

David Lloyd

Irish Times

Temporalities of Modernity



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Irish Times is dedicated to Seamus Deane, who makes space for the possible to occur.

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Introduction

That the past is another country is an all too often cited dictum. Just as commonly held, if less often stated so baldly, is the belief that another country is the past. Coeval with the observer or the visitor, the colonizer or the tourist, that other country will seem caught nonetheless in a time-lag, trapped in a stage of development, or non-development, that represents a moment in the past of the more modern outsider. In its backwardness that country will appear savage, or feudal, or perhaps merely a little quaint, a suitable object for nostalgia and romanticization. Like many another former colony or periphery, and exceptional only in the specific inflections that particular geographies and histories give to any place, Ireland has seemed to play this iconic role throughout modernity. Not only strangers, but often enough even its own inhabitants, well schooled as we are in the attitudes of an assumed modernity, have viewed it as ‘another country’, caught in the webs of another time and struggling to emerge from them. Ireland has accordingly been subject to the whole gamut of responses such an iconicity calls forth. From the sentimentalization of its picturesque survivals to the violent repression of its bloody-minded and irrational violence, these responses have sought over and again to fix, with all the ambiguity of that term, the remnants of other times that appear as the signs of Ireland’s incivility.

Faced with such judgements of our backwardness, and their often destructive consequences, it has been tempting to the historical revisionist to embrace the idea of Ireland’s modernization, its leaps forward at various critical junctures over the last two hundred years, whether at the moment of the Great Famine of 1845–52, at the advent of partial independent statehood in 1922, or, more recently, on the ‘rocky road’ of programmatic economic modernization that led from the Whitaker Report of 1959 to the unprecedented growth of the last decade or so. If that last period continues, in an orgy of public narcissism, to be celebrated and wondered at, it is not least because of what

we are held to have put behind us. We have commemorated and laid to rest the spectre of the Famine; we have, in becoming good Europeans, emerged from the shadow of our continuing postcolonial dependence on Britain and enjoy parity rather than peripherality in relation to the Continent of which we were always, culturally as well as economically, a part; we have abandoned our servile subordination to the conservative mores and dogmas of the Catholic Church and the associated social and cultural conservatism of the state; we have succeeded in putting an end to the politics of the gun in the North and even reached the point of power-sharing in Stormont between obdurately opposed political entities and personalities. We have, it seems, in every respect moved on and left behind us all the symptoms of an uncured backwardness.

And yet, ‘What then ...?’ as Plato’s ghost might have said. What if we have merely exchanged dependence on Britain for integration into a European superstate and a new mode of capitalist domination, becoming collaborators in an exacerbated regime of accumulation that continues to widen the gap between the world’s rich and the world’s poor? What if, within the island, the consequence of material prosperity and unprecedented growth has been equally to widen the gap between rich and poor in a nation that once saw one of the most equitable distributions of wealth of any postcolonial state? What if the consequence of prosperity is that Ireland, traipsing as always with blithe insouciance into all the problems that earlier ‘developed’ countries have discovered in their own modernizing projects, is now facing urban sprawl, inflated real estate, creeping cultural homogenization, environmental degradation and, inevitably as other ‘peripheral’ European nations match our comparative advantages, a new cycle of economic downturn? What if one of the effects of our obedience to Europe, in a moment when we have moved from being a nation of emigrants to one of net immigration and greater cultural and racial diversity, is the imposition of the racist tenets of Fortress Europe to the point of altering our constitution to found nationality not upon the republican principle of birth but on the regressive idea of purity of blood and descent?

To invoke these indubitably negative consequences of Ireland’s recently accelerated programme of modernization is not to suggest that the achievements of this period should be discounted. However poorly its new wealth may have been distributed and however thoughtlessly that wealth may have been squandered rather than reinvested in lasting welfare, it is doubtless good that Ireland and Irish people should be better off materially and, material goods aside, that the culture should, in consequence of the very immigration that the state seeks to curtail, have become more diverse and more open. But modernization, which has always been another term for capitalist rationalization, is a deeply contradictory process. It may lead, on the one hand, to the critique of established modes of domination and the shaping of emancipatory possibilities; on the other, to the concentration and consolidation of power in the increasingly alienated structures of the state and corporations. These contradictory processes are what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer long ago saw as effects of ‘the dialectic of enlightenment’ — the peculiar and baleful logic by which the critical dimension of enlightenment reason had

as its corollary the extension of rationalization and domination over both nature and an increasingly 'administered' society.¹ The modernization of Irish society, over the past two hundred years and in recent decades, has not escaped the effects of this logic. We are no less subject than moderns elsewhere to the peculiarly regressive obeisance to the twin fetishes of commodification and development. Modernity has its own forms of backwardness and superstition that are nowhere more evident than in the common sense of capitalism, whose disastrous global impact we are only just beginning to comprehend.

Founded, however, on their intimate observation of two of the most advanced industrial societies of their time, Germany and the United States, Adorno and Horkheimer's theses on modernity accommodate only one, immanent form of the contradictions of modernity. The value of a postcolonial critique of modernity that emanates from locations once considered peripheral is that it supplements the recognition of the internal contradictions of modernization with the apprehension of other forms of unevenness, forms of unevenness that call into question the historicist narrative that understands modernity as the progress from the backward to the advanced, from the pre-modern to the modern. Such a narrative is already contained within the modernizing process historicism takes as its object. It views social and cultural elements that resist modernization as residues of ideas and practices that belong to the past and remain to be overcome. Symptoms of an obstinate backwardness, these elements are stuck in a past that is opposed to the inevitable advent of progress and accordingly have no future. If they remain, they remain as ruins, fragments of no longer functional structures that will eventually be worn away. From such historicism, the idea that residual elements of the past might persist into the present with some real differential significance is utterly remote. The very fact that they have been damaged in the brutal march of progress becomes a judgement against their potential to bear any human value, to conserve, even in that damage, the outlines of utopian desires that might challenge the dogmas of modernity. Equally remote is the idea that the damaged remnants of the past are not fixed and frozen survivals of backward practices, but formations that find ways to live on in transformation, counterpointing modernity critically by representing, however weakly or even self-destructively, alternative ways of living. Paradoxically, the very acknowledgement that they have suffered damage and were prevented from unfolding the extent of their potential guards against nostalgic projection: these remnants are not the regressive images of some impossible golden age and their promise of alternatives could only be realized with the advent of the justice whose absence they protest. The 'empty, homogeneous time' that stretches between tradition and modernity in the historicist scheme is necessarily void of such alternatives.

1 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York, 1972).

The essays gathered in *Irish Times* are committed in various ways both to an alternative conception of historical time and to the view that the temporality of modernization in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland is rifted with formations that live on as the altered shape of practices which, rendered unviable by the inroads of colonial capitalist rationalization, find new and resistant ways to persist. Formations that are recalcitrant to capitalist logic and therefore targeted for destruction are in the first place not backward remainders of outmoded traditions, but already adaptations and modifications of older formations in response to previous confrontations with earlier forms of modernization. What that implies is, in the second place, that modernity does not replace tradition, but that modern forms and institutions emerge always in differential relation to their non-modern and recalcitrant counterparts. On the one hand, for example, the institutions of the modern state emerge in response to the resistance of the colonized and are not imposed in some perfected or fully realized form upon a backward population; on the other, these new institutions of the state call forth among the colonized new modes of resistance that are not, for all that, easily subsumed into modern categories. The modern state and the practices of the colonized continually react upon and displace one another. What Raymond Williams designates the residual may furnish the forms, as I have elsewhere suggested, for what he calls the emergent.² In this respect, rather than extirpating non-modern practices and values, colonial modernity may — as, I argue in chapter 5, James Connolly recognized — in fact ensure their living on.

While the essays in this volume begin and end with the figure of the ruin, what is evoked is not the picturesque notion of the remainder that decorates the landscape with the image of the reconciliation of past destruction, nor even the elegiac counterpart of that notion, which would translate destruction into beauty or loss into nostalgia, but a conception of the ruin as the image of a continuing violence or ruination that afflicts at once the present and the unsubsumed remnants of the past. If the work of modernity is in effect to obliterate both the memory and the present consciousness of its violence, and to naturalize progress as the self-evident form of human time, then the ruin stands as a kind of uneroded sill that both recalls destruction and comes into conjunction with the obstinate refusal in the present to accept that there are no alternatives. As I argue in chapter 1, 'Overture: Ruins/Runes', the ruin has the form of myth, if one understands myth, as Ashis Nandy does, not as the mystified relation of superstitious cultures to an irrational cosmos, but as a form of thinking that remains interpretively open to both the past and the present. The ruins that dot the Irish landscape are the signs of alternative possibilities, of potentials in the past that have not been exhausted by or for the present. In the final essay, 'Ruination: Partition and the Expectation of Violence', the ruins of the past are constellated with those of the present in the form of the wrecked cars that punctuate the Donegal landscapes of Allan deSouza's photographs. Ruins of

2 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), 121–27; David Lloyd, *Ireland after History* (Cork, 1999), 78.

contemporary commodity forms, these images evoke the spectre of an always imminent contemporary violence, that of the state of emergency declared in a moment of political terror that brings to light the founding violence of the state. But rather than normalize that state of exception, deSouza's photography indicates how violence saturates the normal and everyday with its threatening imminence. Out of such images there emerges an alternative conception of history, not rendered as the record of a gradually imposed civility but as transforming the melancholy of loss into a refusal to let go of the possibilities of the past.

No moment in Irish history is more saturated with the consciousness of loss than that of the Great Famine of the mid-nineteenth century. Not only the sheer number of lives needlessly lost as a result of the subsistence crisis that followed the failure of the potato crop, but furthermore the deliberate use of famine relief projects, eviction, and emigration under duress to eradicate ways of life that had been recalcitrant to capitalism, mark the Famine as a colonial catastrophe. If not deliberately genocidal, British policy nonetheless sought to make of the Famine a means both to the clearance of what they regarded as a 'redundant' population and to the transformation and modernization of Irish agricultural processes. How we remember the Famine, both in historiography and in public ceremony, signifies no less our relation to the ongoing processes of primitive accumulation, or what David Harvey has dubbed 'accumulation by dispossession', processes re-energized in our own time and without which the contemporary prosperity of Ireland is unimaginable.³ Writing some twenty years after the Famine, Karl Marx understood the depopulation of the country to be continuous with the processes of enclosure that had taken place elsewhere in the British Isles over several centuries and led to the displacement there also of a peasant population.⁴ In our own time, different commodities than common land may be the object of violent accumulation, oil and water being the most salient, but whatever its principal objects, that process continues and is everywhere, from Iraq to the Congo or the Amazon, undertaken with unrestrained violence.

The commemoration of the Famine in the 1990s all too readily furnished the occasion, however, for putting the past behind us and for moving on. In chapters 2 and 3, I discuss the memory of the Famine and its relation to the traumas of the past. 'Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?' critiques a therapeutic notion of postcolonial history and its complicity with the notion of the Famine as in some sense a 'natural' disaster or an act of God. It discovers in the oral archives of the Famine not only that sense of catastrophe and even divine anger that are so often read in the folk record, but equally a determination to create the forms for living on in ways that do not accept the iron laws of capitalist determination. 'The Indigent Sublime: Spectres of Irish Hunger' seeks similarly to

3 David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford, 2003), 137–82.

4 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 3 vols., ed. Friedrich Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (London, 1954), vol. 1, 664–65.

read the recurrent image of haunting that clusters around Famine narratives as the sign of contemporary observers' disturbance at the spectacle of primitive accumulation's violence and at their own uncanny proximity to its dehumanized victims in their utter indigence. At a later point, when the memory of the Famine has been notoriously repressed among the surviving Irish rural communities, the ghosts of the Famine appear to haunt events that take place in its wake. The after-effects of the Famine emerge not so much in recurrent hunger or in explicit recollection as in the phenomena that it inaugurates, such as mass emigration. The Famine reappears as a kind of displaced memory that haunts the afterlife of Irish culture, not directly but in images and tropes that form its traces.

Both in the invention of social formations and imaginaries that project temporal horizons and ethical frames that are out of kilter with modernity and in the displaced structures of memory that refuse to succumb to forgetting and moving on, post-Famine Irish culture secretes a resistance to the obliterative tendencies of modernization. It does so, however, not by remaining fixed in the past, but by inhabiting a temporal dimension composed simultaneously of multiple and often incommensurable temporalities for which the terms 'tradition' and 'modernity' are only partial and certainly inadequate designations. Irish memory is at once the memory of modernity and its catastrophes and that of living otherwise. Irish times are composed of both the rhythms of industrial and agricultural capitalism and those of the destroyed collectivity of the *clachan* cast forward into the future in new and casual collectivities; of the rhythms of rationalization and progress and of rhythms that pose an obdurate recalcitrance to the imposition of modern disciplines; those of the clock and the ledger and the keyboard and those of oral community. These layerings of different times, the coequality of different relations to time normatively distributed on the axis of tradition and modernity, were not illegible to intellectuals or artists following the Famine.

In chapters 4 and 5, I discuss the ways in which such realizations affected the peculiar versions of Irish political and aesthetic modernism. Both James Joyce and James Connolly seem to have understood the radical alternative potentials of Ireland's anomalous relation to modernity. Joyce, who has often been seen as the most critical among Irish modernists of Irish backwardness, clearly grasps between the composition of *Stephen Hero* and that of *Ulysses* the radically alternative possibilities of Ireland's mixed temporalities. Displacing the rigid naturalism of *Stephen Hero*, with its 'iron memorial' depiction of the relation of self to past and modern subject to backward peasant, *Ulysses* becomes the aesthetic correlative of Ireland's relation to the past and of a subjectivity composed of an irreducible multiplicity of possibilities. Colonial modernity finds its literary analogue in the proliferating field of possible narratives and bottomless associations that weave the fabric of *Ulysses*. But if the composite of correspondences, analogies, and resemblances that constitutes the novel partake of the habits of medieval thought, in Joyce that medievalism, which he embraced from a very early point in his career, is the sign, not of backwardness or of the mere historical antecedents of capital,