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Intellectual Imposters? – We Should be so Lucky!:  
Towards an Irish Public Sphere

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Abstract

Looking back on the challenge posed to critical theory by the publication in 1999 of Sokal and Bricmont's book, *Intellectual Impostures*, this essay argues that the latter was at least evidence of the ongoing vitality of the French public sphere, thirty years after most of the books indicted in it had been published. Throwing light on the French political context in which they appeared, specifically the events of May '68, it then tries to assess the reasons why events of similar import in contemporary Ireland and Northern Ireland have not prompted the same level of debate, and points out the want of a real Irish public sphere as one possible cause.

Key words: *Intellectual Impostures*, France, Ireland, public sphere, role of the intellectual

Résumé

*Revenant sur la parution en 1999 de l'ouvrage de Sokal et Bricmont, Impostures intellectuelles, et sur le défi critique que celui-ci a constitué, cet article avance l'idée selon laquelle un tel livre était au moins la preuve de la vitalité persistante de la sphère publique française, plus de trente ans après que les essais incriminés aient été publiés. Si l'on compare le contexte politique français dans lequel ces essais furent publiés, notamment les événements de mai 68, et le contexte récent en Irlande et en Irlande du Nord, où des événements de signification semblable se sont produits, on peut s'interroger sur les raisons qui font que ces derniers n'ont pas donné lieu à des débats d'un même niveau : l'absence d'une véritable sphère publique irlandaise est avancée comme l'une des causes possibles.*

*Mots-clés : Impostures intellectuelles, France, Irlande, sphère publique, rôle de l'intellectuel*

Early in 1996 the journal *Social Text* published "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity", by Alan Sokal, Professor of Physics at New York University. This article was a fabricated pastiche of contemporary theoretical jargon, which suggested that, among other things, the teaching of science and mathematics should be "purged of its authoritarian and elitist characteristics, and the content of these subjects enriched by incorporating the insights of the feminist, queer, multiculturalist and ecological critiques."<sup>1</sup> Sokal later collaborated with Jean Bricmont, Professor of Mathem

<sup>1</sup> Alan Sokal, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity", *Social Text* 46/47 (1996), p. 230.

atics at the University of Louvain in Belgium, in a book-length critique of what they termed “postmodern philosophers’ abuse of science”, published in French in 1997, in English a year later. Entitled *Intellectual Impostures*<sup>2</sup>, this book contained only a very brief discussion of Lyotard, whole chapters on Lacan, Kristeva, Irigaray, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, but nothing substantial on Lévi-Strauss or Barthes, Foucault or Derrida. Sokal and Bricmont’s main target was the supposedly widespread notion among English-speaking devotees of French theory that “modern science is nothing more than a ‘myth’, a ‘narration’ or a ‘social construction’, among many others.<sup>3</sup>” By citing these postmodern theorists as intellectual imposters, these writer were making the point that there were correct and, in their view, incorrect ways of commenting on contemporary socio-political and cultural events, and whether one agrees with this or not, what is taken for granted by Sokal and Bricmont is that there is a need to define and analyse the contribution of these intellectual imposters and to demonstrate why they are imposters. The core point seems to be that by transposing the disciplinary and hermeneutical modes from literary analysis to that of science, these intellectuals are imposters as their level of knowledge is not commensurate with the disciplines involved. It is an attempt to regulate the contributions of intellectuals within the French public sphere, and to analyse the role of the intellectual therein.

A parallel exercise which attempted to analyse the role of the intellectual in the Irish public sphere would require either a very powerful microscope or a great deal of imagination. Indeed, to look for the Irish public sphere itself would require a similar exercise in micro-imaging-technology and imagination. Granted, Ireland has produced scholars who from time to time comment across different areas of activity such as Joe Lee or Declan Kiberd, but by and large, there is not a broad tradition of intellectual input into the broader social or cultural sphere. If we define an intellectual as one who writes outside of his or her chosen discipline, and who, by transposing paradigms of a specific discipline, acts as a type of public commentator on social and cultural mores, then Ireland is, and has been, in the grip of an intellectual recession as dire and difficult as the current fiscal recession for quite some time. The investment of intellectual capital outside of disciplinary areas is very much absent from Irish discourse. Indeed the existence of an Irish public sphere is itself open to question. There are, it is true, a number of Summer Schools such as the Magill or Merriman Schools, but even the seasonal title of these makes the point that the Irish public sphere is not a year-round phenomenon. If we look at contemporary cultural debate, the Irish public sphere

<sup>2</sup> Sokal and Bricmont’s original title was *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals’ Abuse of Science*, New York, Picador, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers’ Abuse of Science*, London, Profile Books, 1999, p. x.

is a barren place indeed. Where is the intellectual debate around the Ryan Report on clerical abuse, or on the current credit crisis, its causes and ramifications for the capitalist system as we know it, or the status of republicanism in Ireland now that there is peace in Northern Ireland, or the ideological positions of the political parties in Ireland or the nature and demise of the Celtic Tiger? If we leave aside journalists like Fintan O'Toole, Eoin Harris and John Waters, then we are left looking for intellectual input. Talk radio, most notably the *Newstalk* station, has come to the fore in encouraging debate about contemporary issues, and the journalist Vincent Brown, in his current affairs programme on the TV3 television station, is also engaged in an ongoing robust critique of state institutions. The late Conor Cruise O'Brien was the last presiding intellectual presence in Irish public life, and his rigorous unpacking of nationalist and republican ideology, in a specifically Irish context, was paradigm-changing in terms of the attitudes of a large number of Irish people, and there has, as yet, been little to replace him, though Michael Cronin is perhaps the heir apparent to this role in that his discourse ranges across a number of disciplines. There have been a number of commentators of an economic leaning who have come to the fore in the recent recession-driven discourse – David McWilliams, Eddie Hobbs and George Lee (recently elected to Dáil Éireann in a bye-election for the Fine Gael party) – but these people comment on matters financial and seem to see social and cultural issues as a distraction of the superstructure when we should all be examining the base, to use a Marxist paradigm.

But before we examine why France seems to have a flourishing public sphere and Ireland does not, it is first necessary to explore some aspects of the very concept of a public sphere. The term derives from the work of, Jürgen Habermas, the neo-Marxist thinker of the Frankfurt School. His first book, *The Structural Transformation in the Public Sphere*, appeared in 1962 and it explored the emergence of the public sphere between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. He saw it as a process of ongoing debate between equals. It “cannot be conceived as an institution and certainly not as an organisation”, writes Habermas, rather it is “a network for communicating information and points of view.”<sup>4</sup> The public sphere is where ideas and information are shared – outside of the pressures of the economic or political system. It is where public opinions are formed as a result of communication. Hannah Arendt sees this public sphere as a liminal state, between the private world and the public world. It is a “social space” which is “neither private nor public, strictly speaking, a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1996, p. 360.

political form in the nation-state.<sup>5</sup>” The major institutions which gave rise to the public sphere included the *salons* in France, the learned and literary societies in Germany and the coffee houses in England. Habermas traced the historical evolution of the institutions of public opinion through to their apparent decline in the modern social-welfare state, where state and society penetrate each other. Initially, the various communications media could help generate the public sphere as articles in newspapers or pamphlets often precipitated discussions, but their later commercialization and trivialization brought about the rapid decline and “refeudalization<sup>6</sup>” of the public sphere. As Habermas notes, when the mass media draw their material from “powerful, well-organised information producers” and “as long as they prefer media strategies that lower rather than raise the discursive level of public communication, issues will tend to start in and be managed from, the centre rather than follow a spontaneous course originating in the periphery.<sup>7</sup>”

The public sphere, therefore, is not umbilically related to any specific mode of production or communication. For Habermas, a reasoned disagreement is the basic point of departure for the modern public sphere and his discourse theory of democracy “privileges a strong procedural distinction between culture and the political.<sup>8</sup>” Thus it is an idealized space in a way, a space of debate, close to the Kantian *sensus communis*, which is related to economic and political interests but not constituted by them. The term *sensus communis* is used by Kant in his *Third Critique* to indicate not merely the sense of being part of society, but rather a special sense that fits us into a human community. It is a specifically *community* sense because “communication and speech depend upon it, and without communication we could neither constitute nor enter into a community.<sup>9</sup>” As Terry Eagleton has noted, it is no longer the social power of individuals but the way in which “they are constituted as discoursing subjects by sharing in a consensus of universal reason.<sup>10</sup>” Now while the status of universal reason has become problematic in the light of deconstructive, postmodern and post-Marxist thinking, nevertheless this quotation holds true in terms of defining the epistemological status of the public sphere. And I would agree with Žižek here in terms of the definition of the ‘universal’, which is not an identification with an “all-encompassing global Substance” but rather, the identification with “a universal ethico-political

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, introduction by Margaret Canovan, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1989, p. 231.

<sup>7</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 360.

<sup>8</sup> Greg Marc Nielsen, *The Norms of Answerability Social Theory between Bakhtin and Habermas*, foreword by Caryl Emerson, New York, State University of New York Press, 2002, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Maurizio Passerin D’entrèves, “Arendt’s Theory of Judgment”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana R. Villa, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 245-260, p. 252

<sup>10</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism: From ‘The Spectator’ to Post-Structuralism*, London, Verso, 1996, p. 9.

principle – a universal religious collective, a scientific collective, a global revolutionary organization, all of which are in principle accessible to everyone”:

This is what Kant, in the famous passage of “What Is Enlightenment?”, means by “public” as opposed to “private”: “private” is not individual as opposed to communal ties, but the very communal-institutional order of one’s particular identification; while “public” is the transnational universality of the exercise of one’s Reason. The paradox is thus that one participates in the universal dimension of the “public” sphere precisely as a singular individual extracted from or even opposed to one’s substantial communal identification – one is truly universal only as radically singular, in the interstices of communal identities<sup>11</sup>.

For James Tully, a public sphere of “free speech, assembly and dissent” is vital in terms of an informed citizenship if people are not to “submit uncritically to the socialisation and media glorification of a life of negative freedom and private consumption.<sup>12</sup>” As Habermas has observed, “reasoned argumentation, not the status or authority of the speaker, was to be the sole arbiter in debate<sup>13</sup>”; nothing was to be protected from criticism, as reasoned critique was allowed to compete with the feudal authority of the church and the court as an arbiter of opinion, and finally the norms of the public sphere were intolerant of all cliquish inclinations in which merely private interests might seek to assert their combined weight and influence. The issues discussed “became ‘general’ not merely in their significance, but also in their accessibility: everyone had to *be able* to participate.<sup>14</sup>” In other words, it is a sphere where issues of public importance are debated and discussed in a manner that is untrammelled by the bonds of discipline or of political allegiance.

It is clear, then, that the relationship between the public sphere and the economic and political sphere is not simple, but nevertheless it is essential in a modern democratic culture as a bridge between the public and private. In contemporary postmodern culture, there is a media-sphere or cyber-sphere which are aspects of the public sphere as communication has now entered into these new modalities. Thus the internet can be a development of the salon or periodical and, as Calbrese and Borchert have pointed out, instances of cyberdemocracy have existed and will continue to exist. Whether they are random, institutionalised or commonplace is perhaps “not what is most important about democracy.<sup>15</sup>” In

<sup>11</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2006, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, vol. II: *Imperialism and Civic Freedom*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 54.

<sup>13</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*, p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Calabrese and Mark Borchert, “Prospects for Electronic Democracy in the United States: Rethinking Communication and Social Policy”, *Media, Culture & Society* 18 (1996), pp. 49-268, p. 264.

this sense, cyberdemocracy and the mediasphere have the potential to enable the public sphere as they can facilitate an equality of communication<sup>16</sup>, but there is always the possibility that they will become feudalised in the sense of becoming a hierarchically-driven vehicle for the transmission of a hegemonic view as opposed to a place where there can be intellectual communication and critique of society, economics and politics.

So, as my purpose here is to look at examples of the French public sphere and to compare and contrast this with an Irish public sphere, then on the basis of my opening paragraph, this should be a very brief article. However, I propose instead to attempt to learn from the French example of how a public sphere can be created which allows for the input of intellectual ideas, and more importantly for an informed intellectual critique of the political and social spheres, and I will then offer a theoretical, and I hope intellectual, assessment of the Irish socio-political situation, and of how we got to the present impasse, and a putative solution to the current problems. I do not expect that there will be universal agreement with my ideas but if in the space of this journal, I can initiate a debate on the correct ordering and organisation of an Irish public sphere, then I will feel that my work has been done.

### **French theory and the public sphere**

To say that the French public sphere is super-saturated in terms of intellectual input would be a truism. One could list out a number of intellectuals who have helped to transform the global public sphere let alone the French one, but two examples will suffice to make this clear, a very positive one and the other an oddly negative one. To begin with the positive, 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 to some extent inspired by French intellectual thought, most notably by those thinkers belonging to the “French theory” circle<sup>17</sup>. In 1966, Jacques Lacan’s *Écrits*<sup>18</sup> and Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* were published<sup>19</sup>. Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*

<sup>16</sup> John Hartley, *Popular Reality: Journalism, Modernity and Popular Culture*, London, Arnold, 1996, *passim*.

<sup>17</sup> For a French perspective on the subject, see François Cusset, *French Theory – Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux Etats-Unis*, Paris, La Découverte, 2003, *passim*.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, Paris, Seuil, 1966; *Écrits – A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, London, Tavistock, 1977; *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg. New York, Norton, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966; *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York, Random House, 1970.

was published the following year<sup>20</sup>. These three texts asked seminal questions about the nature of culture and human organisations, questions which would prove to have a destabilising and largely emancipatory force on the discourses of the human sciences. The literary and theoretical origins of much of *les événements* has been traced in a recent article by Jean-Michel Rabaté in *Parrhesia*. Discussing Michel de Certeau's *La Prise de Parole: pour une nouvelle culture*<sup>21</sup>, a book about the May uprising in Paris in 1968, Rabaté notes that:

Like most commentators, de Certeau noted the somewhat nostalgic mode of many May slogans – along with the practice of heaping up paving stones to make barricades, a hangover from the Paris insurrections in the 1830s, 1848 and 1871. The Paris Commune, with its blend of anarchism, utopian socialism and neo-Marxism was a dominant utopia in 1968. This is why most of the mottos had a quotational air and knowingly returned to the slogans of Spanish anarchists during the civil war, the jokes of Dadaists, or the neo-Romantic tags of the Surrealists. It was also obvious that quite a few slogans came from Lacan's teachings, including the word *jouissance* that was spreading on all the walls of Paris<sup>22</sup>.

Indeed, “*jouissez sans entraves*” was one of the slogans of *les événements* as is revealed in the famous photograph taken by Henri Cartier-Bresson<sup>23</sup>. 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>24</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. His placing of desire at the centre of the epistemology of the subject – “the function of desire is a last residuum of the effect of the signifier in the subject. *Desidero* is the Freudian *cogito*<sup>25</sup>” – has led to a revision of the primacy of reason in the human sciences.

Given the nature of the French public sphere, Lacan, in his psychoanalytic seminars, felt free to discuss the events of May 1968. He referred to Raymond Aron's

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie*, Paris, Minuit, 1967; *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, London, Johns Hopkins Press, 1976.

<sup>21</sup> Michel de Certeau, *La Prise de Parole: pour une nouvelle culture*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1968.

<sup>22</sup> Jean-Michel Rabaté, Jean-Michel, « 68 + 1: Lacan's *année érotique* », *Parrhesia* 6 (2009), pp. 28-45, p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, London, Routledge, 1999, p. 46.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977, p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

critique of students' rebelling in different campuses – Paris, Columbia, Poland – and noted that Aron's article "reflects the thinking of honest people who say: it is happening everywhere. But in saying that, for him that means precisely everywhere they make the same racket."<sup>26</sup> Lacan notes that Aron's reference to the globalization of the unrest is a telling point, but he feels that the article, while strong in style and tone, is missing out on a key structural point about the riots. As Rabaté notes: "the structural knot that Lacan was looking for would have to be situated at the hinge between knowledge and truth. Such a knot could be probed or assessed by psychoanalysis, since as a discourse, psychoanalysis was also interested in the transmission of its knowledge."<sup>27</sup> Here we see the public sphere in action as psychoanalysis, which is traditionally seen as a micro-science, focusing on the internal workings of single subjects, is now becoming a macro-science, analysing a whole generation of students. Indeed when one of the leaders of the students, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, told members of Lacan's school that they could help only by throwing paving stones at the police, Lacan developed the idea that a paving stone could embody the notion of *objet petit a*. The point is that, in the seminar:

the sudden juxtaposition of Aron and Cohn-Bendit is remarkable: the liberal-turned-conservative who kept denouncing the "imaginary revolution" of well-off students and their vain psychodrama is side by side with the activist. Lacan refused to align himself with either, but, facing their contradictory positions, attempted to situate their discourses in a psychoanalytic context<sup>28</sup>.

In fact, Lacan's view on revolutions was quite jaundiced, as he noted that "I would tell you that the aspiration to revolution has but one conceivable issue, always, the discourse of the master. That is what experience has proved. What you, as revolutionaries, aspire to is a Master. You will have one."<sup>29</sup> In spite of this, Lacan's reaction to the revolutionary events was quite nuanced, but he was held by some as being partly responsible for the events of May 1968 and was asked to leave the *École Normale Supérieure*<sup>30</sup>. What is most interesting is that matters of current social and political importance are being addressed on an intellectual level, without polemical or ideological bias, and in the spirit of inquiry – the public sphere in action.

Michel 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

<sup>26</sup> Gaogoa, *Transcriptions des Séminaires de Lacan*, <http://gaogoa.free.fr/seminaires.htm>, 15-05-1968, p. 208.

<sup>27</sup> Rabaté, « 68 + 1: Lacan's *année érotique* », p. 32.

<sup>28</sup> Rabaté, « 68 + 1: Lacan's *année érotique* », p. 32.

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson, ed. Joan Copjec, New York, Norton, 1990, p. 126.

<sup>30</sup> Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, p. 11.



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. 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. He, too, reacted to *les événements* on an intellectual level, noting that “without May 1968, I would never have done such investigations as those on the prison.<sup>31</sup>” For Foucault, this prison work “provided [him] with the opportunity to stitch together the loose ends that had troubled me in works like the *History of Madness* or *Birth of the Clinic*.<sup>32</sup>” Clearly once again major events become refracted in the public sphere and they give rise to different and alternate engagements in terms of causal factors and consequences, and this intellectual activity is part of a contemporary plural reaction to, and critique of, events.

It was with this same issue of structurality that Derrida’s work was concerned, as he 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>33</sup>” Derrida, and perhaps specifically his neologism “deconstruction”, has become a synecdoche of this process of theoretical critique, and of intellectual engagement with every structure that exists in society. At its most basic, deconstruction consists in 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>34</sup>” 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 of “a thinking through of transference”, and his most “elliptical and economical” definition of deconstruction is “*plus d’une langue* – both more than a language and no more of a language.<sup>35</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. Indeed for Derrida,

<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito, New York, Semiotext(e), 1991, p. 140.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, London, Routledge, 1978, p. 280.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 41.

<sup>35</sup> Jacques Derrida, Jacques, *Mémoires: For Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler and Eduardo Cadava, New York, Columbia University Press, 1989, pp. 14-15.

the public sphere is being globalized and in a joint article with Habermas, this very point is made, as Habermas maintains that the simultaneity of mass demonstrations that erupted across European centres on 15 February 2003 to the “sneak attack” of the “coalition of the willing” on Iraq “may well, in hindsight, go down in history as a sign of the birth of a European public sphere.”<sup>36</sup>

Another critic, Roland Barthes, in *Mythologies*, applied the techniques of what had been hitherto for 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. Barthes explained the aims of the book in terms which are especially significant for this paper:

This book has a double theoretical framework: on the one hand, an ideological critique bearing on the language of so-called mass culture; on the other, a first attempt to analyse semiologically the mechanics of this language. I had just read Saussure and as a result acquired the conviction that by treating ‘collective representations’ as sign-systems, one might hope to go further than the pious show of unmasking them and account *in detail* for the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal nature<sup>37</sup>.

The book was originally published in French in 1957, and interestingly in a preface to a revised edition, written in 1970, Barthes goes on to critique the mode of operation of the book itself, making the point that he could not write it now, not because what brought it about has now disappeared, but because ‘ideological criticism, at the very moment when the need for it was again made brutally evident (May ’68), has become more sophisticated.’<sup>38</sup> The reference to May ’68 is important as it demonstrates that French intellectuals see themselves very much as writing within their public sphere, indeed, they see their writings as helping to create that very sphere. Writing in *Image Music Text*, Barthes would suggest a globalised public sphere *avant la lettre*, when he notes that:

In an initial moment, the aim was the destruction of the (ideological) signified; in a second, it is that of the destruction of the sign: ‘mythoclasm’ is succeeded by a ‘semioclasm’ which is much more far-reaching

<sup>36</sup> Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, “February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe”, *Constellations* 10.3 (2003), pp. 291–297, p. 291.

<sup>37</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, selected and translated from the French by Annette Lavers, New York, The Noonday Press, 1972, p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

and pitched at a different level. The historical field of action is thus widened: no longer the (narrow) sphere of French society but far beyond that, historically and geographically, the whole of Western civilization (Graeco- Judaeo-Islamo-Christian) [...] from Plato to *France-Dimanche*.<sup>39</sup>

Here we see a globalised frame of reference and of interplay; here we see a globalised public sphere, where debate is transnational, a public sphere that again relates to the points made by Derrida and Habermas. Habermas has said that the next incarnation of the public sphere would be “a European-wide, integrated public sphere [which] develops in the ambit of a common political culture: a civil society encompassing interest associations, nongovernmental organizations, citizens’ movements.”<sup>40</sup>

### **Is there an Irish public sphere?**

Clearly, to return to *Intellectual Impostures*, the notion that this level of social critique is that of intellectual imposters is a point that is very much open to debate, but what is fascinating to an Irish reader about this book is that some thirty years after the books mentioned in the opening section of this essay, the theoretical public sphere of French intellectual activity had become such a “given” that there can be a debate about the aspects of intellectual activity that are seen as challenging. Although some French historians have shed a somewhat different light on the role of French intellectuals in the 1960s<sup>41</sup>, the “events” of 1968, which we have been looking at, were culture and epoch-defining in French society, and as such, were part of the public sphere. However, in recent years in Ireland there have been a number of “events” which have had similar seismic effects on Irish society and culture. I would argue that had we a defined public sphere in Ireland, then these “events” could form the genesis of systemic and structural change in terms of the future of Irish society.

The ongoing war in Northern Ireland, which resulted in the deaths of some 3,600 people was carried out under the aegis of the Provisional IRA, who saw themselves as part of a republican tradition that stretched back to Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmet. Gerry Adams has frequently contextualised the PIRA campaign in the overall context of the rebellions of 1798, 1848 and 1916, and has used these as a form of political and ethical warrant for the bombing campaigns

<sup>39</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath, London, Fontana, 1977, p. 84.

<sup>40</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Does Europe Need a Constitution? A Response to Dieter Grimm”, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 1998, pp. 155–161, p. 160.

<sup>41</sup> For a recent reappraisal of this vexed issue, see Jean-François Sirinelli, *Mai 68 – L’événement Janus*, Paris, Fayard, 2008, pp. 243-44 (“Intellectuels en sourdine”).

in Northern Ireland and on mainland Britain. There has been comparatively little discussion of this narrative structuring of republicanism in Irish intellectual circles. Indeed, there is almost a revised revisionism coming about as republicanism is being seen as a valid form of political ideology in an Irish context without ever having its epistemological position unpacked. Given that the aims of provisional Sinn Féin are similar to those of the IRA, namely a 32-county united Ireland, and given that the largest political party in Ireland, and the one which has been in almost continuous government since 1932, Fianna Fáil, shares this aim, and further given that the subtitle of Fianna Fáil is “The Republican Party”, one would expect that the epistemology of Irish republicanism would be the subject of ongoing debate in an Irish public sphere but one would be wrong. Here, the value of an intellectual consideration of this grand narrative would have significant ramifications for people’s attitudes to the “republicanism” of each of these parties.

In June of 2009, the Ryan Report was released which outlined and detailed levels of institutional abuse of children in church-run institutions over a period of some fifty years. With an “unconditional apology”, the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy said:

We accept that many who spent their childhoods in our orphanages or industrial schools were hurt and damaged while in our care. We are mindful of all who, as children, were cared for by us in our institutions. We know that it is a very painful time for you as you read the findings of this report. It is a very difficult time for our sisters and our lay staff who gave long service in caring for children in our residential institutions. There is a great sadness in all of our hearts at this time and our deepest desire is to continue the healing process for all involved<sup>42</sup>.

The Conference of Religious in Ireland (CORI) acknowledged “the pain and hurt experienced by many”. CORI went on to add that “most importantly, all of us must now make certain that we continue to learn from the past by ensuring that all vulnerable people are provided with quality care which respects their needs and dignity and reflects the compassion of Christ.”<sup>43</sup> These are fine words, but the “unconditional” nature of the apology was called into question by the deal which the religious orders involved did with the state, in the shape of government minister Michael Woods, which indemnified them against financial reparations. That the orders would seek to negotiate these reparations is certainly at odds with any true sense of regret or responsibility and one would think that in a public sphere, there would be questions raised as to state support of these orders in terms of teaching salaries or capitation grants or indeed of the value and correctness of

<sup>42</sup> *The Irish Examiner*, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> *The Irish Examiner*, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2009.

their continuing role in the education and care of the young, given the range and systemic nature of the abuse and of the subsequent ongoing campaigns of avoidance of blame for that abuse. Some over 800 known abusers in over 200 institutions during a period of 35 years have been identified in terms of having committed acts of violence, sexual oppression and criminal assault on the children in these homes but because of an immunity deal, none of these will be named and none of these will be prosecuted. Without a valid and energised public sphere, there is merely a journalistic flurry which is time-dependent and as soon as the next story comes along, then discussion is shelved and there is neither democratic accountability nor responsibility in the case of these actions.

One of the main images left in the mind after two days reporting of brutality was of a twelve-year-old boy in one of the institutions who was being so badly beaten on a second floor landing that he fell over the banisters and died. The fact that no-one will be charged for this act is a very real indictment of church and state in this country, but in the absence of ongoing critique, it is one which, like Freud's repetition complex, is destined to be repeated again and again, in different aspects of Irish life. We have seen this in the Irish socio-political system in recent times. Despite serious inappropriate, and possibly illegal, behaviours in our banking system, none of the major players has suffered in any way. The AGMs of the banks, while a little heated, still elect the same boards of executive and non-executive directors, and the shareholders still have to accept their losses while the institutions are underwritten to the tune of billions by the taxpayers – very often those same shareholders. There are very few voices of critique here – the general opinion of commentators is that while this is unfair and unjust, the banks are structurally necessary to the economy and so must be kept in business. The Gardai did enter Anglo-Irish bank and took away a number of documents and computers, but one imagines there will be no need to rush through the building of the new Clover Hill Prison to house the directors of Anglo after they are charged and convicted. The same is true of the National Assets Management Agency (NAMA) which will attempt to buy up the bad debts of the banks and thus absolve the Banks, their bondholders and shareholders of all fiscal responsibility and instead the taxpayers of Ireland will assume the debts over the coming years.

There is little or no public debate among intellectuals about these matters and the results are that the system is able to batten down the hatches while the media discuss the initial news-bite and then the furore dies down and things move along in the usual fashion. The narrative is dictated from the top of the system and the lack of a discernible public sphere is an eloquent silence in the Ireland of today. In postmodern Ireland (and I use this term chronologically as opposed to intellectually), the overriding emotion towards metanarratives is one of acceptance, and hence we are not truly postmodern in the sense described

by Lyotard, when he defined postmodernism as an “incredulity toward metanarratives.<sup>44</sup>” Republicanism, religion, governmental structures and the banking system – all of these need to be offered to ongoing critique in a public sphere in a manner parallel to that of the French public sphere. It is to be hoped that intellectuals in Ireland will take up the torch that has been kept alight for so long by French intellectuals and it would be a significant mark of progress in the creation of such public sphere if a book by Irish authors criticising Irish intellectual imposters were to be published because it would be a significant marker of the achievement of a public sphere in Ireland. And if we are to develop as a society, and deal with all of the problems of the twenty first century, such a sphere is necessary. Ireland is well-equipped technologically-speaking to initiate a public sphere. The media, cyberspace, mobile technology, the blogosphere and electronic journals will all have a part to play in the global public sphere, but it is not enough to just have the technology because “the public sphere must not itself be ‘subverted by power’, whether that of large organizations or the mass media.<sup>45</sup>” In Habermas’s “two-track” view of democratic law-making, formally institutionalized deliberation and decision-making must be open to input from informal public spheres. This means that the political must not become an autonomous system, operating solely according to its own criteria of efficiency and unresponsive to citizen concerns, nor should it become subservient to particular interests that have access to administrative power through unofficial paths of influence that by-pass the democratic process<sup>46</sup>. The intellectual imposters contretemps was an example, albeit a negative one, of the strength of the French public sphere – in Ireland, we should be so lucky!

<sup>44</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, p. xxiv.

<sup>45</sup> William Rehg, “Translator’s Introduction”, in Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 1996, pp. ix–xxxix, pp. xxxi–ii.

<sup>46</sup> Pauline Johnson, *Habermas: Rescuing the Public Sphere*, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 92.