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Ireland: When Everyone You Know Buys Art, or a Sculpture, to Upgrade Their Life

People protest when they can take no more, but also when there is a glimmer of hope: when it becomes obvious that there is enough to go around, but despite that, all boats are not being lifted. People protest when they find out just how much is being squandered and how little the elite know or care.

Séamus Power quoted Alexis de Tocqueville (1955 [1856]), who pointed out that it was “in those parts of France where there had been most improvement that popular discontent ran highest” (176). The French Revolution occurred when and where it did within France not only because there was great suffering and poor harvests but also because the squandering of great and growing riches had become so clear to so many.

Ireland is not about to have a revolution, but in contrast to every other affluent nation, it has suffered by far the greatest crash. Figure 1 shows how public expenditure rose to bail out banks in many countries but more in Ireland, and then the subsequent choices made to cut down on public expenditure.

In the United States, protest erupted in the 1960s when it became clear that a large proportion of the population was not being listened to. These people were simply unheard, not even

ignored but unknown. Speaking 3 years after the Watts riots of 1965, Martin Luther King told an audience at Grosse Pointe High School:

It is not enough for me to stand before you tonight and condemn riots. It would be morally irresponsible for me to do that without, at the same time, condemning the contingent, intolerable conditions that exist in our society. These conditions are the things that cause individuals to feel that they have no other alternative than to engage in violent rebellions to get attention. And I must say tonight that a riot is the language of the unheard. (Walters 2015)

In England, the riots of 2011 were mainly confined to London. They were not riots over austerity. Instead, their geography revealed economic inequality to be key. It was where there was most to be looted, where the riches and ignorance of the very affluent were flaunted most, that rioting was most common (Dorling and Lee 2014).

Figure 2 shows that more rioters lived in a ring of boroughs outside central London than in entire English regions located far away from the capital and far away from the shopping malls of the rich (Dorling 2014b).

Power suggests that “in the Irish context, people accepted austerity because they believed by doing so the entire economy would benefit.” However, emigration increased rapidly—hardly an example of accepting austerity.

On September 30, 2008, a bank deposit guarantee was introduced that made people wonder why it was needed. Within

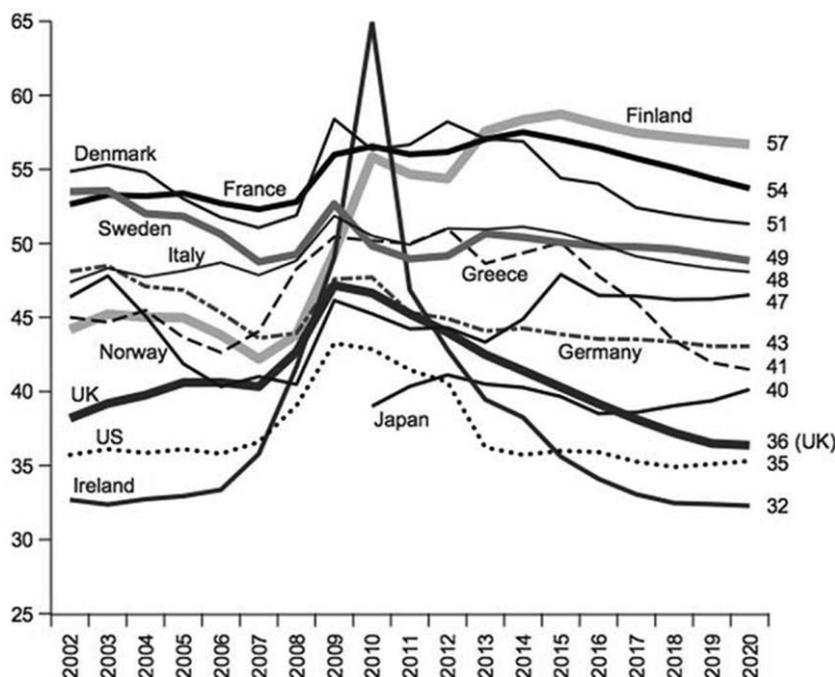


Figure 1. Public expenditure as a proportion of GDP 2002–2020.

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Figure 2. The regions of England and boroughs of London sized by the numbers of people accused of riot in 2011. A color version of this figure is available online.

days the crash had begun, most probably just after 10:00 p.m. on October 2, 2008, when the chief executive of the Financial Regulator of Ireland appeared on Irish television news. As Michael Lewis (2011) so eloquently explained, quoting Colm McCarthy 3 years after these events, the reaction of the Irish public to that man's appearance was, "They saw him and said, 'Who the fuck was that??? Is that the fucking guy who is in charge of the money??? That's when everyone panicked'" (98).

Analysis of large-scale survey data taken each year in Ireland between 2004 and 2014 recently revealed that life satisfaction reached a minimum in 2010, driven by the despair of those who were worse off. Social trust fell, and in 2010, "belonging to the lowest income quartile . . . had a significant negative impact on life satisfaction. This is in marked contrast to 2008, where the income stratification of life satisfaction was completely due to subjective economic hardship" (Weckroth, Kempainen, and Dorling 2017:18). In other words, by 2010, the poorest in Ireland had come to realize that they were disadvantaged as a group, whereas just 2 years earlier, their answers to survey questions did not reveal such knowledge.

Only analysis of survey data taken from across a whole country can tell you when the overall mood changes. Anecdotes, such as that of Colm McCarthy quoted above, help identify plausible trigger points. Anecdotes also identify the ignorance of the elite, such as the rich Irish woman, quoted by Power, who said that prior to the crash she did not know anyone "who didn't buy art, or a sculpture, or something to upgrade their life." Power suggests that when the crash came, the rich lost the most. He says, "in objective terms their relative loss is greater."

But in objective terms, who really lost the most? Was it the person who now has to sleep in a car because they can no longer pay the rent on their old home? Or the person whose home is now worth a few hundred thousand euros less, but they still live in it and own it?

Most recently, the situation in Ireland has become much worse, as figure 3 reveals. Cuts are a political choice, not inevitable.

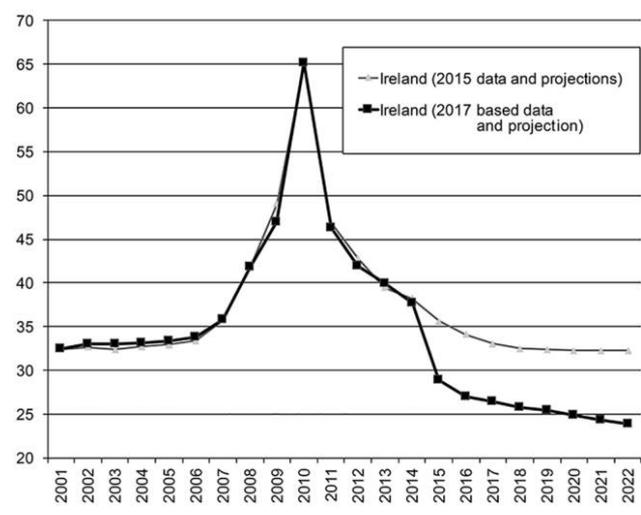


Figure 3. Ireland: public expenditure as a proportion of GDP 2001–2022, original and most recent IMF estimates and projections.

Lewis, M. 2011. *Boomerang: the meltdown tour*. London: Allen Lane.

Walters, Michael W. 2015. Mortal men and the city of Baltimore. *Huffington Post*, April 28. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-w-walters/mortal-men-and-the-city-of-baltimore_b_7157252.html.

Weckroth, M., T. Kempainen, and D. Dorling. 2017. Income-based social stratification of life satisfaction in Ireland between 2004 and 2014. *Irish Journal of Sociology* 25(2):128–149.