“For lack of accountability”: The logic of the price in Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries

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“The most successful ideological effects are the ones that have no need of words, but only of laissez-faire and complicitous silence.” - Pierre Bourdieu (1990:133)

The study explores the links between price, accounting and accountability by analysing the harmful effects of their absence from key relationships in and around Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries. The way the relationship between the State and the institutions was initially set up and maintained throughout the twentieth century was deliberately informal and casual. Bourdieu is used to understand this as a careful denial of the logic of the price between the State and the religious orders, a way of wilfully obscuring the usual lines of accountability that might otherwise have applied. The study examines the way in which the exchanges between State and institutions were characterised, and the lasting consequences within and around the Laundries themselves, for the women who spent time there and for Ireland.

Introduction

Magdalen homes or Laundries are not a uniquely Irish phenomenon, having operated throughout Ireland and the UK from the late 18th century as asylums, refuges or places of incarceration for what were often called “fallen women.” In Ireland, however, from the founding of the Irish State in 1922, the nature of the Irish Laundries began to differ from their equivalents in the UK. The contrast can be traced to the strategically obscure relationship that was established and maintained between the government and the religious orders. Women were consigned to the Laundries both formally and informally, and were often offered a “choice” to enter the Laundries or face possible imprisonment. This obscured the involuntary nature of their incarceration, and their status in the eyes of the State. Government and Health Board payments to convents or religious orders pertaining to the Magdalen Laundries were made on an inconsistent, ad-hoc basis, and often described as ex-gratia basis, or as gifts or donations. The work of the religious orders operating the Laundries was seen as an “offered” service, part of their religious mission. Bourdieu describes this as a denial of the logic of the price which in turn he sees as a way to refuse calculation.

The paper explores the impact of this excision of accounting ways of thinking under three headings: the lack of accountability between the State and the Laundries; the way in which this was mirrored within the Laundries themselves; and the way in which this structure served the State and how these relationships, set up almost one hundred years ago and maintained by a long social silence continue to serve the interests of power.

Methodology

While Magdalen institutions existed throughout Ireland and Britain since the Eighteenth Century, this study focused on their operation from the foundation of the Irish State, up to the closure of the last institution in the 1990s. Fortunately there is a rich reserve of first-person accounts of life in and after the
Laundries. The study is based on analysis of archival material, parliament records, media accounts, a series of government reports, eye-witness accounts, submissions compiled by advocacy groups to various human rights bodies and their responses, and the recorded testimonies of the women themselves. Despite the available records, however, there is little universal consensus on even the most basic facts. A consistent theme of blurred accounts persists since the suppression of the first relevant government report in 1931.

**Findings**

Bourdieu provides a useful lens to expose the way in which a tacit understanding masked the real nature of relations between the State, the Laundries and the women who spent time there. The denial of a “logic of the price” led to an almost complete lack of accountability between the Laundries and the State. No annual reports were made. Very little data was either sought or supplied as to the welfare, education or release of the women concerned. As a result, the incidents or situations that caused women to be sent to the Laundries were rarely recorded, and so did not enter history or form part of the image Ireland presented to the world or to itself. Some 10,000 women were consigned to the Laundries through the twentieth century. They went there for a wide variety of reasons, but all acquired the same stigmatised status of Magdalen. For the State, this provided a way to avoid accounting for aspects of Irish society that were troubling to the national identity. A wide range of issues including the independent role of women, the idea of women having children outside of marriage, infanticide and aspects of property rights could be simply removed from the national consciousness by the increasingly repressive use of the Laundries.

This lack of accountability was mirrored within the institutions, where women were “accounted for” in ways that rendered “accounting to” them unthinkable. Their status before entering the Laundries became irrelevant. Names were changed; records were either not maintained or were sparse and obscure. Friendships were discouraged. Family connections were not recorded, or actively hidden. The work the women did was not described as labour, and did not accrue the normal entitlements of social security and independent identity. Women, often mothers, were called children while nuns were referred to as mothers. While Ireland developed economically, culturally and socially through the twentieth century, with broad improvements to welfare, housing and the rights of workers and of women, behind the walls of the Laundries the closed, unaccounted-for field prioritised symbolic capital over social or economic, and prevented women inside from taking their place in Irish society.

**Discussion**

The case has implications beyond the historic for the outsourcing of the provision of State services to private bodies. It illustrates how the framing of the relationship between State and service provider sets the level and nature of accounting in its broadest sense, and accountability. More significantly, it shows how this impacts on the power of those affected by the provision of the service, and on perceptions about who is responsible for any harm done. A blurring of financial motivations leads to a blurring of the usual forms of calculative accountability that automatically follow economic relationships. In the absence of any counter-weight of alternative forms of testimony or accountability, the State may find a way to disclaim responsibility for its citizens. As this case shows, that disclaiming of responsibility can extend far beyond the period of provision of the original service. This paper highlights informality as a gap through which the ‘usual’ mechanisms of accountability can fall. This is perhaps as much an indictment of what is ‘usual’ in terms of accountability as it is a criticism of the informal. The systematic devaluing of the women’s labour illustrates this effect. In the absence of wages, those systems designed to record or tax or protect the rights of workers failed to recognise the women’s work as labour in the ‘usual’ sense. Their work was rendered invisible to the system simply by removing the financial, because the systems themselves were so limited in their interpretation of what they should record and ‘account for.’ Without a calculated, formal and financial value to represent the work, it simply disappeared from official records, and thus from the set of things for which the government saw itself as having a direct and obvious responsibility. This underlines the importance of carefully building an architecture of accountability in the widest and most inclusive sense into all State relationships, particularly where services are delegated or outsourced, and doubly so when the services are targeted at groups who lack a clear voice. The strategically arranged informality and careful casualness with which women who entered the Laundries were ‘re-accounted for’ systematically drew power away from them. A system based on curated informality has a dangerous potential to alter the status and identities of those (un)accounted for, and these alterations shift power. The State is rewarded with an on-going means of distancing itself from these negative outcomes.