

Discourses of diasporic responsibility in Ireland: The modern moment and the discursive costs of moving

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Abstract

In this paper, I offer a critical reflection regarding the rhetorical employment of an analogy between mid-nineteenth-century, Famine-age emigrants from Ireland and non-Irish-national immigrants that have been increasingly present in the Republic of Ireland since the mid-1990s. While this discursive device is considered to be politically correct, cosmopolitan, and/or accepting of recent migrants to Ireland, I maintain that drawing the comparison between Famine-age and earlier emigrants from Ireland and current-day immigrants to the island supports the characterization of non-Irish-national residents as less than modern and incapable of integration into Irish society.

Keywords: Celtic Tiger; diasporic responsibility; immigration discourse; Irish emigration; immigration to Ireland

Introduction

Beginning in the early 1990s, the economy of the Republic of Ireland began a period of unprecedented improvement. Following over a century of almost uninterrupted emigration, by the mid-1990s commentators were busy trying to describe the economic phenomenon that was the Republic of Ireland. A term that seemed to stick was "The Celtic Tiger," which favorably compared Ireland to fast-growing Asian economies.

Along with this growth of the Irish economy came a quick rise in the number of non-national migrants coming to the Republic of Ireland to fill a variety of employment positions. Steve Loyal reports that "[i]n 1993, 1,103 work permits were issued (to non-European Economic Area workers). By the end of the year 2000, this figure had risen to 18,017, and by the end of 2001 it stood at 36,431" (2003:80). The Republic of Ireland's Central Statistics Office (CSO) reports the state's population to be 4,239,848 based on a census taken April 23rd, 2006. This total reflects an increase of 8.2% in four years. The total population includes 419,733 respondents, approximately 10% of the Republic's total population, who self reported as non-Irish nationals (CSO, 2007:1). Elaborating on these

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DISCOURSES OF DIASPORIC RESPONSIBILITY

totals, the CSO suggests “[t]he 2002–2006 period has witnessed record population growth with annual increase amounting to 79,000—consisting of a natural increase of 33,000 supplemented by an annual net inward migration of 46,000” (2007:4).

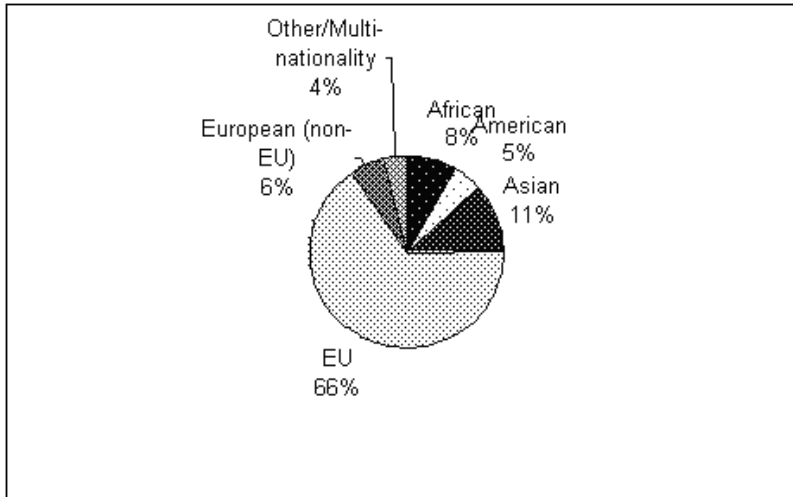
According to the 2006 census figures, 275,775 (66%) of non-Irish-national residents of the Republic of Ireland were nationals of EU-member states. Slightly over 40% of respondents in this subgroup (112,548) were from the United Kingdom. Respondents from Poland made up the second largest part of this subgroup at 63,276 (23% of those coming from EU member states and 15% of total non-Irish-nationals residing in the Republic). Respondents from other, non-EU-member, European countries comprised slightly less than 6% of the total number of non-Irish-national residents at 24,425. Nationals from countries in Africa comprised over 8% (35,326 respondents) of the total non-Irish-national respondents residing in the Republic, with Nigerians comprising the largest portion of this subgroup (16,300 [46% of those from African countries and slightly less than 4% of total non-Irish-national residents]). Respondents from a number of countries in Asia constituted approximately 11% of the total non-Irish-national census respondents. Nationals from countries in America (North and South) accounted for approximately 5% of total non-Irish-national respondents, at 21,124 persons, with those from the United States comprising the largest single population of this subgroup (12,475). The remaining 4% of non-Irish-nationals residing in the Republic of Ireland (16,131 respondents) was comprised of nationalities not accounted for in the above groups and multi-nationality respondents.¹

Irish people are most often considered to be accepting of non-Irish residents living and working on the island. This claim is often supported by pointing to a relative scarcity of anti-immigrant far-right political parties that seem to be flourishing in other EU states. In this regard, Steve Garner suggests, “the parties manifestly opposed to immigration have accumulated less than 1 per cent of the vote whenever they have stood for election” (2007:110). Additionally, overt race-hate groups appear to have had difficulty establishing themselves in the Republic of Ireland. “The attempt by the American National Socialist Party to organize in Ireland over the

¹ These percentages are based upon Central Statistics Office of Ireland reports (2007:13–14). In addition to these totals, 1,318 census respondents self-reported as “No nationality” and 44,279 census respondents are reported as nationality “Not Stated” (CSO 2007:14)

2000–3 period, through a dedicated website (‘No to a Black Ireland’) and locally based activism, ended in failure” (Garner 2007:115).²

Figure 1: Non-Irish-national residents in the Republic of Ireland classified by nationality, 2006



Source: Chart compiled from data of the Central Statistics Office Ireland (2007)

In more general terms, Irish individuals often express what I have come to call diasporic responsibility. Diasporic responsibility is the idea that the Irish, as a people, have an historic debt as a long-time exporter of people to receive immigrants and treat them well. As succinctly put by BBC Dublin Correspondent James Helm, “[m]any Irish people believe the country’s history of migration means they have a duty to extend a warm welcome to people coming to settle here (in Ireland)” (2004). I have heard this sentiment voiced at multiple times in my two plus years living in Ireland. I have noted it in speeches and had it expressed to me in one-on-one conversations with Irish friends and acquaintances. Discourses of diasporic responsibility often present themselves as an analogy between modern-day migrants to Ireland and nineteenth-century, Famine-age emigrants from Ireland.

² While noting these oft-evoked supporting statements in his article, Garner’s main contention is that key racial elements considered the domain of far-right parties elsewhere in Europe are part of the political mainstream in the Republic of Ireland as a result of its particular political history.

DISCOURSES OF DIASPORIC RESPONSIBILITY

In this paper, I will review three instances of discourses reflecting the analogy noted above. The first example will be taken from an Irish-language student film entitled *Rotha Mór an tSaoil*. I will also present two additional examples, the first being a description of an exhibit currently on display at the National Library of Ireland and the second coming from a political speech. Taken together, these three instances suggest that the use of this analogy is not an isolated instance specific to any one of the examples. Through representing and elaborating upon these three discursive instances I hope to demonstrate both the utility of the concept of diasporic responsibility and that the range of spheres in which this diasporic responsibility analogy can be found is relatively wide. I will then go to a critical reflection upon this discursive device that calls into question the perceived desirability of its use/articulation.

The Instances

Rotha Mór an tSaoil

The first example of the diasporic responsibility analogy I will highlight is found in the opening scenes of a short film that was produced as part of an annual student Irish-language film competition called Comórtas Scannán. Each year second-level school classes of 14- to 16-year-olds from around Ireland send in storylines and scripts written in the Irish language (Gaeilge) to be assessed by a panel of judges. Three or four of these entries are chosen and a producer and film crew are assigned to each of the short-listed classes to turn the script into a short film with the assistance of the class that wrote them. The resulting short films are then, in turn, judged and the overall winner represents the Republic of Ireland in the Ciak Junior international youth film competition held annually in Treviso, Italy.

At the start of *Rotha Mór an tSaoil*, the low sound of a bodhran drum begins as a low fire in a stone hearth comes into view. Panning out, we see what we take to be a family of four—a father, mother, older son, and younger daughter. The four sit pensively in a dark room in front of the fireplace. A narrator's voice, speaking in Gaeilge with English subtitles, locates the family in mid-nineteenth-century Ireland, explaining that they fled the Great Famine during which a million died. "Don't go" says the mother (also in Gaeilge with English subtitles). "He must go" responds the father. The narrator's voice introduces the son, Oisín, 17 years old. Deirdre, his younger sister sitting on the lap of their mother, is nine years old. The narrator explains that they have a dream, to

escape from the poverty and hardship that would condemn them to “no future” in Ireland.

The music then changes to a slow tune played out on xylophone-like instrument as the scene changes to show a head shot of stout dark-skinned man before panning to a younger man wearing a white and green knitted skull cap. The narrator, still speaking in Gaeilge, introduces the younger man as Segun, the eldest son. The scene changes again to show a young girl, Segun’s younger sister Niki, in the arms of their mother. Segun and Niki, too, have a dream. Their dream is to escape the poverty and hardship of Ibadan, Nigeria. They have no future there, the narrator informs us.

Switching back to the previous (Irish) scene, Oisín’s mother gives him a ring.

Returning again to the tear-filled scene in Nigeria, the narrator explains that Segun and Niki’s mother knew that they had to leave. That she sold her business and put Segun and Niki on a boat. We see the mother put a brown package (what we can assume is money) into Segun’s hand. As Segun and Niki walk away, the narrator informs us that their mother is about to lose a piece of her heart.

“We shed the same tears” the narrator sums up. “We suffer the same pain. We feel with the same hearts. We dance to the same rhythm: the rhythm of life. We are all carried by the same wheel: the great wheel of life.” The scene fades to black and words “rotha mór an tsaoil,” Gaeilge for ‘the great wheel of life,’ appear on the screen.

When the scene fades back from black, the rest of this 15-minute film focuses on the early period of Segun and Nikki’s life as illegal immigrants living in Dublin, Ireland. What I want to highlight for the purposes of this paper is the analogy drawn between Segun and Nikki, current-day Nigerian immigrants to Ireland, and Oisín and Deirdre, mid-nineteenth-century Irish people fleeing the Famine.

Strangers to Citizens

A second example of a place that this discourse of diasporic responsibility is arguably represented is in a museum exhibit that is currently on display at the Leabharlann Náisiúnta na hÉireann (National Library of Ireland). The library was established in 1877 and functions as a reference library whose holdings constitute “the most comprehensive collection of Irish documentary material in

DISCOURSES OF DIASPORIC RESPONSIBILITY

the world” (Introduction 2009). In addition to its primary service of maintaining multiple reading rooms in which holders of valid Reader’s Tickets can consult the library’s collection, it performs a number of other services. Among these services is the maintenance of dedicated exhibition spaces in which material from its collection are displayed.

The exhibit I want to highlight is entitled “Strangers to Citizens,” which is on display at the library from December 2007 through 2009. The webpage advertising the exhibit reads:

Following the wars at the end of the 16th century, the Irish began to migrate to continental Europe in a pattern which continued over two hundred years. Soldiers, students, priests, professionals, and merchants, were among the many thousands who emigrated, to Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Russia, and Sweden, and elsewhere. Over time migrants formed communities and eventually integrated into their host societies.

After detailing the National Library and other resources brought to bear in creating the exhibit, the ad continues:

People left Ireland for a bewildering number of reasons. Like migrants through time and the world over, they had to call on all their resources to survive and prosper in alien environments. Their achievement was considerable, permitting an ‘outsider’ people to achieve ‘insider’ status on the Continent and in the Spanish, French and Dutch colonies by the mid-eighteenth century. Their example indicates that migration, far from being an exceptional, temporary phenomenon is actually a permanent part of the human condition. Migration is ceaseless and continues today as foreign migrants, pushed and pulled by a variety of forces, make the journey to Ireland.³

Here again, the analogy between Irish emigrants of days long past and immigrants to Ireland in recent times can be noted.

Arthur Morgan speech

Given the nature of this analogy it perhaps comes as no surprise that it can also be found in political discourse. An example of this can be seen in a speech given by a Sinn Fein party TD (Representative in Parliament) Arthur Morgan in addressing a group of

³ The National Library of Ireland webpage description of the exhibit was accessed online at <http://www.nli.ie/en/udlist/current-exhibitions.aspx?article=0a7328e2-5ccd-4387-9993-1a5982c93ab6> on December 19, 2008.

Parents of Irish Citizens. While this might seem like a strange phrase, it results from the fact of a 2004 change in the naturalization laws in Ireland. Prior to 2004, anyone born on the island of Ireland was considered a citizen of the Republic of Ireland. In 2004, a majority of the Republic's electorate voted in a referendum to change the constitution so that this was no longer the case. Overnight, the law of the land changed from *jus soli* to *jus sanguinis*, bringing Ireland more into line with other European Union member countries. The Parents of Irish Citizens Arthur Morgan was addressing were non-Irish nationals living in Ireland with their sons and daughters who were born in Ireland prior to this 2004 change. In some cases the Irish government began deportation proceedings against them with the intention of returning them to their countries of origin. The argument against this was that it was not in the best interest of the Irish citizen children of these non-Irish nationals to either be forced to live in the country of their parents' origin or deprived of their parents should they remain in Ireland if/when their parents were deported. Arthur Morgan made the speech to a group protesting the (potential) deportations in front of Irish government buildings in which he claimed:

The situation that you find yourselves in is not unknown to Irish people. Because, for several centuries now, many Irish people have been forced to leave this land for economic reasons, and to seek employment in other countries all around the globe. In some cases, Irish people suffered much indignity and much racism at the hands of the host communities. We should not be inflicting the same wrath on you people coming here to our country. Rather, having learned the lessons of it, we should be welcoming you with open arms and make you all, and your children, very welcome here.⁴

So, yet again, we see a discourse that highlights the similarity of situation between Irish emigrants of the past and immigrants to Ireland in recent times. It is worth noting, further, that a round of applause met Morgan's speech as he completed the part quoted above. This demonstrates how articulations of this analogy/discourse of diasporic responsibility are often met with ap-

⁴ Arthur Morgan's speech can be seen as part of YouTube video entitled "Non-Irish Want Ireland." The title at the beginning of the video reads "Parents of Irish Citizens campaign to be allowed stay with their children." The quoted portion of Arthur Morgan's speech takes up time point 1:17 through 1:57. Accessed online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0LjpkGk5gyY> on December 19, 2008.

DISCOURSES OF DIASPORIC RESPONSIBILITY

proval and considered a cosmopolitan and politically correct position.

I hope these few examples illustrate how relatively common this rhetorical device is and the multiple spheres in which it can be found. While, as just suggested, articulations of this analogy are most often met with general approval, in the rest of this paper I want to question what else might be going on here. What other work might this discursive formation be doing?

Reflecting on the instances

In proposing a reevaluation of the discursive move inherent in the analogy found in the above instances, I want to appeal to the concept of “the modern moment.” Arjun Appadurai addresses this concept, defining it as “the sense of some single moment... that by its appearance creates a dramatic and unprecedented break between past and present... the break between tradition and modernity” (1996:3).

The concept of the modern moment in the context of Ireland is elaborated on nicely in Stuart McLean’s book *The event and its terrors: Ireland, famine, modernity*. In this work, McLean describes the Coimisiún Béaloideas Éireann (Irish Folklore Commission) in some detail. Building on earlier private and government-supported efforts to record folklore and oral traditions of Ireland, the Commission was established by the Irish government in 1935. In an effort to salvage what was taken to be the dying cultural heritage of Ireland, the Commission employed a number of collectors that were responsible for any of a number of rural, most often Gaelic-speaking, parts of Ireland, usually in the vicinity of their own homes. These collectors recorded stories, oral histories, and other oral traditions on wax-cylinder Ediphone recording machines and then transcribed these recordings into standard note books. These notebooks comprise the Commission’s Main Manuscript Collection that totaled 1,735 volumes at the time that the Commission was incorporated into University College Dublin as the Department of Irish Folklore in 1971 (McLean 2004:21–22).

The folklore archive, McLean contends, highlights the ways in which justification of and for the modern Irish state hinges on the capacity to posit a lost pre-modern that the state is simultaneously separated from and dependent upon for its legitimacy. As McLean puts it, “[t]he nation-state is obliged to posit itself as an entity existing in the homogenous, empty time of secularism and progress, yet its projects of cultural self-legitimation, including folklore,

point to the copersistence of multiple temporalities (that is, of the premodern and non-modern)" (2004:31).

The Irish Famine of the mid-nineteenth century and its resultant mass emigration out of Ireland, is painted early in McLean's book as the fatal, if not entirely final, blow to the premodern of Ireland in the Irish popular imagination. The Famine's effects are reported to have been most devastating in the rural western seaboard of the island. It is often depicted as a major blow to the Gaeilge-speakers of the island and, as a result, the oral traditions of that language community. McLean quotes E. Estyn Evans in characterizing the Famine as "the end of prehistoric times in Ireland" (2004:160) or, at least, it was construed as such in print culture.

So, given this foundational distinction between the "now" and the "then," the modern and the pre-modern, what... or perhaps what else... could the analogy between nineteenth-century and earlier emigrants out of Ireland and recent immigrants coming to Ireland be doing? Well, first off, these images of Famine-age Irish partake of characteristics of premoderns. McLean refers in his book to the "[w]idespread portrayal of famine victims as creatures reduced to pure appetite, bereft of conscience or reason" (2004:126). Compare this characterization to a claim by Law Professor John Harrington that "[i]mages of foreigners and especially people of African descent as inherently violent, lazy, and incapable of integration into modern society" (2005:438) circulate in the Republic of Ireland.

This juxtaposition is striking to me. While recognizing the conscious humanitarian intentions of those who employ this analogy, at another level, it is important to acknowledge the potentially primitiving effects of the rhetorical device addressed in this paper. I question whether the association between mid-nineteenth century and earlier emigrants from Ireland and recent non-Irish-national immigrants to the Republic is the best comparison to make here. Given that there are a reported 50,000 undocumented Irish migrants living and working in the U.S. alone (O'Dowd: Immigration debate not about borders, 2007), why is the analogy not drawn between modern day immigrants to Ireland and these Irish people living abroad, many if not most of whom claim economic opportunity as the motivating reason for their migration.

If, indeed, Famine-age victims and emigrants act as a placeholder for the premodern in some sort of "modern moment" complex of the Irish nation-state, then what extra, and perhaps not so welcome, characterizations accrue to non-Irish migrants as a result

DISCOURSES OF DIASPORIC RESPONSIBILITY

of the employment of this analogy? How might the utilization of this rhetorical device support and/or advance the negative stereotypes of non-Irish nationals living in Ireland to which Harrington referred.

Discussion

A great many of the non-Irish nationals living in Ireland have come to the island to avail themselves of employment opportunities in the quickly growing "Celtic Tiger" economy. However, as in many places around the world, recent economic difficulties have struck the Republic of Ireland. In October 2008, the Economic and Social Research Institute in Ireland predicted the GDP of the Republic to shrink by 1.3% by the end of 2008, and shrink further in 2009 (ESRI, 2008). Unemployment is predicted to top out at around 8% next year (FÁS predicts unemployment could hit 8% next year, 2008). The Central Statistics Office (CSO) of Ireland has reported a drop of 18.6% in the number of people employed by construction firms, an industry that employs a large percentage of labor migrants in Ireland, in September 2008 compared to September 2007 (Builders' jobs continue to fall, 2008). The total volume of output in the building and construction industry has decreased by 26.5% in the second quarter of 2008 compared with the same period of the previous year, according to the CSO (Construction down by 26.5%, 2008). This state of affairs has brought with it much discussion regarding non-Irish national migrants, such as an article by journalist Henry McDonald entitled plainly enough "Ireland's immigrants return home as slump sharpens fear of racism" (2008) and a claim by Fine Gael party TD (Representative in Parliament) Lucinda Creighton that "[t]here is a powerful correlation between the fears of ordinary working people as Ireland experiences a sharp economic downturn, and a growing suspicion of immigrant workers" (2008). What I hope I was able to highlight in this paper is the way in which a discursive regime that, through the described (however well-intentioned) analogy between nineteenth-century or earlier Irish emigrants and recent immigrants to the island, supports a "modern moment" complex present in the context of the Irish nation-state that may have the unintended consequence of feeding into this growing suspicion.

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