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# Where are the Pots and Pans? Collective Responses in Ireland to Neoliberalization in a Time of Crisis: Learning from Latin America

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**ABSTRACT** *Since 2008, Ireland has experienced a profound multi-faceted crisis, stemming from the collapse of the financial and property sectors. Despite enduring six years of neoliberal austerity measures in response to this situation, popular protest has been muted. Using Silva's [(2009) Challenging Neoliberalism in Latin America (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press)] framework of analysis of popular responses in Latin America to that region's debt crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, this article seeks to investigate why this has been the case. We assess how the crisis is being framed among popular and civil society groups, and whether increased associational and collective power is developing. In doing so, we look at processes of intra-group cooperation, cross-group cooperation and framing and brokerage mechanisms. We then ask, where such processes exist, if they can lead to a comprehensive challenge to the neoliberal policies currently being implemented, as happened in much of Latin America. We conclude that the crisis has not yet reached sufficient depth or longevity to foster a more robust popular response, but propose that analysis of similar processes in Latin America can help us understand better why this is the case, not just in Ireland, but in other countries of Europe experiencing similar situations.*

## **Introduction: Collective Responses in Ireland to Neoliberalization in a Time of Crisis: Where are the Pots and Pans?**

Since the global financial crisis began in 2008, Ireland has been undergoing unprecedented economic and social crises and austerity measures. Neoliberal adjustments have been implemented by two successive governments. Yet, despite the severity of the crisis and the scale of adjustment, Irish popular reaction has primarily been electoral in nature, with little in the way of sustained mass protest or street campaigns, unlike more lively responses in other European countries suffering similar crises and

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austerity programmes, such as Greece and Spain. In this article, we seek to shed light on this conundrum by using Silva's (2009) analysis of Latin America during that region's debt crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, as a framework to understand better Ireland's present situation.

Like Ireland and many European countries today, Latin America was also beset by economic crisis in the early 1980s. Public debt resulted in similar neoliberal adjustment measures being implemented throughout the region. State services and social provision were drastically cut back, while debt repayment was prioritized, and state-owned companies in key sectors, including telecommunications, energy, mining, water and other areas were privatized and often sold to foreign investors. This resulted in more precarious labour conditions, higher unemployment, increased poverty and inequality, higher prices for basic utilities, and increased concentration of income and capital.

Argentina was the most paradigmatic case of them all, swiftly moving in 2001 from 'poster child' status for neoliberalism in the region to become 'the Ethiopia of Latin America' (Kirby, 2003: 202). By the end of 2002, the country's economy was reduced to practically half its 1998 size, incomes were also halved and over 50 per cent of the population slid below the poverty line (Kirby, 2003: 202). While Argentina's story is certainly the most dramatic of the time, other countries, such as Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia, experienced similar declines. However, unlike in Ireland, in these countries crises eventually led to mass popular uprisings and a 'pink tide' of left- and left-of-centre governments being installed throughout much of the region (Silva, 2009).

How did such a massive shift take place in Latin America and what lessons in that experience are there for Ireland or other European countries experiencing similar processes of neoliberalization? In this article, we use Silva's (2009) framework of analysis of popular responses to neoliberalism in Latin America to help answer this question. Silva (2009) offers a multi-dimensional framework, drawn from Polanyi's (2001 [1944]) theory of the double movement, which identifies associational power (intra-group cooperation), collective power (cross-group cooperation) and ideological power (framing and brokerage mechanisms) as key concepts to help explain successful popular mobilization against neoliberalism in Latin America. We use this framework to assess the extent to which such processes are taking place among popular sectors and civil society groups in Ireland, how crisis is being framed among those groups and whether increased associational and collective power is capable of posing a popular challenge to the neoliberal policies currently being implemented.

In adopting Silva's inquiry into the Latin American experience as a springboard, we are cognizant of important differences between the reality of Latin America and Ireland, not least that Ireland is a developed country and within the European Union (EU). However, we believe the conjunctural situation of neoliberal austerity is sufficiently similar and Silva's framework sufficiently flexible to make such a comparison worthwhile. We also believe that the framework is a useful comparative mechanism for other European societies implementing fiscal retrenchment policies.

The article first identifies the key theoretical themes in Silva's work that are applicable to the Irish case. This involves identifying sufficient *motivation* for a double movement to occur, including the imposition of market society, leading to economic crisis and causing stark socio-economic inequalities. The article then examines Silva's concept of *capacity* among popular forces to force change away from neoliberal precepts. It applies these concepts to the Irish situation, assessing to what extent motivation and capacity exist in Irish society to provoke a successful double movement type reaction against market society construction. It concludes by reflecting on the original question – why there has not been concerted resistance to neoliberalism in the current context of crisis.

### Five Conditions for Popular Organization against Neoliberalism

Silva, in his examination of challenges to neoliberalism in Latin America, takes Karl Polanyi's theory of the 'double movement' as his starting point. Briefly, Polanyi argued in *The Great Transformation* (2001 [1944]) that during the 'long' nineteenth century the principal world (i.e. European plus the United States) powers attempted to impose 'market society' globally, leading to a 'double movement' of popular reaction against its imposition, whereby all sorts of social and economic groups sought 'state support to insulate them from market forces' (Silva, 2009: 18). Polanyi argued that this led to 'fascism, communism, or social democracy, passing through worldwide economic collapse and war' (Silva, 2009: 18).

Neoliberalism refers to a set of ideas about the relationship between the state, market and society, which reflects Polanyi's concept of 'market society'. According to Harvey (2005: 2), neoliberalism is 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade'. It is often associated with practices of monetarism, deregulation, privatization and tax cuts and a general roll-back of the state and public expenditure. Ultimately, society is more commodified and dependent on the market to survive.

Silva contends that the 25 years of application of neoliberal reform in Latin America, roughly taking place during the 1980s and 1990s, is comparable to the imposition of market society as hypothesized by Polanyi. In Latin America, pro-neoliberal forces – 'political leaders, political parties, technocrats, socio-economic elites, and sectors of the middle class' (Harvey, 2005: 44) – all supported and guided neoliberal reforms. Crucial too was transnational power, in the form of expanding financial markets and multi-national companies along with powerful multi-lateral lending agencies, mainly the IMF and the World Bank. Successive governments, regardless of ideological background, worked with these agencies, to develop market society and reshape the state and democracy to meet neoliberal objectives. To do this, many governments used decree powers, bypassing their own parties or party coalitions, often relying on small, closed technocratic teams for policy formulation.

In response to these measures, in almost all cases organized labour spearheaded resistance, yet this was quashed due to its structural weakening in terms of bargaining power, depleting memberships, reduced influence with political parties, manipulation by and collusion with neoliberal forces, and state repression. New unions emerged in Brazil and to a lesser extent in Uruguay but elsewhere established unions remained marginal. This vacuum at the heart of popular organizing meant that popular power had to be re-founded by rebuilding *associational* power (creating new organizations and recasting existing ones) and forging *collective* power (coalition building). ‘This permitted the mobilization of large numbers of people (masses) to exercise disruptive economic power’ (Silva, 2009: 46), leading eventually to the breaking up of neoliberal coalitions, the overthrow of neoliberal governments and their replacement with ‘governments committed to reforming contemporary market society’ (Silva, 2009: 46).

Silva (2009: 46) identifies ‘five necessary conditions’ to create such a dynamic. First, citizens must feel economically and politically excluded; second, there must be a democratic setting to allow collective action and protest to take place; third, neoliberalism must be identified in the popular imagination as the key cause of people’s sense of exclusion, and different mechanisms such as brokerage to help organize and form anti-neoliberal alliances are the means to achieve this; fourth, such mobilization must be reformist and non-violent in nature and, fifth, the overall context is one of poor economic performance, if not outright economic crisis, both nationally and internationally. We will return to these conditions in more detail below.

In Latin America, popular power developed through organization among those groups most affected by austerity measures: the unemployed, the underemployed, pensioners, territorial organizations (such as neighbourhood organizations), agricultural workers and smallholders, indigenous groups and even within the military. State responses to such mobilization were also important in the formation of such organization. Co-optation helped weaken it, dividing the different groups and so lessening the impact of popular responses. However, often the promises inherent in co-optation of increased social and political inclusion were betrayed, leading to furious popular counter-reaction, met in turn by state repression and continued exclusion, which ultimately led in some cases to outright rebellion. Issue framing was crucial in knitting together the myriad groups, connecting ‘personal problems and those of social groups, to the economic and political exclusion generated by the construction of market society’ (Silva, 2009: 50). The central theme of such framing had its roots in the

will of domestic and international political and economic elites to exploit and dominate the popular sectors, which robbed them of the necessary conditions for *life* (meaning the protection of individuals from the market in the interest of improving livelihood) . . . .Therefore all had an interest in economic nationalism and instruments of de-commodification in order to rebuild the conditions necessary for *life for all*. (Silva, 2009: 50)

This reading of the situation, and the enormity of the social forces ranged against them, underlined the necessity for a ‘common front’ between disparate groups.

Such alliances were built, according to Silva (2009), through four common brokerage mechanisms: summit meetings and the formation of umbrella organizations to build coalitions; overlapping membership and activity of leaders in different organizational networks facilitating communication; open, general assembly-style deliberations for decision-making ensuring transparency and participation; and use of communal or ancestral customs to encourage mobilization, especially among indigenous people. The repertoire of contention included strikes and, of these, public sector strikes were most effective. However, with unions less powerful, actions like strikes at the point of production had less force, and were increasingly replaced by a focus on exchange or action at the point of consumption. This led to widespread use of roadblocks, as these ‘disrupt commerce, therefore generating economic loss’ (Silva, 2009: 51), sometimes threatening city supplies. Mass demonstrations were also favoured actions, as these disrupted state business, as were intercity marches. The mass banging of pots and pans – so called *cacerolazos* – was particularly important in middle-class areas. In some countries, mass rioting and looting broke out. As a whole, Silva contends, this ‘concatenation of forms of struggle wrought by the fragmentation inherent in globalization may well be the contemporary replacement for the general strike of yesteryear’ (Silva, 2009: 274).

These activities – of forging associational power, brokerage and protest – pressed forward in waves, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, at each new economic crisis. Most countries had, at different times, intense bursts of growth followed by deep busts. The lack of improved conditions for the majorities prejudiced popular acceptance of neoliberalism as did neoliberal measures that invariably followed busts. As time went by, more individuals, families and groups were affected negatively by neoliberal measures, building the case for a change of course. Yet governments rejected popular involvement in the solution of these crises, while extracting ever higher costs from society, resulting in fresh waves of protest. In time this had a political impact, leading to rebellions in congress and among party ranks, and political support for the neoliberal project began to dissolve. Repression meanwhile only added more fuel to the fire. New parties emerged, or old parties fractured between pro- and anti-neoliberal factions, with voters deserting pro-neoliberal camps. The result was the eventual ouster of pro-neoliberal governments in Venezuela (1998), Argentina (2003), Bolivia (2006) and Ecuador (2007), among others.

Silva’s analysis of anti-neoliberal challenges in Latin America provides sufficient commonalities and similarities to justify utilizing such a framework to examine the situation of crisis in Ireland. Ireland, along with many other European countries, is currently implementing austerity policies, which are being imposed (increased neoliberalization), under the same pretext (the reduction of debt) by similar agents (mostly centre-right, but some centre-left, governments, encouraged and supported by transnational institutional actors such as the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the IMF). Similar social impacts are evident with rises in unemployment, underemployment, poverty and inequality, and consistently low growth patterns. And similar popular responses are developing in similar patterns

– increased trade union activity in some states, including strikes, and increased popular organization, sometimes resulting in state repression.

This framework can be effected by using the five conditions identified by Silva (2009) and outlined above to establish if the conditions exist within Ireland (or another country in a similar situation) to indicate the possible emergence of anti-neoliberal contention. These five conditions can be divided into two main types; establishing, first, if the *motivations* are present to provoke such a popular reaction and, second, if the *capacity* exists to ensure its success in reversing neoliberalism. With regard to *motivation*, we need first to ask if Ireland is experiencing a ‘long-term market society project’, which can be done by looking for a range of state reforms favouring the market over society and social protection. This is accompanied by an assessment of the extent of political and socio-economic exclusion being created by such a project, and if this is sufficient to cause a corresponding ‘double movement’ in Irish society, measured by increases in unemployment, poverty and inequality. It can also be identified through evidence of measures to restrict popular and political influence over economic decision-making. Second, we need to ascertain the existence and extent of economic volatility and crisis, thus assessing the likelihood of waves of contention to occur. Indicators of this are wide swings in GDP, government deficits and declines in popular confidence in politics and political institutionality. The third condition is evident through the existence of party competition and elections. With regard to *capacity*, we need to identify a fourth factor in the existence of different protest groups resulting from this situation of crisis and assess the nature of change that they are advocating. Finally, and most importantly, we need to identify if framing and brokerage mechanisms are being used to build a common front and if so if these are effective. From these points, we may be able to assess the existence, nature, extent and potential of anti-neoliberal contentious politics in the country. These conditions and their corresponding indicators are identified in more detail in [Table 1](#) and will be used to guide the ensuing discussion with regard to the Irish case.

### **Motivation for Popular Response in Ireland**

This section examines whether there is sufficient motivation for a ‘double movement’ to emerge against increased neoliberal marketization in Ireland. To do this, it explores whether Ireland is a ‘long-term market society project’ with stark political and socio-economic exclusion and with significant economic volatility and crisis.

#### *Ireland as a ‘Long-term Market Society Project’*

Ireland fulfils many, if not most, of the indicators associated with a ‘long-term market society project’. Dellepiane and Hardiman (2012b: 11) assert that from the late 1980s onwards ‘a low-tax, service-poor equilibrium began to become embedded in Irish political economy as the engine of growth and employment creation’. The financial crisis of 2008 led to a continuation and intensification of these policies. In the 2010 Memorandum of Understanding to the ‘troika’ of lenders to Ireland (the IMF, the EC



**Table 1.** Five factors explaining popular organization against neoliberalism

Type	Factors	Indicators
Motivation	Long-term market society project creating stark political and economic exclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fiscal reforms liberalization, privatization, welfare reforms, expansion of institutional capacity of finance ministers and central banks reforms to remove economic policy for political change</li> <li>• Economic exclusion, for example, increased unemployment, informality and underemployment, inequality and poverty, with lower incomes</li> <li>• Political exclusion, reduced space for expression of popular demands, strengthened executive power at expense of legislature, consensus among major parties in favour of neoliberal reform, betrayal of election and other promises by political parties</li> </ul>
Motivation	Economic volatility and crisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic growth rates to identify sharp downturns, gross debt to GDP ratios and government deficits, polls on lack of confidence expressed in government</li> </ul>
Capacity	Associational political space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existence of a democratic system of governance</li> </ul>
Capacity	Constructing associational power and forging collective power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating new organizations and recasting exiting ones</li> <li>• Coalition building across traditional movement organizations and across clusters of power</li> <li>• Issue framing and brokerage mechanism to link protest groups</li> </ul>
Capacity	Reformist thrust to major protest groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocacy for reform of neoliberalism not the replacement of capitalism</li> </ul>

*Source:* Adapted from Silva (2009, Table 3.1: 48–49).

and the ECB), the Irish government, led then by Fianna Fáil, agreed to ‘... promote service sector growth through vigorous action to remove remaining restrictions on trade and competition, and ... propose amendments to legislation to enable the imposition of financial and other sanctions in civil law cases relating to competition’ (IMF, 2010: 8–9) as well as opening up ‘sheltered’ legal, medical and pharmacy sectors (IMF, 2010: 27–28).

Furthermore, in meeting deficit targets government elected to have a ratio of 2:1 in favour of cuts instead of tax increases. Total cuts planned for the period 2008–2015 would amount to 20 per cent of GDP, including just for the period 2009–2013, a 14



per cent cut in public wages, 8 per cent cut in working age welfare rates and over 50 per cent cuts for the young unemployed, 17 per cent cut in non-pay current budget and a 63 per cent cut in the capital budget (Caritas Europa, 2012: 23). Hence, ‘the profile of the Irish fiscal policy response to the economic crisis since 2008 has been quite consistently “orthodox” ... the Irish government has displayed a steady commitment to the politics of fiscal retrenchment’ (Dellepiane & Hardiman, 2012a: 9). Government commitments to the ‘troika’ also have led to increased modification of previously protected areas, for example, the introduction of water charging and the privatization of state-owned electricity and gas companies (IMF, 2010: 9, 30). Labour reforms focused on action to ‘facilitate re-adjustment in the labour market’ and reforming the ‘benefits system’ to ‘create greater incentives to take up employment’ (IMF, 2010: 9).

### *Socio-economic and Political Exclusion*

Public expenditure cuts have impacted negatively in terms of socio-economic exclusion and cuts in public spending have been significant. Even in the context of high emigration, Ireland has seen a rise in unemployment (6.4 per cent in 2008 to nearly 15 per cent in 2012), with 60 per cent of those long-term unemployed (over one year) in 2012 and youth unemployment at 27 per cent (Caritas, 2012: 61); lower average annual disposable income (from €24,380 to €20,856 between 2008 and 2012) (CSO, 2014); increased consistent poverty (4.2 per cent in 2008 to 7.7 per cent in 2012) (CSO, 2014), higher inequality (30.7 on the Gini coefficient measure in 2008 to 31.2 in 2012) (CSO, 2014) and worsened income distribution (4.6 in 2008 to 5.0 of income quintile in 2012) (CSO, 2014). As the crisis goes on, the cumulative impact of austerity may deepen and so the pressure on the growing cost of social transfers may become more and more difficult to sustain. Deprivation rates measuring enforced lack of two or more essential items have risen from 11.8 per cent in 2007 to 26.9 per cent in 2012 (CSO, 2014) and people are coping with extra charges including a 2013 property tax and a 2015 domestic water charge.

Irish labour unit costs fell by 12.2 per cent during the same period (2008–2012) due to the imposition of wage cuts (especially in the public sector) and an increase of Irish labour productivity (Erne, 2013). There is variable experience in the private sector. While many workers lost jobs and saw reduced income and reduced hours lost, some sectors experienced wage increases, a cut in the minimum wage effected by the previous government was restored, the Universal Social Charge thresholds were made less regressive and direct income taxes were not increased after 2011. All these measures have softened the blow in terms of loss of earning power for many in the private sector. Similarly, adult (over 25) social welfare payments remain frozen at 2011 rates and social welfare pensions remain protected. Moreover, although unemployment is high, it has not reached levels found in similar crisis countries such as Greece or Spain, and is declining, with figures below 12 per cent by early 2014. So while many are suffering real hardship and deprivation, it cannot be said that Ireland’s current, post-crisis levels of socio-economic

exclusion are ‘stark’ or that rates of poverty and inequality have sky rocketed since the crisis.

A number of measures taken by government have had the effect of isolating economic policy from democratic influence. The conditional loan arrangement with the ‘troika’ assured isolation from democratic oversight and severely constrained domestic budgetary discretion as ‘all budget decisions must be cleared with the troika, fiscal performance is subject to quarterly reviews and troika personnel are embedded in the core government departments’ (Hardiman & Regan, 2012: 9). The 2011 European Fiscal Compact Treaty Referendum locks Ireland into fulfilling strict fiscal targets set by the EC. A new state agency, the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, was established in July 2011 to independently assess, and comment publicly on whether the Government is meeting these fiscal targets. A new ministry for Public Expenditure and Reform (PER) was also created to drive through cuts in the public service and power is further centralized in a new Cabinet Sub-Committee, the Economic Management Council comprising the top echelons of government: the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), the Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (currently a combined portfolio), the Minister for Finance, and the Minister for PER – in other words the top echelons of the government with an emphasis on the economic and the fiscal. Meeting weekly, it ‘makes decisions on everything important’ for the country ‘and is, in effect, the core of the Government’ (Kinsella, 2013), further isolating economic decision-making from popular scrutiny and reinforcing a sense of political exclusion.

Forms of political exclusion have also become more widespread in civil society. In the past, civil society, including trade unions and relevant NGOs influenced socio-economic policy through the Social Partnership arrangements. These, however, ended rather abruptly in 2008 and civil society had little input into the State’s National Recovery Plan for 2011–2014.<sup>1</sup> Hence, there was ‘a clear lack of popular participation in both the design and implementation of crisis response measures’ (Holland, 2012: 11). A variety of state agencies charged with ensuring equality and monitoring poverty were closed or downgraded in state-rationalization programmes. The Human Rights Commission and the Equality Authority were downgraded, while the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism was closed down and the Combat Poverty Agency was integrated into the Department of Social Affairs (Holland, 2012: 16).

Government action became less accountable to the public as it sought to expedite reform. Hardiman (2012: 11–12) points to the fact that the Minister for Finance in the Irish political system traditionally has wide autonomy of action, and this was most forcefully used in his institution of the bank guarantee in September 2008, which safeguarded all assets of Irish-based banks. The Anglo-Irish Bank was nationalized through emergency legislation in 2009 (Hardiman, 2012: 7) and from 2011 to September 2013, a parliamentary guillotine process was used to pass 55 per cent of legislation (McDowell, 2013). Public trust in the State’s public and private institutions has collapsed as a result with the Edelman Trust Index, measuring average public trust in the four main groups of institutions – business, government, NGOs and media – placed

Ireland as the third least trusting country of the 27 European countries surveyed (Edelman, 2014).

*Economic Volatility and Crisis*

Since the onset of the crisis, Ireland has gone from very high rates of growth to deep negative rates and after some recovery, relative stagnation. Hence growth in 2007 was at 5.4 per cent of GDP, plunging to -5.5 per cent in 2009, to recover somewhat to 1.6 per cent in 2011 (Caritas Europa, 2012: 23, Table 5). Meanwhile, the gross debt to GDP ratio ballooned from 24.8 to 106.4 per cent between 2007 and 2011, with the government deficit going from 0.1 to 13.4 per cent of GDP in the same period. Table 2 shows the Irish economic crisis relative to other EU crisis states and how Irish volatility did not always reach Greek or even Spanish levels:

To conclude this section Ireland displays many of the indicators that satisfy Silva’s conditions for a ‘double movement’ to occur. There is convincing evidence that a ‘long-term market society project’ is taking place, from the 1980s to the 2008 crisis and right through to the present. The country has displayed economic volatility and there is evidence of social and political exclusion. As can be seen in Table 2, Ireland does not reach Greek or Spanish levels of economic volatility so our conclusion concerning levels of motivation is necessarily nuanced; conditions, while present, are less extreme in form than in comparable countries such as Spain and Greece, not to mention those experienced in Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s. Irish indicators, therefore, may not be sufficiently severe to provoke a determined counter-reaction from popular sectors, at least one capable of forcing a change of course. It is safe to say then that there are still many with much to lose from a significant change in the status quo. In sum, while there is *motivation* for a popular reaction against marketization, it is questionable if this is sufficiently advanced to be effective in stalling or reversing the market project. A further question, the task of the next section, is to ask if there is sufficient capacity among popular forces to achieve such a result.

**Table 2.** Economic crisis and volatility, comparing EU peripheral states

Indicators	GDP 2011–2012	GDP peak 2012 <sup>a</sup>	Unem Sept. 2012	Real wage 2011–2012	Real wage peak 2012 <sup>b</sup>
Greece	-6.0	-19.8	25.4	-7.8	-19.3
Ireland	0.4	-6.4	15.1	-1.2	-3.4
Italy	-2.3	-6.7	10.8	-1.4	-2.9
Portugal	-3.0	-6.1	15.7	-5.1	-9.2
Spain	-1.4	-5.0	25.8	-1.8	-5.8

Source: Euromemorandum (2013).

<sup>a</sup>Peak GDP is highest of 2007 or 2008.

<sup>b</sup>Peak real wage is highest for 2007–2010.

## Capacity for Popular Response in Ireland

### *There is Some Motivation but is There Capacity?*

How can we assess the existence, nature, extent and potential of anti-neoliberal contentious politics in Ireland? In the preceding sections, we attempted to establish if there was sufficient *motivation* for anti-neoliberal contention. In the following sections, we seek to establish if Irish civil society exhibits the *capacity* to challenge neoliberalism. We take the existence of ‘associational political space’ as given, as Ireland has been a functioning liberal democracy since the foundation of the state in 1922. However, we do need to identify if there is sufficient associational and collective power to carry out contentious protest. To do this, we identify the different crisis-related protest groups and assess the nature of change they are advocating. Simultaneously, we examine ideological power and ascertain if framing and brokerage mechanisms are being used to build a common front and, if so, whether these are effective. This section will, therefore, first review evidence and patterns in three areas of organized activity in society: starting with political parties, then trade unions and finally concentrating on social organizations. Second, with particular regard to the latter it will then discuss framing and brokerage in an integrated manner with associational power, separating them into distinct ideological frames, including the largely successful framing activities of the state.

### *Political Capacity: Left-wing Parties*

Silva identifies political activity as essential to processes of change and illustrates how interaction of left political leaders and left civil society leaders is a crucial element in fermenting an active associational space with capacity to shift power. In Ireland, the 2011 general election saw broad left-wing parties and independents massively increase their support with almost 35 per cent or a combined 62 ‘left-wing seats’ in the 31st Dáil (comprising Labour, Sinn Féin, the United Left Alliance and some left independents). Nevertheless, the centre-right Fine Gael won almost a majority of seats, eventually going into government with the social-democratic Labour Party, thus limiting momentum for any potential wider left alliance.

Despite widespread dissatisfaction with this coalition government, and in particular with the Labour Party, there is a sense of powerlessness among the public caused in part by an increasing sense of betrayal on the part of political parties (O’Callaghan, 2013; Edelman, 2014). This causes difficulties not just for the more established parties, but also the broader left. While by 2014 Sinn Féin was established as the dominant left party, like the Labour Party it is also open to possible coalition with other mainstream parties. Its past involvement in the Northern Irish ‘Troubles’ and its contemporary record in government in Northern Ireland where it has implemented some austerity measures may limit its ability to lead the broader left and/or translate support into votes in primary elections. In the broader left despite some attempts at coalition building, such as with the People before Profit and United Left Alliance,

the left remains divided and its fragmentation acts as a significant barrier to broader movement building.

### *Civil Society Capacity I: The Trade Unions*

Trade Unions in Ireland have exhibited tendencies towards both protest and co-optation, with the latter the most powerful of the two strategies. Consistent with Silva's expectations, Irish organized labour spearheaded early resistance to austerity with, for example, a 100,000 strong show of force at a march in February 2009. There has been some evidence, also, of allocating funds towards organizing and mobilization, cross-sectoral participation in wider campaigns, developing alliances with left groups and organizing sectoral protests by teacher and nurse unions against specific policy measures. Nevertheless, as in Latin America, a structural weakening in terms of bargaining power, depleting memberships, reduced influence with political parties and a proactive state framing strategy, which implicated trade unions as a causal part of crisis, led unions to follow a defensive strategy. This involved maintaining their corporate tradition by entering into public sector wage agreements facilitating some policies that wider leadership rhetoric, conversely, appears to resist.

Three agreements have been negotiated with government since 2010 (Croke Park I, Croke Park II and Haddington Road), all involving elements such as pay cuts and freezes, changes in working conditions and practices and no-strike deals in return for guarantees against compulsory redundancies in the public service. The trade union movement remains a source of associational, collective and ideological power with significant levels of grassroots resistance within union membership, and minor strategies of sectoral mobilization, inter-organizational solidarity and cooperation, not to mention a relatively challenging anti-austerity discourse. However, based on a strategic and tactical analysis of what was felt possible to deliver (informed by a context of high levels of worker debt, particularly mortgage debt) the leadership appears to have judged it not possible to mobilize sufficient numbers of people to exercise 'disruptive economic power' capable of forcing state policy away from neoliberalism (O'Connor, 2013). This defensive strategy creates its own momentum, impacts on the trade union capacity to lead resistance, while also opening up splits among and within trade unions.

### *Civil Society Capacity II: Social Organizations*

What then of popular power, as in organized civil society, apart from trade unions? Murphy (2011) and Kirby (2010) explore various cultural, historical and institutional explanations for the nature of Irish civil society response to the crisis. Adshead and Tonge (2009: 142) identify Ireland's peripheral location and a conservative, peasant, land owning and rural culture as key factors influencing the political culture of Irish civil society. They stress how, in response to colonialism, Ireland developed a 'religious-ethnic conceptualization of nation' which reinforced a political culture associated not with citizenship but with authoritarianism, conformism and loyalty (Adshead

& Tonge, 2009: 147). Mair (1992) draws attention to the lack of ideological or class divide in the historical evolution of Irish political parties and describes citizens as passive and stagnant (Mair, 2010).

Here, mindful of such political culture and context, we focus on evidence of increased associational space or collective power in Irish civil society and examine which framing techniques are used. Popplewell (2013) observes that in comparison to Greece and Spain, there has been a relative absence in Ireland of new social movements or other types of civic action in response to state austerity policy. While protests have been more numerous than is often asserted, many have been small, sector specific and often local, with little trade union involvement. It is possible, however, to identify broad trends of creating new organizations, recasting existing ones and coalition building across clusters of power.

Exploring formation of narratives is crucial. Following Khoo and Murphy's (2010) analysis of early public responses to the crisis, these experiences can be categorized under three main tendencies; first, mainstream, state or business-led framing and associational exercises explicitly or implicitly supportive of neoliberalism; second, defensive, reformist and renovative associational and discourse exercises which seek to reform the state and/or neoliberalism; and finally, anti-capitalist groups which seek to challenge the state, capitalism as well as neoliberalism. The 2011 General Election was a key narrative opportunity in which a number of distinct constituencies of interests were part of the ideological framing of the crisis; media, academics, politicians, trade union officials and left think tanks and some civil society organizations. Across these political spectrums, debates questioned the basis of austerity responses, the balance of taxation and expenditure responses to managing the fiscal deficit, the nature of responses to sovereign debt and the role of the EU.

*State and market-led exercises.* We start by looking at framing activity on the part of the state in alliance with market and transnational actors. Throughout the 2011 General Election, a general policy convergence in favour of neoliberal reform was prevalent among the three main parties of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour (Dellepiane & Hardiman, 2012a: 10), including promoting the EU Fiscal Compact Treaty in a 2012 Referendum. Public sector and welfare recipients, trade unions and civil society actors were thus 'unable to veto a strategy that was deemed to be essential to restoring both financial credibility and business confidence' (Dellepiane & Hardiman, 2012a: 23) and the case for curbing public spending commitments has acquired the status of received opinion among political, financial and media elites (Dellepiane & Hardiman, 2012a:12, Mercille, 2014; see also Costello, 2014).

Indeed, those putting forward counter-narratives were to an extent blamed for the crisis. This was seen in a state, market and media narrative which vilified public sector workers and trade unions as at least partially responsible for the crisis, pitting these against private sector, non-unionized workers. Similarly, successive Ministers for Social Protection framed narratives about social welfare fraud that set welfare claimants against citizens who themselves are framed as tax payers and further divided as 'deserving' and 'non deserving' welfare claimants. Such framing

exercises were paralleled by some market-led associational projects, which sought to provide solutions to the crisis based on promoting economic activity. For example, an early initiative Your Country, Your Call (2010) focused on the economy and called for 'entrepreneurial citizenship'. These projects were consistent with neoliberal Ireland and often funded by the state in association with private philanthropy and/or private companies.

*Reformist and renovative associational and discourse exercises.* In terms of associational experiences, this subgroup can best be subdivided into defensive and offensive coalitions, as they have slightly differing discourses. On the defensive side examples are the Equality and Rights Alliance, a campaign of 170 social organizations organized to defend and strengthen statutory equality and human rights institutions; The Poor Can't Pay, a civil society coalition, involving socially oriented NGOs and trade unions and focusing on protecting minimum wages and social welfare rates; and the Coalition to Protect the Lowest Paid made up of workers, trade unions and community organizations who came together to defend the pay and conditions of the lowest paid workers in Ireland. None of these explicitly frame their agendas as anti-neoliberal but they do resist neoliberal austerity measures through building coalitions (Equality and Rights Alliance), and including overlapping membership and active leadership in different organizational networks (The Poor Can't Pay and The Coalition to Protect the Lowest Paid).

Offensive coalitions seek to proactively reframe debate about alternatives and more overtly contest neoliberalism. One example, Anglo: Not Our Debt formed from cross-sectoral relationships and coalitions with the global justice community and local community organizations and activists. It opposed the repayment of debt accrued by Anglo-Irish Bank, a property and investment bank which contributed most to the Irish financial crisis. Another example, Claiming Our Future, described itself as 'a progressive movement for an equal, sustainable and thriving Ireland' (Murphy, 2013). Emerging in 2010 as a small group seeking to promote the discussion of macro-level alternatives, its 'Plan B' initiative, a 2012/2013 campaign to popularize a macro-economic alternative to austerity, focused on increased investment, higher taxation and maintenance of key public spending initiatives. This initiative involved a number of key anti-neoliberal reformist think tanks, including the social-democratic-oriented Think Tank for Action on Social Change; the religious-based Social Justice Ireland and the trade union funded Nevin Economic Research Institute, all of which had some individual and collective success in framing economic debate and developing an anti-neoliberal narrative which promotes alternatives. Cross-sectoral gender movements also engaged in coalition building with a resurgence of feminism and the Irish Feminist Network and their campaign for equality proofing budgets and the reproductive rights campaigns for abortion legislation in 2013. These groups are also part of a wider developing social and economic rights discourse, which, led by groups like Amnesty Ireland and the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, successfully championed the Constitutional Convention



(2012–2014) to recommend the insertion of economic and social rights into the Irish constitution.

All of these groups are to some degree impacted by various state policies that have changed the nature of civil society (Murphy, 2011). As Popplewell (2013: 15) reflects there are ‘clear tensions ... between the service delivery and more political functions’ of NGOs with many dominated by the state, through funding and other means, hence limiting their ability to criticize government policy and advocate for change. Harvey (2014) argues these features of Irish civil society have been exacerbated since the onset of the current crisis, making it even more difficult for these organizations to act as a catalyst for a double movement to develop. Relatively low motivation and weak social capacity, combined with active state-market forces and collusion with these by key civil society actors, limits even further the likelihood of its occurring.

*Anti-capitalist coalition building and framing exercises.* Three coalitions serve as examples of a more radical form of coalition building. Cross-sectoral mobilization exists in the pre-crisis Shell to Sea Campaign and the newer Anti-Fracking campaigns as well as various attempts at bringing related movements together through Climate Camp, Community Campaigns Gathering and Activist Fleadh (Cox, 2012). The Campaign against Household and Water Taxes, a cross-sectoral alliance between the household charge, property tax and water charges campaigns, has been the largest Irish mobilization vehicle to date. The campaign evolved to oppose a new 2013 property tax (which replaced the 2012 flat rate household charge) and to oppose new water charges introduced in 2014. The campaign, with a strong IT presence, focuses on county-level mobilization, and advocates actions such as non-payment of taxes and charges, tactical disruption of local council meetings, more general street protest, pickets and marches. Its wider cross-sectoral capacity is limited, however, by programmatic, strategic and political differences among heterogeneous members, making it difficult to frame collective demands. Some collaborators, for example, are issue-specific groups (such as septic tanks and turf cutting campaigns dominated by private property and land rights perspectives), while others are anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist in analysis. Demands, then, can be framed according to the lowest common denominator and thus positioned ambiguously in relation to neoliberalism, capitalism and taxation. Other examples of such coalition building where it was difficult to agree and articulate demands was the Irish Occupy experience, similar to Occupy Wall Street in New York and Occupy St Paul’s in London. Occupy used open, general assembly-style deliberations for decision-making ensuring transparency and participation, camping in six different Irish towns and capturing some popular support. However, like its USA and UK cousins it fizzled out when dismantled in March 2012.

To sum up, in general we can find Irish evidence of brokerage mechanisms including summit meetings and the formation of umbrella organizations to build coalitions. Protest repertoires are limited across these different forms of cross-sectoral alliances. Trade unions, due to their policy of cooperation with government, have embarked on few strikes. There has been little evidence of more disruptive protest such as

roadblocks, mass demonstrations, intercity marches, mass rioting and looting or mass banging of pots and pans. There is, however, evidence of overlapping membership and activity of leaders in different organizational networks facilitating communication. And there are some examples of open, general assembly-style deliberations for decision-making ensuring transparency and participation. There is, nevertheless, less evidence of successful strategies strengthening *collective power* where action meaningfully combines groups from ‘two or more power clusters’.

To some degree this may be due to a failure of framing. A key question in Silva (2009) is the objective of protest. In Latin America he found that most groups aimed to reform neoliberalism, not replace capitalism. Irish experience points to defensive rather than reformist strategies, with little evidence even of a political project centred on macro reform of neoliberalism, never mind replacing capitalism. The central theme in Latin America to ‘rebuild the conditions necessary for *life for all*’ (Silva, 2009: 50) has been largely absent in Ireland. Indeed, we could argue the opposite has occurred and the common sense legitimization of neoliberalism has been reinforced over the crisis, perhaps not surprising given how well neoliberalism was internalized in the Irish psyche pre-crisis (Garry *et al.*, 2006). In terms of Silva’s power analysis in Ireland, so far, the state’s coercive capacity and relative elite unity have been maintained. A conscious state and market strategy to assure inclusion of the ‘coping classes’ or ‘middle Ireland’ helped pull ‘the teeth from mobilizing forces’ (Silva, 2009: 32). Those opposing have been varied in nature and rarely anti-neoliberal in focus.

### **Conclusions: How Deep is Your Crisis? Prospects for a Double Movement**

The main motivation behind this article was to explain the absence of large-scale popular revolt against Irish austerity imposed as a result of the 2008 crisis. Having explored the problem we conclude that Silva’s (2009) framework, developed to examine response to austerity in Latin America, was useful in elucidating understanding of Irish societal responses to crisis. In particular, it facilitated greater clarity on two key points: the depth of the Irish crisis and the likely level of motivation for protest; and the extent of and nature of Irish protest and capacity for increased protest if the crisis is not resolved or deepens in the future. We also conclude that the framework has potential for wider application to enable comparison with other European crisis states and that lessons from such a European focus could offer even deeper learning from an Irish perspective.

In examining motivation we identified a ‘long-term market society project’ in Ireland ongoing since the 1990s. This project brought important levels of prosperity for large swathes of the Irish population and also significant personal debt. Despite falling property prices many people have retained some prosperity even in the current context of crisis and so are committed to the status quo. Others, however, are limited by significant amounts of personal debt. Furthermore, as noted above, neoliberalism and free market ideology have largely been internalized by Irish people. Although faith in neoliberal institutions has been badly shaken (Edelman, 2014)

progressive groups have had difficulty popularizing ideas about alternatives to austerity, not helped by a largely neoliberalized mainstream media (Mercille, 2014) using narrow, pro-market and divisive framing mechanisms (Cawley, 2011). Despite unresolved high levels of individual and collective indebtedness, increased deprivation as a growing feature in the middle class<sup>2</sup> and extensive political and socio-economic exclusion created by economic volatility, we argue, relative to Latin America, the crisis simply has not been grave enough to cause a 'double movement' with sufficient force to provoke a change of course. Meanwhile, the power of indigenous Irish pro-neoliberal forces augmented by their international allies, particularly in the 'troika' of the EC, ECB and IMF, has remained far stronger than that of contending forces.

The capacity framework draws our attention to, and makes visible, a substantial degree of Irish protest and some very conscious attempts to build collective action and frame narratives. This article has identified a number of the larger attempts but there have also been countless smaller, more localized protests. Yet these have not demonstrated the necessary capacity, alliance building and narrative framing potential to create the conditions for a double movement. Key to this phenomenon is the decline in the traditional role of the trade unions in Irish protest building, as indeed was the case in Latin America. These have adopted a largely defensive role, thus restricting their capacity for narrative and alliance building with others. We also note that a historically strong Irish civil society is now dominated by state and market (Mair, 2010), reducing its requisite force to catalyse such a double movement (Kirby, 2010; Murphy, 2013). As Popplewell (2013: 15) contends, 'space for civil society activity, how civil society should be funded in the context of declining resources, and the ability of civil society to respond to and capitalise on windows of opportunity produced by crisis' are all key issues for its ability to respond to the current situation.

In Latin America, coalition building on a national and regional basis involved the framing of issues in clearly anti-neoliberal terms, appealing to all groups including popular movements and middle classes. Indeed, identity-based social movements in a number of countries, including indigenous movements, are generally recognized as having been the main catalysts for anti-neoliberalism. As Fraser (2013) insists this intersection between redistribution and recognition is an essential space for movement building and for developing common reformist narratives. In Ireland, however, no such 'spearhead' exists on a social or political basis to channel popular demands in such an anti-neoliberal direction. This absence we have argued seems to lie in lack of capacity as much as lack of motivation. Lack of capacity can be explained by the nature of Irish social power and how it is organized, in particular the state and market structures which constrain and shape such agency and their position in the wider global structure. It can also be accounted for due to more local fragmentary and sectarian tendencies within the Irish Left and the reactive and conservative natures of Irish NGOs. We noted a number of Irish attempts at forging inter-organizational coalitions and unified discourses and strategies. We conclude these efforts will need to be continued and strengthened in the coming years if a double movement is to emerge at all in Ireland.

Finally, we believe that a key insight which Silva (2009) brings to the debate in Ireland is his insistence on the need to take the long view. Silva (2009) understood neoliberalism as assaulting in waves, resulting in counter-waves of associational power, brokerage and protest at each new economic crisis. Despite government protestations to the contrary, the crisis is still very much alive in Irish society. As noted, debt, both collective and individual, remains at record levels, having a negative effect on domestic demand. Moreover, unemployment, despite reductions, remains high, and a whole host of structural adjustment policies are pending, including new taxes and charges and privatizations of key utilities. The neoliberal waves, then, are far from stagnant and potential for conflict will therefore remain.

## Notes

1. This was drawn up by the Fianna Fáil-led government but has been executed relatively unchanged by the present Fine Gael/Labour coalition.
2. The CSO's 2014 Survey Income and Living Conditions (CSO, 2014) shows that 16.5 per cent of the population are at risk of poverty and 26.9 per cent experience two or more deprivation indicators.

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