Travellers, land management, and the political ecology of marginalisation in Ireland

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Abstract: Irish Travellers were once an itinerant population on the island of Ireland, but are now predominantly sedentary and urbanised. Their longstanding horsekeeping practices have become subject to increased management and regulation in the Republic. Nominally introduced in the interest of safeguarding the well-being of horses, the policing of horsekeeping has also served as an instrument of surveillance and marginalisation, and has had a culturally and economically severe impact on the Traveller community. This paper argues that the policing of Travellers who keep horses has its roots in a larger transformation of rural landscapes, led by the Irish state as part of an economic plan of modernised dairy and beef production for an international market. The spatial transformation of rural areas was intensified further during the Celtic Tiger (1994-2008), when the central government's transfer of responsibilities to under resourced local authorities combined with property speculation and new environmental regulation from the European Union to produce new land management discourse and practices at the local level. Land was understood to have new and lucrative potential for development and, although they often managed it badly, local authorities increased their oversight and policing of previously flexible or 'disorderly' land. These evolving frameworks and practices of land management and oversight served to marginalise communities whose ties to land were insecure, such as Travellers who kept horses.

Keywords: *Irish Travellers, land management, political ecology, social marginalisation, Celtic Tiger, horses*

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Introduction

The following is an exploration of a recent intensification by the Irish state of the control of horses, particularly those held by Irish Travellers, set in both broad and narrow contexts in order to understand why this issue has taken on such urgency and import. The study of horses in particular serves as a window into examining what space is and is not made for Travellers, how their space and movement is policed, and how such practices are explained and justified. Following the introduction of the 1996 Control of Horses Act, Travellers experienced a notable increase in the seizure and impoundment of their horses. Horsekeeping by Travellers became problematic even as horsekeeping by others for sport and leisure increased; the subsequent abandonment of many of the sport horses became a post-facto part of the justification for restricting Traveller horsekeeping. The story, however, is bigger than its most immediate context.

The resulting findings indicate important relationships of economics and governance at various scales, from the local to the national to the regional/global (primarily Europe). Not all relationships are direct and intentional: the contexts in which various players find themselves and the situations, which they themselves create, create contexts for other parties. Travellers, as an already vulnerable population, often lack the resources to respond successfully to the state's interference into their property rights. Thus, their vulnerability and marginalisation are increased. At times, Travellers are caught in the crossfire, rather than being the direct targets, just as horses became the nominal target for what is, I would argue, a contest over the control of land. The situation arises from a complicated collision of interests and political capacities. In the experience of Travellers, horses are at the centre of a complex story of competing pressures of agricultural development, environmental regulation, changing property rights, residential and commercial development, local authority governance issues and, in no small way, racism.

Since the 1990s, Irish Travellers have been subject to intense assimilation pressures by the Irish government along three prongs. First, Travellers have been subject to a movement away from culturally appropriate accommodation into private, mixed housing, under the guise of a government programme that in many instances promised the very opposite of what it delivered. Secondly, Travellers have faced severe restrictions on itinerant practices, making nomadism almost non-existent, through the criminalisation of trespass and the blocking off, boarding up, earthing up, and redevelopment of hundreds of stopping places that were once accessible. Lastly, they have been directly and deeply affected by new restrictions on the keeping of horses, which have led to licensing costs, fines for violation, and even seizure and impoundment of their horses. Thus, the question of Travellers' horsekeeping practices is placed into this larger context of assimilation pressure.

In my focus on Travellers' attachment to horses, I am also endorsing Hobson's argument that 'animals can and should be considered political geographical subjects' and that, moreover, they 'can be considered affective political subjects' (Hobson, 2007, 251), as well as 'subjects whose ecology, behavior and welfare are an implicit part of the uneven social and economic outcomes that concern political ecologists' (255).

Travellers' complex and emotional attachment to horses, and horses' attachment to Travellers, intensify the impact of the state's actions. As horses became identified as a flashpoint of conflict between Travellers and other parties, they provide cover for already-existing racism, as well as a deflection away from discussions about land use rights. These conflicts over keeping horses are used to frame their horses as trespassers and disrupters of the landscape, rather than residents of it. By extension, Travellers themselves become disrupters, non-residents and unwanted and such representations problematise Travellers as a travelling community (see, for example, Geraghty, 2011).

This examination of the politics of Traveller horsekeeping is significant also in the broader context of the Republic of Ireland because it is a story of some of the most vulnerable members of Irish society. It speaks to Ireland's ongoing challenges with cultural diversity that have nothing to do with immigration, and it documents another case of how the wealth of the boom years was unevenly distributed (O'Callaghan *et al.,* 2015; Kitchin *et al.,* 2014; Allen and O'Boyle, 2013, Kelly, 2007). More broadly still, this story is about the way social exclusion is produced both directly through targeted policy and indirectly through complex intersections of material space, policy and politics.

One purpose of this research is to strengthen the presence of Travellers in the literature on rural Ireland. The complex and uneven impacts of the profound changes to rural landscapes in the Republic of Ireland from 1960 to the present are well studied (see, for example, Hourihane, 2003; Cawley, 2005; Mahon, 2007; McDonagh *et al.,* 2009), but the absence of Travellers from this literature is striking. Although historically they were 'neither exclusively urban nor rural' (Bhreathnach, 2006, 4), Travellers have always moved through and spent extended time in rural areas (Gmelch, 1987). Nevertheless, Travellers defy easy categorisation, as they were rarely property owners or settled residents in rural areas, and their role in both urban and rural economies has commonly been at the economic and social margins. Their historical presence in rural landscapes, however transitory, is undeniable, and their absence from the literature leaves it incomplete.

As Panelli *et al.* have noted, the scholarship on rural landscapes published in at least one leading journal has been dominated by 'White-Anglo-Celtic imaginations and agendas,' and that, 'while there are notable exceptions,' it is overwhelmingly the lives and livelihoods of 'White-Anglo societies' that scholars have made visible (Panelli *et al.,* 2009, 355). It is important to continue to document the ways in which, 'despite the veneer of cultural homogeneity, the countryside is – and always has been – a multicultural space' as well as a space of 'exclusion, racism and abjection' (ibid; see also Dhillon, 2006). Panelli *et al*. point to the need for an 'explicit 'anti-racist geography' in which the assumed whiteness of rural space is exposed and critiqued' (ibid; Holloway, 2007). This needs to include 'minority White groups who are imagined as 'not-quite' White,' such as Travellers and their unsettled and unsettling geographies (Panelli *et al.,* 2009, 357; McLaughlin, 1998). Holloway has noted how racialisation of Travellers, specifically through their relationship with horses, has been used by non-Travellers both to romanticise and to criminalise Traveller communities, and whiteness asserted, sometimes violently, as the dominant identity in rural places (Holloway, 2003, 2007). There remains 'a need to avoid

stereotyping non-White peoples as passive victims of settler societies' (Panelli *et al.,* 2009, 360) and instead to re-centre research from their perspectives. Along the same lines, the current work is also framed in the spirit of Gilmartin and Berg (2007) who, in their broader discussion of the power relationships embedded in academic research, recognise that the Irish are both 'colonizers and colonized' (120). Although Gilmartin and Berg do not take up the specifics of how the Irish are colonisers, I submit that policies that seek to physically displace Travellers and to impose on them a sedentary, urban lifestyle and livelihood that is spatially organised around the immediate nuclear family, constitute an example of Irish internal colonising practices.

With this in mind, the present project has been developed through community-based, active research practices, in which the author, who is neither Irish nor a Traveller, has partnered with Traveller organisations in an ongoing effort to decolonise her own epistemological space and research practices, and to set Travellers' concerns as the starting point rather than the margin of a research agenda of geographical investigations into the impact of transformations of the Irish rural landscape and economy. Methodologically, then, this work sets out state-led social and economic development with a focus on policies that affect Travellers and Traveller horsekeeping, and simultaneously interrupts them with some data from Travellers' perspectives and experiences. Moreover, it is understood that the state here is not only developing the Republic, but also itself. Thus, the highlighting of the state's management of marginalised communities and the interventions of Traveller voices show how marginalisation is built into the structuring practices of the state.

To do this, I have brought together the recent history of rural Ireland and the modernisation of agriculture, the history of planning and building during the Celtic Tiger, the political economy of relations between Local Authorities and the Central Government, and between Ireland and the EU, the 1963 *Report of the Commission on Itinerancy*, media coverage and survey research regarding unwanted horses in Ireland, as well as interviews and field research with Travellers regarding horses over the course of several years (2011-16). This mix of sources is needed to explore the intersections of discrimination against Travellers with political economy, land use management, and the political ecology of keeping horses. There has been a material and discursive change in land management since the 1960s, which arose fundamentally from a strategy for an export economy by the Irish state. The consequent position of horses in the Irish landscape and its recent presentation as a 'problem' are multifaceted.

The pieces of the argument are then set out as follows: a short contextualising discussion of the rich and multifaceted significance of horses for Travellers is followed by details of the history of the state's intervention into Traveller life and the more recent problem of horse control, particularly seizure and impoundment. Traveller horsekeeping is then set in a wider context of the changing presence and uses of horses across the Republic from the 1960s forward. The changing type and use of horses is then connected to the changing landscapes brought about by various stages of economic development strategies at the national and, later, local level. By the time of the Celtic Tiger, we have a somewhat chaotic

mix of economic strategies colliding with the contradictions between the ambitions and the limited planning capacity of local authorities, as well as environmental restrictions from yet another scale of governance: the EU. In the conclusion, connections are drawn in support of a theory of a structural racism that is perpetuated through local authorities' strategies for land management within this complicated context.

Travellers and horses

Irish Travellers are a previously itinerant population, who are now mostly sedentary largely due to pressures of government. A greater percentage of Travellers (82.7%) live in urban areas than the Irish population overall (62%) (Central Statistics Office 2012, 28). They constitute the largest 'ethnic minority' in Ireland, although they do not hold official designation as such in the Republic of Ireland (as they do in the United Kingdom). Historically, the Travellers are as 'Irish' as any other Irish, in that their ties to the island go back as far as other Celtic claims, as even DNA evidence has now confirmed (North *et al.,* 2000). The same DNA analysis nonetheless testifies to the Travellers as a 'social isolate' that has been 'relatively isolated through time' from other Irish populations (North *et al.,* 2000, 463). Irish Travellers are a 'community' in a loose sense. They are an ethnic group consisting of different extended families, who share many historical and contemporary cultural practices, including a distinct language. Although they are not formally unified as a community, there are local support groups and two national advocacy organisations, which give them a strong sense of identity as Travellers.

Travellers are also a vulnerable population whose well-being by every official measure falls well short of settled Irish. According to a 2010 study, the male Traveller lifespan averages 61.7 years, which is the same as the lifespan of an average male living in Ireland in the 1940s, and 15 years less than the general population. For Traveller women, the average lifespan is 70 years, 11.5 years less than Irish women as a whole (cited in Hunt, 2010). Two-thirds of the Traveller community are younger than 25. Travellers rank significantly lower than the rest of the country in education, infant mortality rates and life expectancy (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2005), and a significant number 'live in conditions that no other section of Irish society would be expected to tolerate' (Fahy, 2001, 8).

Irish Travellers have also been known (usually pejoratively) as 'tinkers', because many were tinsmiths, making and repairing buckets and such for farmers. In their travels, they made a living largely within the rural economy, not as property-owning farmers, but in many supporting roles. Rooted in their historical practice of travelling in horse-drawn caravans, Travellers have a longstanding attachment to horses. To a large extent, horses set the pace of travel and were a strong factor in a choice of site for encampment. Horses needed to be watered and they needed a field in which to graze, either at the immediate roadside or on a nearby farmer's land. In the early 1960s, there were still hundreds of families using horse-drawn caravans to travel; motorised vehicles were used by only a very small minority of families (*Report of the Commission on Itinerancy (RCI),* 1963, 40). In December 1960, from a census of 1,198 families, a count of horses kept by Travellers

numbered 1,775, along with 721 horse-drawn caravans and 701 horse carts (*RCI,* 71). For 738 (62%) of those families, a horse-drawn caravan was also their 'type of family abode' (sometimes also with a tent) (*RCI*, 145). Switching to motorised caravans, however, did not remove horses from Traveller life. Even among now-sedentary families, horses are embedded in the economic, social, cultural life of Travellers, and the equine symbol itself is a marker of identity and territory.

The many important and intertwined roles that horses play in the lives of Travellers have been detailed at greater length elsewhere (Conway, 2004; Wood, 2017), but a brief summary is useful here. Horses are and have been a source of economic activity for Travellers, in several ways: horse-trading, horse racing, and tourist-related activities, such as cart rides, pony rides, and having photographs taken with them. Horses also provide training that can be used potentially for employment, especially for young men, who in the care of horses learn about the feeding, health, and physiology of the animals, which can prepare them for farm work and/or the specialised care of horses, as well as establishing general employment skills such as reliability and responsibility. For Travellers, horses have many social roles, too. They are a significant means of intrafamilial bonding, especially between fathers and sons. Caring for horses is seen by families as a positive activity for young men that keeps them close to their families and culture and 'out of trouble'. Travellers even identify themselves through horses, using their images in and around their homes and in the symbols of their organisations. And finally, Travellers have meaningful care relationships with these intelligent, sentient beings. Many connect horses to their own well-being:

> 'Here I can keep my horses…what keeps me sane…, and share the traditions with my children…*the best thing about Carrowbrowne is that there is land to keep animals*, something we could not do on a council estate' (*Travellers' Health Matters* 2009, 30; emphasis added).

Travellers could often find the land they needed at the roadside and, for longer stays in an area, they were able to make arrangements with local farmers for grazing. As the transformation of agricultural land and an active push to sedentarise Travellers both accelerated into the 1960s, keeping horses became more difficult and even a point of conflict with others. The 1963 Commission on Itinerancy was critical of the use of horses for transport, specifically because of the conflict that sometimes arose: 'It is very clear that the trouble and injury that itinerants cause to the rural community by trespass and damage to crops, etc., would diminish substantially if they changed over to motor transport,' although it also noted that the costs of the latter were greater for the Traveller (*RCI,* 71). Nevertheless, in its report the Commission did not recommend the elimination of horse-drawn caravans, only that they should be of better quality. They also recommended the provision of long-term camping sites of good quality, with room for horses: 'Part of each site should be set aside for the stallage of the itinerants' animals and this section should be adequately fenced' (*RCI,* 54). Even at short-term halting places,

their recommendations explicitly included 'a tethering place for animals' which should also 'provide a certain amount of shelter from stormy weather' (*RCI,* 57).

Conflict over horses was not only a finding of the Commission; it was part of the frame of its mandate. At its first meeting on 1 July, 1960, Charles Haughey, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice (and Minister of Justice by the time of the Commission's report) addressed the members, making it clear that the 'problems created by' Travellers would not be resolved 'until they are absorbed into the general community' (*RCI*, 111). Haughey included among his concerns 'trespass with their animals on pastures, crops and gardens' (*RCI,* 112) and described this as 'most aggravating to farmers and persons living along the itinerants' routes' because it 'causes considerable damage and even more annoyance' (*RCI*, 113). 'Most of these animals are fed on the grass of the roadside and frequently on the lands of the adjoining landowner', the Commission later reported (*RCI,* 81), and this placed displeased landowners in a difficult position. They were not permitted to merely evict horses to the roadside, but were obliged either to return the animals to their owners and try to resolve a claim for any damage, or take the animals to a pound (*RCI,* 95). Unfortunately, angry landowners frequently took matters into their own hands in aggressive and illegal ways. The Commission received reports from Gardaí of hundreds of aggressive retaliatory acts by settled Irish towards Travellers, their horses and their residences, including demands for compensation, 'assaults on itinerants and attacks on their encampments, seizure of their property, shots fired in the vicinity of camps or at trespassing animals, animals wounded and disfigured by various means including slashing, the cutting of horses' tails and manes, and horses being driven long distances' (*RCI*, 96).

These instances of harassment and assault on Travellers were one part of a broader antipathy towards them. In her study covering the period from the 1950s to the 1980s, Crowley notes that Travellers' relocation,

> … invariably provoked an immediate and hostile reaction from the local settled population. Travellers were seen by many as social pariahs, as uncivilised, dirty and diseased, leaving a trail of filth and rubbish wherever they went. Their presence was considered to lower the tone of a neighbourhood and have a negative impact on house prices. Politicians and members of the business community viewed Traveller encampments around the city as an embarrassment and a hindrance to progress and modernisation (Crowley, 2009, 17).

The Commission openly acknowledged the poor and outright discriminatory treatment of Travellers by the settled community, at times describing it as 'bitter hostility', and summarising that 'in nearly all areas, itinerants are despised as inferior beings and are regarded as the dregs of society' (*RCI,* 102). The Commission also found that Travellers' 'isolation by the settled community… is becoming progressively worse…,' which led them to conclude that 'absorption is the only real solution' (*RCI,* 103). Despite any sympathies, the Commission's (foregone) conclusion of an assimilationist policy was indicative of the shrinking desire to accommodate Traveller horses, and Travellers themselves.

The control of horses

There have been several recent efforts on the part of the state to control the horses of Travellers. These range from the regulatory, such as the licensing of horses; to more pragmatic 'horse strategies' (often at the initiative of the Traveller community); to the punitive: seizure and impoundment. The 1996 Control of Horses Act was introduced with the purpose of managing the issue of horsekeeping in urban areas, and many at the time felt it was directed primarily at the Travelling community. Certainly, it provided an entry for the state into the close management of Traveller communities, but without any mechanism for support. In 2000, in the *First Progress Report of the Committee to Monitor and Co-ordinate the Implementation of the Recommendations of the Task Force on the Travelling Community*, it was noted:

The Control of Horses Act, 1996 made no provision for assistance to Travellers in complying with the requirements of the legislation. This has caused great hardship, both financial and personal, to Travellers who keep horses and for whom this has been an important part of their cultural expression (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2000, 9).

The 1996 Act stipulated that Local Authorities had the power to dictate that horses be allowed in designated 'Control Areas' only and that horses must be licensed in these areas. The Act created serious expense for horse owners, and serious consequences for violation. Licenses in 2015 cost €31.74 each, and were valid for one year only. Licenses required applicants to provide a name and address. Horses could be seized, and the Act provided for large fines, summary and indictable convictions, and imprisonment up to two years. If a horse had been detained on two or more occasions within the previous twelve months, the Local Authority could decide to dispose of the horse. After an offense, a person was forbidden from keeping a horse.

Other methods of control are 'horse strategies', one of which exists in Tralee; several others have been considered. These are efforts by councils or Travellers to identify land that can be designated for Travellers to graze and shelter their horses. This strategy presents very well politically, but it is complex in its implementation. A horse strategy provides authorities with the ability to place serious restrictions on the keeping of horses and may lead to conflict with families whose horse ownership may be reduced and whose abilities to tend and maintain relationships with their horses may be diminished by living at significant distance from the designated area. The successful securing of appropriate land in Tralee arose only from a fortuitous set of circumstances, not easily reproducible elsewhere. Also, sharing a horse pasture has the potential for conflict among families who do not otherwise associate positively.

The most extreme measure for the control of horses is seizure. Media coverage (see, for example, O'Sullivan, 1999; Roche, 2013) as well as survey (Irish Traveller Movement n.d.) and interview evidence from around the country indicates impoundment has become more common. Travellers' experience of this have often been unexpected and intense. For example, in May 2011, in Gort Bhride, County Galway, the Gardaí arrived before dawn, without any notice, to remove eleven horses from a field, and subsequently

impound them in Kilkenny. The field in question was adjacent to a Traveller group housing scheme where the owners resided, and they had been keeping horses there for over 40 years (Geraghty, 2011).

The seizure of horses in this and other instances has had a damaging impact on an already vulnerable population. Among other issues, the loss of horses has a significant impact on mental health, especially for older Traveller men. In the case of one of the horses taken in Gort Bhride, the family did not tell the owner, an older man, that his horse had been taken, telling him instead that 'it's just down the fields, out of sight' (interview November 2011). They feared that the old man would be heartbroken. It is worth underscoring that the suicide rate among Traveller men is six times that of the settled Irish community, with a noticeable increase over the past ten years, and that horsekeeping is often specifically noted as a key therapeutic aid (*Travellers' Health Matters,* 2009).

In the case of Gort Bhride, Galway County Council disputes the Travellers' claim to use of the land for 40 years. The Local Authority's justification for their action is telling: the Director of Housing argued that the horses were trespassing on County land, and that the land had been 'earmarked for a facility by the environment department'. The only expressed concern regarding the horses was that they 'are being kept in an unsupervised manner, without adequate facilities' (Geraghty, 2011). The affected families argue there was no issue with the care and well-being of the horses. Six of the 11 horses were returned to Travellers who were able to provide evidence of private arrangements for other grazing land.

Interestingly, the concerns about the place of horses arose when there were far fewer horses in the ownership of Travellers. At the time of the 1996 Control of Horses legislation, Ireland's horse population was at less than one-fifth of what it had been earlier in the century. According to Leadon *et al.*:

> Ireland's horse and pony population fell progressively throughout the mid twentieth century from 402,000 in 1949 to under 300,000 by 1955 and by 1962 to less than 200,000. The rate of decline decreased thereafter and from 98,000 in 1974 to 59,000 in 1989. (Leadon *et al.,* 2012, 1).[1]

After falling steadily for generations, the horse population rose again in the early 1990s. In 1991, government statisticians counted 63,100 horses; the figure rose to 75,500 in 1999 (Central Statistics Office, 2004), where after the numbers fell again for a few years before climbing steeply (see Figure 1) due to horses acquired for 'sport, leisure and tourism stimulated expansion' (Leadon *et al.,* 2012, 1). Leadon's estimate of the 2007 sporthorse population is 110,000 (a number that significantly exceeds the government's count of all horses and ponies), which 'placed Ireland as the most horse-dense population in Europe' (Leadon *et al.,* 2012, 2).
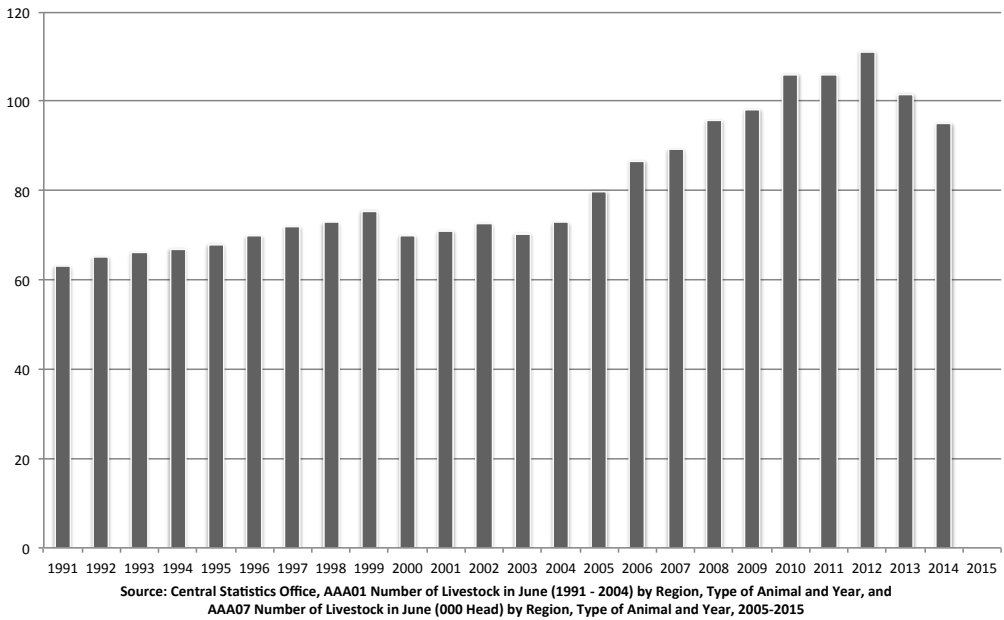
Source: Central Statistics Office, AAA01 Number of Livestock in June (1991 - 2004) by Region, Type of Animal and Year, and AAA07 Number of Livestock in June (000 Head) by Region, Type of Animal and Year, 2005-2015

Figure 1: Total horses and ponies in the Republic of Ireland

Leadon *et al.* (2012) have conducted surveys (with limited, but useful, results) to document and get a sense of the scope of the problem of unwanted horses in Ireland. 'Stud farmers, racing trainers and many other keepers of horses on behalf of others, have been reporting being left with horses abandoned by their owners who can no longer afford to pay for their keep…' (Leadon *et al.,* 2012, 10). Welfare groups reported that they had received calls in the hundreds each year, about 'abandoned, neglected or roaming horses'. These numbers increased from 2008 on. Horses relinquished to welfare societies were often suffering from poor health, including emaciation, skin diseases, wounds, parasitic infections, and foot problems (Leadon *et al.,* 2012, 6; Leadon *et al.,* 2013, 5). The few Local Authority Offices that responded to the survey indicated that calls to their offices regarding horses in need of care increased significantly in 2009 and 2010. From government statistics, Leadon *et al.* observed a jump in the number of horse seizures by Local Authorities in 2010: from 714 seizures in 2005, to 1,099 in 2008, 2,364 in 2010, and 2,929 in 2012 (Leadon *et al.,* 2012, 8; Leadon *et al.,* 2013, 6). There was a similar sharp increase in the number of horses disposed of or slaughtered: from numbers in the range of 6,500 before the crisis, to a total of 10,429 in 2010, 19,400 in 2011, and 26,330 in 2012 (Leadon *et al.,* 2013, 7).

These wandering and unwell horses were an expensive problem for Local Authorities, who called on the central government for financial support (Leadon *et al.,* 2013, 7). The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (DAFF) provided 'more than €5.25 million to local authorities for costs relating to horse seizures, under the Control of Horses Act of 1996' between 2007 and 2010. Between 1995 and 2010, DAFF also gave more than

€12 million to national animal welfare charity organisations, including €1,210 million in 2010 alone (Leadon *et al.,* 2012, 2).

Today's horse population in the Republic is less than one-quarter of what it was at its peak in 1949, but the CSO counts are nevertheless nearly double in 2016 what they were in 1994 (67,000), at the start of the economic boom. Moreover, when the Control of Horses legislation was implemented in 1996, the horse population was only 69,900, and the rapid increase in leisure- and sport-related horse ownership and post-crisis abandonment of horses was not yet an issue (Leadon *et al.,* 2012). The connection between the legislation and the problem of neglected or abandoned horses, particularly Travellers' horses, is not clear. Leadon's work is based on an online survey, which does not appear to have circulated to Travellers or, at least, was not specifically directed at them. Travellers are not mentioned in either the 2012 or 2013 papers, and it seems fair to infer that Traveller horses are not central to the problem Leadon is documenting. Given the numbers of seizures and slaughters, it simply is not possible that Traveller horses are a significant source of unwanted or neglected horses. So, why are Traveller horses, which are in good condition, being seized, often without notice? Why are measures actively taken to prevent Travellers from keeping horses? Why are these urgent issues? I argue that part of the motivation of these actions is to sedentarise Travellers, and part derives from changes to rural Ireland that displace Travellers in direct and indirect ways, starting in the 1960s and intensifying in the boom years.

The political economy of rural land

McCabe (2011) argues that the groundwork for more recent economic restructuring was laid in the decades prior to the Celtic Tiger, through years of organising agriculture, industry and property in the interest of an elite who either prospered from the trade relationship with the United Kingdom (which dominated Ireland's economy and over which Ireland had little control) or who were ill-prepared for negotiations with international developers who had an interest in Ireland's natural resources. The national government directed and oversaw an ongoing restructuring of the rural economy, modernising agricultural production for export to the rest of the world. This is exemplified in the creation of 'Kerry Gold' as an effort to represent Irish agricultural products (especially dairy) as fresh and wholesome, but also as modern and safe for consumption.

According to McCabe (2011), the story of the modern Irish economy is fundamentally the story of cattle for live export. Therefore, it is also a story of land use: of specific urban and rural development increasingly shaped to facilitate the maintenance and growth of the live-cattle trade. Several studies by Don Gillmor and others have fleshed out the specifics of the history of agriculture. Export of cattle from Ireland to Britain dates back to the sixteenth century; significant growth occurred in the nineteenth century, from an annual shipment of 100,000 animals in the 1830s to 800,000 by 1900 (Gillmor, 1965, 320).[2] For such a small country, Ireland's cattle production was significant: 'During the five years period 1960-64, the Irish Republic was the principal exporter of cattle in the world, accounting for 18 per cent of the total cattle exports and 24 per cent of the world

trade by value', and 94 per cent of these animals were shipped to the UK (Gillmor, 1965, 321).

That dominance of cattle was the leading edge of a modernising transformation of Irish agriculture, organising land use like a factory floor on a national scale (McCabe, 2011). The use of mechanised technology and fertilisers increased the efficiency of production and led to an immediate and significant decline in the number of agricultural workers in the decade between 1960 and 1970 (Gillmor, 1972). Mechanisation also led to a decline in the presence of horses, from 6.3 per cent of livestock in 1960 to 3 per cent in 1970 (charts in Gillmor, 1972, 494 and 496). The decline in the number of working horses was even more substantial in the 1970s, ranging from a drop of 76.3 per cent in the Southwest to 85.5 per cent in the Northwest (chart in Walsh and Horner, 1984, 97).

The organisation of land use and management that accompanied this modernisation scheme was similar in many ways to the pre-modernised landscape. The size of farm increased, though not dramatically, from an average of 38.7 acres to 42.4 acres between 1960 and 1970. The number of larger landholdings (more than 300 acres) actually declined by 9.8 per cent, which Gillmor indicates was a product of 'subdivision by the Land Commission'.[3] There was a small decline in the number of farmers, but a more significant decline in the number of agricultural workers. There was also 'more widespread letting of land,' but the overall 'land base… remained relatively unchanged', not expanding into 'marginal land' at this time (Gillmor, 1972, 493).

Also, it is worth noting that commonage land continues to exist in small but significant holdings in Ireland: 'It is estimated that there are 426,124 hectares of commonage in the Republic of Ireland managed by 11,837 farms' or about 4,500 commons, mostly in the 'upland areas in the west' and 'typically associated with a community in a village or townland' (Van Rensburg *et al.,* 2009, 347-348). In the west, commonage accounts for approximately 19 per cent of the land used for agriculture; these holdings are found in Galway and Mayo especially, and are associated mostly with farms of less than 30 hectares (Van Rensburg *et al.,* 2009).

The transformation of agriculture was a state-subsidised affair. Total state expenditure on agriculture more than quadrupled in the 1960s, to £95.8 million by 1970 (Gillmor, 1972). The state's grants and subsidies had a positive effect on production volume. From 1960 to 1970, with the increased capital investment and use of mechanisation and fertilisers, 'gross agricultural output increased by 28 per cent' (Gillmor, 1972, 497). Gillmor notes that establishing an 'exact relationship between state measures and observed agricultural change' is a challenge but, nevertheless, 'the impact was certainly great'. State subsidies were available for the use of fertiliser and these and other new expenses were supported with an increased availability of credit. The state also provided indirect assistance to farmers through the support of more agricultural research and education.

In 1973, Ireland joined the European Common Community, and thus the European Community Common Agricultural Policy came into operation. The ECC 'emphasised and reinforced the need, of much longer standing, for modernisation in agricultural

production. In this continuing adjustment, the capital/labour ratio has increased greatly between 1970 and 1980' (Walsh and Horner, 1984, 95). The trends towards machinery, fertilisers, and specialisation continued and intensified; so, too, did the decline in agricultural workers and workhorses. Between 1970 and 1980, the number of farm workers declined by 27.4 per cent in the Southeast and 37.4 per cent in the Northwest. By 1981, only one-eighth of the Republic's labour force remained in agriculture (Walsh and Horner, 1984, 96-97). Walsh and Horner summarise the decade's changes as follows:

> (a) fewer farms, employing a significantly reduced amount of labour and more machinery, (b) an overall increase in the level of intensification of cattle, milk and cereals production, (c) significant reductions in the numbers of sheep, horses, pigs and poultry, and (d) marked regional shifts in the location of many agricultural enterprises…' (Walsh and Horner, 1984, 101).

There was a steady decline in space for Travellers in this agricultural economic landscape. Changes from metals to plastics as early as the late 1940s were the beginning of their economic displacement from the rural economy (North *et al.,* 2000). Similarly, the mechanisation that had reduced the agricultural workforce overall also reduced or eliminated the seasonal farm labour on which Travellers had relied for income (Kearns, 1978). The Itinerancy Commission observed in its 1963 *Report* that there was no longer enough work in tinsmithing to support a family, as the metals 'have been superseded almost everywhere by the much cheaper plastic and other mass produced containers…' (*RCI,* 72). By the 1960s, a major, 'externally induced' rural-to-urban shift in the residency of Travellers had begun (Kearns, 1978, 23) that would eventually give rise to significant pressure to disrupt their use of marginal land for nomadic practices. This resulted in irregular settlement patterns across the country, as different Local Authorities had different policies or 'strategies.' Overall, Travellers were relocating to Dublin more than other cities, but moving to the 'periphery of cities,' rather than into town (Kearns, 1978, 25). 'Located mainly on the margin of the city, in the band where suburban housing meets agricultural land, encampments were highly visible and often squalid' (Crowley, 2009, 17). Kearns documented 359 families in Dublin by 1976, an increase of over 300 per cent from the 85 families counted there in 1960 (Kearns, 1978, 26). According to his work, by 1976 more than 800 families (of a total of 1,874) remained nomadic, and just over half had become 'settled' – although he considered most Travellers to be 'semi-sedentary.'

Crowley's research on state policy towards Travellers identifies the 1963 *Report of the Commission on Itinerancy* as the start of a concerted effort to incorporate Travellers into the state's active management, through 'settlement,' 'assimilation,' and 'rehabilitation' (Crowley, 2005, 2009; see also Ruckstuhl, 2015), which coincides with the beginnings of the modernisation of agriculture. Following the formation of the National Settlement Programme in 1964, the state's efforts to identify and establish appropriate locations for Traveller accommodation were 'for the most part, half-hearted' and local authorities, particularly in the Dublin area 'put more energy into summonsing, evicting and

harassing Travellers…than into site or housing provision,' even as they were aware of the dangerously inadequate conditions of many families (Crowley, 2009, 18, 19). The displacement of Travellers and their livelihoods from rural areas was not counterbalanced sufficiently with new opportunities and space elsewhere. The next twenty years were marked by increasing animosity towards Travellers, which 'ranged from shunning to verbal and physical violence; from territorial exclusion and evictions to vigilante attacks' (Crowley, 2009, 17).

New interests in rural land

The state continued to renew its active involvement and support of agricultural development. The Farm Modernisation Scheme of the late 1970s was followed by the Farm Improvement Programme (1986-1994). Yet despite the modernisation schemes of the 1960s forward, Ireland was still described as late as 1999 as 'a country with a less developed and less intensive farming system' relative to other European countries, with a 'farming system…based essentially on small to medium-sized family farms, with almost universal owner occupancy' (Emerson and Gillmor, 1999, 235, 236). Moreover, on the cusp of the boom, in a collection based on papers from 1993, Shirlow (1995) was lamenting the *growing* gap in wealth and social well-being between Ireland and the rest of Western Europe. In the eyes of the EU, Ireland's agricultural production fell 'far short of its productive potential and of the level attained in most other member states. The productivity of agricultural land is only half the EU average…' (Emerson and Gillmor, 1999, 236).

Despite the country's relatively low productivity, the intensification of production and use of synthetic fertilisers had a significant impact on the environment. This resulted in a further increase of management of land and land use by both the Irish state and the EU. For example, by 1999 the application of nitrogen was '20 times greater than in 1960;' while this helped feed agricultural productivity, it had also become an environmental issue (Emerson and Gillmor, 1999, 237). Another major concern was overgrazing, which had led to soil degradation and erosion, particularly on commonage land.

In 1994, the first Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS) was introduced, to comply with EU environmental policy. This scheme was a voluntary programme with incentives for farmers to participate. Take-up was overwhelmingly in the west (see map in Emerson and Gillmor, 1999, 244). In keeping with the interests in both the representation and the production of rural land, REPS measures included 'maintenance of farm and field boundaries' and 'maintenance and improvement of the visual appearance of the farm and farmyard'. Also, access to unused or marginal land became more directed: supplementary measures of REPS included 'public access and leisure activities' whereby 'Farmers are assisted in providing free access to their land for environmentally friendly and sporting activities' (Emerson and Gillmor, 1999, 239). Because it was not compulsory, REPS did not succeed in curbing overgrazing (Van Rensburg *et al.,* 2009). The EU was frustrated at ongoing soil degradation from overgrazing; it threatened to withhold REPS payments and then passed legislation to require all commonage farms to adhere to a commonage

framework plan (CFP). A second REPS scheme (REPS 2), introduced in 1999, remained voluntary but training was mandatory for those who took it up, and 'the supplementary measure relating to public access and leisure activities was discontinued' (Van Rensburg *et al.,* 2009, 346). Participation rates in the scheme dropped. Recreational use of commonage land remained high, and the impact of 'hill-walking, mountaineering, horse riding, sports pitches and golf courses' led to the formation of recreation and conservation groups to assert stewardship and governance of commonage land (Van Rensburg *et al.,* 2009, 348).

Into this tense dynamic of rural development and environmental protection stepped a nationwide construction boom, which pushed out into new spaces, many previously used for agriculture or not used at all. Rural areas became even more connected to an urban-centred economy, wired into the EU and global economy with a new focus. Kitchin *et al.* have described this as 'a building frenzy of private housing units, commercial property and public infrastructure...' (Kitchin *et al.,* 2012a, 3). It is clear now that the 'building frenzy' was one of overbuilding; after the crash, there were tens of thousands of empty or unfinished buildings all over Ireland, in every county (see map [figure 5] in An Taisce, 2012, 15). In 2011, 10 of 34 council areas had housing stock vacancy rates of over 20 per cent (An Taisce, 2012, chart, 27). There were legal loopholes, which enabled skirting of regulations, and, in any event, councils were lax about enforcement of their own planning codes. Massive amounts of land were zoned for development, even where development was inappropriate or impossible, such as remote and unserviced areas or even floodplains (Kitchin *et al.,* 2010; An Taisce, 2012).

> In 2008 … Ireland had enough zoned land to almost double the national population to 8 millions, with some 42,000 hectares having residential zoning, almost all of it greenfield land. … Zoning vastly inflated the value of land turning green fields into 'fields of gold', providing an easy conduit to cheap credit and facilitating property speculation (An Taisce, 2012, 17).

A National Spatial Strategy 'designed to be a strategic spatial planning framework for the country as a whole' was nominally introduced in 2002, but never implemented in practice (An Taisce, 2012, 18). Land was over-zoned, and development took place on unzoned land regardless: '30% to 50% of all planning permissions in each of [Clare, Co. Cork and Donegal] councils was for one-off housing on *unzoned* land' (An Taisce, 2012, 18-19, emphasis in original). Too often, the development was piecemeal, rather than part of a larger plan. The environmental think tank, An Taisce, documented approval of 170,000 one-off housing developments between 2001-11 across the Republic, 'consuming an average of one acre of land each' (An Taisce, 2012, 35). An Taisce has argued that given that so much 'pasture and tillage land for farming' was rezoned for development, the inevitable revocation of that zoning will dramatically and negatively affect the value of NAMA's development land accounts (An Taisce, 2012, 17-18).

Environmental law or the consequences of environmental damage were not a deterrent to development, with Councils demonstrating open disregard for EU environmental law and existing Special Protection Areas. An Taisce pointed to the deleterious environmental impact of Celtic-Tiger development, particularly from the discharge of wastewater into rivers. Compliance with wastewater treatment is well below national and EU requirements and 'the costs of retrofitting specialised wastewater treatment systems in areas never intended for housing are massive' (An Taisce, 2012, 33). An Taisce intervened in several cases that 'involved councils disregarding their own development plan, contravening regional planning guidelines or flouting EU law' (An Taisce, 2012, 22-24).

Some of the poor planning actions taken by local authorities were also due to a lack of professional capacity. An Taisce's report noted that smaller councils lacked the economy of scale to justify the investment in professional staff necessary for the undertaking of extensive new development, such as, 'planners, architects, conservation specialists, ecology experts, hydrology engineers, and senior personnel with a good knowledge of European and Irish law', with European law being a particular weakness (An Taisce, 2012, 5, 34).

The disregard for sound planning practice and environmental law reveals the interest that local authorities took in property development. Coupled with decentralisation, this gave local authorities an interest in the actual land under their jurisdiction in a whole new way. In that context, land that was 'out of control' became inherently problematic, where even horses grazing on undeveloped property belonging to the local authority or NAMA was unacceptable (RTÉ.ie, 2013). This put the Travellers, their culturally specific halting sites, their desire to keep horses, and especially any 'unauthorised' encampments, in the firing line of local authorities. As Crowley (2005, 2009) has documented, most local authorities had little interest in supporting Traveller families in the first place; these incentives to make marginal land profitable reduced that interest further still. Local authorities were already moving away from investment in social housing more broadly, and the 2002 repeal of requirements for developers to designate a share of new housing as affordable pushed interests more exclusively towards the profit-seeking private sector (Kitchin *et al.,*, 2010). In keeping with the move away from social housing, local authorities preferred to support private rental accommodation for Travellers rather than culturally appropriate, collective arrangements, and thus undermined the stated goals of the Traveller Accommodation Programme.

It is worth underscoring how intense and dramatic a change the 'Celtic Tiger' was. Not only was the boom a brief window of only 13 or 14 years, but its intensity was extraordinary. In the broader context of the second half of the twentieth century, the sharp and rapid change is obvious. Immediately prior, population in both urban and rural areas flat-lined, and there were signs of rural population decline (Cawley, 1994); the boom years saw 'record population growth,' the vast majority of which went to cities and towns (Central Statistics Office, 2006). Economic growth has similarly stalled prior to the boom: unemployment rates prior to the Celtic Tiger were as bad as or worse than what Ireland experienced in the wake of the global financial crisis.

There are longstanding political and academic debates about the balance of power between central and local government bodies in Ireland. Some argue that local authorities have steadily lost much of their authority over the last 20 years or so as the Central Government has assumed responsibility for such things as health and roads. Nonetheless, local authorities remain responsible for 'Housing and building, Roads and transportation, Water and sewerage, Planning and development, Environmental protection, Recreation and amenity, Miscellaneous services' (Department of Environment, HLG 2008). What is perhaps more significant is that the funding provided for the services for which it is responsible has become more precarious. The Green Paper on Local Government Reform of 2008 notes, 'The establishment of the Local Government Fund (with a mix of Exchequer funding and motor-tax receipts) which helped to improve the financial position of all local authorities. Local authorities have also benefited from the increase in construction activity which, together with legislative reforms, has seen significant increases in capital receipts for the provision of new infrastructure.' It nevertheless acknowledges that local authorities rely on 'significant specific grant-aided programmes which are centrally determined' (Department of Environment, HLG 2008).

The financial constraints and the building opportunities appear to have led local authorities to take an intense interest in developing lands within their jurisdiction, which gave them an interest in intensifying their oversight of the land itself. The An Taisce report spoke of 'the lure of lucrative capital contribution levies' (An Taisce, 2012, 26), and argued that '[i]n the absence of local taxation, these 88 councils compete fiercely for new development, with their eyes firmly on the capital contribution levies and commercial rates that result from development, leading to extremely bad planning outcomes' (ibid, 5).

In many ways, the national government encouraged local authorities to act as they did. As Kitchin and his colleagues at NIRSA have documented (Kitchin *et al.,* 2010, 2012a, 2012b), the Central Government 'loosened the regulation of finance and construction, introduced widespread tax incentive schemes, changed the parameters of stamp duty, lowered capital gains tax, allowed developers to forego their affordable and social housing obligations, promoted a laissez faire system of planning, and allowed the construction industry to self-certify quality and standards...' (2010, 4; Kitchin *et al.,* 2012b). The national government gave every sign of downloading its authority to the local level. There was even the short-lived 'public service decentralisation programme,' first mentioned in the Budget of December 2000, and launched officially in December 2003. This programme, as explained in a statement from the Minister of Finance, would

> 'involve the transfer of complete Departments – including their Ministers and senior management – to provincial locations. A total of eight Departments and the Office of Public Works will move their headquarters from Dublin to provincial locations, leaving seven Departments with their headquarters in Dublin. (...) In total, it will involve the relocation of 10,300 civil and public service jobs to 53 centres in 25 counties.'

The programme was, in part, a response to complaints that policy was too often 'made entirely in Dublin on the basis of a Dublin mindset.' It was also expressly designed to encourage and support development across the country, and not just in its capital city. For a variety of reasons, the idea was very unpopular among both elected officials and bureaucrats. The projected moves did not occur and the programme was cancelled in November 2011.

The growing expenses of the responsibilities of local government, coupled with uncertain and often inadequate resources from the central government, left politicians and civil servants to manage the everyday consequences of major economic and social transitions. This has at times strained or exceeded the capacity of local authorities, particularly in less-populated areas. The possibility of developing land during the Celtic Tiger offered a seemingly more secure source of revenue, but also often placed high demands on the planning expertise of local councils. Their approach to development was often to strengthen its nominal control over land, but this was not always accompanied by best planning practices regarding land use. Local authorities acted bluntly and recklessly at times, both in their approval of development projects and in their treatment of existing land users, such as Travellers.

Conclusion: the political ecology of marginalisation

The increased alienation of and discrimination towards Travellers from 1949 to 1970 were a product of changes in the Republic's economy, particularly a slow shift from a rural to urban economy, and the newly emerging state's self-invention through the management of that economy and society (Bhreatnach, 2006; Crowley, 2009; Kearns, 1978). This dynamic continued and intensified in the 1980s and 90s, and into the twenty-first century as the Irish government sought to extend its participation in the European market, and then to increase involvement in a more global market. Crowley notes that throughout these major transformations (specifically between 1963 and 1985), there was a 'lack of an integrated policy on Traveller accommodation between central and local government' (Crowley, 2009, 17). Crowley and Kitchin (2010) argue further that during the Celtic Tiger, specifically from 1998 to 2003, the Irish government 'attempted… to shift its strategy of dealing with the "Traveller problem" from a regulationist form of citizenship designed to force Travellers to adopt a sedentary lifestyle, to active citizenship that offered Travellers recognition, rewards and rights in return for managed nomadism or sedentary conformism.' The strategy 'paradoxically' resulted in 'legislation that further criminalised Traveller lifestyle and gave more powers to state agencies to regulate their lives' (Crowley and Kitchin, 2007, 142).

The mechanisation of the agricultural economy eliminated opportunities for Travellers, who once found a niche at the margins of the informal rural economy. This transformation has always been supported by a central state whose vision of economic success for Ireland is an export economy. Thus, it has sought to modernise agriculture in order to serve an export market. Traveller horses disrupted that modernised, ordered

landscape. Yet in the Celtic Tiger era, horses once again had a place in the rural landscape. The rise in horse population during the Celtic Tiger years demonstrates that valuable land was available for private residential development schemes that could accommodate horsekeeping. What became problematic was land whose use value to vulnerable communities' horses was prioritised over its potential exchange value. Horses were viewed primarily as recreational property rather than as labour or as culturally specific companion animals.

There are points of connection between the parties, at various scales, where one clearly affects and, in many ways, directs another. While the Irish Government's economic policy may not be directed at the Travellers, what is happening to Travellers is directly related to the actions the Government took to steer the economy in various ways, and especially to the ways in which it influenced the actions of local authorities. Much of this is not specifically aimed at Travellers, but some certainly is, and in any event, they are 'in the way' so they get caught up in the cyclone. Travellers' everyday lives have become subject to more and more regulation and surveillance, while the quality of those lives deteriorates. The economic strategies of the Central Government and local authorities, particularly their related control and management of land, have pushed Travellers out of rural areas, broken up their residential social geographies, and threatened the survival of their culture in ways that affect their well-being. Increasingly, Travellers have become assimilated or have been written off as excluded and unnecessary.

The marginalisation of Travellers is grounded in a political ecology. Their keeping of horses has required access to land in a way that coordinated with their nomadic practices and their involvement in the agricultural economy; this has usually entailed flexible access to marginal land, often through a set of informal relationships with local community members and local authorities. The transformation of rural Ireland through the modernisation of agricultural production and the introduction of conservationist regulation to protect rural environments has increased the managerial oversight of land and reduced such flexible access. During the Celtic Tiger years, pressures on local authorities to raise revenues adequate to their responsibilities heightened their interest in the potential profitability of land. This in turn brought about an intensification of oversight of land; not only for the purpose of specific development, but land management became a goal in and of itself. Such oversight and development were not always conducted in a rational and appropriate manner – at times, it was quite the opposite. The disregard for sensible planning practices reveals the intensity and rush with which local authorities pursued new development.

The spatial, material exclusion from land, and the consequent reduction in the ability to keep horses have disrupted Traveller lives and livelihoods, negatively impacted their material and psychological well-being, and thus increased their vulnerability. Travellers' presence in rural landscapes was always technically precarious, and yet, in practice, it was economically and socially viable for generations. The Irish horse population declined with farm mechanisation, but rebounded significantly with the acquisition of sporthorses, whose presence was accommodated through the private and commercial landholdings of

new development. In the context of Travellers' experience and alongside the other efforts of the state to settle Travellers into permanent housing in urban areas, the 1996 Control of Horses legislation, arguably, does not merely concern and address a horse problem; rather, it has been used to facilitate access to, and management of, land for development during the Celtic Tiger. Within that development process is the final stage of clearing rural landscapes of Travellers, their itinerant practices and their allegedly unproductive animals.

Endnotes

[1] Leadon *et al.* also note: 'Government figures of horse populations are acknowledged to be underestimates (…) Although there is a legal requirement for all horses in Ireland to be identified and be in possession of a valid passport within six months of birth or by 31st December of the year of birth, it is generally recognized that there is poor compliance with this legislation, other than in the elite sectors' (2012, 1).

[2] Much of the Irish literature on agriculture has incorporated Northern Ireland into its study area. 'Ireland' in this paper refers only to the Republic of Ireland, and the author has been careful to sift data as necessary.

[3] The Central Government's Irish Land Commission, founded in 1881, stopped acquiring land for redistribution in 1983, and was 'dissolved in 1999, with its remaining assets and liabilities being transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture and Food' (Van Rensburg 2009, 347).

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