

Comment

Anthropology and the Irish Encounter

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In their discussion of ancestral versus contemporary anthropology in Ireland, Keith Egan and Fiona Murphy (this issue) do not draw a parallel distinction, quite probably deliberately, between “metropolitan” and “native” anthropologies. Positing a category of “native anthropology” opens up an explosive set of issues about the claim to be “native”—all the more combustible in a place that has known settler colonialism since the 12th century, tidal waves of out-migration (and consequently a vast and tuned-in diaspora) due to famine in the 19th and economic stagnation in the 20th century, and a total demographic makeover through in-migration in the past two decades. Nonetheless, even though they do not resort to this distinction, Egan and Murphy are likely to agree that they are describing an Irish version of a quandary that is all too familiar to native anthropologists from marginal anthropological traditions, predominantly in the postcolonial world: namely, what is to be done when the acknowledged gold standard of metropolitan ethnographic writing renders your home place in a way that is unrecognizable to you? Noting the eminence of Nancy Scheper-Hughes and the fact that she is “a beautiful, even literary, writer” (this issue), still they voice this plaint about her Ireland book, *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics* (1979, 2001): “As anthropologists, we are drawn to feel a certain allegiance to her professional ethics, her choice of subject, and her attempts to pull back the covers on a supposedly disenchanted land, but as subjects implicated in her analysis, this tradition of anomie leaves Irish anthropologists with unfinished business” (this issue).

My remarks here are an attempt to join the process of thinking through that question of “what is to be done?” and to contribute an idea or two toward an agenda for a radical anthropology of Ireland. First, it is no resolution at all, of course, to seemingly park the craniometry of A. C. Haddon and C. R. Browne (1891) alongside Scheper-Hughes’s (1979, 2001) ethnography of mental illness in rural County Kerry. An engagement with one’s ancestors, whether in the distant or in the much more recent past, makes it necessary to pinpoint and pursue specific material histories and hierarchies of knowledge production. For example, Irish anthropologists have generally tended to leave to cultural theorists and creative writers the discussion regarding anthropology and colonialism in the Irish context. This discussion is long overdue. It is germane in making sense of 19th-century racist science and the time warp “ethnographic present” found in the writings of Conrad Arensberg (1988) and Solon Kimball (Arensberg and Kimball 1968) and their followers

but also in understanding the lack of institutional rootedness of anthropology on Irish soil.

Egan and Murphy observe the shift away from the dramas of rural Ireland and the concern, “as Adrian Peace puts it, ‘not with Irish society but with the anthropology of the ethnic Irish’” (this issue) to current ethnographic writing that aims to evoke experience and performance and to chart the flux of lives lived in a globalized Ireland. “Queer ethnographies,” they write, “ethnographies of Ireland’s itinerant populations, violence, crime, gender, equality, secularization, sports, and material culture studies now all stand with folklore studies in university bookshops” (this issue).

I have a minor quibble with the periodization they have proposed: older work that deals with these themes in a processual way tends to be marginalized in the service of the somewhat presentist premises of their article. I am thinking, for example, of Sharon Gmelch’s *Nan: The Life of an Irish Travelling Woman* (1986), a product of the fieldwork that she and George Gmelch conducted in the 1970s. While it is also very tempting to bring up here the older writings of Northern Irish anthropologists on conflict and change, or the work of U.S.-based scholars such as Joan Vincent (1988) and Marilyn Cohen (1994, 1997) in the North, Egan and Murphy have clearly stated at the outset that they are restricting their gaze in their article to ethnographies based in the Irish Republic. Also, they are plainly striving for a broad-stroke depiction of anthropology in Ireland; they do not appear to be claiming that these temporal categories are watertight.

A far more important matter is the question of situating cultural processes in Ireland within the ebbs and flows of present-day capitalism, a theoretical task that has mostly been undertaken by scholarship in other related fields—literature, Irish studies, history. Contemporary anthropology in Ireland would do well to activate and nourish its kinship ties with the writings of David Lloyd (1999, 2008, 2011), Joe Cleary (2006), Conor McCarthy (2000), and others. There is a particularly clear analytical view from the vantage point of an Ireland that has lived through the Celtic Tiger and its abrupt and catastrophic end, along the margins and at the behest of a renewed European hegemony (*The New Old World*, as proclaimed in Perry Anderson’s [2009] book title). Ethnographic evocation is badly needed to enrich and complicate the analyses that have been rushed out in the heat of this moment.

Ultimately, Egan and Murphy have argued that the most constructive way of seeing through and seeing past ghosts and ancestors is to build an anthropology of one’s own. It is distinctly heartening to hear of the scale and breadth of the creative labors they have described in the Irish context.

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