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A Very British Putsch

Brexit, Ireland and the Red Room

Gavin Murphy

I

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 the 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. Traces of earlier forms were not slow to show through. The Irish government, backed by the European Union (EU), believe a hard border is not acceptable. North–South co-operation must be protected, as should the EU’s single market and customs union. Their response to Brexit talks in December 2017 roused the Democratic Unionist Party’s (DUP) fear of a united Ireland by the EU’s (and Ireland’s) insistence of ‘no regulatory divergence’ across the North–South border.¹ Stephen Collins viewed the Irish government’s response as ‘green triumphalism... pandering to populist sentiment’.² He suggested a subtler approach. Liberal opinion in Ireland is, in this instance, 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.

1 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.

2 Stephen Collins, ‘Irish Government is Partly to Blame for Brexit Shambles’, *Irish Times*, 7 December 2017, <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/irish-government-is-partly-to-blame-for-brexit-shambles-1.3317855>, accessed 3 April 2018

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.

II

When I think of Brexit and those vast impersonal forces accruing on the border, I think not only of a new front line upon which the future of the EU rests, but of a Turkish 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 recognise 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 realised. 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.³

³ Isaiah Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', *Four Essays on Liberty* (1969), Oxford University Press, 1992, p 135

Berlin finds the voice of ‘ascetics and quietists, of stoics or Buddhist sages’ in this bid for self-emancipation.⁴ For him, a retreat to the inner citadel, or what he calls a ‘kind of inner emigration’, simply will not do.⁵

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 television 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* (c 1563), was rendered garish on the TV screen by the colouration of a cheap German import. It 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. 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.⁶

The arts and humanities have suffered under this regime, continuing their poor track record since the inception of the Irish state where a dominant Catholic nationalist ethos has 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 2017 *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. It defended the tradition of fine art as ‘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.’⁷

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 of Ireland (An Chomhairle Ealaíon) is now challenged by the introduction of a parallel arts funding agency, Creative Ireland, which was set up, ironically, in the light of the success of recent Easter Rising commemorations. Creative Ireland demands 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

4 Ibid

5 Ibid, p 139

6 Dick Ahlstrom, ‘Funding Plan for Third Level a Recipe for Disaster’, *Irish Times*, 25 January 2018

7 Editorial to ‘Degree Shows 2017: Writers’ Choice’, *Circa Art Magazine*, <http://circaartmagazine.website/>, last accessed 8 March 2018

the development of that articulation, and will strive to increase our influence in the world, with direct and indirect economic and social benefits.⁸

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.

III

A culture of dissent in Ireland remains in the doldrums despite the severity of austerity. 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's *Towards a Second Republic* is perhaps the most robust example. Kirby and Murphy call for an active participatory sphere within a social democratic model as a renewal of the Irish project for independence. They also keep a good eye on Northern Ireland, seeking pragmatic ways in which it can be accommodated into their republic in a fair and equitable manner.⁹ An over-emphasis on the legacy and renewal of Irish independence, however, downplays a consideration of the modes of interdependence, which can be imagined as a rectitude to the centralising forces shaping the EU. There is little outreach and little sense of alliances to be built across the EU in the effort to re-democratise 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.

Wider forms of analysis and dissent are being overlooked in Irish media circles. Yanis Varoufakis's 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 centralised union. Greece, for him, is effectively a debtors' colony. The EU's lack of accountability is typified by the democratic deficit of the European Parliament. Varoufakis's hopes lie in a federal democracy grafted onto Brussels's technocracy, where sovereignty is forfeited at national or state levels but coalesces at a new unitary federal level.¹⁰ This renewed vision is set against a consideration of Europe's fragmentation and the rise in right-wing extremism and xenophobia.¹¹

The point here is not to fly a flag for Varoufakis but to recognise the limits of the 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

8 Clár Éire Ildánach, *Creative Ireland Programme 2017–2022*, p 29, <https://creativeireland.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2017-12/Creative%20Ireland%20Programme.pdf>, last accessed 2 April 2018

9 Peadar Kirby and Mary P Murphy, *Towards a Second Republic: Irish Politics after the Celtic Tiger*, Pluto Press, London, 2011, p 205

10 Yanis Varoufakis, *And the Weak Suffer What They Must?: Europe's Crisis and America's Economic Future*, Nation Books, New York, 2016, pp 223–224

11 Varoufakis's practical approach has given rise to the pan-European Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25) and its more recent local offshoot, MeRA 25, in which he advocates for a 'responsible disobedience'.

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. Along with the DUP, it recently agreed to cut corporation tax in Northern Ireland. Newton Emerson has argued that the drive for unification has impelled this harmonisation with the Republic's corporate tax rate, despite criticism of a 'neoliberal race to the bottom'.¹² This is what riles so many commentators in the Republic – the political momentum might well favour Sinn Féin most of all.

IV

The 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 motivated by this. A recent visit to London to see an old school friend caused me to think of this again.

He had voted for Brexit. His argument was surprisingly familiar, echoing the positions of some Irish commentators. It was about reasserting sovereignty and regaining autonomy from a ludicrously bureaucratic and dictatorial EU. This was an EU serving the interests of a centralised (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 taking 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 postcolonial discourse, it seems, are now motivational resources in gaining a competitive edge in a global economy. No amount of beer could reconcile us.

Somewhere between beginnings and end points, 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.¹³ Focusing on a forthcoming election in 2015 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?'¹⁴ 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.'¹⁵ The problem is less about jobs than a sense of, and a cultural investment in, place. The Thatcherite dream of privatisation did not lead to local ownership but to port buy-outs by foreign governments and overseas pension funds with little commitment other than guaranteeing shareholders their five per cent. Those who made money simply moved away to get 'the smell of fish out of their clothes'.¹⁶ In Meek's grey-scape, the local desire for political disruption was a desperate one.

All in all, Brexit is a very British putsch. Tory Brexiteers represent a malignant reassertion of an old patrician order. They, along with their

12 Newton Emerson, 'If Sinn Féin is Good Enough for Us, It's Good Enough for You', *Irish Times*, 26 April 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>, last accessed 30 April 2018

13 James Meek, 'Why Are You Still Here?', *London Review of Books*, vol 37, no 8, April 2015, p 3. 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.

14 Meek, 'Why Are You Still Here?', *op cit*

15 *Ibid*, p 10

16 *Ibid*, p 12

UKIP sidekicks, presented themselves in 2016 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 English heartlands towards the ‘disruptive trends of the periphery’.¹⁷ In the face of increasing demands for devolved power, he recognised the Tory’s long-standing commitment to the total sovereignty of the British Parliament.¹⁸ 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 Agreement 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.

V

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 and imperfection 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:

17 Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain* (1977), second expanded edition, Verso, London, 1981, p 73

18 *Ibid*, p 12

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.¹⁹

¹⁹ Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, op cit, pp 139-149

I will finish teaching today and go home. I will settle down to watch a movie. *Closely Observed Trains* (Jiří Menzel, 1966), perhaps. I hear it calling. What kind of article would be written had I thought of this earlier?