What We Talk About When We Talk About Sex: Modernization and Sexuality in Contemporary Irish Scholarship

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1. Transformation and Continuity

On May 22, 2015, the Irish electorate voted in a constitutional refer-endum to extend marriage rights to same-sex couples. Following a much higher than usual turnout, 60 percent of the electorate, the result was a substantial majority, 62 percent, in favor of marriage equality. The Republic of Ireland was not the first state to make same-sex marriage—as opposed to civil partnership—legal, but it was the first in which this political objec-tive was secured through a popular vote (rather than through parliamen-tary legislation or, as in the United States a month after the Irish vote, a judicial ruling). Those campaigning for a Yes vote came from across the political spectrum, including the conservative political parties. Politically, the campaign was structured around questions of fairness, equality, and solidarity, along with a more nebulous cultural evocation of the Irish family being redefined to encompass lesbian and gay people.

Those campaigning against the proposed change, at least those par-ticipating in the mainstream media, stressed, not always convincingly, that

they were not against same-sex relationships as such. Instead, they situated themselves as defenders of heterosexual marriage as "natural" and the healthiest family form for raising children. Nevertheless, most No campaigners came from an avowedly Catholic position and routinely blurred the distinction between marriage as a legal contract and as a supposedly divinely instituted sacrament legitimizing sexual relations. While some individual clergy voiced their support for marriage equality, or were reported to have advised their congregation to follow their conscience, the Irish Catholic Church as an institution was actively opposed to the proposed change. The referendum came after two decades of distressing revelations about the sexual abuse of children by Irish Catholic clergy and, more scandalously, the uncovering of an entrenched institutional culture of protecting such priests from the law—a culture that in some cases facilitated priests continuing to abuse children. Given this context, the referendum was inevitably interpreted as a judgment on the role of the Catholic Church as the hegemonic arbiter of sexual morality for Irish people. The high vote in favor meant that a considerable number of Irish people who are practicing Catholics rejected the Church's position.[1]

From this perspective, the referendum result is another decisive landmark in an accelerated but uneven process of secularization under way in Ireland since the 1970s. Significant in itself, the vote is also the outcome of a dynamic, contested process of social transformation. It signals a dramatic transition in the dominant values and mores regulating sexual life in Ireland. But as the historical coincidence of the marriage equality campaign (and the progress of LGBT politics since decriminalization in 1993 generally) with the clerical abuse scandals reiterates, such changes are not merely about discarding the "old" and embracing the "new." Changes of the kind involved here require continual negotiation, and renegotiation, by individuals and the wider culture, as competing worldviews lose or acquire coherence and plausibility.

How have Irish intellectuals engaged with this historically rapid, socially significant, and far-reaching transformation? What kinds of explanatory models for understanding this major shift in Irish sexual culture have been produced to date? As this survey demonstrates, despite a diversity of methodologies, we can identify some recurring patterns in the scholarship on Irish sexuality. One is the problem of locating the agent

1. For detailed accounts of the marriage equality campaign, see Mullaly 2014 and Healy et al. 2015.

propelling this dramatic change in Irish sexual norms. The scholars repre-
sented here explicitly declare that they intend to give an account of how
Irish people negotiated and drove the processes of social change, but their
methodology invariably expresses an ideological tendency to represent the
majority of Irish people—outside of an enlightened vanguard—as the pas-
sive recipients of, or reactive resistors to, the inevitable unfolding of mod-
ernizing forces. The studies oscillate between analyzing the operation of
institutions—the state, the Catholic Church, social movements—and map-
ping how such change is felt and embodied by individual subjects, but the
authors struggle to provide a model that can allow for a dynamic interaction
between these.

　　Another problem is that of situating Irish society historically. The
secularization and informalization of Irish society during the late twentieth
century—the lessening, or recalibration, of regulation over sexual conduct
and the expansion of individual freedom—is invariably constructed in the
scholarly literature as either belated or anomalous. Irish society, that is, is
always either becoming more like or diverging from a loosely defined, pos-
sibly hypothetical metropolitan liberal norm, but never synchronically nego-
tiating late capitalist modernity. Again, the authors will explicitly challenge
such assumptions, only for their historical model to then reinforce them.
This is related to a third problem, which is the overwhelming emphasis
on cultural interpretations. Whether we are analyzing the sexually repres-
sive Ireland of the early twentieth century or the sexually liberated Ireland
coming into being at the end of the century, the primary—usually only—
determining factor is the dominance of the Catholic Church and the per-
sistence of a distinctively Irish Catholic habitus. While this culturalism is a
useful counterweight to any crudely deterministic emphasis on institutions,
it also leads to a disabling absence of any materialist or Marxian analy-
sis of Irish sexuality. That Ireland was as capitalist as it was overwhelm-
ingly Catholic during the twentieth century—that Irish Catholicism, espe-
cially from the mid-nineteenth century, served as an ideological bulwark for
a property-owning bourgeois order—and that secular twenty-first-century
Ireland is enthusiastically neoliberal may be registered in this work, but
this historical condition is invariably deemed analytically negligible when
it comes to understanding the history of Irish sexuality. For this reason, I
conclude the essay with a discussion of two illustrative recent interventions
by cultural critics who foreground the persistence of gendered oppression,
sexual hypocrisy, and biopolitical regulation in "sexually liberated" neolib-
eral Ireland.

2. Historical Transitions

In his introduction to *Occasions of Sin*, Diarmaid Ferriter rebukes contemporary Irish media commentators who "contrive a neat historical symmetry" concerning Ireland's "emergence from the sexual dark ages towards liberation." This type of narrative, Ferriter contends, "does scant justice to the complexity of Irish sexual history" (2009: 1). He challenges the type of one-dimensional historical account he deplores by surveying the diversity of discourses, competing voices, and evolving official attitudes to human sexuality in Ireland during the twentieth century. He draws on a variety of sources—government archives, archives of social movements, memoirs, journalism—to convey a more complex dialogic process of evolving norms and political antagonisms.

For the earlier part of the century, Ferriter makes extensive use of court records, but because a reader is likely to be depressed by this unrelenting catalog of rape and incest cases, his methodology here risks perpetuating precisely the monochromatic view of the past, and the glibly cheerful perspective on the "liberated" present, that he warns against at the outset. On the other hand, he devotes a substantial portion of his final chapter—covering the period from 1970 to 2005—to material held in the Irish Queer Archive (487–517). This extensive collection includes the records of various gay and lesbian organizations from the mid-1970s onward, along with collections of private correspondence, newspaper clippings, lesbian and gay publications, and ephemera. Ferriter uses this material to outline a history of political activism, protest, and engagement, along with the creation of a vibrant subculture and network of support (most notably in the wake of the AIDS epidemic).

Along with the emergence and consolidation of LGBT political and social activism, Ferriter identifies several other key currents in the evolution of Irish sexual culture during the past five decades. Chief among these are the feminist-led campaigns for access to contraception in the Republic and Northern Ireland and the decades-long struggle between feminists and the right-wing opponents of abortion rights. He also charts the unfolding revelations about child sexual abuse, which in the past two decades has particularly focused on clerical sexual abuse and the historical abuse of women and children in religious-run but state-funded institutions.

Ferriter's account of these historical developments is weakened by his methodological empiricism in which analysis and narrative are consistently subordinated to description and survey. Focused on an "even-handed" uncovering of the "facts," his study yields limited insight into the deeper

structures of this history. He exacerbates this shortcoming by reproducing particularly ludicrous statements by one or another reactionary opponent of sexual liberalization throughout his history. Ferriter's repeated use of this stylistic device generates in his book a sense of progressive social change as the inevitable unfolding of an abstract modernization rather than as a dialectical process, since the antagonists of such change appear as eccentric and residual figures. If he sometimes lampoons the sexual mores of the past, Ferriter can also resort to weakly moralizing critiques of contemporary sexual culture. He uncritically cites media "concern" about young girls being "prematurely sexualized" in Celtic Tiger Ireland and notes a "dramatic rise in sexually transmitted diseases." He also accepts on its own terms the reactionary antifeminist discourse about a "crisis of masculinity" (536–57).

To critique Ferriter's methodology and style in this manner is not insignificant or trivial. For one thing, aside from accuracy, methodology and style are the only grounds on which to evaluate a work of historical synthesis that does not, over 546 pages, put forward an argument. Cumulatively, these elements of compositional technique create a tone and shape the meaning of the work. Ferriter's methodology and rhetorical style are structural indices of a destabilizing contradiction between the work's scope and ambition and its reversion to the conventional topoi of Irish sexual discourse and its unwitting descent into a weak liberal historicism.

By contrast, Tom Inglis's work on Irish sexuality offers a strong historical narrative, but one that is overly rigid and liable to become schematic. For Inglis, the history of sexuality in twentieth-century Ireland is a narrative of two wholly distinct and totalized regimes. The distinguishing feature of the earlier regime was "a Catholic culture of self-abnegation in which sexual pleasure and desire were repressed." From the 1960s onward, this regime was gradually replaced by an entirely different dispensation characterized by "a culture of consumption and self-indulgence in which the fulfilment of pleasures and desires is emphasized" (Inglis 2005: 11). In *Moral Monopoly*, Inglis mapped the consolidation of the first regime, and the emergence of a distinctive Irish Catholic habitus, from the mid-nineteenth century. By conceding Catholic Emancipation in 1829, the British state had effectively admitted the defeat of the civilizing mission designed to convert the Irish populace to Protestantism inaugurated in the era of early modern plantations. The introduction of the policy of denominational national education in the 1830s, through which control over primary education for the majority of the population was ceded to the Catholic Church, signaled

the switch to a different civilizing program. Out of the catastrophe of the Famine a resurgent Irish Catholic petite bourgeoisie began gradually to mold itself into a ruling class. Adapting Norbert Elias's theoretical framework from *The Civilizing Process* (1982), Inglis argued in *Moral Monopoly* that the assertion of hegemonic authority by the Irish Catholic petite bourgeoisie primarily entailed a rigorous process of disciplining the minds and bodies of this newly dominant class; this involved what Inglis characterizes as "a transformation from open passionate bodies to closed, restrained bodies" (Inglis [1987] 1998: 137).

Once the Catholic Church had consolidated its hold over Irish sexual morality in the mid- to late nineteenth century, this dominance, Inglis contends, remained largely unchallenged until the 1960s: this interval marks "the long nineteenth century of Irish Catholicism" at the end of which Irish society once again began to change as it secularized and embraced capitalist development. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, he maintains, "the Irish way of being in the world is now structured by market and media forces which emphasize the importance of difference, self-realization and continual self-transformation and which rarely emphasize the importance of self-denial and self-surrender" (Inglis 2008: 6–7). The transformation of the individual body, he feels, has been crucial to this metamorphosis of a culture of self-denial into one devoted to self-realization. Irish people have, according to Inglis, "increasingly left aside their shy, awkward, demure, chaste bodies and embraced strong, confident, sexualized, disciplined bodies" (185).

In *Global Ireland: Same Difference*, Inglis builds on his earlier study and analyzes this Irish transition in the late twentieth century—between two identifiable sexual and cultural regimes, embodied in two characteristic types of habitus—within the framework of a globalizing world culture. His governing analytic is a dialectic of "sameness" and "difference." Just as individuals negotiate between their need to be the same—the need for belonging, for the security of connections, for shared values and goals— and the need to cultivate their own unique individuality, so too, he argues, societies in a globalizing world system must negotiate the imperatives of a homogenizing global market and culture and attempt to retain a distinctive identity. But Inglis's repeated formulation in his study that Ireland, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, was "becoming like the rest of the West" indicates the active logic of same/different being undermined by the rigid logic of either/or. The promise of the sameness/difference concept— a dynamic, dialectical process of negotiation in contrast with the stadial

developmentalism of modernization theory—gives way to a familiar binary of two reified options: the static modernity of "the West," which is not in this schema grappling with sameness and difference, and an equally static traditional Irish culture (Catholic; supporting the Gaelic Athletic Association [GAA]; neighborly and sociable, but claustrophobic; stable but suffocatingly homogeneous).

Inglis is not simplistically boosterish about the forms of subjectivity, and the new sexual norms, delivered by the process of modernization he describes. But his ambivalence about contemporary Ireland is primarily articulated in moralizing and psychologizing terms; while late capitalism has liberated the Irish from older repressions and generated a noticeable increase in "self-belief," this has simultaneously made the Irish "more selfish" (Inglis 2008: 257–58). Construing both the new sexual norms and consumerism in contemporary Irish society as a libidinal excess of "self-indulgence" and "self-realization," a hysterical release of energies pent up in the decades of repression, precludes any more rigorous analysis of the dominant neoliberal political rationality that interpellates the modern Irish citizen as an entrepreneurial subject, striving to maximize returns on its "human capital" in all spheres of life. Arguably, this paradox, a committed left-liberal intellectual resorting to a weakly moralizing critique, is an effect of the rigidities of Inglis's historical model. The rather schematic formulation of an earlier "Catholic" culture of self-denial and chastity and a contemporary "consumerist" culture of self-realization and sexual pleasure suggests a history of rupture as Ireland passes from a religious order to a consumerist one. Sexual regimes here are conceived in ways that seem uncannily similar to economic cycles of austerity and affluence: until the 1960s, Ireland was, for Inglis, all sexual austerity; now, it is, in his view, a postmodern consumer society defined by sexual affluence.

3. Democratic Deficit: Models of Social Change

In *Kicking and Screaming: Dragging Ireland into the Twenty-First Century*, Ivana Bacik provides a synoptic overview of social change in late twentieth-century Ireland. A barrister, legal scholar, and senator for the Labour Party, Bacik pays particular attention to legislation and social policy. Her account of Irish second-wave feminism from 1970 to 1990 adheres to the four-stage phased development of that movement identified by the feminist academic and activist Ailbhe Smyth (Smyth 1993: 254–69). Organizations such as the Irish Women's Liberation Movement (founded in 1970)

and the Council for the Status of Women (founded in 1972) inaugurated a phase of politicization as women mobilized around successful campaigns for equal pay, protection against discrimination in employment, and an end to the "marriage bar" (which had, since the 1930s, prohibited women from continuing to work in the civil service after marriage). A campaign to end the legal ban on contraception, in place since 1935, also began in the early 1970s, and the first change to the law, allowing access to contraception, restricted to married couples, was enacted in 1979. However, it was not until the early 1990s that full access was made available and that the statutory health promotion organizations began to actively encourage the use of condoms for sexual health purposes.

The second phase of the women's movement, from 1974 to 1977, was a period of radicalization characterized by direct-action tactics and the emergence of new organizations such as Irish Women United, which pursued a liberationist rather than a reformist politics. In her brief account of this period, Bacik lists "rights for lesbians" among the political objectives of this stage in the movement (Bacik 2004: 86). This significantly downplays the degree to which lesbian feminism was from the outset a distinct radical current in its own right and often in tension with the wider women's movement (Connolly and O'Toole 2005: 59–73). Likewise, she avoids any reference to the radicalizing effect of the war in Northern Ireland on the women's movement on both sides of the border. Her account ignores the experience of many working-class women in Northern Ireland, for whom feminism and socialist republicanism were kindred modes of mobilization and solidarity, and the degree to which protests against the degrading treatment of women prisoners in Armagh prison constituted a notable point of cross-border solidarity for Irish feminists (O'Keefe 2013: 33–51, 121–48).

In contrast with the innovative mobilizations and political gains of the 1970s, for Irish feminism, the 1980s was characterized by political defeats and by personal tragedies that became bitter national scandals and rallying points for the movement. One of the more notable tragedies occurred in January 1984, when a fifteen-year-old girl, Ann Lovett, was found unconscious beneath a statue of the Virgin Mary in a cemetery in Granard, County Longford, having given birth alone. Lovett and her baby subsequently died in hospital. Later the same year, the body of a baby with multiple stab wounds was found on a beach in County Kerry. A Garda investigation led to the arrest of Joanna Hayes, a single mother, who signed a confession that she subsequently retracted. The discovery of the body of a stillborn baby on Hayes's family farm proved that she could not have

been the mother of the baby washed up on the beach. Hayes and her family alleged that the Gardaí had coerced and intimidated them into signing the confessions, and a public inquiry was held in 1985 to investigate these charges. There was considerable anger, locally and nationally, at the invasive, bullying, and humiliating treatment of Hayes by the judge and all-male legal team at this inquiry. Together, the Lovett and Hayes cases demonstrated the tragic effects of a still-pervasive stigma directed at unmarried mothers and a misogynistic prejudice against perceived sexual transgressions by women. The resonance of these private traumas was amplified by the intensifying political battle over the liberalization of sexual regulation and social norms. The strength of the conservative reaction against the advancement of a liberalizing and feminist politics could be gauged by the success of a referendum inserting a clause protecting the "right to life" of the unborn into the Constitution in 1983, and the defeat of the referendum to lift the constitutional ban on divorce in 1986. The 1983 referendum was instigated by Irish antiabortion campaigners as a preemptive strike against feminist mobilization on reproductive justice in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Bacik argues that the Eighth Amendment, as it is known, is "uniquely misogynistic, even in a world of sexist laws." The Irish Constitution is alone in granting a fetus a right to life that is equal to the right to life of a pregnant adult woman or girl child and "expressly sets up the right to life of both . . . as being in opposition" (2004: 112). As she outlines, the consequences of this constitutional change have been a decades-long political and legal quagmire and needless pain and anxiety for many thousands of Irish women, including the estimated six thousand women who travel to Britain annually to avail themselves of a termination.[2]

The election of Mary Robinson as the first female president of Ireland in 1990 was, as Bacik notes, a significant symbolic turning point in the fortunes of Irish feminism and of the Irish lesbian and gay rights movement. A second referendum to remove the constitutional ban on divorce was held in 1996, and this was passed (albeit narrowly). In 1993, the Irish government, after losing a case in the European Court of Justice, decriminalized sexual acts between men, which had been illegal under an 1885 law that had been retained on the southern Irish statute books after independence. In the late 1990s, the government introduced equality legislation to prevent discrimination on grounds of gender and sexual orientation, and it also

2. For a cogent analysis of the politics of abortion rights in contemporary Ireland, see Kennedy 2015.

established the Equality Authority to implement this policy. Since Bacik was writing in 2004, the marriage equality campaign was successful, and there has also been movement in recent years toward the vindication of the legal rights of those who are transgendered (Ní Mhuirthe 2014).

Bacik's study presents a strong case for a pluralist, rights-based political agenda that is feminist and social democratic. She advocates "a new constitutional order in which equality becomes the core norm, and in which enforceable rights are guaranteed to disadvantaged groups rather than just to individuals" (2004: 10). For her, the pursuit of gender equality and sexual freedom is part of a spectrum of political questions that also includes poverty, housing, healthcare, and environmentalism. While charting the significant achievements of feminist and other progressive campaigns over several decades, she is alert to their shortcomings—sharply criticizing the failure of Irish feminism to move the debate on abortion outside of the legal/constitutional arena, for instance (110)—and she is not complacent about contemporary Ireland. As well as outlining persistent and significant challenges confronting women—access to abortion, unequal pay, workplace discrimination, lack of affordable childcare, obstacles to political participation—Bacik is alarmed by the rise of racism in Irish society and deplores the "economic values which have generated such immense wealth for a relatively small number of individuals" and created a society that is "deeply polarized" (243).

However, Bacik's political analysis of contemporary Ireland is weakened by the shortcomings of the historical narrative underpinning her account of social change during the late twentieth century. These weaknesses are telegraphed in her title. Though her study is aimed at a popular readership and produced by a nonacademic publisher, this cannot excuse the lazy cliché of the title or the antidemocratic elitism that resurfaces throughout the book. This title imagines something called "Ireland"—presumably Irish society and the citizens of which it is composed—as a passive, homogeneous, and inert mass that must be dragged for its own good into "the twentieth century," shorthand for a reified and presumably wholly positive modernity. Insofar as this entity termed "Ireland" is ascribed any active function at all in this process, it displays only an infantile, tantrum-like gesture of violent, unthinking resistance to its enforced enlightenment. But if "Ireland" is a recalcitrant infant, who are the adults who do the dragging in this instance? For Bacik, as her title suggests, changing gender and sexual norms is primarily imagined as a hierarchical process transacted by interactions between a small enlightened vanguard and state institutions,

and in this mode of analysis national institutions are generally resistant to change, while those of the European Union are facilitators of change. The possibility that social transformation might come about through extra-political forces or through democratic mass mobilization is not considered. Nor does her study allow that social change might be a complex, dialectical process and that the same historical forces eroding the hegemony of the Catholic Church and opening new possibilities for sexual freedom may simultaneously be generating new forms of sexual regulation and different but no less oppressive norms and expectations.

While Bacik is explicitly committed to a leftist, social democratic politics, her work, like most Irish scholarship on the topic, has little time for Marxist or cultural materialist modes of analyzing the regulation of gender and sexuality in capitalist societies. For her, creating a society where everybody could "enjoy a fulfilling sex life and sexual identity" (134) and confronting the "economic values" that generate poverty and inequality are conceptually separate political goals. In this view, the regulation of gender and sexuality is in no way determined by the social and ideological structures through which the physical and emotional labor required to meet human needs is currently organized around the extraction of surplus value. In Bacik's analysis, sexual repression in Ireland has little to do with political economy and everything to do with religion, and the capitalist structure of the Irish economy is completely distinct from Catholic regulation and control over Irish sexuality. For this reason, Catholic regulation remains the single object of attention for those committed to gender and sexual emancipation. For Bacik, "to speak of the 'liberalization' of Irish society is, by definition, to speak of its secularization" (20). The overriding objective of her political project, as outlined in this book, is the removal of "theocratic principles" from the Irish constitution, law, and social policy.

Bacik's secularism conforms to what Charles Taylor characterizes as a "subtraction story," in which the advance of secularism is attained by the progressive decline or privatization of religious beliefs to achieve some more truthful encounter with the world. Against this weak but commonly held version of secularism, Taylor posits "secularity" as a defining characteristic of modernity. Secular societies "are not just mankind minus the religion. They are very specific kinds of societies, imaginable only as the outcomes of long histories" (Warner et al. 2010: 24–25). In other words, we cannot assume, as Bacik's model does, that subtracting Catholicism from public life and confining it to a properly modern space of private belief will in itself deliver gender and sexual emancipation. This is not to down-

play the hegemonic role of the Catholic Church as the agent of a puritanical and often cruel regime of sexual regulation during the twentieth century, and neither does it diminish the urgency of removing religious control over state-funded schools and creating a child-centered, properly funded education system on republican principles. Rather, it is to highlight that we cannot so easily sever the problem of Catholicism and the problem of capitalism in Ireland as Bacik's model does. The subtractive secularization narrative, as deployed by Bacik, can hide as much as it reveals about the past or present regulation of sexuality, and such narratives can sometimes impede rather than facilitate radical change when they act as a prophylactic against more materialist modes of analysis.

In *Asking Angela MacNamara: An Intimate History of Irish Lives*, Irish sociologist Paul Ryan maps "a change in how Irish men and women conducted their intimate lives" during the late 1960s and 1970s (Ryan 2012: 3). In this study, Ryan examines the correspondence between Angela MacNamara and her readers. Between 1963 and 1980, MacNamara was an advice columnist with the *Sunday Press*, then the most popular Irish Sunday newspaper, and arguably the most influential lay proponent of Catholic sexual morality in Irish society. In addition to examining the letters, Ryan conducted a series of life-history interviews with a group of men who had read MacNamara's column at the time and who now review their earlier responses. Ryan's methodology foregrounds the importance of narrative as an analytical tool for capturing the texture and variety of history and the complexity of self-formation conducted in the midst of changing norms and values. The dialogue between MacNamara and her readers, and the retrospective interpretations of earlier experiences and thoughts offered by Ryan's informants, generates a sense of social change as a dynamic, open-ended process being actively negotiated.

While Bacik assumes that Irish Catholicism is, and has always been, a homogeneous formation, Ryan's study notes the diversity of voices among Irish Catholics on sexual issues. Likewise, while Bacik concentrates on the movements and activists who, in her view, spearheaded social change in the area of sexuality, Ryan aims to discover how Irish people emotionally and intellectually made sense of the changes under way. Taking a path earlier followed by historian Catriona Clear, in her study of Irish women's household work in the 1930s and 1940s, Ryan challenges the "one-dimensional story," constructed by generations of (usually US-based) ethnographers, that viewed Irish women as "completely powerless and silenced" and men as "patriarchal autocrats" (Ryan 2012: 10; Clear 2003: 104).

Drawing on the Dutch sociologist Cas Wouters, Ryan argues that the transformation of sexual norms takes place at different tempos for different groups within the same society. While they might be embraced by a minority of radicals and liberals, new sexual expectations and the "discussion of a wider spectrum of sexual desires" can be a source of great anxiety for most people (Ryan 2012: 5). As Ryan's work reveals, MacNamara and her readers shared a commitment to Catholic moral perspectives on sexuality, yet they were increasingly conscious, often painfully so, of the inadequacy of this teaching as a practical ethical framework. The Catholic definition of marital sexuality in strictly reproductive terms, for instance, came into constant conflict with the human desire for, and expectation of, nonreproductive experiences such as romance, intimacy, and sexual and emotional fulfillment that heterosexual women and men brought to courtship and marriage. Moreover, for married couples, the experience of sexual intimacy and pleasure was commonly burdened by anxiety about pregnancy, and thus this intimacy came under the purview of church teaching on contraception and indeed of government policy on contraception and divorce. Likewise, for MacNamara's readers who were parents concerned about their children negotiating rapidly changing norms and expectations, the traditional emphasis on maintaining children's ignorance on sexual matters came to seem entirely redundant and counterproductive.

Drawing on the letters of those troubled and confused gay men who sought MacNamara's advice, and those older gay men he interviewed, Ryan traces "the rise and fall of two expert voices on homosexuality—religion and psychiatry" while also charting an emergent voice, articulated by the lesbian and gay rights social movement from the mid-1970s onward, which challenged these discourses and "spoke about homosexuality in a context of human rights, relationships and fulfilled lives" (166). For MacNamara's gay male correspondents, her column created a discursive space to articulate the unspoken and thus helped some to embrace new discourses of "coming out," liberation, and gay rights. Viewed thus, she facilitated just the liberalizing development that she opposed; while counseling understanding and compassion for gay men, MacNamara's replies invariably adhered to a mix of the religious and medical "explanations" for homosexuality even as these were being superseded in medicine and mass media. This illustrates the most interesting paradox of MacNamara's column. She intended it to buttress Catholic moral teaching in a modernizing society, but it actually facilitated the modernizing process that eroded the hegemony of Catholic teaching. MacNamara was thus to some degree an agent of what she

ostensibly stood against because, as Ryan observes, her column "inadvertently" became "a force for sexual change in Ireland" (193). Ryan's work assumes, contrary to that of Inglis, Ferriter, or Bacik, that social change is less a matter of abrupt transitions from one dominant regime to another than of uneven, incremental, and unpredictable (rather than legislatively controlled) change. His analysis suggests that sexual change is brought about by unexpected conjunctions of historical currents, which create gaps or fissures in the dominant ideological fabric that allow individuals to imagine themselves, and their future, differently.

4. Equal and Empowered: Neoliberal Paradoxes

As Ryan's methodological emphasis on narrative implies, the circulation of stories and images in a culture shapes how individuals negotiate their formation as sexual subjects. In general, the critical study of literary representations of Irish sexuality, and the study of the interaction between literary discourses and other types of sexual discourse, has mainly focused on the period before 1970. Eibhear Walshe's edited collection, *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing* (1997), was a pioneering work of Irish lesbian and gay studies scholarship. The book's publication signaled the social change that had been under way since the 1970s: the emergence of a vibrant Irish lesbian and gay subculture and the achievement of decriminalization four years before. But the content is mainly focused on the prehistory, as it were, of this movement and the representation of same-sex passions by writers such as Somerville and Ross, Oscar Wilde, Molly Keane, and Kate O'Brien. This pioneering focus on the early and mid-twentieth century continues in more recent studies of sexuality and Irish literature. The results have been overwhelmingly productive: Irish studies is now far more attentive than it was even a decade or two ago to the complexities and contradictions of sexual discourses and identities. However, the "repressive Ireland" theorized by Inglis that was, as Bacik has it, dragged unwillingly into the twentieth century still commands a preponderant weight of attention, and this in itself suggests the dogged persistence of the idea that Ireland is journeying from a repressive Catholic past to a progressive and liberated secular present. My examination of sexuality and the Catholic bildungsroman in *Impure Thoughts* (2012), for instance, effectively concludes in the 1960s. James M Smith's *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (2007) examines contemporary representations of the Magdalen women's stories in drama, cinema, and

visual culture, but the critical interest is on how the culture is finding ways to represent that painful past. In other critical studies, the analysis of sexuality is a minor thematic strand within a broader concern with gender and nationalism. Elizabeth Butler Cullingford's *Ireland's Others* (2001) and Gerardine Meaney's *Gender, Ireland and Cultural Change* (2010) are paradigmatic works in this regard. Both works span the early and late twentieth century, but even while examining post-1970 Irish literature and cinema, their hermeneutic remains that established for their study of the earlier historical period. These books contrast sharply in their relative sympathy (Cullingford) or hostility (Meaney) toward nationalism, and toward postcolonial readings of Irish history, but this problematic, rather than the late twentieth-century transformation of sexual norms, is the determining horizon.

Nevertheless, literary and cultural critics have inevitably been concerned with the analysis of gender and sexual regulation in contemporary Ireland. As yet, these critics have conducted their analyses in essay form rather than as major critical studies. Here I will discuss two such interventions, by Ann Mulhall and Debbie Ging, which are indicative of two critical currents—queer theory and materialist feminism—and the potential they offer for new directions in Irish sexual scholarship.

Mulhall's characteristic method demonstrates the critical potential of a flexible, mobile conception of queerness. She scrupulously deconstructs a literary or cultural text that has been widely hailed as queering and disrupting prevailing norms—Neil Jordan's *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005) and Dónal Óg Cusack's *Come What May* (2009) are two instances—to demonstrate how such texts in fact simultaneously challenge and reconsolidate the prevailing heteronormative gender order (Mulhall 2013b; Mulhall 2013c).[3] Her work also indicates how queer theory, striving for a more worldly and politically engaged register in the past decade, has assimilated a conception of biopower and the biopolitical derived from a combination of late Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben.

In "Queer in Ireland: Deviant Filiations and the (Un)holy Family," Mulhall brings the techniques of a literary critic to bear on political discourse and analyzes a symbolically powerful moment of rupture in recent Irish sexual politics. After 1993, once decriminalization had been secured, the Irish LGBT movement—or, more precisely, an increasingly professionalized lobbying group—initially worked in a broad-based alliance of civil

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3. Dónal Óg Cusack is an out-gay GAA hurling star and has become a prominent LGBT rights advocate. His 2009 memoir, and the intensive media discussion it generated, is also analyzed in Cronin 2014 and Ging 2015.

society organizations to pursue a generously defined program of progressive change, notably the establishment of a statutory equality infrastructure. However, once the pursuit of civil partnership, and later same-sex marriage, came to the fore in the new millennium, this broader vision of social justice and alliance building was inevitably abandoned in favor of a narrowly defined, sectoral objective premised on a markedly neoliberal, contractual model of "equality." Observing this current, the activist Michael Barron has noted the "emergence in the Irish LGBT community of a strong emphasis on the achievement of individual rights as opposed to efforts to address the systemic inequalities which impact on the most marginalized within our community" (Barron 2013: 24). In 2005, the organizers of the Dublin Lesbian and Gay Film Festival invited the then minister for justice Michael McDowell to open the festival.[4] This was a cynical piece of political horse trading. In return for the minister looking favorably on the civil partnership proposals, an LGBT organization gave him a media-friendly public platform to burnish his "socially liberal" credentials at a time when his actual policies—particularly in relation to migrants, refugees, and people with disabilities—were reactionary, illiberal, and entirely counter to any conception of "equality." By ignoring the protest of their erstwhile allies in the migrant and disability rights organizations, the organizers compounded that breach with the earlier politics.

Mulhall connects this event to the 2004 referendum, in which a large majority voted to redefine Irish citizenship on grounds of descent or blood rather than place of birth; in short, after the referendum was passed, a child born in the state was no longer automatically entitled to Irish citizenship. During the referendum campaign, McDowell had raised an entirely fictitious specter of Dublin's maternity hospitals being overwhelmed by migrant women, mainly from African countries, giving birth to acquire citizenship for their children and thus the right of residence for their families. This scaremongering meant that the transition from a racial to a racist state, to use Ronit Lentin's terms, was explicitly gendered (Lentin 2007). Mulhall connects the Irish state's policies of "racial management" with its misogynistic ban on abortion as part of the same biopolitical dynamic: "the racially

4. McDowell was a founding member of the Progressive Democrats, a center-right political party, in existence between 1985 and 2009. Its platform combined neoliberal, free-market economic policies with a "socially liberal," "modernizing," and "revisionist" agenda. Though never electorally strong, the structure of the Irish electoral system gave the party several opportunities to be a junior coalition partner. Paradoxically, since its neoliberalism became the doxa of politics, it was both highly influential and ultimately redundant.

marked woman as producer of an undesirable future who must therefore be managed by expulsion if necessary is the biopolitical complement to the ethnically desirable, presumptively white woman who is, on the other hand, legislatively coerced into reproducing the nation's aspirational future" (Mulhall 2011: 101).

Mulhall argues that the broadening of citizenship to include the right to same-sex marriage and the narrowing of citizenship to exclude migrants are not unrelated, one progressive and the other regressive, political developments but are inextricably part of the same process. In contrast to liberal accounts of the LGBT political movement, such as Ferriter's and Bacik's, in which it is deemed an agent of wholly progressive change, confronting the state and challenging it to modernize, Mulhall presents a more complex dynamic. While securing one set of sexual and political rights, movements can simultaneously contribute to the construction of a neoliberal biopolitical regime that denies different rights to others. Describing the scene on the evening of the film festival opening in 2005, when those attending walked past the protesting migrants, she suggests a startling reversal of roles. In his speech, Minister McDowell painted a picture of Dublin as a modern "successful city" and a space of multiculturalism and diversity; he recruited the city's lesbian and gay community as guarantors of this "diverse heterogeneous sense of Irish-ness that will replace the narrow self-image of monochrome Catholic nationalist Ireland" (cited in Mulhall 2011: 107). However, the presence of the protesting migrant bodies outside this "putatively queer space" made visible the "narrow" racist exclusions on which the minister's shallow pluralism and cosmopolitanism silently rested. Insofar as it was they who disrupted, challenged, and confronted the status quo, "the agents of 'queerness' in this scene are not, then, the largely white, largely middle-class queers in attendance but the heterosexual racialized mothers and their disenfranchised children" (107). In light of the 2015 marriage referendum, Mulhall's analysis presents a searching challenge to the widespread liberal assumption that the "bad" result of 2004—when the majority voted for a regressive, racist proposal—has been atoned for by the "good," progressive result of 2015; each result is a component of the same process of redefining who counts as a legitimate citizen, and, as she observes, in this process "legitimation for some inevitably entails delegitimation for others" (105).[5]

5. Mulhall's mode of analysis could productively be extended to the media discourse generated by the selection of Leo Varadkar as the leader of the center-right Fine Gael Party

In "All-Consuming Images: New Gender Formations in Post-Celtic-Tiger Ireland," Debbie Ging surveys what she terms the "gender-scape" of contemporary Irish media culture and observes that "Irish women may be finally free from Catholicism but they must now negotiate the dual forces of bio-determinism and commodification, which have equally high stakes in the regulation of their bodies" (Ging 2009: 59). In her view, Catholicism is by no means a merely residual formation, since denominational education still determines how schools discuss gender and sexuality, for instance. Ging also notes that the gender-essentialist rhetoric of the antifeminist American men's movement has been taken up by the reactionary Catholic lobby (she mentions the newspaper columnists John Waters and Breda O'Brien) to "produce a highly volatile and distorted public discussion" (60). Nevertheless, Ging acknowledges that Catholicism is now just one discourse in the public sphere and, *pace* Bacik, no longer necessarily the most authoritative one in shaping gender and sexual norms.

Of those alternative, newly hegemonic gender discourses, Ging identifies two as most pervasive in contemporary Ireland: postfeminism and biological essentialism. Unlike feminism, postfeminism is not a clearly defined or even coherent political position but "a set of discursive responses—often serving contradictory agendas—to the perceived successes and failures of feminism" (57). A governing assumption of this discourse is that substantive gender equality has been achieved and that feminism is felt as anachronistic or redundant by contemporary women. In Ireland, this late capitalist position, present across Western societies, also chimes with modernization discourse and the complacency, exemplified by McDowell's 2005 speech, about a "post-Catholic" and "postnationalist" Irish pluralism. More invidious is the contradictory postfeminist claim that gender equality as a political objective is not so much achieved as misguided. From this perspective, what women need is not radically transformed social and gender relations but individual "empowerment." Here, postfeminism is woven through the hegemonic political rationality of neoliberalism. Transformation is conceived

and subsequent election as Taoiseach in June 2017. Just before the marriage referendum was called in 2015, Varadkar, then minister of health, spoke publicly about being gay. Thus, much commentary in 2017, nationally and internationally, focused on the historical significance of a "devoutly Catholic country," in the words of the *New York Post*, having a prime minister who is gay and the son of an immigrant. From the perspective of any radical sexual politics, the analytical difficulty is to acknowledge that this development is symbolically important and indexes a form of political progress, while recognizing that the actual content of Varadkar's politics are wholly regressive and neoliberal.

as a creative project by the entrepreneurial subject rather than an objective of collective mobilization, and the effective mechanism to deliver such transformation is the marketplace. The indicative act of empowerment, in this view, is the exercise of consumer choice.

In the postfeminist imaginary, feminism is not only outmoded but was actually damaging to women since it is alleged to have suppressed women's "innate" femininity. From this perspective, the postmodern proliferation of "ironic" images of objectified female bodies, and the widespread appropriation of a pornographic aesthetic by mainstream advertising, is not to be understood as the reassertion of sexist misogyny. On the contrary, the dominant culture interpellates young Irish women to experience this objectification as a form of sexual liberation and a welcome delivery from the alleged "puritanism" of feminism as much as of Catholicism.

The sexual objectification of women's bodies has been relegitimized by postfeminist discourse, as well as by the unexpected renaissance of biological essentialism. By the 1990s, feminism, and the widely accepted social constructionist hermeneutic it drew on, appeared to have convincingly demolished any notion of innate, biologically determined gender differences between men and women. The ideological deployment of that idea to naturalize discrimination against women was equally undermined. But, like the undead of zombie fiction, biological essentialism has returned in the twenty-first century with renewed vigor and similarly appalling consequences. This revitalized biodeterminism has acquired new legitimacy through recourse to genetics and other developments in the scientific understanding of human biology, especially the human brain. Biology—or genetics or biochemistry—is, it would appear, once again destiny. Biodeterminism has gained widespread currency through a pseudo-scientific babble—invoking genetics, evolution, "brain size," hormones, and so on—that proliferates, usually unchallenged, through contemporary media discourse. As with postfeminism, the biodeterminist discourse is readily assimilated to neoliberal political rationality, and this helps explain its ascendency. After all, biodeterminism apparently provides a rationally demonstrable "scientific" basis, no mere ideological argument, for individualized and commodified solutions to structural problems: the intensified use of pharmaceuticals to control "hyperactive" children, whose difficulties may be better addressed through better distribution of educational and welfare resources, for instance, or to treat forms of "depression" that are less the consequence of "chemical imbalances" than the stresses and anxieties endemic to contemporary capitalism.

As Ging outlines, this is a late capitalist phenomenon that is common across the Western world while taking specific shape in contemporary Irish culture. In particular, variants of biological essentialism are evoked by Irish political commentators when discussing a range of pressing questions: the high suicide rate among young men in rural Ireland; the low level of educational attainment and high levels of antisocial behavior in urban working-class areas; the persistently high levels of domestic violence. Notably, bio-determinist discourse features strongly in any discussion of the Irish state's childcare policy, which is a striking fusion of gender conservativism, newly licensed by biological essentialism, and a "progressive" neoliberal commitment to pluralism and the market. The policy is founded on the contradictory premises that more women in the labor force is an economic and political good and that childcare is the "natural" responsibility of mothers, who should pay exorbitantly, in a mostly private childcare "market," for the privilege of "having it all."

Mulhall and Ging present a dispiriting picture of contemporary Ireland, in which, as Ging argues, "the increased visibility of homosexuality, the perceived freedoms of 'raunch culture' and the broad acceptance of the myth that equality has been achieved have serviced a convincing rhetoric of progress and, in doing so, have ultimately served to gloss over the persistence of substantial material inequalities between men and women" (69). Nevertheless, while the picture is discouraging, their framing of it is encouraging. Their mode of analysis is fully cognizant of the complex interaction between local and global ideological currents in late capitalist Ireland. Drawing on the radical potential of the materialist and biopolitical strands in contemporary feminism and queer theory, their analysis allows for a dynamic model of social change propelled by the dialectic of regulation and freedom and moves us away from the traps of a one-dimensional modernization model of Irish history. Their work reiterates the urgency for Irish scholars to reconceive human sexuality, less as a natural drive repressed by puritanical institutions than as human potentialities, desires, and affects that are intimately shaped by the material conditions of an exploitative global system that fails to meet the broad continuum of human needs.

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