

An ethnography of advice: between market, society and the declining welfare state

Readings and Methods Workshop: 29 September 2015

Potential collaborators. Sam Kirwan, Morag McDermott (Bristol), Mel Nowicki (Royal Holloway). How to interact with these?

Insa mentioned some PhDs in the Law Dept: one on telephone advice; Kate someone doing work on LiPs (litigants in person) and how this is affecting things; Joseph Spooner who is working on insolvency cases.

Tobias – I have another project I'm working on, and there is a similar project in Switzerland funded by the same institution (we were excited and afraid) – what we did was to organise events together with people from both teams jointly organising sessions (eg Swiss Italian border) – rather than 'joining forces' it is about having events that are co-organised and still have their own separate identities.

Anna. If we want to focus on broader anthropological stuff, we don't want to box ourselves into narrower social policy-type stuff.

Ana. I am in contact with the Sociology dept in Madrid and I will be a visiting fellow (esp in Anthropology) but both departments have people working on related topics: debt, housing, migration, what happens in Spain.

Coffee Break

Ask for ideas on how to (re) structure the day. Discuss how/when to plan future meetings: how many, what role for advisory board, etc.

Tobias: I still don't get what we are looking at. He hands around a map – state/market/individual. From my perspective, I have looked at state/individual relation as mediated via agencies. What a lot of you look at is individual perspectives with peers; at brokers; at classic NGOs. There are these new semi-private arrangements. In this triangle we have a lot of different agents – my worry is, are we trying to capture all of this? Do we have a joint perspective? If we were only to focus on state and advice funded by that state we would be missing out: if we are only looking at collective organisations we might miss out.

DJ.

Ana: Ryan's, Insa's and mine are trying to interlink these things from the point of view of individuals; in Anna's work it is also individuals but mediated via the actions of these intermediaries. To me the first thing to do is to start with individuals. Or it can be the other way around. But in my case I cannot talk about the state or the market without talking about how these people are connected to them.

Matt. I am trying to decide whether to put myself in an institutional setting. I went to eviction resistance training. Private renter, got into arrears, had mental health problems, went to get advice from CAB in Walthamstow but they did not have a specialist so she had no support. She went to the borough housing office but she felt they were on the side of the council, then she came into contact with the radical housing activists, so now she is adopting a more confrontational attitude towards the state. She had gone to Shelter. So you had the individual, who used a corporate NGO, learned the law, then got into a collective setting. What interested me was – depending on what advice you get, you'll get pushed into a different

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direction. Had she been in a different place it might have been different. I still couldn't tell if it is useful to work in a state office.

Anna. But you might want to find out how/what she did what she did – so you might want to spend one day a week in a housing office.

Ryan. Going in the debt advice office made it possible to understand what the individuals were referring to. I have a similar thought: do I want to do institution based research.

Insa. Whether to start with institution or individual will depend on what we want to do. I understand that we are moving away from an institutionalized analysis, which might try to come up with a black letter approach.

Tobias. In our case for support we do have a general framing. So do we try to do what we say we are going to do?

Insa. See Dubois – when you see how people who are welfare claimants approach – isn't our basic premise that policy issues do not work out as intended?

Tobias. If the big theme is 'there is a big shift to the market', then how do we make sure methodologically that we capture these things? We might find out that that is not relevant at all – the type of advice might or might not be useful (depending on how knowledgeable the person). I am worried about getting an idea on how these different approaches to advice and its impact on the individual play out.

Insa. I think you are starting with a different perspective – mapping out a holistic approach. Whereas we are starting with a specific project.

Insa. But there are 7 or 8 of us, how do we make sure that we are coming up with sufficiently divergent things.

Ryan. It is also about 'what counts as advice and what does not'. Why, if it is CAB is it advice, if a debt management company.

Tobias. Is there something that we might miss? This is the key question.

Insa. This map is one picture: what about another more thematic one – eg focused on housing, debt, etc.

DJ.

Anna – the local state can often bring out very different kinds of things: the national state might say 'no' but the local one will say 'yes we will do it'. A lot depends on the specific local authority.

Matt. You have labour councils who are bringing in private funding, and there are local councillors who are resisting it, so there are interesting complexities here.

Anna. Re Palomera, financialisation on the ground, how tensions play out on the ground.

Matt. If we meet in 3 months' time we can return to these methodological issues with some practical examples. We might find that we get barred from certain kinds of access – certain people might not actually let you in.

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Insa. I was more worried about community members judging me for being affiliated with the council – this was one of my key problems, I could not interview the police because I didn't want to be known as affiliated to the police.

Anna. You might have to become an adviser and this could skew things.

Ryan – yes, things got obscured from me. I was thought of as 'that loans man'. It was useful being less involved with it over time.

Insa. There are totally different logics at stake. You talk about how people feel obliged, but yet also joke about it and live for the day/time.

DJ.

Ryan. Do we want to encounter people's encounters with the law? Or 'what is the work of the law'?

Tobias. We initially framed it more as the 'advice' encounter etc. – not so much vis a vis the law.

Ana. I was present in certain advice sessions though I did not write about them. When I was in those sessions it was difficult to separate how they received the advice from the question of 'how they experienced the law'.

Ryan. Maybe it is a question when people are engaging with advice organisations are they still engaging with the law?

Anna. DF the Bristol workshop – for the CAB people advice was only encounters with the law. One was 'information' which is 'just the facts' and 'advice' is legally framed. #

Tobias – law and legality and expertise is another problem I have. A lot is about finding ways to deal with the problem cluster; the right way for you might be looking for loopholes etc. But do we need to know what the actual legal possibilities are. Some advice givers give people advice to lie low rather than to go for regularisation. So how far is 'hard policy' and 'policy possibilities' something we need to take into account.

Insa. We need to know this, but to do creative research that only allows us to point to discrepancies, but it is not everything.

Tobias. To go back to the eviction workshop – if we knew that the workshop could have given the right answer, it might have ended up in a different setting. I.e. could they have found an outcome that might have worked.

DJ. On how precariat is generated – a bit as with immigrants but in this case they are British nationals.

Anna. Citizenship is here important.

Insa. For welfare claimants, a random and pragmatic decision can be the thing on which people make decisions: (same with Tobias, etc.) in Germany, they don't raid people's houses because they don't care. If that is the case then why are people so scared?

Anna. But it might be that the media makes for scare tactics.

Tobias.

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Matt. It is the apparent randomness that keeps you worried.

Tobias. Following Veena Das, it is the magic of the state.

Ana. Things like language barriers, trying to translate, but there are still random raids, etc. The state might be doing random checks, just to scare. But migrants might call the Home Office too. Even I didn't know if the form would work – but they would go to the lawyers who spoke Spanish.

Ryan. Interesting position. We have all this research people have done already, how people do cash in hand work, don't want to go to advice centres – given all of this that we know, how do people now behave in specific advice settings. Do advisers have a sense that they are being fed a certain version of events.

Matt. What about volunteering? We will get access, we'll learn what the legal stuff is about? What do people think? I am thinking of this.

Anna. It might be different here. In Italy it is quite informal, but here in Britain it requires a lot more formality. You can always claim ignorance.

Insa. It depends on where you go. In B L, when I tried to shadow I was still seen as partisan. There are organisations that are not actually 'called' advice. McKinsey Friends.

Matt. That came up in the meeting I was in, someone would go with you, just a presence in the room.

Insa. It operates in settings where you don't have a lawyer, but you just go along to give moral support. So there are other ways of getting training.

Matt. Everyone says you need more than advice.

Insa. From a person's point of view, the priority might be v different from what the legal person believes. The person she interviewed was worried about his running tap, he committed suicide, it was not the issue of his heavy debts.

Ryan. For the adviser, it might have been very hard to understand where he was coming from.

Tobias. Here, it might have been better to have training 'this is a wellbeing problem'. I am fascinated with how these immigration people focus on 'immigration' rather than other things. You need 'intercultural training: How to present something to a Japanese person.' Not how to deal with fear, anxiety etc. In prolonged situations of precarity, the pigeonholing of 'mental health' may be the only way to bracket it.

Insa. This might come up as a shorthand in many research projects. Ryan's chapter was good on this. Temporality. People who live in the present and do not plan ahead. To a benefits office this could be a straightforward case of mental health, why else would they smoke a fag instead of spending money on their children?

Ryan. Mental health might become a residual category.

We talk about the state; people's belief that they are dealing with a liberal state, human rights are respected etc.

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Insa. Although the state may be all these different things, it is nonetheless experienced often in quite a homogenous way – they did always experience things in a very particular way. You identify as belonging to a community, and people's experience of this was quite particular.

Tobias. The question is then, who do people think of as the state? What makes the state? All of them probably interact with particular state actors? Is it a common lens of translation and a certain type of practice.

Insa – I thought of it as framed via 'vernacular' ideas. The 'them' could include people you'd fallen out with. We need to move away from these categories. But from how many different perspectives?

Matt. When I worked in housing in Manchester, lots of people actually worked for Manchester City Council – how does this complicate things? When I worked there, you'd adopt a certain persona and then when you walk out of the door you adopt a different persona.

Tobias – a lot of the people who work in advice offices are NOT that well off. We are talking about the 'same people' on either side of the divide. Are people helping or are they 'exploiting'. It is often assumed that co-nationals are exploiters.

Ryan. In certain neighbourhoods we will have this 'people vs the state' idea. For me it was very pronounced. You'd almost want to look for the people in the interstices.

DJ. I make the point about the vacuum, the empty space that might be experienced.

Ana. For my migrants, the NHS was always seen as the benevolent wing of the state.

Tobias: when you talk of the us/them dichotomy – there can be ambiguities of benevolence. See also the Gupta article: the local could be good vs the national being bad, and vice versa.

Insa. It is also something that is present in civil society – locals can break into your home. It is not only the state. The anxiety here is about the private companies that are coming in, but with legal sanction. The criminal and the legal enforcer can be in the same experiential world.

Ryan. Analytical dilemma. People are more preoccupied by the coercive aspects of the state. But we all know that there are cross cutting ties etc. there is a tension, people will have these interactions with different types of provision.

Lunch Break

Report backs:

Matt Wilde on Harvey. Read first half. More relevant for his and Ana's; but perhaps also for others – some parallels with Palomera. He is trying to fill in gaps in Marxist theories of accumulation. Lefebvre – what would a right to the city look like in the contemporary era. The kinds of places people want to live in – all of this has been eroded by neoliberalism. Urban spaces are where surplus products and populations are 'dumped'. – a Marxist theory of the city. A chapter on rent, on financial crisis and its relation to housing. Second part of book is on contemporary struggles around the right to the city and how resuscitated in recent years. Draws on Holston's work and others, plus writes on Occupy. Useful as a backdrop: is a good starting point, but anthropologists usually find stuff to critique.

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Ideas on how to theorise the urban is interesting. Eg Plymouth is not a megalopolis. Sink estates in Oxford. Palomera's article might be more germane.

Tobias. A lot of his theory encompasses Luxembourg – there are not these separate spheres with markets being shaped by the state, but more like these entanglements that we are speaking of. It will be interesting to compare the UK, Germany, Spain in these terms.

DJ Mentions Fred Cooper – on the struggle for the city.

Matt. The idea of a 'right' to a home/house, goes against market logics. You are asking the state that you are antagonistic to, for rights/benefits.

Ana. Lefebvre queries the ideas – there is also the 'right' to the public space. The basic right is also to the space in which you ought to be able to belong.

Matt. I thought – re Ryan – about the guy who was 'good' and was trying to aspire to 'being a good debt repayer'. So it might be more like a mish-mash of ideas, people are working these things out in practice.

Ryan. People can waver – between feeling that they do have that right, and feeling that they do not.

Insa. Ideas of ownership can be different from legal categories. Dench et al *The New East End* on working class communities in Bethnal Green, on how scarcity of housing turns into 'there are too many foreigners'. It is more about local ownership of resources that is 'control over housing stock'. Legal scholar who writes on the new urban commons, making the point that legal scholars should incorporate more relational ideas, connecting back to legal individualism.

Matt. So this woman was being 'normative' then she became more 'radicalised' – everyone should have a house. Ties into 'respectability', emergence of earlier social housing, Beverly Skeggs.

Anna. The old anthro on personhood, and how we don't really think of ourselves as 'individuals' – we are going to be exposing how people don't necessarily think they are individuals. We are not doing a 'personhood' ethnography as such.

Insa. Howell in Northern Ireland, on how people negotiate the welfare benefits system – you can prove your worth in other ways.

Ryan. What do people mean by 'haves' or 'have nots'. If there is a discourse of rights then who grants those rights?

Tobias. Look back at the Chicago school, they talk a lot about precarity, pre the world war welfare state – there might be parallel experiences and ways to frame this without reference to a 'loss' of stability: since there was so little stability at that earlier time. The couples in Ryan 's chapters might never have experienced that stability.

Insa. Even then, the right to housing was not that strong.

Tobias. Are there any good studies on alienation? From reading Palomera's work it sounds like you go from vulnerability to activism. But what about those who don't politicise, who just get lost within different scenarios of advice, and do not get drawn into activism?

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Anna. At the workshop we went to there was a difference between those who just deal with cases and those who take things up one level and turn it into a campaign. Often getting advice is very individualised, and is anti-activist, it can even inhibit it. It can enable the system to function.

Matt. The housing people see it as an opportunity to seize.

In Spain, 50% unemployment, this must have an impact on how many people start getting to be activists.

Insa. The political party I worked with, what struck me is the emphasis on ‘politicization’ and on how ‘we are in a key moment of crisis’ – but little attempt to link this with existing literature on brokerage politics. How direct action can be quite depoliticizing. A lot of us work with people who want to be more than just problem solvers.

Matt. Interesting – Unite, the largest union, have started new scheme – Unite community members, you can pay £2.50 a month and be a member. Woman running the meeting was a union person, was a rep, I am guessing she is paid.

Insa. like claimants unions, people who get together and sort out issues.

Ryan. I wonder if they are the same ones who joined up in the 80s. The most recent thing in lived memory in Plymouth is the Poll tax, there are resonances with that.

Matt. In London they are referencing Spain.

Ana. Yes, and in Barcelona this is now explicitly linked to politics; no-one thought this was going to happen. The Pah has a chance of winning the elections.

Ana on Moorhead. It was dry and boring, and pretty predictable. ‘When people go and ask for advice, their problems come in clusters - The main one might be related to others. How do advisers deal with them? Do they just signpost them or give them specialist advice?’ But they don’t take into account gender, context, etc. The main question is – how do we go beyond these common sense conclusions? How do we get past the banality of these kinds of studies?

Insa. We are trying to understand how policies that are unidirectional go wrong. We can understand... [But that is their conclusion]. Hazel Genn. How these complexities lead toward a ‘right or wrong’ legal system. How does this play out in relation to our democracy?

Matt. What they do not do is to look at the complexities of people’s lives outside of the advice setting itself.

Ana. In terms of the impact, what we are going to do is to base ourselves on these assumptions but to look at how they play out on the ground on an everyday basis.

Tobias. At the same time, there are two different reactions: one is – look at other forms of advice that people are getting elsewhere. There is also a neoliberal take on this – you go to one – i.e. the Universal Credit. There are two utterly diverging perspectives. I am interested in how these more neoliberal style arrangements actually work through. The idea is ‘if you have a one stop shop you also have a single, joined up thinking’ system.

Ryan. It’s not like advisers are compartmentalising as much as they are required to. There IS a discourse that these things are joined up; it would be interesting to look into how *our* idea of the joined up aspect intersects with *their* one.

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Insa - asks for more on how the UC actually works.

Matt. Except for the housing benefit – which will involve still going to the council.

DJ in Germany?

Tobias. There are still separate offices, but it is all done through the social services, and there is a strong linkage between the Federal State-paid thing and the other things.

DJ. Has the outcome of this been studied?

Tobias. There is supposed to be a study.

Insa. To me it is obvious that we are not just replicating these things. The Forbess/James piece shows how expert advice givers move into highly complex forms of mediation, often even litigation.

Tobias. But that is from the advice givers' perspective.

Insa. It is worth focusing on the same settings but then moving beyond as well.

Ana. In Bristol, at the CAB thing, talking about the emotional labour stuff that advisers do – this Moorhead is not talking about that. What about the levels of exhaustion? The way it becomes a moral project.

Tobias. How people try to 'de-emotionalise' it as well.

DJ. Refers to her work with Evan Killick.

Ana. The CAB people are doing what looks like care work. Not as direct as domestic work, more like managing information as given from one person to another. There are many useful references on this.

Insa. See Wacquant – about how the masculine sides of the state is being imposed (vis a vis the more feminine aspect – and these aspects are more feminised and not accommodated in the more macro theories).

Ryan. How advisers are managing these feelings. The interplay between the technical and the emotive; when advisers see themselves as technicians and when as compassionate. One guy in Plymouth, when you spoke to him, was anti compassion, but in the setting he was both avuncular and detached. That too is a kind of affective management – also a kind of emotional labour. You can perform emotional labour.

Anna on Dubois.

He is very Foucauldian, argues that people in France who are going to houses, having interviews, assessing whether benefits being claimed are appropriate – it is a form of control. Central idea is about the gap between policy on paper and in practice – down to individual officers' own world views, how they make judgments. In the 2009 one, he is writing to a policy audience and we would agree with him, but in the other one that shows how policy plays out on the ground seems to be really bad – it is more like a tool to control the poor. The idea that all have their own particular rational choice theory, and this cascades down the system and how this has a disconnect with the way people actually live.

It is written in a context in which there is a new discourse on responsabilisation.

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Tobias. He based himself in welfare offices and then followed up through interviews, so two parts are – as with my book – on how policy gets made on the hoof. But he also shows ‘sense making’ operates. Because he is able to bring these views together, having seen the interaction and then going to look at them (which I was scared to do) ... he managed to bring out some of the discrepancies.

Anna. He also historicizes the stuff very well, he is showing how the thing changes over time.

Tobias. I am sceptical of the institutionalisation of bureaucracy argument: it is peculiarly French. If there is a tradition in Germany it is more ‘we don’t know what we are doing, we have to reform it’. That is in fact the institutional tradition of Germany. It is a tradition/strategy to do this in a setting where ‘something has changed’ – we need more money etc.

Anna. In Italy the ethos is ‘nothing works’. In Switzerland it is ‘we do have a tradition’. Boris was talking about placements, assessing, it is about creating a particular kind of German subject. Dubois

Tobias – in all these settings it is ‘managing discontinuity’.

Insa. I find it hard to believe that France had such an amazing welfare state. This is the official narrative everywhere but in the UK it is so far away from what really happened.

Anna. Maybe he is accepting the official French tradition.

Matt and Insa have an argument over the extent of universal benefits.

Tobias. What has changed is that in the German case, there was more of an account of ‘including those who were previously discriminated against’ but it is now ‘universal’. But also strongly sanctioned.

Anna. Someone from a poor background would now be far less likely to be able to do this ‘making music’.

Tobias. Now there is exclusion based on inactivity, before it was ...

Ryan. Narratives of loss. What we think of as regulating was about giving these things the sanction of law, there were multiple kinds of regulation.

Tobias. Graeber on bureaucracy – that it is an increase rather than a retreat of bureaucracy that is going on right now. I am thinking of how the analysis of capitalism – disembedding and re-embedding. ... it is a constant to-ing and fro-ing rather than a continual linear narrative. Cyclical waves: expansion and contraction.

Moving class and community Rogaly and Taylor – the shift from welfare paternalism.

Tobias. Are we talking about loss – in a nostalgic sense?

Insa. Not so much ‘is there more or less bureaucracy’ but more ‘is there a personalised bureaucracy’ or ‘do we operate via telephone calls?’

Tobias – it is replacing a whole lot of paperwork, except it has turned into a web based form rather than a long paper form. It is not so much a ‘change from the good old days’ – it is more of the same.

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Matt. It is easier to personalise the state if there is someone with a face and a name.

Ana. It is also about 'what kind of person do you have to become' in order to get access to all these different things. What types of people did the state create – in a paternalistic way? Now, who are the deserving ones? It is about being literate, being able to access technology, etc.

Ryan. There are instances where the consumer might not want to have a face to face interaction. There are arenas where you can have a more disclosive connection: here is the tactics of this company, etc. there is one called Consumer Action Group – online chat spaces.

Anna. The 'it is an offence to give advice' – it is strongly connected to 'legal' and to 'not getting sued' – this is something we should think about in different settings: which kinds of agencies are you able to consult?

Tobias. Why is it so different in my experience? A lot of people ask for more formality, they want an email, this is something they can hold on to. Regarding the fear of giving advice that might be in the grey zone – there is a stark difference between state-funded NGOs that have good ties to the immigration offices, and to other state agencies, etc. – such as the housing office. They are more integrated into a state-driven approach. There are other types – the corporate NGOs never get those who just want to stay in limbo. There is a stark division of diff intuitional logics.

One key ways for NGOs to get advice is through cross referral.

Ryan. On emotional labour. What is the atmosphere in an advice office? What is the sort of mood? The one in Plymouth was very depressing. One guy said 'this building makes people ill'. Plymouth does something to you.

Anna. In Italy it was more fun. People got quite angry but a lot of time they also had a lot of fun.

DJ. How at SAfH they would do 'mindfulness'.

Insa. How there would be stuff on welfare scroungers, etc. Have you-all read Lois Wacqant? He is the major sociologist writing on transformations in the welfare state. The punitive logic of law and order – *Punishing the Poor*.

Tobias. It is a very American perspective.

Matt. It is not all redundant. The blurring of welfare and law/order is definitely true – it is just that that is not the whole story.

DJ On the middle class.

Ryan. Skeggs. The working class is an historical object of analysis in the UK – so why is my attention directed in this way?

Insa. In the great class survey, middle class people were identifying themselves as working class.

Tobias. The Guy Standing book and Therborn's article on it in the New Left Review – on what is the potential of this new mob. The politicisation of the precariat. Mike Savage. Isabell Lorey. 2015. *State of Insecurity. Government of the Precarious*, London/New York: Verso.

Back to methods

Tobias. The more we focus on individual journeys the more we will be talking on precarity, but the more we look at the more collective aspect, the more we will move away from that.

In my other project, we are looking at 1. border controls and 2. Being policed. We could do something similar. This is how we figured our way through the problem in that project.

Matt. How easy is it to pursue people back home? Can you ‘change hats’?

Anna. Often people have to come back multiple times, so you just called them.

Ryan. I called up people who were connected at the advice service – but no one wanted to speak to me. There was a strong resistance.

Matt. If I work with a grassroots group in Hackney, will it also be unwise to cross over and work as an adviser?

Insa. Yes it would be unwise – they think you are a person. They will get suspicious if they see you in other settings – as a spy.

DJ. Questions Tobias about it.

Tobias. It is about comparing myths to practice in each case.

Tobias. A few points:

1 to go beyond Moorhead etc. – on how these problems are all interconnected. Can we actually go beyond these things? How layered are these things, how far was it evident that the bits were all interconnected? Eg in Ryan’s case, getting rid of one type of debt in order to get another. How much time does it take to get into this level of complexity?

2 Bad advice. What is our attitude? experience in immigration advice – being done by volunteers, many of whom are politically interested. In some cases, they gave bad advice, both legally and practically. It can be the ‘lack of expertise’ and do we ask ‘are there people who have no clue’ and how do we react to this. The idea of ‘burn your papers’ – but this can be very short term and it can leave you in limbo in perpetuity.

Anna. It is relational. If someone was able to understand etc. you might be able to advise them better. Many of my people would continually challenge and query, there’d be rumours and these too constituted advice.

Tobias. I can play the researcher card ‘I didn’t understand, can you explain’ and then they become more able to see where they made the mistake. The types of evidence gathered by home invasions can be a misleading. Is bad advice an empirical category – and what do we do when we see it? (Answer – wait and see).

Insa – it is sometimes linked into particular logics of policy malpractice. Judges in court often act more as interveners, settling cases, because it might help them in getting promoted, so there may be self-interest at stake. Can advice be bad advice at all?