



## “For lack of accountability”: The logic of the price in Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries



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### ABSTRACT

Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries are now infamous for the damaging impact they had on the lives of the women who passed through them throughout the twentieth century. The relationship between the state and the Laundries was constituted using a deliberately informal frame characterised by an excision of the “*logic of the price*”. This wilful disregard for the economic was significant in form and function, and was mirrored within the institutions where the women were “accounted for” in ways that rendered “accounting to” them unthinkable. The Laundries functioned for the emerging Irish state as a tool that helped to orchestrate a shared national habitus and to moderate the state’s own account of the role and record of women. The way in which the relationship between the state and the institutions was constructed almost 100 years ago continues to mute accountability and to serve the interests of power. The closed nature of the institutions now permits an examination of the impact of this deliberate informality. This reveals the potentially devastating consequences of the removal of accounting ways of thinking from relationships between the state and private bodies to which pivotal services have been outsourced. Analysis of the case using a Bourdieusian frame has implications for accounting as a discipline in public contexts and for the way in which we understand the limits of state responsibility in the case of outsourced or privatised service provision and policy formation.

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### Introduction

*“The most successful ideological effects are the ones that have no need of words, but only of laissez-faire and complicitous silence.”*

[Bourdieu, 1990b: 133]

This paper explores the relationship between price, accounting and accountability by examining the harmful effects of their absence from key relationships in and around Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries, through which some 10,000 women passed from the foundation of the state to the closure of last such institution in 1996. Bourdieu is used to understand the careful denial of *the logic of the*

*price* between the state and the religious orders, and a wilful obscuring of accountability and excision of formality in relations between these two bodies. The strategically arranged informality and careful casualness with which the women were ‘re-accounted for’ systematically drew power away from them. This solved a problem for the emerging state, and set a pattern for its pivotal relationship with the Catholic Church throughout the twentieth century, enabling and obscuring the operation of these institutions as part of Ireland’s “*architecture of containment*” (Smith, 2007).

Magdalen homes or Laundries operated throughout Ireland and the UK from the late 18th century as asylums, refuges or places of incarceration for “fallen women” (Finnegan, 2001; Mahood, 1990; Smith, 2007). From the founding of the Irish state in 1922, however, the Irish

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Laundries functioned as a repressive and repressed system of incarceration for a wide variety of women who for one reason or another posed a problem for society (Smith, 2007). This contrast between the way in which the Laundries developed in Ireland and the progress of their sister institutions in the UK after Irish independence is marked, and can be traced to the strategically obscure relationship between the new Irish state and the institutions.

Given the long period over which the Laundries operated in Ireland, it has been suggested that the harsh conditions within the institutions were not problematic by contemporaneous norms. Maeve O'Rourke, barrister for the advocacy group *Justice for Magdalenes* (JFM) addresses this question as follows: "This isn't a case of applying today's standards to something that happened in the past, and judging it by today's moral or legal lens to be wrong. Under the 1926 Slavery Convention, the 1930 Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, the European Convention on Human Rights, Ireland had an obligation ... to intervene" (RTE, 2012).

Similarly, accounting and accountability are not immutable concepts, readily migrated through history and across different contexts. The Laundries were run as part of religious institutions, and so were arguably subject to different norms of accountability (Goddard & Assad, 2006). In addition, norms of accountability at the foundation of the Irish state in 1922 were not the same as those which prevailed at the closure of the last Magdalen Laundry in 1996. The analysis below is informed by Oakes and Young (2008) who take as the object of their study another women-run institution in a historical context, that of Hull House around the turn of the twentieth century. Key to their analysis is the idea that the women in Hull House modelled their public assistance around the private roles of women, including motherhood and other domestic roles. The fact that the nuns who ran the Laundries referred to themselves as "mothers" and to the women in their care as "children" may indicate a similar dynamic at play in the Irish institutions. "The relationship of mother or neighbor would seem to bring with them different conceptions of accountability than the formal, more distant relationships central to current notions of accountability" (Oakes & Young, 2008: 773). Given this idea, it is possible that the nuns working in the Irish Laundries may have shared with the women of Hull House a "formulation of relations as reciprocal rather than hierarchical ... [that] ... may cause accountability to be more mutual or self-critical than punitive and authoritative" (Oakes & Young, 2008: 775). Within Hull House, this perspective did not remove the need for accountability, but rather generated "a different sort of accountability than the bureaucratic and formalized accountability recommended by the managerial literature" (Oakes & Young, 2008: 773). This led to more narrative and less quantitative forms of reporting, a feature echoed in the findings of Evans and Pierpoint (2015) in their study of a Scottish Magdalen Institution. Recent work on the "accounterability" concept of Kamuf (2007) prioritises such inclusive conceptions of accounting and accountability, beyond purely calculative measures (Joannides, 2012; Lowe, Locke, & Lymer, 2012; McKernan & McPhail, 2012; Smyth, 2012). "It is clear that the idea

of accountability contains threads of both calculation and narration: counting and accounting, recounting and explaining oneself." (McKernan & McPhail, 2012: 177) However, given the almost complete absence of either quantitative or narrative forms of reporting, by any measure, the levels of accountability offered from the Irish Magdalen Laundries fell far below those of either Hull House (Oakes & Young, 2008) or the Edinburgh Magdalen Asylum (Evans & Pierpoint, 2015). Neither, as evidenced by the remarkable parliamentary silence on the subject discussed in 'The Magdalen Laundries in Ireland' below, was there any clamour for accountability on the part of the state. Instead, in contrast to the "vast accounting apparatus" described by O'Regan (2010) in 1840s Ireland, the Laundries were "for many years characterised primarily by secrecy, silence and shame" (McAleese, 2013: 11).

For the state, the social silence surrounding the Laundries facilitated their use to avoid accounting for aspects of Irish society that were troubling to the national identity. The relationship between the Laundries as a system of containment and the formal state networks of control was marked by strategic obfuscation. Women were consigned to the Laundries both formally and informally, and to the extent that there was an associated financial relationship between the state and the religious orders, it was framed in terms of a gift, a free exchange of offered services, with state payments sometimes given on an *ex gratia* basis, or described as something in the nature of a donation. This had the effect of blurring the normal lines of accountability as to the welfare, education or release of the women concerned. No annual reports were made. Very little data was sought or supplied. As a result, the incidents or situations that caused the women<sup>1</sup> to be sent to the Laundries were rarely recorded, and so did not enter history or form part of the image the state presented to the world or to itself. While Ireland developed economically, culturally and socially through the twentieth century, with broad improvements to welfare, housing and the rights of workers and of women, behind the walls of the Laundries the closed, unaccounted-for field prioritised symbolic capital over economic, and prevented the ability of the women inside from taking their place in Irish society.

As discussed in Smith (2007), the occluded nature of the Magdalen system facilitated the young Irish state in a post-colonial context, helping it to create for itself a separate, Catholic identity, untainted by ideas of prostitution, single motherhood or sexual violence, effectively approaching what Kuipers (2013) called a form of national habitus that served its political needs at the time, and long after the closure of the Laundries. This also created a duality in the work of the religious orders, as observed by Kerr (1931). In describing the work of the Good Shepherd homes he writes: "Surely there is no grander work for God and soul

<sup>1</sup> The terminology used to describe the women who were detained in the Laundries is challenging. Over the years, terms including inmates, victims, children, penitents, residents and survivors have all been used by different actors, and all are problematic to some extent. Conscious of issues raised in Bourdieu, 1982) and broadly following McAleese (2013), the slightly cumbersome description women who were admitted to or detained in Magdalen Laundries is used in this paper.

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