THE SOCIOLOGICAL OBSERVER

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

BY THE SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION OF IRELAND
INTRODUCTION:

SOCIOLOGICAL READINGS OF THE PANDEMIC IN IRELAND

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Some weeks ago we put out a call to the sociological community connected to the SAI, requesting Thought Pieces on the COVID-19 Pandemic. Our expectation was greatly exceeded with seventeen sociologists responding, which we share with you in this first edition of the Association’s newsletter: *The Sociological Observer*. In what is probably a reflection of the times, but also a heartening sign of the vibrancy of publicly engaged sociological commentary the newsletter has expanded into something more akin to a book. Perhaps we should not be surprised, as the pandemic is not only a crisis causing enormous disruption, suffering and long-term transformations in how we will live, but is also a sociological litmus test, or as Ryan Nolan puts it in one the articles, a ‘breaching experiment’, in which a sudden event and the responses to this has revealed an enormous amount about the macro and micro structures of our society. The pandemic has thrown into relief the hierarchy of different forms of knowledge, structures of social stratification, the degree of social trust, the manner in which modernisation produces risk, the operation of systems, in particular health, and the role and malleability of social practices and customs.

You must excuse us in the speed in which we have been able to publish this work. Events have moved quickly, and so figures and policies cited in pieces will have changed. However, they remain important statements that capture the contingency of the moment they were written in. We are not journalists, and in particular, we have learnt that we are not newspaper editors, and rapid response sociological insight is something we are learning how to provide. However it is noteworthy, that while two months has been a long time in
sociology lately, the pieces written at the earlier point in the pandemic continue to be extremely relevant. This points to the fact that while we are sharing these works with you as the lockdown ends, we will continue to live very much in the shadow of the coronavirus and the developments of the past three months.

The newsletter is produced in collaboration with the *Irish Journal of Sociology*, with versions of these thought pieces being published in its Debates Section. Special thanks goes to the editors in general, and to Ruben Flores in particular. Through the very productive collaboration between the SAI, the IJS and the sociological community at large we hope to make accessible and timely sociological commentary available on important social issues.

This newsletter is divided into four section, addressing different aspects of the pandemic.

1. Our contributors reflect on how risk is managed and the way that social trust underpins this
2. There are accounts of inequalities and how the pandemic has created, compounded and made clearer inequality and injustice.
3. Health policy and the nature of expertise is examined looking at the nature of technocratic and scientific expertise, and the degree of effectiveness of responses
4. Finally, we look at how social practices and customs have been transformed, showing the mutability of social life, while also revealing the solidity of certain social forms.

Everyday life has been profoundly changed by the pandemic. In a flash the hospitality industry, social practices of hosting and association, sport and the normal rituals of interaction disappeared from our lives. There has been an enormous acceleration in the process towards digital forms of association, with religious ritual, sociability, family or working
life moving online. Rather than the emergence of lonely and rational monads, a theme that emerges is how rationalisation and re-enchantment are important and connected dynamics of social life in general. The pandemic has accelerated the process of rationalisation - increasing the role of technology, expert systems, close-coordination of the wider social figuration. But it has also led to a spurt of re-enchantment, as personality, ritual, and charismatic symbolism are strengthened as a feature of social life. The online world that we inhabit may be a treadmill of Zoom meetings, but is also a space where traditions such as sacred practices continue to be experienced, as well as being a carnivalesque space of new ways to socialise and a meme culture of rapid, reflexive and irreverent interpretive theorisations of what we are living through.

Alongside the transformation of everyday life, the pandemic has made clear the extent to which we are living in a ‘risk society’, due to how the pandemic is a human creation resulting from modernisation (in the sense of globalisation, destruction of natural habitats, incorporation of novel food sources in diets, urbanisation, hyper-mobility), and how this modernisation produces its own particular risks that require management. It has powerfully demonstrated that the management of crisis is inherent in our mode of social organisation.

One feature of the pandemic might be a humanisation of our Risk Societies. It is difficult not to compare the current response with the response to the 2008 Financial Crisis, particularly as we are still very much living with its legacy. In contrast to the previous crisis there is some indication that the social nature of money, as a medium of communication that facilitates a community of exchange and belief in value, and which expresses values such as trust and faith in the future, is more recognised now than in 2008 when the ‘laws of the financial market’-type-thinking dominated. Perhaps one
consequence of the crisis will be a more sociologically literate understanding of money and the social basis of the economy, where we can avoid sacrificing individuals, businesses and states in efforts to appease the market.

The pandemic has done wonders for the legitimacy of political parties, leading to the accrual of considerable political capital, as a rhetoric of solidarity replaced the tottering language of neoliberal austerity: of getting out of bed early, a Republic of Opportunity, getting on the ladder and criticism of welfare cheats. Neoliberal discourse was already at breaking point in light of the housing crisis in particular, but the pandemic may have led to a change in attitude regarding collective versus individual responsibility for bearing risk. On the other hand, this may be a temporary expression borne of Flying the Green Flag. Time will tell.

One of the most severe crises that is recurrently produced in a Risk Society is a crisis of trust, with this also a crucial resource for managing risk. Again, we cannot help but think of the previous crisis as a comparison, which was produced by failures of trust and resulted in major loss of trust. What will the impact of the pandemic be in this regard? There is a possibility that it will result in the return of faith and belief in institutions as the source of security for citizens. Central banks, governments, professions, health systems have of course taken centre stage in addressing the pandemic. The state may finally be back, and the question of how it will wield its enhanced power will be answered over time.

Ultimately the risks the pandemic presents can be addressed through generalised reciprocity through public services, mechanisms of collective solidarity and civility, or a much darker possibility, of a sacrificial response, where risks are not managed, but amplified, perhaps malevolently, to stir chaos, and benefit from the disruption that follows. There may also be displacement, where the virus becomes a
scapegoat itself, being used to obscures the fact that we are the reproducers of the risk society that systemically creates such crises, absolving us of blame for the risks human society itself has produced.

The pandemic has aggravated and made clearer inequalities and systemic injustices in our society. There are many important examples of social suffering and inequity which are not addressed in this collection. The higher mortality rates of minority groups and lower socioeconomic status groups is not dealt with. We do not have a piece on domestic violence and how the pandemic has exacerbated the danger that women and others in abusive relationships are in. The suffering of cocooned elderly and high mortality rates of elderly in care homes is not dealt with. The disruption of routes for help for those with mental health and addiction problems is not spoken of. We could go on; but there are excellent reflections on unemployment, precarious employment, and housing inequalities, and the plight of International Protection Applicants in the pandemic, which provides us with important statements on the uneven impacts of the crisis.

Again, while the pandemic has in many ways worsened the suffering of vulnerable individuals and groups, it has also pointed to better ways of dealing with the sources of social suffering. Our experiment with an expanded universal social welfare system makes a move away from conditionality easier to imagine. The pandemic has for a moment made the structural roots of unemployment difficult to question by those inclined to do so. We are emerging from a period where we viscerally have felt our mutual dependence, where some groups, such as the young have been asked and made to make sacrifices for others. It is a moment to consider previous deficits of solidarity, such as the condition of the precarious younger generation who emerged from the Financial Crisis with multiple disadvantages. For example, the
call to ‘stay at home’ leaves a bad taste in the context of a housing crisis where so many have been excluded from adequate accommodation. One of the most extreme examples of an unequal ability to protect oneself and others from infection is the condition of International Protection Applicants, whose accommodation circumstances can be described as crowded and isolated simultaneously; marginalised but also in group accommodation with shared facilities.

Finally, the pandemic has highlighted the hierarchy of types of knowledge and disciplines. Power in a modern society is largely based on a perceived or actual ability to shape and direct life in productive directions and to protect it. Different academic disciplines compete for relevance in the context of this. Statistical knowledge and quantitative methodology has predominated in the pandemic, with medicine and economics at the forefront, with the general public daily focused on graphs and curves. Status and legitimacy has been gained through the measurable effects of policy measures. Such knowledge has proved very digestible by the public, with the seemingly straightforward quality of the information highly attractive. However, as we see from several of our contributions this disguises an enormous amount of change and difficulty beneath the figures. Biomedicine has moved towards social control with unclear implications as public health is in tension with a range of other goods. Measures that are demanded of health and social care workers to reduce infection rates has caused confusion and anxiety as their translation into actual work practices have to be worked out on the ground, belying the seeming objective nature of protocols. A catastrophic biological health crisis has been averted, but what are the social-psychological effects of a loss of touch and contact, as a reduction of risk in the medical domain results in an in an increase in risks in subjective experience. Measurable harms
have been given precedence over harms that are difficult to quantify, but which are critical to consider nonetheless.

This newsletter is a partial take on the pandemic and its effects. Not every topic has been covered, and we must be as aware of what has not been addressed as what has been attended to. It does however provide us with important sociological readings of the meaning, effect and possibilities created by the pandemic, which can help us understand better the circumstances we are currently living, clarify social values and meaning that has been given to the pandemic, and point to wiser and more just policies.
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RISK AND TRUST
The social-theoretical paradigms of René Girard and Marcel Mauss can help us to understand the coronavirus pandemic, and they point towards two very different possible futures. On the one hand, in Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World Girard (2017) gives us the key concepts of 'contagious mimesis', 'the scapegoat mechanism', and 'sacrificial violence'. Acquisitive mimesis is exemplified by panic buying, spiraling into what Girard calls conflictual mimesis, and scapegoating: someone or something is to blame for this, and that scapegoat can be used to unify and to re-order society by leading otherwise separate individuals to “converge on one and the same adversary that all wish to strike down” (Girard, 2017: 25).

Contagious mimesis and scapegoating violence is manifest in Trump's calling Covid-19 the 'Wuhan foreign virus'; gun sales in the US spiking by 180%; the raft of 'emergency powers'; the shift in language: this is a 'war,' against an 'invisible enemy', with 'heroes' on the 'front line'. And this shift in the symbolic order towards an imaginary of war intimates a future scenario: the daily body count; piling up into a tomb of heroes and martyrs (the elderly and the vulnerable; the 20% of cases amongst healthcare workers) a burial mound which may become part of the foundation upon which a new order will be built. Small businesses will be ‘mass casualties’, in terminal
debt, to be salvaged in a future fire-sale to global corporates and vulture funds. Meanwhile, a step-change into the so-called ‘third industrial revolution’ has been effected virtually overnight, under emergency conditions that would ordinarily have entailed protracted and costly negotiations, while instantly vastly enriching global tech giants and online retailers – Microsoft, Facebook, Amazon, and others.

‘The virus’ against which we wage war performs the role of scapegoat: we are united against this common enemy. This scapegoat masks and exculpates us from what is really at work, for in this symbolic exchange what we mask from ourselves is that in fact it is we, the modern human species, that is the aggressor. In the global eco-political-economy our relentless assault on Nature has caused climate breakdown and species extinction. In the Anthropocene it is modern human beings that are the pandemic pathogen species.

On the other hand, and in a very different key, the coronavirus crisis can be understood in terms of Marcel Mauss’s Essay on the Gift. The Maussian response to coronavirus is all about hau and mana, two words from Oceania signifying the unifying and assimilating spirit of gift-exchange, “an activity that has implications throughout society” with ramifications that “are at once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, morphological and so on” (Mauss, 2002: 100-101). Gift exchange is a socially integrating system of material and moral relationships that are reciprocal, obligatory and incremental. This is hau, the power of the gift to create social bonds between givers and receivers; morally binding mutual obligations constitute mana: honor and prestige, power and authority, the life-force of society as a whole. These gift-exchange aspects of the coronavirus crisis are illustrated, for example, by the Italians singing from their balconies, sustaining esprit de corps and solidarity; by New Yorkers and Londoners’ nightly rituals of applause; by people
volunteering, shopping for neighbors, and by countless small acts of kindness and civility.

The gift economy is also at the heart of institutional responses: governments’ mass mobilization and coordination of powers and resources in the public interest and for the common good, with increased legitimation of authority and collective national pride for leaders and governments that have managed the crisis well, but loss of face and national prestige, and political reprobation for others; employers continuing to pay employees; banks giving mortgage holidays; suspending utilities bills, rents and evictions; all of which is very good, of course, even though this gifting, underwritten by states’ Revenues is given in the interest of avoiding civil unrest, and that these are gifts given on the expectation that they will be accepted graciously, ensuring harmony, and that they will be repaid later, with interest.

Humanity, Mauss says, has always been “more than Homo oeconomicus, a mere utilitarian calculating machine. … For a very long time man was something different” (Mauss, 2002: 98). Underpinning the financial and real economies is an anthropologically universal gift economy, wherein people exchange something much more than material products of work, monetarily calculated; namely, they give and exchange something of themselves – their time, their care; part of their ‘spirit’, for which intangible, incalculable, but very meaningful gifts they expect to be recognised, respected and rewarded reciprocally. This “gift economy” is what we can see functioning, Mauss says, “in the hearts of the masses, who possess, very often better than their leaders, a sense of their own interests, and of the common interest.” Thus the spirit of the gift “throws light upon the path that nations must follow, both in their morality and in their economy” (Mauss, 2002: 100).
Responses to the coronavirus crisis exemplify both the Girardian and the Maussian paradigms, for now; and the kind of society that will emerge is in the balance. Will the new order after coronavirus be a neo-Malthusian, social Darwinian authoritarian neoliberalism, introduced under emergency powers that become normalised, legitimated by a discourse of social hygiene, a regime of bio-power, wherein “numerous and diverse techniques achieve the subjugation of bodies and the control of population” (Foucault, 1978: 140)? Or will this be the occasion for social deceleration, of rediscovering mutual empathy for human and planetary vulnerability; of revitalizing the spirit of community and society; a time for generous giving and gracious receiving, of exchanging reciprocal recognition and respect; a time of restoring relations of resonance with the world, finding a new modality of dynamic stabilisation (Rosa, 2019)?

'Coronavirus-disaster capitalism' could be used by neoliberals to apply more ‘economic shock treatment’ (Klein, 2007): unload and transfer corporate losses onto taxpayers (bailouts for airlines, cruise operators, and global hotel & resort chains); massive ‘downsizing’, ‘rationalisation’ and ‘precariatisation’ achieved at a stroke; huge public funding to Pharma and Biotech; crash public utilities (overwhelmed public health services become the premise for more private hospitals); close schools and universities, move education onto Big Tech’s proprietary online platforms that will become the ‘content providers’ of ‘intellectual property’ harvested from faculty who have been precariatised, retired, or expired); militarise the democratic state, and securitise civil society; mobilise, and at the same time discipline public life into a ‘permanent state of emergency.’ These authoritarian neoliberal ideas have been lying around for some time already, “kept alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable” (Friedman, 2002: xiv). To this end Trump may be scapegoated and sacrificed as a ‘false king’ who led his people astray. During
the interregnum (which is the present crisis) Trudeau, Macron, Varadkar, Biden and others appear as paragons of reason and competence when contrasted with Trump, masking the extent to which they are pure neoliberals themselves. The [symbolic, legal, electoral] sacrificial violence that will be visited on Trump may be used to consecrate the foundations of a new order: a state with new powers, shoring up ‘business-as-usual’; the acceptable face of authoritarian neoliberalism as ‘the new normal’.

A better outcome will depend on what alternative ideas and visions are available. Re-building the world after coronavirus could mean re-imagining and re-inventing the traditions that Mauss identified as the moral foundations of economy & society: “Rather than the egoism of our contemporaries and the individualism of our laws...we need a ‘new ethics’ founded on mutual respect and reciprocal generosity”(Mauss, 2002: 88-9). Gift economy is not to be confused with charity or philanthropy. The gift is not a handout. There is no such thing as a free gift, as all gifts must be reciprocated. Gift exchange is one of the bedrocks upon which all societies known to anthropology are built, as it is in modern societies too, where the gift economy is institutionalised in state Revenue and through distributive systems of corporate and individual taxation: in exchange for fair pay and good public services people give their labour and their loyalty to employers, and they give political legitimation to good government. This gift exchange of total services institutionalised in Revenue and taxation has been the moral foundation of economy & society, the anthropologically deep-seated, concrete base of reciprocal social action on which modern civilisation is built.

For this reason, rebuilding after coronavirus cannot entail another corporate bailout, especially not to offshore-registered businesses, as by such tax minimizing strategies global corporations have been contributing less than their fair
share to states’ and federal Revenues, causing ‘base erosion by profit shifting’ -BEPS. Rebuilding the world after the pandemic on a renewed principle of the gift must begin by ensuring greater fairness and reciprocity in taxation. France, Poland, Italy, Belgium, and Denmark have already made this the principle of their recovery strategy. Ireland, which is presently amongst the world’s worst corporate tax havens (Harper, 2020) ought to do the same.

References


Writing towards the end of the 19th century, Georg Simmel (2011) sought to understand the role of money in exchanges between people: money acted as a type of reified, quantitative mediator linked to, but distinct from, personal, qualitative values. Simmel considered money’s mediating role as individuals coped with the potentially overwhelming effect of living in modern society. One hundred years later, the increasing ‘thing-ness’ of money had evolved into the operation of complex, socially-detached financial instruments and commodities through which debt and risk could be repackaged and traded, reaching an unsustainable crescendo with the 2008 financial crisis (Mullins and Murphy, 2012). Responses to that crisis saw governments, policy makers, and central banks deploy money with the repeated and narrow rhetoric that the financial system had to be ‘saved’. The Covid-19 pandemic, however, requires a broader rhetorical and practical appeal to the qualitative and social essence of money, with significant implications as to how governments and central banks are expected to respond.

In this regard, it is perhaps helpful to consider the role of money within individualised acts of exchange. Money, in this context, represents a tacit and repeatable form of accumulated socialisation (Habermas, 1976; Habermas, 1987; McCarthy, 1991). Tacit, in the sense of a commonly-agreed, institutionalised medium linked to the implied value that we
have accepted is held within money. Repeatable, in the sense that individuals are not required to agree upon this tacit value anew for every exchange. With this in mind, crises (financial, public health, or otherwise) have the potential to alter how we view such an institutionalised medium and, crucially, how it is used by governments and central banks.

The financial crisis of 2008 appeared as an internal creation of the financial system, albeit with detrimental effects on people and real economies (Teubner, 2011; Esposito, 2011). Before that crisis, financial institutions asserted their ability to, in effect, create a type of money: money-lite products packaged by institutions for sale to other institutions and signed off by ratings agencies (Davies, 2010). Bundling different types of loans with differing levels of risk and long-term sustainability into supposedly A-rated financial instruments became a pass-the-parcel game supported by the dark arts of risk-modelling. Money in this form operated at a remove: indifferently detached from the real economy, from any personalised and qualitative essence of value, and from the real lives of those who sought credit from their local financial institutions (Harvey, 2010; Mullins and Murphy, 2012). The financial crisis revealed this detachment: concerns about the sustainability of repackaged debt arose and the lustre of credit ratings became smudged by a realisation that ratings agencies and financial institutions may have been a bit too clever (Davies and McGoeY, 2012). To continue with the game-playing metaphors, the pass-the-parcel frivolities of pre-crisis risk-bundling became a post-crisis and very bleak version of musical chairs. The music of repeatable intra-bank and so-called creditworthy products - internal to the financial system and detached from any wider social relevance - had stopped. By late 2008, murmurings of credit crunches and deleveraging within the financial system over the previous year had become an economic and social crisis as financial institutions sought bailouts from governments. The inherently repeatable element of money (and debt!) was now called
upon as money flowed from governments, through central banks, to financial institutions. The nature of such bailouts ignored and bypassed the tacit, social essence of money. In Ireland, for example, money was repeatedly and narrowly funnelled into banks that purportedly needed ‘saving’: public money became public debt, used to plug a hole of the financial system’s own making (McCabe, 2018). Terms like ‘quantitative easing’ - central banks effectively printing money to hand over to financial institutions - hinted at the repeatable nature of money and debt, detached from any tacit element of community agreement or social ‘buy-in’.

The impact of the financial crisis of 2008, of course, was not simply felt as something internal to the financial system. In Europe, it included a programme of European Central Bank (ECB) bond-buying, cheap wholesale credit for financial institutions, and years of national austerity budgets for many countries (Allen and O’Boyle, 2013; Blyth, 2013; Streeck, 2013). Nevertheless, while regulations and regulatory institutions were revamped, political pronouncements that a similar financial crisis would never recur tended to focus on inherent problems within the financial system. Whatever the merits or validity of portraying the financial crisis in this manner (i.e. not engaging with wider political and regulatory decisions that allowed financial services to operate in such a way), politicians, central banks, and regulators sought to use instruments, including money, to fix the problem. Money and debt, in this context, were spoken of in terms of repeated ‘bailouts’ (of errant financial institutions and of Europe’s purportedly feckless peripheral countries). Countries consigned to the economic naughty step would be welcomed back to the financial markets once they had taken their spoonful of austerity to address ‘their’ debt.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic has not emerged from within the financial system. It is not playing by any normal rules of engagement for a financial crisis. It is certainly not
listening to Christine Lagarde’s recent announcement of a €750 billion Emergency Purchase Programme (Taylor, 2020). Notably, it was not until July 2012 - some years after the onset of the financial crisis – that the president of the ECB sought to assure citizens and financial markets that the ECB would do ‘whatever it takes’ to rescue the Euro zone project (Fitzgerald, 2017). Similar ‘whatever it takes’ policy pronouncements have been made much sooner in response to Covid-19. The possibility of issuing so-called Corona-Bonds, although currently on the ‘maybe’ list of political and financial tools, has shades of the Euro-Bonds touted over ten years ago. The nature and scope of such European-wide responses to the economic and social impact of Covid-19 will no doubt be the subject of much political haggling. However, the willingness to even countenance such measures indicates a shift towards a remembrance, or realisation, of the social and qualitative essence of values upon which money as an institutionalised medium operates.

In contrast to the narrow and socially-detached rhetorical announcements of 2008 regarding ‘saving’ the financial system, the use of money in response to Covid-19 is unavoidably and necessarily discussed in the context of the wider community impact of the virus. As well as using the repeatable element of money, policy makers, governments, and central banks must now also appeal to a tacit community and social context. The effectiveness and impact of how such monies are dispersed will be for later analyses. However, at least initially, official responses to Covid-19 are not simply engaging with repeatable and detached figures on a computer screen – a criticism, and perceived injustice, of the handling of the 2008 crisis. Instead, the monies deployed in response to Covid-19 seem more real: linked to community, social and economic needs, to say nothing of the attempts to battle the very human horrors the virus is visiting upon communities. This has the effect of reminding us of the sociological character of money and its role: not simply as a
quantitative and indifferent mediator, but as a tacit medium linked to wider qualitative and social values.

The financial crisis saw money used with a Simmelian detachment on the part of financial institutions, governments, and central banks. Covid-19, however, requires a reengagement with the inherently social essence and supports on which money as an institutionalised medium rely. Initial responses to the spread of Covid-19 saw health authorities urging people to engage in social distancing and to avoid community interaction. Simmel (2011: 518) referred to ‘jostling crowdedness’ and an ‘urban culture [forcing] us to be physically close to an enormous number of people’. These terms, used over a hundred years ago, related to the role of money in how people cope with living in modern society. However, in the context of Covid-19, such terms would be very much at home in Department of Health warning leaflets seeking to encourage social and physical distancing. Money is no longer the quantitative, indifferent mediator of Simmel. Rather, as witnessed in the hastily-arranged payment schemes for people financially impacted by the pandemic, money is now deployed to fill both the metaphorical and literal gap left by public health measures around social and physical distancing. While we are required to be socially-detached in response to a global pandemic, the deployment of money has forced discussion about the qualitative and social values of the community in which it operates.

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Current online media sources suggest that our caretaker government and its leader are ‘playing a blinder’. On the verge of a change in the political climate of Ireland, an unprecedented global pandemic ensued and changed the way in which society operates. The coronavirus has disrupted politics on an international scale and has granted an unforeseeable opportunity to Ireland’s ostensibly ‘outgoing’ Taoiseach. Managing the crisis has afforded an opening for Varadkar and his party to improve their public image through their responses to emerging issues. Throughout, it is argued that there are risks associated with simply accepting the emergence of this competence and failing to think of the long-term implications of praising a party that suffered during the last general election in February 2020. Recent newspaper publications and social media posts will be used to frame an analysis of Varadkar’s leadership and how it echoes previous blunders and incompetence.

Opportunity amongst the panic:

The first national address, shortly after the initial lockdown on Thursday, 12th of March, was broadly well received by the country (Doyle 2020). The previously relatively unpopular Taoiseach was, in the moment, reconstructed as capable, competent and empathetic regarding the understandable fear caused by the early news of the pandemic. Varadkar
reassured the nation that our “strong economy” would alleviate part of the blow of a national lockdown whilst demonstrating a level of calm instruction for Ireland’s citizens, both young and old, to “protect each other” (Doyle 2020). Since the original address, the phrase, ‘playing a blinder’ was applied liberally across newspaper publications, comment sections and tweets to any government action that seemed in any way supportive of people affected by the crisis (Carswell 2020; McCrave 2020). The introduction of a 12-week COVID-19 unemployment payment of €350 and legislation on rent/mortgage freezes that discouraged evictions were some of the central developments contributing to the polishing of Varadkar’s and Fine Gael’s public image.

The responses of parodied political figures such as Boris Johnson⁴ and Donald Trump⁵ perhaps further enhanced Varadkar’s image, after he delivered a swift announcement of a lockdown and its conditions, which were assured and reasonable amidst global panic (Burne 2020; Stewart 2020). What seems peculiar about the emergence of a supportive and competent Varadkar was that just weeks earlier, he and his party had lost considerable political ground in the general election and were subject to regular excoriation on social media⁶. Given the nature of the most recent election results, and the seeming repudiation of Fine Gael policies and leadership, it seemed as though Varadkar was effectively finished. Ireland had essentially ‘voted for change’ or at least, shown its intent (Leahy 2020), but the desire for alternative government evaporated once the coronavirus had breached the barriers.

While it is likely that those in Government, who have overseen this global emergency will find themselves in power once this has subsided, Ireland could, nevertheless, benefit by adopting a more critical view of the current political arrangement against the backdrop of the coronavirus. Therefore, the discussion presented through recent
newspaper articles and social media posts suggests three broad options for analysis: (a) Varadkar’s quick action in a complex situation is one of competency, (b) Varadkar’s performance is opportunistic or c) a combination of both competency and opportunism. The purpose here, is to suggest that option (b), is the more accurate.

\[ \text{The ‘strong leadership’ mask is slipping:} \]

The past influences the present, and this is evident in the cracks appearing in the ‘energetic leadership’ of Varadkar (Landler 2020, para 4). The quick governance and provisions for ‘ordinary’ people have already been met with disgruntlement that mirrors previous campaigns run by the Taoiseach. Referring to the bi-weekly payment of €350, Varadkar\(^7\) criticised those working for “€11 an hour” for “20 hours per week” for asking their employers to “lay them off” so that they could benefit financially from the coronavirus (Finn 2020; Landler 2020; Mullaly 2020). Varadkar began his assessment by stating, “I have heard stories…”, a poor substitute for evidence of this claim (Finn 2020; Landler 2020; Mullaly 2020), and took a similar line to Varadkar’s ‘Welfare Cheats Cheat Us All’ campaign, that was condemned for overexaggerating the amount of welfare fraud that occurs in Ireland (RTÉ 2017), showing a willingness to accept and reiterate standard neoliberal tropes critical of welfare claimants, and an assumption that ‘such people’ will inevitably abuse the system. What seemed a reasonable consolation for those made unemployed by the coronavirus, in a package that costs an estimated €3.7 billion (Miley 2020), has already undergone a process of stigmatisation.

Previously, Varadkar received criticism for not empathising with those who were not born with ‘middle class privilege’ (Mullaly 2018). Varadkar’s approach to the lower classes was regarded as ‘tone deaf’ and suggested he lacked a sense of empathy (Mullaly 2018). In discussing approaches
to raising the funds for a house deposit, Varadkar declared: “...people go abroad for a period and earn money. Others get money from their parents. Lots of us did” (Mullaly 2018, para 2). These comments regarding housing/home-ownership appeared insensitive and reflect Varadkar’s and Fine Gael’s approach to housing concerns during this pandemic. Fine Gael’s current plan to build 112,000 social houses (to combat eviction into homelessness and emergency accommodation) by 2027 (Fine Gael 2020) is vague on long-term security and aligns itself with the party’s pre-virus intention to restrict the rights of low-income tenants to buy their home, therefore signifying an inability to address the need for stable tenancies (Kelly 2020; Lyons 2020).

Useful legislation introduced to protect home-owners and those with rental agreements was a welcome relief for some. A system of ‘fairness and transparency’ would reduce monetary stress for those fearing falling behind on payments through the introduction of payment breaks, suspension of evictions, and rent freezes (O’Neill 2020). However, these methods of stress relief neglect Ireland’s ‘rent-a-roomers’ and leaves those with insecure tenancies vulnerable to short-notice evictions in a climate that encourages people to self-isolate. The Citizen’s Information Board have informed anxious tenants that as they do not have a standard rental agreement, they will only remain in their rented room by the landlord’s request and therefore must rely on the home-owners conscience to keep them indoors during a global pandemic (Molloy 2020). Housing charity, ‘Threshold’, have been inundated with calls from those who fear eviction in these uncertain times (Towey 2020), and with Eoin Ó Broin, Sinn Féin’s housing spokesperson, recently condemning Fine Gael’s carelessness after they publicly released their ‘7 policy tests & 10 specific policies” without a ‘single mention’ of housing or homelessness (Ó Broin 2020), it appears we are seeing the continuation of a trend that dismisses the struggles of vulnerable people.
Concluding remarks:

Varadkar’s attempts at easing the economic hardship of citizens during an unparalleled global fiasco, along with his re-joining of the medical register (Hurley 2020), has earned him a level of admiration amongst Ireland’s citizens with 82% of a 1,016-person sample indicating their agreement that the government are managing this crisis well (Reagan 2020). This figure supports Varadkar’s political resurrection and leaves the door open for another sustained role in government, whether this is as Taoiseach or not (Landler 2020). Given their recent history, Fine Gael’s return to power via a grand coalition with Fianna Fail (Finn 2020a; McConnell 2020), should be a cause for alarm for those concerned with housing and welfare policy making. ‘Playing a blinder’ (in comparison to Johnson’s and Trump’s incompetence) during an emergency situation, does not imply a sudden ‘road to Damascus’ moment for Varadkar, rather this brief window of apparent competence should be considered a short-term aberration, rather than a change in ideology and behaviour.

Footnotes

1 A Twitter search for the phrase ‘playing a blinder’ leads to a timeline of contested public opinion if traced back to the first week of the coronavirus outbreak. Adding ‘Varadkar’, ‘Fine Gael’, ‘Coveney’or ‘Harris’ to this provides results specific to each individual/party in the management of the crisis.  
[https://twitter.com/search?q=%20playing%20a%20blinder%20&src=typed_query](https://twitter.com/search?q=%20playing%20a%20blinder%20&src=typed_query)

2 Varadkar's approval ratings dropped from 51% in October 2019 to 35%. in January 2020. In the same month, Fine Gael recorded its lowest approval rating (23%) since the previous general election. [https://www.echolive.ie/corknews/Latest-opinion-poll-bad-news-for-Government--86f725e7-adf9-49a0-ac2f-294f2e40b91d-ds](https://www.echolive.ie/corknews/Latest-opinion-poll-bad-news-for-Government--86f725e7-adf9-49a0-ac2f-294f2e40b91d-ds)

3 Searching ‘playing a blinder Varadkar’ through Google returns pages of results that uncover the phrase’s popularity amongst newspaper publications, comment sections and tweets. [https://www.google.com/search?q=playing+a+blinder+varadkar&rlz=1C5CHFA_enIE764IE764&gsr=sxsrf=ALEkK03PkbSK0fVbSQGJqWZaLkVYYXEg0w:1588330133327&ei=lf6rXt6zE_er1fAPrbGSkAQ&st=]
Boris Johnson stubbornly insisted on continuing to shake hands with people before contracting COVID-19 https://twitter.com/trtworld/status/1243840254542405633

Donald Trump’s competence has, yet again, been called into question after he suggested that injecting disinfectant could act as a cure for the coronavirus https://twitter.com/guardian/status/1253673829454483457

Exploring Varadkar’s Twitter post-election and mid-pandemic shows a disdain for the left vote having lost political ground. https://twitter.com/search?q=%40LeoVaradkar%20left%20government%20OR%20Sinn%20Fein&src=typed_query

Link to video for Varadkar’s comments: https://twitter.com/caulmick/status/124579548846640899

Eoin Ó Broin’s comments on Fine Gael’s policy tests and objectives: https://twitter.com/EOBroin/status/1250062612638904323

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INEQUALITIES
The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically altered our daily routines, social interactions, workplaces, future plans and social norms. Social distancing, isolating, or ‘cocooning’, and avoiding all non-essential contact are the ‘new normal’. In one of his speeches, An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar highlights the frustration felt by many in adapting to the ‘new normal’ and the longing for simple things we all perhaps have taken for granted. This, he goes on to say, is necessary to stop the spread of the virus and to ‘shelter our most vulnerable and [to] protect them’ (Varadkar, 2020). However, the measures taken to protect those deemed vulnerable have not been extended to include some 7,700 international protection applicants living in Direct Provision centres. In this short article I reflect on how asylum seekers, one of the most vulnerable groups in Irish society, have been left behind during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

‘WE WANT TO BE OUTSIDE, WE WANT TO BE WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY, AND WE WANT TO FEEL LIKE WE CAN GO ANYWHERE. WE WANT TO BE FREE.’ (AN TAOISEACH, LEO VARADKAR, 2020).

Direct Provision in Ireland

International protection applicants in Ireland are accommodated in a system known as Direct Provision. The
system has been heavily criticised since its introduction in 2000 and numerous research studies have highlighted the negative impact it has had on international protection applicants (Gusciute et al., 2016; Filges et al., 2018). Many residents live in shared bedrooms and share common area amenities such as sanitary and eating facilities with other residents (Joyce and Quinn, 2014). Overall, little control and autonomy within the direct provision system impacts on the social and emotional well-being of international protection applicants (Ní Raghallaigh et al., 2016), and experiences of marginalisation and social exclusion often lead to social isolation and poor mental health (O’Connor, 2003; Fanning and Veale, 2004). Direct Provision was intended to provide short-term accommodation for international protection applicants, however lengthy delays and the lack of an alternative system has resulted in many spending years in unsuitable accommodation. The outbreak of the current pandemic has further highlighted the unsuitability of Direct Provision.

Direct Provision and the Covid-19 outbreak

During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Irish Government has issued several public health measures aimed at containing the spread of the coronavirus. These include implementation of social distancing of at least 2 meters from individuals not residing in one’s household and remaining in one’s accommodation with the exception of some permissible activities such as purchasing groceries, carrying out essential work and taking brief exercise (Department of Health and Department of the Taoiseach, 2020). While most of the population was coming to terms with the ‘new normal’, international protection applicants were left behind in Government’s approach to ‘shelter our most vulnerable’ (Varadkar, 2020).
Socially distancing and ‘cocooning’ are effectively impossible in accommodation settings with shared communal facilities such as kitchens and bathrooms. The Government has taken several measures in response to the pandemic, but the actions have been slow and minimal. Over 600 residents have been relocated to new accommodation to ensure social distancing (Department of Justice and Equality, 2020). However, it is hard to understand or even imagine how social distancing is possible in these new settings where up to three single people may be sharing a room. The relocation of 105 international protection applicants from Dublin to the Skellig Star Hotel in County Kerry (Lucey, 2020) is an example of attempting to do the impossible within unsuitable accommodation settings; as almost 25 per cent of those relocated have since tested positive for the coronavirus.

To date, approximately 23,400 cases of coronavirus have been confirmed in the Republic of Ireland (Johns Hopkins University, 2020); this equates to approximately 0.5% of the total population. While the number of cases has been growing in the State since the outbreak of the pandemic, the public health measures such as ‘staying at home’ and social distancing seem to be working in ‘flattening the curve’ (Leahy and Kelly, 2020). However, this is not the case within Direct Provision centres. Social distancing and ‘cocooning’ are not possible due to the number of residents living in shared accommodation and due to capacity constraints within the centres themselves. Currently there are 140 confirmed cases (Thomas, 2020); equating to 1.9 per cent of the total population resident within Direct Provision centres, thus highlighting that individuals in this setting are more vulnerable in contracting Covid-19. Could this have been avoided? A plan which recognises that any residential setting, where clusters can easily form, is at particular risk to an outbreak could have mitigated these risks from the outset. Unfortunately, in the current context it is likely that cases
within Direct Provision will continue to increase unless alternative measures are put in place.

Social distancing and other measures have also had social, health and economic impacts on Irish society. There has been an increase in people reporting feeling lonely and experiencing mental health problems such as anxiety and depression (Maynooth University, 2020). In addition, due to the Covid-19 related economic impact, the unemployment rate has increased to 28 per cent (Central Statistics Office, 2020). In the case of international protection applicants these impacts are amplified. International protection applicants experience marginalisation and social exclusion while in the direct provision centres (O’Connor, 2003) and it is likely that in the current pandemic the feelings of social exclusion may increase further with potential for long-lasting mental health impacts. While we grapple on how to adjust to working from home, studying online, and rearranging our daily routines to fit with the ‘new normal’, international protection applicants are asked to do the impossible. How can one work from home when sharing a room with others? How can a student study or do assignments in a congregated living space environment? A small proportion of international protection applicants who are permitted to work are most likely to fall in one of the two categories; either working in services deemed essential as frontline staff or in precarious employment which has ceased due to Covid-19. In the case of the former, these individuals are particularly vulnerable to contracting the virus and largely depend on non-governmental organisations to source alternative housing so that they can continue to provide an essential service. In the case of the latter if they reside in Direct Provision centres, they are not entitled to the weekly pandemic payment of 350 euro and instead receive a weekly allowance of 38.80 euro. The general rules which apply to social welfare payments have been relaxed in order to extend the net of safety to those who have lost their jobs due to Covid-19 and include non-EEA nationals, students, self-
employed and part-time workers. However international protection applicants are once again excluded from this safety net.

Reflection on the future

To re-state from Varadkar’s speech ‘[w]e want to be outside, we want to be with friends and family, and we want to feel like we can go anywhere’. We all look forward to lifting of measures and slowly returning to our normal lives and routines as Irish society and the economy starts to re-open. Gatherings with family and friends, domestic holidays, partial return to offices, schools and universities all seem possible in the not too distant future. However, there is no return to normal for international protection applicants residing in Direct Provision centres. Isolated, but without the possibility to self-isolate, international protection applicants will continue to live in unsuitable, overcrowded accommodation at high risk of contracting the virus. What happens if there is a second wave of the virus? Or when the pandemic is over, will this be yet another failure on the behalf of the State to protect its most vulnerable? If we have really set out to protect our most vulnerable then surely, direct provision centres should have been considered as priority areas when implementing measures to prevent and delay the spread of Covid-19. Perhaps the distinction lies between us and them? The Government’s approach to protect ‘our most vulnerable’ clearly demarks who is considered vulnerable but more importantly who belongs and is part of ‘us’. Perhaps there is a silver lining and the pandemic will finally prompt a reform to direct provision centres? Unfortunately, this is unlikely in the context of the shrinking economy and high unemployment levels. As large parts of Irish society continue to return to some normality, the socially excluded, often forgotten, and marginalised international protection applicants will continue to live in constrained, overcrowded settings with no sign of return of normality in the foreseeable future.
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Covid-19: Breaking the Social Veneer

The Covid-19 pandemic has illuminated the stratification of society in every nation-state it has touched. The pandemic has unmasked the hidden systems of inequality that are lost in the mundanity of everyday life. The veneer of capitalist meritocratic society has been fractured. The disruption of social order has ‘breached’ the social world publicising structures of inequality previously obscured. Garfinkle (1991, 1984) devised breaching experiments to uncover social norms. I will argue that Covid-19 has become a similar breaching experiment on a macro scale. The pandemic has ruptured the fabric of social order revealing structures of inequality in its wake. Just like as Garfinkle (1984) broke the social order to uncover the rules of everyday life, so too has Covid-19 broken the social order to expose the macro rules of social life, and they are systems of stratification. The illumination of these structures is married with a cumulative growth of societal inequality. Covid-19 is most fatal to individuals who already have underlying health conditions. However, as McNamara et al. (2020) demonstrate, lower socioeconomic groups are considerably more likely to suffer from these preventable or manageable health conditions, hence are most at-risk in the Covid-19 pandemic.

Covid-19 and Employment Inequality

As social isolation measures were implemented, the class division of occupations has created a stratified response to
the virus. The idea of working from home is only practicable for specific class occupations. For middle-class jobs, characterised by office work, working from home is feasible. Hospitality, retail, and manual labour occupations are the most common forms of employment for lower-socioeconomic classes. These jobs cannot be done from home, and paradoxically hold some of the worst job security because of the widespread use of zero-hour contracts. When the lockdown came into place many workers face the real possibility that they would not be going back to their occupation after the lockdown. Although we all went into lockdown together, we will come out of this vastly different.

With the lockdown came the remuneration packages from the government. The Covid-19 social welfare payments were rolled out to any individual that was made unemployed due to the pandemic. The band of payments was capped at a blanket rate of €350 euro a week for any worker from 18-66 (Government of Ireland, 2020a). This is a considerable increase in the rate of pay for out of work benefit. Anyone aged 18-24 starts out with a jobseeker’s rate of €112.70 rising to €203 for any claimant 25 or older (Government of Ireland, 2020b). By increasing the weekly pay rate for those exclusively out of work because of Covi-19, the government is conceding that the standard benefit rates are not a viable sum to sustain a comfortable living. However, those who claimed jobseekers prior to the pandemic, are still required to live with the lower rate of welfare. This has introduced a two-tier welfare system. As Boland and Griffin (2015) maintain, the social welfare system in Ireland is particularly restrictive, it enacts a ritual of self-examination which serves to reinforce ideas of insufficiency in prospective jobseekers. This two-tiered system further reinforces Boland and Griffin’s (2015) thesis, as Covid-19 has exposed the inherit dehumanisation that is part of the social welfare system, acknowledging on the one hand, the system does not provide enough financial stability to meaningfully exist. But on the other alienates an
underclass of jobseekers, who are deemed second class to the unemployment brought about by Covid-19. Concurrently, it is hard to ignore the large influx of middle-class workers forced into ‘temporary’ unemployment and the correlation with the implementation of this two-tier welfare system. All the while, the most financially vulnerable people and some of the least paid, least appreciated employees are either still working on the front lines or are faced with job insecurity in a post-pandemic world.

**Consolidating the Housing Crisis?**

Ireland is in the grips of a housing crisis. Affordable homes in urban areas are unachievable for most of the workforce. Covid-19 has done nothing but inflame this on-going crisis as a majority of the population now faced precarious financial situations. By March 18th, the Finance Minister Pascal Donoghue secured an agreement with the 5 major banks in Ireland, to put a temporary 3 month freeze on mortgage repayments till the pandemic has passed. This is symptomatic of the Irish’s states attitude that housing is a commodity not a right, at the state’s role is to protect and encourage private landowners and landlords. As Punch (2007, 2009, 2011) maintains the Irish housing policy system emphasizes privatisation and a reliance on market forces. This culminates in an increasingly commodified housing market, constructed around the dominant private ownership sector, which severely restricts rental options (Punch, 2007: 347). Private landlords benefit greatly from government policy aimed to stimulate this market. This is reflected in the difference of policy approaches to Covid-19, as while Pascal Donoghue arranged to freeze mortgage repayments on March 18th, 2020, it wasn’t until the following week, March 26th that measures were introduced to freeze rents payments for tenants.

That same week the housing charity *Threshold* reported a significant increase in outreach by renters who were facing
forced evictions, and continued pressure to pay rent even during the lockdown. Due to this focus on supporting private ownership of property, it is increasingly difficult to protect tenants, especially those in causal rent-a-room arrangements. The legislation was later expanded to cover properties and tenants outside the Residential Tenancies Board, but by then two weeks had passed since the initial closing of schools and colleges, and a week since the countrywide lockdown. Many tenants in rent-a-room arrangements were already forcibly evicted long before the legislation came into place.

The housing system itself, and the inequalities that are inherent in the flawed system, have been unearthed by the pandemic. Those who were homeless before the pandemic suffer the task of avoiding the virus while trying to survive without a home. Those tenants in precarious rental agreements faced forcible eviction at worst, at best uncertainty about their rental situation. All the while, homeowners, private landlords, and holiday homeowners could capitalise on their private home ownership. By either escaping to their rural holiday homes during the Easter lockdown or capitalising on precious rent-a-room arrangements. Of course, with the lockdown brings economic uncertainty, and I do not want to understate the financial pressure brought about for all. We are all feeling the pinch of the pandemic, however, the redistribution of how much and what we lose is by no means dispersed evenly.

Conclusion

Recent figures for Covid-19 deaths have shown in the U.K (see Barr et al. 2020; Parveen, 2020) and the U.S (see U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020) low-socioeconomic communities are over-represented in fatalities. The Institute of Fiscal Studies has shown the death rate in the U.K among British Black Africans and British Pakistanis is 2.5 times higher than the white population,
(Siddique, 2020). As Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) demonstrated, vast disparages in wealth directly influence the abundance of health issues in a given society. The marginalised and vulnerable are fighting both Covid-19 and a stratified system that is dumping the burden of destruction on their shoulders. Whether it is policies of financial redistribution for time off work, job insecurity, rates of social welfare payments, or the flawed housing system preoccupied with private home ownership. Members of low socioeconomic classes not only risk losing their lives to the virus, but also irreparable harm to their economic and social position in Ireland and across the globe.

Covid-19 has proven to be an unprecedented period in living memory. The pandemic has exhumed the inequality at the core of Irish society. Our social reality has been forcibly broken, and the weapons of economic and social domination have been uncovered in boorish detail. While we take care to wash our hands for our protection against Covid-19 it is simultaneously ironic to see how Irish governmental policy has continually washed its hands from the plight of the Irish population which faces these economic struggles; let us hope that in a post-pandemic Ireland, the dirt that this virus has exposed within the stratified structures of the state, cannot be washed away so easily. When the dust eventually settles and the pandemic is beaten, we will see that we were not all in it together, in fact a small few carried the burden of the many and will continue to do long after the virus has passed.

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Within months, Covid-19 has fundamentally reconfigured the relationship between the market and the state in Ireland. The ‘Great Lockdown’ has administered a shock to global patterns of production and consumption not seen since the Great Depression (Gopinath, 2020) causing unprecedented levels of job-loss. In Ireland, the hardship of this job-loss been partially cushioned by the social security response to the crisis, and the introduction of a Pandemic Unemployment Payment. For the hundreds of thousands of citizens receiving this and related payments, welfare has replaced market earnings as their means of subsistence. This is a major adjustment not only in the economic lives of these citizens but also in the ‘productivist’ footing of Ireland’s welfare state.

‘Productivism’ is ‘the ideological fetishisation of productivity growth’ as an end-in-itself, and it is reproduced via discursive, psychological and institutional processes that subordinate social goals to market growth (Fitzpatrick, 2004). Contemporary welfare states are deeply productivist in that they frequently tie social security to market participation to stimulate labour commodification and employment growth. In Ireland, the connection between welfare and employment has been gradually tightened by the introduction of ‘mutual commitments’ for claimants to seek paid work, and legislation of payment penalties for non-compliance with various activation requirements. Welfare payments have been
progressively reconfigured into ‘conditional payments for good jobseekers’ (Boland, 2015: 168) in order to motivate supposedly ‘passive’ claimants to become ‘active’ worker-citizens who achieve self-sufficiency through employment. As then Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, proclaimed when launching the most recent *Pathways to Work*: ‘I want to see people independent in work, not dependent on welfare’ because ‘a job is the best route out of poverty’ (DEASP, 2016). This however conceals ‘the enduring reality of in-work poverty’ (Patrick, 2012: 7) and the complicity of activation in its reproduction.

Before Covid-19, Ireland had one of the highest incidences of low-pay in the OECD—defined as earnings below two-thirds of national median earnings—with 110,000 workers living below the poverty line and one in four working in low-paid jobs (Social Justice Ireland, 2020). Regulatory activation policies feed this cycle by how they ‘ratchet-up’ (Greer, 2016) competition for peripheral employment, reduce the bargaining power of workers, and generally reset ‘the terms for what constitutes acceptable work’ (Brodkin and Larsen, 2013: 58). Hence why critics of ‘low-road’ activation models view them as little more than strategies for ‘pimping the precariat’ (Dean, 2012).

Increasingly, ‘productivist’ welfare states not only view market participation as the end of welfare provision. They also organise and deploy the commodifying power of the state via social services markets that extend the commodification of claimants in important ways. In Ireland, this is exemplified by Job Path, an employment service for long-term claimants delivered by two private agencies under Payment-by-Results contracts. When employment services are contracted via Payment-by-Results, claimants are organised into purchasing lots and the ‘options’ to sell them into employment are bid on by agencies ‘in a manner that any other commodity might be sold in “free” markets’ (Grover,
Bidders compete for the right to try to turn claimants into profit in the very real sense of earning an outcome payment that is higher than the investments they make in building their ‘employability’. Thus, marketisation itself relies on a strategy of ‘double activation’ (Considine et al., 2015): deploying the same logic of financial incentives and contractual regulation to steer the behaviours of service providers as activation policies rely on to discipline claimants. Both govern people as if they were ‘knaves’ motivated by no other end ‘than private interest’ (Le Grand, 1997: 149).

Pandemic Unemployment as a State of Exception

Coronavirus challenges this political economy of welfare. The ubiquity of pandemic unemployment resists any attempt to locate the causes of unemployment ‘downstream’, in a deficit of individual responsibility or agency (Wright, 2012: 312). By late April, almost 820,000 Irish workers were on unemployment payments, including over 600,000 people receiving the newly created Pandemic Unemployment Payment (CSO, 2020a). About 20 per cent of PUP claimants were previously employed in Accommodation and Food Services, the economic sector with the highest incidence of low pay. The name of this emergency welfare, a Pandemic Unemployment payment, has an important double meaning. It positions coronavirus unemployment as ‘pandemic’ not only in being widespread but also in being a ‘state of exception’.

Agamben (2005) invokes the concept of a state of exception to describe how states deploy crises as a form of biopower: declaring emergences to suspend the rule of law and override citizenship rights for prolonged periods. Agamben (2020) has cited the Italian Government’s ‘suspension of daily life in entire regions’ as an example of this kind of biopolitical deployment of pandemic. The technological ‘solutionism’ (Morozov, 2020) advocated by governments, to automate contact tracing via smart phone
apps—is another example of the slippage between states of exception and authoritarian states. However, in the case of social welfare, the enacted measures have largely enhanced rather than diminished citizenship rights. They have done so by deploying social security as an alternative to, rather than stimulant of labour commodification.

During Covid-19, the compensatory aspects of welfare have been amplified while the more regulatory and behavioural conditions have been reduced. Payments for a single unemployed person have temporarily increased from €203 to €350 per week, which is only a little below the average weekly earnings of Accommodation and Food Services workers for the last quarter of 2019 (CSO, 2020b). Meanwhile, requirements for claimants to sign-on at Intreo offices have been suspended due to social distancing, while JobPath has been shuttered.

The civic duty to socially distance has momentarily eclipsed employment as ‘the primary duty of the responsible citizen’ (Patrick, 2012). This has allowed the temporal experience of non-employment to be partially reclaimed. ‘Time’ without work has been returned to claimants as their own; not something owed in mutual commitments or as ‘time spent “job-seeking”’ (Marston and McDonald, 2008: 260). Time-for-self and others through caregiving, volunteering and recreation has been momentarily re-legitimated while claimants and others ‘stay home to save lives.’ The logic of governing citizens via economic incentives has also been eschewed by political leaders, who now invite citizens to act ‘not out of self-interest, but out of love of each other’ (RTE, 2020).

In transitioning from a political economy of ‘work, not welfare’ to one of ‘welfare without work’, Covid-19 has offered a fleeting experience of ‘post-productivist’ welfare (Goodin, 2001). However, the symbolic categories that have been
mobilised to enable this window of decommodification also foreclose it as fiction.

Administratively distinguishing Pandemic Unemployment Payments from ordinary Jobseeker Allowances not only discriminates against those who were already unemployed on March 13th, who receive lower benefits. It also socially distances the pandemically unemployed from the conventionally jobless as (more) deserving victims of circumstance rather than passive dependents. This conceals the experience of structural unemployment as the exception. By so doing, it permits the continued denial and individualisation of unemployment outside coronavirus as something ‘that happens only to a tiny minority of pathological people’ (Eubanks, 2018: 175).

I am reminded of Baudrillard’s reflections on Disneyland as an ‘“ideological” blanket’. As Baudrillard observes, ‘Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong... to the order of simulation’ (1988: 172). Put differently, framing Disneyland as a make-believe world conceals the possibility of critiquing how the social world is imagined. It reifies welfare capitalism as terra firma. Facilitating decommodification through the device of a Pandemic Unemployment Payment likewise casts ‘welfare without work’ as a post-productivist fantasy to the ‘real’ world of liberal welfare capitalism: where social security payments for the ‘conventionally’ unemployed are well below the poverty line of €264 per week for a single-person household (Social Justice Ireland, 2020) and which begets its own pandemic of low-paid, precarious work.
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Irish youth, who already suffered a lethal cocktail of unemployment, emigration, high rents, mortgage arrears, welfare cuts and homelessness as the legacy of the 2008 recession, seem likely to again suffer significantly from the long term implications of the Covid 19 crisis. While the previous recession can, at least to some degree, be blamed on an older generation's lack of political and economic leadership, clearly this crisis cannot. Nonetheless, there is a clear generational dynamic with young generations making economic and social sacrifices to protect the health and lives of older generations. Most do so willingly, but Ireland has a reciprocal obligation to ensure the young do not again pay a disproportional cost for this second crisis in a decade of their young lives. The political and policy choices we make now, and related realignments, will create path dependent structural change that will determine class, gender, ethnic and generational distributional impacts for decades to come. Young people are already at the centre of the political debate about the future of Covid 19 related social welfare responses (Leahy et al 2020). We can expect increased stereotyping, scapegoating and stigmatization of young people in that regard (Tyler 2019).

The 2008 recession, which led to high youth unemployment and emigration, translated into high incidences of mental ill health, youth suicide and self-harm. Scarred and with personal milestones stunted by the absence of decent employment and secure housing tenure, the demand for change in the 2020 General Election manifested
underlying intergenerational political conflict. Most young people who left Ireland over the last decade did so not for lifestyle choice but to **find better and less precarious jobs**. They left in a decade when welfare and labour market policy was manifestly unfair in terms of intergenerational justice. We saw corrosive intergenerational distributional outcomes in housing policy leading to the phenomena of ‘generation rent’ and ‘generation stay at home’, lower wages and pensions for young public sector entrants, an expansion of sanctions and poor quality labour market programmes including the discontinued JobBridge. There were controversial age-related reductions in social welfare payments for young people and derogatory political discourse targeted at young people to justify these cuts, while younger people became vulnerable to homelessness. Of course not all young people suffered, and scarring not equally distributed (Wilson et al 2020). Recent research highlights the complex needs of those on low income, ill health, disability, ethnicity and educational disadvantage also experience more labour market insecurity (Dowling 2020). We need to ensure services do not reinforce the negative psychological impact of unemployment and trauma (Whelan 2020).

Emerging from the previous crisis Irish politicians showed limited imagination or ambition with regard to policy responses to youth precariousness. It is timely to ask now whether and how any new government will rise above intergenerational power differentials and turn the compass towards hope for the disproportionate number of young people who will suffer economically as a direct outcome of the Covid crisis.
Like the previous recession, Chart 1 highlights how the disproportionate share of the burden of Covid-19 unemployment is falling on young people. Those under 34 comprise less than one third of the workforce but 43 percent of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP).

Table 1  Severely impacted sectors are more likely young, precarious, and unskilled (DEASP 2020)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Severe</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Mild</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Share in receipt of PUP %</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>21.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of total employment Sectors A-R %</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>24.4%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share under 35 %</td>
<td>41.8%</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share with less than tertiary education %</td>
<td>59.2%</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 shows workers in the most severely impacted sectors are most likely to be young, precarious, and unskilled with the share of employees with less than tertiary education highest in the most severely impacted sectors. The pre-Covid indigenous Irish labour market was is structurally characterised by a stubborn cohort of low productivity firms employing poorly paid low-skilled workers, creating a ‘low learning trap’ (O Riain 2017, Murphy 2017). Low pay is epidemic for young people, 50% of those aged 15-24 in employment took home less than €292pw in 2018, while half of 25-29 year olds took home less than €465 (Nugent 2020).

Table 1 also illustrates how precarious workers in the most severely impacted sectors are both in debt and more likely to be renting. In the short term they are dependent on Rent

| Share non Irish % | 20.4 | 13.7 | 16.5 | 16.3 |
| Share female %   | 41.0 | 45   | 59   | 45.3 |
| Share male       | 59.0 | 55   | 41   | 54.7 |
| Share in role less than 12 months % | 22.4 | 13.8 | 15.4 | 17.0 |
| Share self-employed % | 15.0 | 10.3 | 19.7 | 14.1 |
| Share in part time employment % | 29.2 | 12.5 | 20.2 | 20.4 |
| HH income median % | 54,000 | 80,700 | 52,700 |
| Share with NLA   | 68.61 | 67.12 | 73.22 |
| Share with debt % | 60.97 | 73.0 | 57.78 |
| Total debt service burden % | 13.75 | 14.86 | 16.63 |
| Renter Share %   | 44.40 | 23.95 | 39.45 |

Source DEASP 2020
Supplement, well known for employment and poverty traps (Beirne et al 2020). Many are in debt, often related to essential utilities, even low levels of debt, depending on the source of the loan and capacity to repay, are stressful.

Ireland’s immediate post-Covid response was progressive in its impact on low-income families (Beirne et al 2020). How can we ensure generational progressivity with sufficient and appropriate investment in the future of our youth? Thoughts now turn to tapering the PUP with arguments that realignment to less generous established welfare payments is particularly justified for young people for whom issues of employment incentives have been identified (DEASP 2020). However there are also issues of income adequacy, a ‘normalisation’ strategy could also level up the present under 25s jobseekers payment of €112.70pw, and examine the operation of parental income means testing for under 25s who have been forced back to living in the family home. Lone Parents who depend on income supports (98% of them women), are particularly vulnerable to poverty and deprivation, policy must accommodate care-work and support legitimate decisions to work part time (SVP 2019).

A new social contract needs to include a ‘social wage’ (universal basic services) and ‘a living wage’ or ‘participation income’ (from employment and/or social welfare) as part of a High Road Back to Work Strategy (Coote and Percy 2020, Murphy et al 2020, Murphy and McGann 2020). Enterprise policy needs to advance the productivity of indigenous firms, and combine with education and training, apprenticeship and traineeships, and life-long learning for low skilled workers in and out of employment. New forms of employment protection legislation need to safeguard against negative, perilous forms of atypical work. A Public Employment Eco System made up of public, private and not-for-profit employment services, needs to meet the needs of 100,000 young people who in June 2020 graduate from
school or university with no guidance or scaffolds to transition into an uncertain world with less jobs.

The younger generation contributed much to the Covid-19 societal effort. Covid-19 travel restrictions will prevent migration from playing its historical safety valve option. The idea of a European Union Youth Guarantee was launched as part of the Irish 2013 EU presidency. Piloted in Ballymun, a version could be developed as a part of post-Covid recovery, with *choice, quality and guidance* as central operational principles. Integrated services need to link employment supports with drug services, health and care providers, homeless services etc.

In all of this, we need to treat young people not with suspicion but with respect. A divisive discourse is emerging which stigmatises and blames young people. Some politicians and business people perpetuate stereotypes, implying that the 200,000 or 38% of Pandemic Unemployment Payment claimants in receipt of higher income support than they earned in pre-Covid part time employment are themselves at fault (*Rabbitte 2020*). Others seek to consciously avoid the horrible narrative that some in receipt of the PUP “are somehow cheats, scroungers and spongers” (*O’Halloran and Clarke 2020*). If there are anomalies or work disincentives in the PUP they are not a product of young people’s behaviour but outcomes and unintended consequence of well-meaning but necessarily hastily designed policy responses to the Covid crisis. Political discourse about young people in receipt of the PUP is ‘a sideshow’, the real issue is the vulnerability and precarity of those workers in the most impacted sectors who may never regain such employment (*Taylor 2020*).

Two-thirds of those volunteering are under 35 years of age, young people have earned our trust in rising to the challenge required of them in this crisis. We need to innovate
to earn their trust, see them as a resource and listen to their knowledge and experience. Solidarity between generations must work both ways and over the long-term. In this respect we also need also to think of the generations ahead, all of us, young and old need to support the decisive action on climate change and movement to more sustainable patterns of development (Steven and Evans, 2020; 5).
Rarely has the importance of home to each and every one of us been so clearly demonstrated. The Covid-19 emergency has shed light on the many ways in which home is a fundamental part of being human, an all too often taken for granted resource which forms the foundation of how we live. The ubiquitous injunction to ‘stay home’ carries with it an implicit understanding that this is the one place we can retreat to for some semblance of safety, a place where we can control who comes and goes and so fully practice social distancing.

This is particularly clear in relation to private renters. The emergency had only just hit, and almost instantly the spotlight fell on the potential for mass rent arrears and evictions. The sectors of the economy hit fastest and hardest are those in which young people, migrants and low income households dominate. These groups are massively over-represented in the private rental sector. Moreover, insecurity is baked in to the DNA of the rental sector, which means tenants are exposed to any major social or economic shocks.

Thankfully, the Irish government has been quick to respond. The new legislation, which came into effect on March 27th, establishes a moratorium on evictions and rent increases. Landlords will not be able to issue notices of termination during the ‘emergency period’, which lasts until June 27th (but can be extended thereafter by Government order). If done right, this will keep tenants from the doomsday scenario of trying to move house or becoming

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homeless during a pandemic. Underlying this immediate policy response is of course a recognition of the contradiction between a potential impending wave of evictions and the necessity of social distancing. We cannot practice social distancing without a home; and so our new found interest in social distancing tells us something essential about the very meaning of home.

Humans are social animals. We need each other to survive, quite literally. Our material economic and social reproduction is dependent on networks of relations in which we come together to work and trade. Our cultural reproduction – how we represent ourselves and the world in ways that form bonds between us and enable coordinated, collective action – also depends on social interaction, as does, of course, educating our children, in the broadest sense. And besides anything else, we seem to get bored pretty quickly without interacting with others. Viruses know this, and Covid-19 is no exception. Viruses have developed to exploit this fact, thriving on our need and desire to come into contact with one another. No doubt all of us recall how difficult it was those first few days to encounter friends and family and not shake their hand or embrace them.

But humans have another, altogether different side. No other animal forms such intense and widespread social relations, and yet humans also need to retreat from those relations. Spending time with other people is exhausting and can be stressful. It takes work, and a certain amount of performance, as Sociologists have long emphasised. The space to which we retreat to escape from our own inherent sociality is home (Handel, 2019). This is what Heidegger (1971) captures with his concept of dwelling. To dwell, he reminds us in his essay Building Dwelling Thinking, is more than merely to take shelter. To dwell is also ‘to cherish and protect, to preserve and to care for’. It is to create a sanctuary from our own inherent sociality.
As someone who researches housing, it has always struck me as paradoxical that human beings, perhaps the most intensely social of all animals, construct special spaces – usually residential buildings – within which to carry out this activity of dwelling. These buildings become our homes. They are places we, first of all, control access to. They are private spaces; unopen to the public. We only let certain people into our homes. To have a stranger enter our home without our permission is one of the most threatening things a human can experience, despite the fact that we encounter strangers every day in every other type of place. Even having the people we love as house guests becomes difficult after a relatively short period; we’ve all experienced that sense of relief as a family member or friend’s car pulls out of the driveway and we wave them goodbye.

We control the boundaries of home, and we also exercise much more control over our homes and the organisations of objects and activities in our homes than in any other space. We arrange our things as we like them, we design them and make aesthetic choices which make them feel homely (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). We make them comfortable – places of comfort. The sociologist Anthony Giddens captured much of this with the concept of ‘ontological security’, a sense of the reliability of places and things over time, a kind of fundamental regularity in the world which gives us a sense of the possibility to act, to anticipate, to shape the world and, to some extent, our future (see Easthope, 2004). Home is the paradigmatic site of ontological security; the regularity of its structures, the fact that we organise our possessions and resources there, the fact that we know where our stuff is (except our car keys), and the intensely routinised way we behave in our home, all speak to this.

The sense of safety and security tied up with home is also linked to the important work that happens in the home: the
work of social reproduction, or care work (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). Feeding ourselves and our family, cleaning, resting, these all take place primarily in the home. When we are sick, most of would hope to be in our own beds, at home. Most importantly, all of these homely qualities make us feel safe. And they do so specifically by allowing us to retreat from the social world, or, in the terminology of the post-coronavirus world, to socially distance. For all these reasons, home is fundamental to being human. Returning to Heidegger, ‘to be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal, it means to dwell’. As a place which allows us to retreat into safety, to care for ourselves and to take refuge from the social, it a resource without which we cannot socially distance, because the creation of home is, fundamentally, the quintessential act of social distancing.

The strange atmosphere that seems to pervade everything during this pandemic, might be described as *uncanny*, a concept associated with Freud and which in the original German is rendered as *Unheimlich*, or ‘unhomely’. The unhomely, as Freud (2019) suggests in the first part of his essay *The Uncanny*, is the opposite of the *heimlich*, understood as ‘friendly, intimate, homelike; the enjoyment of quiet content, arousing a sense of peacefulness and security’. It is something which makes us experience unease, eeriness, and a sense of creeping horror. Freud also notes that the uncanny is different to the simply scary, as it is often things that are in some sense familiar in which we encounter the uncanny. It’s hard not to think here of the experience of going to my local Tesco in the early days of the pandemic, where everything was the same as always and yet eerily different, characterised by an imperceptible tension as shoppers tried to navigate the aisles without breaching the two metres distance. And perhaps it was the very normality of crowds heading to the seaside on one of the first sunny days of Spring that made images of packed beaches so unsettling. Covid-19 is, after all, a flu; something we are all familiar with,
and yet something so very different to anything we have experienced before. Against this unhomeliness, we stay home.

For many, the qualities of homeliness are taken for granted. For ‘generation rent’, however, the true preciousness of home is present in much more everyday ways, because for renters ‘homely qualities’ cannot be taken for granted; every day can be a battle to preserve them (Easthope, 2014). Most obviously, in most jurisdictions (Northern European and Scandinavian countries being the main exceptions), the security of tenure enjoyed by renters is infinitely inferior, especially when compared with homeowners. We don’t have precise data on the level of evictions in Ireland. But we do know that losing a home in the rental sector is, by a large margin, the leading cause of homelessness (Gambi et al., 2018). More than half of tenants remain for less than three years in their home (Byrne, 2018), and a recent survey shows that a third of those looking for rental properties were doing so because they had been evicted from their home (Knight Frank, 2019). But evictions are just the most tangible instance of the precarity of renting. Life in the rental sector undermines dwelling, the creation of home, in many other ways. Many tenants are subject to all sorts of injunctions, prohibitions and petty controls, for example not being able to own a pet, paint the walls, or in some cases have guests (Soaita & McKee, 2019).

In many instances, tenants house share, often with strangers. In this case, all of the challenges of social relations are incorporated within the home; having to ‘deal with’ other people, manage conflicts, take collective decisions etc. All of the things home is supposed to enable us to retreat from. In shared houses, tenants often retreat to their bedroom, as the one space they can feel fully at ease, at home.

Tenants, of course, will typically attempt to construct a sense of home in spite of their limited control over continuing
access to, and control over, their dwelling. But in contrast to other tenures, they do so always in the context of a social relationship with their landlord, a relationship which is also necessarily a power relation (Chisholm et al., 2020; Lister, 2004). Another individual (or a company) ultimately exercises power over the home tenants create, including the power to take it away (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). Tenants typically learn to ‘manage’ their landlord, just like workers learn to manage their employers. They learn how to communicate without generating conflict, learn what rubs her or him up the wrong way, the right moment to request that repair (Lister, 2005). They do so because they know that their ongoing access to their home is dependent on their social relationship with their landlord. Renting, at least in those countries were protections for renters are weak, can never really be a sanctuary, a retreat, a safe haven. It remains a space which is permeated by social and power relations, a space where feelings of control and security are undermined, where ontological security is always incomplete.

All of this will be familiar to renters. But the Covid-19 emergency sheds new light on it. Without a home, there can be no social distancing. For those who are evicted, or for those forced to share, there can be no social distancing. Perhaps, when all this is over, there will be greater recognition of the fact that home is something we all need when we need to retreat from the social world, to feel safe, to protect ourselves; when we need distance from the social.

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HEALTH POLICY AND EXPERTISE
We are at war. We heard that statement time after time from various political leaders across the globe. War on pandemics. This figurative speech, by inducing a common “enemy” as Sinisa Malešević rightly pointed out in the interview for the Croatian newspaper Faktograf (Brakus, 2020) is nothing but a tool to homogenise the nation, to manipulate its patriotic senses not only for the sake of establishing authority, but to promote certain political agendas. In many places, such as United States, Britain, Hungary, Israel, Serbia, the war speech has been repeatedly used to claim facts, impose war-like measures, cut off liberties, impose wide-spread surveillance on citizens, tap phones, execute arbitrary arrests, and many other ‘strategic’ choices under the pretence of fighting the war over corona virus. The war speech, not only being immoral, is no more than a political tool to force people into both action and emotion to align with their governments and give them permission to continue campaigning.

And yet, we are at war. But war of a different kind. What the pandemic exposed is the salient and persistent war between disciplines to claim the authority over knowledge. Two most pronounced bodies of knowledge, with their almost opposing interests and focuses conquered the global stage from the very beginning of the pandemics outbreak. First and the most loud comes from the global medical efforts to understand the coronavirus. Epidemiologists, molecular-biologists, virologists, biochemists, medical doctors (of all kinds), share their (often contradicting) knowledge, insights,
research findings, vast experiences in order to warn us, protect us, manage us, save us, best-guide us. Their expertise, naturally, seems best suited to suggest this is the authority we should follow. The other competing expert discourse that resurged and entered on the front doors into our lives, is the knowledge from the realm of economics. Just as the war talk triggers very particular societal mechanisms of homogenisation via strong national sentiments, the recession talk brings to the fore another set of societal mechanisms – suggesting that our lives are in danger but in a different way. We keep hearing that ‘many more will die of hunger than from the coronavirus’, that ‘we are going to experience a recession similar to that of 1929 (and it wasn’t pretty)’, that ‘we need to think of our economies’, and similar phrases that displace our focus from here and now to there and then. Those two competing sets of expert knowledge not only work on different temporal axes but have different objectives in their mind – the first is focused on public health, while the second on public wealth.

There are other competitors, other disciplines that are pushing to be heard. Behavioural science had its share by introducing a bleak concept of ‘self-isolation fatigue’ that shaped policies, directives and measures on a critical question of when to start isolation and how long one can sustain it without producing a countereffect of social unrest. Psychologists, in particular, flooded the public with warnings, research findings, recommendations and advices on what-(not)-to-do. Historians as well, induced a shot of historical perspective, trying to tell us that nothing is as novel as it seems. What the coronavirus pandemic exposed is the war between disciplines and their attempt to justify their own value and existence.

The war of different bodies of exert knowledge is nothing new, but what is novel is that it has never been fought, in a Goffmanian sense, at the front stage (and front page) of
public discourse. This is because there is no more burning question now as who to trust. Lives are at stake, not just of our physical bodies but, maybe even more importantly (some say) of our extended bodies – our nations.¹ Like in a reality show, the expert knowledge must be pitched not only to governments and the political elite but to the wider audience, that will align their beliefs and attitudes with the one that best reflects their own positionality.

However, all those sets of expert knowledge lag behind the medical and economic discourse not because they are not crucial to our knowledge to navigate the pandemics, but because they are particular types of knowledge that is generally perceived as more accurate and reliable. What both medical and economic knowledge have in common is the mode of presentation. They have transformative capability to be digested and simplified through numbers, stats and prediction models. Numbers, models and stats literally run the pandemic narratives. Governments present highly quantified expert knowledge, media brings each day abundance of different opinions presented with new macabre-like excitement over death rates, virus related statistics, graphs of the recovered, infected and deceased, risk predictions, big data models, percentages, fractions, tables, calculations, you name it.

To peek into the relationship between expert knowledge and authority, we need to ask why the quantified expert knowledge has such powerful effects on us? What is in the numbers that can push us both into action and into an emotional state of mind? Figuratively speaking, the answer is - in the toothpaste advertisement. The simple graph with the growing exponential line explaining the benefits of consuming X toothpaste, together with the ‘expert’s’ enthusiastic explanation (actor in the white coat resembling a dentist) that he/she also uses the very same brand – is familiar to all regardless of our geographies and cultural settings.
Numbers, graphs and statistics have a long history in affecting our behaviours and emotions. Starting with the literacy statistics, which date back to the 1620s, and after the period of intense statistical activities that laid the basis for quantitative enquiries in the Western world, roughly between 1770 and 1840, quantified data triumphed in the Napoleonic years (Woolf, 1898). Statistics formed an integral part of this science, carrying the possibility of a classification of all knowledge and its effective exposition for public benefit starting from Antoine Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836) to Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909). While the use of statistics was integral for the rise of nations-states and scientific classifications, valuation and commensuration, in the 20th century, quantified data in general and statistics in particular became publicly visible and available in a variety of aspects of daily life. The ‘democratization of statistics’ happened, not through educational systems but via popular culture. In particular, the development of advertising and the integration of numbers, graphs and statistics enabled a shared community of discourse, meaning – “an integrative common language shared by otherwise diverse audiences” (Marchand, 1986: xx).

What is so powerful and attractive in this mode of knowledge representation is their seemingly straightforward nature that is easily communicated with the wider audience. In other words, even the poor and uneducated can understand that this toothpaste is the ONE. But what may seem as an ‘obvious’ conclusion resulting from the presented graphs and stats is in fact perceived in myriad ways by those who consume them. As a matter of fact, they are like Rorschach – they never fall onto a tabula rasa, but instead enable everyone to read into it their already established beliefs, concepts, doubts and experiences as well as religious upbringing and level of education. We know that even the same statistical set of data (this problem exponentially
multiplies when we have different sets of data) can be appropriated differently by different people (and governments). Three per cent can be understand as both a very low and very high death rate, and will accordingly generate very different set of behaviours.

The challenge with quantified expert knowledge is that emotional responses to hazards and events when communicated through numbers also land on pre-acquired knowledge and past individual and collective experiences and often lead to reactions that differ from what would be expected based on what is known, or communicated, about a risk (Rakow, Heard and Newell, 2015). More than 80 years ago, Mannheim introduced the idea that our cognitive frameworks and conceptual schemes are influenced by social conditions and our own social locations. The way in which different people will understand the quantified expertise knowledge has to do both with their background (in terms of education, status and religion) and with their cultural perceptions and national histories. Traumatic events from national past, whether we speak of wars, pandemics or natural catastrophes play crucial role in how we reason with the present (Hayden, 1995; Low, 2004; Segev, 1993; Toom, 2020). New extraordinary experiences are always projected and screened into our previous individual and collective sets of narratives and beliefs (David, 2013; Freeman, Nienass and Melamed, 2013). In Israel, in both private and political discourse, the parallels and the links between corona and the Holocaust are striking. Israeli prime minister Netanyahu on the commemoration of the Holocaust Remembrance Day made this connection explicit saying that “unlike Holocaust, we saw danger of coronavirus in time” (Haaretz, 2020), drawing direct parallel between the coronavirus ‘era’ and the Holocaust. The White House made a clear reference between the death toll of coronavirus and the Americans killed in WWI, Vietnam or Korean wars (Mangan, Higgins and Schoen, 2020). Serbian Ministry of Défense Vulin said that “today, just
like 21 years ago during the NATO bombardment, the Serbian people are under threat of being extinguished” (Beta, 2020), framing past collective traumas in reference to the current state of coronavirus. Evoking traumatic past events is always deeply embedded in numbers of dead, killed, vanished, or those who survived as a means to provoke wide range of feelings and promote certain behaviours: from fear, anxiety or anger to empathy and solidarity. This means that the ways in which people internalize the current pandemic and consequently shape their behaviours, numbers introduced by experts are likely to be strongly linked with the previously conceptualized comprehension of what certain numbers depict, ranging from horror, fear, to indifference and to optimism.

The war over and between expert knowledge is taking its toll. This war exposed the shrinking space for social sciences and humanities, because governments and the public alike need policies, plans and instant solutions here and now. There is no time or space for context, in-depth analysis, ambiguities, messiness, criticism – all those analytical pillars social sciences and humanities bring to the table. It is all about quantitative data; qualitative data is a luxury demand. Randall Collins in his 1979 book ‘The Credential Society’ demonstrated how credentials promote occupational closure and social stratification, underlying that education is entirely about status and not at all about skill development. In this current war, credentials are displaced from individual status to a status of a discipline – the more quantified data the more credential expert knowledge becomes. Ultimately, the real price of such displacement and the reduction of our knowledge to data sets is yet to be revealed.

Footnotes

1 We can talk of global solidarity just as wishful thinking. With the appearance of the pandemics, two things happened
almost simultaneously: it exposed the tenacity of nations-states and nationalism as its shaping ideology, and the weakness of supranational capabilities at the global polity level to carry on the human rights regime.

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This paper was written in May 2020, approximately two months after the UK and Ireland imposed stringent lock-down measures, including social distancing (SD). These measures were presented in highly scientised frames as the only objectively reliable way of preventing the rapid spread of this highly contagious virus. Scientisation refers to reifying and normalising scientific language, knowledge, assumptions, ways of thinking and acting (Bäckstrand, 2003). The potential social implications of abruptly imposing such novel and draconian regulations on human bodies and normative touch practices, were, however overlooked, marginalised from this scientific frame. Despite small national differences in policy responses, including the speed/rate of adoption of control measures, governmental discourses therefore framed the disease primarily as a ‘scientific ‘problem. The temporary ‘scientific’ solution was ‘unveiled as SD, achieved through mass control of human movement and interactions, obscuring the heightened risks this conferred on the public, particularly vulnerable groups.

Since Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Knowledge* (1962), scientific predominance has been critically (and not always favourably) compared with other knowledges and ways of knowing (e.g. tacit knowledge, intuition, lay knowledge, social science knowledge) (Fischer 2000). Scientific knowledge is, however frequently uncritically accepted as accurate, objective, neutral, irrefutable and the
pinnacle of truth, partially attributable to scientific knowledge often being simplistically collapsed into numbers, percentages, graphs and statistics. Since the mid-1990s, discourse as an ensemble of ‘ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena’ (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005), has garnered considerable influence. As one key strategy for disease prevention, SD constitutes a discursive response where Covid-19 is framed as a ‘scientific’ problem with scientific solutions. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDPC) (2020, p. 2), for example, defines SD as ‘efforts that aim... to decrease/interrupt transmission in a population/subgroup by minimising contact between potentially infected and healthy individuals. SD measures were therefore translated into accessible public information campaigns (e.g. ‘one-way’ queuing, 2m distancing). Whilst initially being mostly successful, in terms of public compliance, these campaigns entrenched scientific frames while other ‘ways of knowing’ were devalued. While lay and social science knowledge is interpreted as ‘less reliable’ from scientific vantage points, governments, however, did draw implicitly on social science and psychological knowledge to harness public acceptance and compliance with behavioural change, whilst upholding SD as a scientific, technical solution. Generic scripts and phrases such as ‘stronger together’ and ‘look after each other’ infiltrated government discourses in both countries to strengthen public morale and implementation, with ‘movement’ connected to breaking restrictions, accompanied by government acknowledgements that these ‘difficult’ measures would save lives. Phrases such as ‘looking after people’ tacitly invoked images of social interaction, touch and care, but policy officials ‘talked around’ emotional and bodily regulation rather than directly discussing them.

Although scientisation was the manifest discourse through which governments presented ‘facts’ and measures, covertly
they deployed social and behavioural insights to drum up public support and encourage compliance. However, some paradigmatic ‘discursive frame’ (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005) mixing and oscillating did occur between two seemingly contradictory discourses - scientifically softening the mortality curve through SD or ensuring people returned to work as soon as possible (thereby risking lives) to prevent an economic crash. ‘Mixing’ frames successfully, relies on frame compatibility, and despite differences, economic and scientific frames deploy comparable claims to measurement, statistical analyses, methodological/conceptual rigour and objectivity, thereby transcending largely ‘subjective’, sociological insights on emotions and knowledge (Garavan, 2007).

**The Effects of Presenting Social Distancing as Scientization on Social and Emotional Experiences**

Whilst governmental dictates presented the Covid-19 pandemic as a strictly scientific problem resolvable though ostensibly scientific solutions, the potential social and emotional impacts of seriously restricting people’s movements and social interactions through SD, which social science knowledge could have contributed greatly to were largely unacknowledged. Contradictory scientific perspectives, initially vying with each other, such as ‘flattening the curve’ through SD, or achieving ‘herd immunity’ through maximum public exposure, also failed to lower the elevated value accorded to scientised approaches. However, it was not long before detrimental social and psychological consequences emerged. We analyse these according to social interaction and various touch constellations, with touch defined as deliberate/inadvertent, direct/indirect, physical contact between people or between persons and inanimate object(s). Affectionate/nurturing touch is essential for children’s healthy physical, social and psychological development and is highly significant in adult relationships,
conveying various positive and negative meanings, associated not only with care, support and intimacy but also with unequal and negative group and interpersonal power dynamics (Green, 2017). Applying strictly scientific frames, successful SD, (achieved through regulating travel/space between individuals, introducing hygiene etiquettes, avoiding routine touch, e.g. surfaces, people), is portrayed as overtly positive by government; minimising touch between non-infected and infected objects and people, and thereby saving lives. However, this overlooks the complexity of touch, proscribing close interaction with others for entire populations, without examining potential consequences. Normative physical interactions were thereby proscribed within these new socially-avoidant behaviours, which subsequently assumed the mantel of ‘the new normal’. Moreover, scientific frames of disease control also incited extreme fear about contamination, compounded by threats of legal sanctions if contravened.

Shortly before lock-down, relatives of elderly care-homes residents were banned from visiting in the false ‘scientific’ belief that this would render the homes safe places. However, most elderly residents suffer multiple health conditions, requiring ‘hands-on’ care. Multiple carers, travelling from different locations, and caring physically for different residents with complex needs in one location, without adequate PPE, resulted in unanticipated rapid and often-deadly virus transmission (Holt and Butcher, 2020). In both countries, people were forbidden to see dying relatives in homes/hospitals. The number of funeral attendees was regulated, albeit variably, and grieving rituals involving touching were banned (PHE, 2020). Face-to-face GP consultations and social worker child protection visits were subsequently largely replaced by phone/online consultations which are sometimes diagnostically and professionally insufficient (BASW, 2020; Radio 4, BBC, 13.05.2020). In England, rapidly-passed legislation, furthermore, eroded child
protection by replacing statutory time-scales for family visits with when it is ‘reasonably practical’ (Willow, 2020). Ferguson (2011) stresses the importance of social workers interacting with children at-risk, reflecting on cases where professionals failed to physically engage with children who were subsequently murdered by caregivers. Fears of touching infected surfaces or being infected by others also led people to avoid GPs and hospitals, some of whom urgently needed treatment, or died because of delays (Roxby, 2020). Furthermore, Covid-related changes in how people are touched and experience touch require consideration. We experience skin-to-skin touch socially and emotionally differently from when there are physical barriers in between (e.g. gloves, visors). We need to reflect therefore on the multidimensional nature of touch in post-Covid realities, including how touch is experienced in clinical settings where skin-to-skin touch is critical to communication and care.

For those who are locked-down together, touch is not taboo, but for those living alone or who suffer mental illness what might the deprivation of touch lead to? One journalist writes of ‘craving touch’ after self-isolating for weeks on end (Abbate, 2020). If that is the effect on a presumably affluent and socially well-integrated person, this does not bode well for those less fortunate, who experience additional stress linked to actual/feared financial insecurities. Domestic violence involving abusive touch has also increased (Singh-Chandan et al, 2020) with victims having limited means for alerting others when effectively locked in their own homes with perpetrators. Longitudinal life-course research demonstrates strong and enduring links between parental stress, discord, unemployment and child abuse (e.g., Elder, 1974) but sociological insights on the long-term effects of SD remain marginal in debates. The preceding examples illuminate the difficulties and inadequacies with relying wholly on scientised knowledge to identify and seek solutions to problems. They also show how undervalued sociology is, and
suggest how beneficial a trans-disciplinary collaborative approach could be, in terms of embracing a more holistic, multifaceted and long-term perspective, if adopted from the outset.

In conclusion, the elevated scientisation of SD considered curbing Covid-19 as the predominant priority. However, reducing risks in one area within distinctively scientific frames creates further risks, exacerbating inequalities in relation to those who disproportionately contract the disease and who are seen as ‘worthy’ to be treated. Various touch constellations influenced by societal experiences are central for understanding the effects of such policies and although the policies are presented as ‘best’ scientific knowledge, many as yet unproven and speculative scientific hypotheses vie with one another. Which hypothesis is seen as appropriate to support is inordinately influenced by scientific/economic frame mixing, where the value of people’s lives is implicitly measured against potential economic losses. In these contexts, scientific knowledge trumps human emotion, with sparse policy emphasis on the multifaceted nature of touch and SD, which is becoming embedded in ‘ordinary’ life, affecting us all in extraordinary and often unanticipated ways.

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Author’s own (2017)


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SEÁN L’ESTRANGE. UCD.

Introduction

“WE HAVE TO BE IN A POSITION TO CATCH IT AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE IF THERE IS TO BE AN INCREASE ...OUR INTENTION IS TO HAVE THE SAMPLING, TESTING AND RESULTS BACK TO PATIENTS IN A REAL TIME BASIS.” (TONY HOLOHAN, CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER IRISH DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND CHAIR OF THE NATIONAL PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY TEAM, 17 APRIL 2020, QUOTED IN HALPIN (2020))

Over the past couple of months there have been serious and sustained attempts by the vast majority of countries and territories across the world to “ramp up” Covid-19 testing capacity, improve efficiency and accuracy in testing, and test more widely and rapidly than heretofore. These efforts continue in many parts of the world, and combined with efforts to establish effective contact-tracing operations, they are essential to efforts to progressively relax ‘lockdown’ restrictions in the weeks and months ahead so that some form of ‘normality’ can be re-established in the wake of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet even under tight and well-regulated social distancing protocols, new transmissions of Covid-19 will inevitably arise as interpersonal interactions increase and social contact chains
begin to be restored. The role of testing within this regulated resumption of social life is to enable the identification of new cases of infection so they can be contained locally through prompt isolation alongside those suspected of having been infected by a confirmed case. In so doing, the testing and tracing regimes that accompany social distancing protocols form part of the post-lockdown social landscape and become novel additions to the regulatory apparatus of societies for as long the pandemic continues.

This short “thought piece” seeks to identify some of the social implications of testing-and-tracing regimes established as components of strategies for regulating the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. There are many other questions one could ask about the incipient testing-and-tracing regimes, and about testing practices in particular—not least about the significance of testing as an indicator of government response to the pandemic.¹ However, within the confines of this short piece, the focus will be on common (mis)understandings of testing and the implications of new Covid-19 testing practices for the immediate and foreseeable future. While there has been no shortage of controversy and debate over testing, much of it seems to me have missed the point about why it matters, the questions it raises, and neglected consideration of what its societal effects might be.

“Testing 1 … 2 …”

There are two main kinds of test currently used in public health investigations of Covid-19. Only one has direct value in regulating viral transmission though both are important to policy and strategy.² The first tests for the live presence of the Sars-CoV-2 virus in a given biosample (mucus or saliva) using expensive machinery and specialist techniques and procedures (‘PCR’ or Polymerase Chain Reaction) found only in biological laboratories. The second tests for the presence of Sars-CoV-2 antibodies in a blood sample using inexpensive
devices usable in any setting without specialist skill or training. The latter—cheap, quick, simple, but with significant reliability issues—are used to gauge the extent to which the virus has already progressed through a given population. Thus large-scale studies using antibody tests have been conducted in many countries and locales across the world to estimate how widespread the Sars-CoV-2 virus has spread. These studies have been necessary given that PCR testing has been restricted in its application and given that a significant proportion of infected people will exhibit no symptoms and thus not even register as potential candidates for PCR testing. Studies using antibody tests are thus useful for calibrating the results of PCR testing as indicators of viral spread, as well as being of interest to assess the level of collective immunity that may or may not exist in a given population. However it is PCR testing that is usually reported (or at least implied) in official statistics by governments and health authorities when it comes to assessing testing practices as part of assessing government responses to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Why Test? Why Not?

Why does testing matter? Given that there is (as yet) no medical treatment for Covid-19, testing for the presence of the Sars-CoV-2 virus is of no direct medical benefit to an individual nor is such knowledge directly beneficial to a medical practitioner faced with such an individual—there is little either can do with the knowledge by way of intervening in the bodily processes of responding to the infection. All that can be done is recommend the individual ride it out in conditions of self-isolation unless symptoms become severe enough to merit hospitalisation so that they can avail of the monitoring, supports, and auxiliary interventions hospitals can provide to assist in individual struggles with the virus.
Covid-19 testing is thus not medical testing as commonly understood. Instead it is about surveillance and data-gathering. Tests are conducted to gather knowledge on the location of a virus in a human body at a given time in order to place the virus under surveillance through the control of bodies via social regulations that can, when required, be reinforced by laws. The questions that testing answers are the following: In which human bodies has the virus taken up residence? In which bodies is it actively replicating? In which bodies is it seeking to reproduce through transmission to other human bodies? And where are those bodies located? Positive tests results answer these questions by identifying bodies hosting the virus. And that is the value of PCR testing. Or not, as the case may be.  

So much for the questions that testing answers: there are also the questions that testing raises. For inherent in the desire to control the virus is the uncomfortable corollary that the only way to achieve that goal is to control the bodies hosting it. And that means potentially intrusive and coercive measures applied to individuals and populations in the interests of viral surveillance. For if the goal is to stop the virus in its tracks, then knowing precisely where each and every body hosting the virus is, and acting decisively upon each of these bodies to prevent onwards transmission (by rigorous quarantine) is a requirement of effective action. Only then can the goal of eliminating the virus by having it expire in every host body without any onwards transmission be achieved.

This is the logic of an extensive, comprehensive and sophisticated testing system—implicit in the quotation that opens this “thought piece”—that reflects a strategy of suppression through rapid and ‘live’ interventions on infected (and infectious) bodies. It implies too that such an intensive testing regime is to remain in place until such time as mass vaccination of the population is accomplished or collective
immunity is achieved by other means. The alternative is to allow the spread of the virus through the population, with greater or lesser control exercised over it, and hence greater of lesser control exercised over members of the population carrying it and transmitting it.

*Tracing—The Test of Compliance*

The adjunct to a system of testing is that of ‘contact tracing’—tracing people potentially infected by someone confirmed as a carrier of Covid-19—and arguably of more critical importance to controlling transmission of the virus given its highly infectious nature, its special capacity for pre-symptomatic transmission, and the large proportion of people who experience no symptoms from infection yet can transmit it to others. For while somebody with moderate symptoms of the virus may well simply remove themselves from circulation on account of being too unwell to function as normal—thus reducing their power to infect many others—those identified as close contacts under WHO definitions and guidelines will not necessarily experience any symptoms and may resist injunctions to isolate themselves from others, thereby risking accelerating the spread of the virus through non-compliance. After all, many may not *feel* they are a risk to others. And many may not, in fact, *be* a risk. (That depends on the predictive accuracy of the WHO definitions and the theory of transmission underpinning it.) And yet under the Covid-19 testing-and-tracing regime these people will be required to isolate themselves if the goal of suppressing the spread of the virus is to be rigorously pursued. Here the tensions between effective control of the virus in the interests of public health and the social control of human beings is arguably brought into sharpest relief—tensions expressed in ongoing public controversies over quarantining people such as international travellers. Yet unlike conditions of generalised lockdown where everybody (with the exception of those engaged in “essential” activities) was effectively in self-
quarantine together (yet apart), selective quarantining of people poses a much greater challenge in securing voluntary compliance and willing co-operation. Whether these requirements will be reinforced by law, subject to ‘social shaming’ strategies and practices, and/or receive social and financial supports to disincentivize non-compliance remains to be seen.

At a Distance—Where SDPs Meet TTIs

It has been clear for some time that social distancing protocols (hereafter SDPs) will be with us for quite some time and that they will regulate social life in post-lockdown societies in complex ways. Many customs and rituals governing interpersonal interactions (handshakes, kisses, hugs used in greetings and leave-takings) will be proscribed for all outside of household/family groupings. Social gatherings (in homes, streets, parks, schools, workplaces, bars, restaurants, churches, clubs) will be radically reconfigured—some beyond recognition. What has been less often observed or commented upon is how the new regulatory order of SDPs dovetails with the regulatory apparatus of TTIs—the regime of ‘Test, Trace, Isolate’ that constitutes the new test-and-trace systems that complement SDPs as part of the regulated restoration of social life under the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic. Together these will help restructure social life and lead to re-constituted social networks whose characteristics are difficult to discern yet will be clearly transformative.7

The wider ramifications and implications of this new regulatory regime—regulating viruses, bodies, and lives—are endless, and many simply unknowable at this point in time. They spill over, into, and across all swathes of our lives and relationships and our cares and concerns. And yet it is, pending mass vaccination or some ‘miracle treatment’, the sole alternative to repeated generalised lockdowns—with all
the inconveniences that they bring with them.\textsuperscript{8} And this is why Covid-19 testing—understood as viral surveillance and social control rather than a conventional biomedical intervention—is not only essential to reconstituting our immediate future lives in the midst of the pandemic, but also raises urgent questions about the shape of those lives. Questions of compliance with new protocols, regulations, guidelines, laws, and norms—through consent and/or coercion. Questions of individual freedoms and rights—to choose, to privacy, to assemble, to travel, to bodies. Questions of public goods, shared values, collective security, re-imagined futures. All these questions, and many more besides, are raised once we recognise that Covid-19 testing involves more than simply regulating the reproductive activities of the Sars-CoV-2 virus in a bio-population, but also involves the regulation of a complicated and delicate series of negotiations between multitudes of human beings bound together in a social, cultural and biological order being refashioned before our very eyes.

Footnotes

\textsuperscript{1}In L’Estrange 2020b I suggest that data on testing is a false proxy if used to assess government performance in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. There are many reasons for this. Most obviously it is because testing practices are only one small but essential component of a comprehensive and coherent strategy. Less obviously it is because testing has little to do with reducing mortality either directly or in the immediate term—it is not that kind of intervention. Data on testing can, however, be treated as a very strong indicator of how seriously a government takes the goal of controlling the virus. By focusing on measurable actions rather than public avowals (and disavowals) it may even reveal the contours of a government’s strategy along a spectrum ranging from one of determined elimination of the virus to that of wishing it rapid progress through the population, with shades in between including suppression, containment, mitigation, to regulated spread. Equally it may show the tactical commitment to testing on the part of many governments, from the modest goal of preventing the collapse of public health systems, to the more ambitious goal of preventing widespread loss of life. Indeed, in many cases—including Ireland (Nolan 2020)—the initial goal of
testing (and epidemiological modelling) was focussed primarily and narrowly upon estimating healthcare demand generated by the pandemic.

2 There has been considerable public confusion over Covid-19 testing that even includes confusion over what actually counts as a “test”. Frequently, the taking of biosamples from a person has been considered a “test”, as when centres for taking throat or nasal swabs from people have been called “testing centres”. More troubling is when the materials and devices used to perform biosampling have been described and counted as “tests”—the latter being the practice of the British Government in its public (mis)information campaign that has been decried by countless scientists, most recently by David Norgrove, the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority. (Norgrove 2020)

3 It is important to note that antibody tests have not only issues with reliability but also operate on the assumption that most (if not all) human bodies infected with Sars-CoV-2 will produce antibodies. Furthermore, the popular appeal of these tests is based on the assumption that the presence of antibodies shows a person is protected from the virus in the future. While theoretically plausible on the basis of knowledge of other coronaviruses, neither of these assumptions has been confirmed in the case of Sars-CoV-2 and there is even some evidence against each of them—albeit weak and contested as is the case with most current knowledge on the virus. (O’Farrelly 2020)

4 I am leaving aside here both the medical effects of belief on the course of an illness or ailment and the medical value of negative test results that exclude Covid-19 from the reckoning, neither of which is negligible. I am also leaving aside the personal and social benefits of a negative test result—releasing an individual from obligations to isolate themselves if/when suspected of being infected and infectious.

5 The value of this knowledge from the point of view of public health depends on what the strategy and policy—in theory or in practice—of a given government and its health authorities might be. (See note 1 above and L’Estrange 2020b passim.) As for the cost, the current cost to the Irish state of identifying just one person hosting the virus is over €20,000—making it arguably the most expensive data-gathering exercise in Irish history and making Covid-19 testing strategies in general amongst the most expensive scientific knowledge generation enterprises ever conceived. (In Ireland the current cost for one test is €200 and to identify one positive case requires 100 tests, i.e. outlay of €20,000 for each successful identification of the virus. See O’Halloran (2020) for reported costs of a test and Department of Health (2020) for the number of tests conducted and positive results found between 1 and 8 June 2020.)

6 A recent review of evidence estimates the proportion of asymptomatic carriers capable of transmitting the virus (so-called “silent spreaders”) to be 40-45%. (Oran and Topol 2020)

7 See Creighton et al (2020) for an important and careful argument about how social distancing regulations, despite their broad uniformity across Europe, nonetheless differentially affect national populations on account of their varying pre-Covid customs and practices with respect to interpersonal interaction and social contact. Thus some cultures have less socio-cultural distance to travel in order to comply with SDPs than others, resulting in different challenges—both for
peoples and governments—when it comes to securing compliance with SDPs depending upon the scale of departure from pre-Covid ‘norms’ required.

I am not persuaded that the elimination of the virus is currently a genuinely viable option for the vast majority of countries, not least those in Western Europe, and hence have discounted this option. For an alternative argument, advocating the eradication of the virus from the island of Ireland, see the ‘Crush The Curve Ireland’ campaign (www.crushthecurve.ie).

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Covid-19 has dramatically changed how services for people with disabilities operate in Ireland. Disability services over the past 150 years have gone through many transformations from support for people with disabilities through institutionalisation in large congregated settings to a more person-centred rights-based approach within services (McConkey et al, 2018; Considine and Dukelow, 2017). Since the 1990s, in light of how the global Disability Rights Movement discredited the medical model based approach, Ireland began another transformative period towards a more social model of service provision (Garcia Iriarte, 2016; Dukelow and Considine, 2017). The shift towards the social model of person-centred, rights-based approach evident in the policies and legislation has become even more pronounced in the 2010s (McConkey et al, 2018). Due to the pandemic we are now in the midst of another transformative period, which is not only indicating long-term, major changes in the provision of services, but also uncovering the nature of the mode of delivery that has emerged of the past number of years.

The changes that have stemmed from the social model’s response to the medical model of disability have been further developed by a rights-based approach, where the emphasis is on the achievement of efficiency, accountability and respect for the rights of service users. Underpinning this new philosophy is the Health Service Executive and the Health
Information and Quality Authority who define how services for people with disabilities are run in an Irish context through the research, guidelines and protocols that they produce. Underlying this is the process whereby the focus in service provision and design is moving towards a right-based approach which places the rights and dignity of the person with disabilities at the forefront of services (Health Information and Quality Authority, 2019; Health Service Executive, 2019).

This process can be well understood through the concept of legal domination, an aspect of the broader process of rationalisation, as discussed by Weber (2005). What has appeared is an impersonal order of procedure grounded in law, which replaces vaguer notions of principle-based care, in the sense of broad ethical positions to follow, and deference to the honourable identity of service providers, whose actions would not ordinarily be questioned. Instead, there is increasingly ‘rule by statute’: which are prescribed actions that are legally grounded, and legitimate to the extent that they produce equal treatment and effective administration. There is of course a sting in the tail, as efficiency and respect for the dignity and autonomy of persons as the only outcomes would be too good to be true. This form of governmentality, which Weber termed ‘instrumental rationality’ rests on a bureaucratic administrative apparatus, a hierarchical chain of command, and means of ensuring that every actor in the chain of administration is accountable. Weber noted that this is technically the most rational and efficient means of governance, producing a rational, technical orientation to problem solving based on empirical data. However, paradoxically it seems it is best visualised in the image of the iron cage, where professionals’ conduct becomes dominated by procedure and law, with these means, in some ways, preventing them achieving the ends that they desire. The statutes that are focused on being effective, consistent, producing predictable outcomes and respecting the dignity and equality of all clients can somehow
become barriers to the effective carrying out of necessary tasks.

While Bauman (2000) worried about the terrifying efficiency of bureaucracies when they become subject to highly concentrated control, we must also consider the incoherence of bureaucracy in contexts where states, inspired by liberal political economy (O’Riain, 2014) dream of planning for their own demise, in the process creating an assemblage of bureaucracies with overlapping authority and unclear boundaries of responsibility, which confronts workers with a cacophony of protocol that officially aims at efficiency, accountability and fairness, but may result in fact, in confusion, anxiety and harassed frontline workers. As the Irish state has sought to maintain and promote a mixed-economy of welfare (Peillon, 2001; Murphy, 2014), where the state provides a level of funding and oversight to contracted agencies, a contradiction has become apparent between accountability, and the coherence of guidelines.

Since the start of the pandemic, information and knowledge relating to disability services’ response to Covid-19 have simultaneously been provided across many different institutions; the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA), the Health Service Executive (HSE) at a national and local level, the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC), the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) and the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers (Fedvol) sometimes including internal branches within each. Information has taken the form of variety of mediums sometimes with overlapping, repetitive and conflicting communication on what is to be done in disability services to protect people. From the beginning of the pandemic, each institution has issued a great deal of documentation that directly impacts on how services should operate², however, with the exception of some collaborative approaches, the HSE and HPSC, there has been no cohesive
streamline of information and it is left to disability organisations to navigate through the ever changing guidance that they receive to implement and follow guidance through divulging information to those employed in disability services and advising them on their practical meaning. Guidelines are highly complex as they are different according to the area of application which is divided into clinical and non-clinical settings, i.e. nurse led services or social care led services.

Illustrative of the above dynamic is the conflicting guidance for disability organisations to follow in regard to PPE. Service providers have been confronted with a mountain of documentation which is ever changing and difficult to parse. Multiple documents have been produced to advise disability organisations on when PPE is to be used, what kinds, for how long, and so on. However, this was followed by a call from government in regards to the ethical use of PPE in order to not deplete stocks in organisations (Department of Health, 2020). Another example of conflicting guidance is in relation to clothing worn by staff in long term residential care facilities who provide support to people with disabilities. They are required to wash their clothes after their shift has ended, but the application of how this is done is left open to the interpretation of the senior management with varying applications. Recent HPSC guidance and HSE guidance has issued the vague order that clothes should be washed at the maximum temperature that the fabric can tolerate.

The cacophony of guidelines ranges from such seemingly trivial issues to the fundamental goals of the state. Public health and the autonomy and dignity of the individual are in tension. Faced with the national objectives of public health services of ‘flattening the curve’ agencies are now trying to figure out how to reconcile public health objectives with the rights-based approach to services and support. Guidelines issued on providing end of life care to people with disabilities
at home was followed by statements issued by government
and human rights organisations to reaffirm the rights of
people with disabilities to access to acute healthcare similar
to other citizens of Ireland. Public health concerns raised
ethical questions in regards to protecting the rights of people
with disabilities during this pandemic and led to human rights
organisations issued documentation calling for the rights of
people with disabilities to be respected by stating that people
with disabilities and are to be involved with decisions about
their healthcare (The Centre for Disability Law and Policy,
2020).

Related to the question of a cacophony of information,
recommendations and requirements, is the issue of
responsibleisation, a central feature of neoliberal forms of
governmentality (Rose 1996, 2007). We can speculate that
the function of these different information streams in some
ways has less to do with disseminating knowledge and
effective practices to the various disability organisations in
the unfolding crisis, and more with an organisational
dramaturgy of being seen to be providing effective oversight.
Inherent in this would be a transference of accountability to
those involved in direct service provision, who are compelled
to engage in the extremely complex task of fleshing out and
interpreting the meaning of guidelines in practice, translating
them into actionable steps. In an audit and insurance culture,
if it is assessed that this translation process has been done
incorrectly, the service provider can have the blame shifted to
them, due to the quality of their interpretation. While the
bureaucratic performance of accountability has an objective,
legalistic and even scientific image to it, in reality
implementation will always involve interpretation, negotiation,
practical decisions and accommodations. However, because
the legitimacy of the entire system is grounded in the
principle of legal domination, raising the question of the
interpretative nature of implementation is illegitimate and
very difficult to do in practice, despite the fundamental truth of the matter.

Thus, the intensity and rapid changes of the current moment provides a lens of understanding the process of rationalisation that is fundamental in shaping the nature of disability services.

**Footnotes**


[https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/partner-resources](https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/partner-resources)  
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SOCIAL PRACTICES
The true sociologists right now are not those teaching, but those tweeting. They’re capturing, defining, and challenging a world no textbook prepared us for. In 1517 Martin Luther famously said: “If you want to change the world, pick up your pen.” Today, if you want to change the world, pick up your phone. While you were feeling guilty about not writing - they were educating. While you were avoiding emails like the plague (pun intended) - they were posting. While you were checking the fridge for the seventh time as if by some merciful feat of God there would be something new – they were capturing and defining a world no textbook prepared us for. ‘They’ are The Internet.

Often dismissed as a cesspool of over-opinionated mouth-breathers yelling into the void with memes no right-minded person could comprehend, our confinement is pushing us to listen as we’re no longer standing in front of classrooms trying to reach beyond the glassy-eyed students’ wall of indifference while they check how many likes their latest tweet got. The true sociologists right now are not those staring-down classrooms, but those staring-down the world. These sociologists don’t use big words like ‘liminality’, ‘functionalism’, ‘interactionalism’, or ‘online learning’, instead tweeting over a bowl of cereal they’re shamelessly having for dinner. Again. #lol #cornflakes4dinnersquad.
Pandemics shape society and crises question commonly held beliefs (White, 2020). People are turning to science again, but while epidemiologists, doctors, and biologists can offer facts – Covid is spreading fast and often unpredictably – social scientists are being called upon to explain how (International Sociological Association, 2020); how societies function, how health systems are limited, and how previously unseen/ignored inequalities and vulnerabilities arose (Carpino, 2020; ISA, 2020; White, 2020). The hard sciences are turning to the social sciences to make sense of the pandemic and what are we doing? We’re checking the fridge again.

In the spirit of memes’ relatable nature, allow me to use the opening line of every first-year sociology student’s essay: Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines sociology as “the systematic study of the development, structure, interaction, and collective behaviour of organised groups of human beings”.

Sociologists love defining contemporary society as in a time of personal and global ‘crisis’; a liminal time of disjointedness and acceleration we can’t keep up with (Rosa, 2013:13). Then, we were struck by a true disruptive crisis that shook the momentum of our acceleration and brought into question the very nature of society. However, sociology has an opportunity to put their feet back on the ground in the eye of the storm. First, we need to embrace the sociologist’s calling as evaluator, communicator, and socially responsible global citizen. Many voices are drowned out by the noise of a world in chaos, yet the sociologist’s needs to be among them – one of them, not just about them. What sets sociology apart from other humanities is insight and description; the ability to correlate actions to circumstances in a societal cartography. The nature of our skill should be that of counsellors and inventors of ideas, in that the value of a counsellor is to show
their client what the real issue is. (Nettler, 1980). Who are our clients? Those with paid access to Journals? Those mulling around with their polystyrene cup of remarkably average coffee mumbling around an oat-and-raisin cookie about how tough it is to be a job-seeking graduate right now in the 10-minute conference break? Too often maintaining ‘academic objectivity’ has brought on a silence which breeds ignorance and absence (Crowder, 2020). There is a global stage unlike any before now, and the ones capturing, questioning, and challenging have taken up a responsibility that should extend to sociology.

Why Memes Matter

A meme, “an idea, behaviour, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), is the language of The Internet beyond Gmail, Canvas, and Google Analytics.

What do viruses and memes have in common? When it goes viral – we need to pay attention. In the early days of the outbreak in Wuhan officials censored reports of the virus’ rapid spread (Patta, 2020). It had taken a cooperative campaign of celebrities and average people who kept consistently sharing accounts of infected persons before the outcry lead to a change in policy (Mack, 2020). The Internet spoke, social media was its platform, and the world had to listen. But it’s not that simple. How people talk about diseases influences how it spreads (Laurent Hébert-Dufresne in Mack, 2020). Mixed messages from various sources with their own agendas have led to inconsistent and incorrect beliefs. Notions about who is susceptible were developed by the spread of news, rumours, and misinformation and subsequently determined behaviour and exposure (Artnsen, 2020; Mack, 2020; Morton, 2020). Ideas are just as contagious as pathogens. Combining social reinforcement theory and contagion models, patterns arise that centre
around spaces where ideas interact (Hébert-Dufresne, Scarpino, & Young, 2020; Mønsted, Sapieżyński, Ferrara, & Lehmann, 2017). Pathogens and ideas interact and in turn shape the host, which in turn shapes the contagion. Tracking and understanding the spread of the virus is unequivocally linked to the diffusion of information and ideas in complex social systems (Mønsted et al., 2017), and the most powerful indicators of these are online memes.

Sathish Kumar (in Sivapriyan & Chennai, 2020) talks about a meme that had his family #LMAOing: screenshots from a stand-up comedy with the captions: ‘If we remain indoors for 21 days we can meet in May, else we will have to meet only in heaven.’ “It conveys the need for staying indoors in just a second that [can easily] be comprehended by the common man. That is the power of memes.” Much like bards, renaissance artists, and cave painters – these are the snapshots of Living in the Time of Covid-19. Lives have become defined by containment, but the social world online offers relief through distraction, connection, and information (Harris, 2020). Using humour and as few words as possible Covid memes not only lightens the devastation of the virus through humour, but also serves as important propaganda to reinforce messages, raise awareness, and address misinformation (Medic Footprints, 2020). “It normalizes the situation we’re in without really ignoring the concern,” (Valickis, 2020).

Let’s Time Travel

The year is 2040 and you step into the museum exhibit titled: ‘Covid-19 Pandemic’. Scholars and tourists alike are admiring the works by the collective called The Internet. The walls are lined with framed memes, tweets, and posts that captured and conveyed life during the pandemic. You see the numbers of retweets, reblogs, and likes testifying of a massive world-wide camaraderie. You see the contagions, the
ideas, the observers, the teachers, and the advocates, and you see the power these voices had during the time the world went online (Taylor, 2020; Sweney, 2020).

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You stroll to the first. It speaks to when and how it all started (its trivial, 2020).

Covid was a time of reflection and people shared their innermost feelings. (Andersen, 2020)
The education system had been particularly affected. Students explained why. (Zoom Memes for Quaranteens, 2020).
Ireland contributed too, with Aibhe Daly (2020) arguing that it is important to stay positive.

During such confusing, crazy times it is important to not lose perspective. (Andersen, 2020; Edith, 2020; Flake, 2020; McCollum, 2020)
Society’s warped ideas of the importance of some occupations over others were highlighted (Carpino, 2020). Some corporations took advantage of Covid, even stating that the economy should be prioritized. (Murphy, 2020)
Co-morbidities of Capitalism

Prognosis
Billionaires Want People Back to Work. Employees Aren’t So Sure

By Max Abelson and Donald Moore
March 25, 2020 3:56 PM GMT

- "We'll gradually bring those people back and see what happens"
- "Goldman veteran Blankfein and Co. want the economy 'back on'"

Dick Kovacevich, who ran Wells Fargo & Co. until 2007, wants to see healthy workers below about $75,000 or so return to work this new month if the outbreak is under control. "We'll gradually bring those people back and see what happens. Some of them will get sick, some may even die. I don't know."

Do you want to suffer more economically or take some risk that you'll get flu-like symptoms and a flu-like experience? Do you want to take an economic risk or a health risk? You get to choose.

SOME OF YOU MAY DIE,

BUT THAT IS A SACRIFICE I AM WILLING TO MAKE.

Rachel Clarke
@doctor_oxford

So society's *real* key workers have just been revealed.
Not the bankers. Not the traders. Not the elite hedge fund managers. It's the nurses. The doctors. The delivery drivers. The carers. The porters. The teachers. The shelf stackers. The check out staff.

#COVID19

4:39 am - 19/3/20 - Twitter for iPhone
Lead by Gal Gadot a celebrity collaborative rendition of ‘Imagine’ by John Lennon had gone viral intending to spread a message of hope. Many were instead thoroughly unimpressed, calling out how blinding privilege can be. (unknown, 2020)
Covid changed the way people dressed, identified themselves, and communicated. (Mews, 2020; unknown, 2020)
Jazmin Valickis (2020) shared her ‘work from home’ fashion and spoke of the importance of humour in calming the widespread anxiety." Others lamented not even having a job (eanna-k, 2020).

Millennials were a particularly interesting bunch with their dark sense of humour and desire to die. (Kesslen, 2020)
A new appreciation for the arts arose. (unknown, 2020)
You had just seen ‘Covid-2019’ where Henry Cavil was panic buying toilet paper. You wonder if Daniyar Fellan would be disappointed.

when I am watching “Covid-2019” movie in ten years, I hope I will see Matt Damon panic buying toilet papers.
The internet was a rich place of advice during this time of intimacy and conflict. Advice that was often a little tongue-in-cheek. (tinkerprophet, 2020; unknown, 2020)
The final piece captures the progression of 2020 by month. January had threats of a WW3, February saw Australia burning, COVID hit in full force by March, April was the month the world staid home, and May was a month of resistance and revolution with the #blacklivesmatter protests.

You wake up, still in your armchair where you had been staring out the window judging the neighbourhood kids playing in the streets. You pick up your phone and see the email icon with 34 in a red bubble over it. Instead of opening
it, you call the nearest teenager and ask them to help you set up the Twitters. You join the conversation.

“If you want to change the world, pick up your pen.” – Martin Luther, 1517

Today, if you want to change the world, pick up your phone.

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Meme Sources

Disclaimer: All images were taken from popular public platforms and groups, many without a source. Where possible I have traced the source, listed below, but there are ones
where the creator of the meme cannot be traced. None of the images are my own, nor did I alter them in any way.


McCollum V (2020) *Do you know what else opened before it was ready?* Retrieved from Twitter: https://twitter.com/Vic_McC/status/12585239412424245813.


Will the Covid-19 lockdown weaken the stability of modern religion? Can religion adapt to a vastly changed society? This article reflects on this and other questions, to explore what the rise of digital religion during Covid-19 might tell us about the nature of religion and its capacity for adaptation in uncertain times. Sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000) argued that religion is based on the authority of tradition and relies on an intergenerational transmission of collective memory of that tradition in order to sustain itself. This does not mean that religion is static, nor that the fragmented nature of modernity is incompatible with religion. Hervieu-Léger (2000: p. 93) maintains that “modernity has not done away with the individual’s or society’s need to believe. Indeed, it has been observed that the uncertainty that flows from the dynamics of change has made the need stronger”. Acknowledging that the transmission of religious tradition is more challenging in the contemporary era, Hervieu-Léger (2000: p. 93) argued that it would nonetheless persist in different ways than before; “religion retains a creative potential within modernity”.

What does that mean? It means that fewer people might identify with their country’s dominant religion than in previous generations, but some may convert to another religion instead (Scharbrodt, 2015). It means that people will continue to use religion as a tool for cultural belonging, even as they reject key Church doctrine (Inglis, 2007). Hybrid religious
practices will gain greater legitimacy (Brownlee, 2011). Increasingly, people will turn away from institutional religion for their religious or spiritual needs, such as those who seek out New Age and alternative spiritualities (Gierek, 2011). Finally, we might see evidence of Hervieu-Léger’s (2000) argument in those who engage with worldviews and/or practices which contemporary society has questioned as being ‘religion’ at all (Watt, 2014). These examples illustrate that we already know religion is malleable, adaptable, and capable of dealing with rapid change.

The response of religion and of religious individuals to Covid-19 presents us with an opportunity to examine Hervieu-Léger’s (2000) arguments once more. What happens to religion when ‘normal’ society shuts down? I imagine that Hervieu-Léger might suggest that our society has not shut down; that society like our need for tradition, continues and adapts. This is evident through an examination of religion during Covid-19, where it appears that large numbers of regular church attendees have moved to incorporate online religious attendance, many for the first time, during Ireland’s lockdown (Ganiel, 2020).

However, there is nothing new about digital religion more broadly. Digital religion is “the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended or integrated” (Campbell, 2012: pp. 4–5). Like all other aspects of our 21st century lives, the division between offline and online life has increasingly blurred (Campbell, 2012; Boellstorff, 2015). For some adherents, supplementing or even replacing offline religious community and practice with online alternatives and extensions, is old news. It is important to be mindful of this as a bulwark against superficial reporting of the current moment which might suggest that Covid-19 has transformed religion. Religion is always transforming.
Exactly how offline and online religious worlds integrate will vary according to the religion, and the wider culture that surrounds it. Some religions are particularly good at taking advantages of the opportunities that digital technologies have provided us. Mormonism, my current focus of research, provides a good example. Within Mormonism online cultural practices can blur with conventional religious practice and belief, allowing one to support the other until the distinctions between them are less clear (Thain, 2012). In this way people’s use of digital religion offers an opportunity for some to conform to their religion and to support dominant narratives about their faith (Burroughs, 2013; Cheong, 2014). For others, digital technologies create a space in which adherents can challenge or even reject aspects of their religion. This space is used creatively by those who would perhaps be hesitant to challenge their religion in ‘real life’ for various reasons (Finnigan and Ross, 2013).

It is clear that there has been an acceleration of innovation in digital religion caused by Covid-19 and its associated lockdowns across the globe. This innovation is worthy of sociological analysis. As it has done with education through its initiative *Homeschool Hub*, Ireland’s public service TV channel RTÉ has taken the lead. It broadcasts Catholic mass six days a week followed by a religious message from other denominations called *With You in Spirit*. People are streaming mass in large numbers; RTÉ reports that 1.2 million people have watched church services from Knock online since mid-March. Virtual pilgrimages are being created, with parishioners in the Catholic diocese of Cloyne being amongst the first to experience a virtual pilgrimage of Knock (McGrath, 2020). Adherents are also making use of social media to support their faith, joining groups like *The Digital Parish* on Facebook.

Across the globe, people are innovating their religious practice. In the United Kingdom (UK), BBC One has returned to broadcasting Sunday morning services. In Iran, Muslims are
attending drive-in religious ceremonies during Ramadan, something described by one participant as “creative and beautiful” (AFP TV, 2020). In the United States, early studies show that 40% of regular worshippers have replaced church attendance with online services instead (Pew Research Center, 2020). Similar to Ireland (McGrath, 2020), it is likely that many of these U.S church services are being streamed by church groups who have no previous experience with community engagement of this kind. A lack of previous experience offers a space in which novel adaptations of ritual, prayer, and community may emerge.

So, people’s use of broadcast media, social media, blogs, livestreams, podcasts, forums, and other digital technologies to support, adapt, and challenge their religious experience is not new in the age of Covid-19. What is new perhaps, is how Covid-19 has made digital religion more visible and accessible to more people, especially due to recent media coverage of these trends which have brought widespread attention to what is possible within digital religion. Clearly, many who would not usually tune in to a livestream of mass from Knock are now more aware that such things can be done and are trying it for themselves. For those religions which have not made use of digital technologies to the same degree as others, the current moment may accelerate a transition to greater online integration. Digital religion has opened itself up to the masses as a result of Covid-19, but this is an acceleration of a pre-existing development, rather than something new.

As per Hervieu-Léger (2000), people’s need for tradition continues even when society is no longer structured to sustain that tradition to the same degree. Sociology has demonstrated that people will claim tradition in innovative ways to sustain that need. From the ‘outside’ looking ‘in’ at online religious engagement during Covid-19, someone leaving comments on a religious social media page may not look much like ‘tradition’. But for an adherent denied physical
access to their church or to the sacraments, this action can be interpreted as maintaining their link to their parish, as continuing the public declaration of their faith, or as observing sacred time that would usually be spent in church. For them, the tradition of their religion may be sustained through such practices. Using this perspective, we can recognise that what appears at first to an example of change, a rupture with what has gone before, can also incorporate continuity.

Many want to know if the trends identified over the last few weeks symbolise a fundamental shift in how people will ‘do’ religion in the future. Underpinning this question is often an assumption that such practices are completely new. However, emerging research does indicate that many more people are engaging with religion in this way currently (Newport, 2020). Hutchings and McKenzie (2012: p. 75) remind us that the internet is “neither content nor material” yet nonetheless “it structures what we can do”. The digital world may be ephemeral and ungraspable, but it does physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually affect us, as we affect it.

On this basis it is reasonable to question if these recent trends are to become another of religion’s adaptations. Will we see a permanent move towards a weekly online mass in Ireland’s Catholic parishes where priest numbers are already low? Could this be a part-solution to Ireland’s vocations crisis? Will this moment allow for greater ecumenical collaborations across denominations such as the recent UK initiative Church Support Online? Initiatives such as this demonstrate what is possible in bridging theological or cultural divides through the use of digital technologies. A significant question might be to ask if online religious engagement throughout Covid-19 will have been enough to sustain individual and collective belonging to religion? Or, will our time in isolation have irrevocably weakened the tradition that religion rests upon?
Following the arguments of Hervieu-Léger (2000), I think that religion will continue to adapt in fascinating and unexpected ways, and I will continue to observe with interest.

References

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There is a great focus at present on the disciplinary architecture that will envelop society as a result of the ‘state of exception’ that the COVID-19 Pandemic represents (Van den Berge, 2020), and the negative psycho-social effects of social distancing. However, in contrast to these alienating outcomes, outbreaks of disease have historically also resulted in greater sociability, making it worthwhile to examine the ‘Coronavirus Crisis’ in light of the great sociologist of sociability: Georg Simmel. Alongside new surveillance policies and practices of dividing and confining, and concerns over a collapse in subjective well-being that portents a mental health crisis, there is also a manifest democratic sense of togetherness, and a popular commitment to public health, and new rituals that undergird this. The cause in one sense is because pandemics make nonsense of Social Darwinism and social elites’ sense of exceptionalism. The poor may suffer most, but privilege does not provide a complete escape, making it clear that public health is the route to an individual’s well-being. President Trump’s politics of division, distilled in the phrase ‘the China virus’, is a constant of his political career, rather than something new caused by the changed times, and comic-macho politicians whose *modus operandi* is mock dominance rather than amicability have manifestly been the least effective and have been badly discredited. Spikes in social solidarity in eras of pandemics can be seen throughout history, through elite support for the poor to mitigate the
conditions that facilitated the spread of plague through public
delivery in the shape of entertainment, nutrition and medical
care (Cohn, 2012). Practical public health innovations emerge,
such as the quarantine in Venice, the centre of European
trade at the time, or John Snow’s social epidemiology in
London, the centre of industrial, urban modernity. But
alongside these, as Cohn (2012) shows, despite the belief in
the association between pandemics and scapegoating,
vioent and blame, they are in most cases linked with a new
commitment to interdependence and a lack of blame for an
‘other’.

The internalisation of consideration of public health into
habitus can be seen in the crystallisation of rituals that
underpin the evident need for solidarity by producing the
motivation to support it, and enshrine everyday practices of
cleanliness, respect, sociability and orderliness. New public
rituals to propitiate the gods by expressing a commitment to
reducing class agonisms and social distance, and to
celebrate collective overcoming have been linked with
pandemics across the centuries. The plagues in the Roman
Empire, resulted in vows to Apollo to stage games, build
chapels, establish holy days and festivals. The Festa del
Redentore in Venice was instituted to mark the ending of a
plague outbreak. Kyoto’s Gion Festival is a major festival that
arose out of epidemics, with a focus on purification and the
warding off of future plagues, and the establishment of
sociability and solidarity to support this (Roemer, 2007). The
origins of the Double Ninth Festival in China is similar, as are
those of the Dragon Boat Festival, the Bonalu festival in India,
Nyepi day in Bali and the Kundum festival in Ghana (Etikpah,
2015). A consistent association is thus the importance of
conviviality as well as public health measures to successfully
ward off the pandemic.

If it were not for living in the context of social acceleration
where all that is solid melts into air, we could imagine some of
the ritual expressions of solidarity and sociability that we are witnessing today becoming crystallised into traditions in the future. For example, myriad micro-level rituals have emerged, which express social solidarity and sociability to support public health measures, providing a muted, festive quality to the lockdown, seen in the decoration of neighbourhoods aimed at the general raising of morale and *espirit de corps*, and the need to express our collective being. Sociability must be connected with serious life to prevent it being trivial, but it must be an end in itself, with a focus on personalities rather than instrumental goals. There is hence a link to serious business, but a freedom from serious practical interests, shifting the focus to play, a stylised mode of interacting, for the end of interaction itself, and the expression of equality and reciprocity (Simmel, 1997a). Sociable play linked with the very gravity of the moment is evident all around in the normally sober metropolitan environment. National flags hang out the front of houses; some with messages, such as: thanks to our front-line workers; little humorous works of craft pop up, such as masks being glued on to the faces of statues and murals. The front window of a local house is covered in photocopies of toilet paper to create the optical illusion that they had the temporarily precious commodity stacked from floor to ceiling, with a message added of “we’re stocked if you need some, ring the bell!”. Less tongue in cheek, and more sincere expressions also feature, such as a long line of trees with yellow ribbons tied to them. Most common is Easter decorations made by kids hanging in front
windows or gates, showing their art to the neighbourhood in a sweet gesture of camaraderie and mutual recognition. Larger rituals of solidarity have emerged in an evanescent manner, such as standing in the front garden collectively banging pots, lighting candles in front window, mass choreography dance-at-a-distance gatherings, and socially distanced exercising on the street. On a more everyday basis we are witnessing the emergence of new rituals of sociability. An example is the transformation of the front garden into a social club, with people sitting on fold-up chairs either side of the gate, and a succession of people stopping for ‘the chat’ at a distance, removing the sterility of neighbourhoods. There is a sense that, ironically for a shut down, that there is action all around. Less dramatic, but more fundamental perhaps is the new emphasis on etiquette and civility. This can be seen in the interaction rituals of queuing at shops and pharmacies, showing that you are showing a respectful distance when passing people on the street, and the pleasant obligation of having a chat with people on the checkout, and saying thanks to them for keeping us all fed. The seriousness of the moment has bolstered sociability, for example in the showing of respect and consideration of others through little signs of ‘civil inattention’ (Goffman, 1963), repeating the phrases ‘these challenging times’ and ‘stay safe’, and references to good wishes for others’ wider social circle and vulnerable relatives in every email. Though these expressions become a bit stereotyped, they are a marked change from more robotic ways of interrelating and emphasise a novel emphasis on a mutual recognition of personality.

There is a certain feeling of the pandemic bringing us in touch with a more communal and even traditional way of life (witness the groups of kids cycling just to get some fresh air, or teenagers out for a walk with their parents, or parks filled with people rediscovering the Victorian joy of nature in the city, shopping for elderly relatives transforming the solitary shop and purchase of mundane items of sustenance and
minor pleasure being granted a degree of nobility and purpose). We should however remember that Simmel would note that the play aspect of modernity rises in proportion to the need for compensations due to its alienating nature. The COVID-19 pandemic represents also an enormous intensification of the level of abstract, instrumentalised modes of coordination in our lives and orientation to quantified measures as a guide to conduct, causing an increase in objective culture, and the dominance of this over subjective experience. This is evident in the focus and authority it has given (in most countries) to expertise, in the extensions of surveillance technology, in globalisation and the immediate transmission of events in terms of infection, economic ripple effects, the growth in strategies for modifying behaviour to preserve collective physical and economic health. The pandemic has intensified sociability, but in proportion to the alienating dynamics in modern culture. Simmel (1997b) outlined the process whereby objective culture dominates subjective culture, making the attainment of individual personality difficult and disordered. This tragic quality of culture has intensified, as we now are forced to live in every moment under the weight of a collective obligation to the wider social configuration. A trip to the shops is choreography dramatising to the person that they are simply a unit in a vast mechanism, as one shuffles from one line, tape-marked on the ground to the next, as instructed, or moves with a batch of people to a new position. The current intensification of interdependence is matched by an intensification of individualism, as we come to rely on everyone (today, the lives of our loved ones literally depend on each persons’ conduct), but not on anyone in particular.

The psycho-social distance between people, in some ways has intensified through a magnification of the ‘fear of contact’, aversion and repulsion, and a reduction of things to objective terms, that is a feature of metropolitan life in general. Simmel (1997c) noted ‘reserve’, a mental distance
and mutual repulsion between people, as typical of modern subjectivity. Reserve has been multiplied many times over, by the danger people present by their literal potential infectiousness. Face masks withhold the regard of others, screens separate customers and shopkeepers, we social distance, and we have learned an aversion to touch. Social distancing has removed the handshake, the bisou, the playful punch on the shoulder that signalled the stepping out of mutual alienation. The meal (Simmel, 1997d) as the paradigmatic ritual of sociability, in the modern form as ‘eating out’, has been replaced by queues of cars with their occupants waiting to pick up a takeout. We cleanse ourselves after stepping out into shared spaced, with handwashing. Our nostrils, earholes, mouths, that are the doors from the monad to the social have become sites of danger, requiring protection, distance and cleansing to prevent the infectious outside world penetrating it. Sensory exchanges that mediate the reciprocity and smoothness of interactions have been removed or fatally disrupted, as in the lack of proper eye contact in a video call. Simmel (1997e) explains that with the eye one reveals oneself in receiving the look from the other, so that one cannot take without giving, and the ear is less reciprocal than the eye, taking but not giving, and unable to avoid taking. Video meetings combine the narcissism of viewing oneself in interactions rather than one’s interlocutors, with the blasé attitude of reserve by shutting off one’s camera and microphone at will. Reserve is matched by a huge growth in privacy that has turned people into idiotës, literally private persons, which is producing loneliness, cognitive decline, and feelings of oneself descending into being somewhat socially unhinged, as people ‘stay at home’ and cocoon.

The normal compensations for the excessive authority, intensity and rationality of modern culture have been perhaps most effected by the pandemic, in a social recession, characterised by a loss of playful modes of interaction, with no sport and no ‘third spaces’ (Oldenberg, 1999), alongside
the loss of the mournful, yet high sociability of funerals. But here we can see the Simmelian dialectic of play and alienation once more. Pubs were closed on 15th March, but bottle banks are anecdotally overflowing, off-licence sales have spiked, domestic consumption has become more normalised, and people experiment with how to socialise at a distance. There is a stepping out of crystallised routines leading some into trouble, but for others reinscribing the emphasis on the meeting of personalities, rather than simply going through the motions; and in death, people go beyond the normal to show respect for a person’s passing or loss, often in quite beautiful ways, showing the eternal nature of the dialectic between the alienation of modernity and sociability.

References


The Coronavirus is forcing us to make many changes in our lives, perhaps the most significant being the requirement to socially distance or maybe even self-isolate. Some of these words will no doubt be competing for top place in the next New Words List compiled by dictionaries, but the lived reality of these necessary restrictions is challenging.

Probably we feel the lack of close contact most acutely when a loved one dies, regardless of the circumstances of the death. Sociability is central to this part of Irish culture, with one of the notable traditions being the rallying around the bereaved family. One can be struck by the particularity of this cultural practice, through experience of other cultures. When living abroad some years ago a colleague’s husband died and I was left speechless when some people at work – middle-aged people – spoke of how they had never been to a funeral in their lives.

With the current travel restrictions preventing those living abroad from travelling home for a funeral, it is especially important to be there for those in distress. Traditions relating to Irish funerals include the obligatory random stranger who turns up and works their way through the sandwiches and any other refreshments on offer - this social practice made easier now we have rip.ie. Undoubtedly these harmless opportunists are now missing those free meals, as well of course as the banter which co-exists with the solemnity.
The government’s guidelines have totally altered the way we are interact but when it comes to funerals it did not take long for us to find ways to accommodate our cultural practices. Officially a maximum of ten people can gather together but as a local undertaker recently described it, at funerals it’s often an ‘Irish ten’! When it comes to the important things in life, new meanings are, and should be, constructed. As Longhurst et al. (2017: 57) asserted, ‘there exists no one true meaning, no one true reality. There is no truth, but only truths.’ Thus, the number ten can mean different things in different times. And these are certainly different times.

Newly bereaved families used to muddle through the first few especially difficult days surrounded by people who wanted to show they cared and who did so just by being there. Notwithstanding the speed at which burials and cremations take place in Ireland compared to, for instance, the UK where it could be weeks before a funeral happens, anyone with a connection to the deceased or their family will make it to the home, funeral parlour, removal or burial. Maybe even to all of the above.

People often travel from one end of the country to the other for a funeral (sometimes not even staying on for the sandwiches). Unfortunately, during this period of lockdown, we cannot travel more than five (subject to interpretation of course) kilometres. And even we Irish, not exactly renowned for compliance, might not wish to greatly exceed that all-important number of ten who are allowed to congregate. But we manage to help our friends and neighbours emotionally during the first few terribly difficult days. The belief is ‘we’ll find a way’. And we do.

We stand outside our houses, chatting across the two-metre distance, seeing each other more now than we did before we had to ‘Stay Home’. When the hearse comes
slowly up the road, the family walking or in cars behind it, all becomes silent. The hearse pauses at the home of the deceased. Some people bless themselves as a mark of respect. Young men in baseball caps take those caps off as the hearse passes by. Members of the local GAA or soccer club, drama group or simply some people who want to carry out this service for their friend, form a guard of honour behind the hearse. There will be people waiting outside the church gates, others in the graveyard standing at a distance. Some might slip quietly into the church; maybe looking for solace themselves as they too are grieving.

These are simple things to do for a family in their time of sorrow, just giving up a little bit of our own time to mark the passing of their loved one and doing so in long-held ways which hold meaning. I find it heartening that despite the rapid changes in society, some cultural traditions remain. These sentiments may seem old fashioned but if we have good neighbours, we are very lucky. Peig Sayers (1878-1973), author and seanchaí, who lived through hard times in a close Gaeltacht community in Kerry, talked of ‘living in the shelter of your neighbours’. These words resonate during times of bereavement, and particular so during this pandemic.

References