



**european
student
think
tank**

Working Group on Youth Employment

The Unemployed Shall not Apply

Justus Seuferle

June 2020

In their famous 1933 Study “the unemployed of Marienthal”, Marie Jahoda and Paul Lazarsfeld in much detail described the effects unemployment had on the population of the small Austrian working-class town of Marienthal. In a ground-breaking empirical study they analysed everything this surrounding could provide. Their findings still allow for interesting insights today. One of the main theses of the Marienthal study was that prolonged unemployment leads to a state of apathy in which the victims do not utilize any longer even the few opportunities left to them. The vicious cycle between reduced opportunities and reduced level of aspiration has remained the focus of all subsequent discussions. Being unemployed has an effect on how you see yourself and the world, it contributes to your political and social ideals, it creates feelings of purposelessness and not belonging, it even has an effect on the speed of your walking¹. Being unemployed doesn't just change your employment status, or the size of your income check, it creates a state of mind. It can even, as George Orwell observed, annihilate your feeling of future² and make you a prisoner of the present.

Apart from a lack of money and a feeling of purposelessness the unemployed face a diverse set of problems. Some of them material, others social. One problem that is avoidable, and independent of the material situation, is discrimination. Media and politicians alike created a narrative of the unemployed not as victims of economic circumstances but as lazy and entitled recipients of “*free-wealth*”: Private television stations like the German RTL who show scripted reality TV formats that portray the unemployed as individuals who are hedonistic beyond common acceptance, uneducated, lazy, rude and entitled; Yellow press papers

such as the British SUN or the German BILD who homestory individuals which fit in this image and portray them as a sort of norm; Politicians such as former German Vice Chancellor Guido Westerwelle who in 2010 speaking of unemployed welfare recipients labelled them “*wealthy without the effort*”. Strikingly he was accusing individuals who get little more than 360 Euro a month to live off, he was not extending this gracious insult to heirs, privateers or the royal families of Europe. In a 2010 study in Germany 47% of the questioned thought that the unemployed were not looking for work and 59% found it to be appalling that they “*live off of other people's work*”³. Considering that the unemployed in Germany have to prove to the social services that they are applying to jobs, this is a frighteningly high number. There are deeply rooted false stigmas that view the unemployed as lazy and entitled.

A special form of classism

For all the right reasons awareness is being spread to fight sexism, racism and homophobia, but classism - meaning discrimination based on an economic class position and wealth or lack thereof - is a widely ignored “ism”. To give an example of this: Media commentators agreed that the 2016 Daily Mail article calling the Duchess of Sussex Meghan Markle a “straight outta compton girl” showcased racism. And indeed it did, one shouldn't assume a low class upbringing due to skin colour. But being “straight outta compton” meaning coming from an economically deprived neighborhood should not be an insult and not be taken as one. Being poor or being brought up poor is neither a shame nor a vice. Assuming that is classism. A not so much talked about form of discrimination.

¹ Lazarsfeld and Jahoda, 1933

² Orwell, 1933

³ Heitmeyer, 2007

When talking about work it is always assumed that it is equal with contribution and duty. That work is *qua natura* a productive and constructive activity that not only symbolizes but is contribution to society. This might be true for garbage men, nurses, doctors, train drivers and many other professions. But what about corporate lawyers, marketing gurus, or PR consultants and so many other jobs that lack production input or bureaucratic necessity. Why is it simply assumed their work is foremost a contribution? Adam Smith saw work as either productive, reproductive or destructive⁴. If your job consists out of selling useless stuff to people or of creating false needs through marketing and else, why is this seen as far better and contributory than being unemployed? This is not to belittle such jobs but to draw a comparison between the unemployed who are seen as not contributing and those who supposedly do. Not all work is contribution and essential duty. The discrimination, as in so many other cases, is not based on any moral argument, it is a more social Darwinist discrimination. It's about perceived failure and perceived lower worth. Often times the unemployed are accused of having to be taken care of by society and living off of other people's work, the similar argument is not however used while talking about people who inherited a lot of capital or the royal families of Europe or people in professions David Graeber calls "bullshit jobs"⁵. They also lack production or reproduction input. The argument is once again not aiming at their social relation to society but at their perceived lower worth.

This becomes more striking if we consider that usually a minority of little less than 50% of the population works. Yet for their non-work only the about 6% of those seeking employment are being discriminated against. To define human

worthiness only by his or hers - perceived - production value is a dangerous game. What is being perceived as meaningful and contributory work is either defined by the market or by apparatus that shape the ideology of a society, these two institutions might however reflect it in false and discriminatory ways, as happening today. So many professions and social roles lack production value: Mothers, political activists, volunteers, street musicians and so many other tasks that are not seen as work, but that contribute to society. John Locke famously stated that "*all wealth is the product of labour*"⁶ and while I don't doubt the righteousness of that statement I have to question the petty conclusion that labour is reducible to holding a job. This is not to say that we shouldn't be allowed to ask what an individual contributes to society, but that we should think beyond employment to answer that question. If we use a more sociological lens and define labour as the process of creating use value, we can move away from the pettiness of defining contribution only by employment status.

The flawed logic behind this assumption of laziness and entitlement stems from what Karl Polanyi calls the „economistic fallacy“, the false reducing of economic activity only to the market. The creation of value to yourself and others can be so much: telling a joke at a dinner party, cooking for your friends and family, shopping for your elderly neighbors in times of corona and fixing stuff in the house by yourself. Economic activity is not reducible to market action nor to employment. Economic activity is a part of everyday life.

The construction of a Persona Non Grata

A considerable problem rooted in this discrimination is that being unemployed or having a history of unemployment often leads to being stigmatised by possible employers.

⁴ Smith, 1776

⁵ Graeber, 2018

⁶ Locke, 1689

This unemployment trap is making it much harder to find a job. There are numerous European directives that prohibit discrimination on grounds of race, religion, disability, gender, sexual orientation and belief⁷. However, there is no such European directive or a regulation to prohibit discrimination by employers based on your current employment or lack thereof. The more laissez faire orientated United States introduced such a law with the “Unemployed Anti-Discrimination Act” in 2012, which simply *“prohibits employers from discriminating against an individual applicant because they are unemployed.”*⁸ At the very least the EU should integrate such a policy in their current anti-discrimination directives.

This is of course not enough to fight discrimination, the problem is to be tackled at the root, which is culture and ideology. The narrative of the lazy unemployed is not only being spun by the media and the yellow press papers but also by politicians. Apart from the liberal Westermelle, former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder attacked the unemployed telling them *“there is no right to laziness”*, his Minister of Labour Wolfgang Clement called most unemployed *“con artists”*. The common narrative that sees the unemployed not as victims of economic circumstances but as lazy and entitled criminals is being spun by politicians and the media alike. As the sociologist Wilhelm Heitmeyer wrote: *“If one looks at the devaluation of the long-term unemployed, one must also discuss the connection between the images of benefit recipients and the long-term unemployed, which are reproduced again and again by social elites via the media, and the attitudes in the different population groups. This results - as reported - in patterns of devaluation which affect those groups of people who are*

*considered ‘useless’ or ‘superfluous’ in the sense of cold calculations”*⁹. In a 2001 study the Social Research Center Berlin found a *“striking coincidence of debates about the bad image of the unemployed in public opinion, with upcoming elections”*.¹⁰ This cultural and political practice simply needs to be stopped and reversed. Not only is there psychological harm done against the unemployed, there is also a narrative creation that makes it harder to reintegrate unemployed into the workforce, for they are seen in a bad light.

The discrimination becomes even more appalling if you consider that there is a natural number of unemployment within every capitalist society. The problem is not to be eradicated completely. The individualisation of society has led to widespread agreement of one being responsible of one's own fate, an idea constantly in agony with the interconnectedness of the world. The capitalist production process is and remains exclusive, it is not accessible for everyone. The social policy of the EU is of course not as powerful as national social policies. But the fight against exclusion and discrimination was mentioned in every EU social charter since the Turin Social Charter¹¹. It's time to fight the discrimination of the unemployed as any other form of unjust discrimination.

A great danger

For some lawmakers this problem might be one that the state cannot take care of, a situation of “we can't help everyone” or “solve everything”, but given their partly creation of the problem and the changes employment and the economy are facing this particular problem of discrimination of the unemployed might become a defining problem of the future.

⁷ Directive 2000/78/EC

⁸ Fair Employment Opportunity Act, 2011

⁹ Heitmeyer, 2007

¹⁰ Study Berlin Research Center, 2013

¹¹ European Social charter

In a society that increasingly justifies elitism and wealth with virtues and work ethics, a situation occurs where those who have no work will be deprived of human needs for respect and dignity. Your social position is to a large extent the product of your position within the production process. In earlier times you were an elite by birth, now societal elites, which to a large extent still get their positions through contacts, social capital and arbitrary hierarchisation structures, are justifying their positions with adjectives such as “hard work” and “eagerness”. Hard work has become the arch virtue of the Homo Laborans, everyone who can, claims it for himself. Considering that our economy might be on the way to a mass automation leaving millions unemployed, historian Yuval Hariri fears the establishment of a new “useless class”. Just as the industrialization created the working class, the AI revolution, so he thinks, will create a new unworking class¹². Even if society manages to satisfy the material needs of this new class, the feeling of purposelessness and the social discrimination will still prevail. If contribution or the feeling of it becomes more and more exclusive this might have devastating effects on our social fabric. The exclusivity of our production process combined with the discrimination and condemnation of those who shall not be allowed to participate in it, is already a burden for the collective psyche of our society. With increasing exclusivity this might become a great danger.

The goal must be to undock employment from social contribution or to make the participation in the production process less exclusive and to unlink the social benefits of contribution from the employment status. Human contribution is not simply to be measured by the grade of your

production value nor is the grade of your productive value measured by the amount of your wage or your employment status. For too long we have passively tolerated the narrative of the lazy unemployed, societal elites constructed an image that is false and morally repugnant. It's time to undo this narrative and to start viewing the unemployed as what they are: Seekers of employment.

¹² Hariri, 2017

References:

- Marie Jahoda, Paul Felix Lazarsfeld, Hans Zeisel: *Die Arbeitslosen von Marienthal. Ein soziographischer Versuch über die Wirkungen langandauernder Arbeitslosigkeit*. Hirzel, Leipzig 1933.
- *Down and Out in Paris and London*. London : Victor Gollancz, 1933
- Wilhelm Heitmeyer: *Moralisch abwärts in den Aufschwung. Nützlichkeit und Effizienz - dieses Denken ist weit verbreitet und bedroht den Zusammenhalt der Gesellschaft. Ein Forschungsbericht*, in: Die Zeit Nr. 51 vom 13. Dezember 2007
- Smith, Adam (1776). *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. 1 (1 ed.). London: W. Strahan.
- Graeber, David (October 14, 2018). "Bullshit Jobs: Vom wahren Sinn der Arbeit". Klett-Cotta. Retrieved October 22, 2018
- John Locke, *Zwei Abhandlungen über die Regierung*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1977 (13. Nachdruck 2008). (Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, Bd. 213)
- Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation
- Fair Employment Opportunity Act of 2011 (H.R. 2501)
- Heitmeyer: *Moralisch abwärts in den Aufschwung. Nützlichkeit und Effizienz - dieses Denken ist weit verbreitet und bedroht den Zusammenhalt der Gesellschaft. Ein Forschungsbericht*, in: Die Zeit Nr. 51 vom 13. Dezember 2007
- Wilhelm Heitmeyer / Kirsten Edrikat: *Die Ökonomisierung des Sozialen. Folgen für „Überflüssige“ und „Nutzlose“*, in: Wilhelm Heitmeyer (Hrsg.) 2008: *Deutsche Zustände*
- Study Berlin Research Center: Klaus Neumann: *Arbeitslosigkeit in der Bundesrepublik. Öffentlicher Umgang mit einem Dauerproblem*. Tectum Verlag, Marburg 2013.
- European Social Charter Turin; Link:
https://www.bgbl.de/xaver/bgbl/start.xav?startbk=Bundesanzeiger_BGBl&jumpTo=bgbl264s1261.pdf#_bgbl_%2F%2F%5B%40attr_id%3D%27bgbl264s1261.pdf%27%5D_1583597257095
- The rise of the useless class, Feb 24, 2017 / Yuval Noah Harari. Link:
<https://ideas.ted.com/the-rise-of-the-useless-class/>