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***“Ireland in Theory: the Influence of French Theory on Irish Cultural and Societal Development.”***

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**Abstract**

This essay argues that the advent of French literary and cultural theory, specifically the work of Barthes, Foucault, Derrida and Lacan, has been responsible for some of the accelerated social changes that Ireland has undergone in the last twenty years or so. It argues that the radicalism of the generation of 1968 has had a belated effect on the Ireland of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

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That contemporary Irish society and culture is in the process of a radical transformation is beyond question. However, what is open to question is the context within which this process has been set in motion. From being a socially and religiously conservative, homogenous culture, Ireland has now begun on the problematic journey towards becoming a European pluralist society. The hegemonic pillars of traditional Irish society – the church, the twin governmental parties of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, and ‘republicanism’ (however undefined) as a default position within the national psyche – are in the process of undergoing a searching interrogation and critique. The position of church and state as arbiters of opinion and unquestioned sources of wisdom has never been more tenuous.

This chapter will offer a reading of the engine that initiated this change and will suggest that increasing levels of education, specifically in the areas of literary and cultural theory, much of which originated in France, have been the catalyst behind this process. I think that the emancipatory and political force of such critical discourse is often obscured by the arcane terminology and overzealous

jargon of some practitioners. In this discussion, only broad strokes will be traced, as the underlying imperative behind the theoretical writings of the last forty years will be examined, and then applied to the Irish situation.

Before looking at the process of change, and its contexts, it is necessary to examine the position from which the national psyche began this journey. It is generally accepted that the nationalist struggle for independence, culminating in the treaty of 1922 which saw the partition of Ireland and the foundation of the Free State, followed the trend of most nationalist movements by defining itself in terms of the departed colonizing power. Despite the shared nomenclature, the republican ethos of the IRA, IRB and Sinn Féin movements of the 1920s was a far cry from that of the American or French republican revolutions. The latter's aim was the achievement of a more emancipatory, more libertarian societal structure where the limits of the governing apparatus of the state were being probed in order to create a new societal and political dispensation. In an Irish context, however, such probing was confined to the eradication of the British presence, and that having been done, the lack of any coherent intellectual strategy meant that there was a glaring *lacuna* in terms of policy or transformation. As George Bernard Shaw acerbically put it:

Under the feeble and apologetic tyranny of Dublin Castle we Irish were forced to endure a considerable degree of compulsory freedom. The moment we got rid of that tyranny we rushed to enslave ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

Ireland was economically stagnant in the wake of British withdrawal. Much of Irish political and social thinking is 'still clouded by De Valera's vision of a self-sufficient, bucolic, Gaelic utopia'.<sup>2</sup> However, the point must also be made that in the aftermath of British withdrawal, the Irish government was left in an epistemological quagmire. Having expended energy for, if we are to believe certain narratives of history, some 700 years in attempting to get rid of the colonizing presence, it seems odd that their actual departure caused such a shock to the system of the body politic. But shock it seemed to be, as there were no structures ready to be put in place in order to

1 G. B. Shaw, 'The Censorship,' *Irish Statesman* 11 (1928): 206-8, p. 206.

2 J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985, Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989 reprinted 1992), p. 187.

make self-government in any way a transformational process, nor were there any intellectual ones in place to facilitate debate as to the nature and tenor of the society which would develop.

Instead of a debate regarding the future direction of our society in terms of the major issues of land ownership, legal and societal rights and social justice, there ensued a process of adaptation of hierarchical British models of government, judiciary, legislature and civil service, adding the additional layer of the Roman Catholic Church. The fact that both of these institutions were imperial in design, and therefore designed to restrict debate and enforce compliance with the existing structures was not taken into consideration. The Dáil and Seanad were a carbon copy of the structures of Westminster, which is somewhat ironical when you think about it. Despite the default position of republicanism, there was little or no effort to emulate the ringing assertions of the American Bill of Rights, or the French declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, August 27, 1789. Instead the imprimatur of the Catholic Church was sought by de Valera in the run up to the drafting of the constitution in 1937.

Much of the legal system of the Free State, later to become the republic, was exactly what had been placed on the statute books during the British administration. One would not expect a clean sweep of the *ancien régime*, in the manner of the French revolution; however, there was not even a process of legal review set in motion. In terms of the structure of the legal system, both the legal theory and practice of the British system, right down to the wigs and archaic forms of address, were retained. To quote Brendan Behan's caustic, but accurate, summary of the effects of independence, in *The Quare Fellow*: 'Then the Free State came in we were afraid of our life they were going to change the mattresses for feather beds. ... But sure, thanks be to God, the Free State didn't change anything more than the badges in the warders' caps.'<sup>3</sup>

Behan's point is that the centres of power, whether under British or Irish jurisdiction, were deemed beyond criticism. In a manner that has become a *locus classicus* of a postcolonial state, British rule

was replaced with home rule, but this was a home rule which was unselfconfident and based on non-existent intellectual foundations. All of the social and political thinking was based on Roman Catholic doctrine, and significantly, Catholic political influence was also pervasive in the country. As John A. Costello, leader of the inter-party government, declared: 'I am an Irishman second; I am a Catholic first',<sup>4</sup> and it was this attitude that created a hierarchically driven model of society in which the parallel and coterminous structures of church and state ruled, with comparatively little criticism from those being ruled.

Hence Ireland, that erstwhile Celtic Tiger, was at this stage more in the nature of a Celtic Ostrich, with its head very firmly dug in the ground, and with two hierarchical centres – Church and State – happily stepping into the post-colonial void left by the British withdrawal in 1922. These centres organized and directed the development of society through a quite rigid control of information. Formally, Church and State achieved symphysis in terms of educational control. Education was Catholic in tenor and nationalist in orientation. Clearly, the Celtic Ostrich was in full cry at this juncture, and with the establishment of censorship, a process which copper-fastened the societal, political and cultural control of the church-state central hierarchies, the flow of information available to Irish people, outside the state-controlled education system and media, was filtered before it ever reached these shores. Despite their bitter post civil-war differences, Cumann na nGael and Fianna Fáil were in cosy alliance in their introduction of censorship legislation to delimit any alien influences on the emergent state. W.T. Cosgrave oversaw the passing of the Censorship of Publications Bill, under his authority in 1928.

In 1942, the writer Seán O'Faoláin made the point, speaking in regard to a play *Morning Becomes Electra*, that was attacked by clergy for an incest theme, that the attitude of the clergy was:

...to cherish their ignorance! What it amounts to is 'Don't think about anything that does not concern you.' Combined with the implication that there is very little which does concern us.

3 Brendan Behan, *The Quare Fellow* (London: Methuen, 1960), p. 21.

4 Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth Century Ireland: Nation and State* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1994), p. 208.

And although it is, indeed, very pleasant and easy to have such an obedient and innocent populace, surely if their obedience and innocence is automatic, i.e., based on indifference and not on an intelligent appreciation of what is involved, it will inevitably crack when they do come face to face with some difficult task which does concern them.<sup>5</sup>

Another banned writer, John McGahern, made the following incisive remarks:

It was a young, insecure state without any traditions, without any manners, and there was this notion that to be Irish was good. Nobody actually took any time to understand what to be Irish was. There was this slogan and fanaticism and a lot of emotion, but there wasn't any clear idea except what you were against: you were against sexuality; you were against the English.<sup>6</sup>

So, in a country with fixed social, political and religious structures, governed autocratically and unquestioningly by the twin centres of power, the Catholic Church and the political elite, the restriction and strict control of information, allied to an educational system which perpetuated middle-class hegemony, meant that change was anathema to the elite in whose charge the governance of the country lay. In an undereducated, largely rural community, such power structures had little difficulty perpetuating themselves: they created narrow horizons of expectation which limited any development or influence from outside – the Celtic Ostrich was encouraged to keep its head buried firmly in the four green fields of Ireland. So, the question at this stage must be how did the metamorphoses occur from Celtic Ostrich to Celtic Tiger and beyond? How did the twin pillars of Church and State suddenly become accountable and responsible to the people for their actions? How did we come to a point where the princes of the Church, and the paladins of the State were, and are, being brought to book for various misdemeanours over the years? How did we broaden our horizons in order to interrogate and subject to critique the very structures which made us who we were?

The answers to these questions are to be found in the broadening of educational opportunity in Ireland, with specific reference to the numbers of students attending third level, and in the resultant gradual application of literary and critical theoretical interrogations to the body politic and the body clerical in Ireland. This process is not culturally specific: in America and continental Europe, the

5 Sean O'Faolain, 'The Market of Ideas,' *Bell* 4 (June 1942) pp. 153-7, p. 154.

student riots of the 1960s combined with the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia heralded an upsurge in questioning of received values. Up until then, the societal, cultural and religious ‘givens’ of society were passed on in a largely unquestioned and unquestioning manner, a paradigm which, as we have seen, applied to the Irish State as well. However, given the newly post-colonial status of Ireland, and the somewhat ossified intellectual climate that followed independence, I would suggest that we were in a form of time-lag in terms of the liberating and emancipatory *Zeitgeist* of the 1960s.

Much has been made of the influence of French intellectual writings on raising student consciousness in Paris in 1968. The student uprisings of May 1968 in Paris, and those in Prague and Los Angeles of the same year, were largely inspired by French intellectual thought. In 1966, Jacques Lacan’s *Écrits* and Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* were published.<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* was published the following year.<sup>8</sup> These three texts asked seminal questions about the nature of culture and human organisations, questions which would prove to have destabilising force on the discourses of the human sciences.

Foucault, who saw himself as a specialist in the history of systems of thought, probed the nature of knowledge itself, arguing that the different aspects of what counts as knowledge in a given historical period – intellectual, cultural, political – form an ‘episteme’, and he saw the function of the historian of ideas as involving the disentangling of the different layers of discourse which constitutes that episteme. Hence his use of the term ‘archaeology’ to describe his *modus operandi*.

Interestingly in the present context, his mode of analysis is less important than the objects of his analysis – issues of discourse. For Foucault, all cultural activities were governed by discursive processes which validate and marginalise different practices within society. His analysis focused on the power relations between different agents within culture. In his ‘repressive hypothesis’, he made the point that in psychoanalysis, or in the ritual of confession, the discourse establishes an unequal

6 Julia Carlson, ed. *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer* (London: Routledge, 1960), p. 63.

7 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits - A Selection*. Translated by Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Translated by Alan Sheridan-Smith (New York: Random House, 1970).

8 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976).

relationship of power and control. For Foucault, the question which he addressed in all of his work was how have the objects of my knowledge been produced and how have the questions I address to them been produced? This level of analysis of the systems through which culture expresses itself would have profound implications for our understanding of society in general and of Irish society, with its very static systems of control and organisation of knowledge, in particular.

Lacan, developing the work of Freud, undercut the notion of rationality as the dominant factor in our humanity and instead began to examine language as an index of the unconscious processes of the mind. He also coined the phrase that the 'unconscious is structured like a language',<sup>9</sup> which brought the study of structures to the fore in continental thought. For Lacan, the unconscious and language could no longer be seen as givens, or as natural; instead, they were structures which required investigation. In this model, language, no matter what the mode of enunciation, was shot through with metaphors, metonymies and complex codifications which often masked, as opposed to revealed, the real self. Taking the structuralist ideas of the word as divided into signifier and signified, he stressed the lack of correlation between the two, adding that meaning is always fraught with slippage, lack of clarity and play. His recasting of the Cartesian '*cogito ergo sum*' ('I think therefore I am') into '*desidero ergo sum*' ('I desire therefore I am') has led to a revision of the primacy of reason in the human sciences.

He also suggested that selfhood was a complex construct in which the self took on reflections and refractions from the societal context in which it was placed. His notion of the 'mirror stage' stressed the imaginary and fictive nature of the ideal-self, which he saw as predicated on a desire for an unattainable ideal which could never be actualised. In a culture where repression of desire was very much part of the socio-religious mindset, this view of language and desire would have revolutionary implications for any analysis of culture and sexuality. His view of the Oedipus Complex, as a structural moment in the life of the child, where the sexual desire for the mother is counterbalanced

9 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977), p. 20.

by a culturally-driven identification with the father, and specifically the ‘name of the father’ would open up the constructions, and constrictions, of patriarchy to scrutiny.

It was with this same issue of structurality that Derrida’s work was concerned, as he presented a critique of ‘logocentrism’ (the central set of beliefs or truth-claims around which a culture revolves) and introduces his strategy of deconstruction (the dismantling of the underlying structure of a text to expose its grounding in logocentrism). Derrida postulates that the history of any process of meaning or signification is always predicated on some ‘centre’, some validating point seen as a ‘full presence which is beyond play’.<sup>10</sup> Derrida, and perhaps specifically his neologism ‘deconstruction’, has become a synecdoche of this process of theoretical critique. At its most basic, deconstruction consists of taking the binary oppositions which are constructive of the epistemological paradigm of Western philosophy and, as Derrida himself notes: ‘to deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment’.<sup>11</sup>

However, this reversal is only the first step in the deconstructive project. Making the point that an opposition of metaphysical concepts is never the face-to-face opposition of two terms, but a hierarchy and an order of subordination, Derrida goes on to say that deconstruction ‘does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order, as well as the non-conceptual order with which the conceptual order is articulated’.<sup>12</sup> It is this sense of displacement of the static oppositional criteria that is important in the context of the present discussion. What Derrida has termed the ‘structurality of structure’ stresses that very little in human culture is ‘natural’ or ‘given’; instead, all structurations are created from an ideological standpoint which, and here we would be in Foucault territory, is governed by power relationships. What we might term the ‘politics of deconstruction’ exerts a loosening force on these relationships by suggesting the necessity for alternative structures which are self-aware in terms of the power relationships.

10 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 280.

11 Jacques Derrida, *Positions*. Translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 41.



For Derrida, the teleology of deconstructive critique involves the imbrication of text with context. He is unwilling to bracket any field of cultural endeavour within its own self-defined parameters. Deconstruction, he says, consists:

only of transference, and of a thinking through of transference, in all the senses that this word acquires in more than one language, and first of all that of the transference between languages. If I had to risk a single definition of deconstruction, one as brief, elliptical and economical as a password, I would say simply and without overstatement: *plus d'une langue* – both more than a language and no more of *a* language.<sup>13</sup>

The idea of hermetically sealed-off cultures, national languages, ideologies are deconstructed to reveal a broader context of comparison and contrast, a process which will have ramifications for any exploration of Irish social, cultural and political mores.

Another critic, Roland Barthes, in *Mythologies*, applied the techniques of what had been hitherto fore literary analysis, to a complex range of culture iconic, linguistic and visual signifiers, offering readings of different items of culture which laid bare the ideological imperatives through which their seemingly natural meanings had come into being. Barthes's lucid and complex readings of phenomena as diverse as wrestling, steak, the motor car, the iconography of a black soldier saluting the French flag, was to become a template for future studies of the semiotics of culture.

That such theoretical questionings were central to the student riots of the 1960s is well accepted. I think this is specifically true of the mindset of these students, and to their relationship with their own cultural contexts. Instead of knowledge being seen as predefined and hierarchical, it now became socially constructed and discursive, and Derrida's notion of transference and transformation became crucial to the debates on politics, feminism and race.

12 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), p.329.

13 Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires: For Paul de Man*, translated by Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler and Eduardo Cadava (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 14-15.

While these theories referred initially to academic texts, and were presented in language that could be described, at best as opaque and at worst as unreadable, their political subtext was subversive in the extreme. Derrida's oft-quoted remark that '*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*' ('there is nothing outside the text'),<sup>14</sup> meant that such theoretical approaches could be applied to all political and cultural paradigms, as they were all composed of linguistic structures, and hence all capable of being deconstructed. The effect of such destabilization was not confined to the seminar, but could also apply to the central planks of any social or political structure, for example, in Ireland, the Church and State, so long the unquestioned centres around which our culture revolved. The application of the work of these theorists led to a searching critique of the *habitus* of Irish social and cultural practices, a critique that is ongoing as we speak. The fact that the teaching of such theoretical approaches to culture came late to an Irish context meant that the radical force of the 1960s would not be felt in Ireland until the 1990s and beyond.

In Ireland, such theory came to the fore in the early 1980s. Most Departments of English and French began to teach aspects of the work of Barthes, Foucault, Derrida and Lacan in the early 1980s, and despite the general assumption that such work is esoteric, the underlying imperative beyond theory is definitely emancipatory, as the events of 1968 indicated. Terry Eagleton makes the point that children make the best theorists since they do not automatically accept our routine social practices, or in the context of this discussion, our seemingly normative standards of literary value, as 'natural', but persist in subjecting such 'practices' and 'standards' to the 'most embarrassingly general and fundamental questions'.<sup>15</sup> The increasing popularity of the Social Sciences further broadened the appeal of such writing, with its interdisciplinary scope and the application of the interrogative discourses of 'theory' to texts beyond those of the lecture or seminar. The interrogation of what had been seen previously as the unchanging centres of authority would have important consequences for the development of Irish culture.

14 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976), p. 158.

15 Terry Eagleton, *The Significance of Theory* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 34.

One can look at Yeats's famous lines to see this process in action. 'Things fall apart' in *The Second Coming* because 'the centre cannot hold'.<sup>16</sup> The centre is conceived as a point of fixity which acts as a guarantor of order and stability in a mutable world: hence, by definition, it is itself immutable. In an Irish context, these centres which arbitrated and controlled the amount of play were twofold – the church and the state. These, as in our quotations from Behan and Shaw, were very much beyond the visual perspective of our Celtic Ostrich, even when its head was momentarily lifted from the four green fields. That there were abuses of power in Ireland in the past is undeniable; what is also undeniable is that searching questions were not asked of those in central positions in Church or State hierarchies. One thinks of clerical child abuse, cloaked in secrecy with the perpetrators displaced to offend again; of the Magdalene laundries, where oppression of the unfortunate was a default position; of forced adoptions; of the Fethard-On-Sea boycott, where the failure of Sean and Sheila Kelly to educate their children in Catholic school, as required by the *Ne Timere* Decree, resulted in a boycott by Catholics of the Protestant community in the village; of the sacking of John McGahern from his position as a primary teacher due to the banning of his novel, *The Dark*, in 1965. In terms of the state, one thinks of the Arms trial, and of the fact that no-one was ever held accountable for the monies that went missing; of the Taca scandal where, for £100 businesspeople were enabled to have dinner in the Gresham Hotel in Dublin with members of the cabinet, with consequent opportunities for corruption; of the planning applications and the culture of bribery that seemed endemic in the 1960s and 1970s in Ireland. If ever there was an episteme in need of unpacking, or a structure in need of deconstruction, then this was it.

The implications of the deconstruction of centrality for the development of such a society are clear. The transcendentalism of the Church and State could no longer be taken as a given. Instead, they, too, became part of the system of differences, and hence capable of interrogation. In a sense, this view of the epistemology of language could be seen as analogous to the sense of the sublime of which we have been speaking in that it broadens the horizons of expectation and thought of a society and of a culture. Here, the notion of a central signifier, be that Church or State, as being sacrosanct,

16 William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 211.

unchanging, immovable, and above all, impervious to criticism, was deconstructed, and the Celtic Ostrich would never be able to bury its head quite so deeply again. Instead, Irish society began, albeit slowly, to think the unthinkable – these central hierarchical power structures were in effect just part of the system. They were neither above nor beyond that system, nor were they immune from error or from criticism. The radical imperative towards change that characterised the Prague Spring and the May riots in Paris in 1968 would finally react in an Irish context. However, in this metamorphosis from Ostrich to Tiger, a particular initiating event would be required to kick-start this process. This is true of most great paradigm shifts – one thinks of the French and American revolutions, or Luther's 99 theses. An impetus was needed to get that Ostrich's head out of the sand.

Ironically, it was another attempted burial, but this time, executed from a far greater height, that would initiate this process. This action was in itself a microcosm of the whole *Weltanschauung* of a very particular sublime in the city, though it took place in a city some 4000 miles away from Ireland. In February 1992, in the City of Orlando, Florida, in the Grand Cypress Hotel, Irish businessman Ben Dunne, having ingested some 40 grammes of cocaine, was perched precariously on a 17<sup>th</sup> floor balcony, threatening to jump. Luckily for him, the Orlando police managed to persuade him against this course of action, and this encounter ended with a \$5000 dollar fine, and attendance at a London drugs clinic.<sup>17</sup>

In the aftermath of this event, an internecine power struggle took place within the Dunne family empire, with other members of the family attempting to remove Ben from the centre of power. During the course of this struggle, a report was commissioned from Price Waterhouse to examine Ben Dunne's management of the financial side of the family business, and two of the more interesting details to emerge were payments to two members of Dáil Éireann – the payment for an extension to the house of Michael Lowry, Fine Gael T.D., of North Tipperary, and several large cash payments to Charles J. Haughey, Fianna Fáil T.D., the former Taoiseach of Ireland. Given the

17 Gene Kerrigan, and Pat Brennan, *This Great Little Nation: The A-Z of Irish Scandals and Controversies* (Dublin: Gill and McMillan, 1999), p. 96.

hitherto unquestioned status of those in power, such dealings were often the stuff of rumour and gossip: now, there was hard evidence to prove that those at the centre of power were engaged in practices which were at best, questionable, and at worst, corrupt. The country faced a choice at this point: to ignore this evidence, or to attempt to find out the truth behind these payments. There were some who felt that transactions between politicians and businessmen were the stuff of a capitalist democracy – be it admitted that these voices generally came from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael apologists.

There were others who felt that if there was cash changing hands, then some form of favour or *quid pro quo* arrangement must be in place, and, to their credit, the media in Ireland set out to critique this process. In what looked like an Irish solution to an Irish problem, a retired judge, Gerard Buchanan, began an enquiry into these payments, but without the power to call witnesses. Such an *ad hoc* enquiry could only progress so far, and as a result, the McCracken Tribunal was initiated, on the 7<sup>th</sup> February 1997, to examine Dunne's payments to politicians. After seven months, this tribunal had discovered that the Lowry-Haughey payments were the tip of the iceberg, as they traced money through London to the Cayman Islands, and they added a new word to common linguistic currency, with the revelation of the Ansbacher accounts. These, it emerged, were accounts which were 'technically' offshore, and hence untaxable, while *de facto*, the money was freely available. Some 120 of the wealthiest people in the country were involved in these accounts with over 50 million pounds deposited therein. Two of the accounts, S8 and S9, were for the benefit of Charles Haughey, with money from these being used to pay his bills, money which had been donated by big business.

These exposures necessitated further critique, and on the 21st October 1997, the Moriarity tribunal was set up. This tribunal uncovered more payments from Dunne to Haughey. This process, I would argue, is a *locus classicus* of the influence of theoretical critique in Irish society. The calling into question of hitherto untouchable centres of power has meant that we, as a culture, have finally accepted the necessity of coupling power with responsibility. While these tribunals may be

expensive, protracted and highly stressful on those called before them, what they have achieved is remarkable. Sworn enquiry and rigid evidentiary procedures have uncovered layers of corruption in the Irish body politic to such an extent that people now have a full appreciation of the need to maintain a careful watch on their political masters. The sending to prison of Liam Lawlor is a signifier of the power that can be unleashed by such deconstructive strategies. The Flood tribunal, most recently in the case of Frank Dunlop, has uncovered what looks like a Pandora's Box of corruption in the planning and zoning of land in Dublin.

The benefits of such a process are clear. While people may be uncomfortable about these revelations, they paved the way for new codes of conduct and practice which will make this society a better and more ethical place in which to live. While no-one has yet gone to jail (with the exception of two short sentences served by Lawlor), and while barristers seem to be the major beneficiaries of these processes, nevertheless, I contend that these tribunals are a seminal step on our journey towards societal maturity. Dáil committees, charged with the power of sworn investigation, a model similar to that used in America, could well be the answer to the desire to provide a less expensive and more proactive form of investigation.

The other centre of power in Irish society, the Catholic Church, has not remained immune either. Various scandals, mainly revolving around sexual abuse, have become common knowledge in the Ireland of the Celtic Tiger – though perhaps the most disturbing fact of these is that when Brendan Smyth and Ivan Payne were complained for abuse, their superiors, bishops and cardinals, obviously still in full Celtic Ostrich mode, did nothing to bring this to a halt, but rather sent them to different parishes, where the pattern of abuse continued. These cases of the abuse of children, together with the sexual details of Eamonn Casey (whose scandal also involved £70,000 of Diocesan funds) and Michael Cleary, who had been most vociferous in his condemnation of sexual misbehaviour, and diminished support for traditional Catholic positions in the Divorce and Abortion referenda, further eroded the central position of the Church as a moral arbiter in Ireland.

The position of the Church as moral arbiter, far beyond criticism by the laity, has been utterly transformed by these scandals. Perhaps the most interesting point about them is that they were made public. For years, scandals in Irish society were kept quiet, due to the use, and abuse, of power without responsibility, but now, thanks, I would suggest, to the new critical dispensation, centres are no longer impervious to the play of the system. Derrida's theorization of centrality allows us to focus our gaze in a different direction, to look outward from the 'sort of non-locus', and allow the 'infinite number of sign-substitutions' to 'come into play', to take on new attitudes and philosophical standpoints, to change with time and circumstance.<sup>18</sup>

In our own context, such 'centres' have included the Catholic Church, government authority, the seeming certainties of Civil War Politics, and a recidivist nationalism which posited sentimental links with 'our people in the North'. All of these have now been called into question by such processes of critique, and we have begun the torturous project of redefining our sense of identity without these horizons which had hitherto encompassed that identity. That Sinn Féin can take up elected positions in the Northern Irish executive, and in the Dáil is proof of the transformative power of such questioning: a short time ago, Sinn Féin *de jure*, refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of either government. Now, the party is *de facto* participating in, and hence legitimating, what they had so long derided as partitionist structures. This prospect is frightening to many, as it may well result in mistakes, difficulties and unforeseen problems. Nevertheless, I maintain that a new openness has begun to dawn, an openness where the old centres have not been demolished, merely decentred, deconstructed in the sense that they are no longer beyond the power of critique. The legacy of literary and critical theory is that of the question: the question that asks the unaskable, that suggests the unsuggestable and that looks at an encompassing horizon, and asks, what's on the other side. I would see such a process as essentially ethical in tone.

18 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 280.

Posing an ethics of the question, Derrida makes the point that the ‘liberty of the question’ must be ‘stated and protected’, and he goes on to say that if this ‘commandment’ has an ethical meaning, it is not ‘that it belongs to the *domain* of the ethical, but in that it ultimately authorizes every ethical law in general’.<sup>19</sup> The force of such open-ended questions within Irish culture has been seismic in recent years. It has underpinned the gradual decentring of church and state as unmoved movers in an Irish context. While this situation may lead to something of an epistemological void, nevertheless it provides the opportunity to reshape or refashion the culture in which we live. The past, or our received notions of the past, can be seen as either a straitjacket, delimiting progress or development of the present culture, or as something to be renegotiated. It is this project of reimagining the historical, cultural, linguistic and societal givens that I see as central to the role of theory in developing a fresh conception of the structures that govern society. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida makes a similar point in terms of the fractured notion of an inheritance, which, far from issuing from a fixed centre, and from containing an unequivocal meaning, ‘is never gathered together, it is never one with itself’.<sup>20</sup> It is always in need of interpretation, and this can be hierarchically imposed or can be achieved by a form of critique, which is precisely the role of the process of theoretical questioning which has been the subject of this paper.

As Seamus Heaney puts it in ‘The Settle Bed,’ a poem from his volume *Seeing Things*: ‘an inheritance’ is from ‘the long ago,’ and yet it can be made ‘willable forward/Again and again and again,’ because: ‘whatever is given/can always be reimagined’.<sup>21</sup> These lines could serve as a rubric for the transformation of the *mentalité* of Irish society over the last twenty years or so. Heaney here is suggesting that any culture which predicates its values on the past, and which adopts hegemonic attitudes as ‘givens’ within a culture is only taking one possible narrative pathway in terms of its development. The value of deconstructive theory has been questioned a lot in recent years. In the

19 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

20 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International*. Translated from the French by Peggy Kamuf. Introduction by Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg. London: Routledge, 1994), p. 16.

21 Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber, 1984), p. 49.



context of this discussion, however, a deconstructive critique brings to the fore the other face of deconstruction which is:

its hair-raising radicalism – the nerve and daring with which it knocks the stuffing out of every smug concept and leaves the well-groomed text shamefully dishevelled.<sup>22</sup>

It is to be hoped that the result of this process of dishevelment will be more fluid concepts, a more intersubjective notion of power and responsibility and a national text which, while not quite so well-groomed, is capable of conducting its business in an increasingly ethical manner.

22 Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London, New Left Books, 1981), p. 134.