

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Australian Centaur State and the Post-Pandemic Economic Recovery

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Abstract

This article uses Loïc Wacquant’s concept of the centaur state to analyse symbolic framings of the meaning and future of work in the Australian policy response to COVID-19 in 2020. In contrast with historical conceptualisations anchored in rights and social security, contemporary Australian social welfare policy discourse is dominated by political representations of the imperative to work. For people currently outside of the labour market, self-reliance through paid work is a primary objective of social security policy. In 2020, economic impacts of national lockdowns were ameliorated by large transfers from the state to businesses and individuals. Concurrent announcements of plans for a ‘business-led’ post-pandemic economic recovery centred the message that the meaning of work lies in its individual and social utility. Prior to the pandemic, transformation of the modes of organisation of work had already brought into question normative claims about the meaning of work, and what is comprehended by the term ‘job’. Analysis of key ‘economic recovery’ policy initiatives illustrates that they combined considerable corporate welfare with a construction of job seekers as having unrealistic expectations of meaningful work, for which there could be no room in the institutional machinery driving economic recovery. In the policy trajectory of the Australian centaur state, the future of work for people currently unemployed is to serve as a resource to fuel the business-led recovery.

Keywords: COVID-19; meaningful work; social welfare policy; work futures

JEL Codes: I38; P16; H53

Introduction

This article explores the Australian government’s construction of the meaning of ‘work’ in relation to ‘economic recovery’, following the first appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic (‘the pandemic’) in Australia in 2020. Wacquant’s ‘centaur state’ thesis is mobilised to illuminate the then government’s understanding of economics and labour relations, and the social implications of this understanding for people currently outside of the formal labour market. The pandemic interrupted a programme of ‘welfare reform’ implemented over the previous 5 years, involving both the institutional and symbolic reorientation of social welfare policy in Australia. For people experiencing unemployment, welfare reform principally entailed increasing enforcement of obligations to actively seek work in exchange

for income security payments, including financial penalties for non-compliance (Morrison 2015; Porter 2017a, 2017b).

In 2020, the Australian response to the pandemic resulted in large fluctuations in labour market participation and the first acknowledged recession in nearly three decades (Frydenberg 2020a). By the end of March 2020, a population-wide lockdown had stalled economic activity, and financial support was provided through the *Coronavirus Economic Response Package (Payments and Benefits) Act 2020* and *Coronavirus Economic Response Package Omnibus (Measures No. 2) Act 2020*. These measures enabled temporary support for businesses to retain employees through a wage subsidy called 'JobKeeper'. People experiencing unemployment were paid a supplement to their income support payments, called 'JobSeeker'. The Federal Government's response thus combined significant corporate welfare and targeted individual support depending on workforce status. By the end of April 2020, the government had begun to announce plans for 'economic recovery' (Commonwealth of Australia 2020a). The then incumbent, while ideologically committed to a policy platform of deregulation, fiscal austerity, and a minimal state (Liberal Party 2002), had by mid-2020 enacted public spending measures estimated by the Treasury to cost in the area of \$AU 300 billion (Commonwealth of Australia 2020b). As a proportion of GDP, Hawkins (2021) estimated that Government expenditure rose from an average of 25% for the previous two decades to a peak of 34% in 2020–21.

In his theorisation of the convergence of welfare and penal responses in American neoliberalism through practices of 'punitive containment' (2009: 294), Wacquant developed a sociological perspective on neoliberalism that identified the need for analysis of 'the institutional machinery and symbolic frames through which neoliberal tenets are being actualized' (Wacquant 2009: 306). To the orthodox economic frame of deregulation, Wacquant added the institutional machinery of 'welfare state devolution, retraction, and recomposition designed to facilitate the expansion and support the intensification of commodification, and in particular to submit reticent individuals to the discipline of desocialized wage labor via variants of "workfare"', complemented by the 'cultural trope of individual responsibility' and entrepreneurship, which both legitimates market-style modes of social organisation and absolves the state of its prior social and economic responsibilities (Wacquant 2009: 307). This governmentality is supported by 'an expansive, intrusive, and proactive penal apparatus' which manages and contains the ensuing social insecurity with strategies of punitive containment. Against assertions of a minimal state, Wacquant concludes neoliberal tenets are actualised by:

not the shrinking of government, but the erection of a centaur state, liberal at the top and paternalistic at the bottom, which presents radically different faces at the two ends of the social hierarchy: a comely and caring visage toward the middle and upper classes, and a fearsome and frowning mug toward the lower class. (2009: 312)

As illustrated by the chronology of events, the Australian Federal Government's policy response to the pandemic was exactly that of a centaur state. Centaur states demonstrate the significant power the state retains to affect the future conditions of work. Wacquant described this power in terms of a capacity 'to trace salient social demarcations and produce social reality through its work of inculcation of efficient categories and classifications' (2009: xvi). As such a force, the symbolic frames embedded in government policy must be an analytical focus of any attempt to theorise or influence the future of work.

Deranty and Breen, commenting on the ethics and politics of work and the pandemic, associated economic responses to crisis with the 'curtailing of freedoms at work' where these are framed as a necessary 'part of an emergency response to an overwhelming threat' and attributing to 'hard-nosed economists and business leaders' the view that

Table 1. Sources used in the analysis

Source	Documents
Statements, speeches, and interviews by Liberal National Coalition Government Ministers	Andrews (2014a, 2014b); Frydenberg (2020a, 2020b); McCormack (2020); Morrison (2015, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021a, 2021b); O’Dwyer (2019); Porter (2017a, 2017b, 2016a, 2016b).
Commonwealth Government policy statements, Legislation, Parliamentary Committee reports	Commonwealth of Australia (2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e, 2021f, 2021g, 2021h, 2021i, 2021k)
Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE)	DESE (2021, 2020a, 2020b)
Department of Jobs and Small Business (DJSB)	DJSB (2018)

‘In times of crisis . . . freedom must make room for economic efficiency at the macro-level of the national product and at the micro-level of the firm’s productivity’ (2021: 8).

Australian government policy discourses shape normative understandings and expectations of work, which are then operationalised across social security, economic, and employment programmes. The pandemic ‘economic recovery’ discourse is an example of policy reframing the symbolic meaning of work. Commencing with consideration of statements communicating normative framings of the purpose of work, the article then analyses key policy announcements in the development of the Australian Government’s pandemic response through 2020. Analysis of the discursive enactment of a new institutional machinery illustrates how liberalisation strategies to promote business activity were accompanied by curtailment of the future freedom to engage in meaningful work – for some – as legitimated through the symbolic frame of ‘economic recovery’. We argue that the vision of work embedded in governmental policy discourse relegated people seeking work to a lower symbolic social status than those currently employed, and that this structured inequity operated as a principle of selection to produce and reinforce a new institutional machinery and social reality of labour relations.

Method

The analysis is of policy documents produced between 2014 and 2021 centred around social security, work, and unemployment, in an Australian context. The period spans three successive terms of the Liberal National Coalition Government and shifts in policy discourses and policy change relating to social support and employment that occurred through that time. The specific focus of this article is on the construction of work in relation to ‘economic recovery’ conceptualised and implemented by the government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Whereas the focus of this analysis is on policy statements directly concerned with social security and employment following the onset of the pandemic, the study also includes policy statements prior to the pandemic that are relevant to highlight the trajectory of political discourses and policy making.

Table 1 shows the policy documents used in the analysis: principally policy statements, speeches, and interviews by Federal Government Ministers, between 2014 and 2021. Policy statements, legislation, and parliamentary committee reports published by the Commonwealth of Australia and policy documents relevant to social security and employment published by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), and the Department of Jobs and Small Business (DJSB) were also included. Together these

statements illustrate the implications of symbolic reframing via representations of work, unemployment, and social security in dominant policy discourses, and their operationalisation in the ‘institutional machinery’ of the social security and broader economic systems. As such, the analysis is confined to documents that are representative of the change discourse of the Australian Government.

The construction of work in pre-pandemic welfare reform

Mainstream economics conceptualises work as a means through which people satisfy consumption wants; work itself is conceived as a disutility and remuneration as recompense for the detrimental impacts of work (such as loss of leisure time) on the worker (Pocock 2009; Sayer 2012; Spencer 2015). From that perspective, work is meaningful as a means, through the income that it yields. The positioning of work as a necessary ‘bad’ also contributes to the interpretation of work as an activity that people would prefer to avoid (Pocock 2009; Spencer 2015). Spencer argued:

the picture of workers as incorrigible ‘shirkers’ has an ideological cast that fits with the interests of employers. It offers a ready-made excuse to blame workers for work resistance and avoids confrontation with the malpractice and exploitative behaviour of employers. It also condones and supports traditional, top-down governance systems that seek to curtail the discretionary power and freedom of workers. (2015: 677–78)

By contrast, the Liberal discourse of work has been dominated by a modification of the utilitarian perspective, incorporating the normative assumption that ‘a job’ enables financial self-sufficiency, and a meaningful existence through the ability to find purpose in life, support a family, and participate in economic life (Morrison 2015; O’Dwyer 2019; Porter 2016a, 2016b). Participation in work is framed as the foundation of a better life, ‘made more meaningful by employment, by community contribution and through self-reliance’ (Porter 2016a). In some representations, work loses its meaning as a means, becoming an end-in-itself:

Before it was ever an economic exchange — work was (and still remains) THE most fundamental form of giving — the giving by the direct application of individual capabilities to community needs. This is why work provides depth and meaning to our lives. It is self-worth from self-reliance. Its friendships, its purpose and meaning in life. And when our capacity to work is applied in our own communities the fundamental reward is that we are linked into those communities and isolation gives way to connectedness and belonging. (Porter 2017b, original emphasis)

This discourse underpinned a programme of ‘welfare reform’ focused on people experiencing unemployment achieving ‘self-reliance’, recently expressed in a revised primary outcome of the social security programme as ‘a sustainable social security system that incentivises self-reliance and supports people who cannot fully support themselves by providing targeted payments and assistance’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2021f:192, authors emphasis).

The focus on self-reliance has been translated into a policy imperative that job seekers should accept work regardless of its relationship to their capabilities or aspirations. This symbolic framing was promoted through political speeches on welfare reform, for example:

I might make mention of a question that was put during the press conference announcing welfare reforms. It was to the effect that — ‘are you saying if someone

is qualified as an aeronautical engineer they should be content with working in a café?’ There is a specific and general answer to this question. The specific answer is that how content someone is depends on them and their job and whether they see how jobs in retail and tourism or care are great and valuable jobs or how they use an initial job to move into a second better job. But the general answer to the question is that being dependent on yourself in a job is always better than being dependent on an unemployment benefit. (Porter 2017a)

This statement both individualises meaning (‘how content someone is depends on them’) and prioritises independence as the meaning of work. In a series of speeches and media releases on welfare reform, members of the former government repeated the sentiment that work provides people with social meaning through the contribution that it enables them to make to their communities (Andrews 2014a, 2014b; Porter 2017b). Community mindedness and community participation were primarily equated with participation in paid employment; having ‘a job’ is constructed as virtuous giving.

‘Economic recovery’ discourse (i): ‘liberal at the top . . .’

The Government’s response to the economic crisis in 2020 focused on creating a beneficial investment environment for business. Ultimately, this was claimed to be inspired by the need to create ‘jobs’, in response to the overwhelming loss of employment experienced through 2020. Announcements of recovery plans in mid-2020 equated ‘jobs’ and economic recovery through attaching the prefix ‘Job’ to every major initiative. An overarching plan, entitled ‘JobMaker’, centred on five objectives: ‘support a stronger economy; drive a faster recovery in employment; invest in skills and higher education; improve the ease of doing business; and support the manufacturing and energy sectors’ which it was claimed would ‘secure a strong and sustained economic recovery which will help drive the unemployment rate down as fast as possible’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2020a: 4).

A second set of initiatives were announced, both framed in terms of ensuring available human capital ‘in areas of anticipated employment growth’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2021h): ‘JobTrainer’ (free or ‘low fee’ skills courses) and ‘JobReady Graduates’ (university funding arrangements). In the case of the higher education ‘JobReady Graduates’ legislation, a system-wide reorientation of the university system toward the imperative of graduate employability, restructured the institutional machinery through restructuring funding arrangements (Warburton 2021). Student fees and Commonwealth funding for different courses were raised and lowered relative to perceived areas of future employability, on the assumption that prospective students would enroll in courses of study based on price signal incentives.

The prominent role of business in economic recovery was underscored by the Prime Minister, who announced JobMaker as:

A plan that retains a clear focus on lower taxes, competitive policy settings for Australian industry, sensible industrial relations settings, deregulation, open trade, open markets. A plan that does not sacrifice our traditional industries in regional Australia by seeking to tax our way to lower emissions and a net zero economy. A plan that invests in our people and new technologies — whether it be in our manufacturing plan, our plan to become one of the world’s leading digital economies by 2030, and our plan to take full advantage of the big global energy transition that is taking place around the world. A plan that very much puts business and the private sector in the driver’s seat for a durable and strong economic recovery. (Morrison 2021a)

In this statement, and the 2020 JobMaker programme (Morrison 2020b) ‘recovery’ lies in liberalisation of policy settings in such areas as taxation, industrial relations, trade, climate change, manufacturing, and energy, to support business growth and profitability. The main contention was that preferential conditions for business, created by the state, would empower the private sector to ‘earn our way’ out of the economic crisis (Morrison 2020b). As explained by the Prime Minister:

Value created by establishing successful products and services, the ability to be able to sell them at a competitive and profitable price and into growing and sustainable markets. It’s economics 101. That’s what happens in a sustainable and successful job making market economy. (Morrison 2020a)

This construction positions market liberalism as ‘economics 101’ and assumes the role of government is to facilitate value creation, through stimulating economic growth which results in job creation. The validity of such a claim assumes the existence of a ‘virtuous economic cycle’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2020a: 19) linking enhanced business profitability with job creation (Frydenberg 2020a; Morrison 2020b, 2021a).

Value creation was to be facilitated by incentives in the form of cash transfers and deductions through such programmes as the AUD 4 billion ‘JobMaker Hiring Credit’, paying businesses hiring people aged 34 and under a 12-month wage subsidy; ‘temporary full expensing’ allowing business tax deductions for the cost of new and upgrading of equipment until 2023; deduction of losses against prior years’ profits (Commonwealth of Australia 2021e: 8); a 10-year AUD 110 billion ‘infrastructure pipeline’, and progression of the deregulation agenda, including ‘removal of responsible lending obligations under the *National Consumer Credit Protection Act 2009*’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2020a: 46), and digitising regulatory processes.

Wide-ranging changes incorporated in the economic recovery programme were acknowledged as long-held ambitions: ‘From well before COVID, deregulation has been an integral part of our economic plan . . . We are determined to take unnecessary regulatory burdens off business, off employers, to unlock investment and to create jobs’ (Morrison 2021a). The crises caused by the pandemic provided a rationale to expedite changes envisaged as part of a long-term programme of restructuring to support business (Morrison 2020b) and to reinforce the construct of work as an obligation to the nation. In the implementation of a ‘business-led’ recovery, the Government emphasised business flexibility and profitability (Morrison 2021a, 2020b); as Peetz (2021: 430) argued, alternative policy agendas received little attention. The emphasis on ‘job making’ remained rhetorical, in the sense that it was frequently used but remained undefined. For example, the Treasurer’s Budget Speech for 2020–21 mentioned the word ‘job’ 50 times, in reference to job losses caused by the pandemic and job-creation measures introduced by the government: ‘Tonight, we embark as a nation on the next phase of our journey. A journey to rebuild our economy and secure Australia’s future. Our plan will grow the economy. Our plan will create jobs’ (Frydenberg 2020b). The nature of the jobs to be created was not identified as a concern; the rhetoric of ‘economic recovery’ stipulated the role of government as supporting business activity in the name of job creation.

‘Economic recovery’ discourse (ii): ‘. . . paternalistic at the bottom’

The construction of work as disutility, coupled with the assumption that freedom of choice underpins avoidance of the obligation to work, was evident in the pre-pandemic institutional machinery of the Australian social security system. Mutual obligation requirements are imposed as a condition of receipt of income support payments, ‘designed to ensure that unemployed people receiving activity tested income support payments are actively

looking for work and are participating in activities that will help them into employment’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2021a). The symbolic underpinning of mutual obligation requirements is the frequently repeated statement that ‘the best form of welfare is a job, and we will do everything that we can to move people from welfare into work’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2021j). Mutual obligation uses punitive measures intended to ensure compliant behaviour from job seekers; the Targeted Compliance Framework introduced in 2018 is a central part of this strategy, using the threat of financial penalties to ‘incentivise’ job seeking activity and to penalise job seekers who are ‘non-compliant’ with mutual obligation requirements (non-attendance at an interview with an employment services organisation, for example). The harshest penalties are reserved for what is described as a ‘work refusal failure’ or an ‘employment failure’ (DESE 2020a: 5; 2020b:12):

Where a job seeker fails to accept or commence a suitable job, leaves a job or is dismissed for misconduct, immediate financial penalties may be applied. This means the most severe penalties can be applied for the most serious types of non-compliance. (DJSB 2018: 4)

‘Severe penalties’ extend to cancellation of payment followed by a minimum 28-day waiting period before being able to reapply (DESE 2020b).

Payment rates reflect the disincentive principle of ‘less eligibility’, which is the belief that income security payments set at a rate lower than wages offer an incentive to work. This was reflected in the announcement of the end of the coronavirus supplement for JobSeeker payments in February 2021, which provided people receiving income support payments with an additional AUD 550 per fortnight (Davidson et al. 2020). This measure helped alleviate the worst impacts of poverty for many (Davidson et al. 2020). However, in the middle to latter parts of 2020, members of the Australian government suggested that this measure disincentivised work (Morrison 2020c; Hurst 2020; Karp 2020). As then Prime Minister Morrison explained in a radio interview (Morrison 2020c):

What we have to be worried about now is that we can’t allow the JobSeeker payment to become an impediment to people going out and doing work, getting extra shifts. And we are getting a lot of anecdotal feedback from small businesses even large businesses where some of them are finding it hard to get people to come and take the shifts because they’re on these higher levels of payment.

These claims were not founded on any substantial evidence (Karp 2020). At the time, a number of key industries were still impacted by considerable restrictions, and the number of jobs lost due to the pandemic had yet to be restored. This argument leant on the decades-long construction of job seekers as ‘work shy’ shirkers (Marston 2008; Badham 2020), whose unwillingness to accept work would be an impediment to economic recovery. To illustrate this point, job seekers were encouraged to move to regional areas and take on work such as fruit picking (Morrison 2021b; Whyte 2020). Notwithstanding exploitative conditions experienced by many workers in fruit picking (Cowburn 2020; Martin 2019), the then Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack invoked stereotypical constructs of young unemployed people, stating:

if you’re on your surfboard, you’re unemployed, you’re on the coast and you really want to improve yourself and help your nation besides, have a look what’s available for you. There are plenty of jobs and plenty of good paying jobs

There are people out there who probably don’t have jobs and there are plenty of people collecting a welfare cheque who could better themselves, who could improve

themselves, give them new skills, meet new friends and as I say, get those adventures for life. A great Instagram story up on a fruit tree, up on a ladder picking fruit, sun shining in the background, meeting new friends . . . (McCormack 2020)

The removal of the coronavirus supplement was accompanied by the first increase to income support payments since the 1980s, taking the basic payment from 37.5% to 41.2% of the minimum wage. The Prime Minister commented:

If you're on JobSeeker, we'll work night and day to get you off it and into a job . . . Every person we get off JobSeeker on to a job, that not only puts their household budget in a better position so they can have greater control over own lives, that also supports the Australian people's budget, as expressed through the Australian Government's Budget. (Commonwealth of Australia 2021j)

Reframing 'suitable work'

As part of the digital economy strategy a 'New Employment Services Model' was funded to commence in mid-2022. The digital employment services platform was described as 'a high quality, personalised digital platform [with] a range of tools, online learning and job matching' intended for 'digitally literate' job seekers, and offering ' . . . matching, pre-screening and validation processes for jobseekers, [to] assist employers and providers in maximising employment outcomes' (Commonwealth of Australia 2021b: 40). An exposure draft of the purchasing model for enhanced services elaborated that it would be, 'a core service that includes resumé tools, online learning modules, professional career guidance, a Jobs Board with skills matching, links to training and other programs and support' (Commonwealth of Australia 2021i: 21).

The digitalisation of employment services provision was followed by amendments to the *Social Security Act (Cth) 1991* and *Social Security (Administration) Act (Cth) 1999*, through the *Social Security Legislation Amendment (Streamlined Participation Requirements and Other Measures) Bill 2021*. Amongst other provisions, the Bill proposed to formalise the new digital institutional machinery by elevating the symbolic frame of 'suitable work' as a frame of arbitration in the operation of targeted compliance measures. The reference to 'suitable work' prompts the question of how suitability is determined, and who, or in a digital environment what algorithm, might make that determination. The explanatory memorandum for the amendment clarified that:

work is not unsuitable for a person merely because they consider that they are too highly qualified to do it or would prefer a higher rate of pay. This is not a substantive change to the law as it reflects the manner in which courts and tribunals have interpreted the provisions but will *send a clearer message that job seekers cannot expect to be supported by the tax payer if they turn down work which they are capable of safely doing merely because it is not their preferred type of work or preferred rate of pay.* (Commonwealth of Australia 2021c: 7, authors emphasis)

Construing individual aspiration and value as 'preference' directly challenges normative conceptualisations of meaningful work (informed by individual attributions of meaning) as a legitimate frame for job seekers. It is arguable that enshrining this construct of suitability in the amendment is 'not a substantive change to the law', particularly considering the potential impact of automated administrative processes mediating interactions of job seekers and mutual obligation provisions. Job seekers are not free to refuse work that is incommensurate with their qualifications, training, skill set, or financial requirements. The phrase 'job seekers cannot expect' constructs preferences in work as an aspiration

to which people experiencing unemployment are not entitled. It further underscores the assumption that job seekers are inclined to ‘shirk’ work (Spencer 2015) and therefore require the threat of penalty to pre-empt ‘work refusal failure’.

The phrase ‘merely because it is not their preferred type of work’ signals the pursuit of meaning in work is a lower priority than engaging in paid employment. While there is a provision that a job seeker cannot be required to accept unsuitable work, this is narrowly stipulated:

work will be unsuitable for a person if they cannot do it because of a lack of training and no training will be provided, it would aggravate a medical condition of the person, they lack access to appropriate care and supervision for one or more children they principally care for at times they would be required to do the work, the work is unsafe, remuneration would be less generous than applicable statutory conditions, commuting to and from the work would be unreasonably difficult, they would have to move home to do the work . . . (Commonwealth of Australia 2021c: 78)

This change has symbolic force. By separating the question of meaningful work from the question of suitable work, job seekers are segregated from those who retain autonomy in decisions about their work futures. The necessity for the measure is framed in individualising terms, with reference to clarifying misapprehension on the part of job seekers:

At times a person with significant qualifications, or who considers that their skills warrant greater pay than that offered to them, will need to accept work that is not their preferred work or pays a lower wage than they would prefer, rather than continue to be supported by the taxpayer. (Commonwealth of Australia 2021c: 79)

A Senate Inquiry into the proposed legislation questioned both the framing of the measure and the mechanisms that would be used to determine how unsuitability could be established. The Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights highlighted the measure’s framing of suitability as individual expectation when it observed that:

it remains unclear how job seekers would know that they can refuse a job offer where they believe the workplace may be unsafe because of conduct relating to sexism, racism, homophobia or other bullying or harassment, and whether job services providers would themselves be aware that this may be a legitimate basis on which to find that an offer of employment was not suitable . . . it is not clear what a person would need to demonstrate to make out their case that work was unsuitable. (Commonwealth of Australia 2021k: 60)

Discussion and conclusion

The documentary analysis in this research highlighted the normative constructions of work, ‘jobs’, and social security that informed Australian Federal Government policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in relation to framings of unemployment. Concepts of meaningfulness, choice, and freedom were applied differentially in justifications offered by Government Ministers for the ‘economic recovery’ agenda. Subsequent changes to social security policy showed how these discourses were operationalised in the policy machinery in application to unemployed workers. Debates about personal responsibility, conditionality, and the dignity of work have surrounded welfare systems since their earliest incarnations. The explanatory power of Wacquant’s idea of the centaur state lies in its clear differentiation of the state’s uses of political power to articulate and to

reproduce the relations between the state and capital, and the implications of these relations for workers.

In the Australian context, it was not ‘hard-nosed economists and business leaders’ (Deranty and Breen 2021) but rather the Federal Government making the argument that freedoms should be subordinated to the necessity of economic recovery. In the transition to a discourse of recovery, legislative amendments to industrial relations and social security systems were introduced to give effect to proposed recovery strategies, as the national response was reframed as ‘evolving from a health and crisis management focus, to one of driving Australia’s economic recovery and jobs creation’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2021d). Recovery strategies signaled less a new necessity precipitated by the crisis, as found in crisis a new pretext for further deregulation of constraints on businesses and increasing punitive containment of the unemployed.

The pandemic recovery discourse redefined the boundaries of the ‘realm of necessity’ in relation to both business and work. It rests on a construction of ‘work’ that treats meaningfulness as an externality subordinate to economic imperatives. At the same time, fundamental ambiguity around the meaning and scope of ‘a job’ serves to rebase normative expectations about the configuration of future work for those currently experiencing unemployment.

Framing policy initiatives in the language of economic recovery, the Jobmaker plan assumed that recovery would be achieved through enhancing the capability of business. While the ostensible focus of recovery is described as ‘job creation’, ‘work’ is considered only to the extent that it contributes to a ‘virtuous economic cycle’ propelled by business profitability, and the further assumption that profitability will generate further employment. The extent to which these assumptions are valid in the context of changing employment forms is questionable, as work becomes increasingly precarious and the demand for productivity gains escalates (Deranty and Breen 2021: 2–3).

The new institutional machinery of social security established through digital employment services is oriented to the business-led recovery, configuring job seekers as resources. This is accompanied by a construction of the meaning of work as a duty to participate in the creation of economic value (Deranty and Breen 2021; Spencer 2015) and to achieve self-reliance (albeit through potentially insecure and poorly paid work). For people experiencing unemployment, current social security policy is premised on the assumption of work as a disutility which workers prefer to avoid, requiring their compulsion to participate. This compulsion is manifest in the requirement to accept ‘any suitable work’, where suitability is formally defined *a priori* in policy, rather than understood with reference to individual capability, aspirations, and values. The exercise of individual agency to determine whether work is suitable or not is mitigated by the threat of penalty. Undercutting the right or need for meaning in work denies its importance to workers, and the opportunity to construct their own sense of meaning (Persson and Savulescu 2012).

The Australian pandemic recovery plan adopted a centaur stance in providing direct support to businesses through programmes to stimulate economic activity with comparatively few conditions placed on that support, while signaling a limited scope of agency for those not working. The ‘liberal at the top’ approach adopted by the Australian Government throughout the first year of the pandemic is exemplified through pronouncements that liberating private enterprise from regulation was essential to facilitate economic recovery. Strategies of deregulation, reduced taxation, and financial subsidies for business were presented as a necessary means to stimulate economic activity leading to ‘jobs’ growth. Sweeping structural changes in education, industrial relations, taxation, and environmental regulation were implemented on the basis of the claimed links between business investment, activity and profitability, and job creation. While liberalisation supported business interests, the justification for restructuring was also based on rhetorical

flourishes, assumptions around the relationship between profitability and employment growth, and statements purporting to uphold a societal vision though lacking a substantial evidence base. Business and capital were afforded new freedoms and opportunities on the grounds that their profitability was integral to the recovery of the Australian economy. On the other hand, workers were framed as creating barriers to economic recovery, through their claimed disinclination to work. While the Australian Government sought to create an economic environment to stimulate business growth, inherently trusting business to act in the nation’s interest, workers were perceived with suspicion.

Whereas liberalisation ‘at the top’ was facilitated by rhetoric and unsubstantiated claims, paternalism ‘at the bottom’ was operationalised through the institutional machinery of digital employment services and targeted compliance, which penalise ‘non-compliant’ job seekers who refuse work. While business is afforded the freedom that it is claimed is required to return the economy to a position of growth, workers are denied the freedom to choose work which suits their requirements and circumstances. Furthermore, the institutional machinery governing access to social services serves to enforce the un-freedom of workers. The contrast between the complex institutional apparatus established to deny workers’ freedoms, and the tenuous connections between profitability and job creation, used to rationalise and justify liberalisation of markets and industries, is stark. Notwithstanding the state’s hyperbolic insistence on the connection between business profitability and ‘jobs’, and the association of ‘jobs’ with ‘self-reliance’, a fundamental ambiguity in what is meant by ‘jobs’, means the pandemic economic recovery policy framework contains the prospect of future work-regimes that understand human capability only through the alienated frame of bundles of behavioural assets that serve a different end, that is, that treat people as a means.

In the Australian context, the combination of low rates of income security payment (less eligibility) and the requirement that any paid work that exceeds the income security payment by AUD 50 per fortnight will be considered suitable work (with only limited exceptions, see Commonwealth of Australia 2021a), signals that work futures in the recovery include the possibility that job seekers may be obliged to accept ‘the gloomy prospect of work that is both precarious and meaningless’ (Patulny et al. 2020: 334–335).

In the dominant political discourse of meaningful work, ‘meaning’ is relocated outside of work itself into both individual utility and a greater social purpose, and other ways of understanding how work might be meaningful are marginalised. Concepts of meaning not associated with productive use of resources are framed as impediments to the goal of increasing growth in the name of economic recovery.

Policies which frame meaningful work as extraneous to economic recovery deny groups subject to those policies the freedom that inheres in meaning-finding, and with it the social freedoms that are available to others. This social stratification is apparent in punitive processes of employment support that combine the compulsion to participate in paid work with reduction of any scope to individually determine meaning in or suitability of work.

Work-regimes that can be projected from the symbolic framing of various recovery initiatives prioritise the liberties of businesses in employment relationships, with future workers who are presently unemployed or not yet in the workforce considered predominantly through the lens of resources to fuel the economic recovery. The post-pandemic work future for prospective workers is presented as a sacrifice of freedom necessary for recovery, but in effect continues the project of ‘actualising neoliberal tenets’ through reconstituting the social reality of work as a necessary ‘bad’ for the sake of economic recovery. Yet the question remains, recovery of what and for whom?

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