The Anthropology of Ireland

Eugene McNamee


For a short book – 184 pages – this is a tremendously ambitious one. The authors embrace the complexity that comes with reading the title in tri-partite fashion. First, they seek to provide “an overview of the history of anthropology in Ireland and a history of the anthropology about Ireland” (3). Secondly, the book is about “how Ireland has been constructed in anthropological writing and professional practice… about how anthropologists have contributed in their own distinctive ways to ‘writing Ireland’ ” (4). Thirdly, they seek “to open up some windows on Irish life for the students and practitioners of anthropology elsewhere, to help locate the anthropology of Ireland within broader global frames” (5). The authors seek to gradually substantiate their arguments throughout a series of themed chapters which deal with areas of social life and concerns that they take to be particularly illustrative of contemporary Ireland and of how it has developed in the last century or so. There are chapters, for example on “Controlling Bodies”, “Ireland’s ‘Othering’ Economies”, “Re-presenting ‘Irishness’”, “Transnational and Global Ireland”, “Frontier Tales and the Politics of Emplacement”. These stand together with framing chapters on “Anthropology Ireland; Identity, Voice and Invention”, “Locating the Anthropology of Ireland”, and “Ethnographic Experience and Engagement in the Anthropology of Ireland”, which more explicitly and synthetically turn to the unifying aims. Beyond these core aims and organising themes the entire enterprise is explicitly directed towards a cultural politics of resistance to stale meaning, which takes as its task “to report and write anthropology in ways which inform the Irish and their own attempts to reinvent themselves” (15). There is a very definite “sense of mission”.

Turning to the first theme, the history of anthropological research in Ireland, the premise relied on by the authors is that Ireland, bearing the somewhat seductive charms of a European nation perceived as coming late to the Modern World, was a privileged site for study in the early development of anthropology. Not only that, but, for reasons of history, politics and geography, it found itself a site for the encounter between two developing schools of anthropology; the British “social” school and the American “cultural” school, the former more concerned with sideways links and breaks across patterns of social life, and the latter with developments in culture over time. The seminal study by Arensberg and Kimball in the early 1930s, leading to their book Family and Community in Ireland challenged the distinctiveness of these schools. However, the authors argue that rather than serving as a basis for departure into more challenging work the subtlety of their study gave way to a series of pale imitation studies. There was a gradual reversion back into a disciplinary distinctiveness between a British and American model which ran nicely along the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The result over time was the gradual concretization of different anthropologies of Ireland North and South revolving around the respective poles of “Warring Tribes” and “Dying Peasantry”, or “the bomb and the bucolic”. It was not until the 1980s that a certain head of steam in the resistance to the concerns and assumptions of this core model led to a recognizable pattern of “alternative
anthropologies”. These tackled the same problems of anthropologists worldwide such as youth violence and urban decay, and also bridged the cross-border gap in Ireland itself. Aptly enough the authors place a lot of emphasis on Ireland’s entry into the European Union (European Economic Community (EEC) as it was) in developing this wider anthropological and social consciousness, and tie these developments also to the constitutional restructuring of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. These twin ideas also allow the authors to make their point as to the distinctive usefulness of anthropology as a social science. Through participant observation work, it constitutes a kind of long term policy-oriented journalistic embeddedness, challenging the wish fulfillment fantasies of central planners at the national or supra-national (EU) level. It is this fine-grained gold-dust of local knowledge, “the view from below”, coupled to broad awareness and social commitment that legitimates the work and the role of the contemporary anthropologist.

Chapter three, following on the first two more introductory chapters, turns to the theme of “controlling bodies”. The chapter splits into three parts which follows the broad pattern of looking North, South and at the transcendent theme of youth on either side. For the North, under the rubric of “resisting bodies” the focus is on the mass of work done in relation to prisoners, with the spectacular instance of the blanket and dirty protests at the Maze prison/Long Kesh providing a fulcrum for attention. This focus is legitimated by the observation that this type of work has allowed for Irish anthropological studies in this area to provide a testing area and development ground for post-structuralist theories of embodiment and resistance (the entire chapter is broadly Foucauldian). The treatment of the South looks at the circle of meaning created by intense study of the notion of the Irish as a sexually repressed and priest ridden populace, under the thumb of a paranoid Jansenist Catholic Church. Briefly put, and once again rehearsing the argument of old and new models of anthropology played out in the previous chapter, the argument goes that this version of Ireland was over-determined by the eagerness of researchers to find it. Aspects of alternative anthropology emerge in the third segment of the chapter, the attention turning to youth and studies of their embodied experience. Drawing on a wide field of research in the area, the authors suggest that there may be many more commonalities than have been acknowledged in the experience of teenagers North and South.

Chapter four on “Ireland’s Other(ing) Economies” moves away from the stock Ireland of “the bomb and the bucolic” and is oriented to patterns of conduct which have always been marginalized. The historical attention is less pronounced than in other chapters, and gives a somewhat stand-alone flavour to this. This is accentuated by the fact that two of the three areas of activity used to exemplify the theme are dealt with in a cross-border way; the area of long-term unemployment and the area of cross-border consumers (whether legal or illegal). The third area of activity is that of the work of Irish Travellers, an issue which has traditionally been a greater political and social issue in the South rather than the North of Ireland. The other two areas of activity strongly bring out the thematic angle implicit throughout the work; that the dominant notion of Ireland as a island of two very distinct populations may well have been over-stated all along, and that a line of commonality runs through what marginalised people will do to make ends meet, and how this activity will frequently run counter to what the state (British or Irish) would like. Anthropology as a discipline in Ireland, the authors state, has always been more interested in these corners of economic activity because, being against the norm, they throw up more interesting illustrations of the interaction between culture (in the sense of understanding of one’s position in a community, one’s activity in relation to that, one’s sense of self) and economy. While other social scientists can easily figure the posturing of the rampant Celtic Tiger, the
more subtle anthropologists have always been and remain interested in the scavenging mice on the margins, picking the crumbs that fall from the table. An implicit argument that half-emerges here is the ecological one, that the variety and resourcefulness of such resistant economic practices constitute a resource in themselves, a kind of seed-bank of wild economic practice, that might well prove extremely valuable if (and as) the Tiger loses its roar.

Chapter five turns to the idea of “Representing ‘Irishness’” and to a series of examples of public performance through which, the authors argue, a version of Irishness is played out which constitutes a kind of power manoeuvre in its claim to a form of authenticity. At times such a manoeuvre might be blatantly tied to an economic interest, for example in the standardization and internationalization of the themed “Irish Pub”. More usually, the authors suggest on the basis of a wide collation of research studies centering around the topics of dance, sport and parades, that the representation of Irishness at play in such events demonstrates a complex field of negotiations, compromises and adaptations which throw up interesting questions about the development of an Irish identity. In relation to dance, the authors focus heavily on the “Riverdance” phenomenon, and conclude – relying on the work of Helena Wulff – that the effect is to produce a species of internationalised Irishness, between the local and the global, slick, skinny, successful. It is not that the elements of Riverdance which amount to a series of borrowings or appropriations of elements of Flamenco, tap or other styles are simply the result of a lack of connection to tradition or a bend to the priorities of audiences in various places. Rather, that the nature of Irishness now is about such a transformed international consciousness; Riverdance dances authentically across the national imagination, and is something in which the nation recognises itself. In sports and in parades the palette of colors might not immediately seem so broad in terms of diffuse elements at play in negotiations of identity. But here too the authors draw on various bodies of work to argue that, for example, a match played by the Irish rugby team can only also carry the trace of the perceived “Britishness” of the game itself, or that an Orange parade will also carry a trace of carnivalesque which subverts the ostensible direct claim to authentic Protestant identity. The conclusion therefore must be that there is an ineluctable input of restless imagination into contemporary forms of subjectivity formation. As this process is fed by technological development and global communicative consciousness, “cultural forms considered characteristic of tradition or modernity, and consequently constituted as ‘mutually incommensurable’, are actually irreducibly contemporaneous with one another” (113).

Chapter 6, entitled “Frontier Tales and the Politics of Emplacement”, casts a somewhat sceptical eye on the fashionable concept of “detransitionization” that marks contemporary social science, and proposes contrarily that “locality and place are socially meaningful for people in various spots in Ireland, where they are constitutive of wider ideas of community and culture, and where the politics of identity are often inseparable from social space and political territory” (116). Rather than theories of “detransitionization” as a means to think the patterns of late modernity the authors find more salient the notions of frontier and border, which contain implicit reference to bounded space while at the same time point to a necessary liminality and interstitiality. Such ideas have particular purchase, of course, because Ireland is marked by its own internal border between North and South, its automatic internal mutual Otherness. The authors back up this argument focusing first on a single study of a community in the West of Ireland, and then on the process of “telling” of religious/ethnic identity in Northern Ireland. Finally, they look at theories of the border as applied to studies on those living along the actual North/South border. The first study of
the West of Ireland community highlights the paradox of multiple seemingly contradictory sub-community identifications while still maintaining a sense of belonging to the community. The farmers dislike/distrust the townies who dislike/distrust the pier people etc., but all have a strong sense of belonging to the same community on the basis of the recognized particularity of their knowledge of each other. They also share the practical activity of keeping such knowledge circulating within a broader imperative of mutual support in the face of the vagaries and changes in a world beyond. The borderlines and frontiers run through and around the community, but there is a definite sense of community. In Northern Ireland the process of “telling” is that whereby Catholics and Protestants “tell” each other apart by reading the subtlest signs of physiognomy, dress, accent, name, intonation, reaction to theme, or incident. This “telling” then provides a kind of existential base for filtering of future interactions to the point where what appears from the outside to constitute a single community in fact constitutes two mutually self-selecting and other-excluding communities; “small differences have big meanings” (125). Looking directly at people and communities living along the border and their proximity to a physical manifestation of a metaphysical condition, the analysis dives into yet more complex terrain of identifications filtered through ideas of home, memory, history, memorialization and the paradox of the heightened sense of place in the shifting sands of the liminal space. The overall purpose of the chapter is described as “to re-position place and locality within the anthropology of Ireland, to re-emplace it more firmly at the centre of what anthropologists do in Ireland… to interrogate the concepts of community, home, locality and culture, and not blithely accept them in the form that the meta-theorizing of post-modernity demands… to listen, to observe and to engage” (134).

Chapter seven deals with “Transnational and Global Ireland”. The former element is discussed chiefly in terms of the influence of Ireland’s integration into the European Union, European Institutions, and also a more Europe-conscious way of thinking and self-perception. On this point the quoted comment of Fintan O’Toole is particularly apt; that Ireland, for so long fascinated by exile, has become an Ex-Isle, no longer so aware of its difference, aloneness (and overshadowed-ness by Britain). It is now part of Europe in a much more than geographical sense, illustrated not only by obvious features such as the two way flow of working personnel, the flow of capital funds into Ireland for infrastructural projects, but also by the adoption of broad social democratic political ideals and forms manifested in, for example, the implementation of “Social Partnerships” as a guiding pattern of government. It is particularly in the North-South border areas where the tensions between an “old Ireland” defined by its sense of social, national and constitutional particularity and a new “Europeanized” Ireland come to the fore because of the cross-cutting theme of Irish versus British across the border. The authors note that the tensions between these old and new Ireland’s may well be regarded as currently held in abeyance rather then definitively dealt with, and given the recent no vote to the Lisbon Treaty this was a particularly healthy proviso to have inserted in this text. They also note that while anthropological research in Ireland has increasingly focused on public policy its longer term future might more usefully be oriented to the issue of the local reception of European policy and the cultural effects of same: “Because of their use of qualitative and quantitative methods, over relatively long periods of time, in localities, in order to contextualize the objective outcomes of policy within personalized, interested, and symbolically charged local cultures and communities, anthropologists may be in the best position among all social scientists to provide the information necessary for the understanding of wider European social formations in the everyday lives of Europeans” (141). As regards “Global” Ireland,
issues pertaining to identity and difference at the European level feed into issues of racism and definition as other of those who in particular have ostensibly obviously different cultural background, usually perceived on the basis of dress, colour or language. Ireland, the authors suggest, is as post-modern in its multiplicities as any other place on earth, and by this token as interesting as a site for comparative anthropology as any other; in European terms perhaps more so than other European nations.

The final chapter turns back to the theme of the need for maturity of anthropology in Ireland, given the polysemic nature of social experience and the challenge that this still presents in Ireland. The authors recognize that the general notion of “identity” can serve the purpose of catering for multiple contradictory meanings at different levels to be attached to social and self-understandings, but are somewhat suspicious of its “empty vessel” quality. They try to negotiate a route through the anthropological ideas and models that does not discard a role for the idea of “culture” as central, but nevertheless is sufficiently ample to embrace all the elements listed above. They turn to the internal dynamics of anthropological practice, and the ideas of “fieldwork”, “experience”, and “practice” as signalling orientations towards the relative value of the contributions of interviewees and researchers, and also the degree of reflexive attention paid by researchers to their own input. The authors largely rely on the work done throughout the substantive chapters of the book to illustrate their own views on this score. In brief, they are in favor of a “realist” ethnography relying on detailed fieldwork, added to high-grade reflexive theoretical attitudes and an ongoing awareness of historical and political contexts. The closing point is once again a nod to the initial characterization of the “mission” of the book, that Ireland needs and deserves an intelligent anthropology to add its voice to public policy debates on what Ireland is, and what it might and should become.

The book then might also be read as a kind of preamble to a manifesto of an anthropology for Ireland – or, in keeping with the author’s carefully expressed desire to respect complexity, perhaps mutually compatible anthropologies for Ireland. The great virtue of anthropology in this regard is that it is singularly marked by its methodological reliance on longterm participant observation studies. This fieldwork methodology provides a potential to get under the outer shell of social networks and communities of people and to read the “culture” as a matter of complex and meaningful relationships and dynamics, often in ways initially counter-intuitive or against the grain of what the participants claim as their motivations and understandings. If social policy is to be based on an accurate picture of how people understand their own lives and how they are likely to respond to particular interventions, then the kind of thick descriptive local knowledge which is the stock in trade of anthropological research is extremely valuable.

This is not a book for the faint-hearted. Despite the claim that it seeks also a general (non-specialist anthropological) readership, it makes few concessions to such a potential readership; the density of the analysis, the mass of referenced materials, the range of topics, the uncomfortably small typeface mean that 184 pages sometimes feel like 481. To the extent then that this text is comprehensive on the theme of anthropological research and is a kind of plea for anthropology’s maturity as a social science, it certainly does impress as an invaluable resource book on the development of anthropology in Ireland. It manages to extend a coherent and somewhat controversial in its direct focus on public policy implications, argument on what anthropology could and should become. To the extent that the authors are serious in their view that they intend the book also for a more general readership, the book is likely to be less successful. Not only do they have to contend with the collected mass of the literary tradition, which very often focuses on just such issues as
are dealt with in this text (sexual repression, economic marginalization, decline of community and value etc. etc.) but there is also a fairly recent glut of “pop-anthropology” which addresses the overall direction of the country or of various selected sub-groups and communities within it in a highly thematized but often very insightful way; the archetypes here might well be anything by Fintan O'Toole, David McWilliam’s *The Pope’s Children; Ireland’s New Elite*, Anne-Marie Hourihan’s *She Moved Through the Boom*, Malachi O'Doherty’s *The Empty Pulpit*, and many more besides. It is the lament of the authors of this book that anthropology has always spoken with an inappropriately “quiet voice”. It may be that the only way to achieve a loudness attractive to the general public is to radically simplify the approach.

**Eugene McNamee**: University of Ulster

**Notes**

1 From a book jacket comment attributed to Joan Vincent, Columbia University, USA