The Power of Place: the Irish West as a Case Study

Stipe Grgas
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zagreb

The article deals with the spatial practice whereby nations privilege certain locales in constructing and representing their identity. This strategy is illustrated by an analysis of the function of the west of Ireland both during the process of decolonisation and in the later period of state formation. Later in his argument the author shows, using examples from literature, how this practice is not uncontested but is criticized by oppositional voices within the cultural archive. In the conclusion the author delineates the role of the west in the Irish tourist industry.

1.

Although culture, however one defines it, has been recognized as a powerful tool in the construction of national identity, the issue of spatiality or, more specifically, the fact that cultural identity inevitably involves a human transaction with geographical space, has not been assailed with the attention bestowed on its other constituent parts. One of the consequences of the "spatial" turn, the agenda of questions of space that has burgeoned throughout the social sciences and the humanities, is the realization that culture has a geography or, to use another formulation,

that there is an "isomorphism of space, place and culture" (Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zùniga 2003:25). Gesturing to its etymological roots, this purchase on the concept of culture indicates that it is always located within determinate spatial coordinates. On the other hand, it need be said that it is only within a cultural framework that humans can comprehend the notion of being in or belonging to a place. It is in this latter sense that we speak of culture as referring to something people possess, that they hold on to and whose integrity and system of values they are willing to protect.

It is obvious that whether we speak of belonging to or being in possession of a culture we are thereby implying an outside, spaces and people that are extrinsic to the demarcated place. Although the prevalent accounts of identity formation privilege the third, relational definition of cultural identity , I believe that the previous two aspects have to be kept in mind particularly since the framework of my discussion presupposes the existential as well as the theoretical relevance of national culture and its spatial conjectures. To anticipate the argument, the constructions of cultural identity within a national framework are not merely triggered by what is extraneous to it but reveal a constellation of possible locations for the nation or, to put it otherwise, various answers to the question what place is home.

National identities and the cultures they espouse or are espoused by legitimate themselves by playing upon, enacting or, if need be, creating ways they are different from what encircles them. As its ultimate aim this insistence on difference has the drawing up of boundaries separating us from the others and, within the political arena, the establishment of the nation-state. The territorial dimensions of the nation-state are salient in Anthony Giddens's definition:

> The nation-state, which exists in a complex of other nation-states, is a set of institutional forms of governance maintaining an administrative monopoly over territory with demarcated boundaries (borders), its rule being sanctioned by law and direct control of the means of internal and external violence (Giddens 1985:121)

The nation which has been and, I maintain, continues to be a powerful framework for the construction of identity cannot be thought without at-

tending to the way it relates to space. The crucial concept which has been proffered in discussing this relationship has been "territoriality" as the "primary geographical expression of social power", the means by which space and society are interrelated (Sack 1986:5). Highlighting its social role, Gordon Ericksen ascribes to territoriality "a strength in group making, group solidarity" and contends that it "embraces both sociological and social psychological dimensions (Ericksen 1980: 35). Representing the attempt to establish control over a delimited space which is considered distinct by those who define its spread and boundaries, territoriality appears to be a basic human need having to do with identity and rootedness and the way these define themselves in relation to an other.

However, this is not the only mapping being carried out during the process of nation-state building. A less obvious process attends identity-construction *within* the borders demarcating a national culture. In the research programme Anthony Smith announces in the conclusion of his study *Nationalism and Modernism* (1998) he states that "it would also be necessary to explore the more elusive issues of how landscapes and sacred sites contributed to the generation of ideas of 'homeland' and national territory" (Smith 2003:226). To put this in broadest terms, the premise of my argument is that the national enclosure itself, during the process of the construction of nationess, undergoes additional processes of spatial differentiation. As a consequence of these procedures a "constant tension" exists, as Paul James puts it, "in the abstraction of space". Of the four "incongruent developments" on his list the first two are pertinent to my argument:

> firstly, a nation's territory is thoroughly homogenized in terms of its cultural significance; secondly, some spaces, such as Uluru (Ayers Rock) in Australia or Mount Fuji in Japan, are conferred with symbolic meaning over and above, although representative of, the whole; (James 1996:36)

Taking for granted the importance of spatial mapping within the process of identity formation, my intention is to focus on this, less evident spatial practice, one which does not refer to geographical

111

differentiations in relation to what is perceived as the foreign but rather to the differentiation within the confines of the imagined or boundary-defined territory itself.

If one looks closely at any national imaginary it is paradoxical that the political project it serves, so keen on sovereignty and the control over its whole territory, nevertheless does not, as a rule, perceive its territory as a homogeneous space. To use Benedict Anderson's formulation, the "imagined community" (1983), in the process of self-formulation as well as in the subsequent legitimating of its distinctiveness, re-imagines its spatial base by endowing certain sites with a special significance. Thusly, a reading of a particular cultural imaginary discloses a hierarchy of places which are perceived as locations of different degrees of authenticity or representativeness. On the present occasion my intention is to describe the position the West of Ireland has within its culture and its political imaginary, to theorize that positioning and to outline how it impacted upon Irish society and how it has been negotiated within Irish culture

2.

As a preliminary step in my argument but one which justifies its main focus I draw attention to the oft-remarked fact that space has been and still is an important factor in the construction of Irish identity. In his study *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination* (2001) Gerry Smyth speaks of a paradox concerning the relationship between time and space at the heart of Irish Studies which he formulates in the following manner:

> This paradox resides in the fact that although the formal study of Irish culture has been dominated throughout the modern period by a methodology organized around issues of chronology, duration, order, frequency, disruption, inheritance – in other words, issues of history – the subject matter of that study has been invariably geographical, concerned (even when it seemed not to be the case) with the existence and influence of a 'special relationship' between community and environment permeating Irish life. (Smyth 2001:19)

112

The reasons why the Irish identity is chthonic doubtlessly have to do with the genealogy of the land and in particular with the traumatic story of dispossession. Countless cultural narratives and images render accounts of the Irish fixation on the history-saturated earth. These show that Smyth's "special relationship" was not indiscriminate but differentiated the landscape in question, the uses to which the land was put and the positioning of sites within the broader configuration of Ireland as an island. Speaking in broadest terms, the fact that waves of colonization had always come from the East made the western portion of Ireland the locality that was the last and the least incorporated into the implacable westward encroachment. In the face of a relentless process of dispossession both in the sense of loss of land and of a distinctive identity, the possibility of spiritual renewal was located where the English impress was least evident.

Thusly, at one point in his study of nation-building in Ireland, Jim Mac Laughlin writes that inhabitants of towns on the Irish eastern littoral were labeled "West Britons". He continues: "The 'true Irish were said to live elsewhere, in a 'Hidden Ireland' of rural valleys and secluded upland regions well outside the pale of a modernizing, nation-building English civility" (Mac Laughlin 2001:75). A description of this "Hidden Ireland" was given by Daniel Corkery in the book bearing the same title (1924) from which Mac Laughlin quotes the following passage:

> The hard mountain lands of West Cork and Kerry, the wild seaboard of the West, the back places of Connemara and Donegal in such places only was the Gael at liberty to live his own way. In them he was not put upon. Big houses were few or none. Travellers were rare; officials short at the very aspect of the landscape; coaches found no fare. To reach them one must, leaving the cities and town behind, venture among the bogs and hills, far into the mountains even, where the native Irish, as the pamphleteers and politicians loved to call them, still lurked. (Quoted in Mac Laughlin 2001:248)

Corkery's is just one of the better known sources of a cultural archive which provides a huge store of references to the West, its landscapes, its

113

people and their way of life. Works of literature, painting, film, political discourse, tourist brochures, music - all provide examples not only of strategies of representing a specially-endowed space but also, of course, of constructing it.

Seamus Deane offers an explanation of this phenomenon which summarizes the reasons, means and the significance of privileging a particular locality on the island. In a passage of his study *Strange Country* he writes how a discourse of nation perceived the uprooting and the transformation of the native property system by property rights and farming techniques introduced during colonization as a "collapse", a "disastrous transition". However, he also remarks that discourse's oppositional assertion of a national spirit, "of which both writing and landownership systems are embodiments", that has survived and that will ultimately prevail, bringing about recovery:

> Revival's later apotheosis of the west as the site of the immemorial Irish culture is a telling example of this assertion, as is the Yeatsian extraction of the Irish peasantry and the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy from their specific histories into an ideology of anti-modern Irishness. The west became the place of Irish authenticity, the place that was not yet subject to the effects of administrative, governmental rules and laws, and which therefore preserved among its population the national character in its pristine form or, at least, in such a state of preservation that the pristine form could be inferred from it. It was not only geographically distinct; it was historically precedent to the rest of the country which, especially in Dublin, had been reduced to a colonized space of the imperial administration. (Deane 1997:52-53)

Notice should be made of the way Deane ties together writing and landownership systems providing a telling instance of the powerful imbrication of culture and geographical space in the Irish national project. Notice should also be made of the fact that the "apotheosis of the west" which ensued from this coupling ought not only to be understood as investing particular value in a geographically distant place but also as

114

projecting a different, miraculously preserved temporality. Considering what was involved in the empowerment of the West, it was expected that it was destined to play a significant role in the profiling of Irish nationalism and the cultural values it projected and later attempted to implement in the newly-established state.

3.

There are different ways of describing or conceptualizing what is at stake in this spatial practice. Margaret C. Rodman in her contribution to Low and Lawrence- Zùniga's anthology on the anthropology of space and place mentions the use of places "as metonyms in which one locale stands, inappropriately, for a whole area" (Low and Lawrence- Zùniga 2003:204). Needless to say one could easily summon other figures to explain the relationship between the part and the whole. Synecdoche or metaphor come first to mind. However, although such tropological readings do open certain interpretative possibilities, to explain what is at play here it is necessary to look at this politics of location within a broader context. The tropological reading schematises an instance that in practice always and everywhere has a more complicated nature. In other words it is necessary to flesh out these purely relational terms.

The opposition and the implied hierarchy between the West and the rest of Ireland within the framework of Irish nation-building exemplifies an instance of what Henri Lefebvre has labeled as the "production of space". In setting forth the agenda of his study of space he mentions "the active – operational or instrumental – role of space" and announces that he will "show how space serves, and how hegemony makes use of it, in the establishment, on the basis of an underlying logic and with the help of knowledge and technical expertise, of a 'system'" (Lefebvre 1996:11). Within the Irish case that system would be the space of the nation both as imagined within the project of the anti-colonial struggle but also as actualized through the politics and the cultural practices of the Irish state.

In order to legitimate its cause Irish anti-colonial struggle resorted to various strategies to promote its own distinctiveness. As mentioned

115

above, since the intrusion from abroad came from the east, displacing the indigenous traditions and way of life, it came about that the older mode of life was pushed to the western fringes. In a paradoxical move, the place which was denigrated in the English representations of Ireland as the epitome of, at times, subhuman backwardness was recuperated during the Revival as a source of authenticity and renewal. Needless to say, it did not matter that in both the colonial project and within the oppositional discourse of Irish nationalism the West was primarily a construct, an element within the ensemble of battling ideologies.

The representational practices of the newly-established Irish state evince the retentive power of this construct within its identity politics. In order to appreciate its significance one has to renounce the idea of the state as encompassing a homogenous geographical space and to recognize that the state and its hegemony produce and depend upon spatial hierarchies. In the Irish case, the West was a part of a strategy which ensured that Ireland was imagined and represented in a particular fashion. During the long period of de Valera's Ireland it was a formative element in the conceptualization of how the new state was to be imagined and organized, the kind of ideology it was to be built upon and the actual ordering of everyday life in the Free State.

In founding itself upon the values supposedly encapsulated in the West, the Irish sate projected itself as the redeemer of a community which had survived in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. To put it otherwise, such a strategy drew a distinction between the eternal and immutable entity – or at least as this space is inscribed within an ideology – and the temporary political constellation. In the Irish case, the transient construct would be the colonial encroachment whereas the West represented a site uncontaminated by colonization, a reservoir of distinctively Irish practices. The time inscribed in this place was the authentic time of the people, undisturbed by intrusions or modernizing processes, the slow, archaic time of isolated communities which have not been affected by the commodified time of English rule and dominance. Therefore, it is not surprising that for a long period after the establishment of the Irish state its temporal orientation was turned to the past. As such, the ballast of history was detrimental to the development of the country

116

and had to be dealt with before Ireland's integration into European modernity.

The privileging of the West had an impact on the definition of Irishness by implicating the question of inclusion in or exclusion from an imagined community. As a rule, the hierarchical spatializing of the nation state denies or suspects the right of some people's incorporation on a par with others within the nation. Deciding both who are the authentic members, whose membership is doubtful and who are the non-members such spatial practices exclude, in differing degrees of course, the latter two from the universe of those entitled to be considered as by right belonging to the community. Discursively positioned as the wellspring of a specific Irish identity, the West was a powerful factor, for example, in structuring the dichotomy of the urban and the rural within Ireland. The anti-urban tendency was not only a part of the Irish cultural imaginary but was influential in tailoring concrete state policies. Alongside the "hypertrophy" of "the historical sense", to use Nietzsche's formulation, the envisioning of Ireland as a rural community contributed to the fact that Ireland, during a long period of its statehood, was out of tune with twentieth century processes of modernization.

Returning here to the concept of territoriality we can say that the West played an important role in the power politics of DeValera's Ireland. The West of Ireland, more as an imaginative and symbolic devise than the actual geographical place, empowered a distinctive projection of Ireland as a nation state and helped to secure its legitimacy. A particular landscape and the store of meanings that had been read into it had a power over and beyond its position and role within the physical, ecological and the everyday political systems of which it was a part. The political option that emerged from the turmoil of Irish politics created and ordered an environment whose function was to enhance, legitimate and reinforce its hegemony. The challenges confronting Ireland after De Valera and some of the decisions which have transformed the country have to be seen on the background of the heritage and consequences of this symbolic investment in the West. Stock had to be taken of how it had impacted on Irish society, how it had to be renegotiated and how it could be repackaged for future use.

117

4.

The above account gives only one, albeit, in my opinion, the most significant spatial configuration that can be gleaned from the Irish cultural archive and its social contexts. To presuppose otherwise would be an untenable simplification. Culture being a dynamic frame of ideas, representations and material practices existing not for the moment but marked with the sediments of history, it is inevitable that the distribution and hierarchies of spatial imaginaries inscribed within it are neither static nor homogeneous.

Therefore, as a cursory overview of literary culture, for example, easily reveals the privileged status of the West within Irish culture was not unanimously accepted but drew critiques from different quarters and with varying degrees of vituperativeness. Thusly, Joyce's narrativization of middle-class urban existence can be understood as an intervention into the prioritization of the rural within Irish culture. Samuel Beckett's castigation of the neo-Revivalists poets for their "antiquarian" qualities and his espousal of the small group of Irish modernists evinces his critique of the unitary myth. Flann O'Brien's hilarious satire *The Poor Mouth* (1941) persuasively shows the debilitating aspects of life in the isolated communities of the West of Ireland. These three authors provide evidence of how certain writers worked apart and against the ideological matrix which was, in part, empowered by a hierarchy of Irish spaces.

What their critique has done and what contemporary cultural artifacts continue to do is to subvert the ensemble of values and existential investments that have accrued to a largely-imagined place. These critical interventions have shown how ideology has masked the reality of the place and how the power of the created images occluded significant places of Irish life. Therefore it was to be expected that many later cultural productions focused upon "counter-sites" excluded from the earlier paradigm. In the Irish case this is particularly evident in the way that the introduction of urban themes has worked against the privileging of the rural. To summarize these practices, using the analytical tools we have been working with, we can say that they display a process of «re-differentiation». Simply put, just as the earlier spatialization of the state

118

partitioned the national territory and ascribed to the parts differential values, at a later point the former oppositions and the values they embodied were problematized and renegotiated.

The process can be seen to have intensified if we leave the nation-state frame and approach Ireland after it became a member of the European Union. In her ethnographic study *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics* (1977) Nancy Scheper-Hughes not only exposed the negative aspects of life in the West but observed how Ireland's integration into the Union wreaked havoc on its traditional way of life. As we move nearer to the present it is obvious that this process has been aggravated and that Ireland, positioned as it is within the conjecture of late western capitalism, has become less and less, to use Mauel Castellas's terms, "the space of places" and more and more "the space of flows" (Castellas, 1996:440-60). Has the West and what it represented as a consequence disappeared from this transformed space?

Hardly so. In order to perceive this it would be necessary to leave behind the frame of reference of the nation state and to put into its place the global economy and its production of space. If one scans, for example, the repertoire of the images of Ireland which have spawned within the self-representations promulgated by the tourist industry, images which many unwittingly accept as the real thing, it is evident that the West still holds a privileged position. Appropriated by tourism and other forms of commercialization it is on offer within the circularity of images, unimpaired by the work of demystification to which it has been subjected on different occasions.

To attempt a generalization, the work of spatial differentiation and the way this yields a hierarchy of places does not occur at a uniform pace throughout the whole of society nor can it command a consensus from all of its citizens. The critical takes on the myth of the West which I have referred to in literary works would be an instance of this dissensus. However, if the dominant trend within many cultural practices during the second part of the twentieth century in Ireland has been to problematize the privileging of the West of Ireland and to expose the ideological stakes involved in this strategy, it is also evident that other sectors of societies have found a way to utilize it for their own purposes. The tourist industry provides an example where the West still retains its power. What

119

has changed is that in this domain it has been packaged as a consumer product. If previously the West has functioned as a powerful tool in the process of integrating Ireland, nowadays the same locality or, perhaps more accurately, the images of this place and the way they have empowered a modern-resort locality have contributed to Ireland's integration into a capitalized flow of commodified spaces. Again we are faced with a paradox that a country that partakes of processes characteristic of the Post-Fordist world barters an "archaic temporality".

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that the nation-state and the subdivision of the region are neither mutually exclusive nor is the latter antipodal to the homogenizing thrust of state formation. On the contrary, at least on the level of promulgating a legitimating identity, they evince a close relationship in which the nation-state resorts to a particular region in defining and representing itself. As a consequence, the empowerment of a particular region within the cultural imaginary disempowers other possible founding places and what they connote. As is to be expected, the power bestowed upon a particular place is not recognized or accepted by all agents within a culture. The hierarchy of places which marks a particular community is therefore prone to being questioned and whether its hegemony remains intact or is undermined ultimately depends on developments within society as a whole and the way that society engages the wider global context.

The reading of the role of the West in Irish state formation and within its cultural imaginary was not intended to rehearse the extant research which has been devoted to this question. My purpose was to demarcate the contours of a politics of space which, far from being idiosyncratic to Ireland, can be found in other contexts. As such the reading was not intended to fully develop and elaborate upon a distinct case study but rather to create a paradigm of reference for future projects on other spaces and their cultural politics. As an intercultural reading the above ought to have made us aware how we frequently work with stereotypical representations which hide cultural and political practices that ought to be

120

the proper subject matter of our analysis. On both the theoretical and the practical level, I am convinced that the recognition of the variety of ways that the nation-state relates to and uses the region yields a rich agenda of questions and a site of a powerful political critique.

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121

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Stipe Grgas
Department of English
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb
Ivana Lučića 3
10000 Zagreb, CROATIA
sgrgas@ffzg.hr