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## **Dangerously Empty? Hegemony and the construction of the Irish Entrepreneur**

**Forthcoming at Organization (2012)**

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### **Abstract:**

In this paper we build on Jones and Spicer's (2009) conceptualisation of the entrepreneur as an empty signifier. We explore the function of the signifier 'entrepreneurship' within a social context marked by crisis: Ireland 2007 to 2010. In doing so, we show how its articulation by government acted to legitimise the continuation of market logics and, relatedly, the existing political status quo. Theoretically, we demonstrate the usefulness of Laclau and Mouffe's conception of hegemony, which shares a Lacanian legacy with Jones and Spicer. This helps us to understand the contradictory nature of the signifier of the entrepreneur in Irish political and social discourse, along with its relationship to the reproduction of political hegemony.

**Keywords:** Entrepreneur, hegemony, Ireland, Laclau, political discourse

## Introduction

*In the relatively short time since I last talked at the Institute, Ireland has gone from being the economic toast of Europe to being excoriated for a champagne lifestyle that was based on unsustainable levels of borrowing. (McAleese, 2010)*

In the early 2000s, Ireland was widely touted as a phenomenon among global economies due to its exceptional growth during the Celtic Tiger era. By 2010, the country had sunk into a deep recession and was considered something of a pariah in Europe. The Celtic Tiger not only died, but in its death throes it shook the very foundations of Ireland's sovereignty and identity. In 2010, the Irish state accepted an €85 billion IMF-EU 'bailout' loan at a notably high rate of interest, and is once again exporting its young workers to more stable economies (O'Hara, 2011). Unemployment in 2010 approached 14%, with few indications of economic growth on the horizon, while against the burdensome IMF-EU loan repayment scheme, social supports including healthcare and education witnessed drastic cuts. The recession that officially began in Ireland in 2008 after a year of economic slow-down had devastating consequences for Irish society (Kirby, 2010).

It has emerged that poor decision-making in relation to banking regulation and wilful blindness towards an escalating property bubble were at least two ways in which the Irish governing parties were instrumental, if not the key cause, of the downturn (O'Toole, 2009). With such changes coming after more than a decade of unprecedented growth and wealth creation, Irish people expressed considerable resentment towards the then-government<sup>1</sup> and a deep pessimism towards Ireland's future. Yet, the government did not witness the level of

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<sup>1</sup> By 'government', we refer particularly to ministers in the Fianna Fáil political party, which has dominated Irish politics since independence and which was the major party in a coalition government during the time period studied.

political mobilisation of affected groups that other European states, such as Greece, France and the UK, experienced. Instead, the years 2007-2010 were notable for the passivity and consent displayed by Ireland's voting public. In particular, the adherence to market principles by the ruling political party remained unquestioned (Smyth, 2011:4). In this paper we explore this, and focus on how the concept of the entrepreneur within political and public discourse played a part in political stability.

In what follows, we argue that in this context of a national recession, entrepreneurship became more than an 'empty' concept that was difficult to pin down and define; rather, we highlight its dangers and show how entrepreneurship acted as a fantasmatic smokescreen that, while appearing to offer a compelling utopia to Ireland's people, privileged particular forms of economic action and stymied resistance. These effects demonstrate the importance of investigating the articulation of the signifier 'entrepreneurship' within specific political contexts. Theoretically, we find Laclau and Mouffe's ideas to be helpful. Our paper proceeds as follows: first we provide an overview of existing literature on entrepreneurship within organization studies and elaborate upon Jones and Spicer's understanding of the concept. Next, we consider how Laclau and Mouffe's account of hegemony may benefit the analysis of the discourse of entrepreneurship in Ireland. We present data from the recent Irish context that illustrate the operation of the signifier, 'entrepreneur'. Noting that the government articulation of the entrepreneur was one among many, we critically assess the function of such articulations to hegemonic operations and consider how contestant understandings of the entrepreneur vie with government-led articulations. We build on existing work in organization studies and argue that the analysis of entrepreneurship discourse must go beyond recognition of its elusive, multiple and ultimately 'empty' nature in order to find ways to theorize its operation in different settings. The approach we propose enables us to illustrate the dangers that can attend particular articulations of entrepreneurship within a given context. In doing so, we add an empirical illustration to existing accounts of the 'dark side' of entrepreneurship discourse (Jones and Spicer, 2005: 229).

### The Signifier Entrepreneur

The concept of 'the entrepreneur' is a slippery one. Discourses of entrepreneurship can be differently constructed and mobilised depending on the political and social context (Armstrong, 2005; Nodoushani and Nodoushani, 1999). The entrepreneur may be conceptualised as a quasi-religious figure (Sørensen, 2008), an agent of change and

innovation (Calás et. al. 2009; Hjorth and Steyaert, 2009), a kind of uberman for the globalised era (Kilgour, 2000), a ‘passive agent of omnipotent capital’ as characterised by Marx (Taymans, 1951: 88), a Modern Prince who challenges hegemonic practices (Levy and Scully, 2007) or as a means of transmitting national identity and political values (Hillis, Petit and Cravey, 2008). The multiplicity of meaning that can be attached to entrepreneurship has a darker side however. Common conceptions have been shown to be ethnocentric and patriarchal (Essers and Benschop, 2007; Ogbor, 2000). In addition, the discourse of entrepreneurship tends to implicitly uphold a ‘free market’, ‘capitalist’ worldview (Ogbor, 2000: 614). These aspects can be problematic when deployed in settings not suited to the logics of the market (Armstrong, 2005). This was seen during changes to approaches to public sector work by the UK government in the 1980s and 1990s. Here, the figure of the ‘entrepreneur’ came to symbolize the new, ideal public servant who approached work from a private sector mindset that prioritizes profit and innovation (Du Gay, 1996), implicitly distracting from an emphasis on service and vocation. Among contract workers and others in precarious employment, the dominance of such a discourse posits an entrepreneurial ideal as the best way for workers to view their situations (Parker, 2007; Storey, Salaman and Platman, 2005). This can lead to a sense of failure when the individual struggles to live up to the ideal in economically uncertain times (Tretheway, 2001). Enterprise discourses similarly encroach on contemporary university settings, leading to an erosion of traditional values of academic freedom and autonomy (Bridgman, 2007). Further, entrepreneurship as an ideology can be problematic even when deployed in for-profit firms, as Stein (2007) argues in an analysis of its central role in Enron’s corporate culture. Such a polysemy of meaning attached to the signifier suggests that the entrepreneur is not only open to interpretation and articulation, but also one that is potentially dangerous.

Attempting to understand this multiplicity, Jones and Spicer draw on a poststructural, Lacanian framework to describe how particular signifiers in society function to order peoples’ identifications: they provide us with the appearance of a stable phenomenon, which is helpful. Jones and Spicer use these ideas to theorize the figure of the entrepreneur as an empty signifier, an ‘absent centre’ (2005: 236). The authors speak back to the large body of work within business and management studies that involve attempts to define what an entrepreneur ‘is’, and argue that this pursuit is futile. The reason that entrepreneurship is so difficult to define and ‘researchers seem continually to run into failure’ (Jones and Spicer, 2005: 234), is because it is, finally, an empty concept- its function is only to be articulated

onto neighbouring discourses operating in a particular social context. For Jones and Spicer, this emptiness is precisely the reason that practices of identifying with the signifier entrepreneurship persist: ‘the paradoxical and apparently mysterious nature’ of the notion sustains it through ‘enlisting budding entrepreneurs and reproducing the current relations of economic domination’ (Jones and Spicer, 2005: 234). The function of the entrepreneur as an empty signifier as developed by Jones and Spicer has been of considerable importance for understanding its apparently perennial attraction; as an ‘empty’ signifier it can be (almost) whatever one desires it to be. However, it is necessary to investigate how the articulation of this signifier takes place in particular empirical contexts. In this paper we contribute one such illustration: Ireland in crisis.

### Hegemony and Affect

In developing our argument, we ask whether Laclau and Mouffe’s concepts can help us understand the concept of the entrepreneur as it is deployed in local settings. In what follows, we develop a theoretical framework drawing from their ideas of hegemony, discourse and articulation, that is then used to analyze the discourse of entrepreneurship in Ireland.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, the practice of hegemony is an attempt to dominate meaning in a particular social context, or ‘field of discursivity’ (2001:111). This attempt involves creating apparent connections between particular signifiers. Some signifiers are particularly vulnerable to being assigned different meanings in different situations, and these are termed ‘floating’ signifiers<sup>2</sup>. Connections between different signifiers take place in terms of certain ‘logics’. While there are a number of logics within Laclau’s deconstructive theory, the logics of ‘equivalence’ and ‘difference’ are particularly useful for this study. A logic of equivalence relates to the construction of a linkage, or a ‘chain’ between different signifiers that are presented as ‘expressing a certain sameness’ (Torfing, 1999:300-301). In turn, a logic of difference links particular signifiers through highlighting their ‘mutual differences’ (Torfing, 1999:300-301). Thus while the logic of equivalence tends to be a uniting force, binding together diverse identities, the logic of difference tends towards dispersal. By reinforcing aspects of sameness and difference, meaning is altered. For example, through the construction of chains of equivalence, the identities of the signifiers involved are changed

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘floating signifier’ refers to a signifier so overflowing ‘with meaning because it is articulated differently within different discourses’ (Torfing, 1999:301).

somewhat (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001:105), as the similarities between signifiers in the chain are emphasised at the expense of their differences.

Central to achieving these links are particular, ‘privileged’ signifiers that are considered to be empty of content<sup>3</sup>. Termed ‘nodal points’, the function of these signifiers is to organize the connections above, for example, to structure a chain of equivalence across diverse signifiers (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 13; Torfing, 1999:301). Thus, as du Gay (1996) shows, in the UK public sector of the 1990s, disparate signifiers such as ‘public sector work’, ‘excellence’ and ‘motivation’ came to be articulated alongside each other by the signifier ‘enterprise’, which acted as a nodal point. The practice of creating such a connection is termed an articulation.

Importantly, in this view, discourse represents the ‘structured totality’ that is in place at any given time, from a result of these articulations. This totality is constructed via a series of signifying sequences that attach to create a ‘more or less coherent framework’. The idea is that diverse statements, ideas, concepts, or signs are articulated in such a way as to produce an overarching framework ‘for what can be said or done’ (Torfing, 1999, 300). An important implication of this is that discourse cannot be seen as a static end-product but rather it is the outcome of dynamic ‘articulatory practices’ that are continuously re-negotiated; it is never complete (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001:105).

This conception of discourse differs from other theorizations commonly drawn upon within organization studies, including those of Michel Foucault. For Foucault, discourse is sometimes conceived of as a ‘group of statements’, at other times as as ‘a regulated practice’ that accounts for such statements (Foucault, 1986: 80), and in yet other places as a ‘weapon of power, of control, of subjection, of qualification and of disqualification’<sup>4</sup> (Foucault, 1994:124). Foucault’s conception of discourse has proven useful in many theoretical contexts (see, for instance, Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1986), including analyses of organizations. However, as we will show, certain features of Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of discourse and method of analysis have particular advantages for the analysis of entrepreneurship presented here.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Torfing identifies ‘democracy’ as a signifier that is empty of content, as it is ‘so over-coded that it means everything and nothing’ (Torfing, 1999 p. 301).

<sup>4</sup> [Le discours est une arme de pouvoir, de contrôle, d’assujettissement, de qualification et de disqualification] (Foucault, 1994:124).

A number of points are important in understanding the theoretical and practical importance of Laclau and Mouffe's conceptualisation of discourse. First, nodal points can themselves 'float', that is, come to be articulated onto other sets of signifiers. This multiplicity of meaning can particularly occur during times of uncertainty and crisis and when it takes place, the discursive field is momentarily 'problematized and temporarily opened up' and can be reorganized in a 'new direction' (Skálén et al., 2008:42). This point is significant for the following analysis, occurring at such a time of economic and political crisis. Related to this, articulations cannot take place at random, unfettered by limits. Rather, a particular signifier must be available to act as a legitimate nodal point, and this depends on the discursive context in question. Articulation occurs within 'a certain symbolic code' (Žižek, 1989:103) or social order which is itself the result of previous articulations (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 167). The unequal relations of power that constitute both the availability and credibility of signifiers is a product of previous hegemonic struggles (Howarth, 2004:262). In essence, empty signifiers are never truly empty, but contain a remainder of their previous articulation, thereby placing some limits on their arbitrariness. However, hegemony is never complete, but is always betrayed by its own inability to permanently fix elements (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 107). Hegemony is therefore dynamic: the outcome of a continually re-negotiated attempt at closure. It is always attended by the possibility of re-articulation and thus social and political change.

In addition, affective relations<sup>5</sup> play a key role in hegemonic articulations. Successful hegemonic formations that remain 'salient' over a long period of time, for example nationalism and populism, do not depend simply on achieving lasting articulation (Stavrakakis, 2010:5). An 'affective, libidinal investment' is also required (Stavrakakis, 2010:5). Discourse and affect are thus consubstantial: while rhetoric can explain the form, it is affect that explains the force (Laclau, 2004:326), and this point is developed later. In summary therefore, hegemony represents 'the expansion of a discourse, or set of discourses, into a dominant horizon of social orientation and action' and this is achieved by 'articulating unfixed elements into partial fixed moments in a context crisscrossed by antagonistic forces' (Torfing 1999:101). Simplifying this description, we can say that hegemony is not merely about the exercise of power, but also about the attempt to control the fixation of meaning so that certain world views, norms, and values appear as common sense.

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<sup>5</sup> Affective relations are here understood as the emotive elements attached to signifiers.

The above ideas have proven helpful in understanding both the achievement and manipulation of popular consent by particular political forces (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001:105). They provide a useful way of understanding how change occurs, and how competing meanings can move from being in the background to achieving a position of dominance. In this paper, we use the theory to develop a deeper understanding of the function of the signifier ‘entrepreneur’. We concur with Jones and Spicer (2005) that this signifier is ‘empty’, in that it is ‘so over-coded’ that it can represent ‘everything and nothing’ (Torfing, 1999: 301). We build on this idea to examine the operation of entrepreneurship in practice and argue that it acts as a nodal point that links signifiers that are already imbued with positive meanings, to government actions and activities. This is achieved through logics of equivalence and difference and occurs within a wider symbolic code that privileges market logics. We demonstrate the value of this framework for examining the logics at work within hegemonic government practices. While other authors have found such an approach useful in the analysis of business and organization (Bridgman, 2007; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996:50; Spicer and Bohm, 2007; Willmott 2005), the theories of Laclau and Mouffe nevertheless remain underused in organization studies (Willmott, 2005:749) in particular in relation to entrepreneurship research. Our analysis demonstrates their significance to this strand of critical organization scholarship.

### **Analysing the Irish Entrepreneur: Methods**

To explore the notion of entrepreneurship and how it plays out in practice, we focus on the discursive context surrounding the recent recession in Ireland, and consider how entrepreneurship was articulated between 2007 and 2010. We chose this because it represents the period in which the Irish economy rapidly descended into crisis. Crisis often acts to reveal existent discourses and behaviours that may be less overt during times of peace and prosperity (Foley, 2010: 2). During this time, Fianna Fáil was the dominant party in a coalition government.

#### Data collection

We collected data from government and media sources, focusing on texts in which the signifiers ‘entrepreneur’ and ‘entrepreneurship’ were used. The newspaper search focused on *The Irish Times* and *The Irish Independent*, considered to be opinion-leaders in Irish public and political life (O’Regan, 2007: 13). We began with a broad archive search using the term

‘entrepreneur’ and focused upon the years 2007-2010, in order to identify themes. We followed this with a narrower search using the terms ‘entrepreneur’ and ‘government’. Here, a total of 665 matches were produced from the *Irish Times* archive search, while 249 matches were identified in the *Irish Independent* search. A further archive search using ‘entrepreneurship and government’ produced 207 matches with the *Irish Times* and 37 matches with the *Irish Independent*. Noting that the concept of entrepreneurship was key in the Irish government’s economic strategy during this time (O’Hara, 2011: 11; O’Rourke, 2010), we next focused on government texts. Reports on Ireland’s economic future make continuous reference to the centrality of entrepreneurship and enterprise (O’Rourke, 2010: 83) and so we began by examining these (Fianna Fáil, 2009; Forfás, 2010; Government of Ireland, 2008; IDA, 2009; Department of Finance, 2010). We also searched within government archives to identify further publications, press releases and speeches that referenced ‘entrepreneur’ and ‘entrepreneurship’. The relatively small number of relevant publications during this time-frame allowed us to satisfy saturation.

#### Data Analysis

First, both researchers read through the data and working together we coded what appeared to be key themes in reference to the concepts ‘entrepreneur’ and ‘entrepreneurship’. The next stage of our analysis was characteristically abductive, involving a continual movement between our data and theory (Wodak, 2004). In particular, the analytic process was guided by Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony and also drew on interpretations of this approach for discourse analysis (e.g. Andersen, 2003). In line with the overview presented above, this approach enables an exploration of the ‘general hegemonic relationships in society’ along with ‘conditions for the transformation of society’ (Andersen, 2003:55-56). This is achieved through examining articulatory practices<sup>6</sup> in which relations between signifiers are established, or indeed dispersed. In particular, we incorporated a deconstructive approach in order to identify the logics of equivalence and difference that acted to construct discursive meaning in relation to the signifier entrepreneur (Andersen, 2003: 59). It must be noted that in contrast to Derrida’s conception of deconstruction (1998), Laclau uses deconstruction as a means to ‘show how differences are contingent’; that even where a ‘bar’ has been discursively established between two elements, this cannot be maintained (Anderson, 2003: 57). Through deconstruction it is possible to break down the connections

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<sup>6</sup> Laclau and Mouffe explain that ‘articulation is designated by any practice that establishes relationships, that is, differences and similarities between elements (2001:105).

between signifiers, demonstrate their arbitrariness, and thus highlight attempts towards hegemonising the discursive field. The dual use of discourse analysis and deconstruction provides specific theoretical and analytical tools which benefit our analysis of the ‘entrepreneur’ within government discourse during this time of crisis in Ireland. In particular, such an approach enables a focus on articulatory practices in which entrepreneurship comes to be inscribed with meaning in ways that alter the significance that it holds (Torfing, 1999), a sensitivity to the construction of logics of difference and equivalence within these practices, and a focus on affect. These ideas informed the abductive analytic approach adopted by this study. Before describing this in more depth, it is helpful to introduce some background to the concept of the entrepreneur in Ireland.

### *The Entrepreneur in Ireland: Background*

Given that this study examines shifts in conceptions of entrepreneurship over the period 2007-2010, it is important to understand the emergence of this signifier in the Irish context. In Ireland, entrepreneurship traditionally occupied a relatively marginal position in government discourse on economic policy, although from the mid 1980s, government documents reveal a growing interest in being supportive of new businesses (Hulpke and Byrnes, 1994). During the early 1990s, rhetoric around entrepreneurship largely took the form of encouraging the growth of ancillary businesses that would support foreign-owned multinational corporations. This was due to Ireland’s economic reliance on MNCs in the areas of IT and pharmaceuticals. From the late 1990s to mid 2000s, often characterized as Ireland’s ‘Celtic Tiger’ period, Ireland exhibited the highest level of early-stage entrepreneurial activity among European states, along with the ‘most positive outlook’ on entrepreneurship (Bosma and Harding, 2007). Alongside this, the Irish government espoused an intensified interest in entrepreneurship, citing it as a key driver of economic growth; ‘It is only right that we should celebrate our entrepreneurs’, enthused Minister for Finance Charlie McCreevy in 2001 (McCreevy, 2001). A growing ‘culture of enterprise’ was reflected in government economic policy during this period (O’Carroll, 2002; O’Rourke, 2010: 84); it influenced business culture as was evidenced in an interview-based study of small business proprietors in Ireland, in which this discourse was strongly embraced (O’Rourke and Pitt, 2006). By 2007, when Ireland’s economy began to slow down and a devastating crash appeared imminent, the concept of the entrepreneur had attained a relatively prominent place within government and societal discourse (Flanagan, 2008; O’Hara, 2011: 4). However, it was still largely viewed as a separate field of business activity that should be supported by

government incentives, in the hope that it would contribute to Ireland's economic development.

In the following sections we examine articulations of entrepreneurship that emerged in the years following the economic downturn. We draw on the theoretical approach outlined above. This approach enabled an understanding of how entrepreneurship came to be articulated alongside particular signifiers in a chain of equivalence in the Irish case. Focusing on government articulations in the first instance, we ask how such articulations are used. As will be illustrated, emergent signifiers include: the government itself, Irish national identity, business success, meritocracy and economic development. These articulations created a 'sameness' across the signifiers in question, holding the notion of 'entrepreneurship' together in a positive way. After this, we consider whether alternative understandings are foreclosed or enabled to emerge. We note how competing articulations appeared to have failed in efforts to build affective chains of equivalence, and thus failed to present a significant challenge to the dominant discourse of entrepreneurship.

### **Articulating the Irish Entrepreneur: competing discursive strategies**

#### Entrepreneurship as a Quintessentially Irish Trait

In Ireland, the concept of entrepreneurship has a history of being linked with patriotism and nationalism (O'Rourke, 2010: 83), but during the years following the economic downturn, this took on a new momentum. During the period studied, the Irish entrepreneur had come to be seen as something of a 'modern patriot' (O'Hara, 2011: 4). In a report from this time, Forfás<sup>7</sup>, a national advisory board, declared that 'Ireland is one of the most entrepreneurial countries in the world' and emphasised how a way out of Ireland's problems must involve building on the 'solid enterprise foundations' that already existed among Irish people (2010). Media and governmental discourse around Irish identity made regular reference to Ireland's unique cultural heritage and the resulting entrepreneurial characteristics of the Irish people. It was asserted with regularity that the Irish were inherently creative, hardworking and innovative, or as the IDA's marketing campaign termed it: 'Innovation + People = Ireland' (IDA, 2009). This marketing campaign aimed at attracting investors from the United States

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<sup>7</sup> Forfás is Ireland's policy advisory board for enterprise, trade, science, technology and innovation operating as an agency of the [Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment](http://www.Forfás.ie) (www.Forfás.ie).

and elsewhere also featured the slogan ‘Ireland. Where innovation comes naturally’, and was used in television advertisements across the United States (IDA, 2009). While this campaign was directed at those outside of Ireland, we see a similar discursive practice operating internally. For instance, during a week in which two reports were released detailing how government failures of regulation and weak governance in Ireland’s banking sector had led to the downturn, Batt O’Keeffe, Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Innovation, gave an emotional speech that focused on the inherently Irish proclivity for entrepreneurship as the way to solve the country’s problems. Ireland is ‘an entrepreneurial nation’, he declared, and went on to paint the heroic Irish entrepreneur as an inspiration (O’Keeffe, 2010). Moreover, it is their very Irishness that grants people special qualities, such as the gift of being able to handle both complexity and ambiguity simultaneously. This, he noted, was a talent resonant of iconic writer James Joyce’s observations of the unique Irish ability to think ‘two thoughts at a time’. For O’Keeffe, this meant that ‘we Irish think and act in a unique and agile way’ and so Irish entrepreneurs are inherently more imaginative and intuitive than those in other countries. Irish people are famous for their ability to ‘get along with anyone’, he went on, and this means that they excel at building new relationships in business (O’Keeffe, 2010). We can see how O’Keeffe drew on national stereotypes in order to build affective links between peoples’ pride in being Irish, national ‘traits’, and their potential for entrepreneurship.

As can be seen, this supposedly endemic talent for entrepreneurship was repeatedly cited as a means for Irish people to survive the recession. In an impassioned speech to Dublin’s Chamber of Commerce, Taoiseach Brian Cowen appealed to the Irish people to draw on their innate ‘entrepreneurial can-do spirit’ in order to face the challenges of widespread job losses and significant decline in living standards that lay ahead (McGee, 2009). At a 2009 meeting of leading commentators and business people, government representatives and potential foreign investors, the Global Irish Economic Forum, also known as the Farmleigh Forum, indicated that ‘there is a unique “Irishness” that can be harnessed and used to foster economic growth’ (Lynch, 2010).

Here we see that the entrepreneur is articulated alongside a notion of Irish national identity. A logic of equivalence connects the disparate signifiers of Irish national identity and business success. Moreover, the government is presented as a key enabler of this through its espoused support: it is presented as an important link in the chain. Organizing this ‘chain’ is the signifier entrepreneur, which now loses its emptiness and becomes one that is imbued with

meaning from these, previously disparate, signifiers. This linkage of Irish national identity, business success and government, via entrepreneurship, appears to take place within a wider code that privileges the market, whereby a country's growth and development are understood in terms of market participation. Taking place in this context, we see how this articulating practice both draws upon and reinforces the code. Further, underlying this construction of equivalence between signifiers is a powerful affective appeal to peoples' sense of identity, with national identity being one of the deepest and most resilient forms of attachment (Smith, 1995: 159). Amid fears and uncertainty about what the future holds, government leaders appeal to peoples' sense of national pride and plead with them to draw on their innate, Irish, entrepreneurial spirit. The effect is the promotion of entrepreneurial activity as being congruent with Ireland's economic progress, along with a vehicle for expressing one's attachment to the nation.

#### From Uberman to Everyman: Constructing the Irish Entrepreneur

The attitude displayed by government and put in practice through investment in entrepreneurial education and training schemes promoted a belief that entrepreneurial skills can be learned by anyone. This drew on a wider cultural attitude towards entrepreneurial activity; in contemporary Ireland, the view that anyone can be an entrepreneur was powerful. Personal accounts of existent entrepreneurs had reached the bestseller lists (Cullen, 2003; O'Coineen, 2005) and a report noted that over three quarters of undergraduate students polled wanted to start their own business (DETI, 2009), offering strong evidence of support for the belief that entrepreneurial success was open to anyone and achievable through knowledge, study and hard work.

Government articulations of entrepreneurship attempted to hegemonise the view of entrepreneurship as inherently open, positive and attainable by all. The 2009 *Entrepreneurial Education Report*, co-funded by the Higher Education Authority, states that:

the benefits of entrepreneurship education are not limited to the creation of new business ventures and subsequent new jobs but will develop key competencies of students, develop their mindsets and in turn enable them to be more creative and self-confident in whatever they undertake. By developing an entrepreneurial capacity among students, the economic and social well-being of a nation will be enhanced at a time when it is needed the most (Ace Initiative Committee, 2009: 5).

This reflected an enthusiasm espoused by government ministers. Minister for Science Technology and Innovation, Jimmy Devins, noted in a 2008 speech to students that there had recently occurred a ‘sea change in how entrepreneurs are viewed in this country. We now tune into television programmes such as Dragon’s Den... It has become cool to be an entrepreneur’ (Devins, 2008). It was certainly ‘cool’ in the government’s eyes; an image of the entrepreneur as energetic and enthusiastic dominated speeches and press releases. Moreover, ministers repeatedly painted a picture of a tirelessly supportive government, propping up this new breed of saviour (Devins, 2008). In addition to promoting entrepreneurial education in schools, politicians stressed the importance of re-training the unemployed in this vein (Irish Press Releases, 2009). Jimmy Devins pointed out that ‘with unemployment rising... [entrepreneurship] was an ideal course for assisting people in getting back to work’ adding that ‘this was exactly the time for out-of-work budding entrepreneurs to set up a business’ (The Irish Times, 2009).

Overall, entrepreneurship was articulated as something that can be performed by anyone. In constructing entrepreneurship in this way, floating signifiers of meritocracy and opportunity, each already invested with certain affective libidinal attachments due to their past articulation by discourses of democracy and liberalism, are linked through equivalential chains. Again, an equivalence is created with government itself, and the resulting chain of meaning presents these signifiers as interlinked in a positive way, upheld by the nodal point entrepreneurship. We see once more how the discursive articulation of entrepreneurship draws on affective ties and takes place within what appears to be a wider code that privileges market-led behaviour.

### Championing the Irish Entrepreneur; Saving the Economy

We saw above how entrepreneurship was presented as a quintessentially Irish trait. Related to this, from 2007 to 2010, Irish government ministers presented the entrepreneur as a potential saviour of Ireland’s threatened economy. Further, they positioned their government as the primary driver and supporter of this saviour. In response to questions about how his party was dealing with the banking collapse, Foreign Minister Michael Martin pointed out that ‘a new breed of entrepreneurs and enterprise’, which government agencies had helped to grow, would lead to Ireland’s immanent recovery (O’Clery, 2009). Regional development projects in the west of Ireland provide one illustration of how entrepreneurship via government strategies held the potential of saving the economy (Dunphy, 2010). Limerick,

for example, has a higher than average dependency on manufacturing and high-volume jobs: the city and its surrounding areas suffered almost 3000 redundancies since the mid 2000s, due in large part to the closure of the Dell computer facility (Bicheno, 2009). In response to these shocks, there were wide calls for government assistance to help people who had been laid off. Outlining the government's response, Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment Mary Coughlan stressed the importance of promoting entrepreneurship as a key way of addressing this social crisis (Coughlan, 2010). This would be achieved through supports and programmes including night-time seminars and short courses aimed at developing entrepreneurial skills (Coughlan, 2010). The emphasis of this approach was on encouraging ex-Dell workers to start their own businesses. These new initiatives were widely touted as the way in which the government would deal with Limerick's problems. Ministers reinforced their determination to support this position, stating that the Irish government was committed to encouraging 'the innovative talent inherent in the Irish entrepreneur' (O'Keeffe, 2010). This stance was matched by successive government declarations that significant supports would be put in place to encourage entrepreneurship in a context of rising unemployment (Government of Ireland, 2008: 12).

As part of this strategy, it is interesting to note how a logic of difference between the collapse of the economy, and the signifier entrepreneur, was constructed. On one hand, notions of entrepreneurship are easily linked to the kind of market-led economic policies that led to Ireland's problems. In a 2009 report arguing for more entrepreneurship education, this link was skilfully severed. The report argues: 'One of the most common misconceptions about entrepreneurship is that it deals only with starting a business and that it promotes capitalistic greed, a trait that some would argue was clearly evident during the Celtic Tiger years. But entrepreneurship is not just about starting your own business'. The text goes on to emphasise entrepreneurship as a 'way of thinking and behaving' that has many applications, including starting a charity, participating in sports and social clubs, attending church gate collections, all activities that involve behaving 'entrepreneurially on a weekly basis' (Fianna Fáil, 2009). In this way, we see how mutual difference is emphasised between entrepreneurship and economic collapse: the logic of difference thus distances the discourse of entrepreneurship with the behaviour, identified as capitalist greed, associated with the recession.

As argued by Sørensen (2008) in the context of Denmark, the entrepreneur is often imbued with saviour-like qualities. This can be seen in the example of Limerick and other initiatives in which the Irish government made considerable effort to direct public attention towards their strategies, investments and plans for facilitating the development of such saviour-figures. It was implied that Ireland's very future is reliant on the existence of these Christ-like beings. This resonates with studies that have shown how the affective pull of the enterprise discourse is particularly powerful where people suffer from economic underdevelopment: it represents a 'righteous', self-evident solution to such problems and promises a speedy path to progress (Nicholson and Anderson, 2005: 153). Here, we see how the signifier entrepreneurship sets the notion of economic development and the ruling government beside each other in a tight pairing; the government *is* the champion of the entrepreneur-hero in the utopian future economy. Once again, an affective set of equivalences is constructed, with the government itself forming a key element in the chain.

The study of hegemony is the study of different attempts to dominate a field of discursivity. Above, we have shown how entrepreneurship acts as a nodal point through which particular signifiers come to be articulated, including Irish national identity, business success, meritocracy, opportunity and economic development. We see how the government also features as a signifier in these chains of equivalences, positing itself as a positive force. The affective aspect of the party's discursive support of entrepreneurship is clear – by constructing an image of itself as a champion of entrepreneurship, the government aligns itself with the entrepreneur – already presented as Ireland's potential saviour. In this way, the government can influence the flow of meaning, harnessing the positive associations that entrepreneurship inspires, and garnering support for itself even in the face of economic and social turmoil. The entrepreneur acts as a suture in the fantasy of Ireland's economic recovery; it preserves the notion that government has the means and capacity to effectively manage the failing economy and an increasingly disgruntled society through supporting and developing new entrepreneurs. While such attachments are given force through pre-existing affective ties to certain signifiers, the form of the government discourse takes place within a discursive field whose possibilities and limits appear to be set by a wider code of market logics.

### Alternative discursive strategies

While we have pointed to certain dominant articulations above, our analysis of the signifier entrepreneurship in fact yielded a polysemy of articulations and competing interpretations. Given the number of documents and sources analyzed for this project, this is not surprising. Signification is a practice that yields surplus meanings, as the creation of equivalences produces at the same time a remainder – that which must be excluded in order to construct a certain sameness (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 128). While government discourse appeared as the most coherent attempt to hegemonise the concept of the entrepreneur, and drew on affective attachments, a number of competing discourses co-existed and it is important to account for these.

First, some commentators called into question the notion that entrepreneurship is a particularly Irish trait (Fitzsimons and O’Gorman, 2009:20), pointing out that the people who are statistically most likely to engage in entrepreneurship in Ireland were not born in Ireland, or have lived outside the country for a period of their adult lives. The devastation of the Irish economy in the period chosen further challenged the idea of entrepreneurship as a national characteristic, as peoples’ confidence in Ireland as a nation of capable entrepreneurs diminished (Fitzsimons and O’Gorman, 2009: 17). The recent downturn has been noted to present dangers for existent and potential entrepreneurs, whether they are Irish or not (McCall, 2010: 3).

Second, while government discourse equated the signifier ‘entrepreneur’ with the idea that ‘anyone can be an entrepreneur’, contestant articulations saw entrepreneurship as a rather exclusive club. A report on the state of entrepreneurial activity in Ireland at the time paints a picture of a field dominated by men, who are relatively young (between 18-40), from well-off backgrounds and that have access to social, familial and business networks that support their initiatives (Eurobarometer, 2008; O’Hara, 2011). From this, they are likely to receive informal investment in the early stages of business start-up, primarily from family and friends. In addition, the report finds that Irish entrepreneurs of the time tended to display somewhat unusual personal qualities including high levels of confidence and a relatively low fear of failure (Eurobarometer, 2008). Most successful entrepreneurs tended to prioritize work above all else, including at times family and friends (O’Rourke and Pitt, 2006). For example, well-known entrepreneurs O’Coineen and Cullen described an ability for ‘inhumane’ working hours in their accounts (O’Coineen, 2009; Cullen, 2003); attributes that

are not generally witnessed throughout the population (O'Hara, 2011: 53). This alternative articulation thus portrays the average entrepreneur in Ireland in ways that are contrary to government articulations of entrepreneurship as linked to meritocracy and opportunity. Instead, it suggests that the entrepreneurial journey begins with a level of social capital through familial wealth and knowledge and support from other entrepreneurs that cannot easily be duplicated by 'anyone' in Ireland. Such articulations draw on a logic of difference, breaking down the links between meritocracy, opportunity and Irish entrepreneurship in the chain of equivalence that has been constructed. Related to this, critics note that entrepreneurial success may be difficult, if not impossible to teach (Kuratko, 2005:10). Indeed, the attempt to do so may lead to an institutionalisation of entrepreneurship that could devalue the very characteristics that make for successful businesses (Stevenson, 2000).

Third, contestant articulations use the logic of difference to break the link between entrepreneurship and government, discussed above, by showing the gap between the discursive construction of 'government as supportive', and the material and financial supports that were provided. For example, critics noted that during the time period studied the preliminary tax that start-up businesses must pay had been increased from one year to two and argued that this created significant pressure on new enterprises as they were compelled to pay money that they had not yet had a chance to earn (O'Brien, 2010). In addition, even though it had recently bailed out large banks for billions of euro in exchange for ownership rights, the Irish government did not put effective criteria in place to ensure that banks would continue lending to smaller, more risky businesses (Siggins, 2010). Banks remained cautious about lending (O'Hara, 2010: 122) and this led to the successive closure of many small enterprises. Further, critics noted that Irish legislation prevented company directors from returning to directorships for 12 years if their company was declared bankrupt. In addition, failed entrepreneurs were not entitled to the same welfare benefits as newly-redundant employees (McCall, 2010: 1; O'Hara, 2010) while state funding for entrepreneurship in Ireland explicitly focused on businesses that already employed ten people, were involved in manufacturing or internationally-traded services and fit the description of a 'high performance' start-up (O'Hara, 2011). This support, administered through Enterprise Ireland, was therefore restricted to a small segment of Irish indigenous enterprise. Critics argued that the promise of targeting significant amounts of funding for entrepreneurship at low-skilled manufacturing workers with little experience, as with the Limerick regeneration project, was unlikely to be delivered. This view was borne out by the fact that the majority of funding

promised by government for job creation and retraining in the Limerick region never materialised (Bopp, 2010). These structural problems created a general culture of fear around taking a risk to start a new company (Digital 21, 2010). Under this articulation, Ireland is certainly not constructed as the land of encouragement and opportunity for business described by the government; indeed, that government does not actually support business is a view that is regularly expressed by critical entrepreneurs (Carswell, 2011). Moreover, contestant articulations suggest that the actual number of new businesses being created in Ireland is relatively small in comparison with the rest of the EU. Overall therefore, ‘entrepreneurial Ireland’ was seen as something of a myth by many critics (Keena, 2009). Here, Fianna Fáil’s loud proclamations of their party’s support for Ireland’s burgeoning entrepreneurial culture was re-articulated as little more than opportunism, providing a rhetorical veneer on politico-social changes that were occurring anyway and that were not supported by actual legislation or material assistance. Overall, however, these alternative discursive strategies did little to dampen the general enthusiasm for Irish entrepreneurship (O’Hara, 2011: 4), with government articulations continuing to hegemonize debates.

### **Signifying danger? Discussing the Irish Entrepreneur**

We have examined the function of the signifier ‘entrepreneur’ within the Irish discursive context during the initial period of the economic crisis, 2007-2010. Using logics of equivalence and difference, a deconstructive poststructuralist method, we explored the ways in which Irish national identity, business success, meritocracy, opportunity and economic development, signifiers already imbued with affective meaning, became articulated through signifying chains so as to garner positive support for the government. Moreover, ‘entrepreneur’ acted as a nodal point in this, and as such this ‘empty’ signifier was provided with a specific, if temporary, content. The discursive meaning of entrepreneur could now be understood in terms of rescuing, resuscitating and ‘saving’ the Irish economy; we see how what Laclau and Mouffe term a ‘partial fixity of meaning’ was achieved (2001: 162). As the economy began to slow down and a devastating crash appeared immanent, government discourse shifted from an understanding of entrepreneurship as a *sui generis* field of activity which benefited from government support through business incentives while contributing to the economy, to one in which entrepreneurship was posited as a central, necessary solution to Ireland’s woes. In this way, the signifier of the entrepreneur as it was constructed and mobilised by the Irish government during the initial years of the recession illustrates the practice of hegemony.

In each articulation above, we saw how a logic of the market appeared to structure articulatory practices. As noted earlier, such practices always occur within a particular overriding symbolic code (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Žižek, 1989). It appears that market logics formed such a code in Ireland during the period studied, and this observation is supported by other commentators that have noted Ireland's successive moves towards increasingly neoliberal economic policies over the previous twenty years (Donnelly, 2010; Murphy, 2006: 298). These manifest in for example preference for 'light-touch' regulation (O'Hara, 2011: 10) along with prioritization of free trade (Kirby, 2010: 91). According to Nobel prize-winning economist Paul Krugman, Ireland had during this time 'jumped with both feet into the brave new world of unsupervised global markets' (Krugman, 2009). These observations support those made in our study, in which the desirability of maintaining an essentially capitalist economic system, despite the problems with this that were highlighted during the recession, was never questioned by government. Rather, the entrepreneur acted as an articulating principle or nodal point within a symbolic code constituted by diverse discourses but which reinforces, through such practices, a hegemony of market logics – quite literally in this sense, the entrepreneur was the quilting point in the larger production of the quilt of market logics. In this way, this article contributes to a body of research that connects the entrepreneur to the market system of capitalism (see, for instance, Ogbor, 2000; Kirzner 1992; 2000).

In the Irish case, discursive practices led to the articulation of new meanings of 'Irishness' which normalized the market-led behaviour of the government, all the while proposing something of a utopian future. Entrepreneurship was deployed as an evocative image in the social fantasy of Irish success and possibility. This discursive strategy could be interpreted as an attempt to direct public anger away from government, at least temporarily, suggesting fruitful avenues for further research. Constructing this consent for a market-led Irish government that was potentially under threat, however, was only achievable within the wider symbolic code of market logic described above, and also by articulations that were affective in nature. This is clear when we examine the alternative articulations of the signifier 'entrepreneur' that co-existed with the government's, and yet did not manage to represent a significant challenge. Why this failure? First, these alternative articulations were able only to offer the negation of government articulations without presenting positive alternatives. They criticise government for not following through on their assertions and promises, rather than being able to propose a 'better' way. This means that a key aspect of hegemony is omitted:

the role of affect. We know that the organization of consent through fantasy or mythic construction is required for a long-term, stable hegemonic formation. Myth functions as an important 'surface on which dislocations and social demands can be inscribed' (Laclau, 1990:67). Alternative articulations failed on these grounds. In contrast, government discourse is presented in ways that invite an emotional response: an affective support for a utopian, entrepreneurial Ireland. The role of a utopian future in cementing the people's consent has long been recognised within studies of ideology (e.g. Marx & Engels, 1932/1998; Mannheim, 1936). Such a device acts as a means of regulating behaviour today, of organising consent, through projected rewards for tomorrow. In its absence, alternative articulations struggle to achieve prominence. Second, it is likely that the failure of alternatives is linked to the wider symbolic code of market logics which itself implicitly supports a culture of enterprise, and discourages challenges to it. In any given context, the availability and legitimacy of certain signifiers is contingent on the wider code in place, and here, market logics act to delegitimise alternative constructions of entrepreneurship. Given this, the struggle was over the right to articulate the entrepreneur, rather than over its specific meaning. In summary, we see how two features were central in the maintenance of hegemony during the period studied: the role of affect, and the fact that alternative articulations of the entrepreneur were limited by a discursive field governed by market logics.

Despite the fact that economic crisis has been identified as a primary motivation for political change, as individuals lose faith in the aptitude of a particular government to continue running the country, such political transformation did not occur during the period studied. The Irish public's initial reaction towards government failures at the on-set of the recession was muted in comparison with other European states. Here, we argue that the hegemonization of economic discourse contributed to this consent. It is important to note however that the consent achieved was temporary; the Fianna Fáil government did not manage to secure their survival as the primary political party in Ireland and was forced to leave in 2011. Importantly, this was not due to a challenge to its overall deployment of market logics, but to public outrage over revelations about political corruption. The market-led symbolic code continued and consent around the primacy of entrepreneurship remained, with the succeeding government continuing to emphasise its importance (O'Hara, 2011). Indeed, discussing the economic implications of this change in government, Smyth (2011:11) identifies the election of the current government as a case of 'meet the new boss, same as the old boss'.

While studies of entrepreneurship have highlighted the potential problems and ‘dark side’ associated with this discourse, the framework presented here enables an analysis of the articulatory practices by which such discourses are constructed and maintained over time. With a focus on discourse as practice, affective relations and the operation of logics, it provides a useful way of understanding in more depth how such hegemonising practices take place. In this way, the analysis here presents a valuable contribution to the study of entrepreneurship discourse. Moreover, it provides an interesting example of a contemporary application of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony.

### **Conclusion**

This paper adds to current understandings of entrepreneurship in that it builds on the notion of entrepreneurship as an empty signifier, to show how its meaning can be partially fixed in ways that effectively support hegemonic discourses in particular empirical contexts. In this article we demonstrate how, in the Irish case, the entrepreneur is imbued with positive meaning, and through this becomes a method through which consent is maintained for a hegemonic political party rapidly losing legitimacy. Significantly, this paper has demonstrated the important role of affect in hegemonic articulations. We find that it is through the discursive arrangement of signifiers already imbued with affective meaning, such as opportunity, success and economic development, that the government was able to maintain power and garner public support. Further, the analysis provides support for a theoretical framework that enables an analysis of how public passivity and public support may be organised through discourse and, in this case, through the nodal point of the signifier ‘entrepreneur’. In recognising that meaning is not fixed, we acknowledge also the possibility of alternative, contestant articulations of the discourse of the entrepreneur; however, our analysis suggests that existing alternatives are limited by the current reigning symbolic code. Without challenging the construction of meaning of the empty signifier ‘entrepreneur’, contestant discourses are able only to offer critique of government, without presenting affective, viable alternatives. Thus, while the government may have been criticised, the structuring force of market logics remained unchallenged in Ireland and contemporary relations of economic domination, as identified by Jones and Spicer, were reproduced (2005: 237).

Using the discursive and deconstructive theory of Laclau and Mouffe and building on the work of other organisation theorists, we have demonstrated the importance of affect and the

role of the discourse of entrepreneurship as used by the Fianna Fáil Irish government during a time of crisis in their attempt to maintain political power. In doing so, we have also suggested the potential for the concept of the entrepreneur to be used to attain, maintain and even to challenge political power. This paper thus demonstrates the necessity and urgency for organization studies scholars to engage with the dark side of entrepreneurship and contribute to the analysis of its various political appropriations.

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