

Introduction

Critiquing ‘The Neoliberal City’

When I first visited Dublin, in 2012, Ireland was pocked with ghost estates. These semi-finished, ambitious buildings were scattered throughout the city centre and at Dublin's fringes, looming at the edges of abandoned suburban plots or pressing up against the coastline. Monuments to the ambition of the Celtic Tiger years, these halted developments left Irish citizens to witness the dereliction of thousands of uninhabitable residential buildings during a time when housing was in short supply, many ordinary families had lost their homes and austerity measures were in full swing. Advertisements featuring images of comfortable family homes were left to peel off billboards hovering over rows of empty properties, and those unlucky families who moved into these estates shortly before the crash found themselves living adjacent to vacant and abandoned buildings and often unsafe building sites.

These sorts of scenes were typical of the years after the 2008 housing bubble and financial recession (O'Callaghan, Boyle and Kitchin 2014). Dubliners were unfortunate to find themselves in one of the Euro–American economies worst hit by this financial catastrophe, in which subprime mortgage lending led to an unprecedented house price bubble and collapse, leaving many families saddled with enormous housing debt and in negative equity. As in other Euro–American liberal democracies, many of those financial professionals and developers who benefited from this boom did not face particularly severe consequences, aside distressed balance sheets. Ordinary Irish families were less lucky, as it was with their property and livelihoods as collateral that colossal bets were waged in the market. Those young people who came of age in the years after 2008 had watched parents and family members struggle through these difficult years. Disenchanted with establishment political parties and eager for a political alternative, they turned to a range of activist movements and forms of alternative work and life.

It is this generation's rejection of the Irish state's response to 2008, and the political consequences of this rejection, that forms the core subject matter of

this book. In studying these movements and spaces, this book explores how young, left-wing artists and activists in Ireland understand critical thought and action, and how they approach the task of practically transforming contemporary society. It traces a key period in Irish activist organising in the decade after the 2008 financial crisis. During this period, gay marriage and abortion were legalised by referenda, and major campaigns were organised pushing for social and affordable housing. At the same time, a widening group of Irish citizens on low and middle incomes experienced increasingly precarious labour and housing markets. The young, left-wing artists and activists at the heart of this book reacted to this situation by experimenting with alternative forms of social organisation, work and life in a network of collaboratively or cooperatively run arts and community spaces. Though this group of left-wing activists might seem like a marginal cohort, it functions as a useful window onto a range of hotly contested issues in contemporary Irish society. Its communities were often housed in informal or postindustrial spaces that were located in blighted neighbourhoods targeted for regeneration. Its spaces were therefore also frequently funded by state-subsidised 'creative' initiatives designed to kickstart economic growth. This cohort therefore found itself thrust to the forefront of the state's response to the 2008 recession, targeted by policies that deployed young, hip artists and activists to platform short-term creative initiatives in pop-up, ad hoc and temporary spaces in historically working-class neighbourhoods. In other words, artists and activists who were earnestly exploring alternative forms of work and life found themselves at the sharp end of gentrification. Yet this also meant they were experiencing housing and employment precarity alongside working-class neighbours, with whom they therefore increasingly shared at least some political-economic interests and with whom they collaborated in a range of activist movements, even if their relationships were not always easy.

This book positions these artists and activists as a prism through which to understand the effects of the housing crisis and the state's response to the 2008 recession, as well as the diverse strategies everyday citizens adopted in this period to question the political status quo. Throughout, I frame my interlocutors' art and activism as two different but equally political forms of critique, or strategies for questioning and assessing post-recession Irish society. I also examine what they mean when they use the word 'neoliberalism' to describe Irish political economy after 2008. I explore how their lives as artists and activists sit – sometimes easily, sometimes uncomfortably – alongside their relationships with family, friends and neighbours. As I demonstrate, artists and activists function as an essential window onto the everyday conflicts generated by the 2008 financial crisis and housing collapse. Often from middle-class backgrounds – or at least able to lean on middle-class family and social networks, and educational qualifications – these young people are keenly aware of the opportunities that accompany employment security and property ownership. They are disenchanted with politics-as-usual precisely because

they are particularly affected by the decline in their quality of life relative to their parents' generation – who saw their property values rise vertiginously in the Celtic Tiger years. They are also targeted by the state as the poster children of a new, 'creative' attitude to work, life and social value – even if it is a model they themselves critique. Pedestalled as especially valuable public 'critics', they find themselves in a double-edged position: they are granted a platform they can use to critique a state that they also rely on for funding, and they are sometimes blamed for the processes of gentrification and urban exclusion that they themselves struggle to navigate. They are therefore in a tense relationship with those both above and below them on the class spectrum, but increasingly looking 'downward' for meaningful allies in the fight against rising inequality. These middle-class artists and activists function, then, as a route to consider a range of interrelated factors fuelling important political–economic shifts in Ireland today: class, labour, housing, nationalism, urban development, creativity, critique and the limits of democratic participation. As I suggest, this case is also reflective of intergenerational shifts across a range of Euro–American liberal–democratic states, in which a combination of affordability and cost-of-living and housing crises have undermined the gains of the children of the middle and working classes. More educated but poorer, this cohort is acutely aware of the failure of the state and market to deliver greater equality and opportunity. This is producing, in some cases, historical alliances across the working and middle classes – two groups that have commonly been framed as in class conflict, and often because of different degrees of access to property and wealth accumulation.

I am focused ethnographically, then, on these artists and activists and their neighbours, and what they reveal about the fault lines in those Euro–American liberal democracies in which everyday people have struggled economically since 2008. In this sense, this book intentionally frames Ireland as a particularly important European fieldsite – one of the first subjects of European anthropological attention (Wilson and Donnan 2006: 6), it was historically a place in which anthropologists studied rural social groups (Scheper-Hughes 2001), leaving anthropology with a somewhat complex reputation in the country (Taylor 1996; Scheper-Hughes 2000). A shift away from studying Irish 'traditional' life has meant that since the 1990s, anthropologists and colleagues in other disciplines have made an increasingly concerted effort to tie the anthropology of Ireland to the analysis of global and regional trends and processes. This book hopes to contribute to this effort. It frames Ireland as exemplary of some of the most important sea changes we have witnessed in Euro–American political economy over the last several decades. From the rise of the 'social partnership' model in areas like housing and healthcare to the rising influence of American Foreign Direct Investment and tech companies and its burgeoning identity as Europe's 'Silicon Valley', Ireland typifies many of the major historical shifts observable in the region. Chief among these is the adoption of a heady blend of European social democracy, American finance

capitalism and 'cultural' policy (Wilson and Donnan 2006: 13). This combination has fundamentally reshaped Irish society, Ireland's national economy and its place in the European imagination since the 1990s, when Ireland was often pejoratively described as an underdeveloped European backwater.

One of a handful of Euro-American countries that experienced a particularly severe housing crisis after 2008, it is also exemplary of demographic and intergenerational trends we can observe in the region: especially related to income redistribution, intergenerational wealth accumulation, increasingly precarious labour markets, and ongoing housing and cost-of-living crises. Interlocutors' anxieties about contemporary Irish society are indicative of a wider sense of disaffection among younger generations from working- and middle-class backgrounds, who have experienced an increase in cultural capital but perceive their material conditions and life chances to be in decline. This experience of widening inequality has laid the groundwork for increasingly volatile political movements throughout the European region, and Ireland is no exception. This book therefore yields important lessons not only about the contemporary Left but also about the rise of nationalist party-political alternatives in Euro-America, where nationalism is increasingly presenting in new and unexpected guises.

Yet this book also builds on these artists' and activists' critical claims about contemporary Irish society to stage some interventions at the level of anthropological and social theory. First, I unpack what this period of art and activism reveals about the relationship between capitalism, critique and creativity. I suggest that capitalism is distinctive for its ability to reduce human creative potential to an engine for financial value creation. I also draw attention to the ways in which finance capitalism and 'social' investment have worked together to retrench an explicit class-based hierarchy of human creative potential and worth, one that runs counter to the language of 'socially responsible' capitalism that has dominated market-led policy responses to the housing crisis in Ireland and further afield. I show how interlocutors use the word 'neoliberalism' to draw attention to this disingenuous distance between the rhetoric and the effects of market-led policymaking.

Second, in focusing on a group of everyday critics of neoliberalism, I am intentionally treating this word as an ethnographic category: a concept that has a life outside of academic debates about its usefulness. I suggest that examining how critical words like neoliberalism function in everyday life allows us to intervene on theoretical debates about the analytical uses of these terms. I argue that little attention has been paid to everyday critics of neoliberalism because they often use the word in ways that are familiar to anthropological critics, who suggest that such uses are analytically imprecise. And yet I demonstrate how it is precisely the slipperiness of the term that makes it powerful as a tactical tool in activist movements and in party-political rhetoric, where it has increasingly been taken up in Ireland. More than this, I argue that following the actual critical uses of this word reveals that actual critics

of neoliberalism are more flexible and dynamic about the term than anthropologists are. Playing with neo-Marxist and Foucauldian uses of the term, and understandings of political power, they creatively and critically engage with this word to draw attention to some concrete features of contemporary political economy. Unpicking the ethnographic life of this term therefore also allows me to position my interlocutors as sensible critics, who are interested in both coming to know the world and making non-neutral judgements of its features. Neoliberalism emerges as an extremely powerful word for organising this exercise, which I demonstrate is equal parts empiricism and moral advocacy.

This observation allows me to use this case to therefore also intervene on the tension between ‘critique’ and ‘critical anthropology’ in the discipline. Following Rita Felski’s (2015) definition of critique, I frame critique not as one’s ideological views but as an orientation towards knowledge that aims at transforming the world. More than this, drawing on my interlocutors’ own critical practices, I suggest that critique by definition involves both empiricism and judgement: that is, both observing the world around you and then acting to transform it, based on what you think you know. Critique, then, is a neutral cognitive exercise, one that can be populated with radically divergent ideological content. I intentionally define critique in such a general way, so that it encompasses more than those forms of critique we know well in the discipline. This definition is useful, I suggest, when it comes to making sense of critical terms like neoliberalism, which are not only or primarily descriptions of the world. They are also words that demand a specific moral and political response, and so function as a critical provocation. This is true, I suggest, of a great many ‘critical’ terms in academic discourse and in political movements. Employing the definition of critique I defend in this book, we can map these different critical claims, breaking down the empirical ‘facts’ everyday critics gather as they observe the world and the structure of the moral judgements they make about what they think they know. Critique, then, becomes an analytical tool for better understanding political–theoretical categories and their non-neutral lives in activist movements and political parties. This is particularly true for the word neoliberalism, which I show has been especially potent in activist movements in Ireland and is also being widely used in political rhetoric, especially in parties like Ireland’s nationalist, populist, socialist, republican party, Sinn Féin.

The Fieldsite – Art, Class and Housing in Dublin

This book is based on two periods of fieldwork. First, between 2016 and 2017, I lived adjacent to a failed social housing estate and a controversial regeneration in Dublin. The regeneration saw a social housing block razed and replaced by a smaller newbuild block, and arts and cultural spaces rise over the vacant site of the historical tower flats. I lived on a mixed public–private row and

got to know people in the area who had lived in the neighbourhood – which I call Mount Stephens – many for generations, and who had been involved in sometimes heated discussion about the regeneration with politicians and developers. I also watched as a steady stream of middle-class artists and activists started trickling into the neighbourhood, often as a result of an increasingly impossible struggle to find affordable accommodation in other parts of the city.

This was an experience I knew well. Since 2013, I had lived periodically in Dublin, and each time, I would join the legions of renters competing for low-quality accommodation in a brutally competitive rental market. Among the less-accommodating properties I had called home, there was the converted garden shed with a single plug-in electric burner propped up on top of a mini fridge for a kitchen (€1,800 per calendar month rental); the windowless bunk room with one skylight (€900 pcm); and the one-room bedsit, which doubled as a storage unit for the landlord (€1,000 pcm). Shoddy, barely above-board properties like this are endemic in Dublin, even as rent has rocketed, at the time of writing, to around €2,100 pcm, with even higher average rents in the city centre. Among the nicest places I lived was the home I shared with a family in Mount Stephens during that first period of fieldwork in 2016–2017. Affordable on my research stipend, I had my own bedroom in a row house with a mix of public and private space and the bustling comforts of a lived-in family home. I was lucky to find a landlady who would also become a generous host and a friend. But like the other young renters moving to Mount Stephens, I initially went looking in the area because of my financial situation – there was nowhere else in the city centre I could afford to rent.

The young artists and activists trickling into the area piqued my interest, then, as there was a kinship between their struggle to navigate the housing market while patching together temporary creative employment and part-time jobs, and the experiences of academics and others working in the creative and knowledge economies. There is often an ongoing struggle to balance the demands of housing and labour precarity, while also trying to build a life and achieve the milestones of adulthood. There is a tension at the heart of creative work, then, that I recognised: the labour comes with distinction and prestige, and certain pleasures, yet no amount of education can protect against the more basic experience of financial insecurity. What is more, rising financial insecurity was increasingly impacting not only on those from more working-class backgrounds but also on those from lower middle-class families in neighbourhoods like Mount Stephens. The children of those who owned their homes but who had no additional wealth to transfer to younger generations before their death found that their education and the distinction attached to intellectual and creative labour did not translate to financial or personal security. Many of these artists and activists fit this category, and I was interested in whether this meant they and their neighbours began to see one another as sharing a struggle in common. Put another way, I was interested if it was not so much

a shared experience of precarity as the increasing gap between the working and middle classes versus the elite that was motivating a unification between these two classes that have historically also been uneasy political bedfellows. And I was asking this question because, for the first time – at least, for young people – property ownership and wealth accumulation can no longer be considered a defining feature of being socially and culturally ‘middle class’.

During this first period of fieldwork, I therefore turned my attention to a few hotspots of gentrification in the city, in neighbourhoods that had historically been working class or were near well-known and often controversial social housing demolitions and regenerations. I do not name these in this book to protect the identities of those I worked with and spoke to, but anyone familiar with the history of social housing regenerations in Dublin would be aware of a handful of estates positioned at the periphery of the city centre, ringing the more affluent neighbourhoods in the centre and south of the River Liffey along the coast. Low- and middle-income tenants were increasingly being pushed out of the city centre and towards this ring of more historically deprived areas at the city’s edges. I focused on artists and activists living and working in four concentrated areas of redevelopment, and who were struggling to hold onto residential and creative spaces: the tech and financial district called the Docklands; the urban core between Parnell Square and Temple Bar; the neighbourhoods ringing and north of Smithfield Square; and more peripherally, the area southwest of St Patrick’s Cathedral and the Guinness Storehouse. All of these areas are currently undergoing or have recently undergone systemic regeneration, and all of them currently contain or have historically contained social housing and working-class neighbourhoods in areas now widely described by interlocutors as ‘gentrified’. They have nevertheless experienced different degrees of redevelopment – with the Docklands thickly populated with gated corporate and tech campuses, some rising over the few working-class terraced houses still standing in neighbourhoods like East Wall, but the southwest periphery of the city only more recently subject to orchestrated attention. Temple Bar, the most heavily touristed district in the city centre, gives perhaps the clearest example of the role of the arts in the city’s redevelopment strategy. It is the site of one of the earliest culture-led redevelopments in Dublin, in a district once dense with artist studios, almost all of which have been displaced by retail venues, clubs, cafes and cultural institutions. The area spanning from Temple Bar to Parnell Square also contains several Cultural and Creative Quarters and an urban planning thoroughfare the Dublin City Council (DCC) calls the Civic Spine: a major walking route along which a visitor might amble through districts saturated with galleries, museums, theatres, small businesses, restaurants, bars, cafes and shopping centres.

I was particularly interested in artists who had worked in three small, collectively run arts spaces I call Square 7, Project B and The Station. Two of these closed in the decade after 2008, pushed out by waves of more upwardly mobile

renters and buyers who followed the regenerations described in this book. I also met a significant number of artists in a state-funded cultural institution I call Arts Hall. Many artists worked in collectives that had lost physical space, so I would often encounter them in institutions like Arts Hall, which offered hourly rental facilities. The neighbourhood in which I lived, Mount Stephens, was described to me by one interlocutor as 'Dublin's Bermuda Triangle' – as up until relatively recently it had escaped the kind of heavily curated regeneration plans that had transformed other parts of the city centre, pushing out low- and middle-income tenants. I spent a significant amount of informal time in this area, and in and around nearby studios and community arts facilities. I visited and interviewed artists working at an additional fifteen collectives, galleries, theatres and arts institutions in the city centre. I also participated in a number of artist training programmes and performance pieces, hosted by three national cultural institutions, alongside amateur and professional artists, many of whom were struggling to find work and secure grants for arts projects, and so had turned to such institutions to meet artists in training. Participating in artist training programmes was a useful way of meeting those actively working in the creative sector and was the main route through which I first gained an informal sense of their stakes in debates about gentrification, housing and the state's response to the 2008 financial crisis. I further interviewed some interlocutors who had worked for the DCC and the Arts Council and a handful of planners and architects, who often had their own complex and sometimes critical views of the policies discussed throughout this book. It should be said that planners and architects did not form the central focus on this research, and the complex role they occupy and views they hold warrant an entire analysis. Here, they feature primarily through activists', artists' and residents' perception of them and their work, which, however non-neutral, remains politically and ethnographically important.

While my core interlocutors were initially those artists and activists I encountered in the network of institutions described above, they are not the only key players in this story. They sit at the heart of the book but always function to draw other interlocutors into view. Indeed, it was also through conversations with local residents in neighbourhoods like Mount Stephens that I confirmed that artists, activists and their neighbours did indeed share investment in a number of activist campaigns. The most obvious overlap was in housing activism, as both middle-class artists and activists and their neighbours were affected by the ongoing and increasingly severe housing crisis in Ireland. Indeed, family friends of people I knew in Mount Stephens were involved in occupations and housing protests that appear later in this dissertation, including the Apollo House occupation in Chapter 4. Though they would not always narrate their encounters with artists and activists in purely positive terms, there was a general sense that they were on the same side in these campaigns. But this was true even beyond housing activism. For instance, there was also some significant shared investment in the campaign to

repeal the 8th Amendment (to the Irish Constitution), which legalised abortion by referendum in Ireland in 2018, and in protest movements supporting immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers – as later chapters will demonstrate. However, unlike the campaign to repeal the 8th Amendment, the push for social and affordable housing has not yet yielded meaningful political change. This is therefore the most ‘live’ area in which activist alliances are being built across class lines, precisely because the housing crisis remains unsolved and is, in fact, worsening. Where these allegiances have successfully been built, it is in part because the artists and activists described in this book have been genuinely invested in finding ways to translate the critical tools they developed in their artistic work and their activist campaigns to engage more effectively in grassroots activist movements that often originated in social housing communities and working-class neighbourhoods. This was true even as these artists and activists were also the people increasingly blamed in the media for sparking waves of gentrification in the city. Tracking these artists’ involvement in both alternative arts spaces in the city and in these left-wing political campaigns in historically working-class areas thus opened up an entire set of ethnographic questions about the diverse critical strategies they brought to living, working and organising politically alongside non-artist community members and potential political allies, as well as where such strategies failed.

It is worth saying a little bit about what united this group of artists and activists, who lived and worked all over the city but would often find themselves coalescing in certain community and creative spaces and in a range of activist campaigns. They were by and large young, with the majority of participants under the age of forty. Though they borrowed from a range of ideological and activist traditions, these generally self-described as left-wing and they shared a critical stance on contemporary capitalism. This is an important fact about this group: it was not a specific ideological view or even party-political preference that drew these activists together. Indeed, while a significant number voted for Sinn Féin in the 2020 General Election, many others supported other left-wing parties like People Before Profit or, indeed, the Green Party or Independent candidates. What united these groups politically was *a critical view*: of the state’s handling of the housing crisis, and of what they called neoliberalism more broadly. They also shared a set of institutional spaces as a result: community and creative spaces in their neighbourhoods, where they would meet and organise, and state funded institutions where they might gather to produce or consume creative work. It was in these spaces that they would seek out what they called ‘critical community’, and engage in forms of intellectual and creative production. In this sense, they bear kinship to academics, who are also professional critics and engage in a similar sort of immaterial labour. However, these artists and activists consumed a more eclectic range of intellectual resources and were sometimes less institutionally integrated than academics. With some working almost exclusively on a project-by-project basis, they perhaps most closely resemble early-career academics, who might hop from grant to grant

and institution to institution. They all drew some distinction between their artistic and activist work, with the former more experimental and the latter more focused on achieving discrete political change. It was primarily when engaged in their activist work that they would find themselves interfacing with their working-class neighbours, which could result in either productive social and political relationships or in degrees of friction.

I was interested in them ethnographically, then, as they sat at the intersection of a range of different social groups and their presence could have a variety of contradictory effects. At times, when they became integrated into the community and got involved in activist campaigns of concern to their neighbours, these artists and activists could become important political allies. And yet tensions often remained between these young, middle-class artists and activists and their neighbours – who often experienced more intense degrees of housing and labour precarity as a result of their lack of comparable social and cultural capital, and who would sometimes find artists' work and lives difficult to understand or appreciate. Nevertheless, both groups evidently shared an experience of declining quality of life and of struggling to access high-quality, affordable housing.

This fact laid the groundwork for the outcome of the 2020 Irish General Election, in which significant segments of these two groups voted for the nationalist, pro-unification party, Sinn Féin, attracted by the party's proposal to solve the housing and cost-of-living crises (e.g. McQuinn 2023; O'Leary 2020). I returned to the field in 2022 to conduct a second period of follow-up interviews with interlocutors; to speak with Sinn Féin supporters and politicians; to attend protests and demonstrations organised by the party and the Cost of Living Coalition, of which Sinn Féin is a member; and to follow housing activists as they organised in neighbourhoods like Mount Stephens. I found that a significant number of artists and activists I had worked with previously had since left Dublin, pushed out by the housing and cost-of-living crises, and had in some cases emigrated, having judged the Irish housing market to be prohibitively expensive. This second period of fieldwork was a strange experience in some respects, then, in that it involved chasing some absent people and places, and patching together the stories they or their friends told about their decisions to leave. It also involved following a renewed wave of housing activism, concentrated in underserved social housing estates at the edges of the city, including some I had spent time in during my first period of fieldwork in 2016–2017. Many of these housing activists had been involved in movements I will describe in this book, including the occupation of Apollo House in Chapter 4, but they were increasingly experimenting with new forms of political organisation, focused on stepping away from occupations and confrontations with police and towards building stronger local networks in working-class communities and defending tenants from unlawful evictions and wayward landlords. This time, the tension between middle- and working-class residents in these neighbourhoods had become newly inflected

by contentious debates about immigration and about whether Sinn Féin could be trusted to deliver on its promise to solve the housing crisis. This book therefore traces a thread from the period of activist organising after 2008 through to the more recent if tenuous rise of the nationalist party, Sinn Féin, and current hotly contested debates about the relationship between immigration, nationalism and the housing crisis in the Republic of Ireland.

Throughout this book, I show that artists, activists and their neighbours increasingly share not only an investment in a range of activist causes. They also share a distaste for a specific brand of ‘fast-capitalism’ (Holmes 2000) that many interlocutors called ‘neoliberalism’. This word was most common among artists and activists, but it has also floated out of these communities into wider public discourse and indeed into party-political discourse. They were also cynical about the profusion of talk – in policy and planning documentation and corporate manifestos – about building ‘good’, ‘creative’, ‘dynamic’, ‘vibrant’ ‘communities’. Interlocutors from a range of class backgrounds were fundamentally unconvinced that capitalism, functioning as it does at present, could achieve anything other than widening inequality. Promises on the part of politicians or hedge fund managers that they would invest in ‘social’ enterprises or secure ‘responsible’ outcomes appeared as disingenuous cover, veiling the fact that some continued to profit while others continued to struggle to make ends meet. They were therefore also disenchanted with politics-as-usual, and with those political parties that were in coalition governments during and after the 2008 recession – especially Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and Labour. This was true even where they turned to different party-political alternatives as a result – often either Sinn Féin, People Before Profit, the Green Party or Independent candidates.

And yet this book also aims to give an honest account of the tensions between these two groups. An important difference between those middle-class artists and activists described in this book and their neighbours was that the former group were granted a unique pedestal by the state. Framed as especially valuable ‘creative’ producers and public critics, artists and creative labourers were attractive to a state keen to revitalise depressed urban areas on a budget. Artists and activists therefore found themselves in a unique Catch-22, whereby they were strategically backed by the state they sought to critique. In this sense, they are paradigmatic of the predicaments of left-wing, middle-class critics more broadly, who find themselves integrated – albeit not fully – into the institutions and social networks they target with public criticism, and in sometimes uneasy relationships with others further down the class hierarchy.

Familiar as they were with finding themselves and their labour folded into the policy projects they disliked, they were therefore also experimenting with how to protect values like ‘creativity’ and ‘community’ from being subsumed by an urban development ethos that reframed social and immaterial values like ‘creativity’ and ‘dynamism’ in terms of their raw financial worth.

To explain this, I turn in the next section to the policy climate in Dublin after 2008. I briefly explain the rise of ‘creative city’ and ‘culture-led’ development models, and what this has to do with the housing crisis and the growth of what some call ‘socially responsible’ capitalism and investment. I also offer some context regarding the history of home ownership and social and affordable housing provision, which is bound up in ethnographically specific ways with Ireland’s origins as a relatively young republic and a postcolonial nation-state. This is with a view to fleshing out the landscape within which interlocutors were engaging in both experimental artistic projects and activist campaigns, the latter alongside their neighbours.

Social and Financial Value – Creative Dublin and the Housing Crisis

The artists and activists at the centre of this book work and organise in arts spaces in the city, many in vacant or derelict properties that cropped up throughout the city after 2008. Artists and activists were experimenting with alternative forms of work and life, and strategies for critically engaging with ‘neoliberalism’, in precisely those properties that the state was eager to regenerate and transform into an engine for capital growth. Artists and other young, creative rebels were therefore quickly reframed by the state: as important and strategic tools for generating property value in depressed parts of the city. We see this borne out in language about artists and other creative workers in policy documentation and development plans, and in the rhetoric invoked by corporations, investors and developers cashing in on this new wave of regenerations, as I show momentarily.

This shift is an extension of a now well-documented sea change in urban development policy in Ireland and further afield over the last several decades: towards urban planning models that seek to transform cultural into economic capital, and that treat social and financial value as codependent. This shift has come in various guises: the designation as European Capital of Culture (e.g. Sassatelli 2002; Herrero et al. 2006), the American ‘creative city’ model (e.g. Florida 2003, 2005, 2008; Andersson, Andersson and Mellander 2011; Lawton, Murphy and Redmond 2010; McGuigan 2009; Pratt 2008), the rise of ‘social partnership’ (Wilson and Donnan 2006: 13) and the now widespread model of ‘culture-led’ development (Paddison and Miles 2007; Bayliss 2004). In Richard Florida’s particularly utopian version of the story, cities become bastions of artistic and creative potential – a process that seamlessly also begets capital growth. But in practice, because these development models are motivated by wealth creation, the early waves of cultural flourishing also eventually retrench socio-economic inequalities. This is because the cultural growth these models generate is unevenly distributed and not accessible to all. Indeed, Florida’s ‘creative class’ implies the existence of a legion of ‘uncreative’

workers, who do not possess the knowledge or skills – or what economists call ‘human capital’ – needed to thrive in a creative economy and are therefore consigned to the margins of the ‘creative city’ (Peck 2005). Where this development model is implemented, a ‘depressed’ or ‘blighted’ neighbourhood in the city will be targeted with a regeneration plan designed to produce a new cultural hotspot. Cafes, creative enterprises and pop-ups will begin cropping up, often replacing what used to be low-income or social housing – or vacant property that could have been converted to add to the housing stock (O’Callaghan and Lawton 2016). With a new, upwardly mobile consumer base frequenting the area, developers and investors will see an opportunity for financial gain. More tired housing will be razed and replaced with newbuilds at a higher price point, social and affordable housing tenants sidelined or displaced entirely by upwardly mobile renters and buyers. What began as a plan to produce a ‘vibrant’, ‘dynamic’, ‘socially sustainable’, ‘creative’ community will have become a more familiar process of exclusionary urban planning that serves those who want to rent and buy in ‘edgy’ neighbourhoods, and the investors and developers that profit from redevelopment. New lucrative start-ups and tech corporations will replace community halls and arts spaces, and local communities will be displaced even as corporate manifestos, urban plans and policy documentation continue to invoke the language of ‘culture’, ‘art’, ‘innovation’, ‘social value’ and ‘creativity’.

Artists were therefore tactical allies for the state. They were increasingly encouraged in the years after the recession to participate in regenerating the city by reinvigorating vacant sites with pop-ups, start-ups, collectives and other temporary ‘creative’ projects. Among the most explicit examples of this was the Creative Ireland planning programme, a five-year culture-led development plan rolled out while I was in the field. After its initial unveiling in 2017, it has now been extended to a ten-year programme, ending in 2027. It is designed to catalyse ‘individual wellbeing, social cohesion and economic success’ through increased access to and production of the arts (Creative Ireland Programme 2017–22: 5). It frames creativity as ‘a set of innate abilities’ and the artist as ‘the primary interrogator and narrator of our culture’ – a particularly important generator of ‘human value’ (ibid.: 10). It is clear, throughout these policy documents, that ‘human value’ here also means financial value. ‘Human creativity’ is framed as ‘the ultimate economic resource’, and ‘creative people’ as ‘key to the new economy’, where ‘the ability to conceptualise’ is key to generating value in a ‘post-industrial’ labour process (ibid.: 11). The establishment of Creative Quarters in Dublin, and efforts to advertise Dublin as a creative cultural capital, were envisaged as key components in this nationwide project. The DCC placed great emphasis on an image of Dublin as a city that contains organically high levels of creative potential; the Irish as an especially intrinsically artistic national population; and art as contained within the physical infrastructure of the city, as a spontaneous force one might encounter in the streets. Creativity is also treated as an immaterial

asset than can frictionlessly generate economic growth. The DCC's planning documentation and private ad campaigns in these areas therefore emphasise the importance of consumption as a route to ethical citizenship. Shoppers can consume the creative energy of the city by carefully patronising the right kind of creative businesses: those involved in artisanal production, craftwork, design and innovative entrepreneurial models. Shopping, dining out, meeting over coffee and patronising independent shops are as much the stuff of creativity in these planning models as the work of the painter, street artist, writer or actor. And both are presented to the tourist or urban wanderer as available for serendipitous discovery.

It is this conflation of creative potential and profit that my interlocutors critique. In particular, they are suspicious of policy projects that promise to generate both social improvement and a more dynamic market economy by tapping the 'creative' energy of the city. For artists, such projects are fundamentally more motivated by meeting a bottom line and rely on temporary and voluntaristic forms of creative labour. For artists, activists and their neighbours, these projects also seem like a strange distraction from more underlying structural concerns, as they generally avoid directly providing or publicly funding significant amounts of social and affordable housing with decent social infrastructure and opportunities for jobs. It is for this reason that artists and activists are so interested in protecting values like 'community' and 'creativity' as something other than a financial value. For them, the value of art is its ability to make space for critical thought and action in the company of others. Artists see their work and social communities as having value in their own right, like the neighbourhoods these spaces often serve. For artist and activist interlocutors, this distance between the promises and actual effects of 'creative' and culture-led redevelopment models was characteristic of what they called 'the neoliberal city'. Creative start-ups and Cultural Quarters dense with shopping spaces would proliferate, often made possible by regenerations funded by Foreign Direct Investment or predatory investment vehicles like vulture funds, often displacing entirely the communities who once lived in these parts of the city. Everyday people seemed to be losing, while powerful and wealthy stakeholders keen on reimagining the city as a space of financial and social vigour reaped a profit – drawing a veil over this more basic fact with talk about 'social' values.

There has been a marked shift, then, in urban development models – towards plans that prioritise, at least nominally, immaterial social values like 'creativity', 'community' and 'vitality'. But this shift has been part of a more systemic step-change in the last couple of decades: towards 'social' investment, corporate 'responsibility' and 'ethical' capitalism. This is a shift that a growing cohort of anthropologists of finance capitalism have commented upon. Giulia Dal Maso, Aneil Tripathy and Marc Brightman (2022) describe it as the 'moral turn in finance', a new age in capitalism in which profit accumulation is reframed as compatible with 'social impact' and social and

environmental ‘sustainability’. This moral turn in finance contains, at its heart, a contradiction: it responds to the inequalities wrought by a deregulated and untethered form of finance capitalism by reintegrating the values it is seen to have undermined into the discourse, practices and techniques of the financial professional. In this sense, we can understand the ‘moral turn’ in finance, just like the shift towards ‘corporate social responsibility’, as a form of optics management. This is true even as it is also surely the case that some financial professionals are self-aware about these concerns, that many may be earnestly invested in experimenting with ways of using financial capitalism for good, and even as the rise of a new ‘moral’ and ‘socially responsible’ set of financial practices can produce unanticipated effects. On the whole, anthropologists of the new ‘moral’ or ‘social turn’ in finance therefore agree on this more fundamental fact: the promise of social capitalism ‘almost invariably comes at the cost of exclusion, precarity or disempowerment’ (Dolan and Rajak 2016: 4) for large swathes of the human population. Because of its patterned effects and internal practices, Horacio Ortiz (2021) argues that we can understand the network of financial instruments, industry experts and corporations as a global institution – an institution which we can also say is currently in crisis. With rising concern about impending climate catastrophe, a descent into war and conflict in Europe and further afield, and simmering political discontent and material inequalities at the heart of the liberal–democratic ‘West’, interlocutors like mine find this ‘social’ talk troubling. This looks to them like an attempt on the part of elites and financial experts to cleave to an optimistic promise that deregulated capitalism can deliver us from the structural inequalities it has itself sown.

And yet, this ‘social turn’ is not confined to finance capitalism or to ‘creative’ and ‘culture-led’ development models. We have also witnessed a parallel turn in contemporary art. The ‘social turn’ (Bishop 2005) in contemporary art refers to the increased emphasis placed, from the 1990s onwards, on ephemeral public performance pieces in which social situations are themselves treated as the artist’s subject matter. Characterised by site-specific encounters staged in public space, this genre of contemporary art often places a high moral value on consensus-building social interaction and the potential for art to bring about positive social engagement. The spirit of the turn was perhaps most systematically articulated in Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*: these pieces contravene the classical expectation that art represent the world, and instead seek to act on it, to generate social relations and bring about a ‘friendship culture’ (Bourriaud 2002: 32 cited in Sansi 2015: 11). One frequently cited example of this is a piece by Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose work consisted of simply cooking meals for visitors to the galleries that hosted him (Sansi 2015: 9–10). Such pieces are about challenging the containment of art in social institutions and weaving its potential to bring people together into the everyday fabric of social life in the city. They also seek to displace art’s focus on objects and recentre the significance of social acts – or what my interlocutors call ‘art acts’.

Yet critics regularly challenge the assumption that there is an equal relationship between artist, audience and participants in the work, as the artist often straightforwardly profits from these spectacles. Like my interlocutors, they instead advocate for a turn towards more agonistic methods, ones designed less to please than to disrupt (Bishop 2004, 2012; Kester 2011; Rancière 2009, 2015; Sansi 2015: 88).

I frame all of these turns towards ‘social’ and participatory market, planning and arts practices as part of a general ‘social turn’ within capitalism in liberal–democratic contexts. This is part of a mounting effort to reimagine capitalism as capable of morally accounting for and limiting its own excesses – as if it were capable of self-regulation from within. The rise of ‘socially responsible’ investment tracks other parallel trends – towards ‘conscious capitalism’ (Aburdene 2005; O’Toole and Vogel 2011) and ethical consumption (Dolan 2007). It is a shift that has also occurred alongside a turn towards public cultures of transparency (Shryok 2004; Ballesterio 2012; Bear and Mathur 2015) and what Marilyn Strathern (2000a, 2000b) calls ‘audit culture.’ This language about the potential for capitalism to tap fundamental human capacities – like creative innovation – and transform them into an engine for value creation can be understood as but the latest attempt at rebranding capitalism as usual, without necessarily demanding that any meaningful redistribution of wealth or economic regulation occur. Indeed, in the last decade we have seen a stark increase in relative inequality in Ireland and further afield, in the decades since Ireland began to deregulate its economy in line with those of other Euro–American states (Cronin 2024; Riddell et al. 2024; Dalton 2023). We can therefore understand these social turns as evidence of the crisis of the highly deregulated form of capitalism we live with today. More than this, though, we can understand these ‘social turns’ as typical of a more general tendency in capitalism: for it to endogenise criticism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 163). Capitalism, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello argue, is distinctive for its ability to incorporate rebels and their rebellious attitudes and transform them into a source of distinction than can then be converted into capital. There is no clearer evidence of this than the incorporation of ‘edgy’ artists and activists into ‘creative city’ development plans that function practically to inflate property value but exclude working-class communities and now – as the housing crisis worsens – the precariously employed children of the middle class.

We have seen this profusion of talk about the ‘social’ potential of capitalism alongside a practical retreat of direct public provision in sectors like housing in Ireland. As housing policy experts like Michelle Norris (2016) argue, this helps explain both why the housing crisis was so severe in Ireland and why parties like Sinn Féin are calling for a reinvigoration of the welfare state model. Ireland did not develop a conventional welfare state in the period after the Second World War, following the model employed in countries like the United Kingdom (UK) and elsewhere in Europe. Rather than rolling out a fully blown system of direct provision of housing, healthcare and other public

goods, Ireland followed an ‘asset-based’ welfare model. In other words, it prioritised wealth and asset transfer to citizens, with a push towards home ownership at the heart of this form of indirect provision. This was a byproduct of Ireland’s history of colonisation, and the great importance placed on land and property redistribution after the Civil War, as well as the fact that Ireland did not experience a period of industrialisation comparable with the UK and other parts of Europe. Ireland found itself leaping from an agrarian, semi-industrialised colony to the status of fully fledged modern nation-state in a period in which the UK experienced more intense waves of urbanisation and industrialisation.

This historical context had a direct effect on the state’s housing strategy. It meant that in the early years of the Free State, the state primarily focused on rolling out housing in rural areas, investing more resources and energy into urban social housing provision only some decades later (Norris and Fahey 2011: 460). By this point, Ireland had also introduced right-to-buy schemes decades earlier than in places like the UK (*ibid.*: 464). This meant that well before the age of ‘neoliberal reform,’ a more diverse cross-section of the Irish class spectrum owned their homes. For instance, ‘in 1971, 70.8 per cent of Irish households were homeowners, compared to 50 and 35 per cent of their counterparts in the UK and Sweden, respectively’ (Kemeny 1981; Central Statistics Office, various years, cited in Norris 2016: 7). It also meant that when neoliberal reform did strike, it catastrophically undercut the already scanty provision of social housing in cities like Dublin. This fact – combined with the dereliction of estates, the heroin epidemic, and upwardly mobile social housing tenants buying up and moving off estates – meant that the demographic of person likely to rely on social housing narrowed to those who were not upwardly mobile and were ‘welfare-dependent’. In the 1990s and 2000s, in the heyday of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger years, a rising number of aspiring home owners also got on or climbed the housing ladder. However, in this same period, as had been true historically, home ownership and rent in the private market continued to be heavily subsidised by the state. This leads Norris and others to argue that it is not the case that the state has been uninvolved in providing housing but that, from the early years of the Free State, it has relied on an asset-based model that privileges subsidised home ownership over the direct provision of benefits and public resources like social housing. This emphasis on home ownership over direct welfare provision also meant that – as in other countries with ‘property-based welfare regimes’ like the US – Ireland suffered a particularly severe housing bubble and collapse (Norris 2016:10). Stripped of their assets, or saddled with assets with a rapidly declining value, citizens were not then able to fall back on a robust welfare state offering direct benefits and resources like housing. This has also meant that in the years after the 2008 recession, as Sinn Féin politicians will often point out, the Irish state built the lowest number of social and affordable units compared with any year in the state’s history, with only 642 units delivered in

2014 (Ó Broin 2019: 83). The ability of those at the lower end of the class spectrum to buy is also becoming more and more constrained, with a stark fall in the proportion of lower-income home owners compared with the proportion in higher income brackets. This is true even as, at the time of writing, the Irish state is not in deficit but in surplus (Page 2023).

It is this policy landscape that interlocutors point to as evidence that the promises of 'social' capitalism ring hollow. For those who had begun to use the word – as it increasingly began circulating in activist and policy discourse – this gap between the promises and actual effects of these policies was described as being quintessentially 'neoliberal'. Interlocutors were suspicious of the 'social turn' in urban planning, art and finance – of whether it was really about nurturing ephemeral social values like 'creativity', 'community' and 'dynamism' and not just rebranding capitalism as usual while continuing to maximise profits. Though their responses to this predicament varied, the artists and activists at the heart of this book turned to alternative forms of community-building to avoid what they called neoliberal 'co-optation': being swept up in waves of urban restructuring, in spite of their best efforts to reroute them. Indeed, neoliberal reform was often described as being characterised by an ability to capture processes imagined in contradiction to it, with their effort to protect informal urban spaces but an especially clear example of a more widespread tendency.

It is this last anxiety – that art *cannot but be* a tool in marketing and development campaigns – that most fundamentally shapes my interlocutors' political strategies in their art and their activist campaigns. To reclaim art for its critical purpose, rather than as a tool for marketing Ireland's potential to contribute to a global 'creative economy', was considered a vital political project. Pushing back against this global creative economy was also about redirecting energy and resources to a project of Irish state-building, in order to solve issues like the housing crisis in earnest. Indeed, the resurgence of nationalism in Ireland in recent years can be understood as linked to this critique of 'neoliberalism' and the instrumentalisation of creativity as a tool for wealth accumulation, which these activists worry primarily enriches elites abroad and a narrow section of the Irish population at home. In mounting this critique, they appeal to uses of neoliberalism that both overlap with and depart from the anthropological uses to which the word has been put. My interlocutors directly engage with several of the same thinkers subject to ongoing debate for the anthropologist: David Harvey, Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, Naomi Klein, Gilles Deleuze, Chantal Mouffe and other artists, activists and philosophers. They dynamically and critically draw on these thinkers and the activist, intellectual and artistic movements out of which they emerged to test diverse strategies for critically engaging with and challenging the distribution of political power and resources in the city. They are fundamentally preoccupied with many of the same tensions as the anthropologist of politics: of when detached critical thinking is more or less justified or strategic than moral advocacy, and

of the relationship between action and more dispassionately understanding the world around them.

Yet, as this book demonstrates, unlike some critics of neoliberalism, they do not see what the anthropologist might broadly characterise as Foucauldian and Marxist approaches to neoliberalism, and theories of political power, as mutually exclusive. They experiment with diverse ideas and strategies to *both* come to know the world in a detached, experimental sense *and* to act upon it. In so doing, they shift the stakes of some of the most persistent debates in the anthropology of politics and critique – and the role of the anthropologist as a scientific descriptor versus political participant – many of which have emerged in full force in recent debates about the uses to which neoliberalism is put. It is to these debates, and their relevance to this book's argument, that I turn next. I examine how this word neoliberalism functions for them as a critical claim. I also ask how we anthropologists should understand this word when it escapes the academy and goes on to have a life as a critical term in activist movements and party politics – as it has done, more recently, in the rhetoric of political parties like Sinn Féin.

'Actually Existing' Critics of Neoliberalism

As I have argued elsewhere (Morningstar 2020), neoliberalism is both a powerful and a slippery term. For that reason, it has been subject to significant debate in the anthropological literature. Yet its history as a term well predates its use in the discipline. The word was first used by a group of theorists of political economy critical of Keynesian economic doctrine and concerned about the abuses that could be committed by a bloated state (Slobodian 2018: 6, 128). Among them were Milton Friedman, Karl Popper, George Stigler and Friedrich Hayek, who organised the Mont Pelerin Society meeting in 1947, just after the end of the Second World War (Harvey 2007a; Coleman 2013; Mirowski and Plehwe 2015; Slobodian 2018). Though their exact critiques of Keynesian doctrine varied, they did not propose a retreat of the state from the market *per se*. Rather, they felt that the state should be moulded on the model of the market, and that its primary aim should be to protect competition and free-market principles. As Foucault wrote of this new liberalism, what distinguishes it from classical liberalism is that the market is not treated as separate from the state but rather 'as the principle, form, and model' for it (Foucault 2010: 117). This, the Mont Pelerin theorists felt, was the best route to preserving liberty and limiting the excesses of state intervention while also correcting for the fact that – as the Great Depression made clear – the market is not perfectly capable of regulating itself. A common misreading of neoliberalism, then, is that it involves a retreat of the state from the market. In fact, it proposes a radical new form of codependency between market and state: state intervention in the market is encouraged, but to preserve principles

other than public spending, equality, and the direct provision of welfare and benefits. The market, then, is framed as a bastion of liberty and a vital check on the state, and the role of the state is as a regulatory tool designed to keep the competitive, open market in balance (Slobodian 2018: 128).

In the 1970s and 1980s, neoliberalism (the political-economic doctrine) was implemented by what we now often refer to as the neoliberal politicians par excellence – Deng Xiaoping, Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Augusto Pinochet – under the influence of a group of Chicago School economists. A major motivation in the policy uptake of neoliberalism was the high rates of unemployment and inflation in this period, which discouraged a more classic Keynesian spending-based approach to this period of economic decline. This was the start of a privatisation creep into a range of public sectors in places like Ireland. Funding was diverted away from the public provision of housing, healthcare, education and other public goods. However, as noted above, it is not correct to suggest that the state disappeared or ‘retreated’ from the market. Rather, the state was an enormously important actor and continued to heavily subsidise sectors like housing in Ireland and further afield. What happened instead was that the division between the public and the private, the market and the state, became increasingly blurred. As James Ferguson observes, the key characteristic of neoliberalism is that it ‘puts governmental mechanisms developed in the private sphere to work within the state’ (2010: 172), with the state’s function being primarily to preserve market competition and deliver on policy promises through a mixed public–private model. The policy shift, then, is not away from the state’s involvement in sectors like housing but towards a new patchwork model of private and indirect public provision. Along with this, we also witnessed the start of a long decline in the power of organised labour movements, a decline in stable employment and labour protections, and a rise in the power of financial institutions as ‘enterprise’ trumped ‘welfare’ as the central value of this policy shift. With neoliberalisation, therefore, also came a new ideological narrative about the self-enterprising citizen–subject, for whom autonomy from rather than dependence on the state is the most desirable outcome. ‘Creativity’ became an attribute valued for its centrality to forming innovative, dynamic, flexible, enterprising citizens, capable of weathering precarious labour and housing arrangements and turning struggle into opportunity.

By the time the word floats into the anthropological discipline, in the 1990s and early 2000s (Kipnis 2007), it is to describe the negative effects of both of the former waves of neoliberal doctrine and policymaking. For anthropologists, neoliberalism was largely a pejorative, critical term used to critique a bundle of effects – rising economic inequality, market fundamentalism, a tendency to lean on meritocratic arguments to justify inequality, a turn towards individualism and self-responsibilisation, the privatisation of the welfare state, the decline of organised labour movements and a new age of unfettered finance capitalism. For anthropological critics, neoliberalism seemed

to have sufficiently patterned effects to be described as a 'new world order' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 1): a structure or system spreading a 'global virus' (Wacquant 2012: 68). Those approaches that framed neoliberalism as a patterned global system, structure or culture frequently leaned on neo-Marxist theories of power. Power, here, is patterned and mappable – a vast network or structure. It is also best understood as a zero-sum arrangement, in which there are clear winners or losers: those 'in power' versus those without. Power, for Marx, was fundamentally tied to the labour and class hierarchy, so that the only way of gaining political power was to reclaim the means of production and gain control of the ideological narrative told about the distribution of wealth and resources. Hence, for Marx, power is structural because it is fundamentally tied to one's position in the social hierarchy and in the relations of production: if one does not control the means of production, all one has is 'labour power', which the worker will be compelled to sell in exchange for a wage (Marx 2013: 376).

Thinking about power in this structural, zero-sum fashion is an extremely effective approach for drawing attention to the systemic effects of contemporary political economy, and for those who want to demonstrate how neoliberalism consistently retrenches inequality. Many anthropologists and social scientists who think about power in this way will therefore do so for strategic reasons – because it helps them highlight neoliberalism's patterned effects: the very real rising rates of relative inequality and a tendency to lean on meritocratic explanations for inequality and hardship. Harvey, for instance, theorises neoliberalism as a class-based project designed to facilitate the accumulation of wealth in the upper class, pointing out that it has produced consistent evidence bases pointing to rising inequality in a range of ethnographic settings. These figures are sometimes startling, as when he observes that in the United States, 'the ratio of the median compensation of workers to the salaries of CEOs increased from just over 30 to 1 in 1970 to nearly 500 to 1 by 2000' (Harvey 2007a: 16). Loïc Wacquant (2012), Mathieu Hilgers (2011), Brenner and Theodore (2002), and others would similarly theorise neoliberalism as a 'global' or 'world system' (Marcus 1995) reproducing increasingly extreme and patterned forms of inequality wherever it touches down. This would lead anthropologists like the Comaroffs (1999, 2000) to argue that it had produced a global 'culture' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000) that places a high value on risk and promises enormous rewards for the self-enterprising subject.

The above thinkers, in anthropology and adjacent disciplines, therefore tended to frame neoliberalism as an essentially monolithic doctrine and a patterned policy project with consistent effects in all ethnographic contexts. Critics of this approach therefore pointed out that the word had become a kind of 'Leviathan' concept (Collier 2012). Neoliberalism, these critics argued, seemed to explain too diverse a range of effects and had therefore lost its precision as a critical term (Eriksen et al. 2015). It increasingly seemed to be the unquestioned backdrop against which a dizzying diversity of ethnographic

cases were contextualised. More than this, some anthropologists saw the term as part of a broader tendency to frame our interlocutors as always and only ever caught up in structures of oppression, with lives primarily characterised by suffering (Ortner 2016; cf. Laidlaw 2016). Some therefore argued that we should be more careful in couching how we use the term, and when we decide on which theories of power and the political to draw from. Ferguson, for instance, identified several different ‘uses’ of the term in the literature. He distinguishes between approaches that drew on the above Marxist theories of neoliberalism as a class-based project of wealth accumulation and his own, which draws on Foucault’s ‘arts of government’ (Ferguson 2010: 167) to frame neoliberalism as a more complex policy project that can produce unexpected departures from classical ‘neoliberal doctrine’ (ibid.: 170). Along the way, such anthropologists argued, we should allow for the possibility that our interlocutors do not experience neoliberalism in quite the way that neo-Marxist anthropologists might expect. Otherwise, we risk using ‘neoliberalism’ as just another ‘meta-narrative of modernity’ (Englund and Leach 2000) – a critical term that the anthropologist finds attractive prior to analysis, and which might be so powerful that it overwrites our interlocutors’ own critical accounts of themselves or their circumstances. What all of these critics encourage us to do, then, is treat neoliberalism as a critical term with many faces, and an ethnographic object that may take on unexpected or contradictory features.

Early critiques of neo-Marxist uses of neoliberalism would therefore draw attention to ethnographic cases in which the story of neoliberalisation or neoliberal reform produces unexpected outcomes, or collides with non-neoliberal policy projects to unanticipated effect. Throughout these accounts, a more Foucauldian approach to power and politics is implemented in order to draw attention to the ways in which neoliberal ‘governance’ can coincide with other political projects. Power is therefore also framed differently – as a force that can be both ‘repressive’ (Foucault 1977) and ‘productive’ (Foucault 1979), rather than a structure that produces zero-sum conflicts over status or resources. While this observation is incipient in some of Marx’s writings, which Foucault engages with directly in *Discipline and Punish* (Feldman 2019), Foucault is perhaps keener to emphasise the ways in which power can be both about ‘domination’ and ‘capacity’ (ibid.: 324). This means that when anthropologists lean on Foucault’s theory of power to understand neoliberalism, they also make a different set of assumptions about the relationship between power and human subjects. For Foucault, all subjects to some extent participate in their own governance and are therefore not only, or necessarily, always constrained by ‘structures of unfreedom’ (Laidlaw 2013). Because they are dynamic, critical, thinking subjects, they are also capable of evading or refusing patterned forms of subjectivation (Butler 2004).

Thinking about neoliberalism and neoliberal subjects in this way allows these anthropologists to bring its unexpected effects more firmly into view. For instance, Aihwa Ong’s (2006) early ethnography of East and Southeast

Asian policy reform theorises neoliberalism as a flexible form of governance that can coexist and intersect with illiberal political projects, and which she tracks throughout the region (see also Ong 2007). Andrew Kipnis (2007) focuses on how neoliberal ideology intersected with nationalist, communist and Confucian principles in contemporary China, in his study of the Chinese concept of *suzhi* or 'human quality'. Stephen Collier (2011) follows 'actual neoliberals' in post-Soviet Russia as they deploy critical tools of governance to in fact *preserve* the modernist social state's infrastructure. Ferguson (2010) reveals how neoliberal reform paved the way for 'pro-poor' policies like basic income grants in southern Africa. Throughout, neoliberalism is shown to have the potential to produce 'exceptions' (Ong 2006) – rather than always resulting in anti-poor policies, the retrenchment of the welfare state or a rise in individualism, neoliberalism is framed as a 'mobile technology' (Ong 2007: 3), a flexible mode of governance that is particularly adaptable to context-specific demands. Neoliberal subjects, too, are presented as flexible and dynamic actors – who might take up neoliberalism in creative or unanticipated ways, or at least evade total capture by neoliberal logics.

Somewhat absent from the above, very productive bodies of literature, however, is any ethnographic account of everyday people or political actors who use the word 'neoliberalism' as a critical term. We have robust critiques of the critical 'uses' (Ferguson 2010) of this word in the academic literature and we have excellent ethnographic accounts of the policy work of actual neoliberals (e.g. Collier 2011, Ferguson 2010), who earnestly take up neoliberal tools, ideas and policies. And yet we do not know much about people other than anthropologists and academics for whom the critical uses of the word remain convincing. It is in this respect that my interlocutors are important. They reveal to us that the critical use of the word has had a life outside the academy – one that has been particularly fruitful in critical artistic communities, in activist movements, and in the rhetoric of political parties and their public mouthpieces. To do away with the word in the literature, as some of have suggested (Eriksen et al. 2015), is, then, premature. Even if it has become a messy, slippery analytical term in academic discourse, it is still being put to use by actual political actors, who have their own worked-out sense of what the word is good for. As I explain below, framing the word as a critical term is therefore useful – as it allows us to track both what interlocutors think it describes about the world and the non-neutral moral and political judgements of those circumstances that the term implies. It therefore cedes to our interlocutors the ability to engage in the same kinds of debates about neoliberalism that have interested anthropologists: neoliberalism the critical term becomes, here, an important and interesting ethnographic object.

More than this, as I reveal, my interlocutors play with uses of the word and theories of political power that anthropologists often treat as contradictory. Power for them is sometimes best understood as a structure or zero-sum game, and yet at other times it is treated as an unpredictable force – one

that can have unanticipated effects, and that can present as either repressive or productive.

They therefore challenge the assumption that where we see people using 'neoliberalism', the familiar neo-Marxist critical term, they are therefore also incapable of holding other concepts or possibilities in mind. Just like anthropologists and other academics of neoliberalism, our interlocutors are capable of critical thought and action, and often engage in dynamic and flexible ways with the concepts they enlist in their politics and activism. I argue that we must accept that where their claims look like those we critique in the anthropological literature, it is doubly important to examine how such claims operate rather than write them off as another instance of a familiar and messy use of the term. We must accept that they emerge from sensical interpretations of the world if we are at all willing to 'take them seriously' (sensu Candea 2011). And where this word has a life in activist and party-political projects, as it does in my fieldsite, there is a public imperative to study it. The word is doing work outside the academy, so, whether we are comfortable with its uses or not, we should follow it and unpack its form and function.

This book therefore extends the above debates about neoliberalism in a particular direction. In the first instance, this is not an ethnography of policymakers, whose work might be thought of as either an exception (sensu Ong 2006, 2007) or an 'actual' instance of neoliberalism as a form of 'critical governance' or 'programming' (sensu Collier 2011). Nor is it an ethnography of interlocutors who, following a vision of the world as contoured fundamentally by a vast neoliberal network, I will analytically describe as irredeemably caught up in neoliberalism's global project (Wacquant 2012; Hilgers 2011; Harvey 2007a, b). Rather, I present an ethnography of actually existing neoliberalism as it is understood by vocal critics *of* neoliberalism, who use the word to signal specific features of urban and economic restructuring. Crucially, the uses to which they put neoliberalism map onto certain uses spotlighted in the above works. Like Collier's interlocutors, they engage in an ongoing critical reflection that we might describe as Foucauldian, but, unlike his interlocutors, they do so while critiquing neoliberalism. Like those neo-Marxist critics of neoliberalism in the literature, they are anxious about the all-consuming potential for neoliberal policies to capture projects imagined outside their remit, but even where they use neoliberalism as a Leviathan category it is as a productive irritant to evade or challenge through critical thought and action. When they do so, they often lean on more Foucauldian critical techniques of unpicking the diffuse and unanticipated effects of power. My focus is thus on people for whom developing a critical relationship to what *they* saw as actually existing neoliberalism involves dynamically leveraging its multiple uses, which map in unexpected ways onto the debates in the anthropological literature and which therefore demand an innovative path through 'our' investments in the term.

More than this, the uses to which these critics put neoliberalism challenge the assumption that empirical experimentation or description need be at odds

with moral or political advocacy. Neoliberalism, for my interlocutors, is used in multiple ways in dynamic, ongoing projects of experimenting with strategies for critically thinking and acting in the world, a world they assume is not entirely captured by a neoliberal order but which has certain widespread features aptly described as neoliberal. Wherever it is used, it operates not as an exclusively empirical description of contemporary political economy but as *an already critical claim*. It is a mutable idea deployed to express a lack of trust in contemporary governance: the spark that lights the fire of critique, without entirely determining the outcome of reflective thought or collective action. Sometimes, they put neoliberalism to 'use' as a pejorative term for a diffuse system of global causation to compel responses to the predicaments it spotlights. Elsewhere, they render it a detached object, precisely to get free of its terms and become acquainted with its inner workings. In the first case, they deploy something very much like the neo-Marxist use of neoliberalism to signal an expansive global order; in the second, they conduct something like detached genealogical critique and engage in a speculative effort to track its mechanisms. Neither, they argue, is a more or less justified way of using the term neoliberalism or thinking about political power. Rather, *each project works in the service of different ends*. For them, the former is productive in activist movements while the latter is especially useful in generating the critical uncertainty they value in their art practice. And tacking flexibly between the two projects is considered the most significant critical skill.

In this sense, more than any other, they challenge the purification of neo-Marxist and Foucauldian interpretations of neoliberalism in the anthropological literature. Those theorists who have been accused of using neoliberalism as Leviathan (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Harvey 2007a; Wacquant 2012), drawing on Marxist and neo-Marxist styles of analysis, are accused of frictionless 'analytic acceleration' across social scales (Collier 2011: 12; see also Latour 2005: 22). Conversely, critics of neoliberalism as Leviathan, such as those noted above, who lean instead on Foucauldian theories of power tend to reframe 'actual neoliberalism' as a malleable project ultimately articulated, where it 'exists', by subjects capable of decision-making and problem-solving, or as an overly deterministic analytic assumption from which dynamic subjects may in fact depart (e.g. Kipnis 2007; Collier 2011; Ferguson 2011). The implicit battleground lurking in the backdrop of this literature is the question of what counts as good critique, and of how we should theorise power and the subject. One of the key contributions of this book is to argue that this case strikingly parochialises some of the stakes and expectations embedded in the above anthropological debates about power and neoliberalism, and Marx versus Foucault. My interlocutors were entirely willing to dynamically play with these concepts, and to shift between different ways of thinking about each.

A brief look at the claims my interlocutors would make about neoliberalism and political power sheds light on the complex ways in which they mobilise

different critical assumptions. While further attention to these nuances will form the subject of subsequent analysis, it is worth noting here that they regularly, often in the same breath, invoke a sense of power as an all-consuming structure or system, a kind of top-down force or a zero-sum game, *and* as a diffuse force that might take on unexpected features – and which critical, thinking subjects can evade or sidestep. Power is therefore a force that it is sometimes strategic to harness, in order to win these zero-sum games. But in other moments, it is a force that the curious critic has to learn to step back and watch with a detached eye, in order to get better acquainted with its complex or unexpected effects. Neoliberalism, similarly, is used to describe features of contemporary governance at once pervasive, homogeneous *and* as a provocation designed to anger and challenge the enthusiastic critic. Often, interlocutors would point to encounters with single planners, developers or landlords to scale up to claims about systemic or patterned forms of power and inequality. Yet they would equally insist that generalisations about power and the state were always subject to exception, that there were ‘good eggs and bad eggs’, that single ‘decisions’ could either ‘interrupt’ or ‘structure’ politics when enacted by the powerful or well-positioned. ‘Neoliberalism’ was a word that described pervasive features of their ‘social context’, but it was also an idea ‘with limits’. Their position was fundamentally that critique, of whatever kind, is always necessary to interrupt absolutisms or to keep people thinking. In one interlocutor’s words: ‘An assumption is always wrong.’

This section has demonstrated that the bone of contention in the tide of Foucauldian critiques of Marxist readings of neoliberalism is that they structurally over-determine the subject, paint with broad brush strokes over ethnographically specific instances of economic and political reform or transition, and assume, *a priori*, the existence of an analytic category to which every social phenomenon is reducible. Within this literature, then, is nestled a very fundamental and important disagreement about the extent to which we should think of people as being determined by patterned structures of inequality versus being capable of critically engaging with them. The next section unpicks the consequences of this in the light of how anthropologists understand ‘critique’. Further examining the above debates about neoliberalism and the subject, I demonstrate how many of the above disagreements map onto long-held and often implicit battles over how we should theorise the relationship between politics, critique and empiricism, as well as that between power and the subject. I therefore turn now to a slight rereading of a familiar story.

Marx, Foucault and the Anthropology of Critique

One way of reframing the above debates about neoliberalism is as a more fundamental disagreement over how we should think about the relationship between power, critique and the political subject. In the above neo-Marxist

uses of the term neoliberalism, it is implied that political subjects in a vast range of ethnographic contexts are irredeemably limited by an equally all-consuming system of power and oppression. For Harvey, this is a class-based project of wealth accumulation; for the Comaroffs, a global culture; for Wacquant, a global virus, system or structure. We can understand the Foucauldian critiques of these uses of the term, then, as motivated by a more fundamental disagreement about what people are capable of. For Ferguson, Collier, Kipnis and others, neoliberal citizen-subjects and politicians are revealed to be rather more dynamic than we might expect. They are, in other words, capable of critically engaging with their conditions and dynamically playing with a range of available ideas and possibilities. These subjects are never fully constrained by the systems or structures they navigate, it is implied. They are capable of evading power, of capturing it and implementing it in the service of unexpected or creative outcomes. This entire literature, then, is but one of several instances in which anthropologists productively draw attention to the limitations of any model that assumes that power functions as a vast system or structure, within which subjects have available to them a tragically limited degree of 'agency'. The problem with this approach is twofold: first, it frames our interlocutors as *a priori* governed fully and completely by a structure or system. And second, and following on from the first, the structure or system in question often says more about the anthropologist than their interlocutors. Neoliberalism, in the neo-Marxist analyses noted above, is an analytical rather than an ethnographic term. The structure the anthropologist selects will therefore often be the theory of power and politics that is most appealing to the analyst rather than to their interlocutors. As a critical term, then, neoliberalism becomes a non-neutral ideological claim about how the world works – one that gets smuggled into analyses without ever being properly examined. To engage in 'critical' anthropology, following this line of thinking, is in essence to share this non-neutral view of how power works. Critique becomes the content of, rather than an orientation to, knowledge about the world (Morningstar 2024).

In this section, I want to consider what the literature on neoliberalism reveals about the perceived tension between the anthropology of critique and 'critical' anthropology. The disagreement lurking behind the disagreement over Marxist versus Foucauldian 'uses' of neoliberalism is not just about how we should theorise power, or whether structure and agency are the best concepts for understanding the relationship between human subjects and their political-economic conditions. The disagreement is also about the relationship between critique and empiricism. The neo-Marxist uses of the term 'neoliberalism' are flawed, in this reading, not only because they buy into the structure/agency approach and come with a non-neutral ideological critique of the world baked into the analytical framework. They are also therefore less scientific and empirically robust. At the other end of the spectrum, scepticism is expressed about Foucauldian approaches for their commitment to

description and complexity at the expense of a clear moral and political critique (Wacquant 2012: 70). Empiricism and critique are framed in this literature, then, as contradictory tools, as if the anthropologist has to pick between saying something about how power works and critiquing its effects. Though this is a problem I will turn even more fine-grained attention to in Chapters 3 and 4, for our purposes here, the most important point to emphasise is that this trade-off leaves us in a strange position: to describe what our interlocutors think about power and politics is treated as the equivalent of being 'uncritical'. A major ambition of this book is to challenge this stalemate in the literature on critique, neoliberalism and power. I aim to reinvigorate critical empiricism as an approach that allows us to describe the world in an empirically rigorous sense without abandoning our moral and political critiques of what we observe.

In marrying empiricism and moral advocacy, I am taking inspiration from a long line of modern theorists of critique, for whom critique is also understood to be fundamentally about both. I highlight this lineage now in order to emphasise the degree to which our battles in the discipline – between Marxist and Foucauldian uses of neoliberalism, theories of power, and approaches to critique and the political subject – are of our own making. Most modern theorists of critique agree that critique is a practice that requires nurturing a degree of productive uncertainty. Though some have argued that sceptical critique relies on a secular will to suspend belief (Asad et al. 2013), others have emphasised the centrality of scepticism to religious critical traditions, such as Christian asceticism (Foucault 2011). Thus, secular or otherwise, most hold that a requirement of criticism is the will to question: what Paul Ricoeur (2008 [1970]) described as a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. However, as Felski (2015) has observed, this is only one form of critique – one that has perhaps become overly dominant in the social sciences and humanities. I want to explore what happens when this suspicious orientation towards knowledge is construed as the only acceptable ideological stance. This brand of critical suspicion masks a dogmatic certainty regarding how power and politics operate – one that I argue compromises good critique and good activism. To that end, I demonstrate how three bodies of 'critical' theory – the work of Marx, the Critical Theorists and Foucault – are selectively interpreted in 'critical' anthropological analysis, in ways that say more about our 'cosmology' of critique (Ssorin-Chaikov 2012) than these theoretical traditions. Though they are often categorised as resources for *either* moral critique *or* empiricism, all three bodies of theory emphasise the importance of both.

Our understanding of critique as a practice of unmasking is inherited from Marx's critique of Hegelian idealism. Marx was adamant that critique was not solely a matter of the 'liberation' of the mind (Marx and Engels 1976 [1845–46]: 44). Rather, critique was also a tool for revealing the relationship between ideology and 'material conditions' (Marx 1977 [1843]: 131). If ideology existed to lull the masses into believing that material inequality was

inevitable and natural, critique was the practice through which we reveal ideology for what it is: a useful story told to justify the unequal distribution of wealth, power and opportunity. Yet Marx did not think of ideology and critique as a battle between opposing dogmas. To highlight as much, he distinguishes between 'vulgar' and 'true criticism'. 'Vulgar criticism' capitulates to 'dogma', is caught up in 'contradictions', and always 'struggles with its opposite'. 'True criticism', conversely, 'shows the internal genesis' of dogma and describes 'the act of its birth' (ibid.: 92). 'True' critique is not what one believes but how one approaches the task of unpicking the ideology targeted.

The Critical Theorists extended this feature of Marx's criticism to examine what they saw as the uncomfortably close relationship between Enlightenment philosophy and dogma. For them, the danger of Enlightenment thinking was not empiricism but the 'pure immanence of positivism' (Adorno and Horkheimer (2016 [1944]: 16) – a reliance on absolute facts. The solution was critical empiricism and a cultivation of contingency: as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer write, 'the Enlightenment *must examine itself*' (ibid.: xv, original emphasis). The ideological positivists would never question their position in this way because they were as uncomfortable with uncertainty as Marx's vulgar critic was. It was this rigid fear of uncertainty, this refusal of scepticism, that Adorno and Horkheimer saw as the root cause of the 'manipulated collective' (ibid.: 13) mobilised in European fascism. 'Critical thought', and the doubting subject, were refuges for 'the residues of freedom' (ibid.: ix). As Deborah Cook observes, ideological positivism eliminates 'our ability to distinguish between what is and what ought to be' (2001: 1), so that we instead see the world only through our normative filters. The risk is then that we treat as facts beyond reproach what are indeed a complicated combination of facts and moral judgements. It is only through disentangling these exercises that we can puncture positivist dogma, that we can begin to critically examine the world around us. It is important to note that Critical Theory is not a homogeneous body of work and has been patchily incorporated into our canon. Consequently, it is often invoked to prove the critical credentials of anthropologists, as a vague 'appendix' to 'deconstructive approaches' (Lynteris 2018: 168). This is further complicated by the fact that lower-case 'critical theory' is frequently used to refer to loosely left-wing, deconstructive or neo-Marxist approaches (e.g. Ssorin-Chaikov 2012). Rather than advancing an argument about how anthropologists should engage with Critical Theory, my aim is to emphasise that we have overlooked at least this central intervention: despite different approaches, the Critical Theorists all shared a distaste for positivism and a view that questioning and empiricism are fundamental to critique (Cook 2001: 4; Lynteris 2018: 160).

Though Foucault departed from aspects of Marxist critique and Critical Theory, he was enormously influenced by both (Balibar 1992; Bess 1988: 11; Jay 1984) and convinced of the importance both placed on scepticism. Indeed, for Foucault, critique is a 'virtue' built on a bedrock of productive doubt

(2007 [1997]: 43). It is 'a way of thinking' (ibid.: 45) founded on 'a basic distrust' (ibid.) and an appreciation of the subject's 'right to question' (ibid.: 47). Yet, as for Marx and Adorno and Horkheimer, there is a moral dimension to Foucault's critique: critique, for him, is not just 'the art of not being governed quite so much' (ibid.: 45); it is the instrument through which we identify 'how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles . . . not like that, not for that, not by them' (ibid.: 44, original emphasis). This refusal then cracks open an opportunity to articulate a positive political project in response (Bess 1988: 13). We are only capable of defining the good, following Foucault's definition of critique, if we first engage in an act of refusal – of what we judge to be dark or lacking about the world. '*Not like that, not for that, not by them*' (ibid., my emphasis).

For Marx, the Critical Theorists and Foucault, then, critique was about *both* doubt *and* moral advocacy. As for artists and activists, it was a tool through which to arrive at a more faithful description of the world *and* a tool for transforming it. A good critic is willing *both* to ask questions, *and* to shore up enough moral certainty to do the practical work of 'politics'. Nevertheless, these two aspects of critique have been cast as at odds in anthropological analyses. This has much to do with how 'critical' anthropologists have interpreted these canonical approaches to critique. Often, Marxist critique and Critical Theory are construed as more political, and less empirical, than Foucauldian genealogical critique. Consequently, rather than engage with how doubt and moral conviction function in relation to critique, a brand of scepticism that loosely overlaps with aspects of Marxism and Critical Theory, and early Foucault, has been adopted as its own ideological position. As Felski notes, whether critics draw on Marx, Foucault or others, they do so 'with an attitude of vigilance, detachment, and wariness' in the tradition of 'suspicious interpretation' described by Ricoeur (Felski 2015: 3). This approach presumes that suspicion is 'an intrinsic good or a guarantee of rigorous or radical thought' (ibid.: 6). Moreover, it masks the dogmatic thinking that Marx, the Critical Theorists and Foucault all argued compromises critique. This version of critique presents as scepticism but masks a rigid 'antinormative normativity: scepticism as dogma' (ibid.: 9).

Bruno Latour offered one response to the crisis of critique: instead of doubling down on suspicious critique, he argues that we should reinvigorate 'critical' 'empiricism' (2004b: 231). For Latour, it is not only zealous suspicion that is the problem. It is also the tendency to deconstruct facts rather than explain what makes them convincing. Latour concedes that he was a contributor to this deconstructive 'critical spirit' (ibid.). Yet he insists that this style of critique has 'run out of steam', as it rests on a logical fallacy: depending on the prior beliefs of the critic, it relies either on a deconstructive unmasking of the conditions that make its target convincing or on a positivist invocation of the critic's preferred truth. This style of critique therefore smuggles in an ideological positivism that is never subject to the same suspicious eye as the critic's target.

Latour's solution is to shift from deconstructive to constructive critique, from unmasking the presuppositions of the opponent to unpacking what makes a fact plausible. As he writes, 'The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles' (ibid.: 246). Far from a 'reckless pronouncement on the death of critique' (Fassin and Harcourt 2019: 3), Latour's piece is, in my view, consistent with Felski's (2015) urging that we expand what we mean by critique, to describe its form, content and effects – and, indeed, *to judge them*. It is also consistent with the importance Marx, the Critical Theorists and Foucault placed on scepticism as a bulwark against ideological positivism.

However, anthropologists have tended to offer two slightly different solutions: either they suggest that we shift our theoretical approach to critique or they encourage us to study critique ethnographically. The first is often preoccupied with advocating for a given canonical approach to critique, construed as more or less empirical, and the second with decentring the Euro–American critical tradition.

Many in the first camp have argued that the problem with deconstructive critique is that it is too faithful to Marxist over Foucauldian criticism. For these anthropologists, Marx and Foucault – despite their shared emphasis on scepticism – differ in their approach to deconstruction. If for Marx the task was to unmask concealed ideologies, Foucault's genealogical critique was about rendering the present contingent. This subtle, important difference has meant that, for many, Foucault offers a more useful critical toolkit for those invested in empirical description, while still making space for moral criticism. Ghassan Hage, for instance, sets up a choice between 'anti' and 'alter' politics (2012: 292), or 'radical sociological' and 'radical anthropological thought' (ibid.: 290) – the former a 'general cognitive and affective structure' not lending itself to 'an empirically minute description' (ibid.: 290–91), and the latter a more subtle appreciation of the 'possibilities of being other to ourselves' (ibid.: 292). Ferguson describes how Foucauldian critique differs from Marxist interpretation insofar as 'empirical experimentation rather than moralistic denunciation takes center place' (2011: 61). Like Hage, he decries the leftist preoccupation with a politics of 'anti' (ibid.: 62) and subaltern resistance (ibid.: 63) at the expense of 'a revitalized notion of the political good' (ibid.: 64) and a willingness to exercise power rather than refuse it (ibid.: 67). The implication here is that having 'moral' certainty about what is 'good' is a requirement of doing 'critique', and that 'empiricism', because it is primarily about 'description', is not 'critical'. This is a distinction that would puzzle my interlocutors: they would see 'empirical experimentation' and 'moralistic denunciation' as just two forms of critique – amenable to different political objectives, appropriate in different settings.

For those in the second camp, the problem is that our understanding of critique is overly influenced by a Euro–American philosophical tradition, especially Immanuel Kant and Foucault, one that should be challenged by giving airtime to ethnographic critique less influenced by this legacy.

Magnus Marsden's (2005) work on Pakistani Muslim critics and the relationship between textual interpretation, disputation and affect is one excellent example. Irfan Ahmad (2017) argues that the discipline should track alternative genealogies of critique by engaging with exemplary texts, religious movements and historical figures outside the Euro–American canon. Contrary to readings of the ontological turn as heralding a 'crisis of critique' (Bessire and Bond 2014: 449), Martin Holbraad describes how the ontological turn offers 'further critical vantages for reconceiving what we even mean by "critique"' (2017: 277). This body of literature chimes with broader trends in the social sciences towards describing actually existing forms of critique. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's (2006 [1991]) response to Pierre Bourdieu's critical sociology has been to advocate for a sociology of critique: the description of forms of reasoning and justification. Yet as Didier Fassin observes (2019: 28), as in anthropology, the tension between critical sociology and the sociology of critique has been construed as a false choice between critique and empiricism.

This book extends these two bodies of literature and offers a contribution to each. It also argues that Latour's solution is consistent with the most productive impulses in these literatures. In relation to the first, the decision regarding which theoretical approach we take to critique is often revelatory of rigidly held theories of power and politics. If these remain unexamined, the project of critique is doomed to fail as Latour describes: the anthropologist's sacred fetishes are never subject to questioning even as they operate as the premises on which the critic's debunking is predicated. Instead, critique as we know it must examine itself. It must be treated as one of many critical forms, considered alongside ethnographic forms of critique that may cut across our anthropological expectations. Indeed, as my interlocutors demonstrate, being versed in multiple critical forms is the key criterion for being 'good' at critique. Moreover, the implicit theories of power and politics undergirding critique may differ markedly from those of our interlocutors. For instance, my interlocutors do not purify out critique and empiricism, nor do they think detachment is apolitical, and even though they agree with the poststructuralist anthropologist that anything could become 'political', they still maintain a distinction between 'political art' and 'politics'. In relation to the second, I therefore also argue that an under-examined front of the anthropology of critique is the anthropology of critique 'at home'. To turn our attention to critics with whom we share public cultures of debate harbours democratising potential. It grants to academic and ethnographic critique the same world-building potential *and* delivers to anthropologists the power to *explain* rather than *debunk* those with whom they disagree. It contributes to the project of turning to ethnographic forms of critique as a source of theoretical innovation – complementary resources with which to critique those theories of politics, power and governance that have dominated the Euro–American philosophical tradition.

This book draws these threads together – the literature on critique, capitalism and creativity; power and neoliberalism; and critique versus critical

anthropology – to advocate for a fundamental rethink of some of our foundational resources in the anthropology of politics. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with everyday ‘critical citizens’ (Norris 1999, 2011), I follow their critical strategies as they denounce certain aspects of contemporary political economy and then actively propose positive alternatives. I reveal that the word neoliberalism is used as an already critical claim to draw attention to the ease with which social values – like creativity – are absorbed in the ‘social turns’ in art, finance and urban planning. The angst here is about a more fundamental tendency for capitalism to ‘endogenise’ critique (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 163), to turn substantive challenges to it into a source of distinction and raw financial value creation. And yet these critics of neoliberalism use the word in ways that parochialises our debate in the discipline. They do not see what we call Marxist versus Foucauldian theories of power or uses of neoliberalism as incompatible with each other. Moreover, they do not see whether one holds a Marxist or any other view of power as the criterion for whether one is ‘political’ or ‘critical’. Rather, they explore different critical strategies for learning about power, in their art, and then wielding it, in their activism. Art and activism, then, are just different *forms of critique* – different strategies for observing the world and attempting to transform it. And throughout, they play with different kinds of critical claims about what power and neoliberalism are like. Most importantly, they frame the ability to take up different forms of critique as the most important critical skill – and for them, critique only becomes political when undertaken in the company of others.

In this sense, they demand that we reapproach our understanding of critique in the discipline. Drawing on this ethnographic instance of critique, and canonical theorists of critique in the social sciences, I urge a reframing of critique as equal parts empirical description and moral advocacy. This sets the stage for some of the interventions I make later in this book – especially in the Conclusion – in relation to the anthropology of the good, politics and power. Critique, I suggest, cuts to the heart of human subjectivity, and in a way that demands that we think with ‘the good’ and ‘dark anthropology’ simultaneously. Any anthropological approach that aims at one in the absence of the other is not only partial but inevitably a distortion. More than this, such a partial approach would, I suggest, make an empirically rigorous anthropology of politics impossible.

It should be emphasised that the distinction drawn here between Marxist and Foucauldian interpretations of neoliberalism, critique and power is not a description of what Marx and Foucault actually thought, or of the thinking of ‘actual’ Marxist or Foucauldian anthropologists. As I show above, Marx and Foucault had rather more nuanced views of critique and power than this narrative implies. There are also certainly anthropologists who convincingly draw from both Marxist and Foucauldian thought in their analyses of neoliberalism (e.g. Ong 2007; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). This distinction is therefore intended more as a reflection of two different common applications of these

thinkers in the literature and the assumptions about neoliberalism, critique and power that often get baked into their analyses. In this sense, these different approaches are best understood as ideal types, a categorisation that functions in this book to help me reveal broader trends and tendencies worthy of examination and adjustment. However, to avoid diverting attention towards semantic debates about the extent to which the trends or anthropologists I describe are 'really' Marxist or Foucauldian, from this point onward I will use *structural* and *poststructural* to describe these different approaches to neoliberalism, critique and political power. Throughout the book, the key distinction will be that structural approaches tend to frame power as a zero-sum game, neoliberalism as a vast system or structure, and critique as an exercise primarily about antagonistic debunking for the purposes of controlling the narrative and winning power games. Poststructural approaches, on the other hand, frame power as a more unpredictable, distributed force, which might be either repressive or productive; neoliberalism as a patterned form of governance vulnerable to flexible recapture by other ideologies and actors; and critique as an exercise primarily about generating critical uncertainty in order to render a given assumption contingent, so that it might become a detached object of reflection.

Synopsis and Chapter Outline

The book is separated into three parts: Part I – The Neoliberal City – explores the economic and policy climate that interlocutors found themselves navigating after 2008. Part II – Forms of Critique – unpicks the different critical strategies interlocutors enlist to critique the conditions outlined in Part I, especially the artistic genres and activist movements that have attracted their attention. Part III – Creativity and Action – trains the reader's eye on the fractures and inequalities in the activist movements described in Part II – especially in relation to class, labour, housing, immigration and Irish nationalism. Theoretical reflections on critique, neoliberalism and creativity are threaded through these chapters, which work together to tell a story about the impact rising inequality has had on value creation and democratic participation in Euro–American liberal democracies. Ireland, I suggest, functions as an extremely important site in which to unpick the everyday effects of those global processes that have shaped Euro–American liberal–democratic politics since 2008: from housing crisis to the legacy of austerity, to the ongoing role of American Foreign Direct Investment on the European continent, to the contemporary face of European nationalism, Ireland stands as an ethnographic site in which major political–economic shifts can be tracked on the level of lived experience.

Part I. The Neoliberal City

Chapter 1. Mapping Neoliberalism

Chapter 1 has two functions: First, it contextualises the fieldsite, describing the policy and economic landscape in Dublin after the 2008 financial crisis. I focus on rapid, visible, speculative development in particular, which interlocutors experienced alongside a rise in precarious labour and a decrease in available social and affordable housing. I demonstrate how they use the word ‘neoliberalism’ to draw attention to specific features of the city – especially what they see as a disingenuous gap between the promises and actual effects of the state’s response to the 2008 crisis. Second, drawing on the anthropological literature on city and space, neoliberalism and conspiratorial thinking, I explore how my interlocutors use the word neoliberalism less as a description of the world and more as a critical claim. Neoliberalism, for them, is a flexible word they use to draw attention to features of the city that they read as evidence of uneven political investment. This chapter therefore ethnographically describes how interlocutors critically and sometimes conspiratorially map the contemporary city to make judgements about political processes they cannot directly witness and actors they do not personally know. As I reveal, this is a tendency both among left-wing artists and activists and their neighbours in and around social housing estates, who would often be equally suspicious of politicians and political parties even if they would not always use the word ‘neoliberalism’. This chapter demonstrates, then, that political processes appear opaque and suspect to interlocutors from diverse class backgrounds. More than this, diverse interlocutors express suspicion of visibly uneven investment in the city and a tendency to harness human creativity for the purposes of value creation.

Chapter 2. The Value of the Gift

Chapter 2 explores how artists–activists react to a problem set out in the first chapter: that what they call ‘neoliberalism’ is particularly adept at transforming creative labour into capitalist value. Practically, this problem poses an existential threat to creative spaces, which are often rapidly replaced with more lucrative corporate offices, hotels and upscale housing options as soon as they become financially viable. Anxious, too, about avoiding contributing to exclusionary processes of gentrification, artists and activists try to remain ‘hidden in plain sight’ – just successful enough to remain financially viable, but not so successful that they draw the attention of politicians and developers. They do this by engaging in a mix of commodity- and gift-like forms of exchange in their arts spaces. They often exert significant effort to protect some spheres of exchange as primarily gift-like, and they do this as a critique of ‘neoliberalism’ and commodity exchange. I also unpack the significance of

what my interlocutors call ‘selling out’: undertaking creative work deemed too commodity-like and lucrative and therefore artistically corrupt and inauthentic. As I suggest, selling out is materially and morally fraught: it is seen to be justified when it serves a basic material need, but becomes suspect when it is seen to contribute to ‘unnecessary’ levels of profit accumulation. The limits of commodity exchange thus expose distinctively middle-class moral dilemmas about what counts as acceptable forms of consumption and wealth accumulation. I therefore suggest that in Euro–American contexts like this, where the gift/commodity distinction is emic, we should pay attention to the moral motivations behind partaking in one form of exchange over the other. For my interlocutors, gift exchange is explicitly framed as a critique of commodity exchange – even when elements of commodity exchange are desirable or inescapable. This not only helps us explain how they think about the value of artistic labour in these spaces. It also clarifies what they mean when they use the word neoliberalism, as described in Chapter 1.

Part II. Forms of Critique

Chapter 3. Art and the Bricoleur

Chapter 3 is the first of two chapters to explore the two primary forms of critique my interlocutors pursue: art and activism. Building on Claude Levi-Strauss’ work on structure versus change and Victor Turner’s writings on ritual, critique and rupture, I argue that these two forms of critique allow interlocutors to cycle between forms of artistic experimentation and more morally absolute forms of political advocacy. In this chapter, I use Levi-Strauss’ figure of the bricoleur to explain how artists see objectivity, empiricism and scepticism as central to artistic critique. My interlocutors are especially influenced by two artistic traditions: situationism and agonistic critiques of the social turn in contemporary art, both of which treat social life as the artist’s primary material and aim to challenge the expectation that art be comfortable or pleasurable. Artists stage absurd, provocative stunts in public space – ‘art acts’ – and then afterwards exhibit the ‘traces’ of the art act in galleries, which attendees are encouraged to debate and witness as artefacts of the artist’s encounter with political power. Precisely unlike activism, then, art is experimental and is about disagreement. I use this ethnographic material to begin to intervene on anthropological understandings of critique, which I argue have framed critique as ideologically proscriptive. Building on Felski’s (2015) writings on critique, I argue we should understand critique quite generally: as an orientation towards the world aimed at its transformation. Both art and activism allow interlocutors to aim at transforming the world, but in different ways. Here, when engaging in art, interlocutors give pride of place to experimentation and open-ended, detached thinking – what one interlocutor called ‘fluffy

thought'. In their art, then, they play with a poststructural attitude to power, where it is treated as an ambiguous force that one has to watch unfold. Like the genealogical critic, or the archaeologist of knowledge, they examine power in order to get better acquainted with its complex and unexpected features. And yet art is always undertaken with a view to later turning to activism and political advocacy. Thus, it is not one form of critique, or one ideological view, that counts as 'real' critique. Instead, the ultimate critical skills is the ability to 'circle back' between different critical attitudes.

Chapter 4. Activism and the Engineer

In Chapter 4, I recount two campaigns to which interlocutors were especially committed: reproductive rights and the campaign for social and affordable housing. I explore how interlocutors intentionally 'circle back' between periods of artistic experimentation and intense activist campaigning. In the process, arts spaces are physically transformed – from ad hoc, DIY art studios and workshops to spaces that play host to activist organisers, who might use the studio to mock up posters and banners before marches or to produce campaign merchandise. Artists also employ lessons learned from more speculative artistic projects in order to push for practical policy changes. If what makes art political and critical is experimental thinking in the company of others, what makes activism political and critical is organising to build a moral majority and achieve discrete political reforms. Drawing on Levi-Strauss again, I explore how the activist is thus more of an engineer than a bricoleur, who replaces periods of experimentation with clearcut moral narratives intended to achieve discrete future goals. More than this, rather than encouraging debate and disagreement, the activist is interested in crafting consensus and building a moral majority in order to reach those outside their network and achieve clearcut structural change. Here, then, power is imagined more in a structural sense, as a force that is ordered, zero-sum and involves conflicts over resources and public narratives. The activist therefore builds on what they have learned about power elsewhere in order to capture and wield it successfully in a political campaign. Activism, unlike art, is about 'winning'. I demonstrate how this functioned as an effective tactic in two areas of campaign organising: in the successful campaign to legalise abortion by referendum, and in a series of protests, direct actions and occupations designed to call for an increase in the stock of social and affordable housing.

Part III. Creativity and Transformation

Chapter 5. Class, Work and Creativity

Chapter 5 explores the sometimes tense relationships between artists and their audiences, unpacking why these relationships are particularly fraught in gentrifying neighbourhoods with historically working-class majority populations. Building on the anthropological literature on precarity, class and creativity, the chapter unpicks the class dimensions in perceptions of what counts as high quality work. As I reveal, artists are subject to derision and suspicion where they are seen to have used their perceived higher status to engage in self-indulgent artistic work. And yet, as I reveal, this does not mean that people in working-class neighbourhoods do not value creative work. In fact, like artists, they strive for creative autonomy and control over labour time. Yet they struggle with more restricted social networks and less cultural capital than the artists moving into these parts of the city. Crucially, then, it is not a shared experience of the same kind of precarious work that unites these two groups but what I describe as a trap held in common: whereby work is construed as a route to freedom and creative fulfilment. Strangely, then, the current political economic climate in which artists work shares features with historical political economic models – especially feudalism and communism – which required that the worker identify totally with their labouring role. Neoliberalism, they fear, aims at governing and harnessing the innermost recesses of the human soul, and is therefore a ‘total’ form of governance. The reality, as I reveal, is often more complex and produces tensions along classed lines, as it is those further up the class spectrum who are more capable of excising themselves from their labouring lives and reclaiming some control over labour time. They also retain a management function, controlling their own time and the labour time of others, meaning that their work provides more avenues for creative self-actualisation and transformation. This is true even as these two groups are united in party-political terms. Building on a period of recent follow-up field-work, I suggest that shared senses of disenchantment in the housing market and suspicion of mainstream politicians are the key reasons why significant segments of these two groups voted en masse for the nationalist party, Sinn Féin, in the 2020 General Election.

Chapter 6. Housing and Irish Nationalism

The final chapter, Chapter 6, picks up where the last chapter left off, to explore the politics of housing in contemporary Ireland. I reflect on recent field-work focusing on the ongoing housing crisis, recent escalations in housing activism, and Sinn Féin’s strategic attempt to present the party as an anti-establishment alternative to centrist parties in government during and after

the 2008 financial crisis. Drawing on interviews and conversations with Sinn Féin supporters and politicians, and participant-observation at protests, demonstrations and marches, I examine how Sinn Féin is consciously positioning itself as the party-political solution to the housing crisis. More than this, the party is offering a conscious critique of neoliberalism, one that is intersecting with interlocutors' critiques in ways that proved electorally significant in 2020, when Sinn Féin won the popular vote in the Irish General Election. This chapter therefore comes full circle, examining how the critiques of neoliberalism among artists, activists and their neighbours in Chapter 1 have been absorbed into party political rhetoric. Theoretically, this chapter makes a case for approaching party politics using the framing of critique employed throughout the book. If we understand everyday voters as critical citizens, and examine how political parties mobilise a critique of the same issues targeted by the critical citizen, we can better theorise how a party-political ideology gains traction and produces electoral results. And yet I also suggest that critique can help us train an eye on the gaps between voters' critiques and the critiques put forth by the party. I suggest that even though Sinn Féin is an avowedly left-wing party that supports inclusive welfarism and is pro-immigration, there is a growing sense of dissatisfaction within the Irish electorate about immigration and housing. Some of these voters support Sinn Féin, but others vote for other establishment parties, Independent candidates, or do not vote at all. There is also a vocal minority of voters who are participating in anti-immigrant agitation, and have been involved in protests and clashes around sites earmarked to house refugees and asylum seekers. Indeed, a recent slide in Sinn Féin's polling figures indicates that this issue is impacting support for the party (Webber 2024). I therefore argue that there is a novel critique of the housing crisis gaining steam in Ireland that does not match the critique Sinn Féin sets forth. Rather than holding the governing parties to account, these disaffected citizens are scapegoating migrants, and blaming Sinn Féin for abandoning the working class. I suggest that critique can help us identify and respond to this critical gap between parties like Sinn Féin and the electorate. More than this, whether we agree with Sinn Féin's party politics or not, it remains a significant test case. Whether it can traverse this gap is an important litmus test of whether left-wing nationalist parties across Europe can tame the more exclusionary right-wing politics gaining traction in cities like Dublin. As I show, these exploit the feelings of disenchantment and disempowerment characteristic of those sidelined by the class distinctions and inequalities analysed in Chapter 5. Those drawn into these movements, I suggest, are attracted by the promise that they function as a rapid and often violent avenue through which to exert their will and transform the world around them.

The Conclusion draws together the theoretical claims the book has made regarding neoliberalism and critique. It makes a case for an anthropology of critique as itself a crucial form of 'critical' anthropology. I argue that retheorising critique quite generally – as an orientation to the world aimed towards

its transformation – allows us to treat forms of critique we encounter ethnographically as conceptual resources that can and should impact on our own ‘critical’ theory. More than this, I argue it can help us better theorise party politics and electoral behaviour, two areas overlooked in recent political anthropology. Unlike opinion polls, this study of critique mandates that the researcher assess voter views on two levels: on the level of fact or information gathering, and on the level of the moral or political claims made on that basis. Pushing existing anthropological work on ‘the political’, it suggests that political parties are rich, untapped sites for further anthropological study – a subject I argue we have overlooked for reasons related to how we have theorised political power. More generally, the conclusion argues that political anthropology has the potential to generate political theoretical tools of interdisciplinary interest, a theoretical potential not yet fully exploited at the intersection between political theory and anthropology. If we ask how concepts like critique and neoliberalism function for our interlocutors, and then let these emic concepts impact on our theoretical tools, I argue we will arrive at a more faithful account of everyday people’s experiences of politics and governance. This approach to political anthropological theory has important democratising potential – in the spirit of the ontological turn, but with our attention applied to political concepts. The book concludes by suggesting that taking this new approach to critique seriously also involves rethinking some of the most fundamental disagreements in the anthropology of ethics and the subject: regarding the legacy of Marx versus Foucault, and the false choice between dark anthropology and the anthropology of the good.