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Scapegoating in Post 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland: Framing Blame in Crisis Times

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Abstract

Irish society continues to reel in the aftershock of the 2008 global financial crisis, particularly since the government socialised the massive liabilities of private banks. Sensitized to antagonistic social relations using group conflict theory, frame analysis and Marxian informed critique, this paper reflects on some of the corrosive social consequences of the crisis. In particular, we interrogate hegemonic discourses which scapegoat various targets, such as public sector workers and social welfare recipients. While scapegoating is understood anthropologically as the 'transference of evil' our sociological interest is in the transference of blame and privately accumulated debt as part of a class project that has served finance capital and its representatives so well. In conclusion, we suggest that Ireland serves as an example of the power and dominance of the financial sector under late capitalism, and of the ideological means by which its socially corrosive ends are currently facilitated.

Keywords: conflict; economic crisis; finance capital; frame analysis; scapegoating.

Introduction: From 'Banker Bashing' to Predatory Finance Capital

The policy decisions following the collapse of the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' in 2008 demonstrate the extent to which wealthy and influential groups have been able to offload the costs of the global financial crisis (GFC) onto others. Ireland's crisis also offers a valuable case study on the processes of ideological rationalisation that accompany predatory finance capital, making clear that as economic crises unfold, oppressed groups are all too often treated as convenient scapegoats for the ills of a globalised system that is devouring itself (Ticktin 2009). The unemployed, public sector workers and immigrants are usual targets in Ireland, as elsewhere, as competition intensifies over resource allocation. Similarly, later entrants into the property bubble, who now find they can no longer keep up mortgage repayments (especially after wages were slashed and unemployment rapidly increased) find themselves being held culpable for their 'irresponsible' (sic) borrowing. This is despite well documented control frauds within the financial sector, including the deliberate issuance of bad loans, which resulted in rampant asset price inflation in the USA and beyond (Black 2005).

At the same time, we would avoid reproducing those ‘fantasmatic logics’ (Glynos et al. 2012) that socially construct a select few elites as diversionary scapegoats, that is, the appeal of simply blaming narrowly logical targets such as executives of bailed-out banks. Indeed, we recognise the limitations of ‘banker bashing’ not least because it is individualising and sociological attention must be directed at broader structured relations, logics and discourses. Indeed, we would flag the de-politicising character of ‘banker bashing’ and 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, a leading Irish politician, Tánaiste (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).

The opportunism that characterises 'banker bashing' is only one strand of a much more elaborate and corrosive system, explored further in our paper. At a time when a transnational 'feral overclass' (a hard core of financiers, executives and their representatives) (Scambler and Scambler 2012: 2.5) are running amok, we are concerned with how waves of opprobrium are being heaped onto the denizens of odiously indebted nations who have largely been constructed as blameworthy. In particular, people who would have formerly been considered 'working class' are being socially constructed as parasitic on a system that can ill-afford them and which is groaning under the weight of their 'unreasonable demands' (e.g. the desire for decent employment opportunities, healthcare, education, pension provision and social security). In this paper, we go some way towards critiquing all-too-common efforts to construct easy scapegoats in these crisis times. Our discussion will be elaborated with reference to post 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland, where the toxic fallout from the GFC is severely impacting civil society (Allen 2009; McDonough and Loughrey 2009). However, as we will explain, our paper is also intended to have wider

resonance when interrogating an interconnected 'world system' (Wallerstein 1983) of exploitative class relations and ideological fictions where it is not only Ireland's (new) poor and marginalised who risk vilification.

Scapegoating: The Secular 'Transference of Evil' in Late Capitalist Societies

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 and drastically impacts on the fortunes of a community. Detailed analysis of the problem as it affects rural Tanzania concludes that severe income shocks are the key cause of sudden increases in murders of elderly women accused of witchcraft. Typically, when extreme rainfall negatively impacts income there is a doubling of witch murders (Miguel 2005).

Here, we are concerned with the forms of scapegoating that emerge independently of religious practices and rituals, but that likewise appear to flourish under conditions of economic hardship and exacerbated insecurities. With the GFC as our backdrop, we are most concerned with the processes that facilitate the channelling of blame away from one social group (usually the most powerful and influential) towards subordinated and marginalised groups. Periodic instances of 'banker bashing' aside (and occasional punishment of 'deviant cases' such as Bernard Madoff in the USA who constructed a \$65bn ponzi scheme and who could in fact be viewed as the tip of an iceberg; see self reference 2012), it is those groups lower down the social hierarchy who are most vulnerable to the fallout from the GFC as powerful groups seek to defend the status quo. Accordingly, we are concerned with scapegoating as it relates to and facilitates the on-going redistribution of wealth as the public gaze is focused on certain groups of people who are vilified for their alleged offences against the moral and symbolic order of society. Hence, we are primarily interested in scapegoating in its secular sense and in the context of the crises of late capitalism, with close attention to its development in the wake of Ireland's economic collapse.

Of course, as indicated above, the process of scapegoating and the conditions underlying this process are not specific to any particular nation state. Furthermore, attention cannot be limited to economically underdeveloped nations where people's

immediate livelihoods are especially vulnerable to the vagaries of the weather and infectious diseases. For example, research in the USA and Europe has identified self-interest 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, the group conflict theoretical framework (Blumer 1958) argues that how members of outgroups (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 ingroup's advantageous circumstances or their requirements for resources (McLaren and Johnson 2004). In brief, 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 the scapegoating of subordinated populations in Ireland, and the relative subordination of the nation itself in what Wallerstein (1983) would refer to as a world system.

As part of a theoretically eclectic approach, we also see value in at least two other lines of analysis. First, framing analysis sensitises us to how claims makers seek to make their definition of reality prevail over competing versions. Our concern in the ensuing critique is to show how the dominant 'ingroup' construct and marginalise the 'outgroup', even when the latter are the statistical majority. In other words, we will utilise framing analysis in order to see group conflict theory and the politicised/diversionary process of stigmatising myriad targets in operation. We will use such an approach to illuminate the powerful role of the 'framers' (members of the privileged ingroup) and the part they play in moulding social discourses, orchestrating the public agenda and controlling the public thought process (Breen 2007, cited in Marron 2011: 24). Second, as seen with reference to some of the literature broached in the next section that places framing and competition over resources in context, we are indebted to Marxian informed critiques.

Scapegoating in Context: (Post) 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland and the GFC

Scapegoating in contemporary Ireland cannot be divorced from dire political economic conditions wherein conflict over resource allocation has been escalating. 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). Viewing Ireland's crisis through a Marxian lens, which is attentive to forms of swindling, expropriation and ideological fictions in class-divided societies, Allen (2009) offers a damning critique of the nation's economic crash. According to Allen, dominant class interests turned what was widely considered an 'economic miracle' into a nightmare for vast swathes of the population, ranging from manual workers and the unemployed to middle-class professionals in the public sector who have had their incomes slashed while struggling to repay mortgages on their homes - the prices of which were inflated exponentially during a housing bubble (see Hennigan 2008). This fits similar lines of analysis of Anglo-American capitalism, such as that offered by Harman (2009) and Hudson (2010) where the fictions of finance capital have proven so catastrophic.

Critiquing the extractive operations of global finance capital, and a complicit political class that enabled Ireland to become the 'Wild West of European finance' (McCabe

2011: 148) self reference (2012, 2013) interrogate the conditions underlying the intensification of scapegoating. In so doing, they suggest that scapegoating - in combination with other processes, such as mass deception, efforts to maintain secrecy/silence and obfuscation - occlude critical attention that might otherwise challenge deeper structural relations, figurations and logics that have served the hegemonic interests of financiers, property developers, rentiers and members of a corrupt political class (see also Mahon 2012). We anticipate most readers will have at least some familiarity with the tale of the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' economy (1995 to 2008). To quote a well known Irish journalist, the rise and fall of Ireland's economy makes 'Icarus look surprisingly boring' (O'Toole 2010: 10). It is widely understood that the Irish economy experienced an unprecedented boom, serving as a poster child for Europe, before it suddenly went bust as the US financial crisis went global. The Celtic Tiger era should thus be understood as a speculative boom (self reference 2013) - a brief period in history when Ireland, which has always had a weak indigenous economy and is effectively an 'outpost of the USA' (Allen 2009: 152), rode on the coat-tails of far more powerful global players.

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 European Union (EU) (McDonough and Loughrey 2009). The illusory (Share and Corcoran 2010) status of Ireland's economic miracle

was effectively exposed as finance capitalism hit a brick wall in 2008, culminating in massive bank bailouts and attendant austerity. This has involved sums which dwarf the levels witnessed in other EU nations as citizens are held liable for private losses within the finance, insurance and real estate (FIRE) sector. Self reference (2013: 10), in their Madoffization of Irish society thesis and their discussion on the significance of debt-expansion, cite various sources when explaining how Ireland has the dubious honour of being the most burdened in the EU by bank debts. Noting Eurostat data for 2007 to 2011, it is reported that: 'When the European banking crisis is costed on an individual basis throughout the EU, it works out at €192 per person. The cost bourn by German citizens is considerably more, standing at €491. However, the cost per capita in Ireland stands at €8,981 (Taft 2013)'. Accumulation though debt expansion, as discussed by self reference (2012, 2013), is a crucial mechanism of wealth transference in nations dominated by ponzi finance and associated fictions.

The bail-out of Irish banks fits a pre-established pattern, revealing a power structure that renders the process of scapegoating intelligible. As we have emphasised above, scapegoating involves redirecting blame from powerful, privileged and influential groups to others (invariably to people of more modest means and influence). That considered, it is important to remember that the financial sector's interest were prioritised by government policy long before the 2008 blanket guarantee (McCabe 2010). When the GFC hit, true to form, Ireland's politicians bowed to bankers and

speculators and socialised astronomical private losses in their entirety much to the dissatisfaction of EU partners. A sovereign debt crisis predictably ensued before the intervention of international money lenders.

Ireland's suicidal bank bailouts culminated in Ireland taking an €85bn conditional loan in 2010 from the EU and European Central Bank, funded, in no small part, by the country's own pension reserves (€17.5bn).¹ Along with the International Monetary fund (IMF), the so-called Troika have become the 'heroic saviours' of a nation in crisis (or, rather, we argue, the defenders of the private interests of bankers, developers and international bondholders), and continue to provide a seemingly incontestable rationale for right-wing economic policies at the time of writing. Competing frames and dissenting voices notwithstanding, we are told ad nauseum by politicians and mainstream media that the attendant programme of austerity, although difficult and protracted, is necessary in order to satisfy 'the markets' and 'balance the budget' – obfuscating claims that cloud the real exploitation and looting that are still underway. As witnesses to and subjects of this regime, we are not 'cooled out' to use Goffman's (1952) terminology in his analysis of the confidence game where efforts are made to appease the 'marks' (targets of the swindle) after the 'accident' or 'mistake' that leaves them financially worse off (also, see Glynos et al. 2012). Indeed, to add insult to injury, on-going dispossession and its legitimisation are proceeding under the 'leadership' of a subsequently elected coalition government

that supposedly represents the public interest but is evidently more interested in giving 'instruction in the philosophy of taking a loss' (Goffman 1952: 452). This coalition, comprising Fine Gael and Labour, was elected in 2011 and has shamelessly reneged on election promises such as 'burning bank bond holders'. In short, the current Irish government is administering the deeply divisive 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. For example, the current Fine Gael Minister for Finance, Michael Noonan, when in opposition in 2010, stated:

What legal or moral compulsion is on Ireland, however, to honour in full debt incurred by Irish banks when there was no state involvement in these arrangements? These loans were entered into freely by willing lenders and borrowers, with absolutely no state participation. The interest rate charged represented the risk at the time, and there never was a state liability. It is obscene that liability for these loans is now being transferred to the Irish taxpayer, in many respects to the poorest of the Irish taxpayers. The Irish government and the taxpayer has no liability whatsoever for these debts ... In the Budget, the minister for Finance reduced social welfare payments, punished the blind, disabled, widows, carers and the

unemployed and he taxed the poorest at work, and for what? It was so the taxpayer can take on liability for debts the country never incurred, and arose from private arrangements between private institutions. What a disaster and an obscenity (cited in Kerrigan 2012).

In his current role, Minister Noonan presides over arrangements designed to institutionalise this obscenity. To use Dinerstein's (2004: 264-8) words regarding the political economic conditions under which the Argentinians took to the streets in December 2001, we are witnessing in Ireland 'economic terrorism' and 'violence intrinsic to the imposition of the capitalist (dis)order'. Yet, forms of protest in Ireland remain somewhat muted as privileged groups seek to reproduce the status quo through various channels of communication, notably the mainstream media.

Mindful of the larger context of neoliberal globalisation and financialisation, our substantive interest in and concerns about scapegoating in contemporary Irish society are thus located within these broader processes and conflicts. Indeed, as with other late capitalist nations, the population of Ireland are witnessing the intensification of oppressive political economic conditions that are hitting the most vulnerable members of society hardest and are likely to continue as long as the odiously imposed debt remains. Unfortunately, economic indicators suggest that conditions over resource allocation and competition are likely to get much worse

(Taft 2013), and, by implication, the scapegoating will likely intensify. We now turn to the scapegoating of various groups - the oppressive 'framing' of myriad targets - in contemporary Irish mainstream media and hegemonic political discourse.

Oppression, Values and Ideologies: Shaping Perception, Framing Blame

In Ireland, the political decision to socialise private banking debt and subsequent austerity policies are rooted in hegemonic class interests and neoliberal ideology, which seek 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 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' 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 it is no surprise to see stark examples of both frames in circulation. For example, immigrant rights, trade unions and social justice have increasingly come under fire since 2008, and many civil society organizations have had to participate in debates 'where the terms of the discussion guarantee that they cannot progress their goals i.e. debates about budget cuts rather than focusing on [creating] jobs' (O'Donoghue 2012).

By way of illustrating the use of such frames in Ireland, we now focus on a number of dominant discourses that circulate in the public domain: '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), 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, ranging from single mothers who ostensibly have children with multiple fathers, to immigrants who reportedly fly into the country to claim benefits before departing. As a caveat, informed critique also appears within mainstream newspapers (e.g. Browne 2012) and we draw from such commentary, though the aforementioned discourses remain hegemonic in the contested process of framing and scapegoating.

Democratising Blame: 'We All Partied'

As finance capital imploded, blame was largely deflected away from the government and the most powerful groups that dominate government policy. As in other parts of the world, the most privileged groups exercised their power in an effort to castigate subordinated groups. Likewise, only the most powerful and influential groups have the means to deflect opprobrium (McCullagh 2010), with the convenient exception of a few aberrant types or 'rotten apples' (as exposed by whistleblowers rather than the authorities as seen with our earlier reference to the Anglo Irish Bank debacle). Though at the early stages of the economic meltdown it was difficult for the political class to deflect blame from the financial and property sectors - there was a steady stream of revelations that could not be ignored - the process of scapegoating others began immediately in the interests of reproducing dominant class interests. Indeed, the political establishment began by attempting to spread the blame as thinly and widely among the population as possible. According to the then Minister for Finance, Brian Lenihan 'we decided as a people, collectively, to have this property boom', or to put it another way, 'we all partied' (cited in Kerrigan 2012). As far as government ministers were concerned, there was no point blaming financiers, speculators and their political representatives. We were all culpable and should share in the shame of this self-inflicted catastrophe. Similarly, Minister Martin Mansergh acknowledged that mistakes had been made, but was only prepared to admit 'imprudence, with the benefit of hindsight, on the part of us all' (ibid.).

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 perspective is that it obscures the extent to which the property bubble was a direct result of government housing policy, which as McCabe (2011) has demonstrated,

very often served as a system of state subsidisation for the property and banking sectors.

'Inefficient' Public Sector Workers

There is a common theme running through the government justifications of 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. In this respect it was quite predictable that the government and mainstream media would attempt to create the impression that Ireland has become 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. 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, 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 was set up with the view to examining the expenditure programmes in each Government Department (Department of Finance 2013). Headed by UCD economist Colm McCarthy, it recommended cuts in public expenditure, which involved reducing the number of people working in the public sector by 17500. The report was used to rationalise cuts, but was only a small part in the overall process. Accordingly, it is worth examining how attacks on the public sector have been sold to the public in general.

Measures that impact negatively on a society are generally coupled with a discourse that serves to stigmatise those directly affected, a function ably performed by the print media. In examining representations of the public service in Ireland's print media we see clear evidence of the use 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 in the period that preceded 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' (Murphy 2010: 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 (if not the direct intention) 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' when unpopular and ideological policies are about to be implemented (p. 18).

Similarly, Marron (2011) documents how the Irish Health Service Executive and its employees have been constructed, with sensationalist headlines and inflammatory content depicting them as inefficient, incompetent, over-paid and privileged. In this context it should be noted that the Irish print media is merely one element of a system-wide campaign, which we argue aims 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 parasitic nature of finance capital. Sociologists such as Walby (2013) would no doubt underscore the important gendered processes and inequities at play here since public sector jobs and services are disproportionately held and supported by women.

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

In post 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland, the government has chosen to make direct and indirect cuts to social welfare. The increased cost of the social welfare budget is attributable to structural deficits in the Irish labour market (which was dominated by construction during the boom) and which has seen consistently high levels of unemployment after the 2008 crash. However, rather than conceding any failure on their own part to develop the productive economy and boost employment, politicians in association with a complicit media repeatedly sensationalize 'social welfare fraud' - a construction that ostensibly justifies ongoing welfare cuts. Various entitlements have been targeted, entitlements which typically make life more bearable for low and middle income groups and which disproportionately include women who are hardest hit in times of economic crisis (Walby 2013).

The people of Ireland are routinely exposed to television investigations by leading state and commercial stations, print media coverage, and vocal pronouncements from politicians in the main parties claiming that massive fraud is occurring. Ireland's commercial TV3 station has been quite enthusiastic about this. In 2011, 2012 and 2013 the station aired a 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 problem of social welfare fraud occurring in Ireland'

(TV3 Player 2013). Conveniently, each time this was aired it helped the government to rationalize ever deeper cuts to welfare. Claims of fraud are of course only part of the strategy. All manner of rationalisations were offered for the regressive measures contained in the Social Welfare Bill of December 2012, not least with respect to the putative immorality and/or imprudence of claimants.

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.). This sudden concern about single-parents’ claims on welfare could not have been prompted by any increase in occurrence, since the number of single-parent 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’. The strategy employed by Keating has a long history and is similarly witnessed in Britain (see

Skeggs 2006, Tyler 2008, 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 (self-reference 2009).

When it comes to efforts to scapegoat vulnerable groups, those involved typically prefer anecdotes over facts. For example, in 2008 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 (self reference 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 26th May cited in self-reference et al 2012: 13-14).ⁱⁱ 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).

Another common approach in order to enhance frame resonance 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. 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 2011a). 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% 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 within 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 crisis (also, self reference 2013).

As we have been careful to establish, it is not only the poor and vulnerable who have been targeted in the media. Because the 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 commonplace. However, we would argue such a practice also serves to deflect attention from the predation of the financial sector, which, after all, does not create wealth, but merely extracts it from where it is originally created for itself (Ticktin 2009). So-called banker bashing 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. The tendency to individualise is ever-present. Many commentators in Ireland, such as McNamara (2013) trace the nation’s woes back to decisions taken in Europe, pointing the finger of blame at ‘criminally incompetent’ EU leaders. This, we would argue, is to deflect attention away from European finance, members of which would hardly consider decisions that benefit the FIRE sector as incompetent. To suggest that EU leaders failed to properly oversee matters presumes too much. We would be in broad agreement with Storey (2013), who claims that accusations of incompetence are far

too charitable since 'what has happened is largely in line with how the makers of the Eurozone saw the system working'.

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 interests that it is prioritising; on the other hand it serves to rationalise and normalise attacks on those that it has decided must bear the costs. The process is part of the generalised 'transference of evil' and, indeed, 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). It is not surprising that the mainstream media, which have long acted as cheerleaders for the property and financial sectors, began to point the finger at myriad targets post 2008 as the consequences of the system they championed descended into chaos, producing all manner of societal discontents. With respect to the damage inflicted upon Irish society, the government and mainstream media have overwhelmingly sought to justify austerity – something that we consider unjustifiable despite the resonance of their neoliberal frames among 'right minded' (conservative thinking) denizens. 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 blame to those lower down the social structure wherein inequalities and inequity are most acutely experienced.

Conclusion

Scapegoating is a multi-faceted and embedded social process that is inseparable from and is indeed exacerbated by deteriorating material conditions of existence. Drawing in particular from group conflict theory, frame analysis and Marxian informed critique of the current economic crisis, our paper 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 defined as a 'mad, mad world' where all manner of inequities are institutionalised and myths prevail. However, this is also a world that is socially structured according to discernible interests and the distribution of power within and between nations.

One key conclusion is that the process of scapegoating 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 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 gender justice), representing perhaps in exaggerated form how the power of the nation state underpins the monetary system itself. Between 2007/8 and 2011, €20bn (12 percent of GDP) was taken out of the Irish economy in austerity budgets. Though

the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council has claimed austerity is working by reducing the nation's deficit, Taft (2011b) clearly demonstrates that it has not worked. Austerity has achieved no more than a 1.8 per cent reduction in the deficit, but has contributed to the sharp increase in poverty, the return to mass unemployment and mass emigration. It is of course difficult to rationalise policies that have such negative effects, particularly since the reckless, destructive and parasitic character of the FIRE sector has been so fully exposed. Yet, such narrow interests are still prioritised, which means offloading the costs of its speculative activity onto the larger public. Because there are incredible social costs to this, heavy symbolic machinery and capital continue to be deployed to deflect blame away from the powerful FIRE sector – 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, it is clear to us that the rationalisation of government policy in Ireland and the process of scapegoating are really two sides of the same coin. The key consideration here is that of class power as it operates within and between nations in an integrated world system. Through both the boom and the crisis periods, Irish government policy has largely transferred wealth upwards and outwards (e.g. via payments to international bondholders and corporate tax avoidance) and debt downwards and inwards (e.g. as increased mortgage burdens or socialised banking debt that was placed on the sovereign balance sheet). Just as elected politicians have dispensed with democracy

and continue to serve the interests of a feral overclass at public expense, the mainstream media has also largely been subservient and complicit by accepting government rationalisations of 'austerity' measures and limiting the political debate to what cuts should be made in the 'national interest' (sic). In order to preserve the accumulated claims on wealth on the part of bankers, property speculators and bondholders, more and more cuts and taxes are imposed on the general population, the justification of which invariably involves deflecting blame away from the beneficiaries of austerity, and towards its victims. We would stress the point, however, that it is not only Ireland's (new) poor and marginalised who risk vilification. Ireland simply offers a lens with which to highlight the pervasive process of scapegoating and its role in the economic crisis as it affects populations across the world. Ireland serves as a cautionary tale - an example of the power and dominance of the financial sector under late capitalism, and of the ideological means by which its oppressive ends are currently facilitated.

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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 See self reference at al. (2010) for a fuller discussion on how Irish politicians constructed Transnational EU migrants in Ireland between 2008 and 2010.