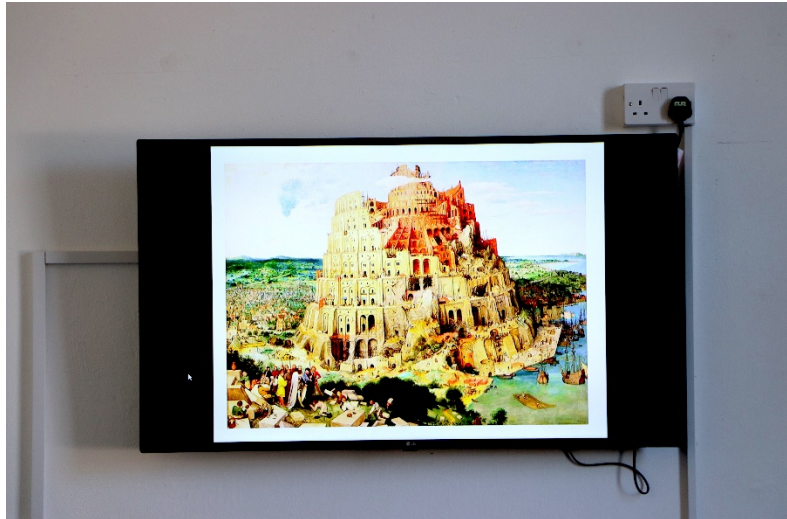


# A Very British Putsch: Brexit, Ireland and the Red Room

Gavin Murphy



## 1

It's an old family story. My mother, a Dubliner, was offered a job in a hospital in Newry, a town just inside the Northern Irish border. It was the late 1950s. She accepted it. A unionist councillor got wind of this and demanded the offer be rescinded since the job should go to a local candidate (ie. a protestant from Northern Ireland and not a catholic from the Republic of Ireland). The councillor was successful. The offer was withdrawn and the job re-advertised. My mother, whether belligerent or indifferent (or both?) applied again. Once more, she was interviewed and offered the job. She accepted it and the councillor moved on to other, presumably more pressing matters.

The civil rights movement in Northern Ireland would emerge some years later. Non-sectarian in nature, the movement called for an end to discrimination in jobs and housing, and, a more equitable voting system, among others. When the Troubles ensued, politics became increasingly polarised along nationalist and unionist lines. The border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland became a major issue once again.

The civil rights were, for me, a valuable struggle for equitable foundations for living life to the full and, certainly from a youthful perspective, not necessarily an eternal vigilance towards power and corruption. The border between Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland, and all that is implied in terms of identity and associations, is one I have a measure of indifference towards; difference being something imposed by a questionable other. Culture always has an edge over politics for me. Its draw is a freedom to wander through charged terrain. This would seem to demand a degree of belligerence and indifference, or possibly both.

Brexit is the next stage in relations between Britain and Ireland. The traces of earlier forms were not slow to show through. The Irish government, strongly backed by the European Union (EU), believe a hard border is not acceptable. North/South co-operation must be protected, as should EU's single market and customs union. Their response to Brexit talks in December roused the Democratic Unionist Party's (DUP) fear of a united Ireland by EU's (and Ireland's) insistence of 'no regulatory divergence' across the North/South border.<sup>1</sup> Writing in the *Irish Times*, Stephen Collins viewed the Irish government's response as 'green triumphalism ... pandering to populist sentiment'.<sup>2</sup> Collins suggested a more a subtle approach. Liberal opinion in Ireland is, in this instance at least, aligned with the government's position. If there is a difference, it is one of tone.

Tory Brexiteers, through ignorance and apathy towards Northern Ireland, might well clear a path towards a united Ireland. It will be one safe within, and with a great deal of help from, the EU. The Irish government is comfortable with the 'backstop' option in the Draft Brexit Agreement. This entails Northern Ireland remaining in 'full alignment' with the EU's single market and customs union in order to uphold the Belfast Agreement. Of course, Brexit can occur without agreement between Britain and the EU. This is generally seen as the worst of all possible scenarios.

The DUP will remind the lesser-concerned Brexiteer of the dangers of the break-up of Britain, or to use official terminology, the break-up of the United Kingdom of Great Britain *and* Northern Ireland. I emphasise the *and* so to point to a certain vulnerability: Northern Ireland can have a very separate deal to the rest of the UK without threatening *Great Britain* as a sovereign entity. This is a deal the Tory's may well feel they can sell. The DUP's goal to retain a uniform agreement across the UK should be easier since they are currently propping up the Tory government. If the initial tone of the Irish government is unnerving the DUP, reassurances from Tory Brexiteers that Northern Ireland is as

British as Finchley or Somerset should be further call for alarm. It is a reference to Thatcher's claim that 'Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom; as much as my constituency is'. This was declared before the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which, to the horror of unionists, gave the Republic of Ireland a foothold in Northern Irish affairs. Clearly, difference or differences within the UK is a tender matter which is giving rise to over-exaggerated claims about the essential Britishness of Northern Ireland.

The question of a united Ireland is an increasingly frequent topic of debate in the media. Susan McKay has been keeping a close eye on the shifting demographics in Northern Ireland, noting how unionism lost its majority for the first time in the 2017 elections. Border polls on Irish unity (in accordance with the Belfast Agreement) is, for McKay, an inevitability in coming decades.<sup>3</sup> One senses pragmatic ground to be explored between an Irish government and the economic interests of moderate unionists. It is a conversation encouraged even more by what McKay calls the 'shabby alliance' between the DUP and 'little Englandism'.<sup>4</sup>

## 2

When I think of Brexit and those vast impersonal forces accruing on the border, I think not only of a new frontline upon which rests the future of the EU, but of a movie which will not go away.

*Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, 2011) tells the story of a doctor who is part of a night time cortège searching for a murdered body buried in the landscape. It is a search prolonged by the vague recollection of the perpetrator whose tragic downfall we track. Various agents of the state carry out their tasks with a level of commitment befitting the early hours. The mood is melancholic, particularly as we sense the doctor asking how his life has ended up at this point in time, in a place like this, on a night like this. The same question is asked of them all. A moment of rare beauty, however, cuts through the grim of the night. The major's daughter serves tea to the group. They recognize her charm as the act of kindness and sweet warmth of tea in the dark hour lift them one by one. This moment of repose appears to offer the doctor balance and equilibrium. He accepts the nature of things by the film's resolve.

The tone reminds me of Chekov's short stories – the provincial doctor whose youthful hopes and cosmopolitan dreams have faded to the point where he is somewhat at a loss. The temptation is to turn away from the world at large so as to regain a sense of self-mastery once again; to 'liberate' oneself from those desires which cannot be realized. Isaiah Berlin articulates this line of thought as follows:

I choose to avoid defeat and waste, and therefore decide to strive for nothing that I cannot be sure to obtain. I determine myself not to desire what is unattainable ... it is as if I had performed a strategic retreat into an inner citadel – my reason, my soul, my 'noumenal' self – which, do what they may, neither external blind force, nor human malice can touch.<sup>5</sup>

Berlin finds the voice of 'ascetics and quietists, of stoics or Buddhist sages' in this bid for self-emancipation.<sup>6</sup> For Berlin, a retreat to the inner citadel, or what he calls a 'kind of inner emigration', simply will not do.<sup>7</sup>



I mention this as a recent incident in Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology where I teach illuminated these tensions. The old projector in the Red Room broke down. It was deemed too expensive to fix so a domestic tv screen replaced it. This was despite my protestations. I teach Critical Theory to graduate and postgraduate art students, a subject where the scrutiny of images and their contexts is paramount. I sat in the Red Room hooking a laptop up to the tv trying to figure out a solution. The image on the computer screen, Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*, was rendered garish on the tv screen by the colouration of a cheap German import. The image was destroyed beyond belief. Here was austerity and neoliberal reform facing me in all its horror.

This is a picture of Institutes of Technology, or schools therein, starved of funding and investment since the economic crash. Financial deficits have accrued and campuses are under threat because of debt. Survival is dependent on an ability to deliver 'key national priorities' which have been set by the government's Hunt Report (National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030). New funding streams will be based on delivering STEM and generating the personnel demanded by multinationals and the private sector.<sup>8</sup>

The arts and humanities have suffered under this regime, continuing the poor track record since the inception of the Irish state where a dominant catholic nationalist ethos retained a heavy censorial hand and deep suspicion towards the challenging cultures of new times. Art colleges in Ireland, as well as the wider visual arts culture, played no small part in confronting this conservative edifice. A recent *Circa Art Magazine* editorial voiced concerns over the survival of many fine art courses in Ireland in the light of the new educational demand for market innovation and entrepreneurship. The tradition of fine art is defended as follows:

a way of making and thinking that has always eluded easy definition and which, perhaps, resonates best with experimentation, research, criticality, irreverence and disruption. As such it is distinct from the functional aims and methodologies of design, no matter how creative the latter.<sup>9</sup>

It could be argued that those ideals themselves have come under pressure from within the practices of fine and contemporary art. The degree of antagonism and dissensus is questionable when artists are to operate within a new gig economy and navigate neoliberal funding streams as a matter of survival. Worse, the arms-length principle which has defined the liberal ethos of the Arts Council (*An Chomhairle Ealaíon*) since its inception is now challenged by the introduction of a parallel arts funding agency. *Creative Ireland* was set up, ironically, in the light of the success of recent Easter Rising commemorations. They demand a 'singular positive image' from the cultural sector for the benefit of Ireland's global economic standing. Their programme brochure is, for the most part, couched in the language of well-being. It is, however, punctuated by moments like this:

Amid increasingly fierce global competition for investment, tourism and export markets, a clear articulation of a country's values, capabilities and beliefs about itself is increasingly important. Creative Ireland will facilitate the development of that articulation, and will strive to increase our influence in the world, with direct and indirect economic and social benefits.<sup>10</sup>

The mood is one of threat and survival ('increasingly fierce ... increasingly important') with a curious imperial bent given its connections to 1916 ('to increase our influence in the world'). Artistic survival

hangs on producing optimism within the demarcated boundaries of a national culture in a global economy.

The point here should be obvious: the financial crisis, rather than discrediting neoliberal doctrine, has sharpened its punitive edge through austerity. Ireland's relationship to the European Union, particularly as the latter shifted from a social democratic to a neoliberal footing, is a matter of serious concern.

### 3

A culture of dissent in Ireland remains in the doldrums despite the severity of austerity. Writing in 2014 as opposition grew to the Troika's demand to privatize water services and impose charges, Daniel Finn wrote that 'the emergence of a real anti-austerity movement was reaching fever pitch'.<sup>11</sup> Finn quickly recognized that political opposition on the left was split. He also recognized the weight of vested interests in the privatization.<sup>12</sup> Protest evaporated quickly. Water charges were dropped but neoliberal reform continued apace.

Possible solutions to this impasse are somewhat myopic in that the principle arena in which to act is bound by nationalist discourse. Peadar Kirby and Mary P. Murphy, writing in *Towards a Second Republic*, call for an active participatory sphere within a social democratic model as a renewal of the Irish project for independence. They keep a good eye on Northern Ireland, seeking pragmatic ways in which it can be accommodated into their second republic in a fair and equitable manner.<sup>13</sup> Fintan O'Toole also draws upon ideals inspiring Irish independence as a means to 'renew the republic'. Powers are to be devolved to local government and housing, healthcare, pensions and education. O'Toole's post-crash attitude to the EU pitches the desire for local autonomy against a loss of budgetary control, calling for, 'a radical reassertion of Irish sovereignty, a popular revolt, not just against Fianna Fáil, but against the bank bail-out and the EU-IMF deal as well'.<sup>14</sup>

An over-emphasis on the legacy and renewal of Irish independence downplays a consideration of the modes of interdependence which can be imagined as a rectitude to the centralizing forces shaping the EU. There is little outreach and little sense of alliances to be built across the EU in the effort to re-democratize it. The Irish media pays little attention to the institutional workings of Brussels, never

mind the question of how to rejuvenate them. Brussels remains an unfathomable, technocratic behemoth in the local imagination, one where Ireland is fated to its whims, blessings and wrath.

It is worth giving attention to wider forms of analysis and dissent being overlooked in Irish media circles. Yanis Varoufakis' critique of a punitive austerity imposed upon the peripheries is a good example. Varoufakis highlights growing inequality between centre and periphery, rich and poor, native and migrant. The EU has removed national sovereignty over budgets in favour of a disciplinary centralized union. Greece, for Varoufakis, is effectively a debtors' colony. The EU's lack of accountability is typified by the democratic deficit of the European parliament. Varoufakis' hopes lie in a federal democracy grafted onto Brussel's technocracy, where sovereignty is forfeited on the national or state level but coalesces at a new unitary federal level.<sup>15</sup> This renewed vision is set against a consideration of Europe's fragmentation and the rise in right-wing extremism and xenophobia.<sup>16</sup>

The point here is not to fly a flag for Varoufakis but to recognize the limits of debate in Ireland. The tidal pull of nationalism leaves discussion of federalism stranded despite efforts to seek a balance between the EU and self-government. Of course, there is good reason why liberal and left opinion in Ireland is unwilling to cede this space. Sinn Féin are more than adept when navigating the terrain between the politics of the left and nationhood, tacking between the two when circumstances demand. Sinn Féin, along with the DUP, agreed recently to cut corporation tax in Northern Ireland. Newton Emerson has argued that the drive for unification has impelled this harmonization with the Republic's corporate tax rate, despite criticism of a 'neoliberal race to the bottom'.<sup>17</sup> This is perhaps what riles so many commentators in the Republic; that the political momentum might well favour Sinn Féin most of all.

#### 4

I was sent a cartoon strip when I was in art college in Belfast in the late 1980's. It was sent by a schoolfriend who had just moved to Manchester to go to university. The strip was cut out and used for the cover of a tape-mix he had compiled. Both are now long lost.

The cartoon had Tintin and Captain Haddock manning the barricades with Molotov cocktails in their hands, as if taking part in the May '68 protests. It was from a fanzine with a young artist taking Hergé's

heroes into new terrain. 'Vive la revolution!', calls Tintin. 'What are we fighting for?', asks Captain Haddock in the next image. 'I don't know', replies Tintin, 'but we sure are going to have a good time along the way'.

This spirit of revolt is compelling: not knowing a final destination but a wild energy propelling you all the way. I always thought radical strains of French philosophy from the mid-twentieth century onwards were similarly motivated. A recent visit to London to see my friend, however, caused me to think again of that cartoon and things I had taken for granted for quite some time.

He had voted for Brexit. His argument was surprisingly familiar, echoing positions of Irish commentators outlined earlier. It was about reasserting sovereignty and regaining autonomy from a ludicrously bureaucratic and dictatorial EU. This was an EU serving the interests of a centralized (German) economy. There were differences, of course. One lay in the belief of a country awash with immigrants and an underclass taking its health and welfare provision to breaking point (more like a country awash with Tories takings health and welfare provision to breaking point, I said). Another lay in drawing upon an imperial legacy and economic dominance of old to adopt a nimble strategic position on a global stage. Imperial and post-colonial discourse, it seems, are now motivational resources to get a competitive edge in a global economy.

No amount of beer could reconcile us. I was struck by the divergent paths, particularly when I thought of the Tintin cartoon and the ideals of the left: that the energy propelling dreams of revolt and popular protest would have you arrive at a common destination. It's implied but never guaranteed.

Somewhere between beginnings and endpoints, moods of divergence prevail. In terms of Brexit, James Meek's essay on Grimsby, the 'former fishing capital of England', best captures a sense of alienation and interminable decline.<sup>18</sup> Focusing on a forthcoming election and the rise of UKIP in an old labour stronghold, Meek taps into the disillusion with established political frameworks and the mutant strains arising within UKIP, conservatism and the militant left. 'Someone, or something, abdicated power in Grimsby, leaving swathes of it to rot. But who, or what? And what will the succession be?'.<sup>19</sup> The answer for Meek, is a loss in local, municipal and national power:



The great abdication in Grimsby has been of power itself, local power, that essential trinity of access to resources; inspired, ruthless marshalling of effort; and care for what local people think.<sup>20</sup>

The problem is less about jobs than a sense of, and a cultural investment in, place. The Thatcherite dream of privatization did not lead to local ownership but to port buyouts by foreign governments and overseas pension funds with little commitment other than guaranteeing shareholders their 5%. Those who made money simply moved away to get 'the smell of fish out of their clothes'.<sup>21</sup> In Meek's grey scape, the local desire for political disruption was a desperate one.

All in all, Brexit is a very British putsch. The Tory Brexiteers represent a malignant re-assertion of an old patrician order. They, along with their UKIP sidekicks, presented themselves as upholders of tradition and bearers of future prosperity through vulgar hysteria and patriotic kitsch. They summoned nostalgic fantasies of a great empire reborn through free trade agreements and open seas, unhindered by EU interference.

If Brexit can be defined as the next stage in relations between Britain and Ireland, it is also the next chapter in the break-up of Britain. Writing in the late 1970s, Tom Nairn observed the 'tenacious, conservative resistance' of the English heartlands towards the 'disruptive trends of the periphery'.<sup>22</sup> In the face of increasing demands for devolved power, Nairn recognized the Tory's long-standing commitment to British parliament's total sovereignty.<sup>23</sup> These tensions persist and are exacerbated by Northern Ireland and Scotland choosing to remain within the EU in the referendum. Brexiteers have also alienated the City and business interests of its metropolitan heartland. Current negotiations over the EU/UK Withdrawal Treaty are clearly vexing the British government's team, caught between the wily bureaucrats of Europe and the grubby ambitions of its Brexiteer populists. There is a new volatility in the decline and fall of the UK. Northern Ireland is but one of several dreadful oversights just as Brexit itself is an unforeseen consequence of the global economic crisis.

## 5

I have lived in the west of Ireland for nearly twenty years. I was lured (naively) by the humble riches of an epicurean life on the periphery. It held the promise of ample time and space to do my own thing, far removed from the vanity of metropolitan careerism. The lesson to be learned is a harsh one: in times of crisis, the periphery is the first to get it in the neck. This is Varoufakis's refrain when dealing

with the banking and Euro crisis. Brexiteers are equally boorish towards periphery in all its complexities. The threat of Brexit's hard border aligns EU policy with an Irish nationalist desire for all-island unity. The Irish state, despite traditions of national independence, is a model of European interdependence. It is of a questionable sort, accepting austerity and neoliberal reform as a means of survival and strategic positioning.

So I sit in the Red Room before the next class and think. Here I am on the periphery of peripheries: a run-down room, teaching on run-down courses, in a run-down campus, in a run-down college, in a run-down region, in a run-down country, with beliefs I hold dear, run-down, European solidarity, run-down, the potency of democratic protest, run-down. But run-down I am not. That film, the serving of tea in the dark hour. The forth-year seminar group will arrive to give presentations on their studio practice. Each and all are building worlds of hope from ambition and desire, driven by the pleasures of the imagination.

Life on the periphery holds in tension the lure of the retreat and a recognition of its limitations. It is, and it is not, enough. Isaiah Berlin, writing of the tension between autonomy and heterotony, stated the following:

If the tyrant (or 'hidden persuader') manages to condition his subjects (or customers) into losing their original wishes and embrace ('internalize') the form of life he has invented for them, he will, on this definition, have succeeded in liberating them ... but what he has created is the very antithesis of political freedom.<sup>24</sup>

I will finish teaching today and go home. This conclusion has me thinking we live in an age where we may well be too fragmented as individuals for solidarity. I will settle down to watch a movie, with an eye on the next piece of writing. *Closely Observed Trains* (Jiří Menzel, 1966)? I hear it calling. What kind of essay would be written if I had thought of this earlier?



Gavin Murphy May 2018

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<sup>1</sup> The DUP negotiated a last-minute change in wording of the draft agreement between Britain and the EU. It changed from 'no regulatory divergence' across the North/South border to a post Brexit 'regulatory alignment'. This is a subtle shift giving more scope in further negotiations.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Collins, 'Irish Government is partly to blame for Brexit shambles', *Irish Times*, Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> December 2017. <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/irish-government-is-partly-to-blame-for-brex-it-shambles-1.3317855>

<sup>3</sup> See, Susan McKay 'Diary', *London Review of Books*, Vol.40, No.5, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018, p.37, and, Susan McKay, 'How old ghosts are haunting Ireland', *The Guardian*, Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> March 2018: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/mar/25/brexit-ireland-troubles-border-sunday-essay>

<sup>4</sup> McKay, 'How old ghosts are haunting Ireland' op.cit.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', *Four Essays on Liberty* (1969), Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 135.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.139.

<sup>8</sup> See, Dick Ahlstrom, 'Funding Plan for Third Level a Recipe for Disaster', *Irish Times*, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Editorial to 'Degree Shows 2017: Writers' Choice', *Circa Art Magazine*, <http://circaartmagazine.website/>

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<sup>10</sup> Clár Éire Ildánach, Creative Ireland Programme 2017—2022, pdf, p.29, see, <https://creative.ireland.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2017-12/Creative%20Ireland%20Programme.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Finn, 'Water Wars in Ireland', *New Left Review*, no.95, Sept/Oct 2015, p.49.

<sup>12</sup> Finn noted the contract to install water meters was awarded to Siteserv, a company acquired by businessman Denis O'Brien at a severely reduced rate from the state-owned Irish Bank Resolution Corporation which was set up to offload distressed assets from Anglo Irish and Nationwide banks. O'Brien had previously been embroiled in controversy when his acquisition of a mobile phone license was secured by considerable cash payments to the Fine Gael TD Michael Lowry responsible for overseeing the tendering process.

<sup>13</sup> See, Peadar Kirby and Mary P. Murphy, *Towards a Second Republic: Irish Politics after the Celtic Tiger*, Pluto Press, 2011, p.205.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Daniel Finn, 'Rethinking the Republic: Fintan O'Toole and the Irish Crisis', *New Left Review*, no.90, Nov/Dec 2014, p.75.

<sup>15</sup> Yanis Varoufakis, *And the Weak Suffer What They Must?: Europe's Crisis and America's Economic Future*, Nation Books, New York, 2016, p.223-224.

<sup>16</sup> Varoufakis' practical approach has given rise to the pan European movement Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25) and its more recent local offshoot MeRA 25 in which he advocates a 'responsible disobedience'.

<sup>17</sup> Newton Emerson, 'If Sinn Féin is good enough for us, it's good enough for you', *Irish Times*, April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2018: <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/newton-emerson-if-sinn-f%C3%A9in-is-good-enough-for-us-it-s-good-enough-for-you-1.3474018>

<sup>18</sup> James Meek, 'Why are you still here?', *London Review of Books*, Vol.37, no.8, April 2015, p3.

<sup>19</sup> James Meek, 'Why are you still here?', *London Review of Books*, Vol.37, no.8, April 2015, p3.

This is one of several of Meek's essays for the LRB on Brexit and the new global economy. See also, 'In Farageland', LRB, Vol.37, no.19, October 2014, pp.5-10, and, 'Somerdale to Skarbimierz', LRB, Vol.39, No.8, April 2017, pp.3-15.

<sup>20</sup> James Meek, 'Why are you still here?', p.10.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12.

<sup>22</sup> Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain (1977)* (second, expanded edition), Verso, 1981, p.73.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12.

<sup>24</sup> Isiah Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in, *Four Essays on Liberty* (1969), Oxford university Press, 1992, pp.139-149.