

CULTURE IN THE REPUBLIC

EDITORIAL

Recently, the Deputy Leader of Fine Gael likened the position of his party to that of Birmingham City, a relatively obscure English football team—they were starting in a lowly position, reorganisation and advance would not be immediate, but they would improve gradually given time. It is interesting that a senior Irish politician felt that this comparison would be a meaningful and effective means of communication with the Irish people. It assumed that everyone would know what he was talking about and that it would be acceptable and unproblematic.

This cameo serves as an indicator of where we stand today. From one perspective, there is clear provincialism and cultural domination: not only is the comparison located within a narrowly English context, it is also with a comparatively minor team of little newsworthiness even in England. This pattern is repeated elsewhere in the Irish media, where the weekly turns in the Premiership are frequently headline items, displacing news about social, economic and political affairs in Ireland.

Yet, England and Britain are our nearest neighbours, and our history is intimately bound up with theirs, so that there is no escaping the mutual influences and interactions that have linked us to each other over many centuries. While these relations have often been difficult and problematic, involving power and domination, they cannot be contained in any one-dimensional narrative of ‘eight hundred years of oppression’. Perhaps understandably, given the trauma associated with the efforts to carve out a sphere of Irish autonomy, and perhaps because of the seemingly ‘obvious’ correlation of political autonomy with cultural autonomy, an ideological drive for cultural separation was a feature both before and after 1922.

From another perspective, Richard Bruton’s Birmingham comparison can be seen as a sign of increasing ease between the two islands and a greater maturity in our attitudes. It is not so long since soccer was frowned upon as a foreign sport, nor since there was a large degree of defensiveness surrounding Irish culture—the resulting protectionism (whether manifested in bans on foreign games or in notions of a pure Irish tradition) has faded to a large extent, although it may have

transformed itself into exaggerated ideas of Irish exceptionalism and uniqueness.

A different set of questions arises from the huge prominence now given to all sports in Irish public culture. Apart from displacing other news stories, there is a cumulative effect from treating sport and news as of equivalent importance and relevance. A news bulletin that includes items on war, international politics and economic affairs, on the one hand, and items on football matches, horse races and golf, on the other, is perhaps making claims about what is important to society and the relative weights it attaches to different categories of news. If the war on Iraq or the treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay is of no more importance than the result of a football match, what does this say about society's priorities and its will to act?

Some of these matters are addressed in issues three and four of *The Republic*, both of which deal with culture and republicanism. Several of the writers insist that the cultural sphere is not autonomous and does not exist outside an economic, social and political context. Further, they argue, while culture occupies an increasing share of public discourse, culture is not determining of society or its other spheres. And if all the writers acknowledge the importance of culture, most of them are relaxed about it and suggest that if political solutions are found to political problems, economic solutions to economic problems, and so on, then culture will find its own forms and means of expression in a society at ease with itself.

Whether culture can play an integrative role in increasingly diverse societies is also discussed, and aspects of how culture deals with and affects groups such as children or Travellers and areas such as human rights and science are considered. Other essays address matters concerned with music and literature and republicanism. Issue four of *The Republic* will include articles that consider the changing global and international context as it affects culture, nations and republicanism.

It is not intended to present a comprehensive and systematic account of culture and its relationship with the republic. Instead, a broad range of issues are addressed, and somewhere in their scope and variety it is hoped that we will come to a better appreciation of the multi-faceted and complex relationships between culture and society.

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