

Reversed Memory, Collective Action and the Irish Economic Crisis 2010-2013

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Abstract: *This paper examines how collective memory of colonialism informed the response of Irish citizens to the Irish economic crisis of 2010-2013. This crisis resulted in the Troika bailout of the Irish banks, a related programme of austerity measures and the loss of economic sovereignty. The frequent referencing of colonial experience during this period is examined using Zandberg, Meyers and Neiger's (2012) concept of reversed memory. This model asserts that collective memory not only shapes how a society may view the past but that events in the present can re-shape how a society understands its past.*

Keywords: *Reversed Memory; Collective Action; Irish Economic Crash*

The Irish Economic crisis of the 2010-2013 was one of the most traumatic events of recent Irish history. Having been through a period of deep recession in the 1980s, the Irish economy recovered during the 1990s to produce a sustained period of extraordinary growth and prosperity (Nolan, O'Connell and Whelan 2000). The economic boom not only produced significant increases in wage and income levels in Ireland but led to reduction in emigration, almost full employment and a new confidence evident in Irish culture (Coulter and Coleman 2003). The long-term unemployment of the 1980s was replaced by a sustained demand for labour which resulted in inward migration and an increasing ethnic diversity emerging in Irish society (Fanning, 2007). However, from 2003 onwards, the manufacturing sector which had driven the early Celtic Tiger growth was replaced by a construction boom as the key driver of economic growth. A property bubble emerged inflated by the availability of cheap credit from banks which was used to purchase properties which were over-valued (Donovan and Murphy 2013).

The global banking crash of 2008 punctured this system and resulted in a profound crisis within an Irish banking sector which had become over-extended servicing this property bubble. The problem was initially 'solved' by the Irish government by providing a blanket guarantee to the Irish banks. However, in 2009, it became clear that the crisis in the Irish banks was much deeper than previously thought. By 2010, it was evident that Irish state would not have the funds to meet its obligations under the 2008 bank guarantee. Because the Irish banking sector was integrated into European Monetary Union, European political and financial elites believed that the Irish banks could not be allowed to fail. Therefore, the Irish government was forced to accept an enormous loan in order to bailout

the banks. These loans came at a considerable cost to the Irish citizen. The state had to agree to a programme of austerity measures which involved severe cuts to public services and a range of new taxes. The implementation of this austerity programme was to be overseen by the Troika (EU/ ECB/ IMF) resulting in an effective ceding of economic sovereignty from the Irish state to transnational institutions (Allen and O'Boyle 2013).

This paper focuses on two aspects of this financial crisis. Firstly, it traces how the collective memory of colonialism in Ireland was referenced during the economic and political debates of 2010-2013. Using Zandberg, Meyer and Neiger (2012) concept of reversed memory, it is argued that the trauma of the bailout changed the narrative of the past which had emerged during the Celtic Tiger period. This narrative which stressed how Ireland had left the oppression of colonialism behind in its prosperous present was particularly evident at the time of the commemoration of the Irish famine in 1995. The paper also explores whether there is a link between the Irish memory of the colonialism and the Irish response to the bailout programme. In Greece, the other European society which experienced a bailout in 2010, the programme of austerity measures recommended by the Troika was greeted with mass protests and robust opposition (Cox 2012). In Ireland, in contrast, many commentators highlighted the absence of protest as a distinctive feature of the Irish response to austerity (Mercaille 2013; Hearne 2013). This paper concludes by asking whether the collective memory of colonialism in Ireland might have informed this more acquiescent response to the austerity process.

Reversed Memory

The study of memory is enmeshed in the tension between the past and the present. Maurice Halbwachs (1950) noted that while memory is collective, it is individuals who remember. Historical events have a significant role in shaping public opinion and attitudes to contemporary political and economic events (Schuman and Scott 1989). Cunningham, Nugent and Slodden comment 'accounting for how events are remembered and represented by collectivities requires that we take seriously a bedrock assumption of historical process – the fact that past events shape present actions and outcomes' (2010: 1).

Michael Dawson (1994) argues that collective memory creates a sense of linked fate which is central to social solidarity within groups, operating as a shared past which underpins their sense of 'we'. Memory is

malleable. It is constantly made and re-made as the narratives of the memory are told and re-told across the generations (Schudson 1992). Momentous or traumatic events have a particularly profound impact on how collective groups view contemporary realities (Schudson 1992). In his work on memories of slavery in the African-American community, Ron Eyreman (2002) has noted that while each generation has to engage with traumatic memories, each generation engages with the memory in a slightly different way. They have 'different perspectives on the past because of both emotional and temporal distance, altered circumstances and needs' (2002: 3).

While much of the research on collective memory has focused on how the past shapes the present, Bearman *et al* (1999), Danto (2007) and Griffin (2004) have all focused on the opposite side of this tension. They examine how events in the present have the capacity to reshape how the past is perceived and interpreted. Schudson comments 'the past is subject to reconstruction and rewriting according to present views' (1992: 205). Mapping how memories are reshaped in light of present events is a complex process. One of the most useful models provided in recent empirical research on memory which enables this type of mapping is Zandberg, Meyer and Neiger's model of reversed memory (2012). Their research examines how Israel's *Memorial Day for the Holocaust and Heroism* has been treated in the news media in Israel between 1994 and 2007. It provides a thought-provoking analysis of how the present alters and re-shapes narratives of the past. They note 'the process of shaping collective memory is ongoing and involves political, cultural and sociological dimensions, as different interpretations compete for their place in history' (Zandberg, Meyer and Neiger 2012: 66). Within their research, they devote particular attention to how the Israeli belief in their triumphal present has changed their narrative of the past creating what they call reversed memory. They comment 'reversed memory which commemorates the traumatic past by narrating the triumphal present and thus cultivates the understanding of past events as continuous ones, constantly extending into the present' (Zandberg, Meyer and Neiger, 2012: 66). They also note that this process 'not only eases the collective confrontation with painful traumas, but rather avoids this encounter altogether' (Zandberg, Meyer and Neiger 2012: 66).

In Irish historical memory, the Irish Famine 1845-1848 is the event which is most commonly likened to the Holocaust. During the Famine, almost one million people died and a further million emigrated. The traumatic memories of the Famine were still evident in the recollections of elderly people collected by the *Irish Folklore Commission* in the 1940s. For instance, they recorded one elderly lady who stated 'I heard accounts of people who gathered around the Killarney workhouse moaning and groaning with the hunger and the cartloads of corpses wending their

way to the pauper's graveyard in the neighbourhood' (National Folklore Ireland 1945). Another woman recalled

The Casey's lived down at the bottom. The ruin is still there. There were seven or eight of them there. The eldest girl went the six days of the week for soup and came empty. On the seventh day, five of them died. Years after, my father was digging near the ruin and he found the bones, an old man and a child, the arm of the old man wound around the child (National Folklore Ireland 1945)

These memories of individuals collected in the 1940s demonstrate a clear and continuing connection with the trauma of the Famine which had been passed through narrative from generation to generation.

As the twentieth century progressed however, some scholars have argued that this direct connection to the trauma of the Famine fragmented particularly as Ireland moved into a new period of prosperity and confidence in the 1990s. In this context, the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of Famine in 1995 which occurred during a period when Ireland was experiencing rapid economic growth was a watershed. With the establishment of a new Famine museum, it was argued by Irish elites that this would be the period when Irish society would finally come to terms with the trauma of the Famine (Dáil Debates 1995). However, David Lloyd argues that the narrative of the Celtic Tiger which stressed success and affluence was used to numb encounters with the more painful aspects of the Famine. Rather than focusing on earlier traumatic narratives evident in the 1940s, public figures tended to focus on how much the Irish Diaspora had achieved in contributing to the Celtic Tiger boom. He says

The commemoration of the Famine becomes unhappily one with a set of current cultural and political tendencies in Ireland that are thrusting the country uncritically into European and transnational capitalist modernity – uncritical not only of the still uncertain effects of our integration on our own social structures and environments, but also of the meaning for ourselves and for others of this alliance with transnational capitalism whose rapacious, brutal and destructive past is continually reproduced in the present (2000: 222).

This approach to commemorating the past which focuses on the narration of the triumphal present conforms to the pattern of reversed memory identified by Zandberg, Meyer and Neiger in Israel. They argue that this process may be viewed as a form of post-memory where 'the past is not merely narrated in the service of current objectives. Rather *the past is commemorated by means of the narration of the present*' (2012: 77).

An analysis of references to the Famine and the colonial period in Irish history during the 2010-2013 bailout and austerity period, demonstrate an entirely different form of engagement with the past. This sharp change suggests that the process of narrating the past through a triumphal present came to an end with the economic crash. The trauma of the bank guarantee, bailout and austerity had forced Irish citizens to engage with their painful memories of colonialism in a manner more directly linked to its harsh realities. During the 2010-2013 period in Ireland, there was a striking increase in popular and scholarly interest in the Famine. *The Atlas of the Great Irish Famine* was published which provided minute regional detail on the numbers of deaths which had occurred and highlighted horrific local accounts of starvation (Crowley, Smyth and Murphy 2012). This scholarly work was accompanied by the publication of a range of popular history books on the subject and a radio series '*Blighted Nation*' on RTÉ (Ó Murchadha 2011; Coogan, 2013(a); Kelly, 2013). While scholarly historians debated whether the Famine was genocide or not, popular commentators focused more on the question of how the legacy of the Irish Famine might be continuing to shape responses to the contemporary trauma of the bailout.

Aside from interest in the Famine during the austerity period, colonialism was increasingly referenced in order to understand the loss of economic sovereignty. For instance, when the EU/IMF/ECB team arrived in Dublin to negotiate the terms of the bailout agreement, the 2FM DJ Hector Ó hEochagáin played the rebel song '*The Foggy Dew*' on Friday November 19th especially he said, for team leader, A. J Chopra. The implied message to the Troika contained in the lyrics which described Irish resistance to British colonialism was not lost on ÓhEochagáin's audience even if the IMF official didn't hear the programme (RTÉ Archive 2010).

This post-colonial perspective on the crisis was also evident in a political spat the following week when Fianna Fáil TD, Mattie McGrath accused his own party leader, Taoiseach Brian Cowen of being "worse than Cromwell" during a Dáil debate on the national recovery plan. One of Cowen's ministers, Martin Mansergh rushed to his defence. In response, a national newspaper highlighted the fact that Mansergh's own ancestor, Bryan Mansergh had benefited from the Cromwellian invasion, having been given a castle by Cromwell's forces (Brennan 2010). After the change of government in 2011, McGrath who left Fianna Fáil continued his comparisons of austerity and colonialism. In a debate on the introduction of septic tank charges, as part of the austerity programme, on RTÉ Radio, he commented 'God, we got rid of the Black and Tans and Cromwell, not a bother. I don't want to wake up some morning and see two or three gentlemen in my backyard, peeping into my septic tank like the peep o'day boys out doing searches' (McGrath 2011).

As the scope of new taxes inflicted under austerity deepened in 2012, politicians on the left wing

of the Irish political spectrum also invoked Ireland's colonial past in order to justify protests. In January of that year, Clare Daly TD described the importance of protests against the introduction of a new household charge. She commented that 'this issue may be the one that changes the view of the Irish from one of passive compliance with any amount of austerity thrown our way, to a reawakening of the traditions of a nation that coined the term "boycott" in the first place.' (Daly 2012) In launching a campaign against the austerity treaty, socialist republican Dublin councillor Louise Minihan not surprisingly characterised the bailout process as a form of neo-colonialism. She said 'the goal of those who are pushing this treaty is to force the further erosion of our national and economic sovereignty. Their aim is to remove our hard fought economic rights. Ireland is now in a position of total colonial occupation. We are a colony' (Minihan 2013). Although this perspective might be considered extreme, popular historian Tim Pat Coogan was also quick to view the response to austerity in neo-colonial terms. In his blog, he commented 'In the case of the Famine and in today's Ireland, people are either accepting whatever burdens have been placed upon them with varying degrees of despair or they are getting out' (Coogan 2013(b)).

Publicly at least, Irish government officials seemed to resist these neo-colonial parallels, though behind the scenes, the legacy of colonialism also seemed to influence their perspective. Journalist Pat Leahy of the *Sunday Business Post* described his banter with a senior government official who mused in early 2013 about his ideal bailout exit scenario. He said 'my plan is to get the jeep that Michael Collins arrived in to Dublin Castle to accept the handover from the British in 1922. We'll put Enda and Eamonn in the back!' (2013: 7).

As the mortgage arrears crisis worsened, the fear of bank repossessions of homes raised the spectre of evictions, a common feature of the colonial period. In describing legislation passed to facilitate bank repossession, Liam MacNally writing in the *Mayo News* said

For those of us, outside the well-paid loop and mindset of politicians and bankers, the legislation reminds us of colonialism. It transports us back on the plains of the pale ghost of history where eviction was the order of the day, Irish families ousted by the foreigner, aided and abetted by Irishmen (2013: 10).

The Land League also cast a long shadow in Co. Meath where brother of deceased Fine Gael politician, Jimmy McEntee launched a movement which he described as a new 'Land League' to resist bank repossessions in 2013 (Reilly 2013: 23). The parallels between the austerity process and colonialism were also evident to international commentators on the Irish crisis. In the *Huffington Post* for instance, Ellen Brown commented

The Irish have a long history of being tyrannized, exploited and oppressed – from the forced conversion to Christianity in the Dark Ages, to slave trading of the native in the 15th and 16th centuries, to the mid-nineteenth century “potato famine” that was really a holocaust. The British got Ireland’s food exports, while at least one million Irish died from starvation and related diseases, and another million or more emigrated. Today, Ireland is under a different form of tyranny, one imposed by the banks and the Troika – the EU, ECB and IMF. The oppressors have demanded austerity and more austerity, forcing the public to pick up the tab for bills incurred by profligate private bankers (2013).

Therefore, the trauma of the economic crash, bank bailout and austerity process had transformed the process of reversed memory which had emerged during the Celtic Tiger period. Rather than the trauma of the past being narrated through a triumphal present, the trauma of the present was re-awakening the trauma of the past.

The frequency with which Irish political, media and scholarly figures reached for post-colonial memory in order to understand the difficulties of the present demonstrates that the traumatic memory of colonialism continued to remain central to a sense of linked fate and shared solidarity in the Irish collective consciousness. Indeed, it is possible to argue that some of the distress evident in public debate about the bailout and austerity during the 2010-2013 period may be related to the fact that it put the process of triumphal reversed memory of colonialism to an end. The trauma of poverty, financial hardship, remote power and imposed top-down decision-making were not relegated to the past but features of a very difficult present. On the website *Ireland After Nama*, Cian O’Callaghan confronts this reality in response to the visit of Queen Elisabeth II to Ireland in May 2011. He states

The legacy of colonialism plays a key role in Celtic Tiger Ireland and its catastrophic aftermath. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the IMF/ECB bailout. Here Ireland draws closer to its spiritual neighbours on the post-colony than perhaps even before...So as the Queen visits these shores, rather than drawing divisions between those who have ‘moved on’ and those ‘living in the past’, perhaps we should be asking what this past really means for our present (O’Callaghan 2011)

Aside from the frequent referencing of colonialism, one of the most prevalent issues in public debates about the bailout and austerity process were questions regarding the lack of protest in Ireland to these events. Greece, the other nation which experienced a bailout process in

late 2010 was torn apart by street protests and political instability (Cox 2012). In contrast, the Irish response to the top-down imposition of an austerity programme in order to bail out profligate banks was relatively muted. In a piece entitled ‘*The Non-Fighting Irish*’, Derek Scally commented ‘Every week in Greece or Portugal, people are on the streets, ventilating their anger. Even non-bailout recipients like Spain and Italy are at it. Ireland, meanwhile, seems to have adopted the wartime maxim of its British neighbours: keep calm and carry on (Scally 2012). Julian Mercaille notes ‘sometimes, we get the impression that the Irish have lost any hope of getting out of economic crisis and life under austerity. Where is the dissent and protest?’ (2012). Rory Hearne also asks ‘People are debating why the Irish have not been more like the Greeks and Spanish protesting against unemployment, the bank bailout, austerity budgets and cuts to public services?’ (2013). In these debates, the role of colonialism in shaping this response is frequently referenced. Tim Pat Coogan comments

I’ve been pondering the implication of a discovery I made while researching my book on the Famine, namely that one of its principal legacies to Ireland was what the psychiatrists called ‘learned helplessness’. The beliefs that no matter how one tried there was nothing to do in the face of catastrophe save succumb to it or emigrate. There was no possibility of getting back at those who brought about the disaster... if one looks at the plight of modern Ireland and comments in astonishment ‘and nobody is going to jail’, one can be certain that the automatic knee jerk reaction will be; “No. And nobody will go” (2013).

A review of the literature on collective action and memory suggests that there may be some basis for this theorizing. In his research on memories of slavery and African-American protest, Frederick Harris argues ‘The shared memories of past injustices may actually deter resistance among marginal groups, even as opportunities for collective action expand.... for many blacks, memories of racial domination may have undermined their activism during the movement’ (2006: 24). He concludes ‘not only do communities of memory keep alive past events through narratives that symbolize triumph over adversity, they also pass on narratives that are painful stories of shared suffering that sometimes create deeper identities than narratives that illustrate success’ (2006: 27). Irish post-colonial memory provides many examples of successful protest which are celebrated in Irish popular culture. However, it also provides many examples of tragedy due to remote decision-making such as the Famine and high cost protest. Though these memories may fade or become blunted by success and prosperity, they can be powerfully re-awakened by contemporary traumatic events.

During the last major period of recession in Ireland in the mid 1980s, psychologist Vincent Kenny asked a similar question: why ordinary people acquiesced to a process of austerity? In his analysis of the Irish *Post-Colonial Personality*, he concluded that memories of colonialism informed this response. He states 'In order to survive ... one must appear to be at least superficially compliant. Open rebelliousness tends to meet with immediately harsh measures. It is important to create an external image which reassures the oppressor that the status quo is being maintained' (1985: 73). Therefore, it is the powerful memory of the sharp and painful costs of protest which prevents a more rebellious response to top-down imposed programmes of austerity.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the role of post-colonial memory in shaping the Irish response to the bank bailout and austerity programme of 2010-2013. It argues that during the Celtic Tiger period, the legacy of colonialism came to be viewed through the prism of reversed memory. Zandberg, Meyers and Neiger (2012) describe this process as the narration of a traumatic past from the position of a triumphal present in a form which avoided confronting the more painful aspects of these memories. The Irish economic crash brought this process to an abrupt end. It is clear that economic hardship, remote power and top-down decision-making which characterized austerity re-awakened memories of colonialism which were referenced frequently in public debates during this period. It is also possible that post-colonial memory influenced the relatively acquiescent response of the Irish public to the austerity process. 'Learned helplessness' or perhaps the memory of high cost protests in colonial history may have informed the public's sense of its own efficacy in the bailout context. Therefore, this research suggests that memories of the past are profoundly re-shaped by events in the present which make it a vitally important reference point for understanding contemporary Irish society.

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