The end of Irish history?

An introduction to the book

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During the Easter vacation of 2001, I happened to be travelling through the United States and picked up a copy of a renowned popular music magazine to pass the time on a short internal flight. While leafing through the publication, I stumbled across a feature that struck me as having no little cultural significance. It was a single-frame, full-page advertisement for some commodity or other set in a stylish contemporary bathroom that could have been located in more or less any major city in the western world. The central focus of the feature in question falls upon a young attractive heterosexual couple dressed solely in bath towels and caught in what might perhaps be best described as an implausibly gymnastic pre-coital clinch. The woman who appears in the frame seems blissfully unaware of the presence of the camera as she longingly addresses her partner. He does not, however, return her gaze. Rather, the reflection in the bathroom mirror shows the male subject looking squarely into the eye of the reader/viewer. Eyebrows arched suggestively beneath a fulsome mane of fashionably spiked hair, his expression is that of a sublime sexual self-confidence that demands our prurient admiration.

The general tone and form of the promotion outlined above could scarcely, of course, be considered innovative or daring. Sexual images and innuendo have, after all, become so commonplace in contemporary advertising that they often fail to register in any meaningful way with the audience. The advertisement under examination here does, however, contain one remarkable detail that makes it distinctly worthy of our attention. The young man, who is in effect the central figure of the promotion, almost inevitably exhibits an appetite for the current vogue of elaborate body art. Across his broad back there appears an enormous tattoo that comprises a single word mapped out in a decidedly baroque and ersatz version of traditional Celtic script. The text that the young suitor has chosen to bear offers a simple but unmistakable declaration of his pride in being 'Irish'.

The ethnic designation of our amorous hero ensures that a simple advertisement that might otherwise be considered entirely unworthy of comment actually comes to exercise a distinct cultural resonance. That the attractive swain who appears in the promotion should happen – or perhaps even aspire – to be Irish might perhaps be considered as emblematic of a rather broader and more profound change in the meaning(s) of that particular term. In historical terms, the dominant constructions of ‘Irishness’ have, of course, been distinctly uncomplimentary. Traditionally, the Irish have been regarded – not least in the circles of imperial authority – as feckless, inebriated and violent. Elements of these deeply unflattering representations of Irishness have persisted into the present day. It comes as little surprise when watching *The Simpsons* – to take a fairly innocuous example – that we discover that the amiably boorish drunk Barney Gumble hails from Irish stock.

In recent times, however, the essentially racist stereotypes through which Irish people have conventionally been regarded have been increasingly challenged and even displaced perhaps by a sequence of rather more complimentary perspectives. The specific advertisement sketched earlier might be read as illustrative of this rather wider and more critical shift in cultural meaning. In the single frame of the promotion, the term ‘Irish’ comes to assume solely positive connotations. To be Irish is to be young, fun, fashionable and, above all perhaps, belligerently sexual. Irishness has, in other words, become shorthand for ‘cool’.

The brazen tattoo etched across the shoulder blades of one particular male model selected by a single advertising agency might be taken, then, as suggestive of a radical recent transformation of the manner in which Irishness is perceived, signified and imagined. Over the last decade or so, it has become commonplace for cultural commentators to pronounce that it has never been more fashionable to be Irish. There is certainly no shortage of evidence that could be used to bear out this particular estimation. In the last few years, numerous filmmakers, artists, actors and musicians from the Republic of Ireland have secured commercial success and even critical acclaim abroad. The phenomenal popularity of *Riverdance* has, moreover, encouraged the view that versions of traditional Irish culture – albeit highly hybridised ones – have the potential to reach a global audience.

The burgeoning cultural appeal of the Irish Republic has been underlined further by the changing fortunes of the national capital. If we were to go back fifteen years or so, the reputation that Dublin held among foreigners was essentially that of a fairly drab and unsophisticated place. In the course the 1990s, the image of the city would, however, be transformed almost beyond recognition. Consequently, the view that outsiders have of Dublin today is invariably that of a thriving and cosmopolitan place to visit. The decision of the Music Television (MTV) Corporation

to host its prestigious European awards in the city in the winter of 1999 suggested that Dublin has possibly become one of that select band of urban centres that constitutes the principal network for the circulation of cultural capital.

The impressive cultural revival that has overtaken the Irish Republic over the last decade has, of course, fed off and into an even more remarkable turnaround in the economic fortunes of the state. In the late 1980s, the twenty-six counties were mired in an economic depression from which there appeared no possibility of escape. When political commentators at the time posed the question of whether the Republic of Ireland could be considered a 'third world country', they did so with no discernible trace of irony.¹ In terms of all the principal indices of economic performance, southern Ireland lagged disastrously far behind most of the other member states of the European Union (EU).² The return of mass unemployment ensured that the annual haemorrhage of young people emigrating in pursuit of a better life elsewhere reached levels that had not been seen since the dark days of the 1950s. The national debt per capita was for a time greater than that of any other state on the face of the planet.

When viewed against this singularly miserable backdrop, the subsequent economic performance of the Irish Republic seems almost incomprehensible. Throughout the 1990s, it registered levels of economic growth that soon became the envy of every other western state. Over the decade as a whole, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita grew on average by seven per cent each year. In 1996, an important psychological barrier was breached when the economy of the twenty-six counties overtook that of the United Kingdom for the first time ever. In the following year, GDP per capita in the Irish Republic was recorded as being larger than that of the EU average. The unprecedented and unanticipated performance of the economy was inevitably greeted with delight within the twenty-six counties. In the words of one influential historian, the recent change in economic fortune marked the transformation of the Irish Republic from the status of a 'carthorse' to that of a 'thoroughbred'.³

As the evidence of a nascent economic boom began to accumulate in the mid-1990s, numerous analysts sought to characterise the nature of the changes underway. While various terms were coined to capture the transformation of the southern Irish economy, there was, of course, one that would become indelibly inscribed upon the process and the period. In the summer of 1994, Kevin Gardiner of the Morgan Stanley investment bank in London sought to draw a comparison between the performance of the Irish Republic and that of the 'tiger' economies of south-east Asia.⁴ The resemblance was sufficiently close, Gardiner suggested, to justify the description of the twenty-six counties as the 'Celtic Tiger'. Rarely can a metaphor spun by a financial analyst have had such a dramatic impact upon popular discourse. In the years since it was

invented, the term ‘Celtic Tiger’ has become a common feature of everyday speech in the Irish Republic. Indeed, the phrase has been issued with such regularity that it has become a bane for a great many Irish people. This understandable irritation has done little, however, to diminish the ubiquity or authority of the metaphor.

Originally, then, the phrase ‘Celtic Tiger’ was turned in order to capture the newfound dynamism of the southern Irish economy. It would not be long, however, before the metaphor would slip its moorings and begin to move through a range of other debates on the nature of culture and politics within the twenty-six counties. In a remarkably short space of time, the notion of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ would come to operate as a widely recognised and understood master signifier for a very particular and essentially hegemonic reading of the nature of contemporary Irish society. The precise substance of this ideological programme will be examined in detail later in this chapter. In part, the ideas and concerns that circulate within the figure of the Celtic Tiger articulate the interests and experiences of certain sections of southern Irish society. The distinctive ideological enterprise that has come to hold sway within the twenty-six counties in recent times also draws upon a set of perspectives that are rather more universal. In particular, the readings of southern Irish society that are encoded within the conceit of the Celtic Tiger clearly draw from specific understandings of ‘the modern’ that have enjoyed a renaissance over the last dozen years or so. It is to these distinctive constructions of modernity that we turn our attention next.

The new world order of things

The decades that immediately followed the Second World War offered witness to a fierce and prolonged ideological contest as to which path of development humanity should follow. During the Cold War, the presumed political interests and inclinations of western societies were articulated in part by a diverse band of social scientists whose work is conventionally designated under the umbrella term of ‘modernisation theory’.⁵ The writings of modernisation theorists evidently plundered the concerns and terms of certain strands of classical social theory and reworked them to suit and serve the particular ideological climate of the times. At the heart of their outlook was a distinctive and specific understanding of the nature of the good or ‘modern’ society. Modernisation theorists insisted that the mode of social organisation to which all peoples should aspire was that of the liberal democracies of the west. The specific society identified and celebrated as the acme of modernity was inevitably that of the United States. The tenets of modernisation theory held that the social forms characteristic of western states were not merely desirable

but attainable. Every society could, in principle, follow the path towards liberal democracy and mass consumption that had been pioneered by the United States and its allies.

The quest for modernity would, however, place enormous demands upon societies regarded as existing at a rather more primitive stage of development. Modernisation would inevitably entail the installation of those institutions and processes deemed conducive to capitalist accumulation. In particular, existing forms of social interaction and regulation would have to be replaced with those of the free market. The drive to modernity would require not only systematic structural reform but radical cultural change as well. Modernisation theorists contested that if underdeveloped states were ever to evolve to the level of the west, they would have to dispense with customary ways of thinking and being. In more specific terms, people living in these societies would have to nurture those narrowly rational approaches to work and consumption that one figure within the modernisation school famously characterised as the 'need to achieve'.⁶ The acquisition of these instrumentalist and entrepreneurial dispositions was deemed essential if the poorer nations of the world were to access the path to development that western societies had followed much earlier. At some stage in this particular journey, there would come a fundamental moment of rupture when underdeveloped states would finally free themselves of the burdens of tradition and take their place in the exalted company of the genuinely 'modern'.

In the quarter century or so that followed the Second World War, the modernisation school enjoyed considerable currency and influence. Various modernisation theorists were, of course, intimately and personally connected to the conduct of US foreign policy during this period. In the late 1960s, however, the previously hegemonic status of modernisation theory began to wane. In part this was due to the growing body of withering critiques advanced by radical writers operating out of the dependency school. The decline in the fortunes of the modernisation theorists probably owed a great deal more, though, to certain events in a 'real world' that they had helped to shape. The assertion that the free market was an innately rational mechanism that promised ultimately to bestow affluence upon all seemed risible as global capitalism slumped from one crisis to another. Equally, the conviction that the United States was essentially a force for progress in the world seemed rather less than persuasive as the US military visited mass slaughter on Vietnam and its neighbours.

The seemingly terminal demise of the modernisation approach coincided with a significant change in intellectual fashion in the west. The 1970s marked the genesis of certain postmodern forms of thought that would gradually come to exercise enormous influence within western academies.⁷ The postmodernist perspective insists that the universalist discourse that defines various other prominent philosophical traditions

renders them inherently objectionable. Those ‘grand narratives’ that promise a faithful and total understanding of the world in fact offer only a partial and distorted version of it that ultimately serves the interests of power. As the popularity of postmodernism grew throughout the 1980s, the classical bourgeois ideals of the modernisation theorists appeared out of date. The notion of a philosophical programme with an absolute vision of how the social world could – and should – operate struck many people as not only implausible but thoroughly reactionary as well.

Regarded against this backdrop, the subsequent turn in the course of intellectual affairs might be considered especially surprising. Over the last dozen years or so, there has been a remarkable revival of versions of social theory concerned to examine and ultimately celebrate the nature of ‘modernity’. While contemporary readings of ‘the modern’ assume a range of guises, there are two that are relevant to our purposes and will therefore be considered at length.

The first of these finds its clearest expression, perhaps, in the hugely influential writings of the political scientist Francis Fukuyama. In a famous polemic published in the summer of 1989, Fukuyama appeared to foretell the imminent demise of the Soviet Union.⁸ The central premise of his argument was that the particular form of modernity that was actualised in the west had proved itself superior to any other mode of social organisation. While the institutions of liberal democracy had offered western citizens optimal security and freedom, the operation of the capitalist free market had proved able to sate their desires as consumers. The ideological victory of liberal capitalism – Fukuyama insisted – ensured that the future course of human development was essentially preordained. In order to progress, people living outside the west would simply have to mimic that particular version of modernity at work in the United States and countries like it.

What is often overlooked is that Fukuyama explicitly acknowledges that the process of modernisation will inevitably entail losses and reversals.⁹ In common with many other commentators on the subject, Fukuyama notes that the transition to modernity entails the displacement of feeling by calculation. Living in the modern world involves its own particular sadness. Fukuyama also observes that there are a great many people who will seek to frustrate and reverse the drift towards modernity. In a recent reiteration of his views, for instance, he explains the slaughter in the United States on 11 September 2001 in precisely these terms.¹⁰ All such attempts to stem the tide of the modernity will ultimately, however, amount to nothing. In the absence of any meaningful alternative, there is no option other than to embrace the free market and the liberal democratic state. While the paths that individual societies will follow may differ, we all face essentially the same destination. We are therefore – Fukuyama famously declares – living at ‘the end of history’.

The second recent approach to the notion of modernity that we shall consider is the one that appears in the writings of the eminent sociologist Anthony Giddens over the last dozen years or so. An axiom of Giddens' recent work is that there is a need to accept the reality that capitalism represents the form of social organisation under which we will live for the foreseeable future.¹¹ In the absence of any meaningful alternative – he asserts – the concern of those who regard themselves as progressive must be to ameliorate some of the more harmful ways in which capitalist practice affects people and their environment. The political strategy that Giddens seeks to construct is essentially that of a revived social democracy. The policies to which he lends his name are intended to wed the presumed dynamism of capital to the supposed benevolence of civil society and the state.¹² It is this particular desire to reconcile the private and the public, apparently in the interests of all, that underlies the politics of the 'third way'.

Although he is willing to acknowledge its failings, it becomes readily apparent that Giddens regards capitalism as having rather more strengths than weaknesses.¹³ In his recent writings, the various ways in which forms of capitalist practice operate to connect people who live large distances apart – what is often termed 'globalisation' – are depicted as essentially benign. In particular, Giddens tends to praise the ability and tendency of advances in communications to emancipate social actors from the physical and cultural settings in which they reside.¹⁴ The speed and scope of recent developments in global capitalism are sufficient to persuade Giddens to contend that we have entered a new era, which he chooses to term 'late modernity'. The essential attribute of the late modern age is held to be 'biographical autonomy'.¹⁵ Individuals are no longer constrained by those traditional forms of identity that arise out of the likes of nation, religion or class. Rather than adhere to the dictates of custom, social actors are increasingly willing and able to assemble their own biographies out of the manifold resources of everyday life. In the eyes of Anthony Giddens, then, the principal subject of late modernity is the reflexive individual constantly revising and reinventing her notion of herself throughout the entire course of her life.

The two distinctive conceptions of modernity circulating within contemporary public discourse that we have examined here would appear – at least at first glance – to be radically different. In his ruminations, Francis Fukuyama emerges as the principal heir to the classical tradition of modernisation theory. The metaphor of the 'end of history' entails the most unabashed declaration imaginable of the superiority of the values and institutions of western bourgeois society. The radical prescriptions that Fukuyama has advanced have, of course, proved profoundly persuasive to those agencies and individuals that exercise power at a global level. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the world has been radically

reconfigured upon the presumption that the operation of the free market will ultimately confer universal benefit. The devastating reforms imposed upon large swathes of the planet have been guided by the imperative that goods, services and finance – but not people – should be allowed to flow freely across international boundaries.

At first glance, the disposition of Anthony Giddens would seem to have little in common with the neo-liberal intellectual tradition recently revived in the writings of Francis Fukuyama. The vision of the good society that Giddens seeks to advance is, after all, one in which capital is not given free rein but rather is harnessed in the interests of a rather broader public good. The philosophical inclinations that animate Giddens, moreover, are not those of the original modernisation theorists but rather those of the classical social theorists, whom the former sought to appropriate in often highly questionable ways. The reflexive social agency that he identifies and admires as the hallmark of our times, for instance, has clear echoes of the ‘ethic of responsibility’ that Max Weber proposed as a counterweight to the dislocations of modernity.¹⁶

While the disposition of Anthony Giddens may initially appear radically different from that of the modernisation school, the shared source of certain of their philosophical suppositions suggests that they may have rather more in common than might first meet the eye. A series of moments of convergence may be identified here. First, it would appear that Giddens broadly shares with the neo-liberals a belief in the essential benevolence of capital. While he issues demands for greater regulation by national and global institutions, it is particularly evident in his most recent writings that Giddens regards capital as being overwhelmingly a force for good in the world. Second, the particular values and practices that Giddens highlights as admirable and desirable in the late modern age would draw few quibbles from orthodox modernisation theorists. While the tone and scope of his discourse are singularly global, it quickly becomes apparent that Giddens’ understanding of how the world works – or rather of how the world *should* work – is premised upon the actions and interests of a rather small section of western society. What runs through the recent social theory of Anthony Giddens is a clear presumption – one that is mirrored in classical modernisation theory – that things would be very much better if only the rest of the planet could bring themselves to behave in a manner similar to people like himself. Third, the course of social development that Giddens charts and envisages entails a radical moment of departure. In his examination of the late modern age, Giddens insists that social actors have come increasingly to discard the strictures of custom in order to assemble their own understandings of themselves as individuals. At the heart of the supposedly sophisticated and contemporary theoretical reflections of Anthony Giddens, then, is that crude distinction between the ‘traditional’ and the

‘modern’ that was originally at the height of intellectual fashion during the Cold War.

The multiple resemblances that obtain between the outlook of Anthony Giddens and that of more orthodox modernisation theorists allude to the existence of substantial common ground between social democracy and neo-liberalism. The complementary nature of these allegedly antagonistic doctrines becomes apparent when we turn to examine the specific political programmes to which they have given rise in practice. The course that New Labour has pursued since assuming office in the United Kingdom offers an especially telling illustration of the processes and interests with which we are concerned. It is often remarked that Anthony Giddens has exercised a palpable influence upon the outlook and conduct of Tony Blair. Indeed, the terms and concerns that embroider the discourse of the British Prime Minister are evidently those that arise out of ‘third way’ politics.¹⁷ One of the principal areas in which New Labour has sought to implement this particular ideological agenda is the provision of public services. Since coming to office, Blair has attempted to establish the conditions under which the likes of health and education would be financed jointly by government and business. In principle, the Private Finance Initiative is conceived as an admirable social democratic measure that promises to enhance a range of public and private interests. Those who support the scheme contend that it promises both improved services to every citizen and legitimate opportunities for profit to enterprising corporations. In practice, however, the benefits of the third way marriage of capital and the state have been rather less than universal.

In his remarkable book *Captive State*, George Monbiot¹⁸ illustrates the various ways in which New Labour has employed the language and forms of social democracy to serve and advance a narrow range of corporate interests. The various case studies that Monbiot presents reveal that the Private Finance Initiative has had the perverse effect of increasing public expenditure while at the same time reducing standards of public provision. Hospitals that have been built under the scheme have cost vastly more than it would have taken to refurbish existing facilities. Health workers employed in privately funded institutions face low wages and little security, and the patients whom they tend have to wait longer for a poorer standard of treatment.¹⁹ While the wedding of the public and the private in the provision of essential services may have done little to enhance the lives of ordinary people in the United Kingdom, it has done a great deal to improve the balance sheets of a range of large corporations. It is hardly surprising, then, that Monbiot feels compelled to conclude that the formal social democratic rhetoric of the ‘third way’ is simply a convenient ruse that facilitates and conceals the transfer of resources from the poor to the wealthy.²⁰

The specific forms of political practice that are chronicled between the covers of *Captive State* suggest that we need to adopt a more critical stance than is often the case when approaching the rather more abstract affairs that define the sphere of human ideas. The two distinctive understandings of modernity that we have examined here would appear to advocate starkly different political agendas. In the more significant realm of actual social practice, however, it soon becomes apparent that these seemingly divergent readings of 'the modern' frequently give rise to remarkably similar ideological enterprises. Social democrats may well be sincere in their belief that they inhabit a late modern age in which a historic dialogue and compromise between the private and public is possible. It remains the case, though, that the language and logic of social democracy are engaged with numbing regularity to produce outcomes that are as conducive to the interests of capital as even the most ardent neo-liberal could wish for.

Hagiographies of the Celtic Tiger

The period since the demise of Stalinism has, therefore, seen the rise of two rather different – though perhaps ultimately compatible – conceptions of 'modernity'. The distinctive understandings of the nature of 'the modern' – of the identity of the good society – that Fukuyama and Giddens have sought to advance have had an important bearing upon the manner in which the recent transformation of the Irish Republic has been interpreted. This is not to suggest, of course, that notions of the 'end of history' or the 'late modern age' have become pervasive elements of public debate or indeed everyday speech within the twenty-six counties. The channels that connect ideological production and popular discourse are invariably rather less direct and rather more subtle than that. It remains reasonable, nonetheless, to suggest that the distinctions, ambitions and prognoses that arise out of the constructions of modernity scrutinised above have been strongly echoed in the pronouncements of those who have thus far been considered to have provided the most persuasive accounts of the radical changes that have overtaken the twenty-six counties in the last generation.²¹ It is these orthodox explanations of the 'Celtic Tiger' that we shall consider next.

The voices that have dominated public debate upon the nature of the seismic social changes that have overtaken the Irish Republic over the last decade have been overwhelmingly positive. In the main, social commentators have traced the origins of the 'Celtic Tiger' to developments within rather than without the twenty-six counties. The dramatic progress assumed to have been made during the 1990s has typically been attributed to a series of astute policy decisions implemented in earlier

decades.²² In most orthodox accounts, the move towards fiscal prudence in the late 1980s is considered to have been essential in creating the conditions for the possibility of an economic boom. The enormous cuts in public expenditure that marked this period are held to have established a desirable, stable macroeconomic environment that, in time, induced investment by some of the largest and most dynamic multinational corporations in the world. The introduction of formally free schooling in the late 1960s is also often identified as a measure that would ultimately serve to alter the economic fortunes of the Irish Republic.²³ It has become a common assertion within certain influential strands of public commentary that multinational capital would not have been drawn to the twenty-six counties were it not for the existence of an especially highly educated workforce.

While conventional interpretations highlight a range of policies as having nurtured the Celtic Tiger, there is one in particular that is considered to have been absolutely crucial to the revival of the southern Irish economy. In principle, the recent books written by Paul Sweeney,²⁴ on the one hand, and Ray MacSharry and Padraic White,²⁵ on the other, articulate viewpoints drawn from radically different points of the ideological spectrum. The analyses that are advanced within the texts transpire, however, to be remarkably similar. An argument that features prominently in both insists that the apparent economic progress of the 1990s would have been simply impossible had it not been for the institution of neo-corporatist social relations in the previous decade. In 1987, the first of a series of 'social partnership' agreements was signed, principally between the Irish government and the representatives of organised labour. At a superficial level, at least, the advent of the scheme appeared to mark the dawning of a more harmonious era in labour relations. In return for placing limits on wage demands, the trade unions were offered certain assurances about the future conduct of government policy. The many prominent admirers of social partnership contend that it is the development that, more than any other, secured the recent economic prosperity of the twenty-six counties. It is held that the voluntary restraints that have been placed upon wages have been essential in creating the conditions that have allowed indigenous and foreign businesses to flourish. In the eyes of MacSharry and White,²⁶ for instance, the significance of social partnership is so great that it should be acknowledged as the 'crowning achievement' of the Celtic Tiger era.

The interpretations of the boom that have exercised perhaps greatest influence over the popular imagination suggest that the turnaround in the economic performance of the Irish Republic hinged upon not only the allegedly 'daring' measures adopted at senior levels of the state but also a wider shift in the values and practices of the population as a whole. The dynamic between structure and culture considered to have

driven the Celtic Tiger is regarded as having found expression in the guise of social partnership.²⁷ In the minds of its advocates, the new social relations of corporatism entail not merely a series of legally recognised agreements and agencies but also a distinctive network of moral values. The era of social partnership has attended a great deal of cultural change within the Republic of Ireland. In order to negotiate the rather more demanding environs of the 1990s, many people in the twenty-six counties were compelled to dispense with customary ways of being and acting and to adopt more flexible and energetic approaches to life and work. The orthodox reading of the period suggests that the Irish people have proved to be more than equal to the challenges that modernisation has offered. The formally leftist commentator Paul Sweeney, for instance, has spoken with evident pride of the ability of employees in the Irish Republic to adapt to the new demands made upon them within the branch plants of multinational corporations. Irish employees have – he argues – not merely survived the new regime of more flexible working practices but actually flourished under it.²⁸

The orthodox reading suggests, then, that the modernisation of the twenty-six counties has demanded and articulated important changes in the ways in which Irish people think and act. While the cultural values deemed to be admirable are regarded as having become increasingly widespread throughout the general population, they are perceived to be articulated most clearly in the lives of certain sections of southern Irish society. The principal heroes of the dominant narrative of the Celtic Tiger are a small number of state functionaries celebrated for their imagination, as well as a somewhat larger body of capitalists lionised for their enterprise. The elevation of the entrepreneur within contemporary Irish culture finds especially telling illustration in a recent book entitled *Driving the Tiger*. Drawing upon a series of interviews, John Travers seeks to identify the talent and zeal of those who have accumulated personal fortunes in a time of boom in a country that, until recently, was scarcely associated with business acumen.²⁹ The tone of this sequence of hagiographies strives, predictably, to translate the elementary pursuit of profit into a rather higher moral calling.

The perspectives that social commentators have advanced most frequently have sought, then, to attribute the recent transformation of southern Irish society to a series of astute structural adjustments on the part of the state and the acquisition of values regarded as consistent with the ‘modern world’ on the part of the people. The explanation of the origins of the Celtic Tiger that has assumed almost hegemonic status within the twenty-six counties emerges, therefore, as one that is entirely consistent with the distinctive readings of modernity discussed at length earlier. The resemblance to the modernisation school becomes more pronounced still when mainstream commentators move beyond explanations

of the important social changes at work within the Irish Republic and begin to evaluate these particular developments.

In most orthodox approaches to the Celtic Tiger, the evidence that would seem to point to an economic miracle in the Republic of Ireland is typically regarded as transparent and unproblematic. The annual data that indicate rapid and unpunctuated expansion of the national economy are read simply as a faithful reflection of what is actually going on. We must be living through an economic golden age. After all, the people who collect and decipher the relevant data have told us time and again that it is so. And, in any case, the recurrent pronouncements of a buoyant economy would seem to be borne out amply in those various trends and indices that register at the more immediate level of everyday experience. The official contention that the 1990s saw the most successful programme of job creation in the history of the state seems more credible when one constantly passes the windows of retail outlets carrying advertisements for new staff. The declaration that the former scourge of mass emigration has been vanquished, moreover, appears persuasive when friends and family are no longer compelled to leave the country and when some of those who left in previous times begin to return. In light of these experiences, it is far from surprising that a great many people have come to assume with astonishment and delight that the Irish Republic has become the site of an economic miracle. MacSharry and White reiterate a widely held view when they remark ostentatiously that the twenty-six counties have ceased to be an economic casualty and have become instead 'a shining light and a beacon to the world'.³⁰

The burgeoning levels of wealth generated within the Irish Republic over the last dozen years have, of course, found increasingly stark expression in radically altered patterns of consumption. While the conceit of the Celtic Tiger connotes a great many social processes, it articulates with singular ease a particular image of how young Ireland shops, dines and plays. The accounts that appear most regularly in media portrayals of contemporary southern Irish society seek not merely to document current modes of consumption but to celebrate them.³¹ The ways in which the individual who resides in the twenty-six counties chooses to spend his time and money have come to be viewed as part of an ongoing attempt to arrive at an understanding of himself and others. In effect, the seemingly straightforward act of consumption has come to be regarded as a rather grander ontological enterprise. The popularity of the seemingly endless sequence of fashionable restaurants that have opened in most Irish cities is read as indicative of a desire for cultural refinement. The phenomenal growth in the sales of new high-performance cars as the millennium turned is seen as expressive of a longing for exhilaration and mobility. The sudden ubiquity of the mobile phone is interpreted as feeding into a wish to be autonomous and connected simultaneously. In

the distinctly changeful context of contemporary southern Irish society, it would appear that the reflexive social agent so beloved of Anthony Giddens may transmute with telling ease into the sovereign consumer who constitutes the principal hero of late capitalism.

The acceleration of consumption in the twenty-six counties is invariably taken as indicative of the wider cultural changes that have defined the Irish Republic over the past generation. The social psychologist Michael O'Connell³² has set out to chart the manner in which the era of the Celtic Tiger has altered the ways in which Irish people regard and represent themselves. The substantial body of opinion poll evidence that appears in the text broadly accords with the rather more impressionistic accounts of cultural change in southern Ireland published in countless Sunday supplements and features articles. Inevitably, O'Connell argues that younger people living in the twenty-six counties are altogether less constrained by customary norms and practices than were their predecessors. The teachings of the Catholic Church have come to exercise relatively little moral influence. The younger generation in the Irish Republic conceive of themselves less as members of collectivities than as individuals. This sense of individuality is articulated principally through material possessions rather than spiritual dispositions. The cultural changes that have emerged under the Celtic Tiger are – O'Connell suggests – expressed most keenly in relation to issues of sexual morality.³³ The statistical evidence that he presents indicates that young Irish people have rather more tolerant views than their parents on issues such as premarital sex, abortion and homosexuality. In the last decade, then, the sexual morals and practices prevalent within the twenty-six counties have begun to converge towards the liberal norms of continental Europe.

The particular moral trajectory that O'Connell maps out is, of course, the familiar one predicted and prescribed by the theorists of modernity to whom we have returned many times in this chapter. To be fair, the account of social change that O'Connell provides is rather more nuanced and critical than that advanced by the modernisation school.³⁴ While the cultural developments of the last decade are considered to be largely progressive, it is explicitly acknowledged that they have been secured at substantial cost to the moral fabric of the Irish Republic. In the final instance, however, O'Connell chooses to dispense with the dialectical model of social change that he seems to recommend and opts instead for a characterisation of the Celtic Tiger era that even the most orthodox modernisation theorist would find acceptable. The cultural evolution of the twenty-six counties over the last generation is conceived as having entailed a radical departure at some unspecified moment in the 1990s. It is this that prompts and enables O'Connell to insist that, in the recent past, an 'old Irish psyche' was replaced with a new one.³⁵ For 'old' and 'new' we should, of course, read 'traditional' and 'modern'. The cultural

narrative that O'Connell outlines is, therefore, one in which the people of southern Ireland awoke one morning to discover that their previously cherished beliefs and practices had been displaced with a set more suitable to the rigours of modernity. It is this perennially seductive tenet of modernisation theory that draws O'Connell to declare – in the title of his book – that the Irish Republic has ‘changed utterly’.

In most orthodox analyses, contemporary Irish society is depicted as the home not only of people who have changed but also of a changed people.³⁶ The advent of the Celtic Tiger is held to have marked an era in which the Irish Republic emerged from its former underdevelopment in order to take its rightful place as an equal among the nations of the world. Commentators examining the recent changes at work within the twenty-six counties can often barely conceal their pride in how far the state has come in such a short time. The excellence of Irish athletes and artists is interpreted as symptomatic of a deeper and growing sense of self-belief. The supposed ease with which politicians from the twenty-six counties operate on a European and global stage is considered to mark a certain coming of age.³⁷ The regularity with which conventional statistics record that the Irish Republic is economically more advanced than the United Kingdom is a recurrent source of satisfaction. A view that is heard with some regularity suggests that the burgeoning cultural self-confidence that defines contemporary southern Ireland has nurtured a version of nationalism that is rather more palatable than is often the case. The current of self-belief that energises younger Irish people is said to have encouraged them not be introspective and chauvinistic but rather to be cosmopolitan and inclusive. The mode of nationalism assumed to have been kindled under the Celtic Tiger is, in a sense then, post-nationalist.³⁸

Deliberations upon the nature of Irish nationalism are an inevitably heated and recurrent element of public debate on an island with a long and bloody history of political division. For most of the period since partition, the political distinctions that are evident in Ireland have had a clear material subtext. As recently as the early 1990s, it was the case that people living in Northern Ireland generally enjoyed a substantially better standard of living than their counterparts south of the border. The arrival of the Celtic Tiger has, of course, changed all that. In some quarters, the recent transformation of the economic life of the twenty-six counties is regarded as having served to transform the political context of the entire island.³⁹ The changing cultural values and traits of people living in the Irish Republic are considered to be conducive to the cause of political reconciliation. The rather softer and more inclusive version of nationalism regarded as increasingly prevalent south of the border is conceived as one rather better equipped than its predecessors to accommodate the interests and anxieties of northern unionists.

In addition, the enormous material advances that the Irish Republic has secured over the last decade are held to have the potential to heal the political divisions that persist on the island.⁴⁰ One of the traditional taunts of Ulster unionism has been that Dublin could simply never afford to maintain Northern Irish people in the manner to which they have become accustomed.⁴¹ The phenomenal expansion of the southern Irish economy during the 1990s swiftly eliminated that particular rationale for partition. As a consequence, nationalist commentators have come to argue forcefully that the conditions for the unification of Ireland are now firmly in place.⁴²

In sum, then, the various developments that are signified within the figure of the Celtic Tiger might be considered to have radically altered the field of political possibility in Ireland. The multiple changes at work over the last decade have, in principle, established cultural and material conditions that might enable and allow the peoples living on the island to transcend their differences within the context of a unitary state. It is in this sense not least, perhaps, that we might be considered to be living at 'the end of Irish history'.⁴³

Dislocations and distortions

Over the last decade, popular debate within the twenty-six counties has been dominated by the contention that the path the Irish Republic has followed in the last generation has been essentially benign. While it has enjoyed substantial currency both at home and abroad, this distinctly optimistic take on where southern Irish society is going must be acknowledged as deeply problematic. The orthodox reading of the Celtic Tiger era exhibits shortcomings that are the hallmark of the particular ideological tradition upon which it draws. The specific construction of modernity that has exercised a palpable influence over public commentary within the twenty-six counties adheres to a model of social change that proves entirely inadequate. The evolution of human societies is held to centre upon that fundamental moment of progress in which the traditional is displaced by the modern. This particular opposition has – as Tovey and Share⁴⁴ point out – exercised a perennial appeal for social scientists and others within the twenty-six counties. It has been entirely predictable, therefore, that the advent of the Celtic Tiger should have moved a range of commentators to declare and delineate the demise of traditional Ireland. In recent times, it has become commonplace to portray the Irish Republic as a thoroughly modern society that has changed utterly and for the better.

The particular conception of social development that emerges out of the hegemonic reading of Celtic Tiger Ireland is, of course, distinctly

threadbare.⁴⁵ The actual ways in which real human societies evolve tend to be rather more complicated than those betrothed to a certain notion of the modern are willing to allow. The assertion that the process of modernisation in effect entails the obliteration of those inclinations and practices conventionally understood as 'traditional' simply flies in the face of historical evidence. It is the experience of most developed societies that the onset of modernity allows for the persistence and even the revival of certain forms of tradition. The musings of modernisation theorists and those within their orbit are also questionable in that they fail to grasp the genuinely contradictory nature of social development. In the course of their evolution, human societies tend to get both better and worse more or less at the same time.⁴⁶ In the outlook of those who advocate a particular version of modernity there appears, however, to be little or no appreciation of the dialectics of social change. The present course of development is interpreted as singularly and uniformly progressive. The dislocations and casualties of the modernisation process are understated or even airbrushed out of the picture altogether.⁴⁷

In the absence of an adequate understanding of the dialectical nature of social change, it is inevitable that the orthodox perspective should tender a vision of the recent course of southern Irish society that turns out to be deeply distorted. Over the last decade, the voices that have been raised with greatest frequency and clarity have sought to depict the era of the Celtic Tiger as a time of unprecedented and unanticipated progress in which we should all simply rejoice. This familiar interpretation is, of course, one that is not entirely without justification. In certain respects, the last decade has marked a period of progress within the twenty-six counties. The fact, for instance, that huge numbers of young Irish men and women are no longer compelled to emigrate involuntarily in pursuit of a better life overseas constitutes a genuinely welcome development. The advances that have undoubtedly been made since the dark days of the 1980s should not, however, be allowed to cloud our critical judgement. While the era of the Celtic Tiger has evidently been a golden age for some Irish people, it has also marked a time of disadvantage and disruption for a great many others. It is the tales of the latter that are all but absent from the official narratives of the recent social history of the Irish Republic.

The omissions that define orthodox readings of contemporary southern Irish society merely serve to disclose the particular ideological interests they are intended to serve. Individuals operating out of a modernisation perspective have often sought to contend that the mode of social organisation to which they lend their name would best serve the interests of all. The advent of the genuinely modern society would offer everyone the multiple advantages that only liberal democracy and the market can bestow. In reality, of course, the admirably universal rhetoric of the

modernisation school has been employed to advance a very particular set of interests. Liberal capitalism is, after all, a social form that in its marrow seeks to elevate the concerns of the few over those of the many. The ideological interests that animate modernisation theorists and their ilk find their echo in a great deal of mainstream commentary on the nature of contemporary southern Irish society. Those versions of Celtic Tiger Ireland that have assumed almost hegemonic status have offered a rather less than faithful account of the period. While the achievements of the last decade or so are repeatedly underlined, the 'dark side' of contemporary social life in the twenty-six counties has been consistently concealed. In striving to advance a systematically distorted vision of the era of the Celtic Tiger, mainstream commentators have conspired to conceal and defend the interests of that small body of individuals who have been the principal beneficiaries of the boom years. The orthodox reading of the turn that the Irish Republic has taken over the last generation should be regarded, therefore, as not merely intellectually feeble but politically reactionary as well.

An alternative biography of the Celtic Tiger

The shortcomings that characterise most mainstream analyses of the Celtic Tiger era become readily apparent when we turn to consider the conventional interpretation of the origins of the economic boom. In the eyes of many commentators, the apparent economic miracle of the 1990s should be attributed principally to the energies and ingenuity of the Irish people. Special mention is afforded to those politicians and civil servants who are regarded as having had the vision and courage to alter public policy.⁴⁸ The reform of the education system and the reform of labour relations are frequently identified as measures that created the conditions that made economic prosperity possible and sustainable. The tone of the accounts of those associated with these supposedly critical changes in public policy verges, at times, on hubris. This is hardly surprising, though. The discourse of those who rule tends habitually, after all, towards an 'uninterrupted monologue of self-praise'.⁴⁹

While the notion that the origins of the Celtic Tiger are to be found within the twenty-six counties has exercised considerable influence, it scarcely stands up to even the most cursory analysis. The dramatic recent reversal of the economic fortunes of the Irish Republic owes rather less to the visionary status of Irish politicians than to convenient changes in the operation of global capitalism.⁵⁰ The decisions that led to the seeming economic miracle of the 1990s were taken not in the corridors of Leinster House but in the boardrooms of a handful of multinational corporations. As the 1980s came to a close, the flows of foreign direct

investment crossing international boundaries began to expand enormously. The principally US multinationals that were keen to produce in and for the EU were drawn disproportionately to the Irish Republic. The motives that informed these decisions to establish branch plants in the twenty-six counties bore little resemblance to the formal explanations offered at press conferences to mark their announcement. The routine assurances of senior executives that their corporations were attracted to the Irish Republic principally by the prospect of dealing with a highly educated workforce have rarely managed to convince. The education system in the twenty-six counties remains, after all, hugely under-funded and emerges poorly out of international comparisons.⁵¹ The simple truth is that those multinational corporations that flocked to the Irish Republic in the early 1990s were attracted first and foremost by its status as an exceptionally good place to turn a profit.

The rate of corporation tax charged in the Irish Republic has for some time been by far the lowest in the EU.⁵² This state of affairs has encouraged multinationals not only to invest in the twenty-six counties but also to engage in some distinctive creative accountancy practices as well. The relatively lenient fiscal regime that faces multinational corporations operating in the Irish Republic offers an enormous incentive to maximise the profits they declare within the state. Through the manipulation of their internal accounts – by selling on components to the branch plant in Ireland at a relatively cheap price and selling on the finished product at a relatively high price – multinationals can register profits in the twenty-six counties rather than in another region with a higher rate of corporation tax. The suspicion that this strategy of ‘transfer pricing’ is a routine practice of transnational corporations with subsidiaries in the Irish Republic would seem to be borne out by the astronomical profits that they declare in the state.⁵³ Those powerful corporations that have invested in the Irish Republic in recent times have come to enjoy rates of profit that are well in excess of what might be ordinarily anticipated on the basis of their output and productivity. One illustrative tale that is often recounted is that of the Coca Cola plant in Drogheda, which, in a single year, announced profits of IR£400 million, even though it had a workforce of only 200 people.⁵⁴

The cunning accountancy practices of multinational capital suggest that we need to approach the recent performance of the southern Irish economy in a rather more cautious and indeed critical spirit than has often been the case. As the standard indicators turned consistently favourable a decade or so ago, most mainstream commentators hastened to identify the Irish Republic as the author of an economic miracle. Statistics such as those that chart movements in GDP were routinely offered as compelling evidence of this economic transformation. Consideration of the conduct of multinational corporations would seem to

suggest, however, that the faith that its hagiographers have invested in the southern Irish economy might not have been entirely well placed. It is undoubtedly true that the economic capacity of the Irish Republic has expanded remarkably. Throughout the 1990s the amount of wealth generated within the southern Irish economy grew at unanticipated rates. A great deal of that money never made it, however, into the wallet or the bank account of an Irish man or woman. In recent times, an increasingly enormous gulf has opened up between the amount of wealth that is created within the Irish Republic and the amount of wealth that is retained within the state. The disparity between the two owes a great deal to the conduct of multinational capital. Perhaps as much as one-fifth of the value generated within the southern Irish economy each year is spirited out of the country, principally in the guise of the repatriated profits of transnational corporations.⁵⁵

The accountancy scams that are operated within multinational enterprises mean that evaluating the economic performance of the Irish Republic represents a rather more arduous task than might first meet the eye. The enormous sums that multinationals routinely repatriate from the twenty-six counties and deposit in tax havens across the globe ensure that official statistics hugely overstate the speed at which – and the scale to which – the southern Irish economy has grown. In simple terms, there is rather less wealth circulating within the Republic of Ireland than appears to be the case on paper. The growing weight of evidence to suggest that official measures exaggerate the performance of the southern Irish economy has done little, however, to dampen the enthusiasm of many mainstream analysts. At times, the pronouncements of politicians and other establishment figures have shaded into unabashed boosterism. The performance and potential of the southern Irish economy have, on occasion, been overstated. Conventional and convenient statistics have been dropped into discussion in a manner that suggests they are straightforward and faithful measures of what is actually going on the economic life of the state.

Although admittedly impressive, the performance of the southern Irish economy since the early 1990s has been consistently exaggerated in a great deal of mainstream analysis. It should also be noted that the foundations of the economic renaissance are somewhat less secure than many commentators would have us believe. After partition, the twenty-six counties followed a path of development that was profoundly dependent. For most of the twentieth century, the southern Irish economy relied heavily upon revenues from exports, principally of live animals, to the United Kingdom. Over the last few decades, however, the importance of British markets has waned considerably. The growing proportion of exports destined for elsewhere has prompted the view that the southern Irish economy has come to assume a rather more healthy and autonomous form than hitherto. In reality, however, the economic course that

the Irish Republic has taken over the last generation has – as Denis O’Hearn illustrates in his contribution to this volume – merely entailed swapping one version of dependency for another.

The bullish rhetoric that has attended the era of the Celtic Tiger conspires to conceal the actual fragility of the southern Irish economy. The record rates of economic growth that were registered throughout the 1990s were attributable, in the main, to the activities of a remarkably small number of multinational corporations operating within a remarkably narrow range of economic sectors.⁵⁶ In the course of the decade, a handful of principally US computer companies came to assume a pivotal importance within the southern Irish economy. This marked reliance upon certain sections of multinational capital has rendered the Irish Republic exceptionally vulnerable to the increasingly rapid changes that characterise the global economy and corporate strategy. The fragility of the southern Irish economy becomes especially apparent if we turn to consider the potential ramifications if, for instance, the Intel Corporation were to close its flagship branch plant in County Kildare. The impact of this single corporate decision would, in all probability, be sufficiently grave to undermine conventional estimations of the vitality and prospects of the Celtic Tiger. It would at least suggest that those commentators who hold to the view that the Irish Republic has now entered an era of sustained and genuinely autonomous development have been seriously misled.⁵⁷

At the heart of optimistic accounts of the Celtic Tiger era is the assumption that the period has bestowed considerable benefit upon every section of southern Irish society. The contention that the boom years have served the interests of all is reflected in part in the rash of collective (pro)nouns that litter public discourse. Politicians and journalists are wont to reflect that ‘*we* have never had it so good’ or that ‘*the Irish* are living through a golden age’. The assumption that there exist collective interests within the twenty-six counties finds institutional expression in the various corporatist schemes that have been devised since the late 1980s. The formal rationale of ‘social partnership’ is, of course, that it facilitates restraint from, and cooperation between, the various sections of southern Irish society, to the advantage of all.

The notion that the economic boom has conferred benefit upon all Irish people represents, perhaps, the most pernicious of the myths that have bloomed during the Celtic Tiger era. The Republic of Ireland exhibits, of course, all those class distinctions and inequalities that are the hallmark of a capitalist society.⁵⁸ As a consequence, it has been entirely inevitable that the distribution of the advantages of economic growth should have been neither even nor universal.⁵⁹ The principal beneficiaries of the advent of the Celtic Tiger have been those elements of southern Irish society that already enjoyed considerable affluence.⁶⁰ Irish business

men and women have come to receive growing profits and dividends, which they have often lodged, on the recommendation of their banks, in offshore accounts that avoid the necessity of paying tax. Speculators in a position to invest in several properties have reaped the benefits of ever spiralling rents and house prices. The owners of the numerous stud farms scattered throughout the twenty-six counties have amassed enormous personal fortunes, unmolested by the state's revenue commissioners.

The era of the Celtic Tiger has, therefore, constituted a time of considerable opportunity for the more affluent elements of southern Irish society. The same could hardly be said, however, for most working-class people living in the twenty-six counties. In principle, the corporatist structures at work within the Irish Republic are intended to operate to the advantage of everyone. In practice, however, social partnership represents a ruse that acts to conceal and advance the interests of the most privileged sections of southern Irish society⁶¹ – a point that Kieran Allen develops more fully in chapter 3. During the boom years the salaries, rents, profits and dividends that accrue to the wealthy have not been restrained and have grown exponentially. Over the same period, however, the wages that are paid to ordinary folk have been subject to strict controls and have grown only marginally. It should scarcely come as a surprise, therefore, to discover that the era of the Celtic Tiger has witnessed an acceleration of the polarisation of wealth.⁶² Indeed, international statistics have shown consistently in recent years that the Irish Republic has come to represent the second most unequal society in the western world.⁶³

The operation of social partnership agreements in the context of an economic boom has worked to the considerable disadvantage of the southern Irish working classes. Modest wage increases have simply been insufficient to keep pace with spiralling rents and house prices in particular. While many working-class people have struggled to make ends meet, especial hardship has often been faced by those who have entered the new forms of employment that have emerged since the birth of the Celtic Tiger. Over the last decade, more jobs have been created than at any other time in the history of the state. In the main, these posts have been filled by the record numbers of women entering the labour force for the first time – a trend that Sinéad Kennedy maps out in her chapter. The new modes of employment that define the Celtic Tiger era are often poorly paid and protected.⁶⁴ In addition, these positions tend to entail working practices that are rather less than enviable. Some commentators – as we saw earlier – have sought to argue that Irish people have actually flourished under these new ways of working. Those observers who celebrate 'flexible' labour practices might, of course, adopt a rather different perspective if they personally were facing a future that consisted of twelve-hour shifts, the endless repetition of a standardised spiel to randomly selected phone owners or delving into their own pockets to

buy the materials required to perform the tasks involved in a contract cleaning position.

The creation of a large body of badly paid jobs – coupled with the often overlooked persistence of long-term unemployment – has ensured that the recent period of economic boom has been accompanied by growing levels of poverty within the twenty-six counties. While this particular trait of the Celtic Tiger might appear to be an aberration, it is in fact entirely in keeping with wider international trends.⁶⁵ The coincidence of burgeoning wealth and growing poverty features in the course of development that all western societies have followed in the last generation. The number of poor people in the twenty-six counties would, however, seem to be exceptionally high. Indeed, recent statistics would suggest that the Irish Republic now has the second greatest concentration of poverty in the western world. Among the developed states, only that supposed paragon of modernity, the United States, has a larger proportion of people who are poor.⁶⁶

The disadvantages that the southern Irish working classes face could, of course, be ameliorated to some extent were the state to provide adequate levels of certain essential services. The era of the Celtic Tiger has provided a golden opportunity to bring public provision in the Irish Republic up to scratch. In spite of the fact that the fortunes amassed by multinational capital and a few private citizens go largely untaxed, the Irish state acquired a healthy fiscal surplus during the 1990s. While these funds offered the chance to improve essential public services dramatically, the opportunity was all but spurned. Indeed, over the period since the phrase ‘Celtic Tiger’ was coined, the proportion of national income devoted to state spending has in fact declined.⁶⁷ The underdevelopment of public services in the Irish Republic is illustrated most keenly in the context of the health system. In the last few years, gnawing dissatisfaction with pay and working conditions has prompted doctors and nurses to increasingly militant industrial action. The success of a sequence of independent candidates campaigning on health issues in the general election held in the early summer of 2002 suggests that the grievances of those working in hospitals have found a resonance with the wider Irish public.

In most mainstream commentaries, the advent of the Celtic Tiger is held to have signalled an era of widespread affluence and contentment. The years of sustained economic growth are held to have enabled people in the Irish Republic to banish the austerity of previous times in order to become sophisticated consumers, akin to their neighbours in other western European states. The euphoria that has exemplified the era of the Celtic Tiger has often failed to square with the everyday realities of the lives of actual flesh-and-blood southern Irish people. While the incomes of professionals as well as many other workers living in the twenty-six counties

have increased substantially, it is debatable whether the quality of their lives has in fact improved. In the last decade or so, the culture of work in a range of occupations has changed dramatically. It is the experience of many professionals that the pace and length of their working day have increased considerably. The stresses that arise out of these new work cultures have been among the factors that have led to spiralling levels of drug and alcohol abuse in the twenty-six counties.⁶⁸

While many of the salaries that are available within the Irish Republic are impressive, they are often insufficient to enable people to live in comfort, let alone luxury. The increasingly exorbitant cost of property has meant that even individuals earning ostensibly substantial incomes have been compelled to live in cramped but expensive rented accommodation in one of the many complexes that jerry-builders have thrown up in southern Irish cities since the beginning of the boom. The quest for somewhere larger in which to breathe or raise children has persuaded many people working in Irish cities to migrate to dormitory towns or even further afield.⁶⁹ An increasingly lengthy and arduous commute to work has become a recurrent bane of many of those who are supposedly living the good life in Celtic Tiger Ireland.⁷⁰

The lives of people who reside in the twenty-six counties – as Anne Ryan illustrates in chapter 9 – exhibit all the pressures and dislocations that are the hallmark of the modern world. The course that it has taken over the last generation has begun to gnaw at the very fabric of southern Irish society. Increasingly, there are signs of atomisation among people who were formerly renowned for their sense of connectedness. As individuals in the twenty-six counties have grown less attached to one another, they have inevitably grown more attached to things. After all, if we are truly living at the end of human history, then what else is there to do but shop?

As we noted in passing earlier, the conceit of the Celtic Tiger has a particular facility to connote the changing patterns of consumption that have marked life in the twenty-six counties over the last generation. In countless features devoted to the period, journalists have sought to celebrate the practices of Irish consumers. The ways in which younger Irish people in particular choose to spend their leisure time has been considered emblematic of a population that has become increasingly confident, imaginative and sophisticated. The hagiographies of the southern Irish consumer that appear in orthodox accounts of the Celtic Tiger period ultimately fail to convince, however. The ways in which people living in the twenty-six counties dress and play are often taken as expressive of a reflexive agency through which individuals seek to create an authentic and original notion of self. It is perplexing, then, that contemporary southern Irish society should be characterised not by diversity and individuality but rather by a baleful blandness. While we may well live at a

time when there has never been greater choice, it is remarkable how few choices are actually being made.⁷¹ It is extremely difficult to judge the claims of features writers that everyone looks better nowadays, simply because everyone sort of looks the same. It was this corrosive uniformity that recently prompted one journalist – in a curious though compelling phrase – to berate the ‘homogeneous sartorial communism’ of contemporary southern Irish society.⁷²

The materialism that has overtaken the twenty-six counties in the era of the Celtic Tiger articulates a spiritual emptiness that invariably attends the process of modernisation⁷³ – a theme that recurs throughout the chapter by Kieran Keohane and Carmen Kuhling. Over the last generation, the Republic of Ireland has, like all other western societies, become a place that elevates having over being. It would seem, increasingly, that the principal way in which most southern Irish people are willing or able to express their sense of who they are is through the commodity form. The rampant consumption that has come to define the period of the Celtic Tiger has inevitably nurtured a culture of narcissism.⁷⁴ As the devotion to self has escalated, consideration for others would appear to have waned. In recent times, a certain arrogance and callousness have appeared within southern Irish society that did not seem to exist before.⁷⁵ An increasingly substantial body of people seem entirely oblivious to the courtesies that can render everyday social interactions vaguely bearable. Possession of a mobile phone would seem to have come to be regarded as a licence to behave in whatever way you please. Unprovoked random assaults under the influence of excess alcohol have become a lamentably common occurrence in all southern Irish cities.⁷⁶

Irish people are, of course, not merely the subjects of the process of commodification that defines contemporary bourgeois society but its objects as well. The course that late capitalism has taken entails a collapse of the distinctions between the cultural and the economic.⁷⁷ Western societies have increasingly become sites less of production than of consumption. The modes of cultural practice and the details of historical triumph and catastrophe have been rendered into the commodity form. This relentless process that leads to the commodification of everything – to the advent of the society of the spectacle – is as apparent in the context of Ireland as in that of other developed societies. In the twenty-six counties, various social practices that were once simply ways of being have been distorted into ways of making money. It is difficult, at times, when walking around Dublin to shake the conviction that the entire city has been transformed into a cultural theme park for the entertainment and distraction of natives and visitors alike. The process of the commodification of Irishness is among the most important forces shaping the contemporary social life of the twenty-six counties. The theme is, therefore, one that is afforded considerable attention in the book and is

taken up in rather different ways in the chapters written by Steve Coleman, Honor Fagan and David Slattery.

There is, perhaps, one final consideration that should receive our attention before we proceed. Among the multiple ideas that emerge out of the deceptively simple conceit of the Celtic Tiger are those that centre upon what it now means to be Irish. It has become commonplace to suggest that recent generations growing up in the twenty-six counties have come to define themselves in ways that are increasingly similar to those of their counterparts in other regions of the EU. Although explicitly proud of where they are from, younger southern Irish people are held to subscribe to a version of Irishness that is outward looking and inclusive. The enmities and injustices that so preoccupied previous generations are considered to be of little concern or interest. The rather gentler mode of nationalism assumed to have gained ground within the twenty-six counties in recent times would appear to be one that promises to heal the divisions that have blighted the island as a whole.

In the minds of some, the prospects of national reconciliation have been heightened further by the economic strides that the Irish Republic has made. The phenomenal rates of growth registered throughout the 1990s have ensured that the economic conditions that might enable the creation of a single polity on the island are now in place. The common-sense association often made between economic prosperity and political progress has, of course, been encouraged by a particular historical coincidence.⁷⁸ The years in which the phrase 'Celtic Tiger' became a recurrent motif of everyday speech also happened to be those in which the peace process in Northern Ireland finally got off the ground.⁷⁹ While the relationship between economic development and political reconciliation remains implicit in the minds of many people living in the twenty-six counties, nationalist politicians have at times sought to make the connection more explicit.

Although comforting, the notion that the advent of the Celtic Tiger will ultimately pave the way to reconciliation among the peoples of Ireland remains a fiction nonetheless. The associations between prosperity and peace that are drawn implicitly in mainstream accounts of contemporary Irish society betray a fundamental weakness of the ideological tradition from which they derive. Among modernisation theorists, there tends to be a belief that, as societies evolve towards the nirvana of high mass consumption, individuals become increasingly disinterested in those practices and beliefs considered to be 'primitive' or 'traditional'. Why would you bother with being a unionist or a nationalist when you can always just go to the mall instead? The essential difficulty with these bourgeois readings of the development process arises out of the fact that they misunderstand the nature of the relationship between what are arbitrarily designated as 'tradition' and 'modernity' respectively. In reality, of

course, those rites and practices that are conventionally understood as 'traditional' are not impediments to modernisation but rather products of it. There are few things as modern as tradition. It is important to remember this when considering the prospects of a place with a history like that of Ireland.

While the economic boom has undoubtedly had some benign effects, it has inevitably served little to diminish the divisions that blight relations among Irish people. The prejudices and preoccupations that define old-school nationalism continue to have a certain currency south of the border. The origins of many of those who have offered their services to the cause of dissident republicanism are merely the most explicit expression of this. While 'traditional' concerns and beliefs persist often under the surface of everyday life in the twenty-six counties, they tend – as Pete Shirlow shows in his contribution to the book – to find rather more vehement articulation north of the border. Over the last decade, a great deal of political progress has, of course, been made in Northern Ireland. The number of young working-class men murdering one another in the name of equally worthless causes has declined enormously. The sense of prejudice and grievance that in part drove 'the troubles' remains obstinately in place, however. Indeed, according to one major survey published in the early summer of 2002, levels of sectarian animosity have in fact heightened within the six counties over the period of the peace process.⁸⁰ The growth of ethnoreligious hatred in Northern Ireland finds particularly chilling expression in the routine violence and intimidation that remain an everyday reality in many parts of the region. If we are really living through the end of Irish history then it would appear that no one has bothered to inform the residents of north and east Belfast.

The contention that contemporary Irish society has become an essentially inclusive and cosmopolitan place, which appears in many orthodox accounts of the Celtic Tiger era, should be denied on at least one further ground. Over the last decade, the Irish Republic has suddenly and unexpectedly become a net importer of people. The experiences of those who have come to these shores from elsewhere are necessarily complex and diverse. While some recent immigrants have encountered warmth and opportunity, a great many others have been met by suspicion and hostility. Those who have arrived from a range of African states in pursuit of a better life have been treated especially badly. The racism that appears increasingly endemic within the twenty-six counties has, predictably, been fomented by those in positions of authority. The institutions and agents of the state seem unable – as Steve Loyal argues in his chapter – to conceive of those seeking asylum in the Irish Republic as being other than a burden. Elements of the media have issued disgraceful misrepresentations of the new immigrants that clearly chime with established racial stereotypes. In this chill climate, it is hardly surprising that

members of ethnic minorities within the twenty-six counties recount that they are often the victims of verbal and physical violence. There are many deplorable facets of the way in which southern Irish society has evolved over the last generation. The manner in which refugees and asylum seekers have been mistreated – especially by the forces of the state – leaps out, though, as the most shameful of all.

How soon is now?

The radical changes that have overtaken the Irish Republic in the course of the last generation have, in the main, been read and refracted through a very particular ideological perspective. In most contemporary accounts, people living in the twenty-six counties are represented as newly and uniformly affluent and contented. While mainstream accounts of the Celtic Tiger do, of course, possess at least a kernel of truth, they offer a vision of southern Irish society that is nonetheless systematically distorted. In particular, orthodox readings tend to understate or overlook entirely those dislocations and injustices that have marked the process of social change in the recent period of economic boom. The purpose of this book is to illuminate and contest the numerous dubious assumptions that inform the hitherto hegemonic readings of the nature of contemporary southern Irish society. It is the conviction of the authors who have contributed to the text that most orthodox analyses have conspired to misrepresent the transformations that have attended the era of the Celtic Tiger. The intention of the book is, then, to add to existing critical voices that are essential if we are ever to arrive at a more faithful appreciation of what the Irish Republic is like and where it might be going.

While the contributors to the text share a conviction that there needs to be a more critical understanding of the nature of contemporary Irish society, their points of view are, of course, far from uniform. The authors who appear in the pages that follow are drawn from a wide range of academic perspectives. The disciplines of adult education, anthropology, English literature, geography, sociology and women's studies are all represented between the covers. The individuals who have contributed to the text also come from a broad arc of ideological viewpoints. In a certain sense, the book represents an endeavour to see whether it is possible to have a fruitful critical dialogue between Marxism and postmodernism. It is hoped and anticipated that the variety of voices that are raised within the text will represent one of its fundamental strengths.

The finishing touches were put to the book in the late summer of 2002. Over the previous year, there had been increasingly dire warnings from authoritative figures that the southern Irish economy had begun to slow down and that a full-blown recession might be just around the

corner.⁸¹ In the last few weeks, there has been a fresh round of expressions of concern for the health of the Celtic Tiger.⁸² Of greatest significance, perhaps, has been the alarm within the International Monetary Fund that has been prompted by the ever more perilous state of the public finances in the Irish Republic. It would appear that the seemingly golden age of the Celtic Tiger might be drawing to a close. This is probably an especially opportune moment, then, to reflect upon the remarkable developments of the last dozen years or so.

The faltering of the southern Irish economy should, of course, be seen as emblematic of a rather more universal trend. In the 1990s, liberal capitalism appeared to be in especially rude health. The rates of growth and profit registered in the lodestar economy of the United States were read in many quarters as heralds of an era of expansion and prosperity.⁸³ This confidence in the performance and potential of global capitalism found its ideological echo, of course, in the contention that the political disputes of the past were over and that we now lived at the end of history. As the millennium turned, however, the difficulties that were already apparent in the world economy began to become rather more pronounced. The horrendous slaughter in New York and elsewhere on 11 September 2001 threatened to accelerate a nascent global recession. The sequence of corporate scandals that have rocked the United States in the months after have merely served to compound the nagging suspicion that all is not well with global capitalism.

Ironically, the essential fragility of global capitalism is encrypted within the very metaphor that was coined to convey its presumed invincibility. While the declaration that we live at the end of history clearly articulates a sense of the ultimate triumph of capital, it produces an echo that suggests a radically different outcome. It would seem that the sole cultural commentator who has been sufficiently astute to have appreciated this has, predictably, been the literary critic Fredric Jameson.⁸⁴ It is his view that, although the metaphor of 'the end of history' might appear to be about time, it is in fact about space.⁸⁵ In the era of globalisation, capital has been able to expand into new and lucrative markets. While the opportunities for profit have been substantial, they remain strictly finite, nonetheless. Jameson suggests that an acknowledgment of the spatial limits of capital is latent within the conceit that most famously celebrates the globalisation process. The notion of the end of history – he contends – articulates a sense not only of the majesty of capitalism but of its mortality as well. It expresses, in other words, not only a belief that the reign of capital represents the culmination of human civilisation, but also a terror that capitalism will inevitably be replaced at some point in the future by a form of society that is genuinely human and sustainable. Speed the day.

Notes

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- 5 A. So, *Social Change and Development: Modernization, Dependency and World System Perspectives* (London: Sage, 1990).
- 6 D. McClelland, *The Achieving Society* (London: Van Nostrand, 1961).
- 7 For a full account see P. Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998), especially chapter 2.
- 8 F. Fukuyama, 'The end of history?', *National Interest* (summer 1989).
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 10 F. Fukuyama, 'The West has won', *Guardian*, 11 November 2001. See also F. Fukuyama, 'History and September 11', in K. Booth and T. Dunne (eds), *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of the Global Order* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002).
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- 12 Giddens, *The Third Way*, pp. 74, 99–100.
- 13 Hutton and Giddens, *On the Edge*, p. 42.
- 14 Giddens, *The Third Way*, p. 31.
- 15 A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990); A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991); Giddens, *The Third Way*, pp. 36–7.
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- 20 Although initiatives between the state and business are less common in Ireland than in the United Kingdom, they are beginning to gather pace. For a critique of the operation of these schemes, see W. Kingston, 'Public–private partnership plan is a recipe for ripoffs', *Irish Times*, 12 August 2002, p. 14.
- 21 An important critique of the importation of hegemonic bourgeois ideals to Ireland – a process astutely designated as 'ideological franchising' – appears in P. Kirby, L. Gibbons and M. Cronin (eds), *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy* (London: Pluto, 2002).
- 22 See, for example, MacSharry and White, *The Making of the Celtic Tiger*, pp. 366–7. A rather more nuanced, but nonetheless overwhelmingly compli-

- mentary, account of the role of the Irish state in the Celtic Tiger boom appears in the work of Sean Ó Riain and Philip O'Connell. See, for instance, S. Ó Riain, 'Soft solutions to hard times', in E. Slater and M. Peillon (eds), *Memories of the Present: A Sociological Chronicle of Ireland, 1997–1998* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2000), and S. Ó Riain and P. O'Connell, 'The role of the state in growth and welfare', in B. Nolan, P. O'Connell and C. Whelan (eds), *From Bust to Boom? The Irish Experience of Growth and Inequality* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2000).
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 - 24 P. Sweeney, *The Celtic Tiger: Ireland's Continuing Economic Miracle* (Dublin: Oak Tree Press, 1999).
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 - 26 *Ibid.*, p. 144.
 - 27 N. Hardiman, 'Social partnership, wage bargaining and growth', in Nolan *et al.* (eds), *From Bust to Boom?*, p. 307.
 - 28 Sweeney, *The Celtic Tiger*, pp. 149–68.
 - 29 J. Travers, *Driving the Tiger: Irish Enterprise Spirit* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2001).
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 - 31 E. Ferguson, 'Celtic Tiger is burning bright', *Observer*, 4 July 1999.
 - 32 M. O'Connell, *Changed Utterly* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2001).
 - 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 75–91.
 - 34 *Ibid.*, pp. 1–11.
 - 35 *Ibid.*, 13–26.
 - 36 FitzGerald, 'The story of Ireland's failure', p. 55; Sweeney, *The Celtic Tiger*, pp. 12, 227.
 - 37 MacSharry and White, *The Making of the Celtic Tiger*, p. 148.
 - 38 R. Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997); R. O'Donnell, 'Reinventing Ireland: from sovereignty to partnership', Jean Monnet inaugural lecture, University College Dublin, 29 April 1999.
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 - 40 B. O'Leary, 'Comparative political science and the British–Irish Agreement', in J. McGarry (ed.), *Northern Ireland and the Divided World: Post-agreement Northern Ireland in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 62; S. Smootha, 'The tenability of partition as a mode of conflict regulation: comparing Ireland with Palestine – land of Israel', in McGarry (ed.), *Northern Ireland and the Divided World*.
 - 41 C. Coulter, '“A miserable failure of a state”: unionist intellectuals and the Irish Republic', in R. Ryan (ed.), *Writing in the Irish Republic: Literature, Culture, Politics 1949–1999* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000).
 - 42 See, for instance, the comments of Seamus Mallon, who was at the time leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), reported in S. Mallon, 'Build trust with the agreement', press release 28 May 2001, available at www.sdlp.ie/prmallon%2dbuild%20trust.htm.
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- Analysing Political Change in Northern Ireland* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1999).
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 - 45 For a useful discussion of the baleful influence that modernisation theory has exercised over Irish cultural commentary see J. Cleary, 'Modernization and aesthetic ideology in contemporary Irish culture', in Ryan (ed.), *Writing in the Irish Republic*.
 - 46 M. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1982); M. Horkheimer and T. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1993 [1944]).
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 - 52 *Ibid.*, pp. 24–5.
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 - 61 K. Allen, 'The Celtic Tiger, inequality and social partnership', *Administration*, 47:2 (summer 1999), pp. 31–55; Kirby, 'Contested pedigrees of the Celtic Tiger', pp. 31–3.
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- 74 For a critique of the culture of narcissism that pervades contemporary Ireland – and elsewhere – see Kirby *et al.* (eds), *Reinventing Ireland*, p. 8.
- 75 Kirby *et al.*, 'Conclusions and transformations', p. 207; F. O'Toole, 'A new nation of beggars on horseback', *Irish Times*, 6 August 2002, p. 12.
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