The Irish Republic’s economic success story has been simultaneously regarded as antithetical to and indicative of neoliberal hegemony. The question of the neoliberal pedigree of the Irish case is explored here from the perspective of mediatized representations of political economy. The paper’s argument is advanced in three distinct stages. First, it outlines a theoretical and methodological rationale for the analysis itself. Second, it formulates a summary account of neoliberalism as discourse(s) and ideology, introducing a key analytical distinction between ‘transparent’ and ‘euphemized’ neoliberal discourses. Third, it presents an empirical overview of how neoliberal assumptions are articulated through mediatized representations of political economy. The article shows how the ‘Celtic Tiger’ can be understood as a case of neoliberal hegemony, as long as it is recognised that neoliberalism is hegemonically constituted through a plurality of (inter)discursive forms and rhetorical strategies. In addition, the paper highlights the constitutive role of media representation, especially the media rhetoric of Irish political leaders, in the production and reproduction of an Irish neoliberalism.

**Keywords** neoliberalism; discourse; hegemony; Irish Republic; media representation; political economy

**Introduction**

The Irish Republic’s economic success story has been simultaneously regarded as antithetical to and indicative of neoliberal hegemony. These debates about the ideological pedigree of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ hinge on one’s understanding of what is meant by neoliberalism, and whether we choose to understand it in doctrinally narrow or ‘loose’ terms. The thesis that neoliberalism, and its specific Irish articulation, is only constituted through the rigid Othering of state and market has been widely rejected by critical political economy scholars, who argue that this wrongfully ‘presumes that what characterises neoliberalism is the sidelining of the state in a situation where the market assumes pre-eminence’ (Kirby, 2002, p. 160). The latter
perspective (also see Allen, 2002) instead conceptualizes neoliberalisms as a restitution of the state in terms of market imperatives and stresses its capacity for ‘many and varied’ (Kirby, 2002, p. 161) rhetorical inflections.

We can, in contrast, discern in the discourse of those who de-emphasize the neoliberal pedigree of the Irish case (see Nolan, O’Connell, & Whelan, 2000) a narrower and more rigid definition, where neoliberalism is understood more as an avowedly ideological discourse that draws stark equivalences between state and market. The fundamental flaw of much of this analysis is that it either reduces neoliberalism to ‘Thatcherism’, in the sense of implicitly binding it to signifiers of a confrontational, self-consciously ideological politics, or characterizes a neoliberal ideological project as externally driven by transnational institutions and transnational capital only—rather than a hegemonic formation that is also co-produced by the practices of national political actors. O’Riain (2000), for instance, essentially regards the state as a bulwark against ‘outside’ neoliberal forces, rather than the instrumentalist basis (Chopra, 2003) of a successful neoliberal localization or ‘rescaling’ (Fairclough, 2003). He also purports to explicate the complex networked relationship between the global and the local, although the crucial (see Jessop, 2004) mediating role of cultural institutions like the media are glossed over completely in his analysis.

The proposition that news media, or, to be more precise, a mediatization of the political, plays an important role in the production, reproduction, and legitimization of an ‘Irish neoliberalism’ (Allen, 2003; Kirby, 2002) has been commonly assumed. Absent from these accounts, however, are theoretically robust insights into how mediatized representation of political economy performs this role, or, to put it in Bourdieuan terms (Bourdieu, 1992), accounts of how the representational practices of the ‘journalistic field’ (Benson & Neveu, 2005) converge with the formal ‘political field’ and the wider ‘meta-field of power’. Also absent from many of the established critical readings are theoretical analyses that situate discourse as fundamental to the constitution of the political and not just as a mirror of ‘real’ political and social processes (Hall, 1996; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2001).

This paper seeks to redress some of these gaps by showing how discourse, and in particular mediatized discourse, plays a key role in the ‘banal’ (Billig, 1995) production and reproduction of an Irish neoliberal hegemony. The argument is advanced in three distinct stages. First, it outlines a theoretical and methodological rationale for the analysis itself. Second, it formulates a summary account of neoliberalism as discourse(s) and ideology, introducing a key analytical distinction between transparent and euphemized neoliberal discourses. Third, it presents an illustrative empirical account of how neoliberal assumptions are articulated in mediatized Irish political economy discourse.

The precise scope of the analysis is worth clarifying. This article should not be read as a comprehensive analysis of the hegemonic emergence and evolution of the Irish Celtic Tiger. It should instead be seen as an illustrative overview of how hegemonic neoliberal assumptions are articulated in elite Irish media and political discourse. By limiting the focus in this way, I am not asserting that the dominant discourse has not been subjected to counter-hegemonic challenges. I also do not analyse discourse from the perspective of audience reception or decoding, although inferences about the question of reception may be discerned from the analysis.
The ‘Irishness’ of the argument should not be exaggerated, for, in its general character, it is indicative of a wider international debate about the ideological pedigree of ‘third way’ discourses and identities (McLennan, 2004; Mouffe 2005; Wacquant, 2004). These debates have been examined in the wider international literature on the ‘language in new capitalism’ (Fairclough, 2002, p. 163), which usefully characterizes neoliberal discourses in terms of their constitutive role in the articulation of a globalized new imperialist project. My analysis follows this literature, yet also argues that ‘nation’ remains an important point of identification for understanding the culturally embedded constitution of neoliberal hegemony.

Theoretical and methodological framework

This analysis draws on insights from a number of theoretical and methodological perspectives, principally critical discourse analysis (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999; Fairclough, 2003) and post-structuralist discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2001). It is aware of the risks of such a cross-theoretical approach, particularly when the status of key ontological categories, such as discourse, is the site of theoretical contestation. This paper’s formal ontological understanding of discourse follows Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001), who define discourse as a ‘structured totality’ resulting from articulatory practices, and articulation as ‘any practice establishing a relation’ (p. 105) among particular elements or signifiers, whose identity is modified as a consequence. The composition of a structured totality is understood in terms of the dynamic and dialectical interplay of a ‘logic of equivalence’ and a ‘logic of difference’. A logic of equivalence can be understood, most easily, as a logic of sameness and ‘simplification’ (p. 130), which aims to fix signifying associations between different discursive elements. This endeavour to fix or chain meaning is how Laclau and Mouffe, following Gramsci, conceptualize hegemony. A logic of difference can, in contrast, be understood as a logic of distinction and ‘increasing complexity’ (p. 130), which seeks to un-fix the hegemonically chained meaning of a discourse’s constitutive elements. Laclau and Mouffe’s theoretical account of discourse is of value here in three key respects. First, it offers a useful theoretical framework for developing an account of a neoliberal political identity, particularly its negative constitution as a disavowal of its Keynesian/quasi-socialist Other. Second, it informs my formulation of an analytical distinction between two distinct, but not discrete, kinds of neoliberal discourses: transparent and euphemized neoliberal discourses. Third, it is a useful perspective for analysing discourse at the more macro-thematic or ‘logical’ level explored in this paper.

The analysis is also theoretically and methodologically informed by Fairclough’s (2003) account of ‘interdiscursivity’, which foregrounds the fact that any structured totality is also a dynamic, open-ended, and contaminable construction. It focuses analytical attention on the dialectical interplay between ways of (inter)acting (genres), ways of representing (discourses), and ways of identifying (styles). Fairclough proffers these as formal analytical distinctions only, not as distinctions clearly demarcated in discourse, and emphasizes how aspects of genre, discourse, and style are routinely combined and internalized with each other in what he describes as an ‘interdiscursive’ space. This methodological perspective assumes
that being neoliberal isn’t bound to a fixed set of representational practices and prompts us to anticipate a modification of aspects of genre, style, and discourse, depending on the context, or the articulating subject, of the neoliberal articulation. It thus cautions us against assuming singular and monolithic conceptions of how neoliberalism is rhetorically realized and performed (see Phelan, forthcoming), foregrounding instead its capacity for what Jessop (2004) calls ‘constrained heterogeneity rather than simple uniformity’ (p. 162).

The empirical objects examined herein comprise fragments of purposefully selected media texts, many of which are organized around ‘sourced’ contributions from Irish politicians. This points to some obvious limitations of this analysis as a metanarrative analysis of the Celtic Tiger, for its empirical focus is limited to objects that have been ‘banally’ (Billig, 1995) co-produced and contaminated by media representational processes. However, this is not viewed as invalidating the analysis, qua political analysis, as it assumes that mediatization (Street, 2001; Thompson, 1996) is a constitutive feature of contemporary politics and that media practices play a key role in the reproduction and legitimization of neoliberal hegemony (Bourdieu, 1998; Jessop, 2004; Wacquant, 2004). Following Thompson (1996), it is theoretically assumed that we live in an era of mediatized political economy, where journalists, pundits, and politicians alike seek to manage, by mediating, the hopes and fears of market-based actors. As a consequence, the projection effects of journalistic-field expectations – understood as a social space with its own purposeful logic of mediating relations between different social fields – will have a complex, if imprecise, determinate effect on the discursive practices of political field actors. Fairclough (2003) would usefully understand such intertextual effects in terms of the workings of ‘genre chains’, which give a neoliberalized coherence to discourse practices across space and time. His observations about the nominalization of neoliberal assumptions in media discourse are also important, especially since journalism’s linguistic forms are typically characterized by their grammatical compression of space, time, and agency detail (Bell, 1991).

Neoliberalism as discourse(s) and ideology

This paper’s argument hinges on the analytical recognition of two kinds of neoliberal discourses, which I call ‘transparent’ and, following Bourdieu (1998, p. 50), ‘euphemized’ neoliberal discourses, which can be heuristically understood as two distinct, though not discrete, modes of rhetorical and political identification with neoliberalism. The two discourses can be understood, in the Foucauldian sense, as part of the same discourse formation (Foucault, 1969/2004), as both have their (immediate) conditions of existence in the global transformation of political economy that has taken place since the 1970s. This necessarily schematic and broadstroke distinction is posited as a useful way of understanding relational differences in the political appropriation of neoliberal assumptions, and this paper suggests that, in an Irish context at least, few political and cultural agents see much ‘symbolic capital’ (Bourdieu, 1992) in the visible, public sphere articulation of transparently neoliberal discourses and identities.
Transparent neoliberalism is best understood with shorthand reference to the articulation of a theoretically literate, neoliberal identity in the works of Hayek and Friedman (see below) and, programmatically, by the kind of confrontational and self-consciously ideological politics articulated by Thatcher.

Euphemized neoliberalism is best understood by the more recent articulation of neoliberal assumptions as part of ‘third way’, ‘partnership’ discourses, which explicitly disavow the kind of sharp ideological distinctions articulated by and attributed to transparent neoliberals.

The constitution of neoliberalism’s political identity, and its dynamic relationship to the two kinds of posited neoliberal discourse, can be usefully understood from the perspective of Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985/2001) discourse theory. It shows how any political identity or discourse is negatively constituted through its establishment of a relatively fixed ‘frontier’ or ‘antagonism’ with its ‘constitutive outside’ (Thomassen, 2005, p. 307): ‘constitutive’ because it has a structuring effect on the internal construction of the identity, yet outside because it remains a signifier of its Other. The constitution of a neoliberal identity, particularly in its most transparently ideological form, can therefore be usefully understood through its antagonistic relationship with its Keynesian/quasi-socialist Other, for being neoliberal – particularly from the historical perspective of the discursive struggles within Anglo-American political economy of the 1970s – is dialectically bound to not being a supporter of direct state intervention in the economy.12

With reference to the initial theoretical articulation of a neoliberal identity in texts such as Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) and *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960), and Milton Friedman’s *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), a preliminary understanding of what constitutes a neoliberal political identity can be heuristically understood in terms of the binary oppositions outlined in table 1.13

The relationship between these hegemonically chained signifiers of a neoliberal identity, and its simultaneous articulation of an oppositional Keynesian/quasi-socialist identity, is worth briefly clarifying.14 Freedom can be understood as the ‘empty signifier’ (Laclau, 1996) of neoliberal discourse, which is to say it assumes a quasi-universalizing function in the hegemonic chaining of signifying associations between the different neoliberal elements identified in table 1. It is articulated in terms of its negative character to refer ‘solely to a relation of men to other men, and the only infringement on it is coercion by men’ (Hayek, 1960, p. 12). This

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1 Neoliberalism’s political identity: key binary oppositions*</th>
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<tr>
<td>Neoliberalism</td>
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<td>Negative freedom/freedom from</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic freedom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Market</td>
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<td>Individual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Means</td>
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<td>Common man</td>
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*Bourdieu and Wacquant (2000) formulate a similar series of neoliberal oppositions organized around metaphors of closure (state) and openness (market).
negative view of freedom is sharply differentiated from positive conceptions of freedom, which Hayek describes as ‘not different species of the same genus but entirely different conditions, often in conflict with one another, which therefore should be kept clearly distinct’ (p. 12). This signifying distinction is articulated in turn as part of a series of linked equivalences and antitheses. The market is equilvalenced as the sphere of economic freedom, while the state is signified as the embodiment of illusory, and ultimately coercive, political freedom. The notion of a self-contained individual subject is privileged, ontologically and epistemologically, while invocations of a collective subject (the ‘social’, the ‘public good’, etc) are regarded with suspicion. The market is valorized as the means of individualized ends, while the misplaced – however well intentioned – politics of social purpose or collective ends is equivalenced with rationalistic, statist fallacies. This neoliberal identity is then skilfully equivalenced, rhetorically, with the identity of the common man/woman (as opposed to a more accurate identification with the powerful elites that have most to gain from the expansion of market freedoms), while statism or socialism is equivalenced with the identity of elitist, unrepresentative, and ‘know all’ intellectuals.15

This is, I suggest, a useful overview of a neoliberal political identity in its most transparently antagonistic and ideological form. However, constructing an analysis of neoliberal hegemony in such straitjacket terms points to some obvious limits – which, principally, shroud the fact that, politically, neoliberalism has perhaps been most successfully articualted as part of an ‘end of ideology’ (Weltman & Billig, 2001) doxa16 that explicitly disavows, and thereby seeks to reconcile, the kind of ideological antagonisms outlined in table 1. A discourse structured around the stark relations of equivalence and antithesis outlined in table 1 can be understood, therefore, as only one possible form of rhetorical identification with neoliberalism: another kind of neoliberal discourse will seek to de-emphasize and dilute these prototypically neoliberal distinctions. What I call euphemized neoliberalism can be understood, then, as a rejection, partly for strategic reasons internal to the positioning dynamics of the political field, of the antagonistic identity and posture articulated by transparent neoliberalism. The relationship between the two kinds of neoliberal discourse can be mapped in accordance with the set of heuristic distinctions outlined in table 2.17

By constructing its identity through a logic of equivalence linking such signifiers as ‘partnership’, ‘practice’, ‘modern’, the ‘national good’, etc, euphemized

<table>
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<th>TABLE 2 Euphemized and transparent neoliberalism: an heuristic comparison</th>
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<td><strong>Euphemized neoliberalism</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-ideology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practice and commonsense</td>
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<td>Partnership</td>
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<td>Pragmatic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Societal welfare/national good</td>
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<td>Progressive and modern</td>
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neoliberalism is self-imagined as a pragmatic appropriation of the commonsense elements of a more ideologically self-contained and dogmatic transparent neoliberalism. Thus, this relational dynamic becomes the fundamental basis of the former’s claim to be non-ideological. However, as Mouffe (2005) observes, this official self-representation of a ‘third way’ political identity should not mask the necessary endurance of an antagonistic politics. Antagonisms persist, she suggests, but are hegemonically articulated as part of a strategically depoliticized ‘moral register’ (p. 5), where the political nature of the excluded identities is denied and, consequently, the only conceivable radical challenge to the dominant political order is constructed as either antiquated (cf. the figure of the unchanging, unimaginative traditionalist) or nefarious (cf. the figure of the evil fundamentalist). Thus, one can describe a hegemonic politics embedded in euphemized neoliberal discourses in terms of the construction of ‘truth effects’ (Bourdieu, 1998) that act to self-fulfil the ‘end of ideology’ prophesy, as the only conceivable ideological challenges to pragmatic prescriptions for good (neoliberal) governance are characterized as either politically redundant or morally reprehensible.

Before I examine the particulars of the Irish case, the question of the ideological character of both neoliberal discourses needs to be considered. Transparent neoliberalism has been represented here as the more self-consciously ideological of the two, while euphemized neoliberalism has been understood with reference to its self-regarding anti-ideological character. However, to conclude a priori that transparent neoliberalism is always the more ideological of the two identities would be a serious mistake, which would obscure the fact that the assertion of a political identity as post-ideological is the ideological move par excellence. Moreover, as I suggest later in this article, such a conclusion would confuse a critical, theoretically robust account of ideology with the commonsense understandings of ideology that structure the left-right positioning of the political field, and which are typically articulated as part of a euphemized neoliberal identity.

This paper’s theoretical understanding of ideology follows Laclau (1996), who understands it as the attempt to naturalize and universalize (also see Eagleton, 1991), thereby concealing and presenting as closed what is always the contingency of any hegemonic formation. Laclau (1996) associates ideological representation with the workings of logics of equivalence in particular, as it is through the construction of equivalent totalities, and the empty signifier’s fixing of signifying links between different signifiers, that any discourse is given a specific ideological dimension. Thus, working with this account of ideology, one can argue that a euphemized neoliberalism is in fact the more ideological of the two discourses, as its construction of an essentially benign equivalence between state and market has done more to naturalize and depoliticize neoliberal assumptions that, if articulated in a more transparently ideological form, are more likely to be discursively contested. Indeed, in support of this argument, one noticeable trend in recent times is how the rhetorical identities of those political groupings most easily identified as transparent liberals – political parties such as the Tories in Britain, the Republicans in the US, and the Progressive Democrats in Ireland – are increasingly assuming a more euphemized, dialogical, and PR-friendly form, as perhaps best exemplified by the sloganeering politics of ‘compassionate conservatism’.
Neoliberal discourses and the Irish Republic: some empirical illustrations

This paper will now show how mediatized Irish political economy discourse is embedded in neoliberal, and particularly euphemized, neoliberal assumptions. The analysis is organized around what I have identified as five key rhetorical strategies structuring the articulation of elite neoliberal discourses in an Irish political and cultural context:

(1) social partnership as empty signifier;
(2) the spectre of the ‘bad old days’;
(3) the pre-emption of critique;
(4) the non-ideological posture;
(5) neoliberalism as threatened or minority discourse.

These strategies are interrelated and can be theoretically understood as key signifying links in the chain of equivalence that produces and reproduces a distinctly Irish neoliberalism. Importantly, this analysis does not seek always to specify, and hence treat as discrete categories, transparent and euphemized neoliberal discourses, although the heuristic distinction informs the analysis throughout. What follows is, because of space restrictions, a general overview of how these strategies cohere ideologically within elite media and political discourse. In addition, the analysis is grounded in specific and banal textual illustrations, most of which have been taken from an earlier doctoral study (Phelan, 2003).

Social partnership as empty signifier

Social partnership can, in short, be described as the empty signifier of euphemized Irish neoliberal discourse: which is to say, it exercises a kind of quasi-universalizing function in the construction of a logic of equivalence between most of the different rhetorical strategies examined in this paper. Its rhetorical authority and presence is evident throughout the political culture, and not just in discourse explicitly about Ireland’s social partnership model. It is typically articulated as part of a strategic attempt to insulate the rhetor from the charge that his or her stance is, in some confrontational sense, ideological, and is thus the signifier of how Irish political discourse has been hegemonically embedded in consensual, classless, and third way conceptions of the political. This section mainly considers the rhetoric of Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern, one of the most skilful proponents of this rhetorical strategy, who is also regularly portrayed by the mainstream media as an exemplar of the consensus politician (Brennock, 2004).

The particular text chosen is an Irish Times news report on the March 2002 summit gathering of EU leaders in Lisbon. This was the summit that ultimately produced what has since become known as the (neoliberalized) ‘Lisbon agenda’. The article includes three directly sourced quotes from Ahern (the first source quoted), the first of which establishes what is projected as a flattering chain of equivalence between the summit agenda and what is variously described as the ‘Irish experience’ and ‘model’ and the ‘principles and values that underpin our approach at home’ (Smyth, 2003). The second quote — the one that interests me here the
most – is presented as Ahern’s response to the issue of additional competitive pressures on Ireland as a result of the summit’s commitment to further liberalize the telecommunications and service markets:

It is therefore vital that we adhere to the commitments agreed in the PPF (Programme for Prosperity and Fairness) [the 2000 social partnership agreement] if we are to maintain continued sustainable growth and increasing prosperity for everyone in the community.

(Ahern, cited in Smyth, 2000, p. 19)

This small fragment of text offers us some surprisingly rich insights into the rhetorical use of the partnership signifier. First, in a typical third way move, Ahern links 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, which variously appropriate fragments of egalitarian (‘prosperity for everyone’), community, and sustainability discourses. Second, a partnership mode of signification is evident in Ahern’s consistent use of the pronominal ‘we’, which, as a genre (Fairclough, 2003), seeks to conjure up the necessary partnership spirit of a classless national collective readying itself for the prescribed disciplinary challenge. Third, Ahern’s wish to close off latent ideological antagonisms, such as the tensions between sustainability and growth, is grammatically performed through the use of such dense nominalizations as ‘continued sustainable growth’ and ‘increasing prosperity for everyone in the community’. Thus, the extract illustrates one of the formulaic rhetorical uses of the social partnership signifier: its articulation through what one might call an interdiscursive marriage of ‘economically correct’ (Aune, 2001) and ‘developmentally correct’ discourses.

Congratulatory partnership discourses are often internalized through purportedly more objective and autonomous forms of media representation, and sometimes support distinctly neoliberalized representations of political economy. Consider, for instance, a November 1999 analytical piece by the Irish Independent’s Chris Glennon, then the paper’s senior political correspondent, which assessed the merits of the just launched National Development Plan, 2000 – 2006. Anchored in a cheerleading, nationalistic ‘we’, the article embeds a tribute to social partnership in a modernization discourse that casually affirms an ‘end of ideology’ doxa:

When Taoiseach Bertie Ahern was unveiling in Dublin Castle yesterday a seven-year plan to spend £40bn on the last big issue in the economy (author’s emphasis) he was underlining how we had come of age as a prosperous European nation. . . . Since Charles Haughey . . . brought forward the first Programme for National Recovery (PNR) [the first social partnership programme] in 1987, there has been an economic turnaround that not even the most optimistic could have predicted.

(Glennon, 1999, paragraph 1)
The spectre of the ‘bad old days’

The citing of 1987 as a key moment in the construction of an Irish success narrative can be more generally linked to the articulation of a modernization discourse that seeks to differentiate starkly the buoyancy of Celtic Tiger Ireland from ‘the bad old days’ of the 1970s and early 1980s. This rhetorical strategy is considered here with specific reference to a November 2001 RTE radio interview with the former Fianna Fail and avowedly neoliberal Minister of Finance, Charlie McCreevey, in which he reflected on the ‘gloomy’ post-September 11 media prognostications of the Republic’s economic growth prospects. The extract below clearly illustrates how McCreevy’s legitimization of the economic status quo seeks to position the national collective subject (again note the ubiquity of the pronominal ‘we’) through a historicizing, modernization discourse:

The Irish economy has slowed down, and we... don’t want to pretend that it is not happening, ‘cause that’s what we did in the ‘70s and as a result of not pretending that there was a crisis about that particular time, it was always going to turn up ... [unclear] ... We made foolish decisions that took us the best part of 20 years to unravel. So, em, as Minister for Finance... this Government is not going to do anything in the budget or into the future which is going to put that at risk and to go back from where we came from.

(McCreevy, interviewed on RTE, 2001)

The antithesis is clear. The 1970s are equivalenced with signifiers of collective denial and fiscal irresponsibility and sharply differentiated from the policy clear-headedness of the current government. The ideological effect, therefore, is a very neoliberal one, as this stark Othering of ‘our’ recent past can be understood as both an implicit rebuttal of a 1970s Keynesian doxa and a legitimization of the logic of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger present. This reading is supported, later in the interview, by McCreevy’s blunt, ‘I do not!’ response to the interviewer’s question, ‘So you don’t think it’s necessary for you to give economic stimuli [author’s emphasis] through this budget to keep things going?’ – which, as a question, functions as a discursive cue for a more distinctly Keynesian model of political economy. McCreevy’s comments are also psychologically addressed to an imagined radio listener susceptible to being haunted by the spectre of Irish historical failure; indeed, the telling admonition that we don’t want ‘to go back from where we came from’ is uttered a second time later in the interview.

The particular example shows, therefore, how the ideological authority of Irish neoliberal is also embedded in a disciplinary discourse which articulates a cultural anxiety that any deviation from ‘our’ current policy trajectory will be punishable and send ‘us all’ back to a pre Celtic Tiger gloom.

The wider media and political authority of this historicizing and modernization discourse was evident in the months before and after the July 1999 stock market flotation of the formerly state-owned telecommunications company Telecom Eireann. At the time, various broadsheet editorials constructed unflattering antitheses between the statist Ireland of the past and the buoyant, market-driven Ireland of the present (Phelan, forthcoming). The use of this rhetorical strategy to try and
rubbish party political opponents was also evident in Bertie Ahern’s rhetoric in the run-up to the 2002 general election:

Their vision [that of the so-called alternative ‘rainbow’ government of Fine Gael, Labour, and the Greens] is back to the bad old days. The bad old days called the 1980s. Their formula is to raise taxes! Raise taxes, reduce revenue, deter investment and destroy jobs. That Rainbow idea is not acceptable and would bring a dark cloud over the entire Irish economy.

(Ahern, 2002, paragraph 32)

The pre-emption of critique

I want to examine now how a euphemized neoliberal discourse seeks to insulate its neoliberalized aspects from rigorous critique by skilfully appropriating fragments of critical discourses into its own rhetoric. In this instance, my illustrative text is an Irish Independent editorial published the day after the launch of the country’s National Development Plan, 2000–2006. Generally lauded (Phelan, 2003) by the two main national newspapers, The Irish Times and Irish Independent, the plan was criticized by some mainstream media commentators for its essential subservience to ‘market forces’ (Coughlan, 1999). This particular editorial ultimately asserts categorical support for the plan (‘this plan is a good plan’) and excitedly projects its transformative potential (‘this country will be transformed’). However, what interests me here is how it prefaces this support with an ambivalent, and at times quite unflattering, assessment of Celtic Tiger Ireland:

The Celtic Tiger boom has made us all the richer. It has put hundreds of thousands of people to work. But it has also placed enormous strains on our creaking infrastructure. It has made travel a misery and created a housing crisis. It has helped to bring contaminated water supplies and polluted beaches. And, despite our commitment to social partnership, class divisions have increased.... We have the money, and all the signs are that we will continue to have it. But the Celtic Tiger, having solved one problem, has created its opposite’

(Irish Independent, 1999, paragraph 3)

The editorial basically collocates two Celtic Tiger subjectivities. On the one hand, it speaks to, and on behalf of, an imagined community of readers individually and collectively buoyed by Celtic Tiger success (as with Ahern’s rhetoric, note how the editorial speaks to an undifferentiated, collective ‘we’, all of whom have somehow been made richer by the Celtic Tiger); on the other, it appropriates, list-style, the strands of various critical discourses (developmental, environmental, and even class) to articulate a ‘lifeworld’ dissatisfaction with the perceived downsides of Irish economic success. Yet, in terms of the editorial’s ‘orders of discourse’ (Fairclough, 2003), this critical posture is ultimately subservient to a strong endorsement of the plan: indeed, when it comes to considering the specifics of the plan, the editorial suggests that a detailed assessment is largely superfluous for ‘the contents have been so widely flagged in advance that they now need relatively
little analysis’ (paragraph 7). Thus, although blithely lauding the plan as an ideologi-
cal prescription, the editorial nevertheless articulates its own semblance of critique,
which can be understood as a simultaneous legitimization (by at least citing) and dele-
gitimization (by ultimately neutering: that is, by integrating critical signifiers into a
hegemonic logic) of a more critical political economy discourse.

Now, in one sense, my analysis simply illustrates how any hegemonic logic seeks
to manage its own rhetorical contradictions. However, from the perspective of the
distinction between transparent and euphemized neoliberalism, I would suggest that
these interdiscursive constructs become, in effect, commonplace and formulaic ways
of seeking to affirm the absence of a transparently ideological stance. In other words,
they enable rhetorical agents to exhibit a self-imagined reflexivity and thus, in their
own minds at least (I am not of course suggesting that all those reading the editorial
will give it such a straightforward hegemonic reading), to insulate themselves against
the charge that their own stance is in any way ideological. The discourse of Bertie
Ahern again attests to the political value of this rhetorical strategy. See, for
example, the Ahern-attributed quote foregrounded in an Irish Independent article
published on the same day as the editorial: ‘Plan will “end imbalances which
have disfigured Ireland”’(Dowling, 1999, paragraph 1) – where ‘imbalances’ and
‘disfigured’ function as the signifiers of a more critical discourse.

The non-ideological posture

The aspect of the Irish neoliberal discourse formation that I would like to examine briefly
now is one which, in its general character, is evident across the series of linked rhetori-
cal strategies. It is directly derivative of an ‘end of ideology’ doxa, and relates to the
tendency of Irish political elites to emphasize the non-ideological character of Irish
politics and, by extension, the Irish economic success story. The illustrative example
here is taken from a studio-based interview with former Irish Prime Minister John
Bruton on a New Zealand television current affairs programme in July 2004, which, as
a discursive genre, can be understood as indicative of the ongoing international
demand for knowing more about (with the hope of replicating) the ‘magic’ of the
Irish Celtic Tiger. The extract is additionally revealing, as it suggests a level of
candour less likely within the confines of a nation-state political field, where, instead
of emphasizing the points of ideological convergence between political parties as
he does in the interview, Bruton would be more disposed towards emphasizing the
differences between parties:26

Irish politicians never became ideological about economics…. [W]e were able
to sort of de-ideologize politics as far as economics was concerned, and therefore
you can have changes of government between the two main formations without
that aspect [corporate taxation] of policy being changed.

(Agenda, 2004)

Bruton constructs a logic of equivalence between a non-ideological politics,
economics, and the rate of Irish corporate taxation, which, lest we forget, is one
of the lowest rates in the world (Industrial Development Authority, 2006). It sig-
nifies, in short, a political culture so embedded in euphemized neoliberal discourses
that an issue as contingent and contentious as corporate tax is somehow imagined as removed from an ideological sphere. Nonetheless, it is worth observing that what gives Bruton’s rhetoric its commonsense authority is the implication that elite political consensus — driven by social partnership of course — is, ipso facto, non-ideological; being ideological is implicitly equivalenced with elite division and difference. Thus, the example attests to the kind of doxic understandings of ideology that structure the left—right positioning of the political field, and which, in this instance, give a kind of ruling class commonsense to articulations that a critical political economy would regard with dismay.

Neoliberalism as threatened or minority discourse

Finally, I would like to discuss briefly one other, to my mind, key aspect of neoliberal rhetoric that is most clearly discernible in the articulation of a transparent neoliberal identity: its arrogation of itself as a minority, even threatened, identity, especially with respect to mass media representational struggles. This aspect of neoliberal rhetoric is not particular to the Irish case and takes its cue from what I earlier suggested is neoliberalism’s antagonism towards intellectuals (generally assumed to be socialist). In a specific media sense, this sometimes amounts to a more transparently neoliberal media/political class hyperbolically cultivating the assumption that most people working in the journalistic field, and other self-consciously ‘intellectual’ fields, are antipathetic to free market values and continue to identify with a ‘redundant’ socialist philosophy.

The following intertextually linked fragments can be cited as examples of this rhetorical strategy at work in an Irish media and political context. Taken together, they implicitly imagine a deep-rooted media and intellectual antipathy to neoliberal signifiers. I want to highlight, in particular, their distinctly ‘market populist’ (Frank, 2001) rhetorical character, which, in this case, is exemplified by Minister for Finance Charlie McCreevy’s juxtaposition of the archetypal concerns of (ordinary neoliberal subjects) ‘Joe and Mary’ with what he characterizes as the ideologically bankrupt prescriptions of ‘left-wing pinko’ writers and commentators — a rhetorical move that is replicated by Irish Times columnist Kevin Myers’ construction of an antithesis between ‘country wideboy’ Charlie and a condescending ‘intelligentsia’. Both extracts attest to the endurance of an antagonistic politics in a culture where it is officially disavowed: where, in effect, the conflict between (what is represented in neoliberal rhetoric as) the common man/woman’s enthusiasm for Celtic Tiger Ireland (linked to signifiers of individual freedom and self-help) and its negative interrogation by curmudgeonly intellectuals (linked to signifiers of statist idolatry and elitist contempt for the ordinary) becomes a key site of hegemonic struggles over how ‘we’ ought to identity with an Irish success narrative:

[McCreevy discussing, in a television interview, how workers will benefit from tax changes made in his previous budget] People work and earn an extra 20 pounds a week, it is that person’s money. There seems to be a kind of belief in some quarters in the country that that money belongs to the state. It does not! It belongs to Joe or Mary, who’s earned it by, through their work or through their business or whatever. . . . I think it’s a philosophy much to be admired, not to be decried by some of these left wing pinkos. . . . The underlying
philosophy that some people aspire to here and write a lot about is based on a redundant, type left wing socialist [unclear] ... which has failed.

(McCreevy, on RTE, 2000)

[Myers intervening to defend McCreevy more generally in light of the perceived antipathy directed towards him by the intellectual class] McCreevy’s ... hand has been steady on the tiller during the most spectacular period of growth any country in Western Europe has experienced. Yet, far from being revered or even liked, he is actively disliked among what passes for an intelligentsia here. ... Charlie’s great and unforgivable sin in the eyes of the liberal-left is that, intellectually, he has proved them wrong: a thousand-fold wrong. ... If you value your brain above all things, it hurts to be proved wrong, especially by someone like Charlie McCreevy, a bit of a country wideboy with a country wideboy’s manners, and a country wideboy’s understanding of economic theory.

(Myers, 2000, paragraph 1)

Briefly, the distinction between transparent and euphemized neoliberal identities again helps cohere the analysis here, for I would suggest that the self-serving, commonsense logic of McCreevy’s and Myers’ assessments is, in one sense, convincing, and that perhaps overt identification with a free market ideology is as likely to be culturally regarded unfavourably as favourably — especially in more self-consciously ‘discerning’ media like The Irish Times. Now, whether such a perception could be supported empirically is a moot question, but the key point I want to emphasize here is how some neoliberal discursive agents, and most obviously transparent neoliberalists such as McCreevy and Myers, rhetorically act as if theirs is the hegemonically marginalized political identity. These paradoxes need a more focussed investigation in their own right, but hopefully I have at least illustrated the unreliability of transparent forms of political identification as barometers for understanding the hegemonic constitution of an Irish neoliberalism. Their unreliability is further evident in the lingering affection for nominal ‘socialist’ identities among Irish political elites, as exemplified by Bertie Ahern’s widely ridiculed assertion that he was ‘one of the few socialists left in Irish politics’ (Brennock, 2004, paragraph 10).

Concluding remarks

This paper’s argument has been presented in three distinct stages. First, it established a theoretical and methodological framework for the analysis of mediatized political economy discourse in a specific Irish cultural context. Second, it outlined a summary account of neoliberalism as discourse(s) and ideology, introducing a key analytical distinction between (ideologically) transparent and (ideologically) euphemized neoliberal discourses. Third, it presented an illustrative overview of how mediatized Irish political economy discourse is hegemonically embedded in neoliberal assumptions. My conclusion, with respect to the question of the neoliberal pedigree of the Irish Celtic Tiger, is that it can clearly be understood as a case of neoliberal hegemony, as long as it is recognized that neoliberalism is hegemonically constituted through a plurality of (inter)discursive forms and rhetorical strategies that are
typically articulated through a euphemized, national accent. In addition, my analysis has shown how the representational practices of the journalistic field (Benson & Neveu, 2005), understood as a key site in the mediation of relations between a diversity of social fields, play an important constitutive role in the production and reproduction of what, following Billig (1995), one could call a ‘banal neoliberalism’.

Finally, in asserting conclusions, I am mindful of the fact that many of the issues explored here necessitate further theoretical consideration and empirical investigation. Nonetheless, I hope my paper has satisfactorily achieved what it set out to do – advance, in illustrative form, a more nuanced account of the role of discursive practices in the hegemonic articulation of an Irish neoliberalism.

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Notes

1 The Celtic Tiger is the metaphor commonly (over)used to describe the Irish ‘economic miracle’ of the early 1990s onwards. The official Tiger narrative is typically structured around the following explanations of Irish success: ‘consistent macro-economic management of the economy, investment in education, social partnership, EU structural funds combined with the fiscal discipline imposed by the Maastricht criteria and, of course, very high levels of inward US investment’ (Kirby, 2001, paragraph 3).

2 Neoliberalism is typically used as a shorthand signifier by those assuming a critical disposition towards the ascent of a reductive market logic as the organizing principle of global political economy since the 1970s and 1980s. Harvey’s (2005, p. 2) outline definition is indicative:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by [state-sponsored support of] strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.

3 This paper’s understanding of ‘the political’ follows Hay’s (2002, p. 3) twinned definition of big ‘P’, politics as institutional politics, and small ‘p’, politics as cultural practice.

4 A rich application of a field theory perspective is outside the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, the concept of ‘fields’, Bourdieu’s term for describing how different social identities (journalist, economist, politician, etc) operate according to different relational logics vis-à-vis their position in the social, does inform the analysis (as it does the theoretical rationale for critical discourse analysis formulated by Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).
My use of the term ‘discourse’ follows Fairclough’s (2003) distinction between its use in a general sense (to mean language and semiosis in toto) and it use in a specific sense (to refer to particular discourses: neoliberal, socialist, etc).

While a focused exploration of the connection is outside the scope of this paper, I would suggest that Billig’s (1995) ‘banal nationalism’ thesis is both directly and analogically relevant to the critical study of neoliberalism. One can usefully speak of a ‘banal neoliberalism’, for it too has its ideological power more in mundane rhetorical reproduction and identification (also see Weltman, 2003), much of it appealing to signifiers of national identity, rather than manifestly ideological gestures and practices.

This particular dispute has been described (Gilbert, 2004) as an argument between those who affirm (Fairclough, Jessop, & Sayer, 2003; Jessop, 2004) and those who reject (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2001) a formal ontological distinction between the discursive and the extra-discursive. Briefly, Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001) see discourse as synonymous with social practice, and therefore do not reduce it to a purely linguistic/semiotic category. In contrast, Fairclough and Jessop treat discourse/semiosis as a specific aspect of social practice and therefore avoid collapsing the distinction between practice and discourse. However, while the basis of a theoretical dispute is clear, even those affirming a distinction between the discursive and the extra-discursive do not represent the latter as discrete from discursive processes. In other words, both sides would agree that the object ‘neoliberalism’ is in part discursively constituted — the key question, of course, is to what degree!

Importantly, Laclau (2004) and Bourdieu (1992) understand ‘logic’ (or, more correctly, a ‘hegemonic’ logic) very differently to how it has been traditionally understood in scholarly discourse. Logic, in Laclau’s account, is not some epistemological domain separate from rhetoric, but a master term for understanding the interplay of rhetorical, grammatical, and (in the more traditional sense) ‘logical’ elements.

Fowler (1991) describes nominalization as a commonplace kind of clause transformation, whereby predicates (verbs and adjectives) are syntactically realized as nouns and noun phrases. Nominalization can assume various dense, complex forms and, from a critical discourse studies perspective, can be used to abstract agency and cement ideologically loaded presuppositions (Fairclough, 2003).

While in many ways interchangeable with the term ‘discourse’, ‘rhetoric’ is used here to emphasize a particular concern with strategies of audience identification (Burke, 1950/1969).

To cite this as an indictment of my analysis would, I’d suggest, gloss over the need — especially within the confines of a journal article — for a generalizing, and hence somewhat reductive, analysis of a phenomenon as empirically complex as neoliberalism.

I foreground here the particular cases of the UK and US because, unlike, for example, in the case of Chile, neoliberal political agents needed formally to secure electoral consent.

The features listed in table 1 should not be understood as exclusively neoliberal and, in their general character, most of them can be considered core tenets of Western civilization, the capitalist system, and liberal democracy.

This is not, of course, purporting to be an exhaustive account of neoliberalism’s political identity, nor am I suggesting that these binary distinctions (such as the simplistic Otherting of state and market) are not open to deconstruction.
My interest here is instead in sketching the function of these binaries within a neoliberal imaginary.

15 Frank (2001) describes the endurance of this rhetorical strategy, particularly in the US, as ‘market populism’: that is, the labelling of anyone who dares question the logic of a market-led social order as ‘elites’.

16 My use of the term ‘doxa’ follows Bourdieu (1992), who uses it to signify the commonplace, taken-for-granted assumptions of any social and political order.

17 It is important to emphasize the heuristic nature of the analytical distinction between transparent and euphemized neoliberal discourses. Political success, in a liberal democratic context, in some sense demands a labour of euphemization, and even a firebrand neoliberal such as Thatcher sought to soften her ideological posture with pragmatic, commonsense, and nationalist rhetorical appeals (Hall, 1988).

18 This caveat is important. The distinction between transparent and euphemized neoliberalism is analytical, not ontological. Moreover, identifying the binary at work is not a sufficient analytical end. It is instead meant to function as an analytical crutch for helping make sense of how neoliberal discourses are differently articulated.

19 Of course, social partnership itself can be understood as an ideology, but not, I suggest, in the confrontational, doctrinaire fashion of transparent neoliberalism.

20 The consensual nature of Irish politics has a complex history with origins in the tribal, more than ideological, antagonism between the two main political parties, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael.

21 Ahern is the leader of Fianna Fail, the senior partner of the coalition government, co-formed with the Progressive Democrats, that has been in power since 1997.

22 Here I follow Salzer-Morling’s (1998) understanding of narrative as a key controlling and integrationist device in the construction of an official identity.

23 RTE is Ireland’s state-owned, public service broadcaster.

24 The television and radio interviews have been transcribed simply to record the accuracy of the words clearly uttered. Hesitations have not been recorded. The marker ‘...’ denotes gaps in the interview, while the exclamation mark denotes emphasis.

25 Interestingly, the dominant historical narrative would attribute much of this fiscal irresponsibility to the actions of the single party Fianna Fail government that was elected to power in 1977.

26 For instance, while still leader of Fine Gael, Bruton sought to interrogate a hegemonic Celtic Tiger ‘success’ narrative with the party’s 1998 Celtic Snail campaign, which, as a political marketing strategy, was widely ridiculed in media assessments.

27 Of course, suspicion of a certain kind of intellectual should not be understood as blanket anti-intellectualism. The hegemonic construction of a neoliberal political programme, especially in the US and Britain, owed much to the increased public visibility of a new class of ‘conservative intellectuals’, which, as a descriptor, some saw as ‘virtually a contradiction in terms’ (Hames & Feasey, 1994, p. 234) up until the 1970s. Consider, too, Bertie Ahern’s highlighting of his admiration for the US sociologist Robert D. Putnam (Brennock, 2004), and the close symbolic relationship between Tony Blair and Anthony Giddens (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2001).

28 Interestingly, McCreevy has had a chance to project his political identity on to a wider European stage since his appointment as EU Commissioner for the Internal Market and Services in 2004.
References


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