

## **Contemporary discourses of working, earning and spending: acceptance, critique and the bigger picture**

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### **Introduction**

It has become commonplace to assert that Irish people now have more choices and enjoy a higher standard of living than ever before. An assumption also exists that the role of the ordinary citizen is to be a member of the paid labour force and a consumer, in order to ‘keep the economy going’. Many people consequently live in a work-earn-spend cycle, spending much of what they earn on possessions and services now considered essential for everyday life. Savings are at an all time low, and credit-card debt at an all-time high, especially among people under thirty five<sup>i</sup>. Everyday life is often experienced as harried and fraught. Media discussions often portray Irish society as increasingly similar to that in the United States of America, often assuming that ordinary people have little choice regarding the shape of their lives<sup>ii</sup>.

However, significant numbers of Irish people have chosen not to engage to this extent with a work-earn-spend culture, and are resisting the idea that life must be pressured. They are critical of the notion that work-earn-spend lifestyles are indicative of progress and a high standard of living. In this, they share conclusions with an estimated fifty million people in the United States and other ‘developed’ countries, who contest the dominant models of well-being put forward by growth economics<sup>iii</sup>. The ideas and practices of this group receive little attention in the mainstream media, however.

This chapter reflects on two qualitative research projects carried out between 1999 and 2001, with people experiencing both ways of life. The discussion that follows examines the discourses available to the participants, which help them interpret their experiences and make life choices. It goes on to discuss the connections between individual choices and the ways that economic values affect society, asserting that the public and private spheres cannot be considered in isolation from each other.

### **The research themes**

Both research projects gathered data concerning work, money and related themes in contemporary life, by means of focus-group discussions and individual and pair interviews. The first study, entitled *How was it for you: learning from couples’ experiences of the first years of marriage*, was commissioned by a marriage- and relationship- education and counselling organisation, and the participants were all under forty, married and based in Dublin.<sup>iv</sup>

From this study, two broad groups emerge. One group’s themes concern the demands of jobs, coping with constant tiredness, a lack of time for family and friends, and a

feeling of being constantly overpressed. I call them the TINA (there is no alternative) group. Most of this group have no children, but would like them in the future and they worry about how they will fit them into their lives. They tend to blame factors outside their control for the shape of their lives. Many of them look to buying things like furniture, holidays, cars, or clothes, in order to create a sense of identity, and to compensate for the difficulties of everyday life. Most have no savings, and worry about what might happen if they were made redundant. Several feel that they cannot continue with their lifestyles. They express awareness of contradictions, namely, that they have a high 'standard of living', in the sense that they have plenty of material goods, but they acknowledge that this is not the same as a good quality of life. However, they are so busy coping with work, commuting and simply surviving the rat race that they have no time to take a step back and think creatively about alternative ways of living. Their talk is dominated by reports of lack of choice and a lack of control over the shape of their lives.

The *How was it for you?* study reveals another group of people who report having a good quality of life, even if it means having fewer material possessions and living on smaller incomes than the first group. I call them the 'creative alternatives' group. They express responsibility for creating the kinds of lives they want, and satisfaction with modest houses, cars, furnishing and clothes. Many of them have savings, however small, which provide a cushion for emergencies. They are very reluctant to borrow money, except for a small mortgage. They speak of prioritising their happiness and well-being, and that of their children. In short, they express criticism of consumerist values and support for the belief that the most important things in life are relationships and the time for friends, family and personal development. These couples are all very different from each other. Some are quite traditional in their approach to gender roles, the women staying at home to do childcare, while the man earns the income. In other cases, both partners have cut back on paid work, in order to both look after a baby. One couple, who have no children, both job-share, and devote time to voluntary work.

### ***Balancing your life***

The emergence of the creative alternatives group in the *How was it for you?* study prompted me to find more people who had actively taken steps to prioritise quality of life and to pursue alternative routes to happiness, thereby challenging mainstream instrumental values. I collected data from people who are single, partnered, at different life stages, with and without children, rural, provincial and urban-based, for a book called *Balancing Your Life*<sup>v</sup>.

Some of the people who feature in *Balancing Your Life* have recently downshifted from pressurised jobs, but several others chose their lifestyles well before the boom of the 1990s. The latter show that the search for quality of life, and a critical attitude to a work-earn-spend culture are not necessarily short-lived phenomena. Some are living on very small incomes, but they have also reduced outgoings and avoided debt. They all express a sense of responsibility for their own lives, and a lack of reliance on institutions and leaders. They have experimented with the variables of paid work and unpaid work until they have found what is right for them. They speak of wanting enough money, and more of the things money can't buy: health, happiness, love, and peace of mind. They all express a sense of control of their lives, although they are not rigid in their expectations of how their lives should be. They mirror the assertion that,

in most circumstances, believing that one is in control of one's fate is closely associated with happiness and satisfaction with one's life<sup>vi</sup>.

The individual stories from both studies are all very different, but those pursuing creative alternatives have some things in common: they have given time to deciding their priorities, questioned the consumerist orientation of contemporary Ireland, and challenged norms and taken-for-granted ways of living and doing things and understanding the world around them. They are sceptical, but not cynical. While many of them possess little material capital, they do possess cultural and human capital, that is, a variety of options provided by education, experience or background. Many have ambitions, goals or strong passions concerning life work rather than career, and they have their own measures of success in relation to them. They also have an ability to live with complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity. For many of the downshifters, some recent turning point inspired them to turn away from consumerist culture and working long hours at jobs. The long-timers have questioned dominant wisdom concerning money, work and possessions since their young adulthood.

### **Discourses and subjectivities**

The preceding overview of the research themes provides the context for discussing the discourses on which the participants draw. The 'TINA' group draws largely on mainstream discourses of progress, economic growth and consumerism, which serve to construct self-regulating subjects who experience a lack of agency, that is, the ability to effect change in their lives and in society. The 'creative alternatives' group draws on discourses critical of the mainstream, which promote the concepts of limits, priorities and *enough*. These critical discourses are often associated with agency, because they encourage people to take action, however small, to effect the changes they want to see.

A discourse is not a language or a text, but a historically, socially and institutionally specific structure of statements, categories and beliefs, habits and practices<sup>vii</sup>. Discourses are used to filter and interpret experience and the discourses available at a certain historical moment frame the ways that people can think or talk about, or respond to phenomena. They 'invite' us to be human in certain ways, or to respond to others in certain ways. They produce certain assumptions (about, for example, women, men, economics, work, childcare, or money) and they provide subject positions and emotional attachments from which people speak and act<sup>viii</sup>.

Discourse, language and visual imagery do not simply reflect or describe reality. They play an integral role in constructing reality and experience, in the ways that we know and understand the world, and in what we assume to be natural or normal. Discourse analysis can tell us a great deal about how social forces influence what individuals do, say and think. Research that uses discourse as its analytical tool concentrates on the accounts, understandings and meaning repertoires of the participants, rather than on their individual psychologies. It examines how their interpretation of their experiences is affected, constrained or enabled by the discursive resources available to them. In this way, it avoids any tendency to judge individual participants, and at the same time, it concentrates on the social and historical content of subjectivity, that is, the sense of oneself, including ideas, beliefs and emotions. Subjectivity is 'the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her

ways of understanding her relation to the world'<sup>ix</sup>. It is a three-way process concerning discourse, emotional responses and relations in the present moment, all existing in a dynamic, mutually productive relationship with each other<sup>x</sup>.

Both 'regulatory' and 'critical' discourses emerge in the accounts of everyday life offered by the research participants<sup>1</sup>. The regulatory discourses include discourses of reality versus quality, lack of choice, work as constraint, job equals life and a work/life split. Critical discourses include limits, mindful spending and life work. In the discussion of the discourses that follows, the following questions are addressed:

1. What is the central premise of each discourse?
2. With what themes is it associated?
3. How does it operate?
4. What conditions facilitate its operation?
5. What discourses does it complement, and what discourses does it oppose?

### **Reality discourses**

Many TINA accounts employ a fatalistic discourse that generates assumptions such as 'that's progress' or 'that's reality, there's nothing that can be done about it' to explain experience, including work patterns and spending habits. In turn, these discourses facilitate participants to blame other people and outside forces for their dissatisfactions and distress.

The 'reality' discourses have the effect of making people feel trapped in a cycle of earning, working, spending, consuming and meeting financial commitments, including the servicing of debts. They include a discourse that emphasises lack of control, making people feel they cannot get out of this cycle, and have few options for challenging excessive spending, or critically examining possessions. Because they foster the idea that people should borrow, and possibly stretch themselves to pay for the most they can afford in terms of house, car, wardrobe and other possessions, these discourses have the effect of making paid work the central feature of life, around which all other life considerations need to revolve. As people try to fit other aspects of life -- such as relationships, children and personal development -- around work, they often feel stretched to the limit all the time, an experience that has been described as 'overload syndrome'<sup>xi</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The process of discourse analysis involves detailed examination of large chunks of text, in this case from interviews and focus groups, and the presentation of textual evidence for every comment and conclusion made by the researcher. To present the textual evidence for the various discourses discussed in this chapter would take up many pages. Short extracts from accounts do not demonstrate the complexity of discourse, and the ways that several different discourses (possibly contradictory) can be drawn on by one person in the course of a single conversation or discussion. Added to this, many of the participants in the *How Was It For You?* study took part on condition that their accounts were made available to personnel from the commissioning organisation only. For these reasons, I have decided to use no quotes from participants, and to concentrate on commenting on the discourses that emerged from both studies, having first described them briefly. In my book, *Balancing Your Life*, several participants in the second study are quoted at length. However, discourse analysis of their accounts is not included there, as the book is for a general readership.

### *New essentials*

The discourse of 'new essentials' hinges on the premise that the costly trappings of contemporary living are necessary. Within this discourse, couples are assumed to need two full incomes, simply to make ends meet. House prices and the need for a range of essentials, from the latest in mobile phones to bottled water, are cited as justification for living beyond one's means, or just breaking even each month. In turn, this discourse facilitates short-term financial thinking, borrowing and credit, and precludes the idea of doing without, living within one's means or building up savings. An emphasis on income rather than net worth or assets also facilitates a certain puzzlement about where all the money goes.

Some reality accounts also assert that because one cannot avoid spending money in contemporary life, one must be organised, so that credit-card and other debt does not get out of control. Significant by its absence in these discussions is any consideration of whether the purchases are themselves necessary. Reality discourses also facilitate the idea that women and men have naturally different consumer needs, especially the notion that women need more 'reality therapy' than men. In this, they also draw on essentialist discourses that portray gender difference as normal and natural.

A discourse of 'defensive spending' complements the discourse of new essentials. It centres on the premise that people must spend, in order to keep abreast of their contemporaries. Gift-buying, especially at Christmas, is seen as a way of remaining on a par with friends and relations who buy expensive gifts. Resentment of this practice is common, but it is seen as inescapable, because of the expectations of others. Several participants give accounts of family cultures of buying expensive gifts. Anybody who resists this practice, even by questioning it, is considered petty. The discourse of coping -- that is, of planning ahead for future spending, even to the extent of taking on extra paid work to 'cover Christmas', and being organised about paying off any credit-card debt -- is used as the best way to deal with this culture.

The discourse of defensive spending is particularly strong in relation to children, supporting the idea that they need the 'right' clothes so that they won't be conspicuous at school and in social situations. It also supports assertions that without apparent essentials such as computers and fee-paying schools, young people will be left behind in the job and education markets. This discourse is also associated with a practice of parents buying things for their children, in order to compensate for the fact that they spend long periods of time apart, while parents are at work.

New essentials discourses also support the creation of self-esteem and self-assertion by means of possessions. They have the effect of conflating self and possessions, making it difficult for people to distinguish between want and need. They preclude the possibility that self-esteem may be more durable, if it is the product of self-reflection and a critical examination knowledge of one's needs, rather than consumption-oriented desires.

### *Work discourses*

In many accounts, work emerges as something that provides a sense of self-worth and importance, as a source of friends and social interaction, as helping individuals to develop their talents and aptitudes and as a provider of security. However, reality

discourses portray work only as paid employment, or jobs, and do not recognise that unpaid work can also provide these satisfactions.

These discourses also support the idea that there is a hierarchy of types of work. There is the stimulating, high-status work associated with 'career', which provides identity and companionship and a good income. And there are the low-paid, low-status, dead-end jobs that nobody really wants to do, but for which money is seen to be some compensation.

On the other hand, because home life can be complicated, time-consuming and unpredictable, and the relationships there often require a lot of attention, these discourses also support a reading of the world of paid work as a respite from home. Paid work becomes so closely identified with 'life work' or career for many people, that the roles involved in it take precedence over all the other roles that people take on. Then, they find it difficult to fit all those other roles into their schedules.

The reality discourses concerning work also divide life itself into job and leisure, or work time and 'time off'. At the same time, accounts recognise that the emphasis placed on paid work has meant less time for interpersonal relationships outside the job, and that as a consequence, many social structures are weak, leisure is often lonely and boring, and that social and personal health can suffer.

The reality discourses surrounding paid work also see jobs as the means by which people are socially included and good citizens, ignoring the fact that many people in high-status, high-paid jobs do not have time or inclination to do the caring work that builds a strong civil society. They are also inadequate for addressing the fact that the low-paid or those in dead-end jobs are not necessarily genuinely socially included simply by virtue of being employed.

### ***Blame and lack of control***

The discourses of 'lack of control' and 'blame' can have the effect of ruling out part-time working, taking career breaks, or considering freelance work. A lifestyle where paid work is central leaves little time for personal reflection and development, or for family, relationship, community or voluntary work. The idea that couples need two full incomes precludes creative approaches to having and caring for children. The perceived need for two full incomes also makes childcare a consumer issue, because the only perceived option is for both partners to continue working fulltime and to pay for childcare. The assumptions surrounding these choices are further complicated by a discourse of gender difference, which operates on the assumption that having children is an issue more pertinent to women than to men. This has several effects. It means that women are constrained by the idea that they must 'do' career and children in the correct order. That is, they believe that they need to make career progress before having children. It rules out the possibility of men being active parents and taking responsibility for childcare, thus possibly freeing women to concentrate on career for a while. It also precludes the most creative and potentially sustainable solution, which is for women and men to construct peer relationships, where both work fewer hours and both actively participate in childcare and other domestic work<sup>xii</sup>.

### ***A self-regulating subject***

People experiencing the dilemmas of overload, consumerism, time poverty and essentialist conceptions of gender can reflect on these issues only according to the ideas that they already have. In more abstract terms, they can draw only on the discourses that are available to them. These tend to be the dominant or 'normal' discourses, which are taken for granted as 'the way things are', as common sense. Therefore, many people do not have access to discourses that could facilitate solutions beyond the obvious. The problem is also compounded by the fact that they are so busy working that they do not have time to think beyond the obvious, and beyond what is considered normal.

Consumerist new-essentials discourses, the dominant discourses of work and the work-earn-spend culture they support all help to blind the human subject to the possibilities for alternatives to how society is currently organised. The type of subjectivity that emerges tends to see money and technology as the solutions to life's challenges and dissatisfactions.

### **Critical discourses**

The second main group of discourses is critical in the sense that it questions the taken-for-granted assumptions of the dominant or mainstream culture of work-earn-spend. The central premises of the critical discourses revolve around a questioning attitude to money, credit, spending and possessions, and they depend to some extent on self-knowledge and a prioritising of needs.

### ***Discourses of limits***

A strong premise within the critical discourses is the idea that personal limits exist. Other critical concepts associated with the discourse of limits are frugality, thoughtful spending, responsibility and 'less is more'.

A discourse of limits emerges in research accounts of everyday life concerning material possessions, money, work, success, achievement, priorities, and business. Its central assertion is that if people understand what is enough, they can be fulfilled and happy, in control of their lives, and not at the mercy of forces that tell them they must always have more and spend more, in order to be more. This discourse distinguishes between wants and needs, and judges goods and services according to their functionality.

The effect of the discourses grouped under the discourse of limits is to give people a sense of responsibility and of the ability to shape their lives, whereby they avoid feeling buffeted by forces outside their control. In other words, individuals can achieve a measure of agency. Agency exists when people have resources for controlling their life choices, even to the extent that they feel able to cope with individual crises such as redundancy or more widespread difficulties such as high house prices, or an economic recession.

The discourses centred on the premise of limits cannot be considered in isolation from the reality discourses, because they often are developed in opposition to them. Furthermore, the reality discourses frequently provide resources for undermining the idea of limits. Limits discourses are much more likely to be *consciously* adopted than

are the reality discourses. For some, their adoption may result from a critical examination of their financial situation, and a decision to get it under control. For others, it may result from the decision to prioritise family life and childcare by parents, ahead of income, promotion or career development. For yet others, it may arise from efforts to deal with role and work overload.

Whatever the motivation, the result is a challenge to some of the most basic mainstream assumptions. For example, limits discourses question the contemporary assumption that two full incomes are always necessary for couples to make ends meet. They question the need for the range of possessions that are portrayed as necessities in Irish society today. They are a direct challenge to a culture of credit and borrowing, because they promote the value of living below one's means instead of just within them or beyond them and of having a savings cushion in the event of a crisis.

### ***Critical discourses of work***

Work, in the accounts drawing on critical discourses, is more than a job. Within this group of discourses, work is anything that gives satisfaction, recognition, or personal growth, or that contributes to the well-being of others, or to the welfare of the planet. Critical discourses do not facilitate the mainstream discourses' distinction between 'work' and 'life'. They introduce the idea of life work, which can include paid work, but not as a given. Some of the types of life work encountered among these discourses are learning, activism, art, spirituality, friendship, family, parenting, caring, entrepreneurial and community work.

Accounts drawing on critical discourses of work emphasise the ways that time-poverty, stress, and the centrality of paid work or lack of it do not sustain human happiness. They are critical of the single-mindedness that is encouraged in pursuit of career success, especially of the ways that such single-mindedness can lead people to compartmentalise their lives and deny the ways that the different sections are connected to the whole, and to other people.

A discourse of visible *versus* invisible work also emerges. It asserts that the predominant economic model portrays paid work as the only work that contributes to well-being. Accounts drawing on critical discourses of work emphasise the importance of work traditionally considered not to contribute to the economy. They emphasise how many activities essential for human happiness are not officially counted as part of the economy. People who do not have jobs, do not participate in business, or do not accumulate money, including children, retired people, old people, the unemployed, carers in the home, and volunteer workers, are economically invisible. In this sense, these discourses are critical of conventional economics' indices of well-being. They also contribute to the feminist assertion that housework and caring work are important and relevant to both sexes.

### ***Critical subjectivities***

Discourses represent political interests and, in consequence, are constantly vying for status and power in the subjectivity of the individual. In themselves, they are a component of subjectivity and affect the choices that individuals make and, ultimately, affect their relationships and the communities that they live in. This is not to suggest that it is always easy to resist social pressures and dominant discourses. One may have an emotional investment in a discourse because it gives meaning to



one's world and oneself. But it is to suggest that people often have more options than they think they have. Nor is it to suggest that discourse is the sole route to social change, but rather to assert that the discursive and the subjective are often overlooked in discussions of social change.

Living with a consciously chosen discourse of limits can result in the assertion that less is more. It can also have the outcome of critical reflection on the self, and on unacknowledged emotional attachments to consumerism, success, or the creation of identity by means of job or possessions. This process, if adequately supported and given access to radical discourses of the self, has the potential to support the construction of critical and politicised subjectivities<sup>xiii</sup>.

The process of constructing a critical self, at variance with mainstream regulatory discourses, also necessitates communication with one's intimates. Decisions based on quality-of-life priorities have to be negotiated and constantly revisited. The individual lives in interdependent systems with other people. Therefore, beliefs, attitudes and priorities, and the emotional responses that accompany a questioning approach to life need to be constant topics for discussion. Adults in a household or community (and children, as they are old enough to participate in discussions) have to know themselves and each other, and constantly reflect and negotiate. Thus the potential exists for a limits discourse to create the conditions whereby the whole system, or the community, can be taken into account, along with the individual.

### ***Gender***

Both reality and quality discourses are prey to gender-difference discourses, demonstrating the all-pervasiveness of gender as a factor shaping contemporary social relations. The potential for women and men to be radical about gender roles can be lost, if discourses of limits, adopted in the search for quality of life, are assumed to mean a return to a traditional past, where women looked after the home and men worked in the formal paid economy. This may be the case if individuals draw on discourses of essential gender difference and equity, as distinct from equality. The assumption that there are separate spheres of skill and responsibility for women and men rules out men's involvement in childcare, and the associated pleasures and satisfactions, as well as difficulties. It also precludes women's self-development by means of participation in the paid workforce. Further, it means that each sex may have little appreciation of the difficulties of the work of the other. Since most women have been part of the paid workforce at some time, it is more likely that a 'separate spheres' arrangement will mean that men have little appreciation of the work of running a home. Ultimately, both women and men are disadvantaged by assumptions of gender differences, and have more to gain from questioning them<sup>xiv</sup>.

### ***Normality***

The mindfulness and conscious choice associated with the limits group of discourses are in direct contrast to the way people often unconsciously 'buy in' to consumerist discourses. They may become sucked into a cycle of borrowing and credit, which seems entirely normal, because it is what most people are doing, before they have had the opportunity to critically reflect on these issues.

'Normality' is both a useful and a dangerous discourse. It can be useful for people to know that their experience is similar to that of other people. But it can be dangerous if

statistical normality - for example, in the idea that it is normal to need the new essentials, for couples to need two full incomes, or to experience overload syndrome - precludes questioning the situation or considering alternatives. The 'normality' of the work-earn-spend cycle can have the effect of making people believe that no alternatives exist. A discourse of normality can also be used as the justification for adhering to a belief in essential gender differences, for justifying separate spheres of responsibility for women and men, and for the assumption that women and men have fundamentally different communication styles and emotional needs. Then, if individuals experience contradictions or dissatisfaction with these divisions, they have the added problem of feeling that they are not normal.

### **The bigger picture**

As people seek quality of life, it becomes clear that none of their problems or choices exists in isolation. Global politics and economics are connected to hurried lifestyles, difficulties with money and debt, a deteriorating environment, the growth of conspicuous and competitive spending, and the lack of control over their lives that many Irish citizens experience today.

The mainstream view of politics is narrow, seeing it as a pursuit of power, centred on political parties and pressure groups. But there are other ways of looking at politics, which see that both individuals and society are connected at a deep level, and that economic decisions and social relations exist together in a dynamic relationship. Economics is a key aspect of politics – to have people economically unaware is to undermine democracy, participation, human connectedness, happiness and citizenship. The way that an economy is organised is a political decision.

The conventional economic thinking that dominates in the Republic of Ireland and in most Western countries understands the economy as the visible economy – businesses, buying and selling of goods and services, paid work and money-making. This visible economy is seen as the primary source of society's wealth and well-being, and depends on the concept of economic growth. Growth is concerned with raising productivity, increasing competitiveness, developing new markets, increasing employment, stimulating investment and encouraging consumer confidence so that people spend more. Barbara Brandt<sup>xv</sup> says that this thinking promotes a very narrow view of the economy, seeing it as purely the activities of the investment community. It also promotes the idea that economic growth should take precedence over all other considerations, and that the rest of life – people in their homes, families, communities, unpaid work, government, education, art, culture, religion and spirituality – is dependent on the visible economy. It is assumed that economic growth will bring about progress for everybody, usually understood as individual betterment and material enrichment, without taking into account other systems, such as family, social cohesion, the environment, or fragile eco-systems.

Many alternative economists and systems thinkers, such as Hazel Henderson, Herman Daly, Richard Douthwaite and Barbara Brandt<sup>xvi</sup>, argue that growth may actually make us poorer because environmental and social costs mount faster than production benefits. Most conventional economists acknowledge the existence of ecological/environmental costs, but assume that they will be sorted out by technology. In practice, they ignore social costs because they are not easily measured. Robert E.

Lane's research<sup>xvii</sup> shows that, after a certain point, increasing wealth does not bring increasing happiness. In fact, living in an age of wealth and in a high-tech economy is the cause of extreme stress. People may become rich in material possessions, but poor in time. High earnings and consumption serve purposes that go way beyond meeting needs – they bestow self-esteem, status and identity. In the past, this effect was often confined to men, but now it is available to women also, and this is often portrayed as gender equality.

The world's high and middle-income groups are those caught up to the greatest extent in the work-earn-spend cycle. They have the most consumer power, but exist in a world where half the population has never made a telephone call. The consumer class is concentrated in the highly industrialised regions, and its way of life is depleting the world's raw materials, yet its affluence exists in the midst of poverty. And this consumer class is also setting a standard to which many less affluent people aspire.

Consumption patterns like these are also responsible for class inequalities. With increasing consumption, lower-income children and adults are left behind in the market, and the gap between the affluent and the poor becomes unbridgeable. This results in gated communities trying to protect themselves from the poor outside. And as the pressures on private spending grow, support for taxes and public spending goes down. Public goods and facilities get little support, they deteriorate, and because they are not available, it adds to the pressures to spend privately<sup>xviii</sup>.

In one sense, it is a highly elitist suggestion that already privileged people give up high-powered jobs and the high-consumption lifestyles that go with them, in order to create a better life for themselves. But in another sense, it would be an enormous change if the consumer class developed awareness of these issues and began living with purpose, clarifying their priorities, consuming only what they need, avoiding meaningless jobs, and devoting time to their families, relationships and communities<sup>xix</sup>. Such a change could create the conditions for understanding that economics is relevant to everybody, and that the ways that the economy is organised is a political decision.

Citizens worry about the over-materialistic values being transmitted to children, the downsizing of companies in the name of efficiency, the destruction of the natural environment, the long working and commuting times often demanded to keep the economy growing, and the consequent lack of time for self and relationships. The dominant reality discourses tell them there is no alternative if we are to survive in the competitive global economy. Indeed, Richard Douthwaite points out<sup>xx</sup> that that is largely true. Because of the ways that many countries, including Ireland, are locked into trade agreements – our government has little choice about how the economy is run. Because of global trade agreements, governments are required to run their countries in very specific ways. If they do not, international investors will cause a financial crisis by shifting their funds elsewhere.

Within the present political and economic system, then, there is little choice. Democracy in growth economies, which include Ireland, has been undermined by the extreme wealth owned by global corporations. But the system cannot continue indefinitely, because it depends on and is depleting natural and finite resources such

as oil and gas. It also has personal, psychological and social consequences which many people consider unacceptable.

### ***Effects on spiritual and intellectual development***

Many - especially older - people often wonder why some people are unhappy in their lifestyles and paid work. They are not prepared to shed too many tears for a high-earning younger generation whose main problems seem to be 'time poverty' and job stress. However, growth economics has had considerable effects on society, and the world of paid work has changed in recent years. Brian Thorne points out that we are being taught that life means 'endless toil and competition, the pursuit of ever-greater achievement, the race for material affluence'<sup>xxi</sup>. Policies directed at achieving greater efficiency and competition at ever lower costs have created a 'culture of contempt' that permeates the way we treat each other in the market-place. Many people lack time to stop and think, to question the dominant discourses and to engage in intellectual debate and educational activities that develop alternatives. And while some suffer from time poverty, others suffer from involuntary material poverty, which is degrading to the human spirit because of the helplessness, despair and passivity it generates.

The World Health Organisation predicts that by 2010 depression will be the second most common disease in the developed world. Mild chronic depression is often caused by a lack of meaning or a sense of purpose in life. Time poverty, stress, and lives dominated by paid work or lack of it do not sustain human character, spirit or happiness. Richard Sennett defines character as the part of the person that concerns long-term emotional experience, loyalty and commitment to others. The short-term nature of our economic life and the consequent demands of much paid work today can set inner, emotional lives adrift, he says, and with them the sense of self that supports us over time<sup>xxii</sup>. This growth-oriented way of thinking and being has seeped into our minds and damaged our ability to experience pleasure in simple things, to prioritise health and happiness. It has also 'dumbed down' discussions in the mainstream media about the problems we face.

The growth economics of late modern capitalism needs human subjects who do not question the dominant discourses, but who compartmentalize their lives, and deny the ways that the different sections are connected to the whole, and to other people. We are encouraged to ask the question 'who needs me?' only in relation to our paid work, points out Sennett. In addition, home and the relationships centred on home are messy and uncontrollable, but work relationships are frequently ordered and predictable. As a result, many people prefer to spend their time at their job, and to pay other people to do the messy caring and domestic work. Employment also offers subjects a structure for their time. Many fear the reality of what they would do with their time if they did not have a job to go to for five or six days a week.

One does not have to believe in gods or religions to accept the importance of spirituality. It is also connected to the concept of soul, which Charles Handy, an atheist, defines as that which is best in oneself. It is impossible to be truly human on one's own. Spirituality can be seen as a consciousness of the collective, and of the connections between humans and the natural environment. Brian Thorne describes it thus:

The individual's spirit or spiritual dimension is his or her creative source of energy, which reflects the moving force within the universe itself. In other words, it is because I am essentially a spiritual being that I am, whether I know it or not or whether I like it or not, indissolubly linked to all that is or has been or will be. I am not an isolated entity but rather a unique part of the whole created order.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Dominant economic discourses, which demand compartmentalization and short-term thinking, have serious detrimental effects on the human spirit and on the capacity to engage in critical thinking. Such thinking is based on the questioning of received wisdom and assumptions and on a quest for alternative kinds of knowledge about how to live.

### **Promoting discourses of limits: creating the conditions for critical thinking**

Limits discourses, at the very least, create the conditions for critical thinking about the bigger picture and the longer term. If we slow the treadmill of paid work and work with a discourse of enough concerning money and possessions, we can create conditions where the 'public dialogue' is questioning and critical<sup>xxiv</sup>. Reality or 'no alternative' discourses, and the consumerist practices associated with them, are inherently short-term, and over-immersion in them precludes critical thinking. They support simplistic media discussions about economics, human experience and social life, and foster a politically illiterate and self-regulating citizenry. People experiencing overload have little time to think critically. They may (and most do) experience contradictions, because the discourses available are inadequate to explain all of their experiences. But they have few resources for acting on the insights that contradictions can initiate. Below, I outline some of the possibilities created by a discourses of limits<sup>2</sup>.

### ***Shopping as an expression of knowledge***

Through our spending, we vote, in effect, for the continuation of the dominant economic discourses. If we want alternatives, consuming less and consuming critically are part of what is required.

By consuming less, we use fewer resources. And the good news is that if we consume less, we need less money, we need to do less paid work, we have more time, and we can balance our personal lives. We can also be more active citizens when we have more time. We can become involved in voluntary work and other projects that contribute to human relations. We have the time to consume wisely, by seeking out local sources for goods and services, rather than buying from large corporations. Shopping (or not) is an expression of political and economic knowledge and commitment.

We can also support other local economic initiatives, such as those described by Richard Douthwaite<sup>xxv</sup>. Many of these initiatives have the characteristics of mindful markets, as outlined by David Korten. Korten argues that alternative economics is not against markets, but it is opposed to the free movement of capital around the globe,

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<sup>2</sup> In the following paragraphs, I deliberately use the word 'we', described as 'the dangerous pronoun' by Richard Sennett, in *The Corrosion of Character*. I use it to reinforce my assertion that these are issues of concern to everybody, not just abstract ideas.

and the constant pressure to produce more, without regard for the social and environmental consequences. Mindful markets, he writes, use life rather than money as the standard for evaluating economic choices and performance. The full costs - environmental, human and social - of business decisions are met by those who make the decisions. Such markets favour human-scale, local-ownership businesses; they strive for full disclosure of information, and are regulated to avoid extremes of wealth and poverty, since a viable democratic society needs a ceiling and a floor with regard to the distribution of wealth and assets. They also encourage the sharing of knowledge and technology, and are self-reliant and diverse. Communities have the ability to manage their borders so that cross-border trade and capital flows are not all in one direction. Finally, mindful markets are ethical, with clear and enforceable rules, subject to due legal process<sup>xxvi</sup>.

### ***Challenging economic invisibility***

We need to recognize that the work that is done for free is an important contribution to society and the economy. We need to challenge the split between paid and unpaid work, to value the contribution of volunteers, carers, retired people and children.

As part of the initiative to challenge economic invisibility, women and men need to develop egalitarian relationships, where both contribute to the visible and the invisible economy. Both in the workplace and in the home, men need to identify more as fathers, carers and performers of domestic work, and to recognize that their interests coincide with those of women. Studies of couples who have actively and successfully sought to create equality in their relationships indicate that both women and men need to examine their understanding of work, career and success and personal limits<sup>xxvii</sup>.

### ***Pursuing a sense of connection along with personal development***

Both individuality and connectedness are important in challenging the dominant economic and social paradigm. The physicist and philosopher Fritjof Capra has observed that through self-assertion the individual maintains diversity and energy, which are essential to the creative potential of the whole. Combining individuality with integration into a group or collectivity makes for a healthy system<sup>xxviii</sup>. Modern ways of living emphasise individualism and compartmentalization. Individuality is different from individualism, and a sense of connectedness is not the same as being bound by cultural norms. In broadening the sense of our connection to other people and to the world, and by developing our self-reflective consciousness, we can become happier individuals, as well as agents of change in our worlds, local and global.

### **Conclusion**

Discourses and the practices associated with them are not static. They constantly shift and change according to circumstances of time and place. Central to critical thinking is the question of who benefits from a particular discourse, and who is disadvantaged by it. Some discourses are so dominant that they appear natural and normal. But neither are they simply authored by people and forces 'out there'. Everybody participates in constructing, maintaining, challenging and changing them. People can be agents of change. The first step in becoming an agent of change in one's own life can be a questioning of the discourses that are dominant within contemporary society, and an examination of the benefits and disadvantages associated with them. When people take responsibility for their life choices, and acknowledge the contradictions,

frustrations and complex emotions that they may feel, they are better placed to contribute productively to creative social change.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Europay International. Survey, August 2001
- <sup>ii</sup> The Sunday Show, RTÉ Radio One, Sept 1<sup>st</sup> 2002 is the most recent example at the time of writing.
- <sup>iii</sup> P. H. Ray and S.R. Anderson, *The Cultural Creatives* (New York, Harmony Books, 2000)
- <sup>iv</sup> A. B. Ryan, *How was it for you? Exploring couples' experiences of the first year of marriage* (Dublin, ACCORD and Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 2001).
- <sup>v</sup> A.B. Ryan, *Balancing Your Life: A guide to work, time, money and happiness*. (Dublin, The Liffey Press, 2002)
- <sup>vi</sup> R.E. Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (London and New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000)
- <sup>vii</sup> M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York, Pantheon, 1972), *Histoire de la folie* (Paris, Gallimard, 1972), *Birth of the Clinic* (London, Tavistock, 1973), *Power / Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972 -1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).
- <sup>viii</sup> E. Burman, *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*. (London and New York, Routledge, 1994)
- <sup>ix</sup> C. Weedon, *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1997), p. 32.
- <sup>x</sup> A. B. Ryan, *Feminist ways of knowing: towards theorising the person for radical adult education*, (Leicester, NIACE, 2001).
- <sup>xi</sup> R.A. Swenson, *The Overload Syndrome: Learning to live within your limits* (Colorado Springs, Navpress, 1998)
- <sup>xii</sup> B. Purcell, *For our own good: childcare issues in Ireland* (Cork: Collins Press, 2001).
- <sup>xiii</sup> A.B.Ryan, *Feminist ways of knowing*
- <sup>xiv</sup> J.H. Bray, and E.N. Jouriles 'Treatment of marital conflict and prevention of divorce', in *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* (12:4, 1995) pp 461-473. M.S. Kimmel, and M.A. Messner, *Men's Lives* (Boston, Allyn and Bacon, 2001) J. VanEvery *Heterosexual Women Changing the Family: Refusing to be a 'Wife'!* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1995).
- <sup>xv</sup> B. Brandt, *Whole Life Economics: Revaluing daily life*. (Philadelphia, PA and Gabriola Island, BC, New Society Publishers, 1995)
- <sup>xvi</sup> B. Brandt, *Whole Life Economics*
- R. Douthwaite, *The Growth Illusion: How economic growth has enriched the few, impoverished the many, and endangered the planet* (Dublin, The Lilliput Press, in association with New Society Publishers and Green Books, 2000, second edition)
- H. Daly, *Steady-State Economics* (London, Earthscan, 1991, second edition)
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- <sup>xvii</sup> R.E. Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (London and New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000)
- <sup>xviii</sup> N. Schor, *The overspent American: upscaling, downshifting and the new consumer* (New York, Basic Books, 1998).
- <sup>xix</sup> D. Korten, *The post-corporate world: life after capitalism* (San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler, 1998), p 222).
- <sup>xx</sup> R. Douthwaite, 'The growth illusion', in H. Bohan and G. Kennedy (eds) *Working towards balance: our society in the new millennium* (Dublin, Veritas, 2000)
- <sup>xxi</sup> B. Thorne, *The Secular and the Holy: Person Centered Counselling and Christian Spirituality* (London, Whurr Publishers, 1998)
- <sup>xxii</sup> R. Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The personal consequences of work in the new capitalism* (New York, W.W. Norton, 1999)
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *The Secular and the Holy*, p 78
- <sup>xxiv</sup> 'Bryony L. Hoskins in Conversation with Susan Brownmiller', in *Feminism and Psychology* (11: 4, 2002), p550.
- <sup>xxv</sup> R. Douthwaite, *Short Circuit: strengthening local economies for security in an unstable world*. (Dublin, Lilliput Press, 1996, second edition forthcoming on Feasta website, www.feasta.org)
- <sup>xxvi</sup> D. Korten, *The Post-Corporate World*
- <sup>xxvii</sup> A.R. Hochschild, *The Second Shift* (London, Piatkus, 1990)

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B. Purcell, *For Our Own Good: Childcare Issues in Ireland* (Cork, Collins Press, 2001)  
<sup>xxviii</sup> F. Capra, *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems* (New York, Anchor Books, 1996), p. 4.