**Welfare imaginaries at the interregnum**

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In January 2019, the BBC finally broadcast the 2016 film *I, Daniel Blake* (directed by Ken Loach). This harrowing film tells the story of a joiner who becomes increasingly impoverished when, after having a heart attack, he is consistently failed by the welfare state. The script was partly developed from the testimonies of welfare claimants who had direct experiences of the kinds of surveillance and punishment documented in the film, and partly drew on information provided by anonymous workers in the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), who are thanked in the end credits of the film. During and immediately after the broadcast, a fractious and animated discussion about the 'truth' of the film opened up on social media, followed up over several days in print media.[i] The hashtag #WeAreDanielBlake, which had been used by viewers of the film since its release in 2016, was reanimated again following the 2019 broadcast, in order to share newspaper coverage of the acts of welfare state violence that were dramatised in the film, to invite critics to local food banks to see for themselves the effects of welfare sanction, and in some cases to share personal testimonies and experiences of welfare state reform. These strong responses to the film tell us something about the antagonisms surrounding welfare, poverty and inequality in Britain today: the struggle to determine the parameters of fact and fiction; the pro- and anti-welfare discourses; and the complicated ways in which these debates play out across media, policy and popular debate.

They also tell us something about the texture of the welfare present, a moment that is characterised by a struggle between different versions of what is happening in - and to - the welfare state. It shows how some hold onto their distrust for the testimony of welfare recipients (dramatised in *I, Daniel Blake*, but regularly documented in many other publications and forums), frontline welfare workers and antipoverty organisations, in order to insist that welfare reform is 'working'.

It has now been over ten years since the 2007-8 financial crisis, and the decision by the Coalition government (2010-15) and then the Conservative government (2015-present) to locate the cause of the crisis in excessive public (welfare) spending rather than in the excesses and chaos of unregulated financial capitalism. The response of these governments to the crisis, instead of addressing its underlying causes, has been to embark on an austerity project that has seen an unprecedented scaling back of public spending, and radical, devastating retrenchment of the welfare state. And, despite Theresa May's declaration at the end of 2018 that the 'end is in sight' for austerity, there is little evidence that austerity is 'over', and the damage wrought by years of cuts continues to reveal itself. This context has led to the Institute for Fiscal Studies launching a five-year inquiry into the state of inequality in the UK - which the IFS describes as 'astonishing' - aiming to 'to assemble the evidence on the causes and consequences of different forms of inequalities', and promising to take an intersectional approach.[ii]

Indeed, the sheer range of proliferating testimony and evidence that documents the damage of austerity - from United Nations reports, community-led films, Poverty Truth Commissions, longitudinal poverty research, food-bank mapping and academic

research - seems matched only by the stubborn dismissal of this evidence from the austerity architects themselves.[iii] At this juncture of intense welfare reform and contracting social provision, questions of how we might imagine the welfare state - how it has been imagined and how it might yet be imagined - are both urgent and provident. We are perhaps at the tipping point of austerity 'common-sense', where, in Antonio Gramsci's often-quoted words, 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born'. Gramsci called these 'tipping-point' moments - when old settlements unravel, the usual sources of legitimacy decline, and popular consent fractures - the *'interregnum'*: a liminal time, a moment of inertia and division where no position has overall consent to proceed. What concept could better describe the UK political present? The interregnum, for Gramsci, always presents 'a great variety of morbid symptoms', but it is importantly also a period of opportunity, a time when the future, and how to get there, can be re-imagined.[iv]

In the run-up to the 1942 publication of his landmark report, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, William Beveridge used radio, pamphlets and short films to propagandise his ideas and generate public excitement and support for his welfare state blueprint - and to great effect. The report itself sold more than 100,000 copies within a month of publication. The ambitious case *for* a welfare state had to be actively made, and this meant the construction of a 'welfare imaginary', to be animated and circulated via media, formal and informal discussion and public debate. This welfare imaginary was initially ambitious and far-reaching, drawing on ideas of social providence and mass services; and it included a wide range of services - including the NHS, education, social housing, public libraries and municipal infrastructure. It is hard to imagine the scale of this ambition being replicated in the political present, though some would argue that Labour's swelling membership under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn represents a nascent desire to rekindle the socially provident, cradle-to-grave welfare state, and the ideas of collective and state responsibility that underpin it.

From the national buzz created by Beveridge's report and its welfare vision, to the critique offered in *I, Daniel Blake*, over the past seventy years we have seen welfare, post-welfare and anti-welfare imaginaries being constructed and circulated across multiple media and cultural sites. And social attitudes towards the welfare state have shifted considerably of late: while previous periods of economic recession have seen an increase in public support for welfare provision, the most recent economic downturn has been accompanied by a *hardening* of public opinion towards the welfare state, and towards people claiming welfare benefits.[v] The very conceptualisation of 'welfare' has also narrowed; the broader principles of mass service and 'cradle-to-grave' social security have now been supplanted by a definition of 'welfare' as simply 'cash benefits' that are typically imagined to be solely for the unemployed. This narrowing, in turn, fuels ideas about individual claimants becoming 'welfare-dependent scroungers', and animates new forms of 'underclass' mythologising and welfare stigma.

Media representations of welfare have been central in this reshaping of public attitudes, perhaps most notably in recent years through so-called 'poverty porn' television programmes such as Channel 4's *Benefits Street*. Such programmes have helped reinvigorate older vocabularies of deservingness and moral character. Writers specialising in this area have noted how this reshaping of the texture of 'welfare imaginaries' has helped mobilise consent for political decisions around welfare reform and

retrenchment. In tune with Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea's analysis of the neoliberal settlement outlined in *Soundings* in 2013, Tracey Jensen and Imogen Tyler have considered how pejorative narratives and images of welfare work solidify a broader 'anti-welfare commonsense', and help justify the withdrawal of social provision under austerity.[vi] In the contemporary geopolitical climate of Brexit in the UK and Trump in the US, these imaginaries take on new forms as state racism and xenophobia further undermine the claims to welfare by groups that are marginalised. This means that, in formulating and re-imagining our demands for the future of welfare, attentiveness to these historic and enduring exclusions is crucial, as is a commitment to untangle, rather than repeat, them.

Thinking through the contradictory 'stickiness' in contemporary welfare imaginaries is also necessary.[vii] Complexly co-existing feelings such as nostalgia, disgust, pride and anger, for example, can be mobilised in different ways: in reality television shows like *Benefits Street*; in films such as *I, Daniel Blake*; in forms of anti-austerity activism; or in the Leave campaign's 'take back control' refrain, which capitalised upon the resentment of communities scarred by decades of neoliberalism.[viii] These contradictions and ambivalences reflect some of the contradictions of the welfare state itself. From its launch onwards (notwithstanding the chutzpah with which it was promoted), the welfare state was a compromise between labour and capital: it was shaped by the principles of equality and fairness, but was also always an instrument of surveillance and control; and it was always indelibly marked with the capacity for state violence in multiple forms, now grotesquely enacted via the austerity project.[ix]

Across our research and in our recent seminar series, *Welfare Imaginaries*, we have been examining the ways in which 'welfare' has and can be narrated, constructed and understood.[x] In the current interregnum, what might we want to reach back into the welfare past for - what ideas or concepts might be brought into the welfare present? What welfare experiences do we need to attend to and place at the centre of a new common-sense? What creative and imaginative tools might we need to initiate productive discussion about the place of welfare in society, and when looking forward into an imagined, future?

In what follows, we look at three potential themes that emerged from our discussions: the issue of temporality and its role in how we might (re)imagine welfare; the question of welfare nostalgia; and the need for more creative sites and practices of welfare (re)imagination.

**Time and temporality in the welfare interregnum**

Time and temporality have always been central to the ways that we imagine welfare and the welfare state. The post-war welfare settlement was partly designed to offer protection against the cyclical precarity of capitalism: it was built to insulate workers from periods of unemployment, ill health and old age, and to provide predictability and universality. The mass welfare services and provisions of the postwar period - the National Health Service, council housing and comprehensive education, the national insurance programme and family allowances - can thus be seen as an intervention into time: an intervention to stave off the desperation caused by time unfolding when resources were scarce or non-existent, and to provide a floor of security to protect people against the fluctuating uncertainties of the labour market. The post-war welfare settlement promised to create, amongst other things, a new relationship with time:

space to think about the future, to lift everyone out of 'mere survival' and into thriving, and to offer the possibilities of dreaming and planning. The welfare state project was imagined as a project of modernisation, bringing all into the riches of a more equitable and just future.

And yet we also know that the welfare state has come to shape our sense of time in more punishing and oppressive ways. Rather than liberating people from the tyrannies of the perpetual present, welfare is increasingly used to control, ration, order and direct the ways that we spend our time. Welfare produces different temporal arrangements and inequities for different groups and categories of people. The everyday bordering practices of current government policy, for example, mean that welfare entitlements are differently allocated according to length of residency or citizenship.[xi] The undervaluing of time spent on the work of caring, as well as the mostly invisible apparatus of social reproduction and care, can be seen in the paltry allowances paid to carers, and the assumption that gaps in provision will be filled by ever increasing hours of unpaid work, which create unbearable pressure on people's time. The stigmatising discourses about welfare claimants being lazy and unmotivated underpin increasingly frequent requirements for them to sign on, meet with work coaches, or participate in the often-meaningless work programmes designed to fill their time. Research and personal testimonies of austerity have highlighted some of the ways in which the resource of time is unevenly distributed;[xii] they have also shown how people's ability to practice autonomy over their time is constrained by the demands and inflexibility of the welfare state; and how austerity is itself lived and felt in the mundane and routine practices of everyday life.[xiii] In this welfare interregnum, the question of welfare temporalities is one that we need to hold at the centre of debate.

It is well-documented that the continuing rise in work productivity has not been equalled by a rise in wages for three decades. This has affected people's time in a number of ways. The accelerating costs of living means that many people have to work long hours, often with two or more jobs, to make ends meet; while the rise of zero-hours labour arrangements takes away security about working hours but also often requires people make themselves constantly available. And the crisis of underemployment (rather than unemployment) also has its effects. The changing nature of employment and the high cost of living have made time and time poverty a key facet of injustice. How can we better design the welfare state so that it affords autonomy over time in the welfare future? How can we re-code unwaged 'reproductive' work - which is what makes 'productive' waged work possible - as socially necessary, and how can we recognise it in our welfare system? What can we do to rescue the notions of 'leisure time', 'free time' and time autonomy from the demands of neoliberal capitalism? What experiments in welfare imagination - a four-day week, a universal basic income? - will we need to make welfare temporalities a liberatory force for the twenty-first century?

**Nostalgic longings: challenging the 'golden age' of welfare**

Across much public debate, we can discern a nostalgic yearning for yesteryear's utopian forms of welfare, and a desire to get back to 'there'. In this nostalgic frame, a 'golden age' of welfare is depicted where public attitudes were united in supporting a strong welfare state, and where there was comparatively generous universal provision that was free at the point of use. This welfare melancholia treats the welfare state as a

lost object, in the sense that Wendy Brown evokes in her article 'Resisting Left Melancholy'.[xiv] There is a feeling that we can only now access these good old days through mournful sepia tones and archive recordings. In 2013, before directing *I, Daniel Blake*, Ken Loach made a documentary film, about the birth of the welfare state, *Spirit of* '45, with precisely this sensibility. While these kinds of longings for the past seem intelligible in the current context of welfare retrenchment, they also obscure the myriad of ways that the welfare past excluded, extracted and extorted – as Rebecca Bramall points out in her book *The Cultural Politics of Austerity*.[xv]

One problem in looking back with nostalgia at a golden age is that it overlooks the strong sense of empire that still existed in postwar Britain. The twentieth-century welfare settlement was built upon racialised hierarchies of labour: socialist conceptions of national belonging were as much about defending and maintaining imperialist ambitions as they were about democratic change and improving workers' lives. This desire to romanticise (and perhaps return to) the welfare state of the post-war settlement must be called into question if we are to get beyond the melancholy of welfare nostalgia, which often serves to solidify racialised and hierarchic conceptions of difference. The continuing failure to recognise the dependence of the welfare state on migrant labour, for example, coexists with (and is fermented by) populist arguments that universal welfare is somehow undermined by 'diversity'. This is the kind of thinking that informs the current explosion of discourses that frame the UK's departure from the European Union as necessary in terms of 'protecting' the welfare state.[xvi]

As well as challenging an easy (and often comforting) appeal to nostalgic longings for this 'golden' past, it is important to also recognise the contradictory attitudes to welfare that have endured over time, and the evidence that many have always been resistant to, and questioned, the entitlement of the poorest to state support. It is vital to interrogate and remember the ways in which even supposedly 'supportive' welfare state interventions in the past were often deeply problematic - they could, for example, be profoundly exclusionary, gender-blind and imperialist, and often reinforced the longstanding division between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' populations.

When considering welfare we find a complex interplay between individual imaginations, collective imaginaries and lived experience. This is particularly notable in relation to the National Health Service, which is perhaps the last, and continuingly symbolic, pillar of the post-war welfare settlement. Though the NHS remains a largely valued and consistent element of the UK welfare system, it is, however, one which has been subject to frequent structural reorganisations since its inception in 1948, and it is becoming increasingly privatised. This means that the profoundly positive and proud imaginary of the NHS and its role in British society intersects with individual experiences of NHS provision that are often more ambivalent, and are sometimes negative. The ways in which these sometimes contradictory experiences and imaginaries are resolved, both by individuals and at the broader societal level, is important in driving representations of 'welfare' - and in making the case for policy changes and reform. A recognition of the perhaps irreconcilable nature of imaginaries and lived experiences of welfare points to the need for us to flex our sociological imaginations; to find ways to connect the dreams and aspirations we might have for the welfare state, and for a socially just and flourishing society, with the crushing realities of bureaucracy, conditionality, poverty, marginality and stigma.

An important facet of this is keeping at the forefront of debate people's *lived* experiences of welfare, and especially the experiences of those whose lives are most harshly affected by the government's programme of reform, as we explore below. As much research now demonstrates, the effects of austerity are not equally felt. This government's cuts to welfare have most affected those already living with significant hardship: the unemployed, single parents, the disabled, women, the young and certain ethnic groups have been disproportionately affected.[xvii]

**Bringing welfare to life: sites and practices of re-imagining**

So this is our final point: in building our imaginative armoury for the welfare future, we must place at the front and centre people with direct experience of poverty – especially those most affected by welfare reform, or subjected to the most virulent forms of welfare stigma. We must ensure that 'experts by experience' are not only heard, but also shape and curate the conversation, while simultaneously ensuring, that we are not placing the whole burden of challenging punitive policies onto their shoulders. This was an explicit challenge made to us in our *Welfare Imaginaries* work by those whose knowledge and skills are foregrounded in the lived experience of existing on a low income. It can also be seen in projects and initiatives which seek to modernise and reform welfare services by centring the experiences of service users and by emphasising co-production, cooperation and community building[xviii]. The Poverty Truth Commission movement's statement 'nothing about us, without us, is for us' emphasises the importance of broadening out the conversation from the usual academic spaces to include sites and practices of resistance.

It is also important to retain a focus on the rich as well as the poor. While social researchers have been very good at attending to the life worlds of the most disadvantaged in society, we have in the process taken our eye off what is happening among those at the top. We rarely hear about the spending habits, dietary practices or lifestyles of the elite in the way we do for those living on the most marginal incomes. A call for 'studying up' is thus pertinent here when thinking through the production of welfare imaginaries: where and how they are produced, what work do they do, and who gains from their production and circulation?

A further consideration here is whether more research on the lived experience of welfare is always what is needed, or whether instead more can (and should) be done to support local and emerging forms of resistance.[xix] The role of the media is important in this dialogue about reshaping the public imaginaries around welfare: we particularly need to think about alternative media and different practices of journalism – those which seek not to reproduce welfare stigma but to challenge it.[xx]

To that end, there is a lot to explore in terms of how we expand upon and animate our sense of welfare. This includes thinking about how to make welfare issues and welfare discussion more lively and inclusive, and how to bring the welfare state to life. Across the *Welfare Imaginaries* series we saw a multiplicity of ways in which data, documents, narratives, stories and testimonies about welfare can be shared and made dynamic. Zine making, welfare walkshops and other alternative ways of talking about welfare all provided a basis from which to think in different and more imaginative ways about what we should focus on in the future.

We conclude by drawing hope and inspiration from these collective creative moments and activities from the series. They have opened up possibilities for thinking about how to represent, think and talk about welfare, in creative, accessible and fair ways.

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**Notes**

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[i] For example, James Cleverly MP declared the film to be nothing more than 'political polemic' in a series of tweets during and after the BBC broadcast.
[ii] See the Institute for Fiscal Studies *The Deaton Review*, 2019: https://www.ifs.org.uk/inequality/about-the-review/our-approach/.
[iii] For example, see Kayleigh Garthwaite, *Hunger pains: Life inside foodbank Britain*, Policy Press, Bristol 2016; and Ruth Patrick, *For Whose Benefit: The Everyday Realities of Welfare Reform*, Policy Press, Bristol 2017. See also the 'Period Poverty' project by Sara De Benedictis: https://theperiodpovertyproject.com/.
[iv] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, Lawrence and Wishart 1971.
[v] See for example, John Hill, *Good Times, Bad Times: The Welfare State and What We Can Do About It*, Policy Press, Bristol 2015.
[vi] See Tracey Jensen and Imogen Tyler, 'Benefits broods': the cultural and political crafting of anti-welfare commonsense, *Critical Social Policy*, 35, 4, 2015; for Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea on 'Common-sense neoliberalism' **see:** www.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/kilburn-manifesto.
[vii] In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2000, Sara Ahmed uses the concept of 'stickiness' to explore how emotions can

be 'stuck' to specific ways of thinking through the making of repeated emotive associations.

[viii] See Kim Allen, Imogen Tyler, and Sara De Benedictis, 'Thinking with "White Dee": The Gender Politics of Austerity Porn', *Sociological Research Online*, 19, 3, 2014;

[ix] See Vicki Cooper and David Whyte, *The Violence of Austerity*, Pluto Press, London 2017.

[x] This series was sponsored by The Sociological Review Foundation, Birmingham University and Brunel University, and you can find out more at https://welfareimaginaries.wordpress.com.

[xi] See for example Don Flynn, 'Frontier Anxiety: living with the stress of the every-day border' *Soundings* 61, Winter 2015

[xii] For example, Tracey Warren, 'Work-time underemployment and financial hardship: class inequalities and recession in the UK', *Work, Employment and Society*, 29, 2, 2015.

[xiii] See Sarah Marie Hall, *Everyday Life in Austerity*, Palgrave, London 2019.

[xiv] Wendy Brown, 'Resisting left melancholy', 2014: https://www.commonhouse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/brown-melancholia-of-the-left.pdf.

[xv] See Rebecca Bramall, *The Cultural Politics of Austerity: Past and Present in Austere Times*, Palgrave, London 2013.

[xvi] See Satnam Virdee, 'Racialized Capitalism: an account of its contested origins and consolidation', *The Sociological Review*, 67, 1, 2019.

[xvii] See Leah Bassel and Akwugo Emejulu, *Minority Women and Austerity: Survival and resistance in France and Britain*, Policy Press, Bristol 2017; and Ruth Pearson, 'A feminist analysis of neoliberalism and austerity policies in the UK', *Soundings* 71, 2019: https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/s71_03pearson.pdf.

[xviii] See for example Zoe Gannon, *Co-Production: the modernisation of public services by staff and users,* CompassOnline, available at http://www.compassonline.org.uk/publications/co-production-the-modernisation-of-public-services-by-staff-and-users/

[xix] https://www.thesociologicalreview.com/nothing-about-us-without-us-is-for-us-reflections-on-an-undisciplining-workshop/.

[xx] For example, Rachel Broady's work with National Union of Journalists is relevant here: http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/news/pressroom/stigma/nuj/nujguide.