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Authors	Meade, Rosie R.;Dukelow, Fiona
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Introduction

Rosie Meade and Fiona Dukelow

It is easy to slip into caricature and hyperbole when reflecting on Irish society during the first decade of the 21st Century. Writing in 2014, we continue to wrestle with the political, financial and social legacies of boom and bust that bookended the period. After several years of being lauded as the growth model to follow, and as recession and austerity were normalised in the Republic, it became commonplace in political and public discourse to claim this was 'payback' for the consumerist excesses of those years. In 2010 the then Minister for Finance Brian Lenihan (RTÉ, 2010) articulated it thus: 'I accept that I have to take responsibility as a member of the governing party during that period for what happened, but let's be fair about it, *we all partied*' (emphasis added). A few months later, in April 2011, a report into the causes of the Irish banking crisis pointed to a similar malaise in popular attitudes and behaviour:

> [T]he way Irish households, investors, banks and public authorities voluntarily reacted to foreign and domestic developments was probably not very different to that in other countries now experiencing financial problems. However, *the extent to which large parts of Irish society were willing to let the good times roll on until the very last minute* (a feature of the financial mania) may have been exceptional. (Nyberg, 2011:ii, emphasis added)

This suggestion of a collective or generalised frenzy also entered Taoiseach Enda Kenny's comments at the World Economic Forum in Davos when he observed that 'people went mad borrowing': a remark that contrasted somewhat starkly with his earlier 'State of the Nation' style pronouncement that the people 'are not responsible for this crisis' (Scally, 2012).

Aside from evading more structural or internationalist analyses of Ireland's economy and society during that decade, these narratives oversimplify 'the' public mood at the time. They infer that there was little in the way of dissent in Ireland, that conflicts over economic, cultural or social policy were not a notable feature of Irish society, and that alternative ways of thinking and being were not practised by social movements, community groups and individuals across the State. They also exceptionalise the period, framing it as an extraordinary rupture with what went before; so that by some it is regarded as signifying the overdue abandonment of outmoded allegiances while for others there is nostalgia for the 'purer' or more authentic values of the past.

This book analyses and critiques Irish society in the early 21st Century, but seeks to do so by consciously avoiding myth-making and generalisation. Its authors, through a combination of rigorous theorisation and dedicated attention to 'defining events', profile struggles, controversies and antinomies that challenge easy acceptance of the one big narrative. We

invite readers to re-visit and re-think twelve events that span the years 2001-2009. Some were high profile at the time and still occupy a prominent place in public consciousness today: for example, the bank guarantee of 2008 and the publication in 2009 of the Ryan Report continue to generate media coverage and frame understandings of or responses to emergent social issues. Some chapters focus on what might be regarded as 'fringe' events, which attracted comparatively less attention, the birth of Indymedia.ie perhaps; while others consider events in popular culture, such as reaction to the publication of Donal Óg Cusack's autobiography or the opening of the Dundrum shopping centre. At first glance these chapters may seem to have little scope for either comparison or commonality, but their authors show that in their individual ways all of these events reveal crucial intersections of structural power and resistance in contemporary Ireland. Irrespective of their status on the mediascape or in folk-memory we argue that these events are important happenings in their own right and merit the kind of considered analysis that is presented here. Clearly this book seeks to stretch our often taken for granted expectations of what the word 'event' means. Against a backdrop of 24-hour news feeds, insomniac social media, and a constant barrage of information spliced with entertainment, events appear in an apparently endless procession. Each one is represented as a 'spectacle', seemingly disconnected from that which goes before and that which follows, and all destined to be replaced in time by other, newer events. In 1967 Guy Debord designated the modern era as a 'society of the spectacle'; 'the whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation' (1967/1995:12). Such tendencies are most apparent in the domains of media and celebrity but reflect something more profound; the spectacle 'is the very heart of society's real unreality', it 'epitomizes the prevailing model of social life' (*ibid.*:13). Depth and subtlety of analysis are sacrificed in the name of speed and newsworthiness while complexity is ironed out in the making of society's images of itself.

Against such tendencies, this book simply asks that we slow our responses down, that we take stock of contexts and contradictions, that, in a word, we think 'dialectically'. Rather than represent these twelve events as self-contained episodes, we try to adopt a longer and deeper view of their significance. Therefore, chapters (re)open debates about; the valuation of national resources or the heritage landscape; changing conceptions of sexual identity and citizenship; the fragility of trust in church, state and public institutions; the nature of economic growth and stability; the remaking of place in the name of consumerism or 'progress'; and the pluralised forms that resistance takes in 21st century Ireland. Contributors show how the events carry traces of both social structure and human agency. They were shaped by overarching political, economic, social and cultural currents; but they were also responses to proposals, protests, advocacy and demands that have been articulated by a broad spectrum of social actors.

This series of 'defining events' is analysed with reference to a range of disciplinary traditions in the social sciences. Rather than celebrate uncritically or damn unequivocally, contributors reflect on three central questions. What is the relative influence of hegemonic and oppositional discourses or ideas? What are the various conceptions of identity, progress or truth that inform the actions of those involved? To what extent do events break with or show continuities with the past? This latter question does not propose a retreat into 'political cynicism' (Giroux, 2004:131), the assumption that nothing can or will change, or that resistance always and inevitably re-energises existing power configurations. Instead it acknowledges that 'democracy has to be struggled over even in the most appalling crisis of political agency' (*ibid.*). This makes it imperative to clear-headedly track victories and defeats, be they consequences of policy making, legislative change, lifestyle or life choice, public demonstration or media action.

We appreciate the necessary partiality of this approach: different events could have been selected and alternative interpretations could be brought to bear on those being reviewed. Indeed, we hope that readers will suggest other events that are equally or more worthy of analysis because it is our intention to prompt debate and renewed understandings of what might constitute a politically or socially significant event. Dramatic effect or transformative outcomes are not the only measures. As a totality, this volume suggests that significance can be reflected in both disruptions *and* continuities in prevailing discourses and forms of action. More troublingly, it can also be reflected in the absence of wider publicity, particularly when dominant power and social arrangements trivialise or obscure social cleavages.

II

Another purpose of this book is to demonstrate the relevance of theory to a critical understanding of the dynamics of life in contemporary Ireland. In so doing, it adopts what Goran Therborn (2007:79) calls an 'ecumenical conception of theory', which 'sees social theory as strung between two ambitious poles: on the one hand, providing a comprehensive explanatory framework for a set of social phenomena; and on the other, something "making sense of" such phenomena.' Authors tease out the particularities of the local scene, while simultaneously recording the influence of global forces and structural contradictions. The book is also ecumenical in its recognition of the scope for deliberation and interchange between different disciplines in the social sciences. Contributors come from backgrounds in archaeology, law, sociology, philosophy, equality studies, geography, women's studies and social policy, and their chapters are inflected by those diverse traditions. They are, nonetheless, united in a shared allegiance to critical understanding, where critique is founded on a concern to reveal and counter aspects of inequality or ideological distortion, and where writers consciously acknowledge the political commitments that inform their work.

As authors draw on diverse theoretical resources to support and extend their arguments, issues of power, identity and resistance emerge as unifying themes across the text. Contributors, however, conceive of power in different ways, and so invite readers inside the debate about one of social science's most contested concepts. Some authors conceive of power as a capacity (Lukes, 2005), over which elite actors in the State, legislature or mainstream media, have control or privileged access. Power enables actors to impose their will on dissenting others – to drive a motorway through against opposition (Conor Newman, Chapter 3), to deny some citizens the right to marry (Angela O'Connell, Chapter 4) – but it also operates surreptitiously. It distorts the agenda of public debate so that some voices are never heard in mainstream media (Margaret Gillan and Laurence Cox, Chapter 2) while others are ridiculed - as in the case of opposition to the routing of the M3 motorway - or the public is assailed by fabricated issues – such as the illusionary threats posed by migrants to the concept of Irish citizenship (Steve Garner, Chapter 5) – that undermine their capacity to recognise their real interests. These chapters highlight the extent to which the parameters of decision making, public discourse and popular imagination are set in line with narrow and reactionary agendas. And as Angela O'Connell's analysis of the KAL case shows, the effects of such power are simultaneously intimate and public.

Alternatively, some contributors adopt more Foucauldian conceptions of power: 'power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere' (Foucault, 1998:92). They consider how efforts to conduct the conduct – what Foucault (2007) calls *to govern* - of ourselves and others do not just emanate from on-high but are expressed across the polity by actors including social movements and NGOs. Power's dispersed and relational qualities do not necessarily render the public sphere more

democratic or egalitarian, but they do complicate our understanding of the rationalities and interests that govern contemporary Irish society. Paul Michael Garret (Chapter 7) acknowledges that Anti Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) were introduced and promoted by Minister for Justice Michael McDowell, but the momentum behind his legislation was generated by multiple forces: international think-tanks, policymakers in the US and UK, and political parties that channelled constituents' preoccupations with 'anti-social' conduct. Likewise Rosie Meade (Chapter 10) characterises the *Older People's Uprising* as a confrontation between older people, advocacy groups and the incumbent government, yet recognises the dependencies, collaborations and compromises that structure relationships between those actors in a context where social partnership and clientelist politics have dominated. John Baker, Kathleen Lynch and Judy Walsh (Chapter 11) reflecting on Government efforts to rein in the Equality Authority, remind us that the State can use its power to constrain dissenting institutions. But they too avoid crude polarisations, with the Authority on one side and Government on the other. While applauding the Authority's significant achievements, they nonetheless point to a theoretical continuity between the model of equality it championed and that favoured by the Government, the privileging of equality of opportunity.

Eoin O'Sullivan's contribution (Chapter 12) also evokes Foucault's notion of power as coming from everywhere. As Ireland's confinement culture found expression in the industrial and reformatory school network, O'Sullivan observes the enactment of power across Church, State and, even family, to manage, regulate and contain children. But again Eoin O'Sullivan complicates our understanding of the significance of the Ryan Report and public responses to it, by questioning the popular assumption that these schools reflected a distinctly Irish pathology. He records how similar investigative processes have been undertaken elsewhere, and that they too have unearthed narratives of abuse and brutality. While mindful of the distinguishing socio-cultural characteristics of Ireland at the time, he points to a recurring 'pathology of the institution' which has transcended geographic and national borders.

This book also explores how power works ideologically and through policy instruments to support dominant models of capital accumulation. Fiona Dukelow (Chapter 9) discusses how neo-liberalism as both an ideology and practice continues to 'fail forward', despite being implicated as cause and after-effect of the global economic crisis. Since Ireland's recession was announced in 2008, the urgency of economic stability and renewed growth has become a constant and ubiquitous refrain in the Irish public sphere. Its clarion call of austerity has ensured that neo-liberalism has been normalised within approaches to welfare delivery in particular. Indeed, even though this book seeks to explore a broad range of issues across the spectrum of human experience, it can never really escape the grasp of the economy. Events such as the bank guarantee, but also the *Older People's Uprising*, the decision to build the M3 through Tara, the introduction of ASBOs, and even the Citizenship Referendum, illustrate the form and reach of contemporary capitalism. In Ireland, mainstream analysis pivots on the assumption that the mantra 'it's the economy stupid' should over-determine social, environmental and cultural priorities. In this there are clear resonances with the past – the need to protect economic fundamentals long featuring as *the* theme in Irish policy making – but in our era of neo-liberalism, this tendency has amplified and accelerated. Stuart Hall (2013) has observed:

'Neoliberalism's victory has depended on the boldness and ambition of global capital, on its confidence that it can now govern not just the economy but the whole of social life. On the

back of a revamped liberal political and economic theory, its champions have constructed a vision and a new common sense that have permeated society'.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the salience of Hall's observations is borne out in Denis Linehan's (Chapter 6) analysis of Dundrum Town Centre and by Paul Michael Garrett on the introduction of ASBOs. Although not obviously comparable both problematise the impact of neo-liberalism's fellow travellers, privatisation of public space, the fetishisation of consumerist identities, and contemporary paranoia over security and order. The gating-off of public space, whether physically in shopping centres or metaphorically through ASBOs, classifies the insiders and outsiders in our economy; those with money to spend who are ready to consume and those who threaten the order of things through their deviant and risky habits.

III

As Foucault (1998) observed, where there is power there is resistance, and this book analyses the interplay between those conjoined forces. Resistance has become a fashionable, and possibly hackneyed, concept in the social sciences because it redirects emphasis away from issues of 'social control' and 'structure to issues of agency' (Hollander, and Einwohner, 2004:533). It replaces determinism with hope, suggesting that, at the very least, we can step up to power configurations and, maybe, face them down or overturn them. Even when actors present themselves as unwittingly or unwillingly politicised – as with Dónal Óg Cusack's initial construction of his 'coming out' – the public avowal of 'alternative' identities can challenge hegemonic values (Debbie Ging and Marcus Free, Chapter 13). Social science's engagement with resistance is also a necessary corrective to the assumption that 'progress' is gifted from on high by benevolent elites. In this volume resistance takes a variety of forms and it is practised by diverse actors. We see resistance that is spearheaded by individuals: Katherine Zappone and Ann Louise Gilligan's legal campaign for equal marriage rights highlights the deep reservoirs of personal commitment and courage that are necessary for such battles. But oppositional politics and resistance is also enacted through broad-based but less intensive forms of mobilisation, such as the *Older People's Uprising* and the campaigns against ASBOs or the Citizenship Referendum.

For critical scholars and activists the concept of resistance can host and sustain political optimism; that despite the onslaught of contrary speculation, spectacle and mis-information, alternative ways of thinking and being can find expression in contemporary Ireland. The chapters in this book, however, remind us that outcomes are variable. We find resistances that are partly successful, still evolving, and those are successful in surprising or unusual ways. As Laurence Cox and Margaret Gillan's discussion of Indymedia effectively illustrates, resistance is not a fixed state or space. Over its history Indymedia's relevance as a forum for oppositional politics has diminished, a factor that is associated with broader changes in the media and technological landscape, and the evolving communication strategies of activists themselves.

Contributors to 'Defining Events' affirm the currency and political validity of interventions that counter conventional views of what is good for the culture, society or economy. In Ireland, however, resistance is not always greeted with respect or credibility within the public and political spheres. Paul Michael Garret reflects on how allegedly troublesome young people have been criminalised via the legal instrument of the ASBO, but legislation also has been utilised to restrict the conduct of activists who are seen to be, as Conor Newman puts it,

‘standing in the way of development’. The chapters on Tara and Dundrum reveal the powerful discursive and disciplinary force of ‘development’; how it is invoked in politics and the media to nullify debate, to disguise its own ideological underpinnings and the provisionality of its assumptions. Development, Gustavo Esteva (1992:10) has written, ‘cannot delink itself from the words with which it was formed - growth, evolution, maturation. Just the same, those who now use the word cannot free themselves from a web of meanings that impart a specific blindness to their language, thought and action’. Against such discursive power, those seeking to reveal the limits or counter-sides to ‘development’, automatically become defined as resisters, and once so defined, are liable to become targets of ridicule at best and at worst brute force.

Finally, resistance like power does not always come from below. Rather than attributing an inevitable outlier or heroic status to resisters, some chapters detail how elites may themselves also practise resistance. For example, John Baker, Kathleen Lynch and Judy Walsh note that Irish governments have resisted equality agendas that they themselves have been involved in drafting, thus sabotaging the enactment of more expansive conceptions of equality. Similarly Vicky Conway’s (Chapter 8) detailed account of the Garda Síochana Ombudsman Commission, and its limited scope for action, suggests that a culture of police resistance and ministerial obduracy have significantly limited its capacity to pursue real accountability.

IV

Identities are constructed at the interface between public policy, collective commitments, and individual biographies. They mobilise both power and resistance, as they move beyond the realm of the personal and become focal points for debates about rights, responsibilities, resources and even the borders of the nation itself. The tensions and contradictions inherent in Ireland’s (post)colonial history have generated much soul-searching on what it means to be ‘properly’ Irish: national identity can be presented as a bulwark against oppression; it can service the ambitions of future political and social leadership; it may counter vestiges of racism and exclusion; or alternatively it can reinforce narrow conceptions of who belongs and who does not. Sociological discussions about nationalism often designate the nation as an imagined community, ‘*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’ (Anderson, 2006:6). In Ireland in 2004, four fifths of those who voted in the Citizenship Referendum agreed that citizenship of the nation should become a privilege that is mediated by bloodlines rather than a right that follows birth on the island of Ireland. Steve Garner explains that the populist discourses of the time constructed pregnant migrant women as parasitic on Ireland’s existing citizenship laws while simultaneously affirming the Diaspora’s unquestionable status as citizens. Ultimately the boundaries of voters’ *imagined communities* proved permeable to second or third generation ‘Irish’ people, most of whom may never set foot on the territory itself, but impermeable to many of the migrant children and parents physically present as co-workers, playmates and neighbours in their localities.

More optimistically, however, this book also suggests that conceptions of Irish identity and citizenship are being redrawn in more positive ways. Chapters that detail the after-effects of Donal Óg Cusack’s ‘coming out’ or the momentum created by the KAL Case suggest that these vital affirmations of sexual identity have pushed institutions – the GAA, the State, the Constitution and the media – towards an, albeit grudging, accommodation to ‘diversity’. As ‘defining events’ they have prompted deliberation on the hegemonic status of marriage or

masculinity, and how they must be renegotiated. But these events also highlight the limited contours of public debate, how difficult it is to really escape the hegemonic: to be validated or recognised, 'diverse' Irish identities, whether linked to gender, family, sexuality or marital status, must still make peace with vestiges of patriarchy and homophobia. The events also evoke some inherent challenges in translating individual experience into collectivised action. Donal Óg Cusack, Katherine Zappone and Ann Lousie Gilligan have granted the wider society access and insight into their 'private' lives, and thus they have run the gamut of negative and demeaning judgements. They are building on the groundwork laid by other activists and movements, and inevitably there are differences in tactics and aspiration; regarding what to confront, what to accept and what to reject, what resources to use and what allies to seek. Finally, as Donal Óg's autobiography reminds us, actors may themselves engage ambivalently with the politics of their own public actions, dismissing the suggestion that they are trailblazers, asserting instead that they simply wish to 'be'.

This book proposes that during the early 21st Century there was a simultaneous opening up and closing down of Irish identity in its hegemonic forms. Some ways of living and being were assimilated or absorbed by the national community but not others. Issues of identity are often portrayed as detached from the realm of the economic - for example in distinctions between so-called 'identity or recognition politics' and the 'politics of redistribution' (see Fraser and Honneth, 2003) - but here chapters expose this to be an arbitrary or false opposition. Clearly, as Steve Garner shows, the debate about citizenship in 2004 was undercut by economic anxieties, regarding health service spending or migrants' consumption of allegedly scarce resources. For many voters in that referendum there appeared to be a price on citizenship, and, as other events show, a price has also been put on collective memory, history and heritage. Conor Newman records how the totality of Tara/Skryne's landscape has been dis-assembled in the name of speed, mobility and the myths of economic growth.

Irish social policy has since independence offered only weak commitments to economic equality while the realities of class-conflict and class-interest have by and large been ignored. Yet occasionally, and even though the concept itself remains elusive from official discourses, the continuing salience of 'class' in Ireland is exposed. Industrial schools were instruments of regulation, classification and control, but it was working class children predominantly who were confined within them. While the Ryan Report refers to institutions that have been consigned to the past, the demonisation of specific class identities continues today. Owen Jones (2012: 95) argues that in the UK, in both their delivery and in their accompanying discourses, ASBOs have 'increased the bad reputation of young working-class kids and popularized the Chav caricature', stereotyping the working class as 'feckless, non-aspirational, the scrounger, the dysfunctional and the disorderly'. Although the ASBO debate and its actual implementation have been more circumscribed in Ireland, the legislation, as Paul Michael Garret shows, gained traction due to public fears about the problematic character and identities of young working class people.

Furthermore, with the ascent of neo-liberalism and its privileging of the market, there has been an accompanying attack on principles of solidarity and publicness as detailed in chapters by Fiona Dukelow and Rosie Meade. Neither the Irish state's rescuing of private banks nor its deference to speculative bond-holders has engendered a sustained questioning or reversal of those trends. If anything they have become more embedded and in a classic ideological inversion it is welfare recipients who are represented as the most conspicuous and voracious consumers of public subsidy.

Neo-liberal policies are justified with reference to supposedly self-evident concepts of rationality, fairness, necessity or technical superiority, so that ideology while not absent is often disguised. But in the face of political opposition or resistant publics, neo-liberalism requires some ideological ballast. According to John Clarke (2004:16-17) the UK's New Labour, in its re-making of the public sector, transposed 'identities from the "market" into new locations', seeking to constitute a 'modern British people' who had internalised the subjectivities of 'the self-directing, choosing, citizen-consumer'. Within neo-liberalism consumption becomes something of a moral imperative, and citizens are responsibilised accordingly, while the State's policies and practices refashion more and more aspects of life in line with consumerism. But as Denis Lenihan explains, the connection between consumerist identities and structural forces, economic and spatial policy, is typically ignored within populist discourses in Ireland. Consequently, opposition to the creation of Dundrum Town Centre was primarily couched in reactionary terms: shoppers were represented as atomised individuals who had mislaid their moral compasses, gorgers on excess who had lost touch with the spiritual values of the past. Ostensibly critical of the Celtic Tiger, Lenihan shows that these commentaries were effectively blind to political economy. Late capitalist accumulation requires markets and spaces for the reaping of profit; it is not consumers who make shopping centres, but shopping centres that make consumers.

V

Finally, the collected chapters in this book raise some interesting questions about how political and policy change happens in Ireland. For example, in Vicky Conway's view the creation of the Garda Ombudsman office has been a protracted and imperfect process. Successive governments have constructed the Gardaí as a self-regulating and inherently accountable force; public concerns regarding policing outcomes have been ignored or diverted into an ineffective complaints structure. Influences from abroad, the rolling out of commitments made as part of peace processes in the North, and the shaming of sections of the Gardaí at the Morris Tribunal, ultimately forced the Minister for Justice to create an Ombudsman structure in the name of greater, yet still narrow, accountability. However, even within that new structure the police force continues to display an unwillingness to submit to independent or public oversight.

Vicky Conway describes a complex narrative where reactionary and progressive possibilities run side by side, always battling for advantage. Despite their obvious differences, this is the story behind the main event in all of the chapters in this book. By thinking dialectically and critically we come to recognise the contested and contradictory character of contemporary Irish society. Sometimes indigenous practices of doing and being appear to embody a better way; in other instances policy transfer from 'outside' – from the EU or international community – appears to offer the promise of justice or greater equality. In Ireland, the State resists the resisters, colludes with abuse, but other times it seems susceptible to positive influence and there are occasions of hope.

And what of its people? Sometimes 'we' roll over and other times we rise up: there are unpredictable victories, unexpected failures. This book offers no easy prescriptions and rejects facile conclusions, but if there is a single truth to be found within, it is that we cannot take notions of power, resistance, or identity for granted. We must grapple with them, think them through theoretically and recognise how they manifest in practice. That is the task that the authors have set themselves over the following twelve chapters.

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