Stuck in Mud in the Fields of Athenry': Apple, Territory, and Popular Politics

Patrick Brodie

On May 10, 2018, after three years of negotiations and delays, the Apple corporation announced that it would no longer be proceeding with a planned €850 million data center project in Athenry, a small town in East Galway (Taylor & Hamilton, 2018), whose investment would have constituted the largest private influx of capital in the region's history (O'Donoghue, 2017). This came two weeks after the Supreme Court announced that it would allow the project's principle objectors to continue their environmental appeals, which may have eventually landed Apple on another legal and time consuming crash course with the European Union (EU) (Wuerthele, 2018). Despite this and other ongoing controversies about unpaid taxes, Apple and the Government of Ireland—under the strangle hold of the country's two center-right neoliberal parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil—have sought to maintain their good relationship. Members of 'Athenry for Apple' (AfA), a local civil society group who advocated and staged popular shows of support for the project, press on. Strategies have been implemented by the government to avoid such lengthy delays in the future. The people of Athenry and East Galway have been left at square one, with no incoming capital to speak of, a woodland site outside of town tied up in planning debates that happened across the country and in California boardrooms.

The Republic of Ireland has doubled down on the high-tech sector since the 2007-2008 financial crisis, and it has played a particular role in narratives of the recovery. Data centers are a continuation of this phenomenon, as infrastructures critical for the high-tech and financial services industries undergirding foreign direct investment (FDI)-driven growth in the country (see Brodie, 2020). But the state's strategic zoning laws and uneven regional development are also hallmarks of this haphazard development strategy. Until recently, the general populace has accepted (and sometimes enthusiastically supported) these planning strategies as necessary for economic health at both local and national levels. But as the unevenness of these schemes has intensified during renewed growth, divides between rich and poor, and urban and rural populations, have widened. Drawing from studies and theories

of bordering formations (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013a; Ong 2006), supply chains (Tsing 2009), logistics (Cowen 2014; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013b), and offshoring (Potts 2019; Urry 2014), we can learn how states and corporations actually use division and coordination across space to strengthen power and control over the (non-)movement of populations, goods, and services. Far from connecting and providing access to diverse spaces and populations, communications technologies and their infrastructures have crystallized and created many divides.

These kinds of private infrastructures are administered and planned by complicated partnerships between states, transnational corporations, and local communities, and in connection with global circuits of data and capital which extract value from growing aggregates of information and user labor. As they course through with these various forms of sovereignty, it is necessary to confront and reconsider taken-for-granted conceptions of 'the political.' When encountering transnational capital, politics as a mode of theory and practice—ideas of publics, democracy, rights, not to mention ways of activism and organizing—become recalcitrant. This is especially important when discussing political plans and popular aspirations built on highly speculative gambles with the global market as a purveyor of social and environmental care. Corporations are positioned by state planners as bringers of prosperity, whose wealth-creation generates 'ripple effects' for those in close proximity to their operations. The public and the private aspects of internet infrastructure, and contemporary infrastructures more generally, lose shape, especially in relation to the tensions between supposedly 'local' public goods and transnational private accumulation strategies. What sort of social responsibility or 'duty of care' do transnational corporations actually take on towards local populations? What kind of dispossession, or consent, does this breed?

Speaking from the left, the question is simple. In mapping transnational capital and circuits of exploitation, many theorists and activists have articulated how we can conceive of the resulting protests and 'circulation struggles' in the age of finance capital and the logistical arrangement of global trade (Bernes, 2013; Clover, 2016; Curcio, 2014; The Invisible Committee, 2017). However, movements that arise in these encounters are not always on the left. As I will unravel, these struggles are unpredictable, necessarily so to be adaptive to

capitalism's flexible organization. This also means that they do not always motion towards liberation, but rather through what we may call, borrowing a concept from Verónica Gago, 'neoliberalism from below' (2017), which she conceives as a popular politics in a global field of struggle between liberal modes of power piped in from above and the variable productivities of local civil and political society. AfA's support for Apple represents a pertinent example, where local elements came out in enthusiastic support of a multinational corporation building their logistical infrastructure. Unlike local social movements, as Asta Vonderau finds in her study of Facebook's relations with the state and civil society in northern Sweden, corporate power is highly scalable when developing and negotiating infrastructures, especially in how companies promote themselves to local interests (2019). Thus, when discussing the localization of struggles linked to circuits of transnational capital, struggles which may also act for or against the state, we need more textured accounts of the role of capital, culture, and politics within their diverse arrangements (see Neilson, 2014: 80).

Drawing on research into public discourse, policy discussion, and fieldwork conducted in Athenry and the jurisdiction of East Galway during the summer of 2018, after the announcement that Apple would not be pursuing the data center plans in the region, the methodology I deploy here responds to the shifting grounds and knotty entanglements of the political, legislative, and cultural responses to Apple's attempted project in Athenry. Research on such a localized space required spending time at and around the site and meeting with community members and public officials. However, as I found, residents were tired of talking about Apple, and frequently (at first) mistook me for a journalist getting information. This affective dimension—hope, exhaustion, frustration, bitterness—is crucial to my approach, which incorporates these brief encounters into a sustained analysis of the policy, planning frameworks, public discussion, and granularities of the case. Channeling back and forth between the state/transnational capital nexus and on-the-ground politics, I point to the co-existence of governance with the lived experience, politics, and cultures of the 'governed.' The dynamic interrelation between these forces articulates how the state and transnational capital entangle the social and cultural conditions of a place like Athenry towards macroeconomic interests. As many in infrastructure studies have demonstrated

(Barry, 2013; Larkin, 2008; Anand et al., 2018), especially in postcolonial contexts (bringing modernity, development, access), the persistent 'promise of infrastructure' embeds the material spaces of infrastructure with political drives, hopes, and futurities. The foreclosed future of the Apple project resonates with the affective politics of hope, visibility, and access that have been evacuated from the space of Athenry, leaving a space for more global conjectures not only on what could have been but what could still be.

I begin by presenting the basis of Apple's plans in relation to Ireland's planning laws and local civil society in East Galway. I then detail post-crisis protest culture in Ireland, particularly in relation to what some have called a 'culture of objection' which has led many people to distrust the role of civil society within the planning process, leading to support for less oversight of FDI and private sector-led development strategies. Following this, I discuss how such aspects of 'neoliberalism from below' are tied to pride of place and national cultural heritage in the popular imaginary of Irish economic development. The widespread popular support around these processes, designed to secure and maintain investment as a source of welfare, prosperity, and hope, demonstrate existing and breed a further distrust of the state or local government to provide the necessary infrastructures for renewed growth. In this popular support for private capital—to provide visibility and services—and the non-recognition of the actual role of the state in how this form of development actually happens, we must account for emergent communities of consent and dissent in terms of the re-shuffling of taken-for-granted political practices into these registers of commerce, affect, and culture.

Athenry for Apple: Data, Territory, Civil Society

In 2015, Apple announced plans to build a data center on a 'greenfield' site on the outskirts of Athenry, County Galway, in the West of Ireland. The site, in Derrydonnell Woods, was formerly held by Coillte (a partially state-owned forestry company). How it was chosen remains contentious. Twenty-five sites in Galway were inspected with the semi-state Industrial Development Authority (IDA), but some 'were immediately dismissed because of poor roads and broadband, or else the sites were too small to cope with a 15-year plan to build eight data centres in one location' (Newenham, 2018).

While Coillte and the IDA would not disclose how the land was transferred to Apple (The Irish Times, 2016), Apple officials stated that the plot was 'uniquely attractive' (Newenham, 2018). Visiting the site with Paul Keane, one of the key leaders of the AfA movement, he informed me that a forested site was better for cooling, as the forest is generally several degrees cooler. However, many of the trees would have needed to be cleared to make way for the buildings themselves (Fig. 1). Athenry is also located nearby the junction of the new M17/M18 motorway, a fiber optic cable route, an IDA site, and a commuter railway connection, which would make the forest cooling appear secondary. The initial plan would have constructed one data center in order to establish the infrastructure. Over the following fifteen years, up to seven more Apple-owned data sheds would have been built on the same site, creating several hundred jobs during the construction process. However, like most data centers, only 50-150 (reports vary) permanent employees would have been required for the data center's operation. On the surface, within the apparently mundane metrics of public and private development, Athenry seems to merely be a particularly strategic 'dot on the map'.[1]

Fig. 1: The Derrydonnell Woods site, a strategic 'dot on the map' (photo by author).

However, there were a few complications from the start. First of all, the forested location should have raised red flags. The sale of national and Coillte-owned lands was part of the troika's (European Commission, European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund) austerity program after the financial crisis. If successful, it would have seen Ireland become the only EU nation without national forests. Communications infrastructure and the environment are already (since 2016) governed under the same state agency in Ireland—the Department of Communications, Climate Action, and the Environment. State telecoms operate under the same umbrella as the management and protection of natural resources. These come into strategic cooperation as much as conflicting interests in the basic governance how they operate, from the regulation of antennae to the administration of the environment. Thus, the apparent under-regulation of this land, which as studies of enclaves and strategic zones tell us (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013a; Ong, 2006), masks an excess or overlapping of other criss-crossing sovereign projects, whether those of Irish state economic strategies or supranational regulations. The troika's austerity program pressured Ireland to privatize all of its national and Coillte-owned forests, and Coillte set about the process of rendering Irish forest lands profitable by selling them as both property and resource assets. While there is certainly a bundling of infrastructure favorable to data center development nearby the site in Athenry, the environmental malaise of the Irish state was demonstrated by Coillte's role as asset management company for incoming investors.

Because of concerns for the forest ecosystem, general environmental disruptions, and mostly trepidation over energy usage and emissions, a small contingent of environmental activists objected to the plan from the beginning. Ultimately, after several slow rounds of appeals to Galway County Council and An Bord Pleanála (the national planning board), the objections were dismissed, despite raised eyebrows at certain environmental claims by Apple, including their plan to power the campus with 100% renewable energy. The dismissal of virtually all opposition by the planning bodies came along with widespread popular support at community and governmental levels. More appeals to the High Court after the 2016 decision further delayed the process. The same objectors, Athenry residents Allan Daly (originally from the US) and Sinéad Fitzpatrick (a local), joined by Wicklow-based green data

center investor Brian McDonagh, questioned the rigor of the environmental impact assessment (EIA) of the data center's potential impact, especially considering the seven more planned data sheds to be built (Carolan, 2017a). As revealed in the 2019 Supreme Court case, the finished (eight shed) campus would have used anywhere between 5-8% of national energy capacity on a daily basis, but the EIA performed by An Bord Pleanála only accounted for one shed. Similar to other data centers built in Dublin, where most are concentrated in the country, Apple also had no plans to build new renewable energy capacity, but intended to buy it off the national grid, meaning non-renewable energy would simply be re-routed elsewhere.

Thus, this apparently simple and coordinated process of public-private planning was complicated by local and environmental conditions on the ground, which could not have been predictively measured. Represented across the longer appeals process were objections around anything from ecosystem considerations (mentions of badger and also bat populations abound in relation to forestry issues) to concerns about light pollution affecting astronomy (Paul, 2016), a hodge-podge of local ecologies, endeavors, and enterprises, uncoordinated frictions and contingencies to which the state/corporate partnership had to respond. Two days before these appeals were set to receive judicial review in the High Court in November 2016, 2,000 residents staged a march in Athenry (a town of 4,000) to demonstrate support for Apple, organized by AfA. Local government officials were also involved in the planning of the demonstration. Fine Gael councilor Peter Feeney summed up the sentiment of the march: 'This is not a them and us situation, and a purely *positive* move to show Apple how we feel' (qtd. Moss, 2016, my emphasis). This positivity comes up across many reports of popular and official support of the project, despite the continued judicial delays. Feeney is quoted again:

> When Apple announced its plans in February 2015, everyone felt, this is brilliant, this is exactly what Athenry needed, a shot in the arm to give it a lift—the biggest company in the world coming to a small town…Hope has been in poor supply in this country and this gave us hope…This isn't going to be the cure-all but we have a great local industry in Athenry and across east Galway. (qtd. *The Irish Times*, 2016)

Galway East Fine Gael Teachta Dála (TD, member of Irish parliament) Ciarán Cannon expressed a similar sentiment: 'Walk down the main street and I challenge you to find anybody who will say they are against it' (qtd. Paul, 2016). Speaking with various members of AfA, I encountered this widespread positivity towards Apple, despite a general bitterness that manifested in the project's failure. While many had given up, leading to a feeling of abjection throughout the community, some like Keane pressed on, believing that after the appeals were finally over Apple would return and reevaluate. Martin, a barman involved with AfA, said to me that while the objectors were shortsighted, some in the community, like the principle of Lisheenkyle, a national school on the border of the site which received free iPads from Apple, can 'see the future.' 'We'll battle on, hopefully the wheel will turn,' he told me, with a hopeful air (Interview, 2018).

The political feelings towards Apple manifested in a variety of ways, from the protest to social media. Apple remained a background presence on the AfA Facebook group, and posters spoke as though Apple officials could be continuously monitoring the discussions of these local groups (no evidence suggests they were). Residents would speak directly to Apple as a corporate organization, asking for patience and forgiveness for the planning delays. Thus, the appeals of civil society, often again filtered largely through state figures (ministers, officials, TDs) in the popular press (but more direct over social media), are directed not towards the state but towards Apple, demonstrating support and loyalty. Apple was generally spared bitterness (pointed rather at the state, the objectors, and other community members). However, Apple's 'community investment' was minimal apart from promising to provide a few upgrades, outdoor education space, and an aforementioned donation of iPads to a local school, as well as 'public' walking trails around its forested grounds.[2] While there is a sense that Apple would have provided training for local students and workers, it is unclear how this would have actually been rolled out. These programs were not explicitly written into the Apple plans, as Feeney noted, making this community involvement an extra and somewhat imagined benefit: 'We wouldn't really expect the company to invest in the community…Apple's investment is a form of community investment. There will be construction jobs and spin-off jobs, and rates paid to the local authority' (qtd. Siggins, 2017). Many supporters, like Feeney, seemed to circle around the fact that Apple was not directly

engaging with the Athenry community. Keane explained to me that Apple officials had only come to Athenry to scope out the site, primarily communicating with the community through the government bodies in charge of planning and judicial review. So while the company would only provide a mostly 'immaterial' investment in the social and cultural life of Athenry, and short-term economic benefits stemming from construction work, Apple was also still positioned as a provider of future welfare and prosperity, particularly for young generations fleeing rural areas for urban centers (Siggins, 2017). Ironically, official signage at the entrance to the Derrydonnell Woods site, as of Summer 2020 still owned by Apple, cites legislation excluding the land's proprietors from any 'duty of care' towards those visiting, prohibiting unauthorized entry and trespassing (Fig. 2). In spite of promises, legal ownership of land and the business activity therein clearly does not compel a company to provide the 'care' seemingly imagined by the ripple effects of locating there.

Fig. 2: Notice at the entrance to Derrydonnell Woods in 2018, releasing the 'occupier' of the site from a 'duty of care' towards trespassers (photo by author).

Nonetheless, the hope embedded in these foreclosed promises of Apple's arrival is crucial. Athenry was still recovering from a financial crisis that seems far in the past for Ireland, with newer

crises of housing, Brexit, and now Covid-19 saturating the present. Lauren Berlant argues that 'hope often involves waiting for something specific to happen, although…it can sometimes bind people to a genuinely, actively lived life as well' (2011: 14). After learning that Apple would not push ahead, the town harbored an enormous amount of generalized 'ill-feeling' in the absence (or aftermath) of hope. That bitterness was entirely palpable, with one resident describing an 'Apple hangover' in the town, leaving distrust and grudges in its wake on both sides of the debate. Martin told me that there was even suspicion that the objectors (particularly Allan Daly and Brian McDonagh) had unethical conflicts of interest.[3] However, the question posed by Martin, and echoed in various ways by others in town— 'Who's funding Daly?'—was partially rooted in the fact that he is an outsider, a citizen from abroad not involved in any other local affairs (community groups, culture, Church, and the like). This positivity towards Apple, mixed with growing bitterness towards the inefficient state and paranoia towards those holding up the process, manifested an increasing tension and exhaustion in the town.

These non-democratic, juridical, and civil society processes constitute a challenge for conceptions of dissent and foreign investment. While a vocal majority, and central government officials, supported a 'green' project whose environmental credentials were full of holes, a few very strong voices/actors delayed the process to the point that Apple was compelled to abandon the project altogether. Apple and the state's rhetoric of jobs and investment proved effective in galvanizing citizens in support, but the messy pitfalls of the planning process and local consent and dissent, especially in a traditionally rural region, proved insurmountable.

Partha Chatterjee's studies of 'political society' in India describe the ways in which non- or tenuously-rights-bearing 'citizens' exist and organize politically in an agonistic, tense, or illegal relationship with the state (2004). These precarious citizens organize their lives and labours based on conditions of availability, conditions within which the state *appears* to them as antagonistic or even non-existent (see also Gago, 2017). While these arguments resonate, and Athenry faced abandonment by economic development elsewhere and mobilized the community to seek a 'piece of the pie,' so to speak, I would caution against unilaterally applying a 'political society' debate to AfA. Rahul Mukherjee extends Chatterjee's

framework to map the urban and rural dynamics of civil and 'political society' respectively in his case study of 'environmental publics' formed in India around cell phone towers and nuclear power plants, what he calls 'radiant infrastructures' (2020). Urban concerns are more readily addressed by the state, whereas rural movements are seen as uninformed and non-scientific. Despite clear correlations to these urban and rural divides of legitimacy in India, AfA are still civil society actors within a European state, and legitimized by certain state forces, even if fed up with the central government. One must acknowledge that the abandonment of rural Ireland, in a country that has been so successful at climbing the 'ladder' of Western globalization, is not as dire as those faced elsewhere, despite the state's postcolonial identity. As a relatively wealthy European nation since the Celtic Tiger (a period of globalization and economic growth through the 1990s), recourses to colonial history are often quite fraught (see Cleary, 2002). Ordinary Irish citizens do largely have basic social welfare from the state (the dole, healthcare, subsidized education). However, these and other basic services are always in a state of emergency, under threat by cuts and privatization. This gamble on the high tech economy seen ostensibly succeeding elsewhere in the country may seem low-stakes, but we have to understand that rural areas like East Galway never fully recovered from the crisis. Rural regions, especially outside of the cities and towns, still face economic and population stagnation (Ní Aodha, 2017; O'Donoghue et al., 2017) and epidemic suicide rates during the recovery (D'Arcy, 2016), especially among young people. Rural needs are often secondary to urban concerns in nation-wide discussions. As Dilip Gaonkar argues, 'What constitutes a state of socioeconomic duress might vary significantly across time and place, especially in contemporary affluent Western societies, which are witnessing a resurgence of populisms in their midsts' (2017). Economic recovery strategies have been unevenly rolled out and experienced across the country, with growth concentrated in urban areas. Thus, these *feelings* of abandonment in rural regions, and their political responses, are no less powerful. Because neither have we yet seen the strong resurgence of a populist right (or left) in Ireland in the same way as in other Western democracies. Rather, in Athenry, the popular appealed to those administering the private sector at the highest level. Citizens reached out to Apple as a corporation, bypassing what they saw as an inefficient and unsupportive state structure.

In Athenry, the Apple data center took on an imagined role as a basis for local industrial infrastructure, but its role as a node within a wider global system was not as prevalent within how residents saw its potential, except in how it would provide more access and visibility for the town. There was little sense of the wider coordination and supply chains that this data center would plug into and contribute to: marketplace, streaming, and cloud services for global users. The material consequences of this supposedly immaterial infrastructure were mostly thought of as unrelated to the actual functioning of a data center, or even a tech company. Rather, Apple was permitted to act as a builder and purveyor of a mechanical shed in which data is stored and processed, with promises to provide visibility, hope, and certain services, like consumer technologies and walking trails, to the community. Citizens were (and are) happy to accept Apple's handoff of taxes for jobs and minimal social care. By building a data center, Apple would create a 'ripple effect,' as these benefits are seen to circulate outwards from a capital-intensive center of gravity, from the construction to the creative sector. The data center was posed as an entryway into the high tech economy which would make Athenry, in the words of locals, the 'Silicon Valley of the West of Ireland' (Siggins, 2017), plugging it into the global tech imaginary. With the cultivation of such aspirations at both the governmental and civil society level, the entry of the data center into Athenry found not just consent but enthusiastic support. Popular sentiment motivated residents to embrace the corporation as a harbinger of hopeful change, whatever its actual function, whose mere presence would bring future prosperity. In effect, the intensive singularity of Apple's failed investment, rather than drawing or expelling energy, drained faith in the state to take care of the economy or their community, as well as in the community's own ability to improve their socio-economic conditions.

'Where the Cloud Touches the Ground'

Despite these contradictions, or willful oversights, data centers are not by accident sites at which multivalent forces of state, capital, and popular sentiment come to cooperate and intersect. These sheds are a peculiar kind of infrastructure: they serve public and private functions, utilize and build public and private infrastructure. The value they produce, though, accumulates for only a small few (powerful) companies in the sector. This has led to extensive public discourse. Jennifer Holt

and Patrick Vonderau argue that their public representations and designs (Fig. 3):

> tell us about affordances and constraints turned into pipes and cables, about in-built political values and the ways the engineering of artifacts come close to engineering via law, rhetoric, and commerce. And the images also testify to the constant struggles over standards and policies intrinsic to the network economy. (2015: 74)

These physical infrastructures are not simply those that are built, but also the surrounding visual culture which circulates and contributes to the collective imaginary of a given project as to how and where '"the cloud" touches the ground' (75). While these images and plans are viewed largely in boardrooms and government offices, they are also publicly available and circulated, and experienced in how they come to be enacted (or not) in a particular place (see Degen et al., 2017). In the case of a foreclosed project, they act as visible evidence of an imagined future and an index to a space both existing and stuck in governmental limbo.

Fig. 3: Visual rendering of Apple's proposed Athenry data center.

In Athenry, and in the West of Ireland more generally, these visionary calculations fail to account for what was referred to across my fieldwork as a 'culture of objection,' 'serial objectors,' and 'professional agitators.' Speaking with me in 2018, TD Sean Canney compared Apple's plans in Athenry to the Galway city ring-road, which faced repeated environmental objections despite popular support. The project was eventually approved but was forced to navigate a complex and protracted planning and appeals process all the way to the EU. One Athenry resident understood the NIMBY ('not in my backyard') angle of the objections to the Apple data center but was still frustrated: 'I respect their right to follow procedures…There are plenty of things I didn't want in my back yard but they're in my back yard. People just have to get on with it. Apple is an iconic name, and it'd be great for the town' (qtd. Paul, 2016). Some popular community groups and right-leaning public figures lamented the presence of courts in the planning process at all (The Irish Times, 2017). One hand-made sign in Athenry expressed this: 'An Apple a day keeps the bankman away – STOP OBJECTING' (Parker, 2019). This pro-development ideology renders Apple a benevolent ruler over a space which its actual investment has not even entered, to the point that any dissent (juridical or otherwise) is treated with disdain or intimidation. However, while environmental objections may obviously privilege global concerns over immediate social needs, this subjects objectors to often violent critique at the hands of capital, the state, and even local communities. Take the case of Michael McCoy, a career environmentalist and planning objector who was found beaten to death in the woods in South Dublin, presumedly as a result of his history of opposition to development projects. One Athenry resident (not affiliated with Afa) even referenced this incident, saying Daly could end up the same (Gilbert, 2017).

Nonetheless, climate and financial turbulence both require textured and stakeholder-centered approaches that traverse scales of action and operation. Supporters of the Apple data center operated on grassroots and institutional levels, channeling back and forth depending on issues at hand and obstacles ahead, whereas the objectors remained quite secretive as they navigated the courts. They sparingly engaged with the town halls or community events held to discuss the proposal. The lack of communication between these various factions contributed to the messy, muddy situation on the ground.

'Stuck in Mud': Local Culture and Neoliberalism from Below

Cultures, whether in objection or support, react unpredictably with infrastructure, finance, and technology in Ireland. While these future-leaning industries attempt to generate predictive models that eliminate or manage economic and environmental contingencies, social, cultural, and environmental politics on the ground are unruly. As journalist Mark Paul ironically pointed out, Apple was 'stuck in mud in the fields of Athenry,' referencing the Irish rebel folk song from the 1970s. This tongue-in-cheek headline points to the complex mess of culture, history, capital, politics, and the environment entangled at the site. Tying the data center, community, landscape, colonial history, and human and non-human social words, the aspiration of global connectivity sunk into the mud of the Irish bogs, the thickness of life and territory in the West of Ireland too dense to crawl out of once immersed.[4]

'Fields of Athenry' narrates a story of an imprisoned rebel against 'the famine and the crown' preparing for his forced voyage to a prison colony. As Matt Parker points out, the song is still a touchstone of Irish nationalism, inseparable from the town and visions of national politics and heritage (2019). Local residents casually put current development in historical exchange with this cultural heritage. When I arrived in Athenry, Keane graciously agreed to pick me up at the train station and drive me to the Derrydonnell Woods site. As we drove out of the town, he pointed to the town's Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) pitch and informed me that Athenry's Republican volunteers had gathered there during the 1916 Easter Rising, and that his grandfather had been among them. His family had been in the area since well before then, and he and his family still lived adjacent to the Apple site. He contrasted his position with the objector Fitzpatrick's, by most accounts a 'NIMBY.' While her claims were related to intrusion and the environment, Keane felt as though a data center would be friendlier to the ecosystem than other proposals for the site, like a planned incinerator which was shut down by concerns about the fragile (and shallow) water table (Fig. 4). In addition, in his opinion industrial logging had already done major damage to the area's aesthetic and ecological integrity, which Apple's plan for a publicly accessible walking area through the woods would help remedy. Resident concerns for local ecological conditions were thus

factored into supporters' advocacy for the Apple plan, recalling early discussions of Google's investment in data center infrastructure in Ireland, particularly that put forward by Irish writer Charlie Connelly:

> Maybe Ireland will now embrace its climate. Some have tried already, most notably the 19th-century writer William Bulfin from County Offaly, who described the Irish rain as 'a kind of damp poem. It is a soft, apologetic, modest kind of rain, as a rule; and even in its wildest moods it gives you the impression that it is treating you as well as it can under the circumstances.' But [Google's investment in data centers] is probably the first recorded case of anyone planning a move to Ireland because of the weather. (qtd. McDonald, 2012)

Such an embrace of the environment as a sphere of instrumentalization to attract transnational capital demonstrates the thickness of feeling here mobilized in service of big tech's spectacular projects. Keane's family history in the area, to him, seemed to strengthen his claim on the space and desire to have Apple there. His rooted attachment to Athenry, its environment, and surrounding region actually led to greater feeling about the need for transnational investment.

Fig. 4: Keane demonstrating to me the water table monitors on the site (photo by author).

This flies in the face of leftist ideals of local territorial attachment and alternative claims to space. Ireland's left has been conspicuously absent in pan-European anti-austerity protests since the 2007-2008 financial crisis, despite a recent resurgence in response to the abortion referendum and housing shortages. Rory Hearne argues that the adoption of the 'it's our fault' narrative pushed by Fianna Fáil (the ruling political party during the crisis) is tied to a long history of what is called in Ireland corporatist 'social partnership,' a state strategy used to align the interests of capital with those of workers in the ascending middle classes through the Celtic Tiger economic boom in the 1990s and 2000s. In effect, this led to the overall disempowerment of labor and 'an individualisation and internalisation of the crisis as the stresses of mortgage distress, emigration, unemployment etc. are kept within us and our families and is expressed through isolation, depression, suicide, family break up, alcoholism etc.' (Hearne, 2013). This is brought up throughout public discourse around the data center and FDI in Ireland more broadly. FDI and finance-driven strategies—largely to blame for the financial crisis—are supposed to remedy social problems that emerge in periods of recession and generalized hopelessness:

> If you are persistent and effective the [Irish political] system will address your problem and thus avoids the potential for individuals and groups to organise collectively to demand systemic change…It is also a reflection of Irish people's ambivalent attitude toward the state that ranges from apathy to hatred and powerlessness. It has meant that rather than trying to reform the state people have opted to do it themselves in their communities through the St Vincent de Paul, community development projects, youth work, homework clubs and the GAA. (Hearne, 2013)

Canney echoed this sentiment, especially in terms of GAA's (a cultural nationalist organization) youth participation indicating the health of rural communities. Some have also argued that the prevalence of the Catholic Church in Ireland pre-conditioned neoliberal models even in the early stages of globalization, because the state already 'contracted' many services—from social infrastructure to brutal repression—to the Church (see, for example, Skerritt and Salokangas, 2020). Others have ascribed this submission and dependency, enacted via privatization, to a post-crisis reconciliation of postcolonial feeling (O'Callaghan et al., 2014). (Neo)liberalism does not re-

draw global space, rife with residues of colonization and oppression, but circulates power along these more familiar lines of financial imperialism.

Hearne's provocations about the socio-cultural character of a populace across history, and pathologies re-emerging in a time of crisis, might veer towards essentialism in a similar way to how the IDA and Enterprise Ireland (semi-state bodies designed to attract investment) advertise the 'malleability' and good-naturedness of the Irish workforce.[5] Global capital mobilizes these essentialisms at the same time that they re-emerge in more critical arenas. For example, the environmental finance arm of the European Investment Bank ties the cultural heritage of 'romantic' (and modernist) Ireland, its writers, its woodlands, and high finance solutions to forested Irish territory (Tanklar, 2017). As Isabelle Stengers argues, we should follow Félix Guattari in being 'hypersensitive to the danger of reterritorialization in an imaginary past' (2017: 383), avoiding cultural essentialisms while combating the tentacles of financial globalization.

The relation between Irish culture, civil society, and governance in whatever form it takes—the Church, the state, global capital—begins to identify how certain affective politics take shape towards 'outsiders' and 'enemies' when transnational corporations are seen as neither. The Athenry objectors' absence—particularly Daly's—within local civil society bred distrust among the community towards their aims. Community involvement, and thus ongoing attachment to place and heritage, builds a more robust claim to political stakes. This relation of real and territorially demarcated community—thought by political theorists like Roberto Esposito (2008) to be incompatible with liberal governance and global capital—comes in Athenry to be imbricated by deeply-felt political appeals to the corporate sector tied up in face-to-face and territorial attachment. Gago uses the concept of 'neoliberalism from below' to describe local movements operating under the shadow of neoliberalism in post- and neo-developmental economies in South America. Gago's thesis is that:

> neoliberalism survives as a set of conditions that are manifested, from above, as the renewal of the extractive-dispossessive form in a new moment of financialized sovereignty and, from below, as a rationality that negotiates profits in this context of

> dispossession, in a contractual dynamic that mixes forms of servitude and conflict. (2017: 5)

Athenry's hopeful recourse to Apple as a provider of social services enacts this 'neoliberalism from below.' We can of course critique umbrella definitions of neoliberalism as a dispersed set of practices that account for very specific historical transformations of financialization, sovereignty, political subjectivity, and labor. These days, neoliberalism may have reached the limits of its practical utility as a term. Berlant argues that any world-homogenizing definition of neoliberalism 'does not describe well the messy dynamics of attachment, self-continuity, and the reproduction of life that are the material scenes of living on in the present' (2011: 15). But this seems to be exactly the kind of messiness that Gago responds to, even if still employing 'neoliberalism' as a heuristic. Her analysis of governmentality, popular politics, and political subjectivity applies to the changed role of the state and who it writes contracts for and reports to in an era of digital data and financialization. Through this, we can think about a kind of politics that is not resistant but opportunistically lives in spaces criss-crossed by the sovereignties of the state, the EU, and transnational capital—politics 'in-spite-of,' endemic to the 'crisis ordinary' (Berlant, 2011) of the present. Deeply engaging with such sites and spaces allows us to re-form our conceptions of political economy and sovereignty by taking stock of how territorial mechanisms are enacted extensively and intensively at the same time.

As manifested 'below,' neoliberalism nonetheless seems to imagine a subjective subsumption and participation of a populace within its logics. AfA fits with other right-leaning Western populisms in that it echoes the paradoxical and populist identification of ordinary citizens with elite interests that are by most metrics not their own (see Brown, 2017), considering the low employment numbers, tax evasion strategies, energy hoarding, and security regimes of data centers and the tech industry more broadly. The capital produced by the automated sheds on the outskirts of Athenry, like the data centers clustered and tucked away around Dublin, would ultimately make its way back to the west coast of the United States rather than into the exchequer or residents' pockets. The common sense of neoliberal development, both locally and globally, would be crystallized into the physical infrastructure of Apple's data centers and institutionalized into how they operate in Athenry.

Gago complicates this type of narrative, however, when she argues, 'The social, when understood as an instance of demands to be satisfied, repaired, and mended, reduces the self-organized collective dynamics to a passive, directly victimist position, denying their immediately productive condition' (2017: 233). Spaces and populations are governed and interact at an everyday level with development and infrastructure, and this in itself determines particular relations. When most public services are provided in partnership with profit-making actors, who generally operate, maintain, and promote their infrastructural provisions, we, as scholars and citizens, are confronted by the pervasiveness of infrastructure and its actors within the daily life of somewhere like Ireland. From the patchy passenger rail services, to the graffitied barricades and detours marking gentrifying areas in the cities, to the narrow and treacherous roads in rural regions, to particular localities of electricity, heating, water, zoning, and internet—these are not substrates, and they do not only become visible after breakdown, as infrastructure studies has taught us (Larkin, 2013: 336). Rather, they mediate particular ways of interacting with private and state circulations, delineations, regulations, and allowances, represent the constant struggle of smooth movement against the everyday friction of human and non-human worlds, and are the site of deeply affective and unexpected relations. How infrastructure's everyday operation and breakdown, as well as eventful collisions with the state and transnational capital, are experienced at these sites represents an entire field of social discourse and ways of being, whether within the physical built infrastructure itself or in the social relations of its presence or absence.

In Athenry, Apple provided an opportunity for visibility and access, and thus took on the political role of an infrastructural force without ever developing any infrastructure. It remains unclear, then, what the ultimate political aims of Athenry for Apple could be when theorizing through traditional statist or anti-state political horizons. But this is exactly the point: this is not a politics that can be supplanted elsewhere, because it responds too particularly to the space and culture of Athenry, and the particular collective needs and claims of its residents expressed through infrastructural negotiation. As Gago asserts in her own case study:

> According to Chatterjee, the governed's self-construction as a singular population also implies the self-attribution of a 'moral character' to the

> community itself. For the case analyzed by Chatterjee, the community is built from nothing using metaphors linked to the family that refer not to biological belonging but rather to a 'shared experience.' However, the community also functions as a counterpoint to governmentality understood as a pure apparatus of submission. (2017: 232-233)

Infrastructure is a field of power that circulates the interests of the elite as much as it 'encodes the dreams of individuals and societies' (Larkin, 2013: 333), which in itself represents an affective popular politics that operates around what infrastructure would and should be designed to do or provide. But if, as Gaonkar has argued, 'Populism is a reliable and indispensable mechanism for curbing and regulating the power of the elites' (2017), how do we account for the dynamic interrelation of the elite and the governed in a particular site not towards re-structured class and geopolitical relations, but towards their general *global* maintenance? Infrastructure may provide a place where 'Political theory [can] instead give an account of the structural tensions inherent in representative democracy, the inescapable tension between the elite and the masses' (Gaonkar, 2017). By emphasizing the entanglement of social worlds with various forms of private and state power through infrastructural relations, we can theorize not only these transnational 'elite formations' but try to reconcile the dialectical materialism of class analysis with the immanence of social and community movements.

A Politics for Multinational Tech

In October 2017, after a series of juridical delays—including the arrival of Hurricane Ophelia on Ireland's shores (Carolan, 2017b), an exceptional event likely brought on by climate change—the second round of objectors' appeals were dismissed, although the court agreed that Apple 'had noted no direct renewable energy connections or renewable energy projects' in the plans for the data center, nor had the company 'clearly shown power to the data centre would be from 100 per cent renewable resources' (Carolan, 2017a). Nonetheless, it was determined that 'the potential employment and regional development benefits of the centre outweighed potential adverse climate impacts' (Carolan, 2017a). This admission that the climate impacts were secondary to capital investment in the region is predicted to put Ireland on a crash course with EU

sustainability goals over the next several years. Former Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar and Apple CEO Tim Cook's close relationship in shirking collection on Apple's €13 billion owed back taxes in the country has been widely acknowledged.[6] In November 2017, however, Varadkar's diplomatic meeting at Apple's headquarters in California—a geopolitics of state/corporate partnership—cast doubt on the project's future. He announced the new uncertainty, regretting that the appeals process was outside of Apple's control. In December 2017, there was a final appeal to the Supreme Court, which was subsequently approved. AfA and the government expressed embarrassment and anxiety of scaring off future investors. Since Apple officially withdrew in May 2018, these anxieties have only grown.

Communities and the environment behave unpredictably to the speculative and extractive movements of capital, as the cultural and affective dimensions of socio-economic crisis demonstrate. But like the speculative tentacles of Apple, the de-regulatory organs of the state also have many limbs. In 2017, before the Supreme Court ruling, Varadkar announced proposed amendment of the Strategic Infrastructure Act which designates data centers as critical infrastructure in order to fast track their planning and development and 'enable the planning process to work more smoothly' (qtd. Finn, 2017). The new amendment 'will allow them to skip a whole state of the planning step into the future' (sic). The zombie process of the Supreme Court appeal staggered along, as Apple's undead plans continued to exert political force. The Court, in a ceremony held in Galway in March 2019, ruled that Apple would not have, in fact, been required to submit an EIA for the entire planned campus, meaning that future megaprojects can be spared greater scrutiny by being shoehorned into planning permissions through speculative smaller-scale proposals. This precedent can be followed by similar hyperscale data center providers going forward. The messy and conflicting interests in the West of Ireland constituted a barrier to be overcome by deregulation. The IDA has already laid plans for pre-conditioned sites (O'Halloran, 2017). As Varadkar admits, Athenry was 'not the norm. There are lots of data centres all over Ireland and they get through the planning process with relative ease so I don't think this delay in Athenry because of the courts and because of the planning process is typical' (qtd. Lynch, 2017). Deregulation seemed, then, a formality coming out of a particularly high-profile case. To Keane, the strategic infrastructure amendment

was an empty gesture even in itself: objectors, he believed, would still have slowed the process even if the first round of appeals had been circumvented by the streamlined law.

Since Apple has withdrawn from Athenry, perhaps all that is actually possible is to speculate from the ruin. Ned Rossiter posits that speculating on the ruins of logistical infrastructure can operate a mode of immanent critique (2016: 145), in this case a ruin of something never-to-be-built, or a community in suspended formation. The aspirational drive that motivated the popular politics around this critical infrastructure leaves an unfinished space in the territory and the social fabric that will take on new forms. There is space here for a different kind of response to the unwieldy vagaries of state planning, corporate investment, and civil society. On the one hand, the critiques of Apple and the state are obvious. On the other hand, the citizens of Athenry are left, ultimately, with nothing to show for these first-hand experiences of the eventful whims of transnational capital. While Apple's speculative gaze punctuated the everyday abandonment felt by those in Athenry, aspirational hope has turned to bitterness and resentment.

Despite the somewhat troubling political feeling that arises in Athenry, we need to understand the stakes of 'the political' in terms of its cultural (and environmental) relation to transnational capital. If cultural studies can teach us how political subjectivity is truly relocated (or foreclosed within) consumption and continuous capture by regimes of global capital, then the politics that arise from spaces of extreme feeling towards the figures of multinational corporations must be taken seriously, especially as communities of consent and dissent continue to game the system of nation-states and supranational arrangements in their favor (and in the favor of corporations like Apple). It is a cruel irony that data centers, as sites where the general knowledge and data of the sharing economy is collected and circulated, so smoothly co-opt 'the common' into systems of financial and consumer data aggregation. As Berlant tells us, despite the ruptured legitimacy of the 'system' and its affects:

> The exhausting repetition of the politically depressed position that seeks repair of what may be constitutively broken can eventually split the activity of optimism from expectation and demand. Maintaining this split enables one to sustain one's attachment to the political as such and to one's sense

> of membership in the idea of the polity, which is a virtual—but sensual, not abstract—space of the commons. And so, detaching from it could induce many potential losses along with new freedoms. (228)

If 'politics is reduced to the demand for affective attunement,' inconvenienced by 'antagonistic aims,' we see that '"the political" as we know it in mass democracy *requires* such a splitting of attachment and expectation' (228). The decrease in faith in the state to provide for citizens in Ireland, if this faith ever existed, does not necessarily lead to different forms of political mobilization amongst those who feel as though the 'polity' elsewhere has reaped the benefits of a global system that has left those in Athenry in a state of what Berlant calls 'crisis ordinariness.' The global financial crisis manifested as individual guilt and depression related to far deeper (and unresolved) pathologies. In response, subjects reached out to the figures within that global system. This is a different precarity politics than that seen elsewhere in post-crisis Europe, and even within Ireland, for that matter, where massive swings to the right or apparent swings to the left are seen to be more the norm. The political dial does not swing wildly, but rather short circuits somewhere in the middle. The abstract equations of those planning for economic and political futures failed to read what people in Athenry want and how they can truly achieve their goals in an environment repressively lacking of opportunity and access.

But the idea of a 'centrist populism' (Postill, 2018) may also foreclose more capacious questions about politics and the common. What I propose, rather, is that perhaps within these situations of crisis ordinariness, we can actually ask different questions about the common, and open up different spaces and bonds. In this moment of difference and collapse, where the operations of the state and capital are out in the open, Apple's investment and the state's strategies are now felt in the bitterness and exhaustion of its absence. Elsewhere in Ireland, the state is showing its hand in a different way (Di Feliciantonio & O'Callaghan, 2020). The struggles for housing and spatial justice occurring across the country, especially in urban centers, are mobilized against the same forces of speculative transnational capital that AfA reaches out to, between tech giant Airbnb and the vulture funds holding housing stock hostage. Perhaps these struggles are more intertwined than they may first appear. While the cultural stakes and affective politics are different, both fight for a share in the wealth that the state gives

away to transnational interests. The Irish state has sided with multinational finance and tech. What both urban and rural social movements want is for this capital accumulated through the Irish state to be redirected through the public good in the right way, whatever way that is. The housing movements in Dublin are organized, networked, and effective in their tactics, coordinating largely through social media but also face-to-face modes of mobilization. They frame themselves through leftist categories, sometimes dismissive of those outside of the urban areas, who they often see as naïve or backwards in their aims and relations with the state and capital. AfA, and other rural movements, are savvy in recognizing how to express and communicate their needs, desires, and tactics to their own communities but fail to translate these into a coherent and scalable politics, and often do not intend to. They respond to an everyday, mundane kind of need—in the face of lack, or stagnation—which only receives visibility with the eventfulness of global investment, incursions, or the like. In the wake of these movements, there is often bitterness, resentment, and embarrassment, which can manifest against the wrong people: whether leftists, environmentalists, or outsiders.

How might we begin to conceive of a politics that bridges the desires and tactics of a rural community in Galway, needing investment and social care and looking to a corporation, and those of urban leftists in Dublin, Galway, Limerick, and Cork, rejecting the solutions proposed by the state and capital? At a basic level, it would entail a recognition of coinciding goals. These 'circulation struggles' both mobilize against an increasingly out-of-touch political elite and suffer from decisions being made in boardrooms far away. Finding common tactics across difference towards an equitable future is essential. This may not necessarily come from an affective surge, but from a practical program of claims that cuts across the diverse sites of transnational capital's operations.

My aim is not to put forward a programmatic politics that can overcome these tensions. What I have attempted to do is to focus on the ground, to actually-existing politics, especially those that work against our conceptions. I have done so in order to understand the unexpected and recalcitrant ways in which people and cultures respond to the new territorial infrastructures of global capital, and what happens in the absence where these futures are foreclosed. What we see in Athenry is not anti-austerity, anti-EU, anti-globalization politics. Rather, what the

Athenry case can tell us is that critical theorists need to re-calibrate their conceptual tools in order to understand the political needs, desires, and tactics of those who *feel* dispossessed and disconnected, even if the political goals do not align. As internet infrastructure, the very tubes, wires, sheds, fans, driving the global circulation of information, becomes sovereign,[7] it makes sense that a local population would appeal to a tech company for future social care. When politics channels back and forth between global and local scales, traverses virtual and physical spaces, and rakes across lumpy and often agonistic landscapes of stakeholders, standardized approaches are inadequate. It becomes necessary to recognize that global capital is not a unilateral political force but rather this tangled mess of actual social worlds, requiring adaptive and flexible conceptual frameworks. Recognizing closeness—and common claims—may be more necessary than activating imagined unities. It is just a matter, in Ireland as in elsewhere, of cultivating viable, home-grown alternatives to Apple's foreclosed and empty promises.

Notes

1. Coillte's project page still exists: https://www.coillte.ie/our-business/our-projects/apple-derrydonnell/.

2. As of my visit to Athenry in Summer 2018, only the iPads donated to the local school had been completed.

3. This has been validated in the case of McDonagh, who is elsewhere involved in green data center development.

4. UK-based artist Matt Parker created an installation about the thickness of these kinds of feelings and cultural elements, echoing the immanent critique of Elizabeth Povinelli and the 'thickness' of social projects and subjectivities in late liberalism (2011: 6). For Parker's installation: https://www.earthkeptwarm.com/fields-of-athenry/.

5. See the initiative's website: https://irishadvantage.com/.

6. Varadkar is now Tánaiste, deputy head of the ruling Fianna Fáil/Fine Gael coalition Government.

7. Ned Rossiter posits that in the collapse of the public and the private we may be seeing the rise of a 'logistical state,' not necessarily 'a question of a state-corporate nexus, but a kind of institutional subsumption into infrastructure' (2016: 173).

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