

Presentation of Memory, Politics and Identity

Haunted by History

Cillian McGrattan



«Memory Politic and Identity Haunted by History» of Cillian McGrattan heuristic for my research “Politic of memory in Celtic nationalism” because:

1. It describes the politics of memory in Northern Ireland.
2. It compares the methodologies of the study of the past and attempts to clear them from the influence of nationalism
3. The author meticulously reveals the traces of Irish nationalism in the historiography of Northern Ireland with plenty of examples
4. It is written in a clear and figurative language
5. Case study conducted at a high level and displays a clear picture of events to the uninformed reader.

After processing the first 100 pages and 5 chapters I can say that the author's position is close enough for me and that methodology I might take as the main working methodology of my research.

The purpose of this book, therefore, is twofold: firstly, it aims to describe the inscription of self-justifying and self-exculpatory narratives on the Northern Irish state and onto the collective memories of its citizens; and, secondly, it is a modest attempt to write against their stultifying, moralising, silencing and insular effects.

The first chapter outlines attempts to deal with the past in Northern Ireland. It highlights how an intellectual paradigm based on the transitional justice mechanisms in South Africa has become normative with regards to considerations of Northern Ireland's past often to the detriment of historical accuracy and moral judgement. 'Received' memories shape identities as well as fuel negative perceptions and stereotypes of difference, often hindering reconciliation processes and perpetuating identities of continued victimization. The author denounces the attempts of the terrorists and their supporters to shift the responsibility for their bloody crimes on the victims and in the process to rehabilitate itself. Republican terror groups – most notably, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) – hold the main responsibility for conflict-related fatalities: almost 60%, compared to loyalist terrorists being responsible for almost 30%, and state forces almost 10%. Nevertheless, Provisional republicans consider themselves as victims of British oppression, and without wishing to denigrate the very real suffering and abuses perpetrated by the British state, their story is easily told and fits the decolonial paradigm: an imperial power thwarted legitimate self-determination claims, and PIRA reaction/defence followed repression.

The second and third chapters look at how this normative discourse has arisen. McGrattan suggest that a mode of belatedness, and not simply transition, characterises Northern Irish politics in the movement from conflict to peace. Furthermore, he examines the possibilities and limitations inherent in ethical approaches to the past. Political radicals reconstruct the past in order to authorise the future while historicising the present in order to deprive it of authority. The post-colonial school that has emerged from cultural and literary studies provides a step to developing an ethical approach. However, its rhetorical origins within nationalistic ideologies and its predilections towards hazily defined socio-economic terms means that it swerves away from the empirical realities of brute political violence and is unable to meet the severe normative challenge that those realities pose. The result can be a tendency to at best wish those realities out of existence by considering them 'representations' or, at worse, indulge their nefarious aftermaths. Any approach to the past must remain cognisant of these values and norms we wish to see passed on to future generations and thus must be guided not only by empirical insights but also ethical obligations.

The mode of belatedness is, however, always political: it speaks to and speaks of a common experience – an experience that despite being interior and personal also links us to the world as a fact. Following this logic through, belatedness is seen to entail an ethical dimension. For not only does belatedness link the present to the violence of the past, but it also focuses on the shared experience of a world shaped and defined by that past. The past cannot simply be dealt with or overcome, despite moral and political imperatives to move on and focus on contemporary and future needs. It is also because, certainly in the case of Northern Ireland – where the conflict ended without defeat and where it continues in residual form in rioting and the continued presence of ‘dissident’ republican terrorists – the very idea of moving on depends on the imposition of an arbitrary chronology: a year zero or historical juncture that separates the ‘bad’ past with the ‘good’ present and the hoped-for utopia.

The traumatic paradigm is, in some ways, the normative outworking of the Irish literary post-colonial approach. An implicit narrative structure is followed rigidly:

- 1.'Culture' reveals and revels in the representation of enduring structures of power and injustice culminate in a dead-end victimhood, circled and imprisoned by traumatised pasts;
- 2.The demand for redress and accountability necessitate a therapeutic working through of hurts and sufferings (Irish Studies provides a much needed balm to soothe these sores);
- 3.Although closure is possible, it is not necessary since interpretation and representation are unending; however, it is enough to know that each analytic breakthrough throws new light on the dark places of the Irish psyche and will, thus, hopefully, prevent a return of violence.

Irish Studies and post-colonialism are, thus reduced to being streams in a national eschatology in which ethics demand remembering and remembering can only be achieved ethically. The trope of the detective is inescapable: order is demanded by the future and (hopefully) partially restored by rigorous analysis in the present.

The danger involved in the trauma paradigm is involved not simply in that loss of specifics and specification, but in the tendency inherent in relativism to promote the loudest voices, regardless of their ethical import, their political programme or their social claimsmaking. In so doing, the trauma paradigm not only privileges certain voices and narratives above others, but it also plays into the hands of a nationalistic ideology that post-colonialism purports to disavow.

The elision of a historical consciousness with group-think is essential for the successful functioning of nationalism as an ideology, and belies the tendency to view national projects as having ‘cultural’ wings that are somehow separate and distinct from their ‘political’ ones.

The fourth and fifth chapters attempt to meet that challenge by examining the normative basis of narratival representations along with attempting to ground them empirically. Thus Chapter 4 interrogates narratives proceeding from Bloody Sunday and Chapter 5 narratival representations of the hunger strikes.