EDITED BY SAMUEL KIRWAN

# Problems of Debt: Explorations of Life, Love and Finance

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by

ARN Press
Bristol, United Kingdom.
http://www.authorityresearch.net/
email: contact@authorityresearch.net



Front Cover: image kindly supplied by Christopher Heppell.
Cover design and production by Samuel Kirwan.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-9575882-3-3 (paperback)

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy. Find out more at reedsy.com

# Contents

# Notes on contributors

Tom Barrett is currently employed by the Charity for Civil Servants, primarily providing debt advice to current and former civil servants. Tom joined the Charity in 2016 from Coventry Law Centre, where he worked as a debt adviser. Prior to this he has also worked as a debt adviser at Walsall Housing Group and National Debtline. He completed his Masters in Social Welfare Law, Policy, and Advice Practice at Staffordshire University in January 2018. It was part of this that he completed his dissertation examining the impact of Universal Credit on advice agencies from which his chapter is drawn.

Oscar Berglund is a Critical Political Economist in the School for Policy Studies at the University of Bristol. He is part of the Centre for Urban and Public Policy. He researches political contestation of the processes of neoliberalisation and austerity, including both non-violent contestation by social movements and parliamentary forms of contestation.

Jennie Bunt is a doctoral student at Cardiff University School of Law and Politics, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Her research explores the enforcement of public debts in Wales. The focus of her doctoral thesis will be the use of committal to prison as a sanction for council tax arrears and the influence of the removal of this sanction in Wales from

2019. Her research is socio-legal, informed by mixed-methods which explore both the legal framework which enables and restricts the actions of local authorities to enforce debts and the motivations, pressures and understandings which underpin their decisions.

Ryan Davey is a social anthropologist specialising in debt and class inequality. His research, building upon fieldwork on a housing estate in England and in debt advice services, combines anthropological political economy with the study of subjectivity, and explores how de-industrialisation and financialisation have transformed the foundations out of which class-based identities arise. At the University of Bristol, Ryan is working on a new ethnographic project investigating motherhood and class inequality in the UK, focusing on how working-class women respond to class-based stigma directed towards them in their capacity as mothers.

Leila Dawney is a cultural geographer and theorist of power, affect and embodiment. Her research concerns forms of experience and subjectivity that are produced in and through spaces of late capitalism. She is a Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Exeter and a member of the Authority Research Network.

Ana Gutiérrez Garza specialises in migration, labour, gender, morality and care. She received her PhD in Anthropology from the London School of Economics in 2014. Her doctoral research was an in-depth ethnography of a group of middle-class women from Latin America who exchange care and intimacy for money while working as domestic and sex workers in London. From 2015 to 2018 she worked as part of the ESRC-funded project 'An Ethnography of Advice: Between Market, Society and the Declining Welfare State'. She analysed the role of advice as a form of struggle through the analysis of social movements that have emerged as a result of the dismantling of the Spanish welfare state.

Christopher Harker's research examines spatial practices of debt and finance in Palestine and the UK. He is interested in everyday practices of politics and agency and developing alternatives that allow people to both manage existing debt problems and create new forms of flourishing beyond debt. This means asking far reaching questions about how real quality of life can be financed? His published work advances a spatial conceptualisation of debt, drawing on a decade long ethnographic engagement with the Palestinian city of Ramallah. These ideas are explored most extensively in his forthcoming monograph, *Spacing Debt: Obligations, Violence and Endurance in Ramallah, Palestine*, to be published by Duke University Press in 2020.

Deborah James is Professor of Anthropology at LSE. She is author of *Money from Nothing: Indebtedness and Aspiration in South Africa*, which documents the precarious nature of both the aspirations of upward mobility and the economic relations of debt which sustain the newly upwardly mobile in that country. The book explores the dynamics surrounding South Africa's national project of financial inclusion which aimed to extend credit to black South Africans as a critical aspect of broad-based economic enfranchisement. In a recently-completed ESRC-funded project called "An ethnography of advice: between market, society and the declining welfare state" she did research on debt advice in selected London charities, Citizens Advice Bureaux and the like.

Samuel Kirwan is a Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow and Lecturer in Criminology and Social Policy at the University of Bristol. His research focuses upon experiences of debt and debt advice in the context of welfare reform measures and precarious labour conditions in the United Kingdom. He recently edited the text *Advising in Austerity*: *Reflections on Challenging Times for Advice Agencies* (2017), published by Policy Press, and is writing a book for Agenda Publishing on Financial Inclusion.

Rosie Walker is an independent researcher and writer interested in housing, inequality, employment rights and debt. As a researcher she has worked for the London School of Economics, University of Bristol and University of Brighton. As a journalist she has written for The Guardian, The Observer, Inside Housing and Third Sector. Her co-authored book, The Rent Trap, about private renting and the inequality it produces, was published by Pluto Press in 2016.

# Acknowledgements

Both Samuel Kirwan and Christopher Harker gratefully acknowledge the receipt of a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowships (ECF-2016-518 and ECF-2012-102), which made their research and this book possible.

The material for Deborah James, Ryan Davey and Ana Gutiérrez Garza's chapters was collected under a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK (ESRC Grant ES/M003825/1): 'An ethnography of advice: between market, society and the declining welfare state'.

Oscar Berglund and Jennie Bunt's work was also supported by the Economic and Social Research Council under Grant number ES/J50015X/1 and a PhD studentship respectively.

Leila Dawney and Rosie Walker gratefully acknowledge the receipt of a University of Brighton Rising Stars Award.

Tom Barrett would like to thank Anne Wright, and Dr Liz Boath, both of Staffordshire University.

Finally, all of us would like to express an immense gratitude to our participants who, with their generosity of thoughts and time, made our work possible. To protect the anonymity of

participants, all of the names used in all of the chapters are pseudonyms.

All opinions expressed in the book are the authors' own.

# 1

# Introduction

**Samuel Kirwan**

We settled quickly upon the title of this book. *Problems of Debt* sums up the clearest running theme throughout this collection: the multiple and diverse ways in which debts have a detrimental effect upon everyday life. We trace these effects upon: individuals as they struggle with shame, anxiety and stress; households and their capacity to weather the difficulties of life; and whole communities, most notably those where a dependency upon the high-cost credit sector is endemic. Yet the title also represents our wish to challenge assumptions around what the 'problem' of debt is. There is no easy distinction between 'problem' and 'non-problem' debt to be found here, nor denunciations of debt as something universally 'bad'. Instead the chapters present a variety of stories and observations exploring how, why and where financial debts become a defining feature of life.

The book is organised around six themes combined into three sections: relationships and control, advice and resistance, and productivity and time. Each theme arose from the recognition, as we discussed the book among ourselves and with others, of key areas of life that shape, and are shaped by, financial debts. We know that to be in debt is to be controlled, yet also fuels a need to feel control over one's money. We know that debt is often the cause of relationship breakdown, and that being in relationships and having children also shape how debt is accrued and experienced. We know that the nature of information a debtor receives is key to how their debts will develop, but also that the formal debt advice sector is limited by key factors in terms of the impact it can have. We know that debt imposes a demand of productivity, but also that debts can cause anxiety and shame regarding a failure to be appropriately 'productive'. We know, finally, that debt is inextricable from time; the stories emphasise the importance of the schedules of repayment that define everyday life for so many, as well as the feeling that time is being lost as life is bent to debt repayment.

Moving across different geographic and institutional settings, as well as writing styles and forms of analysis, each section explores the hidden nuances in these connections between debt and other areas of life. Those common themes are, of course, often painful to explore; there so often seems to be little hope when dealing with debt. Across different legal and regulatory settings, punishing 'austerity' measures have pushed households into cycles of indebtedness and desperation, while attempts to regulate the power of creditors does little to restrict their access to wages and bank accounts. Wherever we look, there are regrets over how family relationships have been lost to debt, fears that life will never go back to a 'stable' footing, and an overwhelming sense of being subject to financial forces outside of one's control.

Yet at the same time, we hope this book dispels certain myths about debt, not only that of a feckless poor held back by their reckless spending, but also that of the 'noble poor' passively downtrodden by an uncaring system and the iron fist of a heartless credit sector. The injustices of debt-based economies in the UK and beyond indeed demand to be witnessed. But by paying attention to the pleasures and worries of those in debt, as well as the practices and experiences of those seeking to assist debtors, we have sought to create a collection that is also attentive to the ways debt is 'generative' of life. That is, debt is a site through which we manage and interpret relationships, imagine possible futures, and form a sense of ourselves. While recognising that debt *enlivens* futures as much as it *ensnares*, the collection emphasises also that, in both cases, it does not always do so everywhere in exactly the same way. By looking at how debt accrual, collection and enforcement are experienced differently, this is a collection that charts the shifting and uneven dynamics of this 'generativity' of debt.

In sum, this is not a book that presents debt as a simple and unchanging set of problems that restrict life. It is a book about problems to be dealt with, overcome and resisted; about problems that create, shape and direct life; and about problems whose effects vary across social spaces. There are few problems, we would argue, that tells us as much about who we are as subjects, communities and societies in our current times.

## Background to the book

While this book focuses primarily upon debt in the UK, it includes experiences and analyses from several intra-national contexts, as well as trans-national phenomena such as remittances and credit referencing. While there is no overt comparative work in the book, this geographic diversity highlights how dependent experiences of debt are upon the specific development of legal frameworks; histories of conflict, segregation and occupation; and deep-rooted religious imaginaries.

It is worth highlighting one key difference in this respect. As Paul Rock noted in 1979, in a statement that remains true forty years later, in the UK 'there does not appear to be a viable subculture of default' (2013 [1979]: 8). Indebtedness, despite being an expression of an imbalance of power and a site in which communal action can be immensely productive, has not proved powerful as a political force in the UK. Christopher Harker's chapter shows how, by generating micro-level conflicts, high levels of debt can undermine political mobilisation. Yet this is not the case in other countries.[1] As described in Ana Gutiérrez Garza and Oscar Berglund's contributions to this book, this political mobilisation around debt has been most powerful in Spain, where a vibrant political community has grown around communal experiences of resisting eviction and sharing information.

The stories and reflections presented in this book nonetheless show how debt plays as much of a part in UK politics as it does elsewhere. Leila Dawney and Ryan Davey's chapters in particular demonstrate the extent of everyday life that is re-directed and re-shaped by debt burdens, and through this the ways in which existing forms of marginalisation and inequality are 're-inscribed' under conditions of widespread indebtedness. The chapters as such provide valuable insights both into how debt as an experience shapes contemporary politics, and into

1 See Marek Mikuš (2018:284) on Croatia, Deborah James (2015) on South Africa, and Lauren Tooker (2017) on the USA.

the potential for a 'politics of debt', whether focused upon around forms of debt forgiveness and resistance, as in Tom Barrett, Oscar Berglund and Ana Gutiérrez Garza's chapters, forms of financial capability and changes to the law, as in Samuel Kirwan, Deborah James's and Jennie Bunt's chapters, or by demonstrating wider forms of violence, as in Christopher Harker's chapter.

## How to read this book

We sought to write the book for the widest possible readership, seeking to explain any technical and academic language used in easily approachable terms. The need for such a book, bringing together and clearly communicating diverse research projects into debt, was clear; despite being a subject that defines so much of modern life, to a large extent it remains hidden in the shadows. Where it is widely publicised, in the form of televisual entertainment or newspaper reporting, it is either from the point of view of creditors and collectors, or in order to publicise levels of poverty. Both of these genres fail to account for the agency, creativity and *life* of debtors. By making a book that is diverse and serious in its interests, yet clear and accessible in its writing, we seek to redress this imbalance.

The contributions come from different perspectives. Oscar Berglund, Ryan Davey, Ana Gutiérrez Garza and Deborah James's chapters all present ethnographies of debt, building upon fieldwork in indebted households, activist sites and advice agencies to explore and reflect upon everyday experiences of getting into, managing and repaying debts. Chris Harker and Leila Dawney's chapters use approaches and concepts from human geography to explore how the changing dynamics of the credit industry affect debt as an emotional experience. Tom Barrett, Jennie Bunt and Samuel Kirwan's chapters build upon their own experiences of legal frameworks and the advice sector to reflect upon how changing 'external' conditions are leading households into new forms of hardship.

The common tendencies and points of resonance across the pieces, as well as the key arguments and political implications, are brought out in the section introductions below. Yet we hope that readers will find their own moments of unexpected recognition across these diverse voices, recognising how debt, as a way of life or 'structure of feeling' rather than a financial issue, speaks to their own work and experiences.

For readers looking for further inspiration beyond this text, it is worth noting the collection of books that we convened to read and discuss while we were writing our contributions, and as such have greatly informed this collection: Clara Han's *Life in Debt* (2015), Deborah James's *Money from Nothing* (2015), Joe Deville's *Lived Economies of Default* (2015), Laura Bear's *Navigating Austerity* (2015), Martijn Konings's *The Emotional Logic of Capitalism* (2015), and Lisa Adkins' *The Time of Money* (2018).

## Structure of the book

The contributions are organised into three themes: relationships and control; advice and resistance; and productivity and time. Each section begins with a 'vignette': an individual story drawn from one of our research projects. These present three very different narratives of how someone got into debt, and how it came to define their lives.

## Relationships and control

That debt is about relationships is a more important statement than one might assume. To begin with, it is an observation that challenges the *solitary* figure of the debtor: someone who has taken a rational decision to borrow money and must navigate alone the challenges of repayment. This image feeds into the isolating power of debt, ensuring that individuals feel sufficiently ashamed of their problems that they do not discuss them with others. By ignoring the lender's role in this relationship, as David Graeber has argued, it also allows creditors, through their collection and enforcement functions, to enforce debts irrespective of the human cost of these practices (Graeber, 2011).

When studying everyday experiences of debt there are two key areas of relationships at play:[2] those between the creditor and the debtor, and those between the debtor and significant others, notably partners, children and other family members. These two 'lines' of connection intersect and overlap, most visibly when friends and relations become creditors. Shelley's vignette, recounting how the extent of her new husband's debts became visible to her as their marriage fell apart, shows how intimate relationships can blur the boundaries between creditor, debtor, and concerned others.

What the chapters in this section expose most of all are the ways in which our relationships with those closest to us change

[2] Whilst emphasising these particular 'areas', it is important to note how everyday experiences are also shaped by the relationships between: lenders and securitised debt markets (Adkins, 2018); lenders, regulators and legislators (Spooner, 2017); as well as the debtor and the state (Marron, 2012).

under conditions of debt repayment and default. Intimate and familial relationships become frayed and strained to the point of exhaustion and collapse. Emotional, practical and financial supports are lost in the periods when people need them most. Debt shapes the ways in which relationships begin, with ongoing debt repayments shaping the key decisions to be made about the sharing of incomes. It also affects how they end; in the aftermath of a relationship breakdown, attempts to disentangle lives and finances might be scuppered by the existence of shared debts (on both points see Koch, 2015). On the other hand, borrowing – say, in the form of mortgages – can form the foundation on which families build their aspirations.

What also comes through in these accounts is a dynamic of *control*; so often this damage to relationships is tied to a feeling that life is being controlled by one's debts rather than oneself. Yet we also see how much re-gaining control over one's relationships can become defined by the need to gain control over one's money. Again, Shelley's vignette shows how this dynamic can play out in specific ways: regaining control of her life involved gaining knowledge of her husband's debts, even if this meant having to assume responsibility for them. While the chapters show how hopefulness and self-worth are tied to the elusive moment in which one gains mastery over one's debts, often the only method available to debtors to regain some such feeling of control involves getting into more debt, and as such carries the risks of falling, as Deborah James has put it, 'deeper into a hole' (2014).

Running through Ana Gutiérrez Garza's chapter are the ways in which the dream of homeownership – perhaps the best known marker of this 'good life' – was sold to and drawn upon by Spanish households (and migrant households in particular) as a form of shared optimism. The chapter explores how, in the aftermath of the 'crash' that left huge numbers of mortgage-borrowers defaulting upon their loans, family relationships, as well as those with others who had acted as guarantors upon loans or assisted in other ways, can become irreparably damaged. She describes how the home itself changes in substance; what was a site of hope and togetherness can become another material symbol of a life not being lived. She notes how vitally important the moments of joy and community provided by the Spanish anti-eviction movement known as *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (Platform for people affected by mortgages) or "PAH" have been to these households, creating as it has done a new set of relationships around shared knowledge and practical resistance.

Chris Harker explores, in a theme picked up also by Leila Dawney's chapter, how debts can be experienced as a form of 'slow violence' (Berlant, 2011). The chapter notes the importance of how debts are collected in Palestine; the particular emphasis upon 'compulsory transfer agreements' (a form of Garnishee order) and guarantor arrangements means that debt burdens create a contraction of future possibilities and a strain upon intimate relationships. The chapter ties this to *place*; these relations are both the result of the particular spatial distribution of families in Palestine, as well as the ways in which banking and regulatory systems have developed in relation to dynamics of occupation. The chapter provides a series of spatial metaphors for understanding indebted life, exploring how debtors' accounts show particular dynamics of stasis, movement and circularity.

Leila Dawney's chapter explores the emotions involved in maintaining 'control' over household debt burdens. She brings a novel approach to household indebtedness, tracing the severity and impact of debts less through demonstrable effects than through certain *atmospheres*: a background hum of tension, resentment or shame. Yet the chapter describes also how the experience of juggling multiple debts can lead to a sense of amplified productivity; she notes how one of her participants feels a strong pride in his ability to keep a complex set of plates spinning in the air. Dawney links this state of 'hypervigilance' to the popularity of credit referencing apps, which by enabling continuous access to one's credit score, promise a particular form of pleasure, one tied to the experience of amplified control and perpetual self-optimisation.

## Advice and resistance

The framework for discussion of debt in the United Kingdom remains shaped by the 'Great Financial Crisis' (or 'credit crunch', as it briefly was in the UK), of 2007-8. While we do not doubt the importance of this event, it is equally important to note how limiting this discursive framework is. Interpreting debt through the terms of this distinctly Euro-American event leads us to overlook, as Christopher Harker (2017), Deborah James (2015) and Laura Bear (2015) have made clear, the specific histories and geographies of settler colonialism, IMF-led structural adjustment and urban-rural divides that shape debt relations elsewhere.

Furthermore, in our inability to escape the shadow of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), we become afraid of challenging the validity and enforceability of debts. As Martijn Konings (2018) argues, the established 'narrative' of the GFC, of reckless lending feeding runaway consumer profligacy, forms the ground for a moral narrative of austerity which has attained a kind of religious force. Despite all the pain of austerity, the message remains: *we must pay our debts*. The alternative, so it goes, is a financial collapse for which we are unprepared.

The chapters in this section show how the obsessive focus upon the GFC is misleading both as to what debt is and what can be done about it. They link together help and assistance at the individual level, namely challenging, negotiating and writing off debts, or simply enabling debtors to manage complex situations, with larger-scale political changes and possibilities.

Focusing on the UK, the situation of alarming levels of consumer debt from 2016 onwards has been interpreted primarily in terms of its resemblance to the lending conditions seen to have triggered the 2007 crash, namely excessive consumer credit and high levels of 'toxic' or 'distressed' debt – debts sold without reasonable expectation of repayment. Yet for the advice sector in the UK, as is discussed in Tom Barrett's chapter and interview, debt has changed significantly; the problems with which clients are presenting to services, characterised by escalating 'priority' debts, is unrecognisable from that of a decade earlier. As Malachi's vignette makes clear, these are debts which have a more severe and debilitating effect upon everyday life.

The debt advice sector in the UK comprises a small number of nationwide providers,[3] and a large number of smaller, typically local, providers. Most[4] are funded by the Money Advice Service, which distributes the proceeds of a statutory levy on

---

[3] Principally the Citizens Advice Service, National Debtline, StepChange and Christians Against Poverty.

[4] Many are funded by fair share contributions from creditors, including PayPlan and StepChange.

the financial services industry. As Ryan Davey has explored (2017), the MAS funding model represents a 'polluter pays' framework in which the credit sector as a whole is held to have an interest in funding debt advice (Davey, 2017). While each of the national services has a strong campaigning function, this model indicates the distinct limits placed upon the political role they can play. In a period in which services operate on a financial knife-edge, struggling to find sufficient funding to meet growing demand, they are dependent upon the support of local and national government in a period in which the very problems faced by their clients - poverty, desperation, financial hardship – are considered 'party political' issues by certain politicians in the ruling Conservative party and as such inappropriate for charity campaigns (see Elphicke, quoted in Hope, 2014).

Despite these difficulties, Deborah James's chapter shows how vital advice services remain in local communities struggling with the effects of austerity, while Oscar Berglund's chapter, turning to themes and spaces explored in Ana Gutiérrez Garza's chapter and Marcela's vignette, shows the immense power in linking up the 'local' practices of advice and assistance with with broad-scale political action. Considering the future of debt advice and politics in the UK, there is much to be learned from the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH, Platform for people affected by mortgages) in Spain, particularly from their rejection of the moral narrative that mortgage debtors were solely responsible for the dire situations in which they found themselves. Challenging and overturning the isolating and de-politicising effects of debt, the PAH has enabled community, togetherness and radical change.

Beginning with the advice sector in the UK, Tom Barrett's chapter and subsequent interview presents the results of a research project with advice services and a subsequent interview. He looks at how one of the most significant policy changes enacted in the period of austerity - the introduction of a new benefit system, Universal Credit – has had a significant effect upon the provision and organisation of advice. The chapter notes how Universal Credit fails on its own terms, neither simplifying the benefits system nor getting people into work, instead creating new forms of hardship and new types of debt. It describes the multiple levels at which Universal Credit has affected the ability of advice services to carry out their work, displaying how an attempt to forcibly change the lives of the poorest in society based upon moral assumptions of fecklessness, laziness and benefit-dependency has destroyed the capacity of those same individuals to access the help they need.

Deborah James's chapter presents an ethnographic approach to advice services, describing and reflecting upon the experiences and interactions she witnessed whilst sitting in on debt advice sessions. The chapter gives an indication of the complexity of cases with which clients present to a service, as well as the complex emotional and relational dynamics that compose the advice interview. In a period of cuts to advice funding, James gives a powerful indication of what it is that advice services can do. Recounting the personal narratives of debt clients, she describes how clients often arrive at a service in a state of fear and confusion; debts to local and national government, consumer creditors, energy companies and others are intertwined with difficulties of accessing welfare benefits and vital services. She then describes how a series of simple advice actions can give the client space to reflect and make plans, enabling them to feel, finally, 'in charge of their life'.

Oscar Berglund's chapter explores a very different experience of feeling 'in charge' of one's debts, one that links together the personal, communal and political. Drawing upon research with defaulting homeowners in Spain, he notes how the *PAH* serves both as a site of 'solidarity, camaraderie and struggle', as well as a key space in which individual debt problems become linked to wider struggles, notably those concerning housing inequality, homelessness and the power of financial institutions. The chapter is shaped by the specific ways in which the Spanish legal system treats mortgage default: in Spain, the mortgagor *remains* personally liable for the debt even after foreclosure and bankruptcy. Nonetheless his account of the power imbalance between debtors and their creditors and the everyday effects of abusive debt collection practices ring true across jurisdictions, as does the powerful message about the possibility of 'resistance' rooted in the sharing of knowledge and provision of mutual assistance.

## Productivity and time

This book explores the breadth of areas of social life – relationships, mental health, nutrition, care – that are both affected by, and shaping of, debt burdens. As such it shows how, in 'neoliberal' regimes, debt is 'co-constitutive' of life itself. If we were to bring this together – to put our finger on what is specific about debt – we might observe that much of this hinges upon how *time* is written in to debt. Debt is a temporal relation; today's value in exchange for tomorrow's labour. Often we only consider this temporal relationship once tomorrow has become today, realising the extent to which our previous actions bind the decisions and experiences of the present.

Yet the relationship between debt and time has been argued to go beyond this temporal trade-off; Maurizio Lazzarato (2012) and Lisa Adkins (2018) have made compelling arguments regarding how debt shapes the very ways in which we understand and experience time. For Lazzarato, the key question is whether one's life is experienced as being *open*, characterised by creativity, freedom, and the possibility that something *new* might happen, or whether, alternatively, is it lived in the closed loops determined by repayment schedules.

It is true that much of this book recounts lives stuck in this 'closed' time; joy, desire and hope are all seemingly hemmed in by the demands and restrictions that make up life-in-debt. Yet the chapters also recount the multiple moments in which debts are sold and experienced through *disruptions* to this schema. Drawing our attention to the importance of household payment streams – loan repayments, mortgages, telecommunications, utilities contracts – to the global financial economy, Lisa Adkins (2018) encourages us to look at how the drive to derive profits from the 'flexibilization' of these financial products has important implications for the temporal experience of debt. The debtor is no longer encouraged to make a steady wage, put aside savings and make regular debt repayments, but to *speculate*; to take financial risks based upon a continuous consideration of possible futures. Marcela's vignette shows the intertwining of the physical space of the home, the everyday hopes for a better future for one's family, and the debts that both enable and feed upon these movements between the everyday and the future.

Adkins's analysis explains the changing ways in which dealing with debts can feel like a form of *work*. As has long been described, on top of other obligations, debtors must deal with the emotional and practical difficulties of managing repayments and fending off creditors; Jennie Bunt's chapter describes how time is itself incorporated into the legal frameworks that bind these collection strategies. Yet, in an age of austerity, debt is also associated with new areas of attention and labour, such as the demand to cultivate one's credit rating, to bear the heightened risks of losing one's job, or to prepare for potential stops in welfare or employment income by strengthening relationships with potential guarantors, accepting that it may harm the relationship in the long-term. Such changes in the temporal rhythms of life seem to fit the desired effects of the debt economy; individuals are becoming hyper-active, organising themselves, *doing more*. That is, it seems to promise a society of increased *productivity*; the demands of debt feed the engine of economic growth.

Yet the chapters gathered here show that productivity can go in other directions. Most often, productivity is sucked into the debt relation itself, not only contributing nothing to the wider world, but damaging and destroying the *non-productive* moments – of rest, enjoyment, pleasure – upon which our relationships are built. As Ryan Davey's chapter shows, we need to recognise also the different ways in which individuals find ways of being productive when life does not offer 'appropriate' avenues for productivity-through-work, and as such how moments of creativity can indeed be drawn from the cycles and attachments of debt. The chapters show how societies of debt produce *new* forms of productivity, ones not necessarily aligned to optimisation of forces or the growth of the economy, but rather existing in internal loops, generating negligible value, but nonetheless central to our sense of self, togetherness and hope in a time of debt.

Ryan Davey's chapter, presenting work from ethnographic research on a UK housing estate, focuses upon Frank, a single man who lives on means-tested disability benefits, and who, despite his failing health and mounting debts, finds ways of remaining positive about how life might improve. In an alternative to the indebted productivities described in Leila Dawney's chapter, Frank's attention is given not only to the diverse strategies he uses to fend off the threats of debtors, but also to a range of seemingly purposeless activities that allow him to stay close to a sense of productivity and usefulness. Frank's account emphasises how life-in-debt in the UK must be understood in relation to long-term shifts in employment and welfare. When life has hitherto been defined by meaningful work, purposeful productivity, and balanced budgets, dealing with the unstructured temporalities of unemployment and its accompanying debt anxieties is immensely difficult. Davey describes how Frank finds new strategies for staying hopeful amidst these multiple forms of dispossession.

Jennie Bunt's chapter shows how time is written into legal frameworks of debt. While this is perhaps most visible in the setting of periods of limitation (i.e., the period of inactivity after which a creditor can no longer insist upon repayment), the chapter shows the importance of the different temporal modes in which different debts operate; she notes that part of the reason Council Tax is such a serious problem in the UK is its peculiar temporal structure. The chapter describes how local authorities are now acknowledging their obligations to identify vulnerability. Yet Bunt argues that the ways in which the term itself has become delimited in temporal terms ignores long-term and sustained issues of vulnerability such as addiction and carer status.

Returning to the theme of advice, Samuel Kirwan's chapter describes how debt advice queries have changed during the period of 'austerity'. The increasing number of 'deficit budget sheets' being seen by advice services – where someone's monthly income is less than their essential expenditure – poses particular problems for the organisation and provision of advice. Kirwan uses the concept of 'calendrics of repayment' from the work of Jane Guyer and Lisa Adkins to describe the monthly rhythms of debt repayment, formalised in the financial statement, that underpin advice practice. Given that the financial statement allows for communication with creditors and insolvency services, Kirwan's paper asks about the challenges faced by the debt advice model when stable work and benefit payments can no longer be relied upon. The chapter finishes by considering what debt advice can tell us about a potential 'politics' of debt.

**References**

Adkins, L. (2018). *The Time of Money*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press

Bear, L. (2015). *Navigating Austerity: Currents of Debt Along a South-Asian River*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Deville, J. (2015). *Lived Economies of Default: Consumer Credit, Debt Collection and the Capture of Affect*. London: Routledge.

Han, C. (2015). *Life in Debt: Times of Care and Violence in Neoliberal Chile.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Harker C. (2017). Debt space: Topologies, ecologies and Ramallah, Palestine *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 35(4): 600–619.

James, D. (2014). "Deeper into a hole? Borrowing and lending in South Africa," *Current Anthropology*, 55(9): 17-29.

James, D. (2015). *Money from Nothing: Indebtedness and Aspiration in South Africa*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Koch, I (2015) ""The state has replaced the man": Women, family homes, and the benefit system on a council estate in England," *Focaal*, 73: 84-96.

Konings, M. (2015). *The Emotional Logic of Capitalism: What Progressives Have Missed*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Konings, M. (2018) *Capital and Time: For a New Critique of Neoliberal Reason*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Lazzarato M. (2012). *The Making of Indebted Man*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).

Marron, D. (2012). "Producing over-indebtedness: risk, prudence and consumer vulnerability," *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 5(4): 407-421.

Mikuš, M. (2018). *Frontiers of Civil Society: Government and Hegemony in Serbia*. New York, NY: Berghahn Books.

Rock, P. (2013 [1979]). *Making People Pay*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Spooner, J. (2019). *Bankruptcy: The Case for Relief in an Economy of Debt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tooker, L. (2017). "Ordinary democracy : reading resistances to debt after the global financial crisis with Stanley Cavell's ordinary language philosophy [PhD thesis]". Available from http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/99847/

# 2

# Shelly's story

**Compiled by Rosie Walker and Leila Dawney**

Shelly married her first husband in 2004, and divorced him in 2012. It was during their marriage preparation course that the alarm bells regarding her future husband's relationship with debt first started to ring. They were in a community room, discussing finances and filling in worksheets; she glanced over to where he was sitting and writing and noticed him crossing out some of the things he'd written. At the time, she'd dismissed it as a little odd, and thought no more about it.

Over the course of the marriage, Shelly felt a growing sense of unease as she noticed more and more her husband's secretive attitude towards money. Despite agreeing to run both salaries into a joint current account, he never quite got round to fulfilling his side of the bargain, meaning that all domestic outlays were shouldered by Shelly. On Saturdays, when the couple both worked from home, he would run down the stairs as the postman came. Later, she would hear the sound of the shredder in the next room. Eventually, she gathered up some of the shredded sections, and pieced them together, revealing debts of around £50,000, but no evidence of spending on any of the credit cards.

Her husband loved to shop. He bought things regularly from TK Maxx and Ebay. He bought the latest phone, then sold it on and upgraded a couple of months later. He liked to look good. When Shelly confronted him about his debt, he told her that he was so scared of her leaving him if she found out that he kept it a secret from her. He said that he'd made a terrible mistake. Taking her marriage seriously, Shelly took on his debt, and they devised a spreadsheet and a plan for paying it off in two years. They started putting £1000 a month into the debt. Then, Shelly's husband inherited £50,000. Shelly never saw it materialise, and while they were both paying into the repayment plan, more and more debts kept appearing. It was only when he started a successful business, and yet still the debts kept mounting up, and appearing out of nowhere, that she realised that there was something badly wrong with this situation.

As the debts accumulated, and the lies followed behind, the marriage began to fall apart. Each time a new debt was discovered, it would be the last, there would be no more. Then another would appear. Shelly wondered whether her husband's relationship with money was partly an addiction to shopping, or to gambling. New clothes and things turned up in the flat all the time, and then disappeared. She found duplicates of some of the things he's bought. She had a nagging sensation that there were many more secrets that she would never really know about. At her lowest point, she found two copies of a book called *How to Downsize Your Life.* She sat on the floor, laughing and crying at the same time. After she lost patience, and saw through some of the ways in which she was being silenced and manipulated, she told him that she wanted a divorce. During the divorce he admitted to having an ISA he hadn't told her about. The secrets continued.

As a way of trying to save the situation, the couple went into counselling. During that time it was suggested that the relationship was both financially and emotionally abusive. On recognising this, Shelly was able to begin to come to terms with the stress and damage it had caused her. Despite this, her husband couldn't take responsibility for what had happened, and they split. She worked hard, in part through her religious faith, to move on and forgive. Her parents got involved, and his parents too. Shelly fell out with the vicar at her church, who felt that she should have stuck by him. Caught in a financially abusive relationship based on low-level control, denial and stonewalling, her ongoing sense of unease and financial instability put more and more pressure on her. People can lock themselves and others into destructive cycles, enacting a slow form of violence through intimacy and control.

She has now remarried, having taken £20,000 of debt into the new marriage. She and her new husband paid off this debt in four years. Her physical and mental health is still affected by what happened, and she continues to take antidepressants. Her former husband's debts have shaped Shelly's affective world. Her shared life, and the marriage vows that moved her towards this, were central to the way she dealt with these events. Like so many debt stories we heard during our project, Shelly's experience shows how debt is entangled with attachments, relationships, hope, love and destruction. This is a story of a slow realisation, of denial, of duty, and of letting go. It's a story of how debt can be experienced as a wearing down, of a 'slow' violence that makes itself felt in anxiety-related illnesses and a loss of trust in others and in one's own community.

# 3

# The two faces of debt

**Ana Gutiérrez Garza**

'I never thought that I would have to fight the banks and the government for my house. It looked like a good investment, to buy a house, to get a mortgage - "cheaper than paying rent"- everybody said. Getting into debt to buy a house represented the opportunity to bring my daughter from Ecuador. That was all that mattered to me', Rebeca told me while talking about her story of indebtedness and social struggle in Madrid. In January 2006 Rebeca acquired a 280,000 Euro mortgage in order to buy a three bedroom flat in the south of Madrid. Back then she was making good money (2,300 euros a month) by working as a domestic worker and old peoples' carer. 'There were plenty of job opportunities for us migrants, we were making good money and the banks were offering cheap mortgages.' Although migrants had precarious jobs in construction and the service sector industries, they were able to access the housing market as a way to secure their residence in the country, to prove their insertion into the Spanish middle classes, and most importantly, to claim family reunification. Within Spanish immigration law, people who want to bring their families to the country must prove that they are employed and that they have sufficient economic resources and adequate housing.

For Rebeca getting into debt was indispensable for achieving a dignified life in which she could provide a home for her daughter and prove that she had succeeded as a migrant. Getting into debt was the mechanism that enabled the possibility to make a home, but at the same time it was the instrument that provoked its destruction. 'In 2006 I started paying 1050 euros a month for the mortgage, but by 2009 my mortgage had increased to 1700 euros per month, it was too much money' she told me. After trying to keep up with the payments and getting into more debt in order to pay the mortgage, Rebeca had no choice but to default on her mortgage payments, 'I went to the bank with the intention to give the keys of my flat because I could not continue paying the mortgage but they said that even if I gave them the house I would still have a debt with them.[1] The situation was hopeless, I was going to be indebted for the rest of my life and homeless. This is the moment when I got involved in the PAH, I decided to stop being a victim and *afectada* (the affected one) and become an activist defending my right to have a home.'

Rebeca's story is a consequence of the housing crisis in Spain that, although linked to the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, is also closely related first to the historical preference for homeownership over rented housing which dates back to housing policies that began under Franco's dictatorship in the 1960s (Palomera 2013) and second to the real estate boom that changed the face of urban Spain between 1997 and 2007. For instance, in late 2007 the construction sector accounted for almost 14% of employment and 16% of Spanish GDP; during this time house prices grew by 180%. All of these changes were supported and promoted by international capital markets, which represented a seemingly infinite pool from which Spanish banks could issue securities and fund their mortgage growth. The expansion and easy access to cheap mortgages reinforced ideologies of home ownership across various socio-economic sectors, including the roughly one million migrants from the global south. It was in the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2008 that Spain rapidly nosedived into its housing crisis. After the real estate market collapsed there was an abrupt rise in unemployment followed by a collateral crisis in employment benefits. As a result, thousands of people – who had originally benefitted from the rapid growth of the construction industry - lost their jobs and following the housing boom found themselves unable to pay their mortgages and quickly facing foreclosures and evictions. The figures are stark: between 2007 and 2016 there have been more than 721,000 foreclosures and more than 500,000 evictions. These figures cannot be fully understood without taking into account the legal mortgage framework that has only been partially reformed since 1909 but has not been modified to help people with the current housing situation. 'Unlike in many countries, foreclosures do not satisfy the debt of the mortgage holder. Instead, any difference between the value the lender receives for the property and the original debt is still the responsibility of the defaulter' (Flesher Fominaya

2015: 469).[5] This means that people like Rebeca not only lose their homes, they also continue to be crippled by debt.

It is within this context that the social movement called the PAH (*Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* – Platform for people affected by mortgages) was founded in Spain. PAH was founded as a result of the economic crisis of 2008 that left thousands of homeowners in Spain unable to pay their mortgages and facing foreclosure. It has become the referent to organise the struggle for housing rights, campaigns against evictions and the privatisation of social housing across the country. On the political side, besides public demonstrations and the occupation of banks, local state offices and financial headquarters, the movement uses the Stop Evictions campaign, which consists of non-violent direct actions to prevent families and individuals from being thrown out of their homes. The movement also fosters political action through the promotion of legal changes that aim to reform the jurisprudence regarding property and mortgage law and promotes public housing and access to affordable household utilities for families in poverty.

Besides these political and legal activities, the PAH develops its everyday work through weekly meetings in various neighbourhoods across Madrid. These weekly meetings, called *asambleas* (assemblies), are collective spaces where individuals provide face-to-face lay advice regarding mortgage debts and housing to each other. This model responds to the need to create a sense of solidarity that can help people to confront their fears, anxieties and the sense of shame that accompanies indebtedness. The logic of the meetings revolves around the

[5] This stands in contrast to the United States, where most 'sub-prime' mortgages were 'non-recourse' loans, where the lender can take either the property or the remaining debt but not both.

idea that collective advice can and will slowly empower people to negotiate and defend their own cases. *Asambleas* are intended to 'generate a sense of trust and community that are pre-requisites needed to empower *afectados/as*, to train them - both technically and emotionally - and to elaborate strategies to negotiate with banks' (my translation from Spanish, Colau & Alemany 2012: 99). Within this logic the people I worked with talked about the PAH as a space where they learned how to switch from being an *afectada,* literally affected by debt and by austerity policies, to an activist. To understand the role played by the PAH we need to consider two questions. First, how does the PAH help to solve people like Rebeca's problems? And second, how does the movement help people becoming activists and get involved in the social struggle against mortgage debts and housing rights?

'The first time I came to the PAH I was only an *afectada*' Rosa from Peru tells me. In 2011 the economic crisis hit her household and she (and her ex-husband) could not withstand the debt. Like many families they started cutting back their daily expenses or migrating to other countries to find employment in order to continue with the mortgage payments. In 2012 after her husband left her, Rosa could not cope with the mortgage payments anymore, 'my life collapsed as a house of cards. I knew that the moment I stopped paying the bank would repossess my home and we would end up on the streets with a debt for the rest of our lives'. As *afectadas* women talked about the insecurity and anxiety that the threat of eviction caused on their everyday lives. Being indebted and experiencing the everyday anxiety of the prospects of losing one's home produced fear and shame, however women overcame such feelings once they started attending the meetings and shared their intimate experiences and housing problems with the collective. What is interesting is that this new vulnerability of home – created by mortgage debt - becomes the trigger that pushes people from seeing themselves as *afectadas* with no hope of changing their housing situation into becoming social activists. 'We get rid of the shame and fear produced by debt, the more you talk about it and the more you share your indebtedness with others, the more we realise that we are not criminals' Marlene tells me. 'As *afectadas* we are the main activists because we are the oppressed' she continues. Although the PAH as a whole inculcates the concept that everyone is affected due to the austerity policies and the financialisation of housing, people within the movement who have experienced problems, particularly with mortgage debts, assert that they are the real victims of the financial crisis and the whole system. This status has pushed and helped people to experience a process of empowerment characterised by their active involvement in stop eviction actions, demonstrations, occupations of banks and other political activities that the movement do as a whole. Beyond the public aspects of being activists people in the PAH gain specialised knowledge of the legal steps that they - as empowered individuals - must take in order to navigate the complex bureaucratic Spanish system and defend their homes.

For instance, Rebeca managed to stop attempts to evict her from her home on three occasions. When she got the first eviction notice she decided to get rid of most of her things and leave the flat (with her daughter) before facing eviction. 'I gave all my things to friends, I did not want the bank to get hold of the things that were in the flat' she told me. As she recalls, the first eviction attempt was nerve-racking, she could not sleep but she stayed at the flat with people from her local PAH. The next morning when the police came the group did not let the police in and managed to stop her eviction for a few months. 'Once you realise that evictions can be stopped you become hopeful and feel the power of the collective. This is the moment when you realise what you have to do as an activist, support and be supported by others', she said. On top of the emotional and moral support that people within the PAH offer to newcomers, activists provide legal advice to other *afectadas*, as well as organising and moderating meetings and workshops within their local PAHs. 'We have found our voice, we can talk to journalists, confront the police at the anti-evictions actions and defend our cases in front of the bankers. We know the legal resources that we can use in order to negotiate with the banks and with the courts', Marlene from Ecuador says. More importantly, the movement has shifted public attitudes to mortgages, credit and housing. Rather than seeing mortgages, and the failure to repay them, as an individual failing, the PAH aimed to turn the debate on its head and use mortgage debts as weapons of resistance in the struggle for social rights.

How permanent or long term are the solutions that the PAH offers to activists? How do activists cope with the everyday reality of the threat of eviction? Recent scholarship on evictions in different parts of the world have focused on the effects that the threat of eviction has in peoples' lives. In his analysis of experiences of eviction and time among residents in Ho Chi Ming, Harms shows how the temporal uncertainty of eviction affects people's attempts to construct livelihoods and build meaningful lives (2013:353). Amongst the women I met at the PAH, foreclosures and the future prospects of eviction overshadowed the empowerment that they experienced on the streets and at the meetings. Home, with its broken curtains and damp-stained walls brought them back to the reality of their debts, their broken dreams and the anxiety produced by the prospects of homelessness. 'When I go back home I have a weird sensation of sadness and disconnect. Sometimes I would like to fix the broken curtains, change the sofas or paint the walls, but then I think why I would spend more money on this place, it is not my home anymore. I have lost interest in making it pretty,' Catalina tells me. Laura from the Dominican Republic had a similar conflicting relation with her home, 'I bought my house in 2004 with so many illusions, starting all over again in Spain. The flat was falling apart, the kitchen had no furniture and the walls needed to be recovered with stucco and painted. I fixed the place little by little, I think I spent like 5000 euros but I converted it into a nice place. Eleven years have passed since I bought the house that belongs to the bank. I look around, especially my room and the kitchen and there are instants in which I stop and I can feel the melancholy invading me and I asked myself, Is there any hope that I could stay in this home for more years? But the uncertainty creeps in, a feeling of despair and lack of interest and love to invest in it and make it pretty again. This disinterest started the moment I started having problems with the mortgage, the moment I knew I was going to lose my home', she tells me.

For many of the women that I met while doing fieldwork in Madrid among the PAH, debt had represented a way to achieve upward mobility, to reunite with their loved ones and to build a solid future. In times of prosperity, getting into debt was productive and a necessary step that they had to take in order to enact love and be good mothers; debt allowed them to enjoy the achievements that they had attained as hard-working migrants in a new country. However, as I have shown, the economic crisis of 2007-2008 exposed the unproductive and conflicting side of debt. The lack of state support, unjust mortgage laws and austerity policies, turned debt into a crippling force that infiltrated not only the infrastructure of mortgaged homes, but the hearts and minds of women. As a result, women move between two identities -that of *afectadas* and activists - and live their lives between two temporalities.

As *afectadas* women live in a precarious state characterised by unemployment, lack of opportunities and debts, factors that have disrupted their idealised notions of home as a site of emotional family support. They have not only faced evictions in the present, but they have to live with the threat of eviction in an uncertain future. As a result, home becomes a temporary and insecure space suspended in a legal limbo: a site that reflects and enhances - materially and emotionally - the experience of precarity. As *activists,* women have found strategies to negotiate and confront the current regime of economic austerity and neoliberal housing policies that affect their livelihoods. As a result, women talk about and experience home as a site for political action: a site for resistance and personal empowerment that provides hope for the future. What this case shows us, is how people crippled by debt in times of austerity must find ways to reconfigure their personhood, the way they live alternative temporalities and the way the engage with the space that shape their subjectivities - and of their loved ones - that of home.

**References**

Colau, A., Alemany, A. (2012). *Vidas hipotecadas: de la burbuja immobiliaria al derecho a la vivienda*. Barcelona: Cuadrilátero de libros.

Flesher Fominaya, C. (2015). "Redefining the Crisis/Redefining Democracy: Mobilising for the Right to Housing in Spain's PAH Movement," *South European Society and Politics*, 20(4):1–21.

Harms, Erik. 2013. "Eviction time in the new Saigon: Temporalities of Displacement in the Rubble of Development," *Cultural Anthropology*, 28(2): 344–68.

Palomera, J. (2013). "How Did Finance Capital Infiltrate the World of the Urban Poor? Homeownership and Social Fragmentation in a Spanish Neighborhood," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. 38:218–235.

# 4

# Violence, finance and place: financial crisis ordinariness in Ramallah, Palestine

**Christopher Harker**

This chapter examines the intersection of finance, violence and place, focusing on debt as a particular form of finance. To do so, I deploy the concept of financial crisis ordinariness. Crisis ordinariness is a term Lauren Berlant (2011: 54) introduces to explore 'crisis-shaped subjectivity amid the ongoingness of adjudication, adaptation, and improvisation'. In contrast to the dramatic shift(s) characteristic of trauma narratives, crisis ordinariness describes practices of living with and through severe challenges that may disrupt, but nevertheless become part of people's ongoing lives. Financial crisis ordinariness names the experience of living with and adjusting to finance, and particularly the violence that financial practices and relations embody. As I will demonstrate, often this violence is slow (Nixon, 2011). Empirically, I draw on research conducted in the Palestinian conurbation of Ramallah Al Bireh [hereafter Ramallah]. Ramallah is an interesting case because financial debt is folded into, and emerges from, the settler-colonial violence of the Israeli Occupation. This produces very different forms and experiences of violence from those that emerge in places where finance is more commonly studied, such as Europe.

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of debt and place, before unpacking the concept of slow violence. After thinking about the geographies of slow violence in relation to Ramallah, the second part of the chapter focuses on practices of endurance. Endurance names the practices of coping, adjusting and improvising through which Palestinians craft liveable lives amidst multiple forms of violence. I argue that this concept enlarges our appreciation of agency in relation to experiences of financial crisis ordinariness. The conclusion returns to broader reflections on the relationship between finance, violence and place.

## 1. Conflict, place, slow violence

Many political economic and cultural economic accounts of global financial capitalism foreground its violence. However, few really touch down in particular places. The national and transnational scales remain dominant, and as such there are many outstanding questions about the role finance plays as a set of practices that is inserted into places, and as a source of place-based violence itself. While such questions are too broad to fully address in one chapter, I hope to offer some clues for where answers might begin to emerge. My starting point is Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence, and Lauren

Berlant's (2011) discussion of slow death. While the adjective slow suggests a temporal frame, these concepts are spatial too. Hence, they are useful for thinking about articulations of finance, violence and place.

Nixon (2011: 2) describes slow violence as that which 'occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all'. Slow violence is 'incremental and accretive', 'long' and 'staggered' (Ibid: 2), even as it is caused by fast-paced, short-term capitalist rationalities (Ibid: 17-8). The emphasis on the non-spectacular, incremental and accretive (ibid) resonates closely with Berlant's (2011: 95) concept of slow death, 'the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence'. These conceptual terms draw attention to, and help critique, practices that are not usually thought about, or recognised as forms of violence at all. They also describe forms of violence that people continue to live with, in an ongoing present of crisis ordinariness.

This conceptual framework is useful for understanding the recent growth of debt in Palestine. When I began field research in Ramallah in 2010, levels of debt were increasing rapidly, and debt had become a common topic of conversation. The growth of debt was particularly notable in this context because between 1967 and 1993, Israel largely prevented Arab-owned banks from operating in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Even after the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993 and Palestinians obtained limited autonomy, banks did not lend much due to the weak legal system that prevented effective restitution in the event of default. It was only after a series of political, technical and policy changes converged in 2008, that debt began to grow rapidly, more than tripling between 2008 and 2015.

Debt is conventionally defined as the use of others' resources in the present, with the promise to repay in the future. The instantiation of a debt relation is thus the creation of a particular future, or at least the promise to enact a particular future. However, the prospect of a failed promise also shapes the future. Lazzarato (2012) argues that indebted subjects are both constructed and deconstructed in ways that maximise future repayment and minimize the risk of default. 'The system of debt must… neutralize time, that is, the risk inherent to it. It must anticipate and ward off every potential "deviation" in the behavior of the debtor the future might hold' (Ibid: 45). What Lazzarato terms the debt economy colonises the future, and neutralizes time as the creation of anything new. In such circumstances, debtors are forced to continue paying, even though paying back debt may mean not being able to afford food, electricity, tax payments and may have harmful consequences for physical and mental health.

In Palestine, the debt economy is enabled by compulsory transfer agreements. These legally enable banks to withdraw an agreed upon percentage of the debtor's monthly salary, which can be up to 50% of their income, when it is deposited in their accounts. The socio-technical apparatus of the digital salary deposit ensures that there is no present moment, or indeed future moment, when a debtor can choose *not* to pay back their debt to the bank. In the event that a debtor doesn't have a salaried job, a guarantor who does is required. Debt therefore becomes a tax on income, or more precisely a form of rent extraction. Banks, in effect, generate profit through interest on the money people use to buy housing, cars and household commodities. The act of being paid each month becomes the slow erosion of a person's wealth by financial institutions. The salary transfer agreement ensures that indebted Palestinians have less money for other expenses. The slow violence of debt repayment spreads, as other forms of expenditure are foregone. For some participants, this meant buying cheaper food or simply less food. For others, it meant missing important social events, potentially weakening social and kinship ties. In cases where guarantors are required to make repayments for friends and family members, forms of direct social conflict emerge. In such cases, the harm of debt repayments are rolled over, temporally and socially. This violence is itself premised on a broader set of processes that require a more explicit focus on the geography of debt and slow violence, and Ramallah as a particular type of place.

## Geographies of slow violence

The growth of financial debt in Palestine is not only (temporally) recent, but also geographically concentrated. Banks in the Ramallah governorate held almost two thirds of all debt in 2014. Recently published figures show that this amount has declined to approximately 50% at the time of writing. This concentration reflects the fact that the Palestinian Authority (PA) owe a significant proportion of the total debt to banks. Public debt – money owed by the PA – is heavily concentrated in Ramallah because every PA ministry bar one is located in the conurbation. This concentration occurred because Israel prevented the PA from locating itself in East Jerusalem, the intended capital of a future Palestinian homeland. Levels of private debt are also much higher in Ramallah than elsewhere in the Occupied Territories because banks prefer to lend to salaried workers, which in Palestine means PA employees in most cases. Public sector jobs currently account for 25% of all employment in an economy where unemployment was almost 27% in 2014. Israeli Occupation related movement restrictions within the West Bank, which intensified during the second Palestinian *intifada* or uprising (2000–2007), forced many public-sector workers to live close to their place of work in and around Ramallah, rather than commute. High levels of migration to Ramallah from other parts of the West Bank also increased demand for housing and consequently, house prices.

However, this discussion also misrepresents the spatiality of debt. As I have argued elsewhere (Harker, 2017, forthcoming), debt is a topological spatial relation, that is folded into topographic objects. In other words, the idea of debt concentrated in a city like so many beans in a jar, fails to clearly convey how debt works spatially. To flesh out the implication of a relational approach, I want to return to Nixon and Berlant. They use the adjective slow to name a particular kind of violence and death primarily in terms of its temporal rhythm and frame. However, slow violence is also spatial. It is 'dispersed' (both temporally and spatially) rather than concentrated. Often it is hard to make visible because it does not cohere in(to) a particular site or event. For example, people spending less on food or not attending social events because they have to make debt repayments is not something that concerns Palestinian policy-makers. Slow violence also stems from practices of displacement. The first example of slow violence in Nixon's book, toxic waste that is shipped from export rich nations to Africa, exemplifies this displacement. In this example the slow violence of pollution forced people to leave their land. Innovatively, Nixon expands the idea of displacement to also include the loss of land and resources through extraction, theft and/or degradation. This form of displacement leaves 'communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable' (Ibid: 19). They are dis-placed, without having moved themselves.

Berlant introduces a third term, impasse, with which we can think about the spatiality of slow violence. Impasse describes the experience of dynamic capture or being stuck in a form of perpetual motion that goes nowhere. Berlant (2011: 199) illustrates impasse using the spatial metaphor of the cul-de-sac. Cul-de-sacs are spaces where things keep moving around in circles. She also describes impasses as spaces of 'animated suspension', like the cartoon character who continues to run even though they are over the edge of the cliff, rather than suspended animation, which would be the same character frozen in a block of ice. These three spatialities - dispersal, displacement and impasse - help flesh out financial crisis ordinariness in Ramallah.

## Dispersal

> *"90% of Ramallah is mortgaged to the banks."*
> *Ahmad, 12th August 2013*

If the slow violence of debt is spatially dispersed, then in Ramallah this dispersal occurs most significant through the purchasing practices of Palestinian families. Such dispersal is both hard to see and to quantify. Ahmad's hyperbolic suggestion that 90% of the city is mortgage to banks is not statistically true. The Palestine Monetary Authority provided me with statistics that suggest that only 4% of the working age population at large were indebted in 2014. However, Ahmad's quote nevertheless reflects the ways in which residents experience debt's rapid expansion throughout the city. The growth of debt topologies have become visible to residents through changes in the built environment, particularly the proliferation of multi-storey apartment buildings, premium consumer goods and traffic congestion because of increasing numbers of cars.

> *People will get new cars and new houses but in reality they don't own them. Many people now have new cars but are they rich? Of course they are not rich but they live like rich people... Most of the people bought them through bank loans.*
>
> *(Interview with Ali, 28th August 2013)*

The growth of debt is also dispersed throughout the material landscape of the city in less easily discernible ways. For instance, medical facilities are sustained in part through the credit people use to pay for treatment. The recent proliferation of private schools in Ramallah is also in part supported by credit-money. This dispersal through the topography of the city itself needs to be understood and analyzed in relation to our second spatiality of slow violence, displacement.

## Displacement

The slow violence of displacement works primarily through social networks that span urban and rural spaces, and Palestinians in the Occupied Territories with those 'outside'. While debt contracts are concentrated in Ramallah, there were many examples of these debt relations being extended to other cities and countries, primarily through kinship ties. Here Im Ghassan's describes turning to her brother, who lives in Amman, Jordan for help.

> *In the past there was a delay in paying the employees' salaries, and the loan's interest increased. We were forced to pay double. In order to solve this financial crisis, I borrowed 1000JD from my brother.*
> *(Interview with Im Ghassan, 31st August 2013)*

Such experiences were common, as residents of Um al Sharayet engage in what we might term socio-spatial debt rollover, transferring the burden of payment to relatives elsewhere. By sending money, Palestinians in other parts of the West Bank, Jordan and the US, are folded into the rapidly growing Palestinian debt economy in Ramallah through their relatives who live there. If these practices of socio-spatial rollover are moving the consequences of growing financial debt in Ramallah beyond the city, there are also examples of dis-placement where people themselves remain in place.

> *Poor people may have apartments and cars, but they don't have enough money. They are hungry. Banks cause this poverty. They encourage people to take loans. In fact, when people take loans, they lose everything they have.*
> *(Interview with Abu Ghassan, 15th September 2013)*

In this example, it is the financial resources necessary to live in place that are extracted by banks, almost from 'underneath' families'. This example also connects with impasse, the third spatiality of slow violence and death.

## Impasse

Financial debt in Ramallah contributes to the broader impasse in which Palestinians in the Occupied Territories find themselves in, trying to move both literally and figuratively, but unable to go anywhere. The emerging Ramallah debt economy must be understood in relation to the ongoing Israeli Occupation, and the multiple colonial processes that have systematically impoverished Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories for the last seven decades. The rising demand or need for debt can be directly traced to problems, such as rising living costs, low salaries and the geographic concentration of the Palestinian economy in the Ramallah conurbation, which have been largely caused by the Israeli Occupation.

Since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 (which Palestinians refer to as the *nakba*, or catastrophe) and the occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem in 1967, Israel has prevented Palestinian economic development. Such practices continued after the Oslo Accords in 1993 as Israel retained control of all external borders (and thus the movement of goods and people in and out of the Occupied Territories). The Accords also forced Palestinians to become more economically dependent on not just Israel, but also the international community. Dependency and de-development have literally taken place through the fragmentation of Palestinian space. The Oslo Accords separated the West Bank and Gaza Strip from each other and from the territories Israel captured in 1948. Sixty percent of the West Bank – demarcated as area C in the Accords – remained under complete Israeli control.

Palestinian cities and towns in the West Bank, designated areas A and B in the Accords, were to be nominally under PA administrative control. However, in practice all these territorial islands remain under Israeli control, since their borders, subsurface (i.e. water aquifers) and the sky above them remain occupied, and since 2000 Israeli military forces have entered these areas at will.

The failure of the PA to realize Palestinian aspirations for an independent national homeland, and increasing levels of inequality, are also factors in the current impasse. They have resulted in the emergence of a new, 'cosmopolitan' urban middle-class in Ramallah, which invests – both economic and psychic – in goods, educational and cultural services. In Palestine, far more private debt is borrowed for consumption spending than activities that are conventionally thought to constitute productive investment. The rapid expansion of the banking sector has supported this consumption-driven economy. Debt becomes a response to the animated suspension of going around in circles, without going anywhere in particular.

## Endurance

Residents continually emphasized the forms of harm that debt caused. However, when I repeated these accounts to Palestinian policy makers and bankers, they dismissed them. In part they were able to do this by pointing to the aspirations and forms of endurance that are enfolded in debt relations. Indeed, endurance may even be produced by the slow violence of debt. As noted earlier, financial crisis ordinariness is a situation in which people develop new skills for adjusting and living on. If living under the Israeli Occupation for almost 70 years is an impasse in which various futures have been eviscerated, then the relatively recent growth of debt in Palestine may be understood as more than a form of slow violence. Debt in this context creates a different future out of the present. It has become a means of getting on, getting by and occasionally getting out. Such practices are forms of endurance, dynamic adjustments that may be put in place to create new opportunities or keep the same old things going.

The term endurance denotes forms of agency that are neither practices of domination nor resistance. In the Palestinian context, much as been written about practices of *sumud*, or steadfastness. This word implies a politics of staying in place, usually on one's land, and thus a refusal to be dispossessed by the colonizer. While *sumud* is widely lauded as a form of resistance, endurance is far more politically ambiguous. Nixon (2011: 21) warns that practices of ecological endurance can often be co-opted by politicians, lobbyists, and corporations to privatize profits while externalizing risk and clean up. Similarly, Berlant (2011: 117) suggests such practices are 'directed toward making a less-bad experience… a relief and a reprieve, nor a repair'. However, they do enable the maintenance of selves, and the material and social supports that make life (more) liveable.

In Ramallah, endurance includes practices such as maintaining kinship relationships (often over significant distances), developing new social ties with topographically proximate strangers, obtaining (and preferably owning) living space and securing greater capacity to move, by acquiring citizenship of Western countries and/or permissions from Israel. These are everyday practices, which like forms of slow violence are barely visible. Debt is something that residents willingly take on because they do not simply persist or endure the impasse of the Occupation passively. They commonly become indebted to build or buy and then furnish homes, a crucial aspect of getting married and starting a family for many young men. Debt enables Palestinians to stay on the land, and capacitates everyday life, including many social obligations. Such practices take place in the face of forms of exhaustion that stem from ongoing Israeli colonisation and the failure of the PA leadership and other states to stop or resist it. Debt thus feeds into the transition from collective national aspirations for liberation to familial aspirations for a better life, since a contextually defined 'good' life isn't possible. Debt provides an ambiguous alternative, but it nevertheless opens up both temporal futures and different spatial connections in situations of financial crisis ordinariness.

## Endurance contra crisis

Financial crisis ordinariness focuses attention on agentic practices, rather than thinking crisis as a spectacular event from which forms of agency are evacuated or absent. However, it nevertheless retains a focus on crisis that may itself be problematic. Janet Roitman (2013) argues that crisis is used to secure or 'frame' a world that the narrator (who may be an intellectual, activist or policy maker) can then act in and/or on. Roitman argues the use of crisis is inherently conservative, because it reaffirms a norm (e.g. 'business as usual), against which crisis (disruption, diversion) is defined. In place of crisis narratives, Roitman (2013) seeks a form of analysis that is explicitly 'anti-crisis'. One place we might begin to look for such a method is amidst the practices of endurance. Such practices are 'anti-crisis' precisely because they are not spectacular and 'evental'. Instead they are banal, ongoing and barely visible. They nevertheless counter forms of attritional violence.

Endurance offers a conceptual frame that doesn't *define* people's lives by the violence they experience, even as it acknowledges the role such violence plays. Contrast this with Berlant's concept of slow death, which positions deterioration as a *defining* condition of a population's experience and historical existence. Crisis ordinariness narratives such as slow death risk reducing complex lives and experiences to being simply an object and residue of powerful and extensive forms of violence. Such a conceptual move writes out much of the liveliness one encounters in ethnographic research, which cannot be adequately thought about as simply the result of violence. Writing out this liveliness also risks universalising what are in fact quite particular, situated ideas about what makes life liveable.

Practices of endurance also trouble Nixon's politics of representation as a means of mitigating or diminishing slow violence. Nixon (2011: 3) seeks forms of intervention that 'turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention'. In other words, he seeks to turn slow violence into a crisis story. However, many practices of endurance are powerful and effective precisely because they occur below the threshold of governmental visibility. Drawing attention to them not only risks romanticising practices of survival, to the point where they can be hijacked as evidence of 'resilience' (Nixon 2011: 21), but may expose them to other forms of governmental intervention that subsume and/or evacuate them of any political or practical potentiality.

## Conclusion: place, violence and finance

To conclude, I want to return to the questions I posed at the beginning of the chapter about the role finance plays in relation to place and violence. First, financial practices are not an all-conquering force, which replaces existing power relations. Rather such practices are inserted and articulated in relation to existing geographies and histories of place. In Palestine, the growth of debt has relied on, and shaped itself in relation to institutions, technologies and geographies that are created by the Israeli Occupation, including the population registry, shrinking land markets that in turn create scarcity, and the centralisation of the PA in Ramallah. The growth of the debt economy occurred after the second *intifada* because this event violently created a tabula rasa, with regards to existing forms of governance, which enabled the legal and regulatory environment in which the Palestinian banking sector operates to be reshaped. The second *intifada* also heightened the impasse created by the Oslo Accords, and Palestinians' frustration with the political process and the PA.

Finance can also be a source of place-based violence, although not necessarily in relation to territory. In Palestine, debt has yet to really influence the Israeli occupation. While some people suggest that repaying debt prevents people from resisting the occupation, debt also has the potential to politicize people because it brings into focus the slow violence of de-development and dependency. However, debt has generated micro-level conflicts, such as between individuals who have a guarantor relationship. Debt has also disrupted kinship relations and supported growing levels of inequality (e.g. private schooling in Ramallah). This is why it is necessary to think the slow violence of finance in relation to place.

**References**

Berlant L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Harker C. (2017). Debt space: Topologies, ecologies and Ramallah, Palestine *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35(4): 600–619.

Harker C. Forthcoming. *Spacing Debt: Obligations, Violence and Endurance in Ramallah, Palestine*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Lazzarato M. (2012). *The Making of Indebted Man*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).

Nixon R. (2011). *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Roitman J. (2013). *Anti-Crisis*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

# 5

# On hypervigilant subjects

**Leila Dawney**

Sometimes the pressure of being in debt is felt in low-level ways, and in ways we aren't always are of. Little habits, hesitations, nagging feelings that something isn't quite working out as we'd imagine, a tightness in the upper back, a little more self-medication. It may not be enough to make us feel like we're suffering, or that things are bad enough to go and seek help; and it may feel more like a generalised sense of being overwhelmed, or of juggling too much. In our research, we wanted to try and make sense of these sometimes barely noticeable ways in which we are affected by our increasingly financialised lives. One such example of this presented itself to me as I was walking down the escalator at Gatwick Airport railway station. Every electronic billboard was filled with the same image – an advertisement for Clearscore, the credit ratings service that offers a smartphone app. It occurred to me that such technologies are productive of, and feed into, a culture of checking, self-monitoring and regulation, and of borrowing that is increasingly pervasive. As our financial worlds become more and more complex, and as we diversify our income streams across creditors, increasingly precarious wages and other forms of income, we find ourselves juggling and holding multiple pieces of financial information in our heads. We look to the next thing; the horizon of debt repayment, or consolidation, or insolvency. Trying to keep tabs on it all becomes a work in itself.

This is a chapter about how debts are *experienced*; it is less about debt as quantity than about the domestic atmospheres and subjective states that indebtedness creates. Psychologists refer to a heightened sense of alertness, or a mild fear of impending danger, as 'hypervigilance'. I argue that technologies like the Clearscore app are part of broader economies of indebtedness and financialisation produce hypervigilant financial subjectivities: a background sense of responsibility and anxiety attached to financial lives. To accompany its billboard campaign, Clearscore has launched a series of television adverts involving couples and families interacting with the app on various screen-based devices. We see Charlie and Lauretta, and their dog Moose, in a number of "everyday" domestic scenarios: with the laptop at the kitchen table; on a sofa in the lounge with a smartphone. In these advertisements, Lauretta asks Charlie to check his credit score, which he does easily. In *Wedding* and *Dogs Can't Drive*,[6] Charlie uses the same app to look at loans. In another advert, we see Mick, his partner Patricia and cat Flearoy, relaxing together in bed. Mick checks his credit rating on a tablet and announces that the app offers him "total control of my money".

[6] The titles given to the adverts on Clearscore's Youtube channel. Both can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yl_WVr66nYs and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x91ypZvUYiI

In these adverts, Clearscore seeks to re-frame the multiple screens that inhabit and re-compose the contemporary home as sites of financial promise and self-evaluation. Its advertisements normalise a continued engagement with one's financial subjectivity, drawing on the affective lures of self-monitoring that constitute contemporary digital interfacing (likes, feedback and ratings) to provide small dopamine hits in exchange for involving subjects in domestic routines of financial service-selling and providing credit scores (Dean 2010, see also Ash et al 2018 on affect and financial technologies).

Importantly, front and centre of these imagined routines is the (heterosexual) couple relationship and the domestic space formed around it. Lauretta, in her role as demander of credit score checking, maintains a level of anxiety and alertness around the couple's credit rating. Charlie's checking of the app offers reassurance, promise and a means of strengthening the collective project of domestic life in partnership. The shared relaxation of Mick, Patricia and Flearoy similarly flows from the mastery Mick experiences over his financial self. In these stagings of anxiety, control and release, in which the domestic space and financial subjectivity are indistinguishable, a particular promise takes shape. The app provides a 'hit', as one (re-)checks a marginally improved credit score or gains access to further credit – a hit that can be accessed on a grey commute, or in the sunken minutes after a domestic argument. At the core of this hit is the promise that, for a moment, this shared life, otherwise defined by the pressures and demands of indebtedness, can be made liveable.

In their foregrounding of mundane domestic settings and emotional routines, these adverts trace the ways in which the experience of debt operates just as much through moments of intensity – the letter of default, the pressure cooker of an advice session – as through a background hum in which individuals are engaged in ongoing practices of self-assessment, despair, desire and satisfaction. Contemporary financial subjectivities are shaped through such forms of affective modulation that run in the background: they are composed through low-level affective states that include hypervigilance, dissociation and anxiety. The experience of debt thus hinges on so much more than a binary relationship between creditor and debtor: deep entanglements of people, technologies and objects produce these affective modulations, creating relations of obligation, care and co-dependency alongside vigilance and anxiety.

Hypervigilance is broadly understood as a psychological state, often brought on by trauma, of heightened arousal and anxiety. It is a "state of anxious expectation and hypersensitivity brought on by watchfulness bordering on suspiciousness and excessive alertness to minimal changes in the environment" (Campbell 2004: 477). It is characterised by increased alertness to threat and by compulsive behaviours that can both reinforce or threaten the self. Children who experience trauma, or are asked to take too much responsibility for themselves and others around them are likely to develop hypervigilant behaviours, such as constantly scanning the environment for danger. In our research with people in moderate but manageable levels of debt, we became aware of practices through which financial lives became hypervigilant – everyday, domestic practices such as those in the Clearscore advertisements that this chapter began with.

Ashley Barnwell discusses the emergence of the concept of a hypervigilant public in cultural theory, describing how "individuals try to be alert to how their attention is constantly being diverted toward spectres of prosperity, whether it is in the orchestrated detours of shopping malls or the wish-fulfilling images of advertising". As she notes, "being vigilant is how people feasibly deal with the turbulence of political, economic, and social climates" (Barnwell, 2016:15). In other words, in an unpredictable, unstable world, subjects become more wary, and the practices through which people attempt to explain, make sense of and control their situations come to the fore. Similarly, Lauren Berlant suggests that such forms of attention emerge from a sense that the world, and the promises it offers through imaginaries of the good life, may not hold true (Berlant, 2011). Hypervigilance thus escalates as people begin to realise that things aren't quite shaping up as they imagine. As Barnwell argues, "hypervigilance, as a form of responsive attention, is actually exacerbated by the notion that agencies beyond our control can arise from anywhere at any time" (Barnwell 2016:14-15). Her argument is that, as publics and as critics, in the face of increasing precarity and instability, we read the present with wariness.

Hypervigilance emerges as a generalised embodied condition that runs in the background of our experiential worlds, supported by technologies, objects and imaginaries that involve us in practices such as checking, counting and speculating. As a constitutive part of the experience of indebted life, hypervigilance folds through the worlds of our participants, such that their emotional and domestic lives are inflected by their position in a game of speculation, entrepreneurialism and risk management, and in the "quotidian shuffling of debt among credit sources that has become typical among Americans" (Schüll 2012 n.p.). In other words, the complexity of our financial lives, and the ways in which we try to mitigate against disaster and produce a good life in the wake of growing precarity, alongside the flows of information that encourage us to participate in increasingly baroque architectures of personal finance, can lead to anxious and hypervigilant states. Martin's[7] story, described below, illustrates the way in which these practices and modes of experience manifest themselves in the ongoing everydayness of financial lives.

Martin is a father of three in his late thirties. He lives in South Wales, and is currently working on a contract in the south east of England for part of the week and running a business from home for the other part. He is effectively attempting to do two full-time jobs in an effort to clear his debts and fulfil the role of family provider, while his wife looks after their three pre-school children. He takes financial responsibility for his family, occasionally casting his wife as profligate in the process. His financial world involves a complex arrangement of spreadsheets, moving credit card balances, letting property, debt repayment and control. Everything is recorded on a spreadsheet on his laptop, which is scrutinised regularly. For Martin, this form of financial micromanagement is central to his role as father and husband, as responsible caregiver. His love for his family is fulfilled through his financial responsibility, demonstrated through his technologies of managing complex domestic finances.

Martin's hypervigilance is tied to his project of self and family creation, and as a project of atonement for what he

[7] The interview quotes in this article come from one interview, which was part of a small project entitled "Affective Cartographies of Debt". The project involved in-depth interviews with 12 participants and explored how personal debt related to participants' intimate and affective worlds, and to their life plans and projects.

sees as past financial mistakes. During our interview, Martin produces his spreadsheet of income and outgoings, which he charts against his debts in a self-invented form of double-entry bookkeeping. The excel spreadsheet is proudly passed to me, and explained in detail: material evidence of his financial vigilance, recovery from past irresponsibilities and project of family prosperity. As we talk, Martin discusses how he brought debt into his relationship with his wife from a previous relationship. He compares this with the "path we've set ourselves now". For Martin, working two jobs, moving money around between credit cards and loans from friends and family is a means of marking out a life project as a solvent family man. His hyperawareness of his financial position is part of this performance of financial responsibility and speculative subjectivity:

> *So we've got about £12,000 on the credit cards, and we still owe on the loan about £8,000. Then I owe about £10,000 through my business which is corporation tax and VAT. The car, I owe about £7,000 on. There is other bits and pieces, but I'd have to refer to my spreadsheet. In total it's about £50,000.*

While he discusses financial decisions in the first person plural, it is clear from the interview that he alone takes on the responsibility for financial matters. He sees debt as a short-term solution that he will work his way out of through close financial monitoring:

> *We'll take credit and borrow money to pay our outgoings on the basis that we can even that out in the future, rather*

> *than just not paying bills. Because then you start to get into… you know, you do you start to get records against you and then you do really struggle. We're quite aware of that, that's the tack we have taken, which has contributed to the debt.*

Martin also orientates himself and his family towards a time in the future where the struggle will have paid off, and where there will be prosperity:

> *We have sweated blood and tears to get to where we are. But if we keep going on the current course of action, by the end of September this year we will be in a good position. I'll have a bit of debt within the company but all the other debts will be paid off then we'll have just the regular mortgage payment.*

Martin's vigilance towards his economic situation, and his taking on more and more complex financial commitments is tied in to his care and devotion towards his family, and to his project of the self as competent financial subject. In his practices of calculation and keeping count, devising spreadsheets and juggling money around, he is constantly alert to his own and his family's financial situation and spending habits.

These experiences point to the ways in which credit-based economies and the rise in domestic borrowing impact on everyday domestic scenes. Here, technological forms and practices of financial management and attentiveness are imbricated into domestic practices of care for others and the self. Through these mundane scenes of intimate life, with their descriptions of practices, technologies and financialised worlds we can gain ingress into the the modes of experience and pathologies of contemporary capitalist life. Hypervigilant practices of accounting, management and speculation, mediated through technologies of financial management, contribute to, and also augment, the experiential sensations involved in these practices. This co-constitution of technology, atmosphere, intimacy and debt produces forms of experience that are lived out and through the bodies and life projects of ordinary subjects, in everyday modes of making sense, making do and making a life.

**References**

Ash, J., Anderson, B., Gordon, R. and Langley, P., (2018). Digital interface design and power: Friction, threshold, transition. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *36*(6), pp.1136-1153.

Barnwell, A. (2016). "Creative paranoia: Affect and social method." *Emotion, Space and Society* 20(Supplement C): 10-17.

Berlant, L. G. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press

Campbell, R. J. (2004). *Campbell's psychiatric dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dean, J. (2010). *Blog theory: Feedback and capture in the circuits of drive*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Schüll, N. D. (2012). "Gambled away: Video poker and self-suspension," *Anthropology Now*, 4(2): 1-13.

# 6

# Malachi's story

**Compiled by Samuel Kirwan**

Malachi is in his mid-twenties, is currently single, and has been living in a single-bed council property for the last year. We start off by trying to write down his debts but he trails away; I realise that, in this case, the listing exercise is not useful. There were those he could clearly name: the rent arrears, the Council Tax, the benefits overpayments. Then there are the multiple others: the loans, utility arrears at former properties. But mainly the phones. A whole early adult life, or late youth, of signing up for multiple mobile phone contracts and then abandoning them. It had been addictive; the companies had no issues piling credit upon credit; he was excited each time to have a new handset and the world of new possibilities it promised.

In the intervening years, as his debts grew, multiplied and complexified, Malachi had actually become very good at dealing with debt. He had sensed early on that the mobile phone companies, and the collectors to whom they had sold on the debts, were more keen on the threat of legal action than the action itself. It was, he realised, an attempt to push him into voluntarily starting repayments. Having called their bluff once he had found a seemingly successful strategy for avoiding them. Letters stayed unopened, he did not answer the phone to unknown numbers. He moved frequently enough that they lost track of him.

But the council tax and the rent arrears had been something else. Having lost his job he found himself in the first cohort of new benefits claimants moved onto Universal Credit (UC). As this UC window was subsequently closed, a lack of support and knowledge regarding UC among Jobcentre and Local Authority employees had meant that he was never informed that his Council Tax was not being paid (under the 'legacy' system Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction were claimed together). When he was first informed of the arrears he was already £700 behind. In his anger he refused to engage and had gotten used to bailiff visits at his flat. At the same time, he had not realised that his rent was not being paid for the first three months of his UC claim. When the council sought possession of his flat, suspended possession was granted by the court on the agreement that he maintain payments towards the arrears on top of his rent. Suddenly the stakes had been significantly raised. Continuing to evade Council Tax payments meant the possibility of imprisonment. The consequences of failing to meet a rental payment was not simply eviction but knowing that he would be classified as intentionally homeless and as such ineligible for re-housing.

As these situations escalated, it took someone else – a probation officer – to suggest to him that he *wasn't* dealing with his debts. He began to see how much the stress and anxiety had contributed to the breakdown of his relationship, and how much his fear of his own front door or of unexpected letters were affecting his ability to live. He described the stress of having to think, whenever a friend is visiting, of what you might do if there is an unexpected knock at the door. The friend will have to wait, he explained, until the person is gone.

Attending an advice service had completely transformed his outlook: in the five months since his first visit he was able to talk freely and without anxiety about each of the debts and also had clear plans for dealing with them. He was on friendly terms with his ex-partner and was able to spend relaxed time with friends again. Yet the advice process had only given him knowledge that, on some level, he already held. The debts he had been successfully ignoring, and those that had turned into bailiff visits, possession proceedings and severe deductions from his benefits income, could be divided into 'non-priorities' and 'priorities'. The mental budgeting that he already carried with him, weighing up potential income, expenditure and repayments, needed to be made into a formal budget sheet and used to communicate his situation to creditors. With regard the bailiffs, he had a right to do what he already had been doing: refusing them entry into the property. The principle value of advice had been to give him a language, a structure, and a sense of authority, to act upon these knowledges and turn them into distinct trajectories.

At the same time he had amassed a knowledge about debt far beyond the scope of advice. Malachi knew about the intricacies of car finance deals, being able to detail: why so many people got into hire-purchase deals when they got a new job; how the monthly payments compared to the depreciation of the car; and as such what the risks were of either crashing the car or losing the job. He had spent so long chatting to collectors, local authority officers and rent management teams that he had enough of an understanding of how their systems worked to decipher internal codes and know exactly who to speak to get a decision.

Yet, most interestingly, he also had a clear vision of how the debt economy shapes society. He would inform those close to him about the importance of properly facing up to your debts given how damaging they can be to your life. He had realised that, while there is an effective way of avoiding consumer debts – namely by keeping moving – eventually you get worn down, you realise that you cannot keep it up. The speed, the evasion, the looking both over your shoulder and to an unknown future, begins to fray your nerves. The 'priorities' begin to infringe, pushing you into situations of increasing desperation. In recent weeks something else had happened: unexpectedly, one of the mobile phone creditors had applied for and been granted a County Court Judgment. He attributed this to him having settled down – staying in one place long enough for the creditor to think that it was worth pursuing.

It had taken strength not simply to 'face up to' his debts, but to refuse the life that the debt industry itself had pushed him into: taking on more and more credit, moving around to avoid them, not sitting down, moving between restless, precarious work. A life that is not germane to relationships, to setting down roots. Advice had not 'solved' his debt problems, but had provided a transition to a life in which he could accept and deal with them whilst imagining a better future.

# 7

# The impact of the introduction of Universal Credit on advice agencies

**Tom Barrett**

This chapter seeks to examine the impact that Universal Credit (UC) is having on advice agencies and their ability to meet demand for their services. It builds upon research carried out with advice services,[8] presenting and discussing survey data gathered in 2017 from 123 participants. It was established in the early part of the research that there was, at that time, no other research that examined what impact Universal Credit (UC) was having on advice agencies; in this chapter I will set out some of the emerging indications of the significant effects the policy is likely to take.

[8] Discussion focusses on research that was conducted as part of a dissertation which was written in partial fulfillment of a masters degree in Social Welfare Law, Policy and Advice Practice.

## What is Universal Credit?

UC is a new benefit which collapses a series of working age income related benefits into one payment, incorporating also elements to meet housing costs and additional payments for disability. It has been gradually 'rolled out' since April 2013 – a stop-start process that has been beset with problems. By 2013 £40.1 million of software had been written off (Wintour, 2013) and the roll out programme had been continually delayed. If the original timetable had been followed the UC roll out would have been completed by October 2017, but this is now not expected to be completed until 2022 (Timmins, 2017). Once completely rolled out, over seven million families will be in receipt of Universal Credit, which equates to 28% of all working age families (Drake, 2017). It is as such a highly significant reform.

So, will it work? It is of course very difficult to see into the future to make an assessment of the full impact of UC. Given its significance however it would be expected that the government might have sought to understand the effects of such large-scale changes. This is not the case; the government chose not to commission an independent evaluation of the policy as they did with other welfare reforms (Hickman et al, 2017). What we do have though are organisations such as the National Audit Office and the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), amongst others, who have consistently highlighted its failures and offered suggested solutions. Unfortunately, the government have remained resolutely stubborn in refusing to accept these suggestions.

## Where did the Universal Credit idea come from?

The coalition government did not pluck the UC idea out of thin air; it is rooted in a long-held devotion to 'neo-liberal' ideology. This is an ideology that successive UK governments have followed since the 1970s, whether they be Conservative, 'New' Labour, or the 2010-2015 coalition government. Neo-liberalism broadly advocates a rolling back of the state with the 'market' expected to step in and provide essential services. Emphasis is placed on individuals being expected to become active market participants, with those who resist becoming so being subject to increasingly harsh disciplinary measures. Such disciplining in the case of the UK benefits system includes sanctions, removal of benefits, and a general rhetoric that seeks to discredit the moral integrity of those not willing to conform.

Those people not willing to conform are cast as being not 'responsible'. The idea of 'responsibilisation' is common across neoliberal democracies such as Canada, Australia, the USA and the UK. Universal Credit is an extension of this responsibilisation agenda. This is highlighted by the fact that a key tenet of Universal Credit is that it should promote personal responsibility (DWP, 2010). The fact that people are poor, out of work, or are financially unstable is often cast as a personal failing by neo-liberal politicians (Wiggan, 2012). Put simply, people have not made the correct decisions and have not taken responsibility. In the case of the UK it is often held that these personal failings, and lack of responsibility, are supported by an interventionist state and an expensive welfare system.

Universal Credit is a form of social welfare that fits into the 'welfare to work' mould. It is part of a policy trend that began with the Conservative government prior to 1997 and continued into the New Labour era, the approach to welfare in the latter period being characterised by phrases such as 'a hand-up-not-a-hand-out'. Since 2010 we have seen a dramatic increase in sanctions imposed on those deemed as not doing enough to find work. This increase in sanctions has largely been imposed as a consequence of the government's austerity policies. These have created a drive to reduce the bill created by the UK's supposedly interventionist and expensive welfare system. While David Cameron claimed that austerity and the cuts implemented by it since were not an ideological choice, the coalition government's own materials appeared to contradict this point. The emergency budget of June 2010 cited Alberto Alesina and Silva Ardagna's study, *Large Changes in Fiscal Policy: Taxes Versus Spending* which advocates a reduction in the size of the welfare state, claiming that austerity does not hurt economies but actually helps them recover from recession (Blyth, 2015).

## Advice Agencies and Austerity

Advice agencies have not escaped the grip of austerity policies with advice agency funding being cut substantially since 2010. In 2013 the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (LASPO) was brought into being, one aim of which was to substantially cut the government's expenditure on legal aid. It was predicted at that time by Jew and Johnson (2012) that these cuts would wipe £50 million off the budget for advice agencies. In addition to the loss of legal aid funding the advice sector was also hit by cuts to funding from other sources. Typically, a significant amount of funding was also received from local authorities, but they too experienced cuts to their budgets.

Overall the Low Commission (2014) estimated that the cuts to legal aid and local authority funding would amount to a combined £129 million by 2015 for the advice sector.

The cuts implemented by austerity caused a rapid contraction in the advice sector. By 2015 nine law centres had closed (one in six of Law Centre Network members) and ten advice centres run by the housing charity Shelter had also closed (Shah, 2015). In Liverpool over two fifths of organisations surveyed by Liverpool Charity and Voluntary Services in 2011 had implemented reductions in the areas of welfare benefits, debt, and housing advice (Jones et al, 2016).[9]

It was intended by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) that when people made a UC claim they would be offered money advice (Hartfree, 2014). Clearly the DWP had not considered how this was practically meant to happen, given the diminishing resources discussed above. Indeed, increases in demand and reductions in capacity at advice agencies should not have been news to the DWP. In the following sections we will see just how advisers coped with the UC roll out.

## The Research

The focus of the research was to establish the impact of UC from the adviser perspective. Most advisers will be familiar with the now many and frequent media reports of how UC is affecting claimants – the specific aims of this study were to assess whether this fall-out was landing on the doorstep of

[9] While austerity accelerated the reduction in advice agency capacity, this had actually been a trend for a number of years. According to the Bach Commission (2017) there were 3226 not for profit legal advice centres across England and Wales in 2005, but by 2015 this had fallen to 1462.

advice agencies, and if so how this impact was being managed.

To assess impact in simple terms, respondents to the survey were asked whether the number of new clients seen each week had increased since UC was introduced. Just over half (53.08%) of respondents considered that the number of new clients had increased since UC was introduced – however the qualitative survey responses noted how this might be misleading, given the need for services to manage demand. As one participant noted:

> *Please note our organisation always works to capacity, and so these questions about "increase in new clients" isn't relevant - we always turn away clients and have no statistics on the numbers.*

This quote emphasises the point made above, namely that advice agency resources have been diminishing for many years, and even prior to the introduction of UC many agencies were already at capacity.

So, while it was established that at least some of the fallout from UC was landing at the door of advice agencies, the key question was what problems were advisers facing as a result of the policy. With regard to client issues, the most frequently cited advice area to be affected by UC roll out, one discussed further in Jennie Bunt and Deborah James's contributions to this volume, was 'Priority' debt, with 95.83% of respondents stating that rent arrears had been accrued as consequence of UC. Across the different regions of the UK it remained the most frequently selected debt, followed closely by council tax and utilities.[10]

Regarding advisers' own experiences, it was clear that there was widespread anxiety amongst advisers working in areas that were yet to go full service regarding their agency's ability to manage the potential impact of UC. As well as concerns about UC itself, the combination of UC and diminishing resources was clearly causing significant anxiety among staff. Given the earlier discussion about diminishing resources it is no surprise that such concerns ran through the qualitative data. As one responded noted:

> *We go live with UC in our area in November 2017 and as a debt advice team we are dreading the impact this will have upon our clients and our ability to assist them. At a time when Local Authorities are facing dramatic budget cuts and we are currently undergoing restructuring to cut costs how are we going to be able to meet this demand?*

Where agencies were already dealing with UC, a majority (73.98%) of respondents considered that UC was placing an additional burden on their agency's ability to deliver services. Advisers consistently highlighted how the introduction of UC was leading to cases now taking longer to conclude, with 63.93% of respondents stating this to be the case. Furthermore, 71.31% of respondents stated that cases now contained more administration (such as contacting the DWP), while 36.89% said that there had been an increase in requests just to help with

[10] Respondents were also asked whether the frequency of clients experiencing certain types of debts had increased as a consequence of UC; again responses to this question was very similar, with 96.40% of respondents stating that the frequency of rent arrears had increased.

the initial application. While there has always been an element of administration in the role of adviser, it should not begin to impede on the primary function of giving advice. Ultimately, becoming bogged down in these tasks impedes an adviser's ability to complete their cases in a timely manner, and therefore reduces the number of clients that can be assisted.

Purely considering the volume of cases that advisers are dealing is an issue to be concerned about, but it is when this begins to cause stress among advice staff that it creates a further issue. When the stress of the adviser is combined with the distress of the clients this becomes an awful mix for all concerned, as highlighted by one respondent:

> *the desperation of the client ....... hence our volunteers and staff are under more pressure, seeing more of our community plunged into desperation, financial hardship that affects all of their emotional wellbeing*

Others echoed these points:

> *Increase in worker stress – [it's] very difficult to deal with these clients, who are often agitated*

> *I am working later and later and having to juggle what I am able to do to support clients. I am dealing with more emotional distress and despair than I have ever had to cope with in the past.*

One of the ways that advisers have traditionally spread the impact of policy changes has been to refer clients to other organisations where they were not able to help. Of the respondents to the survey 34.17% said that they had seen an increase in having to do this as a consequence of UC. But 30.83% of respondents stated that referring has itself become difficult; as a consequence of UC these other organisations are also at capacity themselves, again highlighting the issue of diminishing resources. Foodbanks were a prominent theme here, with 76.67% of respondents seeing an increase in referrals. One respondent stated: *"The impact on food bank referrals has been staggering".* This is consistent with research completed by the Trussell Trust, (2017) who noted that between the 1st April 2016 and 31st March 2017 the Trust saw an average increase across the UK in demand for their services of 6.8% on the previous twelve months. When isolated only to UC full service areas they found that there had been a 16.85% increase in demand for their services.

## Conclusion

One conclusion from my research was how Universal Credit is having the greatest impact on advice agencies in the poorest and most deprived areas. The North East and the South East are the two areas that are most greatly affected, with the North East being the poorest region, while the South East has the greatest disparity between rich and poor.

What I have set out in this chapter is the range of deleterious effects taking place across these regional variations. Advisers are becoming increasingly weighed down by administrative tasks, such as making the initial UC application, challenging deductions, making telephone calls to the DWP to chase up applications, and completing foodbank referrals. Adviser's cases are now taking longer to conclude, are more complex, and feature more priority debts such as rent and council tax than they did prior to UC being rolled out. Many of these issues that advisers are dealing with are downstream consequences of the DWP giving poor advice in the first place. In an era of diminishing resources, these impacts are a difficult burden to carry for the advice sector, and are a burden that it is struggling to deal with.

I will finish by noting how the increased use of foodbanks, particularly in areas where UC has been introduced, raises the question of whether charities should, and indeed can, sustainably fill the void which is being left by the withdrawal of the welfare state as neo-liberal governments 'roll it back'. In the case of the advice sector, it also raises the question of what its future role may be. At the current time it appears that expectations are not consistent with capacity, and that there has been little regard given to how expectations placed upon the advice sector can actually be delivered.

Talking of expectations, and the role of the voluntary sector, Greater Manchester Law Centre (2017) were recently approached by a local Jobcentre with a view to them providing supervisors and computers to help UC claimants keep their journals up to date. Quite rightly the Law Centre refused, stating that this is not the role of the voluntary sector. Further they stated that if UC is so convoluted and ineffective that the voluntary sector is expected to assist in its implementation, then the roll out of UC should be stopped. It is very difficult to argue with this point, unfortunately it is also very difficult to see that things will change anytime soon.

## Interview with Tom Barrett: April 26th, 2019.

Samuel Kirwan: In the period since you finished this research the roll-out of Universal Credit has been extended but also suffered further setbacks. How do you read its effects upon advice provision today?

Tom Barrett: From the research one comment stood out to me as indicative of the current situation, and that was that the advice sector is 'always working at capacity and demand on the sector is always high'. The difficulty with this situation is that it is very difficult to establish just exactly what issue, or issues, are creating the demand at that particular point. This continues to be the case, and makes it rather difficult to establish what effects UC is having on advice provision.

From a personal perspective I see that UC causes problems that do not need to exist, and causes clients who may not otherwise have needed advice to seek advice. It creates what I consider to 'structural problems', in that these are problems caused less by the individual's action or inaction than by a system outside of their control.

One such example might be a single parent, who is in receipt of tax credits, and becomes eligible for housing costs due to a reduction in their salary. They would no longer apply for housing benefit but would need to report a change in circumstances, meaning that they would have to apply for UC. They thus relinquish their tax credit claim, with an equivalent element being incorporated into their new UC claim. They would then in turn be subject to the five-week UC waiting period, during which time the likelihood is that they will incur debt as they have suffered a substantial drop in income.

In effect the 'structural problem' creates 'structural debt' due to the ineffectiveness of the system, and it is these issues that impact on the advice sector. The advice sector is essentially clearing up the mess created by the system. This is not the purpose of the advice sector, but advisers cannot leave people to deal with such an ineffective system alone. The system therefore becomes clogged up by problems created at a policy level.

SK: There is a lot of talk in the debt advice sector on 'deficit budget sheets': what are your observations on how changing household budgets are affecting advice practice?

TB: The issue of UC is certainly not helping with regard to deficit budget sheets. In the scenario above, the UC failure potentially creates a deficit budget sheet during the waiting period. The situation that this then creates is that a person will be incurring various arrears which they will need to make new agreements on when their UC payments eventually commence.

Being a UC recipient however is like walking a tight-rope; the feeling I get from UC recipients is that they live in constant fear that it will go wrong, and it does. Trying to establish a consistent repayment plan on this basis is very difficult. Creditors, whether commercial or public sector, are not geared up to supporting repayment plans from people who have unstable and fluctuating incomes. One missed payment will often result in recovery action commencing very quickly. This is particularly so when we consider debts such as council tax (see Jennie Bunt's chapter). From an advice perspective this makes it very difficult to advise people, and means that they often return for advice much more frequently than they should.

There needs to be greater thought given to the debt relief that we offer people with deficit budgets. Debt relief orders (DRO) are often used in this scenario, but this is a temporary fix, as it does not solve the problem that there is simply not enough income. A DRO is the end of the process. We often see people who have had a DRO return within months with priority arrears. The difficulty then is what does the adviser do? They have used their one option, and now have priority arrears, but no money to offer to them.

Deficit budgets raise a further issue when considered in light of the switch to UC. The idealistic position is that people will have savings, and therefore they will be able to sufficiently cater for their own needs through the five-week UC waiting period. In reality, if a person has a deficit budget how do they save for their 'rainy day'? It is just not the reality for many people.

As deficit budgets have become more common, I have seen 'maintain priorities, and do nothing about the non-priorities' offered more and more as a debt solution (see Samuel Kirwan's chapter). For somebody with a low income and no assets the reality is that a creditor cannot take what a person does not have. For people in such a scenario the prospect of a County Court Judgment is quite often not a concern, as their wider circumstances mean that they are not credit worthy anyway.

Deficit budgets certainly raise the question of whether the current range of debt relief options is fit for the 21st Century, especially when we consider the system of "fair shares" in relation to debt management plans (see Advice UK, 2019). In the days when advisers saw people much more frequently with surplus income this system was fine, and worked, but it is now creaking. Certainly we should be considering a real debt forgiveness scheme. Not an insolvency procedure, as these are still rooted in the foundations of punishment, but a true clear fresh start. Along with such a policy however, we need to consider the reality that deficit budgets are a structural issue:

their cause is much further upstream.

Financial Capability is often offered as a solution to a deficit budget, in a lot of cases I find this patronising, as the majority of people with a deficit budget are probably much more financially capable than those prescribing such a solution as a remedy. If we consider the Financial Capability Strategy Board's Five Calls to Action, they are all in my opinion utopian and unachievable unless we accept that a deficit budget is largely not the fault of the individual but is a societal problem. Unfortunately advice practice cannot deal with this alone, and is only one part of the mechanism to solving the problem.

Sadly, there is a long way to go with deficit budgets. There does not seem to be any political appetite for accepting that there may be societal problems, it is all about the individual. If we consider the speech by John Glen MP at the Talk Money Conference in 2018, responsibilisation was the key theme, with financial education of the individual being key to heading off future problems. My prediction is that we'll be still on this hamster wheel in 20 years' time.

**References**

Advice UK (2019). "What does SDAP mean for creditors?" Available from: https://www.adviceuk.org.uk/member-services/grant-funded-projects/sustainable-debt-advice/what-does-sdap-mean-for-creditors/

Blyth, M. (2015). *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Drake, C. (2017). "Universal Credit and Debt". *Citizens Advice*. Available from: www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/policy/policy-research-topics/debt-andmoney-policy-research/universal-credit-and-debt/ [Accessed 15/11/2017].

DWP (2010). "Universal Credit: Welfare That Works" Available from: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/181145/universal-credit-full-document.pdf.

Greater Manchester Law Centre, (2017). "Statement on Universal Credit: We will not be complicit." Available from: http://www.gmlaw.org.uk/our-statement-onuniversal-credit-we-will-not-be-complicit/.

Hickman, P., Kemp, P.A., Reeve, K., and, Wilson, I. (2017). "The Impact of the Direct Payment of Housing Benefit: Evidence from Great Britain," *Housing Studies*, 32(8): 1105-1126.

Hartfree, Y. (2014). "Universal Credit: the impact of monthly payments on low income households," *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 22(1): 15-26.

Jew, P., and, Johnson, S. (2012). "Commissioning The Right Thing," *Quarterly Account*, Summer: 14-15.

Jintendra, A., Thorogood, E., and, Hafield-Spoor, M., (2017). "UK foodbank use continues to rise." *The Trussell Trust*. Available from: 69 b021429d www.trusselltrust.org/2017/04/25/uk-foodbank-use-continues-rise/.

Jones, G., Meegan, R., Kennett, P., Croft, J., (2016). "The uneven impact of austerity on the voluntary and community sector: A tale of two cities," *Urban Studies*, 53(10): 2064-2080.

The Low Commission, (2014). "Tackling the Advice Deficit." *The Low Commission*. Available from: www.lowcommission.org.uk/dyn/1389221772932/LowCommission-Report-FINAL-VERSION.pdf.

Shah, S., (2015). *The impact of legal aid cuts on access to justice in the UK*. London: School of Advanced Study, University of London. Available from: http://sasspace.sas.ac.uk/6213/#undefined.

Timmins, N., (2017). "The problems with Universal Credit," *Institute for Government*. Available from: www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/problems-universalcredit.

Jintendra, A., Thorogood, E., and, Hafield-Spoor, M., (2017). "UK foodbank use continues to rise." *The Trussell Trust*. Available from: 69 b021429d www.trusselltrust.org/2017/04/25/uk-foodbank-use-continues-rise/.

Wiggan, J. (2012). "Telling stories of 21st Century Welfare: the UK Coalition Government and the neo-liberal discourse of worklessness and dependency," *Critical Social Policy*, 32(3): 383-405.

Wintour, P., (2013). "Universal credit failed IT system write-off increased by £6m," *The Guardian*. Available from: www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/dec/09/universal-credit-it-writeoff-iain-duncansmith.

# 8

# 'In charge of your life'

**Deborah James**

'That is what makes me angry – they are in charge of your life' says Elaine. She is sitting in a London advice centre, asking for help from Aaminah, one of the advisers. People on low incomes, or who have no independent source of livelihood, often feel this way. The more they depend on the state for help, the more they seem to be at the receiving end of complex systems of bureaucracy, and the less they are able to control things.

Working as a domestic cleaner, Elaine takes pride in earning her own living. 'I want to free my mind', she explains, 'I need to pay my bills'. But in order to do this she also relies on state support. She gets Child Tax Credits, Working Tax Credits, and is still waiting to hear the outcome of her application for Housing Benefit to help pay her rent. Part of why she feels so powerless is that, with this complicated set of payments and entitlements, she doesn't really understand how much she is due. What are her rights? But the main reason she was driven to come here for advice is that she's realized she is in debt. She has just received a letter from a credit card company: they have taken out a court judgement requiring her to pay £50 monthly to settle her debt with them. Shuffling through the batch of letters Elaine has brought with her, Aaminah works out that she also has rent arrears of £850 (the amount – of course - goes up every week): she is supposed to pay £116 every Monday but she has fallen behind. She also owes Council Tax of £70. The council sent her a letter saying that she must pay this tax in 2 working days. She went in to ask if they would put it on hold. She has a backlog with the gas company and has been paying money in order to clear it. 'Yesterday I paid £12. I don't ever turn it on – instead I just wrap up. If I use it, it finishes, and if I don't use it, it still finishes!' Finally, she owes money to private creditors. She owes her internet provider £48; has a debt with Provident, and one with Shop Direct, which was sold on to a debt-collection company. Despairing, she announces 'I always pay on time, it's just this time…' her voice tails off as she fights back the tears. 'I can't believe I'm in so much debt'.

It was only after Aaminah had questioned her and looked through these various letters that she got an accurate sense of what Elaine owed. Advisers meeting clients (not only unemployed people but also the so-called 'working poor' like Elaine) have a difficult job in situations like these. They must sift through piles of paper, check letters and note down the details of income, benefits, and budgets, in search of elusive information that they are much better placed to interpret than their clients. It is almost as though advisers, helping people with overlapping problems of welfare benefits and debt, have begun to undertake the work of care for which the government used to be held responsible.

How does Aaminah help to solve Elaine's problems? Most important, she reassures Elaine that, compared to other clients, she is in less of a difficult situation than she thought: 'in total the debt is less than £2000'. Besides that, Aaminah separates what seemed like one huge debt into separate, smaller obligations, and finds a way to tackle each of these. First, and much to Elaine's immediate relief, she phones the gas company and establishes that the debt to them has long been repaid. 'Thank God – I am happy!' says Elaine. 'I can't believe I'm laughing – I am happy that that one is clear'. Aaminah then requests a credit check from a credit bureau so they can see whether they've missed out any other debts. She fills in a form requesting that the court order for the credit card debt be lessened or 'varied', and another one: 'This is the letter I will send to the court so that you don't have to pay fees – they will write to you with the decision'. She then sends an email to the council to ask them to avoid taking action and, once news of the Housing Benefit arrives, to set in motion a payment in order to clear the arrears. 'As for your other debts – I will write to them. I will say that you cannot pay at the moment. They should put a hold of 6 months, which will give you some time.' She explains that 'the other option, long-term, is a debt relief order. They write off the debt'. But, if Elaine wants to remain in the flat, the rent arrears cannot be written off. Aaminah asks whether Elaine wants to consider this option, or would rather prefer to 'set up repayments' to each of the creditors.

Aaminah - to sum up - was separating Elaine's debts into discrete strands of payment, making it easier to manage or query them or even write them off. She planned to persuade creditors to postpone their demands or accept reduced payments. She was helping Elaine to reconceptualize her predicament.

> *Elaine: I know God will answer my prayer today – and I refuse to cry today. I want to go through with this. I don't want any money to borrow. I just want to be free from stress. I want a life. From the day I was born until now, I have been suffering.*
>
> *Aaminah: We all deserve happiness...*

Aaminah was offering practical and material possibilities for relief (by establishing through a phone call that the gas bill had been paid off, by getting clarity on the total amount of debt, by finding ways of keeping creditors at bay, and even by exploring the possibilities of 'debt relief'). Perhaps more importantly, she was giving Elaine a sense of greater control, by helping her to overcome that feeling that 'they are in charge of your life'.

But advisers like Aaminah are themselves caught in a complex web of obligations and responsibilities. Funding for advice that was formerly paid for by government is now paid from a variety of sources.[11] Advice organisations have been pushed to resort to complex partnerships. They have been forced to look for new resource flows, invent novel types of interventions likely to attract funds, and perform complex juggling acts to keep all these balls in the air. Some advice organisations receive funds from creditors from a bank levy: a kind of tax paid by financial institutions to counteract the harms arising from indebtedness (Davey 2017). Such contributions are subject to audit. Like GPs and A&E departments in the NHS, advisers are under pressure to meet targets, as well as being obliged by their funders to refer a set number of appropriate cases up the chain to other specialist organisations.

---

[11] The Money and Pensions Service, formerly the Money Advice Service, is the primary funder of debt advice in the UK.

They also find themselves promoting – often unwillingly – a certain kind of moral code. Clients like Elaine are encouraged to take control of their own finances, draw up budgets, and become responsible members of society. We have seen how Elaine did in fact, with Aaminah's help, experience a sense of immediate relief, and how she expressed a desire to remain debt-free in future. But would this translate into an action plan – a genuine ability to 'take charge'? Part of the answer to this lies in understanding the wider forces that lead people to get into debt in the first place, and how these connect to broader structural forces in our society.

## Why debt?

Let me explain by giving a simplified account of what is a very complex situation. Media reports have highlighted the sufferings of low-income people over recent decades. They draw attention both to 'welfare reforms' undertaken in the name of austerity, and to the alarming size of household debt in the UK. These two trends are connected. Although there is 'an increase in jobs', as outlined by Canadian academic Susanne Soederburg, there is 'a decrease or stagnation in incomes … at the bottom and the middle'. That is, there is more work, but less pay. Because wage packets are getting smaller, there has been a widespread 'reliance on credit to augment and/or replace the living wage or the government benefit cheque'. She uses the term 'debtfare' to describe a situation in which people must borrow money in order to provide a large part of their own welfare (2014: 3).

In other words, incomes and expenditures, in this world of zero hours contracts and creeping financialization, simply do not match. This often leaves people like Elaine unable to pay their rent and other expenses. So she borrows from credit card companies and also – by being in arrears for rent and council tax - from the council (see Jennie Bunt's chapter on the way Council Tax acts as a debt). She is thus in default both to commercial creditors and to the government. Although her visit to Aaminah gave her a sense of relief, and even of control, it seems likely that this will be short-lived. The options she faces are quite restricted. One of them, as Aaminah tells her at the end of the session, is to make regular and affordable 'repayments' to her creditors, the other is to opt for one of the variety of insolvency or debt-relief options.[12] Aaminah explains that the first of these is dependent on income: 'Someone who comes here with £15,000 worth of debt and only gets £56 a week, we can't help them set up repayments, because it wouldn't be feasible.' Even for those, like Elaine, who owe much less, small payments 'are only worth it if there's a chance of a change'. Setting up deductions to return money owed could condemn debtors to a lifetime of repayment. In such cases 'we would advise them to go through insolvency.'

[12] A debt relief order (DRO) is only available if the debtor owes less than £20,000 and lives in England, Wales or Northern Ireland. The debtor doesn't pay anything towards her debts for 12 months, after which they will be written off. But she may only have a 'basic bank account' and may not take out further loans. An IVA is suitable for people with higher levels of debt and more assets, and gives debtors more control of their assets than other forms of bankruptcy. It involves making regular payments to an insolvency practitioner or debt management company, who will divide this money between creditors.

## Shame and embarrassment: the lonely debtor

In light of this, were the forms of advice and help offered during Elaine's visit – whether psychological or more material in nature - only temporary? I found myself pondering this question again and again while listening in on debt advice sessions. Even if incomes and outgoings can never match, surely the reassurance and relief offered by advisers – even if it is momentary – makes an important difference? Predicaments that clients recounted were never purely about money owed. They were about the worry that debt provoked, including the anxiety of not really understanding (like Elaine) how much was owed to whom. Knowing that they were in debt, but not knowing how much they owed or how much it was normal to owe, weighed on their minds. They also felt embarrassed and ashamed. This was not only about *being* in debt but also about *seeking advice* for it. This clearly showed that widely-shared media images, whether of the spendthrift debtor or the lazy and work-shy welfare-dependent person, are wrong. Feeling humiliated about debt and dependency also contained a supreme irony. If one way to get abreast of one's debts, or sort out one's welfare problems, is to seek advice, it seems counter-productive to be ashamed of doing so.

Charito occupies a very different bracket from Elaine, and perhaps for this reason is much more reluctant to seek advice. But for her, too, being 'in charge' is an important motive. 'I don't want my personal bills to build up – I want to gain control', she says. Working full-time as a healthcare assistant, with a permanent contract, she lives in privately rented accommodation (her monthly rental is £1044) and earns £1500 per month, depending on how many shifts she does. She spends money on fuel, travel and internet, and has a monthly payment to a dental plan. As the conversation progresses it becomes clear that she is also more focused and more aware of what her debts are than Elaine. But her strategy is a flawed one. She regularly pays her food and clothes bills with two credit cards, and now owes about £10,000 as a result. Despite her being a higher earner (and owing more) than Elaine, she faces a similar choice: between 'repayments' and debt relief. Aaminah outlines the options:

> *If you decide that you want DRO, and you don't mind having your credit rating affected, that is fine. But if you want to carry on, you should contact them [the creditors] yourself. Each one will offer different options. One person I know placed the card on ice for one year. The thing is, if* we *contact them, you will be considered to be "in default" and this will affect your rating. But if* you *contact them, they might give you a "holiday".*

Charito appreciates having these mapped out for her. Realizing (like Elaine – despite owing five times more than her) that her debt situation is less bleak and more manageable than she had thought, Charito keeps saying how 'foolish' she feels. 'This has clarified a lot', she says 'but it has made me feel more stupid – but in a good way. … I should have spoken before – it's been forever'.

> *This is all so new ... and I know it is very silly of me. I need help to manage myself. A person will say 'you can try this'... But my bills just keep on getting bigger. ...It has all got out of my hands, and I don't know where to start*

> *or what to do.*
>
> *Aaminah. You are not "silly" – you make payments, you did not give up easily.*
>
> *Charito: It's embarrassing! One is exposed to a situation that one didn't see coming... You feel like a 12-year-old.*

When Aaminah lays out the option of debt relief, Charito says she feels it would be unfair not to pay her creditors back. 'I'm not asking for special treatment,' she says, 'I just want a little leeway. … Now I feel even more stupid. There are all these ways around it and I didn't even know!' She is very self-critical, interpreting both her getting into debt and her not being able to see a way out of it as personal failures. But her visit to the adviser, in fact, ends up giving her a sense of regained control similar to that which Elaine experienced.

We can think about these cases in the light of two recent sets of writings: about debt and about austerity cuts. Firstly, as sociologist Joe Deville illustrates, people do not get into debt for reasons that are objective or 'purely' material. There are also 'market attachments' involved. A person may *desire* a certain object – such as a better life - as well as simply needing the money that would make it possible. In the process, the harm done to that person – in Charito's case the anxiety and shame she got by chalking up thousands of pounds worth of credit card debt – somehow becomes an intrinsic part of why the person remains 'attached' to the debt (2015: 47-8). This leads to a life lived 'in default' (2015: 51-3). It becomes difficult to admit to the debt, see it in the clear light of day, and seek a means to 'let it go'. Secondly, people like Elaine who are faced with the prospect of having to make do with less (and with having to borrow as a result) tend to experience their hardship as isolated beings, divided from each other despite being subjected to very similar pressures. Both Elaine and Charito face what author Gabriella Elgenius calls 'social division and isolation' (2017:45). The problems they experience are shared with so many others. Yet it is only when speaking to the adviser that they realise their problems are not unique. As someone observing these interactions, I often thought that the organisation of the welfare system and the debt advice sector might have been organized in a less individualised way. Rather than making people feel alone in their suffering, there could have been more emphasis on community and relationships. This might have made it possible to overcome these sentiments of shame more readily (Diamond 2017: 34-5).

## Conclusion

The debt adviser's role is to intervene in the financial payments debtors feel compelled to make in response to threatening or persuasive letters from commercial creditors or the council. In the face of the confusion, panic and embarrassment that debt induces, advisers like Aaminah try to create a temporary space for reflection, even sanity. Within this space, people can come to recognize the size and shape of their finances, seeing them almost as if they were a wallet of money divided into separate bits, each to be allocated to a particular use. In the process, they may imagine themselves relieved of the pressures they have experienced. They may even approach the ideal of the self-reliant, self-motivated, financially prudent worker/consumer who has 'taken charge' of her own life and her own expenditure. For a short period of time, the reality of insecure zero-hours contract jobs, the unpredictable incomes they furnish, and the debts incurred to doorstep lenders, credit card companies, landlords and the council may vanish. By holding out the option of debt relief, the advisor creates the illusion of a world in which the structural conditions and causes for debt are no longer as pressing. However illusory this may seem, the experience of shrugging off those 'market attachments' - and of escaping the lonely isolation of the person in trouble with money – allows them to feel 'in charge' of their lives.

## References

Davey, R. (2017). "Polluter pays? Understanding austerity through debt advice in the UK," *Anthropology Today*, 33(5): 8-11.

Deville, J. (2015). *Lived Economies of Default: Consumer Credit, Debt Collection and the Capture of Affect*. London: Routledge.

Diamond, P. (2017). "Fulfilling basic human needs: the welfare state after Beveridge." In Cohen, S., Fuhr, C. and Bock, J-J. (eds), *Austerity, community action, and the future of citizenship in Europe.* Bristol: Policy Press

Elgenius, Gabriella. (2017). "Social division and resentment in the aftermath of the economic slump." In Cohen, S., Fuhr, C. and Bock, J-J. (eds), *Austerity, community action, and the future of citizenship in Europe.* Bristol: Policy Press

Soederburg, S. (2014). *Debtfare States and the Poverty Industry: Money, Discipline and the Surplus Population*. London: Routledge.

# 9

# Resisting debt and evictions

**Oscar Berglund**

> *Now I'm human, before I wasn't. I was afraid of everything. I spent all day crying. I didn't want to leave the house and go outside. It was the depression from the fear I felt from all the phone calls and letters from the bank... Threats all day, letters every day, insulting us. I was so scared that I used to close the curtains so that nobody could see me. When the doorbell rang I didn't open, I disconnected the telephone.*
>
> *That first bank occupation was [like a huge relief]. Getting rid of all those fears, feeling all that adrenaline. I ended up really tired but like floating. All that anger that we had inside, there that day we let it go. And I said: My God!, nobody can stop me now. All the fear that I had and now nobody can stop me.*

It was on a spring day in 2015 that I ended up in Mari and Juan's living room in the Grazia building in Sabadell outside of Barcelona. Of all the people that I met when researching *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH, Platform for people affected by mortgages), it is that meeting in the squatted building that has stayed with me the most. In that hour they told me their story of losing so much in the crisis – income, home, friends, family, self-worth – and then regaining much of it through fighting back against the bank.

For Mari and Juan, it all started with opening a restaurant in 2007, a venture in which they received the financial help of Mari's sister who stood as a guarantor. As most of their customers were in the construction industry working in nearby sites, business dried up quickly as the crisis hit and the recently booming construction sector came to a standstill. For a couple of years they managed, under much duress, to pay enough of their mortgage and business loan to keep the banks at bay. But when a negotiated grace period came to an end, resulting in demands for payment of €1,600 per month, it was no longer enough to prioritise bills over food and they had to default. Even so, they kept paying little bits here and there but the banks and debt collectors had now started sending letters daily and calling on the phone at all hours of the day. Mari's sister had to start paying off the business loan herself, so that she as the guarantor would not have her home repossessed and did not speak to Mari and Juan for a year. Juan broke several phones in the frustration of not being able to do anything to satisfy the people at the other end of the line and he still suffers from 'phone phobia' as a result. As family and friends disappeared, the stigma of poverty became apparent for Mari, Juan and their children. It also led to depression and something of an identity crisis.

> *JS: It's very hard and only those who go through it can fully understand. As much as you [can try to understand], you have to live it. And those who live through it, they suffer, and it's very hard...We thought that the bank would send us to prison.*
>
> *MaM: We were thinking about who would take care of our children when we were going to prison. As all your life, your parents teach you to work and pay, and that's the mentality that we and others have.*

Like so many others, Mari and Juan's story covers many aspects of their previous life crumbling down as increasingly the money coming in was not enough to pay the bills and ultimately the mortgage. Friends and family disappeared as the stigma of poverty became apparent. The self-perception and self-esteem of people who dutifully pay their way were shattered when this became impossible. What Mari and Juan perhaps made clearer than anybody else was the impact that aggressive behaviour by bank managers and debt collectors have on people. They told me how they would be shouted at over the phone, be called lazy and criminal, and be threatened with prison. Mari told how she closed herself in the house, afraid to even open the blinds. But the worst, they assured me, was not the abuse that the two of them suffered but those times when their teenage daughter answered the phone. Hearing them shout at her, slandering her parents and the daughter trying to convince the bank and debt collectors that her parents were good people that genuinely did not pay because they had no money to pay. But in Mari and Juan's story were also the reasons why I chose to study PAH in the first place. There was the hope, the solidarity and the fighting spirit that makes PAH such a special phenomenon.

One day, Mari stumbled across PAH. On her way to pay a bill she encountered a bank occupation and was asked to sign in support of a family who were facing eviction. 'But that's me', Mari thought. She was told about the local PAH group in Sabadell and they started going to some meetings. As well as the 'floating, invincible' feeling that Mari recounts in the quote above from her first bank occupation, Mari and Juan tell a story of personal transformation and the formation of new identities. Juan tells of the fear he used to have for the bank and how he would do anything to try to please them. 'But we didn't trick the bank, they tricked us. Now we have learnt that we need to go in with our heads held high' (JS). Some old friends, Juan says, cannot accept that they are struggling side-by-side with immigrants. So as old friends and family have disappeared, Juan and Mari have gained new ones and new identities as activists and squatters and are part of a community with different backgrounds and of different ages. Through their PAH activism, Mari and Juan gained debt concessions from the bank and their flat in the occupied Grazia building. Their story is one of crisis, austerity, poverty, eviction, debt, fear and depression, but also one of camaraderie and activism. Mari and Juan are typical victims of the particular Spanish version of the crisis that started in 2008 and the politics of austerity that followed. They are amongst the over 700,000 Spanish households that have been evicted since then in a country where so much of the preceding boom and so much of the ensuing austerity has centred around housing.

The reason I discovered PAH in the first place is that I, like so many others, was intrigued by a movement that enjoyed such wide public support despite using radical forms of civil disobedience like organising squatting. When I came to see Mari and Juan, they had already lived in the Grazia building for nearly two years. It is a new modern building with 40 apartments of different sizes that was just about finished when the crisis hit Spain in 2008. Grazia was one of the first whole buildings that PAH occupied as part of its *Obra Social* campaign. *Obra Social* translates as 'social work' or 'social project' and is taken from the bank *La Caixa* and its charitable program of letting some of its empty housing out to evicted households on subsidised rent. Grazia does not look like a squat. There are no mattresses on floors, no red and black anarchist flags and no graffiti on the walls. Apart from the fact that the lifts are constantly switched off and the presence of a notice board with information about PAH, there is nothing that makes this apartment block look any different from others. The 40 flats are homes to families who have been evicted from their pre-crisis homes, most of whom have children. Inside the flats, the furnishing and decorations show that these are intended as permanent homes and not the temporary accommodation that you may imagine a squat to be. In 2018, the fight over the Grazia building was finally won as ownership was passed over from the bank to the council and the 40 families living there officially became social tenants, paying an affordable percentage of their income in rent, which they have been seeking since first occupying the building five years earlier. Grazia is one of around 40 such building around Spain in addition to the many single-family occupations that are carried out under the *Obra Social* banner.

It was the daring nature of the protests, comprising large-scale occupations, camping out in bank branches and physically getting in the way of bailiffs seeking to evict families that made PAH famous outside of Spain. Like journalists from the New York Times (2013), Guardian (Perry, 2016) and BBC (2014) and many academics and PhD students from across the social sciences (e.g. Romanos, 2013; Flesher Fominaya, 2015; Di Feliciantonio, 2016; García-Lamarca, 2017), I wanted to know more about a movement that openly broke so many laws yet suffered so little repression from the state and so little slander from the media. When I started my PhD in 2013, the Eurozone crisis was at its peak, banks were being bailed out across Europe and austerity was demanded by European and national elites. New levels of poverty and inequality in many European countries became apparent and so did the feeling that the people that were paying for the crisis were not the people that had caused it. PAH became a symbol of standing up to the logic of saving banks whilst putting millions of people in poverty. One of its key political and moral claims is that if we can afford to bail out banks, we can afford to bail out households too. For PAH, 700,000 evictions in a country with 3.5 million empty homes (Neate, 2014) is rightly unjustifiable. The attention that PAH received in national and global news media put the light on the Spanish housing crisis and these contrasts between the treatment of banks and households. What is special about PAH is not just that it managed to make the housing crisis politically salient, but that it showed and continues to show that there are alternatives to evictions and homelessness that are built on contestation.

Mari talks about adrenaline replacing fear, togetherness replacing isolation, her screams at the bank replacing the bank's screams at her, and her singing and dancing in a bank branch with new-found friends channelling her anger. In that opening quote Mari captures what I saw in PAH's everyday activism, how a transformative and energetic politics is born out of shared experiences of dispossession and the fear, anger and isolation that come with that dispossession. It is emotive to see and hear a family speaking after being informed by the police that their eviction has been suspended, that they will not be thrown out on the streets today because a hundred people, many of them strangers, came to put their bodies in the way of bailiffs and police. Whilst I have attended many political protests in my life and adrenaline is always there, the personal, immediate and high stakes in PAH's daily activities makes it different. PAH activists fight for the right to housing to be enshrined in law but they also fight for children to be able to sleep in their own bed tonight. These links in the struggle between the micro and the macro, between everyday experiences and large-scale reforms to housing and debt legislation set PAH apart as a social movement. PAH calls these daily achievements 'small great victories' (*pequenas grandes victorias*) and there have been many.

A small great victory can be a family being granted debt eradication by the bank after years of struggle. It can be obtaining a social housing agreement with the bank. These victories often mean that the people involved no longer have to live with the fear of homelessness. They are never won easily, and they are never won alone. They are the result of solidarity, camaraderie and struggle. They become the magnet that draws more people affected by the housing crisis to PAH with the realistic hope of addressing their debt and housing insecurities through activism. In doing so, people come to participate in a struggle for the right to housing that is much broader. This is a struggle that has achieved medium-sized victories in getting regional laws changed and pushing local governments to limit financial speculation with housing and fining proprietors who leave dwellings empty. The small great victories then constitute the oxygen that keeps PAH and its activists going in the larger struggle against finance capital.

## References

BBC (2014). "Ada Colau: Spain's anti-eviction crusader," *BBC News Magazine* [online]. Available from: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-26228300.

Di Feliciantonio, C. (2016). "Subjectification in Times of Indebtedness and Neoliberal/Austerity Urbanism," *Antipode*, 48(5): 1206–1227.

Flesher Fominaya, C. (2015). "Redefining the Crisis/Redefining Democracy: Mobilising for the Right to Housing in Spain's PAH Movement," *South European Society and Politics*, 20(4): 465–485.

García-Lamarca, M. (2017). From Occupying Plazas to Recuperating Housing: Insurgent Practices in Spain. International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 41(1): 37–53.

Neate, R. (2014). "Scandal of Europe's 11m empty homes," *The Guardian*. Available from: http://www.theguardian.com/-society/2014/feb/23/europe-11m-empty-properties-enough-house-homeless-continent-twice.

New York Times (2013). "Leading the Charge Against Spain's Mortgage Crisis," *New York Times*. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/21/world/europe/leading-the-charge-against-spains-mortgage-crisis.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

Perry, F. (2016). "Right to the city: can this growing social movement win over city officials?" *The Guardian*. Available from: http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/apr/19/right-city-social-movement-transforming-urban-space.

Romanos, E. (2013). "Evictions, Petitions and Escraches: Contentious Housing in Austerity Spain," *Social Movement Studies*, 13(2): 296–302.

# 10

# Marcela's story

**Compiled by Ana Gutiérrez Garza**

I sit down on a sofa in Marcela's house. I take off my coat and I realise that that it is covered with a white dust. Marcela looks at it and apologises, 'Sorry, it is the wall of the hallway, these walls are literally crumbling down, turning into dust, it is quite impossible to keep them from disintegrating. The house was old when we bought it but was in an ok condition, it had no humidity, and everything functioned. It is quite ironic, maybe a sign, but the moment we received the eviction notice the walls started collapsing. It is as if the humidity invaded the place as a reminder of the destruction of our home. Every day I cross the hallway on my wheelchair, I can see the painting coming off. Every time we have a visitor they take a little bit of the house with them, a bit of wall on their clothes, just like your coat now. It is impossible to forget that sooner or later our home will be taken from us', she tells me while we are sitting in a dark living room with a dim light that comes from the only two working bulbs of an eight bulbs old chandelier.

When she tells me about the wall I look around and realise how easy it is to spot the humidity in every wall and see how the coat of stucco as well as the paint are falling off. But it is not only the hallway of the walls, the lamps in the house do not properly work because of a lack of light bulbs, the curtain holders of the living room are broken as well as the kitchen cabinets and the pipes of the shower in the bathroom. The flat where Marcela lives with her husband and their seven-year-old son is in the verge of collapsing. The place feels as if it is upheld by a fragile equilibrium of materials and objects that can subside and disintegrate at any moment. 'I am not fixing it. What for? This is not my home anymore it belongs to the bank now, there is no point in investing in this place' she says. As I learned during fieldwork with people involved in an anti-eviction social movement in Madrid, called the PAH (*Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* - Platform for people affected by mortgages), not investing in mortgaged homes or occupied (squatting) flats was a familiar and widespread remark and practice.

Marcela, from Ecuador, like many other women used to explain to me how important had been to be able to buy a house in Madrid. 'Everything was going great, we were earning good money and buying a flat was cheaper than renting one. Everyone was offering loans and mortgages without having to provide much proof. It was unbelievable!'. The structural economic conditions before the global financial crisis of 2007-2008 were characterised by the boom of the housing industry conjoined with financial policies that created a large housing-based financial market. This market was strategically designed to include middle and low-income consumers, allowing people like Marcela not only to access mortgage loans and buy a home, but also to dream of *making* a home in ways that were previously unattainable to them. Given the economic prosperity in the country, the historical preference for homeownership over rented housing, and the fact that among migrants securing a home represented the opportunity, not only to become integrated into Spanish society but to claim family reunification and therefore be able to bring their families from their home countries, tens of thousands of people got into debt as a way to move towards future stability and social mobility. After the crisis and the bursting of the housing bubble, high levels of unemployment left many of these people unable to pay their mortgages and facing the threat of eviction. These new socio-economic conditions have deeply affected people's livelihood and have enabled the destruction, or the *unmaking*, of thousands of homes across the country

11

# Sands of hope: keeping yourself going in the face of multiple dispossessions

**Ryan Davey**

What is it like trying to stay hopeful when you're facing the possibility of losing something because of not paying your debts? Answering this question requires an investigation of what anthropologists call the "subjectivity" of being in debt: how indebtedness is experienced from within, not only in terms of how people perceive the world around them, but also how their perceptions inform their desire (or lack of desire) to live within that world. Academic researchers and debt advisers tell us that it is important in considering "problems of debt" not to treat debt in isolation from wider problems of livelihood. The difficulties someone has making a living and securing an income are clearly relevant to questions of how and why people get into debt and often struggle to get out of it. Accordingly, we should be on the look-out for links between debt problems and the wider political and economic conditions in which debts emerge. One of the key problems of debt is the dispossessions it seemingly justifies: people losing their homes, or household possessions within it, or in extreme cases their liberty (for example, with council tax arrears, discussed further in Jennie Bunt's chapter). But the phenomenon of "dispossession" can be considered more widely than this, to include people being robbed of their livelihoods (Kasmir and Carbonella, 2008), as well as people being robbed of things that were once in public ownership (Harvey, 2005), such as social welfare. When we start to explore the subjectivities of hope among over-indebted people, we see that the prospect of dispossession in many people's lives ranges far wider than debt and, and the same time, affects people right to their core.

The story I tell below illustrates that similar kinds of hope arise in the face of multiple kinds of dispossession – the kinds I look at here being over-indebtedness, unemployment and austerity. The links between each kind of dispossession, therefore, are not just of an economic kind. Instead, these links relate to people's subjectivities, to their emotional lives, their innermost experiences, and their ability to "keep going." The narrative I tell, about a middle-aged man named Frank, shows that a similar form of hope characterised two different areas of his life: wanting to move to a more suitable home, despite thinking that if his debts caught up with him it could render this impossible; and the hope he had of getting back into work, when his declining employment prospects combined with an increasingly harsh welfare benefits system.

The prospect of these multiple kinds of dispossession – being forced to pay his debts, having social security benefits taken away, and losing the means to make a living for himself – all elicited a similar form of hope. This is a form of hope that has to contend with the possibility of losing the material basis on which that hope itself exists. What is remarkable about this kind of hope is that, within it, the moment of trying to turn the hope into a reality is delayed as a way of trying to stave off the fearful prospect of losing something important, such as being taken to court and forced to pay unpaid debts, or losing any prospect of finding work or a better home. It is a form of hope that – as well as helping people to "keep going" – can also cocoon people in their homes, alienate them from other people, and leave people feeling stuck, although you can hardly blame them for this.[13] Among the many people in Britain for whom threats of dispossession have become part of their ordinary, day-to-day reality, hopes are sometimes suspended in time, so that looming regrets can be held off, too.

## Dormant debts and halted hopes

Struggling to walk to the local shop one day in August 2013, Frank ventured his aspiration for a more suitable place to live. "Even walking up here does my legs in," he said as we started the incline at the end of our street. Despite our slow pace and our decision to walk the winding, less-steep route to the shop, he was breathing heavily and occasionally winced as he took a step. "This is why I am seriously considering trying to get an exchange on this flat," he said. "A one-bed place somewhere nearer to shops. Technically, you see, because I've got a toe

[13] The negative effects of hope have been studied by numerous researchers recently, including the literary critic Lauren Berlant (2011). Berlant argues that in neoliberal Europe and North America, clinging onto certain hopes can end up grinding you down. She calls this "cruel optimism." While her theory applies to the case presented here, what I also want to emphasise here is that even cruel hopes can help people to keep themselves going.

missing," he said, wiggling his right foot in the air, slightly elevated, "I am meant to be able to get help like that. I still can't believe that when they said to me before, when I was in the hospital and they said I had diabetes, 'Do you need any support with your housing because of all this?', I said no straight away. I didn't really think about it, and now I need it, I'm wondering if I've missed my chance."

Frank was ambivalent, then, about whether the prospect of finding a better place to live was still a future possibility or had already passed. I told him that his entitlement to suitable housing should still stand, but he explained that accessing it would entail engaging again with health services, something he preferred to avoid because, as he said, "every time I go to the doctors they tell me there's something else wrong." We arrived at some benches, where we sat down for a rest and set to rolling a cigarette each. "And I'm gonna get someone saying about quitting smoking again, and then someone will say 'Ooh, you have to take your medication [for diabetes]!'" He scoffed. "Whatever they say about diabetes medication is rubbish, because it can't reverse it. [The medication] can slow it down, but it can't reduce it. I'm just being logical. I think of suicide – still!" Frank had twice attempted to take his own life, and still struggled with depression. "So why would you want to stretch it out?"

In thinking through his chances of moving home, Frank ruminated on the implications for his various debts. "I'm clearing the rent arrears and the council tax, but the water rates could be a problem," he said. Frank, like many others in the south west of England, which has the UK's costliest water, had understandably put other needs ahead of paying his water bills. In an attempt to get away with this without being taken to court, he had named his ex-girlfriend (unbeknownst to her) as the account holder.

"Are they still sending you letters or have they gone quiet?" I asked.

"Oh no, they're still sending them. But when I get 'em, I just goes, 'Well, they're not addressed to me, so I ain't opening them.' So if I move out, whoever moves in is gonna start getting the bills. Then they'll call the water company and say [*in a whiny voice*]: 'These aren't my water rates, I only just moved here.'"

"So you want to let sleeping dogs lie."

"Yeah."

Misdirection and lying low were Frank's methods for getting away with not paying. Even though the water bills were being delivered to his flat, he felt he could avoid being taken to court and being legally forced to pay them as long as he remained unnamed. But, should he move, he risked triggering an investigation into the account holder's wherebouts, making it impossible for him to avoid paying.

How did Frank's hope of moving home interact with the possibility of being taken to court over his water arrears? Frank considered the two hoped-for scenarios – moving home and getting away with not paying the water bill – to be incompatible; he believed that if he moved it would lead to the water company tracking him down. In response to this predicament, he sustained both of the hopes by suspending them in time. He later told me that the complications of moving home had led him to postpone agreeing to a friend moving in as a lodger: "That's why, when he asked me about the room, I said I wasn't sure. It wasn't anything personal." Frank was undertaking a self-consciously rational decision-making process, weighing up his options and calculating the likelihood of enforcement, but his postponement of any decision indicates the form his hopes took while this process was underway. The hope itself remained, but he halted its pursuit. In other words, Frank's technique for sustaining his hopefulness was to forestall its fruition. In postponing his decision about moving home, he kept the future possibility of legal enforcement at bay. This gave him an alternative to yielding to this possibility and having to relinquish the hope of moving home that it seemingly ruled out.

## Unemployed occupations

At the time of my fieldwork, Frank was living on Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), a social security benefit given to those deemed unable to work through ill health or disability. Having been unemployed for several years and with his health declining, he was eager to work again. Yet he doubted the possibility of doing so. What's more, he knew pursuing this hope could leave him far worse off, in terms of his health. One evening in September 2013, after moaning in agony from terrible cramps that beset him after walking to the shop, he said: "I'd like to see them [the Job Centre] tell me I can work now. You know, I actually *want* to work. I *like* working. I've done it all my life."

Because his ESA of £105 per week was related to his physical incapacity to work, Frank was not required to apply for jobs and sign on at the Job Centre every week.[14] But should he have been deemed capable of working, then he would be put on

[14] At the time of writing, Frank's situation had been made worse. Following a medical assessment, the Job Centre had put him onto Jobseekers Allowance. He appealed this decision at a tribunal but was again refused.

the basic unemployment benefit at that time of £73 per week (Jobseekers Allowance) and would have to sign on and apply for jobs. Frank had little faith in the Job Centre's assessment of his capacity to work, or about what work would suit him. This was understandable, as many news reports were circulating at the time about terminally ill people being deemed fit for work, due to unofficially tightened eligibility requirements. Still, Frank knew he could scarcely argue with the Job Centre's assessments. Just as the possible enforcement of his water debts led him to stall his pursuit of his hope of moving home (as I described in the previous section), so, too, was Frank's hope of once again working influenced by the possibility that the Job Centre could either force him to do a job that could damage his health, or take away nearly a third of his income.

Dispossessions occurred in Frank's life, then, not only as possible legal consequences of unpaid personal debts, but also in the form of being robbed of the means of paying those debts in the first place. The links between these different forms of dispossession are partly macro-economic. The lack of available jobs in his city had resulted from de-industrialisation and defence cuts. Both developments reflect the UK's changing position on the global stage in the late twentieth century, in the aftermath of empire and with most manufacturing having re-located to developing countries. Since that time, the UK government has relied on the financial industry as its main source of prosperity. Part of this reliance on the financial industry was a massive expansion in consumer lending since the 1980s. Like several other middle-aged working-class men I met during my fieldwork, Frank had dedicated his adult life to performing manual and industrial labour – in his time, working as a bricklayer, a taxi driver, a fruiterer and a security guard. Yet successive governments had failed to take care of the tolls that this labour took on his body. The benefits system Frank had to contend with had become especially draconian due to austerity cuts. The UK government made these cuts after the 2008 financial crisis to serve a deeper political aim of prioritising the health of financial markets at the expense of wealth redistribution.

Frank's story shows that the links between these different forms of dispossession – over-indebtedness, joblessness and austerity – also occur at the "micro" level of people's subjectivities. By looking at how Frank occupied his unemployed time, as I do now, we can see some similarities between, on the one hand, Frank's effort to muster some hope about moving home, when the prospect of debt enforcement threatened to rule this hope out, and, on the other hand, the way he kept alive a hope of finding suitable work, when faced with a lack of job prospects and an increasingly punitive benefits system. Multiple kinds of dispossession elicited a similar form of hope.

"I don't know *what* job I could do," Frank said doubtfully, the day we walked up the hill. "I can't look at a monitor for long, because it strains my eyes. So I couldn't work in a call centre or whatever. That's why you see me turning away every so often [when I'm on the PC]. But they won't get rid of my cataracts till I'm nigh on blind. If I get a job, what are they gonna do about the fact I just can't get out of bed some days, or I really don't want to leave the house?" He both doubted he could find a job and feared being forced to work. He was mindful of how pursuing his hopes could leave him ruined. While sustaining his optimism, he held its goal at bay. As a result, he wavered not merely about whether he would realise his hope of finding work, but also about whether it was within the realm of possibility at all: an aspiration or merely a daydream. For the time being, in a way, it was both.

The ways in which Frank spent his days while unemployed often emulated the productivity of his former working life. He re-enacted his erstwhile tasks as a security officer on and around the street where we lived, offering protection to numerous residents. Seeing him pace slowly with his German shepherd along the perimeter fence of an Armed Forces base that adjoined the estate, on several nights, his blank stare struck me as stoically lonesome. Yet his comments about things he had noticed while out walking – a tear in the netting on some scaffolding indicating attempted burglary, new neighbours from Eastern Europe signalling a tide of immigration to which he was hostile – showed his manner to be also one of vigilance. Indeed, he told me, in explaining his flair for "hidden object" games on Facebook, "When you do security work, you train yourself to notice anything that isn't where it should be." In this way, he kept alive both the memory of his security work and the practical skills he had acquired through it.

Frank was a keen player of online games, on Facebook and other social media sites, and through playing often enough to optimise his success – most games giving bonuses for consecutive daily playing – he cultivated an occupation for himself. The aims of his online pastimes were often profit and productivity. He invested many hours into them, often with an air of heavy obligation and laboriousness. He told me, "First I'm gonna take him [the dog] out for a walk, then I've gotta check my dishes on the caff" (a café management game), or, "I've gotta stay up till 6[am] to do my dishes on the caff." Yet occasionally he made a reference to the fictive qualities of the duties he had assumed, once venturing: "It's not like I structure my day around my games, is it?" As his face changed from wryness to dismay, it seemed that the full irony of his statement occurred to him only on hearing it out loud. He laughed and shook his head.

I went down to the living room one Saturday in August 2013 to see Frank sitting at his computer. He was playing *Farmland*, an online game in which square units of agricultural land were represented by alternately barley- and grass-coloured diamonds on a grid.

"This is taking fucking ages today," he said. "I'm growing coffee here and coffee's a 24-hour crop."

"You have to wait 24 hours before you can harvest it?"

"Yeah," he said, before sighing wearily. "When I first started going on this, I had four of each thing you could produce. Now I've only got one of each. 'Cause at the start you just get as many as you can, but it can only do so much at a time." He said he wanted to expand commercially, but that "it can't process it." He whizzed the mouse around on the desk in a vain attempt to hurry the computer along, tutting: "Still fucking slow. Look, it's still not changed." Frank was impatient that his hardware and the game itself were impeding him. Not infrequently upon my entering the room having heard him shout expletives, he vowed deadpan to hurl the machine out of his balcony window. Whether things would have been different had his broadband and PC worked better I do not know, but as it was, his Facebook games were as much an occasion for exasperation as they were a time of productivity. Perhaps consonant with the physiological, legal and macro-economic conditions that frustrated his wish to work in real life, the inadequacies of his technological infrastructure frustrated his ambition to be productive on *Farmland*.

A wall in Frank's living room had shelves from one end to the other crammed full of DVDs, bought from car boot sales, Gumtree and second-hand shops. As with his online games, so with his hobby of collecting and watching DVDs, there was a labour to his ostensible leisure. He had a collection of several thousand, with an overflow in his bedroom wardrobe, and mused regularly over the bargains he had won and the value of his collectibles. The DVDs in his living room were impeccably alphabetised and Frank was in the habit of playing his discs one after the other in alphabetical order, screening his collection for faults. Should a disc not play properly, he would take it from the player, inspect its underside, tutt, and attempt to repair it. Frank's DVD collection was an ongoing work and he valued the circulation of discs in its own right. Some of his DVDs were pirate copies, which he sought steadily to replace with originals. He occasionally offered me copies he replaced, often so insistently that his impulse seemed primarily to be keeping a disc in circulation, stalling – as for himself – its consignment to the scrapheap and the confirmation of its redundancy.

Frank's pride in the resale value of his DVDs makes it clear how eager he was to be productive and to generate value. He often spoke about wanting to trade his discs as a justification for looking after them so carefully. Yet he seldom pursued this possibility in practice, saying he lacked the legs and the vehicle for car boot sales and the technical savvy for eBay. His interest in saleability was, therefore, largely habitual, the value created by his adroit caretaking somewhat wishful, and his ascription of re-sale value itself chancing. His wish to remain productive had been forced into a realm of sheer potential.

Despite often playing DVDs back-to-back for hours at a time, Frank's attention to what he played was highly selective. He spent much of his time on his desktop computer with his back to the 36-inch, grey CRT television that sat in the corner of the room. He knew his films so well that he could predict their sequences of events and only turned round, he said, for "the best bits" or while waiting for his computer to load, often uttering little commentaries and quips about events on-screen. He told me: "I just have 'em on in the background most the time."

By having the TV on in the background, Frank infused his living room with an atmosphere of productivity. Hence, through both his DVD collection and his online games, the function of these fictions in his life was to simulate productivity. Frank made these fictions a near-constant presence in his living room, their images, sounds, sequences and emotions constantly available to him. Some people might call this escapism, an attempt to lose himself in fictions. But this wrongly implies those fictions can absolutely never become a reality. I would describe Frank's fictional pursuits instead as a kind of cocooning, for they were geared towards sustaining his hope of making a living for himself – a hope which, in turn, sustained him.

In the multiple ways I have mentioned in this chapter, Frank's present-day life featured a tension between an impending past and a future he doubted would ever transpire. In each case, he warded off potential regrets. This applies both to his over-indebtedness and his hope for a nicer home, and to his hope of being productive as a middle-aged man in an austere, post-industrial age. In the first case, the prospect of facing legal enforcement for not paying his water debts threatened less to dispossess him of the things he owned, than finally to extinguish his hope of finding somewhere else to live. Likewise, in the second case, Frank's hope of working faced a likelihood of already having expired. He preserved this hope in the realm of make-believe. He tried to produce value in ways that were variously virtual, makeshift and wishful. But this does not mean they amounted to nothing. While in one sense these were nostalgic re-enactments of a past of gainful employment, in another they were future-oriented and hopeful: his unemployed occupations sustained a hope of re-entering employment despite his doubts as to whether this was even a possibility. The multiple, related forms of dispossession that Frank faced in the twilight of his working life – debt enforcement, the loss of work and government austerity cuts – all elicited in him a similar subjectivity, where hopes were suspended in time so that future dispossessions might also be held off.

**References**

Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Harvey, D. (2005). *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kasmir, S., and Carbonella, A. (2008). “Dispossession and the Anthropology of Labor,” *Critique of Anthropology*, 28(1): 5–25.

# 12

# Debt, vulnerability and time: reflections on the enforcement of council tax arrears in Wales

**Jennie Bunt**

The concept of vulnerability runs through many areas of law. While in some contexts the meaning of the term is set out in statutory definitions, in others it must be scrutinised, considered and defined on a case by case basis. It is a term which is undeniably difficult to conclusively define and as such to identify in practice. Some liken vulnerability to a universal and inevitable aspect of the human condition (Fineman and Greer, 2016) whereas others caution against broad assumptions of vulnerability as encouraging a discourse of 'weakness over strength…' and as such excessively attuned to 'dependency, passivity and the need for assistance' (Fawcett, 2009: 474) as well as a dilution of the concept's meaning which can divert attention away from those most in need.

Wherever vulnerability is a consideration in law it is placed at odds with another competing interest, creating a tension which influences the way in which it will be customarily defined in that arena. For example, Housing Associations assess 'need' based on levels of vulnerability when deciding how to allocate limited housing stock, creating a friction between providing services to those in need and appropriate management of finite housing resources. In a private finance context, in order to safeguard their own financial viability and profitability, creditors must navigate their regulatory obligations to 'treat customers fairly' by taking into account borrower circumstances when seeking to recoup debts. This tension is particularly potent in the context of *public* debts owed to and recoverable by local government; here, it is arguable that the opposing motivations to generate maximum revenue through the collection of debts for investment in community services and to protect vulnerable individuals who are unable to pay from harm are equally laudable. Recognition of this delicate balancing act brings us to the subject of this chapter, namely the collection of council tax arrears by Local Authorities. As I explain, this is a field in which it is particularly important to understand the social construction of vulnerability and its impact on the individual. I focus upon a little-discussed aspect of this construction, namely the ways in which 'vulnerability' is shaped and delimited by considerations of *time*.

The geographical focus of this case study were the twenty-two Local Authorities of Wales who have responsibility for collection of council tax. Introduced by the Local Government Finance Act 1992, council tax replaced the highly contentious poll tax as a dual tax levy on local government services and property (Prabhakar 2016: 417). It is considered by the Welsh government to constitute an equal split of property and personal tax, calculated proportionately to surrounding property values through nine property bandings, labelled A-I.[15] To give context to the size of the financial obligation council tax presents, an average householder in a Band A property in Lisvane, Cardiff would be liable to pay £934.99 per annum, whereas a Band I householder in the same area would face a charge of £3,272.46. Liability to council tax is not contingent on the form of housing tenure, highlighting the extent of its applicability. Exemptions are available for care leavers[16] and full-time students and reductions can be applied for the disabled and those who live alone. Revenue generated through council tax is used to 'top up' central government funding for a range of crucial services which include libraries, transport, emergency services and waste disposal or recycling. As a tax it therefore represents a significant household cost as well as a substantial source of revenue for community investment.

Despite operating under the legal system of England and Wales, enforcement of council tax is a devolved matter in Wales which has allowed it to develop some unique initiatives to those of neighbouring England in recent years. Wales was alone in its decision to continue to make provision for householders on the lowest incomes following the UK government abolition of Council Tax Support in 2013 by introducing a new Council Tax Reduction Scheme which protects approximately 320,000 households from this financial liability. Despite this significant investment, the fact that council tax collection rates continue

---

[15] Only eight property bandings are utilised in England. A ninth band 'I' was introduced in Wales in 2005 following a controversial re-evaluation. Band I applies to properties valued in excess of £424,001.

[16] Introduced across all local authorities in Wales in April 2019 following public consultation (Reference WG36432).

to grow year on year to an all time high of 97.4% in 2017/18 (Welsh Government, 2018) may suggest a determined approach by Local Authorities in Wales to recoup every penny they can. Vulnerability is a personal characteristic which, where identified by an authority, has the capacity to halt this upwards trajectory of collection rates.

Although no binding statutory definition or obligation in relation to vulnerability exists in this context, the Taking Control of Goods National Standards 2014 state that:

> *Enforcement agents/agencies and creditors [including public authorities] must recognise that they each have a role in ensuring that the vulnerable and socially excluded are protected and that the recovery process includes procedures...about how such situations should be dealt with.*

Most commonly this will mean that the authority will be more lenient in the methods they use to enforce the debt and will therefore deviate from the standardised chronology of collections. They may allow the individual additional time to pay off their arrears or postpone the progression of their account through the increasingly invasive enforcement methods available to the authority which include the use of bailiffs and committal to prison. Referrals to sources of free financial advice play a key role here in assisting the individual to address their debts, services considered further in Tom Barrett and Deborah James's contributions to this volume. As well as providing guidance, the debt advice sector also campaigns on behalf of their clients; a key concern in recent years has been the potential impact of the use of bailiffs and the threat of committal on the welfare of indebted individuals, with a number of Local Authorities across England and Wales pledging to end the instruction of external enforcement agents in recent years.[17] These campaigns underline the importance of appropriate debt enforcement and the reality that in particularly acute circumstances the best option may be to write off the debt, although this is rare.

Although these options are available to the Local Authority to help vulnerable individuals, very little is known about the way in which they assess which individuals are vulnerable and to what extent these decisions are influenced by the drive to achieve high collection rates. Far from being an abstract, theorised tension which plays out only in the mind of the researcher, Local Authorities have themselves articulated the nature of the balancing act they face in an era of budget cuts and financial austerity, as shown in the internal policy of one Welsh Local Authority: "proportionate measures will be deployed to develop a culture of payment while encouraging those in need to get in touch with the Council at an early stage".

Turning to the 'temporal' dynamics of council tax collection, we can see how issues of time underpin both the administration of council tax in general and, more specifically, the common ways in which vulnerability is defined. Additional time is the main provision made for vulnerable individuals struggling to pay, but despite the initial benefit of this leniency as a form of 'breathing space', extra time in the context of council tax may not always be beneficial in the long-term as a result of the cyclical nature of the tax. Furthermore, findings from this research indicate that considerations of time are

---

[17] For example, Bristol City Council and the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham.

inextricable from vulnerability which can be seen as a proxy term for individuals who have experienced only *unexpected* and *unforeseeable* life events - circumstances with a certain time status.

The findings discussed below are a combination of general research on the nature of council tax collections and a recent small-scale qualitative case study which analysed the written policies on vulnerability of Local Authorities in Wales. Building on the project to map Local Authority practices conducted by the Money Advice Trust in 2017, these policies were obtained through requests under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. The responses received indicated that twelve authorities had attempted some written definition of vulnerability, eight had made no attempt, with two rejecting the request. The documents obtained were subjected to in-depth thematic analysis to understand variations in definitions of vulnerability across Wales.

## The Temporal Structure of Council Tax

Council tax is different to other forms of debt because of its ongoing, cyclical nature. It is only considered to be a form of credit because of the standard practice of authorities to permit payment through monthly instalments of what is technically an annual charge. Where indebtedness stems from other forms of credit, individuals may face repayment arrangements which span many months or years, but at some foreseeable date they will cease to be financially tied to their original purchase or source of lending. By contrast, council tax liability is indefinite, dependent solely on householder status in a chargeable dwelling, operating on an annual charge system which runs from April to March in line with the traditional 'financial year'. The peculiar temporal rhythms of council tax mean that arrears, which can range from a single missed payment to long-standing and significant arrears that are continuing to accrue, will affect the finances of the household in a number of distinct ways.

Firstly, following a reminder notice the standard response to an initial missed payment is for an authority to notify the individual that their right to pay in monthly instalments has been withdrawn and therefore they must pay their full annual liability in a lump sum. As set out above, when considering the size of council tax as a financial obligation, a missed payment which falls near to the beginning of the financial year and new annual liability could mean a demand for payment of thousands of pounds. For an individual who is unfamiliar with this potential sanction, such a cost would be unexpected and therefore significantly outside of their day to day budgeting, changing the fundamental nature of the financial obligation and the level of urgency which applies to it amongst other day to day necessities.

Secondly, it has been noted that the cycle of the financial year creates monthly variation in the style and pace of arrears collection. This is because authorities are motivated to collect maximum levels of council tax by year end to bolster their annual collection statistics, hoping to be ranked among the authorities with the highest collection rates as monitored by the Welsh Government (Greenall and Prosser 2017: 40). This will inevitably influence the delicate balance between proactive collections and the identification of vulnerability, and the approach to collections is likely to be skewed in favour of the former during the final months of the financial year. This creates a risk that individuals may encounter very different attitudes towards the relevance and importance of their personal circumstances when engaging with Local Authorities at different times of the year.

Further issues arise where an individual is unable to meet their council tax obligations for an extended period and arrears begin to drift into a new financial year. When this occurs, Local Authorities often deem any new arrears which arise after April to constitute a new, separate debt from those of the previous financial year. It could be said that the imposition of this particular structuring of time purely serves the purposes of Local Authority reporting in line with the standard financial calendar of the business world; it does not bear any relevance to the individual in arrears who will live by a very different calendar of salary payments, potentially complex benefit payment schedules and other sources of casual or irregular income as common in modern employment. In addition to its irrelevance to the reality of the debtor it is also financially damaging in that it forms the basis for Local Authorities to justify charging separate fees for the enforcement of individual debts. In the past this has meant that, an authority who instructs a bailiff to contact the debtor or visit their property may be charged separate fees for each individualised debt, , significantly increasing the level of arrears to be repaid.

Similar examples of this temporal dissonance between legal structure and personal reality can be seen in the judicial precedent on the use of imprisonment for council tax arrears. There is clear authority that judges must conduct a separate inquiry into the relevant circumstances for each of the separate years of council tax liability[18] and that a failure to do so would be 'fatal' to any claim of fair assessment. This could be seen as a positive protection as it at the very least introduces an obligation on judges to pay greater attention to the history of the individual's financial circumstances. However, the extent to which this treatment is reflective of the way in which the person in debt views their situation is limited; it seems probable that the individual will understand their arrears in terms of the total expense to be repaid and the proportionate period of months or years they envision themselves having to pay it off, regardless of the financial year in which that element of the debt was accrued, particularly if they are still accruing new monthly arrears of council tax and may have countless other commercial debts to repay. This temporal compartmentalisation of the arrears is at odds with the social reality of the debt and may hinder rather than assist the courts in understanding the debtor's overall circumstances and management of their finances.

There is therefore a significant gap between the structural constraints on time associated with council tax as a source of debt and the day to day realities of living in debt, discussed further in Ryan Davey's chapter, which have the potential to increase debt levels and have a significant negative impact on vulnerable individuals who are unable to afford their repayments. Moving from the general to the specific, discussion will now turn to set practices within the enforcement of this type of debt.

---

[18] R v Leeds Justices ex parte Kennett [1995] 4 WLUK 56 (QBD); R (on the application of Aldous) v Dartford Magistrates Court and Gravesham Borough Council [2011] EWHC 1919 (Admin).

## Vulnerability as a Proxy

In constructing a written definition of vulnerability, the Local Authorities under consideration are delimiting, determining, circumscribing and setting bounds to the concept of vulnerability and by extension the number of people who will be afforded more time to meet their debts (Harris and Hutton 2007). This process is linguistic, and its analysis required close attention to language choices, patterns and common styles across the policies. One style or format of definition was pervasive: a list of between eight and fifteen examples of personal characteristics or circumstances which may indicate a debtor was vulnerable. Authorities rarely attempted to fix a general definition of vulnerability, instead providing practical examples of circumstances which may be identified as sources of vulnerability. Twenty-three different category examples of this kind were identified across the policies, highlighting the 'ever-widening applicability' of vulnerability as a term (Fawcett 2009: 474).

Most, if not all, of these examples could be linked to issues of time. Some referred to common life stages, making a general reference to age as a source of vulnerability without pinpointing specific age categories. One of the most common examples provided was pregnancy; some referred to pregnancy in general, whereas others applied seemingly arbitrary time constraints such as being in the last three weeks of a pregnancy. These levels of specificity highlight a further commonality across the texts, namely an absence of further justification regarding the *content* of these example lists; in fact, only two of the ten policies analysed contained any further explanation of *why* a person falling into one of these categories would be deemed vulnerable.

Throughout our consideration of the policies what emerged most clearly was the importance of descriptive qualifiers as key indicators of understandings of vulnerability. Events such as bereavement or illness, uncontroversial examples of vulnerability with clear impacts on the individual, were limited in scope by words such as “recent”, “sudden”, “acute” or “life-threatening”. The boundaries of the concept were therefore narrowed in terms of how long an individual could continue to site certain circumstances as causes, and the events themselves contributed to an overall understanding of vulnerability as arising only from unforeseeable and unexpected events, occurring without warning.

Such frequent reference to time suggests a general perception of vulnerability as being an exceptional period in an individual’s life, considerably outside of the norm, from which they will recover and return to maintenance of their financial commitments. This narrowing approach in relation to time is propagated in academic research, for example Dominy and Kempson state when referring to categories of debtor that “the first group [people who cannot pay] includes, for example, people who have lost their jobs and been unable to keep up with commitments that were perfectly manageable while they were working,” (2003: 8). Although such examples are understandably non-exhaustive, the same forms of vulnerability continue to be the top of the list or the most-commonly referred to. The “independent self-interested” person whose circumstances suddenly and unexpectedly change, but who was otherwise financially resilient is held out as vulnerable more commonly than those who have long-term or permanent sources of vulnerability (Herring 2016: 18).

This may go some way to explaining why two of the least commonly referred to sources of vulnerability were addiction and carer status. Although it is admittedly difficult to verify the reasoning behind the texts without further probing of the ways in which they are utilised, the uncommon inclusions in these examples of vulnerability further support this temporal element to vulnerability. Carer status and addiction were collectively referred to across all ten policies only three times, begging the question of whether the suggestion of any level of foreseeability or free choice in an individual's circumstances, no matter how misguided this assumption may be, will move such issues outside of the common definition of vulnerability. It is difficult to directly link this absence in the data with this theory, but the limited presence of these examples in the texts cannot be attributed to irrelevance in Wales considering the number of individuals effected by circumstances of this kind.[19]

This analysis tends to suggest that authorities construct broad definitions of vulnerability through a large range of examples, but then use qualifying words to narrow the pool of those considered to be vulnerable. It is not only membership of the category which is important, but where the individual sits within its temporal hierarchy. Such linguistic constructions shape the reality in which individuals' circumstances amounting to vulnerability are pitted against each other in terms of which causes should be acknowledged and who has

[19] For example, in the first quarter of 2018 the Welsh Government reported that 6,542 individuals had been referred for medical assessment linked to drug or alcohol addiction, an increase on the previous quarter's figures. Further, Carers UK estimate that there are approximately 370,000 unpaid carers supporting friends and family members in Wales, which equates to roughly 10% of the population.

the most acute or significant suffering. Further analysis of the outcomes of real decisions would illuminate this trend further, but on present evidence it seems symptomatic of the financial constraints of Local Authorities in Wales, who must encourage their staff to focus attention on what they perceive to be the extremities of vulnerability. Although the motivations behind such narrow definitions can be appreciated, it is crucial that we understand the day to day reality for the indebted person. Significant demographics within Welsh communities, such as those with commitments to provide unpaid care or those who are permanently restricted from the labour market because of long-term illness or disability, do not conform to this narrow construction of vulnerability as something unexpected, temporary and transient. The risk here is that as they are pushed through the regimented chronology of council tax enforcement their arrears grow in proportion with their reduced ability to repay new bills, their own conception of time becoming less relevant to that of the authority seeking payment, resulting in exposure to invasive forms of enforcement to which they may be acutely vulnerable. In this sense, for the vulnerable debtor with council tax arrears, time is often the only reprieve as well as the biggest hurdle.

## References

Dominy, N., Kempson, E. (2003). *Can't pay or won't pay? A review of creditor and debtor approaches to the non-payment of bills.* Personal Finance Research Centre: University of Bristol.

Fawcett, B. (2009). "Vulnerability: questioning the certainties in social work and health," *International Social Work,* 52(4): 473-484.

Fineman, M.A., Greer, A. (2016). *Vulnerability: reflections on* *a new ethical foundation for law and politics.* Farnham: Ashgate.

Greenall, C., Prosser, N. (2017). *Local authorities' approaches to council tax debt recovery in Wales*. Cardiff: Welsh Government, GSR Report Number 57/2017.

Harris, R., Hutton, C. (2007). *Definition in Theory and Practice: Language, Lexicography and the Law.* Continuum: London.

Herring, J. (2016). *Vulnerable adults and the law.* Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Kelly, M. (2016). *Catching up: improving council tax arrears collection.* London: Citizens Advice.

Money Advice Trust. (2017). Stop the Knock: Mapping local authority debt collection practices in England and Wales. *Money Advice Trust*. Available from https://www.stoptheknock.org/.

Prabhakar, R. (2016). How did the Welsh government manage to reform council tax in 2005? *Public Money & Management* 36(6): 417-424.

Welsh Government. (2017). *Council Tax Reduction Scheme: Annual Report 2016-17.* Cardiff: Welsh Government.

Welsh Government. (2018). *Council Tax Collection Rates in Wales: 2017-18.* Cardiff: Welsh Government.

**Case Law**

R v Leeds Justices ex parte Kennett [1995] 4 WLUK 56 (QBD)

R (on the application of Aldous) v Dartford Magistrates Court and Gravesham Borough Council [2011] EWHC 1919 (Admin)

**Legislation**

Taking Control of Goods National Standards 2014

# 13

# Changing times for debt advice

**Samuel Kirwan**

The chapters in this collection, covering a range of countries and social spaces, have displayed not only how more and more individuals are falling into debt, but also how those who are in debt are finding those debts more difficult to service and repay. From my own research in the UK debt advice sector, two aspects of this deepening 'crisis' of private debt stand out as particularly important. The first is that the *type* of debts faced by households are different to those of a decade earlier, a change characterised by a shift from 'consumer' to 'priority' debts. The second is that the assumed basis for making sustainable repayments on debts, namely a stable and balanced household budget, is no longer tenable in a period of 'austerity' welfare provision and insecure income.

In this chapter I will look at these issues in terms of how they relate to the provision of debt advice. More specifically, I examine debt advice not only as the provision of information and assistance, but as entailing a distinct *temporal* schema: an organisation of the client's life into monthly rhythms that enables agreements to be made with creditors. As I explain, the importance of this temporal schema is all the more apparent when, as is the case with the rise of 'deficit budgets', it comes under threat. Through this exploration of advice, budgets and time I consider how advice practice might form the basis for a 'politics of debt' organised around the concept of 'critical financial capability'.

## The 'Calendrics of Repayment'

In the moral economy of debt relations, a clear space is reserved for the 'good' debtor. This is the working adult who, taking responsibility for their actions, accepts the need to restrict their spending and direct their wages towards debt repayments. They stop going out, or insist on buying their own drinks if they do. They holiday at home and instil the virtues of frugality and patience in their children.[20] Most importantly, they make a budget. They continue making and remaking it; they discuss it, work on it and amend it in line with their needs and finances. Until the day they return, 'debt free', their lives ready to begin again. They gear their lives to the temporal schema of debt repayment. They accept the need to be *disciplined*, on the agreement that this period will come to an end. Life is structured by a dual temporality of rhythm and promise; a life held to predictable, punctual events, held in

[20] Each of these examples is drawn from the growing clutch of voices under the banner of 'financial education', from Money Saving Expert's 'Money Mantras' to the lessons and press releases put out by the Money Advice Service.

place by the distant horizon of future freedom.

This 'disciplined' individual is central to Maurizio Lazzarato's (2013) argument that, under neoliberalism, society is 'governed by debt'. No longer, he argues, should inequality be explored in terms of class structures, but rather in different manifestations of the debtor / creditor relationship. Lazzarato focuses upon a two-way power relationship characterised by the temporal structure of discipline. Faced with the considerable powers held by creditors, the debtor must promise to adhere to a stable and predictable behavioural rhythm.

Such calculations and measurements of the future, extrapolated from the present, find their formal representation in the calendar. The need to repay submits the time of experience to the ordered time of monthly deadlines and payments – what Jane Guyer (2012) terms the 'calendrics of repayment'. For Lazzarato (2012:45), granting credit, inasmuch as it imposes this 'calendrics', constitutes the *theft* of time from individuals; the forced seizure of time as the experience of something new. In a nation of debtors, the principal line of power concerns the capacity of the creditor to *neutralise* life in all its variety and unpredictability.

In few spaces is this 'calendrics of repayment' – the organisation of time through an established and predictable monthly rhythm of payments – more important than the advice sector. Whether it is enabling someone to manage their own finances, making agreements with creditors to reduce repayments or write off debts, or enabling insolvency, each advice achievement is reliant to some extent upon working out with a debtor a structure of regularised payments and expenditure. Across the sector, this is carried out through the approved budget sheet, the Standard Financial Statement (SFS).

As several of my participants noted, it is important to give the client the opportunity to compile the SFS in their own time, allowing them the space to reflect upon, and regularise, their own spending. If the goal is not only to alleviate the effects of debts, but also to reform the debtor so that they might be able to deal with them in future, key to the *success* of advice is the loop between the actions of the client and their ongoing negotiation and interpretation of the budget sheet. Thus, as a household budget sheet to be used in the everyday life of the client, it also plays a key role in *formalising* the household. Debtors must consider the role of others within (and without) their household, notably the joint responsibility of partners and ex-partners for certain debts, and also the role of non-dependants, for example older children still living in the family home but not contributing to it financially.

## Changing debts

That the forms of debt faced by advice clients are changing has been a consistent theme in interviews have I carried out with figures in the advice sector between 2014 and 2019. This has been most pronounced for services assisting clients on low incomes and those based in Universal Credit roll-out areas (see Tom Barrett's chapter on how services have dealt with this change).

For such services, the conditions and experience of household debt increasingly bear very little resemblance to the situation previous to the 'Great Financial Crisis' and introduction of 'austerity' measures. As one manager describes a situation that would previously have been unthinkable: "for most of us the problem is Local Authority enforcement agents, HMRC, DWP. And for the client group that I was dealing with in [City] that was nearly every debt" (Leslie, Manager in a debt advice service).

As Leslie notes, for the low-income debtor in 2017, debt is characterised primarily by the startling shift towards what are termed, within the advice sector, 'priority debts'. Thus, for face-to-face advice services, the key debts faced by clients are no longer credit cards and loans, but rent arrears, council tax arrears, court fines and fuel debts. These are debts for which the consequences of non-repayment, namely eviction, prison, or losing access to utilities, are typically misunderstood by clients, who will prioritise those creditors that do the most to chase them.

The very different ways in which 'priority' debts are *lived* have led to significant changes in the indebted everyday. The threat and cost of bailiffs are more significant, deductions from income are more frequent and severe, and the spectre of eviction and homelessness hangs over a growing number of households. Yet it is not simply that the risks associated with life-in-debt are greater as 'austerity' becomes ever-more pronounced, but that these risks are unevenly distributed. Single mothers in particular predominantly carry what I term the 'enforcement burden' – i.e. the stress of dealing with bailiffs and other enforcement practices – for what are often shared debts.[21]

This development has posed problems for the advice sector; priority creditors cannot be relied upon to accept offers of repayment based upon the financial statement. In the case of landlords, the very fact of a missed payment might be sufficient

[21] By this I meant that the debts are 'joint and severally liable' with an ex-partner: both individuals are liable for the whole debt.

to instigate no-fault eviction proceedings. At the same time, it has amplified and cemented their importance; as Malachi's story makes clear, informing debtors of the different legal capacities held by creditors can play a vital role in helping them reorganise their life. If someone is paying a consumer creditor at the expense of their rent, it is essential that they re-organise their payments in line with the financial statement and break their emotional attachments to the catalogues, doorstep lenders and the desire to protect their credit score.

## Deficit budgets

The second key change in debt burdens poses however a more significant threat to the debt advice model discussed above. This is the issue of the 'deficit budget sheet'; the situation in which, for households either in debt, or veering into debt, there is no possibility of working out a balanced budget. Or moreover, no matter how much maximising of benefit income is possible, the only way to produce a balanced budget is to present unworkable, or imaginary, figures in key areas of household expenditure, something that 'didn't feel right' to Leslie and other advisers.

The deficit budget sheet presents significant problems for advisers, as they require a balanced budget to make arrangement with creditors. Yet the further key consequence of a deficit budget is that *there will be no way out of debt*; the client will be sent away with an ongoing need for credit. As several of my participants noted (see also Tom Barrett's chapter), this recognition that, in addition to their *current* debts, the client will acquire *future* debts, critically undermines the restorative power previously assigned to insolvency as an opportunity to wipe the slate clean.

This negotiation I witnessed between advisers over how to compile a budget sheet nonetheless reiterates the importance of the SFS; all of my participants agreed that fixing a stable, workable budget should be the goal of the sector. Yet there was also agreement that in the context in which regular payments, whether of income or benefits, is becoming a distant dream for many, maintaining this role has become a significant challenge for services. Participants described the difficult task of seeking to fit the constraints of a predictable monthly budget sheet when the grounding condition of a workable budget, namely a reliable income, was no longer available. Amidst such discussions, it is clear why the 'deficit debtor' carries such a threat for the advice sector. To send a client away with a budget sheet that promises only to get them into further debt is seen as an admission of failure.

Yet perhaps this is precisely the point. Adkins (2018) argues that the goal of austerity measures, particularly welfare 'reform' and the enabling of increasingly precarious working contracts, is less to push people into material poverty than to force them into the hands of the credit sector. At the heart of the financial system, she argues, are everyday household payment streams; economic growth relies upon getting those same households to tie more aspects of their everyday lives to financial products, with 'flexible' products providing the greatest potential for profit.

A good example of such 'flexible' products are hire-purchase (or 'rent to buy') agreements. For consumers with 'poor credit', rather than saving to buy a household object, there is a growing range of contracts available[22] through which the consumer can obtain the item immediately despite their ineligibility for 'regular' credit products. Paying weekly instalments at extremely high rates of interest, the item is not 'owned' until the final instalment is paid. While debt advisers despair of a growing reliance upon hire-purchase contracts, what is interesting is how providers market their products as *freeing* consumers from the disciplinary constraints of indebted life. This might be through the promise of 'variable payment terms', or simply by emphasising the *joy* in having something immediately; holding on, if only for a moment, to the feeling of a life that is not defined by the rhythms of debt repayment.

Lazzarato and others see the 'power' of debt as exemplified in the ways in which households are forced to sign up to a disciplined and restricted life. Any joy, creativity or hope for the future is definitively closed off: life can only be what your creditors decide it will be. Yet perhaps the true power of debt under 'neoliberalism' lies in the promise to *break free from* this constrained life. That is, the effect of this power is not in the 'slow cancellation' of the future (Berardi, 2010), but rather to use our hopes for a better tomorrow to lead us into increasingly complex debt burdens, and thereby create a deeply uneven distribution of risk. For what is clear is that, in a time of widespread and growing debt, it is those who are already vulnerable – single mothers, individuals with substance and/or mental health issues – that find themselves

[22] Hire-purchase providers typically allow the consumer to define their own payment timescale as well as the ability to 'trade up or down' (see Brighthouse.co.uk). A key recent innovation in automobile finance has been the 'Personal Contract Purchase', a hire-purchase agreement where ownership is transferred upon a final 'balloon payment'.

most severely exposed to the risks of an unexpected change of circumstances.

## Advice and Politics

I will finish by considering how debt advice practice might help us sketch the outlines of a 'politics' of debt. There are two key aspects of debt advice that might help us in this respect. The first is how the advice interview, even if it is not useful in 'practical' terms, carries the simple value of enabling someone to talk about their debts without being judged (see Atfield et al, 2016). Advisers are as such often resistant to the 'financial capability' agenda (see Tom Barrett's chapter), implying as it does a need to fix the client rather than the debts, in particular given the highly-developed budgeting skills of so many of those on low incomes. The first point of a politics of debt must be to facilitate the spaces in which debt can be voiced, discussed and shared without shame or anxiety. Indeed, we should explore how a debtors' movement can positively re-frame the voice of the debtor, highlighting the strength, dignity and value in carrying and managing debt burdens.

The second is that, by focusing upon the 'disciplinary' aspects of the financial statement, we miss that it is also a route to something else, whether being able to negotiate lower repayments, to write-down amounts owed, or to apply for insolvency. That is, the purpose is as much to compile a budget, one around which the client might go away and re-organise their life, as it is to alleviate the severity of the debt burdens that affect that life. This latter goal fundamentally challenges the solemn 'reality' of debts as obligations that must be paid no matter the surrounding circumstances.

One route for such a politics might be to re-frame the term 'financial capability', which has, hitherto, been focused upon educating consumers to live a frugal life, compile and stick to a household budget, and choose the right financial products. In a situation in which households will have not only have no choice but to go into debt, but are also *encouraged* to do so, it might be better to enable a '*critical* financial capability' (see Hütten et al, 2018), equipping citizens with the skills and spaces to: talk about debt without shame; fend off the anxiety of enforcement communally; enable each other to write-down or write-off their debts; and through all of this, challenge a financial system that loads increasing risks onto the sections of society least able to carry them.

**References**

Adkins, L. (2018). *The Time of Money*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press

Atfield, G. Lindley, R., Orton, M. (2016) *Living with debt after advice: A longitudinal study of people on low incomes*. York: Friends Provident Foundation.

Berardi, F. (2011) *After the Future*. Bove, A. (trans.) Genosko, G. Thoburn, N. (eds). Oakland, CA: AK Press.

Guyer, J. I. (2012). "Obligation, binding, debt and responsibility: provocations about temporality from two new sources". *Social Anthropology*, 20(4): 491–501.

Hütten, M., Maman, D., Rosenhek, Z., Thiemann, M. (2018) 'Critical Financial Literacy: an Agenda', *International Journal of Pluralism and Economics Education* (accepted for publication).

Lazzarato M. (2012). *The Making of Indebted Man*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).

Lazzarato, M. (2013). *Governing through debt*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).