

Title	(Neo)Liberal populism and Ireland's "squeezed middle"
Authors	Meade, Rosie R.;Kiely, Elizabeth
Publication date	2020
Original Citation	Meade, R.R. and Kiely, E. (2020) '(Neo)Liberal populism and Ireland's "squeezed middle"', <i>Race & Class</i> , 61(4), pp. 29–49. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396820905729
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.1177/0306396820905729
Rights	© 2020, Institute of Race Relations. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396820905729
Download date	2026-10-04 14:40:09
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/16714

Meade, R. R., & Kiely, E. (2020). (Neo)Liberal populism and Ireland's 'squeezed middle'. *Race & Class*, 61(4), 29-49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396820905729>

Final Accepted Version

(Neo)Liberal populism and Ireland's squeezed middle

Rosie R. Meade and Elizabeth Kiely

Abstract: Acknowledging definitional problems associated with the concept of 'populism', this article shifts the analytic gaze away from actors or politics that are conventionally characterised as populist, on to an analysis of the doing of populism¹ by those who typically evade the populist label. Tracing the discursive construction of the 'squeezed middle' in Irish mainstream media and parliamentary debates between January 2014 and March 2019, we analyse how this signifier was mobilised to fuel and foment *ressentiment* among middle earning taxpayers. This article analyses how the discourses of the 'squeezed middle' functioned ideologically, as a form of anti-welfare populism, re-directing blame for middle-class ontological and material insecurities on to unemployed welfare recipients who were depicted as immoral, lazy and insulated from hardship. This article highlights how populism operates from the so-called moderate centres of liberal democracy and not exclusively from the political margins. Irish political and media narratives of the 'squeezed middle' are seen as part of a larger project whereby damaging myths about the unemployed are propagated in service of ideological class warfare; legitimising neoliberal austerity and normalising unequal economic relations.

Keywords: *populism*, *'squeezed-middle'*, *Ireland*, *neoliberalism*, *ressentiment*.

(Neo)Liberal populism and Ireland's squeezed middle

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Great Recession, the Brexit vote, the elections of Trump, Bolsonaro and other 'hard-man' style authoritarian figures across the globe, there has been intensifying media and academic speculation on the rise of populism as both a destabilising political force and as a kind of new normal. At play in these various analyses are the potentially negative implications for the future viability of liberal democracy and its institutions; the extent to which populist politics is led from the top or circulated from below; the novelty or otherwise of its various manifestations; and the role of social media and online forums in giving vent to and in fomenting populist ideologies. There are appraisals of the extent to which particular political contexts, such as that of the Republic of Ireland may, or may not be, hospitable to populist currents. But there are also serious questions about the conceptual utility of the designator 'populism', which permits unlikely comparisons to be drawn between characters that are as ideologically polarised as Hugo Chávez and Donald Trump, and where there appears to be an 'unacknowledged normative bias equating democracy with its liberal variant, despite the existence of distinct philosophical and theoretical approaches to its realization'.² This relates to the widespread pejorative usage of the adjective 'populist' and how it is invoked to delegitimise those regarded as unruly or irrational political actors, discourses and movements. Problematically, such usages also tend to position 'populism' as *outside of* or as *inimical to* liberal democracy, rather than critically interrogating if and how populism may be constituted through the extant processes, actors and institutions of liberal democracy itself.

In writing this article we are especially mindful of Barry Cannon's warning against treating the concept of populism as an 'intellectual support for the false distinction between a so-called, auto-denominated "moderate center" and its supposed extremes on the left and right'.

³ Instead we are focusing on ‘liberal’ usages of populist discourses and forms of reason, as expressed by centrist politicians and by journalists and commentators in Irish national and local newspapers; discourses that have been mobilised to mythologise a hard done by ‘middle’ in Irish society. We illustrate how populist discourses and forms of reasoning are deployed to elevate the moral superiority of this putative middle class, while at the same time denigrating those in receipt of welfare. Therefore, we invert the analytical gaze, whereby it is more usually the movements and beliefs of the poor and working class that are scrutinised for their risk of populist capture, and instead we analyse how populist discourses have been deployed to constitute, mobilise and direct the resentment of a ‘middle class’. Here the word resentment refers to forms of social and political resentment that are locked into their own sense of victimhood, that express a curious hybrid of grievance and self-valorisation, and that may ‘turn in on themselves, leading to something more socially toxic’⁴. Specifically, we consider how the Irish newspapers, centre-right elected representatives, and current Taoiseach Leo Varadkar have deployed such populist referents as the ‘squeezed middle’ or the ‘people who get out of bed early’ to elicit a permanent, irresolvable sense of grievance that is neutered of any commitment to significant political and economic change.

Puzzling with ‘populism’

A large body of academic scholarship has attempted to distinguish the contents and effects of ‘populist politics’ particularly as it manifests at the current historical moment.⁵ However, as Jacques Rancière explains, ‘populism’ does not ‘characterize a defined political force’⁶ and cannot be boiled down to specific discourses or practical effects - such as racism, settler colonialism, nativism or xenophobia - however commonplace they may appear to be. It ‘benefits from the amalgams that it allows between political forces that range from the extreme right to the radical left. It does not designate an ideology or even a coherent political style’.⁷

Populist actors are variously urban and rural, nationalist and internationalist, conservative, liberal and revolutionary, elitist and anti-elitist: this diversity must be acknowledged even as we reject any presumed chain of equivalence between their various standpoints and ideologies. Efforts to define populism according to its supposed contents also risk glossing over the role and functioning of the supposedly neutral arbiter of liberal democracy, i.e. the state; the ways through which those self-same discourses and practices are deployed through its institutions and policies, rather than by mobs or masses. Justifiable disgust at the re-emergence of far-right and fascist movements should not distract our critical attention from institutional racism, the character of the ‘racial state’⁸ or what Rancière identifies as those ‘forms of discrimination... that are practiced perfectly in sterile offices, away from any mass pressure’.⁹

Clearly there are profound difficulties in circumscribing for whom and for what the term populism stands. Ernesto Laclau proposes that the ‘language of a populist discourse’, irrespective of its ideological stripe, will inevitably be ‘imprecise and fluctuating, not because of any cognitive failure, but because it tries to operate performatively within a social reality which is to a large extent heterogeneous and fluctuating’.¹⁰ To argue that populist discourses operate performatively, means recognising that the category of ‘the people’ to which they appeal and lay claim, is not a pre-existing one but that ‘the people’ is itself constituted through the platforms and demands of political actors. Furthermore, it implies that asking ‘if a movement is or is not populist is... the wrong question’: instead we must consider ‘to what extent is a movement populist’.¹¹ Rather than exoticise or ‘other’ populism as some kind of feral force that exists beyond the pale of liberal democracy, we must appreciate the very pervasiveness of its discourses; it is expressed by mainstream *as well as* by more marginal political actors. Although critical of key aspects of Laclau’s account, Benjamin Arditi agrees that ‘populism is not an accident but a recurrent trait of democratic politics’, iterating ‘itself between both democratic and undemocratic settings’.¹²

In this paper we understand populist discourses to be both contradictory and mobile. They invoke all at once the ‘us’ and ‘them’ categories of assumed solidarity and exclusion; they express and articulate a range of often conflicting political preferences and ideologies; they simultaneously operate as threats to, in the fringes of and at the centre of liberal democracy; and they manifest as practices, which may or may not be consistent with their associated discursive claims. Here we draw upon a broad conceptualisation as outlined by Saturnino M. Borras Jr. whereby populism is seen to involve ‘the deliberate political act of aggregating disparate and even competing and contradictory class and group interests and demands into a relatively *homogenized* voice, that is “*we, the people*”, against an “*adversarial them*” for tactical or strategic political purposes’.¹³ It recognises populism’s ‘capriciousness’, the potential for disjunctures between ‘thought’ and ‘deed’, and its capacity to influence state policies and practice, even from outside the formal institutions of the state.¹⁴ The homogenization that is characteristic of populism must be critically interrogated, even when we are sympathetic to the actors or movements in question. The slippages between equality claims and homogeneity claims that are normalised by populist discourses - whereby the former are (perhaps implicitly) perceived as contingent upon or as arising from the latter - risk legitimising a permanent ‘outside’ to equality to which those who are ‘different’ or not quite sufficiently the same are condemned.¹⁵ In our analysis of populism as led by centrist political parties and organs of the Irish press, we are interested in the constitution of the amorphous category of the ‘middle’, the kinds of identities and subjectivities it is presumed to accommodate, and who is positioned outside of it.

Irish populism from the moderate centre

In the Republic of Ireland, the centre-right party, Fianna Fáil, has most commonly been dubbed populist both because of its persistent ‘claim to be the bearer of the authentic nationalist

tradition’ and because of its tendency to pull political strokes in the name of electoral advantage.¹⁶ In the decades immediately following independence and partition, fiscal, social and cultural conservatism were hegemonic in the 26 Counties and overt expressions of class conflict were dissipated. Fianna Fáil successfully outmanoeuvred the Labour Party in its ability to channel the identities of the urban and rural working class. Posing as a catch-all populist movement, that could get on with the practical business of governing the ‘26-county state’ while holding partition as a ‘national grievance’, it deployed a ‘radical anti-status quo rhetoric but one that was careful never to question the basis of capitalism itself’.¹⁷ Its political trajectory shows how populist claims-making can be successfully mobilised by supposedly mainstream parties within the liberal-democratic system. More recently, political scientists have been assessing, and largely downplaying, the correspondence between the international populist wave and the content and form of politics in the Republic. They have contended that Sinn Féin, the smaller socialist parties, and the various Independents who run for electoral office, have toyed with populist currents or attracted the attentions of the ‘populist voter’, but have not decisively evolved into fully committed populist actors¹⁸. Their research also suggests that populism became somewhat more pronounced as the impacts of recession and austerity were felt in the Republic after 2008. Such populism, however, was more usually expressed as anti-elitism and a somewhat left-wing take on economic policy, rather than manifesting the discernibly right-wing antipathy towards migrants or other out-groups that is common in other EU contexts.¹⁹

In the media and academic imaginary, Fine Gael the centre-right party that has been in government since 2011, is rarely identified as a populist actor: this reflects the party’s own self-styling as a ‘party of prudent financial management’.²⁰ However, some recent research has drawn attention to Fine Gael’s deployment of stroke politics, its vote-chasing behaviour, and its willingness to tap into or ride popular currents.²¹ For example, Mainwaring and

McGraw's analysis of catch-all Irish political parties found that Fine Gael had 'eight statistically significant' policy shifts between 2007 and 2016, double the figure for both Fianna Fáil and the Labour Party, and that 'Fine Gael delegations actually changed views from election to election *more often* than they remained constant'.²² Nonetheless, the party consciously and actively represents itself as *the* political party of the 'moderate centre', one that eschews the baser political instincts of its more populist rivals. In 2017, Paschal Donohue, current Fine Gael Minister for Finance, attacked the rise of populism in Europe, caricaturing the Irish variant as a distinctively left-wing disorder²³:

I firmly believe that dozens of Dáil deputies on the populist left do not think about things like job creation, competitiveness or economic growth from the start of the week until the end. All of these things are taken for granted. Instead of thinking about how to maintain and grow national income, they think only of how to share it out, and use the language of division and perceived injustice to make their point. Any tax reform is seen as Thatcherite. Any spending reform is seen as austerity. The sole message is to spend more and more and more. And if you dare argue against that mantra, you are the elite. You are the enemy.

Donohue's speech followed in the wake of his own cabinet colleague, former Minister for Social Protection and later Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar's notorious and distinctively populist publicity campaign 'Welfare cheats cheat us all'²⁴; a campaign that boosted Varadkar's profile in advance of his successful bid for the leadership of Fine Gael. Terry Eagleton has joked elsewhere²⁵ that ideology is a bit like halitosis because it is always the other person's problem; and so it is with populist ideologies, which are simultaneously condemned and deployed from the so-called moderate centres of political life. Donohue's speech also gives a flavour of his party's ongoing commitment to neoliberal policies despite, allegedly, it being besieged by populist critics. But he underplays the degree of high-profile support his government had

garnered, particularly from the Irish press, as it implemented policies of austerity and fiscal consolidation in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis. In 2010, the Republic secured an €85 billion ‘bailout’ funded by the EU, IMF and EU Bilateral Lenders and from the state’s own National Pensions Reserve Fund. This was followed by swingeing public spending retrenchment measures (€10 billion) and additional taxes/charges (€5 billion) in the period 2011-2014.²⁶ Recent scholarship has tracked the role of the Irish media in rationalising and normalising the implementation of these ‘reforms’. Julien Mercille undertook a systematic study of 929 comment pieces and editorials discussing austerity that were published in five key newspapers during the period 2008-2013. He ‘found that 58% of pieces supported austerity and only 11% opposed it (the remainder were neutral). There was no newspaper’s editorial line opposed to fiscal consolidation (all were supportive of it)’²⁷. Marron’s research found both *The Irish Times* and *The Irish Independent*, during the period 2009 and 2010, to be strong advocates of cutbacks in the public service as the required solution to Ireland’s financial crisis²⁸.

When contemporary political scientists analyse the contents of Irish populism, they tend to focus on how it is expressed as a concern with economic redistribution and anti-elitism on the one hand or with racism, Euroscepticism and nationalism on the other.²⁹ Arguably, such constructions of populism have the effect of intensifying the gaze on working class voters and the parties that seek their votes; those whose structural location is presumed to render them more likely to express those political preferences. Curiously absent from such analyses has been an exploration of how anti-welfarism and middle-class self-regard might be deployed as populist discourses. Anti-welfare populism may evade detection because of its close alignment with the rationalities informing neoliberalisation; the common-sense of contemporary governance, where enterprise, self-sufficiency and responsibility are the pre-eminent markers of subjecthood and identity; and where welfare dependency is constructed as a source of shame

and social failure. Writing in the UK, Paul Hoggett et al. (2013), recognise how anti-welfare populism positions a deserving “we, the people” in opposition to an underserving “adversarial them”. Such discourses challenge the legitimacy of welfare nets and public spending by invoking a fairness/unfairness binary. This allows social housing programmes, welfare payments, halting sites for Travellers, etc. to be re-constituted as discriminatory mechanisms that punish and squeeze a hard-done-by and hard-working ‘middle’, which may or may not be explicitly constituted as a ‘class’.

We are particularly interested in the construction and percolation of populist discourses that claim to represent and in some, although usually ill-defined, way mitigate the ‘pissed offness’ of Ireland’s ‘squeezed middle’. Clearly, such discourses are not peculiar to the Irish context. In 2011 ‘squeezed middle’ was dubbed the ‘word of the year’ by Oxford Dictionary lexicographers in both the UK and the USA.³⁰ For all its discursive power in evoking, constituting and performing a particular set of social anxieties and the identity of those who are presumed to bear them, the term is so highly ambiguous as to generate numerous questions; the middle of what, where and whom? Is ‘middle’ a class, ideological, political or even geographical referent? Who is doing the squeezing, how and why?

Who and where was this ‘squeezed middle’?

Using the Nexis newspaper database, employing the words ‘squeezed’ and ‘middle’ and confining our search to newspaper headlines to capture the most relevant articles, we tracked its deployments in Irish print broadsheet and tabloids over the period 1 January 2014 until the 31 March 2019. This timeframe was chosen as it encapsulated a period of severe austerity after which the Irish economy started showing sign of ‘recovery’ albeit a recovery not felt by many³¹. Although published before the research time-frame, Ireland’s ‘newspaper of record’ *The Irish Times* began on the 4th February 2012 a week-long series of articles on the theme and

because of this concentrated focus, it was also decided to include these articles (n=14) in the sample. We used the same words ('squeezed' and 'middle') to review the online Irish parliamentary discussions and debates in the same period. The complete search generated a sample of 97 newspaper articles and newspaper editorials, two of which were omitted due to irrelevance leaving a total of 95 (**Table 1**) and 13 relevant parliamentary debates (**Table 2**). These were then manually coded and analysed with reference to definitions of the 'squeezed middle'; the stance adopted by the journalist/newspaper/politician in relation to the 'squeezed middle'; descriptors used for the 'squeezed middle' category and the targets for blame if it was accorded. In the entire sample, only in one parliamentary contribution (Brendan Howlin, Labour party) and in 4 articles (2 of which were published in *The Sunday Business Post*), were significant challenges posed to the validity of the construct of the 'squeezed middle' or to the claims being made about it.

Our review reveals that, like many populist referents, the 'squeezed middle' is an elastic category, with shifting parameters in terms of who is included and who is excluded. Marlon Barbehön and Marilena Geugjes observe that 'middle', when referring to either economic status or political affiliation, is usually 'associated with notions of normality, neutrality, moderation and compromise'.³² Newspaper articles typically addressed their readers as members of the 'squeezed middle', with journalists also adopting the subject position. For example, *Sunday Independent* journalist Emily Hourican (17 July 2016) noted that that people like her had their very own 'media-friendly moniker these days', i.e. the 'SqueeMids'. The 'squeezed middle' was comprised of working parents 'aged between 35 and 54 years' according to *The Irish Times* (O'Connell, 1 July 2017), and frequently but not exclusively described as constituting 'ordinary workers' (Weston, 18 August 2018) with dependent children (McWilliams, 7 April 2018) in the *Irish Independent*. Writing in the *Sunday Independent*, Dónal Lynch (29 April 2018) argued that single millennials like himself should

be regarded as the ‘real put-upon squeezed middle in Ireland’ while young working couples were identified in the *Gorey Guardian*, a provincial newspaper, as meriting inclusion (24 March 2018). The occupations most often signified in these discourses were teachers (McWilliams, *Irish Times* 7 April 2018), police officers and nurses (*Irish Independent*, 7 June 2018). The *Irish Independent* (7 June 2018) denoted ‘the clichéd Coppers couple – the nurse and the guard’³³ with a ‘combined income exceeding €100,000’ as the archetypes of this populist category. However, newspapers’ estimations of the earning power and normal incomes of the ‘squeezed middle’ varied considerably: individual salaries were between €30,000 and €60,000 (Sheahan and Melia, *Irish Independent* 12 April 2014) or in the €32,800 to €70,000 range according to former Fine Gael Minister Michael Noonan (see Logue, *Irish Times*, 15 April 2015; McCabe, *Sunday Independent* 1 March 2015). Couples might jointly earn €56,000 (Beesley, *Irish Times* 15 October 2014) or alternatively share a combined income of €100,000 or even more (*Irish Independent* 7 June 2018). For other journalists, the designation ‘squeezed middle’ was related less to income than to financial responsibilities, e.g. those bearing the ‘greatest tax burden and ‘a disproportionate share of distressed loans’ according to Fitzsimons, an independent financial analyst, writing in the *Sunday Independent* (26 October 2014). Similarly, in a column in the *Sunday Independent* (1 June 2014), Fitzpatrick proffered an ‘official’ definition of the ‘SqueeMid’ as constituting ‘a 30-to 50-year-old property owning Irish couple, who wished they had moved to Australia when they had the chance, rather than stay here and bankroll their kids, their parents and various other layabouts.’

Media and political interventions about the ‘squeezed middle’ were forged in the shadow of recession and austerity. In the Republic of Ireland there has been much discussion in academic, media and public forums regarding who was most impacted by the withdrawal of public spending, job losses, retrenchment of services and caps on wages that were instituted in the

name of Ireland's economic recovery after 2008.³⁴ As the evidence presented here illustrates, it became something of a commonplace that the citizens of the 'squeezed middle' were the main victims of the economic collapse. However, the evidence indicates that this is not the case. Examining income distribution in Ireland between 2008 and 2013, using data from the Central Statistics Office Survey on Income and Living Conditions, an ESRI report revealed that real incomes for those at the bottom decile of income distribution fell by 22% (and 27% when examined after housing costs) in comparison with 14.4% for those in the middle income bracket.³⁵ In the same report, the examination of the distributional impact of discretionary welfare and tax policies adopted during austerity saw the greatest reduction in income in the top decile (over 15%), followed by the bottom decile (over 12%) and then the middle income deciles (8-11%). Lynch, Cantillon and Crean concluded after exploring the relationship between austerity policy and income inequality, that the most impacted by austerity were the already impoverished; they were more likely to be working class rather than middle class. They also identified children and young people, Travellers, lone parents, persons with disabilities, carers and ethnic minorities as being the most significantly impacted.³⁶

It is also evident that *the* 'middle-class' experience was neither unified nor coherent, with differences in terms of life-course stage, exposure to debt, employee/self-employed and farming statuses significantly influencing outcomes for 'middle-earners'.³⁷ The research category of 'middle-class' is neither universally understood nor agreed, and any academic practice of measuring or assessing that class's experiences is also constitutive, requiring fine-line judgements of who is in and who is out.³⁸ Reviewing data from the period 2002 to 2012, Peter Mühlau undertook a close reading of indicators related to financial hardship in Ireland, and his findings challenge the widespread currency of the middle-class squeeze. Instead, his research points to the salience of *'perceived economic hardship'* as opposed to actual *'material deprivation'*, and posits that, 'the working classes were "always" exposed to a substantial risk

of financial difficulties and underlying causes such as unemployment or benefit dependency. For the middle classes, these hazards were truly exceptional in the pre-recession period'.³⁹ In other words, austerity and recession both demonstrated and underscored their own vulnerability, credit and market dependency to particular sections –but crucially not all- of the middle-class, lessons already acutely familiar to working class and poorer communities.

While it is necessary to interrogate if/how claims about middle class hardship were borne out in economic and sociological data, it is equally important to critique how the conception of a 'squeezed middle' functioned ideologically, discursively and performatively. This relates less to the veracity and provability of its claims, but instead relates to its effectiveness as a collectively imaginable truth. Laclau signals how populist discourses deploy 'empty signifiers' that both constitute and politicise the 'people's' identity; inviting the putative 'people' to get behind that identity just as they are distinguished from those others who do not share it.⁴⁰ The 'squeezed middle' is such an empty signifier because it is nebulous enough for a broad swathe of people to imagine themselves into its embrace, while at the same time it plays upon some widely understood assumptions about the shared subjectivity of the middle class.⁴¹ As if to echo Laclau's contention that populist discourses are built on 'empty signifiers', Logue, writing in *The Irish Times* (15 April 2015) proposed that the category of the squeezed middle could embrace anyone who thought or felt that they should be included. In *The Irish Times* week-long series of articles in February 2012, journalist Kathy Sheridan (4 February 2012) advised that the term was not restricted to 'the traditional middle class' but encompassed 'a broader cohort', effectively including anyone who was earning. The media's circulation of such generalities about those who were employees and workers, prompts the question of why concepts like the 'proletariat' or 'working class' were not used instead. Arguably, it is because those latter concepts evoke the centrality of class-based relationships in capitalism that they were avoided or scarcely even imagined. Instead, the discourses

reproduced in the newspapers performed the double move of toying with some recognisable signifiers of class as an identity, while evading class-based *analysis*. The structural nature of exploitation and precarity were ignored in favour of a focus on identity-making and the fetishization of particular lifestyles. Citing findings from an Amárach (Research Consultancy Company) convened ‘squeezed middle’ focus group, *Irish Times* journalist Kathy Sheridan (4 February 2012) explained that membership of the category could be denoted in monetary or material terms, such as having two incomes and being able to afford two cars, or two holidays in the year. Crucially though, other distinguishing traits were; having a mortgage and or savings, a concern with self-sufficiency, or possessing the kind of middle-class sensibility and resilience that allowed one to prevail even when a decline in income was experienced.

Such accounts reproduce, what Jock Young has identified as a hegemonic variant of middle-class identity, one which simultaneously denies class politics and structural oppressions while exhibiting a self-regarding moralism and ethic of responsibility.⁴² This variant was colourfully illustrated across the media accounts through the use of adjectives and alternative descriptors. Members of the ‘squeezed middle’ were most commonly described as ‘coping’ (Drennan, *Sunday Independent* 25 May 2014; Kennedy, *Sunday Business Post* 14 October 2017; Johnston, *Irish Independent* 11 March 2017; Ryan, *Sunday Independent* 23 July 2017) but they were also celebrated as: ‘the alarm-clock heroes’; ‘the battlers’ in *The Irish Times* (Sheridan, 4 February 2012); ‘the backbone of our economy and this country’ (*Sunday Independent*, 16 July 2017); those ‘who stumped up to keep the show on the road’ (Bielenberg, *Irish Independent* 12 March 2016); the JAM (Just About Managing) generation (Johnston, *Irish Independent* 11 March 2017); the ‘ordinary Joes and Josephines’ (Weston, *Irish Independent* 18 August 2018); ‘hard-pressed but deserving’ by a UCD professor and Chair of the Housing Finance Agency (Norris, *Sunday Business Post* 26 January 2018). Political representatives affirmed the hard-working people who pay for everything (TD Pat Deering, *Irish Daily Mail*,

1 December 2016) and ‘the ordinary five-eighths in Ireland’ (Senator Aidan Davitt, SÉ Debate 10 November 2016). Independent and socially conservative TD Mattie McGrath (Irish Parliament 10 November 2016) championed a ‘squeezed middle’ that he likened to ‘an orange reduced to a mandarin, and a dry mandarin at that’. Members were characterised as ‘beleaguered’ in the *Sunday Business Post* (7 October 2017) by Richards (Head of Standard Life Investments in Ireland) and ‘financially stressed and downbeat about their future’ in the *Irish Daily Mail* (McDonald, 28 June 2017).

Hegemonic middle-class identity is inherently solipsistic, as Young explains, reflecting a ‘comparative lack of social knowledge about the poor and “dis-possessed”’ while also combining anxieties about failure and loss of status with a strong measure of ‘righteous indignation’.⁴³ This was borne out in newspaper articles that pointed to an ‘endangered’ section of society, at risk of being ‘hollowed out’ because it was so put upon (*Sunday Independent*, 16 July 2017). Notions of journalistic objectivity or balance were cast aside as writers and newspapers affirmed their own membership of the ‘squeezed middle’. Channelling the imagined injuries of its class, the *Sunday Independent* (16 July 2017) warned that, while it may have become fashionable ‘to sneer’ at the suburban middle class, they ‘are solid citizens; decent, hard-working and law-abiding, to be respected and admired’ and the paper encouraged Taoiseach ‘Varadkar to do all in his power to assist the noble aspiration toward property ownership for his and generations to come’.

Journalists repeatedly normalised and vindicated a set of values, norms, aesthetic pursuits and living standards associated with a/their own middle-class way of life, while simultaneously representing that lifestyle as under threat. Members of the ‘squeezed middle’ were constituted as distinctively moral actors, whose consumer habits and expectations about status and personal wealth are the bell-weather for the nation as a whole. In the *Sunday Independent* Hourican (17

July 2016) contended that ‘the normal trappings’, ‘a four-bedroom house with a front and back garden; private school; three-week summer holidays’, could no longer be taken for granted and given her own and others’ family circumstances that ‘extra-curricular activities -piano lessons, tennis, horse riding, ballet are expenditures to be carefully considered’. Furthermore, she noted that trading up, or possessing a single pensionable job were now out of reach of those ‘who were brought up to expect them’. The *Irish Independent* (7 July 2018) noted that even on ‘a combined family income of €100,000’, one

...would be lucky to cover a mortgage on a semi-D on the outskirts of Dublin plus childcare for three kids... you might buy the odd bag of gourmet crisps in Marks & Spencer, but chances are you may be doing your weekly shop in Aldi or Lidl. Child benefit could be paying the electricity bill rather than going into a college savings fund.

Consequently, a ‘nice old age’ (Hourican, *Sunday Independent*, 17 July 2016) or the middle-class ambition of passing on one’s wealth to the next generation could no longer be guaranteed. Confronted with this divergence between their sense of security and entitlement, the adult children of the ‘squeezed middle’ were having to learn ‘flexibility, open-mindedness and a strong work ethic’ (Hourican, *Sunday Independent*, 17 July 2016).

Discourses of the squeezed middle: ventriloquizing neoliberal subjecthood

Contemporary neoliberalisation demands that we constitute ourselves as responsible, enterprising, self-reliant individuals, who willingly adapt to the marketised economies and societies we inhabit. Welfare dependency and social security provisions that are seen to benefit the poor, are constructed as symbols of individual and collective failure: the failures of those irresponsible others, who do not properly play their part; the failures of a society that unfairly

rewards lack of effort while, in effect, penalising the strivers. Irish media and political discourses of the ‘squeezed middle’ that we reviewed consistently underlined the salience of Valerie Walkerdine’s contention that the ‘neo-liberal subject is the autonomous liberal subject made in the image of the middle class’.⁴⁴ Newspapers repeatedly affirmed the singular contribution to economic recovery and growth being made by those who were: ‘running to stand still’ (Moriarty, *Irish Independent*, 10 October 2018); the earners who ‘pony up’ (Weston, *Irish Independent*, 18 August 2018); those who are ‘getting screwed’ (Lynch, *Sunday Independent* 29 April 2018); the ‘savers’ (Richards, *Sunday Business Post*, 7 October 2017); and metaphorically, the ‘geese’ who relative to others ‘hiss least’ (McWilliams, *Irish Independent*, 30 September 2017). Similarly, in the Oireachtas (Houses of Parliament), politicians praised those who ‘carried the country on their backs’ (Deputy Noel Grealish, 26 October 2016) or who would ‘beg, borrow and help each other to build and get our country moving again (Senator Aidan Davitt, 10 November 2016).

The constant note of grievance discernible in these populist discourses could potentially illuminate the myths and fallacies of neoliberalism. Discourses could demonstrate how populism can be ‘a site of struggle rather than a terrain grounded exclusively in the grip of domination’.⁴⁵ They could acknowledge how market prowess and not individual virtue is rewarded in the neoliberal economy; how forms of social protection and security previously guaranteed by Western states to their citizens have been set aside; how individualised striving cannot hope to obviate the constant threat of failure and loss of status. Problematically, however, the kind of middle-class identity that is constituted and performed through the discourses presented above is too invested in its own neoliberal subjecthood and in its conformity with the demands of the economy to offer any real critique of or resistance to neoliberalisation. If there is grievance in being ‘squeezed’ there is a strong sense of self-validation and moral righteousness in being in the ‘middle’. And so, when Lucinda Creighton

(CEO of Vulcan Consulting and former Fine Gael minister), used her *Irish Daily Mail* essay (1 October 2016) to dismiss left wing parties' calls for higher taxation to fund public services, she too claimed the precious status of victim, identifying herself as one of

the people who get up every morning at the crack of dawn, who deposit children to crèche or school half asleep, who work their socks off in their (usually far more than) nine to five job, or who shed sweat and tears to build a business and create jobs for their fellow citizens.

Ireland's Taoiseach, the self-consciously liberal Leo Varadkar, has been a prominent exponent of these populist discourses. In March 2017 the *Irish Independent* noted his acute concern at the unfairness being endured by the putative middle class:

Too often, we have allowed Irish society to be divided into one group of people who pay for everything but get little in return due to means-tests, and another group, who believe they should be entitled to everything for free and that someone else should pay for it. A divided society weakens all of us and it's not the kind of society I want, or that any of us should want (O' Connor, 25 March 2017).

Crucially, the divisions and unfairness elaborated by Varadkar are not regarded as symptomatic of economic or wealth inequality: such an admission might necessitate income redistribution *downward* to those worst off. Rather his concepts of division and unfairness are refashioned along neoliberal lines. His repeated invocations or self-stylings of the 'people who get out of bed early' or 'people who pay for everything' do not propose their opposites as viable alternatives. They are not serious arguments for staying in bed late or all day, or for paying for

nothing. Instead they demand recognition of the *necessary* sacrifices being made by the ‘squeezed middle’, by those people who are doing the *right thing*, and correspondingly they demand the censure and stigmatisation of the ‘irresponsible others’. Ultimately the populism of the ‘squeezed middle’ constitutes and performs a politicised *identity*, one that is locked permanently with the frameworks of identity thinking but which refuses to politicise capitalism and its inherent contradictions. As Wendy Brown explains, such discourses neither critique ‘the sovereign subject of accountability that liberal individualism presupposes nor the economy of inclusion and exclusion liberal universalism establishes’.⁴⁶ Instead, they demand that all should aspire towards the norms of the putative middle class. As we illustrate below, Irish politicians’ and media accounts of everyday hardship and struggle that could be read as evidence of neoliberalism’s continued erosion of social solidarity and workers’ financial security, were reconstituted as evidence for the inalienability of the existing economic model. Instead of structural analysis, readers were presented with a crude ontological choice; be/come the pained yet proud embodiment of neoliberal subjecthood or risk being objectified and judged as mendacious parasites.

At this point, it should be noted that there has been explicit resistance to and refutations of these discourses by – among others - those political actors who are dismissed by Minister Pascal Donohue (see above) as the ‘populist left’. For example, Sinn Féin’s then president, Gerry Adams, warned his party’s 2017 Árd Fheis (General Conference) that Leo Varadkar’s political vision was limited to the ‘26 counties and extends only to those who get up early to go to the gym, on the way to a highly paid job, with big expenses and a gold plated pension’.⁴⁷ Subverting the Taoiseach’s own discourses, Adams likened Varadkar to Margaret Thatcher with her adoption of neoliberal policies and practices, her attacks on the public sector and her promotion of individualism. Similarly, the empty signifier ‘the people who get up early’ was re-appropriated and charged with alternative meanings in an online video produced by the

People Before Profit political grouping.⁴⁸ That phrase was self-consciously adopted and problematised by people who variously rose early because of their homelessness, their need to travel abroad for abortions, their efforts to access basic health services such as chemotherapy, or their desire to resist governmental policies through social activism. While a full review of these and other counter-discourses is beyond the scope of our discussion, the examples cited here remind us that the presumed meanings of specific populist referents are themselves unstable and subject to ongoing critique and struggle.

Populism's stoking of 'ressentiment'

Recent scholarship has built on the prior work of Adam Smith, Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Scheler in introducing and explicating the concept of resentment,⁴⁹ which is helpful for deconstructing how identity is performed through deployments of the 'squeezed middle'. Social and political movements, whether populist or not, that are pursuing a transformative agenda inevitably exhibit some degree of resentment regarding things as they are. Indeed, related terms such as 'grievance', 'moral indignation' or 'moralism' that were used above to characterise hegemonic middle-class identity, are not inherently problematic; such feelings could potentially mobilise and motivate citizens in the name of societal change. However, the word 'ressentiment' captures something qualitatively different. Ure explains how resentment can be overtaken or overwhelmed by '*ressentiment*';

because socio-political resentment responds to the political regulation of basic ontological risks and contingencies – misfortune, irreversibility, loss and so on – that it runs the risk of sliding into ontological *ressentiment* and with it indiscriminate, unremitting blaming, envious spoiling of the good and dangerous attempts to make politics the locus of metaphysical redemption'.⁵⁰

At its worst resentment exhibits as a sort of ‘wounded attachment’⁵¹ to a sense of self that is simultaneously righteous and put upon; constantly at watch for unfairness, as opposed to inequality or oppression; bemoaning some outcomes of the neo-liberalism it never seriously questions; offering the strange consolations of a sanctimonious victimhood.⁵²

Across the media accounts, a positive middle-class sense of self was boosted by a concurrent stigmatisation of poor and working-class communities, invoking tropes that are a staple of reality TV and moral panics about welfare in the UK.⁵³ Imogen Tyler⁵⁴ has tracked how class related inequalities are re-scripted in neoliberal media culture so that they are treated as the consequences of individual choices, whereby wealth is earned and poverty is deserved. Given the widespread consumption of UK media in Ireland through, for example, satellite TV subscriptions and online platforms, Irish audiences have also become familiar with the kinds of austerity porn and demeaning depictions of welfare recipients that appear to be the *raison d’être* of programmes such as Channel 4’s *Benefits Street*. Relatedly, the ‘homegrown’ equivalent ‘*Paul Connolly Investigates*’ broadcast and rebroadcast by Ireland’s Virgin Media (formerly, TV 3)⁵⁵ Channel has purported to reveal the ‘shocking extent of welfare fraud in Ireland’, thus problematizing benefits at the very moment that austerity policies were being extended by government. While it is impossible to estimate the total effect of these representations on the mind-sets and understandings of Irish political figures or media audiences, the repetition of such tropes normalises perceptions of an amoral and dishonest welfare class that is preying on honest taxpayers. Similar perceptions are echoed in the resentment heavy discourses of the ‘squeezed middle’ which depict undeserving others as infringing the neoliberal order of things by securing ‘advantages’ not their due.

In the media articles we analysed, blame for the middle class’s collective predicament was typically levelled at welfare recipients, at Government or at both. While there were

stereotypical depictions of welfare recipients as lazy, indolent and profligate, the discourses we reviewed did not significantly disaggregate welfare recipients into ‘deserving’ or ‘underserving’ categories based on assumptions about ‘race’, ethnicity, migrant status, disability or other attributions - rather social welfare beneficiaries in general were represented as depleting the incomes and ontological security of the middle class. Government was usually targeted for its perpetuation of unfairness through its failure to sanction those not properly playing their part. Dónal Lynch in the *Sunday Independent* (April 29 2018) bemoaning the plight of the ‘real’ put upon squeezed middle, himself and other single millennials without children, wrote:

We prop up the welfare state and other people's lifestyle choices with our returns and when we're not getting screwed by the taxman, consumer society, the employment marketplace, and even the housing crisis, is there to do it (Emphasis added).

Writing in the *Irish Independent* (18 August 2018) Charlie Weston lamented Ireland’s status as ‘a Welfare Nation’ –the implication being that this is a stigmatised national identity– where welfare payments were relatively generous. He posited that, notwithstanding the need to protect the incomes of ‘vulnerable people like pensioners’, the idea that ‘barely-managing workers should pony up more PRSI to support more welfare spending hardly seems fair’.

Such coverage wilfully ignores the cumulative impact of the austerity reforms that had already rendered Ireland’s social welfare and protection regime more punitive and conditional. In the name of labour-market activation, new limitations were placed on the duration of insurance-based welfare and on payments for young unemployed people, while lone parents also were subjected to tighter restrictions. Practices that included the profiling, monitoring and

threatened sanctioning of jobseekers were instituted following the introduction of the Welfare Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2010 and the Social Welfare Act of 2013.⁵⁶ In spite of these reforms, populist resentment was fixated on myths of an untouched and even thriving welfare class. O'Neill from Amárach (*Irish Times* 4 February 2012) claimed middle earners' resentment was 'bubbling up' against those groups perceived as being insulated from hardship and -for the avoidance of any doubt- he clarified that a 'lot of those on social welfare would be seen to be relatively insulated.' Journalist and broadcaster Matt Cooper (*Irish Daily Mail* 5 July 2015) maintained that middle class concerns were neglected in Ireland due to the political parties' excessive focus 'on the poor'. He lauded the moral superiority of those middle-class parents who spend their income on private education for their children; their sacrifice contrasted with the decadent lifestyles of those choosing 'nights in the pub or satellite television services'. Notably, the habits of the wealthy or the affluent, rarely came in for critical attention or scrutiny in the media coverage reviewed. Evidently if the middle is being squeezed, it is those 'others' from below who are squeezing hardest.

Where populism involves the constitution and politicisation of an identity, it is necessary to analyse what form of political action or agency it unleashes. Is there a rallying cry of opposition to existing political, social or economic arrangements, with promises, however dimly outlined, of a brighter future? Discourses of the 'squeezed middle' signalled little in the way of a political project beyond the performance of grievance itself and the mobilisation of support for particular kinds of reformist policies. Despite the prominence of articles about their plight in national newspapers and the interventions of centre-right politicians in the Oireachtas on their behalves, commentators on/from the 'squeezed middle' lamented their own political invisibility. Counterfactually, newspaper readers were warned that if you should find yourself in the squeezed middle 'there is no lobby group or union or political party that really voices your concerns and understands your issues' (Logue, *Irish*

Times, 15 April 2015); that with the exception of Fine Gael –incidentally the party of government- you are ‘uncatered for in terms of political offerings’ (Johnston, *Irish Independent*, 11 March 2017). Consequently, you were ‘squeezed to excess’ (McCarthy, *Irish Times*, 11 February 2012) and ‘continually crucified without respite’ (Johnston, *Irish Independent* 11 March 2017). Similarly, in the Dáil and Seanad (Ireland’s Houses of Parliament), the middle was categorised as ‘the forgotten’ sector of society (Deputy Noel Grealish, 26 October 2016) while Senator Aidan Davitt (10 November 2016) pleaded with the Taoiseach, to ‘give the coping classes a break. Help them to help themselves.’

Our research suggests that, far from being ‘invisible’, conceptions of the ‘squeezed middle’, were at the forefront of government rhetoric and budgetary announcements. The injuries inflicted on the ‘squeezed middle’ were marshalled to support certain policy decisions favourable to that class - selected pay rises, and cuts in the Universal Social Charge, income tax, Exit Tax, Deposit Interest Retention Tax, Child Benefit means testing - and to obviate alternative, more redistributive policy proposals – e.g. the introduction of a wealth tax or the reabsorption of water charges within general taxation. In 2014, Fine Gael Taoiseach Enda Kenny stridently promised that his government would prioritise those ‘who get up early in the morning, work late, shifts, and work weekends, the people who are just about managing and very much in middle Ireland’ (Fitzsimons, *Sunday Independent* 26 October 2014). He also advised the ‘squeezed middle’ to avail of the few ‘carrots’ or the ‘low-hanging fruit’- e.g. a rent-a-room scheme or childminding allowances –currently provided by government. As Budget 2018 approached, it was again reported that the government viewed middle income earners as its priority (Kennedy, *Sunday Business Post*, 2017). Tánaiste Simon Coveney sought to assuage the material and ontological fears of ‘hard-working families on middle incomes’ by asserting that they must be afforded ‘some level of a break in the budgetary decisions we make’ (Speech in Dáil, 4 October 2018). Narrations of the ‘squeezed middle’ were thus put to work

in support of circumscribed budgetary measures that deflected empathy and (some) resources from the most economically vulnerable towards ‘decent hardworking tax-payers’. In an Ireland still coming to terms with the aftermath of a crisis caused solely by financial, banking and political elites, populist resentment was repeatedly stoked by the party of government, perhaps to ensure that economic redistribution or the rebuilding of social solidarity would be kept off the political agenda.

Conclusion

In Ireland, as elsewhere, the populist ‘slur’ is deployed by interests who converge in ‘the moderate centre’ to distance themselves from the supposed extremes to their left and to their right. In this article we intentionally shifted the analytic gaze onto the Irish political centre, its leading newspapers and mainstream politicians. Our evidence clearly demonstrates that in the aftermath of Ireland’s economic crisis populist discourse was not the preserve of any one tendency, party or movement. It was regularly and strategically deployed by those who typically evade the populist label themselves, those who used their privileged access to the public sphere to condemn those ‘others’, the really dangerous populists in our midst.

Given then that ‘everyone’s at it’, it is valid to question the conceptual utility of ‘populism’ and its effectiveness for categorising distinctive, unusual or ‘extreme’ forms of political ideology. We find it more helpful to think of populism not as a set of beliefs, but as a set of practices; to acknowledge that there are populist ‘moves’ through which identities, injuries and enemies are constituted and performed. This article shows that such moves have been central to the conduct of an ideological and material class war against welfare recipients and poor communities in Ireland. Through their narrations of the victimhood experienced by the empty signifier that is the ‘squeezed middle’, Irish mainstream political and media interests converged on a populist ‘blame shifting’⁵⁷ strategy. It saw welfare recipients targeted as the

ones *who must pay* for the avowed hurt felt by the middle classes who saw their living standards decline: resentment demanded redress from below but not from the political and economic elites that had precipitated the economic crisis. Additionally, populist discourses of the ‘squeezed middle’ were used to graft consensus around the political choices and austerity measures adopted by policy makers after the crisis. Beverly Skeggs⁵⁸ has remarked on the correspondence between neoliberal forms of subjectivity and those normalised for/by the contemporary middle class; how they serve as the basis for knowledge and assumptions about the failings of working class subjects. Our reading of the discourses of the ‘squeezed middle’ indicates that they are trapped within the common sense of neoliberalism. In Ireland there is a tendency to rejoice that we have held back the populist wave felt in other countries, but we contend that very successful activations of populist discourses have already taken hold in mainstream media and centrist politics. Significantly, these discourses are shorn of any liberatory or transcendent possibility. They propose that since there are/can be no alternatives, the middle classes must continue *to be as they are*; assured of their moral superiority yet clinging to the uncertain rewards of permanent victimhood and the occasional promise of tax breaks or allowances.

References

-
- ¹ B. Moffitt (2016) *The Global Rise of Populism, Performance, Political Style and Representation*, Stanford University Press.
- ² B. Cannon (2018) ‘Must we talk about populism? Interrogating Populism’s conceptual utility in a context of crisis’, *New Political Science*, 40(3): 477-496, p.494.
- ³ B. Cannon ‘Must we talk about populism?’, p.495.
- ⁴ P. Hoggett, H. Wilkinson and P. Beedell, (2013) ‘Fairness and the politics of resentment’, *Journal of Social Policy*, 42 (3): 567–585, p.571.
- ⁵ S. Brookes (2018) ‘What do we mean when we talk about populism? Local politics, global movements and ‘the people’ in political coverage of the 2016 Australian federal and United States presidential elections’, *Media, Culture and Society*, 40(8): 1252-1269; R. Brubaker (2017) ‘Why populism?’, *Theory and Society*, 46(5): 357-385; B. De Cleen, J. Glynos and A. Mondon (2018) ‘Critical research on populism: nine rules of engagement’, *Organization*, 25(5): 649-661; O. Hirovenen, and J. Pennanen (2019) ‘Populism as a pathological form of

politics of recognition', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 22(1): 27-44; MP. Thomas, and S. Tufts (2016) 'Austerity, right populism and the crisis of labour in Canada', *Antipode*, 48(1): 212-230, for some recent examples of an extensive and growing literature.

⁶ J. Rancière, (2016) 'The populism that is not to be found', in A. Badiou et al. (eds) *What is a People?* Columbia University Press, New York, pp. 100-106, p.102.

⁷ J. Rancière, (2016) 'The populism that is not to be found', p. 102.

⁸ DT. Goldberg (2006) *The Racial State*, Blackwell, Oxford.

⁹ J. Rancière 'The populism that is not to be found', p. 103.

¹⁰ E. Laclau, (2005) *On Populist Reason*, London, Verso, p.118.

¹¹ E. Laclau (2005) 'Populism: What's in a Name?' In Francisco Panizza ed. *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*. Verso, London, pp. 32-49, p.45.

¹² B. Arditì (2003) 'Populism, or, politics at the edges of democracy', *Contemporary Politics*, 9(1): 17-31, p.19-20.

¹³ SM. Borrás Jr. (2020) 'Agrarian social movements: the absurdly difficult but not impossible agenda of defeating right-wing populism and exploring a populist future', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 20: 3-36, p.5, emphasis added.

¹⁴ SM. Borrás Jr. 'Agrarian social movements', p.8-10.

¹⁵ BL. McKean (2016) 'Towards an inclusive populism? On the role of Race and Difference in Laclau's politics', *Political Theory*, 44(6): 797-820, p.799.

¹⁶ JP. O'Carroll, P. (1987/2008) 'Strokes, cute hoors and sneaking regards: the influence of local culture on Irish political style', in C. McGrath and E. O'Malley (eds) *Irish Political Studies Reader*, Abingdon: Routledge, 41-54.

¹⁷ K. Allen (1997) *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, Pluto Press, London, p. 10-12.

¹⁸ J. Fitzgibbon and S. Guerra (2010) 'Not just Europeanization, not necessarily populism: potential factors underlying the mobilization of populism in Ireland and Poland', *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 11(3): 273-291. E. O'Malley (2008) Why is there no radical right party in Ireland? *West European Politics*, 31(5): 960-977; J. Suiter (2017) 'Ireland: the rise of populism on the left and among independents', in T. Aalberg, F. Esser, C. Reinemann, J. Strömbäck and C. de Vreese, *Populist Political Communication in Europe*, Routledge, Abingdon, pp. 127-137.

¹⁹ E. O'Malley and J. Fitzgibbon (2015) 'Everywhere and nowhere: populism and the puzzling non-reaction to Ireland's crises', in H. Kriesi and TS. Pappas (eds) *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession*, ECPR Press, Colchester, pp. 287-302; T. Reidy and J. Suiter (2016-2017) 'Who is the populist Irish voter?', *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*: XLVI, 117-131.

²⁰ B. Roche (2019) 'Tánaiste defends Fine Gael's financial management reputation', *Irish Times*, 19 May.

²¹ E. Devereux and MJ. Power (2019) 'Fake news? A critical analysis of the "Welfare Cheats, Cheat Us All", campaign in Ireland', *Critical Discourse Studies*, 16(3): 347-362; R.R. Meade (2016) 'Worlds turned upside down? The Older People's Uprising, 2008' in R.R. Meade and F. Dukelow (eds) *Defining Events: Power, Resistance and Identity in Twenty-First-Century Ireland*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, pp. 161-180; B. Mainwaring and S. McGraw (2019) 'How catchall parties compete ideologically: beyond party typologies', *European Journal of Political Research*, 58: 676-696.

²² B. Mainwaring and S. McGraw 'How catchall parties compete ideologically', p.692 original emphasis.

²³ P. Donohoe (2017) 'Populism - A Moderate response', Speech by Paschal Donohoe TD, Minister for Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, Collins Institute, June 17 2017, retrieved from <https://www.finegael.ie/speech-paschal-donohoe-td-minister-finance-public-expenditure-reform/> 28/11/2019.

- ²⁴ Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (2017) 'Welfare cheats cheat us all', Press Release, April 18 2017, retrieved from <https://www.welfare.ie/en/pressoffice/Pages/pr180417.aspx> 28/11/2019.
- ²⁵ T. Eagleton (1991) *Ideology: An Introduction*, London, Verso, p.2.
- ²⁶ Houses of the Oireachtas (2013) *Report of the Joint Committee of Inquiry into the Banking Crisis V.1*, Dublin, Stationery Office, pp. 346-347.
- ²⁷ J. Mercille (2017) 'Irish media coverage of the housing bubble and austerity', in E. Heffernan, J. McHale and N. Moore-Cherry (eds) *Debating Austerity in Ireland: Crisis, Experience and Recovery*, Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, pp. 67-79, p.75.
- ²⁸ A. Marron (2019) "'Overpaid" and "inefficient": Print Media Framings of the Public Sector in The Irish Times and The Irish Independent During the financial crisis' *Critical Discourse Studies* 16(3): 282-297.
- ²⁹ See J. Fitzgibbon and S. Guerra 'Not just Europeanization, not necessarily populism'; E. O'Malley 'Why is there no radical right party in Ireland?'; T. Reidy and J. Suiter 'Who is the populist Irish voter?'; J. Suiter 'Ireland: the rise of populism on the left and among independents'.
- ³⁰ G. Eaton (2011) "'Squeezed middle" named word of the year', *New Statesman*, 23 November, <https://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2011/11/named-word-arab-miliband>
- ³¹ C. Coulter and F. Arqueros-Fernández (2019) 'The distortions of the Irish "recovery"' *Critical Social Policy* DOI10.1177/02610183198912.
- ³² M. Barbehön and M. Geugjes (2019). 'Caught in the middle? Welfare state legitimisation and problematisation in German and Swedish middle-class discourses', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 32(1): 1-20, p.2
- ³³ Referring to *Copper Faced Jacks*, a notorious/renowned Dublin night-club, associated in the popular imaginary with romantic assignations between male Gardaí (guards/police), female nurses and both male and female teachers.
- ³⁴ E. Heffernan, J. McHale and N. Moore-Cherry (2017) *Debating Austerity in Ireland*, Royal Irish Academy, Dublin; Coulter, C and Nagle, A (eds) (2015) *Ireland Under Austerity: Neoliberal Crisis, Neoliberal Solutions*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.
- ³⁵ M. Savage, T. Callan, B. Nolan and B. Colgan (2015) *The Great Recession, Austerity and Inequality: Evidence from Ireland* (Working Paper No. 499), The Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin, retrieved from: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/129395/1/823265064.pdf> 20/1/2020.
- ³⁶ K. Lynch, S. Cantillon and M. Crean (2017) 'Inequality' in W.K. Roche. P.J. O'Connell and A. Prothero (eds) (2017) *Austerity and the Recovery in Ireland: Europe's Poster Child and the Great Recession*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp.252-271.
- ³⁷ C.T. Whelan, H. Russell and B. Maître (2016) 'Economic Stress and the Great Recession in Ireland: Polarization, Individualization or "Middle Class Squeeze"?' *Social Indicators Research*, 126(2): 503–526.
- ³⁸ M. Barbehön and M. Geugjes (2019). 'Caught in the middle?', p.5.
- ³⁹ P. Mühlau (2014) "'Middle class squeeze'" Social class and perceived economic hardship in Ireland, 2002-2012', *The Economic and Social Review*, 45(4): 485-509, p. 506.
- ⁴⁰ E. Laclau, (2005) *On Populist Reason*, London, Verso, passim.
- ⁴¹ If this seems like an overreach, think about the way that 'middle class' is used in the USA to refer to every kind of worker.
- ⁴² J. Young (2011) 'Moral panics and the transgressive other', *Crime, Media, Culture*, 7(3): 245–258.
- ⁴³ J. Young (2011) 'Moral panics and the transgressive other', p.250.

-
- ⁴⁴ V. Walkerdine (2003) 'Reclassifying Upward Mobility: Femininity and the neo-liberal subject', *Gender and Education*, 15(3): 237-248, p. 241
- ⁴⁵ H.A. Giroux (2019) 'Neoliberalism and the weaponising of language and education', *Race and Class*, 61(1): 26-45, p.37.
- ⁴⁶ W. Brown 'Wounded attachments', p.403
- ⁴⁷ G. Adams (2017) 'Gerry Adams – Árd Fheis Presidential address', retrieved from <https://www.sinnfein.ie/contents/47265> 06/01/2020.
- ⁴⁸ People Before Profit (2017) 'A message to Leo Varadkar from the people who get up early', retrieved from <https://twitter.com/pb4p/status/886634303404290048?s=20> 06/01/2020.
- ⁴⁹ W. Brown (1993) 'Wounded attachments', *Political Theory* 21(3): 390-410; P. Hoggett (2018) 'Ressentiment and grievance', *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 34(3): 393 – 407; E. le Grand (2015) 'Linking moralisation and class identity: the role of resentment and respectability in the social reaction to "chavs"', *Sociological Research Online*, 20(4): 1-15; M. Ure (2015) 'Resentment/Ressentiment', *Constellations*, 22(4): 599-613.
- ⁵⁰ M. Ure, 'Resentment/Ressentiment', p.608.
- ⁵¹ W. Brown, 'Wounded attachments'.
- ⁵² Hoggett 'Ressentiment and grievance' assesses the psycho-political connotations of resentment.
- ⁵³ I. Tyler (2015) 'Classificatory struggles: class, culture and inequality in neoliberal times', *The Sociological Review*, 63: 493-511; P. Hoggett, H. Wilkinson and P. Beedell, P 'Fairness and the politics of resentment'.
- ⁵⁴ I. Tyler 'Classificatory Struggles', p.505-506
- ⁵⁵ Virgin Media One (2013) 'Ireland's Dole Cheats: Paul Connolly Investigates', retrieved from https://twitter.com/VirginMedia_One/status/331838756669751297 06/01/2020: also E. Devereux and M.J. Power 'Fake news'.
- ⁵⁶ F. Dukelow and P. Kennett (2018) 'Discipline, debt and coercive commodification: Post-crisis neoliberalism and the welfare state in Ireland, the UK and the USA', *Critical Social Policy*, 38(3): 482-504.
- ⁵⁷ M. Lisi and E. Borghetto (2018) 'Populism Blame Shifting and the Crisis: Discourse Strategies in Portuguese Political Parties' *South European Society and Politics*, 23(4): 405-427.
- ⁵⁸ B. Skeggs (2011), 'Imagining personhood differently: person value and autonomist working class value practices', *Sociological Review*, 59(3): 579-594.