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# Irish Studies: Ideas and Institutions after the Crash

MICHAEL G. CRONIN and EMER NOLAN

‘Irish Studies: Ideas and Institutions after the Crash’ is the first of a series of events organized by a group of academics at NUI Maynooth as part of a project entitled ‘Crisis, Culture and Commemoration’ (or ‘The Rocky Road to 2016’). The aim of this initiative is to encourage a response from literary and cultural critics in Ireland to the upcoming centenaries of the Easter Rebellion and of other key events in modern Irish history. A related purpose is to consider the history and possible futures of Irish Studies, which was pioneered in the 1980s and 1990s as a new kind of enterprise for Irish intellectuals. Cultural critics associated with Irish Studies, influenced by international developments in the humanities, analysed the preoccupations and innovations of Irish artists, philosophers and political thinkers, especially in relation to Ireland’s traumatic experience of modernization as a colony of Britain. Irish Studies tried to match the sophistication and ambition of early twentieth-century Irish modernist writers such as Yeats and Joyce in its own critical work. It seemed to promise that, in part by looking back to earlier moments of crisis and experiment, cultural studies or theory could help to produce new ways of thinking about the ongoing problems of conflict in Northern Ireland and of political and economic stagnation in the Republic.

The last three decades or so have been marked by a number of remarkable changes and some equally dramatic reversals, both in Irish society, north and south of the border, and in the institutional history of this critical enterprise. It could be argued that the insistence of Irish Studies on a colonial reading of the Northern crisis and its refusal to jettison entirely the legacies of Irish republicanism were to some extent vindicated by the inclusion and participation of northern republicans in the Peace Process. However, some of the more leftist strands within Irish Studies, and particularly its occasional

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critiques of the culture of late capitalism, were apparently rendered redundant by the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger. Neo-liberal economic policies in the Republic had evidently provided solutions to mass unemployment and enforced emigration. It was widely held that prosperity would quicken the pace of social liberalization and advance cultural self-confidence and artistic achievement. In an atmosphere of relief and even euphoria, there was little appetite for Adornian reflections on commercialized mass culture or consumerism. The story of Irish political and economic success attracted huge international attention; the scholarly investigation of Irish history and culture benefited from this heightened interest in the country – especially in US universities – and from new funding for research in the domestic university system.

Irish Studies began as a radical body of work, seeking not just new academic methodologies but a definition of a new object of investigation – best understood perhaps as Ireland's uneven or delayed modernization as exemplary of the dynamic that drove and created the condition of modernity more generally. It had been strenuously opposed by many – including historians, of all people, wary of the study of the past becoming 'infected' by ideology, traditional humanities scholars fighting a local version of the Anglo-American 'theory wars' and some feminist commentators for whom no version of the 'national' could ever be hospitable to women's interests. Yet within a short period of time, many Irish institutions and universities were teaching Irish Studies, usually in the form of multidisciplinary suites of modules. It became possible and advantageous for historians, sociologists, scholars of the Irish language and literary critics to co-operate peaceably on such programmes without the 'contest of the disciplines' which had dominated the early experiments. But what had happened to the larger ambitions of the enterprise? Was this another example of a 'grand narrative' best abandoned in postmodern times? And if we were living in an age in which issues of empire or of nationalism had lost their governing influence, how would the factors determining Ireland's contemporary development then be identified or understood?

Such questions need to be asked during the post-2008 crisis and in the run-up to the forthcoming national commemorations. During an earlier period in the development of Irish Studies, the influence of cultural theorists on such events as the commemoration of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Great Famine in 1997 or the bicentenary of the United Irish Rebellion in 1998 was criticized by some historians. An Advisory Group, consisting exclusively of distinguished historians, has now been established to guide the Irish government on how best to conduct the current 'Decade of Centenaries'. But cultural critics have a crucial role to play

in, for example, the interpretation of Irish modernism and in tracing other new developments in the revolutionary period such as the emergence of mass cultural forms. The current crisis also underlines the fact that economic peripherality is not easily overcome. While Ireland may still be relatively privileged in global terms, the austerity programme enforced by the government and the EU/IMF has exposed (as elsewhere in Europe) what had been irretrievably demonstrated in Asia, Africa and Latin America – that debt and unemployment are constitutive parts of the capitalist system and not one country's peculiar fate or misfortune. While the economy of Northern Ireland is less dramatically affected by the European uproar, because it is not in the Eurozone and had no comparable preceding surge of prosperity, the cut-backs administered by the coalition government will inevitably affect it disproportionately within the UK, since no other region is or was so dependent upon the public sector. The crisis of neo-liberalism also perhaps makes it harder to imagine a future course of development or identity for Northern Irish society – other than that of being in a 'post-conflict' situation. Other key issues, such as the analysis of gender and sexuality in Ireland – properly to the forefront of Irish Studies in recent years – are also perhaps most productively examined in the context of the late capitalist culture that conditions all modern identities. The sovereignty of the marketplace, with its demand for a 'socialism for the rich', has become as unpalatable as it is apparently irresistible; in turn, this raises the question of democracy itself as seemingly little more than a formal and procedural system that legitimates a shameless plutocracy. There has been a great deal of discussion about 'the loss of sovereignty' in the Republic of Ireland since the bail-out of 2010. More than at any time in the last century, the claim of 1916 to sovereignty and self-government seems more clearly utopian. But this magnifies rather than diminishes its importance.

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The symposium, which took place on 22 June 2012 at NUI Maynooth, was organized by Sinéad Kennedy, Joe Cleary, Emer Nolan and Michael G. Cronin. The organizing committee would like to thank all the speakers and audience members for their valuable contributions to the success of the symposium. Thanks are also due to Conor McCarthy who kindly agreed to chair sessions and to Amanda Bent, Bridget English, Deirdre Quinn and Bernadette Trehay for their practical help. We are grateful to the Department of English and to An Foras Feasa Research Institute in Irish Historical and Cultural Traditions at NUI Maynooth for their administrative and financial support. We are also grateful to the editors of *The Irish Review* for facilitating this special issue.