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EDITORIAL NOTE
TOM BOLAND + RAY GRIFFIN

Experiences of the labour market

The very idea of the ‘labour market’ is problematic, the notion of a rational economic model that neutrally represents the buying and selling of labour power; trading in people’s time, bodies, effort and toil, thoughts and creativity, sometimes even their hearts and souls. The labour market is a bizarre, uniquely contemporary and dangerously inhumane way of thinking about work and the individual. The labour market is also a deeply troubled space, with rich debates about inequality, the working poor, precarious work, dirty work, unemployment, redundancy/scrapheapism, migrant labour, illegal labour, immaterial labour, alienation and anomie, breaking out across the world.

Work is a lived experience, not a simple matter of economic exchange and therefore it requires a close anthropological perspective; from the peculiar practices of seeking work, presenting yourself in applications and interviews to the minutiae of living in and through our work practices; work banter, rosters, hidden hierarchies, from swinging the lead, to the deep and profound moments of care, all moments across the work-scape of the various petty incivilities, hurts, joys and victories of working life.

Clearly, the phrase the ‘labour market’ artificially yokes disparate things together, particularly unemployment, jobseeking and work. However, these elements are linked experientially as sequences which give shape to individual lives and are imbued with significance. Increasingly, with the rise of flexible, short-term, temporary and zero-hours work, the circuit between unemployment, jobseeking and work has become accelerated, a gauntlet which must be run continuously. Furthermore, contemporary activation policies mean that the logic of labour market participation increasingly informs education, perhaps all our experiences become re-orientated towards buying and selling. As William Blake wrote two centuries ago:

What is the price of Experience? Do men buy it for a song?
Or wisdom for a dance in the street? No, it is bought with the price
Of all that a man hath, his house, his wife, his children.
Wisdom is sold in the desolate market where none come to buy,

In this special issue of the Irish Journal of Anthropology we speculatively assemble fresh anthropological field reports, ethnographies and theoretical reflections on the experience of the labour market. Thus, within this special issue we are very pleased to have gathered a broad range of articles which engage imaginatively with the labour market.

Firstly, we are delighted to present Linda Tirado’s reflections on unemployment and precarious work, which provide a direct insight into lived experience. Her writing style crosses boundaries from auto-biographical to auto-ethnographic, yet takes in broader political issues; particularly the perception of the ‘poor’ as begun in Hand to Mouth which mixed memoir and political analysis. Our own ethnographies of welfare offices complement this work by examining the institutional arrangements for welfare activation which re-constitute the experience of unemployment and work on an on-going basis – focalised on the Irish case here. In particular, we reflect upon how the spaces and places of unemployment re-constitute individuals as ‘labour market actors’, wherein ‘actor’ is not simply a theatrical metaphor, but a practice of self-marketing.

Along the continuum from unemployment through precarious work to flexibilised labour, we have two distinctive contributions. Alicia Bobek and James Wickham observe the complex ways
in which contemporary market forces have disrupted the conventional market employment relationship. Here, the constitutive character of the labour market emerges most clearly in regard to time, as quite who owns a worker’s time and how they use it is examined, so that the model of the rational economic actor who freely chooses to invest their labour as a resource becomes problematic. Concentrating more closely on the motivational culture of younger workers who are largely in flexible or insecure work, Niamh Hourigan focuses on the concept of striving. Moving into Weberian concerns, this article demonstrates how a specific work ethic animates contemporary practices of work, connected strongly to institutional changes, yet with an emphasis on cultural adaptation to these circumstances.

Contemporary concerns about the transformation of work in the broader economy are also acutely felt within academia. The experience of precarious work, particularly in the form of part-time lecturing, is explored by Tina Kinsella. Aside from setting the broad economic scene and exploring the experiences of academia, she theorises persistence in precarity via the work of Berlant and Butler as a form of subjectification characterised by ‘cruel optimism’. Within the supposed ‘ivory tower’, Carmen Kuhling explores the transformation of work and life itself in the ‘accelerated university’. Time is central as a concept here again, as work expands to fill the time of life and life moves to the rhythm and speed of interminable tasks and recursive deadlines.

Moving from the university to the street, Kirsty Doyle, John O’Brien and Niamh Maguire examine the working conditions of bouncers in the ‘night-time economy’. Pressures both economic and physical impact on these ‘careers’ as individuals attempt to juggle the demands of business, law, community and personal safety. Drawing innovatively on auto-biography and popular song Tríona Ní Shíocháin returns to earlier ‘labour markets’ in the form of the hiring-fair. Her analysis demonstrates the performative qualities of work in forming worker subjectivities and the constitution of masculinity through labour and violence.

Having attempted to explore an economic concept anthropologically, we turn to the work of Rowena Pechenino for an anthropologically grounded economics. Socially situating economic actors, she argues that constantly readjusting expectations in ever-changing economic circumstances is inescapable in modernity. Like many of our contributors, she finishes on a normative note, indicating how redistributive social mechanisms are vital to the economy.

Although this section introduces the special issue, it is in truth an afterword. The question that emerges as we assemble these distinct reports from the labour market into a collection is do they hang together? Mapping the labour market is as impossible as the fabled map the size of the world; yet this is not just a question of ‘full coverage’ as there are always other issues and topics, rather it is a profoundly ontological question about the labour market. As we edited, curated and coaxed these submissions we were exhilarated by the response to our call, distant voices produced granular descriptions of complex phenomena that animate the labour market. But is this collection just a series of separate essays; or do they have contain an image, a world view, a shared thesis of the labour market? And it is worth noting here that this special issue primarily addresses just one local corner of that global phenomenon, contemporary Ireland – even though this site is buffeted by international forces.

To clarify, we turn again to Blake, ‘To see a World in a Grain of Sand. / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower. / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand. / And Eternity in an hour’; A challenge from poetry to theory: Can traces of a complex whole be grasped in a tiny part; can our necessarily detailed micro-studies give us intimations of the wider processes? Of course, this brings us to disciplinary differences, clearly the ‘labour market’ is firmly perceived in the economics, partially in the sociological imagination – often with a heavy dose of positivism, yet it is still emerging within anthropological paradigms. So the question of whether these proximate studies around the
experience of the labour market speaks to how anthropology can conceptualise such an imagined community. While economics as a discipline has a central client in the market, with a firm ontology of organisation that emerges from collective action in the market; and sociology has a central client in the nation state and an ontology of state organisation allowing collective action; can a discipline built of personal experience, with no a priori image of organising assemble a vision of the labour market?

This anthropological adventure is also problematic for doctrinal anthropology. Producing a collective image of individual experience must suture diversity, bowdlerise alterities, and explore intoxicating but ultimately commodified subjectivities. In these papers we can see individual voices continually account for themselves in such ways, citing the state or the market or the economy to explain individual lives, rarely referring to the local, cultural and particular as emphasised in the discipline of anthropology. Indeed, against the typical accusation of ‘imposing economic categories’, the usage of economic categories by real individuals might even mean that the ‘imposition of anthropological categories’ may be a real problem. So, a challenge emerges for anthropology: Can anthropology account for something as complex as the labour market while the meta-analysis of structures cannot be integrated to the micro-analysis of particulars? Will anthropology have to adapt or create new ways of talking about broader processes?

This leaves us with our final thought. Economics and to a certain extent sociology have taken the labour market as a matter of fact. What these disciplines tend to see are the structures of the labour market, or take advanced second order constructs such as unemployment rate; and then claim to talk about a generalised labour market. In this vision, labour itself stands separated, contextless from the places, people and situations that produce it. For the labour market to be a matter of concern for anthropology it must become just the opposite - a realist activity that is situated, social and the result of individual experience; from which the various assemblages emerge.

Before signing off, we must acknowledge the labour of numerous reviewers and colleagues who helped us in creating this special issue. They must remain nameless, of course, a reminder that there is always hidden labour behind the work which is performed.

**GENERAL EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION**

**JAMES CUFFE**

This special issue of the *Irish Journal of Anthropology* gives voice to the problematic of precarious employment. It is a subject that is increasingly relevant to more and more of us.

I urge everyone to support the IJA team going forward. As I always state, this is a community journal that cannot operate without community support. The constraints grow greater and can only be met with the help of our academic institutions, anthropological departments and good will of our subscribers.

*Thanks to the IJA team and wider IJA community who spare their time and energy for the journal in service of the anthropological community of Ireland.*
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

COVER PHOTO: THOMAS CARPENTIER: http://www.thomascarpentier.com/

TITLE: MODULOR

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of economics and other fields. She has published widely in journals such as the *American Economic Review*, the *Economic Journal*, the *Journal of Public Economics*, and the *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*.

**LINDA TIRADO**

Linda Tirado is a freelance writer and activist who has spoken around the globe about what it's like to be poor in America. She is the author of *Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America*.

**JAMES WICKHAM**

James Wickham is a Fellow Emeritus of Trinity College Dublin where he was Jean Monnet Professor of European Labour Market Studies. He has led research projects on employment, migration and mobility. His most recent book is *Unequal Europe: Social divisions and social cohesion in an old continent* (Routledge, 2016).
We run from unemployment. We discuss it in clinical terms, careful to avoid naming any of the associated assumptions: unemployed is unemployable, and the longer you go without work the more everyone suspects there must be something a bit off about you, even if you interview well and have a sufficient CV. Knowing someone that is unemployed makes you buckle down a bit at your own job because that shit is awful to see.

I’ve been fired or laid off my share. Losing your job is traumatic. Like staring spectres in the face no matter where you look. It feels like being Scrooge where every night a different worry comes to haunt you and keep you tormented and restless. The days pass quickly at first, melting into each other in a haze of scrambling to patch together a safety net in case it takes longer than a week to find work and then scrambling to find a job that will get you your first paycheck before you’re sunk.

The first couple of days after you lose a job you loved are awful. I think it’s almost easier if you had it coming, because then at least you can hate yourself but the world makes sense. Losing a job you liked and worked hard at for some arbitrary reason is the world failing you. It’s the difference between getting a divorce and having your newlywed spouse die in a freak car accident on the way to work. Both devastating, but one is worse for what was meant to have been.

I’d tell myself that it’d be good, I’d find something maybe even better somehow, a bit more convenient or a bit more per hour. I would spend the two days after losing a job picking up applications all over town and dropping them back off again when I knew managers were likely to be in but it wouldn’t be too busy, and if I happened to get the hiring manager I might have a job on the spot. It wasn’t ever a sure thing, though, and if I didn’t find work in the first few days I knew I was in for a rough spot. If I hit a week without work, I downgraded my outlook from crisis to catastrophe.

At the sort of income level I’ve been at for most of my life you can’t afford to miss a day’s work, much less a week. It’s the difference between not eating much for a week because your income was interrupted and being evicted because your rent is late. My timing has always been good as far as these things go; for me unemployment has usually come at times when I could easily give an apartment up and couch-surf for a few weeks until I could save up the deposit on a new place or find a house-share.

It’s hard to be friends with someone who’s unemployed unless you’re the sort of person who never has enough to spend on fripperies anyway, in which case nothing changes. Those friendships that are based on non-consumer activities can be depended upon. The ones...
that revolve around bars and brunches and restaurants, even cheap ones, will collapse when someone can no longer pay the price of admission. You need a certain kind of friendship to have as much fun sitting on someone’s couch with a glass of wine; there is more intimacy there. I have a lot of going-out friends, but very few people have been invited to visit me at home. This is, after all, where my children live.

Most of my life I have had the more comfortable sort of friendships, primarily people that I worked with. Everyone coped with periods of unemployment, though most never lasted more than a few months. Still we all worked as cooks or waiters or clerks at the lower end of the market and none of us ever had enough money to go out with. We took it in turns to help each other out when someone’s paycheck ran low or they hadn’t found any hours anywhere for a while.

Not having enough to get by on is a collaborative effort. If everyone has two dollars you can chip in on a pizza and a few two-liters. If everyone’s hanging out at someone’s house they’ll make something cheap to feed everyone with. I once kept six people fed for four days on a crate of freeze-dried hash browns and three dozen eggs. We would scrounge together everyone’s weird box of something: some basmati rice, some stuffing, some scalloped potatoes and we would feast like kings. Those were some of the best moments of my life, actually, broke as hell with no hope of it changing anytime soon, but, as a result, forced into creativity in the company of people that I very much liked.

As people age, that coexistence falls a bit by the wayside as people get proper places because they’ve married or had a kid. But we hang out as much as we can, hoping our kids like each other and sneaking outside in turns to smoke because it’s a really bad idea to leave those children to their own devices for longer than about three minutes. We invite each other to dinner a bit more formally because the scheduling of families is more complex than that of young singletons.

Still, the routine of friendship isn’t disrupted if someone is out of work; all the more reason to have them over for dinner and a few beers to take their minds off things. Everyone in service has been fired for no good cause at least once, and it’s not an automatic indictment of one’s character. The default is commiseration, actually, because few people in the service industry have fuzzy feelings for their corporate overlords and most anything that goes wrong at someone’s work is assumed to be the fault of incompetent management or faulty equipment or unreasonable customers.

For that matter, it’s fairly standard in a lot of industries to work seasonally, and periods of unemployment amongst construction workers or line cooks are to be expected. As it’s the demand of the career rather than the skill of the worker controlling one’s time off, and given that most people work themselves half to death during the busy season, occasional bouts of unemployment are nearly restful. It’s the closest many people will get to a proper holiday. Of course, that’s only so if there’s a reasonable guarantee that work will begin again in spring.

* 

Now I’m a freelancer, which is to say I’m unemployed but I do get a fair amount of gigs and sometimes they even pay, usually often and well enough that my life is as stable as one could hope for given that it is completely fucking nuts. It was only a few years ago I was facing down what I was sure was a life near the minimum wage in a country that doesn’t value labor for its effort but its production.

I find I am more terrified now than I was before when I could earn next to nothing. I have no wage, no security, no guarantee that this carousel of good fortune won’t end tomorrow leaving me with no earning power.
My new friends are celebrities and editors and politicians and bankers and I am keenly aware that most of them are going out friends. Our friendship is predicated on my earning power; were I unable to pick up my part of the bar tab we would simply not hang out. I work in a cutthroat industry that is just now suffering mortal wounds due to lack of revenue or public faith; it’s a bit much to expect people stick with you on the way down the way they did on the way up. That’s not how either media or politics work.

The absence of a commission feels like the first step into destruction. I try never to go more than a few days without work; the knowledge that I have a check coming relaxes the bands that seem to tighten in my chest when I have no more income on the horizon. It’s an arbitrary anxiety, because it doesn’t seem to matter whether I’ve $100 or $1000 coming in. It’s the fact that there is a check coming that soothes me.

It’s a question of security versus stability. I have spent most of my adult life shaping my worldview and coping mechanisms to a life with no chance of stability, but a small shot at security in the form of knowing you had another paycheck coming at least. If you had that, you could work the rest out somehow. It was survival, hustle, whatever you could do to get the bills paid.

I learned to count on it. And now it simply doesn’t exist. I make much more than I used to for much less work, but it still always shocks me when I get an email asking me to write something. I can’t relax into it because it seems as though I have written many things but I’m not a writer exactly as I don’t have, you know, a job. I am having to learn to count on stability instead of security.

I am not an employed writer, but I am a working one. It seemed like a distinction without a difference to me for the longest time, until I realized that I wouldn’t qualify for a single welfare program even though I’ve not had a job for years now. That’s the thing I keep reminding myself: this is no different than carpentry. Comes and goes, but it’ll be fine.

For me unemployment is almost felt in the negative; I’ve always been so afraid of it that I’ve been driven to more than one bad decision, desperate to avoid it. I’ve taken jobs that were absolutely beneath my dignity for abusive employers who could smell desperation and traded on it. I’ve worked off the books, unable to file taxes because the nature of my employment was such that nobody could alert the government. I’ve tolerated sexual harassment and degrading conditions, safety violations and injuries I wasn’t allowed to tend properly.

I have thought many times over the years that I should quit, just walk out one day and never come back but I was always keenly aware that I wouldn’t qualify for any benefits programs if I quit, only if I were laid off. Then work became a dance of slowly decreasing my productivity until someone would tell me I didn’t have a job anymore while making sure not to break any rules.

(For those unfamiliar, American unemployment benefits are actually a government-run insurance scheme where the government, the employer, and the employee all pay in. It only lasts a certain amount of weeks or until you’ve run your savings out, whichever comes first, and you can only get it if you were terminated for no cause. You cannot collect unemployment benefits if you were fired for good reason or if you quit.)

* 

Facts rarely get in the way of a good discussion about unemployment, because for some reason we’ve decided it’s far more important to be polite than to be right, and fixing problems in the economy isn’t worth it if the cost is rocking too many boats. So we bail out banks and multinationals and they pay our politicians insane sums of money and then the politicians tell us that if we want jobs
we have to first pay off the people who already own everything. We don’t usually agree, but we’re not politicians so there’s not much we can do about it except wonder how much our taxes are about to go up to cover this.

There is no safety net for whistleblowers, for instance, nor for people working in intolerably illegal conditions. One Amazon warehouse had so many employees succumbing to heatstroke that the local hospital kept ambulances sitting outside the warehouse rather than the medical center, for efficiency’s sake. Amazon could have kept their loading doors open to lower the internal building temperature by tens of degrees but chose not to. They said that if they did, employees might smuggle merchandise out to their cars. They also forced employees to submit to searches every time they left the building, keeping them trapped for up to an hour, unpaid, after their shift had ended. People who quit were considered to be “not strong.”

It’s hard to articulate what that kind of socialization does to your reasoning. It feels wrong. Of course a human life is supposed to be worth more than humiliation and degradation; we are all citizens equally. Yet, unemployment is somehow worse than degradation, the active choice to become unemployed a mark of the weak or lazy or exceptionally antisocial. That there aren’t enough decent jobs to go around never seems to enter into it; we excuse the system by finding individual flaws and making them up wholesale if none are naturally occurring. People who quit were considered to be “not strong.”

We have been systematically socialized in this new era of brain-work (as opposed to the old order of muscle-work) to value our worth by our potential, because it is assumed one will be clever enough to get ahead and stay ahead. It’s why millions of Americans believed Trump, at least partly: he is clearly winning at resource acquisition. Even if it’s a hollow front, I certainly don’t have the wherewithal to put up a front that includes a gold-plated jet. We’ve taught ourselves to value that, and more importantly we’ve taught each other that it’s proper to value that. Our corporations focus on quarterly profits to the point that a company is considered to be underperforming if it doesn’t increase enough. Outperform or die.

Of course that filters down and seeps into our bones. If it didn’t, if we didn’t allow it, we could never bring ourselves to keep the bullshit train moving. There’s absolutely no decent reason we should incorporate our bosses into our self-image to the point we’re willing to depress our own wages for decades and watch our jobs offshore for decades as we did. There’s no reason we should tolerate unsafe working conditions or wage theft or sexual harassment or any number of things that are disturbingly common except that we’re terrified of the alternative.

Alain de Botton explained our attachment to employment as virtue in his book Status Anxiety: “Because societies are in practice trusted to be ‘meritocratic,’ financial achievements are necessarily understood to be ‘deserved.’ The ability to accumulate wealth is prized as proof of the presence of at least four cardinal virtues: creativity, courage, intelligence and stamina. The presence or absence of other virtues - humility and godliness, for example - rarely detains attention. That success is no longer attributed, as in past societies, to ‘luck,’ ‘providence’ or ‘God’ is a reflection of the
collective secular faith we now place in individual will or power. Financial failures are judged to be similarly merited, with unemployment’s bearing some of the shame that physical cowardice earned in warrior eras. Money is meanwhile invested with an ethical quality.”

One of the basic requirements of our society is that we obtain and keep gainful employment. After that, it’s prosper and push forward; if one is not actively succeeding, one is failing. After that, it’s amass things and post them on social media so that we can collectively decide what the standards are in this new age of magic and technology. Anyone who doesn’t display that value system is considered to be odd at best, antisocial at worst.

We managed to completely upend the economy just as we were revolutionizing industry and people forget the magnitude of that. In the best of scenarios, without the banking crisis, we’d still be grappling with automation and self-driving cars and robotization and the fact that yeah, technology does make a lot of human labor redundant. We’d be doing it with weak unions and a society that teaches independence over collaboration.

We’d still have globalization of trade and information and communication. So we’d still be competing with Asia for jobs which before the Internet would have been more cost-efficient to keep local. This all would have shaken humanity to its core no matter what. As it happened, we went with “also adding a global financial crisis on a scale not seen for a century” on top of it.

* There’s no way anyone could tell you what all the ramifications have been, but one that people overlook is the rapid expansion of the definition of “basic standards” over the last couple of decades just at a time when everyone is trying to figure out what those are nowadays.

Adam Smith talked about luxuries in terms of relative standards: for millennia, nobody wore linen shirts. But in his time, no self-respecting man would be seen in public without one, which meant a linen shirt was no longer a luxury, but a societal expectation.

An American demagogue from Fox News, Bill O’Reilly, infamously did a segment where he said that because many poor Americans had refrigerators and air conditioning they were practically pampered in comparison to the poor of third-world countries, much less their historical forebears. It’s true enough, but O’Reilly never mentioned Smith.

The fantasy of meritocracy underlies most of our current social dysfunctions: but gradually everyone’s realizing that we’ve been lied to for decades or longer. A university degree isn’t a good indicator of intelligence or aptitude. Hard work isn’t the key to success, because everyone’s been working themselves to exhaustion for years now and we’re not seeing much by way of return.

It turns out meritocracy is bullshit and everyone’s realizing it. It became obvious it was coming apart in 2008, but there were signs before. Work has become increasingly less stable, layoffs more common, internships something you pay for. Banks had crises and we bailed them out. Companies globalized. Then, when it came apart none of our leaders had a good explanation.

In America, the Tea Party took control of the Republican Party not long after and spent a decade crippling government for increasingly absurd reasons. Senators read children’s books on the floor of the United States Congress to avoid actual governance. In the meantime, the banking crisis was blamed on profligate spenders rather than the increasingly unavoidable truth that the banks had acted not just badly, but probably
criminally. We didn’t prosecute them - we paid them.

Our leaders have been lying to us for years; they are not actually anything like elite. Or at least, we’d all better hope not. You’d be hard-pressed to find a janitor or an overnight diner cook that doesn’t know someone who’s brilliant, and the people who’ve gone to the fancy universities are entirely clueless about how the world works, it seems.

A culture hit by fear and financial instability in a time when we define our worth by our jobs can easily turn to poison. It’s easy to turn people against one another if you’ve already convinced them they’re competing, and it’s easy to convince people their interests are opposed if they don’t know anyone from the other group. That’s come.

We’ve done such a poor job of knowing our neighbors that it is apparently new information to people that poverty sucks, and also we have Trump and Farage doing victory laps around whatever was left of reason and logic in London or Washington. All of which was a shock to the creative/media/political classes, who seem to think voters are wind-up toys that can be activated during elections and left idle in between them.

It’s explained as racism or sexism and there’s a lot of that in there but a lot of it was also that people remembered 2008 and all the years since, the years of insecurity and worry and rounds of layoffs every day on the news while Democrats insisted it was getting to be really nice around here, actually, under their wise leadership and Republicans tried to sell us on moral hazard as a safeguard again, and only Trump was talking about how fucked everything is, giving people permission to say the unspeakable and that’s a dangerous box to open up.

Still, you cannot destroy the entire world economy and then be shocked when people don’t trust another word out of your mouth. I was in my mid-twenties when I learned that the whole financial system had been a Ponzi scheme mixed with a game of musical chairs, and that the only people who found themselves standing when the music stopped were the people who didn’t work in finance. I watched friends decide suddenly to get that postgrad, hoping that things would have calmed enough in a couple years there’d be work to find. I watched them take jobs that didn’t pay much more than mine when they ran out of degrees to get and there still weren’t jobs.

A lack of honest leadership leaves us vulnerable to demagoguery. It’s why across the Western world people are beginning to associate cruelty and rage with stability and protection. Australia’s future PM, Tony Abbott, once stood in front of a sign saying “Burn the Bitch” in reference to Australia’s first-ever female PM and addressed the crowd cheering this and other such lofty slogans by calling them “a crowd of fine Australians.”

It’s how we in America wound up with men who two decades ago would have found it shocking to hear more than a folksy “damn” or two at their GOP rallies this year showed up wearing shirts proclaiming HILLARY IS A CUNT and a President who not only grabs women by the pussy but actually bragged about his dick size on national TV during a Presidential debate. Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson, a bad sitcom premise if ever there was one, managed to hoodwink most of the UK into thinking that they weren’t completely out of touch with reality for long enough that it voted itself into a new era of austerity and polite refusal of things like indisputable fact.

We need passion, not mere compassion. Come out of the data and reflect on what it means, what you’ve tolerated in the name of security. Look at the paths your friends have taken over the course of your life, and why you value what you do, and what can be done. I am no academic; I do polemic and memoir and somehow, magically, for a living I
remember all the times I didn’t do this for a living and I talk about how common they are and what they might mean.

What we have needed, what has been missing from the public discourse is people who are as enraged to read about the cracks in society as the people who live in them are about the world generally. It is the job of the media and the academy to relate truth to people who would not otherwise know it and we have fallen down on the job rather spectacularly. It is destroying our societies and it is time to move on from quiet compassion and take up the work of fighting for better.

For some reason, millions of our countrymen believe that success and employment are correlated with virtue and right-thinking. It’s laughably easy to disprove that claim; more importantly we, who know the truth, must start insisting on it.

Tom Clark wrote a fantastic book called Hard Times: Inequality, Recession, Aftermath that tracked things like quality of life and employment rates for people in the UK after the crash. The picture he painted was bleak and cruel and rang utterly familiar to me as someone who’d written a memoir about precarious work and the life you have to lead to accommodate it. And all of it unneeded, superfluous. We live in the wealthiest societies in modern history; surely we can figure out how to provide jobs. If that’s beyond us, then there must be some way to order ourselves where we don’t forget that. If full employment - the real kind, where everyone who wants a job has one and working means you don’t starve - is impossible, then it should be no huge moral problem to provide programs to step into that breach.

In other words, we’re not asking to colonize Mars here. Just to figure out how to stop ourselves wasting millions of pounds of food every year while citizens starve, or how to keep people from sliding into poverty every time an employer deals with an unavoidable efficiency. How to explain to people that we’re doing this capitalism thing, and that means winners and losers and that’s nothing to do with whether someone’s a good person or not.

The most frustrating thing about all of it is the waste of this adversarial society, where our leaders tell us “it’s us or them” but they never really define who belongs to which group. Voters, forced to choose between no good answers and no answers at all, grasp for stability because it’s the more basic need.

We need passion and drive and courage in times like these, and we need to understand that we can’t restore order and fact to society until we’ve looked past our own biases and preconceptions. There are few humans with no redeeming qualities, few people without love and wit and kindness within them. Every data point in the field of society or employment is a human with a life that will, because most human lives are, likely be lived and ended without too much fanfare or dramatics.

The point of society, though, is mutual betterment. We can be better than this, so we should be. We can do more, be wiser, and choose more intelligently. We can, so we should, and we must.
Abstract: The Irish hospitality sector relies on contingent workers who often have flexible contracts and irregular hours. This paper discusses this ongoing flexibilisation of employment and its effects on the ‘ownership’ of time. Our findings suggest that flexibilisation impacts on the division between ‘duty’ time and ‘free’ time as well as on how workers are controlled by managers. The analysis is based on data collected by the ‘Working Conditions in Ireland’ Project which was a qualitative study examining changes in the employment relationship in Ireland.

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Introduction

Time is a crucial dimension of our everyday lives. We use it to organise tasks, structure our days, or even measure spatial distances. In a capitalist economy time is also an important element of the employment relationship and of work itself. Work is structured through time as there is usually an agreement between employees and employers about how long each task should take. Time further defines our employment status by dividing the workforce into those who work ‘part-time’ and those who work ‘full-time’. Finally, time can also be transformed into income, especially if employees’ pay is based on how many hours they work.

Time measured by the clock is a relatively new social phenomenon. Not so long ago people defined time by how long a task (such as a prayer) took. Using the clock to measure time enables time to be structured in a more organised manner; time can be measured and divided between different tasks. In a work context, these divisions also mean different ‘ownings’. In other words, employees should know exactly how many hours per day (or per week) their employers ‘own’ and how many belong to them.

In this paper we analyse how the ownership of time shifts in the context of the ongoing flexibilisation of work. We begin by showing how contemporary developments in work, above all the rise of flexible employment, appear to undermine the rigid distinction between work time and free time. The next section of the paper charts the flexibilisation of the employment relationship in the Irish hospitality sector. The three subsequent sections show how this has involved changes in the nature of time. Firstly, we show how the boundaries between ‘duty’ and ‘non-duty’ time have blurred. We then demonstrate how time can not only have the function of organising social interaction, but can also be used as a means of discipline. Finally, we show how the hour defined by the clock can be
manipulated into an hour defined by the task. All this, we argue, raises the issue of the ownership of time. Time, it seems, is no longer divided between employees and employers, but increasingly owned by employers.

The analysis is based on findings from the ‘Working Conditions in Ireland’ Project which examined the changing employment relationship in four sectors of the Irish economy: hospitality, construction, ICT and finance. The core of the project comprised qualitative interviews with 40 individuals working in these sectors, as well as with 10 relevant trade union representatives.

Who owns working time?

Time became a key feature in social organization of work with the emergence of industrial capitalism. As discussed by Thompson (1967), this is how the clock replaced the prayer and similar tasks as a measure of time; the clock also became the key tool to synchronise individuals’ activities. Synchronization of individuals’ activities became a key feature of industrialised societies and economic development (Hassard, 1989; Noon and Blyton, 1997) and so did the control over worker’s time (Taylor, 1967 [1911]). Once time can be precisely measured, then we can differentiate between ‘subordinate’ time and ‘free’ time (Sipiot 2001) and draw boundaries between the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ sphere (Everingham 2002). In other words, units of time are used to set limits to the share of the day, the week or the year that is dedicated to work and controlled by the employer (Rubery et al. 2005). Conversely, the rest of time belongs to the employee and is outside the control of the employer. In the words of Mrs. Gaskell’s 19th century mill-owner:

‘Because they labour ten hours a-day for us, I do not see that we have any right to impose leading-strings upon them for the rest of their time’ Mr. Thornton in North and South.

Working time is ‘owned’ by the employer who specifies the duration of work and controls the employees’ activities while they are at work, but as Mr. Thornton makes clear, the employer does not own the rest of the employee’s time: free time is the time owned by the employee. As time is also used as a ‘currency’ in Western societies (Adam 1995) it is also tied to the relationship between work and economic exchange (Tietze and Musson 2002). Time, measured by the clock, is therefore important in determining the financial reward for the labour (Rubery et al. 2005).

Furthermore, contemporary discussion of ‘work-life’ balance equally assumes this rigid division between working time and non-working time. Yet this has always been simplistic: for many people, especially but not only those on higher incomes, work is actually enjoyable (Eikhof et al 2007) despite the ongoing intensification (Brannen and Moss, 1998; Esping-Andersen et al. 2002). It has also been argued that the intensification of work leads to the interference of the work sphere with the home sphere (Tietze and Musson, 2002) and that the distinction between the two is blurring (Hochschild, 1997). As the boundaries between work and non-work become less rigid (Perlow, 1998; Nippert-Eng, 1996), it is usually work that enters the non-work sphere (Lewis et al. 2003). Finally, there is a general understanding that these transitions, along with the intensification of the working life, has been exacerbated by the growing use of ICT (Perrons et al 2005; Felstead et al. 2002).

In recent decades changes in the organisation of work – changes that can be summed up by the term ‘flexibilisation’ - also have undermined the division between working time and non-working time. Employers in the so-called 24/7 economy demand that workers be available at different times of the day or of
the week; policy-makers call for labour markets to be more ‘flexible’ in order to ensure greater competitiveness. For some employers the ideal situation is that workers are available at any time of the day or night (Wise et al, 2007), but only actually work when they are needed. When workers are ‘on call’ in this way, their free time is also ‘owned’ by the employer. This is, for example, the case of those who are employed on so-called zero-hours contracts in the United Kingdom: they are required to accept any work available even though there are no weekly hours guaranteed for them (Brinkley 2013).

Although technically speaking such contracts are not widely used in Ireland, other forms of employment relationship allow the employers to take control over employees’ free time. As we shall now show, this is effectively the situation of some workers in the Irish hospitality industry. Furthermore, once the employers’ ownership of time increases in this way, it becomes possible for time to be used as a form of control and indeed for time itself to become flexible. If employers’ ownership of time expands, then there is less need for time to be measured precisely.

From boom to bust and the recovery: Irish hospitality sector in context.

The Irish economy was severely affected by the post-2008 economic downturn. This was a result of the combination of the global financial crash and the collapse of the domestic construction industry. The downturn in Ireland was quite dramatic: between 2008 and 2010 GDP fell by over 10 percent (Barret and McGuinness, 2012). This also had profound effects on the labour market. Employment numbers dropped from over 2.1 million in 2007 to 1.825 million in the beginning of 2012. During the same period unemployment levels rose dramatically from under 5 percent to over 15 percent. All of this also transformed Ireland from a country of immigration to once again a country of emigration. During the Celtic Tiger era, certain sectors of the Irish labour market (for example hospitality) experienced severe labour shortages while high wages attracted migrants from Europe and beyond. The situation reversed after the crash as the net migration oscillated between -27.5 and -34.5 thousand between 2010 and 2013 (compared to 55-60 thousand per year in 2006-2007).

It needs to be emphasised, however, that not all of the sectors of the Irish economy were affected at the same pace. For example, while employment in construction fell dramatically, the ICT sector continued to grow throughout the recession. The hospitality industry experienced a significant slowdown due to the fall in international tourism and domestic spending (ICIT 2008), but the number of persons employed in this sector only decreased from almost 140 thousand in 2007 to under 120 thousand in 2012.

These trends started to reverse by late 2013. As the economy began to recover, so did employment. By the first quarter of 2017 overall employment grew to more than 2 million, while the hospitality sector employed over 150 thousand people. Unsurprisingly it was the number of part-time workers that increased at a faster pace. By the beginning of 2016 the total share of part-time work still remained higher than during the boom and stood at the level of 23 percent, compared to around 17 percent at the beginning of 2007. Employment in the hospitality sector mirrored this trend: during the boom, part-time work in this industry constituted around 30 percent of employment. It rose to over 44 percent by the last quarter of 2012 and then stabilised at nearly 39 percent in early 2016. While it is not possible to establish what proportion of such part-time workers have contracts with flexible hours, there is evidence that in both the recession and the recovery employment in this sector has continued to be casualised. As we will explore in the next part of this paper, such casualisation has had a significant influence on the ‘ownership’ of employees’ time.
Work and employment in the Irish hospitality sector

Historically speaking the Irish hospitality industry (hotels, restaurants etc.) offered some relatively stable jobs, many of them full-time and permanent, with regular salaries. Since the mid-1990s, however, the employment relationship in this sector has undergone significant changes as it became increasingly casualised. Just as in other European countries, the Irish hospitality sector now heavily relies on contingent workers (Head and Lucas 2005). While some claim that this was a result of the large influx of migrants from the New Member States of the EU in the mid-2000s, our informants traced this shift back to the mid-1990s. At that point the employers moved away from hiring experienced workers and started taking on people (including students) who were looking for temporary or part-time jobs. Flexibilisation had thus already happened when the NMS migrants started to arrive in the mid-2000s: the migrants simply filled the positions which were no longer attractive to Irish nationals. These jobs often suited the newcomers as they offered them a relatively high income (compared to home) and also the flexibility which they often desired (Wickham et al. 2009). After the economic downturn, however, this win/win situation ended: with fewer jobs on offer, workers were no longer able to choose the hours they wished to work, while in many workplaces employers were able to dictate the hours that their employees worked.

Work in the hospitality sector is hard and physically demanding. Caterers spend most of their time standing, waiting staff carry around heavy dishes, chefs deal with extreme temperatures and housekeepers have to turn luxurious yet heavy mattresses. Time pressure is also often high. As this fast-food worker explained:

“The idea was that you needed to get them as fast as possible. The fastest you could do an order, if the burger was prepared and the chips were already done – 40 seconds. You can do it in less than the minute. But it depends. If you are waiting on chips... Chips take about 3.5 minutes to cook. So you would hope that they would be half way through the cycle. Then you need to put on goujons - 3 minutes, sausages - 3 minutes. And the fish takes you 7 [minutes] […] 7 minutes is a long time to wait for something, when you are supposed to be getting order done in about 2 [minutes]”

(Mary, fast-food chain worker)

A similar story was told by participants who worked in other establishments such as restaurants or hotels. Pressure to do more tasks within the same amount of time seemed to be on the increase, especially after the economic downturn. This was also confirmed by our trade union informants, who agreed that the employers adopted a simple cost-cutting strategy which involved fewer people doing more work.

Such hard work is not however financially rewarded. The Irish hospitality sector is low paid: hourly rates are low, and most workers work a low number of weekly hours. Currently the hospitality sector has the largest share of part-time work in Ireland (CSO 2016). Many are employed on ‘if and when’ contracts, or ‘hybrid’ contracts (O’Sullivan 2015). These contracts either do not guarantee any minimum weekly hours or have low hours with more possibly available. As we now show, how these contracts are applied in practice has profound implications for the organisation of free-time as well as work-time.

Blurring boundaries: part-time jobs, full-time commitment

Across Europe, hotels and restaurants often rely on contingent employees who are
effectively ‘on call’ (Head and Lucas 2005) and the situation in Ireland is no different. There is also evidence that during the recession employers tended to move away from hiring full-time, permanent employees and instead created a pool of part-time, flexible workers (Krings et al. 2013). This may suit some people who seek additional income, especially if the employer is willing to negotiate the hours according to individuals’ requirements. Our fieldwork, however, suggests that in many cases flexibility is there to suit the employer, not the employee. Both trade union representatives and the respondents confirmed that hours given to people working in this sector often varied from one week to another. Underemployment has also been an issue as some of such part-time workers were willing to work for more hours, but were not given the opportunity. Furthermore, they could not take on another part-time job as their roster was highly unpredictable and announced at very short notice. This is how one of our participants described the situation in a large city centre hotel:

They [the managers] write on the roster, they write for example: start at 8am and finish at 3pm, but next day you come and you see that you work until 5pm not until 3pm (...) You never know, you can’t plan anything, and now it is even worse because they put the roster on the wall the last day, on Sunday. (...) so for example if you have on Monday your day off you can’t make a plan for your day because you didn’t know [that] you will have tomorrow a day off. (Irena, accommodation assistant)

As this quote shows, such practices meant that people working on ‘if and when’ or ‘hybrid’ contracts were not only unable to take on additional employment, but also could not make proper plans in relation to their personal lives. Some of our respondents also reported that their employers would ring them on their day off and ask to come to work as they were short of staff. The opposite could also occur: a manager would ask an employee to go home early if the business was slow, so the worker would only be paid for the hours they actually worked as opposed to the hours in their schedule. One of our participants referred to a situation in which both practices were adopted:

The manager did the thing... Calling people in and then sending them home. He was like ‘oh, we need another member of staff in, tonight, now!’ So you know, it would be your day off. But you will have the warning that, you know, Thursday might be busy. So then you get the phone call and you go down there and then you are being told: ‘no, no, actually... We thought we needed you, but you can go home now’ (Mary, fast-food chain worker)

This blurred the boundary between ‘duty time’ and ‘free time’: the employers not only controlled individuals’ time at work, but also heavily influenced their time outside work. The boundaries between part-time and full-time work became unclear.

**Shifting the power: working time as a tool for reward and punishment**

As the hourly wage rates in the Irish accommodation and food sector tend to be low (usually at, or slightly higher than, the statutory minimum), the number of weekly hours is extremely important for those workers who need a steady income. Employment in this sector also does not only involve the ‘standard’ working hours as there is a large amount of night and weekend shifts that need to be covered. While the unsocial hours may suit some individuals, others would prefer to avoid such shifts. These two factors, combined with the employers’ strength in the labour market, lead to a situation where getting good hours is part of a negotiation between employees and managers. Our fieldwork showed that in many places workers had little bargaining power and their hours
were given to them in an arbitrary manner. This applied to both their number of weekly hours and the allocation of their shifts. Managers seemed to be using their allocation power as a method of reward and punishment. In other words, the better the employees behaved, the better hours they got.

Generally speaking new entrants were affected most severely by such practices. Our participants agreed that the longer somebody worked in the company, the more regular their hours became. One of our interviewees, who worked in a fast food restaurant, preferred to work night shifts as these were better paid. After spending a few years in the company, she was allowed to have a more or less stable schedule:

\[\text{I was doing very well in the [name of the fast food chain]. I think it was like that ‘cause I was there for so long. ‘Cause generally, the longer you were there, the more hours you would get out of it. And I was doing pretty much full-time hours. Well, ‘full time hours’... I had very good hours and they were always fairly regular. I knew that I was always going to work on Friday and I was always going to work on Saturday. (Mary, fast-food worker)}\]

She also told us that at some stage she had a disagreement with her managers and after that they allocated her some day shifts. The number of hours was the same, but the pay was effectively lower that week; she claimed that the radical change of working schedule was particularly difficult to her as she was not used to working during the day.

Furthermore, those employed on ‘if and when’ and ‘hybrid’ contracts were under a constant threat of not getting enough weekly hours. As the trade union representatives explained, such contracts gave great power to the employers even if they intended to have their employees on full time hours on a weekly basis. By giving them contracts with no or very few guaranteed hours, they could reduce the hours if somebody misbehaved, sometimes to the point where an individual would quit ‘voluntarily’.

**Unclear definitions: re-conceptualising ‘wage’ and ‘an hour’**

Not only are the boundaries between full-time and part-time jobs blurring, but flexibilisation of the employment relationship has also been leading to ambiguity as to what constitutes a ‘wage’ or a ‘working hour’. With variable hours, workers cannot predict their wages and cannot plan their immediate financial future. The definition of the ‘minimum wage’ was often brought up in discussions. Currently the minimum wage is 9.25 Euros per hour which would amount to 360.75 Euros for a normal 39-hour week. However, those of our participants who were on ‘minimum wage’ contracts often had take-home pay that differed from this amount. In some situations their weekly wage could be as low as 200 Euros, but then in other weeks it could reach 400 Euros. There were also those who could be classified as full-time, but worked for less than the standard 39 hours per week and thus did not reach the minimum wage level.

More strikingly, the definition of working time as well as the definition of an hour has also been manipulated by many employers. Our participants working in bars and restaurants reported that cleaning up time was not taken into account for their wages. Paid work ended when the place closed for customers, but workers were obliged to stay on and prepare the place for the morning shift. In such cases the actual hourly rate was even lower than the (then) statutory 9.25 Euros. One of our participants, who worked as a tour operator, had previously worked in a bar. In the interview we asked her if that job paid the minimum wage. She replied:
It was actually less. I worked it out later. And it was terrible. It was minimum wage, but we had to stay until all the customers went. And I used to calculate out... it would be less. If you took those hours that you had to stay, those few extra hours, it would work out less. I could never understand that.

A: So you were actually not paid for the actual hours you were there?
S: That we stayed – no. I wouldn’t put up with that now (Kate, former bar worker)

In that last line she refers to the discrepancy between the actual hours worked and the hours recorded on her payslip. This was an issue brought up in a number of interviews with workers and trade union representatives. It seems to be quite common that employees are told to ‘clock-out’ at closing time and to not keep any record of the subsequent overtime work.

Our interviews also showed how the ‘hour’ is no longer always measured by the clock. For many managers in the accommodation departments of hotels in Dublin an hour is no longer a unit of time but instead is defined by the number of rooms that need to be completed. One hotel cleaner explained that workers were assigned a specific number of rooms they needed to complete per shift, regardless of the amount of work required. If the work was not done in time, they had to work overtime, but were only paid for the time they were originally scheduled. As she described the consequences:

Well to speak honestly 30 minutes for one room is not enough...because a lot of tasks, a lot of things to do. And also we have two beds in each room, so if there are four people or three people you have to change two beds...It takes 35/40 minutes, even so, if you’re lucky and you have a clean room - it saves you but otherwise you can’t finish in time. Nobody from cleaning department, housekeeping department, are going to lunch [because they have to] finish their work in time... (Irena, accommodation assistant)

She told us that the number of rooms to complete per shift was also increased during her time in the hotel: the hour was being constantly stretched and could not be defined as ‘60 minutes’ anymore. In such case, the ownership of time gave the employers the power to decide how it is measured – in this case not by the clock but by the task.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the ongoing flexibilisation of the employment relationship has a profound effect on the understanding of time and of the relationship between time and work. Many workers in the Irish hospitality sector either do not have any guaranteed hours or are only contracted for a minimum number of hours every week. There are usually extra hours available, but these are allocated at short notice; the hours vary and usually cannot be refused. Those who are effectively ‘on call’ are not financially compensated for waiting time. They are also unable to take on additional employment or to plan their leisure (or other activities). As a result, so we argue, the division between ‘duty’ and ‘non-duty’ time is erased and the employers often own the individuals’ free time.

As they also own the employees’ work time, the managers also use that as a form of control. Ownership gives them the power to decide who gets more or better hours and who does not. Time becomes a tool of reward and punishment. Employees have less ownership of what was once their free time, while employers have more ownership of the time for which they pay. The clock-based definition of ‘an hour’ has been challenged: time is defined less by standardised units (minutes, hours...) and more by tasks. Workers in bars and restaurants are paid by their shift that
finishes when the last customer leaves, but then stay longer to clean-up: eight hours stretch to nine but on paper the number ‘eight’ still remains. In hotel cleaning departments workers are paid for an amount of rooms per hour, but they spend longer to complete their task. An hour is no longer a 60-minute unit measured by the clock. Once again, the employers, who are the owners of time, have decided how time is used and even how it is defined. These changes can be clearly related to a shift in the power relationship between employers and employees in the labour market after the economic crash. However, they could be reversed or at least restrained by labour market regulation. Firstly, when workers work extra hours without pay this is quite simply illegal. That the practice is widespread shows that the existing regulations are not enforced. Secondly, legislation is now being proposed to make ‘banded hours’ contracts mandatory. This would limit the extent to which employers could arbitrarily alter employees working hours.

In 1967 Thompson wrote his famous article on the changing nature of time and the growing importance of clocks during the industrial era. While not everybody had a clock at the beginning, and not all of the clocks were precise in the early days, over time measurement of time became standardised. The fact that an hour is defined by 60 minutes and a week has seven days not only provided the employers with a method of organising their production, but also structured the ways people were paid, and how they divided their schedules into ‘duty time’ and ‘free time’. While we do not claim that the employment relationship has now reversed this pattern, we hope that this paper demonstrated how the definitions and boundaries of units of time have blurred again.

References


Notes

1 For more details about the study please see the project website: https://www.tasc.ie/researchpolicy/wcip.htm

2 Substantial funding for the project was provided by Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS)
INTERNALIZED FLEXIBILITY AND RELATIVE DEPRIVATION: SUBJECTIVE RESPONSES TO ADULT TRANSITIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

BY NIAMH HOURIGAN

Abstract: This article presents the preliminary findings of a study which explores attitudes to striving amongst thirty-six young middle class adults aged between 22 and 32 in the Republic of Ireland. It draws heavily on a similar study conducted by Bradley and Devadason (2008) which found that young people negotiating complex adult transitions in the UK responded with internalized flexibility (optimism, adaptability, and resourcefulness). Striving in all contexts is based on a set of contingent expectations that if the individual tries hard to achieve certain goals, specific or general results will follow. However, the collapse of the banking system, subsequent economic recession and housing crisis in the Republic of Ireland since 2008 have dramatically altered the contingent expectations on which striving of young adults within Irish society has been based since the 1990s. This study asks if those negotiating adult transitions have responded with internalized flexibility in this transformed economic context. It also examines whether the significant inter-generational disparities in the rewards delivered by striving which have emerged since 2008 (Chailloux Klein and Wilson 2016) have led to increased levels of relative deprivation (Gurr 1970, Bernburg et al 2009).

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Introduction

The term ‘striving’ is defined as ‘exerting oneself vigorously or trying hard’ and has been at the core of theoretical considerations of work and the labour market since the 18th century. For a significant proportion of Irish middle class children raised in homes and education systems which place considerable emphasis on achievement, they are engaged in the process of ‘striving’ before they become self-consciously aware of it (Devine 2003, Nixon and Halpenny 2010). The demand for striving is not only woven through the curriculum of the school system but also evident in the whole range of competitions and exams which are embedded in sporting, musical and other extra-curricular activities (Growing Up in Ireland 2016, Brennan 2014). Striving takes place within a specific cultural context which presents the individual with a set of contingent expectations. These
expectations posit that if the individual tries hard or strives, they will be able to access a set of rewards (Berkert 2012). These expectations are created through subtly transmitted codes communicated at the earliest stages of a child’s life by parents, caregivers and teachers (Loeb et al. 2007). In adolescence, these expectations are often articulated more explicitly through school cultures, and educational policy which sets out frameworks to reward the striving of students (Bates 1984, Carr 1991). However, the contexts in which these expectations are created can change profoundly over a short period of time. Perhaps the most glaring example of this sharp shift occurred in Eastern Europe during the late 1980s where students who strove to achieve within a communist state educational framework found themselves having to adapt very quickly to the realities of post-Communist free market economies (Meredith and Steele 2000). However, the Republic of Ireland, between 2008 and 2016, also provides an interesting context in which to explore how expectations, which are undermined by rapidly changing economic realities, can impact on attitudes to striving.

In January 2007, the Republic of Ireland was ranked as the sixth richest country in the global wealth league by Standard and Poor’s credit rating agency ahead of the USA in 11th place and the United Kingdom in 18th place (Donovan and Murphy 2013). The Irish economy had been growing steadily since the mid 1990s and the state had made significant investment in higher education (MacSharry and White 2000). This burgeoning economic growth provided a range of opportunities for young Irish graduates (Gunnigle and McGuire 2001). These graduates were then in a strong position to buy homes as banks created very favourable lending terms to enable young people to enter the housing market (Kitchin et al. 2012). However between 2008 and 2010, the sets of expectations on which this striving had been built were shattered. The property bubble which had emerged in Ireland led to a crisis within the Irish banks which threatened the stability of the European banking system, prompting Ireland to enter a Troika bailout programme in 2010 (Donovan and Murphy 2013). Under the terms of the agreement, taxes increased, public services were significantly cut and greater labour market flexibility was introduced into the workplace (Allen and O’Boyle 2013). Unemployment rose from 4% in 2007 to 14% in 2012 rapidly contracting the opportunities available to middle class graduates. Emigration levels which had plummeted during the so-called Celtic Tiger era rose dramatically (Kenny 2012). In addition, the construction industry collapsed resulting in a cessation of home-building for a number of years and a subsequent housing crisis from 2014 onwards (Lyons 2017). Therefore, if the process of striving is based on a set of contingent expectations, the economic and societal conditions in the Republic of Ireland which underpinned the striving of young people shifted dramatically between 2008 and 2016.

Given this dramatic shift, the study set out to examine the objective experiences and subjective understandings of striving amongst thirty-six Irish middle class adults aged between 22 and 32. A number of key objectives framed the research. It sought to

- map the evolution of attitudes to striving during the course of youth transitions
- To assess whether interviewees responded to the challenges encountered during these transitions with internalized flexibility in the transformed Irish economic context
- To explore whether the considerable differences which underpinned the contexts of their transitions compared to previous generations had generated unmet expectations which might be
contributing to a growing sense of relative deprivation

Thus, the study seeks to make a contribution to the growing debate about education, employment and precarity in the Republic of Ireland (Murphy and Loftus 2015, Wickham and Bobek 2016). It focuses on how individuals understand their own striving in light of changing economic realities which challenge their long-standing expectations of how their efforts will be rewarded.

Adult Transitions

There is a substantial international literature on adult transitions into the workforce (Ashton and Field 1976, Bates 1984, Furlong and Cartnel 1997, Brooks 2009). Studies of European youth transitions from the 1970s onwards have placed particular emphasis on class differences where the distinctive pathways of highly educated middle class individuals are contrasted to those of the lower middle classes and trajectories towards unskilled or semi-skilled work. Key themes within the literature include levels of pay, job security and conditions of employment and gender differences in adult transitions.

Since the 1970s, increased levels of education, difficulties accessing housing and the de-industrialization of the global North have led to lengthening adult transitions (Wallace and Kovatcheva 1998, Arnett 2015). Young people tend to remain at home or in full-time education for longer periods. Entry level positions have become increasingly poorly paid or unpaid. Once individuals have made the transition to the workforce, their access to jobs is structured by greater levels of precarity and instability (Kesisoglou et al. 2016). Michael Tomlinson (2013) notes a pattern of ‘increasingly delayed entry to the labour market, is itself, the by-product of the breakdown of traditional pathways and employment channels that directed young people’s school to work transitions’ (2013, 131-2). Accompanying all these macro changes to employment patterns is the increasing encroachment of neo-liberalism into the interior world of the individual (Ehrenberg 2009). Specific discourses in relation to striving have become particularly evident in both education and welfare settings. Emphasis has been placed on the ‘effortful citizen’ who is responsible for themselves and adopts an entrepreneurial approach to building their career. Dardot and Laval note that the individual in a neo-liberal economy ‘who wants to improve his lot, must construct means-end frameworks in which he will have to make his own choices. He is not a passive maximizer, but a constructor of profitable situations that he discovers through his alertness and which he can exploit’ (2014, 112) Individuals, of course, do not blindly accept these discourses and negotiate or resist them in accordance with their own desires and orientations. Ball et al (2000) and Brooks (2009) have examined how friendships and lifestyle choices which also shape the internal subjectivities of young adults interweave in a powerful way, with external demands to strive within labour market contexts. Thus, the process of striving is the outcome of a continuous tension between these external contexts and internal impetuses.

Much of the literature on young adult transitions focuses on the objective destinations of young people seeking to find their place in the world rather than their subjective experience of this process (Ashton & Field 1976, Furlong and Cartnel 1997, Anderson et al. 2002). This study focuses on one specific aspect of that subjective experience. Essentially, it explores participants’ attitudes to trying hard and their responses to the outcomes of their efforts within a context of significant economic turmoil in the Republic of Ireland between 2008 and 2016 (Allen and O’Boyle 2013, Blythe 2013). The process of striving can be understood from at least two positions. The
desire to strive can be rooted in a need for goal attainment and the positive affirmation internally and externally which the individual gains through the process (Emmons 1989). However, striving can also be embedded in a desire to manage more negative emotions linked to anxiety about one’s status in the world, one’s self-worth and self-image (Strauman 1996). Anthropological evidence suggests that not all societies’ value striving (Linton 1936). Some cultures and economies offer greater rewards for striving than others or place greater emphasis on ascribed rather than achieved status (McClelland 1961).

At its core, the process of striving itself involves trying to transform from one’s current state to another desire state. McIntosh (1996) argues that at the heart of this process is the recognition of some discrepancy. He comments for individuals who strive

As they go about trying to reduce the perceived discrepancy, they stop intermittently and self-focus to assess their progress. Based on this assessment, they make adjustments in behaviour that are aimed at more efficiently reducing the discrepancy between the current state and the desired state, and they continue their pursuit. Theoretically, this negative feedback cycle ends when the goal is reached or when people decide that it is unlikely that they will reach the goal and therefore they disengage (1996, 57)

Given that the bulk of research conducted on adult transitions since the 1980s indicates that they have become ‘increasingly complex, uneven and unpredictable’ (Tomlinson, 2013), one would imagine that this process of stopping and having to re-assess one’s rationale for striving in the face of obstacles would have become more frequent. In their study of 42 young adults engaged in adult transitions in Bristol, Bradley and Devadason (2008) found that many of their participants encountered significant obstacles which forced them to re-assess their striving. For instance, Kara, who comes from an affluent Indian middle class background, worked in childcare but ‘decided that I was going to do a Masters in something, opted for fashion... didn’t get it, got completely disillusioned’ (2008, 126). However, they found that many of their participants responded with what they described as ‘internalized flexibility’ to the challenges of dealing with a labour market increasingly dominated by flexibility and precarity. Drawing on Raymond Williams, they describe internalized flexibility as a ‘structure of feeling... a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities which gives a sense of generation or period’ (Williams 1977, 131). The structure of feeling which they found within their research cohort was characterized by optimism, flexibility and resourcefulness in the face of setbacks. They comment

Most faced their futures with equanimity and resourcefulness; conditions that cause concern to their elders leave them undaunted. Whether or not there has actually been a decrease in the availability of jobs for life, these young adults have accepted and internalized the rhetoric of adaptability and life-long learning. The interviews show examples of this ‘internalized flexibility’ across boundaries of class, gender and ethnicity (2008, 133)

Significantly however, they also found that the striving of a number of their interviewees, particularly at the higher end of the socio-economic spectrum, was heavily influenced by a sense of expectations about the potential rewards for their efforts. For instance, Andrew an aeronautical engineer who attended an English public school ‘gave the impression that everything in his life was carefully planned... and speaks of leaving his company in the next five years if it has not given him the opportunities he ‘deserves’ to progress’ (2008, 127). Thus, the process of striving is heavily linked to expectations of the rewards which participation on the education system and occupational structure will deliver. Beckert notes
For capitalist economies to operate, societies must succeed in inducing expectations in actors that motivate them to engage in the activities on which growth is based... motivating the decisions of economic actors by shaping their expectations and by shaping the social and political structure underlying these expectations becomes one of the major tasks of political regulators (2012, 6).

Not all young adults will internalize the expectations desired by political and economic elites however, their stage in the life-course means that they experience an exceptional amount of pressure to strive (Schnaiberg and Goldenberg, 1989, Scherger, 2009).

The impact of unmet expectations related to striving has appeared in two significant forms in the literature on capitalism and social change. There is a long-established literature within psychology on goal attainment which explores how individuals deal with the consequences of diminished rewards for striving in terms of their mental health (Emmons 1992; Carver & Scheier 1981, Martin and Tesser, 1996). A number of more recent studies on neo-liberal subjectivities also demonstrate how limited rewards for striving can generate significant mental health strains (Ehrenberg 2009, Walker and Fincham 2011). A number of more recent studies on neo-liberal subjectivities also demonstrate how limited rewards for striving can generate significant mental health strains (Ehrenberg 2009, Walker and Fincham 2011). Ehrenberg comments ‘Self-control, flexibility of mind and feeling and the capacity for action meant that each individual had to be up to the task of constantly adapting to a changing world’ (2009, 185). He notes that depression is often the response of the individual who struggles to cope with these demands particularly when their expectations related to rewards are unmet.

A second area of research where the role of unmet expectations has received considerable attention is within studies on relative deprivation. Drawing on Durkheim, Merton (1968) and Gurr (1970) examined how unmet expectations generated within a context of social comparison can be a significant source of anger and frustration at the individual level and social unrest at a societal level. Bernburg et al note

Relative deprivation implies that economic deprivation has relative as opposed to absolute effects on experience, because the standard of living among the person’s reference groups contextualises how the person experiences deprivation... Perceiving affluence among reference groups tends to raise the person’s aspirations and sense of entitlement to a comparable standard of living. Hence when people think that referenced others enjoy more affluence than themselves, they tend to feel a sense of injustice and frustration (2009, 1223-4).

In his book *Why Men Rebel* (1970), Ted Gurr notes that instead of the individual internalizing their disappointment related to unmet expectations, groups of individuals externalise their anger at elites who have denied them the rewards to which they believe they are entitled. Thus, given the turmoil in the Irish economy since 2008 and increasing concerns about intergenerational justice, this study draws on both the concepts of internalized flexibility and relative deprivation to understand attitudes to striving within Irish adult transitions.

**Irish Adult Transitions and Striving**

This project was designed as a pilot study for broader transnational research collaboration on the theme of striving. Thirty-six middle class young people were interviewed in the three major Irish cities - Dublin, Cork and Limerick. These young people were aged between 22 and 32 and were subdivided into three categories: 22-25 (N=12) 26-28 (N=13) 29-32 (N=11). The sample was controlled for gender (17 - identified female, 16 – identified male, 3 - identified other), all participants described themselves as white Irish. Each interviewee was asked a series of questions about striving in terms of early years’ socialization in the home and school system, their career choices and expectations in their late teens, their workplace experiences and current employment prospects and finally, their expectations for the future. Following
the model established by Bradley and Devadason (2008), participants were asked a series of questions designed to establish whether they exhibited ‘internalized flexibility’ as a core response to the challenges of adult transitions in Ireland. The interviews concluded with a broader set of questions about Irish society and the levels of rewards offered to those who engage in striving. Findings presented focus on three themes: (1) the evolution of attitudes to striving from early years socialization through to current educational and employment experiences; (2) the presence or absence of internalized flexibility as a response to the challenges encountered during the striving process; (3) evidence of relative deprivation given the intergenerational disparities in the rewards of striving which have opened up in the Republic of Ireland since 2008.

Evolution of Attitudes to Striving

Thirty participants interviewed believed that their striving was strongly influenced by early socialization processes in a pattern relatively typical of the European middle classes (Vincent and Ball 2007). Dylan from Dublin’s Northside who is studying physiotherapy says ‘I was the oldest and I remember my mam having all these educational toys and the two of us saying the alphabet and her saying I would know my letters when I went to school and I’d be the cleverest clogs in the class - it meant a lot to her’. In terms of school experience, the period of middle childhood (particularly from 8-10) appears to have been central in terms of growing awareness of the pressure to strive. Sinead who is training to be a teacher in Limerick comments ‘I wouldn’t have thought about it in the junior classes, I was too busy having a good time but from second or third onwards, we had these weekly tests and you really had a sense of the pecking order in the class and being expected to work to keep up’. This monitoring of performance in school was also reflected in the home culture where parents would check test results and reward good performance. Sean, a youth worker in Cork notes ‘I would do my homework at my granny’s house after school and she would check my homework diary, my mum was just too tired in the evenings’. Noelle who is participating in a bank graduate recruitment scheme in Dublin comments ‘I remember bringing a test home and we had to get them signed and I always did well in my maths test but I did badly in this one and you could just feel the disappointment in my parents, it was like “you really should do better”- no shouting just quite disappointment which I think was worse’.

As participants moved from primary to secondary level education, there was less emphasis on parental monitoring of performance and growing personal commitment to striving. Sean notes

I think when I went into secondary, I just wanted to have a laugh with my friends and enjoy life but as the junior cert came along, it all started to get a bit real. You’d notice some of the other lads were really starting to think about their own plans. One guy Pete wanted to be a vet and he really started to get his shit together. The lads would be messing away during the day but they’d be at home in the evening and the work would be done – I think a penny dropped for me around the age of 15, that I’d have to start making more of an effort. It came on gradually but yeah that’s probably when I started to try hard

Eighteen participants identified transition year in secondary school as a key point where they began to consider their career choices as they committed to work placements and subject choices for the Irish Leaving Certificate exam. Dylan tells how

the teacher, Mr Casey came in at the start of transition year and I’d always liked him and he asked us about what we wanted to do for working experience. I panicked ‘coz I didn’t have a clue and when he came to me I said I’d like to be chef coz my cousin is a chef and he put that down in his book so then I was like “oh
fuck, I’ll be stuck in some kitchen” so I went home that night and really started to think about it and at the end of the week, I went to him to talk about been a physio. My dad is a selector for a county GAA team and I’d always watched the physios and thought I’d like to do that so it all went from there really.

The role of expectations in these reflections about career appeared to be highly complex as individuals were still in the adolescent stage of the life-course. Cathal, who works as a journalist for an online news website and who is originally from Cork, remembers

Looking back at my expectations, I think on one hand I was influenced very much by a rejection of my parents’ lifestyle. I didn’t want to be stuck in a three bed-roomed semi-D, I wanted to travel and have an exciting life but that was all based on the assumption that my life ultimately would be better than theirs which I think is probably normal at that teenage stage.

All participants in the study had experiences in the workplace between the ages of 16 and 32. The research revealed surprisingly positive experience of menial service industry jobs – though this positivity may be linked to the belief that these positions were not long-term career choices. For instance, Noelle says I worked in the shop of a petrol station on Saturday and Sunday afternoons and I loved it. All the lads would be coming in and you’d get to chat to them and I liked working the till and stocking up and the people working there were always really nice to me to yes, it was a positive experience for me.

In contrast, there were fewer positive descriptions of unpaid work experience and internships. Edmund is finishing his training to be a solicitor in Limerick and he comments

I’ve done a load of unpaid internships in law firms along the way and I think I’d rather be the shit on someone’s shoe that do it again. For people who are really busy, you are just a pain in the ass who has to be entertained. For those with time on their hands at the bottom of the food chain, you are someone to torment. And at the end of the day, you’re still doing it for free and they’re still doing you a favour.

However, nineteen of the participants noted that these workplace experiences provided them with insights into the regulatory, performance management side of work. Fiona who is a junior manager in supermarket in Cork says ‘when I went out on work experience, I would just have stood around twiddling my thumbs and my supervisor pointed out that I should look busy all the time even if I wasn’t busy, that is something that has stayed with me to this day’.

Overall, there was evidence of both internal and external pressures to strive being experienced by participants in the research from the middle childhood period onwards. During the early years, trying hard appears to have been strongly influenced by external rewards particularly, parental praise. During adolescence, participants began to strive for more diverse reasons, not only to please teachers and parents but to set themselves on a life trajectory. However, early work experiences also appeared to provide them with insights into some of the key challenges of striving in adult contexts. Part-time and unpaid work also introduced them to the significant interpersonal challenges of striving in work contexts with different strata of employees.

Internalized Flexibility and Relative Deprivation

There was considerable variation in the cohort in terms of their responses to setbacks and challenges as they attempted their adult transitions. For the purposes of analysis, the sample was divided into three sub-groups (22-25, 26-28, 29-32) and analysis indicates that while levels of internalized flexibility were relatively high in the 22-25 age-group, this structure of feeling decreased amongst interviewees in the 26-28 who articulated views most consistent with relative deprivation. The oldest interviews (29-32) tended to be less optimistic but also less frustrated. They were either moving towards
the attainment of their goals or demonstrated greater levels of resignation that their striving would not be rewarded in the way they originally envisaged.

Bradley and Devadason (2008) define internalized flexibility as optimism, adaptability and resourcefulness and there was considerable evidence of these responses to the challenges of entering the workforce in the 22-25 category. Five interviewees were in current employment while four were studying and three actively seeking work. All the employed interviewees indicated that they felt their wage levels were low considering their qualifications and highlighted the intense pressure which accommodation costs were placing on their income. However, they also unanimously believed that their current pay and conditions would improve. In addition, they did not view themselves as being permanently trapped in low-paid jobs. Felim who works in a call centre in Cork comments ‘I don’t really like the job that I’m in at the moment, it’s boring and the pay is crap but I want to go travelling next year so it will do to keep me going until then, I don’t view it as a permanent choice’. This approach mirrors the pattern of fractured transitions identified by Bradley and Devadason (2008) which highlighted the significant number of ‘switchers’ and ‘shifters’ moved from unsatisfactory jobs to engage in travel experiences.

Interviewees in the 22-25 category outlined many of the challenges which they had encountered during educational and early work experience. Colette who attended a hotel management course says ‘well a big obstacle for me was fees, my parents had to get a loan to help me pay for them then just as things were going well, I got sick. In the end I had to switch courses to accountancy but now I feel I’m in the right place and I’m enjoying things’. Dave has just started a job as a computer systems analyst in Dublin has also had to deal with some obstacles saying ‘my biggest challenge was paying for accommodation costs while I was doing internships and finishing college. Then my first job was in an industrial estate and I had to get a car and insurance was huge but I’m managing just about’. Jack an architectural technician appeared to be a more discouraged by his work and educational experiences. He notes ‘when I was in college you had to sell your soul even to get an unpaid internship coz there was no building being done and even now the way things are, I thinking of packing my bags which is hard coz I really struggled to get through college and I feel I deserve better’.

In the entire sample, those in the 26-28 category were the most important group in terms of the clash between expectations linked to their striving and the actual results, which emanated from their endeavours. By the age of 26, respondents clearly expected that they would be engaging in jobs which would reflect their long-term career aspirations. They believed that they were entitled to improved pay and conditions but were faced with the relatively low-pay and short-term contracts which had characterized their workplace experiences during the 22-25 age period. Shane works in graphic design in Dublin and says ‘When I started I got these really short term contracts and I thought “what the hell, it’s a foot in the door” but now it’s three years later, I’m on the same money and have no security, I could be turfed out on my ass in the morning, it’s just not good enough.’ Angela who is working in the airline industry and lives in Limerick says

*When you are younger and you get that first job and your car and it’s so exciting and any knocks that come your way, you just take them on the chin coz you think things are bound to get better and I was like that in my early 20s. Bur now I’ve broken up with my boyfriend and I’m tired of being skint and I find I just can’t pick myself up in the same way, knocks get me down for months and I’m struggling to get back up again.*
There was some evidence that this frustration with these ‘knocks’ was leading to a broader protest consciousness. Louise a retail manager in a clothes shop in Cork says ‘all my family are involved in the water protests but that’s really just a focal point for all the anger that’s around at the moment. My granddad was a shop steward and in the union so maybe it’s in the family but I think my generation are getting tired of it all, you can see it all over Europe.’ Raymond who works in social care in Dublin says ‘I think since the same sex referendum younger people are most aware, we have to get up and protest ourselves or we are just going to be take for a ride, we can change things, that was the lesson of it.’ There was also evidence of considerable resentment of those who had gone before and achieved better pay and conditions which were not being offered to younger employees, a view which perhaps reinforces recent concerns about inter-generational justice in Ireland (Chailloux, Klein and Wilson, 2016). Amy who is working as a pharmaceutical sales rep in Dublin comments

My step-sister finished college in 2002. Within a year of leaving college, she had a good job and a year after she put a deposit on a house. She got married before the crash. Now she and her husband are stuck with a huge mortgage but at least they have their own home... I work my ass off and at the moment I don’t think there is any chance that I could by a house even though I’ve had to work a lot harder to get where I am, through internships etc. than she did ten years ago. I just find it hard that a few short years could make such a difference.

Therefore, a number of interviewees had clearly based their striving on a set of contingent expectations which suggested that certain benchmarks or goals would be reached by the age of 26-28. However, for some of them, their expectations were not close to being met.

The greatest variety of experience existed in the 29-32 category. Of the eleven individuals interviewed in this category, five had achieved improved pay and conditions while a further two were hopeful that their pay and conditions would improve in the short term. Three interviewees however were resigned to remaining on low wages and poor conditions and one had opted out of the workplace to start a family. Jamie who is originally from Naas but works in the civil service in Cork says ‘I feel things have settled down a bit. It took me a while to figure out what I wanted to do but when I applied to the civil service, I began to feel now at last I’m on a path. Before I figured it out, I was very anxious about the future.’ All participants in this category placed particular emphasis on the pressure which accommodation costs were placing on their income. Elaine comments

I am one of the lucky ones. I have a good job and I just got a promotion but even with my income, I am still living at home with my mother. I want to save to buy a house so I don’t want to waste money on rent but it feels like despite all my efforts in school and work, I am back where I was when I was twelve

There was some evidence of resignation and what J.D. McIntosh (1996) describes as rumination or ‘repeated reflective thought’ on the themes of careers, life choices and pay rather than the anger evident in the 26-28 group. Sheila went to Art College to study ceramics in Limerick. She tells how

After college I was all about doing my art and doing stuff for small exhibitions and I literally starved but I didn’t care but then the homelessness crisis started to scare me. A couple of my friends were evicted from their flats so I took a job on a deli counter but I hated it. Now I work in a florist which is much better. The pay is rubbish and it’s not art but it will keep me off the streets and I suppose I’ve accepted the fact that I won’t be the new Grayson Perry

Few interviewees in this category believed that their income levels and accommodation would ultimately match those of their parents. This discrepancy in inter-generational experience was the focus of some resentment although a number of
participants acknowledged the significant levels of support which their own parents had given them during the college and early career period. Cathal concludes

“I look back on the kid that I was in transition year and I think how naive I was. The other day I looked out the window of my parent’s house and a guy a bit older than me was coming out of his house across the road and I was thinking, I would love to be him, I would love to have what he has – a home, a family of my own, a good job. The life that my parents had is now a dream for me and one that I don’t think I’ll ever achieve if I stay working in this industry [the media].”

Therefore, there were some significant differences in terms of the subjective understandings of striving in the three sub-groups of the sample. The 22-25 age-group conform most closely to the experience identified by Bradley and Devadason (2008). Most interviewees were optimistic about their future prospects and they appeared to meet set-backs with resilience and adaptability. The 26-28 age group exhibited less optimism and the combined pressure of low pay, poor conditions and spiralling accommodation costs were generating significant levels of anger and frustration in the group. It was this anger which may contribute to increased levels of relative deprivation and an emerging protest consciousness. Finally, the oldest interviewees in the 29-32 category exhibited less optimism but also less frustration in terms of expectations related to striving. A number of participants in this category had achieved greater job security and improved conditions. Those interviewees who hadn’t reached their original goals were more resigned than those in the 26-28 category. They also clearly recognised that their lifestyle may never reach the standards achieved by their parents or previous generations who had made their adult transitions during the Celtic Tiger era (1995-2007).

Discussion and Conclusion
This article presents the preliminary findings of a study of adult transitions in the Republic of Ireland between 2008 and 2016. Two key concepts were used to interrogate the tensions within these transitions related to the process of striving. Drawing on Bradley and Devadason (2008), the study examined whether interviewees responded with internalized flexibility (adaptability, resourcefulness, optimism) to set-backs encountered during the striving process. Because of the dramatic shift in the set of contingent expectations which underpinned the striving of young people in Ireland during this period, the concept of relative deprivation was also applied in order to assess whether unmet expectations were contributing to anger, frustration and potential social unrest.

Analysis of the interview data demonstrated high levels of internalized flexibility in the 22-25 category which gradually decreased amongst older age-groups. In contrast, levels of relative deprivation were highest in the 26-28 age group where there was also evidence of an emerging protest consciousness in relation to questions of inter-generational justice. The oldest participants in the study had either moved to a stage where they felt their striving was being adequately rewarded or had become more resigned to not achieving their original goals and rewards.

As levels of unemployment have decreased steadily in the Republic of Ireland between 2016 and 2017, it is possible that greater employment opportunities will become available to middle-class Irish citizens in these age-groups. Thus, the considerable challenges and set-backs encountered by these young adults as they negotiated their transitions may diminish for the next generation. However, with no evidence of any significant easing of the housing crisis in Ireland, the pressure which accommodation...
costs are placing on the incomes of young adults in these age-categories are likely to remain significant for some time to come.

Overall, the research does suggest some legitimate basis for the concerns expressed by the International Monetary Fund (ironically) about the lack of intergenerational justice in their report on the Republic of Ireland in 2016. There was evidence of enough anger, frustration and anxiety in this sample to fuel social protest and only a few participants in the oldest age-group felt their striving was being adequately rewarded. Ireland is unique in Western Europe in its growing young population which is regarded by both economic and political elites as one of the country’s key assets. However, if individuals who are part of this age cohort believe that their striving is being exploited or not adequately rewarded, this group may ultimately manifest a considerable challenge to the neoliberals’ orthodoxy embraced by Irish political elites during the crisis.

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ARTICLE

PRECARITY IN THE NIGHT-TIME ECONOMY

BY KIRSTY DOYLE, JOHN O’BRIEN, NIAMH MAGUIRE

Abstract: Building upon the work of Monaghan (2002, 2004), Lister et al. (2000, 2001, 2009) and Hobbs et al. (2003), all working in a British context, the aim of this study was to understand how door supervisors manage and regulate the night-time economy in an Irish context. Drawing on observations of and accounts given by door supervisors of their experiences as precarious workers in the night-time economy, this paper explores how their experiences of precarious employment are related to and exacerbated by certain features of the night-time economy. The conditions of the precarious work done by door supervisors were found to be produced at three levels including: the macroeconomic level, which has seen neoliberal policies contribute greatly to the growth of the services sector and the subsequent demand for flexibility, and the national and local levels in terms of both the private security services legislation and the local economic climate. While the position of door staff in the night-time economy is undoubtedly ambivalent and contradictory (Monaghan 2004), the lived experience of doing door work for the majority of those interviewed in this study was characterized by perceived disempowerment in terms of emotional labour, moral injury and vulnerability. Furthermore, while the ‘political potential’ (Waite 2009: 413) of the term precarity has been highlighted, it is deemed unlikely that the term will be adopted by door supervisors for political action.

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Introduction

Bouncers in the popular imagination are icons of power and authority. Blank expressions and props such as sunglasses to refuse the gaze of the onlooker, and ear pieces providing a flow of private information on what is happening in the scene that only they have access to, shows them as a form of panoptic power. They act as the tribal gatekeepers of inclusion and exclusion, and do the disciplinary sorting of the docile and useful revellers, from the troublesome and commercially worthless. In this role they are legitimated to use violence (the term bouncer literally means the practice of ejecting forcibly, and the impact of the person on the pavement), which is symbolised by their physical bulk, muscled physiques, martial arts training, or other more shadily acquired competency in physical confrontation. Thus, they can be seen as embodiments of authority, of sovereign and of disciplinary power, as well as thrilling escapes from this. Rather than anxious and sensitive new men (and women), they are emotionally impervious, capable of taking action in dangerous situations, and capable of dealing
with the uncivilised and barbaric directly and effectively.

Conversely, bouncers are often represented as acting as a law unto themselves, with excessive force in their treatment of customers, a source of moral panic, as well as a liability to the pub owners who employ them. Nonetheless, the image of the bouncer is one of power, and one that people working in the industry construct their identity through. However, the reality is somewhat more ambivalent, as although bouncers embody a form of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) and have a degree of authority in their work (Monaghan 2002, 2004), they often operate in a context of precarious employment.

Precarious employment ‘refers to the explosion of short term, temporary and part-time jobs’ (Gonick 2011), illegal, seasonal and subcontract employment, as well as freelance and ‘so called self-employed’ work (Neilson and Rossiter 2005). While precarious employment has been the norm historically (Waite 2009), the current period of precarity is distinct due to the expansion of the service sector and the associated demand for flexibility which has resulted in precarious jobs becoming the fastest growing jobs in post-industrial societies (Gonick 2011). As the night-time economy has become central to the expansion of the service sector, to urban revitalization and economic development, the number of bouncers, who are tasked with managing and regulating these disorderly nightlife spaces, has increased significantly (Lister 2009). Within the night-time economy, bouncers occupy a position of power as gatekeepers to commercial nightlife spaces and inhabit an occupation where ‘legitimate’ violence can be justified to reproduce the occupational authority of the bouncer (Monaghan 2002). Nevertheless, previous research on door supervisors working in the night-time economy has also noted the legal risk, such as risk of police arrest and risk of ‘prosecution when physically enforcing commercial rules of the house’ (Monaghan 2004: 454), as well as the possibility of violence that is prevalent in this line of work (Lister et al. 2000, 2001; Monaghan 2002). Therefore, the position of door staff in the night-time economy is ambivalent and contradictory as they are both empowered and disempowered by inter-group relations (Monaghan 2004).

Building upon the work of Monaghan (2002, 2004), Lister et al. (2000, 2001, 2009) and Hobbs et al. (2003), all working in a British context, the aim of this study was to understand how door supervisors manage and regulate the night-time economy in an Irish context. The methodology employed to address this research question included ethnography and semi-structured interviews with door supervisors, bar staff, bar owners and customers. Drawing on observations of and accounts given by door supervisors of their experiences as precarious workers in the night-time economy, this paper explores how their experiences of precarious employment are related to and exacerbated by certain features of the night-time economy. The paper will first outline what is meant by the term precarious employment and discuss how this type of labour is related to the expansion of the service sector within neoliberal, post-industrial societies. It will then discuss the methodology used to collect the qualitative data in this study before going on to illustrate the inter-related findings, which suggest that door supervisors working in the Irish night-time economy are in precarious employment. The paper concludes by outlining why it is unlikely that door staff working in the night-time economy will utilize the term precarity for collective political action.
Precarious Employment and Night-time Economy

The terms precarity, precarious and precariousness are often used to describe the condition of life in general (Butler 2004; Ettlinger 2007). However, following Waite (2009), the terms are adopted here to describe particular groups in society who are experiencing precariousness as a result of their labour market experiences (427). When defined this way, ‘precarious labour refers to the explosion of short term, temporary and part-time jobs’ (Gonick 2011) illegal, seasonal and subcontract employment, as well as freelance and ‘so called self-employed’ work (Neilson and Rossiter 2005), which resulted from the economic crisis of the 1970s. In response to the crisis, employers sought to cut labour costs by decreasing full time jobs that carried benefits such as pension plans and health insurance, while increasing ‘non-standard employment relationships’ (Gonick 2011), such as contractual work. Of course, precarious labour is not unique to post-1970s capitalist economies. Rather, before World War II, most employment was insecure and precarious (Gonick 2011). Therefore, from a historical perspective, the Fordist mode of work, characterised by full time, stable employment with benefits in the post WWII years, becomes the exception in employment relations (Neilson and Rossiter 2005) and precarity becomes the norm (Waite 2009). However, what is distinct about this current period of precarity is that due to the expansion of the service sector and the associated demand for flexibility, precarious jobs now constitute the fastest growing jobs in neoliberal, post-industrial societies (Gonick 2011). Central to this growing pool of precarious employment in post-industrial societies is the development of the night-time economy.

The night-time economy is a term used to describe the outcome of urban theory and planning practice aimed at revitalising the centres of struggling cities by generating economic activity, employment and vibrancy through the promotion of creative industries, leisure, sociability, and nightlife (Bianchini 1995; Montgomery 1995). This was largely driven through a set of neoliberal policies, focused on economically benefitting from the features of an emerging type of ‘liquid modern’ society (Bauman 2000), where strong ties have been replaced by weak ties, mobility has increased, identity is based more on lifestyle than background, and longer periods are set aside to the in-between statuses of student and single life (Florida 2002; Putnam 2000). Thus, the agenda behind the creation of the night-time economy can be seen as an attempt to promote and instrumentalise liminality, where the traditional boundaries of the somewhat exclusionary male dominated traditional pub scene, characterised by strong norms about appropriate conduct, along with the paternalistic governance of nightlife which policed boundaries around closing times and restriction of licences, were dissolved. The resulting effects have spawned a considerable critical literature, although the night-time economy was initially designed to be a mixed use space (Montgomery 1995), characterised by creativity, diversity and tolerance, it quickly came to be dominated by the alcohol industry and alcohol use. In tandem with this, public disorder became a key feature of this space and the night-time economy came to be identified as particularly difficult to police (Winlow and Hall 2006; Hobbs et al. 2003; National Crime Council 2003). New forms of governance have appeared alongside this new context of consumption. For example, deregulation is not only associated with a less controlled form of alcohol consumption, captured in the term: the ‘new culture of intoxication’ (Measham& Brain 2005), but also in the great increase in the use of private door supervisors who are tasked with
managing and regulating these disorderly nightlife spaces (Lister 2009).

Therefore, as the night-time economy has become central to urban revitalization, economic development and the expansion of the service sector, the number of door supervisors, who occupy a position of power as gatekeeper to these spaces, has increased significantly. Confirming previous research in this area, while this study found that the work of door staff is steeped in risk including the legal risk of prosecution and risk of violence, and that the position of door staff in the night-time economy is ambivalent and contradictory (Monaghan 2004), it also found that door supervisors are engaged in precarious employment. Differences between the concept of risk, which is typically used to explore the work done by bouncers, and that of precarity have already been explored in the literature. According to Waite (2009), while there may not be distinctive differences regarding the conditions of each, the difference in terminology relates to what is omitted from the term risk and what is ‘included in the concept of precarity’ (421). For example, the concept of precarity incorporates the structural context that produces precarity, whereas the term risk generally refers to the lived conditions (Waite 2009). Therefore, drawing on ethnographic data collected in a small urban centre in Ireland, this paper will explore both the structural and economic contexts that produce precarity for door staff, as well as describe the lived experience of doing door work under conditions of precarity. In addition, unlike the concept of risk, the term precarity has ‘political potential’ (Waite 2009: 413) as it has provided a ‘connecting device for struggles surrounding citizenship, labour rights, the social wage, and migration’ (Neilson and Rossiter 2005). As such, this paper will briefly explore the likelihood of door supervisors adopting the term precarity in order to make collective demands regarding their employment relations.

Methodology
The aim of this study was to understand how door supervisors manage and regulate the night-time economy in an Irish context. The methodology employed to address this research question included ethnography and semi-structured interviews. For the ethnography, one nightlife area, which was located in a small urban centre in Ireland, was designated as the research site. Within this site, an observational role was adopted to observe those who consume and regulate this nightlife district. The data collected amounts to forty-four hours of observation from December 2014 to October 2016. In order to compliment and support this observational data, fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with door supervisors, bar staff, bar owners and customers. Interviews were only carried out with door supervisors and bar staff who currently or had recently worked in the nightlife area observed as part of this study. Likewise, customers were only interviewed as part of the study if they self-identified as frequenting this particular nightlife space at least once a month. These criteria were used to ensure that the experiences of those who work or go out in these spaces was related to this specific night-time economy in order to triangulate the data (Bryman 2012).

Therefore, as all of the data was collected in one small urban centre in Ireland where those working in the area may be identifiable, it was decided that in order to preserve anonymity, pseudonyms would be used for the research site as well as research participants. In addition, some background details have also been changed or omitted in order to maintain the anonymity of the space. These precautions have been taken in similar
research with door supervisors and the night-time economy (Monaghan 2002). After the observational and interview data was collected, it was analysed thematically. Based on this analysis, the door supervisors interviewed and observed as part of this study were identified as being in precarious employment. The lived experience of doing door work under conditions of precarity, as well as the structural and economic contexts that produce precarity for door staff are detailed below.

Producing Precarity

As outlined above, the night-time economy was developed as a strategy to revitalise cities by generating economic activity and employment through a set of neoliberal policies (van Liempt et al. 2015). Within urban governance then, the night-time economy was perceived as an opportunity to double the city’s economy (Bianchini 1995) and was a reaction to the deindustrialisation, increased unemployment and the decreasing tax base of the 1970s in the UK (Harvey 1989). Like the wider leisure economy, the night-time economy is dominated by service sector employment that demands flexibility. While precarious and flexible employment is generally assumed to be negative, it must be highlighted that not everyone in ‘precarious jobs feels in a precarious position’ (Waite 2009). For example, flexible and insecure employment can provide jobholders with a sense of freedom (Horning 2012) and this type of labour may accommodate people at particular times of their life (Waite 2009). There is, therefore, a difference in subjective and objective notions of precarity as while one worker may decide to engage in insecure and flexible work to suit their own circumstances, the precarious worker is without control and power to make these decisions (Waite 2009). The opportunity for this ‘high road flexibility’ (Bone 2006) is part of what enabled neoliberalism’s implementation (Horning 2012) which has subsequently increased significantly the amount of precarious employment in late modernity. However, as well as macroeconomic and structural factors, precarity for door supervisors is further produced at the national and local level.

While door supervisors in Ireland are now legitimized and empowered by the state through the Private Security Services Act 2004 which introduced formal licensing and training as a legal requirement, for many of the doormen interviewed this was perceived as a ‘money making scheme’ (Mark, doorman) aimed at removing criminals from the doors of licensed venues. In addition, while training is now mandatory in order to secure a license, the doormen explained that this ‘wasn’t really in any way informative for doormen’ (Joseph, former doorman) and that in their experiences the instructor told you exactly what to do to pass the exam. Furthermore, many of the doormen felt that training should continue after receiving the private security license. Yet, the majority of them explained that this was not the case. While it was not mentioned by the doormen interviewed, there are differences regarding whether extended training is legally required depending on the employment relations of the door supervisors. For example, it is only organisations that provide security services such as door supervision that must continue to train their staff (Private Security Authority 2013). As such, door supervisors who are employed in house by a pub or nightclub owner are not entitled to extended training whereas those who are employed through a security contract company, are. A lack of extended training and formal qualifications was also found in previous studies on door supervisors working in the night-time economy (Monaghan 2002; 2004). In addition to a lack of training, these studies also found that application forms, pre-arranged
interviews and signed contracts were not a feature of this employment (Monaghan 2002; 2004). Again, this was confirmed in the current study as the doormen explained that they were generally introduced to the work by men they knew from the gym or martial arts training and that rather than an interview, they were put on the door for a night as a trial run before the employment was confirmed. In addition to the lack of contracts, the turnover rate for the doormen was very high and many of the doormen reported working on ‘nearly every door in the town’ (James, doorman). Therefore, due to the lack of signed contracts, the high turnover rate, the lack of formal training as well as the risks associated with this type of work, door work cannot be defined as a permanent, pensionable or standard job and therefore, is categorized as precarious labour.

In addition to a lack of security in terms of employment contracts and prospects, precarity for door supervisors was further produced by the local economic context. For example, the observations and interviews this study draws upon took place in a regional urban centre facing particularly severe economic hardships since the late 2000s. According to the doormen, the private governance of commercial nightlife spaces was shaped by these local economic factors. For example, while most of the doormen outlined that they try to avoid letting people in who they expect they will have to take out later, under direction from venue owners or managers, they were often instructed to let known ‘troublemakers’ in. They explained that due to the economic recession there has been a fall in the number of people using the bars and nightclubs in the city. Furthermore, even when these venues are full, a lot of the customers will have consumed alcohol in their homes before going out and therefore, will not spend much money at the bar. The doormen argued that the resultant decrease in revenue has encouraged bar owners and managers to have a more relaxed door policy, which carries higher risks for door staff, as they are instructed to grant access to customers with troublesome or violent reputations.

‘So basically all the scum that you were throwing out years ago or weren’t leaving in years ago are walking in past you now.’ (Mark, doorman).

The current economic climate also commonly justified a cutback in the number of doormen working in particular venues. The doormen explained that while bar managers encouraged doormen to impose a more relaxed door policy and thus, let larger numbers of customers inside, they were not prepared to hire the appropriate number of door staff to carry out the work safely. For example, Joseph explains:

‘The owners are always wanting to get loads of people in and then you’re conscious of the numbers in safely for doormen to look after them because as much as the owners want as many people in as possible, they don’t want to pay the door staff...If you’re head doorman it can be a constant battle. Well look I need 7 on this night this is a busy night, ah look you’ll get away with 5.’ (Joseph, former doorman).

Therefore, for the doormen, precarity is produced at many levels including: the macroeconomic level which has seen neoliberal policies contribute greatly to the growth of the services sector and the subsequent demand for flexibility; the national and local levels in terms of both the private security services legislation, which has not legislated for satisfactory or extended formal training for all door supervisors, and the local economic climate; and the specific employment relations of door supervisors.
which are characterized by a lack of signed contracts, high turnover rate and uncertainty. As previously mentioned, the position of door staff in the night-time economy is ambivalent and contradictory as the factors contributing to the precarity of door supervisors can also, at the same time, empower them (Monaghan 2004). Furthermore, precarious employment is not always a negative experience as some workers may decide to engage in insecure and flexible work to suit their own life circumstances. Nevertheless, the lived experience of doing door work for the majority of those interviewed was characterized by perceived disempowerment in terms of emotional labour, moral injury and vulnerability. These aspects of the lived experience of door supervisors will be discussed below.

Emotional Labour and Moral Injury

The consequences of enforcing private governance raised personal, professional and ethical questions that had deep consequences for the bouncers. For example, bouncers undertake their work within a hierarchy of power and surveillance by bar managers, customers and the public police (Monaghan 2002: 419). A central aspect of such hierarchical relationships was instructions about whom they could and could not grant access to the premises. A particular difficulty was imposing exclusions on people in quasi-public spaces, with expectations of equality, not only due to licensed premises bleeding into the public realm through smoking areas and seating at the front of venues, but also the strong ethos of ‘communitas’ in liminal nightlife environments.

Contrary to the expectations of the users of these spaces, according to Bayley and Shearing (2001) there has not only been an increase in the number of providers of private security, but also an increase in the number of authorizers of security due to the expansion of mass private property, as the owners of these territories contract in security provision and determine the rules about what is to be protected and the manner in which this is achieved (Shearing and Stenning 1981; 1983). Such owners therefore can be seen as a type of private government, as they are able to determine the behavioural standards expected of their customers and choose which people are welcome in their territories. This empirical study found that the managers or owners of private nightlife establishments indeed act in this manner as authorizers of security, by contracting in security provision and instructing them on which people are welcome into their drinking establishments, and which people are not. This of course means that door supervisors are tasked with carrying out the instructions of the bar managers or owners who employ them.

Contemporary private governments are typically owned and ‘governed by commercial profit-making organizations’ (Jones 2007: 849), compared to the private governments of previous decades which were more likely to be non-market organisations such as churches, trade unions and community clubs. Due to the shift, the demographic of people subject to private forms of governance has changed, because, as commercial private governance is concerned with creating a safe environment for consumption activities, improvised communities and groups that are perceived to be likely to disturb the consumption of others, are more likely to be excluded from these privately governed spaces. Standing at the frontline, and managing this boundary of exclusion exposes bouncers to both physical risks and moral dilemmas. As one bouncer commented:

‘[the Irish] Travelling community, you know, we’d be getting calls like we all wear ear
pieces you know so we’d be getting calls sometimes from the management eh they’d be watching the front door on camera he’s not coming in so we’d have to tell him look sorry’ (James, doorman).

Similarly, a number of other doormen interviewed as part of this study spoke about being instructed by management to refuse certain ethnic minorities at the door. In order to conform to this management request, the doormen employed a number of practices to turn this group away, including telling the ethnic minority members that they had too much to drink and therefore, could not enter the venue, or by requesting identification from them. As James (doorman) outlined, ‘we'd pull him for I.D., most of them wouldn't have I.D. you know’. The doormen expressed frustration at having to act on and enforce the management’s discrimination against this group, explaining that members of the Travelling community often came to the pub before the doormen started their work and would be served by bar staff and the manager. However, according to the doormen’s accounts, as soon as they arrive at work they would be instructed by management to put the members of the Travelling community out of the pub which, they argued, placed them in a particularly difficult position. The doormen highlighted that they would try to explain to those ejected that they were just following orders, but that these instances occasionally led to dangerous situations in which they were threatened or followed home.

Not only is physical risk a taken for granted aspect of working as a doorman, but the risk of moral injury is always present. As mentioned earlier, doormen reported feeling under pressure to act in a discriminatory manner or risk losing their job. Being required to threaten the use of force to compel certain undesirables to comply can contribute to moral injury. If actions cannot be interpreted in a way that integrates them into the moral scheme of the person, they are liable to experience guilt, shame and anxiety, linked with their own self-assessment and the judgement of them by others (Litzet et al. 2009: 698). A self-definition based on taking care of others’ safety can therefore easily become corrupted into feelings of being hired muscle. This was also expressed by James:

‘they hadn’t the guts to say it to them so they want to put all the pressure on us, well this is what you’re getting paid for, they’ve to leave’ (James, doorman).

In addition to moral injury, door supervisors also experienced emotional labour. Developed by Hochschild (1983), emotional labour describes the prescription of the display of expected emotions on the part of workers in organisations, through explicit and implicit ‘feeling rules’ and ‘display rules’, to provide emotional cues to customers in order to facilitate the goals of the organisation, on top of the more instrumental tasks they are expected to carry out. It has traditionally been applied to service workers, such as customer-service operators, flight attendants and funeral directors, who must express socially desired emotions in customer interactions. Typically it is understood as the imperative by workers to display positive emotional reactions towards customers, rather than unfeeling, neutral and even negative emotional cues (Morris and Feldman 1996). It is not a purely negative concept, as it also describes how the expectations of appropriate emotions in roles provide workers with a framework for role enactment and self-construction, especially if they strongly identify with the role (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993). However, on the other hand it can be associated with emotional dissonance and self-alienation, especially when workers are expected to display feelings
that are contrary to their sense of authentic self. For the doormen, emotional labour was based on the display of having to judge the degree of irritation, anger, and seeming closeness to resorting to violence, that would achieve the best ends (Humphrey, Pollack and Hawver 2008: 155). From the doormen’s accounts, this was especially evident in deciding when to ask a disorderly customer to leave the premises. The dilemma in ejecting a customer was the chance that they would remain complaining at the door for a substantial period of time. Below Joseph explains how this can be very hard and frustrating work and that sometimes when he felt like he could not handle it anymore, he reported the customer to the Garda in order to get them away from the door.

‘So it was just a matter of you would actually put him down on the ground when they didn’t deserve it but they did in the sense that you can’t keep listening to it. Like if someone’s keep bombarding you for a half an hour, they’re full of drink with useless stuff ‘where’s my shoe?’...Honest to god, you’ve no idea...And it’s been repeated, like a record, broken record. That’d just wear you down no matter how good you are, it would wear you down so you just get rid of him and just you know get a guard to get him out of there’ (Joseph, former doorman).

Scale and Vulnerability

As well as enforcing private governance, the lack of anonymity offered to door staff in a small city renders them particularly vulnerable. Most of what we know about night-time economies is based on research carried out in large cities (Monaghan 2002, 2004; Lister et al. 2000, 2001; Hobbs et al. 2003). Similarly, in Ireland the only study yet conducted on the night-time economy is based in Dublin (National Crime Council 2003). Studies conducted in large cities have focused on the anonymity of these spaces as an important defining feature. For example, Monaghan notes that regulating nightlife areas often ‘comprises fleeting contact with a large mass of potentially dangerous and ‘unruly’ anonymous bodies’ (Monaghan 2002: 415 original emphasis). Likewise, the National Crime Council Report (2003) suggested anonymity was a particularly important factor influencing the policing of this space. The anonymity of urban environments, and lack of collective efficacy based on reputation, trust and long-standing relationships has long been linked with violence (Jacobs 1961).

However, in contrast to these studies, this research took place in a small city, and it was discovered that although regulating the night-time economy in smaller cities and towns, and managing the risk of violence bouncers were subject to, is indeed linked with questions of anonymity and reputation, anonymity was not as significant a feature of the particular night-time economy in this study. Instead, the lack of anonymity and the high level of familiarity that existed between bouncers and consumers of the night-time economy in this small urban centre was the very feature that exposed them to a risk of violence, contrasting to the situation in a larger city where bouncers are protected by their obscurity in a large urban area. For the doormen interviewed, the small scale and local nature of their working environment produced negative consequences and risks which were not protected by their employment relations. For example, doormen were sometimes followed home by disgruntled customers they had either removed or refused from the bar during the course of their work night. Similarly, there was the possibility of customers finding out details about the doormen and using this information to threaten them. Below, one participant explains that he felt like he had no other option but to give up door work as some people, who his manager had instructed
him not to let in, threatened to set his business on fire.

‘At the time one of the nightclubs had only just opened up and I was the head doorman there and I was threatened by people who the owners didn’t want let in and they told me, I had a business in the city, and they told me they would burn it down if I didn’t let them in and I was trying to explain to them that it was nothing to do with me that if I’m replaced by somebody else they’ll still be stopped but they said you’re the person who is stopping us so you’re the person we’re going to deal with. . . I left because of that; I knew it wasn’t an idle threat’ (Joseph, former doorman).

Bar managers, interviewed as part of this study, also felt vulnerable due to the lack of anonymity offered in this space. For example, one female bar manager explained that when she went out to the nightlife area on her night off from work, she would only drink in the bar she manages. This was due to fear of altercations with customers whom she had previously removed or refused from her place of work.

Fear of refusing or dealing with known customers who have violent reputations was reported by the doormen as a major reason why trouble still occurs in pubs and nightclubs. They explained that some of the doormen or managers were too afraid to stop customers from entering the premises so the clientele of venues differed depending on the door staff working the doors on particular nights. A number of the doormen explained that although the money from door work was relatively good, it was not good enough considering what they had to deal with. From these accounts, it is suggested that if door supervisors were offered an increase in pay, they would carry out their work more efficiently as the monetary increase would justify the risks incurred.

Conclusion

Building on previous studies on bouncers working in the night-time economy, (Monaghan 2002, 2004; Lister et al. 2000, 2001, 2009; Hobbs et al. 2003) the aim of this research was to understand how door supervisors manage and regulate the night-time economy in an Irish context. By drawing on the observations of and accounts given by bouncers, this paper explored door supervisors’ experiences of precarious employment and how it is related to and exacerbated by certain features of the night-time economy. For the context of this study, precarious employment then was defined ‘as short term, temporary and part-time jobs’ (Gonick 2011) illegal, seasonal and subcontract employment, as well as freelance and ‘so called self-employed’ work (Neilson and Rossiter 2005). The conditions of the precarious work done by door supervisors were found to be produced at many levels including: the macroeconomic level which has seen neoliberal policies contribute greatly to the growth of the services sector and the subsequent demand for flexibility; the national and local levels in terms of both the private security services legislation and the local economic climate; and the specific employment relations of door supervisors which are characterized by a lack of signed contracts, high turnover rate, uncertainty and low pay for the work demanded. While the position of door staff in the night-time economy is undoubtedly ambivalent and contradictory, as the factors contributing to the precarity of door supervisors can also, at the same time, empower them (Monaghan 2004), the lived experience of doing door work for the majority of those interviewed in this study was characterized by perceived disempowerment in terms of emotional labour, moral injury and vulnerability.
Furthermore, while the ‘political potential’ (Waite 2009: 413) of the term precarity has been highlighted as ‘a connecting device for struggles surrounding citizenship, labour rights, the social wage, and migration’ (Neilson and Rossiter 2005), it is unlikely that the term will be adopted by door supervisors for political action. This is due to the specific characteristics of door work - insecure, low paid for the work and risks involved, and unstable (for example, can be sent home during the night if the venue is not busy) - which prevent it from being a full-time job. For this reason, many of those who perform this work are also in other employment and therefore, the ability, or indeed desire, to make collective demands regarding their employment relations may not be present among those doing this precarious work.

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References


Abstract: This article concerns the subaltern voices of working men who emigrated from Ireland from the nineteenth century onwards and explores how their experience of the world of precarious work is represented in narrative and song. Through a comparative analysis of Rotha Mór an tSaol by Micí Mac Gabhann and songs of work by Irish migrants, it is argued that working life enacted a series of important ‘moments of becoming’ for the male subject, constituting a formative ‘passing through’ for migrant working-class men. The precarious work of the Irish migrant constituted a chronically liminal existence, an ‘experience’, in the Turnerian sense, that had to be endured and overcome. The Irish migrant had to roll with the punches, often quite literally. Thus, work is here understood as engendering experience, as literally the making of men, a socio-economic practice that forms the subject. The performativity of gender and masculine authority in representations of migrant work is analysed, and the performance of the heroic in narrative and song as an emancipatory response to precarious work is considered. In conclusion, it is argued that the subaltern voices of Micí Mac Gabhann and of the anonymous working men of song give us a vital understanding of the experience of precarious work from within that counterbalances the performatively rationalist discourses of economic and quantitative analysis.

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Introduction
This article attempts a return to the experience of precarious work in former times through the discourses of narrative and song, focussing in particular on the experience of work among male emigrants from Ireland from the nineteenth century onwards. Turner’s etymological reading of experience as a ‘passing through’ is further extrapolated here, through which it is argued that the experience of work can be considered in itself as subject forming (Szakolczai 2009: 149-150, Thomassen 2014: 86-78, 1985: 226). Work is an experience through which the subject may become something or someone else as a result (van Gennep 1960: 65-115). For the purposes of this article, work as an experience that makes men, and that is symbiotically intertwined
with the performance of masculinity, will be explored.

The intense precarity of working life that formed Irish-speaking men from the Donegal Gaeltacht in the nineteenth century as recounted in the oral-derived autobiography of Micí Mac Gabhann [1865-1948], *Rotha Mór an tSaoil* ['The Great Wheel of Life'], is of immediate relevance to the development of an anthropological understanding of work in modernity, one that goes beyond a merely economic conceptualisation of the labour market. Mac Gabhann did not pen his work: rather it was transcribed from his oral testimony and subsequently published as a book.¹ *Rotha Mór an tSaoil* is a rare glimpse into the subaltern world and represents both the sophisticated oral culture of the rural poor and working classes, but also the oft oppressive experience of life under the yoke of the ruling classes, be they nobles or capitalists, before the modern welfare state.² Mac Gabhann occupies a working world of compelling symbols of class divide, of precarity, of fear, of bravery and of a burgeoning masculinity emanating from the ruthless work experiences of colonial Ireland and the New World. When Mac Gabhann’s discourses on subjugation, social hierarchy, and the ruthless and grinding experience of precarious labour are compared with songs in English that dramatise the Irishman’s experience of emigration and work, such as ‘Poor Paddy works on the Railway’, ‘The Hot Ashphelt’ ³ and ‘The Mickey Dam’ ⁴ , an interesting picture emerges of the subject that lived through and was formed by precarity and structural violence (Galtung 1969). Whereas the songs give an up-beat, humourous and ultimately heroic response to the violence and interminable hardship of migrant work, *Rotha Mór an tSaoil* gives a moving personal narrative account, or a ‘thick description’ of migrant work, that betrays the gritty reality of real-world experiences of precarious labour as a ‘passing through’ that moulds the subject. When analysed in tandem, both the songs and Mac Gabhann’s autobiography speak to the inherent performativity of subjectivities of work, and illustrate how the experience of labouring can be foundational in the making of men; they also demonstrate the agency of the workers themselves who, as a response to the cruel realities of precarious labour, creatively and performatively celebrate the working man as a hero figure who triumphs in adversity.

It is argued here, therefore, that the labour market can be seen to permeate and inform important rites of passage that the working man experiences and therefore is integral to the creation of the subject and the performance of masculinity. Thus, it is hoped that this article will counterbalance seemingly ‘neutral’ or ‘calculated’ economic approaches in modernity that support an increased precarity in working life by engaging with subaltern voices of those who knew precarity from the inside and who articulate to us the crucial formative dynamic of lived experience.

**Micí Mac Gabhann’s ‘Forest of Symbols’ and the Rites of Passage of the Working World.**

In paying homage to Baudelaire’s concept of the ‘Forest of Symbols’ in his study of the social practices of the Ndembu, Victor Turner summed up the overwhelmingly symbolic nature and import of human life. Turner’s analysis of ritual and culture as social processes that are ‘alive’ and dynamic and richly symbolic also contributed more generally to our understanding of how community and society work, and how meaning is generated. Much as ritual is a social process that is marked by symbols of great meaning, so too is the passage that is life’s lived experience. In *Rotha Mór an tSaoil* we are similarly presented with a ‘Forest of Symbols’; not necessarily one of ritual per se, but one of the day to day but uncertain life experience of the rural poor. Thus we see symbols of ethnicity, identity and class, such as language, clothing and customs, woven through this first-hand account of Mac...
Gabhann’s heroic foray into an uncertain world. Transition is a recurrent feature of *Rotha Mór an tSaoil* also and the work is a compelling account of the subject who grapples with an ever-changing present. We are introduced early in the book to a bitter coming of age experience in Mac Gabhann’s young life, one in which the young boy must leave home and begin his working life. Micí Mac Gabhann’s mother knew all too well of the cruel realities of a society that normalised extreme poverty and there was nothing out of the ordinary when, at only nine years of age, that Micí Mac Gabhann was to be brought to *aonach an fhostóidh* or the employment fair, where crowds of children like him would line up to be chosen as farm labourers or servant boys by the more well to do farming class (O’Dowd, 1995; Ní Dhonnchadha and Nic Eoin 2008: 294-362). The author describes how the boys were lined up as if they were sheep at a fair to be examined by their prospective masters:

*Bhí mo mhacasamhailsa ansin inár scódráin, go direach – chan a gcur i gcomórtas – mar tífeá caoirigh ar aonach. Bhí fir mhóra an Lagáin ag síol thart frinne agus corrair thigeadh an dá shílínneán ar dhuithe againn agus deireadh rud inteach lena chomrádaí fá dtaoibh dinn. Tá cuimhne agam go dtí an lá inniu ar an rud a dúirt fear acu fá dtaoibh diom féin. Tháinig sé anall chugam, rug greim dhá ghualainn orm agus chroith go maith mé. “He’s a sturdy wee fella”, arsa seisean leis an fhearr a bhí leis (Mac Gabhann, 1959: 35).*

[Others just like me were there – indistinct from one another – just as you would see sheep at a fair. The big men of Lagan were walking around among us and now and again a man would come over to us and hit us between our two shoulder blades and would say something to his comrade about us. I can remember to this day what one of the men said about me. He came over to me, caught hold of my two shoulders and shook me well. “He’s a sturdy wee fella” he said to the man who was with him.]

Here the Irish-speaking children from poor rural families are being rounded up for examination by wealthier English-speaking farmers ‘prior to purchase’. Despite the bitter sorrow felt by the author and his mother because of this economically imposed separation, a self-preserving stoicism prevails: ‘bhi sise chomh saighdiúrtha agus a bhí mise ...’ [‘she was as soldierly as I was ...’] (1959: 36; cf. also Ní Dhonnchadha and Nic Eoin 2012: 61-2). One is struck both by the stark divide on ethnic and class grounds in this depiction of the child labour market in colonial Ireland, but also by how this boy’s experience of leaving home for the first time is formative for the subject. As symbolised by the new suit of clothes his aunt brought to him a few days before he set off for the employment fair, this event marked a transition from boyhood to the child labour force. For this marginalised community, poverty and economic necessity regulated these crucial rites of passage for boys. Micí has no choice, nor does his mother, and must come through this experience, something which results in a necessary ‘hardening’ of sorts: when Micí returns to Lagan a year later he has acclimatised to the separation from his family and the hardship of working life (1959: 46). Childhood truly is no more, he is now an active labourer, a novitiate of the labour market on his way to manhood. This is but one account of many which typifies the engendering experience of work and of the economy in the book. Any relief from the hardship of servitude is only met with more precarity, as we see when he decides to emigrate to Scotland for seasonal work having spent six years working in Lagan (see O’Dowd 1995). This represents a passage into a new working world for Micí, marked by a notable fear of attack in case he was to be recognised as a new-comer. He is unused to wearing
shoes, but only removes them when nobody is there for fear of assault:

_Ba náir linn na bróga a chaitheamh dínn ar an bhóthar seo. Bhí siúl mór daoine air agus bheadh sé chomh dóiche lena athrach go n-ionsófaí sinn dá bhfeicfeadh cosarnocht sinn. Choínnigh muid na bróga orainn (1959: 72)._

[We would have been ashamed to take off our shoes on this road. There used to be a load of people on it and it would have been as likely as not that we would have been attacked if we were to be seen in our bare feet. We kept our shoes on.]

Bare feet and shoes are an important part of the forest of symbols of the migrant Irish-speaking worker. To be a man that ventures out into the uncertain world of seasonal labour, is to be both savvy and brave. It is also to be hardened to punishing work and horrendous conditions, as Micí was to discover when fleeing the poor working conditions at Bonnington Farm only to land in an even worse situation in North Berwick, where the working men were not given so much as a bed to sleep in, but had to share their sleeping quarters with the animals. The men were made to work half starved, and when fed, were fed like animals:

_Lena chois sin, cha choínnigh muid na bróga a fháil an madadh beo. Nuair a tháinig deireadh an fhómhair chaithfimis a dhul amach agus dá aibre a dhéanamh sula bhfaighfimis greim ar bith. Bhiodh scion inár súile ag feithéamh ar an brógha ceart agus fíorbaí is leis an ocras.

Bhi fear ansin ag an mháistir a rabh ‘gig’ aige a théadh amach an bracháin chun na pácraithe. Tobán beag bracháin a bhiodh d'ach suíoch. Rachfá sias ar do ghlúine ansin, dhéanfá pola i dtaobh an bharcháin sa tobán agus dhoírtí isteach do chuid bainnne sa pholl sin. Cha ligseadh an eagla d'aoide an chroich a bhí idir na poill ag an bhíroleadh, nó dá mbriseadh, bhéadh an cogadh ann agus b'fhéidir go mbuailfeadh an fear eile lena spáin é i dtaobh an leicinn (1959: 79)._

[As well as that, the food we were getting wouldn't keep a dog alive. When the end of the harvest came, we used to have to go out and work for two hours before we would be given any bite to eat. There used be a wild look in our eyes waiting for that breakfast to come while we died of the hunger. The master then had a man who had a ‘gig’ to bring out the porridge to the field. A small tub of porridge between every five men was what we got. You would then go down on your knees and make a hole in the side of the porridge, into which your milk would be poured. Fear prevented the boundary between the holes being broken, because if it was there would be war and maybe the other man would hit you in the face with his spoon.]

These men were brutalised by their employers and indeed by an economic system devoid of social conscience or ethical concerns. Throughout Mac Gabhann’s autobiographical account, we see him search repeatedly for yet another better situation. However, for those who came from severe poverty, working life for the most part was akin to a purgatory – inescapable and punitive. This was the work that would make a man of you, and that would create a subject who could withstand hunger, brutalisation, injustice and never ending uncertainty. We see the numerous life transitions, the ‘passing through’ of experience, in Mac Gabhann’s account of his life – from boy to farm boy, and from farm boy to migrant working man. Indeed the first season of work in Scotland was for Micí a rite of passage of sorts to manhood, as he indicates, having worked his first day in Scotland:

_Leoga cha rabh ár leabaídhe deacair a chóiriú an oíche sin agus b’orainn a bhí an lúcháir nuair a shin muid ár gnámhá inti – an chéad oíche in Albain agus ár gcéad lá_
Indeed our beds weren’t hard to dress that night and we were full of joy when we stretched out our bones – the first night in Scotland and our first day’s pay earned as ‘grown men’, ploughing on our own steam.

Here we see the glimmer of the much sought after independence of the young man and the satisfaction of having achieved that. However, though transition as part the tripartite structure as formulated by van Gennep is usually brought to a close by re-aggregation, the life of Micí Mac Gabhann was more like a series of successive transitions, until his final return to Cloich Cheannfhaoila where he retires. We see therefore, that the labour market was at the crux of important rites of passage and moments of becoming for men. The experience of work was central to the subject being created anew in van Gennep’s terms; or work was the making of men.


Working life for the migrant labourer is relentlessly punishing, always running to stand still. Having spent five seasons working in Scotland he makes the decision to emigrate to America as an escape from the oppressive working conditions for the Irish migrant in Scotland: pay that fell short of the work, want of food, and often no bed to sleep on (1959: 83). His working life in America is marked by resourcefulness and determination on the one hand, and an ever present sense of precarity and danger on the other, and it is in the latter part of the book which charts those experiences that we see important moments of becoming in manhood. When working in the docks in Bethlehem, loading and unloading ships, we see how the performativity of gender is connected to permanent transition and the uncertainty of migrant work. Much like discourses we find in songs of emigration and work such as ‘The Mickey Dam’ and ‘The Hot Ashphelt’, which are taken here to be representative of a larger repertoire of songs of migrant labouring, we see how Micí must strike a blow to a threatening work-mate to ensure his own safety and status. Having initially received unwanted attention due to betraying his trepidation at travelling over and back on the slender plank on board the ship, Micí suffers mockery and humiliation at the hands of a Connaughtman. Micí identifies and effective solution: he gives the Connaughtman a belt in the ear that knocks him off the plank and into the water below.

I took my fist and hit the bottom of his ear so that I flung himself and the barrow out into the river. He went down to the bottom. The name the Connaughtmen used to have for the people of this county and we over there was the ‘Far-Downs’ and when I put him in the river, I’m telling you that I put him ‘far-down!’ I was sure that he was dead and I was very afraid I’d be killed, but not a word was said to me.

The heroics of the punch are recounted quite gleefully by Mac Gabhann here, clearly a moment of triumph in adversity. Mac Gabhann has adeptly negotiated his position among the other men, and the punch he threw broke no social code. Rather it affirms a
social code, one of come-uppance being meted through the well-thrown punch, as is sung of in the ‘Hot Ashphelt’ when the protagonist punches an offensive police-officer who accuses him of being ‘a traitor from the Tipperary ranks’: ‘Boys, I hit him straight from the shoulder, and gave him such a belt, that I knocked him into the boiler full of the hot ashphelt’ (COB 2008). Here we find a certain thrill of daring and of justice: in other words, both the policeman and the Connaughtman clearly had it coming! This is what Williams and Ó Laoire term ‘the mythic figure of the Irish fighting man’ in their close reading of the song ‘Morissey and the Russian Sailor’ as sung by Joe Heaney (2011: 159). Indeed, Mac Gabhann’s account of the incident with the Connaughtman, in which the inexperienced Donegal man triumphs over the domineering and cruel Connaughtman, resonates strongly with similar discourses in ‘Morrissey and the Russian Sailor’ as described by Williams and Ó Laoire, of the ‘underdog who, against all odds, succeeds in defeating his opponents and oppressors by dint of sheer physical stamina and endurance’ (2011: 159). The thrill of the underdog is celebrated in the penultimate verse of ‘Morrissey and the Russian Sailor’, and much like Mac Gabhann’s own tale, ends with the villain being truly done for:

\begin{quote}
The thirty-eighth decided on, the Russian felt the smart
And Morrissey with a dreadful blow, struck the Russian on the heart
The doctor, he was called in to open up a vein
He said, “It is quite useless, he’ll never fight again.”
\end{quote}
(Williams and Ó Laoire 2011: 161)

It would seem that in both ‘Morrissey and the Russian Sailor’ and Mac Gabhann’s account, both which come from 19th-century America, a central discursive trope of Irish masculinity, one that is connected to oppression and adversity, is illustrated (Williams and Ó Laoire 2011: 163). This performative heroic Irish masculinity is also epitomised by another song of working migration, ‘The Mickey Dam’, in which a man must leave his farm in County Clare to seek work in Scotland. There he is mistreated by the ganger, but by virtue of a violent altercation, justice prevails and the protagonist wins the day:

\begin{quote}
Now the ganger that I started with, they called him John the Mouse,
and the very first day that I got there, at me he made the grouse,
but quickly I surprised him and said, ‘You little rat! I’ll tie a string around your neck and throw you to the cat!’
And I’m as strong as any lion, I was reared on eggs and ham,
I’m a terror to all fighting men, round the Mickey Dam!
\end{quote}
(as sung by Chris O’Brien, Castletownroche, Co. Cork)

In ‘The Mickey Dam’ the prowess of the fighting working man flies in the face of an oppressive system. In unveiling the feebleness of ‘John the Mouse’, a symbol of an unjust and senseless hierarchy, the song celebrates insubordination and delegitimises the authority of the workplace. Indeed a certain disdain for the well-heeled ruling classes is strongly implied when ‘John the Mouse’ has the tail of his coat shook off by the heroic Irish protagonist:

\begin{quote}
Now this rose the Mouse’s temper, and at me he made to jump,
and swore he’d paralyse me with the handle of the pump,
but I quickly surprised and I caught him by the throat,
and I shook that little monkey ‘til the tail fell off his coat.
\end{quote}

Just like ‘The Hot Ashphelt’, ‘Morrissey and the Russian Sailor’ and Mac Gabhann’s testimony, the thrill of a skilful blow, or the threat of violence from a formidable man,
puts the world to rights. In all cases, violence is a response to the world that is foisted upon them and to the structural violence of the labour market which they must endure, and in this sense these songs, and Mac Gabhann’s story, literally represent the making of men, or the formation of the autonomous Irish male subject. Indeed, the well-thrown punch is an expression of the agency of the Irish migrant working man, who through heroic altercation re-asserts his sense of place in a precarious world. When Mac Gabhann’s personal testimony is compared to the discourses of emigrant song we find a performative masculinity that emanates from the harsh experience of migration and work. I argue that, likewise, the uncertain social structures of the New World and of the experience of migration enables a new moment of becoming in Micí Mac Gabhann’s life, one whereby he gains fluency in the symbolic masculine authority of violence. However, this is not without immense self-discipline in relation to fear, and we see Mac Gabhann literally having to ‘play the part’ of the dominant male:

Cuireadh scéal amach aon Satharn amháin agus cén diabhal a tháinig isteach le dhul a dh'obair i mo chuideachta féin ach an fear céanna a dtug mé an buille fill dó agus a chuir mé san abhainn. Bhí mo sháith eagla orm nuair a chonaic mé ag tarraingt orm é ach dar liom féin nach dtabharfainn de shásamh dó go ligfinn orm go rabh. Nuair a tháinig sé chugam labhair mé le is go maith dolba faoi mar bheinn i mo mhaoirseoir san aít:


[Word was sent out one Saturday [to workers], and who the hell should come in to work with me only the same man to whom I gave the treacherous blow and who I knocked into the river. I was terrified when I saw him coming in but I decided not to give him the satisfaction and didn’t let anything on. When he came over to me I spoke to him boldly as if I were the supervisor in the place: ‘Come on now!’ says I, ‘throw off your coat and do something! I will make you sweat now!’ He said neither yes nor no and he didn’t speak another word to me from that day out.]

Thus, we see that the performativity of gender is interwoven with the larger performance of roles within the social hierarchy at work, having to save face in front of the others, having to ensure one’s position and status. As represented by Micí Mac Gabhann here, however, violence and being able to perform an authority founded on the threat of violence is integral to the self-disciplining of the subject in the Foucauldian sense (1982). Mac Gabhann has to overcome his fearfulness, he must pass through this experience, and when he reaches the other side, he will have become something else as a result. This punch marks another transition: the new guy has now been conferred a higher social status as a man who need not fear any other; this act of violence is a moment of becoming borne of the ‘passing through’ of the precarious experience of migrant work (Szakolczai 2009: 149-150, Turner 1985: 226). This marked performativity of gender in Mac Gabhann’s account shows ‘an identity tenuously constituted in time’ (Butler 1998: 519), therefore representing a masculinity in the making and the subject in the flux of experience, something which is also echoed in the heroic forays in the songs of Irish migrant workers previously mentioned.

Fear and the threat of violence often feature in Mac Gabhann’s representation of the New World. North America is in a liminal period of becoming, it is a place of disorder and precarity. Working life in the new world is a combination of thrill and danger; it is also an experience that transforms the subject. Mac
Gabhann tells of the ‘unnatural life’ that the men endured in Klondike, though they managed to make good money there:

Chaith muid trí nó ceathair de bhlianta ar fad ag obair i Klondike, agus má bhi muid ag déanamh airgid féin bhi muid ag éiri tuirseach de sa deireadh. Bhí an chuid ab fhearr dár saol caite ag cuid againn go minádúrtha – ag obair faoi thalamh san oíche mórán den am agus inár gcoinn tadhsh sa lá (1959: 200).

[We spent three or four years in total working in Klondike and even though we were making money, we were getting fed up of it in the end. We had spent the best part of our lives unnaturally – working underground in the night a lot of the time and sleeping during the day.]

This was a way of life that inverted the natural order of things; making night into day and day into night. Their early adulthood was literally robbed of sunlight, having to go forth into the ‘poll dubh dorcha’ ['dark black hole'] underground instead. A sense of being ‘stuck’ in the world of precarious work is eloquently depicted by the author:

Is iomai rud a chaithfeas duine a dhéanamh in éadan a thola nuair atá sé ag iarraidh gléas beatha a bhaint amach ar an iargúltacht. Bhí blianta fada caite agamsa ag gabháil d’obair mhíslach agus charbh iontas ar bith go rabh mé ag éiri tuirseach di. Idir an Lagán agus Albain agus na háiteacha iargúltach ar mhór-oinn Mheiriceá, cha rabh mórán só i ndán domh ón chéad lá a dhfág mé an baile agus gan iomair ach gasúr (1959: 200).

[Many’s a thing a person has to do against his will when he is trying to make a life in the wilderness. I had spent years doing insulting work and it was no wonder I was growing weary of it. Between Lagan and Scotland and remote places on the American continent, there was not much]

All that had to be endured by these working migrant men left its mark, or formed the subject, as Mac Gabhann depicts when remembering the journey back to ‘civilisation’ from Klondike ‘... bhi an mishuaimhneas, agus an mishsáamh a bhí orainn le achan chineál, i ndiaidh a dhul i bhfostó ionainn fán am seo’ ['the unease and the dissatisfaction of every sort that was upon us had become entangled in us at this stage'] (1959: 202). Mac Gabhann’s eventual weariness with the ‘American Way’ resonates with the sense of permanent liminality that one finds in the famous and up-beat 19th-century working song ‘Poor Paddy Works on the Railway’. In the version of the song most commonly sung in Ireland today, we are told of the emigrant’s passage to Liverpool, his donning of corduroy britches to work upon the railway. However, the work upon the railway is akin to a never-ending ordeal. This slavery eventually kills ‘Poor Paddy’ who then proceeds to work upon the railway in the next life!

In eighteen hundred and forty seven 
Poor Paddy was thinking of going to heaven,
Poor Paddy was thinking of going to heaven 
to work upon the railway, the railway;
I’m sick to my death of the railway;
Poor Paddy works on the railway.
(as sung by Chris O’Brien, Castletownroche, Co. Cork)

This sense of inevitability of being in a bind, of being ‘stuck’ in grinding labour is so compelling, that ‘Poor Paddy’ must expect that this is what is in store for him in Heaven too. The subject here is borne of precarity and of the unknown. These narrative and song accounts make meaning out of this human crisis by creating a subject that can withstand the brutalising liminality of industrial capitalism, but also by framing the subject as a hero-figure, thus singing and telling stories
that emancipate the working man from the senseless and banal suffering of precarious work. Where the gleeful heroics of the songs prevail, however, Mac Gabhann’s work belies the gritty concealed genesis of the performance of masculinity as embroiled in the fearful and precarious experience of the structural violence of the working world of the labouring man.

Conclusion
The life-story of Micí Mac Gabhann is an important document for anthropological history in Ireland, and gives us a rare insight into life as told by those who, in Mac Gabhann’s own words, resided on *iochtar an rotha* or the base of the wheel, while the affluent and powerful occupied *uachtar an rotha* or the top of the wheel. The work enables us to relive the experiences of those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and is representative of the great many migrants and workers whose voices have been erased from Western history, but at whose expense modern industrial capitalism would ultimately flourish and become the dominant mode of social organisation and economic production. Mac Gabhann’s work also illustrates the key transitions that formed the working man, and tells the story of the subject who is re-borne through the ‘passing through’ of life’s experiences. When compared with heroic discourses of Irish migrant workers in ‘The Hot Ashphalt’, ‘Poor Paddy Works Upon the Railway’, ‘The Mickey Dam’ and also Joe Heaney’s famous rendition of ‘Morrissey and the Russian Sailor’, we are given a sense of how men were made, and how the brutal and precarious world of work, that so many Irish men were forced to navigate, would be formative in the creation of the subject and the performance of masculinity. The experience of work is therefore the stuff of creation. In an anthropology of work, therefore, it is essential that work is seen as an engendering experience, as a forest of symbols from which identity is wrought and through which masculinity is performed, rather than a neat economic category that objectively organises pre-formed subjects. For fear that sociology lose itself in number-crunching, an anthropology of work in contemporary modernity that engages with the human stories of work is essential if we are to understand the working world as a dynamic social process that forms the subject, that is integral to social organisation, and that goes far beyond what a quantitative analysis would ever be capable of telling us. It is for this reason that the subaltern voices of Micí Mac Gabhann and of the anonymous working men of song should be listened to more closely.

References


**Discography:**


**Notes**

1 The excerpts herein from *Rotha Mór an tSaol* represent the author’s own words, however it should also be noted that the editor, Proinsias Ó Conluain, did edit the text in places to make it more readable.

2 See Ó Laoire (2011) for a discussion of representations of migratory work from a female perspective, including gruelling conditions, stoicism and heroism in the oral testimony of Róise Rua Mhic Ghrianna (1879-1964), a native Irish speaker from Donegal. See also Ua Cnámhsí, P. (1987), and, more recently, Ua Cnámhsí (2009). For a broader contextualisation of Irish migration literature, see Ó Donnchadh and Nic Eoin (2008, 2012) and Ó Laoire (2011).

3 This orthography represents the pronunciation of the word *asphalt* as is generally the case in performances of this song.

4 The renditions herein of these three songs of work and migration are from the repertoire of singer and song-composer, Christopher O’Brien from Castletownroche in Co. Cork. ‘Poor Paddy works on the railway’ is a song from the oral tradition of the 19th century and has been recorded and performed by many artists, including Ewan McColl, *The Pogues*, and Luke Kelly and the Dubliners. ‘The Mickey Dam’ and ‘The Hot Asphalt’ were favourites of the iconic traditional singer, Frank Harte. ‘The Hot Asphalt’ was also performed and recorded by many others such as Luke Kelly, *The Dubliners, The Pogues, The Wolfetons*, and Damien Dempsey. All three songs have enjoyed continued popularity among the traditional music community and the Irish diaspora for many years. The songs discussed here are representative of a larger repertoire of labour songs that perform Irish masculinity and tell the tale of precarious work for migrants cf. *There are Gangs of the Digging* by Frank Harte and Dónal Lunny 2009 (Hummingbird Records).

5 For comparable accounts of seasonal labouring among children in Donegal, see Mac Cumhaill (1939), Ó Dónaill (1940), Ó
Grianna (1942, 1968), Ua Cnáimhsí (1988); for compiled excerpts of these works see Ní Dhonnchadha and Nic Eoin (2008).

Ruball here literally means ‘tail’, and the final phrase in Irish of the above passage literally means ‘ploughing by our own tail’. Interestingly, this seems to be a reference to ploughing by the horse’s tail, a distinctly Irish practice that was looked down upon by English observers and for which the indigenous Irish were forced to pay a fine from the 17th century (Pinkerton 1858). Perhaps, therefore, as well as being an interesting reference to an indigenous custom, that ‘ploughing by our own tail’ includes an added hint of independence and defiance in adversity. Grateful acknowledgement to the anonymous referee who informed me of this linguistic connotation and nuance.

For a comparative representation of masculinities in Irish language autobiography, see An tOileánach by Tomás Ó Criomhthain from the Great Blasket, County Kerry. Interestingly, Ó Criomhthain’s own brother who returns having worked for seven years in the United States is represented as embodying a near heroic work ethic, but also as having experienced the relentless punishment and precarity of labouring in America and in the end having to return, impoverished, to the Blaskets (2002: 225). Indeed Ó Criomhthain generally paints a negative picture of the labour conditions in the US, to the point of referring to that country as ‘Tír an Allais’ or ‘The Land of Sweat’ (2002: 95; Ní Dhonnchadha and Nic Eoin 2012: 66). The pride in the independent self-sufficiency and working abilities of the Blasket Islanders is a persistent theme in the book, and is comparable to the sense of heroism and triumph that is woven through Mac Gabhann’s account of the world of migratory work.

For a fictional account of Irish navvies in London that illustrates the performativity of heroic masculinity among Irish labourers from an author who himself was an Irish navvy, see Mac Amhlaigh (1986: 75-9); for an autobiographical account of the life of the Irish navvy from the same author, see Mac Amhlaigh (1960). Cf. also Ní Dhonnchadha and Nic Eoin (2012: 67-8).
Abstract: Drawing on the current scholarship of Lauren Berlant and Judith Butler, this article focuses on the affective and performative dimensions of subjectivity with reference to the contemporary landscape of precarious academic labour practices and forces. In Cruel Optimism (2011), Berlant reflects upon the promise of the American Dream that emerged in post-war America and which continues to endure as a possibility in the contemporary social imaginary. Cruel optimism names the dynamics by which the subject remains affectively attached to the fantasy of the “good life” despite the clearly compromised possibility of its realization for most US subjects. According to Butler, the experience of precarity has a performative aspect which impinges upon the agency of the subject as the conditions which produce precariousness cannot be fully recognized either by the individual or in that individual’s environment. Being subject to a precariousness that cannot be fully recognized undermines any attempt to apprehend the structures by which we belong to and yet are dispossessed from the social world as well the ways in which we act in the world and the world acts upon us. Framed by Butler and Berlant’s investigations into the structural and systemic conditions influencing changes in our contemporary social ontologies, this analysis considers the production of subjectivity in late modernity with reference to the experience of working in the precarious academic labour market.

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Introduction

The middle of the 1990s heralded a period of unprecedented economic growth in Ireland generally referred to as the “Celtic Tiger”. In tandem with the global financial crisis of 2007, the previously booming Irish economy experienced a drastic downturn. During the financial bust which followed the Celtic boom, the Irish economy was in a state of seemingly terminal collapse with a descending spiral in property prices, rising unemployment, and crisis in the financial markets. In 2008 the Irish Government issued an emergency budget which ushered in a series of austerity measures that resulted in accelerated pecuniary disparity between the “haves” and “have-nots”. Since the cataclysm visited upon the Irish economy almost a decade ago, there has been a significant increase in zero hour and “If and When” contracts across the broad spectrum of the labour market which have resulted in rising levels of non-standard working hours and increased requirement for employee flexibility in demand-led services (Gunnigle et al, 2015: xi-xii). In February 2015, the International Labour Organization (ILO) published a report on workplace practices which noted that whilst almost half of the global workforce is engaged in waged labour, there has been an increase in non-standard forms of employment over the past several decades with many people working on a part-time or
casual basis for more than one employer (ILO, 2015: 1). Responding to the ILO report in *The Irish Times* in an article entitled ‘Precarious Work: The Sectors at Risk’, Carl O’Brien notes that whilst labour experts have suggested it is hard to measure the exact extent of casualisation of work in Ireland since the economic downturn, evidence from different work sectors increasingly ‘points to a great emphasis on short-term or low-hours contracts, bogus self-employment’ and employers ‘free-riding on internships’ (2015). As O’Brien observes, these global changes in working practices have been reflected in the academic Irish labour market which is one of the employment sectors he singles out for analysis in his article. Current research suggests that up to 40% of teaching hours are presently delivered by part-timers with most researchers being employed on temporary contracts (O’Brien, 2015). Subsequent to the instantiation of austerity measures by the Irish government, staff levels at third-level institutions have dropped by 17% whilst state funding has been reduced by almost 30% with the result that 40% of teaching hours are currently delivered by sessional lecturers (O’Brien, 2015).

Whilst research has been undertaken into the impact of non-standard employment practices in the workplace and academy more generally, this article focuses on the material, psychological and emotional consequences of labour casualization on the academic who is working precariously within third level institutions, specifically within an Irish and UK context.

The Material, Psychological and Emotional Impact of Casualisation on the Precarious Academic Worker

According to research undertaken by the academic pressure group *Third Level Workplace Watch*, 57% of the academic precariat have worked with casual labour conditions for at least five years. The average length of time spent employed in hourly or sessional academic work is eight and a half years and the average annual wage of this worker is €10,000. Such workers have been employed on *JobBridge* schemes, offered book tokens in lieu of pay and often receive no remuneration for grading, consultation and preparation work. As noted by the anonymous testimony of a part-time lecturer on the Tumblr site *The Large and Small Indignities of Precarity*, these experiences are far from exceptional:

*I spent five unpaid hours (because I am on an hourly rate as module coordinator for three modules) for compiling, checking and uploading grades for my modules.*

The testimonies of such precarious academic workers are mainly silent, for the most part appearing anonymously or with pseudonyms in online blogs or newspaper articles with comments suggesting that the casualization of labour practices make ‘it difficult for temporary academic staff to discuss living and working conditions’ as they are ‘afraid to speak out about their conditions for fear of losing what few hours of work they already have.’ In common with the practice of zero hour or “If and When” contracts, precarious academic working conditions induce the belief (in the casualized labour force) that they will be penalized by their employers if they do not accept the work hours and conditions offered to them (Gunnigle, Lavelle, McMahon et al, 2015: xi-xii). Many casual academics are working across multiple institutions whilst trying to balance the expectations of the academy against their own experiences of precarity. This is confirmed by Steve Hanson, a part-time lecturer in political sociology who has been working across ‘three places at once’ where you encounter ‘three HR systems and three intranets and three security systems, each with their glitches and perversities’ (Weale 2016).
Even when employed across multiple third level institutions, precarious academic workers are finding it difficult to make ends meet and often need to rely on Social Welfare payments such as the Job Seekers Allowance to survive. One poster on a blog page entitled ‘Postcards from the Periphery’ stated that ‘Last night I was a “DR” as I delivered a seminar. This morning I collected my dole.’

The material and psychological dissonance perceived by the precarious academic between the highly skilled labour they provide for the academy and the paltry economic benefit they receive for such is highlighted by another anonymous commentator who was teaching across three department in two different colleges: ‘much of what I was earning from teaching was simply deducted from my dole payment, so I wasn’t much better off than I would be if I wasn’t working at all’. This poster also drew attention to the extra unpaid work required of those who work across multiple institutions whilst claiming supplementary welfare benefits:

In addition, I had to fill in dockets and get them signed and stamped weekly by each of my employers and then handed into the dole office to keep my small payment going. This, combined with regular administrative errors by the dole office in calculating my weekly payment, meant that managing my low-paid jobs became a constant chore — and with very little reward.

Claiming supplementary benefits whilst working entails completing a form for every place of employment and submitting these forms to the local Social Welfare office on a weekly basis. Each form must be signed off and stamped, usually by the payroll or HR department, at every institution the individual is employed in. However, access to payroll and HR departments in third level institutions can be limited as these departments may be in a different building or even a different campus from the location one teaches in. In addition to attending to the necessary administration required for access to social welfare benefits, the casual academic also manages their employment in each academy as though they were running their own business. As Steve Hanson notes, ‘the more places that one teaches in, the more time is spent managing the administration required for monthly payment’ so that the ‘negotiation of all that stuff — just getting paid is far from automatic — stacks up to something like a management role’ (Weale, 2016). At the end of every month the casual academic worker must fill in a timesheet detailing the hours they spent teaching in each institution, or even each School or Faculty in that institution. Quite often these timesheets need to be signed off by more than one senior member of staff before they are passed on to the payroll department. If anyone in this chain of process is on annual leave, payment may not be made at the end of the month.

In a mediated, interweb world in which complex information is produced and reduced for the “soundbite” generation, the granular material effects and affects that such precarious labour practices produce upon the day-to-day life of casual academic workers is rarely given adequate publishing space. Take, for example, the ways in which precarity influences the payment of tax. In Ireland, tax allowances are allocated to a maximum of three places of employment. If a casual worker is employed in more than one place they must continually adjust their tax credits on a month-by-month basis so that their tax allowances are distributed according to predicted earnings (which can also vary considerably month to month). No tax credit is applied to earnings gained from any fourth or subsequent place of employment and therefore all tax paid for such employment is subject to emergency tax. Tax rebates cannot be claimed until the following tax year. Coupled with the lack of pay over breaks in the academic year, not only does any sense
of financial and material security become eroded for the precarious academic, it becomes impossible to take the time to develop the professional credentials that would place one in a better position to secure a more permanent position: ‘I am not making enough money to make rent, particularly in the summer, and have to freelance as an editor and proof reader, which eats into time I really should be using to develop my own research and publications’ (Weale, 2016).

Many of the accounts of working conditions provided by casual academics reiterate the same experiences of insecurity and fatigue over again, emphasizing the long hours worked, the lack of remuneration received despite the professional experience gained, and the receding hope of ever being granted a secure position:

- Working 60+ hours per week. Barely making minimum wage. EXHAUSTED.
- 20 years professional experience. 5 years lecturing experience. College refuses to renew C.I.D. Half-way through PhD. Hours cut. Rely on Social Welfare payment to raise family.
- Just lost next terms teaching — no notice, no thanks. NO JOB.¹¹

Even when the “golden chalice” of a permanent academic job appears, it is almost impossible for an aspiring academic to obtain a full-time lecturing position without being in possession of a PhD, having at least two or three years’ experience of teaching in a third level institution and having produced a significant number of publications. One academic who chose not to reveal his or her name, but who is a part-time lecturer in applied linguistics and communications, notes: ‘I have a PhD, a book that’s too expensive for anyone other than a university library to buy and face constant uncertainty’ (Weale, 2016). As Bettina Rößler points out in an online interview entitled ‘Goodbye academia?’, much of the unpaid and time-consuming extra labour provided by casual academics proves counter-productive to the kind of professional development deemed necessary to secure a more permanent position:

> This is a huge problem for casuals as an important part of an academic career consists of in-kind contributions in form of journal issue editing, articles or book reviews, sitting on boards and committees, chairing conferences, and so on. I simply don’t have the time to properly develop my research profile … Moreover, there is very little time left for substantial writing between teaching, marking, and job applications.¹²

Clearly the sustained experience of precarity cannot be entirely reduced to its financial implications. The volatility of income and taxes over the entire annual period places considerable financial, psychological, and emotional strain on the casual worker, compromising one’s ability to project into the future, to make plans for the provision of basic health and dental care, account for the usual expenses of personal grooming, apparel, and equipment necessary for presenting oneself for professional work. Many third level institutions do not provide the casual academic worker with access to library resources and do not include them in internal correspondence communications. As another academic who wished to remain anonymous remarked: ‘My full-time colleagues are not really colleagues, because we are not invited to department meetings or involved in shaping the intellectual and practical life of the department’ (McGuire, 2017). In an article published anonymously in The Guardian in 2016, a precarious academic worker stated that not only did they have ‘no job security, no fixed office space, no permanent email address, no phone number’, they ‘could not participate’ in the “culture of lifelong learning” that universities constantly
promote for full-time members of staff and, consequently, they ‘felt invisible’ (Academics Anonymous, 2016). As the casual academic worker is in a precarious, liminal position in relation to the structures and systems of the academy, they are placed in a constant position of “catching up” with institutional processes and progress, often by hearsay and word of mouth. However, this process of catching up does not only apply to the precarious academic’s involvement with the academy, but directly impacts upon the very production of life itself.

According to a report from McMaster University, whilst only 5.9% of workers in secure employment with a high income express concern regarding the maintenance of their living standards, 45.2% of precarious workers on lower incomes worry about such maintenance with the result that 53.6% of precarious workers find it difficult to commit to significant spending decisions, compared to 15.3% of stable workers (McMaster University, 2015). Another startling finding from the McMaster report is that precarious workers are six times more likely to delay forming relationships, which increases those feelings of isolation and alienation that are indicators of susceptibility to mental health problems (McMaster University, 2015). In common with casual workers employed on zero hour or “If and When” contracts, precarious academics are subject to low and unstable income levels that make it difficult to access financial credit and this creates problems with managing home and family life (Gunnigle, Lavelle, McMahon et al, 2015: xi-xii). As the testimony of Steven Parfitt (Chakrabortty, 2016) and Steve Hanson demonstrate, precarious academics struggle to commit to long-term plans such as buying a home and starting a family: ‘I’ve got a partner. We would like a family, but it would be extremely difficult. And the idea of getting a mortgage is a non-starter’ (Weale, 2016).

Speaking under the pseudonym Jane Adams, another part-time academic noted the psychological fallout of precarious employment due to stress, suggesting that ‘people are suffering anxiety and depression. Many are terrified to say anything’ (O’Hara, 2016). A recent Canadian study found that the mental health of precarious workers suffers at almost double the rate of those in stable employment, incidence of depression increases by almost 13% for the casual worker and the experience of anxiety doubles (McMaster University, 2015). The effect of such precarity is espoused by “Sam” in an article published in The Guardian entitled ‘Part-time lecturers on precarious work: “I don’t make enough for rent”’:

On a personal level, I’ve experienced serious mental health issues and, while I have worked very hard at getting to a point where I can function, unstable work without a network of colleagues and without any security is proving really difficult (Weale, 2016).

At any given moment, the precarious employee is expected to “perform” the role of the serious academic without the benefit of permanency which would aid the fulfilment of these expectations. Out of fear for the discontinuance of future employment prospects and the hope of improving them, the casual academic worker is inclined to invest material and emotional labour in the institution and in the students far beyond the immediate demand of what is expected of them. In this mire of expectations and commitments, the matrix of who takes responsibility for what becomes muddled. A void has been created at the centre of the academy due to neoliberal processes of rationalization, cuts in state-serviced funding, and pressure to seek funding and sponsorship in the entrepreneurial spirit of late modernity. The casual academic worker, devoid of any institutional benefits such as sick pay, paid holidays, or a pension, is expected to fill this void in part through the presentation of a coherent and professional “face” for the
academy which has little cohesive concept of its own identity due to the debilitation of the external supports it previously relied upon. Yet, the very operation of the neoliberal academy itself, with the constant demand for upskilling and side-skilling, places the onus of responsibility for self-improvement upon the employee without taking account of their non-permanence within the institutional structure. Exposure to the possibility of failure in relation to the academy’s demand produces persistent anxieties and fears that heighten the casual worker’s sense of precariousness.

Whilst the consequences for the delivery of educational standards resulting, in part, from increasing levels of precarious workers in the academy has been subject to some evaluation, Rosalind Gill observes that despite academics’ much vaunted interest in reflexivity there has been a palpable reluctance on behalf of third level institutions to ‘turn our gaze upon our own working conditions, practices and relations’ (2014: 12). In part, the paucity of research into the experience of precarious academic workers may arise from a lack of will on behalf of the academy to draw attention to the practices of casualization it has been subject to due to successive cuts in government funding which have also resulted in full-time academic staff being placed under increasing pressure in the workplace. However, as Dr. Theresa O’Keefe (UCC) and Dr Aline Cortois (UCD) note, the increase in casual work practices in third-level institutions cannot be blamed on recent austerity measures but rather must be considered systemic as ‘student numbers have increased as staff numbers get squeezed’ (McGuire, 2017). In this way, from the perspective of the academy there may be some perceived benefit occurring from processes of casualization which allow the academy to remodel itself as a flexible, modern, demand-led service. Within such a remit, the precarious academic worker is expected to be unceasingly adaptive to the needs and demands of the infinitely malleable academy as service provider. The consequences of such unremitting flexibility, insecurity and precarity for the casual academic worker necessarily produces physical, psychological, and emotional effects that not only impact upon the operation of the academy itself but produce manifest changes regarding the subjectivity and identity of the workers themselves.

What Happened to the Promise of a Good Life? Precarity as the New Social Ontology

Clearly, the average precarious academic worker has invested a significant amount of time and money developing their educational qualifications but is reaping little financial reward or cultural capital for their endeavours. Of course, it could be argued that investment in education is not only for the betterment of an individual’s employment prospects but rather contributes to the improvement of self and society. At the heart of the Enlightenment ideal of human flourishing is the notion that the cultivation of one’s mind paves the way to freedom from the tyranny of unreason. This understanding of the benefit education offers to an individual’s self-development, as well as to society more broadly considered, continues to inform the ideal of individual and collective progressive improvement that underpins the project of modernity.

As early as the middle of the 18th century a leading proponent of the Scottish Enlightenment, the social philosopher and economist, Adam Smith, first proposed the concept of human as capital in his Wealth of Nations (1776). Ian Baptiste observes that Smith’s propositions were not further developed until the middle of the 20th century when a formalised theory of human capital emerged with the Chicago School of economists (2001: 187). From the 1960s onwards, various articulations of human capital theory began to be applied to
educational policy with the increasing emphasis on ‘technology as a factor that mediates the relationship between human capital and productivity’ and subsequent advocacy for ‘private over public investment in education’ (Baptiste, 2001: 189). This contemporary version of human capital theory is premised upon two assumptions: first, that investment in human capital directly impacts economic productivity and second, that differences in the earnings of workers is directly related to the investment made in them as human capital (Baptiste, 2001: 189).

Implicit within the turn to human capital theory was the focus on the equilibrium of the free market; an implicit confidence in the ‘regulatory forces of the market’ to operate ‘in concert with people’s utility-maximizing nature’ to ensure that everyone ‘receives mutual and just recompense for their efforts and investments’ (Baptiste, 2001: 192). In sum, human capital theory —which has profoundly influenced the contemporary market-led model of economy indicative of late capitalism — assumes an over-arching complicity between the investment in human capital and market demand or reward. The free-market is assumed to achieve equilibrium and so to reward the capital investments that humans have contributed to the prevailing conditions of the market.

The modern optimal of individual and collective progression is shaped, then, by the Enlightenment ideal of human flourishing as well as subsequent theories of human capital and free market economics which continue to contribute to and arbitrate our contemporary conceptualization of the “good life”. In Cruel Optimism (2011), Lauren Berlant frames the question of contemporary existence within the discursive topography of what she calls the fantasy/bribe of the good life ideal that emerged in post-war America, more commonly referred to as the American Dream. According to Berlant, although the good life ideal is proposed as a collective good, in reality it works against social cohesion by inducing individualistic desires for ‘upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy’ (2011: 3). Cruel optimism indexes the modalities by which the contemporary subject struggles with the gradual attrition of the good life fantasy, whilst striving to maintain an attachment to life at all. For many, contemporary life proceeds without any guarantees of achieving secure employment and access to stable structures of dwelling, protection, and care, all of which make even the minimal production of life possible. The possibility of attaining a liveable life is placed in question, never mind the prospect of realizing a good life.

Within the conditions of advanced capitalism in late or post-modernity, it is hard to imagine a “good life” that does encompass financial reward for one’s educational investment and occupational endeavour. In accordance with human capital theory and the logic of free market economics, the subject expects that any investment they make in their education and any contribution they offer to the workforce will be rewarded. However, the ideals and expectations associated with the good life are difficult to square with the reality of our contemporary moment which is defined by the increasing unequal distribution of various forms of social, cultural, economic, and political capital.

Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter argue that the increased labour casualization and demand for workforce flexibility that has occurred in post-Fordist society means that we can now recognize precarity ‘as the norm – or an aspect of what we have been calling the common – and not the exception’ (2008: 68). Within this contemporary context, it would be foolish to expect that self-investment in education will reap the future benefit of secure employment and a stable income. At the same time, the economic theory that has driven capitalist neoliberalism has precisely argued that financial investment
in one’s education should reap such fiscal and social rewards. The investment that people have made in their continued education has yielded a surplus of highly qualified educators who can now be employed as flexible workers at little financial cost to the academy. The normalization of precarity should necessitate reconsideration of the ‘reproduction of life under the present economic conditions’, whereby precariousness produces the ‘desire for a less-bad life’ in a world whose structures have been so fundamentally structurally altered that the experience of precarity is the new norm (Berlant, 2007: 291). Yet the considerable financial, psychological, and emotional cost to these workers acceding to the demands of the neoliberal academy have not been subject to such consideration.

The experience of precarity can now be evaluated as a constituent of the production of subjectivity in our contemporary moment. Berlant coins the term “crisis ordinariness” to explain the adaptive strategies the precarious subject deploys to remain attached to life, rather than giving up on it. These processes of attachment support individuals through their negotiation with the attrition of the fantasy of the good life that has occurred due to the ever-present threat of precarity resulting from the increased demand for casualization and flexibility in post-Fordist society. Crisis ordinariness indicates the mundane modes of attachment and adaptation which allow the subject to ‘navigate what’s overwhelming’ (Berlant, 2011: 10) in processes that unfold in the prosaicism of the everyday. Berlant foregrounds the concept of precarity in her recent work to convey the systemic and repetitive production of contingency and uncertainty in contemporary life that not only impacts upon our agential possibilities, but provokes extreme vulnerabilities that potentialize the future threat of the gradual erasure of subjectivity. Precarity not only indexes the existential problem of the continuance of life without guarantees, but the ongoing structural, economic changes that occur as a by-product of the capitalist project which ‘thrives on instability’ (Berlant et al, 2012:166). American society since the Reagan era, according to Berlant, has been subject to increased ‘class bifurcation, downward mobility, and environmental, political, and social brittleness’ and the ‘intensification of these processes ... has also increased the probability that structural contingency will create manifest crisis situations in ordinary existence for more kinds of people’ (2011: 11). Berlant argues that ‘capitalist forms of labour make bodies and minds precarious’ (Berlant et al, 2012: 166) whilst at the same time:

... holding out the promise of flourishing while wearing out the corpus we drag around in different ways and at different rates, partly by overstimulation, partly by understimulation, and partly by the incoherence with which alienation is lived as exhaustion plus saturating intensity (Berlant et al, 2012: 166).

Her observations pay testament to the highly educated sessional academic worker who continues working without any assurance of a secure job or steady income, yet whose investment in education offers paltry protection against the risk of continued exposure to the experience of precarity in the future. The precarious academic worker is alienated from the product of their labour, whilst remaining attached to the academy’s desire for it. The academy is caught up in cyclical processes of overstimulation and understimulation that define late market capitalism. While third level institutions are enduring increased levels of staff casualization (understimulation) the industry is pressured to increase student numbers to unsustainable degrees (overstimulation). Berlant asks: ‘What does it mean that, for so many, the labour of reproducing life itself exhausts the bodies that perform it and the imaginaries that must forge through this or that way of being?’ (Berlant et al, 2012: 171).
The casual academic worker perversely entertains the fantasy of permanent employment that produces exhaustive attachment and adaptation strategies in relation to the academy as the promised object of her educational self-investment. Yet this worker becomes alienated from the object of her labour precisely because the self-investment she made is assumed as a product.15

Judith Butler has suggested that we need to ‘rethink the human in light of precarity’ (Berlant et al, 2012: 173) as the contemporary condition of precariousness requires us to rethink the domain of social ontology. There is no human, Butler suggests, without those matrices of support it depends upon and, in this way, a contemporary social ontology must consider those who are excluded from networks of relationality, access to infrastructure, bonds of dependence and interdependence, that many take for granted:

To say that a life is precarious requires not only that a life be apprehended as a life, but also that precariousness be an aspect of what is apprehended in what is living. Normatively construed, I am arguing that there ought to be a more inclusive and egalitarian way of recognizing precariousness, and that this should take form as concrete social policy regarding such issues as shelter, work, food, medical, and legal status (Butler, 2009a: 14).

Being a precondition for ethical relations of care between self and other, the concept of recognition is central Butler’s philosophical project more broadly considered. Along with privileging recognition in the structuration of her ethics, Butler stresses the importance of language, of finding a name for those rendered unrecognizable:

... some name must be reserved for those who do not count as subject, who do not sufficiently conform to the norms that confer recognisability on subjects. What do we call those who do not and cannot appear as “subject” within hegemonic discourse (Butler, 2009: iii).

Such an understanding of recognition acknowledges the other who is so entirely divorced from networks of relation that they are rendered unrecognizable but cannot provide a structure in language to bring those who do not count as subject into structures of recognition. Should we not ask whether it is possible at all to premise an ethics of care upon the rational faculty of recognition that implicitly leans upon the linguistic and signifying functions of language? One would have to ask whether the conditions the precarious academic worker is subject to would be recognizable as precarious life in Butler’s schema for, with her approach, it is not entirely clear whether the onus of recognition is placed upon (i) those who are not in the position of precarity to recognize the precariousness of others or (ii) the subject of precarity who should recognize the conditions of its own precariousness. In other words, is it the responsibility of the casual academic worker to recognize their own precarity or is the academy responsible for recognizing the precarity of its workers? The amplified precarity of the academic worker makes them susceptible to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, thereby fostering the incapacity to reflect on her present and project into her future. The inability to reflect on the present and project into the future produces a cycle of social isolation and alienation which provokes impediments to the creation of rational thought and linguistic expression which, according to Butler, are the very subjective modalities necessary for the production of recognition. However, the position of the academy itself is precariousness. Being subject to sustained processes of change, rationalization, and adaption under the conditions of advanced capitalism, which produce the imperative to recalibrate itself as
a demand-led service, how can the academy affirm its own precarity as a pre-condition to the recognition of the precariousness of its others?

Butler attempts to account for the problem of recognition by suggesting that ‘precariousness itself cannot be properly recognized’ (2009a: 13) as ‘the affective register’ in which precarity dwells is ‘something like dehumanization’ (Berlant et al, 2012: 173). How can the precarious academic worker be cognisant of and responsive to the demand of the academy, and the institutional symptoms that these demands produce, when the academy cannot recognize its own demands due to its own precarity? Is it the academic or the academy who is to be considered as dwelling in the affective register of precarity that impinges upon dehumanization? We are left with an epistemological conundrum as the demands and symptoms produced by precarity in the employer and the employee are enmeshed in each other and therefore cannot be recognized by either.

Reconsidering Affect for the Performative Production of Contemporary Subjectivity

This impasse may be ameliorated through an appraisal of the affective and performative consequences and possibilities of precarity. Whilst within the scholarship emerging from contemporary theorists there is no singular definition of affect, most broadly considered it can be understood as intense or diffuse subjective states of psycho-corporeal being which are not quite as discernible as an emotion or a thought, but which nonetheless shape those agential capacities by which we act in the world and the world acts upon us. Pioneering the work of Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994, 1998), Brian Massumi defines affect as a *bodily intensity* that is experienced *prior* to the structures of linguistic narrative and therefore ‘not semantically or semiotically ordered’ (1995: 84) by the signifying capacities of language. These bodily intensities are not in opposition to language *per se*, rather they shape linguistic discourse insofar as language seems ‘to function differently in relation to’ (Massumi, 1995: 84) affect. Similarly, Simon O’Sullivan defines affect as a field of ‘extra-discursive and extra-textual’ forces or intensities that are *immanent* to experience’ such that ‘you cannot read affects, you can only experience them’ (2001: 126). What unites these various conceptualizations of affect is an emphasis on the role the body plays in its circulation. Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth define affect as intensities that arise ‘in the midst of inbetween-ness’ (2000: 1):

... in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passage or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves (Gregg and Seigworth, 2000: 1).

Affective states of being are not confined to individual subjects, but pass between body, subject, and world to inform our ‘capacities to act and be acted upon’ (Gregg and Seigworth, 2000: 1). Whilst such an understanding of affect firmly emphasizes how its structuration helps to shape our subjectivity, contour our linguistic capacities, and inform our agential possibilities, Susan Best suggests (2011) the theoretical tendency to place the operation of affect beyond interpretative understanding risks limiting our comprehension of the contribution that the structure of affect makes to the domain of the social.

In a lecture entitled ‘Notes on Impressions and Responsiveness’ (2015), Butler suggests that her conceptualization of gender performativity can be expanded to provide a general account of agency inclusive of the part that affect plays in the structuration of subjectivity. Butler’s theory of performativity proposes that the semblance of normativity we experience in daily life is produced through
the socio-cultural norms enacted upon the subject and enacted by the subject through repetitive stylized acts in time. Norms precede us, circulate in the world without any necessary component to their conventions, but they act upon the subject through ‘institutional forms of power’ that ‘are already acting prior to any action I may undertake’ (Butler, 2015). The repetition of norms and the production of their conventions produce the conditions for social and political recognition insofar as non-compliance with norms renders the subject potentially unrecognizable. Although the ‘life of norms continues on, beyond us, with a certain indifference to finitude’ (Butler, 2015), our enactment of norms operates according to an ‘iterative logic’ that constitutes an affective sensibility that leads ‘us to feel in certain ways’ (Butler, 2015) and hence understand ourselves in particular ways. However, the very fact that norms are continuously repeated and enacted through time demonstrates their insufficiency as *a priori* criteria by which to provide a coherent account of the subject as the very fact that norms are continuously repeated is evidence of their insufficiency.

It is in this sense that norms are performative and performativity is affective. I am formed by the norms that proceed me and which act upon me through institutional structures of power, but the *performative* element of such formation by and enactment of norms is that I, in re-enacting those norms, am continuously shaping their contour and thereby their affects. The performative moment in the structuration of affect is this affective intertwining, fold or crossing over between acting and being acted upon which, Butler suggests, occurs ‘simultaneously, rather than sequentially’ (2015). Such performative and affective participation in and with the world fosters one’s recognizability as well as the modes by which we recognize others, thus producing the framings for inclusion into our conceptualization of social ontology. Butler links the performative to precarity by way of understanding a certain subjective relationality, remarking that it is ‘on the basis of this question, who counts as a subject and who does not, that performativity becomes linked with precarity’ (2009b: iv). For Butler, the performativity becomes linked with precarity via the modes by which the social world is reproduced in a manner by which the subject becomes intelligible and readable in space and time and thereby is produced in an ‘implicit relation to other … that is conditioned and mediated by social norms’ (2009b: x-xi). This would seem to suggest a necessary equivalence between the embeddedness of one’s relations in the social world whereby mutual recognition between disparate positionalities is possible. Butler argues that there are those who have ‘limited access’ to intelligibility and there are others who ‘epitomize its symbolic iconography’ and in this way there is always a negotiation with those forms of power which ‘condition whose lives will be more liveable’ (2009b: xi). We do not fully understand how the enactment of power through the repetition of norms forms the processes by which we are made. From this perspective, performativity indexes the:

... complex convergence of social norms on the somatic psyche, and a process of repetition that is structured by a complicated interplay of obligation and a desire, and a desire that is and is not one’s own (Butler, 2009b: xi).

If we apply this argumentation to the social relation between the precarity of the academy and the precariousness of the casual academic, it seems impossible to consider that any relation of mutuality in terms of recognition from the academy to its precarious academic other might exist. For surely the precarity of the academy comes before the precarious academic worker, is more “readable” and “intelligible” than its precarious worker as the precariousness of
the academy is produced in advance of the precarity of the academic by the pre-existing conditions of neoliberal, late capitalism? The precarious academic thereby exists as a result of the financialization and rationalization of the academy that has occurred in late modernity and thereby cannot be understood or recognized without the prior recognition of the precarity of the academy.

Conclusion

The questions that arise from Butler’s account of affective performativity are: How can we find modes of subversion or resistance to the production of subjectivity whereby precarity becomes the norm, rather than the exception? Where can agency be identified when it is clear that neither the precarious academy nor the academic subject to precarity are operating in sovereignty, but within complex relations of interdependence that work to produce perverse structures of power and comprised possibilities for the enactment of agency? It appears that Butler cannot provide any radical account of agency for the subject who is subject-to precarity, but she ends with a number of questions: ‘How does the unspeakable population speak and make its claims? What kind of disruption is this within the field of power? And how can such populations lay claim to what they require?’ (2009b: xiii). In sum, one might say that the performative possibilities of the academy (despite its seeming precarity) produce the conditions for readability, intelligibility and recognizability once the academy acts in compliance with the demands of the socio-cultural norms produced within late modernity. In turn, the casual academic will be recognized, despite their precarity, if they are in compliance with the reproduction of norms that the academy executes. If the casual academic worker refuses to comply with the socio-cultural norms of the neoliberal academy they risk exposure to non-recognition, by the structures of the academy and those employed in it, both of whom are reproducing the norms that hold together the semblance of the academy’s cohesion. And within this imbalance of power, with the academy and the casual worker experiencing precarity in differential ways, how can the academic worker who is so entirely dependent on the academy for the minimal conditions which will sustain their life find any agency to speak, to disrupt, to make demands or claims that would constitute a response to what it is that they require?

Berlant and Butler’s investigations into precarity, affect and performativity provide us with a prism for understanding the individual and collective experience of precariousness in our contemporary moment. Yet they cannot offer any resolution to the imbalances of power, privilege, and possession of forms of socio-cultural capital that produce precarity. What Berlant and Butler’s work does offer, however, is the possibility of bringing the affective experience of precarity, for the one who experiences it, towards cognitive comprehension and thereby into language. If, as Butler suggests, linguistic expression of one’s experience is productive of the conditions of recognition, then perhaps the potential to verbalize and express the precarity one is subject to may provoke the possibility for the subject to at least recognize for themselves the way that precarity shapes the figuration of their agential possibilities in the world. If the precarious subject is dependent upon the precarious other for recognition of its precarity, when that other cannot recognize the conditions of its own precarity, then the possibilities for recognition are diminished. However, if the experience of precarity is to be understood as affective, and thereby crossing over between those psycho-corporeal states of being that are prior to language and yet which shape its possibilities, then being cognisant of the affective intensities that contour and produce one’s
subjectivity in the making of the present may help to propel the subject towards a modicum of self-recognition.

References


Notes

1 Between 2007 and 2010, Ireland experienced a cumulative decline in gross domestic product (GDP) of 21%, making it the largest compound decline in gross national product (GNP) of any industrialized economy during the period spanning 2007-10. Bank bailouts accounted for 14.5% of nominal GDP in 2007 and 32% in 2010. Unemployment grew from 4.6% in 2007 to 14.2% in June 2011. Over 55% of those unemployed are long-term unemployed (Kinsella, 2012: 224).

2 “If and When” contracts indicate a hybrid contract of employment whereby employees have some guarantee of hours and additional hours of work are offered extra hours on an “If” and “When” basis.


10 It is pretty much impossible to find this information on the tax implications for “double jobbing” on the official Tax Revenue site at http://www.revenue.ie/en/Home.aspx. Usually it is best to call your local tax office directly. Some information is provided on the Citizen’s Information website: http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/starting_work_and_changing_job/starting_work/tax_and_starting_work.html.


13 In his 1784 essay ‘Was istAufklärung?’, Immanuel Kant argued that enlightenment ‘must not be conceived simply a general process affecting all humanity; it must not be conceived only as an obligation prescribed to individuals: it now appears as a political problem’ that intersects across the use of ‘private reason and the public and free exercise of autonomous reason’ (1984, p. 36).

14 Man’s emancipation through the processes of Enlightenment outlined by Kant was key to the Enlightenment project of human flourishing that continues to inform the impulse of modernity. As Michel Foucault argues in Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?, Kant’s text is a critical reflection on history and on the status of his own philosophical enterprise, but it also provides a ‘reflection on “today” as Kant’s argument for enlightenment as critique is the beginning of ‘what one might call the attitude of modernity’ (1984, p. 37).

15 Instead of exchanging the pronouns “she” and “he” throughout this analysis, I privilege the use of she as a startling 62% of Irish precarious academic workers are female.
Abstract: This paper will examine the working conditions of academics in the UK and Ireland. ‘New managerialism’ has had a negative effect on individual worker-subjects, and has promoted the fully performative ‘shapeshifting portfolio person’ (Gee, 1999). The new temporal regime of the ‘accelerated University’ has been particularly problematic for precarious academic workers in Ireland, but has resulted in ‘stretched subjectivities’ and temporal tensions for permanent staff as well. This paper will evaluate claims that ‘slow scholarship’ and ‘the slow University’ provide a valuable corrective to ‘social acceleration’ (Rosa, 2010, 2015).

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Introduction
The conditions of work of permanent academics are generally fulfilling and rewarding compared to other forms of work, and many enjoy high levels of autonomy and privilege. However, in her article ‘Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of the Neoliberal University’, Rosalind Gill (2010) documents how the structural changes in the conditions of work of UK academics in the last two decades have had a negative impact on the health and well-being of academics. Structural changes include the broad scale transformation and flexibilization of work, the corporatization and privatization of the university, the intrusion of ‘new managerialism’, the rise of ‘audit culture’ in Third- Level education, changes which have led to new ‘endlessly self-monitoring, planning, prioritizing ‘responsibilized’ forms of academic subjectivity (Gill, 2010: 230). While Parker (2014) focuses on the organizational impact of these structural transformations and questions why more academics don’t resist, Gill’s work emphasizes the ‘hidden injuries’, or subjective experience of exhaustion, stress, overload, anxiety, shame, aggression, hurt, guilt, fraudulence and fear these structural changes produce. Her analysis draws out how the broader academic culture of silence promotes the idea that speaking out is seen as narcissistic and self-indulgent, thus perpetuating this state of affairs and reinforcing a ‘sacrificial ethos’
whereby good workers sacrifice their personal lives for the sake of the institution (Gill, 2010:229).

In a similar vein, O’Neill illustrates the political significance of dealing with anxiety at the level of institutions, and illustrates the psychological costs to individuals where anxiety is denied at an institutional level (2014: 4). Last year Professor Stefan Grimm of Imperial College in London reportedly felt so demoralized by the increasingly high standards of performance imposed by his institution that he ended his life. Despite 50 top-ranked journal articles and over 3000 citations, reportedly his institution had determined that he was underperforming since he had not brought in enough ‘prestigious’ grant money (Morrish, 2015: 1). The conditions of work here in Ireland for permanent lecturers are significantly different than in the UK, and we are somewhat less subject to measurement and evaluation, although this is changing. However, this ‘sacrificial ethos’ is present in Ireland as well, and it silences conversations about the conditions of work, and, more importantly about the increasingly exploitative conditions endured by precarious academics.

**New Managerialism in Higher Education in Ireland**

New managerialism in higher education is a part of a broader set of institutional shifts which are being analyzed through a range of theoretical and historical frames. Foucault’s account of disciplinary power which superseded sovereign power in the latter half of the 18th century shows how power etches itself on our minds, bodies and souls through various disciplinary regimes and surveillance technologies. There is a growing amount of Irish social science literature which uses Foucault in analyzing the radical policy shift since the 1990s towards the disciplinary regime of ‘New Managerialism’. This literature examines how sectors such as health, education, and welfare have been subject to a complex array of reforms, disciplinary technologies and audit mechanisms oriented to producing specific sorts of worker-subjects in Ireland. Gallagher (2012) and Lolich (2011) for example document extensively how this ‘new managerialism’ imported modes of governance from the private sector onto the public which imposed an emphasis on outputs, performance indicators, choice, competition and service, increased authority to line managers, and promoted project-led contractual employment arrangements rather than permanency. Kathleen Lynch critiques the ‘tyranny of numbers’ and obsession with measurement in Higher Education (2012: 90), a phenomenon which is quite pronounced in the UK, but has an effect in Ireland as well.

Since the economic crisis, exchequer funding of all higher education institutions has been cut by half, and a series of ‘performance agreements’ or ‘compacts’ recently agreed between the HEA and all the state’s Universities ITs and Colleges for measurable improvements or targets for the years 2014-2016. These agreements will only accelerate this process of ‘new managerialism’ in the future. Each institution was allowed to select their own quite punitive targets according to their own unique institutional priorities across a range of options including attracting disadvantaged groups, reducing drop-out rates, improving the quality of teaching and learning, and enhancing research and internationalization. Despite this discourse of institutional distinctiveness and differentiation which Foucault identifies as the more positive side of governmentality, the overriding theme of these compacts was obedience and homogenization since up to 10% of the authority’s funding can be withheld if these targets are not met by 2016. University College Dublin (UCD) agreed to double its intake of non-Irish students and increase the number of access students from under-represented groups. University College
Cork (UCC) has committed to increase the number of Erasmus students by 30% and to maintaining its position in the top 2% of global universities in world league tables. Trinity College Dublin (TCD) committed to a partnership with UCD, and to boosting options for Irish students to study abroad, as well as developing new online programmes. NUI Galway committed to improving its research ranking, and increasing international, blended learning and e-learning students as well as Postdoctoral students. The University of Limerick (UL) agreed to increase citations, to boost the number of books published by ‘prestigious publishers’ by 20%, to double the intake of non-EU students, and increase the number of students taking a semester abroad by 30% (Humphries, 2014).

In this increasingly competitive context, the individuals, disciplines, departments and universities are all pitted competitively against each other, since these punitive targets imposed by the compacts occur at the same time as permanent staff have been cut 17% since 2008.

In the UK, Naidoo and Williams (2015) argue that the uses to which the National Student Survey (NSS) has been put has had an impact on curriculum and academic practices that reduces rather than increases teaching innovation and quality: they argue that the student-as-client model promotes the idea that students should be passive learners, and its adoption in practice has resulted in narrowly defined pedagogical approaches and unrealistic time frames and workloads for lecturers. It has also been used as a basis to raise student fees. These examples have resonances with international literature, such as that of Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) in the US, Richard Hil (2012) in Australia, and Jamie Brownlee (2015) in Canada also describe the acceleration of reviewing procedures and the emergence of this new academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime whereby Universities have become more aggressive and entrepreneurial in the past 20 years.

While Irish social science has a growing body of good critical literature on governmentality in terms of how we are governed by systems of measurement, research on the process of subjectification and the subjective effects of internalized self-regulation on well-being is much less common. This is in a sense surprising, since the word ‘govern/mentality’ refers to both structures and subjectivities, and thus both the processes of governing and a mentality of government – i.e. thinking about how the governing happens’ (Sokhi-Bulley, 2014). Governmentality as a concept does not just examine the state, but examines the way we become subjects, or the way and internalize the mentality of state and come to see ourselves from the ‘point of view of the gaze of government power’ (Boland and Griffin, 2015), and thus links technologies of the self with technologies of domination, and the constitution of the subject to the formation of the state (Lemke, 2002: 3). Staff are encouraged to reconfigure themselves and their work based on ranking criteria based on instrumentally rational principles. In University of Limerick, we receive regular prompting to update our research profiles across a range of platforms, to join new ‘research clusters’ which will pump out clearly measurable ‘outputs’ within a narrow range of journals defined as Web of Science publications or with a strictly hierarchical list of ‘prestigious publishers’, and in terms of teaching, to have high evaluation scores with a demonstrable ‘practice impact’. Teaching evaluations are no longer optional, though the purposes to which these evaluations are put are not made clear, despite the fact that they often measure things that are outside the lecturer’s control. In all Irish Third- Level institutions, regular reporting is enforced on numbers and performance in all aspects of our work, and Quality Control has accelerated at every level as we are increasingly ranked and placed in comparison to each other.

New technologies of ‘performance management’ ensure that ever more
ambitious research and teaching targets are set along certain measures which are reset once they are seen not to be appropriately productive. This incessant auditing and measuring-self-display and the fabrication of image over substance lead to feelings of inauthenticity with regards to teaching and research standards (Lynch, 2012). The constant and proliferating requirement to reduce or work to ‘performance indicators’, ‘practice impacts’; to sell our products to newer and newer consumer markets/students causes us to lose touch with our disciplinary roots, pedagogical commitments and broader ideals. Moreover, this surveillance and emphasis on productivity, output, quality, creates a subject who is constantly evaluating oneself, measuring output, and conducting surveillance. As administration loads rise and numbers of evaluation exercises increase, more and more academics are experiencing ‘time poverty’.

**Performative and ‘stretched subjectivities’**

In this reconfigured landscape where our departments and Universities are increasingly answerable to the HEA, we are continuously evaluated by multiple, changing and sometimes contradictory performance targets, benchmarks and indicators. Thus the ideal neoliberal academic subject is the fully performative ‘shapeshifting portfolio person’ (Gee, 1999) who is constantly ready to reinvent themselves to fit the next new mode of measurement. Butler (2004), Lyotard (1984) and Foucault (2010) all speak in different ways of the ascendance of the culture of performativity that characterizes the contemporary era. To Ball, performativity is ‘a powerful and insidious policy technology’ that is increasingly pervasive in education, and which ‘reduces effort, values and purpose purely to measurement, ranking and comparison’ (2012: 29). Performativity, however, reduces rather than enhances productivity since ‘we are required to spend increasing amounts of our time in making ourselves accountable, reporting on what we do rather than doing it’ (2012:30). The skills required to be good at performance are different than those of a good academic. Ball argues that the new landscape prioritizes ‘skills of presentation and of inflation, making the most of ourselves, making a spectacle of ourselves’ (2012: 30) over quality academic work. He argues that within such ‘regimes of performativity’, we become transparent but empty, unrecognizable to ourselves’ (2012:30). Morrish describes how performance management documents in the UK are now using the term ‘stretching objectives’, intended to ‘challenge’ academics; objectives which are supposed to lie ‘between an individual’s comfort zone and panic zone’ (2015: 3). Such efforts at being forcibly ‘stretched’ fail to recognize that many academics report being overstretched already. It takes different skills and mind-sets to teach, do research, do administration than it does to display our performance. This seemingly innocuous term ‘stretching objectives’ captures not only the extent to which we are subject to multiple and often contradictory measures of evaluation, but also the quantitative increase in time we must spend. Aside from the increase in measuring and evaluation across a range of indices which often require very different skills, there has also been a significant and steady increase in recent years the number of tasks we are expected to perform across all aspects of our jobs. Academics are increasingly expected to navigate a steadily increasing number of administrative tasks. For example, at the University of Limerick where I work, if we have difficulty with these new technologies associated with these tasks, we are given a training video or told to attend a training course. Foucault’s analysis focuses on how institutional reform of schools, hospitals, produced a particular kind of governmentalized, ‘docile’ subject within
each of these discrete, enclosed institutional boundaries, forms of subjectivity which are both constraining and enabling. Building on Foucault, Deleuze argues that disciplinary society is being superseded by new and more monstrous ‘societies of control’ whereby a multiplicity of forms of discipline are in operation at the same time. Deleuze says: ‘In the disciplinary societies one was always starting again (from school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory), while in the societies of control one is never finished with anything’ (1; 1990). These new ‘societies of control’ transcend the discrete, enclosed boundaries of these specific institutions and have produced new, monstrous, overlapping forms of discipline with rules or goalposts which are continuously changing and multiplying (Hardt, 2014). As such, subjects are measured, processed, and subjected to multiple and contradictory forms of evaluation. While Deleuze perhaps misunderstands Foucault who believed that there is no limit to how many disciplinary technologies might coexist within a single social formation or institution, (Kelly, 2015: 151), Deleuze’s analysis is compelling because it draws attention to the way in which the modern subject is subject to and internalizes a multiplicity of evaluative gazes with contradictory objectives, which produces a fragmented sense of self. As in the case of Kafka’s protagonist Joseph K in The Trial, we are somehow guilty, but the rules are constantly changing, and the subject is always on the wrong side of a constantly changing and unspecified set of regulations and a constantly shifting and liminal Symbolic Order. Somewhat confusingly, Deleuze ultimately saw the schizophrenic subject as a revolutionary postmodern subject, he certainly captures in a sense the subjective experience of contemporary era whereby the goalposts are constantly changing. These themes of performativity, the need for stretching, and an example of what Adams et al. call a continuous ‘regime of anticipation’ whereby ‘the present is governed, at almost every scale, as if the future is what matters most’ (2009: 248). When in the ‘anticipatory mode’, the present is often ignored, and this inattentiveness and devaluation of the present paradoxically sabotages the anticipated future. (ibid).

‘Time Wars’ and the accelerated University

This theme of performativity is linked in complex ways to the growing body of work at an international level on the politics of time. For example, Adam (2009) critiques the incompatible ‘timescapes’ inherent in different aspects of contemporary life; Virilio (1986; 2006) details the inequalities and hierarchies inherent in the new politics of time, or to ‘chrono-politics’; and Rosa’s work interrogates the negative effect of ‘social acceleration’ on subjectivity (see Rosa, 2010, 2015). This critique of speed is of course not a new phenomenon, rather, was manifest in 19th and early 20th century movements such as Cubism, Dadaism, as well as in Taylor’s principles of scientific management (Vostal 2013:1). Benjamin noted that the flâneurs of the mid-19th century would take turtles for a walk as a form of protest against the burgeoning speed culture. (Vostal, 2013: 2). Paradoxically, Rosa argues, this acceleration leads to social and political inertia since the rate of change has reached a level where we no longer experience our lives as having a meaningful direction or purpose (Zantvoort, 2016: 3). Technological and social acceleration speed up the pace of life beyond human limits and thus ‘actors in modern societies feel subject to heterogeneous pressures and demands they cannot control to a degree quite unknown to any other society’ (2010:75). Rosa notes that imperatives to take ‘power naps’, spend ‘quality time’ with our families, to speed read and speed date demonstrate the increasing levels of ‘social desynchronization’ or ‘dysrhythmia’ between the accelerated pace
of social life and our ability to adjust to this pace. Modern subjects in contemporary times tend to normalize the fact that we ‘are never capable of working down their task-list, or of getting to the bottom of their email account’ (Rosa, 2010: 76). Social acceleration means that we have a new temporal hierarchy whereby the past disappears, the present shrinks and contracts, and the future becomes overvalued. In the context of contradictory and multiple temporal demands, some individuals are constitutionally unable to organize time, and thus are pathologized and seen as in need of expert intervention. Vostal argues that some individuals experience guilt and remorse because they lack the temporal resources to meet the unrealistic expectations imposed by New Managerialism (2015:79). At a personal level, we can find moments of ‘resonance’ beyond simply rarified ‘oases of resonance’ through art, music and love which help us to recalibrate and resynchronize our rhythms. But resonance must also be social, relational, and should involve the public sphere.

This idea of ‘stretching’ is highly relevant to the temporal regime of what is called ‘the accelerated University’. This is a part of a broader tendency towards ‘short-termism’ and the concern with ‘immediate impact’ (Moriarty, 2011: 56) where the gap between the generation of ideas and their application is getting shorter and shorter. Noonan has called this the gap between ‘thought-time’ and ‘money-time’ (2015:109). Critics are arguing that University work is experiencing overall temporal acceleration or an increase in ‘fast time’, whereby University workers have less and less time for reflection, and suffer time- shortage, burnout, alienation, and stress as a result of the contradictory objectives of the university and the need to be always available (O’Neill, 2014). Vostal (2013: 2) describes how excessive workloads in the UK have promoted the rise of ‘bite-sized science’, ‘academic speed dating’, and notes that University rhetoric embraces the language of Allcott’s 2012 book How to be a Productivity Ninja. This book promotes the idea of ‘speed winners’, and thus advocates a philosophy which results in time-shortage, alienation, burnout and overload. On the book’s Amazon site, Allcott is described as ‘using techniques including Ruthlessness, Mindfulness, Zen-like Calm and Stealth & Camouflage you will get your inbox down to zero, make the most of your attention, beat procrastination and learn to work smarter, not harder’ revealing a bizarre combination of New Age and Militaristic metaphors in his analysis.

To O’Neill, there are no easy solutions to the ‘fast University’, but the concept of the ‘slow University’ enables us to reflect on and challenge the increasing pace and tempo of academic life and the potential role of the university in current times. Brian Treanor’s ‘The Slow University: A Manifesto’ (2008) encourages full-time permanent academics to block ‘slow-time hours’ into their schedule in response to the critique of the ‘fast university’. While fast time is accelerated, fragmented, and chaotic, slow time is related to such features as security, predictability, belonging, coherence and cumulative and linear growth. Others, however, argue that the solution is not a conservative and nostalgic retreat to a ‘slow University’ of the past, but rather a need to re-prioritize ‘scholarly time autonomy’ (Vostal, 2013; 2) as a central value of the contemporary academy. While Mendick (2014) is critical of the new temporal regime of ‘fast academia’, she cautions us that this ‘slow University’ presumes an autonomous academic subject with no family responsibilities, and thus is both classed and gendered. The idea of the ‘slow University’ overlooks hierarchies between permanent and temporary staff, and the widely disparate temporal conditions of University workers at a global level, for this perceived acceleration hypothesis
homogenizes experiences that are highly differentiated. The idea of ‘slow scholarship’ relies upon a privileged academic position enjoyed only by permanent and senior lecturers. However, this debate has led to a thriving discussion on the purpose and value of research in contemporary times.

**Precarious workers and the ‘collapsing present’**

Despite these problems with the conditions of work, many permanent academic workers are profoundly privileged compared to precarious academic workers. There has been stark sea shift or generational rift that recent PhD graduates are experiencing in terms of the shrinking of the number of permanent jobs, the proliferation of qualifications now required to attain an entry level academic positions that illustrate but one instance of a complete transformation of higher level education in Ireland and abroad. Paying casual work low wages for a brief period of time used to be justified because it was a transitional apprenticeship that enabled the apprentice to learn valuable skills. However, Courtois and O’Keefe’s work reveals that the average casual worker is typically though not exclusively female, worked HEI for over 8 years, works in the humanities or social sciences, but earns less than 10,000 per year, and thus lives in poverty (2015). Permanent staff levels have been reduced by 17% since 2008, and casual workers have been hired to fill the gaps. Third Level Workplace Watch estimates 40 per cent of teaching hours are delivered by part-timers in Ireland (McGuire, P., *The Irish Times*, May 12, 2015), and percentages are even higher in other countries.

Standing’s (2011) analysis of precarity outlines to the rise in non-standard, temporary, flexible, periodic and insecure work (which can be seen particularly in Ireland in the IT sector, journalism, and the arts) since that has occurred particularly since the 1990s, and its roots in labour market reforms which have weakened the bargaining power of employees since the late 1970s. While the new conditions of work can be positive, and can allow more flexibility and creativity, this rise in non-standard work is associated with a decline in job security, pensions, and possibilities for promotion. While Standing takes both an economic and historical approach in understanding precarious work, he also focuses on the psychological and subjective experience of precarity and the overall effect that this lack of job security, time control has on individuals’ sense of well-being and identity. However, his main focus is on the political dimensions of precarity: how the experience of precarity can inhibit, but also in some ways open up new spaces for class-based political action and collective bargaining. This experience of precarity affects everyone, but particularly the younger generation. Giroux argues precarious workers as a whole are ‘the first post war generation facing the prospect of downward mobility [in which the] plight of the outcast stretches to embrace a generation as a whole’ (2015:1), a generation which he describes in the US context as having ‘Zero opportunities, Zero future, and zero expectations’ (ibid).

Precarious academic workers are subject far more than permanent academics to multiple and contradictory temporal regimes. They experience time pressures, financial vulnerability, and an ambiguity around organizational belonging. One aspect of casual academic workers’ experience is the collapse of the present into a series of projects which Courtois and O’Keefe (2015) describe as ‘the hamster wheel’ of precarity. Finnish research shows that temporary academics are particularly vulnerable to a particular ‘timescape’ of academic work which involves a tightening ‘time screw’ (Salmi, 1997) and ‘time bind’ (Hochschild, 1997) as they cope with an accelerating pace of work, loss of autonomy over time
management, and growing expectations regarding quality of publications yet no permanent job (Ylijoki 2010). McCormack argues this is experienced particularly acutely by precarious workers who are often forced to ‘think of life as a series of projects, where the future may still be imagined as bright, but the present is a series of self-regulatory processes that are supposed to enable the prospect (and fantasy) of one day not being vulnerable’. (McCormack, 2016: 8). Garforth and Cervinkova argue that ‘junior scholars must run as fast as possible to outpace a growing number of known and unknown, local and international competitors’ (2009: 172). Embracing the ‘Slow University’ is not possible for precarious academics on short-term contracts, subjected to the demands of the ‘fast university’, yet expected to be infinitely resilient, despite having few resources or little financial and future security. Some precarious workers must work multiple jobs, and thus their ‘timescapes’ are collapsed into the perpetual present. Foster’s (2016) Canadian research and Ylijoki’s (2010) Finnish research suggest that endless work hours creates a sense of suspended animation whereby a past, present and future are all mixed in together, like ‘crumpled time’. Some casual workers work in multiple institutions, and many have family and parental care responsibilities, and thus experience a temporal fragmentation. Precarious workers are subject to quite extraordinary material and time pressures, yet are silenced and feel unable to express this for fear of their jobs. Permanent academics are often oblivious to these massive temporal pressures, or choose to be oblivious. Courtois and O’Keefe (2015) argue we should document the extent of casual work, abolish hourly wages, eliminate the use of academic internships – such as JobBridge, fight against short-term contracts, and push for more security, solidarity and support to halt exploitation of precarious workers.

In conclusion, the ‘fast University’ has given rise to existential angst and higher levels of physical and mental health problems amongst academic staff in the UK (Gill, 2009). Though we are not subject to as grueling standards of evaluation and measurement here in Ireland, it seems likely this will change in the future. Solutions that focus on ‘fixing the individual’ through better time management or work-life balance courses or other ‘time therapists’ (Rosa, 2010:76) individualize and depoliticize what is clearly a structural problem, and reproduce the ideology of new managerialism. Allowing ‘time out’ for ‘resonance’ or resychronization on holidays only partitions slow time off to ‘oasis of deceleration’ rather than restructuring work as a whole, and paradoxically promotes inertia rather than productivity and creativity (Rosa, 2015: 83). Companies such as Volkswagen, Google and Procter and Gamble have recognized the self-defeating nature of speed culture, and have introduced measure to slow down, reduce working hours and enhance well-being (O’Neill, 2014:2), yet Irish research rarely addresses the issue of academics’ subjective well-being, and there is little space in Irish University political culture for such discussion. Most importantly, the growing body of research on precarious academic work by Courtois and O’Keefe (2015), Ivencheva (2015), O’Flynn and Panayiotopoulos (2015) shows how the ‘hidden injuries’ and time pressures of new managerialism have been experienced by far the most acutely by precarious academic workers. Precarious academic workers on temporary contracts are trapped in the perpetual present, and ‘are caught in a cyclical process, trapped in precarity, with diminishing exit points into secure academic work’ (Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015: 57).

References


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Abstract: When society changes as a result of cultural, economic, and/or political upheaval, the foundation of each individual’s identity, preferences, place and status, which were formed in reference to the society as it was but no longer is, are undermined, and success in what was can be turned into failure in what is. To understand the individual’s responses, I examine a model of a goal-oriented, socially embedded agent, then consider possible responses to societal change using the model as a lens through which to understand the world racked by convulsive change.

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Introduction
Although less than two decades old, the twenty-first century has been characterized by economic, political and cultural upheaval. The distribution of income and wealth within and between countries and regions has become more unequal, economic growth has declined, the distribution of the benefits from that slower growth has become more skewed toward the very upper tail of the wealth and income distributions, wages have stagnated if not fallen in real terms, globalization has led to jobs migrating from the developed West to the Global South, jobs globally have been lost to automation, and free trade has delivered its promised benefits to some rather than to all. In the civic arena, trust of and respect for “the elite,” whether they are political or business leaders, academics, journalists or other experts has diminished. Faith in the democratic process has weakened while faith in autocratic leaders free of the checks and balances of democracy has risen. Culturally, in some countries, traditional mores and values have been displaced by progressive mores and values, in other countries the opposite has occurred. Reaction to this economic, political, and cultural tumult has been reflected in the recent presidential election in the United States, in the referendum on European Union membership in the United Kingdom, in the referendum on political reform in Italy, in the public debates in anticipation of the presidential elections in
France, and in the rise of autocrats in Russia, Turkey, the Philippines, Venezuela and elsewhere. In each country there has been a cry by those who feel economically, politically and/or culturally, that is, socially, marginalized that they have had enough. They demand change, specifically a restoration of what they see as their central position in the economy, in politics, and in culture, that is, in society, and their fair share of the economic, political, and cultural, that is the societal benefits that this centrality implies.

Contrary to Margaret Thatcher’s dictum that “there is no society,” society and the wrenching effects of societal change are critical because humans’ are social beings, existing in and formed by society. The nature of this societal link is essential to defining who a person is since identity, preferences, place and status are defined in reference to society. Who one is and is not, as opposed to what one is or is not, is socially interpreted, and one’s behavior, as well as others’ behavior in response, depends on these social interpretations (Arrow 1994). If we accept that an individual is malleable and is formed by society and social interaction, the only way to understand the individual and individual choices is to understand the society in which the individual lives and the society in which the individual was formed. When society changes, so must the individual.

In this paper I examine societal linkages in the context of convulsive societal change. When society changes so do the societal links that bind the individual to society, some strengthening, some weakening. To do this I build on a model of a goal-oriented, socially-embedded agent who is formed by and makes choices in a social setting. Using this model, I examine how individuals respond to societal change using the recent referendum in the UK and the presidential election in the US for context, examining specifically the role hope and despair play in enabling or dis-enabling an individual in navigating change. I conclude by asking how the costs and benefits of change should be distributed, and society’s role in guiding this distribution.

**Social structure, expectations and goals**

In standard economic analysis an individual is modeled as an atomistic actor who interacts with and obeys the rules of the market rather than of society. The individual makes decisions given preferences, which are defined absolutely. Granovetter (1985, p.487) suggests to the contrary that

> [A]ctors do not behave or decide as atoms outside a social context, .... Their attempts at purposive action are instead embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations.

In a step toward returning society to its central position in the decisions taken by economic actors, preferences can be defined over individual identities (Akerlof and Kranton 2000) which have a social aspect, or preferences can be socially referenced, so that how one’s consumption of goods, services or leisure or how one’s wealth, income or employment status, or how one’s support of one’s family compares to others’ determines how satisfied one is. This preference structure can be adapted so social references, such as comparisons of income with one’s neighbors, are replaced by personal goals or social goals which society deems important to obtain, such as a personal or social identity, as in Brekke, et al. (2003), Shayo (2009), or Eguia (2013) or aspirations as in Dalton, Ghosal and Mani (2014).

To bring society more directly into our analysis, the individual can, as Arrow (1994) suggests, be characterized by a preference ordering over a set of goals which society construes as important. Actions must be taken and resources must be dedicated to move toward or achieve those goals. Society, externally, as well as the individual, internally, measures and validates goal achievement
that determines his satisfaction. Society, however, is not static. Thus, the society in which one is formed is not necessarily the society in which one finds oneself upon attaining one’s majority, or in mid-life or in old age. As society changes so do societally approved goals. Societal change can change the goals, the preference ordering over goals, the actions and resources required to move toward or attain those goals, and the value of goal achievement.

Building on the model proposed by Jeitschko, O’Connell and Pecchenino (2008), further developed by Pecchenino (2011, 2015), and presented here in its entirety, suppose individuals plan to achieve a goal or set of goals all of which are socially construed as important and goal achievement is measured relative to the social ideal for that goal. The individual agent has a single preference ordering defined over $N$ distinct goals. Individual goals can be multifaceted or unidimensional. As society believes these goals to be important, their social importance determines their place in the preference ranking. This place can change as society changes. Goal achievement may require gaining access to, maintaining or improving one’s place in society. Since society is not monolithic, gaining access to, maintaining or improving one’s standing in one social grouping may conflict with gaining access to, maintaining and improving one’s standing in another social grouping. The agent must balance these competing forces, or by pursuing one goal abandon another. While goal achievement requires individual effort, it also requires social recognition and approval, actual or perceived, as well as individual perceptions of worthiness. Further, the society in which one lives is not static and evolves. This means that what is socially important or what affords one high social status can change over time, either gradually or suddenly. These societal changes affect the ordering over goals, the goals themselves and the ease or difficulty of achieving or approaching them.

Let

$$\Gamma(g^1 - g^{1*}, \ldots, g^N - g^{N*})$$

(1)

represent an individual’s preference ordering over goals. His personal and social well-being is a function of his $n=1, \ldots, N$ goals, $g^n$, relative to its socially determined ideal (bliss point), $g^{n*}$, that is, $g^n - g^{n*}$, for all $n$. Assume $\Gamma_n(..., g^n - g^{n*}, \ldots) > 0 (<0)$ for $g^n - g^{n*} < 0 (>0)$, for all $n = 1, \ldots, N$, and that $\Gamma_{nn} \leq 0$ for all $n = 1, \ldots, N$. The sign of $\Gamma_{nnn=mm}$ is positive if the $n$ and $m$ goals are complements, negative if they are substitutes, and zero if they are independent. Note, since society and what society interprets as important changes, the socially determined ideals, the $g^{n*}$, will also change as will the value of goal achievement.

Assume one’s goals and the effort, the individual’s interrelated resources—emotional, psychological, spiritual, intellectual, physical and economic—expended, required to attain them are related as follows

$$g^n - g^{n*} = \hat{e}^n - e^{n*}(\nu^n)$$

(2)

where

$$\hat{e}^n = e^n + \sum_{m\neq n} \beta^{mn} e^m$$

(3)

where $\hat{e}^n$ is the effort the individual puts into the $n^{th}$ goal, which is the sum of his effort dedicated to the $n^{th}$ goal, $e^n$, and any spillover from effort dedicated to the other goals, $\beta^{mn} e^m$, for all $m$, where $\beta^{mn} < 1$. $e^n(\nu^n)$ represents the individual’s belief of the social belief (Orléan 2004) of the effort required to attain the social ideal, a construct that depends on the society in which the individual lives both narrowly and broadly defined, where $\nu^n$ is a vector of conditioning variables—focal points upon which beliefs
about goal $n$ are conditioned. Among these conditioning variables could be the individual’s emotional state (Pfister and Böhm 2008), social structures (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993), the moral strictures of the society of which the individual is part (Kaplow and Shavell 2007), the individual’s circumstances that are determined in part by the individual’s (relative) wealth or poverty (Dalton, Ghosal and Mani 2014), the neighborhood in which he lives (Ellen and Turner 1997; Atkinson and Kintrea 2004), the acute (Buckert, et al. 2014) or chronic stress the individual is under, or one’s religion, race or creed. Goals and the ordering thereof, the value of individual resources, conditioning variables and the social beliefs implied depend on context. Finally, achievement of or movement toward one’s social goal ideals, regardless of effort expended, depends on social recognition and approval thereof, which is not necessarily fixed. Assume, similar to Eguia (2013) that for each social ideal there is a minimum distance requirement that ensures social inclusion, $d^n$, where $d^n$ is determined by societal expectations, which may not be fixed, and individual perceptions thereof. If $|g^n(e)−g^n*| >d^n$, then, even dedicating all his resources to goal $n$ will not allow him to achieve social inclusion in that social sphere.

Substituting the relationship of effort to goal achievement into the individual’s utility function, the individual’s task is to allocate his resources

$$e = \sum e^n, \text{where } e^n \geq 0$$

(4)

to devise a plan to achieve/move toward his desired goals. Since an individual’s total resources are a function of his emotional, psychological, spiritual, intellectual, physical and economic resources, they are not fixed, and can be enhanced or diminished by societal change.

The agent thus optimizes

$$e^1 + \sum_{m=1}^{m^1} e^m e^n(1),...,e^N + \sum_{n=1}^{m^N} e^m e^N(n)$$

subject to his resource constraint (4), nonnegativity, and minimum distance constraints. The first-order conditions of the agent’s problem are

$$\Gamma_n + \sum_{m\neq n} \Gamma_m b_{mn} - \lambda + \mu^n + \omega^n = 0,$n = 1,.., N \tag{6}$$

where $\lambda$ is the marginal disutility of effort, $\mu^n$ is the multiplier on the nonnegativity constraint, and $\omega^n$ is the multiplier on the minimum distance constraint. The multiplier $\mu^n > 0$ if the optimal choice of $e^n \leq 0$: all effort is put into the individual’s other goals since the marginal disutility of effort exceeds the marginal utility of effort invested in that goal either directly or indirectly. The multiplier $\omega^n > 0$ if $|g^n(e)−g^n*| >d^n$. Failure to get close enough to one’s goal ideals is self and/or societally assessed: the individual’s resources, however deployed, are not individually or societally perceived to be adequate to the task. This could be as a result of personal failure, or it could be a result of societal (economic, political, or cultural) change that, in effect, moves the goal posts, the $g^n*$ increase and with it the effort required to achieve it even if the required closeness to the goal required for social inclusion does not, although it too may change and the necessary closeness could also increase.

In this model individuals’ utility is defined over goals. There is an interplay between the individual and society that determines the cost of achieving his goals, the resources he has to do so, and the recognition of success or failure. The utility function does not conform to expected utility assumptions since probabilities, whether exogenous, affected by own actions or conditioned by social forces,
are embedded in the effort required for attainment of one’s goal ideal, an ideal not fixed nor static since its achievement is socially mediated. Further, utility is neither separable across goals with different, perhaps time varying, probabilities of achievement nor across time. Here the perception of time and the definition of the time horizon can also be socially mediated and vary from the eschaton to an irrelevance. Given this structure it is possible to analyze the interactions across goals, plans to achieve those goals as a result of changes societal change (see Jeitschko, O’Connell and Pecchenino, 2008, for derivations).

When the world changes

Given the interplay between the individual and society, individuals confronted with any change that affects the goals society construes as important or the cost of achieving them have two options. They can respond to those changes and do their best to adjust their behavior so that their now individually utility maximizing goals can be approached or achieved, noting that these may not be the goals that they were previously pursuing and taking into account the current costs of doing so as well as their available resources may be higher or lower. Or, they can reject the societal changes and attempt to change society and thereby the goals it construes as important.

To ground the discussion, consider first the following examples of economic, political and/or cultural change, and second consider individual and group reactions thereto filtered through the lens of the model.

Brexit (see Davies 2016, Darvas 2016, Goodwin and Heath 2016, Inglehart and Norris 2016, Kaufmann 2016, Morgan 2016): In 2013 then UK Prime Minister David Cameron promised that if the Conservative Party won the next general election he would call a referendum on the UK’s membership in the EU. He wanted to settle the question of EU membership once and for all, thereby silencing the Euro-skeptic wing of the Conservative party, certain that the UK would remain in the EU since, from his perspective, the UK was economically, politically and culturally stronger inside rather than outside. A majority of UK voters saw things differently. For them the referendum was an opportunity to assert, among other things, their identity as a proud British people. Not European, but British: British by birth, British by inclination, British by right, British by law, British by institution, British by language, British. Many who voted their identity rather than their pocketbooks voted against their immediate economic advantage to reestablish an economic, cultural and political environment in which the UK would again be sovereign. Those voting to leave were, on average, older, less educated, living outside the greater London or other metropolitan areas, English or Welsh rather than Scottish or Northern Irish. They found in the EU and in the UK’s membership thereof a focus for their anger and despair at what they had lost as a result of the financial crisis and the austerity regime that followed, globalization and the deindustrialization of the UK: socially cohesive, generally homogeneous, safe, drug and crime free communities, the ability to own one’s on home, lifetime employment in unionized industries (think coal, steel, heavy manufacturing) with good wages, benefits, and secure pensions. Membership in the EU had, first, outsourced UK sovereignty to Brussels, emasculating the UK. Further, the EU had delivered, they averred, (i) an influx of immigrants who were paid generous benefits, stealing British jobs, driving down wages, and refusing to integrate or ascribe to British values, (ii) restrictions on supporting essential British industries, such as autos and steel, (iii) senseless regulation on, for example, electric kettles, toasters and bananas, (iv) the weakening of the NHS, (v) the expansion of rights and protections to the LGBTQ communities, etc. Leaving the EU would allow the British to become sovereign and
British again. When the votes were counted, 52 percent of the British people who voted chose Brexit, leaving almost half wondering what had become of their proudly European country.

Trump (see Allin 2016, Crooke 2016, Cramer 2016, Davis and Fields 2016, Davis and Hilsenrath 2016, Hochschild 2016, Inglehart and Norris 2016, Irwin and Katz 2016, Thompson 2016): In the United States, after a long and relatively slow recovery from the financial crisis and worldwide recession, in a generally positive economic environment of steady growth, low unemployment, low inflation and low interest rates, although ever widening income inequality both at the individual and regional level, a populist candidate, who was not closely aligned with the traditional political and economic positions of his own party, was elected. During his campaign he connected with a part of the US population who felt the American dream was no longer possible for them. Responding to their deep-seated grievances, he promised (i) to expel illegal immigrants and repel new migrants, by building a wall between the US and Mexico for which the Mexican people would pay and by the “extreme vetting” of Muslim migrants to save America (economically, politically and culturally) for Americans, (ii) to defeat ISIS once and for all, (iii) to invalidate trade pacts and mutual defense treaties that, allegedly, benefitted others and imposed unilateral costs on the US benefitting only our feckless allies, (iv) to rebuild the manufacturing base of the economy thereby restoring lost factory jobs with their implied union wages, benefits and pension entitlements, (v) to restore the crumbling infrastructure, (vi) to bring back to the US all firms that have moved their operations overseas and tax them unmercifully should they not agree to do so. He questioned the scientific basis for climate change and promised to revoke US compliance with the Paris Agreement. He defied social convention and political correctness by demeaning women, members of the LGBTQ community, Muslims (US citizens and otherwise), war heroes and veterans, the disabled, the press, Mexicans, African-Americans, Asians and others. He denigrated elites, experts, policy-wonks, the heads of government agencies, and all those not agreeing with him, as being anti-American: not one of us. He praised foreign autocrats who act independent of a cumbersome democratic process. In short, and in his own words, he promised to make America great again. Those who voted for him were, predominately but not exclusively, white, especially those who live in predominately white areas with very few immigrants, less educated, older, male, but not necessarily poorer, folk holding what they see as traditional values. Those who did not, and they were the majority, largely clustered on the multiethnic, multicultural, liberal cosmopolitan coasts, wondered what had become of their already great nation.

Brexit and the Trump victory can be interpreted in the context of the model as effecting significant societal change. This change will, first, modify if not the actual goals the ordering thereof. Now what society most values may shift away from the cosmopolitan toward the traditional (from London to the North, or from the coasts to the heartland), and in so doing reset the goal ideals, the $g^*$. Second, the victories change the conditioning variables, the $\nu^\nu$ focal points upon which beliefs about goal $n$ are conditioned, making the costs of goal achievement lower for those on the winning side, since society has changed in their favor, although, perhaps, higher for those on the losing side. Among these are the individual’s emotional state (improved if one is on the winning side since now there is more reason to hope for a, from the individual’s perspective, better future, dis-improved otherwise since there is reason to despair about the now more nationalist less internationalist future), social structures...
(more traditional/conservative, thereby less cosmopolitan), the moral strictures of the society of which the individual is part (tighter, more prescriptive, more constraining, rather than open laissez-faire approach allowing each individual to live by his own beliefs), the individual’s circumstances that are determined in part by the individual’s (relative) wealth or poverty (victors expect theirs to improve under the new regime so behave accordingly while losers expect theirs to dis-improve), the neighborhood in which he lives (expected to improve as, for example, industry returns and migrants leave, expected to dis-improve as industry and migrants leave). Third, the emotional, psychological, spiritual, intellectual, physical and economic resources are affected. So, for example, those on the winning side may feel heartened, hopeful, newly vigorous, again on the side of what is right and good, holding the expectation that their once devalued skills would again be of high and rising value and that their physical assets would appreciate, while those on the losing side may feel despondent, lethargic, their spirit sapped by the turn of events, the value of their skills and physical assets diminished. Fourth, the spillover effects, the $\beta$, from pursuing one goal onto the effort required to achieve another goal may change, making complementary or substitutable goals easier or harder to obtain. Finally, the closeness to the goal ideal required for social acceptance, the $d$, may change, making what had been unachievable achievable and vice versa. Thus, from the perspective of the victors, the anticipated change in status/regime alone leads to a perceived improvement in their position vis-à-vis their ultimate goals, while the opposite may hold true for the losers.

The Brexit and Trump victories were, interestingly, triumphs of the despairing. These victories articulated a demand for societal change, politically, economically and culturally, from those who felt they had not been listened to, ignored, forgotten, demeaned, that is, expelled from society. Their demands, however, were not for re-entry into society as it had become but into society as they believe it should be. Through the EU referendum and the US presidential election, they have won the argument for political change. But political change, however disruptive, will be unlikely to deliver all the desired economic, cultural or even political changes. But, change will occur. In the face of these changes, the hopeful will remain determined to attain their utility maximizing goals whatever the challenges no matter whether they found themselves on the winning or losing side of the argument, while the despairing, those on the winning side of the argument who see the promises made them repudiated or those on the losing side who see their world crumble, are apt to struggle to find a way, any way, to their chosen goals.

To see why hope and despair, which are both conditioning variables and a component of an individual’s critical emotional resources, resources that can augment or diminish the individual’s spiritual, intellectual, psychological and economic resources, may play an outsized role in individuals’ responses to societal change, we look to Pecchenino (2011) and Pecchenino (2015). In broad-based reviews of a number of distinct literatures, she finds, first, that most theories of hope have a strong future goal orientation where the future looms large in an individual’s decision-making process (Bloch and Ritter 1976, Meyer 2010, Moltmann 1965). The present, rather than the future, is discounted. Second, for the hopeful, goal attainment depends on an individual’s or society’s desire and ability to transform what is into what should be or to move toward what should or will be even if that goal is known to be unattainable through human effort: nothing is impossible (Pettit 2004, Moltmann 1985, Bloch 1986). Third, theories of hope address the process of living, the journey one is taking, which suggests that
one’s preferences and hopes are redefined by the constraints one faces, such as age or disability (Greenstreet and Fiddian 2006, Antonovsky 1987). These theories provide a means of understanding or accepting fortune and misfortune with equanimity. All is never lost. Fourth, hope is not irrational but may rely on an individual’s ability to filter, sort and selectively use information (Pettit 2004). Fifth, the hopeful are in and of society. For despair she finds, first, that despair is a social malady. Despair excludes the individual from society, a society from which he has or perceives himself to have been expelled (Steinbock 2007, Nesse 1999). Second, re-entry into that society is or is perceived to be exceedingly difficult or impossible (Frank 1974, Greene 1989). Third, because the despairing believe that they have been expelled from society they do not perceive themselves to be bound by its conventions (Hillbrand and Young 2008). Fourth, social relationships for the despairing become difficult or impossible (Tangney, Steuwig and Mashek 2007, Frank 1974). Fifth, the ability to act, to cope even with the quotidian, atrophies or is lost. Apathy, lethargy, recklessness and suicide are common responses to despair (Steinbock 2007). Sixth, life is without value or meaning. This state of may be temporary or permanent. If temporary, life after emerging from despair has less value. If permanent, a future, any future, cannot be imagined (Nesse 1999).

Now consider what has come to be seen as the quintessential Trump or Brexit voter: middle-aged, working class, white male with traditional values who is not particularly well educated, who lives outside of a major metropolitan area where there are few immigrants, who lives in an area where jobs are routine, employment uncertain and unemployment is high and the economy is not thriving, who has seen what had been his rosy future tarnished and his hopes fade as the local economy has deteriorated (because of regulation, foreign competition, international trade agreements, structural change, whatever). Prior to the referendum/presidential elections aid caricature viewed himself as being significantly distant from all of his major goals, $g^n$—large for all n, as not having adequate resources to effectively reduce this distance nor the wherewithal to enhance his resources (through retraining or relocating to where his resources were more highly valued), e low, and no prospect of getting close enough to any goal given what he perceived as society’s preference for the urban, college-educated, cosmopolitan, multicultural, white collar or creative worker over the ordinary working man. If he is a member of the long-term unemployed, he has suffered from many of its associated maladies: poor physical and mental health, social isolation, social exclusion, low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, low self-belief, loss of identity, inability to act, criminal and/or anti-social behavior, alcohol and drug abuse, self-harm, and suicidal ideation (Cooper 2011, Stuckler, et al. 2011, Wanberg 2012, Proudfoot, et al. 1997, Goldsmith, et al. 1996a,b, Brenner 1976, Catalano, et al. 2011, Choudhry, et al. 2012), behaviors that suggest despair: indifference to options taken and the consequences thereof: failure to attain any of his goals. If he personally is not a member of this group, he knows people who are.

After the referendum/presidential election, he saw himself as being closer to his major goals for two reasons: first, he perceived the societal goal ideal to have moved closer to where he was, since society again valued who and what he was, an ordinary working man and, second, conditioning variables, consistent with the new political and promised economic and cultural social order, enhanced the value of his resources. Without doing anything beyond casting his ballot, he achieved or came within striking distance of social inclusion, recognition and acceptance. There were now some grounds for hope and
with them identifiable and achievable paths to his goals.

Arlie Russell Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016) recounts the five years she spent getting to know members of the American right in the bayou country of Louisiana on their own terms. In the penultimate chapter of the book, the promise of Trump to her “white, middle-aged and older, Christian, married, blue- and white-collar Louisianans” is explored. She finds that there was a “deep story.” In that story, strangers step ahead of you in line, making you anxious, resentful and afraid. A president allies with the line cutters, making you feel distrustful, betrayed. A person ahead of you in line insults you as an ignorant redneck, making you feel humiliated and mad. Economically, culturally, demographically, politically, you are suddenly a stranger in your own land.

At a Trump campaign rally Hochschild attends, Trump rails against the EPA, trade, globalization, illegal immigration, and in favor of a strong military that will destroy ISIS. He will make America great again. He has a Black Lives Matter protester forcibly evicted. He further suggests that PC speech and behavior are yokes not to be borne. Trump made her Louisianan friends feel proud again, no longer strangers in their own land. He made them proud: to be white Christian Americans, to hold views reviled in the national press, to be racist, sexist, and bigoted; to carry guns, to be against abortion but for capital punishment, to sign up for Trumpcare and still maintain their manliness. Under a Trump presidency America would again the America where they were “The People”. This would be the case even if they still could not achieve the American dream.

However, the grounds for hope found in the Trump campaign may be tenuous and despair may replace hope if political rhetoric is not institutionalized in government programs (the urban, cosmopolitan, multicultural, college educated person rather than the “strangers in their own land” remains the focus of politicians’ attention) and if the promised employment opportunities (reopened or employment growth in factories and mines) and community renewal do not quickly materialize. Social exclusion from the society you see as your own may be a greater cause for despair than exclusion from a society from which you are already alienated. The repercussions could be significant.

The urban, college-educated, cosmopolitan, multicultural, white collar or creative worker who worked in the financial, IT or creative sector, probably voted Remain or for Hillary Clinton, yet faces the same societal change. Some of them will see this change as making their path to their ultimate goals more difficult, and find themselves out of sync with the new society making their resources of less value, that is the distance $g^n$ has increased and $e$ has fallen as a result of the referendum or election. And, perhaps, $d^n$, has now gotten smaller – one needs to be closer to one’s goals to achieve social acceptance: one has to be even better than before. The hopeful among this group are likely to filter out the bad news, revise their paths, and do whatever needs doing to achieve their goals. This may require returning to college to acquire new skills or another degree. It may require reprioritizing so that a complementary or substitutable goal takes precedence given changed conditioning variables (a less tolerant, more conservative society, more nationally than internationally focused economic and social policies, etc.). The hopeful will find a way. Those who will struggle with the new political, economic and cultural milieu are those who had been successful in the old society who have been accused of aiding and abetting the economic and cultural declines that led to these electoral outcomes: immigrants, legal as well as illegal, recent and second and third generation, LGBTQ community members, all
those seen as “not us.” They may succumb to despair if they see all they have worked so hard to obtain: relative economic success, a place in the community for themselves and their families, a good cultural and spiritual environment, what they thought of as their home, the expectation of a safe and secure future, become unobtainable.

These effects, essentially the ins being thrown out, and the cultural and social, but here not economic, upheaval that causes, can be seen in Olga Khazan’s 2017 article in The Atlantic. For the cosmopolitan, urban, educated, perhaps LGBTQ or of recent immigrant heritage she interviews, Trump’s election was felt as a physical assault on all they held dear leaving them feeling ill, dispossessed, alien rather than citizen, in despair with all the accompanying symptoms and behaviors, hoping, perhaps in vain and knowing that it is in vain, for him to be impeached. They now were the strangers in their own land suffering from cognitive dissonance. They were once proud Americans and now they are Americans who barely recognize their country in the rhetoric and policies of the new presidency, rhetoric and policies that make them ashamed of and apologize for their country. This internal conflict is debilitating, both physically and mentally. Hopelessness and depression have replaced the hopefulness and expectation of a better world that characterized their Obama years. Those who had felt accepted and protected by both law and cultural enlightenment again feel fearful.

A Tea Party of the left is mooted.

You have a disaffected mass of people [Matthew Wright of American University is quoted as saying]. The question is whether that will get translated into anger that will turn into political change, or if people will disengage.

...“The Resistance” can become a new identity, like the Tea Party, which helps Trump-haters reconcile their American pride with their disgust at American leadership.

But the fear remains that the damage of the Trump presidency will be extensive, deep and long lasting whatever the liberal response.

The joyful hopefulness of Hochschild’s Louisianans, is negatively mirrored by the despair of Khazan’s cosmopolitan liberals. The tables have been turned. Society has been thrown asunder.

Conclusion

Societies are never static, and in this constant state of flux individuals attempt to achieve their goals, all of which society interprets as important. As society changes, so to do societal goals and individuals’ means of achieving them. Societal change is never without cost. It is also never without benefits. The question is, then, to whom the spoils? While previously marginalized groups should be compensated for past societal ills, the ills that instigated the change, other groups should not be marginalized or penalized. Instead government actions and private sector initiatives should work to ensure that social marginalization in all spheres, economic, political and cultural, is minimized, that societal failures are acknowledged and amends made, and that all broken social relationships are repaired. That is, we should create a world where to the victors the spoils and all are victorious.

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ARTICLE

WORKING BACKSTAGE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF SOCIAL WELFARE OFFICES

BY TOM BOLAND & RAY GRIFFIN

Abstract: Recent ethnographies of welfare offices have tended to elaborate their governmentalising character, how they exercise power, impose discursive categorisations and form subjectivities. Yet, governmentality also constitutes ‘markets’, and these spaces demand certain forms of action and ‘produce truth’ in terms of ‘market value’ or the ‘going rate’ (Foucault, 2008). Classically, markets are places where strangers meet without violence, sites of differing opinions, the nexus of someone buying and another selling. Most jobseekers pass through the social welfare office, a formative act that categorises and constitutes them as seller in the labour market. So the experience of transformative rituals within these spaces require careful anthropological exploration, particularly because ‘Job-seekers’, unlike other microcosms of poverty like homelessness or social housing, are not a community in that they lack a spatial togetherness, apart from the brief encounters in the strange institutional setting of the social welfare office.

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Introduction

According to Polanyi’s classic historicisation of the market, labour is a fictional commodity (2001). The human activity of work is artificially rendered in economic categories as a service, produced by individuals who ‘reproduce their labour’ or invest in their ‘human capital’ which is in high or low demand, so that the unemployed are ‘surplus’, whether considered as ‘idle’ or ‘jobseekers’. Such jargon might easily be critiqued as ideology derived from the imagination of intellectuals, politicians and policy makers, yet it is embodied and manifested in particular institutions, most notably the welfare office, the site of constant governmental redesign (Boland & Griffin, 2015, Hansen, 2017). While subjects may resist or be co-opted by the governmental powers within the welfare office, our aim here is to interrogate what this curious site can reveal about the labour market. Detailed auto-ethnographic accounts have been offered (Cole, 2008, Dallyn 2014), but here we will offer an artificially detached description of the office, its processes and paperwork for both theoretical and methodological reasons.
Welfare offices embody Augé’s concept of ‘non-places’ (1995), those productions of super-modernity which are characterless, replicable and apparently pragmatic and functional. Following the OECD wide drift towards activation policies administered by service-oriented architectures, Ireland replaced its local Social Welfare offices with the deliberately vacuous ‘Intreo’ offices, which are broadly homogenous. Within these, the individual citizen, who may have a rich personal history and an idiosyncratic set of skills and practices, is categorised through questionnaires, forms and bureaucratic processes as a labour market participant, for the purposes of the office at least. Our methodology includes repeat ethnographies at multiple locations over several years, with minimally variant results, and also takes account of dozens of interviews with jobseekers from 2012 to the present. Therein, the experience of being registered as a benefit claimant and categorised as a ‘jobseeker’ was generally experienced as an encounter with ‘faceless bureaucracy’ in the style of the Weberian or Baumanian critique, and these also inform our account. This detached ethnography and claimant antipathy to the office contextualises how the forms and documents of this space should be interpreted (Hull, 2012).

Beyond these methodological considerations, there are further theoretical reasons for this approach. Broadly, the office renders its claimants as homogenous, transparent cases, as labour to be sold. Howsoever they resist or are co-opted by this ‘governmentalisation’, citizens are reduced to market actors. The term actor, of course, has another connotation, recalling theatre and drama. According to Agnew (1986), the market and the theatre are intertwined, as they occupied the same spaces historically. Indeed, the historically public ceremony of exchange, with sworn oaths is replicated in claiming benefits, where individuals must sign-up to being ‘Jobseekers’, and put their name to a ‘Record of Mutual Commitments’. Markets also historically gave rise to new forms of ‘governmentality’ which police populations and exchange (Szakolczai, 2013).

Beyond this, the theatrical selling of commodities in the marketplace is now replicated in the art of constructing a CV and ‘selling yourself’ (Boland, 2016). Dissimulating the suffering of unemployment and presenting a ‘brave face’ is required by the modern welfare office. Jobseekers are required to be chameleons or improvisation artists who perform a pantomime of being ‘work-ready’ or ‘job-hungry’ for their overseers. The extent to which social life resembles a theatrical performance has been various proposed by Goffman (1990), Alexander (2011) and criticised by Butler (1999) then historicised by Agnew and Szakolczai as a distinctly modern development.

Therefore, our analysis positions the welfare office as a paradoxical ‘back-stage’ to the theatrical market. The labour-exchange is a sort of ‘green-room’ where real concrete individuals prepare to depart from their real experiences and take on a ‘role’. Among non-places, the labour market is distinctive as an institution for the reduction of humanity to a standardised product or service, not just a characterless place, but one where individual experience is reduced to job-ready performance. Yet, even here, the pantomime goes on; one of our informants describes an emotional outburst in the welfare office, where she asked to be helped beyond the routines of queuing and form filling, but she received nothing but the same documents as her last session; the script remains the same, even in the back-stage there is no breach in the performance. While some ‘meta’ talk about welfare processes is possible there, the ‘back-stage’ is more like a temporary hiatus for a soliloquy or an aside, where a character
reveals their thinking, but cannot stop being an actor.

**Matters of method**

Despite the current problematisation around how to undertake ethnographic work of the distinctly contemporary, conceptual and immaterial, we proceed with a relatively detached outsiders’ view, akin to the anthropologist as ‘poverty inspector’ (Rakowski, 2016). Drawing on four years of ethnographic data gathered around the experience of unemployment in Ireland, this paper explores the ethnographic encounter with the social welfare office, the site of the labour market that all sellers must traverse. We find the ritualistic encounter of the claimant/citizen/customer of these spaces can be interrogated through ethnographic distance, because we are all strangers in the market, just as ethnographers are strangers (Van Meij, 2005). Of course, this position of strangerhood has been problematised as an intellectual pose (Pels, 1999). However, in composing this ethnography we are self-consciously weaving a text from the descriptions offered by academics, student researchers and benefit claimants (Greetham, 1999 ??). So, while our voices are privileged and visible here, the actual account is a dialogic encounter in Bakhtin’s sense (19??), and the ethnography is rounded off through descriptions of the welfare office offered by the unemployed in semi-structured interviews.

This ethnography emerges from an ongoing anthropological study by the WUERC (Waterford Unemployment/Employment Research Collective) in which we are investigating the experience of unemployment. Thus far, over the past four years we have collected data from across the landscape of unemployment, with observations and field notes from social welfare offices, charities, recruitment agencies, informal spaces of unemployment, interviews with 62 unemployed people, tracking almost a decade of media discourse, self-help and advisory practices, policy discourses, documents and debates. Copious field notes and observations traced the layout of the spaces, places, materials and stuff of unemployment, as well as the interactions between the various actors in the landscape of unemployment. Data were analysed using an inductive approach to theory building, reviewing field notes, transcripts, codes, themes; personal reflection and interpretation gave way to presentation, dispute, argumentation and debate amongst the collective in a broad cycle of interpretation. Thus, this text is simply an interweaving of multiple texts read over time, and in time, will be just another way-mark in the ‘time-lapse’ of ethnographic exploration.

Following a broadly grounded theory approach we initially noticed the importance of the unofficial advisory practices in getting people through the system. Thus, our work traced the movements through the site of the Waterford Social Welfare office visited from 2012 to 2017, but against the backdrop of 32 site visits to various offices, we explored how the claimants were affected by the places and spaces of social protection, through paperwork, counters and encounters. Applying for welfare is a key site for the anthropology of the labour market, which fully recognises the considerable influence exerted on people’s lives, social relations and identities. By tracing the key passage points through the system, from its messy ad-hoc and improvised elements to the highly codified and bureaucratic touch points, we attempt to ground an ethnographic understanding of paradoxical experiences of non-space, built from fine-grained exploration of the meaning of this process in these places.
Thresholds

Irish social welfare offices, local welfare offices, revamped and new-built Intreo offices exist in various buildings from purpose-built, repurposed and informal accommodations. The purpose built offices tend towards brutalist architecture; an expression of a frugal welfare state, with cheap white PVC windows and block construction with pebble dash. The buildings gesture symbolically towards colossal, pitiless and permanent edifices, a convenient architectural solution to the arduous problems around how a welfare office should look. Brutalism tends towards massive fortress-like buildings, with a predominance of exposed mono-chrome concrete construction which projects a cold-hearted and inhumane atmosphere of seriousness, heft and totalitarianism. Unlike older civic architecture projects that were about making state institutions as meaningful articulations of the nation-building project, these flat and functional buildings have little enchantment. Brutalism was quickly rejected by individuals, the public, corporate and commercial forces, but Government, overly dependent on the authority of experts, took brutalism to heart. So even though brutalism has been on the wane since the 1960s, it tends to live on in monumental government buildings as the physical manifestation of how society manages its surplus labour.

Since 2012 these offices have been rebranded and transformed from ‘social welfare’ to the studiedly meaninglessness Intreo; watching the social welfare system try to brand itself was a fascinating spectacle. This new identity has a vacuous character which articulates broader shifts European homogenisation of welfare. Both the old and new logo speak of corporate distance, but the change from the specific and institutional “social protection” brand provoked discussion around how social protection is being recast as just another service, de-exceptionalised. The new architectural interventions – limited as they are – gesture towards a ‘slick’ retail or commercial aesthetic.

In some rural areas welfare offices are grafted on to the ‘high-street’ with shop frontage or even dwelling windows displaying signage. Within cities and regional centres there are larger, sometimes purpose-built offices. In our case, the Waterford city centre the building is far from inviting. Despite visiting many offices over the course of this study, each and every time there is a tingle of anxiety or stigma associated with crossing the threshold. Across all of our research around the experience of unemployment, taking welfare from the state is perceived as a shameful act; something felt long before an actual encounter with the office. The stigma and shame are most acute on entering the welfare office, and the feeling of stress and anxiety is not just for first time visitors, all visits to this office lack a sense of security and wellness, you just never know what will happen here. As time elapses and field-notes accrue, one might expect to become familiar with the space, but the design is almost deliberately ‘defamiliarising’ (Rakowski, 2016).

The office is poorly signposted, down a laneway, so entrance and exit is discrete. In one encounter, getting directions was discussed, with several ethnographers noting “you would not know it was there”. Users tended not to articulate opinions around the meaning of the building. But it is unlikely that signage is purposefully poor or that the location out of the way to save claimants blushes. Instead, the absence of signage may be taken as a dog-whistle signal of the absence of care. Perhaps there is nothing that can be put into the building’s entrance to reduce stress and anxiety, the environment is not the main source of the stress, the reason for the visit is; but that does not mean that the environment is not important. It is not possible to see inside from the outside, an overgrown bush blocks the side window of the main door, presumably to push smokers
further into the car-park. To walk into the building you sometimes have to walk past a thicket of smoke from the milling smokers, not intentional idlers, but claimants made to wait by the office.

On entering the office there is a small welcome sign directing people to take a ticket, and a vacant reception desk, which over the course of several visits was never occupied, leaving some visitors turning in circles upon entering and theatrically looking for help and assistance to find out how to make the office work. This lack of direction compounds the inherent stress of the visit, no one ever comes to provide direction, so everyone must muddle around before making their way over to the chairs. Natural light is limited to high windows that cast bright winter sun down onto the floor, at all times of the day the smart office lighting embedded in the ceiling is on.

Although almost everyone has an appointed time, everyone diligently notes their position in the virtual line - scanning the scattering of people in the room and noting mentally who arrives in after them; so everyone acts as though the office is on a first come-first served basis, noted by many ethnographers as an assumption by jobseekers of elementary procedural justice. Every now and then the door to the side of the counter opens and a name is called for people meeting in the small meeting rooms; a whoosh of heat comes out from the large room behind the office, compounding the division - the stark front reception office and cosseted and pampered back office that pits the claimant against the state. Occasionally there is a walk-in, someone without an appointment, often without a file or bag of papers. In mid-morning, the line for the counter usually has ten to twenty people in it, even thought the room is set out for sixty seats, ten pods of six Scandinavian pine seats on individual metal frames. The office is organised for waiting.

Waiting and Queuing

Access to welfare means waiting within the office; counter meetings take about three to ten minutes; but waiting typically takes over half an hour. The waiting room in Waterford is unlike other state services. There are similarities with waiting for other Government mandated services, the passport office, kids immunisation, car testing in that even though the rooms are clearly designed for waiting, there is no thought about comfort. Elsewhere people wait to buy a service, dentistry, medical attention, here there are no distractions, no television with rolling news, no lifestyle magazines or newspapers to relive the monotony, other than those abandoned by previous attendees. Such distractions might seem like a luxury or an admission that the process itself is an imposition to be alleviated by entertainment. The chairs are hard; designed for robustness, ease of cleaning, rather than comfort. Bright, fluorescent light permeates the room.

In the first visits we made to social welfare offices people tended to sit looking blankly into the distance, bodies slumped catatonically, but smart phones have transformed waiting experiences as people vacate the building digitally; time flies. People waiting rarely talk, even people waiting together with family or friends. For those without phones, the comfortable digital illusion falls apart and their attention remains on the indeterminable wait. It was always impossible to calculate how long the wait might take. At times the office is teaming with people, at times it is thinly populated, but at all times it has long bursts of solemn silences, with only the noises are shuffling bodies in seats, sighing, the odd door slamming or people taking calls; on some odd occasions people play games on their phones with the digital music on, much to the visible annoyance of others. The only consistent noise is from the counter talk. So despite the sense of silence, the constant flow of people,
the thrum of conversations between employees and customers creates a loud environment. No one complains audibly about the wait, and silence appears a form of respect for other people’s privacy.

Waiting time is the stuff of encounters at the social welfare office. Waiting has many different meanings for those subjected to it. More often than not, the office is thinly populated, so that you are waiting with a few people. You can pick them out, focus on who they might be, guess their family structure, their story. Waiting draws attention to time itself, it is not only endured it is interpreted. For many the queue is a test of wills between the claimant and the state. It is a small stumbling block put in people’s way before they receive a social payment. And so it is minor act of institutionalised sadism or hazing of the poor by the state; the cost of queuing is borne by the claimant and they are rewarded by having their claim assessed. Not everyone can queue.

Queues have a superficial sense of bureaucratic neutrality, with a normative significance that systematises and equalises all citizen claimants at the point of service delivery. Applicants are all treated equally. Time spent in the queue earns you counter-time. In the queue you are depersonalised, and fall into the contours of the office’s routine. People are not told to wait and take a seat; they naturally read the clues. But as time goes on the sense of being controlled and dominated insinuates itself. This arms-length interaction with the state is not about efficiency, or anything inherently logical or rational- it is simply about power. The state demands a level of obedience before even considering a claim to care.

These encounters with the state agency that controls a significant part of their basic livelihood constitute a power-saturated ‘gift-relationship’; determining to a large extent the material and social wellbeing that claimants have for themselves, how they perceive themselves and others on welfare; and perhaps more than anything else, this encounter constructs the experience of what it means to be unemployed, and consequently how the unemployed act and account for themselves. The stigma of entering the office, waiting and taking a payment provokes a suppression rather than an evocation of the self. Beyond the cost of time, waiting forces people to dwell in the humiliation and sense of dependency that queuing for a payment provokes. In the labour market where time is money; little value is placed on claimant’s time. This quasi-ritual of status-degradation transforms claimants, but does not bestow a positive identity on them, instead making them a ‘transitional’ subject, a jobseeker, waiting for employment.

**Paperwork**

Claim forms are placed strategically in the queuing space, but it is unclear which form is for what purpose. They have serial codes that allow them to be handled administratively giving the sense that the complexity of the system shrouds it in mystery. The serial codes do not just have a practical function of discriminating between the various schemes; they exude obfuscation and exclusion- you need to know your way around the system to secure your place in it. After obtaining information at a service window with a “New Claims” sign, claimants are asked to complete necessary paperwork and return for a document review consultation. Many claimants take the paperwork home as it can run to multiple pages. Some start filling it in, but obviously realising they are missing supporting documentation have to head home. Others arrive with dossier files, forms downloaded from the internet and everything in order. There are no desks to fill out forms, some do it on their knees, leaning on files; some walk over to an unused counter. Throughout the encounter with the office
people are required to produce evidence to substantiate their claim, and to resubmit details of their claim; this repetition is typically read as an effective practice of suspicion used to push claimants towards reliability and orderliness; characteristics that might lift them out of poverty.

The paperwork itself is a varied and personal experience for claimants; full of confusing open ended questions, the ambiguity is unsettling. The rules of each scheme are set out and it is important to colour your answer to the rules of the scheme. For instance, often the reason for unemployment in mid-winter was the ending of Christmas contract work, so each claimant was patiently instructed at the counter that they were laid-off work when their contract was not renewed and thus they were now jobseekers. Claimant’s personal experience was battered into fitting the particular language on the form, and how could the system work otherwise? Even before visiting the office people have often consulted friends, charities, government websites or internet forums to unpick the details of the schemes and how to present themselves.

Beyond the forms for their initial claim, jobseekers must fill out two key forms with their ‘case officer’. The timing and regularity of meetings between claimants and officers is dependent on the claimant’s PEX score, an acronym standing for ‘Probability of Exit’ from unemployment. This is an algorithm based on a pilot study from 2005 which measures the probability of a market outcome based on the demographic, employment history and education and skills of an individual, regardless of current market demand. Claimants meet in groups with officers for instructions in their ‘rights and responsibilities’ and then individually to sign a ‘Record of Mutual Commitments’ and to develop and fulfil a ‘Personal Progression Plan’ (PPP). The former transforms entitlements to benefits into a stipend for fulfilment of the duties of jobseeking, and the latter specifies the offices assessment of the claimant and outlines tasks to be undertaken as a condition of continued receipt of welfare payments. These documents obviously constitute an asymmetrical power-relationship between officers and claimants, yet ‘the agency of the form and the form-filler are not neatly circumscribed’ (Riles, 2006: 23). Some jobseekers reported flexibility and generosity, others contempt and disregard. Crucially, these forms (re)constitute relations within the welfare office, and constitute all claimants as market actors.

Such forms are produced through academic knowledge translated through policy making processes into street-level interventions. Seemingly insignificant pieces of paper are the loci of extensive efforts of governmental intervention, but also are assemblages of historical legacies. Just as the architecture of the welfare office is imposed on the urban environment with an ineradicable appearance of temporariness and ill-fittingness, these forms are poorly sutured with individual lives, thrusting categories and rationalities upon them.

Countertime

Twelve identical customer windows were strung along one wall; all with a clear sheet of toughened glass separating the employee from the claimant at each window. One unused window is for disabled claimants, the design is intended to allow for a wheelchair to be pushed up close to the glass. There is minimal desk space and space for a speaker sits in the hole in the glass pane. A gap at the bottom of the glass is intended to allow customers and employees to move paper from one side to the other. A sharply cut circular opening half way up the sheet of glass is meant to allow conversation between customer and employee. It is too high for people sitting at the counter, too low for people standing. People tend to bend in,
looking at the officer when talking, bending their ear towards the gap when listening. Only a few windows are ever in use. Without any muffling or soft surfaces this encounter in large room has a booming, echoing sound that makes easy conversation impossible, people continually repeat themselves to be heard. The windows in use are all bunched together to facilitate interaction between workers who may exchange queries. The net result is that employees and claimants tend to hear each other’s conversations - so people tend to whisper and talk in stilted code, sometimes even in telegram syntax. This similitude of privacy is occasionally breached, especially when individuals have waited for some time and are annoyed with the outcome, or lack thereof.

Behind the windows are housed the officials in a tight rectangular office space. There is just enough room for the employees’ workstations that accommodate their office supplies and computers, where they log customer tickets in an online tracking system or use the case management system to look up case information. Four main things can happen at the counter. Forms to raise a claim are handed to claimants, paperwork evidencing a claim is provided by the claimant - sometimes copied and returned, sometimes retained, brief chats explaining schemes and decisions; or altercations arising from decisions, disagreements, clarifications or requests for further information or activity happen. From in front of the counter it is almost impossible to know what goes on beyond it. These stilted conversations, with people waiting sitting over one’s shoulder, tend to be generically unfriendly, brusque and official. All of this represents a very personal interaction between the claimant and the state which nonetheless proceeds in public.

Our ethnographic concern with the architecture of this space can be augmented by anthropological accounts of the experience of claiming welfare. These emerged from long-form interviews with jobseekers between 2012 and 2016, among which there are a wealth of different stories, each one chronicling the delicate negotiation of a benefit claim. In many instances the narrative wends through the details of multiple interactions with different officials, confusions, refusals, appeals and a Kafkaesque level of bureaucracy. In particular, interviewees recalled encounters at the hatch as fraught with misunderstanding and covert hostility. “...ya can actually feel, its tangible the kinda resentment coming through from behind the counter...” Others felt that the staff were generally helpful and that the system itself was necessarily impersonal and bureaucratic.

Beyond these individual elements, our concern is particularly the experience of the welfare office as a space:

_I thought that was quite odd ... there was an assumption that a few of us in the room were going to be abusing it ...I suppose that’s justified in a way because some people are going to be abusing the system as well so yeah I would have thought they’d be alright yeah._

Here we see the experience of being monitored and supervised, and an interesting deflection of this suspicion – that ‘others’ might be abusing the system. At first this seems ‘odd’, an infringement against basic social trust, but eventually, an unproblematic technical oversight.

_Something of the ethnographic distance which we have practiced in our thick description of the thin non-space of the welfare office was captured succinctly by one respondent: In a situation where you ever kind of in a situation where you stand outside a situation and see yourself in the situation?_”

The interviewee becomes alienated from their situation, and while their future comfort rests upon successful performance of the
bureaucratic acts necessary to confirm they are a jobseeker, they are somehow not involved. The mundane scene of welfare services here becomes a source of surreal consciousness.

Nevertheless, this site, which is not just bland, formal and bureaucratic but works persistently to reduce individuals to its own categories, there is also a performative logic at work:

*Make sure your CV looks the best it possibly can. I think if you are not working then try your best to kind of do courses or something that looks like you have been active.*

The art of polishing a CV, selling the self, becomes a theatrical performance, for jobseekers as much as the job-search websites which they are referred to, replete with motivational self-help jargon. Central to this is the reduction of the individual to skills and aptitudes, commodities within the labour market.

While our analysis veers towards a critical description of welfare processes, this is generally shared by numerous interviewees. Yet, it is worth considering the diversity of perspectives, for instance, those who were pleased with the outcomes from welfare services:

*They gave me three, two places to apply for this job as well for nineteen hours a week, and I did and I got no answer from any of them, but when I went to TUS they helped me, and had a job for me in no length of time.*

To be clear, TUS is an extension of the welfare office, which generally provides low-skilled work within the community, with a parsimonious top-up to welfare benefits. Effectively, this individual remains within the orbit of welfare services, as a sort of cargo which cannot be sold on the market, whose market-readiness is maintained through ‘make-work’ labour which displaces real employment by the state at a cost below the minimum wage. Yet, for the jobseeker, it is a welcome relief from being constantly judged and rejected by the market.

**Conclusion**

Although the welfare office is one of the few concrete places where the labour market can be seen in motion, this is a market like no other. Traditionally, markets are lively places, rich with textures, sounds, colours and smells, all of which shifts with the daily, seasonal and ritual movement of time. They are places of consumption and production, of strong differences of orientation – between buying and selling, holding out for a better price and lively disagreement. The social welfare office in economic terms is a market intervention to store unwanted labour – holding a stock of labour. Yet, labour is not a commodity but a service and perishes when unused; the state can never sell its holding back into the market. Increasingly, through active labour market policies, the state is converting its role from storing labour to becoming ‘market makers’, although in a curious and complicated manner. Market makers are deal-brokers who match deals in the market, in commercial markets taking a small margin, but in this market the state makes a small loss – by subsidising below cost selling of labour through internships, training programmes and pay-for-work schemes. Within this schema, the social welfare office is more a place to produce labour out of failed labour-sellers, spatially organised to hold people for a time, contort them into waiting and conforming to the system, minimising any attempts to dispute or contest for another position in the labour market, while preparing people for work by investing in their human capital.

Combining the governing and market-making rationalities of the welfare state allows us to make better sense of the hybrid experience of the social welfare office. Cash payments are now more than just a stipend to keep body and soul together, the form of
pious charity from medieval times. Now they are conditional payments to maintain the citizens’ work-readiness. In order to qualify for them, the citizen must present themselves as willing to sell their labour, partially as a commodity, with officially mandated data; they have a place of origin, are stored in a certain place, possess certain qualities or qualifications. Like medieval market-goers, they must make a highly ritualised oath that they are *bona fide*, that they have accurately represented their wares. The highly depersonalising processes of the office are not simply the hall-marks of bureaucracy but reflect the reduction of the citizen to a sort of cargo, being inspected and managed on their way to market. Differentiating between deserving and undeserving claimants is a key element of activation policies, and these complex procedures concretise and embody the abstract term ‘commoditisation of labour’.

Experiences of waiting categorise the citizen as a manager of their own stock of temporarily unwanted labour, and in due course, they will be offered choices between upskilling – adding value to their labour or else, selling cheap, perhaps through state internships. Waiting, attendance, trivial tasks, tedium, indeterminable bureaucratic processes and sheer boredom are themes which emerge strongly from this ethnography and so many others, and from the experiences of jobseekers we interviewed over several years. The theme is so common that it is often unreflected. However, for wage-earners, time is money, a positive resource, yet for those who are warehousing their labour, diligently managing their ‘shelf-life’, time is negative, eroding their value, causing the slow depreciation of value. Here we are not just appropriating the jargon of accounting and economics, but reflecting the reality that employers are less likely to choose the long-term unemployed, and every further week of unemployment makes getting a job less probable. Thus, being forced to wait and fulfil trivial errands by the office is a reminder of how the time of the unemployed has become insignificant, if not quite valueless.

Within the welfare office, principally as required by activation policies, but also in the encouraging leaflets and recommended websites, there is one meaningful use of time. This is the preparation of labour to sell on the market. Working on CVs and filling out application forms is one obvious element, another is the acceptance of contractualised obligations as required by official forms such as the PPP. As a foundation for these advertisements for one’s labour power, the claimant must interrogate themselves as a commodity, whether product or service. They must assess their strengths and weaknesses, identify gaps in their education, training or experience, and consider all options for adding to their human capital. Thus, while there are strongly depersonalising elements to welfare processes, there is also a pronounced scrutiny of what the individual is, and what they have the potential to become.

Thus, the welfare office is not just the reconstitution of the poor-house, but also the back-stage of the theatre, a sort of central casting where so much ‘fresh meat’ and ‘extras’ are housed temporarily. New practices of internship and job-shadowing mean that jobseekers become an ‘under-study’ for a proper role, literally waiting in the wings. Yet, the peculiar architecture, processes and forms of the welfare office constitute the ‘back-stage’ as a continuous ‘audition’, before officials or before the amorphous ‘labour market’. The claimant becomes transitory, undefined, stuck within a ritualistic performance with no fixed timeline. What their new role eventually will be is generally decided by employers who offer them a ‘role’. Furthermore, increased state involvement in the direct provision of workers has redesigned welfare offices as a ‘one-stop shop for employment and entitlement services’, which serve employers as much as
citizens, often creating a cycle between precarious work and welfare with no site of stability (Bauman, 20xx). The apparently absurd process of the welfare office are not actually pointless, but amount to constant, chronic preparation which reduces citizens into commodified labour, so that they are ready and willing to perform any act.

References


INTERVIEW WITH

DIDIER DEMAZIERE

UNDERSTANDING THE LABOUR MARKET

BY T. BOLAND & RAY GRIFFIN

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T. Boland: This special issue is concerned with ‘the labour market’; is this a useful term to use? How should we, as social scientists, engage with the idea of the labour market? Obviously, the term is drawn from economics but here addressed from an anthropological perspective. Does this problem of categorisation and classification emerge in your research, not just theoretically, but empirically also?

D. Demaziere: The term labour market is not a term from anthropology, sociology and the social sciences; it does not arise from our discipline. It is a category borrowed from economics and so we hesitate to use it. At the same time, this category is unavoidable, because the notion of labour market has become ever more important. The issues the term labour market provokes, the process of allocating people and workforce, governing work, the public institutions and private actors that organise this process are too important to avoid. The notion of the labour market makes possible a general analytical framework. But the notion of the labour market is not sufficiently built from a theoretical perspective. I do not think that anyone has declared the notion of the labour market obsolete or useless. So at a theoretical level it is useful but its futility or fragility is obvious. As a social scientist I have to argue that there is not a labour market but there are multiple labour markets.

Not only because the labour market is fragmented or segmented as economics advances, but rather when we focus on the territory, professional, communal or spatial qualities we can see how these weigh heavily on the careers of workers. People rely on the qualities of accessible jobs. So each labour market has a specific geography, specific institutions, networks and specific problems of unemployment. So in my own research on a traditional coalmining community in decline, with limited public transport, high unemployment over a long period of time and high levels of poverty this offers a very different experience to metropolitan unemployment with strong public services, transport and education. Consider the labour market for care workers or for civil servants or for hospital doctors, these are not similar, and each has different rules that organise these careers. So these offer a very different kind of experience of unemployment and so they are very different labour markets. To see and conceptualise these categories beyond an economic perspective is to see their differences.
TB: What are the implications for researchers thinking of labour markets rather than The Labour Market?

DD: People are always located in spaces and work in places; and these have different constraints and opportunities. We need to meet people where they live. Whenever we talk about markets we need to talk about prices and values. If the labour market is indeed a market it is because it is a kind of place where the value of work and the worker are established, calibrated, negotiated, regulated and at times destroyed. It raises the question of the value of work and how to establish good decent remuneration. As social scientists we have to look at the process of valuation as something more than cost, the idea of cost denigrates work and we also must look at the issue of inequalities. Inequalities are shaped by wages and the protection offered to certain types of work, so our analysis of the process of exploring the valuation arises from invitation of the term labour market. Using the term labour market makes me think about the places where it happens and stimulates thinking and discussion about the issue of value, prices and valuation.

R. Griffin: To follow on from that, what is the status of a social science approach to researching labour markets?

DD: The interface between the economic and social science perspectives on the labour market is weak and narrow. Economics is dominant and there is no place to introduce a broader perspective on the labour market. Economists are blind to the questions of institutions and are blinded by their rationalities which focus on incentives. It is not possible to participate and cooperate with such a fully reductionist viewpoint. Questions of employment, unemployment and the labour market has been stolen and monopolised by economists for the past few decades, and for policy makers we do not have the same status as economics and so policies are founded entirely on an economists’ view. For policy makers unemployment is merely an economic problem.

TB: What is your perspective on the state’s involvement in the labour market?

DD: The state is strongly interventionist and regulating since the mid twentieth century in France. The state has been strongly committed to the Keynesian convention of full employment, where the state guarantees the right to work for all. This right is included in the constitution of the 5th republic, and this legitimises and explains the various interventions by the state and public institutions. So since the 1950s the state has been very involved in retraining people who have been laid-off, and from there it transforms into helping problematic populations and situations- so young people become a problem, then mothers, then the disabled. So the states involvement is traditionally very strong and orientated to the fight against the selectivity of the labour market. Particularly the state intervenes and corrects where the labour market is detrimental to our most fragile people.

And, of course, the mission of guaranteeing full employment has not worked. Gradually and more noticeably since the end of the 20th century this transforms by implementing activation policies. Importantly these emerge first at European level, not at national level and it really is a restoration of traditional attitudes to the unemployed- mistrust, suspicion and moralising. The history of unemployment studies is very clear on this transformation. Public action on the
labour market has transformed, Keynes is no more, the state is no longer trying to correct inequalities; the paradigm has changed to everyone in their own situation to be self-responsible, constraining everyone to be active. As you show in your book *The Sociology of Unemployment*, unemployment has been reduced to job-search. The unemployed people have to respond to targets, obligations and controls. The French situation is both similar and different in important ways to other countries; so, for example, my recent work in Belgium was with people who lost their benefits because their jobs search was in their social, family or familiar networks rather than one recognised by institutions. In that system they cannot deal with the individuals whose experience does not fit their system and so people trying to work but with housing, money, relationship constraints are not able to be managed. The unemployed in this situation know that their CV does not fit - because of their age, long periods of inactivity, ethnic origin, lack of skills - and there is a deep gap between these people behave and the way the institutions conceive of job-search. The public interventions are no longer aimed at supporting the most vulnerable and fragile people, but is aimed at subjecting them to market forces and excluding them if they attempt to rely on their own networks. The policy in each country has a different strength, but the overall trend is the same - we now seek to govern the unemployed to make the self-responsible, everyone must convert himself to the needs of the market, everyone must be active.

**TB:** Most interestingly for anthropology, your recent research has addressed varied cultural contexts, for instance, your interviews in Paris, Sao Paulo and Tokyo. What are your reflections on the cultural differences and similarities?

**DD:** At the first level we some common references. The experience of unemployment is organised around a lack of status, the lack of being a normal person with a job. We also see the same understanding of what that experience is now, which is job-search, the experience of unemployment is now the search for the positive status of being a person with a job, of being a good worker. This common tendency is less market oriented where the labour market is more informal - as is the case in Brazil. Beyond this there are significant differences which I link with country specific institutions, standards and cultural aspects. In France unemployment is strongly framed by public institutions that support and control the unemployed. These multiple institutions have a strong influence on the behaviours of the unemployed in offering meaning to the social condition. In Brazil public institutions are weak and so the experience is shaped socially in people’s networks of family, community and charity. These networks, their orientations and
informal activities are more important than the encouragement to find formal employment by state institutions. In Japan unemployment is a shameful status and this culture shapes the experience of unemployment. So people do not activate their social networks, it is a status to be hidden from everyone including your family. Public institutions do are underdeveloped and devaluated, so the unemployed only address themselves. Individual job search without help from public institutions are social networks is the condition of unemployment in Japan. So the cultural, social and institutional shape the personal meaning of unemployment in interesting ways, but the overall experience is now job-search, and the desire for the positive status of being a worker.
An important part of coming to terms with something as awful as the end of the Celtic tiger is due academic reflection. The quickly dashed off austerity journalism of 2008-2011 that attempted to make sense of the crisis in real time entertained and angered; but in lockstep with the economic cycle naturally gives way to more substantial, meditative, worthy academic tomes such as *Austerity and Recovery in Ireland*. Indeed this book attempts and largely succeeds to offer the official polyphonic account of the great national trauma. A mean feat.

Writing these things cannot be easy. One needs to link the intricacies of the change in cyclically adjusted primary balances to the goings on at the 57th Cork Film Festival, without them feeling in some way unsympathetically yoked together. As a collective effort it struggles under its own weight to be both coherent in telling the story and alive to alternatives; veering a little too closely towards coherence for my liking. Gestures towards inclusivity belie what is largely a statisticalised account from the economic imagination; with a natural predilection for M50 orientated economic policy driven accounts. By not engaging with some of the angrier voices, perhaps voices who refused to accept the official account that recovery was underway, this effort is a little premature and presumptuous in concluding that “political and social dissent was limited”. Given the evisceration of the largest majority government in the history of the state in the month after the publication of the book, less than half of Irish people agreed with the books thesis that the recession is over, a somewhat awkward state of affairs for something that aspires to fulsome exploration of all the voices. This group of leading social scientists are not keen to encounter the contested zone of their narrative. The more fawningly congratulatory aspects of this effort flush out the tremendous insight of this book- that we might well be a beaten people.

The unexplored thesis of the text is that the austerity Ireland was subjected too had a more aesthetic and symbolic impact than functional economically oriented one; that the suffering of the Irish people was actually a public apology to the global markets, and the willingness to inflict pain, and be seen to inflict pain was key to regaining access getting past the global markets’ ostracism. The war criminal Winston Churchill once asserted that “History will be kind to me for I intend to write it”, and true to his word, his six-volume account of the events in the aftermath of the Munich bother produces a compelling and self-serving narrative that won the contest of understanding; one that plays down his abominable acts. Economists account of the recession veer towards the economicisation of society that got Ireland into the mess. When
the series of serious economists give way to the more vivid describers of issues (housing, inequality, migration, workplaces), the resignation to economics starts to wear. 4.89% of this book is devoted to exploring the cultural recession, and this interesting chapter quickly falls into economically informed argumentation.

If you open a book about Ireland, factual or fiction, history, economic or sociological inspired, it will say two things- Ireland is rapidly changing, and bad things happened in the past. It is the terrible instinct to offer a post-awfulness maturity discourse that hamstrings this effort at fully accounting for the deep and painful recession. In ethos, this book speaks of a darker recession of the Irish soul, a depressing vista of a country being little more than an economy, where consumption practices have the same register as artistic, spiritual, social or cultural.

Encountering *Austerity and Recovery in Ireland* is an encounter with official M50 Ireland’s heroic discourse of economic recovery, and complemented with some more partisan, angry efforts, goes a long way to picking up the story of where the best little country to do business forgot its way for a while.
BOOK REVIEW

ANTHROPOLOGIES OF UNEMPLOYMENT: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON WORK AND ITS ABSENCE

KWON, J.B. & LANE, C.M., EDS.

REVIEW BY TOM BOLAND

Gathering together ten chapters from many corners of the globe, this edited book problematises and rethinks key categories, especially work and unemployment. The anthropological specificity and attention to detail of each of these chapters, and their diversity when placed alongside each other strongly implies that general economic categories are insufficient to understand complex social processes. Nonetheless, this work also picks out the diffusion of contemporary economic processes like marketisation, state intervention and the commodification of labour. These play out in diverse ways in specific regions and industries, but this volume is more than a round-up of reports; rather it gauges the multiple impacts of various globalising forces.

As editors, Lane and Kwon are to be commended for assembling a diverse range of studies of consistently high quality: Strauss offers an excellent close analysis of the impact of ‘positive thinking’ on jobseekers in California, but beyond mere ideology critique, she demonstrates how the unemployed use these discourses to maintain a meaningful identity when unemployed, and also, that many simultaneously hold sceptical ideas about ‘positive thinking’ simultaneously. Mains fascinating study of the unemployed in Ethiopia shows that ‘To work or to not work was a social decision’ – whereby taking menial work led to social shame locally, but was a route to independence for those who travelled abroad, demonstrating the curious dislocation of ‘economy’ and ‘society’. Regarding the state, Kingsolver tracks how South Carolina presents its ‘reserve army of labour’ as an enticement to businesses, stressing its non-unionised qualities. Fisher presents a co-operative in Nicaragua which failed as an enterprise but succeeded in creating a communal locus. The tension between protesters against precarity and actually precarious workers in France, and the curious persistence of forms of solidarity despite rumours of its demise are explored by Murphy.

All of these chapters are fascinating in their own right, and while each is a contribution to a regional or thematic field, when grouped together the effect is not just the accumulation of fascinating insights, but a sense of work and unemployment as part of our cultural imaginary. Indeed, Lane’s chapter illuminates how the idea of ‘work’ is used as a framing device to make sense of networking during unemployment, and how ‘career’ can make even the most fragmentary employment history meaningful. In Kwon’s chapter, the somatic dimensions of work and its absence become visible, as the dislocation of redundancy is experienced so viscerally that the unemployed find themselves crippled, almost zombified.
This collection is a significant and timely addition to our understanding of unemployment and distils years of careful fieldwork into well written chapters. To an extent, the role of the state and welfare processes in constructing unemployment and work were somewhat under-emphasised, although there are excellent alternatives which trace these in more detail, such as Brodkin and Marsden’s *Work and the Welfare State*. Yet, this also means that we discover more of the experience of individuals who are betwixt and between various forms of work, aside from how their fate is considered and debated by politicians, policy makers, intellectuals and the media.

While this book is thoroughly worth reading on the whole, there is a degree of repetition of theoretical points and conceptual clarification between some chapters which might have been avoided. Although the strength of the book is its anthropological caution against generalisation, the challenge of finding common threads nonetheless might have been taken up more explicitly. Some of this work is taken up in the introduction, opening chapters and conclusion, though hardly systematically. This is not to say that a singular thesis should have been forced after the case studies, rather that the success of many chapters in tracing global processes might have been pursued, finding the similarities despite difference in particular contexts. Perhaps this is work for a further volume, which might be titled with a different combination of plurality and singularity: ‘Anthropology of unemployments’ – with explicit reflexivity about the categories that anthropology brings to bear on understanding the varied and paradoxical experiences named ‘unemployment’ or the ‘absence of work’ among other things.
The dominant paradigm of neoliberal capitalism for many has led to the degradation of working conditions, the lowering of employment rights and the normalisation of temporary working arrangements which loosen attachments to the labour market. The term precariat which was popularised by Guy Standing has firmly entered the lexicon of social science and political discourse to the extent that it has become a catch all place holder term which is invoked to describe sub optimal, informal or temporary working arrangements. One of the main benefits of this book is the excellent opening chapter which offers a fine grained description of the term. This chapter opens with a lengthy quote from a 2015 report published by the International Labour Organisation which outlines succinctly the scale of the problem of precarious work at all levels of the global chains of production. ‘Today, wage and salaried employment accounts for only about half of global employment … the incidence of wage and salaried employment has been on a downward trend … over 6 out of 10 wage and salaried workers worldwide are either in part-time or temporary forms of wage and salaried employment … In short, the standard employment model is less and less representative of today’s world of work’ (pp. 1-2).

These opening statements set the tone for the rest of the book which includes nine ethnographies which encompass a broad range of locations and industries ranging from South African textile workers to South Korean car workers and German Electrical goods manufacturers. The breadth of industries and locations demonstrates the fact of the increase of precarious work and working arrangements at all levels of global production. The bottom up accounts of the lived experiences of precarious workers and the attempts to organise them takes the discussion away from dry statistical analysis and into the realm of ‘thick description’. This allows for meaningful reflection on ‘the human consequences of radically insecure work and living conditions’ (p. 303).

Defining precarious work can be a difficult task; the ILO report quoted above one defines it as ‘a means for employers to involuntarily shift risks and responsibilities on to workers’ (p.6). The key element here is the involuntary aspect as public discourse around precarious work often references flexibility and freedom for the worker to attain balance between their work and home lives. Figures outlined in chapter one demonstrate the fallacious nature of this discussion claiming that ‘as temporary work has increased… so has its involuntariness’ (p. 9). In determining whether or not work is precarious it is necessary ‘to move away from an approach which views standard and non-standard employment as categories separate and distinct from one another and towards a
multidimensional approach in which employment is viewed as being more or less precarious’ (p. 7).

The book is divided into two sections, part one is entitled ‘the experience of precarious work and part two ‘challenging precarious work’. Both parts however are imbued with the question of how local actors can organise effectively when ‘resistance is presently weak and uneven relative to the synchronized force of global corporations and the state’ (p. 304).

A further problem which recurs in these accounts is that of the status of precarious workers in relation to trade unions which are presented throughout the book as the primary and default means of resistance to labour market precarity. The in-between and often temporary status of precarious workers however poses a challenge to this. The relationships between precarious workers and trade unions evident in the ethnographies is one which is characterised by ambivalence with some unions recognising and assisting precarious workers and others seeing them as a threat to the terms of employment of their members. A recurring observation from the ethnographies is that any hard fought gains won after long and (sometimes literally) bruising trade union led campaigns amount to little more than treating the symptoms of precarious work. Little is achieved which alters the underlying causes of these problems such as weak and compliant states, and mobile and globally organised capital. Global chains of production and consumption coupled with the supra spatial and therefore mobile nature of globalised capital means that capital can effectively hold nation states to ransom and foster competition making a race to the bottom between competition states almost inevitable.

The ethnographic pieces thus point to the need for activities of resistance to occur across spatial registers. Global flows of production and consumption are often at odds with trade union movements which are usually local or national. In order to effectively confront transnational organisations it is necessary to engage in a number of realms including the local, the national and the international. As is evident in chapter 9 by Gillan & Lambert local labour disputes can be internationalised via mechanisms of shaming which attempt to attack the goodwill attached to corporate branding and mission statements by co-opting civil society and international networks to mount effective challenges to corporate hegemony. Chapter 10 by Aguiar describes some public shaming tactics employed by the ‘rebel clown army’ to draw attention to poor practices in the cleaning industry of the Netherlands. Mark Thomas in chapter 11 examines Global Union Federations (GUF’s) and their ability to negotiate Global Framework Agreements (GFA’s) which set international labour standards which act as a minimum below which no worker in any link of the chain of production will fall irrespective of location. An intriguing chapter by Cock and Lambert on environmental precarity draws out and extends the meaning of the term to include the forms of precarity which are caused by outputs of heavy industries which result in environmental degradation rendering the lived environment precarious.

Limitations of space preclude in depth engagement with the ethnographies in this book yet they are all worthy and self-contained pieces of work. The overall picture drawn is one which demonstrates the social damage wrought by the normalisation of precarious work while pointing to the need for resistance to occur at multiple levels.