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Law and European Studies

This article presents a sociological analysis of current Irish identity using two strands of globalization theory: regressive nationalism and glocalization. It is submitted that Irish society in multicultural, globalized 2009, in the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger and the economic crisis lacks an appropriate sociological "ideal" which Emile Durkheim considers necessary for societal self-reflection. It applies this originally religion orientated theory of “ideals” to identity analysis, arguing that the extremely diverging "ideals" by which Irish people currently struggle to identify themselves - The Irish Paddy and the Irish Cosmopolitan - are both detached from the reality of current Irish identity which is reconstructing itself through a hybrid process of regressive glocalization, negotiating the impact of globalization to preserve the ‘old Irish spirit’. It is therefore proposed that a new "ideal" of Irish identity should be constructed around Irish returning emigrants, which combines cosmopolitan and globalisation ideals with “idyllised” Irish values of community, kinship and sense of humour.

Introduction
Identity is a sense of subject and what kind of entity that subject is (Acrombie et al, 2000). It is how the entity recognises itself and how others recognise it by simultaneously differentiating the entity from others and aligning it with collectives. However, identity is not finite or permanent. It a social construction, and as such it is subject to circumstance and therefore can be reconstructed.
Thus, ‘Identities need to be analyzed not only in their cultural location but also in relation to historical epoch’ (Alcoff 2003, p.3).

Ireland was traditionally a predominantly monocultural society; primarily agrarian, premodern and peasantry. However, it rapidly transformed into a modern society, before being propelled forward into a ‘Postmodern condition’ (Keohane and Kuhling 2004, p.58). Some sociologists claim that “Irish culture experienced modernity before its time” (Gibbons 1996, p.6) while others claim that it in fact skipped modernity altogether, moving instead straight from pre- to post modernity (Crowley and Mac Laughlin 1997, p.2).

Ireland is also a relatively new nation, achieving independence from English rule in 1922. Upon independence, Ireland was still a predominantly agrarian society, having experienced modernity in a focused way, in particular as a modernization of the agriculture and textile sectors to supply the British industrial revolution. (Share et al 2007, p.58) Thus, the Irish economy was left in a fragile condition, and it was not until the economic boom of the ‘Celtic Tiger’, in the 1990s that we saw a shift in Irish politics from protectionism to a neo-liberal, international agenda (O’Hearn 1998 cited in Keohane and Kuhling 2004, p.150) which resulted in Ireland experiencing astonishing economic growth and globalisation in all its forms - in particular the reversal of migration flows; since the 1990s, net immigration rates have overtaken net emigration rates for only the second time since 1921 (Watt 2002 cited in Kuhling and Keohane 2007, p.52). Thus, in a very short period Irish society has undergone rapid reform and reconstruction, thereby also reforming Irish culture and ultimately, as Alcoff (2003, p.3) would argue, identity. This has lead to much lamenting that we are ‘Losing our Irishness’; in particular our sense of community and solidarity, as well as our Irish heritage (Crowley and Mac Laughlin 1997), to “[a] new cult of individualism” (Corcoran 2006 p.2) thereby
resulting in a sense that “the country is not quite sure where it is at, never mind where it is headed” and that the “debate about whether Ireland is closer to Boston or Berlin remains unresolved” (Corcoran 2006, p.3).

To date, Irish identity has been renegotiated, (Corcoran and Peillon 2004, p.3) between the diametrically opposed ideals of the “traditional” and the ‘global’. While these ideals have provoked and allowed a reconstruction of Irish identity, it is submitted that the Irish society of today, in the aftermath of the economic boom and the crash thereof, needs a new ideal, more reflective of the current Ireland, to guide it through such uncertain times. It is proposed that this ideal should be constructed around the concept of the returning emigrant.

Drawing from Durkheim’s work on religion, an ideal is an idea, formed by real conditions; “a natural product of social life” (Durkheim 1915, p.422). It is a concentrated, distilled concept of the society, which serves as a kind of reference point, which he claims is needed in order for a society to create and recreate itself and by making the society become and remain more self-aware and self-reflexive thereby moulding the society’s identity. Traditionally, Irish cultural ideals have been anchored around the ‘Irish Paddy’; the strongly Catholic, agriculturally engaged man, who is born and raised ‘locally’, though often diasporic due to an impoverished Ireland, is family orientated, easy-going, can’t resist a good pint and loves to have ‘the Craic’. In stark contrast, during the Celtic Tiger, the Irish government constructed and sold a new ideal; that of the a highly educated, technologically advanced and competent Irish who, while physically located in a scenic, rural Ireland, have a world view which welcomes and embraces globalization, neo-liberal capitalism, and multiculturalism (Gibbons 1996, pp.82-93). However, such polar-opposite ideals have left many struggling in an attempt to identify a more reflective collective Irish identity.
somewhere along this vast continuum with which they can associate. This article will therefore analyse present-day Irish identity, and examine how, why and in what way it is being reformed and reconstructed, using two diverging strands of Globalization theory. The first relates to Regressive Nationalism, which proposes that in the face of globalization and the consequent threat of homogenization, society regresses back into a narrow, nationalist identity (Feartherstone 2003; Gray 2002). The second strand claims that local societies negotiate the interplays between the global and the local, through the process of Glocalization (Robertson 2001 cited in Ritzer 2004, p.163).

The essay will elaborate on these two processes of identity construction, apply them to recent changes in Irish society and also apply them to two particular types of returning Irish emigrant. The first is the Irish Diaspora who were forced by economic and social factors to emigrate, particularly to Britain and the United States and created close-knit “Irish” communities in the host country, ultimately choosing to return to their “homeland”; the source of their culture, heritage and community solidarity (Corcoran 2003; Gray 2002; Hickman 2002; Ní Laoire 2007). The second relates to emigrants who chose to emigrate, a phenomenon which became particularly common amongst the educated middle-class from the 1980s onwards. They chose to avail of globalization and capitalism and to experience new cultures (Corcoran 2003, p.2). Such emigrants continued to identify themselves as Irish but assimilated more into the host country, and often avoided what they referred to as “ghetto Irish” communities (Corcoran 2003, p.9). However, many such emigrants returned to Ireland later in their lives, provoked by a longing to escape the “rat-race” and the anonymity of their lives in the host states, and to return to their idyllised imaginings of an Ireland characterised by a slow-pace, community, kinship and sense of humour (Corcoran 2003; Gray 2002; Ní Laoire 2007).
Following this analysis, I will critique the usefulness of these theories and finally conclude that Ireland should construct current Irish identity on an ideal of the returning emigrant.

**Globalization: The catalyst**

Globalization theory emerged in the 1980s. Globalisation has countless “definitions”, but typically it is seen as time-space compression (Miles 2001, p.146) caused by the proliferation of new technologies which facilitate the mobility of people, goods, capital and symbols, economic restructuring on a global scale, state deregulation and the emergence of transnational corporations (Savage et al 2005, p.3) cumulatively resulting in the worldwide diffusion of practices and the expansion of relations (Lechner forthcoming cited in Ritzer 2004 p 160), linking “distant localities” (Giddons 1991 cited in Miles 2001, p.145), thereby leading to the “growth of a shared global consciousness” (Lechner forthcoming cited in Ritzer 2004 p.160). This led, particularly in the early days of the theory, to the proposition that globalisation would result in homogenisation of world cultures, and in turn, identities (Miles 2001). Regressive nationalism is a reactive identity formation. It is a resistance to the homogenising forces of globalization (Featherstone 2003). Glocalization on the other hand implies agency. In forming its culture and collective identity, the society has the ability to choose, control and temper both the homogenizing and heterogenizing effects of globalization (Featherstone et al 1995, p.26). Both modes of identity formation are evidenced in Irish society and, as it will be seen, are also apparent in the formation of Irish emigrants’ identities.

**Regressive nationalism**

“It is often the integration of Ireland into the new international order which activates some of the most conservative forces in Irish society”

(Gibbons 1996, p.3)
Sociologists have noted that “information flows” of globalisation (Castells 1996 cited in Savage et al 2005, p.5), and the associated threat of cultural homogenization tend to “trigger a search for fixed orientation points” and attempts to affirm old boundaries, while simultaneously constructing new; physical, psychological, cultural, or otherwise (Meyer and Geschiere 1999, p 2). This can result in a regression to deep nationalism which clings to what Anderson would call “Imagined Communities” (1991, cited in Featherstone 2003, p.346; Gray 2002). Analysing Hillery’s comparison of 94 different definitions of Community, Bell deduced three components common to all: connection to a delimited physical area, common bonds and social interaction (Bell 1972, p.29). Anderson characterises “Imagined Communities” as those situated in areas larger than a “primordial village” as they lack face-to-face daily interaction between the constituent members. In imagined communities collective solidarity is thus founded more on collective historical memories, shared symbols and the “idea” of the community (1991, cited in Featherstone 2003, p.346). This can result in closed constructions of identity, often leading to xenophobic expressions of identity, particularly in post-colonial states who tend to “mimic their masters’ voices” including ideas of “racial purity” (Gibbons 1996, pp.6-7).

Certainly, 21st Century Ireland bares witness to regressive identity formation. Political and public discourse promotes and markets Ireland as a multicultural, globalised nation (Gibbons 1996, pp.82-93). Since the Celtic Tiger, Ireland has opened it borders and embraced Foreign Direct Investment (Share et al 2007, p.79), and a reversed participation in the New International Division of Labour, now characterised by immigration, rather than emigration (Share et al 2007, p.164-169). Yet, there has been very little emphasis on the cultural integration of immigrants, adopting instead an incredibly assimilationist view of multiculturalism (Keohane and Kuhling 2007, p.67; Fanning 2002, p.3). Anti-
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Racism campaigns focus on symbolic positive representations of minority groups rather than tackling real inequalities (Keohane and Kuhling 2007, p.72). Furthermore, non-European immigrants remain in a particularly precarious situation (Fanning 2002; Fanning 2004) through the work visa/work authorisation programme, which is becoming even more stringent and costly since the 7 April 2009 emergency budget.

However, no example is quite as poignant as that of the Citizenship referendum of 2004. Prior to the 2004 referendum, anyone born in the Republic of Ireland was automatically granted Irish citizenship. However, by a margin of four to one, the Irish electorate voted in radical changes which repealed this provision and replaced it with criteria based instead primarily on blood ties (Keohane and Kuhling 2007, p.58). This is a particularly potent example of regressive reformulation of Irish identity, which harks back to notions of racial purity and pedigree (Fanning 2002 p.18). The discourse around this referendum was incredibly xenophobic, exaggerating figures to create panic about, for example, an inundation of pregnant non-EU women coming to Ireland to give birth to “Irish” children, blocking up Irish maternity wards in the process, though in fact such births constituted merely 2.4 percent of all births in the three maternity hospitals in Dublin in 2003. (Keohane and Kuhling 2007, p.58) Regressive, oppressive treatment can also be seen in provisions relating to refugees and asylum seekers who are segregated in closed communities in Ireland and forbidden to work, while simultaneously being constructed as spongers upon Irish generosity (Keohane and Kuhling 2007 pp.57-59; Fanning 2002; Fanning 2002; Fanning 2004).

Regressive nationalism could also be seen in the current “cultural revival”. Irish tin whistle and dance lessons are common features in Irish primary schools, and
the Irish language remains an obligatory course of study for students in Ireland up until Leaving Certificate, with limited exemptions for non-English speaking foreigners, Irish students who have lived abroad for at least three years before the age of eleven, or people with a learning disability. The Irish government enforces protectionist policies and planning conditions based on Irish language competency in Gaeltacht areas (O’Donovan 2009). It also pushed for the recognition of Irish as an official language of the EU, which was accomplished and came into force on 1 January 2007. GAA sports remain phenomenally popular and opposition in 2005 to opening Croke Park to foreign sports could be described as little other than regressive, protectionist nationalism. Cultural events can be seen as a form of ritual or ceremony or “collective effervescence”, as Durkheim argues, which recharge communality (Durkheim 1915 p.428). For example, Saint Patrick’s Day celebrations are increasingly extravagant each year and are spreading across the globe.

Regressive nationalism is also evidenced among Irish emigrants. The old cliché that one is never as nationalistic as when one is abroad is particularly pertinent in relation to Irish Diaspora. Irish Diaspora often congregated in/were forced into ‘Irish Ghettos’, where they created close-knit kinship and friendship based communities. Diaspora continued to identify themselves as Irish, reconstructing their Irish identity by stretching the boundaries of the imagined Irish community based on blood ties and collective memories (Gray 2002) whereby, though not resident in Ireland, they continued to associate themselves with it and dreamt of a return to Ireland, their “idyllised” ‘homeland’ (Ní Laoire 2007, p.334). In this sense they were in fact ahead of their time, deterritorializing Irish identity in much the same way as the 2004 Citizenship referendum (Gray 2002). While of course many couldn’t, or simply chose not to, return to Ireland, those who did (and still do) return report that they experienced a particularly strong hankering to “return home” to Ireland even despite many years abroad in established
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communities (Corcoran 2003; Gray 2002; Hickman 2002; Ní Laoire 2007). This is symbolic of the fact that after hundreds of years of colonisation and emigration, 36 years of membership in the EU and being the primary location of American investment in Europe (Gray 2002, p.125), Ireland remains economically, rather than socially, multicultural and globalized (Kuhling and Keohane 2007; Fanning 2002).

Glocalization

Many globalisation analysts reject theories based on assumptions of cultural homogenisation, insisting instead that it is imperative that globalisation be analysed in relation to the ‘local’; ‘local’ here meaning a territorialized community, generally denoting nations or smaller delineated areas (Miles 2001). Such studies have led to the development of the theory of ‘Glocalization’; the process whereby local societies negotiate the interaction and intermingling of the global and the local, and the homogenising and heterogenising forces of globalization (Featherstone et al 1995, p.126), resulting in unique outcomes in each geographic area (Robertson 2001 cited in Ritzer 2004, p.163). It argues that globalization results in global interconnectedness and increased interaction between “localities” thereby resulting in a process of “selective learning” from other cultures and societies. (Robertson 2001 cited in Ritzer 2004 p.165).

Ireland’s migration policies could be understood as examples of such glocalization. We permit refugees and asylum seekers, but confine their cultural interaction (Kuhling and Keohane 2007; Fanning 2002) and, consequently, their cultural impact. The Irish government and society choose to act, engage and identify themselves on the global scale and international market. Therefore they embrace neo-liberal policies which push capitalist agendas and actively seek
foreign investment, and foreign labour to fill the shortfall in labour (Crowley and Mac Laughlin 1997). Yet, at the same time, the Irish electorate voted in 2004 for a constitutional change to the granting of citizenship establishing the centrality of bloodline connections. This, in turn, has resulted in a deterritorialization of Irish identity which could have far-reaching consequences for the Irish Diaspora and their descendants who have engaged in the essence of globalisation; international mobility and interaction (Gray 2002). Such discourse, encompassing the Diaspora in conceptions of the Irish, has come to the fore particularly since Mary McAleese’s term in presidency where she expressly extended the boundaries of Irish identity to include “the global Irish family” of Diaspora (McAleese 1997 cited in Gray 2002, p.127).

Other examples of glocalization include the emergence of ethnic/world culture festivals which showcase the most attractive elements of foreign and minority cultures in Irish society, such as the annual Festival of World cultures in Dún Laoghaire, or Chinese New Year’s Festival in Dublin (Corcoran 2004), as well as the incorporation of ethnic ‘multicultural’ displays into events such as the Saint Patrick’s Day Parade. Such events showcase snippets of diverse cultures, however, this is often done more as a spectacle; a form of entertainment, based primarily on consumption where very little inter-cultural dialogue actually takes place (Corcoran 2004). This is a clear example of Irish society choosing and controlling the level of interaction with, and integration of other cultures into what it is to be Irish, while still feeding the concept of a “multicultural” Irish.

Returning emigrants also exhibit glocalizing tendencies; particularly those of the educated middle-class who chose to emigrate, to further their education, careers and cultural experiences and to make it on their own (Corcoran 2003, p.9). They continue to identify themselves as Irish, but seek to avail of globalization and in particular the individual liberation that it provides, allowing
them to pursue personal interests and development. Such emigrants are less inclined to associate with the ‘Ghetto Irish’, preferring instead to interact with other nationalities, particularly natives of the host country. Such emigrants also adopt more of the ‘fast-pace’, work orientated culture which is often characteristic of the host state. Nonetheless, they continue to identify themselves as Irish, associating with an imagined, deterritorialised concept of Irishness (Corcoran 2003). During the years of the Celtic Tiger, many of these emigrants returned to what they identify as Irish culture: a sense of community, kinship, and good humour (Corcoran 2003; Gray 2002; Hickman 2002; Ní Laoire 2007). They have availed of globalization, using it to their advantage and have been influenced by their experiences, but still cling to that sense of community solidarity which they associate with Irishness.

Critique

Regressive, reactionary nationalism tends toward the ‘Irish Paddy’ end of the ideal continuum. It constructs identity based on an “idyllised” (Ní Laoire 2007, p.334) “imagined community” (Anderson 1991 cited in Feartherstone 2003, p.346), with a particularly strong emphasis on kinship, friendship and commonalities, which are anchored to the territory of the Republic of Ireland. However, such an identity construction underestimates the interpenetration of globalization into Irish society and identity. It compartmentalises the impact of globalization, assuming that it has been confined merely to the economic sphere. Even if this were true, it would ignore the interaction between economy, culture, and ultimately, identity, as evidenced in the growth of neo-liberal capitalism, individualism, meritocracy and materialism (Crowley and Mac Laughlin 1997).
Glocalization theory, while offering a middle ground between the polarised identity ideals of the ‘Irish Paddy’ and the multicultural Irish, can be regarded as naive. It assumes agency and the ability of cultures to control the impacts of and interaction with globalization. Therefore, similar to the process of regressive nationalism, glocalization erroneously assumes that the impact of global interaction can be controlled.

It is submitted that, in fact, Ireland as a whole is reconstructing itself and its identity through a hybrid process of regressive glocalization, negotiating the impact of globalization to preserve the ‘old Irish spirit’. Thus, while varieties of the returning Irish emigrant could be constructed as an identity ideal, for either identity construction, it is submitted that the returning emigrant who chose to travel, but also to return, could also be constructed as an ideal for a hybrid, regressive glocalization construction.

It must be noted that returning emigrants are often met with hostility upon their return and are subjected to such negative stereotypes as ‘the returned Yank’ (Ní Laoire, p.341; Ní Laoire 2009; Corcoran 2003). However, it is submitted that as identity is a social construction, and in light of shift towards acceptance since President McAleese’s campaigns, this should not hinder such a reconstruction. Furthermore, it is appropriate to recognize Irish emigrants who formed such important roles in Irish history and culture (Gray 2002).

**Conclusion**

Identity is a social construction. It is therefore remoulded and reconstructed in accordance with the temporal, physical and cultural circumstances. The Irish culture, landscape, society and economy have undergone overwhelming transformation in an incredibly short space of time. However, as the wave of the Celtic Tiger recedes, the Irish are left floundering, struggling in a shallow
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puddle between the safe, sandy, beach of ‘old Ireland’ and the vast ocean of globalisation and neo-liberal capitalism. The polarised ideals of the ‘Paddy Irishman’ and the cosmopolitan, global Irish do not correspond sufficiently to the current Irish collective.

This essay has analysed this process of identity construction through two diverging strands of globalization theory: reactive, regressive nationalism, whereby the perceived threat of homogenizing forces of globalization produces a closed, almost essentialist, construction of Irish identity, and glocalization by which societies negotiate both the homogenizing and heterogenising influences of globalization. However, it has been submitted that the Irish case can best be explained, using a combination of the two theories, as a type of nostalgic or regressive glocalization which welcomes aspects of globalization but strives to preserve parts of the old Irish identity. It is proposed that detailed analysis using such an approach, incorporating perhaps post-modern nostalgia, would be insightful.

Finally, following Durkheim (1964), as societies need ideals to construct their identities, it is proposed that a new ideal should be constructed around the concept of the returning Irish emigrant. One who chooses to travel, interact with foreign cultures, avail of global labour markets, and pursue individual interests, but remains anchored in its heritage and community, and chooses to return to Ireland.

References


