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## **The materialities of new welfare: leaving and re-inventing the office**

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# The Materialities of New Welfare

## Leaving and Re-inventing the Office

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When one thinks of the welfare state, the offices of public or social services – and in particular the counters of the welfare office – come readily to mind. Ethnographies of welfare have often focused on welfare offices in which welfare agents are situated on one side of the desk and clients on the other (Siblot 2005; Dubois 2010; Auyero 2012). In these accounts, the welfare office waiting room (Auyero 2012) and the desk (Dubois 2010) are the epitome of the bureaucratic, hierarchical welfare state.

The desk is the perfect and most evocative illustration of a distant and authoritative mode of relations: placed in a position to beg or demand, the applicant depends on the goodwill of the civil servant, knowing that they will not be able to cross the material barrier that physically and symbolically isolates [the civil servant] from the public. (Chevalier in Dubois 2010: 7)

These ethnographies thus portray the traditional welfare office as a crucial icon, site and technique of the welfare state: it stands for a top-down welfare state, while it is also a concrete place where welfare services are delivered, and where particular (caring yet disciplinary and hierarchical) relations between state and citizens are enacted. Especially for poor and marginalised populations, the welfare office is a site that materialises ‘the state’ and their relation to it, a relation that is performed and negotiated in interactions between citizens and bureaucrats (Dubois 2010) and shaped and mediated by bureaucratic artefacts, processes and infrastructures, as well as the material make-up of offices (Auyero 2012; Hull 2012b). With its waiting room, its securitised desks and meeting rooms, and its documents and data systems, the welfare office is usually understood as a technique for the disciplining of the poor (Auyero 2012). It is in the welfare office, so

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these authors argue, that the subjectivation of the poor as particular categories of client-citizen takes shape, and their needs and eligibility for state services and care are tested and negotiated (Koch 2021).

The last two decades, however, have seen the growing prominence of other welfare arrangements and discourses throughout Europe, which in part reform, and in part grow alongside the traditional welfare programmes and institutions discussed in these ethnographies. These arrangements are characterised by the ambition to reposition the welfare state and social services *away* from the hierarchical, topdown and symbolically and physically distant configuration of the welfare office (Tonkens and Kampen 2018; Vollebergh, de Koning and Marchesi 2021). New welfare discourses often portray 'the office' as a crucial site for the welfare state and its state-citizen relations, but one that stands for a problematic configuration that needs to be repaired or overcome. The projects and programmes that we describe here as instances of 'new welfare' instead seek to position professionals and services 'close to' citizens and their everyday needs and lives, to create more responsive programmes that can better align with existing initiatives and energies.

If the regimented welfare office is the embodiment of, and conduit for, 'traditional' welfare relations, how do projects embedded in a new welfare logic seek to create more horizontal, intimate and human relations, through what material forms and sites? And what place does the 'the office' have in new welfare?

We explore these questions based on multi-sited fieldwork in 2017 and 2018 with professionals and volunteers who provide parenting support services in relatively poor and ethnoracially diverse neighbour-

hoods in Amsterdam (conducted by de Koning), Milan (Marchesi), and Paris (Vollebergh). The programmes we studied all sought to embody forms of new welfare, but they did so from different institutional positions. Whereas the Parent and Child Team that de Koning studied is a publicly funded semi-state institution that is a key node in the new youth welfare infrastructure, the associations and organisations that Marchesi and Vollebergh studied in Milan and Paris have more tangential relations to the welfare state, mostly through funding.

We followed professionals and volunteers over the course of a year as they met with parents and participated in the collective activities, discussion groups, training sessions and language courses they organised for parents and families. We also joined them during lunch breaks, team meetings, and interprofessional network discussions. In addition, we interviewed volunteers, professionals, civil servants, and municipal policy makers. Towards the end of the fieldwork, photographers documented the spaces and lives that we studied in each site.

In this essay we present nine photos of the work spaces and 'offices' of our interlocutors, in order to bring out 'the materiality of immaterial labour' (van den Berg and Arts 2019: 455) that goes into the effort to reposition welfare services and refashion state-citizen relations in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In order to secure the anonymity of our respondents and field sites, indications of the identity of organisations and persons in the photos have been blurred except in cases when explicit, written consent was granted.

In what follows, we first explain the tenets and arrangements of new welfare in more detail, and

outline the three dimensions of the materiality of ‘the office’ relevant to studying the materialisation of new welfare: spatial arrangements; aesthetics; and semiotics. Focusing on these dimensions in the nine photos, we show that in the context of new welfare, ‘the welfare office’ was sometimes moved and literally re-sited, transformed, resisted, and, at times, left behind altogether. As we trace how the ‘welfare office’ as form and symbol of ‘traditional’ welfare figures simultaneously as a contrastive foil and as a parallel or lingering presence in new welfare materialities, we show how the materialities captured in the photos bring out inherent contradictions and tensions of new welfare.

### **Intimate welfare**

Over two decades ago, Nikolas Rose (1996) observed a broad policy shift towards governing through community: from addressing citizens primarily as part of a national body, to addressing and governing them as members of localised communities to which they are thought to have strong affective ties. Drawing on our fieldwork with welfare and parenting services for families in Amsterdam, Milan and Paris, we elaborate elsewhere how this move to governing through community is realised in practice (Vollebergh, de Koning and Marchesi 2021). We examine new welfare programmes that aim to organise welfare interventions and services ‘closer to’ client populations, in the hope that such proximate welfare provides more responsive, empowering, and tailor-made services, and makes better use of existing community networks and initiatives.

These attempts at forging ‘proximate’ or intimate

welfare hinge on three crucial features (ibid.) First, a celebration of locality or the neighbourhood, where, it was thought, such an intimate state presence in people’s everyday life could be realised, and where programmes would be able to tie into and make use of existing social energies. Second, new welfare also meant the inclusion of a plethora of actors, from state to semi-state, social entrepreneurs, third sector and client-citizens in the provision of welfare, with a concomitant blurring of institutional and professional boundaries. And third, new welfare programmes principally revolved around ‘immaterial’ goods (advice, mutual support, sociality, capacity-building, activation) and relied heavily on the affective labour of social professionals, who were to build personalised, caring, and empowering relations with their publics or client populations.

The programmes that were the focus of our fieldwork demonstrate the types of (re-)arrangements that are broadly characteristic of new welfare. De Koning’s fieldwork is indicative of how new welfare logics may transform the approach and structure of central welfare institutions. This was a development that also took place in Paris, where the Parisian Family Welfare Services (CAF) increasingly organised their work around local ‘*territoires*’ and ‘*proximité*’. At the same time, new welfare logics have given the neighbourhood-based associations and third-sector organisations that feature in Marchesi’s and Vollebergh’s work an increasingly central role in welfare provision and urban governance (Nicholls 2006). Functioning as ‘partners’ to institutions and services in transversal networks and projects, and contributing to policy goals through their participation in municipal tenders and project-based subsidies, such associations have become key actors in new

welfare landscapes despite their relatively peripheral position in relation to state-actors.

The differences between these programmes also reflect the specificity of policy debates and developments in their respective contexts. De Koning studied Parent and Child Teams that were designed in the context of the 2015 welfare overhaul. They were meant to embody a new welfare state and new state–citizen relations: less top down, less fragmented, and, above all, in proximity to and in close cooperation with citizens. The organisations Marchesi worked with reflected the importance of third-sector organisations in welfare provision in Milan, and the local focus on ‘regenerative welfare’, a welfare that depended less on the state (and its dwindling resources in times of austerity) and more on citizens’ sociality, especially within neighbourhoods. Vollebergh worked with neighbourhood associations running community centres that are increasingly called upon by central state actors and local authorities in France to help repair the ‘fissure’ between the Republic and its institutions on the one hand, and marginalised urban neighbourhoods on the other (Nicholls 2006; Tissot 2007).

The new welfare programmes we studied tried to materialise a new kind of intimate and human-oriented state presence in marginalised urban areas, reworking the spaces of the welfare state, its personnel, and its ‘personality’ (Gallagher, Larbi Mperere and N’djoré 2021: 334), or the ‘face’ of the state vis-à-vis its population (Navaro-Yashin 2002). These are attempts not to stage the welfare state with a capital S, but a welfare state that ‘underperforms’ by downplaying or even masking its state-ness. As Vincent Dubois put it, a state in modesty (Dubois in Vollebergh, de Koning

and Marchesi 2021: 754-5), which facilitates, works alongside and empowers.

Our exploration of the material forms that are meant to bring about these new welfare relations draws on a burgeoning literature that has shown the significance of studying material artefacts, infrastructures and spaces in order to understand complex organisations (see Hull 2012b for an overview). This literature examines, for example, the materiality of bureaucratic artefacts, such as documents or paperwork (Hull 2012a; Cabot 2012; Göpfert 2013), the objects and spaces of meetings (Brown, Reed and Yarrow 2017), bureaucratic proceedings and technologies (Eggen 2012; Street 2012), and public buildings (Gallagher, Larbi Mperere and N’djoré 2021).

Three dimensions guide our analysis of the materiality of new welfare: spatial arrangements; aesthetics; and signs. Spatial arrangements refer to the way in which new welfare projects are situated and embedded in urban space: in what concrete spaces do new welfare projects take place, and in reference to what scales or spatialisation of the state (Ferguson and Gupta 2002)? Aesthetics direct attention to ‘bundles of ... features’ (Hull 2012b: 255) in spaces, objects or practices that together constitute a certain pattern or form, which appears as persuasive or appropriate to its creators (Strathern in Hull 2012b: 255; Göpfert 2013) and which is hoped to compel an affective response in others (Street 2012). Finally, examining material features semiotically as signs (Hull 2012b: 255-256) means asking how such material elements index or symbolise actors, networks, norms or places in the wider social world. In contrast to the aesthetic dimension of materiality, individual elements as ‘signs’ do not necessarily form a coherent

pattern, but ‘can combine in varying, sometimes dissonant ways’ (Hull 2012b: 256), thus offering insight into broader tensions and contradictions.

In the next three sections, we cluster and analyse our photos depicting new welfare programmes in Paris, Milan and Amsterdam along these three material dimensions. The first section deals with the re-spatialisation of welfare ‘in’ the neighbourhood. The pictures presented here show how new welfare projects reposition themselves in neighbourhood spaces, and to what extent this involves leaving the archetypal spatialised form of the office. The second section focuses on the (new) aesthetic repertoires and forms that professionals and volunteers develop to materialise an ‘intimate’ welfare state. The pictures in this theme depict the main reception or activity spaces of the programmes we examined, exploring how the aesthetics of these spaces are part of professionals’ efforts to (re-)shape their relations with clients or residents. The third section presents pictures of the office spaces in which the professionals we followed do their administrative work or hold individual meetings. We focus on their décor and artefacts as signs, teasing out how these reference the contradictory aims and relations of new welfare.

### **Spatial arrangements: leaving the office?**

A crucial feature of new welfare is the way it relates to and is embedded in the neighbourhood. New welfare programmes seek to position themselves within and as part of the neighbourhood and its social fabric, rather than as institutions distinct and set apart from local social life. This often means that professionals and

volunteers are expected to move away from and go beyond ‘the office’ or desk and into the social spaces and networks of the neighbourhood. Although social professionals have never been strictly confined to the office, in the context of the new welfare programmes we studied the neighbourhood was posited as the proper work terrain. Below, we explore how this desire for re-embedding welfare and governance in the neighbourhood and its socialities was given concrete, spatial form.

In Amsterdam, Parent and Child Teams were organised spatially in order to be close to their client population, each serving a particular area of the city. In fact, this resembled the geographical distribution of the previous child welfare ‘consultation bureaus’. As part of the reform of the Amsterdam youth welfare landscape, the PCT’s were meant to no longer just work in a building in a neighbourhood where parents went for appointments, but to actively reach out and connect with people and initiatives in the neighbourhood. They were equipped with laptop computers and mobile phones, and while they had open-plan office spaces for their administrative tasks, and rooms where they could meet with clients, they were supposed to be out and about.

Elementary schools presented the most important points of connection to the Teams’ client population: local families. Each school had its own Parent and Child Advisor, who was supposed to spend around two half days there each week. Parent and Child Advisors were expected to be integrated into the school’s care structure, working closely with the special needs coordinator (*intern begeleider*), while their open office hours would allow parents to come in spontaneously



Photo 1. Shared office of a special needs coordinator and a Parent and Child Advisor in an Amsterdam school (photo by Bart Boeijen).

with questions or requests. Taking up office in local institutions such as schools promised a more thorough embedding in, and access to, local families' everyday lives.

Photo 1 shows the office, consultation and meeting room shared between the special needs coordinator

and the Parent and Child Advisor in a school in Amsterdam North. Parent and Child Advisors were hosted by schools, and dependent on the collaboration of school staff and directors. Not all collaborations were as smooth as the one in the depicted school, where the Parent and Child Advisor had become a



trusted figure in school for parents and teachers, and an important support for the school management. Some Advisors were not made welcome by schools, were not provided with a suitable workspace, or had a hard time connecting to parents and children because they were not included in the school's care trajectories. This was in part due to competition over mandates: in Amsterdam's new youth system, the Parent and Child Teams were envisioned as the sole arbiters of referrals to specialised services, which meant a loss of influence and agency for school care coordinators. Some Parent and Child Advisors complained that schools wanted them to simply sign off on fully formed care plans, bypassing their expertise and mandate.

In the case of the Parent and Child Teams, the new welfare wish to become an integral part of local social life came with a redistribution of responsibilities, mandates and finances. The presence of Parent and Child Team professionals in local institutions such as schools was thus not simply a better embedding in local welfare landscapes, but also initiated a struggle for authority and turf with these same networks. This could result in tense relations and internecine struggles, which could dominate professionals' everyday work lives.

In Milan and Paris, the spatial arrangements of third-sector professionals and community organisers were more explicitly oriented to the informal social dynamics of neighbourhood public space or housing projects. These professionals viewed their own spatial practices as important alternatives to the hierarchical, formal spaces of institutions, and aimed to repair or compliment the inadequacies and failures of more traditional welfare institutions by reaching and involving

residents and embedding their work in informal social relations.

Seeking to address the lack of services in a neighbourhood on the periphery of Milan characterised by high levels of poverty and of residents of recent migrant origins, a third-sector organisation took the services they offered children and their mothers outside into neighbourhood public space (photo 2). The outside space, a pedestrian area amidst shops, was marked by movement and playfulness. By being in the street, the programme sought to stimulate interactions in the neighbourhood – among participants, but also between participants and residents. Residents walked by with fresh bread or groceries and interacted with the playing children, with their parents sitting on benches or walls, and with professionals running the programme. This setting also favoured more informal interactions between professionals and parents, who were mostly mothers. Despite the apparent casualness of the interactions, professionals 'kept their antennas up' for problems that may not be discussed in a more structured and formal setting.

Catching problems before they turned into more serious ones, providing children without access to after-school programmes with enriching activities, and connecting people so that they could find shared solutions were some of the key aims of the programme. This reflected the aims of policymakers seeking to reform welfare towards a more relational and active citizenship. As one policymaker told Marchesi, it was time for social workers to be out on the streets among citizens rather than waiting behind their desks with a list of referrals.

For the professionals enacting this new welfare,



Photo 2. After-school programme for children and their parents in which activities are deliberately held in a pedestrian area of Milan to promote interactions with the neighbourhood and enable more informal conversations with parents (photo by Andrea Balossi Restelli).

however, leaving their desks to be out on the streets also meant having to carefully balance informality and formality. These new welfare professionals tended to be young women who dressed and talked informally, even joking around with participants. When partici-

pants misunderstood the nature of the relationship, such as by disclosing questionable parenting behaviours, being visibly drunk, or, in the case of one father, treating a chat about their child at a local café like a date, professionals had to find ways to make their role

visible again, including rescheduling meetings in a more formal space.

In Paris, too, community workers regularly organised activities that took place in, and focused on, dilapidated neighbourhood public spaces. The community centres and local associations offering homework classes and discussion groups for parents were often located on the ground floors of drab, modernist social housing projects (*cités*). They envisioned themselves as not just situated spatially in the *cité*, but as embedded in its local social life, empowering its residents and ‘strengthening citizenship’. Importantly, this spatial and social closeness of local associations to marginalised neighbourhood residents was also why local policy-makers and traditional welfare institutions approached and subsidised them: they were believed to have access to, and to be able to work with, *cité* families who were deemed to be ‘distanced’ (*éloignés*) from institutions.

One of the key principles of the community organisers and associational workers with whom Anick Vollebergh worked was to not ‘act for’ people (*faire pour*), but to ‘act with’ them (*faire avec*). Bringing residents together and ‘accompanying’ them so that they could organise projects themselves (*faire faire*), community organisers aimed ‘to get things moving in the neighbourhood’, as the director of one of the centres put it. As a result, community workers not only held activities in the public space of *cités*, such as a yearly neighbourhood feast, communal gardening, or graffiti art, but also attempted to bring informal neighbourly initiatives and local networks into the semi-public spaces of the community centre.

In the case of the centre depicted in photo 3, the staff asked participants to bring along friends or neighbours,

stimulated residents who showed particular talents or hobbies (belly dancing, arts and crafts) to organise activities for other participants, and facilitated a range of solidarity initiatives proposed by participants. The second-hand children’s clothing ‘boutique’ was a case



Photo 3. A ‘swap’ boutique in a community centre in Paris where people could bring in, and take for free, second-hand children’s clothes (photo by Jean-Robert Dantou).

in point. People could bring in and donate clothes that other visitors, mostly the mothers making use of the centre's childcare facilities, could take free of charge. Similar projects abounded, including a deal with a local supermarket made by several women of West-African background who were taking French language classes at the centre, with the help of the language class coordinator (who also happened to be of West-African descent). Every week, the women rolled two supermarket carts to the centre, filled to the brim with almost expired groceries, and arranged the groceries on a table free for everyone to take.

The self-regulating character of these initiatives suggested by the text above the donated clothes ('Take, give, exchange. Help yourself') is deceptive, however. Every so often, little conflicts and irritations flared up around the boutique and the supermarket project. Usually, these conflicts revolved around the question of the proper boundaries of who could take what and for whom. In the case of the supermarket project, rumours and discontent centred on the fact that the women always selected a significant part of the groceries to distribute outside the centre: presumably, so other visitors of the centre suspected, amongst their own ethnic network in the housing project. To some, this was a flagrant case of *'communautarisme'* (ethnic sectarianism) that did not befit the communal, public space of the centre in which everyone should be equal and projects should involve a 'mixed' public.

As in Milan, developing spatial arrangements that were to embed projects and professionals within informal social dynamics, and thereby function as an antidote to the 'distant' spatialisation of institutional welfare sites, also had its unintended drawbacks.

Tapping into actual informal neighbourly networks, based on ethnicity or personalised friendships, at times clashed with the citizenship values that the centre also wanted to inculcate, and instigated debate among participants and professionals alike about the need for more top-down regulation of the distribution of resources in such initiatives by the centre's staff.

As these three photos indicate, the reterritorialisation of welfare 'in proximity' to beneficiaries, clients, residents, or the public takes place through spatial arrangements that stress being embedded in the neighbourhood. In Milan and Paris, social workers and associations regularly situate themselves literally in neighbourhood public spaces: in squares; courtyards and playgrounds. Organising festive and ludic activities, they try to invest these usually dilapidated spaces with new social energy, while simultaneously attempting to connect informally with residents or parents. In Paris, community organisers also tried to bring informal neighbourly networks of solidarity and sociality into the community centre. In these cases, professionals sought to move beyond, or practise alternatives to, the spatial arrangements of 'the office', and break down the distinction between the community centre or social programme and the neighbourhood. The Parent and Child Teams in Amsterdam were also meant to work in and with the neighbourhood, but did so by setting up office in local institutions such as schools and community centres. In all three sites, the wish to be embedded in local informal and institutional dynamics, and the spatial arrangements that were to make that possible, meant welfare professionals had to learn to deal with and manage energies, desires and designs other than their own.

## Aesthetics of new welfare

The state with a capital S has often presented itself through a monumental aesthetic registry, with imposing buildings that impress on citizens that they are a small part of a larger whole or that they have come face to face with a larger political entity (Jaffe and de

Koning 2016; Gallagher, Larbi Mpere and N'djoré 2021). Fehérváry (2013: 3) calls such registers 'aesthetic regimes', which she defines as 'politically charged assemblages of material qualities that provok[e] widely shared affective responses'. Such aesthetic regimes shift as political priorities and logics change. In contrast to an imposing and hierarchical state aesthetic, new



Photo 4. Entrance of a Parent and Child Team location in Amsterdam (photo by Bart Boeijen).

welfare programmes seek to convey a different type of institutional presence, and shape warmer, more intimate and horizontal welfare relations. We ask what patterns, material forms and styles make up the aesthetic regime that is seen to fit new welfare in the eyes of professionals. Through what aesthetic cues and forms do they seek to convince their public of this new proximate and empowering instantiation of welfare and how do they seek to generate the warm, intimate and trusting welfare relations desired in new welfare?

The Parent and Child Teams' core values – *laagdrem-pelig, aansluiten, versterken* (approachable, connect and strengthen [sic]) – signalled that these teams were to embody a new form of human-centred, activating welfare, delivered by one supportive, familiar face. These central pillars of new welfare were elaborated quite differently in Parent and Child Teams than in the new welfare programmes we studied in Milan and Paris. This Parent and Child Team location's bright and clean interior, with a minimalist design combining white and green with light wood, created a fresh and friendly, yet formal impression befitting a public service such as the Parent and Child Team.

The location was made up of four sections: the child health services, formerly known as the consultation bureau (*consultatiebureau*) (see also photo 10), an open-plan office where PCT professionals could take care of administrative tasks; a canteen and a large meeting room for team activities that could double as venue for larger group activities, such as a parenting course or group consultation sessions; and smaller rooms for meetings with clients. The latter were also plainly furnished, though some had some toys for children to play with. However, there was none of the clutter of

the communal spaces in Paris or the homey features of the Milan welfare spaces. In contrast, the design of the PCT location indicated that this was a space where professionals provide a public service to parents and children. This space did not invite a public in, let alone seek to make them feel at home or give them ownership, as in the Parisian case. The location's layout and aesthetics spoke of a friendly, flexible and efficient state there to help, while maintaining clear hierarchies and boundaries between clients and professionals.

The relational welfare embraced by Milanese policymakers and third-sector actors sought to break with the 'traditional' state welfare, often described as bureaucratic, institutional and disempowering for citizens. Three decades into a process of privatisation of social and health services intensified by austerity logics, Milanese policymakers publicly emphasised their commitment to social solidarity by supporting a welfare model in which citizens are mobilised (and responsabilised) to care for each other (Muehlebach 2012). Such a system – described alternatively as 'regenerative', 'relational' or 'community' welfare – was celebrated as being more sustainable, not only financially but also socially. Policymakers, non-profit professionals and volunteers argued that a pluralising and increasingly complex society required more personalised and often neighbourhood-based solutions in which citizens play an active part. Moreover, by shifting away from a welfare of rights to one of responsibility, policymakers hoped that conflicts over welfare resources, particularly between native Italians and migrants, could be mitigated.

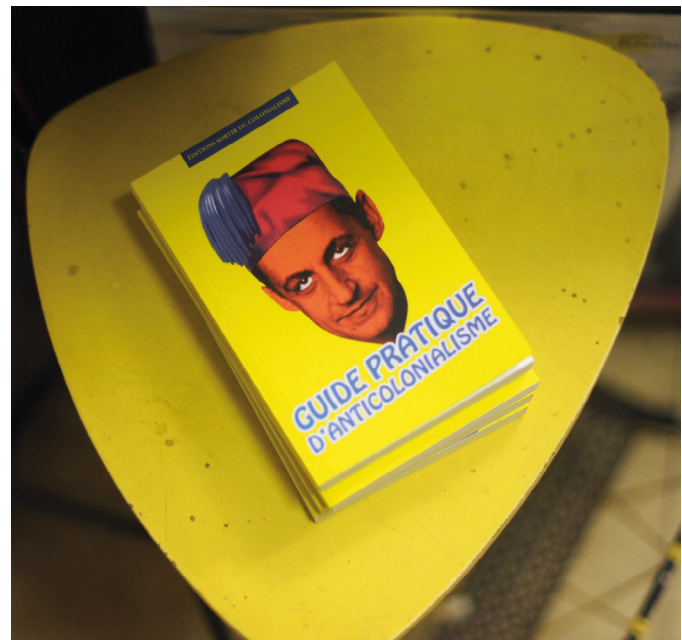
Prominent in the discussions of complex social problems, whether by third-sector professionals, volun-



Photo 5 and 6. A social work professional and certified nutritionist listens carefully to a participant in the regular mothers' group during a cooking activity in the kitchen area of the space used by an association running relational welfare programmes in Milan (photo 5 by Andrea Balossi Restelli 2017; photo 6 by Milena Marchesi).



Photo 7 and 8. Wall lining the welcoming and reception space of a cooperative of several artist organisations and local associations in Paris. On the right, a stack of 'Anti-Colonial Handbooks' with on the cover an image of a collage of the head of former French president Nicolas Sarkozy wearing a fez (photo by Jean-Robert Dantou).





teers, policymakers or traditional social workers, was the perceived isolation of the 'Arab mother' who stays at home, doesn't speak Italian, and doesn't interact with her children's school. A number of new welfare interventions focused on these women. Starting with the assumption that they are insular and home-focused, they sought to draw them out into the broader neighbourhood and beyond by providing home-like spaces such as kitchens and living rooms. A more intimate and familiar space was presumed to be more effective in encouraging participation than institutional spaces and to stimulate a different kind of participation, less as a passive citizen seeking a service and more as an active, social citizen (Marchesi 2020).

Yet with space at a premium in Milan, the spaces that professionals and volunteers could use for such projects were often anything but ideal. Sometimes these were classrooms and hallways with a very institutional feel, such as elementary schools. Sometimes they were old reclaimed stores, or old workshops. As can be seen in photos 5 and 6, these spaces were refurbished and decorated with bright, warm colours to give them an intimate, homey feel. With limited funds, the home-like effect was achieved through paint and IKEA furniture.

It was hoped that the kitchen would draw women out by engaging them in the activities assumed to be of interest to them, but now in a social setting as opposed to the assumed isolation of their homes. The living-room-like space for socialising also included shelves with books and games, and activities aimed at stimulating children's development. These homey aesthetics facilitated professionals' engagement in personalised relationships, working on getting to know

women, their families and their problems individually and encouraging participants to come back daily rather than staying at home alone 'doing nothing,' as professionals described it.

Compared to the bright, clean spaces of the Parent and Child Team locations in Amsterdam, and the improvised, homey spaces of third-sector organisations in Milan, community centres and local associations in Paris shared an aesthetic style that reflected their ambiguous positioning vis-à-vis the state. Many community organisers discussed the deeper aim of their work in terms of healing or fighting what they described as the 'violent' effects of the indifferent and prejudicial attitude of state institutions and social workers towards non-white, working-class residents (Vollebergh 2021). This critical posture towards 'the system' or 'the institutions' also surfaced in parenting discussion groups, during which community workers often addressed and acknowledged parents' painful experiences with the school or the police. Community workers often positioned themselves as standing with local residents and critically empowering them vis-à-vis governance and institutions, but local associations also operated as 'partners' to governance and welfare actors, developing projects in line with policy objectives and concerns.

As photo 7 shows, the welcoming spaces of associations and community centres expressed this critical, '*militante*' grassroots posture through an aesthetic of a messy jumble of plans and projects, combined with a nonchalant informality, and a touch of anarchist activism. On and around the bookshelves in the depicted welcoming area, a plethora of projects directed at local residents compete for attention: a book

exchange, a binder with resources for finding jobs, the flyers of activities by the cooperative association (left-hand corkboard), and the 'good plans' of other local associations in the arrondissement (right-hand corkboard and on top of the bookcase). As in most other communal spaces, furniture is visibly second-hand, but carefully selected, and combined with children's art projects, graffiti, toys, plants, and posters to make the space colourful and give it a homey feel, like the house of a messy friend. Subtle details give these spaces an activist edge – in this case; the poster with nooses hanging off the word 'associations' and calling for a 'general strike' of associations against new policy measures; the stack of anticolonial handbooks, and the parodying photo of Sarkozy (photo 8). In other centres, there was a picture of Che Guevara pinned on the wall, stickers calling for solidarity with refugees, or posters advertising anti-racism protests.

Although these spaces may seem hastily put together, and not particularly curated or designed, they follow a distinctive aesthetic repertoire. This aesthetic repertoire not only materialises associations as the informal, democratic and inclusive opposite (and antidote) of top-down, norm-imposing institutions, it is also meant to compel residents to relate to associations and their staff in a more egalitarian and trusting way.

The photos in this section indicate that new welfare was performed through diverse aesthetic repertoires. These different aesthetic repertoires reflected and helped shape different faces of the state, and differently textured state-citizen relations. The Parent and Child Teams' clean, well-maintained aesthetics seem to reinvent and transform the traditional waiting

space of 'the welfare office' towards a more open, brighter, friendlier version. It contrasts markedly with the more improvised appearance we encountered in the other cases, reflecting the former's closeness and the latter's distance from official public services. The welfare workers in Milan sought to create intimate public spaces through a homey aesthetic, whereas in Paris association professionals sought to create an informal, neighbourly feel with a more activist stance. In both the Paris and Milan cases, the drab and formal aesthetics associated with the traditional welfare office waiting space, and its hierarchical separation between professionals and clients, functioned as an imagined contrastive foil. It is up against 'the office' that the homey and 'grassroots' aesthetics gained their meaning and coherence for professionals, and through which they hoped to compel participants to engage into new, more horizontal and trusting relations with them.

## Contradictions of new welfare

The new spatial embeddings 'in' the neighbourhood and the welcoming spaces described in the previous sections provided important material forms for the new welfare desire to move away from, and find alternatives to, the archetypical 'welfare office'. However, the office was not abandoned altogether. Professionals engaged in new welfare projects usually had some form of (back) office, where they would meet with individual parents, or work on their (extensive) client or subsidy administration. Attention to the semiotic features of these offices – taking artefacts and décor as signs of broader relations and networks – points us to the



Photo 9. The office of a family worker, shared with three other colleagues, in a community centre in Paris (photo by Jean-Robert Dantou).

way our interlocutors worked to navigate the various contradictions inherent in these programmes, and to the precarious balancing acts this often required.

Community organisers in Paris experienced a constant tension between the relational work with participants, which, in their eyes, was the most fundamental part of their job, and the administrative exigencies and accountability demanded by funding agencies. Offices in community centres, such as the office of family worker Eugénie (photo 9) usually had transparent doors, and were shared by multiple staff

members. Some staff, working on contracts paid by multiple short-term projects, had no office at all, but used a desk in the welcoming space separated by a cupboard. Whenever Vollebergh joined Eugénie in her office, parents tended to walk in, or her 'assistant' – an erstwhile participant in the homework programme who now helped out as a volunteer – would enter the office to hang out and chat with her.

Key to rebuilding residents' self-esteem and trust, so community workers felt, was to 'valorise' parents in ways that state institutions, with their top-down and

formal approach, failed to do: to take the time to listen to them; to build up a relationship; and to recognise their capacities instead of 'imposing norms'. This meant that community organisers always made themselves available for parents and would never turn them away, even when they were hunched over Excel sheets and filling out forms in their offices. The personalised relations that Eugénie established with participants in this way translated into artefacts and decorative items on her office wall: photos of the cultural outings or activities she had organised; drawings given to her by the children.

This ethos, however, severely impacted their ability to take care of their administrative tasks. This was a recurrent point of stress and frustration. Whenever Vollebergh asked Eugénie how things were, she would lament being behind with *'les dossiers'*. On the wall of her office then, was another set of signs, indexing this administrative labour crucial to the viability of the centre. The actions and activities run by community organisers were often co-financed by several different government or non-profit agencies. Each of these agencies required annual or bi-annual accounts: stipulating activities, numbers of attendees, the vulnerable groups that were reached, the indicators of whether the goals had been met, and so forth. The work of keeping track of activities and translating relational labour into quantitative information resulted in a different range of artefacts: printed out lists of participants; monthly calendars; and lists of contacts. On the wall, as in Eugénie's everyday practice, the signs of her affective labour and of her administrative labour hang next to each other, overlapping, jostling for her time and attention.

The scene of an Amsterdam child health consultation room (photo 10) speaks to the equally contradictory logics that shape professional practice in the Parent and Child Teams. These teams combined youth welfare and parenting services that had previously been housed in separate institutions. This includes the century-old *'consultatiebureau'*, the extensive public health care programme that combines an immunisation programme with regular health check-ups for children from birth to four. Its Kafkaesque name – consultation bureau – appropriately captures its reputation as a controlling state institution that scrutinises one's parenting. This reputation did not combine well with the approachable, collaborative logic that the Parent and Child Teams were meant to embody.

This ambiguity was not limited to their public health services. Besides providing assistance to parents and children, the Parent and Child Teams were also there to monitor child wellbeing and safety and were mandated to refer families to more specialised services. The collaborative, horizontal logic that was key to PCT self-presentation was thus married to a biopolitical logic of monitoring and optimising population health, and a guardian logic of surveillance of child safety.

The consultation room wall in the picture includes a poster for eye tests, an iconic feature of child health consultations, as well as an assortment of public health leaflets and posters, and a solitary stuffed Ernie doll, which may have been moved from the other side of the room, where a corner with child-sized furniture and toys was situated. The hand-drawn diagram (photo 11) on the whiteboard indicates that these child health consultations were also meant as an opening to providing parenting assistance. The text echoes



Photo 10. A child health consultation room (photo Bart Boeijen).

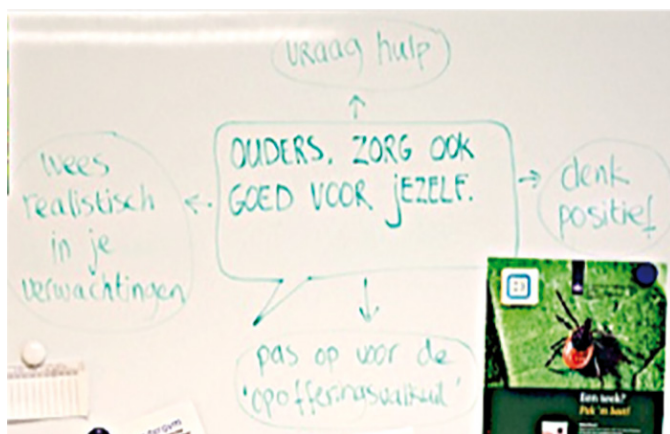


Photo 11. Detail: the diagramme on the whiteboard encourages 'Parents, take good care of yourselves as well' (middle), and clockwise from the right: 'Think positive'; 'Beware of the self-sacrifice trap (*opofferingsvalkuil*)'; 'Be realistic in your expectations'; and 'Ask for help'.



Photo 12. Map of a neighbourhood drawn by children and association professionals in an after-school programme in Milan (photo by Milena Marchesi).

the maxims from the Positive Parenting courses that the Parent and Child Team offers, which focus on rewarding positive behaviour while setting clear boundaries as a parent, in part, as this text suggests, to protect oneself. In the consultation room, biopolitical and monitoring logics thus were mixed with the desire for collaborative helping relations. This mix speaks of the complex positioning of Parent and Child Team professionals vis-à-vis their client families, and the intricate relational labour this required.

In Milan, association professionals engaged in a different kind of relational labour, with its own constitutive contradictions. The map of the neighbourhood in photo 12 was drawn with children participating in an after-school project run by an association operating with funds from the municipality, an international NGO, and the private sector. The map highlights the association's aim of better orienting its participants – migrant origin children and their mothers – to the schools, public spaces, and essential stores in the neighbourhood. Connecting marginalised residents to the neighbourhood tied into the policy ambitions of new welfare in Milan, as it was hoped that this would produce more social cohesion and lessen the burden on traditional welfare. However, the professionals and volunteers who ran these programmes often articulated their role as also being one of more effectively connecting participants to social services and advocating for them. The third-sector professionals and volunteers who were meant to facilitate the miracle of self-generating community welfare thus ended up acting as brokers in petitioning classical welfare institutions for help.

The degree to which third-sector programmes fell back on traditional social services was highlighted by

Anna, a state social work supervisor in Milan. Sitting in the office in which her team met with families seeking traditional welfare services, or referred to social services for serious problems, Anna discussed with Marchesi the challenges she faced. She noted that while demands and referrals had increased, the resources available had decreased in favour of more funding for third-sector welfare projects. Tying economic help to 'activation pacts' also had the unintended effect of increasing the workload of social workers. The way the subsidy process was organised meant that large numbers of applicants would show up at the office at the same time to file their application, often leading to tense encounters and fights breaking out. Anna noted that it was not unusual for her office to have to call in the police.

Like third-sector social operators, social workers were faced with an increasingly diverse clientele with urgent material needs, especially with regard to finding stable employment and affordable housing. Anna remarked with some irony that:

The third sector wins grants and projects, then they do one part of the work. Anything that they can't do, they send to us. In the end they all arrive here, the whole third sector. As soon as there is a problem, they'll say 'no, this is an institutional problem' and they send them here.

Paying attention to the signs and messages that line new welfare office spaces shows us some of the contradictions inherent to new welfare programmes. Even if affective, relational labour were key to new welfare, the office as a site of administrative work and of the work of negotiating access to resources did not completely

disappear. Rather, these two modes of welfare governance jostled for attention and space in the office of the Parisian neighbourhood association. Similarly, in Milan, third-sector associations sought to generate welfare through facilitating caring communities and orienting residents to neighbourhood resources. Faced with residents' often dire material needs, associations directed people back to the traditional welfare office, which had to make do with dwindling resources. In Amsterdam, the effort to combine a public health surveillance programme with a sense of intimacy and horizontality, going beyond more biopolitical aims and top-down welfare relations, speaks of the intense balancing acts Parent and Child Team professionals engaged in on a daily basis.

## Concluding remarks

New welfare programmes seek to create more intimate, closer and less hierarchical relations between welfare institutions and their publics or client populations. They seek to reconfigure the welfare state from one with a capital S to a state in modesty. In this photo essay, we have explored how new welfare programmes re-invent or engage with 'the office' as a central trope, site and technique for materialising state-citizen relations. We have paid particular attention to the spatial arrangements that were meant to embed the programmes 'in' the neighbourhood and the aesthetic repertoires that were suggestive of warmer, less formal and top-down state-citizen relations, even if they did so with very different inflections. These formations and aesthetics purposefully 'left' or countered the archetypical form of

'the office', using it as a contrastive foil, or they redistributed 'the office' across other institutions deemed more locally embedded and refashioned the traditional aesthetics of the office waiting space into a warmer, brighter version.

We ended with a discussion of the contradictory semiotic assemblages that line the walls of new welfare offices and meeting rooms. These showed us that efforts to enact new forms of welfare are always already compromised, carrying sediments of other programmes and logics, and by working within existing infrastructures with limited means. Much of the actual work in new welfare programmes entailed balancing these disparate aims, goals and possibilities.

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