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The Irish Cultural Borderscape

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Summary:

This paper discusses the Irish cultural borderscape, or border region, as the epicentre for the development of cross-border cultural policy. Where PEACE projects have funded efforts that encourage the search for commonalities and a respect for difference, the paper posits that the Brexit process reasserts the differences that the Irish borderscape has been challenging for twenty years.

Key words: Brexit; Cultural Policy; Ireland; Peace; Border

Introduction

An exploration of cross-border cultural policy on the Island of Ireland could begin with a survey of cultural organisations and resources that traverse the Irish border. In this regard, John Whyte's *The Permeability of the United Kingdom-Irish Border: A Preliminary Reconnaissance* (1983) remains a valuable starting point. Religious, historical, sports, arts, and music organisations and resources would loom large in such a survey. In this essay culture is broadly conceived as a space for discussion, argument and debate, through the media of cultural resources such as histories, sports, and music, and in the contexts of national identity and peacebuilding. In these contexts, the central claim of the essay is that an Irish cultural borderscape was forged across the threshold of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Moreover, the Irish cultural borderscape may be regarded as the epicentre for the development of cross-border cultural policy. However, it is also argued that this cultural borderscape was threatened by political neglect and the 'bubbling, frothing and foaming' of the protracted Brexit process.

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Culture

'Culture' is a notoriously difficult concept to pin down. The sociologist Raymond Williams (1976, p. 86) suggested that it was one of the most difficult words in the English language. In cultural theory, culture is commonly understood to be a portmanteau of values and beliefs, social relations and a way of life (Highmore, 2002, p. 30). That's a big bag. For the literary critic Terry Eagleton (2002, p. 32) the word 'culture' was 'both too broad and too narrow to be greatly useful'. However, culture is omnipresent in everyday life. Therefore, the consideration of its multiple meanings remains important for advancing understanding of our lives and the world in which we live.

In the quest to grasp the meaning of a culture its substantive resources offer a good starting point. The resources of history, ethnicity and religion are significant but they are open to interpretation and are responsive to changes in the wider world. By virtue this shifting threshold culture itself may be regarded as a repository of discussion, argument and debate on these resources that can influence the manifestation of identity.

The cultural substance of national identity on which discussions, argument and debate are based includes the resources of history, ethnicity, religion, but also those of sport, language, music, art, literature, drama, film, food, and customs and rituals. So, the nation is not just imagined through the printed page as Benedict Anderson (1983) established it is also imagined on the screen, on the stage, on the canvas, on the field of play, in the public house, in the street and via social media. Therefore, culture may be regarded as a multidimensional site of daily struggle and ongoing contestation wherein the meanings of multiple resources of identity and belonging are continually negotiated through communication. In effect, culture is underpinned by communication. It is shaped by discussion, argument and debate. In the national arena important players in this communication are local, national and international politicians, journalists, academics, and cultural entrepreneurs.

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Borderscapes

Borderscapes may be understood as sites displaying cultural and political complexity, contested discourses and meanings, and struggles over inclusion and exclusion, involving multiple actors (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2008, p. ix-xi). However, the borderscapes concept also resonates with the idea of borders having been reconfigured as networks that enable flows of mobility and communication. The anthropologist Chiara Brambilla (2015, p. 111-122) suggests that

‘... the borderscapes concept is mainly inscribed in the opportunity of liberating political imagination from the burden of the territorialist imperative while opening up spaces within which the organisation of new forms of the political and the social become possible’.

European Union (EU) borderscapes may be thought of as potentially liberating spaces for intercultural contact, communication and cooperation that interrogate binary distinctions between ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, and ‘include’ and ‘exclude’.

The act of crossing the border presents challenges to cultural, political and social meanings, as well as opportunities to examine alternatives. Borderscapes embody the fact that these multifarious dynamics stray beyond the borderline. Borderscapes emphasise borders as gateways, areas of opportunities, zones of contact, communication and cooperation and, if not ambivalent identities, then self-reflexive ones.

An Irish cultural borderscape began to flourish in the 1990s. The EU has been a generator of Irish borderscape development, initially through the removal of border customs posts after the introduction of the European Single Market on 31 December 1992. That development was supported by cross-border, cross-community cooperation initiatives mostly funded by the EU’s

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INTERREG and PEACE programmes. The EU-wide INTERREG programmes support cross-border economic cooperation. Peacebuilding is not a programme priority, though borderscape peacebuilding across the EU may be regarded as a by-product of such cross-border cooperation. As the name suggests, the Ireland-specific EU PEACE programmes have peacebuilding as their core mission. Overall, since 1995, the INTERREG and PEACE programmes have been the main EU channel for the flow of over €2 billion into the island of Ireland resulting in more than 23,000 infrastructural, economic, environmental, educational, training, social, cultural and other projects (Pollack, 2011, p. 137-138).

Advances in the Irish Peace Process and institutionalised North-South cooperation on the island of Ireland were also intrinsic to Irish borderscape development. The 1998 Good Friday Agreement's provision of cross-border institutions was the key infrastructural elementⁱ. After the Agreement, the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), one of the North South Implementation Bodies attached to the North South Ministerial Council, was given responsibility for the management of the PEACE II programme as well as INTERREG IIIA and their successors. Pat Colgan, the Chief Executive of the SEUPB, stated that 130,813 individuals had participated in PEACE II (2000-2006) sponsored cross-border activities alone. Overall, he claimed that, between 1995 and 2008, 450,000 individuals had participated in EU PEACE and INTERREG funded projectsⁱⁱ - a high level of participation from a population of approximately 2.5 million in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland.

The Irish cultural borderscape has provided the opportunity to escape the cage of territorial conflict in Northern Ireland and thus underpin and advance peacebuilding. In that borderscape Ulster British unionist and Irish nationalist cultural differences and commonalities have been explored at a local community level. The process has involved contact, communication and cooperation on a cross-border, cross-community basis.

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The communication aspect is crucial because language does not just inform, but it may also impact upon, emotions—something that is integral to peacebuilding. The communication that thousands upon thousands of EU PEACE programme projects have generated have enabled a loosening of the shackles of binary distinctions between self and other, us and them, here and there, inside and outside, and include and exclude. Those binary distinctions had been forged by bordering from 1921. They were hardened further by decades of violent conflict after 1969, mainly in Northern Ireland but also spilling over the border on occasion.

EU PEACE programme projects have challenged stereotypes, explored diversity and commonality, and consequently, have been important peacebuilding objectives of the Irish cultural borderscape. Examining Irish histories has been one way of achieving these objectives. For example, a cross-border, cross-community project examined the meaning of 1916 for Ulster British unionists/loyalists (the Battle of the Somme during World War I) and for Irish nationalists/republicans (the Easter Rising). Out of that discussion the sacrifice of the Ulster Volunteers *and* the Irish Volunteers at the Somme was revealed comprehensively.

Cross-border projects for young people have been plentiful. The sociologist Dirk Schubotz (2014, pp.128-149) has argued that the future of the Irish peacebuilding process depends on young people. EU PEACE programme projects for young people have included the Cultural Pathways project that brought together young people from Protestant East Belfast and ‘Southern’ Catholic Ballybofey to play music and sport, as well as to discuss issues that interest them and visit each other’s homeplaces (McCall 2011). Another project involved 12 primary schools (500 pupils aged 9 to 12 years) from border regions in counties Louth, Cavan, Down, Armagh and Tyrone for local history, local environment, drama, sport and music activities. The project ended with an exhibition in the Market Place Theatre, Armagh City, of all work undertaken including presentations, drama, songs and stories (Burke, 2007).

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The emphasis of cross-border projects overall has been on a search for commonality and the acceptance of difference, and on the promotion of diversity rather than attempting to narrow political and cultural differences. Respect for difference is a prerequisite. The anthropologist Anton Blok (2001, p. xi) has written that people need to be respected to survive emotionally, socially and even physically. Without respect, violence becomes the default position in a quest to assert cultural reputation.

For many involved in cross border, cross community encounters the Irish borderscape became synonymous with culture as a figurative site of communication and contestation wherein meanings are continually negotiated through communication rather than challenged by violence. However, sustaining and developing these physical and figurative scapes depends on favourable economic and political circumstances on both sides of the Irish border and between Britain and Ireland.

Brexit

After 2008, Ireland's economic collapse and the United Kingdom's austerity programme meant that 'soft capital' enterprises like sustaining the Irish cultural borderscape faced a vulnerable future. The EU's continued commitment to the PEACE programmes alleviated economic vulnerability. However, it is debateable whether a British-Irish political commitment to the peacebuilding process generally remained steadfast in the years after the Good Friday Agreement. Degrees of complacency by British and Irish governments towards Northern Ireland and the Irish Peace process were increasingly detectable as the years went by. However, the threat to the Irish cultural borderscape posed by political neglect was as nothing compared to the political thunderbolt delivered by the United Kingdom's Brexit referendum on 23rd June 2016. It resulted in a majority of 52 per cent in favour of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland exiting the EUⁱⁱⁱ.

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For leading Brexiters, like Westminster Members of Parliament Boris Johnson, Jacob Rees-Mogg and Liam Fox, Brexit was akin to the marvellous medicine brewed by young George Kranky (Dahl, 2016, p.33). It is

a brutal and bewitching smell, spicy and staggering, fierce and frenzied full of wizardry and magic. Whenever he got a whiff of it up his nose firecrackers went off in his skull and electric prickles ran down the backs of his legs. It was wonderful to stand there stirring this amazing mixture and to watch it smoking blue and bubbling and frothing and foaming as though it were alive.

In contrast, the years of Brexit 'smoking blue and bubbling, frothing and foaming' after the referendum created alarm and trepidation among Irish borderlanders and across the island of Ireland. Soothing words from the Brexiters in Westminster that there would be 'no hard border' on the island of Ireland cut little ice when the evidence from the negotiation on the UK withdrawal suggested that a 'no deal' Brexit would lead inevitably to that very thing. In *Candide* by Voltaire (1991, p.18) the protagonist complains that 'Pangloss most cruelly deceived me when he said that everything in the world is for the best'. Irish borderlanders were not deceived by the 'no hard border' soft soaping of Messers Johnson, Rees-Mogg and Dr Fox. Indeed, many mobilised under the banner 'Border Communities Against Brexit'.

Brexit bordering potentially entailed: the reintroduction of customs, agri-food inspection and immigration checkpoints on Irish cross-border arterial routes; the closure of hundreds of secondary cross-border roads (that were reopened in the 1990s through the support of the EU's INTERREG programme); and the establishment of a border security regime to support vulnerable customs and inspection officials and infrastructure in isolated border terrain. The deleterious consequences of such bordering for cross-border contact, communication and cooperation in the Irish cultural borderscape were clear.

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In the context of two decades of painstaking peacebuilding work the post-referendum years of Brexit ‘bubbling, frothing and foaming’ had already damaged the Irish cultural borderscape and the respect that it nurtured for British and Irish identities. Binary distinctions between Remain and Leave (the European Union), ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, and ‘include’ and ‘exclude’ began to reossify as the quest to withdraw the United Kingdom from the EU continued on an elongated and tortuous path. This was precisely the opposite direction of travel from the one that had been pursued in the Irish cultural borderscape wherein a genuine effort was made to explore commonalities and differences and celebrate identity complexity – ‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or’.

Conclusion

The Irish borderscape may be regarded as the epicentre of cross-border cultural policy building on the island of Ireland. Its genesis lies in the reconfiguration of the border after the launch of the European Single Market at the end of 1992. EU funding programmes, principally the PEACE programmes, have been the drivers for its development. The British-Irish peacebuilding process has provided the all-encompassing commodious political context.

In the Irish borderscape culture is a platform for communication across communal and territorial divides. The search for commonality and respect for difference have been fundamental to the thousands of cross-border, cross-community projects funded by the EU PEACE programmes. EU support has been essential.

The Brexit process, beginning in 2016, threatened to harden the Irish border with the establishment of a border customs, inspection and security regime. The implications of such a regime for the Irish cultural borderscape, and the peacebuilding process, were ominous because such a regime disrupts

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mobility, contact, communication and cooperation across the border. Moreover, the Brexit process vigorously reasserted binary distinctions that the Irish cultural borderscape had challenged for two decades. As such, the Irish cultural borderscape was presented with the wanton defacement and destructive force of Brexit.

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ⁱ North South institutions included the North South Ministerial Council, six North South Implementation Bodies, as well as Tourism Ireland Ltd, a semi-official body established to promote the island as a tourist destination.

ⁱⁱIn *The European Union and Cross-border Co-operation in Ireland* at http://www.crossborder.ie/events/Lessons_Colgan.ppt#463,11 (accessed 20/05/2019).

ⁱⁱⁱ In Northern Ireland 56 per cent voted 'Remain' with 44 per cent voting 'Leave'