

## Public Service Accounting and Accountability Group Online Seminar Series 2021

First seminar: **4 March 2021, 11:00-12:30 London time/12:00-13:30 Paris time**

Please register and join the IRSPM Public Services Accounting and Accountability Group seminar with **Liisa Kurunmäki** (Jyväskylä University) and **Peter Miller** (LSE) via the zoom link below! The seminar will take place on Thursday, 4 March 2021 at 11:00-12:30 London time/12:00-13:30 Paris time. We have included the abstract of the presentation below and hope to see you at the seminar!

[https://bham-ac-uk.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZlocuCprj8rE93ScrHwWsx\\_Bw4L-ZBjzFGm](https://bham-ac-uk.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZlocuCprj8rE93ScrHwWsx_Bw4L-ZBjzFGm)

### **Economising Failure and Assembling a Failure Regime**

by Liisa Kurunmäki, Andrea Mennicken and Peter Miller

Sociologists have largely neglected the topic of failure, and particularly the economising of failure. Likewise, they have paid insufficient attention to the increasingly elaborate failure regimes that assess failing and pronounce on failure. This notwithstanding several decades of research into the ways in which economic ideas and instruments shape the economy and the entities that populate it, and a similar amount of time devoted to analysing 'New Public Management'. This neglect is all the more puzzling, as an economised category of failure now saturates public life. The deficit is more than empirical, for failure defined as exit from the market game takes us to the heart of economising and the phenomenon that has been dubbed neoliberalism. Failure defined as financial failure, leading to system exit, has come to be viewed by its proponents as not only inevitable but desirable, in so far as it is held to promote both competition and accountability. As the reach of market-based principles is expanded, so too is the scope of government through a vast apparatus of regulatory intervention, often and ironically in the name of increasing competition. This tension is critical, for without a relatively orderly regime for exit, market principles are ultimately unable to operate. Yet allowing or facilitating the possibility of exit for service providers in the public sphere typically goes hand in hand with the imperative to maintain services. Attending to the category of failure thus focuses our attention on the often overlooked 'how' of economising and marketising. It directs attention also to the calculative infrastructure and ideas on which they depend, and the co-construction of the entities to be regulated and the bodies that are to regulate them in cases where they are deemed to underperform or fail. More generally, it shows the importance of distinguishing between failing and failure, and recognising that neither has the objectivity and inevitability often associated with them. This much has been noted before. Our aim here is to redress this neglect, and to do so in two stages. First, to examine briefly the economising of failure and the assembling of a failure regime for the corporate world, across more or less the whole of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Second, to examine how this notion of failure as an economic event came to travel into the public sphere, and particularly the domain of hospital based healthcare in England, across the first two decades of the twentieth first century. For across the past two decades or so, a particular idea of failure together with its associated instruments have been proposed also and increasingly for hospitals, schools, social work, prisons, universities, and much more besides. Again, our concern here is with the economising of failure, and the attempts to assemble a failure regime in line with that in existence for the corporate sphere. These two moments or processes, albeit covering very different time spans, might be described first as the economising of the economy, and second the economising of the public sphere.