

Scapegoating During a Time of Crisis:

A Critique of Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland

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Abstract

Focusing upon scapegoating in post-crash Ireland, this article considers a pervasive political process that is protective of powerful interests and the status quo following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Drawing from group conflict theory and framing analysis as part of a broader critical realist take on society, we consider how blame has been placed on myriad targets, ranging from a collective 'we who went a bit mad with borrowing' to more specific groups such as public sector workers, the unemployed, single mothers and immigrants. In conclusion, we underscore the need for sociology to assert its relevance by challenging such processes and defend civil society in a capitalist world-system that is in structural crisis.

Keywords: austerity; capitalism; class; conflict; crisis; frame analysis; scapegoating.

From the (Ir)Relevance of Sociology to Scapegoating in Context

Cuts, framed as 'savings', constitute the leitmotif of leading politicians in Ireland, the poster child for austerity in the European Union (EU). Accordingly, as sociologists residing in Ireland, we were encouraged to see calls for papers on the global crisis for this special issue of *Sociology*. While concerns about our discipline's general myopia and possible irrelevance were articulated in the literature on the cusp of the global financial crisis (GFC) - captured by the question 'whither sociology?' (Lenzer 2007) – we feel it is the task and promise of sociology to advance critical, reflexive knowledge in these challenging times. Such a sociology, as Burawoy (2005) contends, not only has disciplinary but also public relevance in terms of addressing the question 'what sort of society do we wish to live in?' It is a question that has increasing resonance. Note, for example, the 2012 British Sociological Association (BSA) conference 'Sociology in an Age of Austerity', the BSA 'Activism in Sociology Forum' and the recent workshop 'Social and Political Critique in an Age of Austerity' held by the BSA Digital Sociology Study Group in 2014.

In this paper we aim to critique all-too-common efforts to construct easy scapegoats under conditions of crisis and austerity. The word scapegoating is derived from religious practice aimed at taking away the sins of the world (Frazer 1919). In biblical stories it involved the ritual transfer of evil to a live goat, from which the process gets its name (Girard 1989). Anthropologists have observed this 'transference of evil'

across a range of cultures, involving animals, inanimate objects and, all too often people (or groups of people). In certain regions, such as in parts of sub-Saharan Africa where witchcraft is still practiced, those labelled as witches are killed with the view to warding off misfortune (Miguel 2005). Significantly, the number of such killings tends to increase when a calamitous situation (i.e. a drought or disease) suddenly hits a community (Miguel 2005). Yet, in contexts such as contemporary USA where scapegoating is increasingly removed from community, religion and physical violence, 'it becomes more widespread but simultaneously shallower' so that in its secular, political sense, 'scapegoating today can still generate hatred, but it is now directed toward a plethora of transitory victims' (Brown and Stivers 1998: 716). A recent example, as seen in Europe under conditions of crisis, is provided in the documentary "'Ruins – Chronicle of an HIV witch-hunt'", which describes and narrates how the Greek government went on a populist, scaremongering and scapegoating campaign against HIV patients' who all happened to be women (Eberhardt 2013). Our discussion on political (secular) scapegoating focuses on post-Celtic Tiger Ireland wherein the GFC and reactions to this are exerting a corrosive effect on the larger society (Allen 2009, McDonough and Loughrey 2009). Befitting calls for this special of *Sociology* on the *global* crisis, our paper, is also intended to have wider resonance when interrogating an interconnected world-system (Wallerstein 1999, 2011) of exploitative class relations and ideological fictions where it is not only Ireland's (new) poor and marginalised who risk vilification.

We anticipate most readers will have at least some familiarity with the tale of the Celtic Tiger economy (circa 1995 to 2008). To quote a well-known Irish journalist, the rise and fall of Ireland's economy makes 'Icarus look boringly stable' (O'Toole 2010: 10). Ireland's economy experienced an unprecedented boom before it suddenly imploded as the US financial crisis went global. We would add that Ireland's 'new found prosperity' was never widely shared; indeed, it was realised in the context of increasing inequality in what is one of the most unequal members of the EU (McDonough and Loughrey 2009; for a discussion on growing inequality in Britain under finance capital, see Scambler 2012). The Celtic Tiger era should thus be understood as a speculative boom within a broader 'bubble economy' that has proliferated in recent decades (Hudson 2010, Monaghan and O'Flynn 2013): a brief period in history when Ireland, which has always had a weak indigenous economy (Allen 2009), rode on the coat-tails of far more powerful global players. The 'illusory' status of Ireland's economic miracle (see Share and Corcoran 2010) was effectively exposed as finance capitalism crashed in 2008, culminating in massive bank bailouts and socialised losses. In 2008 the Irish government put up 'the entire Irish State as collateral for the crushing liabilities of six private banks ... approximately €400 billion in leveraged loans' (McCabe 2011: 169). In 2010 these bailouts resulted in a sovereign debt crisis and an €85bn conditional loan from the EU and European Central Bank, funded, in no small part, by the country's own pension reserves.ⁱ Accordingly, Ireland became the most burdened in the EU by bank debts: Eurostat data (2007 to

2011) reveal that while the bank bailouts in the EU averaged €192 per capita, in Ireland it was a staggering €8,981 (Taft 2013a).

A coalition government, comprising Fine Gael and Labour, was elected in 2011 and immediately reneged on election promises such as ‘burning bank bond holders’. Accordingly, we would argue that the current Irish government is administering a neoliberal (class) project of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2005), where ‘savings’ (cuts to social welfare, incomes and basic public services) are accompanied by increases in levies and taxation that were previously deemed ‘obscene’ by these very same politicians when in opposition (see Kerrigan 2012). Of course, as stated by Weber over a century ago with reference to ‘all economic storm warnings’, it is ‘laughable’ to assume democracy and freedom could survive under the ‘domination’ of ‘high capitalism’ (cited by Lenzer 2007: 499; see also Walby, 2013, on democracy and finance). With this domestic situation and the GFC as our backdrop, we are concerned with the processes that facilitate the channelling of blame away from more powerful groups towards subordinated and marginalised groups. Accordingly, we are concerned with scapegoating as it relates to and facilitates the on-going redistribution of wealth as efforts are made to redirect the public gaze towards myriad groups who are vilified for their alleged offences. Thus we argue that in this instance scapegoating is a deeply political process which occludes critical attention that might otherwise challenge deeper structural relations, figurations and logics that reproduce Irish capitalism (Allen 2009, McCabe 2011).

Theoretical framework

Acknowledging what Scambler (2010) calls meta-construction or 'meta-reflection', where use is made of existing substantive theories and data, our work goes beyond the typically micro-level empirical concerns of cultural anthropology and interpretivist sociology. At a meta-theoretical level we favour critical realism (CR) (e.g. Frauley and Pearce 2007), which is gaining prominence in sub-areas of our discipline and sociology more generally. While Williams (2003) outlines the principles of CR for social theorists of health, Scambler (2012) has directed such concerns to the broader sociological community. Scambler explains that CRs interrogate stratified reality comprising real generative mechanisms such as gender, social class and command (intransitive mechanisms which are mind independent and have causal efficacy). Accordingly, in avoiding the relativising twists and turns of poststructuralist theorising (Williams 2003), CRs seek to advance a more reflexive, critical and politicised sociology that is cautious (knowledge is fallible) but which aims to have real world relevance. CR, with its antecedents in the classics (e.g. Marx's writings), makes sense to us, and, as with Williams (2003), we view much sociological work as CR even if authors do not explicitly identify as such.

Frauley and Pearce (2007: 5) advise that CR 'is compatible with a number of substantive theoretical positions'. Besides sociocultural analyses of scapegoating which we will draw from (e.g. Brown and Stivers 1998), we consider the group

conflict theoretical framework, which has its antecedents in Blumer's (1958) work, to have value. Such a theory argues that how members of out-groups (i.e. those excluded from the dominant means of symbolic reproduction and public opinion formation) are portrayed/perceived is dependent on whether they pose a substantial threat to the in-group's advantageous circumstances, including their 'requirements' for resources (McLaren and Johnson 2004). Group conflict research conducted in the USA and Europe is informative insofar as it identifies group-interests and resource competition as key reasons for hostility towards other groups in society (Bobo 1988, Espenshade and Hempstead 1996). 'Members of the ingroup... enjoy(ed) privileged access to resources such as jobs, power, money, welfare benefits' etc., which if 'challenged by competition' for these resources from 'outgroups' sees prejudice enacted, as a mechanism to keep a grip on the status quo (Gibson 2002: 72, cited in McLaren and Johnson 2004: 713). Accordingly, group conflict theory, 'although originally envisioned as a theory of prejudice and discrimination, also informs a wealth of research on formal social control' (King and Wheelcock 2007: 1255). We would suggest that the theory also provides a useful framework for understanding scapegoating in Ireland, and, in acknowledging larger systemic concerns, the subordination of the nation itself in a capitalist world-system (Wallerstein 1999).

Finally, when reflecting on scapegoating in post-crash Ireland, we will use framing analysis, a form of content analysis that sociologists have usefully applied to various cultural artefacts such as media content and policy documents. Indeed, framing

analysis serves as the basis for media studies in Ireland which explore the vilification of public sector workers (Murphy 2010, Marron 2011, 2012), as well as how the powerful 'ideologically constructed' the crash more generally in an attempt to 'repair the damage that the crisis has done to their interests' (McCullagh 2010: 38). Such an approach, similar to group conflict theory, is useful insofar as it sensitises us to how claims makers seek to make their definition of reality prevail over competing versions. In qualifying our explicitly evaluative (CR) approach, with its emphasis on ontological matters (e.g. underlying intransitive structures), we do not believe the world is reducible to meaning and discourse (Williams 2003), or socially constructed frames. At the same time, CR is compatible with the sociological study of discourse/frames and an appreciation of the power of language in shaping social realities that are real in their effects. In the ensuing critique we will therefore draw from framing analysis to show how the dominant in-group construct and marginalise the out-group, even when the latter are the statistical majority. In short, framing analysis complements our use of group conflict theory and the emancipatory impulse of CR to explore the politicised/diversionary process of stigmatising myriad targets in a larger unequal system of structured, hierarchical social relations. Our approach is intended to illuminate the powerful role of the 'framers' (members of the privileged in-group) and the part they play in moulding social discourses and orchestrating the public agenda in an attempt to control the public thought process (Breen 2007, cited in Marron 2011: 24). Such a discussion, we

think, is timely and necessary especially in light of recent research demonstrating that the Irish mass media are relentless cheerleaders for austerity (Mercille 2013).

Oppression, Values and Ideologies: Shaping Perception, Framing Blame

We now turn our attention to the scapegoating of various groups - the oppressive 'framing' of myriad targets - in hegemonic political discourse and contemporary Irish mainstream media. As we will argue, scapegoating has been a convenient tool as the power elite sought 'ideological retrenchment' and explanations for the crisis that were 'more congruent with the interests of the golden circle of bankers, business and government' (McCullagh 2010: 44). Based on such a reading, the political decision to socialise private banking debt and subsequent austerity policies are rooted in hegemonic class interests and neoliberal ideology, which have sought to 'frame and shape individuals' perceptions and preferences so as to pre-empt challenges to the status quo' (Glasberg and Shannon 2011: 48). In that regard, the 'conflict frame' emerges in hegemonic discourse to divert attention away from the choices made within the political economy and towards some other aspect of social life, while the 'responsibility frame' is used to 'reveal' those who are 'really' (sic) responsible for our social ills (d'Heaenens and de Lange 2001). Given the scale of social suffering currently being imposed on various sections of Irish society (see Browne 2014) it is no surprise to see stark examples of both frames in circulation.

To illustrate the use of such frames, we critique a number of dominant discourses: 'we were all to blame', the 'inefficient' public service, and welfare 'fraud'. These discourses figure in the scapegoating of (1) the whole population of Ireland (an obfuscating 'we' that supposedly democratises blame and thus responsibility for repaying banks' debts), alongside more specific 'drains' on the system, such as (2) unionised public sector workers whose interests are allegedly antagonistic to the valorised private sector, and (3) recipients of social welfare, including: the unemployed who putatively eschew work as a 'lifestyle choice', single mothers who ostensibly have children with multiple fathers, and immigrants who reportedly fly into the country to claim benefits before departing. Brief reference is also made towards the end of our paper to the scapegoating of bankers, the largest recipients of state welfare at a time when evidence of their deceptive practices has been coming to light. As a caveat, informed critique also appears within mainstream media (e.g. Browne 2012) and we note such commentary below, though the aforementioned discourses remain hegemonic in the contested process of framing and scapegoating.

Democratising Blame: 'We All Partied'

In the early stages of the economic crash it was difficult for the power elite to deflect blame away from themselves. According to McCullagh (2010), the crisis was 'accidental' insofar as the powerful were unprepared with ready explanations. And, as details of links between a 'golden circle' of politicians, bankers and property developers began to surface alongside data on the anatomy of the crisis, space was

created for alternative and critical explanations to be publicly aired. For example, as discussed by Ó Riain (2010: 30-1), between 1998 and 2007, under the sway of government policy 'strongly predicated on neoliberal principles', bank lending increased almost five-fold with 67 per cent of this increased lending channelled into property. However, rather than offering a sober and informed assessment of what fuelled Ireland's crash, or what could have mitigated it (e.g. the need for far greater investment in the productive sector rather than speculative lending, subsidised courtesy of a large government cut in capital gains tax) (p. 30-1), the process of scapegoating began in earnest, with politicians, the business community and mainstream media working to spread the blame as widely as possible.

In September 2008, during a national radio interview, the then Minister for Finance, Brian Lenihan, stated 'we decided as a people, collectively, to have this property boom', or to put it another way, 'we all partied' (cited in Kerrigan 2012). McCullagh (2010) similarly quotes this 'discursive fight back' by the power elite to the extent that Minister Lenihan's somewhat defensive remark, 'quickly found favour with the business sector' (p. 45) and even came to pass as 'common-sense'. As stated by the recipient of the 2008 Business Person of the Year Award, Gary McCann: 'we all share part of the responsibility for the position we are in' (p. 46). As far as leading government ministers and their allies were concerned, 'we' were all culpable and should share in the shame of this self-inflicted catastrophe. And, as would become painfully obvious as time progressed, 'we' should all share the costs of absorbing the

banks' toxic debts and reimbursing, among others, holders of unsecured bonds. Multi-billion Euro bank debts quickly became 'our debts' – an 'obligation' that had to be 'honoured' as a matter of 'national pride' and 'reputation' (sic), with such reasoning resonating well with EU leaders (McCarthy 2012). Although recycled by various actors, this narrative, or responsibility frame, began to wear thin in Ireland by 2012 with the new Prime Minister, Enda Kenny, stating during a rare televised state of the nation address that 'you were not to blame' for the crisis. Yet, a few weeks later, while addressing an international audience at Davos, he reverted to the previous position of democratising blame by informing world leaders and representatives of capital that the Irish people 'all went a bit mad with borrowing' (Independent.ie 2012).ⁱⁱ

The doctrine that we were all to blame found various forms of expression, but one of the most convenient was the myth of a lust for property that was specific to the Irish. This notion of an Irish 'property-owning gene' rested on claims that the rate of home ownership is higher in Ireland than in other European countries – a view contradicted by any long-term comparison with European averages. In 2006, at the peak of the boom, home ownership in Ireland stood at 76 per cent, putting Ireland at 16th in 'home-ownership' levels, out of the 27 nations listed by Eurostat (cited in McCabe 2010). However, divergences at particular points in time (such as in 1991, when levels of home ownership were unusually high before increases in the cost of housing far outstripped minimal growth in the average industrial wage) were

considered enough to substantiate claims that the Irish were less content to rent property than people on the continent, that the Irish were simply obsessed with owning their own homes. This explanation was sometimes expressed in pop-psychology terms. McWilliams (2007: 109-10) for instance, suggests that '[n]o-one who has seen Irish people queuing up to buy second and third homes can suggest that what they have seen is rational'. As far as McWilliams was concerned the Irish, including those desperately trying to get onto the property ladder, had acted irrationally and were suffering the consequences.

The problem with this and other expressions of the responsibility frame is that they obscure the extent to which the property bubble was a direct result of government housing policy, which, as McCabe (2011) demonstrates, often served as a system of state subsidisation for the property and banking sectors. For McCabe, this sorry affair offers a clear lesson in class power. Such a view accords with our CR understanding of Irish society where hegemonic frames reflect and aim to reproduce the relatively enduring interests of the moneyed class. The democratisation of blame also rationalised calls for the state to 'tackle' various 'sacred cows' such as social welfare for mothers, the elderly and the sick (McCullagh 2010: 50), alongside the denigration of other specific scapegoats such as public sector workers.

'Inefficient' Public Sector Workers

There is a common theme running through the government justifications for post-boom cuts: once a target is identified, members of the government 'convince' themselves, and seek to convince others, that this particular group is benefiting at the expense of the entire country. As with past crises, Ireland's economic crash represented and continues to represent an opportunity to attack unions, to divide workers and to undermine their pay and conditions: a well-rehearsed case of 'never letting a crisis go to waste' as observed more generally with the proliferation of neoliberal doctrines, or what Klein (2007) terms 'disaster capitalism'. In this respect the government and mainstream media attempted to create the impression that Ireland was uncompetitive internationally, and that wages would have to be reduced (Kelly 2012). Because public sector workers are largely unionised, they are usually more inclined to defend their pay and conditions than workers in the private sector (Turner 2013). The gains realised through collective bargaining on the part of public sector workers represent a benchmark for private sector workers. As such the former represent a ready-made target for capital, to be isolated from other workers wherever the opportunity presents itself, and then disciplined as necessary.

In 2009 the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes was established by Finance Minister Brian Lenihan. The group sought to examine the expenditure programmes in each Government Department (Department of Finance 2013). Headed by a well-known Irish economist, Colm McCarthy, it

recommended significant cuts in public expenditure, including reducing the size of the public sector. The report 'rationalised' cuts, but was only a small part in the overall process. Accordingly, it is worth examining how attacks on the public sector were sold to the public in general.

Just as the Irish public were 'framed' in a retrospective sense as responsible for the borrowing or 'partying' that crashed the nation, we would argue the same process was evident in how politicians sought to cut public expenditure in the name of ensuring recovery and future prosperity. And, as always, the Irish media played its part. In examining representations of the public service in Ireland's print media we see clear evidence of the conflict and responsibility frames. Using a frame analysis approach, Murphy (2010) critically examines the representation of public service workers in the *Irish Independent* newspaper prior to the December 2009 budget. His research clearly documents a representation that was 'symbiotic and reflective of the dominant discourse of government, business and employer elites that sought to shift the burden created by the casino capitalism of the free market onto ordinary workers' (p. 3). This process entailed efforts to alienate or 'Other' this particular group in the minds of the general public, through representations which consistently portrayed an 'unpatriotic, privileged, inefficient, militant, self-serving public sector worker in contrast with a taxpaying, pension paying, efficient, long-suffering private sector worker' (p. 10). Week after week a 'public versus private' dichotomy was maintained. The effect of this language was to create an image of public sector

workers as a burden - a group of people existing at the expense of private sector workers and the population as a whole. The research also documents a process of 'drip feeding future policy decisions in attempts to gauge public reaction', and 'reduce the "shock and awe" effect' before implementing unpopular policies (p. 18).

Similarly, Marron (2011) documents how the Irish Health Service Executive (HSE) and its employees have been constructed, with sensationalist headlines and inflammatory content depicting them as inefficient, incompetent, over-paid and privileged. A number of newspaper articles combine to portray the HSE and staff as 'grossly inept in their treatment of patients' (*Irish Independent* 28 May 2011, cited in Marron 2012: 15). In essence, Marron documents a discourse in which the HSE is consistently identified as an organisation that must 'radically change its operations' reduce staff numbers and make 'pay-bill savings' (p. 10). Marron's research illustrates how, ideologically, these frames seek a 'consensus by consistently reiterating the idea that if "they" were not paid as much, "we" would all have free GP care [an aspiration not even realised in Ireland during the boom] and economically the country could recover' (p. 12).

What the above evidences are systematic efforts to transfer culpability for deteriorating economic and social conditions to the putatively inefficient and parasitic public sector – an incredible inversion of reality, we would argue, given the unproductive nature of finance capital (Hudson 2010). Walby (2013) would likely underscore the gendered processes and inequities at play here since public sector jobs and services are disproportionately held and supported by women. Responsibility and conflict frames are not neutral either in class or gendered terms.

Welfare Recipients: From the Unemployed and Single Mothers to the Biggest 'Welfare Queen' of All

In post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, the government has been directly and indirectly cutting social welfare, whilst also making it increasingly difficult for the unemployed to receive ongoing support for what some Labour ministers regard as a 'lifestyle choice' (see Taft 2014). Rather than conceding any failure on their part to develop the productive economy and meaningfully reduce unemployment (i.e. introduce policies that do not depend on mass emigration and widely condemned 'training courses'), politicians along with the mass media construct claimants, notably young claimants amidst high youth unemployment, as lazy. Taft (2014) writes: 'It's bad enough to suffer cuts – in public services, income supports, job, wages. But then to be told that you are to blame . . . And then to be told that you are lazy, too'.

In further scapegoating 'blameworthy' and 'lazy' welfare recipients and justifying 'savings', politicians and the media repeatedly sensationalize 'social welfare fraud'. The people of Ireland are routinely exposed to television investigations by leading state and commercial stations, print media coverage, and vocal pronouncements from establishment politicians claiming that massive fraud is occurring. Ireland's commercial TV3 station has been quite enthusiastic about this. Between 2011 and 2013 the station repeatedly aired the same documentary on 'dole cheats' from the series *Paul Connolly Investigates*. The TV3 website description of the documentary

reads: 'Paul takes a look at the rampant [sic] problem of social welfare fraud occurring in Ireland' (TV3 Player 2013). Whether consciously intended or not, each time this was aired it helped further crystallize 'common-sense' responses to the crisis where ever deeper cuts to social welfare appeared reasonable and something any 'right minded' person would expect. And, if claims of fraud and laziness were insufficient, other rationalisations helped to frame the regressive measures contained in the Social Welfare Bill of December 2012 as warranted, such as women's 'immorality' and/or 'imprudence'.

Such judgements were offered most enthusiastically by Fine Gael TD Derek Keating who decided to highlight single mothers who were framed as promiscuous, unwise in their choice of partners and abusing the system. With righteous indignation, Keating complained of 'young women who find themselves caring, not for one child or two, but for three and four children by multiple fathers who are uncaring and failing in their duties of care and support with the consequences picked up by the taxpayer' (cited in Browne 2012). These young women were apparently creating 'a new lifestyle of welfare economy' (ibid.). Keating's sudden concern about single-mothers' claims on welfare could not have been prompted by any increase in occurrence of single-parent claimants, since the number of claimants had dropped from 92,326 in 2010 to 87,735 in 2012 (ibid.). In any case, as Browne elaborates: '60% (of claimants) have only one child, 28% have two children and the remaining circa 12% come in the category of having three or more children — with many of these

families comprising women who are divorced or separated after their marriages broke down'. Of course, the strategy employed by Keating has a long history and is similarly witnessed in Britain (see Skeggs 2006, Tyler 2013). In fact it can be traced at least as far back as Thomas Malthus' opposition to the Old Poor Law (abolished in 1834), which depended on claims that the system was facilitating immorality, dependency, irresponsibility and feckless breeding (O'Flynn 2009: 98).

When it comes to efforts to scapegoat vulnerable groups in contemporary Ireland, the political establishment typically prefers anecdotes over facts. This, of course, is in keeping with the previously noted secular, political definition of scapegoating that is shallow, widespread and aimed at a multitude of 'transitory victims' (Brown and Stivers 1998: 716). For example, in 2008, the Labour Party spokesperson on Social and Family Affairs, Roisin Shortall, said there was a need for greater vigilance against child benefit fraud by migrants, and called on the state to stop such payments abroad (Haynes et al. 2010). This was a staggering request given that the arrangement was provided for under EU law (O'Brien 2009). Likewise, in 2009 Limerick County Councillor, Liam Galvin (Fine Gael) said that he believed that a considerable amount of fraud was being committed through the wrongful claiming of 'welfare benefits' by foreign nationals. He stated that 'taxi drivers are picking up foreigners at the airport and driving them straight to the welfare office and straight back to the airport again' (*Limerick Leader* 26 May, cited in Power et al. 2012: 13-14).ⁱⁱⁱ Yet, Councillor Galvin's assertions seem to ignore the fact that since 2004 *all*

applicants had to satisfy the Habitual Residence Condition (HRC) for a wide range of social welfare payments (Department of Social Protection 2010a, 2010b).^{iv}

Another common strategy to enhance frame resonance and the redirection of blame towards scapegoats is to highlight an extreme example of welfare abuse that people can easily visualise, and then extrapolate from the individual case to claims of welfare fraud on an industrial scale. For example, this approach was taken in 2011 as the government were planning to cut social welfare. Minister of State Fergus O'Dowd claimed that there was widespread fraud in the social welfare system, costing the state somewhere in the region of €600m (Taft 2011). Though the newspapers, state broadcasters and others uncritically repeated these assertions, the €600 million figure of welfare fraud was in reality a 'control saving'. This means that 'if there were no controls or inspections', there would be a guesstimated '€600 million in over-payments over time, but crucially fraud would only account for a minority of these over-payments' (Taft 2011). As Taft elaborates, fraud was *actually* accounted for at a rate of '€21 million in 2007, rising to €26 million by 2010', figures which are approximately 0.1 per cent of the Department of Social Protections' budget. However, publicizing these figures would not fit with the hegemonic anti-welfare agenda qua 'responsibility' frame; thus, we concur with Taft's assertion that 'to talk of €600 million in fraud is highly fraudulent'. Yet, crucially, the extent to which these discourses have taken hold among the general public - the degree to which they resonate with pre-existing prejudices and dominant ideology - has meant

that cuts to welfare tend not to appear as attacks on the most vulnerable. Rather, they are framed as a means of tackling the putative abuse of the system and the irresponsibility of feckless groups that cannot and should not be tolerated in a time of austerity. As an aside, we recognise that such framing is also evidenced in Britain with intensified political rhetoric about ‘the welfare scrounger/skiver’ and attendant media ‘poverty porn’ which constructs ‘figures of disgust’ (Jensen 2014).

Of course, the media not only target the poor and vulnerable. Because the finance, insurance and real estate (FIRE) sector is the largest recipient of state handouts – it is the biggest ‘welfare queen’, so to speak, following a historically unprecedented bailout – ‘banker bashing’ is also apparent and it has considerable resonance. Yet, we recognise the limitations of ‘banker bashing’ not least because it is individualising and de-politicising. It is a means of disseminating the enabling myth of a few rotten worms in an otherwise healthy green apple (Žižek 2009), irrespective of the fact that rotten worms are not required for a socially destructive speculative frenzy to develop. Indeed, we would highlight the inadequacy of ‘banker bashing’ by noting how those facilitating the bail-out of the financial sector are among the most eager to participate in the practice. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, for example, recently expressed ‘outrage’ on hearing the Anglo tapes (a series of taped conversations between senior executives at Anglo Irish Bank, made public in June 2013) (Sherrard 2013). The tapes suggest that bankers planned to load the Irish state with billions of Euros worth of private debt, requiring necessary deceptions of politicians and

central bank officials. The fact that 'banker bashing' is an individualising and de-politicising reaction to the crisis permitted Merkel to express moral indignation and apparent outrage at the callous attitude toward the European taxpayer, *while at the same time presiding over the bailout of European banks at public expense*. Likewise, Ireland's Deputy Prime Minister, Eamon Gilmore, said the tapes were 'disgusting', that they showed the 'arrogance', 'contempt' and 'sheer greed' of senior executives at Anglo Irish Bank (thejournal.ie 2013). However, apart from the flippant and offensive tone of the tapes, Gilmore did not condemn the bankers' economic interests (the socialisation of massive private debts) as 'disgusting'. In fact Gilmore expressed relief that the Anglo tapes had not emerged earlier, since they might have jeopardised the Irish government's debt-deal negotiations with European authorities - the same negotiations that have burdened current and future generations with paying off Anglo's debt to European banks and private bondholders (WNS Reporter 2013). Sociologists such as McCullagh (2014) aptly locate such processes within a larger welfare state for the rich, which entails the large vertical redistribution of resources from the bottom and middle to the top.

In the end, the process of scapegoating described above serves a dual-purpose: on the one hand it deflects blame from the government and the relatively enduring class interests that it is prioritising; on the other hand it serves to rationalise and normalise attacks on those that it has been decided must bear the costs. The process is entwined with the transference of privately accumulated debt as part of a

moralised as well as economic class project that is inseparable from other intersecting axes of power (notably gender and ethnicity). We argue that the more obvious the damage wrought by the financial firms, property developers and speculators, and the more obvious the source of deteriorating conditions, the greater the attempts to transfer the burden of blame to groups lower down the social structure wherein inequalities and inequity are most acutely experienced. More generally, we would suggest these are the logics and patterned consequences of a capitalist system in structural crisis. This is a world-system where powerful interests are threatened by a bifurcating system, resulting in renewed efforts to defend deeply structured privileges (Wallerstein 1999, 2011).

Concluding Reflections

Concerns have been expressed that mainstream sociology has, over the past five decades, largely neglected capital, capitalism and the economy, resulting in much myopia and even blindness (Lenzer 2007). Yet, as evidenced by this special issue of *Sociology* and various movements within the BSA, sociology, in line with its classical heritage, has much to offer. Accordingly, we share the view that our discipline must become more engaging in this time of crisis and austerity - or what Scambler (2012) terms 'unjust times' (see also Burawoy 2005, Tyler 2013). Hopefully, our modest contribution to the discussion, from the periphery of Western Europe, provides additional grist to such debates and further stimulates the sociological imagination. To that end, we reflected on the process of scapegoating in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland,

ranging from democratised discourses (everybody is to blame) to the vilification of more specific targets such as 'welfare cheats' (e.g. single mothers and immigrants). While superficial, such processes nonetheless have the potential to foster much intolerance and hatred under conditions of (unresolved) crisis (Wallerstein 2011).

Whether understood anthropologically or sociologically, scapegoating is a multi-faceted social process. As observed, secular/political forms of scapegoating in Ireland, reproduced through and amplified by a neoliberal mass media (Mercille 2013), are inseparable from and are indeed exacerbated by deteriorating material conditions of existence. Sharing critical realist concerns with ontological matters (e.g. real social structures, class as a generative mechanism) and drawing insights from group conflict theory, frame analysis and a political economy critique of the global crisis, we aimed to make sense of what is in many respects utterly senseless and unnecessary for those who dare imagine a more just and equal society. For Allen (2009: 113), post-crash Ireland is a 'mad, mad world' where all manner of inequities are institutionalised and myths prevail. Monaghan and O'Flynn (2013) would refer to this as a Madoffized society, given the corrosive consequences of ponzi finance.

Whether Ireland is considered 'mad' or Madoffized, this is also a nation that is socially structured according to discernible, relatively enduring interests and the exercise of power within and between nations. We would argue, at least in the context of the EU, that Ireland is disproportionately bearing the economic and social

costs of the structural crisis of historical capitalism – a crisis that preoccupied exceptional sociologists, such as Wallerstein (1999), well before the 2008 GFC. These are the conditions where socially structured interests and competition over resources prevail, providing fertile terrain for scapegoating. The above also fits a historical pattern of inequitable inter-state relations, racism and the denigration of subordinated European states as administered by ruling elites. Provocatively, given Ireland's history of colonial oppression by the British Empire and the denigration of the Irish as 'white niggers', O'Keeffe (2013) has (with a nod in the direction of Malcolm X) compared the nation's elite to 'house-negroes', who find favour with their master at the expense of 'field negroes' toiling as slaves. And, just as 'nigger' has been defined as 'the master symbol of outsider to the community' in a process of scapegoating that also implicates place (Brown and Stivers 1998: 713), there are times when Ireland (with its putatively feckless population) is constructed as a scapegoat for 'the European community' where wrongs now have to be put right. Of course, it is not alone; rather, it sits alongside the rest of the deprecated PIIGS (Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain), which remain in crisis and in need of disciplining by the markets.

One key conclusion is that scapegoating in Ireland cannot be understood in isolation from the socially destructive character of global finance capital, or from the power-relations ensuring that particular interests are preserved/consolidated/extended in the event of economic collapse. In Ireland, the process has to be set against the knowledge that the FIRE sector's interests have been prioritised above all other

considerations (such as social/gender justice), representing perhaps in exaggerated form how the power of nation states (in the case of the Eurozone, powerful core nations such as Germany) underpin the monetary system where commercial banks rather than society are purportedly 'too big to fail'. It is of course difficult to publicly rationalise policies that have highly negative effects typically on the most vulnerable in society, particularly since the destructive character of the FIRE sector has been so fully exposed. Yet, such narrow interests prevail. Because there are incredible social costs to this, heavy symbolic machinery and capital continue to be deployed to deflect blame from those groups who profit most from capitalism's exploitative modes of reproduction – an unfortunate yet sociologically interesting twist on group conflict theory that has hitherto largely focused on the degradation of small minority groups rather than larger populations (including entire odiously indebted nations). As such, we would posit that the politics of austerity and scapegoating are two sides of the same coin.

In sum, we believe Ireland's crisis offers a valuable case study on the processes of ideological rationalisation that have become especially acute post-2008, making clear that as financial, economic and fiscal crises unfold, scapegoating becomes a convenient and pervasive process in response to the ills of a polarising world-system. With the exception of a few 'rotten' bankers, it is the unemployed, single mothers, public sector workers and immigrants in Ireland who are the 'logical' targets for routine pillorying. However, rather than claiming Ireland is peculiar, it is

our view that Ireland offers a lens on the pervasive process of scapegoating and its role in the crisis as it affects populations across the world. Ireland serves as a cautionary tale - an example of the power and dominance of fictitious capital and of the ideological means by which its oppressive ends are currently facilitated. It is our hope that broader recognition of such processes will help to move debates away from how to politically administer austerity to more substantively rational concerns about the sort of world we wish to share. Sociology, in line with its classic heritage, is well-placed to rise to this challenge and assert its relevance in a world where the 'logics' of the market rather than civil society currently prevail.

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ⁱ In that regard, patterns of corporate take-over appear to be writ large at the sovereign level and this does not bode well for Ireland's future. We would be remiss here if we did not mention there is a historical record of workers' savings, via 'pension-fund' or 'money manager capitalism', being appropriated and used to attack labour and industrial capital through corporate looting and asset stripping (Hudson 2010: 439).

ⁱⁱ Such U-turns were not peculiar to Ireland. For example, while still in office, former French President, Nicolas Sarkozy (cited in Allen 2011: 171), argued that 'the idea of the absolute power of the markets that should not be constrained by any rule, by any political intervention, was a mad idea. The idea that the markets were always right was a mad idea'. Yet within a few months of such statements the move to resurrect the systems which had caused the GFC was underway in earnest throughout the EU.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Haynes et al. (2010) for a fuller discussion on how Irish politicians constructed Transnational EU migrants in Ireland between 2008 and 2010.

^{iv} As a result of the EU enlargement on 1 May 2004 Ireland and two other EU15 countries permitted open access to their workforce for new EU members. As a precaution against 'welfare tourism', from those countries, on that day, Ireland introduced the Habitual Residence Condition (HRC) as an additional criterion for eligibility for social assistance payments. According to the HRC a person is not habitually resident unless the person has been present in the State for a continuous period of two years (Department of Social Protection 2010a and 2010b). While the legislation has been in place since 2004, it was only with the onset of the GFC that a populist discourse of a need for greater vigilance against welfare fraud by migrants emerged.