

Outrage, Resistance and Redemption: Citizen Action in the Republic of Ireland

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The Republic of Ireland has undergone considerable transformation since the mid 1990s when the Celtic Tiger ushered in a new presumed “economic miracle.” This occurred in a country that had suffered immensely under a long history of colonization and continued, though fading, subordination under an authoritarian Catholic Church. The Celtic Tiger, named after the economically successful East Asian Tigers who late 1980s and early 1990s, grew successful economies and improved social conditions by building upon indigenous industrial sectors and developing export markets for their products. The analogy suggests that the Irish Republic also selected a home-grown strategy to develop its economy and reinvent itself (Kirby, Gibbons, Cronin 2002:1). This presumably deliberate strategy involved modernization through European integration and social partnership among its various economic and social sectors. Some scholars have argued that such reinvention represented a break from the post-colonial and authoritarian past, and a move to a more liberal, tolerant present (Kirby, Gibbons, Cronin 2002:2). However others insist that unlike that of the East Asian Tigers, who took charge of their reinvention, the benefactors of the Celtic Tiger depended on external experts and multinational capital which promoted neo-liberal principles and a radical free market.

The consequences of such a reinvention are seen in the promotion of a new cultural vision tied not to one’s freedom as a citizen, but one’s freedom as a consumer. Ireland’s tigerhood, social theorists like Kieran Allen argue, was bought at the price of growing social inequality, state policies favoring the rich, and deregulation of business and markets, except for wages, which have undergone increasing regulation. Government grants, low tax rates and a highly educated (if poor) population attracted multinational corporations, particularly in the IT industry (Intel, Microsoft, Dell). Government policies encouraged tax policies that continued to

favor the rich, and provided subsidies and low interest rates to builders, in submission to a strong building lobby. A building frenzy reached its height in 2004 with 80,000 new properties completed. Property values soared (quadrupling in an overvalued market) and landlords became increasingly prosperous to the detriment of renters. In terms of overall growth, Ireland was transformed from one of the poorest Western European nations to one of the wealthiest, with a growing immigrant population attracted by low-end service jobs. The proportion of those at the lowest income level also continued to grow, while Irish spending on social welfare dropped to the lowest within the European Union. Inequalities were intensified through successive tax amnesties for the rich. In spite of continuing poverty and heightened gaps between rich and poor, there was a denial that poverty persisted. “There is no more poverty in Ireland,” was a regular comment on RT1, the public radio station that promoted a confident image of the materially abundant state.

These patterns were accompanied by shifts toward individualism, materialism, a social amnesia about the past, intolerance of dissent (p. 13) and difference (p.37), and even a widely acknowledged racism (p. 37). Despite selective infrastructural development, those in urban areas suffered intolerable traffic jams. Health and social welfare programs promoted privatization of services, and those without private health insurance, could wait for days in the hospital before being seen. Lingering fears of returning to a widely impoverished past, helped to dissuade protest among the dissatisfied, as did increased measures of social control over the restless. Prison population soared as 2000 new cells were constructed, and Ireland’s prison population housed the youngest and poorest within Europe (K,G, C 2009:9).

Despite occasional rumblings within the population, by 2002 the paucity of complaints led one group of Irish scholars (Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin 2002) to argue

that “...contemporary Ireland is badly in need of...contestatory social activism if we are to imagine and create a...radically different, more humane and just social order.”¹ This was a nation of people, after all, that was proud of its long history of volunteerism throughout Africa, and that had flooded the streets in 1984 during Reagan’s visit to protest US policies in El Salvador and the murder of Father Romero. If these scholars could have looked ahead six years, however, they would have seen growing expressions of resistance.

From August 2007 – August 2008 and again in the summer of 2009, I witnessed several moments of such resistance. There were repeated demonstrations against the war in Iraq, where I learned how an Irish court had finally acquitted five persons charged with damaging American navy warplanes stationed at Shannon Airport and headed for Iraq. I heard concerned global citizens take action to encourage the Irish government to end its contributions to the World Bank if it did not change its austerity policies in third world nations. I participated in Senior Citizens labor groups where members took a hard line against their government’s New Deal, which demanded that government contributions for old age long term care now be matched by citizen’s own contributions. By June 2008, I walked out of my hotel on Dame Street in Dublin to witness endless ranks of farmers marching in opposition to encroaching European control over their livelihood. They succeeded in convincing referendum voters to register a resounding NO! against the EU’s Lisbon Treaty. Around the same time, a self-proclaimed “simple famer’s wife” mobilized thousands in her community to resist the threatened closure of a local hospital in favor of a remote medical “centre of excellence.”

When I returned last summer I attended meetings and demonstrations for the ongoing “Shell-to-sea” campaign where outraged community members from County Mayo spoke of their government’s 420+ Billion euro giveaway to multinational oil companies of newly discovered

petroleum resources. They were insulted and ashamed that their own Garda (police force) protected the waters for the corporations over their own rights to fish and maintain the environment.

Last May, the Ryan Report exposed decades-long abuse of minors in Catholic-run institutions. After its release, 14,500 people rallied outside the Irish Parliament to protest both the Church and the state authorities who had failed in their state role as regulator to protect the children under their charge. As *redemption* for the abuse, a 70 year old Augustinian priest walked over 150 miles. I later talked with a 25-year-old film maker who was so moved by the story of women who had suffered in Catholic-run Magdalene laundries that he spent three and one half years locating victims and creating a film to honor and also *redeem* them.² Later another young man created a website to enable baptized Irish Catholics to publicly denounce their affiliation to the Catholic Church, in order to diminish the state funds that could be allotted to it for various services. Perhaps the most dramatic outcry, however, occurred last fall when the government threatened to end automatic health care to those over 70. As 15,000 people – old and young -- congregated outside the gates of Leinster House in solidarity, one party leader proclaimed, “In my long years in this House I have never witnessed what I saw on the streets today.”³

This dissent is occurring in a society which has suffered centuries of colonial oppression, a devastating famine, and extensive poverty that continued well into the late twentieth century. The protests may have articulated a *refusal* of further suffering whatever the source – whether foreign powers, state or religious authorities or global capital. They may have proclaimed the desire to become, as Raymond Williams has noted (ref. 4, p.61), “the arrow, not the target”.⁴ Over the last few decades Ireland experienced urbanization, globalization, and secularization.

Economic and social changes introduced by the Celtic Tiger in 1995 further transformed the country from one of the poorest in Europe to one of the wealthiest, albeit least equal and socially secure.⁴ By 2008, the global economic downturn sparked an all too familiar economic insecurity and distrust of foreign interests. That distrust resurrected deep-seated tensions amongst competing aspects of Irish cultural identity⁵ – nationalism versus class divisiveness; competitiveness and self-interest versus mutual aid and caring; individualism versus communalism; post-colonial shame versus post-Celtic Tiger confidence and arrogance; spirituality versus religiosity; traumatic silence versus moral outrage;⁶ materialism versus self-sacrifice; racism versus social inclusion; poverty versus its denial; consumerism versus restraint; and protective charity versus the corruption and abuse of society’s most vulnerable.⁷

In reflecting on the significance of these acts of resistance, it is worth considering the following questions: (1) Does participating in one act of resistance reflect a singular event or more enduring symbolic engagement against forces experienced as abusive? (2) To what extent does the act reflect the participant’s own self-interest as opposed to a larger social concern for others? (3) How enduring is the resistance beyond any single act? (4) What did the involvement *mean* for the individual participants as *citizens*? (5) To what extent does engagement reflect a desire for an ethos of a “caring” society and the need for a new social contract? (6) How, if at all, does engagement in dissent appeal reflect a more enduring cultural, or historical identity? (7) How, if at all, did more constructive experiences with the Celtic Tiger improve the person’s confidence and willingness to act against the state to secure social justice? (8) Finally, to what extent has citizen action led to shifts in power relations and incorporated a range of broadly shared cultural visions inclusive of all Irish citizens regardless of background?

The Irish experience of suffering has evoked a variety of calls for redemption from both its abusers (past and present, internal and external, religious and economic) as well as from its past memories of endured abuse. To redeem citizens *from* their history, that history must be denied; but to redeem the past itself demands that this history somehow be embraced and incorporated into the present⁸. As Michael D. Higgins, sociologist and longstanding T.D. (Teachta Dála), or Irish parliamentarian, our past “is embedded in us” (2007:306), and we can never completely extricate ourselves from it. In order, for example, to understand one’s history of colonization, it is necessary to learn how we were colonized. Only then, can the experience be incorporated in a way that turns the tables on the colonizer. To do so, however, requires neither denying or altering the past, but rather redefining, a la Neitzche, our relationship to it (Shulman 2006:175). People gain redemption, not by becoming freed from suffering, but rather by making it somehow meaningful (Schulman 2006:69) – an assertion that Levinas would challenge. In fact some theorists, such as Arendt, would insist that the past *must* in this way be redeemed (Shulman 2006:175). That is because an unredeemed past – one that is not digested and “made good” – is haunting, and drives people to vengeance, guilt, or escape (p. 175). Schulman is even stronger as to why: because an unredeemed past leads us to relinquish our freedom by submitting to a future dictated by an unexamined past (p.175).

The Celtic Tiger provided a foreign myth to deny a history of poverty; continuing to ignore poverty through denial and social exclusion,² by which poverty is hidden, only served to reinforce that myth. Those who prefer instead to acknowledge and redeem past sorrows do so not by denying or romanticizing them but engaging their constructive possibilities.^{2,4,8} In fact the creative reinterpretation of the past has been called “redemptive” by Hebrew prophets “by delivering people from self-betrayal and failure” by determining an “alternative legacy from

which people could derive themselves” and “be restored to *worthiness*” (Shulman 163-4). As James C. Scott has argued, it is the rootedness of past experiences that evokes resistive power and a creative force for a different future.⁹ The challenge is to reinvent the past so as not to produce yet new exclusions.⁵

There is an ongoing debate building on the work of Talal Asad to create an anthropology of the secular that is relevant to these calls for redemption, particularly relevant to Ireland, as it is moving toward a secular state, in part in mass negativity to the exposure of Church abuse,. Asad doubts whether social and political praxis can produce positive outcomes in a liberal secular state like the U.S., where redemptive missions, like the war against terrorism, have led to enduring violence and new social exclusions.¹⁰ Such redemption redeems the saved by “marking and stigmatizing the damned “ (Shulman 158-9). Thus redemption indeed is a double edged sword if it incites sentiments that produce distrust, othering and distancing. Redemption *from* indeed implies extrication from an implicit enemy, who can assume the position of yet a newfound enemy. But it need not be this way. In fact “redemption *of*” a period or experience seeks instead to redefine it in a meaningful way.

For example, to counter this potential problem in the concept of “redemption,” Drucilla Cornell draws upon Derrida’s notion of redemption as a kind of “hospitality” (Conrell 2008:70-1), instead of a more commonly understood notion as a kind of “future forgiveness” to be bestowed upon us. Redemption, as hospitality, is how forgiveness is sought by demonstrating responsibility in “taking on what is other to our self.” Such responsibility offers an emancipatory opportunity to transform the world.

By January 2009 the Celtic Tiger had withered with predictions that the GDP would shrink 14% the next year¹¹. In addition to global forces that propelled this, the greed of Irish

property owners, contributed to economic collapse within the republic. The housing bubble had burst and some property values had dropped to 1/5 their peak value. Unwise policies that simultaneously increased public spending, while cutting taxes intensified the burst. Whatever the causes, it may be that the end of the economic boom, which disappeared with the economic downturn in 2008 will provide more fuel for resistance to a state whose neoliberal policies turned sour. It may also provide its own redemptive force, reminding those who embraced the Celtic Tiger and the values it represented of its ephemeral nature and compelling reasons to look once again to their own history for redemption, not as deliverance *from it*, but to it as a source of historical imagination and renewed energy (Shulman 2006:175-6) that turning away can only leave hollow.

¹ Kirby P, Gibbons L, and Cronin, eds. M. 2002. Conclusion, p. 200. In *Reinventing Ireland*. London: Pluto Press.

² This was Steve O’Riordan, whose film, *The Forgotten Maggies*, premiered at the Galway Film Festival, July 8, 2009. <http://www.alliancesupport.org/news/archives/003018.html> Retrieved 3.22.10.

³ Collins S and McGee H. 2008. Thousands march in day of anti-Budget protests. *The Irish Times*. October 23, p.1.

⁴ Higgins. MD. 2007. *Causes for Concern: Irish politics, culture and society*. P. 322. Dublin: Liberties Press.

⁵ Moane G. 2002. Colonialism and the Celtic Tiger: Legacies of History and the Quest for Vision. Pp. 114-123 of Kirby et al.

⁶ McCullough A. 1989. The language and legitimation of Irish moral outrage. *Br Journal of Sociology* 40(2):227-243.

⁷ Coldrey B. 2000. A mixture of caring and corruption. *Studies*. www.jesuit.ie/studies/articles/2000/000301.htm.

⁸ Schulman G. 2006. Redemption, Secularization, Politics. In Scott and Hirschkind, Pp154-79.

⁹ Scott, J. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak*. P. 44. New Haven, CN: Yale.

¹⁰ Scott D and Hirschkind C, eds. 2006. *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and his interlocutors*. Stanford UP.

¹¹ See Celtic Tiger, Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtic_Tiger. Accessed 3.22.10.