In Praise of 'Hibernocentricism': Republicanism, Globalisation and Irish Culture

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IN THE SPRING of 2004, RTÉ TV advertised a competition for an Irish family to take part in a new television history series and 'to avail of an extraordinary opportunity to relive a chapter in Irish history'.[1] The chosen family, according to the advertisement, would travel to Australia to take part in *The Colony*—a living history series, co-produced with SBS Australia, which would 'recreate the experience of the thousands of Irish and British free settlers and convicts who were transported to New South Wales in the early 1800s'. At the time of writing, this series has not yet been made, but the prospect that it will appear on our television screens soon might prompt some reflection on issues of national identity, globalisation and popular culture as we enter the twenty-first century. Without wishing to prejudge the programme, certain observations can be made.

The programme being proposed here is, clearly, another mutation of the global reality TV format—if not quite *Big Brother* then *Survivor* in nineteenth-century garb. The 'reality' genre has become the postmodern TV format *par excellence* with its relentless focus on the 'now' and its endless possibilities for role play and parody. *The Colony*, however, intends to cater to 'historical and educational purposes' as well as 'entertainment value'. While some critics might view such a manoeuvre as another dumbing-down exercise, others might applaud the innovative harnessing of pop culture for educational purposes.

Perhaps more significantly, the programme appears to mark a developing interest on the part of the national broadcaster in a more globally recognisable Irish historical experience rather than one which is purely home-focused. This may have something to do with the taking hold of an enlarged and more complex notion of Irish historical trajectories over the last couple of decades, whereby an increasing interest in the formation and evolution of the Irish diaspora has challenged 'Hibernocentric' conceptions of Irish history. More attention than before

is being paid to the historical experiences of the Irish who emigrated and contributed to the making of the New World, as opposed to the Irish who stayed at home and attempted to make something of the old country. This is not, in itself, a bad thing. However, the fact remains that the current appeal of the Irish immigrant story may have a lot to do with the economics of global television production, whereby generic scenarios and narratives are easily transferable and marketable, while material of a more culturally specific nature is not. At the financial core of these projects, where co-production is the order of the day, trans-national appeal and cultural generalisation exert a relentless pressure.

These are issues that should concern anyone interested in the evolution of an Irish republican cultural critique. As Philip Pettit reminds us, 'republicanism stands in contrast to [libertarianism and communitarianism] in so far as it equates freedom with not having to live under the threat of arbitrary power, private or public'.[2] It would appear that the recent dominance of the market in the global production and circulation of Irish culture represents such an arbitrary power-threat, given the strength of global media monopolies and the powerlessness of a minuscule Irish population to influence them. Furthermore, classical republicanism has always promoted the idea of a shared public culture 'at the heart of society and as the basis of politics'.[3] Historically, in the Irish context, culture (in the sense of shared creative output) has been central to the articulation of social ills and an important basis for political action, as well as an expression of collective celebration. Clearly, though, the relationship between cultural output and societal expression has now broken down. There is now a serious gap between the actual conditions of Irish life and the version of Irishness which is being held up to the Irish people and the outside world. Today's Ireland, despite the apparent economic success story, is undergoing a traumatic transition into a First World society. This brings with it an unprecedented level of social inequality, unbridled consumerism, the shrinking of government services, the lack of a coherent political vision beyond the tyranny of the marketplace, the transformation of Ireland's ethnic composition, and the panoply of discontents that accompanies First World development. These are realities which are reflected neither in Ireland's official version of itself nor in current critical thinking.

If 'revisionism' and postcolonialism defined the extremes of cultural debate in Ireland over the past three decades or so, it is clear that these critical models have become outdated with the dawning of the new century. Traces of the old ideological squabbles linger on, of course, and will continue to be heard for some time to come. But the fact remains that

the standard revisionist analysis does not have much potency in post-Good-Friday-Agreement Ireland, where Irish nationalism has been well and truly revised, republican guns are silent, and cultural identity is now vested in the people rather than the territory. In a similar way, the classic postcolonial analysis of Irish underachievement is under strain in an Ireland now securely positioned as one of the most successful economies in the developed world, which has fully embraced global capitalism and which enjoys high growth rates, low unemployment, a deregulated economy, a vigorous consumer culture, and a high global cultural profile. Clearly, new critical thinking is required to make sense of the frenetic pace of political and economic change here over the last decade.

Hand in hand with political and economic transformations has gone a remarkable change in Ireland's cultural fortunes. To say that the Celtic Tiger economy has been accompanied by an unprecedented level of cultural success is to state the obvious. Indeed, one could take the opening of Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* in 1990 as a moment which marks the beginning of this period of incredible cultural accomplishment (beating by a number of months Ireland's World Cup miracle of 1990). This was followed closely by Oscar nominations and awards for Irish films such as *The Crying Game*; numerous Eurovision Song Contest wins; the *Riverdance* phenomenon; Seamus Heaney's Nobel Prize; Roddy Doyle's Booker Prize; the successes of a new generation of dramatists (Martin McDonagh, Marina Carr, Conor McPherson, and Marie Jones); the rebirth of Irish pop with Boyzone, Westlife and The Corrs; the burgeoning of a crop of new Irish comic talent epitomised by the success of *Father Ted*; the wider appeal of traditional Irish music, as demonstrated by the soundtrack to the film *Titanic*; and the unprecedented success of Irish popular fiction in the work of Patricia Scanlan, Marian Keyes, and Cathy Kelly, not to mention Frank McCourt. This is not, by any means, an exhaustive list of cultural success, but it serves to illustrate Ireland's striking makeover on the global stage in the 1990s from unfashionable Paddyland to land of cultural vibrancy.

Irish culture, popular and high, now has a greater visibility on a global scale than at any other time in history. We have, however, barely begun the task of documenting, never mind analysing, the remarkable change in Irish cultural fortunes over the last decade or so. The explanations that have been offered have tended to reflect the thinking of the older critical models. On the one hand, recent cultural success is attributed to the fact that Ireland, in cutting its links to the dead weight of the past and turning its back on regressive nationalist traditions, has become an open, liberal, European, cosmopolitan society, with a more internationalised cultural

output. On the other hand, our cultural success has been explained as a late postcolonial flowering of Irish talent. Having successfully decolonised and 'worked through' the trauma of the past, the Irish nation—according to this thinking—is now reaping a rich harvest of creative output. In both analyses one can detect an understandable feeling of pride in recent Irish cultural success. This success is seen as a signifier for the maturing and increasing sophistication of Irish culture. After decades of obscurity in which the reputation of modern Irish cultural achievement rested almost entirely on the international standing of W. B. Yeats and James Joyce, one can detect in cultural circles at large a general satisfaction at the level of recognition accorded to recent Irish cultural output.

What has not been fully articulated within recent cultural debate, however, is the fact that the 'older evils' of Irish nationalism/British imperialism (depending on your point of view) have been well and truly eclipsed as dominating forces in Irish culture and society by the increasing pressures of global capital and its homogenising cultural agenda. Within a decade, Ireland has been transformed from a relatively impoverished backwater on the periphery of Europe, whose indigenous culture was constantly threatened by the homogenising influences of mass global culture, into a prosperous First World economy whose culture is increasingly being recruited to the global capitalist enterprise. Throughout the first sixty years of independence, the Irish language, traditional music, and other distinctive traditional practices were considered fragile and worthy of protection from outside adulteration, while Irish cultural influence on the world at large was, to put it mildly, limited. Today, it is possible to drink Guinness, Jameson, Bailey's, and Ballygowan in identikit Irish pubs all over the world; visit any international airport and you can pick up the latest Roddy Doyle novel; channel-surf the TV in any Holiday Inn and you will undoubtedly catch a glimpse of the most instantly recognisable global Irishman—*Star Trek's* Chief O'Brien; go shopping in downtown Tokyo and you will hear Andrea Corr sing once more that she 'never really loved you anyway'.

These examples may be somewhat trite, but they serve to illustrate an important point: when we think of globalisation and its threat to cultural distinctiveness around the world we tend to think of Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Hollywood, Oprah Winfrey, and Britney Spears, as they promote their own distinct brands of American consumer culture on the global market. Rarely do we think of Guinness, Irish pubs, *Riverdance*, Frank McCourt, and The Corrs in the same way—pedalling a cultural version of 'Irish-lite' on a global scale for considerable financial reward. The argument here is not that the rest of the world is becoming an Irish

cultural colony—clearly it is not—but rather that, to a significant degree, Irish cultural output has been internationally successful in proportion to its co-option into the mechanisms of mainstream global culture.

One of the well-recognised features of globalisation, of course, is the tearing of cultures from specific geographical locales. Nowadays, it is not uncommon for successful Irish plays to open in London and make guest appearances in Ireland after prolonged runs in New York. Likewise, one is likely to meet more internationally renowned Irish musicians at the Milwaukee Irish Fest than at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann. This can often mean that global Irish culture is less likely to emerge from, reflect on, or relate to the shared experiences, problems, and dilemmas of the Irish 'homeland'. Increasingly, images of Ireland are once again being generated that bear little or no resemblance to the locale they purport to describe. Further evidence of this is the fact that attempts to tell recognisably complex Irish stories have not been greeted with the same level of acclaim and success, but, at times, have been met with open hostility. This was cogently illustrated by the lukewarm and partly adverse international reaction to Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins*, notwithstanding that film's conservative treatment of the origins of the Irish state.

In the 1990s, a neo-revivalism defined the new Irish *zeitgeist*. After the cultural and economic stasis of the 1970s and 1980s, a renewed confidence in traditional Irish culture, epitomised by the *Riverdance* phenomenon, released an interesting creative surge. Many will remember the potency of that original *Riverdance* performance, expressing, as it did, a new moment of Irish possibility. It is worth recalling, though, that the performance was born out of a public service broadcasting initiative—RTÉ's celebration of national culture during the interlude at the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest. Over a decade later, after the 'privatisation' of *Riverdance* and its makeover as a Broadway show, it is still being championed as the pinnacle of Irish cultural achievement, without any hint of embarrassment that this ageing warhorse may reflect an obvious cultural stasis at the heart of contemporary Ireland rather than its vitality. Its blend of traditional dance and music, showbiz glitz, and entrepreneurial nous has come to embody the official version of contemporary Ireland. President McAleese's recent trade mission to China was, of course, accompanied by the obligatory *Riverdance* performance, proving once again that culture and marketing have become utterly confused in contemporary Ireland.

If a republican cultural critique is to challenge the commodification of Irish culture and reconnect cultural output with social expression, it must be careful not to fall back into a nostalgic apologia for a singular, shared

national culture. Republican thinking, after all, should be as sceptical of the dominance of state power as it is of private power in relation to cultural matters. The idea of a singularised Irish identity, however, has been well and truly deconstructed by now and replaced by more liberating and open-ended conceptions of national being. The pressure to conform to an aspirational Gaelic identity has long given way to a more laissez-faire approach in which 'Irishness' is widely conceived as an omnium-gatherum sum-total of how Irish people choose to configure themselves culturally. New challenges, however, have been posed by the recent wave of immigration which has changed Ireland's relatively homogenous ethnic character for ever. Rather than insisting on a high-minded idea of a national culture common to all in society, therefore, a new critical model might promote a more empowering notion of civic culture and mobilise a critique of the ubiquitous global Irishness.

Such an alternative conception of culture could proceed by privileging geography and place over a shared ethnic identity or common cultural bonds. This model would work on the assumption that the dynamics of one's cultural identity are contingent upon one's physical locale as much as one's ethnic, class, or gender identity. In other words, being Irish in Dublin is not the same as being Irish in Boston. Similarly, being Vietnamese in Ireland is not the same as being Vietnamese in Vietnam. In each case, the specifics of place play a key determining role in the evolution of one's cultural identity. A new critical paradigm of this sort might also work to reconfigure Irishness as the sum total of the cultural lives of all inhabitants, indigenous and immigrant. This 'Hibernocentric' notion of Irish cultures, which emphasises shared spatial dynamics rather than shared cultural bonds, could allow for the accommodation of cultural difference, which is the inevitable consequence of these globalised and postmodern times. It might also work as a welcome antidote to the mantra of globalisation that 'geography doesn't matter'. Crucially, it would also enable a meaningful reconnection between culture and Irish society, with the rediscovery of the idea that culture can be an effective means of social expression and critique, rather than purely a form of entertainment to be passively consumed.

Looking to the future, one might predict the emergence of a vigorous new local Irishness, which could follow the trajectory of the Irish Revival of the last century in lots of interesting ways. It is not difficult to imagine such a cultural movement being led by a new generation anaesthetised by Celtic Tiger consumerism, the cultural blandness of global Irishness, and the homogenising pressures of Anglo-American culture. This new local Irishness may also be fuelled by the creative input of recent immigrants.

New arrivals are often intensely interested in the dynamics of their new locale and eager to connect with indigenous cultural strands as a way of expressing their commitment to their new homeland. As Douglas Hyde testified, being from a particular ethnic background is not a prerequisite to learn and value the Irish language and its literature—not to mention Irish music and Gaelic games. If the cultural revival of the early twentieth century was driven by the energy of returning Irish emigrants such as W. B. Yeats and George Moore, it is conceivable that a cultural revival of the twenty-first century could be fuelled by inward migrants who might find resonances of their own personal stories in the Irish cultural experience. For example, the not insignificant body of Irish literature and culture that deals with the emigrant experience might take on an entirely new relevance in such an eventuality.

But, while opening up the possibility of immigrant engagements with 'traditional' Irish culture, a new republican cultural model should not bring with it the pressure to assimilate to some pre-existing ideal of 'indigenous' culture. After all, Irish historical experience has much to tell about the injustices of coercive cultural assimilation. The Irish republican tradition also has much experience to draw on in relation to the struggle for minority cultural rights, which might be usefully deployed in a multi-ethnic Ireland to safeguard the cultural distinctiveness of new immigrant communities. If, for example, a sizeable Filipino community here were to organise for their children to be educated in a Tagalog-speaking environment, such an initiative might find an interesting precursor in the Gaelscoil experience. A development like this might usefully be seen as enriching the linguistic mix in Ireland rather than as a threat to national distinctiveness. It might also provide an interesting example of how the specifics of place might inflect the evolution of an expatriate Filipino cultural identity. Once again, it is the emphasis on shared geography rather than shared cultural bonds that can accommodate cultural difference within a republican political vision.

There is no doubt that the cultural life and complexion of Ireland will change greatly in the coming decades. This will undoubtedly bring moments and points of tension. In a worst-case scenario, new cultural wars will break out which may recall the 'battle of two civilisations' between the Anglo-Irish and Irish Irelanders a century ago. In this context, new republican thinking will be required more than ever to articulate civic-minded notions of cultural possibility on the island of Ireland. It is important that at a time of rapid cultural change, the distinctive cultural practices that are peculiar to Ireland do not become sacred shibboleths to be defended from the perceived threat of immigrant

culture. The creolisation of Irish culture is a prospect full of exciting potential, to be welcomed as much as it is inevitable. It is equally important, however, that a desire to subvert and undermine traditional Irish cultural practices, out of an insecure need to display one's 'sophistication' and liberal credentials, does not take hold—as was the case during the period of high revisionism.

Much has been written about the crisis of authority at the heart of contemporary Ireland. At a time when the moral power of the Catholic Church has collapsed and the integrity of politicians has come under scrutiny by state tribunals, there exists no equivalent civic force of vigour to fill the vacuum. Looking to the legacy of Irish republicanism, its potential to provide an alternative sphere of influence in Irish life was severely limited by the Civil War defeat and, latterly, by the commitment to armed conflict in the northern struggle. As a result, twentieth-century Irish republicanism has been physically courageous but intellectually stunted. If there is to be an intellectual renewal from that quarter, there may be no greater challenge than to lead the debate on the changing landscape of Irish culture in the new century.

Notes

[1] http://www.rte.ie/tv/colony (accessed December 15, 2004).

[2] Philip Pettit, 'Culture in the Constitution of a Republic', *The Republic: A Journal of Contemporary and Historical Debate*, no. 3, (July 2003), p. 11.

[3] Gerard Delanty, 'The Cultural Foundations of a Republican Polity: Culture as Communication', *The Republic: A Journal of Contemporary and Historical Debate*, no. 3, (July 2003), p. 27.