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Looking presentable, feeling optimistic, performing potentiality

How recipients of social assistance in the Netherlands are 'activated' for the post-Fordist labour market

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Conclusion: (Un)doing precarisation

This dissertation has examined the focus on future employment in social assistance policy in the Netherlands today – specifically, the ‘labour market (re)integration’ that is central to it – in the context of the contemporary (post-Fordist) labour market. I delved into the (recent) history of social assistance and developments in the labour market to better understand the reforms that have led to current Dutch social assistance policy and its daily constitution in local offices. I have looked in detail at the interactions that take place in these offices to see how people embrace, cope with and resist the normalisation of precarisation. This has enabled me to discern the mechanisms through which ‘governmental precarisation’ (Lorey, 2015) takes shape in the context of contemporary social assistance – where unpaid and paid work, ‘unemployment’ and ‘employment’ increasingly look alike due to the principle of conditionality and the focus on the future employment of recipients. The dissertation asked: How does the focus on future employment take shape in the context of contemporary social assistance and the post-Fordist labour market in the Netherlands? What exactly is required of social assistance recipients who are deemed ‘work-ready’ in return for obtaining and retaining the right to benefits? And what does this tell us more generally about the politics of social security? These questions are important because in times of precarisation – when social security policies increasingly force individuals to shoulder social risks (e.g. unemployment, sickness, poverty) and labour markets require workers who are “all in” (Weeks, 2017) but offer mainly precarious forms of employment – both social security arrangements and labour markets do *not* offer many people a secure existence. It is crucial to examine this precarisation – particularly how ‘welfare-to-work’ (with its conditionality and focus on future employment) constitutes it – because it enables us to

critically reflect on ‘social security’ as it is organised today.

To answer these questions, I have studied the local daily practices that constitute contemporary social assistance (or ‘welfare-to-work’) in the Netherlands, focussing specifically on the interactions between those who are responsible for providing social assistance in terms of money and services (case managers) and those receiving it (recipients). This has allowed me to reveal the myriad ways in which social assistance policies take shape and affect the lives of citizens and to better understand the day-to-day politics of social security in times of precarisation. In this conclusion, I briefly reiterate my main findings before drawing my main conclusions, connecting them to broader theoretical and societal debates on the politics of social security in times of precarisation in (formerly) well-developed welfare states such as the Netherlands.

Looking presentable, feeling optimistic, performing potentiality

In the Netherlands (as in many other countries), the contemporary (post-Fordist) labour market largely consists of (interactive) service sector jobs and is characterised by precarious employment (relations) across the board but most acutely in low-skilled and low-paid work (see for example Standing, 2011; Savage et al, 2015; Kremer et al, 2017; Vrooman et al, 2018). These conditions require a certain type of labour and relation to this labour: paid workers must be ‘flexible’, ‘sociable’, ‘presentable’, ‘eager’ and able to develop and communicate their ‘personality’ consisting of all these ‘qualities’ (and more) (see for example Hochschild, 1983; Warhurst et al, 2000; Urciuoli, 2008; McDowell, 2009). Given the precarious labour market conditions (e.g. ‘self-employment’ (ZZP), temporary and zero-hour contracts, changing demands and required skills, insufficient bargaining power), there is a constant threat of losing one’s job and, thereby, a certain income, status and feeling of belonging. This dissertation has shown that the continuous *aesthetic and affective labour* that goes into paid work – before, during and after (compare Gregg, 2011; Adkins, 2012; Lorey, 2015) – is also required outside of the labour market in the context of welfare-to-work. Recipients of social assistance must continuously evaluate, regulate and attune their aesthetics, affects and

performances to ‘fit’ *possible* (yet not necessarily *probable*) jobs, thereby *potentially* becoming and remaining ‘employable’ in the post-Fordist labour market. These *performances of potentiality* are crucial for social assistance recipients, not only to possibly obtain and retain paid work in the future, but to obtain and retain the right to benefits in the present. This dissertation has addressed the particulars of this labour that is the essence of welfare-to-work (which would more accurately be called ‘work-to-work’) in times of precarisation. Importantly, this labour requires a lot of effort from both social assistance recipients and case managers without the guarantee – or often even the fighting chance – of finding paid work that would offer a secure existence.

Chapter 1 revealed the aesthetic performances required of social assistance recipients, as taught and evaluated by case managers. These aesthetic requirements are codified in rather vague terms in the Participation Act, which obliges social assistance recipients not to “obstruct” employment by “clothing” or “a lack of personal grooming”. Case managers interpret appropriate aesthetics as looking ‘presentable’ (representatief) – which still seems vague. Yet, they put this concept into practice by defining the aesthetic performances considered not ‘presentable’ and even pathological: slouching, dressing scarcely (particularly for women) and smelling (particularly for men). Moreover, case managers use aesthetics as pedagogy by teaching social assistance recipients the importance of looking ‘presentable’, what it entails and requires. Next to knowing ‘what not to wear’ (e.g. flip-flops), case managers convey that looking ‘presentable’ is context-dependent and requires the ability to continuously adapt aesthetic performances to potential (and changing) work-contexts. Proving this ability is seen as a sign of ‘actively’ cultivating ‘work-readiness’ and ‘employability’ for post-Fordist precarious labour. Within post-Fordist labour markets and welfare-to-work – in which aesthetics are central and highly ambiguous – looking ‘presentable’ is a vital but complex individual duty, necessary not only for obtaining and retaining paid work but for retaining access to social assistance benefits. Aesthetic labour today is a continuous, everyday, backstage labour for labour.

Alongside aesthetic labour, chapter 2 revealed the importance of affective labour for social assistance recipients as well as case managers.

Through pedagogies of optimism – consisting of the techniques of ‘accepting’, ‘controlling’ and ‘imagining’ – case managers teach social assistance recipients (and often also themselves) to accept their precarious position, to embrace it, and to prepare for its continuation while remaining optimistic about better times ahead. The recipients in this study had little to look back to – either because the past was precarious or because the labour market and their situations had changed – while the case managers had mostly insecure, low paid jobs to offer. Case managers thus taught recipients to look forward to an imagined future that made it worthwhile to keep applying for jobs (although it continuously resulted in rejections) and to accept precarious employment in the present if it was offered to them. They encouraged social assistance recipients to focus on possibilities rather than on limitations due to being underqualified, physically less able, overqualified or discriminated against. The focus on individual choice was central: you can choose to accept your situation, control obstructing thoughts and feelings, and select what to focus on. And although case managers acknowledged the unattainability of these imagined futures, optimism was not only a suggestion but a moral imperative as it was seen as labour (paid by the government) as well as a means to find a job and thus a way out of social assistance. In other words, although case managers appreciated that precarious work does not lead to the imagined desired future, imagination was still cultivated as a means to encourage recipients to obtain precarious work. This paradox of social assistance recipients having to accept a precarious situation now in order to (potentially) not be in a precarious situation later is central to the pedagogies of optimism. Importantly, the case managers had far from stable careers themselves and shared some sense of precariousness with the recipients of social assistance; many had ‘flexible’ contracts, while political changes and reorganisations in social assistance offices only created further insecurity. Welfare-to-work programmes are thus characterised by insecurity and precarisation on both the receiving and providing ends of the state–citizen encounter. In effect, social assistance today hardly counterbalances precarity, but offers ways to accept it by ‘thinking positive’ and ‘looking forward’ through pedagogies of optimism.

In chapter 3, I examined in greater detail the exercises that imitate closeness to paid work and cultivate imagined futures of upward mobility

through paid work. These exercises require ‘introspection’ and ‘imitation’ and are meant to ‘improve’ recipients into potential (successful), upwardly mobile paid workers. The chapter analysed these exercises as performances for upward mobility where social assistance recipients are required to look, think, feel and act in ways that are (perceived to be) required in post-Fordist labour markets and that potentially (yet not actually) lead them to obtain the ‘dream job’ they (should) desire. It thus delved deeper into the technique of ‘imagining’ – part of the pedagogies of optimism described and analysed in chapter 2 – showing that the affective labour social assistance recipients must perform not only consists of thinking and feeling ‘positive’ about their current situation and possible future, but of thinking and feeling certain ways about themselves, about their ‘personality’, of learning ways to know themselves (better) in order to (continuously) ‘improve’ themselves for and through paid work. I detailed the performances recipients must give in the social assistance office, performances that imitate upward mobility but offer little else than ways to approximate forms of economic security, social status and belonging. I thus argued that these workshops function as temporal spaces of imagination in which adherence to the promise of upward mobility through paid work is best understood as a form of ‘post-Fordist affect’: the continued adherence to ‘Fordist’ ideals of economic security, social status and belonging in times of precarisation, unattainable for more and more people, especially those at the ‘bottom-end’ of the labour market and in welfare-to-work programmes.

Whereas the first three chapters addressed the similarities within and between the three case-studies, chapter 4 analysed their differences by examining the different approaches case managers take towards ‘(re) integrating’ social assistance recipients in the labour market. First, the pressing mode of governing was the most prominent in all three social assistance offices and particularly salient in local office 3. Case managers ‘pressing’ recipients to find paid work traced their need for benefits to their primarily psychological ‘inabilities’ (e.g. being held back by a ‘fear of the unknown’ and ‘lack of confidence’). By means of ‘persuasion’, case managers encouraged recipients to ‘improve’ themselves, helping them to ‘overcome’ their ‘impeding psychological condition’ and cultivating the personal characteristics needed to find paid work. Importantly, while

case managers often (implicitly) referred to formal rules, this was not followed by (direct threats of) sanctioning. Second, the repressing mode of governing, characterised by the constant reference to formal rules and the threat of sanctions, was mostly used by case managers in local office 1. ‘Repressing’ case managers understood recipients’ need for social assistance benefits primarily in terms of their ‘unwillingness’ to perform paid work. Case managers ‘coerced’ recipients to display ‘responsible’ behaviour by ‘getting a job’ in order to take care of themselves without relying on benefits. The use of sanctions served not only to ‘coerce’ recipients to exit social assistance, but also as a way to directly cut social spending. Third, the accommodating mode of governing was the least prominent approach I observed, used by case managers only rarely when they deemed a recipient too ‘vulnerable’ to be persuaded or coerced into finding paid employment. In these instances, case managers would show ‘care’ and try to ‘empower’ recipients by conveying words of encouragement, trying to boost their self-confidence, and providing practical support. In sum, this chapter revealed the differences (both between and within local offices) in how case managers approach social assistance recipients. It found the room for recipients to voice their concerns to be generally very limited, depending on whether a case manager deemed them to be ‘vulnerable’, ‘unable’ or ‘unwilling’. The differences I observed can be traced to the decentralisation of policy design and implementation as well as the room for discretion enjoyed by case managers. These differences are problematic as effective social conventions and democratic control (e.g. professional standards, appeals procedures, local public debate) are not sufficiently in place or functioning properly. Based on these findings, I argued that welfare-to-work functions partly in arbitrary ways.

Together, the four chapters showed how welfare-to-work brings potential future employment to the present, thereby making employment and unemployment alike in multiple ways (compare Adkins, 2012). Given the insecurity inherent to conditional welfare-to-work policies and precarious post-Fordist labour markets, both employed and unemployed persons must perform in return for (little) money to find ‘better’ work in the future. Unemployment and employment are alike in yet another way, as daily practices in welfare-to-work programmes produce an imaginary proximity to paid work – and a ‘promise of happiness’ (Ahmed, 2010)

– through exercises of imagination and imitation. These practices offer a (temporary) substitute for, and an imaginary proximity to, actual paid work (with career opportunities) as a way to improve and secure one’s position in society. This imaginary proximity also functions as a way to become and remain ‘work-ready’. ‘Work-readiness’ – being aesthetically and affectively continuously and completely ready for and able to adapt to potential future employment – is an essential requirement in welfare-to-work, and accomplished by problematising the need for social assistance, by mobilising (presentations of) ‘the right’ aesthetics and affects, and by glorifying paid work.

Welfare-to-work as precarisation

The close examination of the daily practices of welfare-to-work in the Netherlands today revealed how contemporary social assistance policy is part and parcel of ‘governmental precarisation’ (Lorey, 2015). Like post-Fordist labour markets, it creates uncertainty and instability, making the lives of everyone insecure and contingent on arbitrary decisions – although it obviously affects some less than others, especially those who own, or have access to, considerable wealth. But even for the latter, welfare-to-work serves as an object lesson on the consequences of not being able to successfully participate in the post-Fordist economy. Those who are currently more or less ‘successfully’ earning money in the (labour) market are thus encouraged to do their utmost to keep it that way, since, in the words of one of the case managers in this study, “(going back on) social assistance is not an option”. Social assistance has become a measure of last resort in case all else fails, and comes at a price – contrary to what the then minister had in mind when she devised the social assistance act in the 1960s. Today, social assistance recipients are problematised, aesthetics and affects are mobilised and paid work is glorified in order to maximise and normalise insecurity and create a “social vulnerability that is still just tolerable” (Lorey, 2015, p. 66). I will elaborate on these three main conclusions and, subsequently, discuss alternative ways to organise social security.

Problematization of social assistance recipients

This dissertation has shown how welfare-to-work – legitimised by ‘anti-welfare common sense’ (Jensen and Tyler, 2015; compare Fraser and Gordon, 1994) – classifies social assistance recipients as ‘revolting’ (Tyler, 2013) and in need of ‘improvement’ according to gendered and classed standards of worthiness. As recipients cannot sustain themselves by obtaining (enough) money from paid labour (or their relatives), they are perceived to be members of a separate ‘class’, ‘unable’ or ‘unwilling’ to look ‘presentable’ according to prevailing norms about ‘proper’ aesthetic presentation (compare Skeggs, 1997; Lawler, 2005). In addition, they are considered not ‘optimistic’ enough, not sufficiently self-aware, and unable to develop and perform their ‘personality’ as is required in the post-Fordist labour market. Within welfare-to-work policies and practices, recipients (and their need for social assistance) are perceived as ‘problems’ as they ‘cost’ public money, are not ‘productive’, do not create ‘value’ in the economy, and thus fail to be ‘persons of value’ (Skeggs, 2004, compare Dean, 1995). Those in need of income support are thus automatically deemed to be in need of ‘soft’ or ‘hard’ paternalist intervention (compare Dean, 2002; Pykett, 2012), depending on local welfare-to-work policies and case managers’ assessments of the specific ‘cause’ of individual recipients’ ‘unemployment’ and ‘welfare dependency’. Perceived ‘unwillingness’ is met with sanctions whereas ‘inability’ is met with persuasion or care if it is combined with perceived ‘vulnerability’. Either way, the ‘problem’ lies with the recipient and the only possible ‘solution’ – finding paid work – is sought there, too.

Although the problematisation of social assistance and its recipients is hardly new, decades of social security reform have renewed it. With welfare-to-work, ‘hard’ paternalistic measures are making a comeback while ‘soft’ paternalistic measures are being further developed. What is new are the aesthetic and affective requirements that are now part of welfare-to-work, a new level of intrusiveness into the private lives of social assistance recipients.

Mobilisation of aesthetics and affects

A continuous calibration of aesthetics and affects is required as people

move in and out of precarious employment and unemployment in post-Fordist labour markets. To give the ‘right’ performance in and for paid work, workers are required to bring the most private parts of themselves into the labour market and perform emotional and aesthetic labour (see Hochschild, 1983; Warhurst et al, 2000). This dissertation has shown that, with welfare-to-work, the mobilisation of aesthetics and affects needed to earn an income in the post-Fordist labour market is also needed to ‘earn’ social assistance benefits. Recipients of social assistance must improve their ‘bad’ personal (bodily, cognitive and emotional) attributes in workshops and put their ‘good’ attributes to use in job interviews, internships and work placements as well as inside the social assistance office to show case managers that they are ‘work-ready’ and *want* to obtain paid work. Case managers have to “see, smell, feel that [recipients] intend to get back to work”, as one of them articulated it.

Yet, the ‘work’ that social assistance recipients are supposed to ‘get back to’ mainly entails temporary, discontinuous, badly paid and highly insecure employment in, for example, call-centres, cleaning and hospitality. For many, even such jobs remain out of reach, receiving rejection after rejection because they are not ‘qualified’ and/or ‘experienced’ enough, are too ‘expensive’ (due to their age and years of experience), ‘do not fit the company culture’ or, in most cases, without any reason given at all. In the context of conditional social assistance and precarious employment, focussing on the future fantasy of a ‘dream-job’ is the only thing left to offer relief. But teaching social assistance recipients to be ‘optimistic’ and to look ‘presentable’ in every possible work-context (with the help of philanthropic organisations such as Dress for Success) does not offer them social security. Instead, it offers them strategies to cope with insecurity, leaving them vulnerable and dependent on access to the knowledge, abilities and resources that enable them to be continuously creative, mobile and reflexive (compare Skeggs, 2004).

The state’s mobilisation of affects is not new (see for example Rose, 1989; Duyvendak, 2011; Muehlebach, 2012; De Wilde, 2015). Nevertheless, teaching citizens ‘optimism’ and the ‘right’ aesthetics – and enabling case managers to sanction recipients if they fail to ‘think in possibilities’ or ‘look presentable’ – is characteristic of contemporary social assistance in the Netherlands and beyond (see for example Friedli and

Stearn, 2015; Kampen and Tonkens, 2018). Today, peoples' 'whole selves' are not only exploited in paid work (in the post-Fordist labour market), but also for paid work (in welfare-to-work programmes). Welfare-to-work, then, is an example of what Lisa Adkins describes as "the folding of the economy into society", that is, "a process concerning the movement of productive and value-creating activities away from the formal workplace" and into other (private and social) aspects of life (Adkins, 2012, pp. 621-622). At all times, people have to (be able to) look, think, feel and act in ways that can potentially be 'put to use' in the market – where it can be converted into capital (see Bourdieu, 1986).

Glorification of paid work

This dissertation has shown that the daily practices that constitute welfare-to-work policy (re)produce the *ideal of paid work* as the primary avenue to decent subsistence, to achieve something in life, and to be a valuable member of society. They also reproduce the dominant notion that social assistance is unable to provide these goods – nor should it. As the recipients of social assistance are stigmatised, paid work is glorified – as an opportunity for people to earn income, to develop themselves, to make social connections, to 'do what they love', reach their full potential and, ultimately, be happy (compare Honneth, 2004; Walkerdine and Bansel, 2010; Tokumitsu, 2015; Weeks, 2017). Welfare-to-work requires recipients to 'obtain, accept and retain generally acceptable employment' even when they have caring obligations that prevent them from participating in the labour market. And as this dissertation has shown, this 'generally acceptable employment' generally means precarious employment. Welfare-to-work policy thus revolves around the prominence and promise of paid work while the precarious labour market rarely offers social assistance recipients work that provides economic security, social status and belonging. 'The promise of happiness' (Ahmed, 2010) that is cultivated is a future promise to be redeemed outside of social assistance, in the labour market by recipients themselves. They are taught to work their way up from a (precarious) 'bread job' to a 'dream job', while the post-Fordist economy offers them few avenues to realise this dream. Existing attachments to the 'Fordist' ideal of paid work are thus mobilised in welfare-to-work

to encourage social assistance recipients to ‘obtain, accept and retain’ precarious employment in the post-Fordist labour market and to dream about better futures without offering them tangible ways to actualise this dream (compare Muehlebach and Shoshan, 2012). The glorification of paid work is ‘cruel’ as it commits recipients to forms of employment in the present that actually hamper their chances to improve their situations in the future (compare Berlant, 2011).

With the glorification of paid work, welfare-to-work does not only assign value to paid work, it simultaneously devalues all the unpaid work people (predominantly women) do that often goes unnoticed, yet is crucial for enabling paid work and life more generally. It thus does not only ‘cruelly’ reproduce the (for many people unattainable) ‘Fordist’ ideal of paid work but also contributes to the ‘post-Fordist’ blurring of boundaries between paid and unpaid, ‘productive’ and ‘reproductive’ work, while ‘free-riding’ on the latter (Fraser, 2016). As all citizens are expected to perform paid ‘productive’ or ‘reproductive’ work – which, as this dissertation has shown, requires a lot of unpaid aesthetic and affective labour – the unpaid ‘reproductive’ work that is indispensable to human life, is being ‘squeezed’ (Ibid). In the context of post-Fordist labour markets and welfare-to-work, this work of nurturing children, managing households, caring for others, cultivating social relations and political participation is undermined, resulting in what Nancy Fraser has termed the ‘crisis of care’ (Fraser, 2016; compare Lorey, 2019). The post-Fordist economy ‘free-rides’ on this unpaid ‘reproductive’ work (predominantly done by women) because it does not attribute value to it (neither in terms of capital nor in terms of time) and treats it as a free and infinite resource (Fraser, 2016, p. 101). Welfare-to-work contributes to this, by treating unpaid ‘reproductive’ work as something separate and secondary to paid work. Consequently, it does not only enhance the ‘crisis of care’, but also reinforces the gendered division of labour, as it marginalises the unpaid ‘reproductive’ work that is predominantly done by women.

Discussion: The politics of precarisation

This dissertation has focussed on the details of welfare-to-work and what it requires of case managers and social assistance recipients. The former must

perform evaluative and pedagogical work to judge and change the looks, thoughts, feelings and behaviours of recipients by enticing, persuading or enforcing them to do so. The latter must continuously evaluate, regulate and adjust their aesthetics, affects and performances in order to potentially find paid work in the future, or, in any case, to not to lose (part of) their income right now. Recipients of social assistance must not only (learn to) become 'decent' (i.e. looking, thinking, feeling and acting the 'right' way) but to become 'adaptable' as the 'right' performance is largely context-dependent and ever-changing. What exactly is required of social assistance recipients and how they are steered towards paid work differs between and within social assistance offices. Recipients must thus be able to 'read' and understand not only potential labour market positions, but also local welfare-to-work policies and programmes as they are shaped by case managers.

The aim of welfare-to-work policies to reduce the population of social assistance recipients by deterring those in need of assistance through stringent rules and sanctions leaves important questions unanswered. For instance, what happens to people who drop out of the process during the 'intake' (applying for benefits) or later on, when they do not meet the aesthetic, affective and/or behavioural requirements and relinquish their right to claim social assistance? In policy terms, it is a 'success' when people are prevented from claiming social assistance benefits ('instroom beperken'), just as it is when they 'exit' social assistance ('uitstroom bevorderen') to start paid work or because they reach pensionable age, move away or start new relationships. What happens to people who lose their right to social assistance benefits when they have found a partner who earns enough (according to the rules) to sustain them both? It makes former social assistance recipients even more vulnerable to relations of domination, as they become economically dependent on their partner. The primary aim of welfare-to-work is for recipients to find paid work, but what happens to those who do? What kinds of jobs do they find, with what working conditions, level of income, autonomy and security? We know little about how people manage to provide for themselves and their families outside of social security arrangements. How do they arrange their social security – their present and future income, housing, education, health- and childcare? How (well) do people cope? Considering what we

know about precarious labour markets and severe household debt, my guess is that, for many people (albeit to different degrees) the answer is: barely and with a lot of effort.

Welfare-to-work, then, is an example of how ‘governmental precarisation’ works today (Lorey, 2015). Participation in welfare-to-work programmes and labour markets are best understood as stages in a continuous situation of precarity. Welfare-to-work policies do not counterbalance precarious labour market conditions, but compound it by offering a minimum of social assistance while ‘pushing’ people into precarious employment, teaching them to (optimistically) endure being vulnerable and insecure (both in social assistance and the labour market) and making them individually responsible to improve their fate. It mobilises ‘powerful affective attachments’ (Muehlebach and Shoshan, 2012) to paid work as the primary and only way to economic security, social belonging and improving one’s condition and position in society. This not only applies to social assistance recipients; as this research has shown, precarisation affects case managers as well. They too have to individually deal with the risk of unemployment always looming in the background. They too need to be continuously and completely ‘ready’ to adapt to changing circumstances.

The rhetoric of welfare-to-work making people ‘autonomous’, ‘self-reliant’ (‘zelfredzaam’) and ‘independent’ of social assistance ignores important implications of this type of policy: people have become increasingly ‘dependent’ in the labour market. In the contemporary precarious labour market, this means being dependent on contingency. With the restructuring of the welfare state (of which welfare-to-work is but one exemplary part), collectively organised social security has in large part been exchanged for individualised ways of coping with contingency. Through policies such as welfare-to-work, governments uphold promises that more and more people cannot redeem, rendering them precarious across social positions, struggling for economic security, social status and belonging, while simultaneously normalising their permanent ‘state of insecurity’ (Lorey, 2015). Whereas the social assistance arrangements of European post-war welfare states can be said to be a politics of social security, welfare-to-work is rather a politics of precarisation that (re)produces socioeconomic inequalities, consigning recipients to

conditional social assistance and precarious employment while making them individually responsible for coping with these circumstances and improving their situation.

These politics of precarisation are an example of ‘governmental precarisation’, but that does not mean that it is limited to this. In this dissertation, I have chosen to study the dynamics of ‘governmental precarisation’ in the context of contemporary social assistance as it is provided for ‘work-ready’ recipients by local governments and private organisations under the terms of the Dutch Participation Act, because this is where one way for individuals to secure their position in society (by means of social assistance benefits and services) is replaced by another (earning money in the labour market). Yet, these dynamics can also be studied in other (national) contexts, such as family life (see for example Cooper, 2014) and the high tech industry (see for example Lane, 2011). Examining governmental precarisation in different (national) contexts allows us to grasp the processes inherent to post-Fordist, globalised, financialised capitalism, to understand how people embrace, cope with and resist the normalisation of precarisation, to reflect on ‘social security’ as it is organised today and to imagine alternative futures.

Alternative imagined futures

The imagined futures so pivotal to welfare-to-work policy and practice centre around (unattainable) individual labour market success through which we are all required to *individually* organise protection against social risks (e.g. sickness, poverty) and to prove that we are worthy members of society. Here, I wish to propose alternative imagined futures for social assistance – and social security more broadly – that entail *collectively* organised protection against social risks and which offer individuals multiple routes to achieve stable, fulfilling lives. I propose that we should not hold people individually responsible for ‘protecting’ themselves against vulnerability, but to recognise that this vulnerability is part and parcel of human life, something that we all share and relates us to one another (see Butler, 2004; Lister, 2017). Because post-Fordist economic, political and social processes make people increasingly preoccupied with precarious working and living conditions, isolating them from each other

(Lorey, 2015) while nation-states increasingly (have to) focus on fiscal consolidation (Streeck, 2014), the possibilities for collectively organising protection against social risks are severely limited. Still, I wish to formulate concrete alternatives for collective social security in order to open up possibilities for this within the context of formerly well-developed welfare states such as the Netherlands – although, of course, more structural transformations are necessary on a global scale. To do this, I start from current social assistance policy, or ‘welfare-to-work’.

As I wrote in the dissertation’s introduction, I understand welfare-to-work – following the definition of Caswell et al – to be “programmes and services that are aimed at strengthening the employability [and] labour-market (...) participation of [partially] unemployed benefit recipients of working age, usually by combining enforcing/obligatory/disciplining and enabling/supportive measures in varying extents” (Caswell et al, 2017, p. 3). Two points here offer a starting point for imagining alternative futures. First, social assistance does not need to be aimed solely at strengthening peoples’ ‘employability’, that is, increasing their chances of obtaining and retaining paid work. Contrary to the assumptions underlying welfare-to-work policies, labour market participation does not guarantee individuals ‘autonomy’ as many must depend on precarious labour (relations); nor does it necessarily enable workers to ‘develop’ themselves through possibilities for ‘self-fulfilment’. While the (labour) market might provide this opportunity for some, it certainly does not for all. To contend that it is possible for everyone to ‘flourish’ by performing paid labour in the post-Fordist labour market is to cultivate ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011).

Framing social problems such as unemployment and poverty as individual problems – resulting from aesthetic, affective and behavioural shortcomings – and devising policy based on this does not address their structural and cyclical causes and the damaging consequences for peoples’ lives. Even though welfare-to-work policy redistributes financial resources, it still reproduces important inequalities. To force all individuals to participate in the labour market with the false promise of economic success, social status and individual happiness – no matter how precarious and low-paid their position – contributes to (legitimising) the exploitation, domination, devaluation and stigmatisation of certain populations – especially women, those who are categorised as belonging

to the 'lower classes' (due to the lack of certain forms of capital) and those who are racialised due to their skin-color, religion, cultural and/or migrant background (compare Skeggs, 1997; Korteweg, 2006; Ben-Ishai, 2012; Tyler, 2013; Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Skeggs, 2015; Krivonos, 2019).

In its stead, we need policies that address the causes of social problems such as unemployment and poverty (see for example Streeck, 2014) or that at least ameliorate them. Moreover, we can imagine supporting other roles people can have in society such as participating in (national and local) decision making, contributing to the wellbeing of local communities, advocating for interest groups, raising children and caring for others. This does not mean that social assistance policy should allow recipients to perform these kinds of work that are currently un(der)paid (i.e. 'volunteer work' and 'domestic labour') while retaining the right to benefits. It requires these forms of work to become decently paid (with public funds) in order for people to be able to sustain themselves (and their families). Or, alternatively, more drastic measures are necessary, such as shorter working days and weeks and/or an unconditional basic income to allow people to prioritise other roles than that of 'paid worker' (see for example Pateman, 2004; Weeks, 2011; Frayne, 2015).

Second, if 'labour market (re)integration' is the primary aim of social assistance policy, we need enough secure, well-paid jobs and accessible "employment-enabling services, such as day care and elder care" that free people (especially women) from having to perform unpaid work (Fraser, 1997, p. 51). This also means that all forms of work that are currently unpaid (most notably reproductive, care, domestic and community work), should be performed by paid (instead of unpaid) workers (in the market) and that this paid work should enable people to sustain themselves (and their families) (compare Fraser, 1997). An alternative option would require enough secure, well-paid jobs that demand less time (i.e. less working hours) in order for people to be able to perform unpaid work and develop themselves as (fellow-)citizen or caregiver next to sufficiently paid work (see for example Weeks, 2011; Frayne, 2015).

Subsequently, for those who are (temporarily) out of paid work, various measures and approaches are conceivable. It is, for example, possible to move from 'enforcing/obligatory/ disciplining' measures towards those that are 'enabling/supportive'. Such measures would not

entail aesthetic and behavioural requirements that demand from case managers that they judge and sanction social assistance recipients based on classed, gendered and racialised notions of ‘proper’ looks, thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Enabling and supportive ‘labour market (re) integration services’ would consist of vocational training instead of workshops that teach recipients the ‘right’ aesthetics and affects. They would also demand more active involvement from case managers (finding proper jobs) and employers (offering proper jobs and refraining from biased judgements about recipients) to actually bring paid work closer to social assistance recipients rather than merely imitating this closeness. Importantly, these services should cultivate professional standards for case managers and create professional environments (with enough time and without ‘targets’ for the number of recipients exiting social assistance) that enable them to treat recipients with respect, enhancing rather than undermining their dignity. Such an environment would enable and encourage social assistance recipients to voice their concerns and to make use of existing complaints procedures and their right to appeal. Finally, if ‘labour market (re)integration’ is organised at the local level, it should be democratically controlled through local public debate.

With these alternative imagined futures, I agree with Wolfgang Streeck (2014) that we need “as far as possible to defend and repair what is left of the institutions” that redistribute valuable resources, thereby counterbalancing the social inequalities brought forth by the (labour) market and guaranteeing social security (Streeck, 2014, p. 174). As this hardly seems possible in a ‘consolidation state’ such as the Netherlands focussed on servicing public debt, containing public expenditures, and privatising social security, it requires long-lasting political mobilisation and disruption of the status quo (Ibid). It furthermore requires different labour market policies, offering employment rights and social protection to all paid workers (see for example Rubery et al, 2018). I do not wish to idealise how social security was organised in many post-war European welfare-state-societies. The labour market was highly exclusive and required much from both (male) paid workers – who had to earn money and obtain social status largely through (physically) demanding (and alienating) work – and (female) unpaid workers performing reproductive and care work at home. Moreover, as Tracey Jensen and

Imogen Tyler argue: “the welfare state was always a moral and disciplinary project, conditional upon certain kinds of ideal citizens and behaviours and grounded in classificatory distinctions between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’” (Jensen and Tyler, 2015, p. 471). I agree with them that we need to collectively re-imagine how we can share risks and organise institutions that “ameliorate economic and social hardships, injustices and inequalities” (Ibid) rather than compelling people to individually imagine a future that for the majority will never become a reality. With this dissertation, I have sought to expose how contemporary social assistance (re)produces rather than ameliorates economic and social hardships, injustices and inequalities, and to re-imagine alternatives that undo precarisation in the future.