Post-politics, crisis, and Ireland's 'ghost estates'

Cian O'Callaghan[*], Mark Boyle, Rob Kitchin

Department of Geography, National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis, National University of Ireland Maynooth, County Kildare, Ireland

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the global economic recession provides an instructive point to reconsider recent theorisations of post-politics for two reasons. First, theories of the post-political can help us to understand the current neoliberal impasse, and second, current transformations provide us with an empirical basis to test the limits of these explanatory frameworks. While the resurgence of neoliberal policies, evidenced through the state-sponsored rescue of the financial sector and the introduction of harsh austerity measures in many countries, appear to confirm post-politics, various protest movements have testified to a concurrent re-politicisation of the economy. Furthermore, crises constitute periods of disruption to the discursive and symbolic order, which open a space for hegemonic struggle, however fleeting. We focus our analysis on Ireland's 'ghost estates' — residential developments left abandoned or unfinished after the property crash — and their treatment within mainstream print media. We argue that in the context of crash, the 'ghost estate' functioned as an 'empty signifier' through which hegemonic struggles over how to narrate, and thus re-inscribe, the event of the crisis were staged. We explore the double role played by 'ghost estates': firstly, as an opening for politics, and secondly, as a vehicle used to discursively contain the crisis through a neoliberal narrative of 'excess'. We argue that our analysis offers an instructive example of how post-politicisation occurs as a process that is always contingent, contextual, and partial, and reliant on the cooption and coproduction of existing cultural signifiers with emergent narrations of crisis.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Since, 'society doesn't exist', its ultimate unity can be symbolised only in the guise of an empty signifier hegemonised by some particular content — the struggle for this content is the political struggle (Žižek, 1999, 207).

How do you know you are in a 'ghost estate'? Often, from the outside, they look like any other new housing estate … But nothing prepares you for seeing them up close, for the echo of your footstep on the gravel, for the sight of a toilet abandoned in a hall, or a wing-backed three-piece suite in a derelict sitting room (Irish Independent, 2010b).

Although the 2008 global financial crisis (GFC) heralded a "Berlin wall moment" for neoliberal capitalism (Peck, Theodore & Brenner, 2010), the wellspring of evidence suggests this system has emerged resurgent. Financial institutions were 'bailed out' while governments turned to harsh austerity measures in attempts to cut public spending and restore national 'competitiveness'.

Ireland offers a clear case in point. From 1993 to 2007 Ireland experienced a period of unprecedented economic growth. Presenting itself as a small open and liberalised economy with a low corporate tax rate, the country became a leading destination for footloose transnational capital. A period of export-led growth during the 1990s was followed in the 2000s by growth largely predicated on a debt-fuelled property bubble. From 2007 onwards, as the global financial system collapsed, so too did Ireland's economic miracle, leaving in its trail mass unemployment (peaking at 14.6%), large scale emigration (net emigration of over 122,000 since April 2009), a broken banking sector (the country's 6 principal banking institutions were, at least partially, nationalised), an indebted government (government debt standing at 117% of GDP) and public (1 in 8 households with a mortgage in arrears of 90 days or more), and a wrecked housing market (prices having dropped over 50% for houses and 60% for apartments) up to April 2013.

Despite such a negative transformation, Ireland adopted austerity and embraced an EU-ECB-IMF-led structural adjustment

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +353 1 708 6835; fax: +353 1 708 3573.
E-mail address: cian.ocallaghan@nuim.ie (C. O'Callaghan).

recovery programme in a bid to restore its competitiveness and retain its position as a destination for global capital. In so doing, Ireland has become the poster child of recovery through austerity; so much so that in October 2012 An Taoiseach Enda Kenny (the Irish Prime Minister) found himself on the front cover of Time magazine under the title 'The Celtic comeback … what the rest of Europe can learn from him'.

These developments would seem to confirm theories of post-politics, post-democracy, and de-politicisation, which have gained cache and critique in recent years (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Barnett, 2012; Crouch, 2004; Dikeç, 2005; Haughton, Allmendinger, & Oosterlynck, 2013; Oosterlynck & Swyngedouw, 2010; Ruez, 2013; Swyngedouw, 2009; 2011). While these concepts have been heterogeneously deployed, key theorists — including Jacques Rancière, Chantal Mouffe, Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou — share a concern with identifying and designating what they see as the current political impasse. This they attribute to the combination of the consensus around liberal democracy (in particular the Habermasian version of deliberative democracy), the rise of neoliberal globalisation, and the fragmentation of traditional political divisions through post-modern identity politics (see Dean, 2009, 10—18).

"Recent events however, demonstrate that post-politics is far from complete" (Gill, Johnstone, & Williams, 2012, 508). Despite the state-sponsored rescue of the financial sector and the overall resilience of neoliberal capitalism in the face of overwhelming failure, various protest movements have testified to a concurrent re-politicisation of the economy. Moreover, crises also constitute periods of social and symbolic disruption. Walter Benjamin (1999) has shown how capitalist modernity is predicated on a linear, historicist, vision that needs to repress the material evidence of its failure to achieve uninterrupted progress, along with the failed revolutions that might have pointed towards alternative trajectories (see also Edensor, 2005; Lloyd, 2008). During periods of crisis it is precisely these symbolic fictions of linear progress that are disrupted. Žižek (1999, 2008) shows how events that disrupt the symbolic order need to be re-inscribed in new ways, while Rancière (2004, 2009) in his work on the politics of aesthetics makes the point that art can intervene politically to disrupt the 'distribution of the sensible'. These theories share a concern for the underlying importance of discourses and symbolic fictions to the staging of society, a point that we also seek to elucidate here.

We focus our analysis on Ireland's 'ghost estates' — residential developments left abandoned or unfinished in the wake of the Ireland's property crash — and their treatment within mainstream print media discourse. Ireland's property crash left vast tracks of vacant and derelict property scattered across the landscape. While these came in many forms, ranging from largely vacant shopping centres situated incongruously in rural towns to the iconic skeletons of would-be 'landmark' buildings in Dublin's city centre, it was the images and stories of 'ghost estates' that became the material and symbolic apotheosis of Ireland's economic crisis (Fig. 1).

The term 'ghost estate' was first used in 2006 by economist David McWilliams to describe empty or unfinished housing developments in Ireland. He wrote:

All over Ireland, 'ghost estates' are enveloping many of our towns. Driving back from the West, these spooky ghost estates emerged out of the mist announcing places like Termonbarry, Frenchpark and Edgeworthstown [towns in the midlands Counties of Roscommon and Longford]… In the years ahead, these ghost villages, like our famine villages, may stand testament to a great tragedy which, although predicted by concerned observers, was never fully appreciated until the morning the crops failed (McWilliams, 2006)

While the property market was still booming unfinished construction sites were comprehensible within the dominant Celtic Tiger narrative as developments that were yet to be completed and occupied. For most people, they did not constitute a worrying sight,

Fig. 1. Examples of 'ghost estates'.
Source authors' photos.

but rather a symbol of the continuous 'good health' of the Celtic Tiger economic boom.

The juncture of the crisis changed this dramatically. With the collapse of the property market, these empty housing estates — which, in the intervening years, had grown in number (see Kitchin, Gleeson, Keaveney, & O'Callaghan, 2010) — could no longer be rationalised as 'normal' functional components of the landscape. They returned as a problematic synecdoche whose increasingly visible presence was simultaneously revealed by, and evidence of, the crisis.

We argue that the 'ghost estate' constitutes a symptomal point of Ireland's crisis, an empty signifier used to re-script the post-Celtic Tiger era. We explore the double role played by 'ghost estates': firstly, as an opening for politics, and secondly, as a vehicle used to discursively contain the crisis through a neoliberal narrative of 'excess'. Our analysis of the 'ghost estate' suggests that the discursive struggle to fix their meaning can be broadly understood within the framework outlined by post-political theory. On the one hand are attempts to raise the 'ghost estate' from a single issue to a complaint signifying systemic problems, while on the other hand there are attempts to disavow the political aspect of the 'ghost estate'. The latter, through the deployment of a series of technocratic solutions, addresses the 'ghost estate' as a 'particular' rather than 'systemic' problem.

To unpack how the 'ghost estate' is de-politicised offers an instructive example of how post-politicisation occurs as a process that is always contingent, contextual, and partial, and reliant on the cooption and coproduction of existing cultural signifiers with emergent narrations of the crisis.

Post-politics and crisis

Post-democracy and post-politics

With the intensification of neoliberal economic policies and a broad acceptance of capitalism after the fall of state socialism, Rancière (1995, 1999) and others (Crouch, 2004) argue that society has entered into 'post-democracy'. "To the extent that state authority is increasingly less able to constrain corporate power, politics matter less" (Dean, 2009, 11), while the consensus-based approach of deliberative democracy and the celebration of the individualised neoliberal subject have combined to diminish 'the political'.

For Rancière 'politics' (sometimes referred to as the 'police') is "the art of suppressing the political" (Rancière, 1995, 11), while 'the political' is an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing" (Rancière, 1999, 29). The public sphere is "a sphere of encounters and conflicts between the two opposed logics of police and politics [and thus the] spontaneous practices of any government tend to shrink this public sphere" by 'disavowing' the political (Rancière, 2006, 55). Government is oligarchic and politics only occurs in fleeting moments of 'disagreement' (Rancière, 1999), a point of articulation outside the police order, but which aims at transforming it.

Theorists of the post-political generally agree that the current constellation more forcefully disavows the political in that "[p]roper political questions always involve decisions that require making a choice between conflicting alternatives" (Mouffe, 2013, 3). Under these conditions, "adversarial politics (of the left/right variety or of radically divergent struggles over imagining and naming different socio-environmental futures, for example) are considered hopelessly out of date" and debate and disagreement operate within "an overall model of elite consensus and agreement" (Swyngedouw, 2009, 610). Mouffe (2000; 2005; 2013) sees a way out of this impasse through a reformation of the institutions of liberal democracy to better enable 'agonistic' politics of a pluralist nature to flourish. Žižek's (1999, 236) concern, however, is that the current formation of "post-modern post-politics… no longer merely 'represses' the political, trying to contain it and pacify the 'returns of the repressed', but much more effectively 'forecloses' it".

Žižek identifies two core components to this shift. First, drawing on psychoanalytic theory he argues that the collapse of the stable identity categories of modernity into the plural subject positions of post-modernity has led to a decline of 'symbolic efficiency', which diminishes the ability of groups to raise political demands to the level of the universal. This "suffocating closure" leaves 'irrational' outbursts of violence as one of the only avenues through which the political can return (Žižek, 1999, 203). Second and interrelated "is thus the radical depoliticisation of the sphere of the economy":

…the way the economy functions (the need to cut social welfare, etc) is accepted as a simple insight into the objective state of things… That is to say: if the problem with today's post-politics ('administration of social affairs') is that it increasingly undermines the possibility of the properly political act, this undermining is directly due to the common acceptance of Capital and market mechanisms as neutral tools/procedures to be exploited (Žižek, 1999, 429–430).

Politics is, thus, foreclosed he argues because "a properly political act would necessarily entail the repoliticization of the economy" (Žižek, 1999, 432).

The current post-politics, Žižek contends, prevents the "metaphoric universalisation of particular demands… [by mobilising] the vast apparatus of experts, social workers, and so on, to reduce the overall demand (complaint) of a particular group to just this demand, with its particular content…" (Žižek, 1999, 203). With the basic rules set in advance, technocratic management solutions will always be put forward for the situation 'as it stands'. This forecloses the art of the *impossible*, which is the very ground for politics (Žižek, 1999, 237).

A key question we seek to investigate is to what extent these parameters are challenged by the current crisis. To address this we now turn our attention to the role of discursive and symbolic fictions in sustaining our everyday reality.

Crisis, discourse, disruption

Žižek (1999, 64–66) argues that our reality is dependent on the structuring role played by symbolic fictions that mediate the gap between everyday reality and the Real (that which is outside language and resists symbolisation absolutely). Our reality is mediated by the symbolisation of the Real in 'empty signifiers' — a signifier emptied of any one particular meaning and consequently open to multiple, conflicting, interpretations — which cover over the fact that reality is unspecified. However, in that there is no reality outside of this 'covering up', the 'covering up' *is our experience of reality*. As such, following Laclau, Žižek argues that "our social reality is 'symbolically constructed' also in this radical sense". There is always a "minimal gap, the delay, which forever separates an event 'in itself' from its symbolic inscription/registration". During periods of crisis, this process is intensified, in part, because the discursive and extra-discursive threads that structure reality become untied and existing symbolic frameworks no longer reflect emergent social realities.

Drawing on Benjamin's theories on revolution as "as a repetition that realises hidden possibility of the past", Žižek argues that the pivot between the potential for the political act to inaugurate a new "positive order of being" and the tendency for it to be re-inscribed back into the dominant order reside in the already present, but

elided, histories (Žižek, 1999, 17/102–103; 2008). The new reality is made 'coherent' by constructing new symbolic fictions through the shards of the extant, but repressed, pasts.

Crises, therefore, are a combination of shifting political-economic dynamics and their re-inscription in the discursive and symbolic realm. Both of these components matter in terms of producing the conditions for political alternatives to emerge. However, theories of post-politics suggests that despite the potentialities opened up by crisis for re-politicisation, the capacity of groups to affect radical transformations has been severely curtailed.

Jodi Dean's (2009) work on 'communicative capitalism' is highly instructive here. Taking a sympathetic but critical view of post-politics, Dean argues that this literature can be useful in designating what is wrong in the current political impasse but that it ignores, and thus fails to act on, the many sites of political struggle that do exist on various levels. Dean (2009, 14–15) argues that although "Žižek's position is weakest when he uses 'post-political' descriptively, his explanation is nonetheless insightful". Her work offers a critique of the Left's failure to challenge neoliberalisation, but it is also concerned with unpacking what is specific about the contemporary media, political, and cultural landscape that militate against the universalisation of particular demands. She defines this as 'communicative capitalism': "the materialisazation of ideals of inclusion and participation in information, entertainment and communication technologies in ways that capture resistance and intensify global capitalism" (Dean, 2009, 2).

Dean's argument is that the contemporary media and communications environment (characterised in particular by the supposed 'democratisation' of new social media), while fetishising speech, opinion and participation, ultimately provides a mechanism for the capture of Left politics by neoliberal capitalism. She sees a fundamental disconnect between the intense multiplication and circulation of political opinion and the increasingly narrow realm of policy. While ideally, in line with Habermas's theories of communication, media debate should influence and shape policy, in large part it does not. The "multiplication of resistances" that result from the decline of symbolic efficiency "hinder the formation of strong counter-hegemonies" in that "… the intense circulation of content in communicative capitalism occludes the antagonism necessary for politics, multiplying antagonisms into myriad minor issues and events" (Dean, 2009, 21–24). Thus, the current media landscape enables the disavowal of politics and reinforces the post-political consensus of technocratic management.

The current crisis moment offers an instructive point to consider theories of post-politics for two intertwined reasons: first, theories of the post-political can help us to understand the current neoliberal impasse, and second, the transformations that are occurring can provide us with an empirical basis to test their limits as an explanatory framework. The core problematic that emerges, then, is this: the diverse literature on post-politics outlines various reasons for scepticism regarding the capacity of crises to engender political actions that radically alter the path of neoliberal capitalism. Nevertheless, in this vacuum *something does take place*. The smooth consensus is disrupted by material and discursive conditions that challenge the coherence of the socio-political reality. This opens a space of hegemonic struggle, however fleeting. Our aim here is to analyse what happens in this fleeting space in the context of Ireland post-Celtic Tiger.

Archive and methods

Our argument is based on a critical discourse analysis of uses of the term 'ghost estate' in mainstream Irish print media in the period 2007–2011. As our principal sources, we chose Ireland's three major daily broadsheet newspapers, indicative of the core mainstream print media in daily circulation: the *Irish Independent*, *Irish Times*, and *Irish Examiner*. Of these, the *Irish Independent* has the largest daily sales (125,786), followed by the *Irish Times* (92,565), and *Irish Examiner* (40,245) (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2012), and all have established web presences and audiences.

All three publications occupy a politically centrist position, as does the majority of Irish media more broadly. A range of factors contribute to this conservative positioning, including a concentration of ownership into a handful of commercial media groups, corporate and governance links between newspapers and the wider (broadly neoliberal) apparatus of Ireland's political economy, and the need for journalists to keep a small cadre of sources and gatekeepers 'on side'. Moreover, as newspapers became increasingly reliant on advertising revenues accrued from ever more lavish 'property supplements', these proclivities (particularly in regard to property development) were significantly amplified during the boom (Mercille, 2014a). The Irish Times itself joined the property sector through its acquisition of myhome.ie, a national property sales/rental portal.

These factors have been further exacerbated by the crisis. During the period 2007–2012 Irish newspapers' advertising revenue decreased on aggregate from €1082 million to €334 million, a drop of 69%. Similarly, circulation of daily newspapers decreased from 608,493 to 499,072, a drop of 18%, in the period 2008–2012 (Flynn, 2013). This has led to a casualisation of journalism, a decrease in full-time staff, increased demands for productivity, and a disinvestment in investigative journalism. One of the key outcomes is that newspapers are now increasingly reliant on press releases for their content, which are produced by vested interests in the private sector and (particularly in Ireland) the Government (Flynn, 2013).

Previous research by Mercille (2014a, 2014b) has used a critical political economic conceptualisation to demonstrate how the Irish print media sustained the property bubble until its collapse and worked to defend neoliberal policies during the crisis. Rather than being 'right-wing', however, these publications are reflective of the type of technocratic-managerial approach to governance described in the literature on post-politics. In line with Dean's (2009) description of communicative capitalism, these publications are not devoid of left-leaning perspectives, although proportionally the balance of content is in favour of a neoliberal consensus. In the period following the crash, the mainstream print media was caught between competing agendas. On the one hand was their broadly neoliberal position within Ireland's political economy coupled with their own vested interests in the property sector (Preston & Silke, 2012), while on the other was their need to commercially appeal to a nebulous 'middle class' readership, many of whom had been affected by the crisis. Their content, thus, needed to straddle the demands of reflecting emergent social realities while defending the neoliberal consensus. We can, therefore, expect these publications to reflect the emergence of new discursive hegemonies.

In focussing on mainstream print media, we do not overlook the growing complexity of the media landscape. Indeed an argument could be made that Ireland's crisis period has seen an increased proliferation of political debate through new social media platforms (Kitchin, Linehan, O'Callaghan, & Lawton, 2013, Titley, 2012). Moreover, the return of the political has taken many forms in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, ranging from the creation of new left parties, the proliferation of an emergent ecology of anti-austerity protest movements (Hearne, 2014), to the aforementioned explosion of political blogs and other social media platforms. We are not, therefore, claiming an over-arching position with regard to the de-politicisation of Ireland's crisis. Nevertheless, print media remains important to establishing new hegemonies in that its content is frequently used as the basis for political debate and discussion in other media, including television and radio, and its online formats

constitute important nodes in Ireland's networked communications.

Employing the Lexis Nexis search engine, we searched for articles in these three newspapers using the term 'ghost estate' in the period 2007–2011. The search returned an archive totalling 462 articles. It shows a substantial increase in articles concerning 'ghost estates' following the crash of the housing market, particularly in the period 2010–2011 when the extent of the housing crisis became apparent (Fig. 2). We conducted a discourse analysis using Edward Said's 'contrapuntal' approach (Said, 1994). In *Culture and Imperialism* Said uses this musical metaphor to conceptualise how hegemonic voices and voices of resistance combine together to cumulatively create overarching representations of reality that are relational and in a constant state of becoming (see also O'Callaghan, 2012).

We used the archive to plot a thread through the overarching media narrative about 'ghost estates'. This narrative followed the trajectory from the 'discovery' of 'ghost estates' to their 'recapture' in a new hegemonic developmental narrative. The articles were coded using categories through which 'ghost estates' were discussed, and various modalities which they were used to construct. This analysis was time sensitive, with consistent correlations made between the evolution of the overarching narrative and the deployment of different modalities. In our analysis we reflect on the discursive struggle between attempts to raise the 'ghost estate' to the level of a universal complaint indicating systemic problems and the counter-position that seeks to reduce it to a particular issue.

'Ghost estates' in the Irish print media

Prelude: a soft landing

In order to frame the analysis of Ireland's post-crash media landscape, it is first necessary to briefly set out the trajectory of the boom, especially with respect to property, and the initial attempts to script the unwinding of the economy as a 'soft landing'.

After the turbulent years of the 1980s in which Ireland suffered a series of economic and political crises, a new economic model was adopted based on a combination of social partnership and neoliberal economic policies designed to attract foreign direct investment (including low corporate tax, financial deregulation, tax-incentive schemes, and an entrepreneurial and laissez faire planning system) (Kitchin & Bartley, 2007). This model proved to be remarkably successful in enticing FDI into Ireland and stimulating sustained economic growth, with a marked increase in GDP per annum, a rapid rise in total workforce (doubling in fifteen years), and a fall in unemployment. Ireland was transformed from the second poorest country in Western Europe in 1987 (Breathnach, 1998) to one of the richest in the world in terms of GDP per head of population by the end of the 1990s. The population also increased from 3.5 million in 1987 to 4.3 million in 2007 (CSO, 2013).
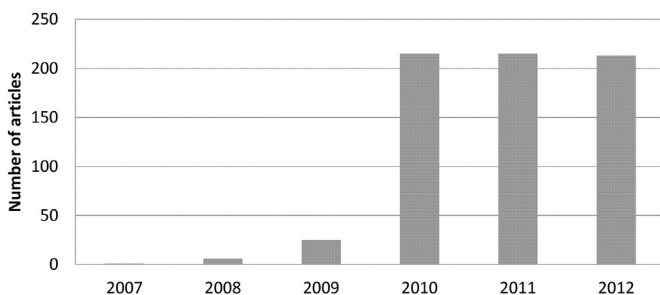
Fig. 2. Number of articles featuring the term 'ghost estate' in *Irish Times, Irish Independent, Irish Examiner* 2007–2012.

This precipitated rapid urbanisation. Between 1991 and 2006, 762,541 housing units were built in Ireland, with the number of households increasing in the same period by 444,634 (from 1.029 m to 1.473 m) (CSO, 1991, 2006; DoEHLG, 2009). This geographically dispersed construction was partly driven by a series of urban and rural tax incentive schemes to stimulate property development, which ran from 1986 to 2008. Planning policy at all scales in Ireland is the preserve of the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DoEHLG). Planning functions, including the drawing up of county and local development plans, planning permissions, and enforcement, is principally discharged by local authorities, though the DoEHLG Minister retains supervisory jurisdiction. Regional Authorities, eight of which were established in 1994, have a remit to develop strategic spatial planning at the regional level and to coordinate local planning within a region through regional planning guidelines. Published in 2002, the *National Spatial Strategy* (NSS) (DoEHLG, 2002) was expected to plan for and guide "balanced regional development" during the boom. In theory, a national spatial strategy devised by the DoEHLG guides regional plans devised by Regional Authorities, that guides county and local development plans (Grist, 2012). The NSS was not dovetailed with capital expenditure in the National Development Plan, however, and there was a lack of joined-up planning between local, regional, and national strategies.

Property development became a dominant driver of economic growth in the years 2000–2007 and a highly significant source of employment. People were encouraged to jump on the 'property ladder' to avoid being 'left behind' and to borrow to invest in buy-to-let investments, cheered on by a national media which confidently predicted many more years of growth in Irish property prices. Accompanying this was a rapid growth in property prices. The average new house price rose from €78,715 in Dublin, and €66,914 for the country as a whole in 1991, to €416,225 in Dublin (a 429% increase) and €322,634 for the country as a whole (382% increase) in 2007. Second-hand homes followed the same trend, costing on average €76,075 in Dublin in 1991, and €64,122 for the country as a whole, rising to €495,576 in Dublin (551% increase) and €377,850 (489% increase) across the country in 2007 (Kitchin et al., 2010).

As the GFC started to unfold in 2006 and 2007, a new narrative emerged within government, the Central Bank and financial circles with respect to Irish property. This narrative asserted that Irish banks were not exposed to the sub-prime loans that had contaminated other international banks and therefore any banking crash should bypass Ireland, and that the Irish property market was fundamentally sound and continued to present good investment opportunities. It aggressively sought to nullify the voices of commentators who suggested that a massive housing bubble had been allowed to inflate and was about to burst, taking the Irish banks, the predominant source of investment and mortgage capital, with it. The most famous example was An Taoiseach Bertie Aherne positing that the naysayers who talk down the economy should commit suicide if they had so little faith in the future.

The new mantra was that house prices might slow down, but they would level off and certainly not fall in value – houses over the medium term continued to be a sound investment and purchasers should take advantage of the slow down to snap up property before the market took off again. This narrative was widely repeated and supported by the mainstream media, who largely silenced and mocked cautionary commentators. This 'soft landing' narrative was ruptured by the financial crash of 2008.

The crash (2008–2009)

On 29 September 2008, fourteen days after the collapse of Lehmann Brothers in the US, Ireland's Finance Minister Brian

Lenihan issued a blanket guarantee on Irish banks in an effort to protect them from the enormous storm swirling around the global financial system. The guarantee included the five major banks holding personal deposits, along with the commercial bank Anglo Irish Bank (which alone has since cost the Irish taxpayer €34 billion, equivalent to one year's tax receipts, Carswell, 2011). This decision was influenced by advice given to the Minister and An Taoiseach on the night in question, much of it by advisors who had vested interests in the banking sector, and the banks themselves, who wilfully misrepresented their levels of debt. Writing two years later, *Vanity Fair*'s Michael Lewis (2011, 114) suggests:

> Lenihan faced a choice: Should he believe the people immediately around him or the financial markets? Should he trust the family or the experts? He stuck with the family. Ireland gave its promise. And the promise sank Ireland.

Despite the stark 'before and after' picture painted here, the onset of Ireland's crisis was slow to announce itself. Some of this was dissimulation on the part of the Government, who, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, tried to present the image of a strong and stable Irish economy to the world. Even after Lenihan's bank bailout, for instance, then Taoiseach Brian Cowen was describing Irish banks as being "in a healthy state" (RTE, 2008). But the complexity of the financial crisis also remained opaque to the general public (and perhaps the Government), who were left to anxiously await its unfolding impacts.

Internationally, the Left have used the GFC as the Marxian symptomal point by which to uncover the true workings of the system and present a counter-narrative to neoliberal globalisation (Harvey, 2010). Such struggles over ideology, however, need to be tied to some particular content in order to function as something that "relates and applies to our 'actual experience'". Advancing theories by Laclau and Mouffe, Žižek (1999, 205–210) outlines how 'single issues' will function as symptomal or nodal points in hegemonic struggles. For instance, in the context of legitimating neoliberal cuts to social welfare during John Major's Conservative Government in the UK, the 'single unemployed mother' became the particular content "at which all the lines of the predominant ideological argumentation" met.

In the context of Ireland's crisis, the 'ghost estate' emerged as such a 'single issue' or 'empty signifier' in attempts to narrate the crisis. The struggle to fill the 'ghost estate' with content constituted a hegemonic struggle to discursively narrate the crisis and, thus, to re-inscribe that event back into the symbolic order.

While radical anti-capitalist perspectives on Ireland's crisis have been outlined in various contexts, they were generally absent from mainstream media discourse. Indeed, only two articles in our archive pursue the argument that Ireland's crisis was a consequence of internal contradictions in the global capitalist system. Furthermore, even when comparisons were made to other housing bubbles in the US (McEnroe, 2010), China (Coonan, 2011), and Latvia (Smyth, 2010), the common component emphasised was human greed. However, as important symbolic sites in the crisis narrative, media discussion needed to discursively deal with 'ghost estates'. Accordingly, some version of the debate casting the 'ghost estate' as either a 'systemic' or 'particular' issue was also evident.

An early example by David McWilliams appeared in the *Irish Times* in October 2008, which used the motif of the 'ghost estate' as a way to animate the social and spatial affects of the bank bailout. Essentially a short story, the piece concerns 'Breakfast Roll Man', a small-scale property developer who has fallen on hard times. He owes money on a loan to finance a housing development that is now a "ghost estate" – "not one sold" – and with the banks pulling his finance he feels he has been left to take the fall. "Worse still, the

personal guarantees… mean that everything he worked for since 2000 is tied to this field on the N3 [a National Primary Road running between Dublin and Cavan]. His whole world is cross-collateralised" (McWilliams, 2008). McWilliams' article tries to grapple with the question of how, in the context of the crash, the Irish public were now to understand the Celtic Tiger era. In this, the 'ghost estate' played a central role in signifying systemic problems with the development model.

Similarly, economist Morgan Kelly presented a clear-cut division between the economic boom and property bubble.

> For 20 years, the Irish economy experienced extraordinary growth. Unfortunately, this growth came from two separate booms that merged imperceptibly into each other. First we had real growth in the 1990s, driven by rising competitiveness and exports. However, after 2000 competitiveness collapsed, and growth came to be driven by a lending bubble without equal in the euro zone (M Kelly, 2009).

When Kelly had identified the structural problems with Ireland's property bubble in 2006 he was loudly vilified, and only after many of his predictions came true were his opinions actively elicited by the media. Kelly's discourse of two separate booms offered an instructive lens through which the public could grasp the immediate causes of the crash. As Harvey (2012) agues, processes of urbanisation are closely linked to the absorption of overaccumulated capital and historical evidence shows us that property bubbles frequently follow periods of expansion in the 'real' economy. Thus, while the trajectory of the Celtic Tiger is hardly surprising, the two separate booms discourse pointed to systemic problems with the shift towards property-led growth.

However, rather than universally acknowledge the structural problems of the speculative growth model, there was a further attempt to split the era of property-led growth into a necessary 'boom' and a destructive 'bubble'. Property had become such an essential component of the Irish economy that it was impossible to extrapolate what it would have looked like in its absence. However, hegemonic interests attempted to disavow the political critique of speculative growth by concentrating on the identification of the housing 'bubble' as the 'excess' of a housing 'boom', the point when things went 'too far'.

Jodi Dean (2009, 56) outlines the role that narratives of 'excess' play in sustaining the fantasy of 'free trade'. Despite evidence of persistent market failures and structural inequalities, the premise that the "perfect market… will meet everyone's needs and desires" is sustained at the level of fantasy, she argues, because individuals cannot imagine the capitalist system as a whole. Rather they imagine, small, individual exchanges, which stand in for global flows. When these stand-ins fail to support the fantasy, or are suggestive of its failure, there is an attempt to rationalise them as 'exceptions'. The principal narrative she identifies in this regard is that of 'excess'; "The one who fails to enjoy [the market] fails because he has overdone something".

> A company expanded too fast; it tried to do too much too quickly. Perhaps it failed because it overpaid its workers, overproduced, or over-diversified (and hence lost touch with the fundamentals). Similarly, those who find their stock portfolios, retirement accounts, and pension funds decimated by falling markets are likewise alleged to have expended *too much*. They were overconfident; they didn't play it safe enough, they had too much faith in the market… Everybody knows that ordinary people can become overexuberant and that this can lead to speculative bubbles. The wise investor should believe in the market, *but not too much*. In the terms of the fantasy of free

trade, these losers were irrational in their expectations. Perhaps they were even greedy. At the very least, they failed to achieve the proper balance necessary for the promised, inevitable, market success (Dean, 2009, 59).

There was an attempt to construct the 'ghost estate' similarly within a narrative of 'excess'. Thus, the initial response was to manage the problem by re-appropriating the waste of the property bubble for other *useful* purposes.

Within this narrative there were divergent agendas. For instance, community and sectoral advocacy groups suggested using 'ghost estates' for social housing or to accommodate growing homeless populations. Underpinning these proposals was a welfarist agenda to appropriate vacant properties away from the (failed) market to achieve a social dividend. Meanwhile, different groups put forward a series of 'creative' 'alternative' uses the estates might be put to, such as start-up or pop-up space for new businesses, film sets, or test-labs for smart city technologies (Tipton, 2009). Regardless of their ideological differences, these set of responses were part of a narrative that saw the crisis as something that could be (to varying degrees) 'contained' through the amelioration of the boom's obsolete remnants.

These efforts were abandoned when it became apparent how much housing oversupply there was, how isolated many of these estates were, and how much it would cost to repurpose the buildings (Boland, 2010; Kitchin et al., 2010). Discourses concerning re-use began to fade away long before the point at which this was established, however. Initially then, there was a failure to reduce the 'ghost estate' to a particular problem that could be solved by a simple realignment of managerial priorities. The discourses identifying 'ghost estates' with more systemic problems won out. It is as this point that the re-inscription of the shock of the crisis in the symbolic realm becomes evident in media discussion. In discursive and symbolic terms, the 'ghost estate' begins to function as a ruin.

Crisis and narrative rupture (2009–2011)

i. 'Ghost estates' as ruin

Edensor (2005, 165) argues that, "…as glaring signs of instability, ruins deride the pretensions of governments and local authorities to maintain economic prosperity and hence social sustainability, and give the lie to these myths of endless progress which sustains the heightened form of neoliberal philosophy through which a globalising capitalist modernity extends". Ruins have, Edensor argues, a 'dis-ordering' affect on time and space. For Hell and Schönle (2010, 6) "a ruin is a ruin precisely because it seems to have lost its function or meaning in the present" (see also Pálsson, 2012). 'Ghost estates' emerged as 'ruins' in the context of the collapse of the symbolic edifice of the Celtic Tiger, 'overflowing' the narrative and ideological consistency of the dominant order. They functioned both as the ruins of the speculative property bubble and the material manifestation of the 'ruined' future promised by the Celtic Tiger narrative (Kitchin, O'Callaghan, & Gleeson, 2014).

This discourse began to emerge towards the end of 2009. Media articles explicitly articulated the ruin aesthetic of 'ghost estates' to express the disconnection between the original plans for the estates and their current reality. Frequent recourse was made to the visual tension created by the contrast of lush advertisements adorning hoardings surrounding semi-derelict shells or abandoned construction sites (Fig. 3).

'A fresh view for a new way of life'… The jaunty advertising slogan of this particular development company has an unintentionally ironic tone: the fact is, for a considerable number of people around the country, living alongside unfinished developments has indeed become a new way of life… One completed apartment block overlooks the shell of another, which has an immense trompe loeil-type piece of fabric covering two sides of it, giving the illusion from a distance that the place is populated with couples on balconies taking in the view, or sitting outside for a bit of al fresco dining (Boland, 2009)

Fig. 3. A fresh view of life: Hoardings around unfinished developments, Sandyford, Dublin 2009.
Source Philip Lawton.

The "broken dreams" and "abandoned futures" that these descriptions of the estates highlighted were mirrored in the lives of the residents "stranded" on them (Fig. 4). The lives that they had imagined were replaced by an existence of uncertainty in "degraded environments" coupled with "the woe of having to make unsustainable mortgage repayments for homes that have tumbled in value" (Irish Times, 2010). 'Ghost estates' were contextualised as ruined spaces, leaving journalists reaching for visceral and hyperbolic allusions to articulate the social and moral catastrophe of the death of the Celtic Tiger dream.

It was like a scene from one of those Chernobyl documentaries. Empty houses rotting away, broken pavements, no street lighting, rubble everywhere and pools of water that you just knew stank to high heaven. Except there were some people living there, young homeowners who were trapped paying premium mortgages to live in an unfinished estate where sewage bubbled up outside their door in houses they knew were worthless because they were unsellable (Harrison, 2010).

The descriptions of the physical conditions of the estates were coupled with reports of residents fears about the lack of security and anti-social behaviour that living amidst vacant spaces was seen to attract. That the grounds for such fears were perhaps exaggerated was beside the point. The 'ghost estate' fulfilled a symbolic function that sated the Irish public's "need to be haunted" (Till, 2005, 13) by the crash.

The ruin aesthetic of 'ghost estates' functioned as a vehicle to express the symbolic rupture of the crash and to begin to re-inscribe this event back into the symbolic order. This opened a crucial political space in the struggle over the 'ghost estate' as an empty signifier. Ruins have been "unwitting or involuntary vessels for a host of human remembering, dreaming, hoping and fearing" (Pensky, 2011, 77) and "gesture towards the present and the future as temporal frames which can be read as both dystopian and utopian" (Edensor, 2005, 15). Thus, ruins can offer a powerful mechanism through which to challenge dominant hegemonies. However, political potentialities of ruins lie in their radical openness, and are largely foreclosed when their meaning is 'fixed'. Thus, the struggle over how the 'ghost estate' was narrated as a ruin was crucial to how the Celtic Tiger era was historicised, a point we will return to later.

ii. Quantifying the crisis by proxy though 'ghost estates'

'Ghost estates' also factored in more 'ordinary' debates that sought to account for the crisis. One of the ways in which the economic uncertainty of the crisis was negotiated was through an almost pathological drive towards quantifying housing vacancy and 'ghost estates'. Broadly, this was constitutive of two conflicting drives: the 'political' imperative to understand the extent and geography of 'ghost estates' in order to mobilise a political-economic critique of Government policies, and the 'police' imperative to determine the level of 'excess' housing in order to quarantine this 'dysfunctional' component and strengthen the system. At the same time, interest groups such as the Construction Industry Federation — a lobby group for the construction sector — went further by continually refuting evidence of housing vacancy and oversupply, and arguing that new construction was urgently needed.

On 28 October 2008, the Irish Independent made the first foray into what would become a prolonged debate about levels of housing vacancy by making the claim that "At least 50,000 newly-built homes are lying empty in 'ghost' estates across the country because of the economic downturn" (Melia, O'Farrell, & Cody, 2008). Although they gave no real sense of how they had arrived at this figure, within two days it was being cited as fact in the Dáil (Parliament) and being used by the opposition to lambast the Government. By January 2009 the figure that was being reported had doubled (F Kelly, 2009).

This latent desire for more 'scientific' assessments was somewhat sated in January 2010 by a series of maps and an estimate of

Fig. 4. Stranded residents: Report on 'ghost estates' in Sunday Times January 2010.

housing vacancy by academics (including one of the authors) at the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) in the National University of Ireland Maynooth (see Kitchin et al., 2010; Kitchin, Gleeson, & Dodge, 2013). The NIRSA estimate of vacancy (302,625 units) was published shortly after figures, (produced by DKM for the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DKM, 2009)) indicating levels of oversupply of between 122,029–147,032 units, were announced by the Minister for Housing, Michael Finnernan. Although both estimates were broadly in line once allowances were made for differences between vacancy and oversupply (see Kitchin et al., 2010, 18–19), the perception that the NIRSA estimate was "up to three times the estimate from [the] Housing Minister" (Hutton, 2010a) caused a media sensation that pushed the issue of vacancy centre stage – "For the first time, a comprehensive map charts the locations of the empty and abandoned developments that stand as haunting monuments to the Celtic Tiger splurge" (Hutton, 2010b) – and allowed for a geographical discussion to take place (Fig. 5).

While this resulted in certain counties, such as Leitrim, being singled out and perhaps stigmatised (see Pope, 2010), correlations could be made between the location and distribution of the estates and Government spatial planning policy and housing policy. This provided an empirical basis to demonstrate how such policy actions as the Government's implementation of the Upper Shannon Rural Renewal Tax Incentive Scheme, their successive withdrawal from social housing provision (Norris & Fahy, 2011), and their failure to implement the National Spatial Strategy (DoEHLG, 2002) contributed to the creation of 'ghost estates' (Kitchin, O'Callaghan, Boyle, Gleeson, & Keaveney, 2012). This was followed over the coming months by other studies that sought to quantify the levels of vacancy (Williams, Hughes, & Redmond, 2010) – although the precise figures remained opaque, and the issue remained an open discussion, at least until the DoEHLG (2009) released the findings of their National Housing Development survey in October 2010 (which revealed there were 2846 'unfinished estates') and possibly until the release of the 2011 Census figures in March 2012 (which revealed that 289,451 units were vacant, 59,395 of which were holiday homes).

By insisting upon and 'fixing' their geography, the 'ghost estates' map transformed their meaning into the articulation of a geographically uneven crisis. This helped to put the debates about 're-use' on a more sober footing; creative alternatives were generally abandoned and advocates for social uses approached the issue with more caution. Similarly, it pushed a discussion about the systemic failure of governance to regulate property development and finance.

However, the map was also co-opted as a mechanism to quarantine the crisis in these estates. It became a cartographic representation of the crisis of overproduction, a means to actually *visualise* the bubble. This was intended to place a quantitative measurement on the estates, but also frame a discussion around the uneven nature of Celtic Tiger development (Kitchin et al., 2010, 2012). In the mainstream media, however, 'ghost estates' often merely became the de-facto signifier of the bubble. As the sites most iconically associated with the bubble, 'ghost estates' also became a vehicle to 'contain' it.

iii. An era of excess

There has been massive over-zoning [of land for development]. This is now clear. We need to learn the lesson of the ghost estates which we now have as a result of us losing the run of ourselves during the Celtic Tiger years (Minister of State Ciarán Cuffe quoted in Irish Independent, 2010a).

…But let's be fair about it: we all partied (Finance Minister, Brian Lenihan, RTE, 2010).

The 'ghost estate' became the particular issue that stood in for the crisis narrative. This narrative of 'excess' was then used to recapture and contain the symbolic disruption. The Celtic Tiger was recast as an 'era of excess'. The 'excess' discourse captured the collective claims made through the symbolic space of the 'ghost estate' and deployed them to construct a narrative about the responsibility of particular groups and individuals for the crisis. It used "losses to reconfirm the necessity of strengthening the system" and isolated particular groups "as warnings, exceptions, contingencies" (Dean, 2009, 62).

In the first instance, the crash instigated a clear shift in how the figureheads of the era were perceived. The property developers who had previously been seen as astute 'entrepreneurs' were now labelled 'gamblers', the individuals who had been running Ireland's banks were recognised as having run them into the ground, and the political leaders who had credited themselves as the architects of the Celtic Tiger became the hapless avatars of dumb luck who had let their 'economic miracle' slip through their fingers due to incompetence (Slattery, 2010). Meanwhile, those who had predicted the property crash underwent a transfiguration from pariahs into prophets (albeit in Morgan Kelly's case, a "prophet of doom", Holden, 2010). The tripartite of banks, property developers, and politicians were identified as the parties most culpable for Ireland's property bubble (Carswell, 2011; McDonanald and Sheridan, 2010; O'Toole, 2009; Ross, 2009).

The dominance of the narrative focussing on the role of individuals and groups in the crash was partly enabled by the fact that, in contrast to other countries, Ireland's banking crisis was almost entirely the result of a 'home grown' property bubble rather than being due to exposure to US subprime mortgages (Honohan, 2010). National deregulations in banking and planning, along with clientalist and corrupt politics at the local level, then, were a necessary part of this story.

However, there were two further crucial factors to the success of this version of the 'excess' narrative in the Irish context. The first relates to how the 'excess' narrative was married to assumed pathologies of the Irish, which had its roots in latent post-colonial anxieties. The second relates to the nature of the 'ghost estate' as an empty signifier.

Ireland's Celtic Tiger period was characterised by "a releasing of older notions of exotic and quaint Irishness in favour of 'business chic' Ireland… a mobile, postmodern Irishness for the new millennium… celebrated for its ability to behave like global capital itself" (Negra, 2010, 836–838). In this eschewing of historical notions of Irishness in favour of a trans-cultural cosmopolitanism, people emerged from a sense of "public guilt at being Irish" and into a feel-good wave and thus accepted the discourses of the 'economic miracle' in a largely unproblematic manner (O'Hearn, 1998, xi). Post-colonial anxieties, evident since independence from the United Kingdom in 1922, were repressed by the Celtic Tiger development narrative, but with the crash they returned (Lloyd, 2008). Almost in an instant, Ireland lost its 'core' position within the European economy and returned to being a peripheral nation that, with its high levels of sovereign debt, was threatening to become 'surplus' to the requirements of capitalist modernity.

At its core, the narrative of 'excess' is haunted by the perception that the boom was always 'too good to be true', and that the crash was inevitable because the Irish were unfit to manage their own affairs independently. This was articulated through a curious mixture of melancholia and stoicism. There is both a sense of shame and frustration that Ireland failed to live up to the promise of its political and economic freedom, which is given form through a melancholic rumination of set of ideals that are seen to have been abandoned during the Celtic Tiger era.

Over 600 ghost estates stand as haunting legacy of crash

Brian Hutton

THE startling scale of Ireland's property crash is laid bare today as academics reveal that more than 600 'ghost' estates are scattered around the country.

For the first time, a comprehensive map charts the locations of the empty and abandoned developments that stand as haunting monuments to the Celtic Tiger splurge.

The analysis suggests pockets of the north-west and midlands will be worst hit by a housing glut that will take years to sell off.

Largely rural counties Leitrim, Longford, Roscommon and Sligo have the highest number of partially built and semi-vacant housing estates when measured against their populations.

Their relative distance from major cities is expected to compound their oversupply problem for the foreseeable future.

Although Cork has 96 so-called 'ghost' estates and Dublin 58 – the highest figures by county – it is believed that their urban populations can absorb the surplus much sooner.

The map was drawn up by the National Institute of Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA), which last week revealed that more than 300,000 houses now lie empty around the country.

Professor Rob Kitchin, director of the NUI Maynooth-based body which advises the Government, said black-spot counties at the end of the N4 could be scarred for up to a decade.

"The population went up the M1, the N2, down the N7, down the N11 and so the N4 was the last big corridor. They started their housing boom after everybody else."

His calculation shows that there are 621 'ghost' estates. The worst-hit area is Leitrim, where 2,945 homes were built during the boom, despite population projections that showed
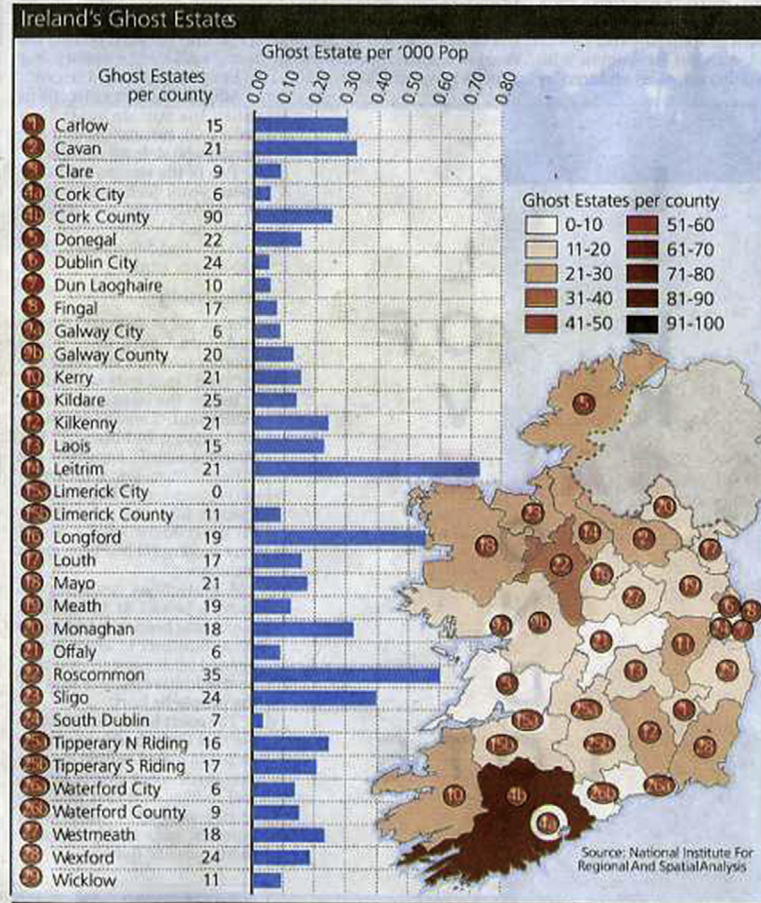
just 588 homes were actually needed.

Longford, Roscommon and Sligo, in particular, as well as Monaghan, Cavan and Carlow also face years of oversupply.

In the months ahead, the State's 'bad bank', NAMA, will assess the value of the uncompleted and half-empty estates and determine their future.

NIRSA estimates around half of them will be taken over by the agency, which will then have to decide whether to sell, lease, maintain, hold, develop or demolish them.

> The worst-hit area is Leitrim, where 2,945 homes were built during the boom, despite population projections that showed just 588 homes were actually needed

There is speculation that some developers are keeping 'ghost' estates off the market or hiking their prices in the hope that NAMA will value them higher and take them off their hands.

Prof Kitchen believes many estates in rural areas could be left as eerie monuments to the property crash.

"They will just be left as scars on the landscape, because nobody will be prepared to pay the cost of knocking them down and restoring the land to agricultural prices," he said.

Ireland's Ghost Estates

Ghost Estates per county		Ghost Estate per '000 Pop
1 Carlow	15	
2 Cavan	21	
3 Clare	9	
4a Cork City	6	
4b Cork County	90	
5 Donegal	22	
6 Dublin City	24	
7 Dun Laoghaire	10	
8 Fingal	17	
9a Galway City	6	
9b Galway County	20	
10 Kerry	21	
11 Kildare	25	
12 Kilkenny	21	
13 Laois	15	
14 Leitrim	21	
15a Limerick City	0	
15b Limerick County	11	
16 Longford	19	
17 Louth	17	
18 Mayo	21	
19 Meath	19	
20 Monaghan	18	
21 Offaly	6	
22 Roscommon	35	
23 Sligo	24	
24 South Dublin	7	
25 Tipperary N Riding	16	
26 Tipperary S Riding	17	
27 Waterford City	6	
28 Waterford County	9	
29 Westmeath	18	
30 Wexford	24	
31 Wicklow	11	

Ghost Estates per county
- 0-10
- 11-20
- 21-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51-60
- 61-70
- 71-80
- 81-90
- 91-100

Source: National Institute For Regional And Spatial Analysis

Fig. 5. 'Ghost estates' in Ireland: The *Irish Independent*'s coverage of the NIRSA 'ghost estate' map.

Shortly before his own death, [Francis] Ledwidge wrote his 'Lament for Thomas McDonagh'. He wrote of his Dark Cow, Ireland, "lifting her horn in pleasant meads". The pleasant meads were a metaphor for an independent Ireland. A greater poet, WB Yeats, coined the unforgettable phrase "a terrible beauty" [in his poem 'Easter 1916']. A terrible beauty, indeed, in the deaths of McDonagh and Ledwidge. And a sort of prophecy in the 'Lament', for we did, for a time, create pleasant meads for ourselves. At the same time, we swapped the Dark Cow for an animal of a very different kind, the Tiger. Then we killed him. Now, instead of pleasant meads we have ghost estates. Before long, I expect, we will see "greedy weeds" devouring them in the literal sense… (Downey, 2010).

One of the ways in which this shame and frustration was dealt with was by internalising the responsibility for the crisis. This position, somewhat ironically, offered a way to reconcile the nation's post-colonial history in a post-Celtic Tiger context.

Irish people have instinctively turned to emigration in times of economic hardship ever since the Great Famine [1841-45 in which over 1 million died and 1 million emigrated]. We conveniently blamed that on the British… What was subsequently called the Great Silence was probably a consequence of people feeling guilty because they could have done more to help the starving and thus helped to avoid the ensuing epidemics that killed so many. To err is human, and to blame it on someone else is politics. So we blamed the whole thing on the British. We can still learn from the mistakes of those days. (Dwyer, 2010).

This discourse implied that by stoically accepting responsibility Ireland could demonstrate its ability to stand on its own feet and avoid returning to a position of dependency. The supreme irony here is that by accepting the responsibility to bail out the banks, the Irish Government locked the Irish people into a structural adjustment programme that institutionalised dependency.

Through the 'era of excess' discourse, austerity was constructed as not only necessary for economic recovery, but also a national penance. A dose of sobriety, stoicism, and temperance would ensure that the nation might rediscover its 'essential self' and reestablish its credibility with international investors. Indeed, at its most reductive, the narrative of 'excess' explains Ireland's crisis through the normative, and highly misleading, phrase "we all partied". This perspective cloaks the socially and spatially uneven impacts of the period of economic growth and the crisis that followed (Fraser, Murphy, & Kelly, 2013), and while we do not claim that this depoliticised understanding of the crisis is an over-arching position, some, albeit qualified, version has become the new hegemonic narrative. The way in which the Celtic Tiger era was historicised in the 'ghost estate' was crucial to this process.

As an empty signifier, the 'ghost estate' provides a perfect encapsulation of Žižek's (1999, 330–331) conceptualisation of Capital as the Real of modern society — " 'reality' is the social reality of actual people involved in the interaction and in the productive process, while the Real is the inexorable 'abstract' spectral logic of Capital which determines what goes on in social reality". The 'ghost estate' was a powerful political symbol because it linked the abstract machinations of capital to the level of everyday reality. But for these same reasons, the 'ghost estate' became a potent tool in the service of neoliberal ideology, by linking the narrative of 'excess' to the individual 'consumer'. Thus, individual homeowners were encouraged to feel a sense of personal responsibility for having bought into the property bubble, therefore contributing to the crisis: "we" were all guilty of 'enjoying the market too much',

"*we* all partied". It was precisely because the crisis in Ireland was bound up in a property bubble driven by personal indebtedness (Murphy & Scott, 2013; Norris & Brooke, 2011), and because the icon of the crash, the 'ghost estate', was a symbol of ordinary life, that the narrative of excess was internalised rather than collectivised.

…the half-built units standing there reproachfully, like a reminder of our excess… There is now simply no market for these big, square houses. That's another odd thing about these estates: most of the houses are big, solid, detached homes. This was not housing for the masses, but mini-mansions for the tiger cubs (Irish Independent, 2010b)

Conclusion

The 'ghost estate' was central to the symbolic re-inscription of the crisis in Ireland. Hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces sought to narrate it for different political ends. Emerging as a discourse after the crash, 'ghost estates' overflowed the symbolic edifice and rendered the Celtic Tiger narrative, as it was, incommensurable. Their subsequent articulation as ruins saw them function as an empty signifier through which opposing narrations of the crisis struggled for hegemony. 'Ghost estates' then became a proxy measure for the crisis itself, which ultimately offered a vehicle to 'contain' it. It did so by identifying 'ghost estates' as the portion of 'excess', the part of the free market model that 'went too far', and thus to be used as a cautionary example. In so doing, the 'ghost estate' was reduced to a particular issue, which began to stand in for the crisis itself, signifying the Celtic Tiger as an 'era of excess'.

The neoliberal narrative of 'excess', which ultimately captures the political potentialities of the 'ghost estate', is comprised of features that can be illuminated by post-political theory, while also speaking back to this conceptual framework. Firstly, the 'ghost estate' is largely politically neutralised by its reduction to a 'particular' issue. However, our analysis demonstrates that political readings of the 'ghost estate' could not be automatically foreclosed. Rather, a series of technocratic discourses were attempted that failed to fully efface the political dimension, before the 'ghost estate' and the crisis was re-inscribed in the 'era of excess' narrative. This accommodation between the symbolic rupture of the crisis and its reinscription in a way that was largely non-threatening to the dominant order is suggestive of Rancière's (1999; 2004) theories of disruption.

In support of Dean's (2009) analysis of communicative capitalism, the 'era of excess' narrative captures discourses using 'ghost estates' as a symptomal point and selectively redeploys their components in the service of strengthening neoliberalism. Critiques of post-politics have argued that within the "restrictive definition of 'the political'" outlined by these frameworks various political struggles are dismissed as insignificant (Barnett, 2012, 677–688). In this, we concur that while Žižek's arguments are instructive for illuminating the mechanisms by which 'ghost estates' are depoliticised, to reduce this process to foreclosure is to ignore a site of politicisation. Furthermore, our analysis suggests the importance of the cooption and redeployment of pre-existing, sometimes deeply rooted or repressed, discourses of cultural identity, and their synthesis with emergent narrations of crisis in the process of re-inscription. We disagree with Žižek's (2008, 180) reading of Benjamin's revolutionary history, which attempts to move towards a conception of "the paradox of a contingent actual emergency which retroactively creates its own possibility", and thus potentially transforms the symbolic field in its entirety. Rather our analysis suggests the centrality of revised versions of

recognisable histories to the transition from one inscription of the symbolic order to another.

In approaching the crisis period, we conclude that theories of post-politics are instructive in designating the current neoliberal impasse, but that less dualistic conceptualisations can be more attuned to capturing the nuance of political struggles that occur in this void. Ours has been a modest attempt to reclaim the 'ghost estate' from the de-politicised 'excess' narrative, and by virtue of illuminating the political struggles inherent in this process, to disrupt it.

Acknowledgements

References

Allmendinger, P., & Haughton, G. (2012). Post-political spatial planning in England: a crisis of consensus? *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers New Series, 37*, 89–103.

Audit Bureau of Circulations. (2012). *Island of Ireland report*. Hertfordshire, UK: ABC. http://www.abc.org.uk/Certificates-Reports/Our-Reports/.

Barnett, C. (2012). Situating the geographies of injustice in democratic theory. *Geoforum, 43*(4), 677–686.

Benjamin, W. (1999). Thesis on the philosophy of history. In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations* (pp. 245–255). London, UK: Pimlico.

Breathnach, P. (1998). Exploring the 'Celtic Tiger' phenomenon: causes and consequences of Ireland's economic miracle. *European Urban and Regional Studies, 5*(3), 305–316.

Boland, R. (2009). *A landscape of half-built buildings*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Times, 3 October.

Boland, R. (2010). *Why our empty buildings can't be turned into schools, hospitals or jails*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Times, 29 May.

Carswell, S. (2011). *Anglo republic: Inside the bank that broke Ireland*. Dublin, Ireland: Penguin Ireland.

Coonan, C. (2011). *Is China a bubble? And what if it bursts?* Dublin, Ireland: Irish Times, 22 January.

Crouch, C. (2004). *Post-democracy*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

CSO. (1991). *Census 1991 volumes*. Dublin, Ireland: Central Statistics Office. http://www.cso.ie/en/census/census20021996resultsandearliercensuses/historicalreports/census1991reports/.

CSO. (2006). *Census 2006 reports*. Dublin, Ireland: Central Statistics Office. http://www.cso.ie/en/census/census2006reports/.

CSO. (2013). *Population and migration estimates*. Dublin, Ireland: Central Statistics Office. http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/pme/populationandmigrationestimatesapril2013/#.U7rAzUCfhv4.

Dean, J. (2009). *Democracy and other neoliberal fantasies*. Durham and London, USA: Duke University Press.

Dikeç, M. (2005). Space, politics and the political. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 23*(2), 171–188.

DoEHLG. (2009). *Housing statistics*. Dublin, Ireland: Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government. http://www.environ.ie/en/Publications/StatisticsandRegularPublications/HousingStatistics.

DoEHLG. (2002). *National Spatial Strategy for Ireland 2002–2020: People, places and potential*. Dublin, Ireland: Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. http://www.irishspatialstrategy.ie.pdfs/Completea.pdf.

DKM. (2009). *Review of the construction Industry 2008 and outlook 2009–2011*. Dublin, Ireland: Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government. http://www.environ.ie/en/Publications/StatisticsandRegularPublications/ConstructionIndustryStatistics/FileDownLoad, 21120,en.pdf.

Downey, J. (2010). *Forget 1916 — it's poets that we really need now*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Independent, 13 February.

Dwyer, R. (2010). *Bulldozing ghost housing estates is like a flashback to famine times*. Cork, Ireland: Irish Examiner, 17 April.

Edensor, T. (2005). *Industrial Ruins: Space, aesthetics and materiality*. Oxford, UK: Berg.

Flynn, R. (2013). *Irish media in (the) crisis*. Paper given at IAMCR 2013 Conference Dublin, 25–29 June 2013.

Fraser, A., Murphy, E., & Kelly, S. (2013). Deepening neoliberalism via austerity and 'reform': the case of Ireland. *Human Geography, 6*(2), 38–53.

Gill, N., Johnstone, P., & Williams, A. (2012). Towards a geography of tolerance: Post-politics and political forms of toleration. *Political Geography, 31*(8), 509–518.

Grist, B. (2012). *An introduction to Irish Planning Law*. Dublin, Ireland: Institute of Public Administration.

Harrison, B. (2010). *It was just an illusion*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Times, 15 May.

Harvey, D. (2010). *The enigma of capital: And the crises of capitalism*. London, UK: Profile Books.

Harvey, D. (2012). *Rebel cities*. London, UK: Verso.

Haughton, G., Allmendinger, P., & Oosterlynck, S. (2013). Spaces of neoliberal experimentation: soft spaces, postpolitics, and neoliberal governmentality. *Environment and Planning A, 45*(1), 217–234.

Hearne, R. (2014). Creating utopia through real struggle: lessons from practical experiences of symbiotic strategies for transformation in austerity Ireland. *Irish Journal of Sociology, 21*(2).

Hell, J., & Schönle, A. (2010). Introduction. In J. Hell, & A. Schönle (Eds.), *Ruins of modernity* (pp. 1–14). Durham and London, USA: Duke University Press.

Holden, L. (2010). *The doom merchant whose warnings don't seem so far-fetched anymore*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Times, 13 April.

Honohan, P. (2010). *The Irish banking crisis: Regulatory and financial stability policy 2003–2008*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Central Bank.

Hutton, B. (2010a). *300,000 homes are lying empty, claim academics*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Independent, 20 January.

Hutton, B. (2010b). *Over 600 ghost estates stand as haunting legacy of crash*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Independent, 27 January.

Irish Independent. (2010a). *Land rezoned for 800,000 more homes than needed*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Independent, 3 May.

Irish Independent. (2010b). *Walking with the ghosts*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Independent, 22 May.

Irish Times. (2010). *A legacy of ghost estates*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Times, 23 October.

Kelly, F. (2009). *New rules may force 'firesale' of 70,000 houses*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Independent, 03 January.

Kelly, M. (2009). *Ghosts of debt and jobs will haunt economy*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Times, 29 December.

Kitchin, R., & Bartley, B. (2007). Ireland in the twenty-first century. In B. Bartley, & R. Kitchin (Eds.), *Understanding contemporary Ireland* (pp. 1–26). London, UK: Pluto Press.

Kitchin, R., Gleeson, J., & Dodge, M. (2013). Unfolding mapping practices: a new epistemology for cartography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers New Series, 38*(3), 480–496.

Kitchin, R., Gleeson, J., Keaveney, K., & O'Callaghan, C. (2010). *A haunted landscape: Housing and ghost estates in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland*. Kildare, Ireland: NIRSA. working paper No. 59 http://www.nuim.ie/nirsa/research/documents/WP59-A-Haunted-Landscape.pdf.

Kitchin, R., Linehan, D., O'Callaghan, C., & Lawton, P. (2013). Public geography through social media. *Dialogues in Human Geography, 3*(1), 56–72.

Kitchin, R., O'Callaghan, C., Boyle, M., Gleeson, J., & Keaveney, K. (2012). Placing neoliberalism: the rise and fall of Ireland's Celtic Tiger. *Environment and Planning A, 44*(6), 1302–1326.

Kitchin, R., O'Callaghan, C., & Gleeson, J. (2014). The new ruins of Ireland? Unfinished estates in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 38*(3), 1069–1080.

Lewis, M. (2011). *Boomerang: The biggest bust*. London, UK: Penguin.

Lloyd, D. (2008). *Irish Times: Temporalities of modernity*. Dublin, Ireland: Field Day.

McDonanald, F., & Sheridan, K. (2010). *The Builders*. London, UK: Penguin.

McEnroe, J. (2010). *Time to raze the unfinished relics of the building boom*. Cork, Ireland: Irish Examiner, 2 January.

McWilliams, D. (2006). *A warning from deserted ghost estates*. Dublin, Ireland: Davidmcwilliams.ie. http://www.davidmcwilliams.ie/2006/10/01/a-warning-from-deserted-ghost-estates Accessed 15.07.13.

McWilliams, D. (2008). *Breakfast role man needs a second chance*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Independent, 22 October.

Melia, P., O'Farrell, S., & Cody, C. (2008). *50,000 new homes lying empty in 'ghost' estates*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Independent, 28 October.

Mercille, J. (2014a). The role of the media in sustaining Ireland's housing bubble. *New Political Economy, 19*(2), 282–301.

Mercille, J. (2014b). The role of the media in fiscal consolidation programmes: the case of Ireland. *Cambridge Journal of Economics, 38*(2), 281–300.

Mouffe, C. (2000). *The democratic paradox*. London, UK: Verso.

Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the political*. London, UK: Routledge.

Mouffe, C. (2013). *Agonistics*. London, UK: Verso.

Murphy, E., & Scott, M. (2013). Mortgage-related issues in a crisis economy: evidence from rural households in Ireland. *Geoforum, 46*, 34–44.

Negra, R. (2010). Urban space, luxury retailing and the new Irishness. *Cultural Studies, 24*(6), 836–853.

Norris, M., & Brooke, S. (2011). *Lifting the load: Help for people in mortgage arrears*. Dublin, Ireland: Citizens' Information Board.

Norris, M., & Fahy, T. (2011). From asset based welfare to welfare housing: the changing meaning of social housing in Ireland. *Housing Studies, 26*(3), 459–469.

Oosterlynck, S., & Swyngedouw, E. (2010). Noise reduction: the postpolitical quandary of night flights at Brussels airport. *Environment and Planning A, 42*(7), 1577–1594.

O'Callaghan, C. (2012). Contrapuntal urbanisms: towards a postcolonial relational geography. *Environment and Planning A, 44*(8), 1930–1950.

O'Hearn, D. (1998). *Inside the Celtic Tiger: The Irish economy and the Asian model*. London, UK: Pluto Press.

O'Toole, F. (2009). *Ship of fools: How stupidity and corruption sank the Celtic Tiger*. London, UK: Faber and Faber.

Pálsson, G. (2012). These are not old ruins: a heritage of the Hrun. *International Journal of Historical Archaeology, 16*(3), 559–576.

Peck, J., Theodore, N., & Brenner, N. (2010). Postneoliberalism and its malcontents. *Antipode, 41*(6), 1236–1258.

Pensky. (2011). Three types of ruin: Heidigger, Benjamin, Sebald. *Poligrafi, 61–62*(16), 65–90.

Pope, C. (2010). *621 'ghost estates' built across State*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Times, 27 January.

Preston, P., & Silke, H. (2012). Market 'Realities' – de-coding neoliberal ideology and media discourses. *Australian Journal of Communication, 38*(2), 47–63.

Rancière, J. (1995). *On the shores of politics*. New York City, New York, USA: Verso.

Rancière, J. (1999). *Disagreement: Politics and philosophy*. Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA: University of Minnesota Press.

Rancière, J. (2004). *The politics of aesthetics: The distribution of the sensible*. London, UK: Continuum.

Rancière, J. (2006). *Hatred of democracy*. London, UK: Verso.

Rancière, J. (2009). *The emancipated spectator*. London, UK: Verso.

Ross, S. (2009). *The Bankers*. Dublin, Ireland: Penguin Ireland.

RTE (Raidió Teilifís Éireann). (2008). *Cowen: Banks in a healthy state*. Dublin, Ireland: Six One News, 30 September.

RTE (Raidió Teilifís Éireann). (2010). *Interview with Finance Minister Brian Lenihan. Prime Time*, 24 November.

Ruez, D. (2013). "Partitioning the Sensible" at Park 51: Rancière, Islamophobia, and Common Politics. *Antipode, 45*(5), 1128–1147.

Said, E. (1994). *Culture and imperialism*. London, UK: Penguin.

Slattery, L. (2010). *A handful of winners and a lot of losers populated Ireland's bleak landscape this year*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Times, 31 December.

Smyth, J. (2010). *'Perfect storm' rages in Latvia*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Times, 24 September.

Swyngedouw, E. (2009). The antinomies of the postpolitical city: In search of a democratic politics of environmental production. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 33*(3), 601–620.

Swyngedouw, E. (2011). Interrogating post-democratisation: reclaiming egalitarian political spaces. *Political Geography, 30*(7), 370–380.

Till, K. (2005). *The new Berlin: Memory, politics, place*. Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA: University of Minnesota Press.

Tipton, G. (2009). *Life for the boom's dead spaces*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Times, 30 June.

Titley, G. (2012). Budgetjam! A communications intervention in the political-economic crisis in Ireland. *Journalism, 14*(2), 292–306.

Williams, B., Hughes, B., & Redmond, D. (2010). *Managing an unstable housing market*. Dublin, Ireland: UCD Urban Institute Ireland. Working Paper Series http://www.uep.ie/pdfs/WP%201002%20W.pdf.

Žižek, S. (1999). *The Ticklish subject: The absent centre of political ontology*. London, UK: Verso.

Žižek, S. (2008). *In defence of lost causes*. London, UK: Verso.