Part 4
When the Crisis Is not Enough
Camps as the Sole Symbolic Expression of Protest

The Difficulties of Occupy in Ireland

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Shortly after the start of Occupy Wall Street (OWS) in New York City, a number of people set up similar camps in Dublin in early October 2011. Following Dublin’s lead, Occupy-style campaigns were soon established in some of the Republic of Ireland’s major cities such as Cork, Galway, Limerick, and Waterford. Though varying in size and in intensity – the occupations lasted from between several weeks in the case of Limerick to seven months in that of Galway – protesters in each of these cities occupied public spaces in community-like encampments and mounted rallies and demonstrations attended by citizens numbering anywhere from several dozen to several hundred people.

As in New York, Madrid, Buenos Aires, and London, Irish Occupiers expressed their anger and frustration over a number of social and economic issues. In Ireland, this concerned issues such as falling incomes, declining living standards, and crippling public and private indebtedness arising from the 2008 economic crisis. What compounded the situation in Ireland was the gradual but consistent retreat of the state from many of its social welfare commitments combined with the adoption of neoliberal privatization practices, especially during the post-1995 ‘Celtic Tiger’ years. But however novel Occupy movements may have been around the world (Pickerill and Krinsky 2012), Irish occupiers struggled to gain widespread public support despite some initial displays of solidarity. The mainstream media dedicated some print space and air time to the Indignados in Spain, to the Arab uprisings, and to OWS but devoted little space and time to the home-grown Occupy campaigns. When it did, the media overwhelmingly portrayed the Irish occupiers as irrational activists fueled by anger, despair, and frustration. Overall, occupiers sought to challenge such dominant depictions by justifying or clarifying their actions to a wary and skeptical

1 This chapter focuses on two of the camps: Occupy Dame Street (based in Dublin) and Occupy Galway.
public. But despite such noble efforts, we argue that their efforts were of limited impact and fraught with difficulties.

This chapter is based on field research carried out between October 2012 and November 2014. During this period, we interviewed former Occupy leaders and activists from Limerick, Galway, and Dublin as well as union leaders, community organizers, media figures, and political activists. We also carried out participant observations in protest marches organized by Occupy Galway and spin-off organizations in this city in November 2012. And finally, we systematically analyzed occupiers' printed, audiovisual, and electronic documents (blogs, minutes, protest videos, correspondence, etc.).

The chapter is divided into two parts. The first section briefly reviews the country's recent social and economic context as a backdrop to the camps' establishment. The following section describes Occupy Galway and Occupy Dame Street (ODS) in Dublin and presents some of their key internal characteristics – non-hierarchical structures, sociological diversity, loose network relations, etc. The final section reviews some of the dominant ways the camps and activists were depicted, and considers the occupiers' frames of experience and representations so as to assess ODS and Occupy Galway's political significance.

Social and Economic Context

Compared to the historically lethargic performance dating from independence in the early 1920s, Ireland's economy underwent a remarkable transformation during the 1990s. By 2000, economic growth was averaging 10 per cent per annum, and there was a solid budget surplus and a very low ratio of debt to gross domestic product (GDP). Emigration – the country's perennial nemesis – had virtually disappeared and had been replaced by very strong immigration flows from forthcoming European Union accession countries such as Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia. By the end of the decade, however, the high-growth and high-performing economy had fallen into a macro-economic abyss. The Celtic Tiger housing boom, the backbone of the high-growth and high-performing economy, had been transformed into a property market bubble through excessive and reckless credit creation. Buoyed by strong property-related taxes, successive profligate coalition governments – led by Fianna Fáil from 1997 to 2011 – over-spent and under-taxed, thus contributing to the overheated property market bubble (Donovan and Murphy 2013). Few political leaders recognized and/or heeded the danger signals because the prevailing neoliberal economic ideology
suggested that financial markets could regulate themselves. Blinded by his government’s achievements, the prime minister responded to criticism with arrogance. But in the face of the unprecedented economic collapse in September 2008, the coalition government provided highly controversial – and ultimately ruinous – comprehensive guarantees on all deposits and borrowings for six troubled Irish-owned banks. Despite the guarantees, economic growth had plummeted by 2010, the budget deficit had spiralled out of control, the debt-to-GDP ratio had risen to over 100 percent, and unemployment had increased sharply (see Figure 10.1). As the comprehensive guarantees proved to be insufficient, the government was left with no alternative, according to some commentators, but to apply for an emergency €85 billion (US$113 billion) rescue package in November 2010 from the so-called Troika: the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. In a catastrophic reversal of fortune, the property market bubble led to the Celtic Tiger’s fall and the Republic entered the most unprecedented and traumatic period in its short economic and financial history.

In the context of growing economic and financial difficulties, the government was obliged to impose a series of austerity measures such as tax increases, reductions in public spending, salary restrictions in the public sector, and limits on social welfare entitlements. To some critics, the rise and demise of the Celtic Tiger were the result of long-standing free-market decisions based on the slavish adoption of a neoliberal agenda that set greater importance on kowtowing to international capitalist investors – and subsequently on reimbursing the international banking creditors – than on the needs of the Irish people (Kirby 2010). Such critics also saw the

2  “My message to you this morning is about confidence for the future. Confidence, in the strength of the economy that we have created together over recent decades. [...] Confidence, in our own judgement in the face of commentators and others who regularly cast doubt, not only on our future, but even on the reality of our past achievements [...] There are those who believe that our recent successes are an illusion. That they will disappear and we will be back to the natural order, an Ireland of unemployment and under-achievement. Some of these voices were telling us, not so long ago, that our approach was all wrong. [...] They were wrong then, and they are still wrong. [...] Sitting on the sidelines, cribbing and moaning is a lost opportunity. I don’t know how people who engage in that don’t commit suicide”. Bertie Ahern, Taoiseach, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Bundoran, 4 July 2007.
3  The banks covered were the Allied Irish Bank, the Bank of Ireland, the Anglo Irish Bank, the Irish Life & Permanent, which owned Permanent TSB, the Irish Nationwide Building Society, and the Educational Building Society.
4  For an overview of the 2008 crisis and its international ramifications, see Ross’s chapter in this volume.
emergency rescue package as imposing a significant burden on the most vulnerable members of society.

The austerity and reimbursement measures – imposed first by the bank guarantees and then by the Troika's emergency rescue package – led to an unprecedented number of anti-austerity demonstrations organized by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. For example, 120,000 people marched in Dublin on 21 February 2009, and 100,000 did so on 27 November 2010. Also significant is that a number of demonstrations and marches were organized independently of the trade union movement. These protesters focused essentially on the government’s cost-saving measures: the reduction in the number of people entitled to medical cards, the reinstatement of third-level fees, the cuts in pension entitlements, the reduction in the number of substitute teachers made available to schools, the closing of local hospitals, the reductions in child benefits, etc. For example, according to data from the

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6 The Observer, 27 November 2010.
Irish Times, 25,000 students demonstrated on 3 November 2010, 2,000 people marched in an anti-austerity protest in Dublin on 27 November 2011 and, one year later, 10,000 people participated in another. By 2013, anti-austerity protests were rather common across the country, even if most struggled to gather over 5,000 people. Such numbers compare perhaps unfavorably with the major anti-austerity protests that took place in other rescue-package countries such as Italy, Greece, Portugal, and Spain (Zamponi 2012). But of key importance in Ireland is that many of these protests focusing on economic issues were not organized by the trade union movement and thus were of a kind not seen hitherto. What these protests had in common was a deep-set opposition to the austerity measures resulting from the economic and financial crisis and the perceived sense that the country had now lost its economic sovereignty. The Occupy camps emerged in such a context of protest.

The Occupy Camps

Emergence

ODS and Occupy Galway were inspired by the Madrid Indignados movement of May 2011 and by the many American Occupy movements that were well-established by early October 2011. It is perhaps therefore of little surprise that Irish occupiers were inspired by many of the activities, structures, and processes drawn from these international protest-tent campaigns. ODS started as a campaign launched online by a number of people who had been active in various left-leaning organizations including Real Democracy Now and who had been interacting via Facebook and Twitter. The organizers sent out a call on social media for people to attend a protest rally on October 8 against the financial sector and to attend another one on October 15 in support of the global Occupy movement. Organizers also posted invitations around central Dublin, and potential protesters were told “Yes we camp!” and encouraged to “bring a tent”. The protest started as a traditional rally on the afternoon of 8 October with approximately 30 people and grew to 150 people in attendance outside the Central Bank of Ireland’s main office on Dame Street, Dublin.

8 ‘Workers Across Europe Synchronize Protests’, The New York Times, 14 November 2012. See also the various contributions in this volume.
9 Interview, Mo…, female, employee, 20+, Dublin, 7 January 2013.
Approximately 50 protesters stayed overnight. They were soon joined by a number of other people and ODS thus got underway. In the following days and weeks, a considerable number of Occupy events were organized such as media workshops, teach-ins, musical and poetic performances, and rallies. By mid-November 2011, the Central Bank announced that it would seek a court order to put an end to ODS, but it continued until 8 March 2012 when the national police force, Garda Síochána, dismantled the camp.

For its part, Occupy Galway was launched on 15 October, one week after ODS. The occupation started with about 50 people and was timed to link up with the international day of solidarity with the global Occupy movement. Since it was to have been a one-day event, protesters in Galway did not necessarily intend to occupy Eyre Square, but a number of them simply stayed on the square when the police did not ask them to move on. Official requests for the camp’s removal only came later when city officials wrote to the occupiers and made public their concerns about health and safety issues.

The Occupiers

Overall, there were relatively few occasional occupiers and even far fewer permanent occupiers in both Dublin and Galway. There were at most several dozen occasional occupiers in Dublin and between ten and twenty in Galway. In the early days, ODS and Occupy Galway brought together an interesting mix of people from all walks of life: students, artists, academics, trade union activists, service workers, local community organizers, and

10 Interview, Th..., male, unemployed, 25+, Dublin, 7 January 2013. Once the camp was dismantled, gates were installed, thereby limiting the public’s use of this space.
11 “Superintendent N. Kelly stated that Occupy Galway were not committing an illegal act and that he was not aware that there was a national position on the occupation of public places” (Minutes of the Galway City Joint Policing Committee, 20 February 2012). The occupation of public space was also a feature of the other Irish camps. For instance, Cork and Waterford occupiers set up their camps along main thoroughfares (respectively at a main intersection and on the quays, both in the heart of the city). By contrast, the Limerick Occupy camp suffered from a ‘lack of visibility’ since it was located in a by-street, far removed from the city’s busy shopping district and away from through-traffic.
12 Occasional occupiers spent neither the night nor the entire day at the camp. They were around only for a few hours a day. Permanent occupiers, in contrast, stayed day and night.
13 Much of the information presented in this section is derived from the interviews we did of Occupy activists and leaders and, in particular, of those that had participated continuously from the very first days in October 2011 to their eventual eviction by the police several months later.
seasoned political, social and environmental activists. The occupiers were also quite diverse in terms of age, gender, origin, experience of political and social activism, and social and economic profile. The mean age of the occupiers was below 30. Men and women participated in more or less equal numbers.\footnote{Irish occupiers are in many ways sociologically similar to what has been identified in other Occupy movements around the world (see Benski et al. 2013: 548-50).}

Although most of the occupiers were Irish, some European backpackers who had been involved in Occupy movements in their own country also visited the camps and stayed for short periods. Some of these occasional occupiers used their visit to show a type of international solidarity with the Irish occupiers, as shown by the posters they drew up in Spanish or in French while there. Although some ODS activists knew each other because of their involvement in Real Democracy Now,\footnote{Interview, Mo..., female, employee, 20+, Dublin, 8 January 2013. Real Democracy Now is a group formed out of the 15M movement in Spain. See http://www.realdemocracynowireland.org/.} most of the occupiers first met in the camp. Many of the younger occupiers had never before been involved in a protest movement and had no clear agenda.\footnote{Interview, He..., female, retired, 65+, Dublin, 19 November 2012. By comparison with OWS, the "episode as a whole has become an irresistible magnet for radical academics of the cultural-theory sort; indeed, for them it seems to have been a sort of holy episode, the moment they were waiting for, the putting into practice of their most treasured beliefs" (Frank 2012).} This was also the case in Galway where most of the occupiers did not know each other before joining the movement,\footnote{Interview, Gil..., male, unemployed, 50+, Galway, 17 November 2012.} although some of the longer-serving protesters had some experience of activism, notably as part of the Corrib gas protest movement.\footnote{The Corrib gas project concerned the extraction of a natural gas off the northwest coast of Ireland, in County Mayo. This project was opposed by local residents and activists for environmental and security reasons. Several protesters were jailed following confrontations with the police in 2005.} One factor that played a key part as the occupations moved from autumn to winter and then to spring is that, students apart, a majority and growing number of the ODS occupiers came from the more disadvantaged sectors of society such as unemployed workers or young homeless people.

Because life in the camp was hard and because many sympathizers had family or professional obligations, the gender, age, and socio-economic mix of the camps soon withered away. In Dublin, for instance, as the camp became a haven for an increasing number of very young and homeless people, it became less ‘open’ to the general public and more self-fulfilling...
and inward-looking. In such circumstances, we may well ask if the very young and homeless people stayed in the camp because they supported the movement’s ideals or rather because they were looking for moral or material support.

Quite a large public was generally well-disposed to the Occupy movement. If they weren’t, it wouldn’t have lasted as long as it did. That it didn’t become a mass, a massive movement is, I think, a case of people saying ‘What can I do? I can’t go down there, I have a job!’ And, as time went on, it is true that the places did start to attract people who had nothing to do with it. Just people who thought it was a good place to pan-handle […] You just get professional beggars turning up. This was bound to happen. I don’t see this as anything particular to the Occupy movement. […] All body-politics get infiltrated by parasites. The Occupy movement is nothing special in that case.19

By December, we noticed that most of the permanent occupiers were in fact homeless young men. They weren’t really interested in the movement. All they really wanted was a place to sleep and to get warm. […] This led to a lot of problems.20

Depictions: The Symbolic Background of Mobilization

Along with the difficulties in ensuring the camps’ social and economic diversity, occupiers found it difficult to develop their mobilization potential.21 One reason for this is that it is particularly tricky for vulnerable, underprivileged, or powerless people and groups to ‘voice’ their concerns or to impose their vision on society especially when their actions are denied political content and/or meaning. When ‘marches’, ‘sit-ins’, or ‘occupations’ do take place, they are often interpreted or depicted in negative terms by the very people, or by the social categories – the political, social, and/or economic elites – who have the most to lose from the protests. So it is particularly important to understand what the vulnerable, underprivileged, or powerless people seek to gain from their actions, that is, how they understand or give meaning to their actions (Goffman 1967). What may seem irrational to an outside observer may make perfect sense to a protester. In

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19 Interview, Da…, male, independent filmmaker, 35+, Dublin, 19 February 2013.
20 Interview, Mo…, female, employee, 20+, Dublin, 8 January 2013.
21 For a wider discussion of the impact of Occupy movements, see Benski et al. (2013: 554-557).
other words, looking at the common and dominant ways that the Occupy campaigns were depicted is perhaps not the best way to understand what took place or to assess the political significance of the events. It is perhaps more useful to consider what the occupiers did or said they were doing and thus to look at how they challenged the ways they were commonly portrayed. When individuals try to understand why they are subjected to what they feel to be arbitrary decisions and/or forms of discrimination, their subjective feelings may be enough to put in place mobilization processes (Gamson 1975). As Snow and Benford suggest, “movement organizations and actors are actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, bystanders and observers” (1992: 136). We will now summarize briefly the main ways that the Occupy camps were described before considering the experiences and the representations of the occupiers themselves (Snow 2004).

The camps were portrayed in several ways, the majority of them negative. In the most common depictions, many small businessmen and local politicians scorned and mocked the occupations. The camps were condemned as illegal gatherings and the occupiers decried as irrational radicals, unpatriotic social misfits, and outdated eco-warriors who were carrying out ridiculous actions.22 The mainstream media rarely referred to the camps, but in the rare moments that journalists broached the subject, the comments had condescending overtones. One such example is a feature published in the Irish Times:

I stopped by the Occupy Dame Street protest on the way home the other night and what struck me most was how extraordinarily nice the whole thing is. It’s so polite and well-behaved that it could almost be some kind of civic amenity laid on by City Hall.23

Such commentators were either incapable or unwilling to take the camps seriously. ODS and Occupy Galway were also deemed to be socially destabilizing, illegal, and even illegitimate. Local politicians in Galway were particularly anxious to dismantle the encampment before the start of a major international ocean race in June 2012 so as not to harm the city’s international reputation.24 In Dublin, local businesses expressed increasing

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22 Interview, Th..., male, politician, 50+, Limerick, 5 January 2013.
levels of dissatisfaction and annoyance as ODS became a permanent local fixture. These views were based on the belief that camps were giving the country a bad name at a time when all that really mattered was to secure tourist revenue and to promote Ireland’s image as a safe and stable country in the eyes of foreign investors.

A second series of depictions focused on the social and economic determinants of the camps. For some commentators, Irish public authorities’ subservience to international capital during the ‘Celtic Tiger’ years – and the subsequent collapse of the Irish economic miracle as of 2008 – precipitated and ultimately led to the country’s very rapid move from a high-growth and high-performing economy to that of an economic basket case represented by its banking, fiscal, and financial crises (Kirby 2010; Kitchin et al. 2012). Ironically, occupiers even received the indirect and unexpected support from one of the country’s main business journals. They were, perhaps surprisingly, seen by such commentators as the unlikely opponents of the destructive forces of international capital and of the unbearable social consequences of neoliberal, free-market economics policies.

A third series of depictions focused on the occupiers’ amateurism. A number of commentators alluded to the utopian nature of the camps (McDonald 2012). But criticism was perhaps the more pronounced and damning when it originated specifically from the left of the political spectrum. Here, references to Occupy Galway and ODS camps heralded a ‘new dawn’ for the working class in Ireland but under the specific leadership and guidance of enlightened and campaign-hardened left-wing political activists. Occupiers were portrayed as political amateurs whose conceptual frameworks were redolent of conspiracy theorists lacking in class understanding. In many ways, the very small left-wing parties from whom the most negative depictions emerged seemed more interested in scoring political points against

26 “Over the previous two decades, financial market regulation has been pared back to almost observer status. The thinking was that any sort of regulation that hemmed in market forces was unnecessary and bureaucratic. It was an orthodoxy that became a cornerstone of economic policy throughout OECD countries. It obviously hasn’t worked. Consequently it would be a mistake to ignore the incipient protests against Wall Street as the vacuous bleatings of professional radicals. It is symptomatic of a much deeper and wider malaise that western government would do well to heed” (Business & Finance October 2011, Retrieved 5 November 2013 from http://www.businessandfinance.ie/index.jsp?p=1026&n=996).
one another, in decrying the occupiers’ “false consciousness”, and in denying political meanings to the occupiers’ actions.

These varied and widespread depictions all rest on the belief that Occupy Galway and ODS did not have any significant political value. The first series of depictions considered them to be no more than public order disturbances. The second viewed them as being economic in origin and that improvements in the country’s social and economic conditions would resolve all issues. The third was based on politics, but the occupiers were curiously absent from the analysis in that they were denied a political status and their experiences and representations were not taken either seriously or into consideration. The following section looks at the experiences and representations of the occupiers to see how they themselves framed their actions.

**Experiences and Representations**

As noted above, many occupiers criticized the systematic failings of the Irish economic system and wished to show their anger, despair, and frustration at the increasingly widening gap between Celtic Tiger expectations and current economic realities.²⁸ Many of them were convinced that the country had been brought to its knees by the collective greed of Irish financiers.²⁹ Many occupiers aired their loathing of the greed culture that had spread during the Celtic Tiger years and of the reckless investments of financial institutions which had brought the economy to such depressingly low levels.³⁰ They felt that international economic actors including the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund were now playing an invidious role in diminishing the Republic’s economic sovereignty and democratic foundation. A number of occupiers also stated that they joined the encampment and stayed on for several weeks because they were deeply troubled by the Irish social and political state of affairs.³¹ They felt that they had been betrayed by the abject failure of the political class to protect Irish people’s interests and that their own and their children’s future offered little more than economic hardship and emigration.³² They pointed out that the government-imposed cuts

²⁹ Interview, Ch…, male, unemployed, 25+, Galway, 17 November 2012.
³⁰ Interview, St…, male, unemployed, 35+, Galway, 9 December 2012.
³¹ Interview, Fi…, female, student, 20+, Galway, 17 November 2012.
³² Interview, He…, female, retired, 65+, Dublin, 19 November 2012.
were unfair, and they stressed that the cuts overwhelmingly targeted the poor and the weak (pensioners, the young, single parents, the unemployed, social welfare recipients, etc.) while those responsible for the deep recession (bankers, speculators, property developers) were not held to task. They vented much of their anger against the Irish political elite that had allowed the economic crisis to develop. For some occupiers, the need to ‘kick out the government and the politicians in power’ was an instrumental factor that led to their participation in the occupations. Others stated that they saw the camps as useful insofar as they represented a forum where they could raise the public’s awareness about the Irish political elite’s responsibility for the crisis. Many of these occupiers also saw the camps as extremely useful from an educational point of view because the camps allowed them to see and to understand the extent of corruption at local and national levels that had led to the economic morass. In Galway, for example, some occupiers indicated that the camp was for them a “wake-up call” in that it helped them to become active within their community.

Many occupiers felt that conveying their anger and despair in this collective format was therapeutic, as it allowed them to give voice to the frustration that they often found hard to express publicly. Many other occupiers also found personal comfort, solace, and solidarity in the camps. For these people, the camp helped them to break feelings of loneliness, personal failure, guilt, solitude, and/or despair. Other occupiers felt that the camp allowed them to do something concrete for the country, but many of them despaired at the level of passivity in Ireland. Some attributed this passivity to the lack of political conscience, to a poor level of political education, or to the ever-present moral dictates of the Catholic Church. Since this was the first time that many of the younger activists had ever participated in a collective action, they were enthusiastic about learning how to become politically active. Many of them also pointed out that they learned very quickly how to deal with practical issues such as how to build

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33 Interview, Ch... male, unemployed, 25+, Galway, 17 November 2012.
34 Interview, El... female, student, 20+, Galway, 17 November 2012.
35 Interview, Fi... female, student, 20+, Galway, 17 November 2012.
36 In some ways, the public’s passivity shows that high levels of anger and frustration do not necessarily lead to mobilization.
37 One occupier also attributed the passivity to the renowned inclement Irish weather (Interview, Fi..., female, student, 20+, Galway, 17 November 2012). Another attributed the passivity to prevailing begrudging attitudes (Interview, Mo..., female, student, 20+, Dublin, 8 January 2013).
38 Although the more seasoned activists were often frustrated that the movements were not more militant, many of the younger participants stated that they became politically aware because of their involvement in the cause. These younger participants thus became increasingly
and to maintain a viable camp when faced with adverse conditions such as bad weather, security issues, or the lack of hygiene. But in essence, learning from others’ experiences and raising the public’s awareness were for many occupiers the key incentives for their involvement in Occupy.39

Occupy Galway and ODS protesters were inspired by the demands, forms, rituals, and models used by Spanish and North American Occupy activists and, as such, put forward rather broad demands:

The issue of demands has been a contentious one, particularly at OWS, although not so much at ODS [...] Elsewhere in the Occupy movement there was a reluctance to make demands, as demands imply acceptance of a system that the movement has set out to undermine or even overthrow. These were broad demands on which everyone could agree, but could not easily be conceded. (Sheehan 2012: 5)40

In ODS, Real Democracy Now activists – inspired by the Spanish 15M movement – framed the movement’s original demands but they only really focused on the Irish situation.41 The demands – adopted by Occupy Galway one week later – were formulated as follows: (1) the departure of the International Monetary Fund from Ireland; (2) the end to public ownership of private banks’ debts; (3) the implementation of what was entitled “real participatory democracy”; and (4) the return to public ownership of Ireland’s privatized oil and gas reserves.42

Another way Occupy Galway and ODS were inspired by North American activists was by using their strategies, forms, and rituals. For example, Occupy Galway and ODS encampments were manned round-the-clock. In Galway, ten to twelve people on average were present daily, with occupiers staying mainly in blocks of two to three days. Participation rates in Dublin were slightly higher. Both camps lasted for what may be considered a remarkably long period (five months in the case of ODS and seven in

aware that they had a political role to play but that they did not necessarily need to do so via representative democracy or through party politics.

39 Interview, Se..., male, student, 25+, Dublin, 16 February 2013.
40 Helena Sheehan is a US-born, Dublin-based academic, now retired. A former member of the Irish Labour Party, she has been very active in left-wing circles since the 1970s and was one of the early activists involved in ODS. In publishing a personal account of her involvement in ODS, she provides a rich analysis of the conflicting narratives at hand in ODS (leadership, agenda, strategy, etc.).
41 Interview, Mo..., female, employee, 20+, Dublin, 8 January 2013.
that of Occupy Galway) considering the very difficult living and security conditions occupiers faced (cold and wet weather, sustained pressure from local authorities and the police, harassment from local residents, passers-by and late-night revelers, etc.).\(^{43}\) ODS protesters also organized daily general assemblies and used ‘open mics’ by passing a microphone from one speaker to the next so that all opinions could be heard and no one could dominate procedures. An ODS activist had also seen the successful use of ‘mic-check rituals’ (protestors telling their stories in a call-and-response formats) in YouTube videos of Philadelphia protests and thought it would go down well in Dublin as the ultimate democratic way to proceed. So as in many international protest-tent campaigns, Irish occupiers depended on the crucial role of social media in encouraging people to come together in high visibility public places – Eyre Square in central Galway and outside the Central Bank of Ireland in downtown Dublin.\(^{44}\) These public places were chosen because protesters could not be evicted or arrested for trespassing and since such spaces “belong to everybody and to nobody at the same time”.\(^{45}\) For Occupy Galway activists, the camp’s central location was also important because they would not run the risk of being part of an “invisible” protest and it would be easier for them to put their views to the general public. As in OWS, the camps’ locations and the available material and symbolic resources also helped shaped the emerging relations between the occupiers themselves and with the general public. Much of Occupy Galway’s or ODS’s material resources such as tents, sleeping bags, or food came from public donations.\(^{46}\) Local businesses gave food, members of the public donated money, tradesmen offered their expertise and building material, etc.\(^{47}\) These donations helped to sustain the occupiers and allowed them to provide small-scale support services for some homeless people or for the occasional occupiers who were encouraged to stay in the camp for however long they wished. All these initiatives were well supported initially

43 One Occupy Galway activist described herself as a bouncer. Interview, Ao..., female, student, 20+, Galway, 17 November 2012.
44 “We are in Eyre Square because the public owns the square and because the protest is a visual statement”. Michael Lyndon, protester of Occupy Galway quoted by Andrews (2011).
45 Interview, Ch..., male, unemployed, 25+, Galway, 17 November 2012.
46 “People have come with blankets and food and words of encouragement, others stay for a while in solidarity. [...] Even people who are opposed to what we do, when we explain what we are about see what we are getting at”. Michael Lyndon, protester of Occupy Galway quoted by Andrews (2011).
47 Interview, Mo..., female, employee, 20+, Dublin, 8 January 2013; Interview, Gi..., male, unemployed, 50+, Galway, 17 November 2012.
but, as we indicated above, in time many locals became far less disposed towards the camps.

Occupy Galway and ODS also resisted the establishment of hierarchical structures. Occupy Galway and ODS preferred fluid processes based on open, democratic objectives. For instance, general assemblies were often held twice daily where all comers could bring up any subject even if it meant that general assemblies often led to “tortuous discussions”.48 The rituals of participatory democracy, borrowed from OWS in particular, were much welcomed in the early stages of Occupy Galway and ODS, but they soon became fraught with difficulty especially when new occupiers tried to settle in or when practical decisions needed to be made quickly to address immediate problems, most notably in ODS. Two such examples in ODS were the difficulties associated with stopping the theft of laptops, cell phones, and money, or the problems linked to the organization of direct-action initiatives. ODS also facilitated public meetings and debates involving trade unionists, political activists, and the general public. But again in Dublin, perhaps more so than in Galway, the meetings also often led to many increasingly intractable disputes that had more to do with petty concerns than with substantive issues.49

Occupy Galway and ODS were, nonetheless, vastly different in some key respects from the many Spanish and North American movements that inspired them. The comfort, solidarity, and strength that many Irish occupiers felt by participating in the camps did not mean that the vast majority of them considered that it was imperative that ODS or Occupy Galway become politically active. Many occupiers found it very difficult to acknowledge that they were engaging in political acts or that they could ever align themselves with a political organization. In fact, most of the occupiers never really framed their claims in radical, ideological terms, as had been the case, for instance, of the Indignados in Spain or in OWS (Castañeda 2012). Although a minority of the occupiers attributed the country’s problems to fundamentally unjust and neoliberal economic priorities, the majority stayed away from politics per se. Most simply felt that greed and political expediency were at the root of the problems and that restoring Irish values and sovereignty would be sufficient.

A leading Galway occupier proclaimed often and proudly that “we are not a political group”.50 In ODS, however, discussions centered far more on

48 Interview, He..., female, retired, 65+, Dublin, 19 November 2012.
49 Interview, Mo..., female, employee, 25+, Dublin, 26 November 2014.
50 Interview, Gi..., male, unemployed, 50+, Galway, 17 November 2012.
the movement’s political mission than on its identity, at least in the initial stages.

I returned on day two, a Sunday, which was a much quieter day. I participated in a smaller assembly and found it really frustrating. It was about defining what we were. Over and over in the next days, I heard things that made me cringe at the conceptual confusion that seemed to prevail: assertions that this was not a political movement, that it was neither right nor left, that participants were welcome as individuals but had to leave their politics at the door. I tried to be patient, to argue that a person’s political philosophy was something integral to his/her being and not something that could be left at the door, aside from the other absurdity of this constant injunction – the fact that we had no door! I invoked a conception of politics that was broader and deeper than party politics. We need to reclaim the polis, I contended. Some took the point, but others continued with the ‘no politics’ rhetoric regardless (Sheehan 2012: 2).

Occupy Galway and ODS activists were also quite pragmatic. The ODS organized various working groups: a security group, a food group, a media group, and an ‘Open University’ group. However, although the ‘Open University’ group organized scores of public lectures, it became a particularly key source of contention. One reason is that, in Dublin in particular, some ‘working-class’ occupiers felt that ‘middle-class’ occupiers were far too active in ‘intellectual’ pursuits such as the ‘Open University’ but that they were not doing their share of the more mundane tasks such as getting food, building shelters, or dealing with security issues.51

In some ways, the following stringent criticism of OWS could be applicable in the case of ODS in the first few weeks but no longer after that since most of the ‘intellectuals’ or the ‘politically active’ had been pushed to the margins or simply gave up coming to the camp.

A while later I happened to watch an online video of an Occupy panel discussion held at a bookstore in New York; at some point in the recording, a panellist objected to the way protesters had of saying they were ‘speaking for themselves’ rather than acknowledging that they were part of a group. Another one of the panellists was moved to utter this riposte: ‘What I would note, is that people can only speak for themselves, that

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51 Interview, Mo..., female, employee, 25+, Dublin, 26 November 2014.
the self would be under erasure there, in that the self is then held into question, as any poststructuralist thought leading through anarchism would push you towards [...]. I would agree, an individualism that our society has definitely had inscribed upon it and continues to inscribe upon itself, ‘I can only speak for myself’, the ‘only’ is operative there, and of course these spaces are being opened up [...]. My heart dropped like a broken elevator. As soon as I heard this long, desperate stream of pseudo-intellectual gibberish, I knew instantly that this thing was doomed. (Frank 2012: 1)  

So the discourse in Occupy Galway and ODS was far different from some of the radical viewpoints expressed in OWS in particular (Flank 2011). Although Occupy Galway and ODS protesters decried the state and the scale of inequality in Ireland, radical policy proposals were never high on the agenda. Occupiers in Ireland understood very well that the bank guarantees and the emergency rescue package led to cutbacks in social welfare, in educational support, or in health provision, but they were not necessarily sure how the policy decisions could be overturned nor did they seem willing to offer concrete, alternative political solutions. So in this sense they reacted to events rather than devised and proposed alternatives. They also seemed aware that they were involved in a unique type of protest event for Ireland, but they were reluctant or unsure how to broaden the scope of the protest.  

Equally important is that while the consensus approach inspired by OWS was of help in building solidarity in the small and relatively homogeneous Galway group, it was not of much use in the larger and far more diverse ODS. Resistance to formal structures in ODS notably led to a situation whereby cliques soon formed and whereby some of the stronger and more vocal personalities dominated proceedings. For example, tensions in ODS were particularly apparent when some of the camp’s ‘permanent residents’ suggested that only they, as ‘real’ occupiers, should have a higher status in

52 Thomas Frank is the co-founder and was co-editor of the Chicago-based left-wing magazine The Baffler, which focuses on cultural, political, and business issues.

53 “At one assembly I asked: ‘Do you want to build a camp or do you want to build a movement?’ I believed that a camp obsession, even narcissism, was subverting the attempt to build a movement” (Sheehan 2012: 13).

54 Interview, He…, female, retired, 65+, Dublin, 19 November 2012.
decision-making and only they should be allowed to define, to decide, and to voice demands. For many of the round-the-clock occupiers, only they had the legitimacy to speak out. This led to constant strife between the ‘real’ and the ‘moral’ occupiers in particular and limited the movement’s public reach or alliance-building potential. For instance, some guests were not allowed to speak at organized events because of their trade union or political backgrounds, protest marches were abandoned because they had not received ‘proper’ approval, and general assemblies were set during working hours so that only permanent occupiers could realistically attend. These types of problems of rivalries were rampant and existed very early on within the camps. They often led older and more seasoned activists to become frustrated with the idealism and naivety expressed by these younger activists who wished above all to be apolitical.

Some of those camping became obsessed with the camp and with an inflated image of themselves as the core of this movement. ‘I camp therefore I am’ I said of them on one occasion, when I was frustrated by the camp narcissism, paraphrasing Descartes to ends he never intended. One habitually referred to himself and others in the camp as ‘heroes of the revolution’ [...] I believed that a camp obsession, even narcissism, was subverting the attempt to build a movement. (Sheehan 2012: 7)

In Dublin, some of the initial organizers also felt that the newer, younger, and more permanent occupiers failed to appreciate the history of the left and of the trade union movement in Ireland (as in the United States, as Smith demonstrates in this volume). “It was as if all protest started in October 2011.” For many of the ‘moral’ activists, the ‘real’ occupiers were doomed to fail because they refused to frame the movement in class-based terminology and to seek the support of more seasoned and radical social and political groupings. In Dublin in particular, the newer (and younger) activists were extremely wary of being infiltrated by radical political organizations, and they were also extremely distrustful of and disillusioned with the trade

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55 One ODS participant attributes this division as based on class. The ‘permanent’ occupiers came mainly from the more disadvantaged parts of Dublin and many of them were young homeless people, whereas the occasional or ‘moral’ occupiers were principally middle-class, rather well educated, and often in stable jobs. In Dublin, this also led to some minor disputes between students and some of the less economically privileged occupiers. Interview, Mo..., female, employee, 20+, Dublin, 8 January 2013.

56 Interview, Ge..., male, employee, 50+, Dublin, 5 January 2013.

57 Interview, He..., female, retired, 65+, Dublin, 19 November 2012.
union movement. This ‘no politics’ approach was fundamentally different to what had emerged in OWS. In New York, the “episode as a whole has become an irresistible magnet for radical academics of the cultural-theory sort; indeed, for them it seems to have been a sort of holy episode, the moment they were waiting for, the putting into practice of their most treasured beliefs” (Frank 2012). By comparison, occupiers in ODS and in Occupy Galway had different views:

[We wanted] to create a movement with no affiliation to political parties and to resist entryism on the part of any existing political formations [...] There was an obsession with a ban on political and trade union banners and literature. There was fear of any organisation bringing its own agenda into this movement. [...] From the beginning, in fact before the occupation actually started, much of the discussion was driven by hostility to the Socialist Workers’ Party. (Sheehan 2012: 3)

In Galway, we took a pragmatic stance. We let the various parties or organizations that gravitated around Occupy access to the camp but they couldn’t use it as a platform to get recruits for themselves because we were not linked to anyone and we didn’t share the Socialist Workers’ Party’s political views.58

Some of the more seasoned – but ultimately shunned – activists in Dublin considered that this ‘no politics’ stance was naive and ultimately destructive.59 For them, ODS ran the risk of withering away if broad social and political alliances could not be established. This is part of what Lipsky (1968) suggests when stating that the powerless in society have many ways of expressing themselves politically but that their political existence depends very much on the help provided by third parties. But as time passed, occupiers in both Occupy Galway and ODS were particularly adamant that they would not enter into alliances, as also happened in other Occupy campaigns around the world (Uitermark and Nicholls 2012). They took this stance despite evidence that allies in the trade union movement or even within some of the parties of the ‘left’ may well have helped to diffuse and to support their cause. The occupiers also took the ‘no-alliance’ approach even though many of them were well aware that this stance would limit their chances of diffusing their viewpoints and that this could cut off public

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58 Interview, Ch…, male, unemployed, 25+, Galway, 17 November 2012.
59 Interview, Ge…, male, employee, 50+, Dublin, 5 January 2013..
support. Theirs was a conscious and tactical decision. Occupiers believed that by refusing to enter into alliances, they would be preserved from accusations of being politically inclined and thus were ensuring the purity of their cause.

But collaboration and communication between the various Occupy camps around the country was also remarkably poor. Only a very small minority of occupiers travelled to other camps to see what was taking place or to discuss common issues. An even smaller number took part in Occupy’s National Assembly. This lack of communication and incapacity to share information and experiences certainly hindered the camps’ ability to organize collective actions and campaigns, to refine their goals and strategies, or to set up a national platform to voice their claims. But, yet again, many of the occupiers had limited interest in national issues and preferred to concentrate on improving their own lot in life.

In short, internal characteristics and tactical decisions limited Occupy Galway and ODS’s capacity to widen their campaigns, to secure positive public opinion and sympathy, and to create spaces that were open and inclusive of people most harmed by the effects of the recessions such as the ‘new poor’ and the homeless. It could well be argued that the increasing presence of homeless people weakened Occupy Galway and ODS’s mobilization potential, since many middle-class members (with relevant social capital) became increasingly reluctant to take part. As the Occupy Galway and ODS became less and less diverse in terms of their social and economic make-up, the camps soon became ends in themselves, generating an exclusionary group dynamic and contradicting the slogan “We are the 99%” that made it difficult to build a wider movement. This allowed the Occupy Galway and ODS to lose their way in the mist of internal conflicts. Ultimately, the camps wore themselves down by dealing with a host of relatively minor daily issues, leaving little time for collective action. In retrospect, it could be argued that the camps were the sole expression of the movement. Rooted to a location, they ‘traveled’ with difficulty. Attempts to widen the movement were fiercely resisted and became practically impossible, not only because of the movement’s internal characteristics and tensions (and lack of resources) but also because the occupation of a

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60 In February 2012, during a National Assembly of the Occupy movement, some participants wondered: “What happened to the other Occupies? Are they worn out, no funds, divided, disbanded, or just too busy?” (Minutes of Occupy National Assembly, Rossporrt, 4 February 2012). The question highlights the remarkably poor level of communication between the campaigns, as well as the perceived lack of impact and visibility at the local, regional, or national levels.

61 On the lack of credibility of the slogan, see Smith’s chapter in this volume.
public space for an undetermined period of time became the participants’ sole symbolic expression of protest. But did they really want anything else?

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In this chapter we focused on the Occupy Galway and ODS camps. We pointed to a number of key issues and questions occupiers faced: how to overturn common depictions of them; how to generate mass support and participation; how to transform narrow interests into symbols that concerned Irish society as a whole; and how to be seen as champions of the public good? All proved difficult to bring about. Although the occupiers gradually slotted into the daily routine of the local community where they garnered some support, when the camps became ‘eyesores’, local support turned sharply against them.\(^{62}\) As for public authorities and the police, they never considered the protesters to be sufficiently disruptive or threatening that they had to be removed urgently. They simply waited for the initiatives to run their course before serving orders on the few remaining occupiers to dismantle the camps and evicting them. Only at this point did a few minor public disorder incidents arise.\(^{63}\)

Aside from the euphoric first few weeks, the camps existed in a social and political vacuum and proved to be especially unattractive and uninviting to the victims of the economic crisis and, more widely, to the general public. One key reason for Occupy Galway and ODS’s difficulty in spreading their message is that the activists refused to take a political stance and to enter into alliances similar to their Spanish colleagues’ position but with different outcomes (see chapter 5 in this volume).

Many of the younger protesters – many of whom came from the more disadvantaged parts of Dublin or Galway – were also radically opposed to the idea of building alliances with the trade union movement or with left-wing parties as they felt this would co-op the movement and distort its original raison-d’être. This led to ongoing conflicts between many of these first-time younger protesters and many older, middle-class, and more seasoned activists who believed that Occupy Galway and ODS could not evolve without the help of such key allies. In addition, occupiers were determined not to make specific claims or to deal with public authorities. Their preferred strategy was to snub the ‘enemy’ and to refuse to acknowledge

\(^{62}\) Irish Independent, 23 January 2012.

\(^{63}\) Interview, El…, female, student, 20+, Galway, 17 November 2012; Interview, Mo…, female, employee, 20+, Dublin, 8 January 2013.
the ‘system’s’ legitimacy so as to preserve the camps’ independence and purity. Although the practical benefits of such an approach are questionable (Smith and Glidden 2012), the strategy is understandable in theory at least. But by refusing to engage with public authorities or even with potentially important allies, Occupy Galway and ODS protesters consciously and willingly reduced their capacity to have a wide-ranging political or social impact or even to make the camps more attractive to their focus group, the victims of the Celtic Tiger’s collapse. As a result, the slogan “We are the 99%” proved to be particularly ill-adapted to Occupy Galway and, even more so, to ODS. Although Occupy Galway and ODS activists expressed the view that the camps were open to one and all, ODS especially did little to make many of these victims feel welcome. Pressure was put on newcomers to become ‘permanent residents’ or to leave aside their political feelings. These examples point to a movement that was guided by people who were, in some cases, rather inflexible and intolerant. Limited by their strategic choices and by the small number of the occupiers who had relevant organizational experience and knowledge, Occupy Galway and ODS never truly managed to widen their appeal.

But it is perhaps unreasonable to focus solely on some of these negative elements of the Occupy Galway and ODS. Despite some of the camps’ difficulties as described above, there were a number of key positive outcomes. Many young and previously politically apathetic people had come to take part for the first time in a collective action. An ODS activist has pointed out that these young and ‘naïve’ protesters were frustrated at not knowing why their world was crumbling around them. They were fed up with the ‘lies’ and sickened by the depressing state of affairs. They wanted to ‘do something’ but they could not express clearly exactly what they wanted. These protesters were taking a plunge into the unknown. Although they had no specific claims aside from the four described above, they were adamant that the movement should have no leaders and they really wanted to stay together in the camps for as long as they could. As one protester stated, all he really wanted was to stay put “until they forced us to move.” These occupiers thereby seized the occasion to develop personally. Even though public authorities, the mainstream media, and the general public largely ignored the camps and their occupiers, many of the first-time protesters stated that they benefited immensely from the experience. Some of the

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64 Interview, Mo..., female, employee, 20+, Dublin, 8 January 2013.
65 Interview, Da..., male, independent filmmaker, 35+, Dublin, 19 February 2013.
66 Interview, Ch..., male, unemployed, 25+, Galway, 17 November 2012.
more seasoned and politically engaged activists took another view. Some found it particularly frustrating to see their younger colleagues shun the well-established traditions of protest in favor of what they viewed to be a narcissistic and utopian exercise. For these seasoned and politically engaged activists, Occupy Galway and ODS activists never appeared able – or really willing – to project themselves beyond the camps, with the result that the camps became the sole symbolic expression of protest. One such activist who left the Dublin camp in protest in December considered that this was an ‘ironic’ stance for a movement that claimed to be largely inclusive – “We are the 99%” – and that pretended to be the voice of all the victims of the crisis.67 Nonetheless, many of the younger and longer-standing occupiers felt that participating in the camps was the most important thing they had ever done in their lives and pointed out the educational or formative experience of Occupy: “The main aim of occupy is to educate and empower people to change the system. We must be patient with the ‘people’ and with each other and keep an eye on the big picture to avoid bickering.”68

In short, a key element of ODS and Occupy Galway relates to the activists’ frames of experience and of representations and thus to ODS and Occupy Galway’s political significance. Weak public support, few alliances, weak resources, and occupiers’ subsequent feelings of isolation or of despair may have led them to feel that they had ‘nothing to lose’ by taking action and by remaining in the camps as long as they could. Perhaps because Dublin and Galway occupiers did not put forward specific claims or because they did not want to have hierarchical structures, they did not conform to expected means of actions. But this was not necessarily a sign of weakness or an indication that their efforts were futile. The longest-serving occupiers in Dublin and in particular Galway told us that Occupy ignited a flame in them as it allowed them to become aware of a host of key social and economic issues. Occupy also showed them how hard it is to initiate collective action. The occupiers felt they built a collective cause, however limited in scope and in impact. They condemned the social and economic problems they faced and they also denounced the socially disseminated representations and institutional practices. In doing so, they expressed and justified their actions in political terms and actions. But also of paramount importance is that Occupy allowed these politically apathetic people to become politically active in the defence of a number of causes in the final stages of the camps

67 Interview, Ge..., male, unemployed, 30+, Dublin, 6 January 2013.
68 Minutes of Occupy National Assembly, Rossport, 4 February 2012.
and in the months that followed the camps’ dismantlement. These are positive elements, irrespective of the total number of people who were involved in Occupy from October 2011 to May 2012. Occupy Ireland shows, therefore, the importance of listening to what the occupiers were saying, of considering why they acted in the ways they did, and of taking account of what they gained from the experience.

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69 See, for example, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ul2esP2Ug88, retrieved 9 December 2013; http://www.flickr.com/photos/67918286@N05/7454146890/in/photostream/, retrieved 3 December 2013.