“You never let a serious crisis go to waste. And what I mean by that it’s an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before.”
–Rahm Emanuel, former White House Chief of Staff to President Obama and current Mayor of Chicago, speaking at a *Wall Street Journal* conference of corporate chief executives in November 2008

Though this quote has a specific context it gets to the heart of *Deepening Neoliberalism, Austerity, and Crisis* by Julien Mercille and Enda Murphy. One of the key objectives of the book is to demonstrate that neoliberalism is not only about markets; rather it is about power and demonstrating how power is consolidated and extended in times of economic crisis.

How the global economic crisis has affected individuals and households, communities and societies, and the governance structures within which lives are lived and regulated reveals much about the locus, accumulation, and wielding of power. A challenge facing those seeking a deeper understanding of how the socio-economic model that is at the heart of the most recent crisis of capitalism has not only retained its credibility but also extended it, is identifying and assessing the myriad intersections between international governance frameworks, economic and financial networks, national policy, and local, household, or individual impacts on, for example, the provision of health care, setting of pay levels, or control of public resources. Untangling this political and economic “ecosystem” is problematic as cause and effect are difficult to discern in most settings. There are cases where the structure, functioning, and outcomes of the ecosystem are more evident, if not transparent. Ireland represents one such case. Not only has the country long embraced
neoliberal models of governance as a means of embedding itself within global flows of capital, but neoliberal processes, e.g. individualization of the tax system, have come to the fore as the primary means of allocating and regulating both private and public resources. The spectacular and catastrophic collapse of the Irish economy and financial system, which had long been held up as an exemplar of the benefits of neoliberal policies or approaches, represents a clear failure of this socio-economic model. Notwithstanding this, the solutions implemented within Ireland—including those imposed by the “Troika” (the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund) as well as those identified by national bodies—persisted with a neoliberal logic, i.e. “broadening” the tax base by increasing the tax burden on the least well-off; increasing competition within key sectors; privatization of public assets and resources; and reducing public spending in areas such as welfare, health, and education. By taking this approach Ireland has become the poster child for the “success” of neoliberal austerity measures. As a consequence Ireland has the unenviable distinction of being amongst those countries that illuminates how neoliberal approaches and processes operate in both times of economic expansion and times of crisis.

*Deepening Neoliberalism* contributes to the small but growing body of literature that has emerged from academics interested in the impacts of the global economic and financial crisis on Ireland. The book, with its accessible and well-presented theoretical framework and illuminating case studies, makes a valuable contribution to understanding the causes and, particularly, consequences of Ireland’s embrace of neoliberalism. It should be read in conjunction with *Celtic Tiger in Collapse: Explaining the Weaknesses of the Irish Model* by Peadar Kirby (2010) (for its longer historical perspective on the evolution of neoliberal governance frameworks in Ireland and the role of “Social Partnership” in co-opting what might have otherwise been dissenting voices into supporting neoliberal agendas), *The Rise and Fall of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger* by Seán Ó Riain (2014) (for an assessment of the intersections between national and international governance systems and their implications
for the development of new forms of governance in shaping the political economy), and
Gerry Kearns and colleagues’ (2014) *Spatial Justice and the Irish Crisis* (for case studies
covering a range of domains and more detailed spatial analysis of the sub-national impacts of
the crisis). Where *Deepening Neoliberalism* differs from these contributions is the
combination of a theoretical framework, which explores the crisis in Ireland through the lens
of neoliberalisation, with selected case studies describing the centrality of (class-based)
power relations, both internal and external to the state, that are at the heart of responses to the
crisis in Ireland. In taking this approach, Mercille and Murphy merge theorization of
neoliberalisation with analysis of developments affecting the restructuring of power
relationships and dynamics both within the state and between the state and international
systems of governance. By framing the analysis in this way, *Deepening Neoliberalism*
highlights the array of actors, including public institutions and private bodies, operating,
sometimes in collaboration and sometimes independently of each other, and at a variety of
geographical scales, required to foster and develop the ecosystem supportive of neoliberal
processes. Focusing the analysis on Ireland in general and selected case studies in particular
gives readers insights into how what are conceived of as generic neoliberal initiatives have
evolved over time from ad hoc or “experimental” interventions to more structured or
“deeper” processes driven by or requiring engagement and compliance with international
regulatory systems. In this way, the authors draw attention to and demonstrate how the
regulation of space is central to neoliberalism and neoliberalisation processes.

The structure of the book clearly reflects the authors’ objective of developing a
theoretical framework in support of their objectives (Chapters 2 and 3) and demonstrating the
centrality of Ireland’s entanglement within international governance systems that have, in the
words of the authors’, “disciplined and pressurized Ireland to adopt specific neoliberal fiscal
and monetary strategies” (Chapter 4). Chapters 5-9 provide case studies of how the process of
neoliberalisation has been rolled out through the dominant media; what is broadly defined as
“privatization”; changes to the taxation system; the governance of the labour force; and the functioning of the health care sector. Being critical, the authors could have comprehensively presented their approach and perspectives at an early stage. Whilst Chapter 1 covers some of this ground, key arguments are introduced at different places within the book which undermines the overall coherence of the thesis being advanced. Readers need to persist beyond the introduction in order to develop a sense of the authors’ objectives and perspectives.

The individual findings from the case studies—and this will not come as a surprise to anyone with an interest in these topics—tell us that the response of the state to the crisis is one that is characteristic of neoliberal processes as they have, on average, benefited the corporate sector relative to society and the wealthy relative to those on low levels of income. In one respect there is nothing particularly new for the reader in hearing that, under neoliberalism in Ireland, income has become more unequally distributed, changes to the tax system favour the wealthy, the labour force and particularly the unemployed are increasingly disempowered, and the provision of and access to health care services is fundamentally inequitable. In a superficial sense, the very fact that the experience in Ireland is similar to other places is instructive as it speaks to the global hegemony of neoliberalism. What will prove interesting and valuable to the reader is the detail offered in the case studies, highlighting the intersection and alignment of domestic and international actors’ interests in furthering and deepening neoliberalism as a means of consolidating or accumulating power. It also draws attention to the significance of international institutions, particularly those who set the “rules of the game”, in shifting the nexus of power from public to private bodies or from national to international settings. More significantly, the case studies highlight that “markets” are not necessarily the primary conduit by which neoliberal processes confer power on privileged groups within society. They consistently outline and reiterate how the current crisis has afforded an opportunity to those that seek to further embed neoliberal concepts and processes
within governance systems in ways that serve the needs of capital and property at the expense of the general populace, society and, sometimes, the “free market”. This latter point is critically important in conveying the message that neoliberalism is not about extending the power of markets, it is about power.

References


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