

REVIEW: REINVENTING IRELAND

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Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (eds) **Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy** London, London: Pluto Press, 2002, 240pp, hb £50, pb £16.99 ISBN 0745318258 (hb), 074531824X (pb).

A collection of twelve essays by ten authors, **Reinventing Ireland** presents a sustained critique of contemporary Ireland of the period 1990-2000 – the era of the 'Celtic Tiger'. Six of the authors have an institutional connection with Dublin City University, one of the two new universities established in the period. The publication is part of a series under the heading of 'Contemporary Irish Studies' from Pluto Press in which there are nine other volumes available to date.

An extended introductory essay sets out the perspectives of the editors that are the basis of the coherence achieved by the collection. The assertion that Ireland reinvented itself in the 1990s as made by others is contested. Terry Eagleton's work, **The Idea of Culture** (2000), is cited as a guiding influence, defining culture as, 'a set of potentials bred by history and subversively at work within it' (p.1). In their introductory chapter the editors present the compilation as their challenge to 'a silent and uncritical Academy and a largely docile workforce ... [and to] ... the coercive power of consensual thinking' (p.17) The collection has a slightly injured tone, speaking of 'silenced voices' – to which the collection gives expression – and 'dominating discourses' which are identified as the writings of other named and critiqued commentators on contemporary Ireland, ranging from economists (Rory O'Donnell and associated authors), to journalists and social and political commentators such as Conor Cruise O'Brien and Fintan O'Toole. The sense

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of a set of outsider, minority reports to the mainstream analysis of others seems a little out of place to this reader. In terms of fora available to them and their presence in journalistic and other fora in which their work is encountered, they are and have been clearly heard voices in Irish debates.

That said, each of the essays taken individually is engaging, enlightening and perceptive. Individual essays challenge the limitations of economic narratives, of the revisionism of much recent historical writing and of the aesthetic representations of Irish life which combine to present the Republic as a 'modern, vibrant economy and society which has successfully abandoned its reactionary, nationalist Catholic past, [where] Ireland's contemporary culture is seen as an eloquent expression of new-found confidence where liberalisation of internal markets is matched by the celebration of individual rights and liberties' (p.7). Naïve and optimistic readings of Irish society are challenged.

In Chapter 2, Peadar Kirby, the leading editor, contests the dominant 'pedigrees of the Celtic Tiger', contrasting the founding of the Irish state 'emerging as it did out of the redefinition of the "imagined community" of the nation by civil society' with today's Ireland which has been 'reinvented through the actions of market-accommodating business and political elites rather than through popular social and cultural contestation of the dominant order' (p.35). The essay is a significant analysis, marred a little by ungenerous treatment in its critique of revisionist social and historical writing on Ireland from Independence to the 1960s as 'caricature replacing historical judgement' (p.34).

Michel Peillon's chapter on 'Culture and State in Ireland's New Economy', referring to culture as 'the way people represent the world in which they live: the beliefs they embrace, the ideas they hold, the feelings they express and the meaning according to which they act', argues that not only have the Irish economy and culture mutated over time but the connection between economy and culture has been fundamentally altered (p.38). Outlining the uneven development of modernity in different spheres of Irish life, he argues that the new economy of Ireland involves two different implosions: the first relates to economy and culture; the second dissolves the boundaries between the state and the business class (pp.51-52). The effects include making the formulation of critical discourse far more difficult. In an analysis that reflects tellingly the major thrust of the collection he speaks of protest and resistance having

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buried itself deep in the fabric of Irish society ... manifesting itself in the form of sceptical and possibly cynical distance from established reality ... The failure to mobilise comes predominantly from the desire to keep a critical distance from society, rather than from commitment and counter-values.
(p.53)

In a punchy essay, Michael Cronin explores the consequences of the 'chronopoliticisation' of Ireland ... which leads to reductive readings of the Irish past and the Irish present'. Arrestingly suggesting that it 'is surely appropriate that Ulysses begins on the top of a Martello Tower, a landmark of colonial geo-strategic nervousness defining Ireland's place in the British military scheme of things, the back door, the exposed flank', and linking this with the 1994 Downing Street Declaration that Britain no longer had any strategic interest in Ireland, Cronin sees this as in effect declaring that geography was politically no longer destiny (p.56) and that peripherality is no longer geographically but chronologically defined (p.57). Another telling juxtaposition is the way 'one of Ireland's longest-suffering minorities, the Travelling community, is constantly urged to abandon its nomadic way of life and living at the same time and by the elite groups who are more and more mobile in their own professional and leisure pursuits ... competing forms of illegitimate and legitimate nomadism occupying the same space of circulation' (p.59).

The chapter of most interest to me was that by Joseph Dunne, an educational philosopher writing under the title 'Citizenship and Education: A Crisis of the Republic?'. Dunne's concern is that we may no longer be able to educate for citizenship; he is sceptical on whether we 'do in fact have a strong notion of citizenship – one that [shapes], and at the same time is reinforced by, our system of education' (p.70). Tracing the features of citizenship in its classical conception and identifying the potential of civil society as 'kind of proving ground for citizenship and the wider engagement it implies' (p.82), Dunne proceeds to indict Ireland as a 'place where knowledge is construed as a commodity, education as a business, students and their parents as customers, and teachers as mere functionaries who must satisfy the demands of their managers and clients' (p 86). Dunne concludes, firstly, with 'a core republican intuition' (p.85) that a healthy polity resides 'in the capacity for thought, initiative and concerted actions of citizens themselves' and, secondly, with 'a "formative project", the active cultivation of those competencies and dispositions characteristic of responsible citizens'. This he sees as an

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educational project. It would be far too complacent to consign responsibility for such a project to schools (p. 86). The real question is whether we (in the Republic of Ireland) have the moral resources, as state or society, to sponsor it. 'As well as autonomy, what students – and all of us – may now most need to learn are the "virtues of acknowledged dependency:' (MacIntyre 1999) (p.86). Scottish readers might be surprised at the extent to which Dunne appears to be a lone voice in drawing attention to the civic functions of education and schooling in Ireland.

Other essays which particularly impressed me were Lionel Pilkington's 'Religion and the Celtic Tiger: the Cultural Legacies of anti-Catholicism', a refreshingly new take on religious issues on the island from a Southern Protestant academic working at the National University of Ireland, Galway, and Roddy Flynn's essay on broadcasting policy and practice in the Republic. Barra O'Seaghda's characterisation of 'media gateway pundits' (such as Conor Cruise O'Brien and Colm Tóibín) as lacking 'intellectual integrity' I thought unfair and unnecessary in an otherwise interesting essay on the Irish media during the period. The arguments would carry every bit of their intended weight, without the name-calling.

There is a sense that the collection forms the ideational basis of a political programme and mobilisation process. In the final chapter by the editors, titled 'Conclusions and Transformations', lines are drawn between two views of recent Irish society and culture: one, the currently dominant view, prioritises individualism, entrepreneurship, mobility, flexibility, innovation and competitiveness as social values and expects state and educational institutions to play a central role in the strengthening of these values; the other prioritises nationalism, national identity, family, and self-sacrifice as ways to combat the colonisation by the market of the fullness of life to the person.

The key resource through which the colonisation of the market can be resisted is an engagement with our own society and history as a source of moral community and a recovery of our social imagination. (p199).

The raw materials for imagining a different social order for Ireland are found through an engagement with our past, rediscovering in its many muted voices values and inspirations contrary to those that dominate the social order of the Celtic Tiger. In this way, radical strands of egalitarianism, popular democracy, social economy, ecological

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spirituality, an internationalism attentive to the plight of the poor and exploited of the earth, a robust feminism, cultural regeneration and an indigenous language world lie waiting to be tapped into as rich resources of imagining a radically different, more humane and just social order.
(p.200)

This sounds like ruminations for a manifesto. In short, the collection is engaged and engaging, frequently insightful and illuminating, if sometimes naïve and occasionally slipping into being truculent .

November 2002