

Ecology of Abandonment: Non-Take-Up of Social Rights as a Capitalist Critique

Frédérique Leresche 

School of Social Work Fribourg, HES-SO, Switzerland

Correspondence: Frédérique Leresche (frederique.leresche@hefr.ch)

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Abstract

Social protection is often presented as a compassionate response to vulnerability, linking care and inclusion through the lens of autonomy. However, access to social rights is increasingly conditional on activation requirements and compliance with labour market standards. Based on ethnographic research conducted in Switzerland, this article analyzes non-take-up of social rights not as a simple lack of information or a failure of inclusion, but as a socially and morally situated response to these forms of conditional compassion. Using the conceptual framework of an ecology of abandonment, the article shows how some people interpret social policies not as protective measures but as mechanisms of re-commodification (Polanyi, 2001) and moral control. In this context, non-take-up can constitute an infra-political critique of the welfare state, expressed through ordinary practices of refusal or distancing from institutions. The analysis also highlights how these practices are accompanied by a relocation of care towards informal moral economies based on family, community, or collective relationships, which are unevenly accessible.

Keywords

ecology of abandonment; infrapolitics; non-take-up; social rights

1. Introduction

In many welfare states, public institutions present social protection as a compassionate response to vulnerability, i.e., a response that seeks to assist individuals while promoting autonomy and inclusion. In this context, social rights are not only conceived as protection mechanisms, but also as tools for promoting individual responsibility and collective well-being. The promise of “compassionate futures” is thus based on the assumption that social welfare institutions can simultaneously care for vulnerable populations and guide them toward social and economic integration.

However, critical research on the welfare state shows that social rights are far from being universally guaranteed (Bhattacharya & Vogel, 2017; Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Paugam, 1991). Insurance and redistribution mechanisms do not merely protect; they also organise moral and institutional boundaries between individuals considered legitimate or deserving, and those assigned to positions of assistance, who are viewed as suspicious or even deviant (Polanyi, 2001; Wacquant, 2009). These mechanisms contribute to producing hierarchies of value between lives, while masking these inequalities behind the language of solidarity and compassion (Fassin, 2012).

In this context, care is offered selectively, under conditions that associate compassion with productivity and autonomy with integration into the labour market. Care is understood in this article in the broad sense proposed by Fisher and Tronto (1990) as everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible, a definition that encompasses both informal and institutional practices, and that is explicitly relational and political.

This article is part of the broader conceptual framework of an ecology of abandonment, which refers to Povinelli's (2011) work on the economies of abandonment. The ecology of abandonment is understood as the set of material, relational, and institutional conditions that emerge when care is offered selectively and certain lives are structurally left behind. From this perspective, exclusion is not an accident or a failure of public policy, but the systemic effect of administrative, legal, economic, and moral arrangements that organise access to protection while producing unequal forms of assistance (Povinelli, 2011). Whilst Povinelli's concept of "economies of abandonment" highlights the distributive logic through which liberal regimes allocate recognition and protection, thereby determining which lives are preserved and which are left behind, this article proposes the notion of an "ecology of abandonment" to capture the relational and affective entanglements through which abandonment is experienced in bodies and between people. Placing social policies in such an ecology allows us to question how care becomes conditional and how certain lives are kept on the margins of protection without ever being fully recognised.

From this perspective, the aim is to understand how individuals position themselves morally and emotionally in relation to what matters to them (Paperman & Laugier, 2011). For research, this implies taking people's perspectives seriously and treating them as "critiques," in the sense that Boltanski (2011) uses it. This is a central epistemological issue, given that the lives of people in precarious situations are rarely regarded as sources of knowledge (Foucault, 1997; Sarker, 2015).

Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Switzerland (Leresche, 2022a), this article shows that some people interpret social policies not as instruments of care or protection, but as mechanisms of re-commodification, designed to reintegrate them into the labour market and reproduce existing economic relations. From this perspective, refusing social benefits becomes a way of resisting what is perceived as a form of conditional and productivist compassion.

By bringing this perspective to the fore, the article contributes to debates on compassionate futures by highlighting the limitations of institutional care when compassion is conditioned by economic productivity. It also shows that social rights are both mechanisms of protection and abandonment, in which lives are hierarchised (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013).

The article is structured as follows. In the theoretical section, I discuss the structural ambivalence within the welfare state between protection and activation, before presenting the Swiss institutional context in which the study is set. I then develop the concepts of non-take-up of benefits, re-commodification through work, infra-political critique, and care, leading to the notion of the ecology of abandonment, which is employed here as an analytical lens. In the methodological section, I describe the ethnographic approach, the field sites, and the construction of the analytical corpus. Then, in the three empirical sections, I examine respectively how critiques of wage labour shape practices of refusal, how activation policies and the re-commodification are experienced as forms of moral control, and how participants redirect care toward informal moral economies as alternatives to institutional dependency. In the discussion, I situate these findings within the framework of debates on compassionate futures, drawing on Tronto's concept of *homines curans* to interpret informal care practices as a different ontological starting point for social protection, while taking into account the risks of their instrumentalisation.

2. Theoretical Frame

Contemporary welfare states are organised around a structural tension. They are simultaneously designed to protect individuals from market risks and to reintegrate them into the market as quickly as possible. This double mandate of protection and activation produces an ambivalence at the heart of social policy that shapes not only how benefits are designed, but how they are experienced by those who receive them. Recent comparative work has shown how this tension has intensified under the pressure of workfare reforms across European welfare regimes (Janssens & Van Mechelen, 2022), tightening the conditions under which protection is granted and maintained. It is within this structural ambivalence that non-take-up can be analysed, as it becomes a reaction to the very conditions under which care is provided.

2.1. Non-Take-Up and Conditionality of Social Policies

Research on non-take-up of social rights has shown that a significant proportion of people entitled to benefits and services do not access the schemes intended for them (Van Oorschot, 1996). Initially understood as a technical or information problem, non-take-up was mainly explained by administrative complexity, stigmatisation, or lack of information (Currie, 2004; Hernanz et al., 2004; Warin, 2016). Economic approaches to non-take-up have emphasised rational cost-benefit calculations, stigma costs, and information asymmetries as primary explanatory factors (Van Oorschot, 1996), to develop policies to tackle non-take-up (Dubois & Ludwinek, 2015; Van Oorschot, 1998). While these perspectives capture important dimensions of non-take-up, they tend to presuppose a calculating subject whose relationship to social rights is primarily instrumental.

Some researchers have developed classifications of non-take-up to better distinguish not only the causes but also the appropriate responses to the phenomenon (Rode, 2009; Warin, 2014). Warin, in particular, has shown that non-take-up can be attributed to a lack of knowledge, or to the fact that entitlements are not being distributed, or even to situations where people know where and how to access a service (at least in part) but do not do so.

It is this form of non-take-up that my research has focused on—the non-demand—seeking to understand the critique in the act of foregoing, not applying for, or deciding to withdraw from a benefit. These situations are

not mutually exclusive and may occur in succession over time, as in the case of Jacques, who entered and left the social protection system on several occasions. The analysis here focuses on a specific subset: cases in which non-take-up was explicitly presented by participants as a critical response to the productivist logic inherent in social policy. It is important to note that non-take-up is rarely complete and permanent. People move in and out of the system, mostly partially, and depending on different factors, including emotions, states of mind, or the hope they have for the future. They combine partial claims with selective refusals, and negotiate their relationship to institutions over time. It is precisely this intermittent quality that makes non-demand difficult to observe and easy to misread as indifference or ignorance.

These dynamics take a specific form in the Swiss context, where the architecture of social protection is itself a site of conditionality and discretion. Switzerland has a highly decentralised welfare state, in which social protection is organised at several levels, in accordance with a federalist system. Unemployment insurance, for example, is a federal scheme that provides income support for a limited period, subject to prior contributions and active job-seeking. However, it is administered at the cantonal level by regional employment offices, whose advisers play a central role in assigning activation measures to beneficiaries, notably compulsory work placements and temporary jobs. Once unemployment insurance entitlements have been exhausted, individuals may access cantonal income support schemes (referred to as “integration income,” “social assistance,” or other terms depending on the canton), which constitute the last resort of social protection and are available only to certain categories of people. These cantonal schemes are means-tested, highly restrictive, and vary significantly across Switzerland’s 26 cantons in terms of benefit levels, conditionality requirements, repayment conditions, and the discretionary powers granted to social workers. Other forms of assistance may be provided in addition to income support (such as housing assistance or health insurance assistance), again at the discretion of the cantons. It is within this institutional framework, characterised by multi-level conditionality, strict activation requirements and significant local variations, that the experiences of non-take-up documented in this article must be understood.

It is important to point out that I use certain terms in different ways. In this article, social rights refer to the legal and political framework of established rights. Protection refers to the expected role of safeguarding individuals against market risks. Assistance refers to concrete last-resort mechanisms, where conditionality and institutional oversight are most visible. Benefits refer to the specific administrative procedures through which this protection is granted or denied. Support, on the other hand, is reserved for informal and collective forms of care that operate outside or alongside institutional mechanisms. Compassion refers to the moral and discursive framework through which institutional care is guided and legitimised.

2.2. Social Rights and Re-Commodification of Labour

To understand non-take-up as a form of critique, it is necessary to situate social policies within broader political-economic arrangements. Classical analyses of social citizenship emphasised the role of social rights in the de-commodification of labour (Castel, 2008; Marshall & Bottomore, 1996), that is, in protecting individuals from total dependence on the market. However, critical perspectives on political economy have shown that social protection also plays a central role in stabilising capitalist systems by reproducing the labour force and maintaining social order (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

Rather than suspending market logic, social policies often work to reintegrate individuals into the labour market by encouraging flexibility and employability. In this sense, social protection functions as a mechanism of re-commodification through labour, orienting beneficiaries towards market participation even when it is precarious, undesirable, or structurally limited. In this article, I therefore use the term “re-commodification” to refer to the process by which individuals are redirected into the market logic of labour, that is, treated as a commodity whose value depends on their employability (Polanyi, 2001).

From this perspective, social policies embody a specific moral economy (Fassin, 2012) in which care is legitimate to the extent that it supports economic integration. Dependence on social rights is presented as temporary and problematic, while autonomy is equated with paid employment. Individuals are encouraged to internalise these norms and align their aspirations with the demands of the labour market. But when social rights are experienced primarily as instruments of activation and control, they can lose their protective and caring significance for those who receive them.

2.3. Non-Take-Up as Infra-Political Criticism

Based on these propositions, this article conceptualises non-take-up as an infra-political critique (Scott, 1990) of social welfare capitalism. Rather than taking the form of explicit political mobilisation, these critiques are expressed through ordinary practices of refusal or distancing. Individuals may forego social benefits not because they reject the assistance itself, but because they contest the conditions under which these benefits are offered and the values it conveys (Leresche, 2019, 2022b).

This conceptualisation differs from both economic and administrative approaches to non-take-up. Where economic approaches explain non-take-up through cost-benefit calculations and administrative approaches focus on information barriers and institutional complexity, this article attends to a third register: the moral and political meaning that refusal carries for those who enact it. The difference is not merely analytical. A person who does not claim a benefit because the paperwork is too burdensome is making a different kind of statement—about the state, about care, about their own place in the social order—than a person who refuses because they experience the conditions attached to that benefit as an affront to their dignity or a betrayal of their values. Collapsing these registers into a single category of “non-take-up” obscures what is politically most significant about the latter.

It is important to emphasise that this approach does not romanticise non-take-up as resistance in itself. The ability to refuse social rights is socially situated and unevenly distributed, particularly according to gender, residency status, age, or physical condition. Non-take-up may express criticism in some contexts, while reflecting structural constraints or exclusion in others. This article therefore focuses on specific configurations in which refusal is explicitly formulated as a rejection of the capitalist rationales embedded in social policies.

2.4. Care and the Limits of Inclusion by the Social State

The concept of “compassionate futures” invites us to refocus our thinking on the role of care in social inclusion. However, as critical studies have shown, compassion is not a neutral or universally benevolent principle (Fassin, 2012). When institutionalised, assistance can serve as a governance tool, determining who

is eligible for assistance and under what conditions. In activation-oriented welfare states, compassion appears more conditional and selective, as it is granted to those who demonstrate a willingness to re-enter market labour. Compassionate discourses can thus coexist with practices perceived as morally demanding or punitive, particularly when inclusion is inextricably linked to economic performance. In this perspective, the welfare state does not merely provide care; it presents its actions as benevolence through a compassionate discourse, and it is this presentation that masks the conditionality, normative surveillance, and selective exclusions that structure access to protection in practice. The analytical value of the ecology of abandonment lies precisely in this gap between the compassionate framework of social policies and the experience of those for whom benevolence, distributed conditionally, turns into abandonment. The concept of abandonment is preferred here to that of exclusion because it captures the condition of being formally included whilst being structurally left behind.

The “compassionate futures,” as understood in this special issue, propose a different starting point. Rather than organising care around the figure of the autonomous and self-sufficient individual who must be temporarily supported until they regain their independence in the labour market, they highlight vulnerability, interdependence and mutual responsibility as constitutive features of social life. This article adopts this perspective, whilst examining the conditions under which it remains unfulfilled. The concept of *homines curans* developed by Tronto (2017) will be drawn upon in the discussion to analyse the alternative practices documented in the empirical sections.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Methodology and the Context of the Study

The empirical material used in this article comes from a doctoral research project conducted between 2016 and 2022 on non-take-up of social rights. Fieldwork was conducted in several locations in Switzerland, including neighbourhood community centres, associations offering hobbies or discussion activities, associations distributing food, rights advocacy associations, and informal networks critical of wage labour and economic growth.

The analysis presented here focuses on a specific subset of the data: people who framed their non-take-up of social benefits as part of a broader critique of capitalism and productivist social policies. This analytical choice reflects the article’s theoretical focus on capitalist critiques of non-take-up and does not aim to represent all the forms or experiences of non-take-up identified in the research.

3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through a combination of comprehensive interviews, participant observation, and field notes. In total, the research project as a whole comprises more than 50 in-depth interviews with people who have various relationships with social rights, as well as extensive observational material collected through regular participation in the field.

For this article, a subset of interviews and field notes were selected for analysis: Those where participants explicitly framed their non-take-up in relation to a broader critique of capitalist social organisation and wage

labour as a norm. This framing was identified both through direct discourse and through the broader narratives participants constructed around their relationship to work, dependency, and institutional assistance. Participants in this subset ranged in age from 20 to 72, with 13 persons identifying as women and 18 as men. The benefits concerned included unemployment insurance, income support (*revenu d'insertion*), housing assistance, family benefits, and health insurance contributions.

The interviews focused on the participants' trajectories, their experiences of social benefits, their perceptions of social welfare institutions and their reasons for refusing or renouncing certain rights. Particular attention was paid to how participants formulated their decisions and framed them within broader moral, ethical, political, or economic critiques. Participant observation made it possible to contextualize these narratives within everyday practices and social interactions.

All interviews were conducted in French, recorded with the participants' consent, and partially transcribed. The data were then classified by theme and keyword. Names and identifying details were anonymised to ensure the confidentiality of the interviewees.

3.3. Analytical Approach

The analysis is based on an inductive and interpretive approach. Interview transcripts and field notes were coded by theme, with particular attention paid to recurring motifs relating to work, autonomy, agency, control, power relations, dependency, care, and market participation.

The extracts presented in this article are illustrative of analytical patterns that recurred across the corpus. They were selected for their capacity to render visible the theoretical dynamics under examination, not as statistically representative instances.

These three analytical registers, critique of wage labour, rejection of re-commodification of labour, and the choice of alternative dependencies, emerged inductively from repeated patterns in the data. They represent distinct, though often overlapping, modes through which participants articulated their relationship to social rights. Some participants moved across all three registers within a single interview; others articulated only one or two. The distinctions drawn here are analytical rather than typological.

3.4. Positionality and Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted with particular attention to reflexivity. The author's position, engaged in long-term fieldwork and prior knowledge of certain areas, facilitated the development of trusting relationships with participants, while requiring continuous reflection on power relations and interpretation.

The aim of the analysis is not to evaluate individual choices or to promote non-take-up as the norm, but to understand how certain practices of refusal emerge as meaningful responses to the conditions in which social protection is organised.

4. Empirical Findings: Capitalist Critiques of Non-Take-Up

4.1. Criticising Paid Work as a Gateway to Social Rights

Access to social protection is mostly structured around contributions and demonstrated efforts to return to the labour market (Bonvin & Moachon, 2007). Some of the people interviewed describe activation measures, particularly reintegration labour programmes, as central components of this process of re-commodification. In that sense, they experience these programmes as coercive and out of step with their aspirations, as Jacques explained to me.

Jacques is 57 years old. He was laid off for economic reasons and continued to accumulate fixed-term contracts with his former employer while he was unemployed, which allowed him to renew his unemployment benefits for ten years. When I met him at the recreation centre, he was receiving income support (considered the last line of social protection), but his advisor, whom he describes as “the Gestapo,” regularly assigns him temporary jobs that he finds “useless, especially for someone who has no chance of finding a job.” Useless, because he thinks he has very little chance of finding a job less than ten years before retirement. Although he has already given up benefits, he has always rejoined the system without being convinced of its utility. He knows that the benefits will allow him to survive, but at the cost of a loss of meaning that seems problematic.

As a recipient of welfare benefits, Jacques is required to take on temporary jobs in the form of internships. In fact, welfare benefits, like unemployment benefits, are a social programmes that comes with reintegration measures. Recipients must demonstrate that they are capable of supporting themselves through employment and that they are self-sufficient in order to be able to leave the programmes.

For Jacques, it is these “work requirements for the unemployed, which cost the community money, that are stupid.” He vacillates between anger and resignation. He knows full well that he will not find a job in a labour market from which he is excluded, not only because of his age, but also because he has had many fixed-term jobs and his resume is marked by instability, making him appear unreliable to potential employers. One must grasp the irony of his situation, which he describes simply: “It makes no sense.” Jacques has also experienced the harsh realities of the job market, as illustrated by an employer who dismissed him because he had become too expensive due to his age, yet continues to employ him on an ad hoc basis through fixed-term contracts, which cost the company less and make Jacques a flexible member of the workforce, adaptable to the company’s economic needs. Unemployment then fulfilled its initial function, which is to maintain the active workforce.

Jacques’s case is not an isolated one within the sample. Several other participants described a similar pattern of cyclical entry into and exit from the social welfare system, in which the requirement to prove one’s employability is experienced as both futile and humiliating. The traumatic experience with the labour market and employers is also a constant feature in most of these stories. What varies from one to another is the extent to which this experience is explicitly framed as a critique of the system and not a personal failure.

Like Jacques, the concerned people questioned the assumption that paid work is the main route to autonomy and social inclusion. Rather than seeing employment as emancipatory, they describe paid work as a source

of dependence on employers, the fluctuating labour market, and institutional norms defining what counts as a “legitimate” life trajectory. In this context, employment-related social rights are not perceived as protective, but as reinforcing an obligation to conform to labour norms.

In these stories, paid work is not merely an economic activity, but also a normative institution that shapes access to care and protection. In this sense, social policies do not challenge the primacy of the labour market, but actively contribute to its reproduction by presenting social rights as transitional benefits geared towards employment. For those who reject this framework, non-take-up becomes a means of challenging the implicit moral economy of the welfare state, in which protection is conditional upon a willingness to participate in paid work.

This critique is expressed through everyday practices of refusal or selective engagement with institutions, and in that sense, constitutes an infra-political critique (Scott, 1990). It also reveals a tension at the heart of compassionate futures. Because when compassionate rhetoric allows access to care to be made conditional on productivity, that care is perceived not as support, but as a constraint—its compassionate framing functioning precisely to render the conditionality invisible. These stories highlight a first dimension of the “ecology of abandonment,” namely a system of institutional assistance organised around participation in the labour market, such that those who cannot or will not conform to its norms are structurally left behind. Jacques’s repeated comings and goings within the social welfare system do not constitute an individual failure, but a structural effect of a welfare system whose logic is activation rather than care.

4.2. Rejecting Re-Commodification of Labour Through Social Policies

Beyond criticising paid work as a normative gateway to social rights, the people I met also expressed a broader rejection of what they see as the effects of the re-commodification of social policies themselves. Benefits are then not experienced as safety nets, but as mechanisms that reorganise life around employability and economic value.

Several people pointed out the conditions to continue receiving benefits. Many point out that time spent outside the paid labour market must be constantly justified by demonstrating effort and compliance with institutional expectations, which entails constant assessment and ongoing justification of one’s choices and motivations.

Stéphanie’s example reveals the gap between what social rights are based on (enabling people to have a minimum level of resources), their application (gaining independence through employment), and the meaning that individuals attach to them. Stéphanie is 30 years old and a single mother to an 8-year-old boy. She worked for 18 years as an employee in a hair salon, but she suffers from recurring health problems and was laid off. She had been unemployed for several months when I met her. As she is unable to find work in her field, she has to reorient herself and takes on several internships in the form of temporary jobs, which are supposed to open the door to a fixed-term contract. Stéphanie is very clear about what she wants to do with her professional life. She is raising her son alone, so she is looking for a job with hours that fit her life as a single mother. She asks her advisor at the regional employment office if she can do work placements in after-school programmes, but her counsellor continually refuses this request, arguing she does not have the professional skills: “She told me that I would need a lot of luck to get hired without a degree.” She then finds her work placement in retirement

homes, where the hours are much more restrictive, but where, according to her advisor, she would have a better chance of finding a job.

Stéphanie's advisor's goal is to get her out of the programme by re-entering the job market and, thus, gaining economic independence. However, Stéphanie's social circumstances (as a single parent) and the meaning she attaches to paid work are not taken into account. She wants to leave the programme to find a job, but not at the cost of another dependency, that on her mother, who will have to look after her son during her demanding working hours in a nursing home.

It is for all these reasons that Stéphanie decides to leave the programme and forge her own path back into work, starting with voluntary work and then moving on to paid work placements, in the hope of finding stability through employment.

Stéphanie's situation is echoed in several other stories in the corpus, particularly among women with family responsibilities, for whom activation measures consistently failed to take into account the time and relationship constraints associated with unpaid care work. In these cases, the gap between the institutional logic of reintegration and the participants' actual living conditions was experienced not only as an inconvenience, but also as a form of institutional indifference to the real demands of care work. This observation is particularly pronounced among single mothers, who, in my sample, have access only to precarious and low-paying jobs, which questions the gendered nature of non-take-up.

These stories highlight a tension between the stated objectives of social policies and their actual effects. While welfare programmes are designed to encourage inclusion, their re-commodifying orientation prevents them from functioning as spaces of care. Non-take-up then becomes a means of challenging these market logics in the intimate and temporal dimensions of life, such as how time is used, what activities are valued, and what forms of dependency are considered acceptable.

Stéphanie's account illuminates a second dimension of the ecology of abandonment: the way in which activation measures, by failing to account for the actual conditions of participants' lives (care responsibilities, temporal constraints, aspirations), produce a form of institutional indifference that is experienced as more coercive than protective. When compliance with activation requirements comes at the cost of other dependencies, on family members, on unsustainable working hours, the welfare state redistributes vulnerability, instead of reducing it.

4.3. Choosing Other Forms of Dependence: Autonomy, Care, and the Moral Economies of Refusal

Significantly, the people I met favour other modes of dependence that they consider more legitimate or less intrusive. The use of family support, informal solidarity networks, forms of shared housing, or collective projects is often described as preferable, placing agency and self-determination back at the centre of their lives.

Refusing social benefits does not therefore imply a rejection of dependence as such. On the contrary, dependence is an inevitable and constitutive dimension of social life for the people I met. What was at stake in their practices of non-take-up was not independence in the absolute sense, but the possibility of choosing forms of dependence perceived as less intrusive or more compatible with their values and ways of life.

In neighbourhoods, families organise themselves by creating collective clothing banks or redistributing food baskets. From this perspective, several of the people interviewed explicitly reject the idea that autonomy should be equated with detachment from others or economic self-sufficiency. On the contrary, they formulate a relational conception of autonomy, rooted in the ability to organise one's life without constant institutional supervision. It is in this perspective that Léo says in an interview: "I want to live outside this capitalist network. I don't take the bus, I don't want a phone contract, I don't want any of that stuff that makes me a little obedient sheep."

These alternative dependencies take shape in concrete, everyday practices of mutual care that participants have developed in response to the inadequacy or intrusiveness of institutional support.

In one neighbourhood where I conducted fieldwork, an informal clothing and toy exchange had been set up in the basement of a residential building. The principle is simple: Everything is free, the exchange is not formalised, and you do not need to bring something to take something in return. The space had its own rhythm, its own economy of attention and trust, entirely outside the framework of institutional social work. Nour, whom I'd met through a food bank, took me there one afternoon.

Nour is a single mother raising her three children on her own. She works as a housekeeper in offices in the evenings. She is constantly confronted by social workers and closely monitored by child protective services, who accuse her of putting her daughters at risk. Her daughters have diabetes, and she sometimes has to bring them to her workplace in the evenings so she doesn't have to leave them home alone. She wants to work full-time, but the more she tries to gain independence, the more social services force her to reduce her hours, arguing that she must prioritise caring for her daughters. She is therefore on welfare, with all the constraints that entails, and regularly leaves the programme only to return a few months later. As we walked through the neighbourhood, she told me she'd just found a job, which she said would enable her to "get off welfare." It was she who took me to this shelter to show me "another way of living together."

A similar logic was at work in the story of Julie, whom I had known as a former neighbour before encountering her at a food distribution point. She told me that the bread she collected from a nearby bakery had gradually become something shared across her entire building. "There's often way too much," she said, "but it's nice, we end up talking too." What began as an individual strategy for reducing food costs had quietly become a small infrastructure of neighbourly connection, operating entirely outside any formal programme or institution.

Gardening, too, featured as a recurring practice across several of the networks I encountered. Vanessa, who was involved in a degrowth collective, described it in those terms: "Maybe there's no collective reach, but there is a shared experience. Gardening together, for example, that can bring about change." For her, the value of these practices lay precisely in their ordinariness, their resistance to being instrumentalised as "alternatives," a word that, as Mathilde put it elsewhere, implies doing things "within the framework, just slightly differently," whereas what some people were reaching for was something else entirely: "another way of life," "another world."

What these practices share is a different organisation of care, one that does not pass through institutional gatekeeping, or the obligation to demonstrate employability. They are forms of what Laugier (2013) calls the maintenance of the world: the ongoing, often invisible work of keeping things liveable, repairing what

tears, attending to what is needed in the specific places where people actually live. In this sense, they do not merely compensate for the withdrawal of institutional protection. They enact a different understanding of dependency, that is based on reciprocity and chosen obligation rather than contractual compliance.

From an analytical perspective, these narratives highlight the importance of distinguishing between different regimes of dependency. This is particularly true for women, who are subject to cross-cutting regimes of dependency: on their “husbands,” in a society built on a patriarchal model, characterised in particular by unequal access to the labour market and economic independence (Togni, 2015), on their families (through state control of bodies and care resources), and on the state through its mechanisms for controlling the people in precarious situations.

By prioritising market-oriented autonomy and framing dependency as a temporary deviation to be corrected, social policies marginalise alternative ways of organising care. Choosing other forms of dependency therefore constitutes a critical stance towards inclusion by the welfare state as it is currently configured. This challenges the idea that social protection necessarily enhances autonomy and well-being, and highlights how care can only be experienced as meaningful when it allows individuals to retain control over their rhythms, relationships, commitments and moral choices.

Taken together, the empirical findings presented in Sections 4.1 to 4.3 show that non-take-up, in these contexts, is less a disengagement from society than a negotiation of the terms of inclusion. By rejecting forms of assistance perceived as re-commodifying and morally demanding, and instead relying on alternative dependencies, participants articulate an infra-political critique of welfare states in which compassion remains conditional on economic conformity.

5. Discussion: Conditional Compassion and the Limits of Inclusion by the Welfare State

We have seen that the institutional care promoted by the rhetoric of the welfare state is in fact conditional and closely aligned with capitalist rationales of productivity and market participation. In this context, non-take-up reveals not a failure of inclusion, but a tension at the very heart of social welfare systems.

The three strands of critique presented in Sections 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 highlight three interdependent dimensions of what this article terms an “ecology of abandonment,” which are the normative centrality of wage labour as a condition for receiving support, the re-commodification effects of activation policies on participants’ lives and relationships, and the shift of protection toward informal moral economies. In this reading, non-take-up is a situated response to structural conditions of unequal access to social programmes.

The ability to employ non-take-up as a form of critique is not, however, equally accessible to all. It presupposes a specific configuration of resources that is itself unequally distributed. Access to informal solidarity networks, alternative housing solutions, or degrowth communities requires social capital and relational ties that not everyone possesses. Gender shapes these conditions in a particular way. The informal care practices documented in Section 4.3 are disproportionately carried out by women, whose ability to refuse institutional assistance is simultaneously limited by care responsibilities that the welfare state does not recognise and by the gendered division of labour within the very alternative networks they help sustain. Many of the women interviewed had access only to precarious jobs in the care or domestic service sectors.

Jobs that are poorly paid, incompatible with family life, and insufficient to guarantee financial independence. For single mothers in particular, institutional dependence is a structural condition. The regulation of family arrangements by the welfare state, through means-tested conditions that take household composition into account, activation requirements that ignore the time constraints of single parenthood, and moral oversight of domestic life, makes breaking free not only difficult, but sometimes structurally impossible. Several women interviewed in this study described feeling trapped not only by poverty, but also by the specific form of control that dependence on social assistance imposes on their ability to organise their own lives and those of their children. Residence status and legal precariousness further limit the possibility of refusal. For residents with precarious statuses or those whose rights depend on proving their compliance, non-take-up entails risks that are qualitatively different from those faced by Swiss citizens or long-term residents. While their ability to opt out is constrained by their room for maneuver, it is nonetheless essential to take seriously their perspectives on state mechanisms or the capitalist system, as well as the strategies they employ to circumvent state control or create alternatives to the constraints that are also inscribed in their bodies. The agency of the people interviewed cannot be reduced to the capacity to formally refuse benefits. It also manifests itself in multiple and often sub-political registers, such as in the way they present themselves at meetings with counselors, formulate their needs strategically, withhold certain information while revealing others, mobilise parallel support networks, or even physically resisting normative injunctions, as in the case of Jacques, who refuses to have his teeth repaired not because he could not request it, but because he has ceased to conform to what the labour market expects of a presentable body.

That means that this agency is always situated and relational and that it must not be romanticised, as the costs of resistance are unevenly distributed according to gender, legal status, and access to alternative resources. What this research highlights is the everyday resilience of people who, in conditions of structural neglect, continue to form a conception of the world as it is but also as it should be.

Non-take-up as a form of critique is also shaped by temporal dynamics. The repeated back-and-forth movements of the individuals interviewed between refusal and reintegration illustrate how what may function as a critical stance at a given moment can become unsustainable over time. The ecology of abandonment is thus a process that unfolds over time, as Auyero (2012) demonstrated in his book on waiting as a mode of domination. Non-take-up, in this sense, is not a stable but a precarious position, sustained by networks and resources that are themselves vulnerable to the very structural forces that make it necessary.

Finally, the practices documented in Section 4.3 are not merely coping strategies in the face of institutional withdrawal. In light of Tronto's (2017) concept of *homines curans*, they constitute a different ontological starting point for reflecting on social protection. While the Swiss activation regime bases its interventions on the figure of the autonomous, self-reliant individual—the *homo economicus*—some participants in this study have organised their lives around a fundamentally different conception of the human being, defined instead by interdependence and vulnerability. When Julie's bread-sharing gradually becomes a neighbourhood practice, or when the exchange of clothing operates on the principle that taking does not require giving in return, what emerges is precisely the kind of continuous cycle of care that produces, in Tronto's terms, the virtues of trust and solidarity, which can hardly be cultivated in a system of distinction and conditionality.

Tronto (2017) identifies three risks associated with care-based alternatives: provincialism, the risk of paternalistic substitution of judgment, and neoliberal co-optation, that is, the reinterpretation of informal care practices as evidence that groups can do without the welfare state.

Identifying these risks is not a reason to dismiss what the participants are doing. Rather, it is a prerequisite for taking it seriously. The non-demand documented in this study is neither a retreat into pure self-sufficiency nor a romantic escape from capitalist social relations. As Laugier (2013) suggests, it is an insistence on sustaining the world carried out under conditions of structural abandonment, and with an awareness of one's own fragility. What distinguishes it from a simple alternative economy is precisely that its practitioners do not claim to have escaped the system. Rather, they claim to be building something within the cracks of a system. Practices of non-demand thus highlight alternative moral economies in which dependency is acknowledged and negotiated outside institutional frameworks. That means the problem is not dependency as such, but the definition of legitimate dependency embedded in social inclusion.

The ethnographic material provides empirical substance to what the ecology of abandonment looks like from the perspective of those affected. In this perspective, abandonment captures the condition of being formally included while being structurally left behind. For example, receiving care that fails to recognise one's actual needs, or being required to undertake integration measures whilst being excluded from the labour market. This distinction is analytically significant because it shifts the focus, on the one hand, to the lived experience of care (rather than the mechanisms that prevent access) and, on the other hand, to the failure of institutions to provide care that is worth claiming (rather than the failure of individuals to assert their rights).

From the perspective of a future marked by compassion, the findings presented here suggest that rethinking social protection requires more than simply expanding access to existing mechanisms or improving their efficiency. It requires a different starting point with the *homines curans*, people who are already caring for one another, rather than the productivist subject who must be reintegrated into the labour market. In concrete terms, this points in three directions. First, reducing conditionality: Activation requirements that make support contingent on employability undermine the protective function of social rights and should be replaced by less conditional forms of protection, whether through basic income schemes, automatic entitlements to benefits, or a reduction in administrative burdens. Second, recognising multiple dependencies: The informal care practices documented in this article deserve to be recognised and supported rather than exploited. A welfare state attentive to futures marked by compassion would ask how public provision could complement rather than replace or exploit them, while remaining vigilant against the risks of reproducing gendered care burdens in the process. Third, listen to refusal: Non-demand, when listened to seriously as an expression of critiques, constitutes a form of knowledge about the welfare state that is currently systematically dismissed. Making room for this knowledge, for example in policy evaluation, participatory design, or the governance of social services, is in itself a prerequisite for a future marked by compassion.

6. Conclusion

This article analysed the non-demand of social rights as a critique of the capitalist system that tends to shape contemporary social policies. The analysis showed that refusal or renouncing can express a challenge to forms of institutional compassion conditioned by activation and employability.

At the same time, the analysis emphasises that refusal does not imply a rejection of care or interdependence. Practices of non-demand are often accompanied by a reconfiguration of dependencies toward informal or collective forms of support, which this article has termed alternative moral economies of care. These

practices remain largely invisible to social protection institutions oriented toward market integration, and their distribution is itself unequal. In fact, the possibility to refuse or renounce is shaped by gender, legal status, access to solidarity networks and material resources. Non-demand must therefore be understood in light of its social and structural conditions.

Situating these dynamics within an ecology of abandonment sheds light on the structural conditions in which institutional compassion coexists with experiences of neglect. According to Fassin (2012), it is a political emotion that governs the recognition of vulnerability and determines who is deemed worthy of care, under what conditions, and in exchange for what. This distinction is important for the argument developed here, because it is precisely because social protection institutions present themselves in the register of care that their conditionality can produce abandonment. The ecology of abandonment is not the absence of care, but its conditional distribution, structured by a compassionate discourse in such a way as to generate exclusion, normative injunctions, and moral surveillance for those who cannot or will not comply.

In that sense, if refusal can constitute a form of critique, then policymakers cannot remain indifferent to what people refuse. Taking this seriously, in policy evaluation, participatory design, and the governance of social services, is in itself a condition for rethinking social inclusion beyond conditional compassion.

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

Due to their sensitive and personal nature, the ethnographic data supporting this article are not publicly available in order to protect participants' confidentiality.

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About the Author



Frédérique Leresche is a socio-anthropologist and actress. Her research focuses on the relationship between individuals and the state. Her recent work has centred on contemporary forms of housing insecurity and social violence. At the intersection of research and creative practice, she develops sensitive and participatory methodologies that are part of a broader reflection on feminist and decolonial epistemologies.