

Reflecting on Troubling Ireland: A Cultural Geographer's Perspectives

by Bryonie Reid

My introduction to *Troubling Ireland* came via an invitation to speak at the think tank's second meeting, in Manorhamilton in County Leitrim. Addressing the town's location near the border with Northern Ireland and its plantation history, that meeting's themes included Ireland's current relationship to globalised capitalism and within this, the reproduction of colonial and postcolonial patterns of thought and behaviour. Artist participant Anna Macleod presented her concerns with the town's forgotten histories, contemporary currents of politico-religious conflict and legacies of guilt and shame, and asked me to speak from my research as a cultural geographer into Irish identity and the border. I decided that since the think tank aimed to trouble Ireland, I would aim to trouble the definition of Ireland as a postcolonial state within the think tank literature.¹

The action and ethos of troubling has underpinned my research for more than a decade. Having grown up an urban, middle-class Protestant in Northern Ireland, it quickly became clear to me that a simple and coherent sense of belonging on the island of Ireland was unattainable. Rejecting the other possibility, that of unreservedly identifying as unionist and British, my work as an undergraduate, a postgraduate and an independent researcher has been focused on the imagining and enacting of Irishness, and Northern Irishness, a much vaguer, more fragmented and more explicitly problematic concept. Entailed in the process is the troubling of these imaginings, probing and unravelling them to examine their origins, their uses and their significance. I still experience my uncertain relationship to Irishness as painful: intellectual appreciation of the reasons for my exclusion from narratives of national identity has never entirely expunged my emotional sensitivity to it. However, I have come to think of this awkward position as a productive one. Forced by dint of personal discomfort to adopt a sceptical and questioning attitude to identity claims, it becomes plain how limited and limiting many of them are, and that Ireland – including the North – is infinitely more complex, and richer, than its popular and traditional representations give us to understand.

I return to my account of the first meeting I attended, in Leitrim. The portrayal of Ireland as a postcolonial state is one which I find difficult, implying as it can that Northern Ireland remains a colonial society: in which case it is suggested I think of myself as a colonist. While I believe that 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' as descriptive terms can be used to simplify what is not now and never has been a straightforward relationship of

¹ Convened by Danish curatorial collective Kuratorisk Aktion (Tone Olaf Nielsen and Frederikke Hansen) upon a commission from Fire Station Artists' Studios, the think tank involved six artists and one curator living and working in Ireland: Gareth Kennedy and Sarah Browne, working collaboratively as Kennedy Browne, Anthony Haughey, Anna Macleod, Susan Thomson, Augustine O'Donoghue and Helen Carey. Between 2010 and 2011 the think tank met five times and aimed to unpick and interrogate received notions of history, politics, culture and economy in Ireland, as well as Ireland's relationship to global capitalism. After speaking in Manorhamilton I was invited to attend the subsequent three meetings as an observer.

coloniser to colonised between Ireland and Britain, Kuratorisk Aktion's response to this, from their expert critical standpoint on postcolonialism, alerted me to the risk of what Edna Longley calls 'selective forgetting' in my own work.² Discussions drew their most ruffled responses from me when I felt that the particular and fraught position of Northern Protestants in relation to Ireland as a postcolonial state was either overlooked or reduced. This threatened to blind me to the particular positions of other parties in Ireland and further afield. Thus, participating in the think tank told me that what I felt viscerally and met with hostility was what I most needed to interrogate and reassess in my ongoing attempt to trouble Ireland and trouble myself as an inhabitant of the island. It is possible to become comfortable in discomfort.

In what I have written so far I have offered a very personal perspective. This is both an ethos and a methodology. Feminist scholar Donna Haraway explains her commitment to personal involvement in research:

following an ethical and methodological principle for science studies that I adopted many years ago, I will critically analyze, or "deconstruct", only that which I love and only that in which I am deeply implicated.³

Many feminists consider that such tactics help researchers to sidestep the pretence to neutrality, objectivity and separateness from the research subject once so pervasive in a patriarchal and phallogentric academia. Although I move now to contextualise the think tank in relation to the work of feminist economic geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham, the thread of personal and emotional engagement is not broken off here.

I have chosen to reflect on aspects of the think tank through the lens of Gibson-Graham because I found repeated and powerful resonances between their principles and practices and those advocated in the think tank. They critique the idea of capitalism as a monolithic and immovable system, suggesting that rather, non-capitalist and anti-capitalist practices flourish in capitalism's interstices, in parallel with it and beyond it.⁴ The act of troubling is central to their efforts to expose capitalism as a 'regulatory fiction' on a par with heterosexuality or Christianity when applied to nation-states – and, I would argue, 'Irishness' in relation to Ireland.⁵

² Edna Longley, 'Northern Ireland: Commemoration, Elegy, Forgetting', pp223-253 in Ian McBride (ed.) *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p253.

³ Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium,..FemaleMan@_Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience*, London and New York, Routledge, 1997, p151.

⁴ J.K. Gibson-Graham is the name assumed by Katherine Gibson and the late Julie Graham for their collective work. What I refer to is found in *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): a Feminist Critique of Political Economy*, Minnesota and London, University of Minneapolis Press, 1996, and *A Postcapitalist Politics*, Minnesota and London, University of Minneapolis Press, 2006. Their views of capitalism are echoed throughout one of the think tank's principal reference texts, *Commonwealth*, by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (Cambridge (Massachusetts), Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁵ Judith Butler, quoted in Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism*, p2.

I will expound upon two (out of many) further aspects of their work which I believe both reflect the think tank process and constitute models for its ongoing work. First is the recognition of emotional engagement with research and with activism. I have been explicit about my own emotional responses to the subjects discussed and I understand emotion to be central to Kuratorisk Aktion's research methodologies, in simple acknowledgement that we are more than our intellects. Gibson-Graham not only privilege the emotional alongside the intellectual in active research, but urge validation of positive emotion, in counterpoint to what they consider an orthodox leftist stance in which 'paranoia, melancholia and moralism intermingle and self-reinforce'. In my experience of academia, emotion is likewise suspect as naïve and subjective and the ability to critically dismantle the work of others is worth more than the attempt to think through possibilities with hope and oriented 'toward connections and openings'.⁶ In setting oneself to trouble, there is a risk of tearing down without building up, and I invoke the example of Gibson-Graham here to argue that the turn to emotion is a methodology of honesty and fullness through which to address colonialism and capitalism in Ireland, and as a reminder that troubling can and should be a creative act.

The second aspect of Gibson-Graham's work which I wish to address is its geographical nature. The think tank's themes and concerns as framed by Kuratorisk Aktion do not derive from geography. However, the geography of the meetings was theoretically as well as materially crucial. These sites gestured towards the four points of the compass, the urban and the rural, the central and the peripheral, and the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Each site's geographical, historical, social, political and cultural particularities shaped the meeting it hosted and each meeting involved discovering the site through walking, allowing for a revelatory conjunction of body, mind and place.

Gibson-Graham, as feminist geographers, ground their work in both subjectivity and place, which they define as 'ontological substrat[a]'.⁷ Refuting the charge that their focus on place is parochial, they cite Rebecca Solnit's formulation of the local as a 'coherent foundation from which to navigate the larger world'.⁸ While Elspeth Probyn is suspicious of 'the postmodernist gesture of the local' – which affects to avoid the grand sweep of modernist theory but fails to engage with actual material localities – she believes that a thoroughly grounded and meticulously self-critical feminism can 'render the local into something workable, something to be worked upon'.⁹ At the most, the local should be taken as 'a fragmented set of possibilities that can be articulated into a momentary politics of time and place . . . [and] not as the end point, but as the start'.¹⁰ Artist Gareth Kennedy points to the need in his work with Sarah

⁶ Ibid., pp1 and 4.

⁷ Ibid., pxxviii.

⁸ *A Postcapitalist Politics*, pxxi.

⁹ Elspeth Probyn, 'Travels in the Postmodern: Making Sense of the Local', pp176-189 in Linda Nicholson (ed.) *Feminism/Postmodernism*, London and New York, Routledge, 1990, p178, p187.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Browne 'not to get stuck in place, but not to deny place'.¹¹ Similarly, Gibson-Graham write of their struggle to render both subjectivity and place as absences, in order to turn them into fluid sites of possibility:

Place has been harder to locate negatively. We were stuck at first on its specificity, its dailyness and groundedness – what might be called the positivities of place. Over time, however, the negativity of place seeped into our awareness. Place became that which is not fully yoked into a system of meaning, not entirely subsumed to and defined within a (global) order; it became the aspect of every site that exists as potentiality. Place is the “event in space”, operating as a “dislocation” with respect to familiar structures and narratives. It is the eruption of the Lacanian “real”, a disruptive materiality. It is the unmapped and unmoored that allows for new moorings and mappings. Place, like the subject, is the site of becoming, the opening for politics.¹²

This rich notion of place's potentiality is what drew me into cultural geography, and for me the geographically grounded nature of the think tank's process over the last year is powerfully significant. Walking around, learning about and attending to individual places in Ireland and Northern Ireland, while engaging with national and local narratives of identity, history, politics and economy, think tank participants have built on their intellectual, bodily and emotional awareness of the real complexity and mutability of Irish subjectivities and Irish places. From this starting point, the campaign to trouble Ireland can productively proceed, and will perform a geographical and conceptual return to those places in which it was conceived.

¹¹ Personal communication from Gareth Kennedy, 14th May 2011, Fire Station Studios, Dublin.

¹² *A Postcapitalist Politics*, pxxxiii.