

Joe Cleary

Outrageous Fortune

Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland



Did Ireland produce a more radical and ambitious literature in the straitened circumstances of the first half of the twentieth century than it has managed to do since it began to 'modernize' and become more affluent from the 1960s onwards? Has Irish modernism ceded place to a prevailing naturalism that seems gritty and tough-minded, but that is aesthetically conservative and politically self-thwarted? Does the fixation with 'de Valera's Ireland' in recent narrative represent a necessary settling of accounts with a dark, abusive history or is it indicative of a worrying inability on the part of Irish artists and intellectuals to respond to the very different predicaments of the post-Cold War world?

These are some of the questions addressed in *Outrageous Fortune*. Scanning literature, theatre, film and music, Joe Cleary probes the connections between capital, culture and criticism in modern Ireland. He includes readings of James Joyce and the Irish modernists, the naturalists Patrick Kavanagh, John McGahern and Edna O'Brien, and comments too on what he terms the 'neo-naturalism' of Marina Carr, Patrick McCabe and Martin McDonagh. He concludes with a provocative analysis of the cultural achievement of the Pogues.

Cover: Shane MacGowan, then the editor of punk rock magazine *Bondage*, in his office at St. Andrews Chambers, Wells Street, London, in 1977.

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Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland

Joe Cleary

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For Gemma and Conor

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- ‘Into which West? Irish Modernity and the Maternal Supernatural’, in Brian Cosgrove, ed., *Literature and the Supernatural* (Dublin: Columba Press, 1995), 147–73;
- ‘Modernization and Aesthetic Ideology in Contemporary Irish Culture’, in Ray Ryan, ed., *Writing in the Irish Republic: Literature, Culture, Politics, 1949–1999* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), 105–29;
- ‘Domestic Troubles: Tragedy and the Northern Ireland Conflict’, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 98, 3 (2000), 501–37;
- ‘Misplaced Ideas? Locating and Dislocating Ireland in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies’, in Neil Lazarus and Crystal Bartolovich, eds., *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 101–24, reprinted in abbreviated form as ‘Misplaced Ideas? Colonialism, Location and Dislocation in Irish Studies’, in Claire Connolly, ed., *Theorizing Ireland* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 91–104, and in an extended version as ‘Misplaced Ideas? Colonialism, Location and Dislocation in Irish Studies’, in Clare Carroll and Patricia King, eds., *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003), 16–45;
- ‘Toward a Materialist-Formalist History of Twentieth-Century Irish Literature in English’, *boundary 2*, 31, 1 (2004), 207–41;
- ‘The Nineteenth-Century Irish Novel: Some Notes and Speculations on Irish Literary Historiography’, in Jacqueline Belanger, ed., *The Irish Novel in the Nineteenth Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 202–21.

Introduction

This volume is about Irish cultural history from 1800 to 2000. Among the topics covered are debates about Ireland's colonial status; the historiography of the nineteenth-century novel; the conditions that contributed to the emergence and waning of literary modernism; the evolution of literary naturalism from the 1890s to the 1990s; and modes of aesthetic ideology in late twentieth-century theatre, fiction, film and popular music. The book is self-consciously essayistic in approach and interrogative and exploratory in spirit. It seeks less to offer definitive new interpretations of this author or that text than to map the intersecting forces that structure the field of modern Irish literary and cultural production, and to query some of the received modes of thinking about the period that inform Irish cultural studies. Broadly speaking, it is an historical materialist work that diagnoses how socio-historical forces converge to shape particular aesthetic ideologies and forms, and how the latter in turn coalesce to mould conceptions of the histories that initially stimulated them. Thus, it moves between local readings of individual authors and texts and broader historical surveys that track the fortunes of particular literary modes over an extended period.

Though it ranges across a long historical period, the volume's main focus is on the second half of the twentieth century, and its concerns throughout are obviously shaped by contemporary cultural and historical debates in Irish studies. Irish cultural criticism in the late twentieth century has been invigorated by the social volatility of the country as it has made the long, difficult transitions from postcolonial economic depression to consumerist opulence in the South, and from a strange late colonial war to an even stranger and still-unsettled 'peace' in the North. In the course of the accelerated overhauls of state and society conducted on both parts of the island during the later decades of the last century especially, many older belief-systems and structures of feeling have been obviously disaggregated. The extended social legitimacy crises, North

and South, triggered in these decades have inevitably generated intellectual and cultural debates more often characterized by short-term tactical skirmishing than by long-range structural analyses. But, on the positive side, these crises also opened fertile space for lively debates about the vicissitudes of modern Irish history and about the direction of Irish society. The intellectual and cultural debates of the period between 1960 and 2000 can now sometimes seem to be distempered by a society too shaken by conflict, too haunted or daunted by a sense of failure. Today, in the early years of the twenty-first century, the greater risk may be that elation at overcoming a difficult history will serve only to reduce the space for debate, and to consolidate new orthodoxies as disabling as any that prevailed in the past. It used to be joked that in Soviet historiography the future was always certain and only the past remained to be predicted. Now, in a post-Cold War climate where it is conventional to assume that the social templates of the future are already given, since all serious alternatives to liberal capitalism have been eliminated from the world stage, that sense of dogmatically stupefied certainty seems to apply more to the artistic and intellectual worlds of affluent Western societies, including Ireland, than to any others. Several essays here consider how this ‘end of history’ structure of feeling weighs upon late twentieth-century Irish literary and cultural production, and on cultural criticism.

Three broad scholarly formations have commanded the field of Irish literary and cultural studies for some time now: revisionism, feminism, and what is now commonly called postcolonial studies. Many of the most substantive works of literary and cultural scholarship here in recent times have emerged from one or other of these intellectual formations or, more accurately, from the contentions between them. These are inevitably crude descriptive categories for large and mobile bodies of scholarship. They can also be obfuscating ones, when they forcibly conscript works by critics who would not identify themselves with any of these formations, or when they occlude the debts that many scholarly projects owe to more than one of these sources. Patently, the cultural and intellectual field is divided along multiple lines of fracture and in response to multiple sources of conflict, not all of which are contained by, or will line up neatly in, these terms. Some strands of contemporary Irish literary or cultural feminism, for example, clearly share much common ground with revisionism; others lean in a more postcolonialist direction; others still are characterized by a scepticism or indifference towards both.¹

1 The extended debates around *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, 5 vols. (1991, 2002) offer a good example of the complexities of the cultural field and of the (mis)identifications possible within it. The fourth and fifth volumes of the anthology, on Irish Women’s Writing, were famously stimulated by a feminist critique of the initial *Field Day Anthology*. Insofar as it ascribed that initial *Anthology*’s underrepresentation of women to the supposed nationalism of the initial editors, and to the anthology’s supposedly nation-building and canon-making intentions, that critique intersected with the revisionist critique of *Field Day*. Yet the fact that the team of scholars that edited these two volumes was prepared to associate this major late twentieth-century feminist undertaking with a ‘completion’ of the original *Anthology* might seem to have identified cultural feminism more broadly, however critically, with the ‘anti-revisionist’ *Field Day*. Indeed, the enterprise drew some revisionist fire on precisely these grounds.

Similarly, there are versions of Irish postcolonialist critique that comport comfortably with a revisionist political outlook whereas other more republican-minded or left-wing versions do not.² There is every reason, then, to avoid overly tidy schematizations of Irish cultural criticism. Nevertheless, the broad impress of revisionist, postcolonial and feminist studies on the production of knowledge in the humanities in recent decades is indisputable, and most conceptualizations of modern Irish social and cultural history are now indebted to one or other, or to some combination, of these formations.

This study's affiliations within this larger field are clear enough. Still, the individual essays maintain a certain agnosticism towards the scholarly sources (and attendant 'worldviews') to which they are most indebted, even if only in the interests of critical self-reflexivity. It is one of the more curious features of Irish cultural criticism that all of the scholarly formations mentioned above represent themselves in fundamentally adversarial terms. Thus, since the 1970s at least, Irish revisionism has presented itself as a dissident intellectual formation dedicated to debunking the reactionary and supposedly obdurately entrenched 'mythologies' that cultural nationalism fashioned in the nineteenth century and then institutionalized in the post-independence state education system.³ However, for postcolonial critics, revisionists are less the anti-establishment dissidents they mistake themselves to be than the avant-garde fraction of a new state intelligentsia determined, firstly, to free historiography from its earlier subordination to militant nationalist agendas and, secondly, to liberalize Irish society (or at least southern society) in ways that upset and provoked the old value-systems of revolutionary nationalism and conservative Catholicism.⁴ For revisionists, postcolonial studies in its turn is merely a project of intellectual restoration, a rearguard effort to rescue the old Sinn Féin worldview under a new 'postmodern' camouflage. Though Irish feminism sometimes finds itself fractured along this revisionist-postcolonialist axis, it nonetheless shares with both formations a fundamentally adversarial disposition. For many feminists, revisionism and postcolonial studies are both deeply masculinist scholarly formations, neither of which addresses itself sufficiently to the patriarchal

2 Interestingly, although revisionist scholarship generally is methodologically conservative and is thus normally dismissive of postmodern or poststructuralist theories, it is often the most poststructuralist versions of postcolonial theory that have most in common politically with revisionism. Where both converge, despite methodological differences, is in their tendency to regard nearly all forms of Irish nationalism as inherently reactionary, or at least in their common disinclination to distinguish between the progressive and retrograde elements in the more militant forms of nationalism.

3 Some of the standard surveys of Irish historical revisionism include Ciaran Brady, ed., *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism 1938–1994* (Dublin, 1994) and Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha and Theo Dorgan, eds., *Revising the Rising* (Derry, 1991). There is as yet no major study of Irish revisionism in either the world of the arts or in that of literary and cultural criticism, though its influence in both is substantial.

4 Terry Eagleton's 'Revisionism Revisited' in his *Crazy John and the Bishop and other Essays on Irish Culture* (Cork, 1998), 308–27, offers a cogent marxian critique of revisionism. For a more 'subalternist' critique, see David Lloyd's 'Outside History: Irish New Histories and the "Subalternity Effect"' in his *Ireland After History* (Cork, 1999), 77–88.

dimensions of Irish society (or academia). By critiquing those forms of gender oppression that others fail to take seriously, feminists claim for themselves an adversarial stance not only vis-à-vis state and society, but also vis-à-vis those other 'radical' intellectual formations within the cultural field that understand themselves in dissident terms.

When every intellectual grouping in Irish studies looks to its opponents and sees essentially 'potentates of the establishment' (residual or emergent) and gazes into its own mirror to discover only anti-establishment 'dissidence,' the potential for intellectual circus is considerable. In this din of dissent, it is easily forgotten that intellectual and cultural debate, however conducted, is monopolized in modern Ireland (as elsewhere of course) by reasonably well-to-do middle-class women and men who typically share a great deal in common despite the constitutive divisions of the intellectual field. Such sibling commonalities include similar modes of education and professional training, shared forms of cultural taste and cultural capital, and, more significantly, a collective structural positioning and vantage-point within the larger social system conferred by their occupation as intellectual workers. These shared experiences and interests surface in relatively standardized languages of argument and analysis, repeated reworkings, via a rather narrow band of methodologies, of relatively small sets of key authors and topics, and reciprocated tolerances for certain modes of licensed ignorance.⁵

Where literary and cultural studies specifically are concerned, these sibling identities across divisions register above all in terms of a widespread tendency to equate political engagement and analysis with thematizing 'the political' in literary or other cultural texts. Conceived thus, political analysis in the cultural sphere essentially amounts to producing new readings of cultural texts or artefacts that foreground political and social themes. The analytical idioms in such cases will undoubtedly be very-up-to-the-moment, but the actual practice (whether in revisionist or postcolonialist or feminist or queer studies, and so on) will still remain largely consonant with the older modes of 'ethical' criticism characteristic of the discipline of literary criticism in its bourgeois meridian.⁶ Whether the object of analysis is a high modernist literary text or popular film, a work of visual art or music, the debate in such instances will predictably be conducted mainly at the level of the semiotic content of the text. This means that more

5 The most obvious form of licensed ignorance across the intellectual field has to do with the Irish language. A capacity in Latin or French, or both, as well as English would be regarded as part of the normal professional competence of any historian or literary critic working on the medieval period in Ireland. However, the same standard of competence in the Irish language is not usually expected of scholars in these disciplines working on the period 1600–1845, even though Ireland was then predominantly Irish-speaking. To give a rather different example, any literary critic working in the field of twentieth-century Irish literature who did not have some knowledge of Shakespeare would almost certainly be considered somewhat philistine by his or her colleagues. But to profess a complete ignorance of, say, economic history or world systems theory might well be considered unremarkable, even a sign of sophistication, since these are commonly viewed within literary circles as vulgar 'sociological' competences.

6 My argument here is much indebted to John Guillory's provocative essay 'Literary Critics as Intellectuals: Class Analysis and the Humanities', in Wai Chee Dimock and Michael T. Gilmore, *Rethinking Class: Literary Studies and Social Formations* (New York, 1994), 107–49.

complex 'sociological' questions about how works of art of any kind, or indeed academic analyses of such works, can actually effect change, go almost totally unexamined. Irish cultural criticism attends remarkably little as a rule to the sedimented, and mostly only slowly-changing, aesthetic ideologies that regulate the production of individual artistic works.⁷ It investigates even less the operations of the institutional networks (of schools and universities; circuits of publishing and performance; cinemas, theatres, museums, galleries; ministries of culture and culture industries) that organize the cultural field and mediate how texts are disseminated to the public and achieve meaning. The changing ways in which cultural and intellectual institutions negotiate their relationship with the domains of the state and the market in late capitalist conditions are equally ignored.⁸ In fine, the Irish universities promote and reward certain textualist modes of humanistic research, and even if they do not actively discourage or legislatively exclude other modes, they don't support them much either. This study cannot claim any great innovative quality for itself in this respect. But in moving things beyond individual author studies and towards the survey of how aesthetic forms and ideologies shape literary production, part of its agenda is to at least nudge cultural criticism in such directions.

Within the existing cultural field, issues of tradition and modernity have been a key site of debate in recent times. Because revisionism, postcolonialism and feminism all conceive of themselves as dissident intellectual formations and even as intellectual avant-gardes of a kind, none, naturally, casts itself as a defender of 'tradition.' Yet whereas revisionists are nearly always enthusiasts of the modernizing thrust of Irish society since the 1960s, postcolonial critics are typically much warier. This is because while modernization in some of its forms may be entirely welcome (as in the various kinds of social liberalization attained in recent decades), the term also clearly serves as alibi for the increasing subjection of nearly every aspect of Irish society (including artistic, academic and intellectual work) to the logic of market forces. But if postcolonialists have good reason to be cautious of the jargon of 'modernization,' a term now almost entirely appropriated by liberals and neo-liberals, they have equal reason to be sceptical about any appeals to 'tradition,' since that latter term has long been the preserve of social conservatives. As a consequence, postcolonial studies has generally found itself

7 Some distinguished exceptions include Seamus Deane's long-range surveys of the intersections of the histories of ideas and aesthetics, especially in *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature* (London, 1985) and *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford, 1997) and Terry Eagleton's studies of form in *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London, 1995). This is not to dismiss strong readings of individual authors or texts, a staple and pleasurable component of any cultural criticism; it is the tendency in Irish studies to treat such readings as the primary site of sociopolitical engagement and analysis that might be questioned.

8 The fact that Raymond Williams's *The Sociology of Culture* (Chicago, 1995) or Pierre Bourdieu's many works dealing with academics and intellectuals, most famously perhaps *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Stanford, 1988), have had such little 'take up' in Irish cultural studies tells its own story. Despite the pioneering efforts of Terence Brown in *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985* (London, 1981), comprehensive studies of Irish intellectual and artistic life in the twentieth century have scarcely ever been attempted by a later generation.

reduced either to repeated deconstructions of the tradition/modernity dichotomy or to valorizing ‘alternative modernities,’ meaning recuperating repertoires of possible developments in the past never realized at the time.⁹ But however valuable such exercises may be, they translate poorly into the praxis-orientated world of the public sphere where the language of modernization governs almost all discussion of social change. Nor does a commitment to ‘alternative modernities’ usually provide much by way of structural analysis or cognitive mapping of the wider global conjunctures that any collective political movement must be able to diagnose to situate itself strategically.¹⁰ Feminists confront a not dissimilar bind. Since feminism was one of the major agents of social modernization in the late twentieth century, and since Irish women have apparently been among the major beneficiaries of both social and economic modernization, feminism in general has been (like marxism or liberalism for that matter) enthusiastically ‘modernizing’ in its general thrust. The more left-wing and postcolonial strands of feminist analysis may share the usual reservations of the contemporary intellectual left about the ways in which ‘modernization’ has come to mean capitalist modernization. But this means that they share, too, the difficulties of articulating a viable alternative to the capitalist modernity from which Ireland has reaped so many rewards in recent times.

Yet however much cultural critics might be at odds about the discourses of modernization, some broadly homologous conceptualizations of the Irish twentieth century seem nonetheless to prevail across these various intellectual formations. They might disagree on other matters, but feminists, revisionists and postcolonialists would seem at least to agree that the society that emerged in (southern) Ireland between independence and the 1960s was overwhelmingly disappointing and unattractive.¹¹ Of course, in many ways this disillusioned sense of the southern state has been around since its inception and on both the left and the right of the political spectrum. Thus, for unionists (north and south), it was axiomatic from the start that post-independent twenty-six county Ireland was intrinsically insular, impoverished, oppressive and theocratic.

9 In the Irish context, arguments about the history and value of alternative possibilities foreclosed by the dominant versions of modernity are most fully developed by Luke Gibbons in *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork, 1996) and Lloyd in *Ireland After History*.

10 The extent of the dilemma involved here, evident as much in the Irish cultural field as any other, is pithily summarized by Fredric Jameson: ‘If free-market positions can be systematically identified with modernity and habitually grasped as representing what is modern, then the free-market people have won a fundamental victory which goes well beyond the older ideological victories. To call this a media victory is to underestimate the displacement onto language and terminology of political struggle today. The point is that the holders of the opposite position have nowhere to go terminologically. The adversaries of the free market, such as the socialists, can only be classed in the negative or privative category of the unmodern, the traditionalist, or, even, ultimately, since they clearly resist progress and modernity, of the hardliners.’ See Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essays on the Ontology of the Present* (London, 2002), 9–10.

11 Where social and cultural life is concerned, far more attention has been devoted to the southern than to the northern state in 1920–60 especially. Terence Brown’s *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History* is typical of the scholarship generally in its concentration on the twenty-six county state, and it is notable that there is no equivalent for its six-county counterpart.

Much of this could be dismissed as mere anti-Catholic bigotry and resentment at the diminution of the Union. But even before Max Weber or R. H. Tawney had identified Protestantism with economic individualism and with a generally modernizing, entrepreneurial and capitalist mentality, it had been conventional in secular intellectual circles to regard Catholicism as an impediment to social or economic progress.¹² So, in many ways the new, largely rural and non-industrialized, and overwhelmingly Catholic Irish Free State came into the world tailor-made to accommodate not just crude Unionist prejudices, but also more respectable sociological and intellectual ones as well. On the left, too, many radical republicans also held that the new state was by definition a failure since it fell so far short of the one-island radical democratic republic they had hoped for. Inveterate antagonists otherwise, the unionist right and the republican left more or less converged on this point at least.

In their different ways, the contemporary revisionist, postcolonialist and feminist critiques of post-independent Ireland are all late twentieth-century legatees to these originary critiques, which they now inflect in their own directions. Thus, for revisionists, the failures of the new state in this period are conventionally charged to its economic and cultural nationalism, to its anti-modern clericalism, and to its incapacity to overcome a 'romantic' commitment to some sort of rural, Gaelic or Catholic utopia. For marxists and the more left-wing postcolonialists, the stress falls instead on the ways in which 'the revolution' was stymied by a comprador bourgeoisie, which repressed more radical social constituencies and concentrated its efforts on keeping the country safe for some form of dependent capitalist development. In feminist analyses, the emphasis falls heavily on the patriarchal dimensions of the new state, and on the ways in which women's agency was written out of the revolutionary period even as the new regime set about disempowering women and confining them, where possible, to the private sphere.

Needless to say, each of these analytics captures real and significant aspects of the harsh and oppressive realities of postcolonial Ireland. If the epoch between 1920 and 1960 has a negative image, it is not without cause. Yet however different they may be in origin and purpose, all of these different critiques of Ireland in this period seem to meet up somewhere in the liberal centre of the intellectual-cultural field at least to create an iconic version of what is now commonly called 'de Valera's Ireland.' In that iconic version, the whole post-independence epoch before the Lemassian turn has become practically a byword for a soul-killing Catholic nationalist traditionalism and in the parlance of much contemporary cultural debate 'de Valera's Ireland' now serves as a reflex shorthand for everything from economic austerity to sexual puritanism, from cultural philistinism to the abuse of women and children.¹³ In many ways, the reaction that led to this stark

12 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London, 1930 [1904–05]); R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London, 1926)

13 No equivalent shorthand exists to designate the oppressiveness of the Northern state in the same period. For a shrewd discussion of what she terms 'de Valera's' overdetermined and somewhat contradictory symbolic potency', see Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, 'Re-Reading the Past: Michael Collins

image of the post-independence state was probably not only inevitable but also even radical and progressive in most of its post-1960s versions. As Fredric Jameson has noted, every strong moment of rupture with an old order seems to require ‘a powerful act of dissociation whereby the present seals off its past from itself and expels and ejects it; an act without which neither the present nor past truly exist, the past not yet fully constituted, the present still a living on within the force field of a past not yet over and done with.’¹⁴ In this sense, the now-conventional negative image of ‘de Valera’s Ireland’ may be understood not just as a creation of post-1960s ‘Lemass’s Ireland,’ but also as a necessary condition for the latter’s self-constitution. For ‘contemporary Ireland’ to emerge, in other words, it had first to create the ‘de Valera’s Ireland’ that would be its repudiated antithesis.

The difficulty is, though, that if ‘de Valera’s Ireland’ has become a magnet-term around which to constellate every negative inference of the word ‘tradition,’ the term ‘Lemass’s Ireland’ or, more commonly, just ‘contemporary Ireland,’ likewise accrues to itself all of the uncritically positive connotations of the word ‘modernity.’ Thus, if one period is conventionally agreed to mean nationalist stagnation and repression, the other, by reflex, comes to mean post-nationalist dynamism and tolerance. These are caricatures of the two epochs, of course, and widely recognized as such, yet their symbolic potency is not necessarily diminished for all that.¹⁵ And when the trajectory of twentieth-century Irish development is configured in this repression-modernization dyad, all sorts of things get drastically simplified. ‘De Valera’s Ireland’ may well have been overwhelmingly repressive, but its repressions were always unequally allocated across classes and genders. Likewise, ‘contemporary Ireland’ may well be dynamic and reforming, but the benefits of such have been as unevenly distributed as were the repressions before. Too often, the dyadic conception of these two eras serves only as a bulwark to sustain inherited modes of dissent, and as a lazy substitute for the more difficult labour of working out the calculus of class and gender power operative in both periods. In other words, the liability of ‘de Valera’s Ireland’ is that even if it began as a tool of critique that enabled a break with the past, today it serves more effectively as a tool to muffle critiques of the post-1960s social and political order. And while cultural critics may readily agree

and Contemporary Popular Culture’, in Robert J. Savage, ed., *Ireland in the New Century: Politics, Culture and Identity* (Dublin, 2003), 174–88. See also Cairtíona Clear, ‘Women in de Valera’s Ireland 1932–48: A Reappraisal’, in Gabriel Doherty and Dermot Keogh, eds., *De Valera’s Ireland* (Cork, 2003), 104–14

¹⁴ See Jameson, *Singular Modernity*, 25.

¹⁵ An exemplary instance of this conception of things is Paul Durcan’s poem, ‘Making Love outside Áras an Uachtaráin’, in which the young poet and his girlfriend make love in the grass outside Áras an Uachtaráin where an aging, blind de Valera reproves them, or is imagined to do so, for their intercourse. In a manner conventional to much post-independence Irish literature, the poem associates nationalist figures with repressiveness, sexual prudery and violence (in a classically Freudian sequence), and equates radicalism with a supposedly audacious transgression of sexual taboos. See Paul Durcan, *Sam’s Cross* (Dublin, 1978), 47. This whole conception of things rests not only on a now commonplace view of de Valera but also on a vulgarization of Freudian theories of sexual repression and liberation.

that the terms 'tradition' and 'modernity' are diagnostically clumsy, the familiar habits of dividing twentieth-century Ireland into 'de Valera's Ireland' and 'Lemass's Ireland' (or 'contemporary Ireland') effectively smuggles that tradition/modernity schema back into our temporal conceptualizations of the whole post-independence period. What gets deconstructed semantically at one level returns to organize conceptions of the century at the level of periodization.

The proper business of any critical theory is not to validate a pre-given political position, whether to the left or right. It is, rather, to track the matrix of oppressive and emancipatory forces at work in every period of modernity, and indeed to be attentive to how even the most emancipatory developments can sometimes collude with or be commandeered by the regressive. Several essays here investigate the aesthetic and intellectual forces that go into the making of 'de Valera's Ireland.' The object of these pieces is not to revise the revisionists, which would be to remain tied to revisionism, even if only oppositionally. Nor is the main motive to salvage that period from what an English historian famously called 'the enormous condescension of posterity,' though this in itself might be a worthy project.¹⁶ Certainly, the intention is not to take issue with the many valuable works that have made it their business to try to understand the more repressive and exploitative realities of the post-independence period. But the aim is to challenge some of the lazier habits and reflexes — operative both in the worlds of art and cultural criticism alike — induced by conceptualizing the century in a manner that associates one whole epoch with static repressiveness and another with dynamic reformism. Beyond that, the broader goal is to locate twentieth-century Irish cultural developments in a more materialist and broader comparativist analytical frame than either nationalist or revisionist cultural scholarship has usually managed to do.

If the interrogative nature of this book risks appearing too indulgent towards an abusively oppressive past to some, it will as likely seem much too grudging of the real achievements of the present to others. However one makes sense of the last century, it can hardly be disputed that most of the people on the island of Ireland now are materially better off and have more social rights and liberties than did their antecedents either when the two states were founded in the early 1920s or even in the early 1960s. This, surely, must be the definitive litmus test of the generally 'progressive' character of the modes of capitalist modernization supervised by the ruling classes in Northern and Southern Irish society in recent decades? Leftists, feminists, and left-of-centre-liberals will rightly argue that if the two Irish states and societies are generally-speaking more socially liberal now than they once were, these boons have not been gifted to them by capitalism in any of its forms, whether autarkic, dependent or neo-liberal. Instead, radical movements from below have had to struggle hard to win such freedoms. These have been secured in recent decades chiefly by the women's liberation movement, trade unions, community organizations, and left-wing or radical democratic campaigns in

16 The phrase is E. P. Thompson's in *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963), 12.

the South. They have been won, at higher cost (because more fiercely resisted), mainly by the civil rights movement, constitutional nationalist reformism, and republican militancy in the North. To this, the defenders of neo-liberal capitalist modernization will argue that however they were won, only the capitalist mode of production can now generate the material affluence needed to sustain those freedoms and to guarantee those liberties. The advances wrested by the various constituencies of what might broadly be called ‘the liberal left’ since the 1960s, in other words, presuppose the very capitalism that these constituencies take as the object of their critique.

Yet even if a great deal of contemporary cultural criticism of whatever kind (postcolonialist, feminist, revisionist) is still struggling conceptually to catch up with Celtic Tiger Ireland and its modes of consumption, some fundamental structural problems of the wider capitalist dispensation are evident.¹⁷ Can capitalist consumerism of the kind that Ireland now enjoys be generalized to the less fortunate peripheries in Asia or South America or devastated Africa or the war-racked Middle East? If it can, then it might well be argued that the Irish experience can serve as a template for other postcolonies, offering them a shining example of transition from the economic destitution and cultural damage of the colonial era to the capitalist land of plenty that lies beyond. Some of the more liberal strands of Irish postcolonial studies now seem disposed towards this roseate view. But what if — as the prevailing conditions of the modern era seem amply to attest — consumerist wealth cannot be globalized and that it is, rather, as Perry Anderson has termed it, an ‘oligarchic wealth,’ the existence of which depends on its restriction to a small minority? As Anderson notes in one of the more considered leftist responses to Francis Fukuyama’s encomium to the historical achievements of liberal capitalism in ‘The End of History?’: ‘Less than a quarter of the world’s population now appropriates eighty-five per cent of world income, and the gap between the shares of the advanced and backward zones has widened over the past half century.’¹⁸ And even if one were to assume, against all appearances, that the extraordinary consumerist affluence of the prevailing capitalist core regions could indeed be generalized to the impoverished peripheries, could the world sustain such

17 The ‘weakest’ critiques from the left — but the most common in artistic, literary and cultural circles — are of the ‘quality of life’ variety, which argue that although capitalism may create materially wealthy societies, it produces modes of social being that are spiritually- or culturally- or time-poor. There may well be much truth to this, but such modes of argument typically treat society as a homogenous bloc and fail to distinguish between the classes which are the beneficiaries and those which are the most exploited in the system. Distributionist critiques are ‘stronger,’ since these at least seek to diagnose how wealth is apportioned across classes and constituencies. But even distributionist critiques are limited because, even when they demonstrate how exploitatively capitalist wealth is generated and how unevenly it is divided, this does not in itself establish that some other mode of production would necessarily fare better. Unless harnessed to a conception of how some non-capitalist society would do better, the main effect, whatever the intention, of distributionist critiques is reformist.

18 Perry Anderson, ‘The Ends of History’, in *A Zone of Engagement* (London, 1992), 279–375, 353. See also Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’, *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), 1–18, a longer version of which later appeared in Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992).

extension in any event? Doesn't the overwhelming immediate evidence seem to indicate, to cite Anderson again, that 'If all of the peoples of the earth possessed the same number of refrigerators and automobiles as those of North America and Western Europe, the planet would become uninhabitable. In the global ecology of capital today, the privilege of the few requires the misery of the many, to be sustainable.'¹⁹

Even within those core zones that currently monopolize the world's wealth, greater affluence commonly goes hand-in-hand with greater levels of inequality between classes. The defenders of capitalism normally reply that even the poorest underclasses in the West are vastly better off now than were the modestly well-to-do middle classes of yesteryear. But this ignores the economic logic of late consumer capitalism, which requires a mode of production that generates not only affluence but also endemic frustration and dissatisfaction. Only by manufacturing a perpetually dissatisfied sense of want can consumer capitalism sustain the continual demand for the unlimited volumes of goods it needs to sell in order to reproduce itself. In the more harshly puritanical capitalist societies of the past, religious value-systems had tried to subordinate individual need to some supposedly higher collective purpose.²⁰ Even if the underclasses of the modern Western world are in fact moderately better off than earlier generations of their kind, the consumerist breakdown of the older religious or secular-left value-systems that valorized things other than wealth accumulation may well have negated any such material advance. Lacking now either the consolations of religion or that sense of collective purpose that the socialist conception of the proletariat's historical mission had once conferred on them, the underclasses are at once exposed to the most rawly exploitative aspects of the consumer society and yet are normally the recipients of only its most low-grade material benefits. Today, Irish society as a whole may be extravagantly wealthy compared to what it was a few decades ago, but what may be revised out of existence is not just the old economic or cultural nationalism of an earlier epoch, but also the old republican credo of liberty, equality, fraternity. In the new neo-liberal Ireland, is liberty — however construed — the only term in that trinity now recognized as a social value? How much of the republican commitment to equality and fraternity (meaning collective solidarity in contemporary idioms) — whether these latter values are defined in national or global terms — is the Republic of Ireland prepared to trade off in the name of its dynamic capitalist competitiveness?

The basic point at issue here is that if 'contemporary Ireland' has escaped the miseries of 'de Valera's Ireland' to secure the benefits of 'the Celtic Tiger,' it has done so essentially by hitching its fortunes to global capitalism. To say as much is not to moralistically indict the society for having done so; in a world that offers so little viable alternative, to have opted otherwise would have been perverse. But far from it being, as its Fukuyamian

19 Anderson, 'The Ends of History', 352–53

20 For a useful critical review of the literature on consumerism, see Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge, 1997) and for a broad historical survey, see Peter N. Stearns, *Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire* (London, 2001).

defenders suppose, a system whose long-term viability has been definitively attested by its capacity to see off its twentieth-century rivals, the central case against capitalism today is that it breeds on a global scale social polarization and ecological crisis of a magnitude that portend disasters as great as any that afflicted the last century. Contemporary Ireland, in short, may have escaped the crises of the autarkic capitalism of ‘de Valera’s Ireland,’ but the new neo-liberal version it has embraced has its own structural crises in abundance.

However, the quandary for the contemporary left now is that capitalism’s difficulty is not necessarily socialism’s opportunity. While the fundamental socialist critique of capitalism’s systemic contradictions seems as cogent as ever, the left’s capacity to elaborate some kind of viable order that could replace capitalism was probably never weaker. The problem is not that it is difficult to imagine a world better than the current one. It is rather that it has become difficult, in the wake of socialism’s own catastrophic historical failures, to make a persuasive case that socialist modernization does not simply offer either a less functional form of modernization than capitalism (as in the Soviet model) or else only some more democratically-tempered or moderately-restrained versions of capitalism, which would still be vulnerable in any case to the consumerist contradictions and ecological destructiveness of capitalism proper. After all, the triumphal post-Cold War neo-liberal claim registered in Fukuyama’s ‘The End of History?’ was not that liberal democracy was or would ever be a perfect system; only that all attempts to elaborate a superior alternative had failed, and thus historically eliminated themselves. As Anderson’s response to Fukuyama reminded its readers, an effective critique of ‘The End of History?’ could not just be content to point out the manifold problems that liberal capitalism seems unlikely to resolve. It must also be able to show that there are powerful systemic alternatives available that Fukuyama had discounted.²¹

To date, very little Irish writing, Irish film, or Irish art generally, can be said to have contemplated with much distinction the vagaries or vicissitudes of the new global order of which Ireland is a constituent part. Nor have literary or cultural criticism distinguished themselves in this regard. For all the talk of a new postnationalism, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism in Irish society, all of the intellectual formations in Irish studies are remarkably localized and narrowly anglocentric or eurocentric in their fundamental dispositions. Time alone will not guarantee a qualitatively better response, since time is only an index, not an agent of change, and some radicalizing transformation in the ideologies and modes of Irish cultural production and analysis will be necessary if positive developments are to occur.²² It remains to be seen whether (or how) revisionist,

21 Anderson, ‘The Ends of History’, 336, 357–58

22 It is sometimes argued that Irish literature and art have been so habituated to dealing with poverty and backwardness that it will take time for them to catch up with the new realities of Irish society. Such arguments simply presuppose positive change, but they cannot identify either the means by which it will come about, or the valence it might have. Is there any reason to presuppose that cultural change must be radical or inflected in any broadly left direction? Is not the converse as likely?

feminist or postcolonialist cultural criticism can evolve to meet the new challenges of the emergent domestic and international conjuncture. If the colonial and autarkic modes of capitalism visited forms of outrageous fortune on Ireland in the past, neoliberal capitalism visits as bad and much worse on many other places today. In such a world, even the best of good fortunes will always have its outrageous dimension.

Irish Studies, Colonial Questions: Locating Ireland in the Colonial World

Questions about Ireland's colonial status, and about the country's relationship to the British Empire, did not begin in the 1980s. However, for reasons both domestic and international, these topics began to receive sustained academic attention and became the focus of considerable controversy in Irish studies in that decade. In retrospect, the Field Day Theatre Company's staging of Brian Friel's *Translations* in 1980 might be seen as a constitutive moment in the emergence of postcolonial studies in Ireland. The play raised a cluster of issues about British state expansion in nineteenth-century Ireland, about the politics of cultural collision and language change, and about the role of knowledge in the imaginative appropriation of territory, that would subsequently become key issues for an emergent Irish postcolonial studies as well. Later in the decade, Field Day also published a number of pamphlets that implicitly situated modern Irish culture within a colonial framework.¹ The small but growing body of work that shared this critical perspective received further stimulus in 1988 when Field Day commissioned pamphlets by Edward Said, Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton, each of which examined some aspect of modern Irish culture within the context of colonialism, imperialism and anti-colonial nationalism.² In the same year, David Cairns and Shaun Richards published their seminal *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture*, the first extended historical survey of Irish literature to draw explicitly on the wider international body of postcolonial cultural

1 See especially Seamus Deane, *Civilians and Barbarians* (Derry, 1983), and Declan Kiberd, *Anglo-Irish Attitudes* (Derry, 1985), both reprinted in *Ireland's Field Day* (London, 1985).

2 Edward Said, *Yeats and Decolonization* (Derry, 1988), Fredric Jameson, *Modernism and Imperialism* (Derry, 1988), and Terry Eagleton, *Nationalism: Irony and Commitment* (Derry, 1988), later republished in Seamus Deane, introd., *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (Minneapolis, 1990)

criticism inspired by Said's *Orientalism*.³ The increasing significance that postcolonial theory was beginning to assume in Irish cultural studies was indicated in the early 1990s with the inclusion of essays by Luke Gibbons, David Lloyd and Clair Wills in a special issue of the *Oxford Literary Review* on colonialism.⁴ All three essays explored Ireland's particular place within the categories of British nineteenth-century colonial and racial discourse. Since then a substantial body of criticism by some of Ireland's leading cultural critics has appeared that draws extensively on the theoretical resources of postcolonial studies. Key works include Thomas Boylan and Timothy Foley's, *Political Economy and Colonial Ireland* (1992); David Lloyd's *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Postcolonial Moment* (1993) and *Ireland After History* (1999); Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland* (1995); Luke Gibbons's *Transformations in Irish Culture* (1996); and Seamus Deane's *Strange Country* (1997).⁵

Postcolonial studies in Ireland is sometimes conceived as an offshoot of literary or cultural studies, but the scholarship and controversies emerging from the 1980s onwards were indebted not only to the wider international emergence of postcolonial studies but also to concurrent developments in British and Irish historiography. The development of the historical enterprises sometimes referred to as the 'the Atlantic archipelago' and the 'new British history' are noteworthy in this context.⁶ Both challenged, in various ways, twentieth-century British historiography's insular amnesia about the British imperial enterprise. The new British history took as its object the interconnections between English state formation and the extension of English control over the rest of the British Isles, while the Atlantic model investigated the wider connections between developments in the British Isles and Britain's westward expansion into North America and the Caribbean. Long before the 1980s, Irish historians, notably David Beers Quinn and Nicholas Canny, working with the Atlantic model of history had been busily publishing on the connections (personnel, trade, practices, and mentalités) that linked the early modern English plantations in Ireland with the contemporaneous establishment of British colonies in North America.⁷

3 David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* (Manchester, 1988)

4 Luke Gibbons, 'Race Against Time: Racial Discourse and Irish History', *Oxford Literary Review*, 13, 1-2 (1991), 95-113, subsequently republished in Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork, 1996); David Lloyd, 'Race Under Representation', *Oxford Literary Review*, 13, 1-2 (1991), 62-94; Clair Wills, 'Language Politics, Narrative, Political Violence', *Oxford Literary Review*, 13, 1-2 (1991), 20-60

5 Thomas A. Boylan and Timothy P. Foley, *Political Economy and Colonial Ireland* (London, 1992); David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Durham, 1993) and *Ireland After History* (Cork, 1999); Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London, 1995); Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*; Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing Since 1790* (Oxford, 1997). Other book-length contributions include Fintan Cullen, *Visual Politics: The Representation of Ireland 1750-1930* (Cork, 1997) and Gerry Smyth, *Decolonisation and Criticism: The Construction of Irish Literature* (London, 1998).

6 For some suggestive overviews on the development of the 'New British' and 'Atlantic' models of historiography, see the special forum on 'The New British History in Atlantic Perspective' in *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999).

7 Quinn's works include *The Elizabethans and the Irish* (Ithaca, 1966) and *Ireland and America: Their Early Associations, 1500-1640* (Liverpool, 1991). Among Canny's numerous publications, see: 'The Ideology of

The historical research agenda pioneered by Quinn and energetically developed by Canny has generated considerable dispute in its own right. Its critics have suggested that early modern Ireland was culturally less alien to the British than the more remote and only recently ‘discovered’ Americas and that Ireland’s constitutional relationship to the British crown was more ambivalent than that of the American colonies.⁸ For such critics, Ireland must be considered ‘a constitutional anomaly, neither the “kingdom” of England nor a “colony” in north America’.⁹ Nevertheless, despite the controversy that Canny’s work provoked, the emergence of postcolonial studies in the 1980s generated more intense academic heat for several reasons. First, the disputes provoked by the work of Beers Quinn and Canny had been restricted to historians, but postcolonial studies extended the debate about Ireland’s colonial condition across several disciplines, thus lending the controversies more interdisciplinary and methodological dimensions. Second, while the Atlantic and (to a lesser extent) the new British histories unsettled the state-centrism of the dominant strains within both Irish and British nationalist historiography, both modes of scholarship remained concentrated on the early modern period, whereas the works that appeared under the rubric of postcolonial studies in the 1980s asserted that colonialism was not simply a remote historical phenomenon but something that remained critical to the development of Irish society until the twentieth century, and that its consequences continued to shape developments in the post-partition period as well. To many, such claims represented not only an unwarranted exaggeration of the importance of colonialism but also an unwelcome ‘politicization’ of Irish scholarship.¹⁰

However, the emergence and reception of postcolonial studies in Ireland must ultimately be linked not only to domestic and international intellectual cross-currents, but also to the socio-political climate on the island at the time. The social toll of the

English Colonization: From Ireland to America’, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 30, 4 (1973), 575–98; *The Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland: A Pattern Established* (New York, 1976); *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (Princeton, 1987); and *Kingdom and Colony: Ireland and the Atlantic World, 1560–1800* (Baltimore, 1988). See also the contributions by Canny and others in K. R. Andrews, N. P. Canny and P. E. H. Hair, eds., *The Westward Enterprise: English Activities in Ireland, the Atlantic, and America 1480–1650* (Liverpool, 1978) and in Nicholas Canny, ed., *The Oxford History of British Empire*, 1, *The Origins of Empire* (Oxford, 1998).

- 8 For representative critiques, see T. C. Barnard, ‘Crisis of Identity Among Irish Protestants, 1641–1845’, *Past and Present*, 127 (1990), 39–83; Karl Bottigheimer, ‘Kingdom and Colony: Ireland in the Westward Enterprise 1536–1660’, in Andrews, Canny and Hair, *Westward Enterprise*, 45–64; Ciaran Brady, ‘The Road to the View: On the Decline of Reform Thought in Tudor Ireland’, in Patricia Coughlan, ed., *Spenser and Ireland; An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Cork, 1989), 25–45; Hiram Morgan ‘Mid-Atlantic Blues’, *The Irish Review*, 11 (1991–92), 50–55; and Steven G. Ellis, ‘Writing Irish History: Revisionism, Colonialism, and the British Isles’, *The Irish Review*, 27 (1994), 1–21.
- 9 Ciaran Brady and Raymond Gillespie, eds., *Natives and Newcomers: Essays on the Making of Irish Colonial Society, 1534–1641* (Dublin, 1986), 17
- 10 Examples include Denis Donoghue, ‘Fears for Irish Studies in an Age of Identity Politics’, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 21 Nov. 1997; David Krause, ‘Review Article: The Reinvention of Ireland’, *Irish University Review*, 27, 2 (1997), 236–44; and Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1994), 22–44.

long economic recession that had continued in the South since the early 1970s and the political deadlock, hunger strikes, and military conflict in the North created an aggravated political and intellectual atmosphere in which the word ‘colonial’ carried a volatile historical and semantic baggage that disturbed many. Since the 1970s, the dominant intellectual responses to the economic and political conflicts that afflicted the island had been shaped by variants of modernization theory and revisionist historiography. Based on a crude dichotomy between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ societies, modernization theories sought to explore the institutional arrangements, cultural values and other social variables that might allow traditional societies to become modern as quickly and effectively as possible.¹¹ From this perspective, the problems that bedevilled Irish society — whether political violence and sectarianism in the North or conservative Catholic nationalism and economic inefficiency in the South — were understood to mean that Ireland remained a dysfunctional traditional society that had still to make the necessary transition to a properly modern social order.

The popularity of modernization discourse in both political and academic milieux is at least partially explained by its discursive suppleness, and by its consequent capacity to lend itself to a wide range of political positions and agendas.¹² ‘Modernity as such,’ Francis Mulhern comments, ‘has no necessary social content: it is a form of “temporalization”, an invariant production of present, past and future that “valorizes the new” and, by that very act, “produces the old”, along with the characteristic modes of its embrace, the distinctively modern phenomena of traditionalism and reaction.’¹³ Irish liberals, genuinely concerned to secularize the Catholic-dominated official culture consolidated in the Irish Republic after independence, had used the tradition/modernity dichotomy very effectively to argue that Irish social legislation needed to be modernized to bring the country into line with the rest of Western Europe. However, the same dichotomy could equally well be used to advance the rather different interests of neo-liberals less concerned with social emancipation than with the emancipation of international capital from all sorts of traditional constraints such as state or trade-union regulation. Modernization discourse also exercised considerable attraction for some sections of the Irish left on both sides of the border. Some liberals and leftists, dismayed that the Irish political landscape did not conform to the right–left divisions common to most Western European societies, seemed to believe that only when a European

11 For a more detailed analysis of modernization theory, see Jorge Larrain, *Theories of Development: Capitalism, Colonialism and Dependency* (Oxford, 1989), esp. 85–110. For an incisive critique of the limits of modernization theory as a mode of comparative social analysis, see Dean C. Tipps, ‘Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 15 (1973), 199–226.

12 For an incisive critique of modernization discourse in the Irish context, a discourse he terms ‘the cultural dominant of the nineties’ and ‘the preferred code of advocacy and dissent’, see Francis Mulhern’s *The Present Lasts a Long Time: Essays in Cultural Politics* (Cork, 1998), 1–28, 20.

13 Mulhern, *The Present Lasts a Long Time*, 20. Mulhern’s critique draws on Peter Osborne’s *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London, 1995).

modernization had enabled Ireland to overcome ‘the idiocy of rural life’ in the South and the ‘atavism’ of sectarianism in the North, would Irish social democracy finally make its belated rendezvous with history.¹⁴

For many, one of the main attractions of postcolonial studies as it took shape in Ireland in the 1980s was its capacity to destabilize the regnant intellectual assumptions of both modernization discourse and revisionist historiography. Like modernization theory, postcolonial studies seeks to articulate the systemic connections between the various crises that affect Irish society, north and south, but it does so in a manner that disputes crucial tenets of the older orthodoxy. From the perspective of postcolonial studies, modernization discourse is simply a contemporary variant on the nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology of evolutionary progress, the occluded side of which has always been European imperialism and the colonial subordination of the greater part of the world to metropolitan domination. By focusing overwhelmingly upon variables relating to indigenous aspects of social culture and structure, modernization theories generally display indifference to the wider systemic dimensions of economic and political imperialism. Even in those cases where they do accord significance to external forces, modernization theorists tend to evaluate ‘impact’ in terms of the diffusion of ideas, values and expectations, but rarely attend to the structural composition of the wider world system that constrains and conditions such interactions. Where modernization discourse consistently locates modern Ireland within an apparently self-contained Western European context and a foreshortened time span in which the past is reductively coded as ‘tradition’, the latter conceived as a negative force that acts mainly as an impediment to progress, postcolonial discourse insists on the need to understand Irish historical development in terms both of the *longue durée* and of the wider geographical span of Western colonial capitalism. Both modernization discourse and Irish revisionist historiography stress the reactionary nature of Irish nationalism, especially its more militant versions, but postcolonial discourse has suggested that Irish nationalism can only be understood contextually as the complex outcome of local interactions with an aggressively-expanding imperialist world economy. Revisionist historiography and modernization studies have both been obsessed with the ‘high’ history of nation and state formation, with the narrative of the political élites that shaped Irish state apparatuses. Postcolonial discourse, in contrast, has sought to develop a more

14 For a revisionist-leftist overview of southern Irish society informed by a modernization perspective, see Ellen Hazelkorn and Henry Patterson, ‘The New Politics of the Irish Republic’, *New Left Review*, 207 (1994), 49–71. See also Tom Nairn, ‘The Curse of Rurality: The Limits of Modernisation Theory’, in John A. Hall, ed., *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism* (Cambridge, 1998), 107–34, 107–08. For both articles, what Nairn calls the ‘curse of rurality’ seems to be the determinant explanation for conservatism and violence in Irish society, and Ireland’s entry into the European Union is undialectically conceived in each case as an unequivocal moment of emancipation. Nairn’s thesis that the upsurge of ethno-nationalist violence around the globe in recent decades can be traced to ‘the spell of rurality’ displays a remarkable lack of interest in issues of imperialism and state oppression in many of these regions.

critical understanding of the various forms of subaltern social struggles largely written out of the dominant modes of Irish historiography, whether in bourgeois nationalist or revisionist versions.¹⁵

For a variety of reasons, then, the applicability of postcolonial studies to the understanding of Irish culture and society, and the question as to whether Ireland was or was not a colony, have never been 'purely' scholarly or academic issues. Methodological differences, different disciplinary protocols and practices, and extra-academic political ideologies and allegiances all came into contentious, and sometimes confused and confusing, play with each other on this issue. For some, to use the word 'colonial' in an Irish context in recent decades has been tantamount to giving intellectual succour to the Provisional IRA; for others, the word emphasized only the negative aspects of Ireland's relationship to the United Kingdom at a time when it was important to build new and better relations with that state. The terms 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' also seemed to controvert the idea, shared by nearly all political parties in the South especially, that Irish people should forget the past and get on with integrating themselves into European mainstream culture where their future now lay. Differences about whether or not Ireland should be regarded as a colony do not tidily organize themselves along conventional 'right' and 'left' fault-lines and render the ensuing controversies more intricate and acrimonious, even if not always more enlightening. It is against this complex socio-political and intellectual-methodological background that any attempt to weigh questions about Ireland's colonial status must be evaluated.

2

The question about Ireland's colonial status can be posed and inflected in a variety of ways. For some critics, the essential question is whether Ireland can legitimately be considered a colony just like Britain's other overseas possessions. For others, the more pressing issue is whether colonialism played a significant role or not in Irish historical development and in what periods (if any) its significance was most consequential. Does the situation in Northern Ireland, for example, represent the continued salience of a colonial dimension in Irish politics or has colonialism long since ceased to be relevant to contemporary matters? If colonialism has actually left any substantive socio-cultural legacies in its wake, what form do they take and how are they to be addressed?¹⁶

15 This aspect of the postcolonial studies project is developed most forcefully by David Lloyd in 'Regarding Ireland in a Postcolonial Frame' and 'Outside History: Irish New Histories and the "Subalternity Effect"'; both essays are in *Ireland After History*.

16 This essay was completed prior to the publication of Stephen Howe's *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford, 2000). Since any substantive engagement with Howe's study would require a separate essay in its own right, this will not be attempted here. The most comprehensive review of Irish scholarship on the colonial question to date, Howe's book has been widely welcomed by revisionist critics especially as a decisive critique of Irish postcolonial studies. While it does usefully critique some of the

For sceptics, the contention that the Irish historical experience resembles that of other colonized countries is simply a species of auto-exoticism with little conceptual merit. Three key objections to the conception of Irish history in colonial terms are consistently cited. The first is that the Irish situation is much more usefully compared to those of other Western European societies, especially to other small peripheral societies dominated by more powerful neighbours, than it is to those of colonized societies in more distant quarters of the globe. In geographic, religious, racial, cultural and economic terms — so this argument runs — Ireland was always an intrinsic part of Western Europe. Hence attempts to consider its historical development in terms of non-European colonized countries tend inevitably to eclipse the intricate network of connections that bind Ireland to its immediate geo-cultural locale. This line of argument has essentially to do with propinquity: its operative assumption is that countries tend inevitably to be shaped by developments in their immediate environs and that Western Europe thus provides the appropriate, indeed inevitable, framework for any comparative analysis of Irish society.¹⁷

more tendentious arguments about Ireland's colonial status, Howe's overall grasp of contemporary Irish cultural theory is weak and many of his arguments about Irish nationalism, which are heavily indebted to revisionist scholarship in the first instance, are quite debatable. Moreover, revisionists who dispute the whole idea that Ireland can be considered a colony in any sense will hardly find much comfort for their own positions in Howe's conclusion that Ireland has had: 'A colonial past, then, yes; though one that took unique hybrid forms, involving extensive integration and consensual partnership as well as exploitation and coercion. And only as part, and not on all levels the dominant part, of an extremely complex and unusual set of legacies shaping the historical present' (232). The circularity and shadow-boxing inherent in this mode of argument should be evident. As the present essay will indicate, many colonial situations could be characterized as 'hybrid forms'; there is nothing aberrant or unique about this and, therefore, to say that Ireland was a colonial hybrid is not to say very much one way or the other. Nearly every mode of colonial power also involved elements of co-operation and 'consensual partnership' on behalf of some sections of the colonized peoples; there is nothing specifically Irish about this either, though the way the sentence highlights the matter seems to infer that this was at least somehow unusual. Colonialism by definition also implies some form of 'integration' of colony and metropole; perhaps Howe wishes to suggest that the degree of integration was exceptional in the Irish case. But even were this the case, and it probably was, then it would not thereby follow that the consequences of integration were any less 'colonial' — indeed, the most successful modes of colonialism might well be those where the colonized society is disaggregated to the degree that very little of it remains intact and 'integration' into the colonizing society on the latter's own terms is the only option left to the 'natives'. Finally, in no colonial situation, even in undisputed instances like those of India or Africa, would one argue that colonialism was the whole story or, as Howe puts it, more than 'only as part, and not on all levels the dominant part' of the historical legacies shaping the present. In sum, the effect of Howe's passage is to suggest that Ireland can be considered colonial only in a highly qualified sense, but what he says of Ireland might be said of many (if not indeed all) colonies. In passages such as this, Howe seems implicitly to assume some 'classical' colonial situation to which Ireland fails to correspond, even though, elsewhere in the study, he dismisses the idea that there is some 'classical' colonial model.

¹⁷ The objection based on ideas of physical propinquity is developed in Barnard, 'Crisis of Identity Among Irish Protestants 1641–1685', 43. The emphasis on propinquity in Irish studies displays a conceptual indebtedness to 'area studies' modes of scholarship.