The centralised government of liquidity: community, language and culture under the Celtic Tiger

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The privatisation of Telecom Éireann in June 1999 came at the high-water mark of Ireland's 'Celtic Tiger' phase. About 600,000 Irish citizens bought shares in the state-owned company, which promptly changed its name to Eircom. For most buyers, it was their first experience of stock ownership.¹

In the television advertisement campaign for the share offer, we saw singers in locations all over Ireland sing verses from the traditional Irish-language song *Dúlamán*. This was followed by shots of people dancing in costumes in the style of Macnas – the Galway-based group which specialises in spectacular street theatre, originally inspired by the Catalan radical theatre company Els Comediants. Then, some fine print appeared about the terms of the share offer and, at the very end, we saw a shot of people approaching a bonfire somewhere in the mountains, carrying burning torches. Other bonfires were visible in the distance. This last image carried an oddly inverted echo of the traditional customs of St John's Eve, *Oíche Shin Sheáin* (23 July), in which bonfires would be lit on heights. Children would ignite wads of paraffin-soaked rags in the fire and throw them like flaming missiles into the air. *Fóid choise* or 'travelling sods' of turf were taken from the fires and hurled at animals and into fields, and placed in family hearths – using 'other world' power to ensure the fertility of individual hearths in the coming harvest.² The advertisement, though, ran this ritual backwards – people brought fire to the central fire. It was as if this Telecom flotation ritual siphoned off goodness from individual hearths, creating an all too worldly power – a multinational corporation.

Here, the state was selling back to its people something that already belonged to them – a semi-state company – but it was also selling back to them a particular sense of their own 'traditions'. Throughout Irish history, relatively localised cultural forms have been appropriated as emblems of wider collectivities. In the process of Irish nation building, forms

of popular expression which originated in the relatively autochthonous culture of local rural communities following the breakup of the Gaelic feudal order were translated to the national sphere as emblems of the ethnic nation state.³ Symbols of what is typically imagined as a rural, 'traditional', egalitarian past were presented as the common essence of what was an increasingly urban, industrialised and class-stratified populace. The Telecom advertisement gave this process a 1990s twist by including urban scenes, such as the ruins of the gasworks in Ringsend, as backdrops for the traditional singers – a reflection of the new-found visibility of Irish in 'Celtic Tiger' Dublin.

This use of the Irish language and 'traditional' culture in a sophisticated media campaign⁴ for an event of historic sociopolitical significance seemed to highlight the new enhanced position and prestige of language and tradition in the Ireland of the 1990s. The advertisement's style was reminiscent of cultural extravaganzas like the Irish-themed dance show *Riverdance*, or festive theatre companies like Macnas, and new loci of culture, such as the Galway Arts Festival and Dublin's Temple Bar. Media pundits proclaimed in the 1990s that 'we're not ashamed to be [or to speak?] Irish anymore'. They could point to the new fashionableness of Irish-medium education (Gaelscoileanna), clubs like Dublin's Club Sult, and the new Irish-language television channel, *Teilifís na Gaeilge* (T. na G., later renamed TG4). Many of these new forms and channels of expression displayed a cultural and linguistic hybridity which seemed to transcend the narrow confines of an obsessively purist nationalist culture. There were suggestions that, having reached an Irish version of Fukuyama's 'end of history',⁵ material affluence would enable the recovery of the Irish language and traditions and the overcoming of the dichotomies between past and present, rural and urban culture, and between Irish and world culture. Was the curse of the Famine finally over?

I would like to propose a more complex interpretation of these events, grounded in what Hardt and Negri identify as 'a dynamic within modernity', between the sociocultural expression of immanent community and its reappropriation on a transcendent plane:

*Modernity itself is defined by crisis, a crisis that is born of the un-interrupted conflict between the immanent, constructive, creative forces and the transcendent power aimed at restoring order.*⁶

Hardt and Negri suggest that all cultural forms in modernity have this dual aspect, a duality that is especially evident in Irish-language culture. Since the seventeenth century,⁷ the Irish language has stood for, and has been variously celebrated or reviled as, the expression of the (real or imagined) Irish 'multitude'. At the same time, it has served as a powerful symbol of the potential 'imagined community' of the nation state. Irish-language culture thus embodies all the tensions and contradictions

historically pertaining to relationships between community, nation and state.

The Irish state has followed patterns typical of nineteenth- and twentieth-century nation building, in that it has sought to establish a unity of geographic space, language and ethnic culture. But Ireland has been caught in the webs of colonial and neo-colonial domination, first by Britain and latterly by processes of global capital. These regimes have enforced cultural and ethnic hybridity (through conquest and the movement of labour power) as well as extreme social and economic inequality. In reaction to this, the Irish state has made periodic attempts to impose (and, if necessary, to invent) a homogeneously 'indigenous' Irish language and culture, in part to legitimate itself as the true expression of the Irish people. But the perceived symbolic power of English has been enduringly attractive to Irish elites. In fact, only the lower echelons of the state civil service embraced Irish.⁸ The Irish state has not been able to achieve the political unification, economic independence or linguistic revival felt to be the nation state's due. Ireland's consolidation as an imagined community⁹ – through 'print capitalism', broadcast media and the growth of the modern state – has occurred almost exclusively through English. At the same time, this consolidation has been dependent on an ideological valorisation of the Irish language and the continuing (narrowly) 'symbolic' role of Irish-speaking communities. The logic of the Irish state has led it to take a stance which conceptualises 'tradition' as the preserved cultural remnant of 'progress' (see below). From this perspective, the Irish language and its speakers embody a 'tradition' which is, at best, eccentric to Irish 'modernity'.

The Telecom advertisement shows that the modern Irish state still needs indigenous culture to legitimise itself, even while fully embracing the new regime of transnational capital. According to an advertising trade journal:

The brief handed down to [the advertising agency] Irish International was straight forward – design a campaign to generate awareness about the flotation and to inform the public that the shares are available to everyone. Irish International operated in accordance with European law which limits the content of any campaign for a public flotation to purely factual information without any persuasive elements.... *The decision to use traditional Irish vocalists rather than mainstream singers is intended to reinforce the message that everybody is eligible to buy shares.* The commercial is supported by press, outdoor posters and local and national radio, all of which run with the strapline 'whoever you are'.¹⁰

Disappointed Eircom investors later complained that the advertising campaign 'skilfully managed to convey the message that it would be almost unpatriotic to buy shares'.¹¹ The advertisement's use of Irish-language

song ('rather than mainstream singers') is an example of Bourdieu's 'strategy of condescension':

which consists in deriving profit from the objective relation of power between the languages that confront one another in practice ... in the very act of symbolically negating that relation, namely, the hierarchy of languages and those who speak them.¹²

There was more than profit at stake, however. In Negri's terms,¹³ 'to say state is only another way to say capital' – as capitalism develops, the state acts more and more as both the embodiment and representative of capital. The Telecom campaign involved more than an attempt to boost share prices: it also represented the state's attempt to relegitimise itself, in its new 'Celtic Tiger' form, as a 'shareholder democracy'.

The Irish language and political economy

By the nineteenth century, Irish was well on its way to becoming a minority language.¹⁴ Following the loss of native sovereignty and the colonisation of Ireland, English had become increasingly identified with the domains of religion, government and commerce. Even before the Great Famine, Irish was being rapidly abandoned in Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) areas. The nineteenth century saw the penetration of the colonial market economy to the poorest and most remote areas of Ireland. Rural Irish-speakers encountered colonial power relations, the ideologies and practices of political economy and the English language as one package. Additionally, both the major nationalist social movements and the modernising Catholic Church operated through English. The Famine hit the poorer, Irish-speaking areas the hardest; emigration and migratory labour practices made knowledge of English a necessity in these areas, and supported an ideology which saw Irish as pertaining only to the past. Irish became more and more the peripheral language of the home, of older people and of the inchoate expressions of resistance embodied in popular culture. English was seen by virtually everyone as the only vehicle for class mobility and for progress more generally, that is, for the creation and reproduction of modern social relationships.

This dynamic has continued to the present day. Thus, a 1971 study group found it 'quite striking' that the use of Irish as an everyday vernacular was confined to the most marginal parts of the officially designated Gaeltacht areas, which were themselves geographically and economically marginal to Ireland as a whole. Individual pockets of Irish-speakers tended to be 'more closely related to an English-speaking village' than to each other.¹⁵ This fractal pattern of linguistic geography illustrates the degree

to which Irish was marginalised, while English was the language of communication, commerce and the middle classes. For the writer and activist Máirtín Ó Cadhain, born in the Connemara Gaeltacht in 1905:

thar áit ar bith in Éirinn tá an tidirdhealú aicmeach, an class distinction, suntasach sa nGaeltacht. Gheobhadh Marx, Engels, agus Lenin cruthú breá ann ar a ndeimhne gurb iad an ardaicme agus lucht an rachmais, na capitalists, is túisce a thréigear saúlacht nó cultúr na muintire. B'ionann na boicht agus lucht na Gaeilge. Bhí an fuath aicmeach seo gríosta ionam i bhfad sul ar léigh mé an chéad focal den Chonaolach ná de *Das Kapital*. Agus nuair a léigh thuig me ar an bpointe céard é. Agus tá seo amhala sa nGaeltacht fós. Cé an fáth nach mbeadh? Ní call do dhuine a dhéanamh ach breathnú ar an anbhás atá aicme an rachmais á imirt ar chultúr na muintire.¹⁶

class distinctions are more prominent in the Gaeltacht than anywhere else in Ireland. Marx, Engels, and Lenin would get a fine proof [there] of their theory that it is the upper classes and the merchant classes – the capitalists – who are the first to abandon the wisdom or culture of the people. [To them] the poor and Irish-speakers were one and the same. This class hatred was ingrained in me long before I ever read a word of James Connolly or of *Das Kapital*. And when I read them I immediately understood what it was. And the same condition still prevails in the Gaeltacht. Why wouldn't it? One only has to look at the havoc that the capitalist class is wreaking on the people's culture.

Conradh na Gaeilge (the Gaelic League), founded in 1893, was an extremely broad-based social movement which not only advocated the revival of Irish but also used it in the creation of new forms of culture and sociality. Although putatively apolitical and 'cultural' in its aims, Conradh na Gaeilge offered a radical challenge to the ideology which identified 'progress' with the English language and the British state. Thus, it offered exactly what poor rural Irish-speakers were lacking – the hope of making a future through Irish. Unfortunately, in Conradh na Gaeilge's vision, this progress was largely of a non-utilitarian nature. Chatterjee notes that postcolonial and decolonising nationalism features a pervasive dualism between the 'spiritual' and 'material' realms:

By my reading, anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains – the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the 'outside', of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain, then, Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an 'inner' domain bearing the

‘essential’ marks of cultural identity. The greater one’s success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctiveness of one’s spiritual culture.¹⁷

Although it was a predominantly urban, middle-class organisation, Conradh na Gaeilge did direct much of its efforts towards native Irish-speakers; it won the right to Irish-language instruction in Gaeltacht schools and opened a teacher training college in the Gaeltacht. But here, as elsewhere, it created only the conditions for the possibility of an Irish-speaking middle class. It failed to attack the class system itself – the main force behind the abandonment of Irish.¹⁸

Conradh na Gaeilge directly inspired the 1916 rebellion; it was the egg out of which the new Irish state was hatched. But this state did little to change the class foundations of Irish society and the decline of Irish in the Gaeltacht continued or actually increased after independence. Although it made Irish mandatory for admission to the National University and for entry to the lower grades of the civil service, the state did not generally change its own linguistic behaviour, and it functioned mainly through English, both internally and in many of its dealings with Irish-speakers in the Gaeltacht.¹⁹

The Gaeltacht and the state

Poor, rural and predominantly Irish-speaking regions in the west were the first areas of Ireland to undergo systematic state-sponsored ‘development’ under the auspices of the Congested Districts Board (CDB), founded in 1891. The CDB concentrated on building up basic infrastructure and ignored broader questions of community, language or culture. Under the newly independent Irish Free State, the Gaeltacht Commission of 1926 surveyed the country and drew what became the geographic boundaries of the official Gaeltacht. Although ostensibly aimed at preserving the Irish language in these areas, Irish state policy concentrated on developing a system of grants to individual families, rather than policies aimed at strengthening community *per se*. Through their developmental interventions, the colonial and postcolonial states have increasingly reified the Gaeltacht as an administrative zone. The general tendency has been towards an increase in state centralisation, the reduction or elimination of local government powers, and the suppression of any form of local autonomy.²⁰ The Irish state portrayed the Gaeltacht as the ‘storehouse’ or ‘treasure’ of identity in a nation state that was constitutionally defined as Irish-speaking. In reality, Irish functioned as a minority language but without any legal recognition or protection of its minority status. In what Ó Ciosáin calls ‘the geographic fallacy’,²¹ the bureaucratic logic of

the state and the romantic ideology of the nation worked hand in hand to define the Gaeltacht in terms of physical space, rather than in terms of community structure or language use. Official ideology reified the Gaeltacht as a geographic entity, while denying the Irish language a public role as a marker of a distinct ethnic or cultural identity within the Irish nation.²²

The state's own efforts at language preservation have often worked against the local autonomy that is essential to the maintenance of a minority language. That this pattern has changed at all is largely the result of successive waves of Gaeltacht-based social activism, with significant support from urban Irish-speakers. In the 1930s, Muintir na Gaeltachta (People of the Gaeltacht) demanded civil rights for Irish-speakers and access to the means of production (arable land, fishing rights, industry) for the rural Irish-speaking poor. Their agitations received national attention, in part through publicity in *An t-Éireannach*, an Irish-language weekly socialist newspaper published in Dublin.²³ The state's response included the resettlement scheme in which Irish-speakers were relocated to County Meath; after a fight for recognition from the state, Ráth Cairn and Baile Ghib, in County Meath, remain as Irish-speaking communities to the present day.²⁴

In the late 1960s, Gluaiseacht Cearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta (the Gaeltacht Civil Rights Movement) made very similar demands, with the addition of the demand for an Irish-language radio service.²⁵ Members of the organisation set up a pirate radio transmitter in Connemara in 1970, the success of which embarrassed the state into setting up Raidió na Gaeltachta,²⁶ a Gaeltacht-based radio station which broadcasts nationally. Raidió na Gaeltachta was the first national institution to function through Irish only and the first to be largely controlled by Gaeltacht people.

A third wave of activism occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, centred on the demand for an Irish-language television service. Illegal television broadcasts were made from Connemara in 1987 and 1988.²⁷ Eventually, Teilifís na Gaeilge (later TG4) was set up by the state and began broadcasting in 1996.

These social movements sought local autonomy in Gaeltacht regions, and concentrated on building and maintaining community rather than focusing on language issues *per se*. This maximally contrasted with national language policy, which almost always failed to connect reverence for the 'spiritual' values of Irish (its non-utilitarian value as a vehicle of identity) with effective practical concern for maintaining communities of Irish-speakers. For the Irish state, 'the separation of the economic and the cultural, the symbolic and the material led to a contradiction between theory and practice in the maintenance of the defined cultural heartland of the country'.²⁸ Already in the 1930s, Muintir na Gaeltachta had opposed

direct grants and ‘handouts’ to Gaeltacht people and the treatment of the Gaeltacht as a separate ghetto within an English-speaking nation state, arguing instead for a social revolution that handed control of production over to the people themselves.²⁹

Gaeltacht social movements were part of larger milieux which featured the growth of new social networks and forms of community – in addition to Raidió na Gaeltachta, the last thirty-five years have seen the growth of Irish-language print media such as the independently minded news weekly *Amárach*, in Connemara,³⁰ as well as the creation of community development cooperatives. This period also saw the establishment of Irish-language publishers of books and local music, such as Cló Iar-Chonnachta, also in Connemara, founded in 1985. In the 1930s as well as the 1970s and 1980s, song composition flourished in the Gaeltacht. Local poets, taking full advantage of the new print and broadcast media, continued and adapted their long-held role as social critics articulating local responses to national and international forces.³¹

Social movements like Gluaiseacht Cearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta follow a pattern typical of the relationship between Irish-speakers and the state.³² The state makes ‘symbolic’ gestures to the language (e.g. constitutionally recognising Irish as the ‘first official language’ of the state) which it has to be forced into upholding. Protest consists of embarrassing the state with adverse publicity through the threat or actual practice of autonomous action. The state then attempts to co-opt social activism by creating or assuming control of institutions such as Raidió na Gaeltachta or TG4 (both are administered under the auspices of Raidió Teilifís Éireann, RTÉ, the state broadcasting authority). ‘[S]ince the 1920s Ireland had taken most action in favour of Irish out of the hands of the campaigners and enthusiasts and embedded it in the actions of the state.’³³

In Akutagawa’s and Hourigan’s analyses,³⁴ these outcomes represent the ‘failure’ of popular political movements. They see the main results of local activism as the extension of state control within the Gaeltacht, and the creation of a new Gaeltacht middle class centred around local cooperatives and the broadcasting and film industries. These indigenous elites are treated by locals ‘as an extension of national elites to be lobbied rather than [as] their local representatives operating at local level’.³⁵ Likewise, local cooperatives become ‘merely structures through which government aid may be channelled into the Gaeltacht regions’.³⁶

It might be more accurate, however, to say that Gaeltacht activism, while failing to achieve its overt goals, has transformed the relationship of local people with translocal forces and processes in a manner which prefigures what Hardt and Negri term ‘postmodernisation’.³⁷ By opening up closed networks of both community and governance, Gaeltacht activism has, in effect, pointed the way for the reduced role of the postmodern Irish state in its Celtic Tiger phase. As ‘the crucible of Irish postmodernity’,

the Gaeltacht has become the state's testing ground for decentralisation and local governance, as well as for the progressive recognition of linguistic and cultural minority rights.³⁸

The 'local and universal' Gaeltacht

These developments present both opportunities for and threats to the construction of community. As Ó hIfearnáin argues,³⁹ the Irish state has progressively withdrawn from direct action:

following a policy of disengaging with direct sponsorship not simply of language restoration policies, but delegation of responsibility for those areas where language support structures do exist to the voluntary, private and semi-state sector. This represents a shift in the way the state regards the language.... [T]he state has now hatched a new understanding that Irish speakers are a cultural and linguistic minority, while the majority must still be able to learn the language as it is part of their heritage and carries sentimental value.

Withdrawal from the ideology of Irish as 'everybody's language' has seen the progressive reduction of language requirements for access to the state sphere, including education, and increased toleration or even encouragement of locally based initiatives. These developments have opened the way for the creation of new forms of community but also for the complete dissolution of community into a spectacular simulacrum thereof. To illustrate what is at stake here, I would like briefly to contrast the formal organisation of Raidió na Gaeltachta with that of TG4.

Although local activists ended up with little representation on the staff or governing bodies of Raidió na Gaeltachta, the station still evolved in a fairly radical way, at least initially. Control of day-to-day operations remained largely in the hands of local staff, who influenced the station's development in several ways. Staff refused to develop a spoken version of Standard Irish and instead broadcast in their own local dialects.⁴⁰ The station developed as a network of local studios in the far-flung Gaeltacht regions. Local programming in local dialects was broadcast nationally (and now internationally, via satellite and the Internet). The station's news department has built up an international network of Irish-speakers for use as correspondents,⁴¹ is well known for its ability to cover national news, especially political news, and has forced politicians to be able to account for themselves through the medium of Irish.⁴² More subtly, the station has embraced not just local dialectal forms but also local modes of discourse. Types of knowledge and discourse which in the national sphere tend to be deprived of their functionality and received as 'folklore' – as emblems of the national past – retain their

role as vehicles for community discussion on Raidió na Gaeltachta.⁴³ Since medieval times, poetry and song, in both literary and oral genres, have been a favoured medium for topical discussion and political debate among all social strata of Irish-speakers. These discursive forms have still functioned, to a certain extent, in modern Irish-language media. The station thus often functions as a seamless extension and radicalisation of ‘traditional’ modes of local discourse, while projecting them into a non-geographically based, open-ended communication community.

Raidió na Gaeltachta has helped build translocal community in exactly the opposite way to that theorised by Anderson, Gellner, Habermas and others. For these theorists, the creation of wider community requires the transformation of language through standardising media such as newspapers and commercial publishing. They see standardised language as, ideally, a maximally transparent medium for rational discourse that enables speakers to transcend their pettily ‘local’ points of view and become fully educated citizens of a geographically contained ‘national’ community.⁴⁴ The case of Raidió na Gaeltachta – a ‘local’ station with national and international reach – shows that, perhaps, the ‘local’ is not merely a geographic entity; locality is not a physical container for people but a wider set of concrete social relationships.⁴⁵

This wider set of relationships is constituted by the tension between immanent ‘democratic’ impulses and their appropriation by structures of power. Thus, there has been constant tension within Raidió na Gaeltachta, and between the station and its listeners, over who controls the station (the state or local people) and over the station’s mission or target audience – Gaeltacht people or a national audience.⁴⁶ The station was set up under the auspices of RTÉ, which directly appoints top management. There is also an *appointed* advisory committee of representatives of the different Gaeltacht communities. The first committee did not include any of the activists who had campaigned for the establishment of the station; most of its members were also members of Fianna Fáil, the party then in power.⁴⁷

Paradoxically, it has been the national organisation (RTÉ) which has occasionally attempted to impose a ‘local’ definition of Raidió na Gaeltachta’s news coverage, while ‘local’ Gaeltacht-based staff wanted the station to cover national and international news. At other times, RTÉ has sought to redefine the station as a ‘national’ entity by de-emphasising ‘Gaeltacht’ programming.⁴⁸ Both tendencies work to diminish the importance of local (as opposed to national) points of view. The question is one of autonomy for Irish and Irish-speaking communities, an autonomy which is outward-looking, versus a protected status as an inward-looking reserve.

In contrast, TG4 perfectly embodies the role of a Celtic Tiger state institution. The ‘cash-starved youth rich channel’⁴⁹ acts as a commissioner

and broadcaster of programming, significant amounts of which it buys from small independent producers. The station's advanced technology allows it to function with a minimal permanent staff. But although TG4 has headquarters in the Gaeltacht, it defines itself as a 'national' service and is much more firmly under the control of RTÉ than Raidió na Gaeltachta. Thus the original name of the station, *Teilifís na Gaeilge*, meant Television 'of Irish', that is, of 'Irish' as the heritage language of all Irish people, as opposed to *Teilifís na Gaeltachta*, Television 'of the Gaeltacht', the voice and point of view of the habitually Irish-speaking community (however that community is defined). This shows in the station's programming, most of which features simple, standardised (and English-subtitled) Irish comprehensible to learners and non-native Irish-speakers. Little of its programming seems to present a Gaeltacht point of view; it has a quality of placelessness that Raidió na Gaeltachta's lacks, while the recent change of the station's name to 'TG4' – an acronym without a referent – bears an uncanny resemblance to the transformation of 'Telecom Éireann' into 'Eircom'. The telephone company's new name reflected its new international provenance as a multinational corporation and presaged a withdrawal from its earlier commitment to Irish-language policies. Would the same be true of TG4?

As with other institutions, the point of view projected by TG4 closely reflects its own power structure. In contrast, the broadcasting service envisioned by many activists would project the points of view of local communities and, in so doing, would change the relationship between localities and the wider world, much as Raidió na Gaeltachta has. Seosamh Ó Cuaig, a member of *Gluaiseacht Cearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta* who is now a journalist with Raidió na Gaeltachta, put the matter like this:

Tá [TG4] ar an gcaoi sin mar gheall gur ón taobh amuigh atá an rud ag tíocht. 'Gabhfaidh muid siar agus slánóidh muid na Sioux Indians', sin é an meon atá ann. Ní fhéadfá Sioux Indian a chur i gceannas ar na Sioux Indians. Níl sé sin ann le Raidió na Gaeltachta, fós. Is é Raidió na Gaeltachta t-aon institiúid Gaeltachta dá raibh againn. Tá RTÉ i gceannas air, ach is é meon na Gaeltachta a bhí ann. Tá an-léigear air sin agus go leor daoine ag iarraidh deireadh a chur leis. Tá brú ar Raidió na Gaeltachta béim a chur ar an ngné Náisiúnta. Ach céard is brí leis sin? Ní áitiúil agus náisiúnta ach áitiúil agus uilíoch. Sin é a deirimse.⁵⁰

[TG4] is that way because it is coming from the outside. 'We'll go West and save the Sioux Indians', that's the mentality there. You couldn't put a Sioux Indian in charge of the Sioux Indians. It isn't that way with Raidió na Gaeltachta, yet. Raidió na Gaeltachta is the only Gaeltacht institution we ever had. RTÉ is in charge of it, but it is the mentality of the Gaeltacht that was in it [from the beginning]. This is under severe siege with a lot of people trying to put an end to it. There is pressure on

Raidió na Gaeltachta to emphasise the national aspect. But what does that mean? It isn't [a case of] local and national but local and universal. That's what I say.

The 'mentality of the Gaeltacht', in its particularity as a locally grounded perspective, not only can speak for itself but has something to say to the world. As with the Sioux Indians, only autonomy can safeguard such perspectives. A 1993 flyer issued by Ráth Cairn's production company to present proposals for the Irish-language television channel makes this point very clearly:

Is iad na réigiúin Gaeltachta sin na lárionaid óna mbreathnófar ar an saol. Caithfidh an tseirbhís a bheith lonnaithe sa nGaeltacht agus a bheith i lámha mhuintir na Gaeltachta agus lucht na Gaeilge.⁵¹

The Gaeltacht regions are the centres from which one will see the world. The service must be located in the Gaeltacht and in the hands of Gaeltacht people and Irish-speakers.

Although 'locally' grounded, such a radically decentralised approach could paradoxically transform the nature of the Gaeltacht, identifying it less with geographically bounded administrative zones than with the unbounded, expansive community of Irish-speakers. This was, in fact, the original meaning of the term 'Gaeltacht'. Such a transformation would be the political expression of a concept of community immanent to Irish-speaking culture.⁵²

Conclusions

For the last few hundred years, the Gaeltacht has exemplified the crisis of Irish modernity. Originally among the poorest and most class-ridden areas of the state, Gaeltacht areas are now much more prosperous. A series of struggles has forced the Irish state to cede a certain amount of control and grant some degree of autonomy to Irish-speaking communities. Activists have successfully lobbied both the Irish state and the European Union for infrastructure and community development funds. In accordance with a shift in state language policy, local development is now, to some extent, under local control. Ironically, these changes have made the Gaeltacht an attractive place to live for non-Irish-speaking families as well. Rising property values and an influx of non-Irish-speakers have threatened to dissolve local communities. This is the negative side of an otherwise necessary and positive development, the globalisation of the Gaeltacht – its breakout from what Máirtín Ó Cadhain termed 'Claidhe na Muice Duibhe' (the Black Pig's Dyke) of geographical

segregation and second-class citizenship to which it had been relegated by traditional state policy.⁵³

What is still very much at stake is the relationship between language and community. The Irish state's language policy has relied almost exclusively on primary and secondary school education to promote the language in non-Irish-speaking communities. Irish was, in effect, a vehicle of what Gellner terms children's 'exo-socialisation' into an official culture that was not the culture of the home.⁵⁴ Ironically, this pattern is now being followed within the Gaeltacht itself, as parents often see the language as pertaining to institutions and not necessarily to the home. These parents then speak English to their children, leaving it to schools and other community institutions to provide them with Irish.⁵⁵ Such behaviour could be seen as 'hard-headed realism' in a world where a knowledge of English is economically essential, while the benefits accruing to competence in Irish are still largely 'symbolic'. But it is grounded in a point of view which takes state intervention in support of the Irish language for granted. And yet, as the state increasingly withdraws from direct action on behalf of linguistic and cultural matters, the fate of the language will depend more and more on its profitability.

Much of what I have termed the 'postmodernisation' of the Gaeltacht is the result of advances in information technology, which have enabled easier local access to modern means of communication. Better communications networks mean that production can be increasingly decentralised – a knitting factory on Inis Meáin in the Aran Islands can be in continuous and instantaneous contact with both its designers and its markets in Japan, Europe and the United States. This is beginning to provide opportunities for people to stay in remote locales rather than emigrating to centres of production. Both Raidió na Gaeltachta and TG4 rely on technological advances that make possible radically decentralised communication networks and a greater variety of choice in both the production and consumption of mediated culture. Privately owned media, such as the Irish-language weekly *Foinse* and the Breton-language television channel TV-Breizh,⁵⁶ show that linguistic 'niche markets' are becoming profitably exploitable by the corporate sector.

Hardt and Negri maintain that:

In the postmodernization of the global economy, the creation of wealth tends ever more toward what we will call biopolitical production, the production of social life itself, in which the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another.⁵⁷

Culture becomes capital, and vice versa, while political action increasingly consists of the struggle to maintain democratic autonomy in the face of global market forces. Yet what they term the 'informatisation' of

production amounts mostly to the transition to a service-based economy,⁵⁸ a process in which Ireland is quite advanced. The typical service sector worker, whether he or she lives in Dublin, in Ros Muc, County Galway or even in Keokuk, Iowa, is now freer than ever to participate in a global community of Irish-speakers. As a cultural producer, he or she may find his or her products accruing market value because of their rootedness in a minority linguistic culture and tradition.

This could all be seen as a revolution but, as such, it is a far cry from that envisaged by Máirtín Ó Cadhain or the members of Muintir na Gaeltachta. Ó Cadhain wrote in 1969 that:

Sí an Ghaeilge Athghabháil na hÉireann agus is í Athghabháil na hÉireann slánú na Gaeilge. Sí teanga na muintire a shlánós an mhuintir.⁵⁹

Irish is the Reconquest of Ireland and the Reconquest of Ireland is the salvation of Irish. The people's own language is what will save them.

By 'the Reconquest of Ireland' he meant James Connolly's call for a socialist revolution in Ireland which would overthrow colonial rule and put the means of production in the hands of the Irish people.⁶⁰ Ó Cadhain saw this as the only hope for saving the Irish language. He saw Irish as the means of expression and cultural medium of the most downtrodden social group in Ireland. In the second sentence of his statement, he expresses his belief that revolution should be a development immanent to the life and culture of the community, and vice versa. This seems to prefigure Hardt and Negri's call for revolution on what they term the 'plane of immanence'. Hardt and Negri see the development of capital itself, as well as popular resistance to it, as sufficient to constitute such a revolution, an assertion which might seem doubtful to even the most optimistic observer of 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland.

In the advertisement offering shares in Telecom Éireann, singers sang *Dúlaman*, a traditional song from Gaoth Dobhair, County Donegal, that represents the voice of a person selling seaweed. Investors who answered the advertisement's call could be forgiven for thinking that seaweed is exactly what they got for their money. As its share prices precipitously declined after its flotation, rumours abounded that Eircom would be dissolved at the behest of the transnational telecommunications corporations that held a majority interest in the new company. Concern over share prices dominated the grievances brought forward at Eircom's stormy annual general meeting on 13 September 2000. In votes at this meeting, small Irish investors found themselves up against the company's chairman, Ray MacSharry, who controlled 1.15 billion proxy votes from large corporate investors.⁶¹ The voices of Irish-language activists, objecting to the new corporation's apparent withdrawal from its commitments to the language, were lost in the fray.

Notes

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- 3 D. Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity, Identity* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000).
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- 5 F. Fukuyama, ‘The end of history?’, *National Interest* (summer 1989).
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- 7 J. Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996); B. Ó Buachalla, *Aisling Ghéar: na Stíobhartaigh agus an t-Aos Léinn, 1603–1788* (Baile Átha Cliath: Clóchomhar Tta, 1996).
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- 10 See www.adworld.ie/news_desk/march99/news133.html, accessed 9 August 1999; my emphasis.
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- 18 Breandán S. MacAodha, ‘Was this a social revolution?’, in S. Ó Tuama (ed.), *The Gaelic League Idea* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1972), p. 29.
- 19 J. Walsh, *Díchoimisíúnnú Teanga: Coimisíúnn na Gaeltachta 1926* (Dublin: Cois Life, 2002); *Coimisíúnn na Gaeltachta 2002, Tuarascáil* (Dublin: Rialtas na hÉireann, 2002).
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 - 22 Akutagawa, 'A linguistic minority under the protection of its own ethnic state', p. 141.
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 - 27 Hourigan, *Comparison of the Campaigns for Raidió na Gaeltachta and TnaG*, p. 60.
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