# Modeling the Origins and Evolution of Postcolonial Politics: The Case of Ireland

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While many in the West depict the twentieth century as an era of great ideological conflict, first between democracy and fascism, and then between democracy and communism (Snyder 5-29), some have interpreted the history of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a period of struggle between imperialism and resistance (Bhabha; Chatterjee; Hastings; Said). Which approach better explains the experience of Ireland in the twentieth century? While many explain Irish history and politics applying models emanating from other European experiences, a number of authors have attempted to apply various colonial and postcolonial models or conceptualizations to Ireland. The latter depict Ireland as a nation struggling to gain its independence and sovereignty from Britain as the colonial power. This colonial perspective is seen by some as a very effective means of analyzing the prodigious Irish literature of the twentieth century. Most authors who have analyzed Ireland from this colonial perspective have done so through an examination of fiction (Cairns and Richards; Deane; Eagleton; Kiberd; Kreilkamp; Lloyd; Mulhern; Smyth). Some do approach the question of Ireland's colonial status from a historical perspective (Carty). However, as is to be expected, not everyone agrees that Ireland fits very well as a colonial territory or postcolonial state (Howe, 2000).

Recently, empire has become a common theme of a wide variety of scholarship that examines the historic relationship between those who were colonized and those who have more recently become under the control of new forms of imperial power (Ferguson; Hardt and Negri; Howe, 2002). One of the common themes that emerges from this literature is the tendency for imperialism to incite a reaction by those who are colonized against the imperialist aggression. This makes the process of colonization much more difficult, demanding, and ultimately unsustainable. Imperialists often predict and expect a much easier occupation and subjugation than occurs when indigenous groups emerge and seek to remove the colonial presence and rule themselves. The legacy of colonialism is also debated in the literature, and many have examined the short and long-term implications of imperialism.

While many have analyzed the impact of imperialism from a variety of approaches, I will utilize a four-stage model of dynamic interaction

between the colonizer and the colonized to explain the imperial process. This model was first developed in the Irish context by Thomas McEvilley, and later Luke Gibbons, but I will expand and apply it more systematically and comparatively. In the first stage of interaction the indigenous culture exists before colonization but comes to be appreciated and remembered after colonization has taken place for the purpose of liberation. While there is a tendency to romanticize indigenous culture around nationalist themes, this often requires re-imagining or remapping a national culture and tradition. The second historical stage is the era of colonial domination when the metropolitan power conquers the subjugated people for economic, political, and cultural reasons. In this period, the colonial power destroys, compromises, or confiscates much of the indigenous culture, sense of pride or self-esteem, and wealth from those they colonize. As a result, while some indigenous culture survives colonization, the values of the imperial power also begin to be incorporated into the culture of the colonized. The period immediately after independence is the third stage of the relationship between the metropolitan and satellite states. When sovereignty has been attained, a postcolonial nationalism and culture permeates society as the colonized convince themselves of their distinct cultural traditions, their historic achievements before colonization, and their separate and unique identity. After the generation that fought for and achieved independence in the former colony is gone, a new set of priorities and values comes to shape life in the fourth stage of historic development. Attempting to recreate an idyllic national past is no longer so important. States seek viability in the modern state system. This becomes the basis of political conflict in postcolonial societies that have matured past their initial preoccupation with national autonomy and cultural authenticity.

This article applies this four-stage model to comprehend the changing realities of Irish politics. This model is not meant to explain all of Irish politics but to help understand those aspects of Irish politics that differentiate it from politics in other European or advanced industrial societies. Irish politics has been said to be lacking social bases (Whyte), but these bases have been primarily examined in terms of social and economic conditions created by industrialization in the European context that were less relevant for postcolonial polities where the dynamic interaction between the colonizer and colonized explains politics. The nature of Irish political conflict can thus be better understood from this colonial and postcolonial perspective.

The Indigenous Culture Before Colonization
The nature of societies and groups before colonization is more open to interpretation than later eras of imperialist conquest. This is due to several factors. First, many societies did not keep written records that allow modern historians to utilize documentary evidence to study these traditional societies. Instead, culture, history, and group identity were

commonly inherited through an oral tradition. While this was not as accurate in a historical sense, it provided an important source of myth and folklore. These narratives provided the basis for a common identity before modern nationalism emerged. Another reason for the lack of history of people who were later colonized was the Western view that history did not exist for a people before the West colonized them. Since the Western colonial powers brought "civilization," this assumed that the history of pre-colonized peoples did not exist or at least was not very important. This was a way of dehumanizing the colonized that was an essential element of the imperialist mindset.

The lack of recorded history regarding the pre-colonial period allowed those who fought against the colonial power to rediscover their ancestors in creative ways. They were able to focus on elements of national myths that had survived that benefited their political agenda (Anderson; Hobsbawm and Ranger). They could revise their own history because it lacked the continuity of an undisturbed past. Colonization allowed those architects of national revivals to emphasize that which was most helpful to the cause of national liberation. This modernization was ironically "accompanied by a cultural annexation of a distant past" (Deane 51). Finding heroes and heroic episodes in the pre-colonial past became an important means of developing the fervor of national revolution in the colonial context. Even those who emphasize the ethnic basis of national and political identity admit to its construction in the modern age of nationalism (Connor; Rothschild 247; Smith).

The Gaelic Revival served such a purpose in the Irish context. Those who sought to resurrect the Irish language, Gaelic games, and other aspects of Irish culture looked to an idealized past that served their contemporary interests. They emphasized those themes and characters of Irish mythology that epitomized those values they sought to inculcate in the Irish masses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Hayes 124; White 2004, 325-339; Sisson). The modern Irish nationalist movement cannot be seen as continuing from an uninterrupted Gaelic heritage. Instead, one must recognize efforts at a Gaelic revival were not meant just to reinvent or revive a disappearing culture but were part of a systematic effort to remove the influence of the imperial power. The English language, English culture, and English colonial power were all part of what prevented the Irish from achieving their national aspirations (Deane 53-54; Hutchinson). Thus, in the immediate period after independence postcolonial peoples seek to sever their colonial connections while simultaneously celebrating their pre-colonial heritage and traditions.

While most Irish and other postcolonial nationalists imagine indigenous culture as more coherent, romantic, and unified than it really was, the reality of inferior political organization and military capability is what allowed imperialism to occur in the first place. Nandy emphasized the ability of imperialists to create secular hierarchies that displaced traditional ones as the key to imperial success. Typically, the imperial power was at least partially successful in depicting the territory of the

colony before independence as "a wild and inhospitable place" to quote a recent account of Irish history (English 25). This justified a wide array of British policies, including the Penal Laws in Ireland, which sought to destroy the indigenous Irish culture and replace it with proper British values and practices. By the late nineteenth century, the British had succeeded in changing fundamentally the culture of Ireland even if they could not destroy a distinct identity that the Irish maintained in the era of British control.

The Irish experience provided the British important lessons in imperialism that they subsequently implemented in their administration of other colonies, especially India (Cook; Foley and O'Connor; Nagai). The mindset of culture and imperialism that Said emphasized was important in justifying the political and military power of the imperial project, but the rationale for imperialism did not by itself make it occur (Said). The European colonizers organized their societies more effectively for the exploitation and plunder that accompanied imperialism. The Irish and other colonized peoples did not develop adequate organizational capability to resist imperialism until after the colonial powers had established their predominance in the colonial territory. While the Irish and other colonized peoples may have rebelled periodically against the imperial powers, they initially lacked the social organization and military capabilities to challenge imperialism effectively. Only after many failures did efforts to remove the colonial presence finally prove successful.

## Colonization and Resistance

Much of the era of colonization is characterized by the political and economic domination by imperial powers over subjugated peoples. As several works have indicated, this domination was based on a cultural predisposition or rationalization for the subjugation of the colonies (Bhabha; Césaire; Fanon; Memmi; Nandy; Said). While the idea of imperialism may have conspired to create colonies, it inevitably led to the creation of resistance from that domination. Those who rebelled against colonization intended to end what they perceived as unjust and inhumane occupation and control. Even if some in the colony sought to integrate in the new world of the imperialist, they were often rejected because of their race, status, or ethnic origin. The very logic of imperial domination engendered the response of resistance and ultimately the drive for national self-determination and an end to colonial rule.

If pre-colonized peoples had not achieved an effective sense of unity and purpose, the colonization process often created a new dynamic that spawned greater political and economic cooperation among peoples. Imperialism thus aroused a response in the indigenous culture that did not previously exist (Chamberlain 14). Pre-existing values and beliefs that were perceived to contribute to the diminution of power and identity were abandoned while nationalists accentuated those values which were helpful in the struggle for independence. While colonized peoples reinterpreted

their past to find continuity with traditional values, they also incorporated metropolitan values into their culture. Some imperialists were much more intent on inculcating their values in their colonial territories, but even those who did not seek to advance their culture inevitably brought new values to their colonies. The result was cultural confusion or "anarchy" to use the title of a book by Lyons in the Irish context. The incorporation of new values from the colonizer and the adaptation of indigenous values did not provide a coherent set of values for those who were colonized. The resulting hybrid created conflicts in society and within individuals' own value system. Typically, the masses did not recognize the contradictions between those values they had incorporated from the imperialist power and those indigenous values they had inherited. Only elites, many of whom were economically or politically benefiting from colonial practices, recognized the contradictions between the communal values of their ancestors and the acquisitive and egocentric values that came with the imperialist powers. Some elites who did not benefit from the new imperial system or who were critical of it for cultural reasons sought to reinterpret and reinvent tradition as a means to resist imperialism and achieve independence (Hobsbawm 12). The themes of cultural conflict, hybridity, and resistance are emphasized by Dawa, Mazrui, Nandy, and Said. In the Irish context, Kevin Kenny depicts the Irish as both subjects and objects of British imperialism (93). Some in Ireland deferred to the colonial power because they benefited from this relationship, but those who rejected the values of the British sought to rebel against imperialism.

In the Irish case, the elites who recognized the contradiction between British imperial power and their own cultural traditions sought to accentuate their goal of castigating certain imperial values as a means of fostering support for their nationalist cultural agenda, much like those who later sought independence in other colonies (Kiberd 251-252). Even these efforts inevitably meant that resurrecting a nationalist agenda was done so by those who had been influenced by British culture for generations. For example, even when Irish nationalists advocated the playing of Gaelic games under the banner of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), these games were played in a Victorian British cultural context with spectators, organized leagues, and a sense of organization that did not historically characterize these games (Mandle). Subconsciously, the values of the British came to shape even the most outwardly Irish cultural activities. Nevertheless, the Gaelic Revival along with the merging of Catholicism and Irish nationalism and a desire for an autarkic national economy became the basis for Irish national identity early in the twentieth century (Deane 53; Girvin 3-14; Jenkins; White 1999, 49-57). These cultural goals or priorities motivated those who led the Irish Rising of 1916 and the guerilla war the Irish fought against the British from 1919 to 1921. Finally, in December 1921 the British agreed in the Anglo-Irish Treaty to at least partial independence as the southern twenty-six counties achieved the status of a Free State. This new independent postcolonial state represented the culmination of Irish efforts in the late nineteenth and early

twentieth century to remove the British presence and recreate the idealized Gaelic Ireland envisioned by literary figures in the Gaelic revival and political leaders of the Easter Rising and Anglo-Irish War (Maume).

## Postcolonial Nationalism

Like other postcolonial states who emerged later in the twentieth century, independent Ireland faced several challenges: building a state apparatus by often incorporating elements of the colonial administration, creating national economic policies that seek to provide prosperity and autonomy for the new nation, and establishing cultural policies that promote the nationalist ideal. Because autarkic economic strategies are not often successful, the postcolonial state often experiences significant emigration that is a continuation of a population pattern that began before independence (Daly; Cleary 254-257). In the long term, postcolonial states will need to redress the often unsuccessful strategies associated with the initial era of independence. Thus, the effect of colonization on politics and culture does not end with the achievement of formal independence or even the recognition of sovereignty for a nation. There is far more cultural continuity than nationalists hope for when they achieve independence. The end of imperial control of the colony means that the new independent state can fill the government bureaucracy with agents committed to the goal of a nationalist revival. Even though the new postcolonial state may inherit the institutions of the modern state from the colonial power, it has the capacity to use these institutions for different purposes (Lloyd 7). Because the postcolonial state typically perceives itself as an island of authenticity surrounded by an alien world, it uses its power to pursue a nationalist agenda (Deane 163). Kiberd depicts the nationalist choice as between returning to a past identity promoted by the politicians or reconstructing one from the complexity of historical experience. While writers and artists may advocate the latter, it is often too complicated and politically less attractive than the former (286).

Independence and self-rule does not necessarily satisfy the nationalists' agenda. In the case of Ireland before nationalists could agree on how to rule they had to agree that the new governing institutions were legitimate. The Irish Civil War can be seen as part of the decolonization process as the Irish nationalist movement bifurcated on the merits of the treaty that brought limited sovereignty to the new Irish Free State (Kissane 2005). While the Civil War was significant, it did not ultimately undermine the stability of the new Irish state. Perhaps this was because the nature of the Irish nationalist movement was conservative and those who dominated the movement were fundamentally conservative in their political outlook (Carroll 369-370; Coquelin 29-39). They looked backward to historic or reinvented conceptions of Irish national identity rather than seeking to combine Irish nationalism with a radical social agenda typical of many other twentieth century revolutions. Hence, independence allows nationalist elites, like those who came to power in

Ireland, to pursue their nationalist ideas. These ideals are often formulated in the pre-independence period as elites seek to identify that in the indigenous culture, which is glorious and worthy of reclamation. It is this vision of reawakening historic ideals which shapes postcolonial national policy (Deane 88). Often, this period is characterized by large scale commemorations which highlight what is perceived as the repressed greatness of the nationalist past. In this way postcolonial nationalists help further construct and solidify the identity of the nation by using the power of the state to create monuments and sponsor activities that glorifies the national past (Gillis).

In the Irish case, Eamon de Valera's role as leader of independent Ireland conforms to this postcolonial pattern of governance. De Valera throughout his political career pursued policies that sought to realize his idealized image of Ireland he made famous in his St. Patrick's Day address of 1943. For de Valera and nationalists like him, the objective of government is not economic prosperity but instead the resurrection of an idealized communal society where the material comforts of life would be exchanged for a greater sense of national fulfillment based on a rural society less economically dependent on Britain and increasingly Gaelic in language and culture. While nationalists like de Valera may seek to live aloof from the world of Western powers or imperialists, their economic policies of isolation and frugal comfort must compete with the culture of material prosperity and self-satisfaction that so permeates the culture of the wealthiest states. The allure of material prosperity, jobs, and higher incomes become very tempting. After the energy of the era of national independence has faded, the more practical concerns of the people make realizing the idealized past an increasingly difficult proposition for those who govern postcolonial polities. Ireland, like many postcolonial states, has abandoned its effort to isolate itself and has increasingly sought to integrate itself with other societies beyond the narrow confines of a parochial national identity.

## Beyond Post-Colonial Nationalism and the Demands of Modernity

It is the task of the generation that follows those who liberated the colony to seek an accommodation between the idealized values of the nation and the values of economic progress and individual self-fulfillment that dominate Western culture. While the postcolonial state may pursue policies in accord with a desire to attain cultural authenticity, the post postcolonial leaders now govern on a different set of values. These values are shaped not just by the dominant values of the West but also by the political constraints of the domestic politics of the postcolonial state (Chamberlain 78). For states like Ireland and India, who emerge as stable or enduring democracies, the task is to fulfill the material expectations of voters. For many other postcolonial governments who do not operate under Western style democratic frameworks the imperialists left their

colonies, the modern state becomes something to be captured for the benefit of oneself or one's ethnic or religious group. Much of the political instability present in former colonial territories is due to the lack of consensus in societies regarding the sources of power and the means of resolving conflict. Neither traditional pre-colonial patterns nor inherited colonial ones work. The result is the creation of states with no effective means of governance or failed states (Rotberg).

Whether it is a government left to pursue material prosperity through democratic means or a weak or failed authoritarian state, postcolonial polities end up living in a world still dominated by those whose conquest through imperialism so controlled these territories in earlier eras. In the Irish case, the means to the economic growth and prosperity increasingly demanded by the Irish Republic required an abandonment of an economic strategy of import substitution and the utilization of an export-led growth that would increasingly link the Irish economy not with its historic colonial master but with the remainder of the world. Seán Lemass led the effort to modernize the Irish economy beginning in the late 1950s to reduce if not end the history of emigration and economic underdevelopment. While Lemass never claimed he was abandoning de Valera's vision of an isolated and autonomous Gaelic Ireland, he nevertheless pursued these policies not as an isolated political elite but one who recognized the growing dissatisfaction among the populace with the poverty that was too pervasive and inescapable in the Ireland of the 1950s.

By the 1970s Ireland had joined the European Community and had achieved a period of rapid economic growth, unprecedented in its history. This economic success only served to whet the appetite of the Irish public and government for greater economic achievement. The result of this increased desire at the personal and governmental level for more economic prosperity has been the phenomenal growth of the Irish economy in the past decade as part of the Celtic Tiger. While critics claim that the economic success of the Celtic Tiger is too dependent on Direct Foreign Investment from abroad, especially from the United States as the new imperial power (Kirby; O'Hearn), the reality is that Irish economic growth seems quite secure based on intelligent government policies and successful Irish entrepreneurship (Ó Riain). The transition to a post postcolonial society in the Irish case has brought great change not just in economic terms but in social terms as well. Ireland is increasingly seen as a leader in a new more globalized culture that represents the cutting edge of culture on a worldwide scale. Ireland's integration into this global culture is seen as threatening its historical nationalism which was based on a parochial conception of national identity and a fusion of Catholicism and nationalism. The rapid secularization that has come to Ireland as part of its change threatens to undermine one of the historic bases of Irish identity (White 2006, 238-256).

However one depicts the current status of national identity in the Irish Republic, it is clear that a massive transformation of values has occurred. Given that the Republic of Ireland's democratic political institutions have

enacted policies intended to bring about this great transformation, the stability and resilience of these institutions amidst the change has been quite remarkable. Ronald Inglehart has highlighted the changes that come to societies as they move from an industrial to a postindustrial economy. The material values of modernity are exchanged for the postmaterial values of a postmodern society. While Ireland skipped the industrial era, its rapid development as an advanced postindustrial society means that Ireland may quickly begin to conform with other states whose life-styles and living standards it has sought to emulate in the last few decades. As its legacy as a colony fades, its politics increasingly conforms to patterns found in other advanced industrial democracies.

## Differences between Ireland and Other Colonies

While this article has maintained that Ireland conforms quite well to a four stage model of colonization first cited by McEvilley, it is important to note how Ireland differs from others who suffered from and then escaped the grasp of the colonial powers. Those who argue that Ireland was atypical of other post-colonial polities cite the cultural continuity and social stability that characterized the period since independence, and the conclusion of the Civil War as reasons why Ireland does not conform to the experience of others who emerge from a colonial experience. The political stability that has been achieved based on democratic means of governance also distinguishes the Irish political experience from most other postcolonial states (Kissane 1995, 43-68).

One of the most important differences between Ireland and most other colonizes was the length of and extent of imperial control of Britain over Ireland. The length and depth of imperial control resulted in Ireland experiencing a greater degree of cultural integration within the British Empire than territories that only had a few decades of imperial presence and a much shallower attempt at transforming those who were colonized. Michael Hechter's model of Ireland as an internal colony of Britain highlights the depth of the imperial impact in the Irish case. For most of Africa, the era of colonization was quite brief, and some see it thus as having a minimal effect on African society. Kenya's first postcolonial ruler was born before colonization and lived to rule Kenya after independence. The result was that in those colonies where the imperial episode was brief there is a greater opportunity for the indigenous culture to survive much more intact than in Ireland where centuries of British influence clearly effected Irish culture in many and profound ways. Much of indigenous Irish culture was lost, but the democratic ethos became much more engrained in Irish political culture. The result is that the Irish have adopted the British Parliamentary system with a few minor adaptations with remarkable success. The successful incorporation of political and legal institutions has provided for a stable constitutional framework of government. While the Irish Civil War may have appeared to challenge the democratic framework of government, the inability of

those who opposed the treaty to motivate the masses to rise up against the new Free State government indicates how well the democratic political attitudes and values had been transferred to the Irish (Kissane 2002*).*

Ireland also emerged as a postcolonial society thirty to forty years earlier than most other colonies. This has meant that it is further along in the process of moving beyond the postcolonial nationalism that is common to many younger postcolonial states. It has already begun the search Said identifies that will move the former colonies beyond their parochial national visions toward a more humanistic set of policies and cosmopolitan identity in a global society (Said 336). Ireland's rapid socioeconomic and cultural transformation of the past several decades may make one forget the logic of colonial and postcolonial politics that so shaped Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century, but Ireland's economic success also indicates that this progress will not by itself resolve the more difficult questions of cultural and national identity that persist for those who experience colonization.

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