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The Politics and Polemics of Culture in Ireland, 1800–2010 by Pat Cooke (2022), Routledge.

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Summary:

Pat Cooke's recent book is a wide-ranging survey of the discourse and development of cultural policy in Ireland over the past 200 years that highlights 'Post-Colonial ironies'.

Abstract:

Cooke's book surveys the history of cultural policy and discourse from the Act of Union to the Financial Crash of 2008. It demonstrates the different ways the role of culture has been conceived by the state with an eye for the ideological ironies when theory is put into practice. Particular focus is devoted to the postcolonial nature of these ironies. The author does not find cultural policy to be a result of deliberative and democratic processes. Rather it is largely ad-hoc, idiosyncratic, and personality-driven.

Key words: Cultural History; Arts Policy; Ireland; Post-colonialism.

Review: The Politics and Polemics of Culture in Ireland 1800-2010

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This is a wonderful book. It achieves the mammoth task of tracing the evolution of cultural policy and the associated discourse of the social role of culture in Ireland over the past two centuries. The book begins with the British colonial efforts to 'kill Home Rule with kindness' and deploy cultural infrastructure 'as an agent of social discipline and bulwark against anarchy' (p. 22). It finishes with the State's scrambling to rescue Ireland's international reputation in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008. In between we see the full gamut of ways that culture has been instrumentalised in Ireland; from colonial weapon, to locus of national difference and bulwark against foreign ideas, to servicing the needs of industry and tourism, evangelising aesthetic elitism, to the vehicle for social welfare initiatives, to the elixir that adds 'fizz to a process of gentrification' (p. 337). At all times the framings of culture serve to establish the notions of nationhood by deploying narratives of civilization and progress.

Across 25 chapters and more than 400 pages, Cooke's approach is to detail, in roughly chronological order, both the political and social change processes that shape and inform the role of culture in Ireland. This standard focus of cultural policy, is, however, complemented with a running reflection on the longer-term processes. By considering the cycles of crises in terms of the political and polemical discourse Cooke is able to reveal how old attitudes about the role of art and culture persist. Though not explicitly described as such, the lens of the longue durée (Braudel, 1991), allows Cooke a wide perspective to tease out what he calls the 'Post-Colonial ironies' (p. 6) of cultural policy in independent Ireland.

Cooke has a laser eye for paradox, contradiction, and ironic juxtaposition. He revels in paradoxes such as the State's attempt to use the British inherited education system designed to suppress the Irish language as its primary vehicle to foster the revival of Irish language post-independence. Only by establishing the cultural infrastructure that was developed in 19th century

Ireland can Cooke illustrate these ironies. The opening chapters establish how this infrastructure, such as the National Museum, National Gallery, the RDS, and the RIA, was aligned to the network and state-run syllabus of the 'South Kensington System' which sought to control culture in the service of industry and empire. Where this utilitarian system would in part provoke the anti-capitalist romanticism of John Ruskin (Hewison, 2013), in Ireland the reaction was 'refracted, via the prism of nationalism' (p. 7).

As such, the story confirms in a curious way Jane Jacobs' dictum that 'Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings.' (Jacobs, 1961) These old buildings, be they the tangible 'identity machines' (McClellan, 2012, 278) called museums, the '*hyper-regulatory* spaces' of schools (Cann, 2018) or the less tangible institutional networks would prove remarkably unchanged in the immediate decades post-independence where a nationalist gloss simply repainted the existing setup.

This is a story in two parts. Almost half of the text is devoted to the final quarter of the time period surveyed. Cooke's concentration in the second half of the text on the past 50 years makes sense given his inclusive approach to culture as opposed to a more exclusive conception of the arts. Furthermore, this focus allows Cooke to cash in on the historical contextualisation detailed in the first half.

The ironies produced by the journey from colony to republic extend into the polemics and politics of the divides of urban and rural, church and state, isolation and cosmopolitanism, modernity and tradition. In the second half of the twentieth century, they are most pronounced in the tensions surrounding the 'arms-length principle' which aimed to negotiate the contradictions between the autonomy of the artist and state support for the arts.

Consequently, the revolution years in Irish cultural policy and discourse were not a century ago, but rather in the late 1960s/ early 1970s. The advent of television is emblematic of the belated democratisation of culture. Here too we see the British influence when Cooke speculates that 'RTÉ's re-broadcast of Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* series for the BBC in 1970 probably did more to familiarise the Irish population with the great artworks of the European tradition than 18 years of effort by the Arts Council.' (p. 242) Cooke focuses on the more generally unacknowledged and structural colonial legacies in Irish culture, recognising that 'the majority of Irish initiatives in the cultural field since the 1950s were either inspired by or based on British precedents.' (p. 13) Perhaps this in part explains why there is, as he notes, a deep ambivalence about the state taking a role in the cultural life of the country.

There is a strong sense that 1973 is the hinge year in the story. With the Arts Act of that year and entry into the ECC, there was a notable shift in policy toward the artist with the state taking a more interventionist and welfarist approach to culture. This shift is evidenced in the developments that followed; the Per Cent for Art Scheme, the establishment of Aosdána, and the appointments of Local Authority Arts Officers to name a few. These initiatives were contemporary with the increased professionalization of the arts, institutionalisation of heritage, and developments of both national and local cultural infrastructure. They firmly established, in the discourse at least, the role of the state as a patron for the individual artist but also the language of 'expediency' where culture is, in the words of George Yúdice, increasingly wielded 'for both socio-political and economic amelioration.' (2003, 9)

This is not a history led by theorists, artists, or even communities. This is a history informed by politicians, civil servants, and institutions played out in Dáil Éireann and the national newspapers. Given that culture is rarely the explicit focus of parochial 'parish-pump politics,' this deep reflection on the process of cultural policy development in Ireland reveals that even here

evidence-based initiatives, democratic deliberation, strategic planning, and critical evaluation are not the main drivers. Here we see instead that the story of cultural policy in Ireland is largely personality-driven (Thomas Bodkin, Seán Ó Faoláin, Patrick Little, Anthony Cronin, Charles Haughey etc.), top-down, patrician, and piecemeal. Projects are the result of idiosyncratic benefactors (Hugh Lane, Michael Scott, Alfred Beit, Chester Beatty, George Bernard Shaw etc.), policy is routinely 'declared', rarely agreed, considered and debated.

This too is a colonial inheritance, as Cooke argues: 'the pragmatic and improvisational approach to policymaking that is such a strong feature of Irish political culture generally (and partly a legacy of British Rule), has resulted in particularly turbulent approaches to the administration of culture.' (p. 13) Nowhere is this more visible than the dizzying rearrangements of the Department of Culture. It has long been clear that the Department's composition is dictated by 'purely pragmatic motivations' (Slaby, 2014, 165). But as Cooke notes: '*Every* subsequent change of government [since the Department was established] has seen a re-configuration of the department's constituent elements. Such Rubik-cube-like efforts to find a solution to the puzzle of culture have tended to postpone the possibility of achieving a semblance of coherence and stability in policies governing it.' (p. 432) Given the widespread dereliction of cultural and heritage infrastructure, amongst other challenges, currently facing the state the under theorisation of culture in Irish popular discourse that allows these almost mandatory ad-hoc mutations does not bode well for coherent responses.

The text is clearly designed with students in mind with endnotes and bibliography after each chapter, a glossary of the different names that the Department has shapeshifted through. In the sweep of Cooke's writing, we see both the broad trends and the key events. This survey approach is valuable insofar as it puts a shape on the evolution of cultural policy in

Ireland. It is, of course, an approach that necessarily leaves the reader wanting to delve deeper into the personalities and controversies that shaped the cultural landscape of Ireland. Doing so reveals Adolf Mahr, director of the National Museum, to be more than a Nazi 'sympathiser' but the Dublin *Ortsgruppenleiter* (local branch leader) of the Nazi party's *Auslandsorganisation* (organisation abroad) from 1934 (McGuinness and Maume, 2009). Equally, it would benefit from the inclusion of images and an organigram of the development of the cultural infrastructure over time. Despite these minor absences, it is certain to be an essential survey for anyone interested in the history of culture in Ireland of the area for many years to come.

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NOTES

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