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Dublin, modernity and the postcolonial spatial fix

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This book makes an impressive postcolonial and geographical contribution to Irish Studies, and one which raises, as I shall explore below, important questions about the relations between cities and modernity. Postcolonial perspectives on Ireland rest upon three main claims¹. First, that for much of its history, Ireland was a British colony². Secondly, that colonial subjects have constricted agency and hybrid identities; what they can do is limited

by the colonial power and what they aspire to is formed in part by that same power³. Finally, to adopt a postcolonial perspective is to search for the ways post-Independence Ireland was shaped by the legacies of colonialism. Revisionist scholars, argues Kincaid, ignore 'the legacy of Ireland's long history of underdevelopment and the difficult circumstances out of which the new nation was born' (p. 128) and blame Ireland's problems instead upon the persistence of nationalist ideologies⁴.

Kincaid's geographical perspective has three emphases. First, he proposes an obsession with literary matters in both postcolonial theory and in Irish Studies. He suggests, instead, that we pay attention to the material city and not only to the metaphorical spaces of literature⁵. Secondly, he directs attention to the urban state practices as opposed to the rural state ideology of independent Ireland. Finally, he identifies these urban state practices as iconography, architecture, town planning and urban development. These, he argues, were central to attempts to stabilise the polity, society and economy of the Republic of Ireland after independence. The state was secured, not mainly through ideology, but by remaking Dublin; postcolonial Ireland was subject, in short, to a spatial fix⁶. This is an audacious claim and signals an important contribution not only to Irish Studies but also to Postcolonial theory more generally⁷. Kincaid's postcolonial and geographical approach produces strikingly original analyses of: Dublin's landscape, the relations between town and country in Ireland, the balance between material and ideological forces in shaping identity and society, the relations between planning and other discourses, the nature of memory, and, much more besides, including, as the rest of my comment illustrates, the links between modernity and state ideologies in Ireland.

At root, we might suggest that modernity, at least in its Western form, is an engagement with the new, in order either to change society or to manage change. Western modernity, I would argue, embraces a dialectic of revolution and management, of enlightenment and despair (Hawthorn, 1976), of celebration and shock (Hughes, 1980). This modernity, then, is necessarily ambivalent, with those afeared of progressive change cleaving to social engineering, while those committed to revolution quail at the ambition of social control. These tensions remain only implicit in *Postcolonial Dublin*, yet they are, I believe, vital for Kincaid's overall argument about the postcolonial spatial fix. I will review Kincaid's arguments about urbanism and modernity for each of the three main periods covered in the book: colony (before 1922), early-independence (1920s to 1970s), and the present (from the 1980s).

The modernity of British colonial administration in Ireland is a recurring theme in Irish Studies (MacDonagh, 1977) and emphasised by Kincaid who notes that the British used Ireland as 'a laboratory for colonizing techniques' (p. xi). There is a significant body of works on colonial modernity and the regulation of the city (Rabinow, 1989; Legg, 2005; Legg, in press). In broad terms, Kincaid echoes Rabinow in arguing that in the colony expansive measures of social control were essayed that respect for civil liberties would preclude at the metropole, until their very effectiveness became too attractive to metropolitan government. Thus Kincaid argues that the Wide Streets Commission, established in 1757, organised Dublin's spaces in ways that anticipated Nash in London and Haussmann in Paris (p. xi). Kincaid argues that in creating a space of circulation between significant official sites, a type of modernity was imposed precociously upon Dublin. Moving to the late-nineteenth century, Kincaid proposes also that the nascent practice of comprehensive town planning was developed in large part in response to colonial and nationalist alongside metropolitan and

social pressures, for the early planners saw themselves as 'rescuing the empire and saving modern industrial culture from its own excesses' (p. 29).

The colonial rather than imperial nature of these planning regimes invites further reflection. Clearly, the ideas about the baroque organisation of space precede this Dublin example, being a conscious echo of Imperial Rome (Mumford, 1961). An obvious comparison would be with London and the earlier schemes of Christopher Wren (Cherry, 1969) and designs of Inigo Jones. O'Brien (2001) argues that there was a burst of urban creativity associated with the rise of mercantile-capitalist societies in the seventeenth-century and Loach (2001) suggests that plans such as those of Wren owe more to changes in political ideology than to the opportunity created by the destructive Great Fire of 1666. In studying John Gwynn's plans for London (1766), Ogborn (2004) documents the way these ideas were taken up again in London at more or less the time of the Wide Streets Commission. There is, it would seem, a continuity between ideas about urban space in metropolitan and colonial cities and it is not clear where the creative precedence lies. It is true that neither Gwynn nor Wren saw their plans realised to any great extent, but it is not clear, as Kincaid suggests, that the implementation of similar plans in early-nineteenth century London rested upon their 'having proven a useful tool of population management' (p. xxiii) in Dublin, rather than there being a continuity of intention about the desirable iconographic expression of imperial power. The relations and distinctions between colonial and imperial intentions require fuller and comparative investigation.

Turning to the second period, modernity is now no longer tied to colonialism and Kincaid takes up modernism as a broadly progressive force, at least in the 1920s and 1930s. For these early decades of independence, Kincaid sees architectural modernism as evidence of the new Irish state's 'quest for newness and experimentation' (p. 71). For the 1960s and 1970s, however, the version of modernism in architecture known as the *international style* is, in contrast, criticised as an attempt to create a depoliticised and thus 'deradicalized present' (p. 171). These tensions point, I think, to a need for scholars discussing modernism to pay close attention to questions of liberalism and of social control.

In a discussion of Indian modernity, Chatterjee insists upon the need to locate intellectuals with respect to particular sets of social and economic processes. It is misleading, argues Chatterjee (1986:23), to take ideas, in isolation, as progressive or not, without attending to the contexts of their deployment. Kincaid's positive view of the earliest years of Irish independence shows the value and the difficulty of this sort of analysis. He points out that, while many have seen the Irish struggle for independence as predominantly rural, it was in fact the urban crisis of early-twentieth century Dublin that did most to discredit the British administration and created the tinder to which 1916 set its match. The revolution was begun on the streets of the capital and its troops were recruited in large part from Dublin's labour and housing struggles. Dublin, then, was the centre that had to hold if mere anarchy were to be caged. The construction of new housing in the city not only addressed the social problems of the slums but, in a directly Keynesian manner, provided work in the place where poverty posed the greatest political danger. The borrowing of architectural models from the Netherlands in the 1920s and 1930s signalled an urbanist approach to the problems of the working class, very different from the suburban solutions offered later. Kincaid believes that, in this early period, the careful attention to the needs of the Dublin working class stabilised the new Irish state at a time when, elsewhere in Europe, unemployment bred instability, and even fascism. Yet, the socialist, feminist and even co-operative movements of early-

twentieth-century Ireland that were so important to the nationalist movement had little effect upon the sort of liberal state that was created after independence, and the centralised, statist management of economy and society, in which housing the poor of Dublin loomed so large, was deaf to the popular and democratic energies that those earlier movements had loosed. The postcolonial spatial fix was already a liberal form of social control even before the bland managerialism of the 1960s.

The third period Kincaid discusses covers the economic growth that accompanied Ireland's entry into the European Union and the investment that followed. Ireland's official state ideology celebrates the dynamism of recent decades and sees a newly globalised Ireland as having emerged from its earlier nationalist dark ages. Kincaid attacks this ideology at both ends. His positive revaluation of the early decades of independence is balanced by his critique of the Celtic Tiger and the spaces it has created in Dublin. In this brave new world, spatial barriers are, according to Kincaid, yielding before the imperatives of global capital. Neo-liberal globalisation even appears to offer Irish people an opportunity to imagine the 'irrelevancy of the nation-state' (p.180) and thus to leave behind the problems created by Partition. However, while the ideology of globalization paints a world without frontiers, it is clear that borders still interrupt both capital and, more dramatically, labour (Weiss, 1997; Bauman, 1998). In this respect, I think that the innovations that Kincaid mentions are more important than he allows.

For Ireland to have developed at Shannon the world's first customs-free industrial zone (p. 127) was an important shaping of a national space and not just the removal of national distinctiveness. If Ireland's low corporate tax regime (p. 176) means that international companies transfer to its national space the profits they would rather not declare elsewhere, then, consequences flow from the re-creation of national differences and not from their abolition. Similarly, Kincaid sees an 'eclectic cosmopolitanism' in the architecture of Temple Bar which is of a piece with its general status as the place that 'has come to represent the collapse of nationalism' (p. 198). For Kincaid, Temple Bar is a space that looks back to a 'medieval bourgeois urban milieu' that in Ireland was 'stymied and repressed by the weight of colonialism' (p. 198). It can not, then, be any sort of authentic historical revival and as an ersatz space signals a loss of faith in local culture. I am not sure we need be quite this dismissive. The scale of the urban fabric in Temple Bar together with the small-scale and inter-connected nature of its enterprises are not so easily assimilated to those of globalised capital found a little further east in the new financial districts of the former dockyards. There are connections and interdependencies, of course, but spaces like Temple Bar, at least before its bars drown out all thought other than where to have the next beer, can nurture a high value-added economy (based on such activities as graphic design) and recruit to the centre of the city the population and spending power that can sustain other institutions such as convenience stores and medical services. Kincaid might prefer, with Jane Jacobs, that an urban middle class be grown out of the city's already-resident working class (p. 186) but that requires more than just urban policies, it needs sympathetic educational and employment policies too. Until, and even after, that we need complex urban spaces of dense contact.

Distinctive localisms do not have only to look back, they can look forward too. The utopian element of urban life is debated as people shape space to allow and promote some activities and contacts and deny others. Kincaid proposes that the current denigration of the geographical vision of early independent Ireland as being both provincial and archaic serves neo-liberal agendas by offering the free-trade innovations of the 1960s as Ireland's emergence

into the light of cosmopolitan sophistication. Kincaid suggests further that what is at stake in the political imaginary of modern Ireland is a geographical vision of a world without frontiers in which all urban space is cut from the same pattern; convenient to capital and comforting to its better-paid employees. If we are to build cities of contacts and not just of networks, of promiscuous and random mixing rather than stratified and purposive social interaction⁸, then, we will need instead to explore the constitution of spaces not only by planning fiat but also by everyday practice. We must consider the subjective elements of urban life alongside their apparently objective, material correlates.

In his final chapter, Kincaid turns to this question of subjectivity. He follows Keya Ganguly in finding a utopian element in memoirs ('what is not yet possible'; Ganguly 2001: 81), but his discussion assimilates them to the Revisionist conception of an Ireland emerging from nationalist obscurantism only through the mass media of the 1960s. Instead of reading for comments about the nature of the Irish nation-state, it might be possible to read literature as a guide to the subjective states of urban living, the quotidian shaping of urban spaces. If we are to understand the dangers of the current neo-liberal moment, then, the urban spaces we must study need to be animated by social life and not just fixed by city plan. In this respect, Declan Kiberd's (2006) claim that Joyce's *Ulysses* defended a world of street people and their democratic mixing and conversation, raises questions not only about the past but also about utopian futures. This returns us, then, to the literary issues whose prominence this book does so much to challenge.

Kincaid describes the postcolonial spatial fix of Dublin, with its monumental and commercial centre, and its residential suburbs of both private villas and social housing, as a vital aspect of the stabilisation of the Irish state. He has identified important geographical and postcolonial dimensions of Irish society and economy and challenges in very important ways the idealism and the rural focus of much scholarship on Independent Ireland. I have highlighted the need for further work on the relations between imperial and colonial ideologies, on the links between liberalism and social control in modernist planning, and finally on subjectivity and the spaces of everyday life. Kincaid's fascinating and suggestive book raises important questions about cities and postcolonial modernities that will reverberate within and well beyond Irish Studies and Historical Geography.

Notes

1. For a sample and review of postcolonial studies of Ireland, see, for example: Carroll and King (2003). For an excellent survey of postcolonial theory more generally see Young (2001).
2. Contested by Howe (2000) and Kennedy (1996) but accepted by Kearns (2002) and McDonough (2005).
3. These conclusions derive in large part from attempts by Indian scholars to write the history of colonialism from below. For a review of this work, see: Chaturvedi (1999).
4. For a survey of revisionism see Boyce and O'Day (1996) and for a trenchant critique see Whelan (2004).

5. The emphasis on literature is clear from the very earliest of the English-language works identified as postcolonial (Said, 1978).
6. Kincaid borrows the term from David Harvey's (1982) writings on capitalism where Harvey argues that the economic crisis arising from the contradictions of a capitalist economy is deferred through various displacements, including the temporal fix of credit and the spatial fixes of urbanism and imperialism (Kearns, 1984). Kincaid understands the crises of colonialism and post-colonialism primarily in political rather than economic terms.
7. Theories of colonialism and of postcolonialism have, in the main, been applied to, rather than derived from, Irish experience. Yet Irish thinkers have reflected intelligently and with originality upon issues of modernity and colonialism (see for example the discussions in the works of Richard Kearney (1985, 1996)) and Ireland is a distinctive and intriguing case study of colonial and postcolonial processes.
8. The distinction is explained, and its implications for democracy are debated, in the remarkable work of Samuel Delany (1999).

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Modernity and Elsewhere: Re-imagining Dublin's Built Environment

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Orbits and legacies

If a reminder was needed about the continuing importance of place in Ireland, the recent submission of the Irish Architectural Association to the 2006 Venice Biennial captured the critical value of space and landscape to Irish society. Six projects, most framed in a kind of 'eco-modernity' set out the future of landscape. One proposal created by Henchion and Reuter Architects presented a futuristic plan for a high-speed train network. The project suggested that if the 1.6m. population increase expected by 2030 were concentrated within a 'penta-zone' linking Cork, Limerick, Galway, Sligo, Dublin and Belfast, it could support high-speed trains that would 'shrink' Ireland—travel time from Dublin to Sligo as a consequence would be reduced from 3h. 20m. to 48 minutes. This aspiration to deploy new technology to destroy time and space has long been represented as a classic modernist tactic and illustrates how issues around modernity, space and transformation have important implications in contemporary Ireland. In this context, Andrew Kincaid's *Postcolonial Dublin* makes a timely intervention by opening up a new debate on the genealogies of space, politics and modernity. The urban planning and architecture of Dublin he concludes 'stand at the crossroads between modernity and tradition, the local and the global, nationalism and colonialism' (p. 231). In making visible this collision of the colonial and modern, Kincaid portrays Dublin at the nexus