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Between Tradition and Modernity:  
Cultural Values and the Problems  
of Irish Society

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1. A friend suggested to me, several years ago, that Ireland's economic problems might not be completely unrelated to our social psychology. Typically, the conversation took place abroad; in Sweden, to be precise: cultural differences spring more readily to mind as causal factors when one's behaviour must repeatedly be adjusted to accord with them.

Since then I've borne the hypothesis in mind while travelling, and have gradually come to view socio-economic structure and behaviour, social relationships, and outlook on the world and on man's place in the world, as an integrated system. Latin America, a peasant society, *felt* more like home to me than Sweden did, or California — home with all its good and bad points !

Since I intend to draw upon such impressions as 'evidence', it is best, I suppose, to present them to you now. I want to use the United States and Ireland as illustrative societies. Observers acquainted with life in both countries tend to agree on certain differences that manifest themselves: relatively speaking, American life is pictured as dynamic; the feeling of controlling one's own destiny and the freedom from social constraints there are contrasted with a moralistic and economically stagnant environment in Ireland. Ireland's advantages, though, are said to include the warmth of its social and communal life, the strength of its family bonds, and the less oppressive level of serious crime. The U.S. emerges as a personally liberating but somewhat alienated society; Ireland as friendly but stultifying. Life in America is painted as fast, furious and exciting; hard work is rewarded, but required. Ireland is relaxed.

In this essay I hope to illuminate some interconnections between these and other characteristics of the two types of society; interconnections which traditionalists and modernists have both ignored in the debates over the future of our society. Each side has instead presented its vision of utopia without any acknowledgement of the less benign features which have shadowed it through history.

I also want to argue that our socio-psychological make-up, conditioned simultaneously as it is both by tradition and by an unprecedented exposure to certain aspects of the ethic of modernity, currently exhibits the classic results of a 'double bind' — the emergence of mutually-inconsistent desires. Our society has in recent decades witnessed an explosion of material expectations which has not been accompanied by the changes in behaviour and attitudes necessary to fulfill them. It may be that, in the jargon of the economist, the demand for a modern lifestyle has been predicated on the basis of underestimated social and personal costs; so, of course, may it be that the call for the retention of traditional values has been predicated on the basis of (somebody else's) undervalued personal costs.

Until these interconnections and inconsistencies have come to the forefront of cultural consciousness we will, I think, see a continuation of the decline of traditional communality alongside the advancement of the social problems of the modern world without experiencing the economic advantages usually associated with modernity.

2. What, though, do these terms, *tradition* and *modernity*, mean ? Anthropologists frequently made use of them, locating cultures on a spectrum that runs from one to the other.

Like all analytical devices this one abstracts from many aspects of reality, but it does serve to draw attention to characteristics shared by societies in different time periods and in different parts of the world, as well as allowing us to isolate features unique to each. As one moves along the scale, differences in socio-economic structure, in psychological orientation, and in the relationship of the individual to the community appear.

The extent of its division of labour provides one means of classifying a society. Consider a tribal society of hunter-gatherers, for example — virtually the only division of tasks will be between men and women. As one moves along the scale, enduring artifacts — temples, images, literature — begin to appear with the development of agriculture: while most of the community will still be engaged in the production of basic requirements, a food surplus enables the society to support several more specialised classes, such as priests and artisans.

More traditional societies, then, exhibit a smaller number of specialised occupations, or social classes. With a smaller number of steps in the hierarchy, the gap between each step is more difficult to leap. One's niche is determined largely by ceremonial principles such as heredity and age, rather than by comparative advantage and merit, which exert a relatively greater impact in more modern cultures.

A useful distinction can be drawn here between prescribed action, which has been described as "the individual expression of a collective act", and discretionary behaviour, which is, within certain limits, chosen by the individual. The domain of the latter, as has been suggested above, is narrower in traditional societies — one may, for example, be less free to choose one's own occupation or one's spouse. Freedom of choice, of course, promotes individuation and a questioning attitude, since thought is stimulated and required in the weighing-up of alternatives, and in this way psychological orientation is said to change as we move along the spectrum. Implicit in the process of individuation is the development of personal value systems, which contrast with the shared norms that dominate non-modern societies. The decay of these shared norms is what we mean by secularisation.

We are all probably aware of certain cross-cultural similarities that appear among members of any occupational group — dockers in different countries, for example. To the extent that one's occupation or one's class influences one's attitude to life, the division of labour itself contributes to the dispersion of values.

The meaning of community is clearly different, then, for the individual in traditional society. Ties of loyalty and authority are stronger, kinship networks wider, property rights may be communal rather than private, and the individual, identifying primarily as a member of a group, a concept with a temporal as well as a spatial dimension, is likely to hold a sacred view of history.

Individuation and secularisation represent the breakdown of these communal bonds and shared value systems, and modern societies are therefore likely to experience more extensive social problems, alienation and crime. Individuation, however, and the occupational and geographic mobility with which it is associated, also promotes flexibility and innovation, i.e. "pur-

poseful deviation from established patterns". These are primary requirements for economic dynamism.

3. I am going to discuss later the extent to which Ireland can be understood in these terms as a traditional society, but I want to look first of all at the manner in which primordial modernization has proceeded in the West, in order to identify the factors that have contributed to the process and to shed light on the cultural value system with which it is associated.

The conventional wisdom, following a line of thought pioneered by Marx, holds that the first cracks in the traditional peasant face of Europe began to appear in sixteenth century England with the monetization of the economy and the growing penetration of the market. The difficulties of exchange in a non-monetized (barter) economy are formidable — a person wishing to 'sell' a commodity must find someone who not only desires it but who also has something which is desired in return. There is therefore a strong incentive for families to be largely self-sufficient, in which case the distinction between economic and social relations is blurred. The extended household in peasant society is the basic unit not only of consumption, as the nuclear family is in modern society, but also of ownership and production; the economic bond linking members is therefore of a different order from that experienced today.

The gradual emergence of a generally-accepted means of exchange contributed to the dissolution of the traditional social bonds of feudal society, drawing families out of self-sufficiency and into the market economy, thereby promoting specialisation and the division of labour, with the consequent growth of individuation discussed earlier. The bonds that formed the peasant community structure were further weakened by the decline in the economic importance of kinship, and the urbanisation and geographic mobility that town-based commodity-production and the expansion in agricultural productivity made possible.

Such changes in the economic infrastructure of a society, the way in which income is produced and distributed, are inextricably linked with changes in the superstructure, the ideology and values to which it subscribes. In his best-known work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* Max Weber explored the culture of late-feudal Europe in an effort to identify those features which gave Western European economic development its specific character, leading ultimately to capitalism and the industrial revolution. While it is clear that the seeds of modern science were sown by the individualistic rejection of the authority of institutionalised dogma which became the distinguishing feature of liberal Protestantism, Weber is concerned with the development of the bourgeois attitude which arose among the fundamentalist sects. For the Calvinist, for example, the doctrine of predestination imposed a duty to consider oneself as one of the elect, and systematic self-control provided the means to attain this self-confidence. In contrast to the 'other-worldliness' of traditional asceticism, diligent single-minded dedication to worldly affairs was promoted as worldly success was regarded as a sign of one's membership of the chosen. From this, Weber argues, came a commitment to efficiency in one's "calling" which combined with the Puritan injunction against "the idolatry of the flesh" to foster thrift and capital accumulation.

It has also been argued that the advantages of improving productive efficiency are less apparent, and that the frame of mind from which stem efficiency-orientation, rationalisation and accumulation, what I will call the *ethic of modernity*, is not encouraged when production, as in peasant society, is for direct use rather than for exchange, and when property ownership is bound in a complex web of communal rights and responsibilities. That such a historically determined orientation to the world can become embodied in a culture and can influence economic behaviour is demonstrated by what I call 'the *fiesta* mentality', the way in which groups such as native Americans or Latin American peasants react to windfall economic gains.

In any case, the culture that arose with the new economic order in the West involved a substitution of the ethic of modernity for the sufficing mentality of the peasant world. The emergence of the individualist-oriented society involved a dissolution of traditional family and clan bonds with the attendant privatisation of communal property, and an increasing emphasis on individual rights above social responsibilities. A competitive, rationalist, efficiency-oriented ethic superseded the ceremonialised traditionalist principles around which society had hitherto been organised. "Acquisition", it has been said, "was freed from traditionalist ethics, and economics separated from social and religious relations."

4. To what extent can Irish society, Irish attitudes and the Irish character be understood in terms of the cultural residue of a traditional peasant society that began to break apart only over the course of this century ?

Consider firstly our attitude towards time: as Aldous Huxley has pointed out in his essay *Time and the Machine*, industrial production imposes on modern society its own regular, rhythmic mode of operation while pre-industrial work, in Eric Hobsbawm's words, depended upon "the variation of the seasons or the weather, the multiplicity of tasks in occupations unaffected by the rational division of labour, the vagaries of other human beings or animals, or even a man's own desire to play instead of working." This particular legacy appears well-preserved today: observers never fail to notice that the Irish do not genuflect before the clock.

Political scientists too have found the traditional/modern distinction to be of use, ascribing the distinctive features of Irish political life to a peasant culture operating within modern political and administrative institutions inherited or imported from the U.K. "It was these features", Basil Chubb writes in his *Government and Politics of Ireland*, "that caused political institutions closely modelled upon the British to work in some respects in a markedly different manner." From the rootedness of communities and a narrowness of horizons comes localism; patronage and brokerage are products of the system of loyalty and obligation which pervades traditional rural societies before its supersession by role relationships; personalism, under which people are valued for who they are and whom they know, replaces the efficiency principle, and anti-intellectualism is a signal of a society that values coherence above innovation.

Traditionalism shows its face also in bureaucratic organisation, where it is apparent that many of our structures — governmental, private, educational and religious — tend towards the hierarchical and authoritarian, with advancement frequently based on seniority rather than on

the modern meritocratic principle of comparative advantage.

It should surprise no one that a political and economic framework of this type, which allows little room for initiative and innovation, will not be a dynamic one. A traditional society is not oriented towards change; its organising principles are the loyalties and obligations that define the family, the community and the hierarchical structure.

"Virtually every writer about Irish society has observed the importance of close personal connections among community and family members," quotes Chubb. The relatively low status accorded to individual liberty when it is seen to conflict with community stability testifies further to the traditionality of the society. "In Western psychiatry... the liberal ethic is emphasized... That has to be reconciled with a model of life in Ireland where personal autonomy is not emphasized; national and religious autonomy is, but Irish society is much more willing to sacrifice the individual to the greater good. Hence, a murderous marriage is better than divorce, and so on," writes Anthony Clare in *The Crane Bag*.

The question of how these cultural differences might manifest themselves on the level of individual psychology is one that admits of much speculation. For example, to the extent that a proportion of people in any society will be favourably disposed towards violence, it may be expected that such acts in a more traditional society will be rationalised within a communal or political context while in the more modern society they will appear simply as individualistic deviance. Compare Western Europe and the U.S. in this regard. "Society has had its chance," said the perpetrator of the massacre at the MacDonalds restaurant in San Ysidro, California, to his wife that morning.

Psychological anthropologist Francis Hsu, in *Rugged Individualism Reconsidered*, has explored the implications for personality structure of the traditional/modern dichotomy. Arguing that intimacy must be recognised as the primary psychological need, he challenges what he regards as the ethnocentricity of the middle-European-determined mainstream paradigm and posits instead as the fundamental layer in the make-up of the human psyche the inter-personal nexus. When communal feelings are strong, as in traditional cultures, the psycho-social equilibrium of the individual may be achieved at this inter-personal level. When such feelings begin to give way to individuation and modernization, the maintenance of the balance requires a simultaneous movement of focus inwards and outwards from this level; inwards into self-exploration (witness the American fascination for psychoanalysis), and outwards beyond one's cultural group and its behaviour patterns — a tendency consistent with geographic mobility and exploration, creativity and deviance. But this distinction between the inner and outer layers of the modern personality type, and the distance between them, it seems to be, may also contribute to an understanding of several paradoxes: the vehemence with which individual privacy is guarded among modern cultures, which co-exists with freer attitudes toward sexual relations; and the curious outer conformism to be observed in modern societies alongside the elevation of individuality, in contrast to the Irish glorification of "characters" alongside the abnegation of individualism.

In many ways, then, — in economic, social and political behaviour, in attitudes towards time

and efficiency, and in the relationship of the individual to the community — we see that Ireland is still strongly shaped by the mould of its relatively recent peasant past. A point perhaps worth pondering is the connection between the various superstructural features shared by the peripheral European societies: the attitudes discussed above, the ubiquitousness of procrastination, the verbal evasiveness that Anthony Clare notes. Could these be related to the structures of the languages used, as suggested by the comments I have heard Germans and Scandinavians make about the non-linear pathways of the Romance languages? Is there some Weberian link with Catholic and Orthodox theology? (A friend is convinced that confession is the answer).

5. In discussing the primordial modernization of the West, the more or less balanced progress of the economic infrastructure and the cultural superstructure was remarked upon. The model I am proposing for Ireland in the second half of the 20th century is of a society labouring under two separate, and inconsistent, cultural value systems; a qualitative change brought about by the massive growth in the international flow of information which has taken place over the last few decades. This 'information revolution' has resulted in a situation in which virtually every Irish household each evening now plays host to a cast of characters whose motives and actions are conditioned by a culture different from their own. This communications flow is, of course, uni-directional.

In order to discuss the impact such intercourse with a separate culture will have, it is necessary to ask which values are likely to be transmitted, and which are likely to be excised, in the making of media products. All I can hope to do here is to give a flavour of the answer that might emerge to this vast question, choosing the United States, the archetypal modern culture, as illustration.

Individuation, the diminution in importance of the nexus situating the individual within the web of community, is, I have argued, the principle characteristic of the modernization process. For many reasons, the severance of the nexus has been most dramatic in the U.S.; a country founded in the relatively recent past by people who, in the economic jargon, chose to exercise 'exit rather than voice', i.e. to sever their links with their traditional homelands rather than to attempt to effect change from within. The frontier mentality of 'rugged individualism' has in this way become the ideology of a society that still exhibits tremendous geographic mobility, and one in which the process of individuation has advanced to the point where it manifests itself as the demise of the nuclear family. The glorification of the self-sufficient individual is to be seen in all genres of American film and fiction, from cowboy and detective stories to such sub-culture favourites as the writings of Ken Kesey and Jack Kerouac.

This individualism affects not just the choice of hero but also the perspective on society embodied in these works as I hope to indicate by a plot analysis of a film chosen fairly much at random — one of Charles Bronson's *Death Wish* series.

The film begins with the hero's arrival alone in New York, a suitcase in each hand, to visit a friend whose murder by a gang of drugged-up young delinquents is cut into the opening credits. Right at the start, then, the only link between the protagonist and his past is severed — the



umbilical cord of modern man is cut. The story is predictable from this point onwards: the few right-thinking people left in the 'community' organise themselves around him to wipe out the delinquents; he finds time for a brief love affair but the woman in question is killed, leaving him to walk off, alone again, suitcases in hand, into the twilight as the final credits roll.

Sound familiar? A societal dysfunction — the alienation of a group of youths from a society incapable of integrating them — is 'solved' by the introduction of yet another alienated self-sufficient individual, an epitome of the negation of the very concept of an integrated community. The 'goodies' are as much a part of the problem as the 'baddies'.

The individualistic perspective promoted by American media products is inadequate for the comprehension of social problems which emerge as natural consequences of individualism.

Paradoxically the vigour with which the ideology is presented is probably necessitated by its content, which, as we have seen, is equivalent to the dissolution of the shared values that bond a society. The functioning of society however, requires, amongst other things some degree of social stability. A shared ideology such as nationalism, or the projection of an 'evil empire', can provide this. So can a common adherence to the ideology of individualism! (We find ourselves back at the paradox of conformity).

It is not just popular culture, but modern culture in general, including the high culture of modernism, that exalts the status of the individual and recognises the validity of the individualistic value system only.

One aspect of this cultural individualism that yields an effect on society is its emphasis on stimulation at the expense of comfort, a duality to which I will return in a moment. In the social sphere this shift of focus is clear, since comfort is associated with the security of community, but it may be seen on many other levels also. (Consider for example the elevation of the rugged landscape above the gentle in romantic painting, the original individualist movement). Exposure to modern culture, I am convinced, promotes an increased desire for excitement, for a fast-paced life, for the car chase and the amphetamine rush.

Individualism also begets materialism. If we recognise, along with psychologists, the individual's need for a balance between the levels of comfort and stimulation, it seems reasonable to suggest that the removal of the protective cocoon of the tightly-knit family and community may enhance the desire for the security proffered by material possessions. Materialism means more than this, however; it means the replacement by a monetary standard of all other standards of value, so that status comes to depend only on income and wealth, and value is ascribed only to commodities and labour services exchanged on the market. (It has been argued that this led to the downgrading of the role of housewife, who is concerned with the organisation of consumption rather than production for the market). Individualism generates materialism precisely because it sweeps away the unquantifiable ceremonialised and 'sacred' values that structure a traditional society.

The growth of consumerism and individualism in an otherwise-traditional society has effects quite different from those we encounter in cultures where such values have always been associated with the ethic of modernity. In his book *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* Daniel Bell argues that 'modern' economic behaviour, conditioned by the ghost of Puritan self-denial, cannot survive the onslaught of hedonistic modern culture. However, he fails to draw what I regard as a crucial distinction between the ethic of modernity and the Puritan injunction on consumerism. The latter, undoubtedly in conflict with the individualist disposition of modern culture, has fallen by the wayside, but there is a strong complementarity between the materialism which drives expectations and the work ethic and orientation towards efficiency which contribute to their fulfillment. The *ethic* of modernity has not been exercised from modern culture, is not contained within traditional culture, and is not relayed from the former to the latter.

To summarise, we may say that the lowly expectations of a traditionalist culture can be fulfilled by the behaviour patterns inculcated by such a culture to a greater extent than the expectations of a society exposed to an individualist ideology can be satisfied by behaviour patterns which have not been organised around the principle of the ethic of modernity. If we adopt the sociologists' definition of poverty as the disproportion between desires and the means of satisfying them we may begin to understand the disillusionment that seems currently to beset our society.

6. Attitudes, economic performance, and community and family relations together, I have argued, form an inter-related social system the logic of which we must understand if we are to build a satisfactory society. Political discourse has been impoverished by our failure to encompass these connections.

To the extent that a small society can maintain any control over its direction of development in the face of the massive cultural influences to which we are subject from abroad, what principles might help us mediate the passage between tradition and modernity ?

The modernist response is presented clearly and forcefully in Clarence Ayres' work *The Theory of Economic Progress*, which applies to the issue Dewey's philosophy of instrumentalism. The cultural artifacts and intellectual achievements by which we measure the level of development of a society, Ayres argues, depend not on its supposed sensibility, but rather on the technology at its disposal. "Even if the last five centuries are left completely out of account", he writes, "the span bounded by the Aurignacian caves and the cathedral at Chartres still represent an amazing achievement. To say that one society wanted caves and the other wanted cathedrals is simply ridiculous. The inescapable truth is that human experience does manifest a developmental pattern of some sort", this pattern, according to him, being the progressive expansion of man's capabilities effected by the continuous combination of previously developed tools and the skills required to employ them. It is a product of the dynamic aspect of human behaviour which he calls 'technology', the tool-using activity of mankind.

Opposed to this dynamic principle is one inhibitory of change – man's tendency to ceremonialise and deem as sacred the way things are now and have been in the past. From this

backward-looking principle come the values embodied in the cultural superstructure. All such values hinder progress, besides which a search for value at the superstructural level can lead only to complete moral relativism once one recognises the diversity of cultures.

There are no objective values other than those of science, he concludes. It "prescribes its own conception of truth (which is) processual, or operational, or instrumental — tool-defined. This conception of truth and of human values generally is at variance with all tribal legends and all tribal authority; and since the technological revolution is itself irresistible, the arbitrary authority and irrational values of pre-scientific, pre-industrial cultures are doomed. Three alternatives confront the partisans of tribal values and beliefs. Resistance, if sufficiently effective, though it cannot save the tribal values, can bring on total revolution. Or ineffective resistance may lead to sequestration like that of the American Indians. The only remaining alternative is that of intelligent, voluntary acceptance of the industrial way of life and all the values that go with it."

Such a benign view of the values of modernity appears unwarranted, however, to those who view the tool-defined conception of progress as bearing us towards nuclear catastrophe or the demise of community.

Lonelier now, and in need,  
 Ever further from each other  
 No longer do we meander.  
 We march on straight ahead

writes Rilke. Opponents of Ayres' undiluted modernism present cultural perspective not simply as 'arbitrary authority and irrational values', but as a communal memory embodying lessons we have learned about ourselves; lessons which, when appropriately translated and renewed in the handing-down from generation to generation, may offer a life-enhancing link between past and future. Thus Herbert Marcuse writes that 'the authentic utopia is grounded in recollection'.

The issue of an appropriate translation of Irish historical tradition motivates much of Richard Kearney's recent writing. The present essay may be regarded as dealing with some of the social and economic factors to be taken into account in such cultural self-analysis and renewal.

Finally, the line of thought explored here does not preclude the possibility that social action might defuse some of the problems associated with the encroachment of modernity, as has occurred to a certain extent in Scandinavia. It supports the argument frequently made by Bertrand Russell for increased access to, and development of, sources of adventure and stimulation alternative to the anti-social ones evident in our cities today. It suggests that the inadequacy of the performance of our educational system in binding the community and encouraging community-oriented paths towards self-fulfillment be addressed; and it emphasises that we must not think of social welfare solely in terms of benefit payments; at least as important, from the point of view of this essay, is social ecology — with implications for regional policy, architecture, urban planning....

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### Postscript on Methodology

The decisions of the 'rational actor' of conventional economic theory are always mutually consistent, as they are assumed to be determined by the continuous weighing-up of *all possible alternatives*. For an option to be chosen by an individual, however, it must be *perceived*; this paper argues for the recognition that the range of options perceived is determined largely by one's cultural and social environment, which is to some extent an amalgam of diverse influences rather than a carefully blended and fully-coherent whole.

Are there equilibrating forces which come into play when an individual's expectations and behaviour, determined in this way, prove to be mutually inconsistent? My response would bear similarities to the perspective of neo- Keynesian economic theory: the existence of disequilibrium does not provide us with an unambiguous indication of the changes required in order to move towards equilibrium.