

Déjà Vu: The story so far (right)

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The American Library Association released a report indicating a sharp upsurge in the far right's attempts to ban books and place restrictions on public libraries. (Giroux, 2023)

Introduction

In the process of writing this article, I reflected on my experience of the transformation of Ireland from an avowedly theocratic state, to one that has been the first in the world to vote for marriage equality by a margin of two to one. In addition, Leo Varadkar, the current Taoiseach, that is, Prime Minister, is openly gay, and his father was from India. Further, five years ago, in 2018, Ireland voted by 66.4% to 33.6% with a turnout of almost 65% to delete an anti-abortion clause in the Constitution of Ireland following a long and arduous campaign (Fitzsimons, 2021).

However, after years of progress, a new phenomenon has appeared. Small, but vocal, groupings of people seem to be intent on putting a stop to progress, under various guises. These include a small number of political parties which advocate extreme nationalism, but also individuals and small groups who champion anti-immigration, anti-vax, anti-mask, anti-gay, anti-trans, anti-abortion, anti-Traveller views. Some of these groupings espouse violence and have attacked people who campaign against them. But all express hate of one type or another, against women, LGBTQI+, people of colour, education, and on and on. Most recently, they turned their attention to libraries, publishers, and bookshops.

When I witness these grouping on the streets of Ireland, and on social media, and even in mainstream media, I'm surprised that they are organised with scripts and slogans and posters, and that they have appeared so visibly in such a short time, in spite of emancipatory social movements developing over decades. Is this the rise of the far right, as is happening in the USA? Is it nationalism, like India? Is it totalitarianism, like Stalinism? Is it fascism, like mid-twentieth century Europe? Is it theocracy, like Afghanistan? Is it right wing populism, like Hungary? These are the questions I ask myself, mystified after years of working in adult and community education, encouraging people to question everything, to raise their consciousness about the levels of oppression and repression they experienced, adopting dialogue and

discussion, critiquing mainstream education and analysing society, culture and history: in other words, normal practice in adult and community education

In this article, I want to explore the rise of the right in Ireland in the present and draw comparisons and contrasts with a long history of conservatism after the foundations of the Irish state, in 1922. I want to examine the nature of the legal and attitudinal authoritarianism that flourished from the 1930s to the 1970s, and re-emerging in the late 1970s, until the middle of the 2010s, when the two ground-breaking referenda were held. And I want to bring it right up to the present day, as a dark force for patriarchal authoritarianism emerges in the cyber space. I want to explore how the tide turns after each emancipatory phase, identify the main actors, and what we can learn from those who resisted at each phase. Finally, I want to find the light of hope, especially through the praxis of adult and community education and development that will equip us to withstand the dark onslaught of hate.

The present day

Henri Giroux, in his blog on Truthout, says that the right wing in the USA has turned attention to libraries, with an upsurge of demand to ban books, particularly by or about the LGBTQIA+ community (Giroux, 2023).

On April third, 2023, the very popular RTE1 programme, *Liveline*, opens with a statement from Irish libraries, stating that a campaign is afoot and that libraries should not engage with it. Then, it proceeds with Pat Cotter, publisher of an edited collection, *Queer Love: An Anthology of Irish Fiction* (McVeigh, 2021), speaking to Philip Boucher Hayes, the presenter, about the need for books on LGBTQI+ themes, including explicit descriptions of sexual activities. Soon, Lynda Kennedy is invited to join in, and she maintains that libraries have far too explicit descriptions of sexual activities for children between the ages of 12 and 17. She explains that her organisation, probably set up in 2021, *The Irish Education Alliance*, supports a campaign to encourage parents to borrow these books and bring them to the local Garda station and complain about it; that these books harm children, against the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (2010). I contact the programme to say that this is censorship and that I have clear memories about how it worked when I was growing up, when anyone could complain about books and films, even if they hadn't read the books or seen the film, to the censor, who might ban them on the grounds of obscenity or information on contraception or abortion.

Then Jena Lunden comes on. She's the founder of the *Natural Women's Council of Ireland*, launched in July 2022. She supports Lynda's contention that children must be protected. The Natural Women's Council of Ireland has spearheaded the campaign against libraries.

I hadn't heard of these organisations before this programme. I was aware of the library campaign, through twitter. One tweeter, Derek Blighe, who started making anti-immigration videos in 2022 (Roche, 2023), moved on to anti-LGBTQI+ campaigning in video, advocated going into libraries, selecting the books and tearing them up in plain view.

Libraries decline to participate in the programme. Other callers speak about their children who might be relieved to read explicit descriptions of LGBTQI+ when they were confused about their own sexuality. Or, most important in the Irish context, where so many children were abused in all kinds of institutions, including mainstream day and boarding schools; 'industrial schools' where many working-class children were incarcerated; altar boys; in choirs; in swimming clubs; and on and on. It is argued that those children would recognise sexual abuse when it happened to them if they had access to explicit books.

Over the following few days, a storm rages on social media. On the one hand, Derek Blighe and Jana Lunden are escorted by Gardaí into libraries to make their complaint, and maybe to stop them tearing up the books. On the other hand, many right-wing watchers draw the connections between this campaign and what's happening in the USA, with regards to the anti-LGBTQI+ and anti-woman trends, especially the emergence of scripts which purport to support women and children, but by organisations and spokespeople who have no previous record of working in these fields.

This episode helped me to see the key concepts in this latest iteration of the right and the far right, having grown up in a society where I witnessed the wide-spread banning of books, including *Borstal Boy*, by Brendan Behan (1958), *Our Bodies Ourselves* (Boston Women's Collective, 1973), not to mention the burning of Edna O'Brien's banned book, *The Country Girls* (1960), in her hometown (Driscoll, 2005). The foundations for this element of book banning were solidified in 1930s Ireland, by the right wing theocratic social institutions, quickly established in the new state.

1930s Ireland

The struggle for independence in Ireland is a very long story, but a key turning point was the 1916 Rising, the culmination of several social movements, including the labour movement, the women's movement, the cultural movement as well as republican politics, all of which had origins that could be traced back over centuries, but with an added impetus of labour movements, and the women's movements.

The 1916 Rising instigated a new phase, resulting in the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 and, ultimately, the Republic of Ireland in 1948. The 1916 Proclamation stated:

The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally. (Proclamation of Independence, 1916, 2018)

The explicit commitment in the proclamation to the people of Ireland was towards equality, rights, and liberty, including women and children. However, within a very short time, the locus of power shifted from the centre left to the centre right and conservatives took over. For example, the first years of the Dáil, the Irish parliament, had only a single woman deputy, Constance Markievicz, who was very active in the 1916 Rising, along with at least 76 other women who were incarcerated in Richmond Barracks, following the Rising (McAuliffe, Gillis, 2016) and probably many more. But from the beginning, the political power in Ireland was held by the mainly centrist and right representatives, until the republican party, Fianna Fáil, was elected in 1932, with a very strong connection to the Roman Catholic Church, and their time in power was unbroken until 1948. They implemented the changes that were in complete contrast to the aspirations of the 1916 proclamation. So, in 1937, the Constitution of Ireland, was accepted by a narrow majority, with objections by feminists, by non-Catholic religious leaders and by some leftist political parties, as it was infused with conservative and religious values. The main objections by feminists were that, rather than being considered equal citizens, women had a special mention in the constitution:

Article 41 2.1: In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

Article 41 2.2: The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.

(Constitution of Ireland, 1937)

That is, the explicit intention of this article is to see women's place in the home, out of the public arena, in spite of the aspiration of the 'common good'. This intention was consolidated with legal changes in 1941, when married women were barred from employment in the public service and, while it wasn't a legal obligation in the private sector, it was the practice in all the major employers, such as Guinness Brewery and Jacobs Biscuits (Bambrick, 2019). Further, it explicitly feminised unpaid work in the home, and forced married mothers to be dependent on their husband's income. Of course, this applied to white- or pink-collar employment, rather than manual and so-called unskilled workers, employed as cleaners, maids, servants, domestic workers and so on. Meanwhile, unmarried mothers were incarcerated in their thousands during that era until the 1990s, and their babies adopted often without their consent (Hogan, 2020).

This strict separation of men and women, in public and private, was underpinned by the dualism of Aristotelian Thomist theology and Catholic theology generally, with the binary of good as the opposite of evil, and male the opposite of female, reason the opposite of emotion, and so on, which Simone de Beauvoir challenged fundamentally with her construction of *The Other*, in the context of existentialism, and her famous statement, *One is not born but becomes a woman* (1953); that is, the dualisms are not absolute but are changeable according to the situation. But the point is that the connections between theology and the rise of fascism is clear, if disingenuous; that it is a war of God versus the Devil.

However, during that time, while fascist political parties rose to power in Germany, Italy and Spain, in Ireland there was just one group who supported General Franco. This was led by Eoin O'Duffy, who saw the conflict as a war between Christian virtue and the evils of communism, with the attendant anti-Semitic and anti-trade union beliefs. O'Duffy's mission to Spain ended when most volunteers voted to go back to Ireland after six months, due to their illness and the deaths of their comrades (Long, 2009). Further, the anti-fascist side were also represented, by Peadar O'Donnell (Ó Drisceoil, 2001) and Michael O'Riordan (White, 2011), both of whom took up roles on the side of workers and artists in Ireland, post-1930s and, far from being a religious war as O'Duffy claimed, it was more a war for democracy against fascism (McGarry, 1999). Interestingly, the Irish government declared neutrality around 1936. Nevertheless, the Dublin Government remained centre right, even though Ireland had an appreciation and some

level of welcome, for anti-Nazis escaping from Germany, as witnessed by Christabel Bielenberg (1968) and her daughters-in-law, sisters Charlotte and Angela von der Schulenburg whose father was active in the German resistance, including the plot to kill Hitler (Hoffman, 1996). All the same, it may not be deduced that Ireland was avowedly anti-fascist and, in my memory, it was often joked that the Irish were neutral on the German side.

It wasn't until entry to the Common Market in the early 1970s, that the social conditions in Ireland were considered as retrogressive. The application to join Europe meant a raft of legislation to transform the social conditions, especially the status of women, with regards to equality.

1971 Dublin to Belfast Train

Ireland in the 1960s was still in the throes of the theocracy that escalated from 1932, with the consolidation of the influence of the Catholic Church into health, education, social policy, and the law. Meanwhile, over the border in Northern Ireland, life seemed to be colourful and free, at least for one part of the population, more influenced by liberal Britain in social matters. A growing women's movement was underway in Dublin, and it was decided that on Saturday, 22nd Mary 1971, a small group of The Irish Women's Liberation Movement members would travel to the North, to procure contraceptives and import them into the Republic in defiance of the ban in the 1937 constitution. Serendipity put me on that scheduled train, with a few school friends, who decided to avail of the £1 return fare, to buy jeans and t-shirts in C&A and M&S, bright, colourful stores unavailable in the Republic. It was the first time that I had heard of the Women's Liberation Movement, but it was probably a complete turning point for me, lifting me out of immersion in the doctrine of good and evil propagated by schooling, the law, the church, the media; indeed, the entire society. Although I was still in school, an all-girls convent school with nuns in abundance, I started to think in opposition to the strict Catholic ethos, and eventually, went on to study philosophy in the university in Maynooth, writing my major assignment (very poorly) on Simon de Beauvoir, whose book, *The Second Sex* was banned, not only by the Irish censor, but also by the Vatican. Incidentally, the Professor of Philosophy, a priest, helped me to procure a copy of the book from England. There was a resistance to the oppression of censorship, even if it was thin on the ground, including the support of Enda O'Brien's work, a lone voice, relatively speaking, at the time, in the 1960s, by the Professor of English Peter Connolly (not a relative) also a priest (Murphy, 2009).

Within a few years of leaving college with my consciousness raised by the women's movement and Beauvoir, I discovered both women's studies and adult education, which I was fortunate enough to be able to combine in my work in the same university, Maynooth. The Centre of Adult and Community Education was established in Maynooth, by another priest, Liam Carey. It was underpinned by a Catholic sociology, which also prevailed in University College Dublin, and in the provision of adult education in the community (Fleming, 2012). However, by the time I joined, it was changing, with more secular philosophies, and I facilitated women's studies in the fledgling subject of community education. This was in 1985, and it was the period of great pain, following the lamentable and distressing campaign to insert the ban on abortion into the constitution, which was driven and funded by the Catholic right, some of which came from the USA, but mainly home-grown conservatives fearful of the progress of the women's movement of the 1970s (O'Reilly, 1992). To this milieu, I brought my experience of women's groups, the philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir and the practice of adult and community education. For me, and hopefully for the learners, it was a deeply emancipatory development.

The Usual Backlash

However, the present-day masterminds of the right see the capacity of education and history to threaten their power and status. Giroux sees the clear connections between the banning of critical race theory, the banning of books on trans issues, and the hostility to the traditional media with the totalitarianism of the past, the McCarthy Era and of course, the Trump epoch (2023). In Ireland, the social institutions of education and health are resisting the efforts of the right to control them. For example, relationship education in both primary and secondary schools include the acknowledgement of gender, sexuality and trans issues, while the whole abortion question was framed as a healthcare issue, not a moral one, for the secular provision. All the same, there is a backlash against the referendums of 2016 and 2016, on the rights of the LGBTQI+ community to legally recognised marriage, and the right to abortion services, which is expressed both overtly and covertly. As I said above, the library campaign against LGBTQI+ books is framed as protecting children under UNCRC, and the Catholic Church still considers abortion as murder. These campaigners have moved over the past few years from anti-vax to anti-immigration, tapping into current social issues including unease about the social isolation during lockdown and the outrageous numbers in homelessness (Gallagher, 2023) echoing scripts from the USA, but also referring to the New Plantation of Ireland: that refugees and

asylum seekers are the counterpart to the plantations in the 16th and 17th centuries, by the Tudors in particular. Typing these words make this contention sound even more ludicrous.

The anti-LGBTQI+ campaign is more serious. The underlying argument depends on adherence to the Thomist dualism, as in the 1930s, that male is opposite to female, and any concessions to fluidity undermines the foundations of society. These arguments were rehearsed in the 50s and 60s, in the discussions about the status of homosexuality as a psychological disorder and as a criminal offence, prompted by the Wolfenden Report in 1957 which argued that private matters were not the business of the state, and the response by the Devlin Report in 1965, which argued that society was a seamless web that would be undermined by any challenge to the moral threads. I studied these two documents in my undergraduate philosophy course in the 1970s, and they are relevant today, in this context, which wants to revert to the 'seamless web' argument.

The Pedagogy of Hope

What can adult and community education do in the face of the backlash against the progress of the recent decades? I suppose what it always did, allowing space for people to tease out the real, complex foundations of these social issues that pre-date the rise of the right. What gives me real hope is 'the war on woke', as articulated in so many contexts from the Tories to the US Republicans, as explored by Syed in the BBC programme, *Woke: The Journey of a Word* (2023). Feminists and adult educators know it as consciousness raising and conscientization, and the war is the declaration that it has been successful in social and cultural analysis that examines the complex foundations of inequality, unfairness, and oppression. It's frightening to witness the far-right influences in mainstream political parties, but there is still hope that history and education will prevail in the face of the backlash.

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