctioned for not being 'available for work'.

Many of the respondents seemed to feel that they needed to clearly define themselves as not being an idle person: "It really does mess with your head! I'm a worker not a sponger!" Rather than feel solidarity with other unemployed people, many respondents identified others as idlers and spongers:

"There's plenty of people out there that just want to sit on their ass all day and do nothing like ... Once they have their few pound to get their few drinks and they've no drive or motivation or anything like that to maybe want to achieve anything for themselves, like."

This quotation clearly shows a normative discourse around work being used by an unemployed person to distinguish themselves from idlers. Of course, this

The question being asked is a legitimate question about how being classed as an unemployed person is stigmatised in Ireland. Of course, the person was also subjected to the suspicious surveillance of the Social Welfare office, which strongly implied that she too might be an idler. This pressure induces most people to choose the alternative possibility of thinking of oneself as a potential worker and job-seeker. Paradoxically, many amongst the 'unemployed' are constantly busy with the Sisyphean task of job-seeking and many amongst them despise and resent 'spongers', 'scroungers' or 'idlers' who they see as deviant, effectively taking on the perspective which stigmatises themselves.

Conclusion

Liberalism is concerned with freedom. Yet, curiously, in order to support the constant play of free choice in the market, the neo-liberal state subjects individuals to monitoring and direction. From government policies favouring full employment and constant growth to the 'street-level' bureaucrats who monitor job-seekers, a new 'welfare' state is gradually emerging. This 'welfare' is profoundly linked to the market; the function of welfare no longer to support citizens, but to connect them to the labour market so that they may support themselves. The overall rate of unemployment has decreased since the implementation of the *Pathways* programme to 12.3%, which would seem to suggest that the policies are effective, even if they may not be attractive. However, many unemployed persons entered into work-experience or internships, often under the government's *Jobsbridge* scheme, whereby the employer gains a trainee worker for up to 9 months, and the employee gains a €50 top-up to their dole. Again the state supports the market, not the citizen.

All this occurs under the pressure of the system which also must contribute to the decision to emigrate of over 150,000 over the last two years. The unemployed must become job-seekers, or be subject to sanctions. Effectively, idleness is punished; around 3,000 out of 400,000 on the Live Register had their benefit cut to date. However, the point here is not just that 1% of the unemployed have actually been punished, but that every unemployed person is subject to suspicion as a potential deviant, an idler. Furthermore, individual resistance or criticism against this system is generally diverted to condemnation of the 'other', the 'real' spongers and idlers. Clearly, this is a disciplinary system, in which the gaze of the institution is internalised, not just by the unemployed, but the population at large.

Tom Boland lectures in Sociology at Waterford Institute of Technology. He is currently preparing a book on the new experience of unemployment with colleagues there. His recent work has appeared in *Culture, Theory & Critique*, *Textual Practice*, *Irish Journal of Sociology*, *International Political Anthropology*, *Irish Political Studies*, *Beascna*, *Anthropological Theory* and *The History of the Human Sciences*. His monograph *Critique as a Modern Social Phenomenon* was published in 2013 by Mellen Press. He is co-ordinator of the Economy + Society Summer School hosted by WIT and UCC annually at Blackwater Castle: www.economyandsocietysummerschool.org

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