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Marcus Free

Clare Scully

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# The run of ourselves: Shame, guilt and confession in post-Celtic Tiger Irish media

**Marcus Free**

Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland

**Clare Scully**

Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland; Carlow College, Ireland

## Abstract

This article examines the emergence of the themes of shame and guilt in Irish print and broadcast media in the wake of Ireland's 2008 economic collapse. It considers how the potential search for explanation of the crisis as a manifestation of unregulated banking and development sectors was displaced onto a confessional discursive pattern in which emphasis was placed on rampant borrowing and consumption as reflective of collective narcissism and acquisitive greed. Hence the logic that 'hubris' led inevitably to a national fall from grace and the corresponding resurgence of postcolonial shame; and the interplay between cultural nationalist and neoliberal discourses of redemption through confession of guilt and disciplinary self-regulation as the purging of excess.

## Keywords

Celtic Tiger, financial crisis, guilt, Ireland, media, shame

The 2008 collapse of Ireland's 'Celtic Tiger' economy manifested not only in a domestic banking crisis but also in acute economic, political and social crises. The crash was followed by a financial 'bailout' in 2010 whose terms were dictated by the European Commission, European Central Bank and IMF (International Monetary Fund) Troika, key to which was the prescribed neoliberal remedy of austerity, resulting in successive years of severe government budgets.

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## Corresponding author:

Marcus Free, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, South Circular Road, Limerick, Ireland.  
Email: [marcus.free@mic.ul.ie](mailto:marcus.free@mic.ul.ie)

Drawing on concepts and approaches from psychoanalysis and post-structuralism this article explores the emergence, at this time, of the theme of postcolonial shame and guilt in Irish print and broadcast media at the supposedly collective and universal excesses and hubris of the Celtic Tiger years. It examines how the potential search for explanation of the crisis as a manifestation of unregulated banking and development sectors was displaced onto a confessional discursive pattern in which rampant borrowing and consumption were construed as reflective of collective narcissism and acquisitive greed, the logic being that 'hubris' led inevitably to a fall from grace and resultant shame.

The common Irish expression that 'we lost the run of ourselves' was often used as both a confession of shame and regret, and as a collective admonishment. Its logic is that the 'run of ourselves' is something to lose and aspire to regain, but not necessarily to 'have' as a source of contentment. The Irish version, '*smacht a chailleadh ort féin*', literally means 'to lose discipline of yourself'. Frank McNally (2008) facetiously observes that it is only used negatively to mean 'knowing what really matters, staying in touch with your roots', etc., and that 'the Celtic Tiger years greatly increased the danger of the Irish losing the run of themselves'. The fear of having 'lost' it and the concomitant shame evoke what Tom Inglis (2006) calls a cultural and corporeal 'habitus', a learned predisposition towards habitual and corporeal modesty and self-regulation peculiar to Irish Catholicism.

The article explores the interplay between this logic of shame and confession and a neoliberal logic of redemption through disciplinary self-regulation. Simon Springer (2012: 141) exemplifies the widely held position that 'in different geographical and institutional contexts neoliberal discourse will circulate and function in variegated ways that intersect with the local culture and political economic circumstances to continually (re) constitute "the social"'. Rather than constituting a 'monolithic' material entity or discursive practice neoliberalism adapts to, intersects with and undergoes reinvention in local and national contexts.

Kitchin et al. (2012: 1305) stress the role of Irish history, particularly the impact of 'British colonisation of Ireland, and annexation through plantation' on the postcolonial foregrounding of land and property ownership and the weakening and compromising of planning by 'localism, cronyism, and corrupt political practices'. These key factors exacerbated unevenly geographically distributed economic growth and fuelled the 'path amplification' of 'neoliberalism's ambitions' (Kitchin et al., 2012: 1308) in the disastrous property bubble that ensued. The articulation of a post-boom shame was indicative of how neoliberalism became intertwined with an equally specific and deeply ingrained Irish Catholic culture of self-denial as morally uplifting and a means of atoning for guilt.

The post-boom public spending cutbacks were discursively rationalised through corporeal metaphors, typically the trimming of needless 'fat' in pursuit of 'leaner' government and a 'competitive' economy such that Ireland's exceptionally low corporate tax rate (frequently claimed as 'ours') was deemed untouchable. This is a classic illustration of how neoliberal and nationalist discourse often intersect, especially in the face of transnational social democratic mobilisation of demands for equality (Harmes, 2012).

The emphasis on correct and supervised 'self-government' at economic and political levels was also visible in an increased emphasis on biopolitical austerity regimes in the guise of local self-help television 'makeover' shows. Chiming with the extensive political

and media concern with Ireland's 'obesity epidemic', here the metaphor of economic-as-corporeal dieting is made flesh in spectacles that merge the imagery and fantasy of purged flesh as a means of personal and collective redemption. However the cruel neoliberal logic of 'reality television' (McCarthy, 2007) has a peculiarly Irish 'back to the future' quality in these shows that interconnected with a pervasive nostalgia for a pre-lapsarian Ireland of collective humility, modesty and discipline.

Crucially, too, there was a displacement from the theme of collective shame to acts of atonement for collective and individual *guilt*, with a heavy emphasis on consumption and corporeal discipline, so reinforcing the logic of austerity as redemption through suffering. Whereas shame is manifested as the mortification of the 'exposed self' (Lewis, 1992) in the eyes of an imagined 'other', guilt focuses on atonement through specific undertakings. Thus austerity is legitimised through the 'mature' response of admission of guilt and measurable reparative acts beyond a more nebulous sense of shame.

## Boom to bust

Between 1987 and 2008 Irish average disposable incomes doubled, while economic growth rose by 200 per cent (Rigney, 2012). The Celtic Tiger years were characterised by high levels of foreign direct investment, particularly in ICTs, financial services, pharmaceuticals and medical devices. Additionally, a low corporate tax rate (12.5 per cent) coexisted with 'light touch' regulation and a generally low tax model in which income and capital gains taxes were steadily reduced (Kirby, 2010). Ireland was widely viewed as 'top of the European class' in economic achievement (Whelan, 2013: 1). The heavy emphasis on the state's enabling of an alternative to dominant neoliberal models fuelled the limited view that 'the Irish growth experience [...] is not a simple story of globalisation, forced withdrawal of the state and the promotion of neoliberalism' (Nolan et al., cited in Kirby, 2010: 9). The discourse of 'social partnership' that commenced with the 1987 *Programme for National Recovery* promoted a vision of 'consensus around national identity rather than sectional self-interest' through negotiated trade union pay restraint in exchange for lowered income tax rates (McDonough and Dundon, 2010: 16).

Sean Phelan (2007: 37) sees social partnership as a key aspect of 'euphemized' neoliberalism, linking 'a neoliberal emphasis on the anticipated competitive pressures of greater market liberalization, and the need for collective self-discipline, to a series of ideologically comforting signifiers and cues'. Government facilitated multinational corporations' non-union policies, trade union membership declined, welfare provision was weak and there was a 'minimalist adaptation of European employment directives' (McDonough and Dundon, 2010: 16). Moreover, the subsidising of private sector developers and mortgage lenders through tax incentives combined with poor banking regulation to fuel an ultimately unsustainable property boom in the 2000s and a radical increase in owner occupation and private debt.

Nonetheless, the 'Irish model' also effected social and cultural outcomes through the displacement of older discourses of Irishness that stressed national identity, self-sacrifice and family with newly prioritised individualism, mobility, flexibility, entrepreneurship and competition (Cronin et al., 2009). References to the 'vibrant', 'flourishing',

'booming' economy appeared emblematic of the nation itself. For example, Michael Casey (2009, cited in Kirby, 2010: 45) recalls that:

When Ireland was booming we had a more important voice in international fora. At meetings in the EU whenever structural reform was being discussed, the Irish delegation would usually be asked to explain the flexibility of our labour market or the beneficial effects of low taxation. [...] It was heady stuff.

Such external acknowledgement included George Osborne, future British Conservative Party Chancellor of the Exchequer (and heir to the Osborne Baronetcy in Tipperary and Waterford – see McSmith, 2011), who proclaimed that the Irish 'have much to teach us, if only we are willing to learn' (quoted in O'Toole, 2010a). Echoing both Ireland's colonial legacy and theoretical contentions that the economic and cultural coalesce to position a nation (and allow it to position itself), Fintan O'Toole (2010a) commented that the Celtic Tiger had facilitated the 'evaporation of this little reservoir of colonial self-loathing. [...] The message was not just that the Irish were fit for self-government but that they were models to be emulated.'

The unsustainable construction boom was key to the Celtic Tiger's spectacular crash. The Fianna Fáil/Green Party government decision to guarantee deposits, bonds and debts in Ireland's banks precipitated Ireland's loss of national sovereignty with the Troika's arrival in 2010. Once again, the interrelationship between the political-economic and the cultural was emphasised in discourses surrounding the crash, in Fintan O'Toole's (2010b: 25) typical summation 'a lethal cocktail of global ideology and Irish habits'.

The conclusions that 'Ireland has gone from poster child of globalisation to the symbol of corporate, regulatory and political failure' (O'Brien, 2009), and that 'a once all-conquering economy has been reduced by hubris to a state of catatonic immobility' (O'Brennan, 2010: 1) typified the emerging theme of shame in Irish media. In Greek mythology, the excessive pride, arrogance and self-confidence of hubris is usually punished by the gods. A period of public political denial and squabbling concerning the origins and extent of the crisis ended in 2010 when Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Brian Cowen announced that Ireland would seek a financial 'bailout' via the European Financial Stability Fund (ESFS). As if to overload what might be described as a postcolonial pathology of inadequacy, its acceptance was accompanied by a loan from Great Britain, with George Osborne stating that 'Britain stands ready to support Ireland' (O'Toole, 2010a). An *Irish Times* editorial (2010) implied that Ireland's infantilised, re-colonised status was its punishment, asking rhetorically if:

this is what the men of 1916 died for [i.e. the 1916 Rising that led ultimately to Ireland's War of Independence]: a bailout from the German chancellor with a few shillings of sympathy from the British chancellor on the side. There is the shame of it all. Having obtained our political independence from Britain to be the masters of our own affairs, we have now surrendered our sovereignty.

The widespread tone of defeat, including variants highlighting inferiority, self-reproach and incapacity for self-government, is reminiscent of Fanon's (1968) thesis on the impact of colonial control and subservience on the colonised subject's self-identity.

## Austerity, adjustments and reinvention

Mylonas (2015: 1) describes the goal of austerity underpinning the bailout terms as the reduction of public debt and the boosting of ‘productivity in the heavily indebted countries of the Eurozone’s periphery’, with a mechanistic view that ‘all one needs to do is to know’ and apply ‘the rules guiding the individual parts of the economic system’. Ireland’s version was the supervised ‘adjustment programme’ of the National Recovery Plan (2011–14).

The ‘discretionary’ tax increases and spending cuts of €28.8 billion constituted ‘one of the largest’ adjustments ‘in modern times’ (Whelan, 2013: 10). While the ensuing period saw a stagnating domestic economy and rising levels of unemployment and emigration, ‘social partnership’ had effectively ended anyway as public sector pay cuts averaging 15 per cent were unilaterally introduced in 2009 (McDonough and Dundon, 2010: 17). Julien Mercille (2014: 285) observes that Ireland’s ‘deprivation rate’ increased from 13.8 per cent to 24.5 per cent by 2011. His analysis of national newspaper opinion indicates a majority of articles either favouring, or neutral with regard to ‘fiscal consolidation’. Disagreements focused on where cuts should be applied rather than the principle (Mercille, 2014: 291). The endorsement of austerity interlinked with an emphasis on alleged ‘government profligacy’ and the imperative to reduce the size of the public sector (Mercille, 2014: 293). The extent to which ‘austerity discourses’ became embedded in public discourse is apparent in Taoiseach Enda Kenny’s (2011–16) address to the Banking Inquiry in 2015, stating that by 2007 ‘an uncompetitive, bloated, over-borrowed and distorted Irish economy had been left at the mercy of subsequent international events’ (Collins, 2015).

The Regling and Watson report (2010) into the crisis explicitly stated that it was, in crucial ways, ‘home-made’ (Regling and Watson, 2010: 5), an inward blame trajectory mirrored in a subtle shift from its discursive figuring as a failure of regulation towards an examination of an Irish society that had ‘lost the run of itself’. Although the then Minister of Finance’s (the late Brian Lenihan Jr) allegation that ‘we all partied’ as an explanation for the crash (RTÉ1, *Prime Time*, 24 November 2010) was highly criticised, there was a general displacement onto an emphasis on excessive consumption as reflective of collective, national character. While newly elected Taoiseach Enda Kenny subsequently opened a televised national address with ‘[I]et me say this to you all: you are *not* responsible for the crisis’ (RTÉ1, 4 December 2011), he then addressed the global economic summit in Davos somewhat contradictorily, stating that ‘[w]hat happened in our country was that people simply went mad borrowing’ (*Irish Independent*, 2012). The implication that blame (and shame) lay domestically underscores a narrative in which ‘individual consumption decisions, coded as moral choice, became the collective cause and, by implication, the solution to the economic crisis’ (Jarrett, 2014: 142).

## Post-Celtic Tiger shame and the Irish ‘habitus’

As noted above, the commonly used expression that ‘we lost the run of ourselves’ evokes an anxiety at having lost something that it is not possible to articulate when notionally in possession of it. The fear of having lost it and the concomitant shame are indicative of

what Tom Inglis (2006, drawing on Bourdieu, 1990) calls a cultural and corporeal ‘habitus’, a learned predisposition towards habitual and corporeal modesty and self-regulation peculiar to Irish Catholicism. Inglis writes that in Catholic Ireland:

humility and self-deprecation became part and parcel of Irish culture. The practice of self-deprecation is closely linked to self-denial, of not wanting or looking for more, of making do. Self-denial emerges from a culture which emphasizes other-worldly spiritual values and disdains indulgence in the temptations and pleasures of this world. (Inglis, 2006: 37)

While there is a danger of reifying the constructed national ‘we’, we maintain that the rhetoric of collective shame and guilt can only be reiterated in a patterned way if it resonates with such an embodied cultural sensibility. In 2014, as Ireland’s economic fortunes were seemingly improving, President Michael D. Higgins warned that ‘insatiable greed’ was returning and that ‘it would be a disaster if we did lose the run of ourselves again’ (*Irish Daily Mail*, 2014). Although his comments (especially given his leftist intellectual credentials and tendency to push the boundaries of his ‘ceremonial’ and ‘neutral’ office) are critical of the free market model, his use of the expression also evokes a sense that ‘the run of ourselves’ is something ‘we Irish’ are likely or predisposed to lose.

A key feature of this ‘habitus’ is its interconnection with a distinctly ‘postcolonial’ sensibility. The neoliberal policies that heightened dependence on foreign direct investment, poor financial regulation and the construction sector rather than indigenous industry are structurally indicative of a pattern of enduring postcolonial vulnerability disguised by the boom and the concomitant ‘hubris’ displayed in Irish politics and media (Kitchin et al., 2012). In her analysis of the postcolonial legacy, Geraldine Moane (1994: 259) identifies ‘constrictions’ resulting from the continuance of psychological domination:

of which four involve social withdrawal and three involve personal withdrawal. The types of social withdrawal are: elaboration of secret worlds, superficial compliance, indirect communication and lack of self-revelation [which can result in] passive aggression, evasiveness, understatement, backbiting and avoidance of competition or self-exhibition. Personal withdrawal involves elaboration of the inner world, helplessness, passivity and elaboration of the negative self [which is] associated with loss of pride and self-confidence, shame, worthlessness, and self-hatred.

The Irish ‘habitus’ to which Inglis refers is indicative both of the legacy of puritanical Catholicism and an enduring postcolonial sensibility in which fragile narcissism and shame are interlinked. As Gadd and Jefferson (2007: 171) remark, albeit in a different context, responses to ‘shame’ can be ‘construed as unconscious defences against the anxiety that we know shame is capable of inducing’. Shame is so often ‘bypassed’ because it is an ‘attack not just on what we have done but on who we are’. In post-Celtic Tiger Ireland shame focuses on fear of an unreconstructed postcolonial dependency and the exposure of an illusory collective narcissism. Timothy Bewes highlights the resonance of Sartre’s account of shame in the postcolonial context. Sartre writes that ‘I am for myself only as I am a pure reference to the Other’ (quoted in Bewes, 2010: 260), and that shame is ‘a unitary apprehension with three dimensions: ‘I am ashamed of *myself* before the *Other*’ (Bewes, 2010: 289–90). Enda Kenny’s oscillation between the blamelessness of the Irish people to (in a European context) stressing their responsibility is

indicative of this tension between ‘by-passing’ and admission that totalises and masks internal differences. Both responses are evasive, though in different ways. By-passing shame often involves a displacement that leaves shame unaddressed, while the ‘admission’ of shame is a ‘global self-attribution’ (Lewis, 1992: 65) that obscures more pointed analysis.

Fiona Dukelow (2015: 144) observes that books and articles concerning the ‘inside story of Irish politics and banks’ became a ‘commentary enterprise’ telling ‘individualised, personalised and usually male stories of greed, stupidity and excess, the majority framed against a benchmark of neoliberalism as common sense economics and politics’; and that the concern of the two banking inquiries established following the crash (Honohan, 2010; Regling and Watson, 2010) with ‘technical questions [...] obscure[s] the underlying contradictory challenges that drive a neoliberalised state’s policy decisions’ (Dukelow, 2015: 149). She traces how the Irish government’s concern to ‘prevent bank failure’ reflects a ‘longer and wider history of how Ireland integrated itself with the global spread of financialised neoliberalism’ and the ‘market-friendly policy settings it instituted’ (Dukelow, 2015: 155).

In many such accounts ‘shame’ and ‘hubris’ became fixations in a relentless focus on symptoms and local causes of the crash rather than its broader connections with the financialisation of the Irish economy and its role as a conduit for international capital (Dukelow, 2015). Principal among the symptoms were material manifestations in the form of the ‘ghost estates scattered around Ireland, where the god-like ambitions of developers met the entirely predictable forces of supply and demand’ (Essay, 2012), becoming ‘memorials to the stupidity, the hubris and the greed that fuelled the property boom’ (O’Connell, 2012). ‘Zombie’ or ‘ghost’ estates are incomplete, frequently abandoned residential and commercial developments. Conor O’Clery (2010: 1) described them as ‘an illusion, a giant illustrated canvas draped over another empty concrete block like a shroud’. Echoing this supernatural theme of undead remnants, ‘Achill-henge’, a circular structure of concrete slabs erected on Achill island by a developer who had mounted a well-publicised protest against Anglo-Irish bank, was described by an associate as ‘a tomb to the Celtic Tiger’ (McGreal, 2012).

The ‘ghost’/‘zombie estate’ thus becomes a concrete, shameful reminder of postcolonial Celtic Tiger narcissism, while the bankers’ and developers’ shameful excesses become the objects of righteous anger and opprobrium. However, such commonly used metaphorical language and recourse to humour helped to perpetuate the mystification of causality in favour of a nebulously collective national responsibility. Indeed, such was the reduction of the ‘hubris–nemesis’ narrative to an abstract, totalising and reiterated formula that by 2012 it became the object of parody. ‘Anglo: the Musical’ (2012), a satire with puppets, featured the pre-crash song ‘Property Porn’ and a spoof of post-crash penitent confessions and resolutions to atone, ‘There’s nothing wrong with bacon and cabbage’. A paradoxical venting of righteous anger capitalising, through humour, on corporate welfarism at the expense of the nation-state and its citizens (and an echo of ‘Kilkennomics’ (2010–), an annual Kilkenny based festival gathering of economists and stand-up comics), this typified growing resignation, acceptance and recourse to metaphor among high-profile commentators. As early as 2008 Jennifer O’Connell opined that ‘The Irish are much happier being miserable, so the end of the Celtic Tiger could be the

start of good times ahead.’ Such was the increasingly clichéd status of the hubris–nemesi narrative that *Sunday Independent* political correspondent John Drennan (2010) mischievously suggested the return of Bertie Ahern, Fianna Fáil Taoiseach during the Celtic Tiger years, as a potential agent of post-nemesi ‘redemption’, proclaiming that ‘he’s heroic, smart and cunning’.

This recourse to metaphor and collective self-directed humour reproduces the all-encompassing collective narcissism of the national ‘we’. Celebrity economic commentator (and regular ‘Kilkenomics’ participant) David McWilliams, for example, used the metaphor of *The Good Room* (2013), into which guests were traditionally invited by Irish families to give an illusory impression of affluence, for successive government failures to broker a better deal with the Troika. While this alludes to pride as a thin mask for the more enduring historical shame of failure triumphantly masked by the hubris of the Celtic Tiger, it somewhat euphemistically implies that honesty and directness alone might secure a better outcome or restore self-respect.<sup>1</sup>

Such discursive moves are reminiscent of Freud’s (1927) essay on gallows humour as the superego’s temporary release of the ego from the paternal voice of authority, the permission to laugh at one’s own predicament as though one were a child. The combined anger, recourse to classical analogy, metaphor, satire and humour suggest a resignation to neoliberalism’s TINA (‘there is no alternative’) mantra and the perpetually induced fear of potentially worse outcomes as cause for acceptance. Hence the repeated invocation of the deferred gratification mentality of the obedient child: ‘we are not Greece. We don’t throw petrol bombs. We don’t (and I hope this remains true) answer absurd calls for general strikes. We wait’ (Downey, 2012); and the insistence (summarising remarks by Minister for Finance Michael Noonan (2011–16)) that Ireland is ‘a north European economy rather than a displaced Mediterranean one in the north Atlantic’ and that ‘the best case scenario for Greece was another 10 years of austerity’ (O’Halloran, 2011).

## **Back to the future: disciplined bodies, atoning for guilt and pre-lapsarian fantasy**

The proliferating discourses of collective and individual recovery in Ireland more recently have correspondingly focused on recovering personal discipline and humility and the revivification of ‘communities’ devastated by depopulation and scarred by the ghost estates. James Reilly, Minister for Health (2011–14) in the Fine Gael/Labour coalition government typified the criticism of the Celtic Tiger’s excessive consumption and metaphorical corpulence in his equation of the rise in obesity in those years with social decline:

we forgot the value of things. The value of family, the value of friends, the value of community, the value of your health. I know many a wealthy man and woman who would give it away if they could have their good health back. (quoted in Lyons, 2013)

The association of excessive consumption with deviation from the ascetic virtues of traditional Catholicism specifically was highlighted by an *Irish Times* article inviting readers to vote for the last object in a series entitled ‘A History of Ireland in 100 Objects’

(O'Toole, 2012). Among the newspaper's nominations was the 'Big fat first communion dress'. Central to the 'annual extravaganza of crude expense with a child as its excuse', this was presented as metaphorical of 'the descent from a sense of the sacred to the profane' in the Celtic Tiger years.

Such remarks exemplify how the discourse of metaphorical and actual fat and fat reduction became increasingly intertwined with the rhetoric of 'austerity economics' which, as Jarrett (2014: 142) argues, demands 'a commitment to probity across all facets of life, to stoicism in the face of physical and/or emotional pain'. Both allegedly excessive private consumption and public spending were strongly censured as needlessly wasteful and inimical to long-term individual and collective health. Thus the nation-state was reduced to a metaphorical body in need of retraining and toning by curbing excessive spending-as-consumption.

As tax receipts shrank and the government deficit grew, the series of austerity budgets extended the neoliberal vision of the private sector as the driver of economic recovery. The largest Irish newspaper group, Independent Newspapers and Media, led the shifting emphasis from causes of the crisis to public service over-spending. Commonly used to designate overpaid executives in the corporate world, the term 'fat cat' was used in Irish media discourse to refer both to the bloated, unregulated financial sector and higher paid public servants. The considerable slippage from 'fat cats' to 'fat' in the public service per se (e.g. Dunphy, 2008; Harris, 2010) served to naturalise, through the moral language of austerity, the neoliberal programme of 'reform'.

Key to this discourse was the promotion of collective discipline and self-denial as moral asceticism. In a distinctly Catholic logic, by confessing the sins of excess the penitent could find salvation. This logic spanned the discourses of both collective and personal recovery. Hence Andrea Smith's (2011) symptom of Celtic Tiger excess, narcissism and perverse pleasure as a metaphor for the necessary punishment that ensued: 'after years of generally losing the run of ourselves on loads of levels, the recession came along to painfully rip the layers of excess from us, in the manner of a particularly sadistic Brazilian waxer!'

Consumption endured as the site of self-realisation, but the worthy penitent would seek and achieve redemption only through targeted objects and calculated ways of consumption. There is a notable rhetorical movement here from the theme of shame to guilt. Whereas shame is manifested as mortification in the eyes of an imagined 'other' and focuses on the 'exposed self' (Lewis, 1992), guilt implies that specific tasks can be undertaken by way of atonement. If shame evinces failure to meet the standards of the 'ego ideal', guilt manifests the 'superego', the internalised voice of parental authority (Lewis, 1971: 23), here disciplining the postcolonial child that had lost the run of itself. The austerity discourse both mirrored an international neoliberal logic and targeted specific government deeds as guilt-inducing acts that could and should be reversed through a more 'mature', adult approach.

The discursive portrayal of public service fat impeding the body's more functionally active parts (i.e. the private sector) additionally intersects with the corresponding proliferation and promotion of neoliberal self-help discourse by Ireland's public service broadcaster RTE and its rivals in print and broadcast media (Ging, 2009). Deborah Lupton (2013: i) defines fat as 'a cultural artefact: a bodily substance or bodily shape that is

given meaning by complex and shifting systems of ideas, practices, emotions, material objects and interpersonal relationships'. During the Celtic Tiger years, excess was seen as representative of social mobility, as typified by stories of Irish shoppers 'blitzing' New York (Brennan, 2004). In the austerity era, excess post-Celtic Tiger 'fat' became a source of shame and revulsion. Public service broadcaster RTÉ1's television programme on the 'obesity epidemic' and its consequently 'ticking time bomb' (*Prime Time*, 7 January 2014) featured a studio debate in which journalist Niamh Horan reiterated her earlier criticism (Horan, 2013) of Health Minister O'Reilly's 'elephant in the room' waistline and failure to introduce a 'fat tax' on food and beverages. Echoing the promotion of 'individualization and surveillance' (Share and Strain, 2008: 241) as the neoliberal solution to the 'epidemic', she rhetorically asked 'why should I have to pay, and any other taxpayers have to pay for [obese people's] excess [...]. It's crippling the healthcare system. [...] Do that on your own pocket, but not mine.'

The 'TINA' narrative is extended in programmes like *Operation Transformation*, an annual January–February 'reality TV' show (RTÉ1, 2007–) featuring New Year resolute shedding weight under the strict monitoring regime of health experts, and variants such as 'Ireland's Fittest Family' (RTÉ1, 2013–). *Operation Transformation* typifies the intertwining of post-Celtic Tiger self-help discourse with a yearning for pre-lapsarian familial and communal integrity, as spin-off walks and runs are arranged in local communities as the series unfolds.

Brenda Weber (2009: 16) argues that 'makeover' reality television illuminates a general anxiety about selfhood manifested 'symbolically through iterations of the imperiled self: the blubbery and cellulited body that testifies to a lack of self-discipline and self-care'. The formula involves shaming the pre-makeover subjects in relation to their bodies (or house, child, etc.) prior to transformation under expert supervision. Recent makeover programmes exhibit a more distinctly austere approach in their 'neoliberal theatre of suffering' (McCarthy, 2007). Ouellette and Hay (2008: 480) contend that these formats have 'become the domains through which television contributes to the reinvention of government, the reconstitution of welfare and the production of a self-sufficient citizenry'.

Inspired by the discursive framing of obesity as epidemic, *Operation Transformation* typifies the pervasive, contradictory 'moral imperative' to be 'well', to be 'happy' by monitoring and disciplining one's own body (Cederstrom and Spicer, 2015: 4). Illustrating the interplay between the political and media spheres in Ireland, in a guest appearance in 2015 (2 January) Minister for Health Leo Varadkar, an enthusiastic endorser of both private health insurance and workplace fitness schemes (Ferriter, 2015), praised the show's social and cultural impact.

Cederstrom and Spicer (2015: 51) argue that 'fat shows' are 'designed for middle-class audiences, who seamlessly alternate between feelings of moralization and disgust' and 'sadistic amusement' at the expense of working-class bodies. In Ireland a key target was undoubtedly so-called 'breakfast roll man', David McWilliams' (2007) caricatural personification of the socially mobile Celtic Tiger male construction sub-contractor surviving on portable 'full Irish' fried breakfasts in baguettes. However, *Operation Transformation* is also notable for its framing of obesity as symptomatic of broader social and moral decline, for its distinctly Irish Catholic ritualisation of confession,

penance and atonement, and mobilising a national 'we' in its exhortation to recover from personal and collective neglect. Thus it attempts to bridge the gap between neoliberal individualism and nostalgia for an Ireland 'once' rooted in community. While, as Nick Couldry (2010: 80) argues, 'self-improvement culture [...] does not necessarily rate caring for others as a high priority', *Operation Transformation* emphasises the reassuring of worried family and friends, and the commitment to staying alive to care for (and be cared about by) others, by taking charge of personal well-being.

Individual applicants to become 'leaders', whose health plans can be followed via RTÉ's website, are evidently chosen for their demographic representation and backstories with a common thread of poignancy and loss. Leaders have included a single mother coping with her husband's premature death, but at risk of cardiovascular disease and orphaning her daughter; and a woman whose failure to conceive becomes linked with a high BMI (body mass index). Oral dependency is discursively and visually presented as retreat from adult, and frequently parental responsibility. The leaders commence each series in a 'circle of truth' to confess their histories of weight gain and sinful personal and familial neglect. In a meeting of Foucault's (2003: 146) 'technologies of power', which 'determine certain conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination', and 'technologies of the self', which permit 'individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being', each leader's 'truth' emerges through confessional unburdening of self-delusion and resolve towards self-redemption. Shame, too, is progressively shed as baring the soul connects with baring the flesh when each strips and is ritually weighed weekly on national television – before seeking absolution through public approval and becoming a more confidently vocal subject. Like secular priests the experts encourage the examination of conscience, but often by direct public shaming – one leader, for example, was accused of serving 'crap' in her café and being an 'abomination' for appearing 'drunk on TV' in the video summary of her week (*Operation Transformation*, 28 January 2015). However, it is through *self*-interrogation and atonement that the reformed subject emerges, typically with an expression of responsibility towards neglected family and 'community'.

While there is a neoliberal logic here, its frequent conjunction with nostalgia for prelapsarian familial and communal integrity is exemplified by the confession and media representation of one of the more widely reported leaders, a well-known former Gaelic football player. His account exemplifies the thematic confessional interplay of self-delusion, social retreat, weight gain, personal neglect and self- and socially destructive indiscipline:

I'd lost the run of myself. [...] I went downhill fast when my football career ended. [I] neglected life, neglected my family, and neglected everything that matters in life. And I became a loner and I got down very fast and the weight started pumping on. [...] When my son didn't make the Kerry minor football team I got crooked and took it out on him. [...] I lost my business because I was owed so much money [...] being a little too nice to people in the good times and not getting paid in the bad times. [...] What I ended up doing was drawing down my pension and paying the guys. [...] I feel better that I've it done now. [...] I had a house fire as well [due to an unattended frying pan]. I was up on the moor and I let the house go on fire. (*The John Murray Show*, RTÉ Radio One, 28 November 2013)

This is also a decidedly gendered confession of the masculine selfishness and narcissism of sporting involvement precipitating a strained father–son relationship, familial fragmentation, domestic incompetence, disastrous isolation and business failure. While the focus on exercise and disciplined consumption recurs here, it is a means to an end of familial recovery. In the same interview he describes ‘making my way back into’ into his (now emigrant) son’s life having ‘lost that father–son relationship’. Elsewhere he recalls his returned emigrant daughter’s insistence that “‘this can’t go on, the way you are eating.” [...] That’s what tipped the scales in more ways than one’ (McCreevy, 2014).

Such stories have resonated with more widespread discourses of shame, confession of guilt and redemption in Irish media, illustrating how neoliberal individualism often mixes with idealised communitarianism in Irish popular discourse. The attempted rapprochement with *emigrant* children here also intersects with the enduring discourse of Irish emigration as reflective of both economic and collective moral failure, encapsulated in Shaun Connolly’s (2010) summation that ‘once more, our biggest export is our people’.

Given the current proliferation of cycling, hill-walking and exercise-based clubs and related developments in Ireland, such confessional narratives may be indicative of what Clive Barnett (2005: 10) calls ‘bottom-up governmentality’, and cannot be simplistically reduced to the work of discursive formations on passively acquiescent participants. The Fianna Fáil/Green Party government’s tax reduction incentive ‘bike to work’ scheme introduced in 2009, for example, was a health and environmental strategy that contributed to, but could not straightforwardly determine the estimated 82 per cent increase in bicycle journeys in Dublin from 2006 to 2011 (Leogue, 2014).

However, confessional narratives and personal pledges to reform nonetheless became metonymically significant in austerity Ireland. In distinguishing shame from guilt Michael Lewis (1992: 132) highlights how shame can be bypassed or masked through anger directed at specific actions or by confessing guilt in which, ‘by admitting to a past error, the person is able to move from the site of the observed to the site of the observer’. While shame and hubris are ‘global attributions’, ‘guilt/regret’ and pride are connected as specific attributions of self (1992: 65). In a context where both mainstream media and successive governments have endorsed austerity and reckless bank lending has largely gone unpunished, the visibility and corporeality of dieting and exercise affords the spectacle of measurable corrective measures. It also yields many biographical narratives whose aggregate *I*’s facilitate the vicarious national *we* of collective recovery.

A related illustration of how shame, guilt and narcissism became connected is the Fine Gael/Labour government-sponsored effort to lure emigrants and emigrant descendants to return (temporarily) to boost the Irish economy in 2013 (Jarrett, 2014). Stressing Ireland’s recessionary affordability and rediscovered friendliness, ‘The Gathering’ was billed as ‘the people’s party’. The participating ‘communities’ would be ‘showcasing the very best of Irish culture, tradition, business, sport, fighting spirit, and the uniquely Irish sense of fun’<sup>2</sup> in a projection of the pugilistic character of the Irish in ‘recovery’ mode. The ‘people’s party’ echoes both Tony Blair’s infamous soundbite ‘The People’s Princess’ (referring to the late Diana, Princess of Wales) and former Taoiseach Brian Cowen’s reference to optimising Ireland’s cultural ‘brand’ to ‘give us the competitive advantage in a globalised world’ (quoted in Meade, 2012: 34).

The logic of consumption as the path to redemption endures, but through wholesome, nation-affirming fare for returning emigrants. However, it also suggests an enduringly fragile narcissism in official national discourse that coexists with the motif of shame: emigrants were duty bound to return and consume in the 'national interest'. Andrew Morrison (1989: 65–6) notes that 'there is an ongoing, tension-generating *dialectic* between narcissistic grandiosity and desire for perfection, and the archaic sense of self as flawed, inadequate, and inferior following realization of separateness from, and dependence on objects' (original emphasis). The hope that emigrants and emigrant descendants would return suggests that certain demons were not exorcised, either rhetorically or symbolically, since it both asserts Ireland's primacy as 'home' and indicates an enduring dependency on other nations that have accommodated Ireland's economic migrants – even as the call to return is supposedly an assertion of national self-sufficiency.

## Conclusions

The post-Celtic Tiger interplay between the neoliberal discourse of individual responsibility, the metaphors of fat and leanness for excess and efficiency, and the discourses of collectivism, community and nostalgia illustrate how the global hegemony of neoliberalism before and following the 2008 crisis must be situated within national cultural contexts. The enduringly Catholic cultural mentality of an increasingly secular country undoubtedly contributed to the widespread discourse of hubris and shame, while the imagery of collective mobilisation and gathering, harking back to a pre-lapsarian past, may well have contributed to tempering and making bearable the punitive discourse of neoliberalism. The 'run' of ourselves is semantically significant, as it signifies both movement and regulation. The spectacle of penitent *Operation Transformation* leaders aspiring to regain 'it' by literally running ahead of 'community' groups exemplifies how the two meanings intertwined and drew together the discourses of neoliberalism and cultural nationalism.

The Fine Gael/Labour government's (2011–16) pre-2016 election #hometowork campaign to 'encourage emigrants arriving home for their Christmas holiday to move back to Ireland permanently' (Hickey, 2015) typifies its attempted promotion of 'happy ending' economic recovery following five years of austerity. Reassuring emigrants that 'you will always be of Ireland' (2015, quoted in Johnston, 2016), Enda Kenny's theme of bringing emigrants 'home' foreshadowed the election slogan, 'let's keep the recovery going'. These discourses mix emotive and obscuring 'narratives of return' with 'the "business-friendly" image of a nation in recovery' (O'Leary and Negra, 2016: 2).

However, response to the campaign was muted, especially in social media fora used to target younger emigrants (see, for example, Johnston, 2016). That the government fell far short of a majority in the February 2016 election indicates growing disaffection with austerity and scepticism regarding the 'recovery'. Yet Fianna Fáil's resurgence at the expense of fellow centre-right rival party Fine Gael (in spite of the former's role in the crash and its introduction of austerity) highlights an enduring conservatism in Irish politics, albeit with reduced overall support for the two. Leftist opposition grew, but was insufficient in elected numbers and too fragmented to offer an alternative government or constitute a principal coalition partner. Predictably, despite widespread talk of 'seismic

shifts' and political 'realignment', national newspapers (see e.g. *Irish Times*, 2016) called for a Fianna Fáil/Fine Gael collaboration in the interests of 'stability'.

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## Notes

1. It should be acknowledged that there was also extensive, more directly anti-Troika and anti-German sentiment. Carol Hunt (2011), for example, angrily reported the Troika's proposal to sell off state assets 'sooner rather than later. Seriously. They aren't joking. Non. Nein'; and referred to Ireland as the Troika's 'best-performing and most compliant financial colony'.
2. See: <http://www.thegatheringireland.com/about>.

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**Author biographies**

**Marcus Free** is a Lecturer in Media and Communication Studies at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick. His research interests focus principally on constructions and intersections of sport, gender, race and national identity in Irish and international media and popular culture. He is co-author (with John Hughson and David Inglis) of *The Uses of Sport: a Critical Study* (Routledge, 2005).

**Clare Scully** is a Lecturer in the School of Media, Dublin Institute of Technology, and in Carlow College, Carlow. She holds a PhD from Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick. Her dissertation concerned the ways in the television series *The West Wing* became a vehicle for the articulation of political ideas, critique and alignment for its Irish fans.