



The dialectics of progress: Irish ‘belatedness’ and the politics of prosperity

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abstract

It has been said that prior to the emergence of the ‘Celtic Tiger’, Ireland’s deficient modernisation occasioned anxious ruminations among historians and sociologists on the ways in which it had remained an uncanny site of the ‘pre-modern’, despite its location astride the highway of Euro-American modernity. And yet in the eyes of others, this uncanny backwardness was trans-valued and recreated as the island’s greatest resource – as a kind of sublime ‘alternative to the world’, a place outside the mainstream of development (Cleary, 2005). With particular reference to the Irish case, this text reflects on the ‘dialectics of development’; the mutations of the recent boom and recession years; and the implications for any project of ‘sustainable consumption’. Drawing on my ‘alternative hedonist’ position, it will argue for the need to counter ‘modernisation’ construed as commitment to the growth model of prosperity with its economic and social adaptation to the constraints of the global capitalist market. Thus far, it will aspire to an ‘alternative to the world’ associated with traditional romantic antipathy to the modern, and present this as an essential condition of a just and sustainable future. But in doing so, it will also denounce the puritanical and socially conservative aspects of traditional cultures of resistance to modernity, and argue for the importance of associating avant-garde social policy with a post-consumerist politics of prosperity. It will conclude by asking whether Ireland might now be in a position to move in such a direction, and thus show the way to an unprecedented form of supercession of the earlier old-new divide.

Modernisation has always hitherto been associated with economic expansion and industrial development. Economic growth and the extension of the market have also proved the predisposing vehicles of enlightened social and sexual policies, secularisation, and progressive cultural movements. What counts as modern is progressive, and economic growth has been its condition.

But faced as we are now with an environmental crisis that demands revision of the unquestioned commitment to market driven growth, and a profound shift of thinking about the nature of prosperity, this set of associations begins to look strained, and to our children's children is likely to seem very outdated. A programme for sustainable consumption ought now to be seen as 'progressive' precisely in virtue of its critique of the anachronistic growth model of the economy with its dependency on an ever expanding and resource intensive consumer culture. Admittedly, those eco-modernisers who emphasise the potential for sustainable development will challenge this picture. Yet it remains very unclear how growth at anything like the rates currently conceived as 'healthy' could be achieved indefinitely. Let us recall that in the recent boom years between 1995 and 1998 growth in world economic output exceeded that during the entire 10,000 year period from the dawn of agriculture to the start of the 20th century, and then consider how far an expansion at that rate could continue. Growth at only 2.5 percent each year from 2050 to the end of the century would more than triple the global economy beyond the 2050 level, requiring (if it were to prove sustainable) almost complete de-carbonisation of every last dollar (Jackson, 2008: 43; cf. 2004, 2009; Victor, 2009; Purdy, 2005).

A just and sustainable global economy will therefore require a break with affluence as currently construed and the general adoption of less work-dominated and more materially reproductive ways of living. It is important to emphasise the role of justice here. This is because greater global equality will be essential to any enduring economic system. But it is also because without a fairer division of wealth at the national level there is unlikely to be any significant electoral support for an alternative politics of prosperity. A more egalitarian order in Europe is in this sense a pre-condition for the development of a new culture of thinking about sustainability – which is why, at present, one must welcome any political shifts, such as Hollande's recent victory in France, that are likely to advance rather than hinder that cause. These claims have been at the centre of the argument I and others have developed in recent years around the concept of 'alternative hedonism', and I shall come back at a later point to say rather more on it.

But in the first instance, since this paper has been written for a conference in Ireland during a period of deep recession, I want to take up a rather different aspect of 'modernisation', namely the culturally contested relationship to it of nations, such as Ireland, whose history is one of colonisation and victimisation by the modernising imperial power. In Ireland, by reason of its subordination to the exemplary modern state, modernity has been viewed, it has been said, as something imposed from outside, as a 'gift' of colonial or religious conquest mediated primarily through an expanding British state rather than as something

brought about through a pre-existing Gaelic society on its own terms and through its own exertions (Cleary, 2005: 3). Gaelic culture thus came to be seen as archaic or pre-Modern relative to the Anglicising influence, and, as such, to be either transcended or preserved, depending on the particular political sentiment and cultural loyalties of the observer. De Valera, for example, in the 1930s-40s associated the republican and nationalist cause with celebration of a pre-Modern Ireland of 'saints and scholars', a place distinguished by its spirituality rather than its economic advance or progressive social policy. As he famously put it on the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Gaelic League in his St Patrick's Day speech of 1943:

The ideal Ireland that we would have, the Ireland that we dreamed of, would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires that men should live. (c.f. MacArthur, 199: 218-220)

Or in Yeats' Anglo-Irish and more aristocratic-aesthetic vision, Ireland was to be valued as a place that had escaped the general corruption of a secular modernity; his image or fantasy was of an Ireland spiritually opposed to what he saw as an unholy trinity of British materialism, middle-class mass culture and orthodox Christianity. Expanding on the point, he wrote:

In Ireland wherever the Gaelic tongue is still spoken, and to some little extent where it is not, the people live according to a tradition of life that existed before the world surrendered to the competition of merchants and to the vulgarity that has been founded on it; and we who would keep the Gaelic tongue and Gaelic memories and Gaelic habits of our mind would keep them, as I think, that we may one day spread a tradition of life that would build up neither great wealth nor great poverty, that makes the arts a natural expression of life that permits even common men to understand good art and high thinking and to have the fine manners these things can give. (Yeats, 1975: 245, cit. Nolan, 2005: 158)

But for many others, of course, Irish backwardness ('the most belated race in Europe' quipped James Joyce (1901) with fond irony) was part of the problem of Anglo-Irish relations, not the transcendence of it. It was an insult to be defied and sublated rather than re-worked and re-valued; Ireland's aberrant relationship to capitalism was regarded as indicative of something anomalous and in need of correction; and there were also, of course, many who, without necessarily being great friends of capitalism, and broadly supportive of the nationalist cause, found the endorsement of a pre-Modern Ireland associated with that cause hugely problematic, not least in virtue of its social conservatism and offensive gender

politics. The preservationist impulse towards Gaelic Ireland was also condemned as reinforcing English hegemony by colluding in the imperialist's sentimental patronage (Kiberd, 2009: 45-8). Summarising reactions to this complexly contested cultural politics, Joe Cleary writes:

Political economists over the last two centuries have consistently remarked upon the many ways in which Ireland can be seen to depart from those pathways to capitalist development regarded as normal in the Western world (...) [and they have been] left to debate whether Ireland had failed political economy or political economy had failed Ireland. (...) Histories and sociologies of Irish modernity frequently turn into extended deliberations on Ireland's deficient modernisation, anxious ruminations on the ways in which Irish society had remained an uncanny site of the 'pre-modern' or the 'non-modern', despite its location astride the very highway of Euro-American modernity. (...) But for others, this uncanny backwardness was trans-valued and recreated as its greatest resource. (...) The country was construed as a sublime periphery to the European mainstream, a place that was out of the world, beyond the world, an alternative to the world. (Cleary 2005: 9-10)

This vision of Ireland as an 'alternative to the world' was, as Cleary goes on to point out, largely discredited with independence and from the 1960s onwards, the state sought multinational corporate investment and EU membership (which it attained in 1973); and this led onto a more general convergence, culturally and economically, with other Western societies. Yet Ireland, until relatively recently, still managed to retain something of its image as a welcome respite from the complexities of the modern world. A place, it has been said, where 'history fades against its much sung landscape of rocky coastlines, rolling grasslands, misted mountain ranges, boglands and moor' (Cleary and Connolly, 2005: xiiv) and the country paradoxically comes 'to represent both the romantic pleasures of solitude and seclusion and traditional virtues of conversation, sociability and close-knit communities' (ibid.).

This chimes with my own personal experience as a regular visitor to Ireland who over 35 years enjoyed it for its rural landscape, and, yes, its entrepreneurial sluggishness. I did not love everything about Ireland, and I could see that England was richer, yet I had this sense that the Irish in certain respects knew 'how to live'. Caricatured as it often was (as, notably, in the postcard images of sheep and cattle on the road in 'rush hour' Ireland), its relatively leisured pace was attractive, and in many ways a 'green' advance on what was happening in Britain¹. At a pre-postmodernist and less complexly mediated moment, however,

1 One of the many ironies of the 'dialectics of modernity' today is the contemporary revaluation of the Slow Food, Slow City, Slow Travel movements and other endorsements of the more leisured and hence sustainable existence to which we need now to aspire; another is the opportunity this provides for tapping new sources of revenue from Ireland's relative commercial belatedness. For the Irish are indeed

I myself nourished a fond idea that Ireland, by reason of a certain cultural sophistication and *savoir vivre*, might avoid ‘over-development’, and reveal to the world a rather different model of how to do prosperity. I hoped, in other words, that it might become less socially conservative, and even, finally, offer a decent cup of coffee, while yet managing a development that would mediate and temper the worst ravages of neo-liberal capitalism².

Such fanciful ideas were to be swept aside with the extreme economic deregulation of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ years (when, far from curbing reliance on the car, transport energy use in fact increased by 181% and the infamous motorway was driven through the Hill of Tara, leading Bertie Ahern to dismiss all objections to such road building as being about ‘swans, snails and people hanging out of trees’ (O’Toole, 2009: 187). Instead of moving towards a more sustainable development, Ireland propelled itself into the forefront of what the ‘modernising’ programme had then become, namely, adaptation to the economic and social constraints of the global capitalist market. Indeed, it found itself suddenly feted for its neo-liberal advancement relative to other centres of commerce by whom it had a few years previously been derided for its backwardness. For a brief period, as Fintan O’Toole has put it, ‘the globalised Irish economy had itself become a global brand’, with Ahern’s speech on ‘the Irish model of development’ much in demand (O’Toole, 2009: 8)³.

Of course, that moment in turn was not to last very long, and when the boom gave way to recession, the follies and corruption of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ mode of modernising capitalism were more fully exposed (Allen, 2007a, 2007b; O’Toole, 2009). Among its other effects was the creation of a huge abyss between the wealthy elite and the rest of the population of a kind that had already taken place

‘adept at turning other people’s dewy-eyed images of them to profitable use’ (Eagleton, 2012). The Irish Tourist Board’s current website (www.discoverireland.com) features a modishly retro sheep-congested rural road (‘Its true. We have our own traffic problems...’) and invites visitors to ‘escape the madness’ of London 2012: ‘You don’t have to wait on crowded platforms. You don’t have to join the snaking queues. You don’t have to lose your cool. You can escape to a world of empty beaches and green fields. A world of quietly winding country lanes and friendly faces. Abandon the petrol fumes for fresh air, exchange rush hour for happy hour’.

- 2 The emergence of what one lifestyle magazine of the period referred to as the ‘Cappuccino Celts’ did seem a kind of advance. James Joyce, we might note, had much earlier joked that Ireland would only be liberated when you could get a decent cup of coffee on every street (Kiberd, 2009: 237).
- 3 Cf. the case study of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ conducted by Eileen Roche in the Harvard Business Review (Roche, 2005), a study used, so I am told, to teach management executives. To date, there has been no follow up from the HBR.

elsewhere (in 1995-2006 the wealth of the top 1% grew by 75 billion euros and held 20% of the country's wealth, with the top 5% holding 40%). In 2003 alone the small oligopoly of development landowners made 6.6 billion euros profit, with farmers and others making 11 billion from selling land, most of it funded by taxpayers, to the state. Ireland, it has been said, returned to being an almost feudal state in which land values were the highest in Europe (six times more than in England in 2007) and ownership in land conferred untold wealth (O'Toole, 2009: 102-5). Meanwhile the surplus of unaffordable or unwanted houses rose to 250,00 with 30% of homes in Leitrim vacant on the night of 2006 census.

But all this is now well known, and in its essentials no departure from the usual course of boom and bust capitalism with its material legacy of new, but never occupied building and half-completed construction work. This is the 'junk space' subject to Alzheimer-like deterioration described by the architect, Rem Koolhaas (cf. Jamieson, 2003). Or as David Harvey pointed out some time ago now, capitalism 'builds a physical landscape appropriate to its own condition at a particular moment in time, only to have to destroy it, usually in the course of a crisis, at a subsequent point in time' (Harvey, 1989: 93). The point, in any case, should not be to single out any particular economy but rather to note the irrational – and, to repeat, unsustainable and hence dangerous – commitment to such undialectical conceptions of prosperity. Yet even in the wake of the crash and a looming crisis of resources, no major political party in Europe has acknowledged this, nor even broached the idea that we might need now to reconsider that commitment.

The current crisis, the most serious since the 1930s, and still unfolding in unpredictable ways, has certainly caused some misgivings about continuing as we are. But these have amounted to little more than feeble expressions of hope that the greediest financiers will content themselves with a little less. And 'growth' is still clung to as the panacea. Only by stimulating the economy, so it is argued, by producing and persuading people to consume more, by fixing credit at rates that might allow them to borrow and hence buy more, can we hope to spend our way out of a crisis largely precipitated by the dynamic of borrowing and spending in the first place. The great fear generated by the Stern and other reports on global warming (one voiced by Stern himself) was that growth would falter if we failed to attend to the environmental damage caused by continuous growth. And the common presumption of all these ways of thinking is that the consumerist model of the 'good life' is the one we want to promote and that any curb on that will prove unwelcome and distressing. Very little is said of what might be gained by pursuing a less work driven and acquisitive way of life. We are held captive, it seems, to a consumerist version of well-being that excludes all other ideas of how to live and prosper.

It is in this context that I have been pressing for what I have termed the 'alternative hedonist' approach to winning support for sustainable lifestyles and for forms of governance promoting them. This responds to the current situation not only as a crisis, and by no means only as presaging future gloom and doom, but as offering an opportunity to advance beyond a mode of life that is not just environmentally disastrous but also in many respects unpleasurable and self-denying. Alternative hedonism is premised, in fact, on the idea that even if the consumerist lifestyle were indefinitely sustainable it would not enhance human happiness and well-being (or not beyond a certain point that has already past). And it claims that it is new forms of desire, rather than fears of ecological disaster that are likely to have most impact in any move towards more sustainable modes of consuming. The seductive depiction of alternatives to resource-intensive, polluting and unhealthy consumerist life-styles is therefore critical not only to meeting commitments on climate change but also to building any more substantial opposition in the future to the current economic order. A counter-consumerist ethic and politics must appeal, not only to altruistic compassion and environmental concern, but also to the self-regarding gratifications of consuming differently⁴.

The emphasis on pleasure rather than austerity distinguishes the alternative hedonist critique from those in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle who have condemned luxury and commerce as a corruption of republican virtue, and praised the 'simple' and ascetic lifestyle – a tradition that still has echoes today in some religious teachings and certain sects that reject contemporary materialism (Sekora, 1997; Berry, 1994). It is also distinctive in seeking legitimation for its claims *not* in some supposedly objective knowledge of 'true' needs (that only an elite of theorists have access to...) but in the embryonic forms of ambivalence about consumer culture that consumers themselves are now beginning to experience. The focus is on newly emerging or imagined needs, and their implications for the development of a new electoral mandate for the forms of self-policing essential to sustainable living. It is, after all, now widely recognised that our so-called 'good life' is a major cause of stress and ill health. It subjects us to high levels of noise and stench, and generates vast amounts of junk. Its work routines and modes of commerce mean that many people for most of their lives begin their days in traffic jams or overcrowded trains and buses, and then spend much of the rest of them glued to the computer screen, often engaged in

4 For some development of this argument, see (Soper, 2007; 2008; Soper and Trentmann, 2008; Soper, Ryle and Thomas, 2009). Support for my research on 'alternative hedonism' was provided by the ESRC-AHRC 'Cultures of consumption' Programme ('Alternative Hedonism and the Theory and Politics of Consumption', reference no.: RES-154-25-005. Further details at: www.consume.bbk.ac.uk).

mind-numbing tasks. A good part of its productive activity locks time into the creation of a material culture of ever faster production turnovers and built-in obsolescence, which pre-empts more worthy, enduring or entrancing forms of human fulfillment.

This is a dynamic that tends to the elimination of non-commodified forms of satisfaction only then to profit from the sale of compensatory goods or services⁵. Economic 'progress' has become ever more dependent on our preparedness to spend the money we earn by working too hard and too long on the goods which help to provide the satisfaction we have increasingly sacrificed through over-work and over-production. The post 9/11 calls for 'patriotic' shopping; the more recent car scrappage schemes; the appeals to spend our way out of the credit crunch, and so forth, these moves all testify to this dependency. The message today is: whatever happens, don't stop shopping! And it is a message aided by the billions spent on advertising, and the more or less total veto on other representations of desire and pleasure: a veto daily sustained in all our mainstream media outlets, dependent as they are on advertising revenue⁶, and reinforced by the discourse on prosperity of all the mainstream political parties. With little or no restraint from government, companies continue to pressurise us into environmentally vandalising forms of consumption; they now spend a fortune grooming children for a life of consumption (Schor, 2004); and they have very readily moved in on, and defused the radicalism, of social movements such as feminism (Littler, 2009).

Yet despite the well-nigh totalitarian hold of commercial culture on the hedonist imagination, there are signs of desire for something other than the high-stress, work dominated existence. Aggressive advertising is now widely criticized and noted as a factor in the recent riots in Britain, where a cross party report on the causes of the riots found that 77 % of those questioned thought that too much branding and advertising was aimed at the young (Boffey, 2012). Media reports and other sources now indicate that many people are beginning to sense – and resent – the contradiction between what they are forced to do in order to survive, and how they would really prefer to live (Schor, 1991, 1999; Levett, 2003; Bunting, 2004; Honore, 2005; Shah, 2005; Thomas, 2008, 2009). And a

5 The stress relieving spa and therapy industries; the luxury holidays that sell you back 'quality' time; the services that do your 'home cooking' for you; the multiplication of gyms to which people drive in order to do treadmill walking, the extreme sports that take you back to nature, and so forth.

6 For more than a decade, the anti-consumerist campaigning group, Adbusters, has been trying to buy airtime for its social marketing TV spots, often called 'un-commercials', and have been regularly rejected by CBS, NBC, ABC, FOX, MTV, and major networks around the world.

growing number of campaigns testify to those now opting for a slower pace, 'downshifting', reduced working hours and more sustainable lifestyles⁷. This subjective sense of disenchantment is also supported by recent researches on occupational ill-health and depression, by evidence on the links between greater equality of income and improved well-being (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009) and by empirical studies that contest the presumed correlation between increased wealth and increased happiness and indicate something inherently self-defeating in the pursuit of ever more consumption (Brown and Kasser, 2005; Kasser, 2002, 2007). It is true that the simple lack of a correlation between higher income and increased reported life satisfaction does not in itself entail that more consumption has not improved well-being. The standards used by people in assessing their level of satisfaction may themselves become more stringent as their life experience changes with increased income. Nor are feelings of satisfaction always the best guide to how well people may be faring. Education has often exposed alienation and served the cause of personal emancipation precisely by generating discontent. The learning of skills may lead to increased dissatisfaction and demands on the self as one makes progress in their acquisition.

Happiness, in short, is an elusive concept, and it is difficult to pronounce on its quality or the extent to which it (and its associated states of pleasure, well-being or satisfaction), has been achieved. What should count in the estimation of the 'good life'? The intensity of its isolated moments of pleasure, or its overall level of contentment? The avoidance of pain and difficulty, or their successful overcoming? And who, finally, is best placed to decide on whether personal well-being has increased: is this entirely a matter of subjective report, or is it open to objective appraisal? Where Utilitarians have looked to a 'hedonic calculus' of subjectively experienced pleasure or avoidance of pain in assessing life satisfaction, the more objectively oriented Aristotelian focus has been on capacities, functions and achievements (with what one has been enabled to do with one's life) rather than with its more immediate feelings of gratification. And they would argue that people are not necessarily the best judges of what conduces to their own happiness. Aristotelians have also claimed that a 'happiness' conceived or measured in terms of subjective feeling discourages the development of the republican sentiment and inter-generational solidarity essential to social and environmental well-being (O'Neill, 2008, 2006). Yet the

7 www.slowfood.org.uk; 'Slow City' (www.cittaslow.net; www.cittaslow.org.uk; the 'New American Dream' www.newdream.org; 'The Idle Foundation' (www.idlefoundation.org/). See also, the International Centre for Anti-Consumption Research at: <http://www.business.auckland.ac.nz/uoa/home/about/our-research/bs-research-groups/international-centre-for-anti-consumption-research-icar>).

Utilitarian 'hedonic calculus' need not rule out the more civically oriented forms of felt pleasure, or the subjective gratifications of consuming in socially and environmentally responsible ways. The pleasure of many activities, riding a bike for example, include both immediately personal sensual enjoyments and those which come from not contributing to social harms – in this case, the danger and damage of car driving. Moreover, it is difficult in the last analysis to legitimate claims about well-being without some element of subjective endorsement on the part of those about whom they are being made.

There is certainly a tension between these two approaches. The focus on the having of good feelings risks overlooking the more objective constituents of the 'good life' and the 'good society'; the Aristotelian emphasis does justice to those constituents but runs the risk of patronage and condoning the superior knowingness of experts over individuals themselves. But to accept the complexity of gauging claims about the quality of life and personal satisfaction is one thing. To deny that today there is any evidence of the self-defeating nature of ever expanding consumption would be quite another, and both sides to the hedonist debate are, in fact, in general agreement that happiness does not lie in the endless accumulation of more stuff. And though it cannot resolve the philosophical issues in this area, the alternative hedonist perspective, by highlighting the narratives about pleasure and well-being that are implicit in the emerging forms of disaffection with affluent culture, seeks to open up a post-consumerist optic on the 'good life' while still respecting felt experience. As indicated earlier, it offers in this sense an immanent critique of consumer culture. It is not a theory about what ought to be needed, or desired, or actually consumed, but a theory about what some consumers are themselves beginning to discover about the 'counter' consumerist aspects of their own needs and preferences⁸. To invoke Raymond Williams's concept (Williams, 1977: 132 cf. 128-136), its main interest is in an emerging 'structure of feeling' that is both troubled by what was previously taken more for granted, and aware, if only dimly, of former pleasures that are going missing, or other possible gratifications that are unlikely now to become available.

8 Those espousing the ecological cause are in general pretty good at diagnosing what has gone wrong and informing us of what is needed in order to put it right. In the *Limits to growth* we are told, for example, that: 'People don't need enormous cars; they need respect. They don't need closetfuls of clothes; they need to feel attractive and they need excitement and variety and beauty. People don't need electronic entertainment; they need something worthwhile to do with their lives. And so forth' (Meadows, 1972: 216). But it is one thing to claim knowledge of what is 'really' needed. It is quite another thing to reveal in what sense, if any, these are indeed the 'needs' of consumers; and another again to show by what agencies and transitional means they might be more universally acknowledged and acted upon.

This is somewhat in contrast to the critique of commodification associated with Marxism and Frankfurt School Critical Theory whose main emphasis was on the construction or manipulation of consumer 'needs' and wants and not on the critical reflexivity of consumers themselves. In the classical Marxist argument the market had protracted its domination by subverting the will to resist it, or to enjoy any system of pleasures other than the one it provided. Resistance was thus theorised as prompted solely by the exploitations of the workplace, while consumption, viewed as essentially determined and controlled by production, was regarded as exercising a placating influence, and as tending to reconcile consumers to the existing order rather than firing them to oppose it. This politics, moreover, in its most orthodox form, was directed primarily at transforming the relationships of ownership and control over industrial production rather than at the quality and methods of production as such; it was about equalising access to consumption, rather than revolutionising its culture. In this situation, labour militancy and trade union activity in the West became confined to protection of income and employees' rights within the existing structures of globalised capital, and did little to challenge, let alone transform, the 'work and spend' dynamic of affluent cultures. Comparably, in Eastern Europe during the Soviet regime, the aspiration was to 'catch up and overtake' the form of industrial development associated with capitalism rather than to revolutionise the goals of prosperity itself.

The alternative hedonist argument also invites a rather more civically oriented conception of consumer needs/desires than is captured in the prevailing spectrum of theoretical perspectives. For whether consumers are viewed as manipulated and constructed by trans-individual systemic market pressures or as existentially authentic and heroically self-creating - in other words, whether viewed as 'unfree' puppets of the system or as 'freely' self-styling, they are not conceived as capable of rising above their formation by market pressures in order to assume, as many now do, a more ethical and socially accountable stance towards their own consumption. What is missing is the more complex and nuanced theoretical understanding required to accommodate the troubled and equivocal forms of reaction to the consumer society with which I am concerned here, and which, I would argue, complicate or transgress the 'consumer-citizen' divide as currently conceived.

Let me make clear, too, that counter to some anti-consumerist critiques, I do not presume that the 'excesses' of modern consumption can be corrected through a return to a simpler, objectively knowable, and supposedly more 'natural' *modus vivendi*. The critique associated with 'alternative hedonism' does not deny the complexity of human desires, nor the need to accommodate the distinctively human quests for novelty, excitement, distraction, self-expression and the

gratifications of *amour propre*. It can even allow that the gratification of what Rousseau termed the '*fureur de se distinguer*' – the zeal for self-distinction which he associated with *amour propre* – is most easily supplied through shopping and consumerist forms of acquisition and display (at least if you have the money for them). But what comes more easily is not necessarily the most rewarding or fulfilling, and in deflecting complex needs and demands on to commodified sources of satisfaction, consumer culture is hedonistically more restrictive than permissive⁹.

Conclusion

Breaking with the growth-driven consumerist dynamic of production and satisfaction is, admittedly, a daunting prospect given the integrated structure of modern existence and the dependencies of national economies on the globalized system. It is an index of the depth of our collective alienation, that we scarcely know how we might begin to achieve it. But a cultural preliminary, I suggest, will be some re-thinking of our current notions of 'progress' and 'development'. We cannot dismiss the advances in democracy and social and sexual emancipation that have accompanied the development of market society and mass production. Nor can we deny the limitations imposed by an earlier and more parochial existence on individual self-realisation¹⁰. But we can certainly be critical of the constraints that the market has now in turn placed on personal pleasure and fulfillment both in and out of the work place.

Notable in this connection is a growing resentment of the centrality of work in people's lives, and its displacement as a source of individual well-being. Today the ideology of work as providing dignity and meaning in life is all too often belied by its failure to supply any worthwhile ethic, and allegiances to it have shifted accordingly. The new pressures of 'digital Taylorism', the 'self-commodification' of workers forced to gear everything to job-seeking and career, the current impact of the vocational ethos in education, and the sheer tedium and pointlessness of much of the work performed: such factors have prompted increasing numbers to view paid work, although needed as a source of income, as frustrating rather than enhancing self-expression and individual fulfillment

9 For its tendency is to seek to accommodate all the more irreducibly symbolic and affective dimensions of human need, whether for the more sensual or the more cerebral fulfilments, by treating them on the model of physiological need: as if they were, indeed, mere extensions or complications of that need, and could be met, for the most part, through the provision of tangible objects.

10 Cf. in this connection, Marx's account of pre-capitalist economic formations in his *Grundrisse* (Marx, 1973: 471-514).

(Gorz, 1999, 1989, 1985; Hochschild, 1997; Fevre, 2003; Erickson, 2010; Frayne 2012).

Given such developments – and against the grain of the politicians and business magnates who denounce green policies for taking us ‘back to the stone age’ – a more genuinely progressive cultural outlook would recast certain forms of retrospection and nostalgia as potentially avant garde. For there *is* a politically progressive role for keeping faith with past ways of doing and making, provided it is not too absolutist; and provided it comes in the form of a retrospection or lament that retains a memory of the social and sexual exploitations of the labour processes of earlier communities as well as of their more congenial aspects. The ‘romantic pre-technical world was permeated with misery, toil, and filth,’ as Marcuse has told us, but it did also provide what he calls ‘a “landscape”, a medium of libidinal experience’: it provided for sustainable sources of gratification that have either gone altogether or are now fast disappearing (Marcuse, 1986: 72-3 cf. Williams, 1993: 36-7, 184; Ryle, 2009a).

One such libidinal medium is craft ways of working, which by reason of their emphasis on skill, attention to detail, and personal involvement run counter to prevailing views on the mental-manual division of labour (cf. Sennett, 2008) and the time line imperatives of the ‘work and spend’ economy. In a slower paced society, craft based production could expand and many more would be able to benefit from the particular forms of concentration in work and self-fulfilment it can provide. They would also enjoy more disposable time – time, as André Gorz has argued, that would not so much exempt people from doing anything at all, but open up possibilities for everyone to engage in a host of individual or collective, private or public activities – activities which no longer need to be profitable in order to flourish (André Gorz, 1999: 100; cf. Purdy, 2007; Raventos, 2007). Instead of treating idleness and free time as threats to prosperity we should begin, then, to see them as the forms in which prosperity can be realised. Instead of promoting education as a forcing house for the economy we should defend it as the place to prepare individuals to enjoy the free time made available in a post consumerist era. And instead of downgrading and marginalising aesthetic resources and satisfactions we need to be making them culturally much more central and universally available.

Along with such developments could come other forms of revaluation of the ways that space and time figure in our lives: for example, longer but more local holidays (rather than the five mini-breaks per annum in far flung places stipulated by Lastminute.com); a more leisured – and safer – urban existence; more encouragement to street loitering and conviviality (note the encouragement

given to this by certain public art works such as Anish Kapoor's sky mirrors, which invite more enjoyable and relaxed forms of being in urban space without the need for any purchase to be made). A slower paced society could also commit to a more selective use of modern technologies (investing, for example, in advanced medicine, green IT communications systems and energy provision, expansion of public transport, avant-garde bicycle engineering and design, but avoiding those dependent on fossil fuels and catering to high speed lifestyles). It would also do much more to encourage re-cycling, inventive bricolage, more self-sufficiency in food growing, less emphasis on fashion following, more on eccentric self-styling, and so forth.

This would be a form of 'modernisation' that would undo the link between 'progress' and economic expansion without the accompanying cultural regression and social conservatism. In place of a stadial and evolutionist conception of history, it would offer a more complex narrative on the old-new divide, a transcendence of the current binary opposition between 'progress' and 'nostalgia'. Nations that had once figured as relatively 'backwards' might reconstitute themselves in such a period of historical transition and conceptual reconstruction as in the vanguard by comparison with the 'over-development' characteristic of the imperial powers or metropolitan centres that had once rendered them marginal and pre-modern by comparison. Joe Cleary (to revert once more to his argument) has suggested (citing the role of the United Irishmen in 1793 as an instance) that peripheral nations can on occasion function as sites of an 'alternative Enlightenment' where ideas of the modern are intellectually tested, creatively extended, radicalised and transformed, and indeed transferred eventually to the metropolitan centre (Cleary, 2005: 6). This chimes with Joyce's speculation on Ireland:

had we been allowed to develop our own civilisation instead of this mock English one imposed on us, and which has never suited us, think of what an original, interesting civilisation we might have produced. (cit. Kiberd, 2009: 33)

Indeed, one might note in passing here (it is an argument to be developed elsewhere), the potential contribution of Irish literature to this revised frame of thinking about relations between old and new, indigenous to imported culture. Emer Nolan has argued that *Ulysses* demonstrates a mode in which 'the archaic and the avant-garde may enter into explosively creative conjunction' and presents it as a book in which 'the notion of the emancipatory power of the modern is interrogated, indeed put under considerable pressure, rather than one in which the modern is uncritically ratified' (Nolan, 2005: 165). Declan Kiberd has argued similarly in his reclamation of *Ulysses* as a guide on how to live. Kiberd himself laments the 'lost world' of social democracy, modernist painting and *Ulysses* now superseded by 'the identikit shopping mall, the ubiquitous security camera and

the celebrity biography'. And he wryly notes that when teaching *Ulysses* in California, his students thought that Mr Bloom must be ill because he was doing so much walking...! (2009: 24).¹¹ John McGahern is another writer to mention in this context. Comparably to that of Hardy, though in its own, quite distinctive and more contemporary mode, McGahern's fiction is richly dialectical in its treatment of the rural-urban and past-present divides (cf. Ryle, 2009b)¹².

Might Ireland, then, today be in a position to draw upon its peculiar history of relations to modernity, and its exceptional literary resources, in order to pioneer a new way of thinking about the politics of prosperity in the post boom-and-bust era? Might it, for example, now commit to a more mediated culture of modernisation: one that retained the commitment to social emancipation while at the same time reconstituting – and re-working in a distinctively post-consumerist mode – something of the earlier romantic spirit of sober consumption and prioritisation of spiritual over material gratification? (To avoid misunderstanding, I would emphasise the role of conceptual reconstruction here, and the break with earlier notions of both 'spirituality' and of 'material' well-being that would necessarily be involved.)¹³

Such questions are obviously highly speculative. But to indulge them is to entertain the idea of a cultural shift that played on the idea of Ireland's particular – if rather indefinable – 'difference' in its relations to modernisation, but in a manner that allowed definitive transcendence of the colonised/victimised other positioning relative to the imperial power. And within that optic one might then regard the unqualified embrace of neo-liberal capitalist 'development' in the Celtic Tiger years as a still too Anglicised and neo-colonial 'moment' (in the Hegelian sense of 'moment') in the completion of modernisation and national

11 Bloom himself, however, can by no means be considered a straightforward guide in this context, being both ad man and advocate of technological advance as well as a figure of republican virtue; he is also, of course, a 'dialectical' counter of some kind to Stephen as the man of art... In what, as the author puts to his readers, did Stephen's and Bloom's views diverge? 'Stephen dissented openly from Bloom's views on the importance of dietary and civic self-help while Bloom dissented tacitly from Stephen's views on the eternal affirmation of the spirit of man in literature' (Joyce, 1992 (1922): 177; cf. Ryle and Soper, 2002, esp. 173-177).

12 Let us note, too, in this context the resistance of Beckett's characters to the capitalist norms of consumption and the imperative to consume (cf. Barry, 2006).

13 Not least of the difficulties in conceptualising these shifts is the lack of a vocabulary of the 'spirit' that does not come loaded with either religious, or mystical or ascetic connotations. Conversely, it is almost impossible to engage in critique of an overly 'materialist' consumption without it being assumed that one is advocating some less baroque and sensually enriching mode of existence.

autonomisation: a moment en route to a way of being that would have made it more successfully and authentically an 'alternative to the world'.

In many ways, I admit, this must look like a fanciful idea. And making headway with any such alternative within the nation state or more globally will undeniably be hugely difficult. Almost certainly, in the short-term we shall have a return to 'business as usual', with a few big 'green' infrastructure projects planned as a means of pump-priming our way out of recession and back into the promised land of growth, full employment and consumer spending. Yet the banking crisis has made the going harder for the advocates and representatives of greed, speculative cunning and profit-driven turbo-capitalism. It has strengthened the hand of interventionist, social-democratic government. Talk of a 'Green New Deal' has been heard outside the red/green circles where the phrase originated (see www.neweconomics.org); EU leaders have been speaking of the need to re-engineer international financial institutions in ways that would help combat climate change and keep world food prices down.

And since, we all know really that it is unrealistic to suppose that we can continue with current rates of expansion of production, work and material consumption over coming decades let alone into the next century, anything that contributes to a less hackneyed way of thinking about economic health and is more inventive about the quality of human well-being is surely to be welcomed.

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