

# Precarious states

## advice, governance and care in settings of austerity

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### Two-day workshop

based on ESRC project *An Ethnography of Advice*

Time/Date: 31<sup>st</sup> May/1<sup>st</sup> June 2018.

Venue: Parish Hall Basement (PAR.LG03),  
LSE, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE.

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Philanthropic counsel, emergency assistance, charitable intervention, do-good-ish interference: these are epithets applied (often critically) to the arena of aid to less developed countries, but not often considered in relation to 'life back home'. This workshop draws attention to the repatriation of such assistance to modern European settings. It offers an anthropological take – in settings of austerity – on advice and care, using them as diagnostic tools that help to illuminate 'the state of the welfare state' today.

The workshop will explore how interconnected problems - debt, housing, immigration, mental health - are affected by the withdrawal of state funding, bringing anthropological perspectives on politics and the law into dialogue with those on economy and value. Instead of seeing the domains of the state, the market and civic society as discrete (Cannell and McKinnon 2013), we will explore how they are juxtaposed and mediated, as difficulties in reconciling official requirements with social reality intensify, leaving rights and care to be granted according to a non-standardized evaluation of individual situations (Dubois 2009). The activists, brokers, or idiosyncratic officers who operate in these interstices make calculations that are simultaneously ethical and economic, requiring complex forms of calculus in order to convert material resources into care-oriented values of the public good, or vice versa. Competing visions of moral worth and social justice permeate the everyday deliberations of those who administer, support and advocate advice. Meanwhile, their client/dependents find themselves increasingly at the mercy of local authorities, immigration regimes, landlords, banks and debt collection agencies. In settings where social movement activists provide 'self-help', struggles and dilemmas occur over how best to instantiate social justice, provide assistance and balance individuals' moral judgments

against the collective good, or convert between these diverse forms of value (Bear et al 2015).

**Advice.** Advisers act to correct mistakes made by state agents, force disparate branches of the state to speak to one another, mimic the state and give it a new guise, offer sites where state power may be challenged, or – increasingly – circumvent the state and other formal institutions altogether. This workshop tracks the mediations that advice enables between the state, the market, charitable initiatives, families, and ordinary citizens, exploring both the dovetailing of and divergence between political, economic and legal imperatives and domains, and highlighting the centrality of ethical concerns, as advisers, activists and the citizenry struggle to make themselves heard. Where in the post-war years welfare (and advice) were furnished and funded by the state, its role is shrinking as the nature of state-citizen relations is reconfigured. Those in need now include new waves of people facing the precarious living conditions prompted by a shift from state-planned to neoliberal economies, growing deindustrialisation, the rise of a service economy, and the effects of financialisation. There are those in employment who cannot make ends meet, those in debt for reasons beyond their own control, and those displaced from their home countries by the knock-on effects of economic crisis but insecure in their host ones. The drastic shrinking of funds for aid and assistance, previously an essential underpinning of the welfare state, has been accompanied by an increase in those who will be needing such aid, and the entry of entirely new sets of players to fill the gap. As a result of such economic reforms, the caring role of the state has been reconfigured and the responsibility to provide assistance and essential counsel expanded beyond the agencies that formerly provided (and subsidized) those services. Responding to such needs, we witness the emergence of new caring agents: informal networks, self-help groups and activists.

**'Ethics of care'**. While recent engagements (Held 2006, Tronto 1994) have tended to focus on processes of personhood-making (Edwards 2000; Degnen and Tyler 2017), we propose to extend the call for a new 'political ontology of the self' (Skeggs & Loveday 2012) to questions of citizenship and governance (Koch 2017). Care directs the distribution and allocation (but often

misallocation) of resources and hence becomes a central node for implementing governance across different social groups. In one example, private agencies may mediate between the state and migrants, enabling an exclusionary immigration policy, yet also act as sites for challenging state power. In others, getting access to the food bank, to debt relief, or to the ranks of those intent on occupying one of the repossessed properties allocated by activists, depends upon relationships of solidarity, but new forms of inequity may also be enshrined. Likewise, in debt advice, where the state, the market and charity are locked in an uneasy embrace, payments take on different moral meanings: they may be viewed as owed to the state so as to balance the fiscus and contribute to the common good, or owed to financial creditors where they accrue as immoral profit. Financial corporations, in recognition of their negative role, have started to subsidise advice and are newly endowed with moral agency, while the (re-) emergence of paternalistic forms of charity, through faith-based, unpaid advice work, indicate a neo-Victorian re-moralisation of poverty.

The workshop seeks to explore 'the state of the welfare state' at a time when austerity politics, an entrenched crisis of welfare provision, and the reconfiguration of state-market relations, have called into question the post-war logic of the welfare consensus. It investigates how redistributive intentions are rendered increasingly difficult by funding cuts, and acknowledges the deleterious effects of austerity regimes as they chip away at the heart of welfarism, rendering people 'expropriable' (Davey 2016). But it also seeks to counter overly pessimistic assessments that uniformly foreground the punitiveness of such new regimes in terms of the rise of a 'neo-liberal Leviathan' (Wacquant 2009) or that exclusively emphasise Foucault-style 'self-discipline'. Advisers working at the coalface, and activists striving to broaden their struggles, seek 'ethical fixes' (Pia 2016) to respond to pressures by delivering fair outcomes in the interests of all. In drawing attention to the work of advisers, activists and ordinary citizens who engage in

advice-seeking processes, we foreground an analytical and ethnographic engagement with an ethics of care that continues to exist at a time when many have seen the decline of collective and redistributive responsibilities in the UK and beyond.

#### References

- Bear, Laura, Karen Ho et al. 2015. *Gens: A Feminist Manifesto for the Study of Capitalism*. *Cultural Anthropology* <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/652-gens-a-feminist-manifesto-for-the-study-of-capitalism>
- McKinnon, Susan, Fenella Cannell. 2013. *Vital Relations: Modernity and the Persistent Life of Kinship*. School for Advanced Research Press.
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- Wacquant, Loïc. 2009. *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Duke University Press.

**THURS 31st****COFFEE****10.30 – 12.30****Panel 1: Housing, financialisation and urban development**

- 1.1 Matt Wilde (LSE/Leicester) 'Affective leadership: commoning amid enclosure on a London council estate'
- 1.2 Ana Gutierrez (LSE) "'El hogar no es lo mismo de antes": Making and Un-making precarious homes among women activists in Spain'
- 1.3 Luna Glucksberg (LSE) 'The opposite of precarity: housing, stability and wealth in elite London'
- 1.4 Jaime Palomera (Universitat de Barcelona) 'The home as an asset: scrutinizing the nexus among home-ownership, rentier capitalism and social reproduction'
- Discussion Catherine Alexander (Durham)

**12.30 – 13.30****LUNCH****13.30 – 16.00****Panel 2 Urban welfarism and austerity**

- 2.1 Cristina Grasseni/Robin Smith (Leiden) 'Solidarity, Advice and Care in urban/rural food reconfigurations in Italy and Croatia'
- 2.2 Martijn Koster, Lieke vd Veer, Janne Heederik (Radboud University) 'Advisers and Activists: The Voluntarization of Care and Welfare in Rotterdam and Manchester'
- 2.3 Antonio Pusceddu (Universitat de Barcelona) 'Austerity, the state and precarious urban welfarism in Italy. A view from the South'
- 2.4 Deborah James (LSE) and Sam Kirwan (Warwick) "'Sorting out income": transnational householding and austerity Britain'
- 2.5 Francisco Arqueros (Maynooth) "'You don't have a right to anything": deservingness revisited'
- Discussion Deborah James (LSE) Insa Koch (LSE)

**DRINKS/DINNER Benugo Bar and Kitchen, BFI, Belvedere Road, South Bank, London, SE1 8XT****FRI 1st****10.00****COFFEE****10.30 – 12.30****Panel 3 Quality advice and funding cuts**

- 3.1 Tobias Eule (Universität Bern/LSE) 'Rumours of Quality: Asylum Advice in Switzerland'
- 3.2 James Organ 'Law Schools and advice sector collaboration: the view from Liverpool in the age of LASPO'
- 3.3 Jennifer Sigafoos "'Firefighting"' austerity advice services'
- 3.4 Lisa Hahn 'Strategically Mobilizing (against) Migration Law'
- Discussion Tobias Eule, James Organ, Jennifer Sigafoos, Lisa Hahn

**12.30 – 13.30****LUNCH****13.30 – 15.30****Panel 4: Popular authoritarianism**

- 4.1 Insa Koch/Ryan Davey (LSE) 'Popular authoritarian revisited: class and coercion in British state liberalism'
- 4.2 Anna Tuckett (LSE) 'Gatekeeping Britishness: Muscular nationalism and the UK citizenship test'
- 4.3 Giacomo Loperfido (Universitat de Barcelona) 'Locality, trust, and "the people": crisis and the decline of Venetian populism'
- 4.4 Gillian Evans (Manchester) 'Surplus to Requirements: precarious populism and the state of post-industrial society in the UK'
- Discussion Katharine Tyler (Exeter)

**15.30 – 17.00****PLENARY**

Laura Bear, Bev Skeggs

