

Editorial

A TRANSFORMED CONTEXT

In March, our world crawled to a halt in ways which were previously unimaginable. The slow emergence and then rapid proliferation of the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 cast doubt on many strongly held certainties and loosened societal touchstones. Much is still uncertain as we attempt to restart our day-to-day lives under the rules of social distancing, wrestle with the public health and economic trade-offs, or await a vaccine which may ultimately fail to meet our growing expectations. As we look to the future, our vision is more opaque than usual.

Yet, while we may only see forwards dimly, Covid-19 has had a sharpening effect as we look backwards. Like the optician slotting the correct lens in front of our eye, clarity is swift as the corners recede and the blurriness dissipates. Little within our society has remained untouched by the pandemic. Suddenly, economic, social and penal policies, which made sense within the globalised neoliberal story we shared, were revealed as woefully inadequate, and in many cases, lethal. Past decisions by politicians and policymakers which we assumed

were just the ways things were – the proverbial cost of doing business – were, in the midst of a pandemic, exposed by an unyielding light.

From the beginning of Ireland's response, the inadequacies of social provision were obvious and the source of much societal fear. Our public hospitals, with some of the lowest number of intensive care beds in Europe, and the wider care system, teetered on the precipice of being overwhelmed. At a time when a secure home or suitable accommodation was central to responding to virus transmission, 10,000 adults and children were homeless and in emergency accommodation. Institutions such as prisons and direct provision centres were painfully overcrowded. For the vulnerable and those on the periphery of society – the homeless, the imprisoned, and the refugee – space is a luxury society does not afford them. As the refrain of “keep your distance” rang in our ears, many who wanted to, simply could not.

Positive steps were taken during the early response. People recently unemployed or furloughed had their income maintained on



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an almost universal basis. An eviction ban, denied for years as unconstitutional, ensured many people could remain in their rented homes. Prison numbers were reduced through structured temporary release. Though much needed interventions, these were fleeting and more revealing of the previous low levels of income support, tenant protections, and non-custodial sanctions.

Some of what was previously hidden was revealed in the starkest ways. Absence of mandatory sick pay and dubious contractual obligations forced many precarious workers, typically migrants, to turn up for work in meat processing plants, day in and day out. As regional lockdowns occurred due largely to rising infection rates in meat plants and direct provision centres, the overlap of people who worked in the former and lived in the latter became visible. At the centre of this viral Venn diagram, we saw for the first time, people who moved to Ireland seeking refuge and a better life, who have instead received institutionalisation and labour exploitation. May we continue to see clearly what lies beneath the lustre of Irish society!

MAPPING THE NEW POLICY SPACES

Any aspect of social, economic or welfare policy could be examined in great detail and much has already been written. We will not seek to replicate this more granular and key work. Yet stepping back for a moment to consider a wider sweep of events, common threads emerge demanding a coherent response. In this issue of *Working Notes*, *Policies After a Pandemic*, we have drawn together a selection of four carefully considered essays to attempt this more integrative work.

For the first time, the essays will now be available online as audio files.¹ This forms part of the Centre's commitments to walk with the marginalised, by making our materials available for those who do not have the capacity to read or are visually impaired, and to keep developing *Working Notes* and its accompanying features. If you are tired of staring at a screen or would just prefer to listen to our social analysis, I heartily recommend this new addition to our website.

¹ Audio files can be streamed at: <https://soundcloud.com/jcfj>

In “*Confines, Wards and Dungeons*”, Pieter De Witte and Geertjan Zuijdwegt, theologians at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in Belgium and prison chaplains, tease apart how lockdown and prison have been compared and contrasted by considering the social meaning of detention. As the similarities start to readily disintegrate, the authors reveal more consequential analogies between how our society responds to crime and to a novel coronavirus. Rebecca Keatinge, Managing Solicitor at Mercy Law Resource Centre, follows with an essay about family hubs which draws on her professional experience to describe how current policy responses to homelessness in Ireland have consciously shifted further into the institutionalised space. In “*Lives On Hold*”, Keatinge outlines the debilitating, and relatively unmapped, effect which family hubs have on families who were previously independent, and argues that the creation of an institutionalised space for homeless families is both short-sighted and unjust.

Both essays ask us to consider what constitutes a meaningful life and to reconsider both homelessness policy and prison policy with a more ambitious standard than mere continuation of life. De Witte and Zuijdwegt rightfully conclude that prisoners are generally ensured of a “continuation of life but a life stripped of all meaningfulness.” In a similar vein, Keatinge shows that, in spite of family hubs being presented as a short-term solution, families are remaining in homelessness for years, existing in a form of stasis, unable to move on with their lives.

Our third essay “*Do we really feel fine? Towards an Irish Green New Deal*,” written collectively by the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice team, considers what meaningful life is possible without the preservation of an environment to allow the continuation of life. Taking for granted the reader does not need to be convinced of accelerating climate and biodiversity breakdown, this longform essay uses as its jumping off point the concept of integral ecology.

The essay seeks to dispel, once and for all, the bifurcation which exists within Irish policymaking that our ecological crisis is separable from our social crises – an insight we describe as “integral ecology”. Having offered

a diagnosis of our political impasse, we present a roadmap to a reorganisation of society and the economy which does not separate our care for the environment with our care for our neighbour. Deliberative democracy with diverse and disagreeing people is concretely proposed as a method to forge a genuinely new politics. Ireland requires a transformative green new deal as the means to recover from the economic and social damage done by the pandemic. Our hope is that this essay will constitute a valuable contribution – intellectually and practically – towards that goal.

Finally, sensitive to both the trauma of current times and the importance of not neglecting our inner lives, Gerry O’Hanlon SJ, theologian and former staff member of the Centre of Faith and Justice, prompts us to ask what is an appropriate response or disposition to live with in the world today; a world which is being irreversibly changed by Covid-19 and a climate and biodiversity crisis. In “*Any Light in Darkness?*”, O’Hanlon considers the reality of illness, death and our sense of life being suspended and guides us towards lament as a restorative response for people who are suffering or disorientated. Lament will naturally lead us to the rudimentary questions of ‘why?’ and ‘for how long?’. But by being comfortable in the place of lament – distinct from despair or nihilistic leanings – deeper insights about meaning, love or, in some cases, the presence of a loving God will emerge. Out of these questions, a wellspring for hope and joy can be divined but also an enduring enthusiasm for a better, more just world.

POLICIES FOR AFTER THE PANDEMIC

Our world has changed and is changing. At a simple level, Covid-19 is a zoonotic disease.² Considering this fact more deeply, the virus could be also understood as a natural consequence of humanity’s unsatiated and unquenchable desire to commodify our environment and the inexorable encroachment

² A zoonosis is an infectious disease—bacterial, viral, or parasitic—that has transmitted from a non-human animal to humans. It is likely that Covid-19 originated in bats but due to the typically limited close contact between humans and bats, it is more likely that the transmission occurred through another animal species such as domestic animal, a wild animal, or a domesticated wild animal. See: World Health Organisation, ‘Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) - Situation Report 94’ (Geneva, 23 April 2020), <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200423-sitrep-94-covid-19.pdf>.

of people into animal habitats. This is simply to say, that policy areas are connected. Our response to environmental policy will impact upon the likelihood of future pandemics which will be exacerbated or mitigated by the economic and social policy we put in place now. We must see the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 as a portent, not a problem which, once solved, will allow life as we knew it to resume.

A return to a more burnished normal is not an option. Positive changes which occurred in Ireland during the early response were temporary, neither permanent or structural in nature. Nascent social solidarity was quickly spent, and old habits are quickly reemerging. Alongside the individual and communal suffering caused by the pandemic, we must treat the revelatory aspect of the coronavirus as a gift, to reimagine and reshape our society. Pope Francis extols us to “not lose our memory once all this is past, let us not file it away and go back to where we were. This is the time to take the decisive step, to move from using and misusing nature to contemplating it.”³

We should take seriously the knowledge that a global pandemic will pale in comparison to accelerating climate breakdown and its much higher human cost. Many of the policies and investments in universal basic services which are vital during a pandemic will be needed even more in the future. Like any virtue, solidarity with each other and care of our environment are not switched on but practised. Now is the time to practise.

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³ Austin Ivereigh, ‘Pope Francis Says Pandemic Can Be a “Place of Conversion”’, The Tablet, 8 April 2020, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/17845/pope-francis-says-pandemic-can-be-a-place-of-conversion->.