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Setting the Record Straight: A Comment on Cahill's Country Report on Ireland

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Governance disavows should have accompanied Anthony Cahill's country report in the last issue: "Ireland Looks Towards 1992 (But Remembers 1948, 1916, 1798, 1782, and 1688)" (vol. 2:2). Apparently this article was exempt from the requirements given in the "Notes for Contributors" stipulating that essays investigate the "theoretical significance of their subject . . . [and] be grounded in original, empirical inquiry." We should have been warned that every so often country reports will be lighthearted, tourist guides to exotic and peripheral states. Finally, we should have been advised that American academics or those resident in America, are new to the art of writing travel-guides; and that it is unreasonable to expect the author of a country report to have the wit of Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad* or the black humor of P. J. O'Rourke's *Holidays in Hell*.

THE MYTH OF SPECIAL IRISH ATAVISM

Atavism is the propensity to resemble one's distant ancestors. The myth of Irish atavism is the notion that the Irish are more prone to be governed by their ancestors than other ethnic groups. This myth is usually propagated by historians, political scientists and journalists in a different vocabulary. We are told that the Irish are "obsessed with history," "historically conditioned," and "trapped in historicist cultural idioms." The author of the country report on Ireland put it thus:

... the effects of history are more real in Ireland than perhaps anywhere else in the western world, and have greater manifest effects on how Ireland's system of governance will affect and be affected by that of the Europe-to-come (Cahill 1989, 216).

He neglects to tell us how "the effects of history are [more] real in Ireland" than "anywhere else in the western world," which is presumably why he prefaced the statement with "perhaps." Nor does he inform us how he acquired the apodictic knowledge that "the effects of history" will "have greater manifest effects on how Ireland's system of governance will affect and be affected by that of Europe to come." Why are Belgium, Denmark,

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France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, or the UK less likely to be affected by their histories in their relations with the EC?

How should one react to such assertions? One historian of Ulster notes dryly that "Ireland, like Dracula's Transylvania, is much troubled by the undead . . . [but] as a matter of fact, the Irish are not only capable of forgetting the past, but quite deliberately expunge from their minds whole areas of it" (Stewart 1986, 15). One might also point out that no serious comparative analysis has been done on the question of whether, how and why some nations, or ethnic groups are more historically self-conscious than others.

The myth of Irish atavism presumably explains why Cahill's article contains not a single reference to work on Irish politics, or to history of administration written after 1975, and uses two articles written in the *Economist* in 1987 and 1988 apparently as the sole bases for updating his knowledge. To illustrate with an analogous case, suppose you are an editor of *Governance* and suppose that an Irish political scientist wrote a country report on the USA or Canada for an issue in 1990, without a single reference to academic work in political science, public administration, public policy or political history written after 1976; however, it does contain two citations from the *New Statesman and New Society*. I rest my case.

NEITHER TRANQUIL NOR TIMELESS

Cahill mentions the "stability, even tranquility of Irish politics" (1989, 216). This notion resembles the blandishments of Irish tourist agencies: "Ireland, the land where time stands still." The evidence for Cahill's proposition is found in: (i) the amorphous "national consensus on most major social economic issues" which can be characterized as "economically capitalist (with a heavy dose of state-controlled social welfare programs), and socially conservative"¹ (1989, 216), (ii) the absence of ideological divisions among members of Ireland's major political parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael (1989, 216-7), and (iii) the paucity of "fringe groups" operating in the political arena (1989, 217).

At best this assertion and its alleged correlates are superficial, at worst they are misleading. Ireland has had a stable regime, in that it has continuously maintained democratic institutions since 1922. However, this stability was hard won, coming after a civil war, and the slow integration of Fianna Fáil into the constitutional order. Moreover, the potential instability still associated with the "national question" in the North reverberates through Irish politics. The signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement was partly motivated by Irish fears of the potentially destabilizing effects of the

conflict in Northern Ireland upon the Republic's political system (O'Leary 1987a).

It is simplistic and misleading to suggest that Ireland has been stable or tranquil in its party system. Major changes have occurred in the dynamics of the party system that are well documented in a recent first-class survey (Mair 1987b). Contrary to Cahill's version, the current composition of the Irish parties, their competitiveness and the characteristics of Irish voting behavior cannot be explained by mere ancestral affiliation in the Irish Civil War of 1922-3 (Laver *et al.* 1987; O'Leary 1987b). In the last Irish general election (February 1987)¹ the combined first preference vote for the two major parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, at 71.1%, was their lowest since 1948. Nearly a third of the electorate voted for non-civil-war parties, and the overwhelming majority of those voting for the civil-war parties were not doing so for civil-war reasons (Mair 1987a, 30-47; Sinnott, Laver and Marsh 1987, 99-140). A new political party, the Progressive Democrats, won 11.8 per cent of the first preference vote, and a relatively new party, the Workers' Party won 3.9 per cent of the first preference vote. Fringe groups, apart from Sinn Féin, are not identified by Cahill, but if he had included all minor parties (Progressive Democrats, Labour, Workers, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Socialists) then, with combined support-levels at or around a quarter of the electorate, they could not be regarded as few or as insignificant.

The fact that time has not stood still in Irish party politics since 1922-3 was confirmed in the general election of June 1989 (after publication of Cahill's article). It resulted in a coalition government between Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats (the first coalition government for Fianna Fáil). It was the highest leftward vote since 1969 and a breakthrough for the Green Party - and there was further evidence of the rise in class- and issue-based voting and continuation of the low support for Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil that began in 1987 (O'Leary and Peterson, in press).

There is evidence that the Irish party system has modernized and Europeanized both in terms of the nature of party competition and party maneuvering and social movements in the political arena (Mair 1987b; O'Leary 1987b; O'Leary and Peterson). The apparent consensus is only superficial and misleading to the unwary. It is misleading for instance, to repeat the old canard about the absence of ideological cleavages between the major Irish political parties. There are serious divisions between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael on the national question and new and sharp divisions on other issues. Indeed, the emergent divisions in party politics are graphically depicted in the figure of a triangle (Mair 1987a, 45). In this metaphor each side of the triangle represents an ideological orientation in which parties are likely to support one another. Perpendicularly opposite the mid-point of each side, there is a corner representing the point of

greatest ideological distance from the orientation in question. Thus Fine Gael, the Progressive Democrats, Labour and the Workers' Party, are in varying degrees secular and pluralist, in favor of divorce and less than deferential to Catholic social mores, and in this respect they diverge from Fianna Fáil. By contrast, Fianna Fáil, Labour and the Workers' Party, are supportive of the welfare state and the role of trade unions as social partners, and in this respect they diverge ideologically from Fine Gael and the Progressive Democrats. Finally, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Progressive Democrats agree on the importance of the free market and promoting a good environment for business and in this respect diverge from Labour and the Workers' Party. This ideological triangle allows various coalitions, either in the form of electoral pacts or in government, and it also facilitates shifting party alignments depending upon the issues. This picture differs markedly from the one that derives from national consensus in a political arena where time stands still.

Again, to illustrate by comparison, the impact of the American Civil War on the American party system and electoral behavior was both more profound in the cleavages it made and more enduring than the impact of the Irish Civil War on Irish party politics and electoral behavior. American atavism, we may suppose, is more deep-rooted than its Irish analogue, but I hesitate to make such touristic judgments, given my previous arguments.

ON SYSTEMS, STABILITY, AND CHANGE

It is curious and false of Cahill to conclude that:

... the lack of diversity in Ireland's political structure is symptomatic of a political system which has not evolved as a body in which divergent ideas and ideologies can be processed and eventually co-opted. In effect, Ireland's outward "stability" helps to preserve a political structure that is singularly non-adaptive to major changes in the political environment (Cahill 1989, 217).

It is curious because he put quotation marks around stability with no explanation for doing so. It is false because its empirical and logical components are not warranted. The Irish political system has evolved; the Constitution of 1937 has been altered. Noteworthy alterations are the deletion of subsections 2 and 3 of Article 44, which recognized "the special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church as the guardian of the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens," and the amendment of the Constitution of 1987 to permit the erosion of national sovereignty within the European Community. Also new ideas and ideological positions on the national question, on Europe, on economic modernization, on the welfare state, on international affairs, on the

liberation of women and on ecology have been incorporated by the existing parties and movements, or taken up by new ones. It is a fact that the Irish electoral system – the single transferrable vote (STV) – allows small parties the prospect of making an easy entry into the political system. For example, if one asks, “which country in Europe is the only one with growing support for a Marxist party?”, not many people will know the answer is Ireland and the party is the Workers’ Party. It is also a fact, regrettable to some, that STV forces the big parties to address the concerns of voters in their choice of candidates (Carty 1983). This broadbrush picture hardly suggests lack of change, or of adaptability in the political system.

It is true that the Catholic Church is still dominant (Ingilis 1987); that Ireland has a smaller left wing than other countries in Europe; that the Irish are subject to restrictions on contraception; and that divorce and abortion are constitutionally prohibited (Randall 1986). However, the church’s hegemony is not what it was; the referenda on abortion and divorce themselves demonstrate that. And the remarkable feature of the referenda was the substantial minority who did not vote for traditional Catholic positions on these ethical issues (Girvin 1986; Coakley 1987). While it is true that Ireland is socially conservative, it is also true that significant movements for social change and secularization have developed since the sixties and these movements continue to have an impact on Irish politics.

ON EXECUTIVE GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

In an article in *Governance*, one expects some attention to be given to matters of executive government and public administration, and to an exploration of recent trends. In Cahill’s article there is little discussion of the following topics, any one of which is probably interesting to readers of the journal:

First, the strength of the executive in Irish government, *vis à vis* the legislature (Dáil Éireann) (Robinson 1974) and the Senate (Garvin 1969); the nature of cabinet government in Ireland (Farrell 1971; Chubb 1974; Chubb 1982, 182–205), and the role of the Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister).

Second, the degree of centralization in Irish central-local governmental relations (Barrington 1987; Collins 1987; Roche 1982), especially the financial and policy-making emasculatation of local government since 1977, and the implications of this centralization for the post-1992 Europe.

Third, the role of the constitution and the courts in restraining government and protecting human rights, and the constitutional control on the government’s freedom to negotiate with the European Community (Lang 1987).

Fourth, the effect of STV (Carty 1983; Gallagher 1986) and the referendum on the behavior of TDs (parliamentary deputies), the ministers and policy-making generally.

Fifth, the methods by which government coordinates policy and financial matters within the administration, and the adaptations due to the fiscal crisis in the late seventies (Dunne 1989;² Ireland 1985a and 1985b).

Finally, the change and growth of the public sector and the welfare system since 1945 (King 1986; Maguire 1986) and the administrative consequences of the recent retrenchment.

WHAT ABOUT 1992?

The oddest feature of Cahill’s essay is that he ignores the title of his article. An essay headed “Ireland Looks Toward 1992” portends a discussion of the Irish debates on the Single European Act, and the government’s response to the European Commission on the question of regional and social funds. One expects at least a general appraisal of Ireland and Europe (Doooge 1986; Drudy and McAleese 1984). One is entitled to more than a glancing remark on the impact of Ireland’s membership in the European Monetary System, its severance from the British pound, and to some discussion of the Irish economy.³ Finally, one would have liked opinion-poll data on the popular reaction to the Single European Act.⁴ All one got from Cahill’s essay was unsupported intimations of how the burden of history will affect Irish-European relations.

WHAT OF 1948, 1916, 1798, 1782 AND 1688?

The other half of Cahill’s title, “. . . Ireland Remembers 1948, 1916, 1798, 1782 and 1688” gets equally short shrift in the text. Readers who are not *cognoscenti* of Irish politics will find these dates mysterious. Let me explain their general significance: 1948 was the year that the Costello coalition government declared Ireland a republic, although it was Easter Day 1949 before Ireland formally became a republic; 1916 was the year that the Irish nationalist revolutionaries took up arms against British rule, proclaimed an Irish Republic, and were subsequently executed by British authorities; 1798 was the year that an Irish revolution, launched with the support of Irish Jacobins (the United Irishmen), Catholic peasant organizations, and revolutionary France, was crushed by British force of arms; 1782 was the year that an entirely Protestant Irish parliament acquired some legislative autonomy within the British empire; and finally 1688 was the year that the English Glorious Revolution took place, leading to the displacement of the Catholic king, James II, by Prince William of Orange.

The significance of these dates in Cahill’s title is never spelled out. The Irish are no less republican now than they were in 1948–9, and European

integration creates no fears of a European monarchy. The 1916 insurrectionaries are certainly being reappraised in revisionist historiography, but there is no evidence that Irish political parties cast nostalgic glances toward their heroic nationalist pieties while they look ahead to 1992. The 1798 rebellion is still regarded by *Northern* Irish revolutionaries as the paradigm of authentic Irish rebellion – Catholics, Protestants and Dissenters together against the British. 1782, the year of the establishment of what became known (wrongly) as Grattan's parliament, is scarcely remembered by anyone except historians. By contrast, the tricentennial of 1688–9 is noted mostly in Northern Ireland, more for what occurred in 1689 and 1690. These years were the prelude to consolidation of Protestant and settler hegemony in Ireland, and the system of penal laws against Catholicism which entrenched it.

The general point made here is that it is fair to say that the Irish Republic has made peace with its past subordination to British imperialism, as witnessed by the Anglo-Irish Agreement and Britain's and Ireland's joint membership in the European Community. Opinion-polls consistently affirm that the desire to integrate Northern Ireland is a "low intensity aspiration." It is really only in Northern Ireland that "history" remains a living issue: that there is any substantive relationship between 1992 and reflections on 1948, 1916, 1798, 1782, 1688 and 1641.

A superficial acquaintance with history distorts the record and can do real damage. The credulous reader of Cahill's country report on Ireland may have been misled and even insulted. The present article is intended to set the record straight.

Notes

- 1 This comment was drafted before the results of the Irish general election of June 1989 were known. The outcome of the election did not require any modification of my argument (O'Leary and Peterson in press).
- 2 Dunne (1989) postdates Cahill's article.
- 3 Severing the link with sterling had dramatic implications for autonomous macroeconomic policy-making, including greater insulation from British inflation, British interest-rate and British exchange-rate fluctuations.
- 4 The latest Eurobarometer survey shows: (i) that 82% of the Irish people polled thought on balance that Ireland had benefited from EC membership (this response was 10% more positive than in any other European country), (ii) that the Irish were the third most positive towards the idea of 1992 (after the Italians and the Spanish), and that (iii) 68% of Irish people polled would like the adoption of an EC Charter of Human Rights (*Irish Times* 1989, May 26).

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Book Reviews

The Pentagonists. By A. ERNEST FITZGERALD, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1989, 314p. \$19.95.

After completing this book, the opening words of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* spring to mind: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times -". These words, echoed at several levels, capture my impressions of this new book by Ernie Fitzgerald.

At one level the book describes with fervor the unrelenting efforts by one person to change the Pentagon system for buying weapons. It reflects the personal odyssey of the author and his ability to survive the slings and arrows of opposition from all levels up to and including the president. His personal journey sifts what is the best in each of us - the ability to discern what needs to be accomplished and the will to make the commitment in time and energy needed to persevere. Ernie has been knocked down many times in his 25 year crusade, but he always gets back on his feet and keeps slugging. The book recounts these battles in great detail.

On another level the book provides some fresh vignettes into the flawed practices of defense buying. Fitzgerald provides a devastating analysis of the Hughes Aircraft Company track record in producing air launched missiles for the Air Force and Navy. Cost overruns, uncontrolled overhead and delivery of sub-quality missiles suggest gross incompetence. Ernie's efforts to spotlight Hughes have had a salutary effect - at the insistence of Defense, Hughes Aircraft has begun corrective action.

Fitzgerald also effectively documents the Northrop coverup of the managerial collapse in its work on the M-X missile. Just released government reports show similar failings with Northrop on two other large defense programs. And this same company is the prime contractor on the Stealth bomber!

In another arena, his vivid description of the games played within Defense to avoid losing funds at the end of each fiscal year again gives a clear view of the shell game tactics used and the apparent ease in directing these funds to favored contractors. And, finally, his humorous depiction on pp. 78-79 of "unbundling" shows the foolishness of simplistic productivity measures used by the Defense Department. In this case, the productivity of civilian employees was measured by the number of purchase orders issued; productivity "increased" simply by dividing one large order into many smaller ones (unbundling) even though no more real work was accomplished.

These sections reflect Fitzgerald at his best. There is, however, another side to this work.

The book too often takes on a preachy quality with Fitzgerald prescribing the one and only magical elixir for Pentagon reform - greater competition plus full implementation of his "should cost" approach to pricing weapons systems. While his proposals are sound, they are at best only a partial solution to the wasteful practices at the Pentagon. Fitzgerald, on occasion, alludes to other underlying problems but never says what should be done to fix them. How can Defense correct the overstated Soviet threat estimates used to justify the "requirement" for new weapons? How can the "gold plating" of high risk but unneeded technological advances be eliminated? What incentives need to be put in place to change the behavior of Defense and contractor personnel? And what should be done to control the "pork barrel" interference of Congress? How do all these needed changes get implemented - can they be done from the "bottom up" within the military services