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A Tie That Blinds: Family and Ideology in Ireland

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Abstract: This paper examines the origins of the role of the family as a social symbol in Irish society. The source, it argues, is in the nature of the inequalities that were present in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland. These were not simply through classes but also through families. The ideology of the family emerged to deny and to displace the tensions created by the nature of these kinds of inequalities.

I INTRODUCTION

For almost twenty years Arensberg and Kimball's (1940, 1968) study remained the only substantial empirical work done in Irish sociology and anthropology. When the disciplines began to establish themselves in the universities and research institutes in the late 1950s and early 1960s the analytical focus established by their study continued. Research studies concentrated mainly on the family with particular emphasis on its structure and function as a social and economic unit (see Humphreys, 1966; McNabb, 1964). This kind of work was important in facilitating the social and institutional acceptance of the disciplines in a way in which an emphasis on power and inequality, for example, might not have. But although the focus of the research was on

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the family, an important aspect of its social significance was overlooked. This was its central role as a key symbol in the ideology of Irish society. This position is reflected in the privileged status which it is given in the Irish Constitution and in the controversies which so often revolve around the need to "preserve the family". Lee and Ó Tuataigh (1982, p. 151) suggest that "no society in Europe so exalted the ideal of the family in its official rhetoric". This paper seeks to examine why the symbol of the family came to occupy such a central position in the dominant ideology of Irish society.¹

II THE FAMILY AS SOCIAL SYMBOL: ITS USES

The social symbol of the family does not, of course, stand alone. It is linked to the syndrome of values called "rural fundamentalism". The dominant ideology in Ireland, according to Peillon (1982, p. 3), "expresses itself in both nationalist rhetoric and in a desire to preserve a highly idealized rural past". These notions of the unified family and the idealisation of the rural come across in many areas but can be seen most clearly if we examine the terms in which a number of policy initiatives have been justified. The introduction of censorship in the 1930s is a case in point. This was seen by its proponents as the way to protect and safeguard what they considered to be national virtues (Murphy, 1984, p. 51). These virtues turn out on closer inspection to revolve primarily around the control of representations of sexuality. The real object of this control was the defence of family virtues and the protection of an idealised version of family life (Lee, 1989, p. 159). This image of the family was also important in the framing of the 1937 Constitution. "De Valera", Lee (*ibid.*, p. 207) notes, "clung to an ideal-type image of the Irish family as a loving haven of selfless accord". This is reflected in Article 41 of the Constitution which "recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society" and as an institution which possesses "inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law". This article has been described by Kelly (1980, p. 483) as "among the most innovatory in the entire constitution".

This image also provided the rhetoric to criticise new policy developments. Sean Mac Entee, for example, claimed that the Unemployment Assistance Act of 1933 had undermined parental authority. "Without the firm exercise of such authority", he said (Mac Entee, quoted in Lee, 1989, p. 284), "a peasant

1. John Mc Gahern captures its importance in his recent novel *Amongst Women*, when the daughters in Dublin face a family crisis. "Then she rang Sean Flynn (her fiancé) who said he would leave work and come over to meet them in the canteen. Such was the primacy of the idea of the family that everyone was able to leave work at once without incurring displeasure. In fact their superiors thought the sisters' involvement was admirable. Sheila won much sympathy and received many offers of help. 'You can make up the old work any time,' they said". (Mc Gahern, 1990, p. 123).

economy such as ours, based on the patriarchal principle, cannot survive". The first formal protest an Irish Government received from the Catholic hierarchy on a piece of legislation was on the Health Act of 1947. The terms in which their protest was formulated were those of the rights of the family. When the Limerick branch of the Medical Association of Eire took up the protest, this too was couched in the language of family rights and it emphasised the central importance in society of "a healthy family life" (see Whyte, 1971, p. 130ff). It might be argued that this was a defence which would have been offered by the Catholic Church anywhere in Europe at that time. Whyte (*ibid.*, pp. 261-165) however suggests that the Catholics, and the Catholic Church, in Ireland were significantly more vociferous in the use of this style of argument.

This kind of rhetoric is not confined to the 1930s and the 1940s. Consider, for example, the document produced in 1982 by the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors (AGSI, 1982). This outlines their response to rising crime in Ireland. It argues for a re-creation of community and evokes an image of a conflict-free past which, if it could only be recaptured, would solve major social problems. The role of the family is central to this solution as one of the factors responsible for the weakening of community stability, it claims, is "the loosening of family structures" (*ibid.*, p. 6). Nally, general secretary of the AGSI, makes much the same point in promoting their scheme of community policing. He argues that an important feature of the present crisis is "a gradual breakdown of the family structure" (Nally, 1983, p. 3). All of this suggests, by implication, a past with unified, tightly structured and stable family life. The precise historical location of such unity is difficult to identify – it could have been anytime from the 1920s to the 1950s – although by their nature such glorious periods are always in the past and never in the present. They are, as Pearson (1983, p. 48) puts it, "glimmering in the distance, just out of sight, back over the next hill, twenty years ago, before the war".

These views of family stability were echoed in the thought of de Valera and "his evocation of a frugal pastoral Utopia" (Murphy, 1983, pp. 11). They were given significant academic support by the work of Arensberg and Kimball (1940, 1968). The picture the anthropologists presented, of an integrated set of relationships within families, and between families, kin groups and neighbours in rural Ireland, was more a product of their theoretical interests in functionalism than of their somewhat more recalcitrant empirical material (see Bell, 1983). But the acceptance and popularity of their ideas was not a purely academic issue. Their work, as Bell (*ibid.*, p. 22) argues, provided a theoretical discourse "to complement the ideological self-understanding of the new nation (or at least its nationalistically inspired intellectual élite)".

III THE FAMILY AS IDEOLOGY

However if one takes the idea that the image of the family is an important ideological symbol in society and if one turns to recent sociological writings on the family for the analytical tools to explore it, the search is unproductive. This literature remains resolutely tied to the "empirical realities" of family life. Little has been written on the ideological significance of the image of the family in society. If one extends this to the argument that a symbol with ideological significance serves particular purposes — for example, to obscure or mystify certain unpalatable realities — then the literature on the family is silent. Exploration of this topic requires us to look beyond this kind of literature for a starting point.

A useful point of entry is provided by Williams's work on the myths that surround the English countryside (Williams, as outlined in Newby, 1979, pp. 17-21). Williams (*ibid.*, p. 17) describes the persistence of the idea of "rural retrospect", the myth that the past in the countryside was more "real" than the present and that the "real" countryside was the countryside of yesterday. He then asks "what kind of experience do the ideas appear to interpret?" The experience, he argues, has its roots in the manner in which capitalist development proceeded in rural England. It conferred differential benefits on the rural population and, through that, produced new sources of social conflict and social inequality. These, in turn, created the need for new social and political controls to stabilise the rural system. In other words, the form of capitalist development created the need for a mystifying ideology. Moreover, because the inequalities were so visible in rural areas and were not concealed either by market mechanisms or the residential segregation typical of modern urban society, the need for a stabilising ideology was correspondingly greater. The need was for an ideology that would disassociate the landlords who had promoted capitalist development from the consequences of their actions. The myths of the breakdown of rural life and of the superiority of the past were particularly suitable for this purpose. Landlords could share these myths with the rural poor and the break-up of rural society was something they too could regret. The effect on the rural poor was to deprive them of the terms in which they could articulate their everyday experiences of landlord domination and consequent deprivation. Through these myths "[T]he English land-owning class . . . was idealized and displaced into an historical contrast with its own real activities" (Williams, quoted in Newby, *ibid.*, p. 20). What this perspective suggests, then, is that if we wish to understand the emergence of a particular ideology, we must examine how the need for it arose and this is most usefully sought in the nature of social inequalities and tensions in the relevant society.

IV THE SOCIAL SOURCES OF IDEOLOGY

When we apply this perspective to Ireland we find that what is striking about late 19th- and early 20th-century rural Ireland is not the existence of forms of inequality or conflict but their social location. A considerable amount of conflict was rooted in the nature of landlord-tenant relationships. But this was declining in importance as the land question moved towards resolution and such conflict was easily handled at an ideological level through traditional nationalist ideology. There were, however, significant sources of conflict in the society that could not be reduced to, or explained in, either class or nationalist terms. These were the tensions and conflicts which existed either between or within families. The central argument of this paper is that it was the need to manage these tensions that produced the "family-centred" ideology of Irish society.

Three sources of tension were important. The first was inter-family disputes over land. There is a complex dispute among historians about the nature of social unrest in late 19th-century rural Ireland (see, for example, Lee, 1979). While it is true that some was class-based between landlord and tenant, an examination of police records indicates that a substantial proportion of disputes was between family groups and between neighbouring families (see Fitzpatrick, 1982). Faction fights, for example, tended in reality to be inter-family conflicts over land as the factions were usually based on either family or kinship ties (*ibid.*, p. 58). Beames's (1978) examination of peasant assassinations in pre-famine Tipperary tends to support this analysis. He found that almost one-third of the assassinations were of peasant farmers and that, where they were killed, "it is the issue of land which prevails, and proletarian concerns — conacre, wages, food prices, farm mechanization — do not figure at all" (*ibid.*, p. 85). Curtin's (1988) study of disputes in a West of Ireland community in the mid-1970s suggests that inter-family disputes still persist and that their source is still primarily land. It is hardly surprising that, in a situation of deprivation, a major source of conflict should be over the one resource that had the potential to relieve, or at least alleviate, the deprivation.

The second source of tension was the widespread exploitation of family labour by parents. On most farms family members worked as farm labourers. The need of the farm for the labour of family members was, for example, a major influence on the education system where farm families often withdrew their children from school at critical stages in the agricultural cycle. But if family members served as farm labourers there was a crucial difference between them and the more conventional agricultural labourers. The use of family

labour was free. As Harris (1988, p. 430) puts it, "sons were an important resource that enabled a man to avoid paying for labour".²

O'Danachair, writing in the 1960s, outlined the effects of this kind of system. "Sons and daughters", he said (O'Danachair, 1962, p. 191), "who work on their parents' farm often do not get any remuneration or reward for their labours . . . in present conditions, with pastime and recreation increasingly on a commercial basis, the absence of some form of wage or allowance can be a very annoying and disturbing factor in rural life". This is particularly so when it is considered alongside other practices which he described as "distasteful in the extreme". These include the example of "a 'boy' of fifty [being] ordered about by a doddering parent" (*ibid.*, p. 191). If these were social irritants in the 1960s then they must also have been sources for potential conflict in the past when many of the strategic decisions in the family, such as the choice of an heir and the postponement of marriage, were designed to maximise the availability of the free labour of the children (see Gibbon and Curtin, 1978).

As theoretical discussion stands at present, sociology does not have the concepts with which to study economic exploitation within families. Recent work in the area of peasant studies has begun to develop concepts which facilitate this analysis. The concepts of "family farm" and "simple commodity production", as developed by Friedmann (1980, 1987), are particularly useful. For example, simple commodity production, which "identifies a class of combined labourers and property owners within a capitalist economy" (Friedmann, 1980, p. 162), can be applied to the Irish family farm situation as outlined here. But if it is, the use of the concept of exploitation within the Marxist understanding of the term is ruled out. This refers to the appropriation of surplus labour of the producing classes by the non-producing class. But it does not apply to the class of simple commodity producers because here the roles of capitalist and labourer are combined in the one class. As Friedmann (1987, p. 249) puts it, "the specific and opposing interests of capital and labour are joined in simple commodity production" and "it follows from the concept of simple commodity production that integration of owners of the means of production into factor markets precludes their exploitation" (Friedmann, 1980, p. 169). The simple commodity producer or family farmer, according to this analysis, cannot exploit himself.

But there are still significant gaps in this literature. The possibility that there might be exploitation in the use simple commodity producers make of

2. Harris emphasises the role of the labour of sons rather than daughters. The position of daughters is unclear but there is a suggestion that they were less valued than sons (see McNabb, 1962, p. 240). This presumably was because they were felt to be less useful for the physical labour of farm work.

the labour of their own family members has not yet been fully explored. While Friedmann (1987, p. 249) acknowledges the work of Chaynov on the internal dimensions of the farm family, she argues that "we must go beyond Chaynov to understand the family as a site of inequality and domination and an arena of struggle". Some work has begun to examine struggle within the family. So far it has tended to focus on domestic work, on the gendered division of labour on family farms and, more specifically, on the relationships between husbands and wives (see, for example, Bouquet, 1984). Other forms of unpaid labour have been ignored. What has yet to be investigated is the effect which the head of the household's use of the unpaid labour of his sons and daughters has on his relationships with them. We do not know what the implications of the non-payment of family labour are for relations within the family unit.

It is, however, reasonable to suggest that this kind of exploitation has the potential to be the source of considerable conflict within families. Its corrosive potential is increased when we combine it with the third source of inequality and conflict in rural society, the stem family system. This kind of family system emerged primarily as a means to preserve family property but the way in which it achieves this objective can produce and reinforce lines of resentment within families. To elaborate on this point and to establish its relevance in the Irish situation, it is important to look at the system's emergence in Ireland, to look at the debate about the extent of its existence and then to examine what its consequences for family life have been.

Tracing its emergence requires a brief excursion into Irish history. The major watershed in 19th-century Ireland was the Great Famine. This was caused primarily by the increasing size of the population and the response of family farmers to it. The population stood at 5,000,000 in 1800. By 1841 it had risen to 8,000,000. When a male family member got married, the father sub-divided his holding and gave a certain portion to the married son. As families were large and holdings generally small, this led to the fragmentation of holdings. By 1841 two-thirds of the population lived on the land and one-half of farms were under 5 acres. Such holdings could only sustain the growth of a basic crop like the potato and, as the potato could not be efficiently stored, the rural population was vulnerable to crop failure. This happened in 1845 and again in 1846. The result was widespread hunger and death. By 1851 the population was almost 2,000,000 lower than in 1846 and at least 1,000,000 had died of starvation.

The effect on rural life was traumatic. It prompted a major readjustment in the family system. The sub-division of land and the pattern of family life it supported was no longer an economic option. It was abandoned and replaced by an inheritance system organised around the stem family. This, to simplify, meant that one son was chosen to inherit the entire farm – the principle of

impartibility of inheritance. Though in theory the chosen heir was the eldest son, there is some evidence that in Ireland this was not always the case (see Ó Grada, 1980, also Lyons, 1973, pp. 51-52). The rest of the family however were, effectively speaking, dispossessed. Although provision was to be made for them, in the Irish context this in reality meant emigration. As Inglis (1987, p. 174) remarks, "it was in the economic interests of those who remained on the farm that all unnecessary labour, especially daughters, emigrate if they did not intend to remain single".

The stem family has been an issue of some controversy in Irish historical and sociological writings. The main point at issue is the extent of the system and especially its prevalence in the West of Ireland. For Fitzpatrick (1983, p. 362), "stem family succession practices . . . were widespread throughout rural Ireland before 1914, but unusually prevalent along the western seaboard". Gibbon and Curtin (1978), by contrast, argue that while the stem family was the norm in areas of medium size farms, it was relatively rare in poorer parts of the West such as Mayo. Hannan and Hardiman (1978, p. 9) claim that while the stem family system may have been slower in establishing itself in the West effectively speaking it was in operation by the 1900s. For our purposes here it is sufficient to note that while there may be conflicting interpretations of the data there does seem to be some consensus that the stem family was fairly widespread in rural Ireland in the early part of this century (see Gibbon and Curtin, 1978, p. 445, also Harris, 1988).

The stem family emerged as a particular solution to a particular problem. But as a solution it is, as Todd (1985) has argued, a mass of contradictions. It succeeds in the major objective of ensuring the transfer of family property and, through that, it "combats the fragmentation of peasant holdings" (*ibid.*, p. 61). But while it solves this problem it appears to open new lines of tension in the society through those whom it marginalises. It "simultaneously creates a rigid family core, shaping and stifling the individual in its vertical structure, and free men (*sic*) who are rejected by the domestic group and have no previously defined place in society" (*op. cit.*, p. 65). It makes provision for them to be accommodated, for example, through emigration but as this is an enforced requirement rather than a free choice it is a potential source of resentment and tension. To examine this aspect of the adoption of the stem family system we need to consider the responses of those marginalised by it.

The emergence of this family system in Ireland tends to be portrayed as a rational and relatively painless adaptation to changed economic circumstances, a frictionless accommodation to the despotism of economic facts. Brown (1981, p. 21) argues that fathers "faced the prospect that most of their offspring would be forced to emigrate, if not with equanimity then with a resigned consciousness that no other course was possible". But was it so easy? The

costs of the adjustment tend to be downplayed by historians mainly because of the existence of what they would regard as compensatory mechanisms for non-inheriting siblings (see, for example, Fitzpatrick, 1982, pp. 63-64 and 1986). These included the use of dowry money to provide an education, mainly for daughters, and to finance emigration. These may have cooled potential discontent but the system was a vulnerable one as the problem of acquiring sufficient resources to compensate non-heirs still remained (Arensberg and Kimball, 1968, p. 149).

The stem family also gave immense power to the father as he decided to whom the land would be passed and when this would happen. If, for example, the eldest son was not considered a suitable heir, he decided which of the other sons would inherit. If, on the other hand, the eldest son was considered suitable, he was not given an education. This meant that the only alternative to remaining under the control of the father was an unskilled and poorly-paid labouring job in the city (Harris, 1988, p. 429). In effect the inheriting son became a captive. The exercise of such power had the potential to create considerable tensions within families and the evidence from the fictional writing of the time suggests that it did. Gibbon (1973, p. 490), for example, claims that "almost every serious novel on Irish rural life dealt with a father-son or father-daughter conflict". Harmon (1977, p. 151), reviewing this literature, says that "the choice facing the children of such harsh, authoritarian fathers, short of killing them with a blow of a loy, is to knuckle down to the brutalizing servitude of the small farm or to leave home". He talks about the social desolation created by this system — the restrictive life, the social and sexual deprivation, the stifling of imagination and the acceptability of the "killing of one's Da" (ibid., p. 157). An attempted patricide is, for example, the theme of J.M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*.

Whatever about the position of inheriting sons, the options for family members who did not inherit were more limited and for the most part much bleaker. The stem family system produced, in the words of Brown (1981, p. 21), "a social order that allowed no significant role in the countryside for the sons and daughters who neither inherit the land nor make an appropriate marriage". "An option firmly closed to them", he argues (ibid., p. 25), "was the choice of finding a fulfilling role at home". The consolidation of this kind of family system was accompanied by a decline in the off-farm economy and produced, what Hannan and Hardiman (1978, p. 8) have called, "an apparently abrupt and convulsive process of marginalisation of a large section of the farm population". The choice for the marginalised was a stark one — either to be marginal and unfulfilled at home or to emigrate. Each solution had its own dangers.

The high costs of this choice are evident in statistics on mental health.

Non-inheriting sons and daughters who took the "option" of emigration at the turn of the century faced a situation of poverty that many did not survive. As Robins (1986, p. 125) puts it, "unskilled and resourceless, living in the most oppressive conditions, many of the earlier arrivals [in the US] never achieved either occupational or property mobility and remained firmly at the bottom of the social ladder". Many of them, expelled by the stem family system in Ireland, simply emigrated to the mental hospitals of the United States. In 1903 Irish emigrants made up 16 per cent of the foreign-born white population of the United States and 29 per cent of such people in the asylums (*ibid.*, p. 121). "They came", Robins (*op. cit.*, p. 125) argues, "from a life of hardship to one of far greater deprivation: many of them became casualties".³

The alternative of staying at home was not much safer. At the turn of the century the populations of workhouses and of prisons had fallen. By contrast those of the mental asylums was increasing rapidly. Between the famine of 1845/46 and 1914 the national population declined by one-third but the numbers in public asylums increased seven-fold. The increases were particularly striking along the Western seaboard. Those in the asylums were mainly young, single people from peasant and farming backgrounds (Finnane, 1981, p. 135), in other words, those marginalised by the re-organisation of family life. They paid a personal price for the adoption of the stem family system. The price, quite literally, was madness.

Indeed it may be possible to extend Brown's (1987) argument about the Russian peasant's use of the mental hospital to the Irish situation. She found that the pattern of admissions to asylums varied with the need of the peasant economy for labour. If demand for labour was high, admissions were low. If demand was low, admissions were high. "In most cases", she argues (*ibid.*, p. 312), "the decision to institutionalize an individual has been less a product of that person's ability to benefit from the institution than a reflection of the needs of the group which has had the primary responsibility for the individual's care". The increase in admissions to asylums in the early part of each year, for example, can be explained as the actions of families who "could no longer afford to feed them nor tolerate their disruptive presence around the crowded hearth" (*op. cit.*, p. 317). It is certainly part of Irish "folklore" that the use of mental hospitals to dispose of "surplus" children was an important resource in the preservation of the inheritance system in rural Ireland. A son, inheriting from the father and bringing a wife into a farm which could only offer a subsistence income, may not always have been pleased with the presence of

3. Robins would not share the analysis I have outlined here. For him the cause of the high rates of mental illness among emigrants was because they decided to settle in cities rather than in rural areas (Robins, 1986, p. 124).

his unmarried and ageing brothers and sisters in the household. Commitment to a mental hospital may have seemed an attractive solution in these circumstances. It would be wrong to conclude that this use of the asylum was callous or unfeeling. As Brown (*op. cit.*, p. 324) indicates, it was just "one more painful weapon in the arsenal of survival".

V CONCLUSION

In this article I have outlined three sources of inequality and conflict in late 19th- and early 20th-century Irish society. If they are considered together they suggest that the lines of fissure and of disruption in the society were not primarily through classes but between and through families. This is a very different situation from the one implied by an official ideology which gives a central role to the ideal of the united and happy family. But it does tell us why there was a need for such an ideology. In a situation where, as Lee (1973, p. 5) tells us, "the integrity of the family was ruthlessly sacrificed generation after generation to the priority of economic man, to the rationale of economic calculus", a certain degree of concealment was, at the very least, required.

The need was for an ideology which both denied and displaced the conflicts and tensions created by the nature of the family system. The one which emerged met this need. In post-Independence Ireland this ideology, which had its roots in rural Ireland, was carried to the political centre by the rural élites who "colonised" the capital city of Dublin and who steadily took over many of the key positions in the civil service and in state bodies. Post-Independence Ireland became, in Garvin's (1974) phrase, a "periphery-dominated centre". Through this an ideology which emerged to deny family-centred conflicts and inequalities became part of the official ideology of the new nation.

Two questions remain about this ideology. One is about the role of the Catholic Church and Catholic teaching in Irish society. This has been a major preoccupation in the analysis of the family but it is, in itself, insufficient to explain the family-centred ideology. As Kennedy (1973) has shown for the late 19th century, Irish Catholics were not prisoners of their church. They were prepared to ignore those aspects of its teaching, such as the encouragement of early marriage, which did not suit them. To the extent that the Catholic Church is a factor here, it is not, in my view, a matter of the Catholic Church shaping the ideology of the society. It was a matter of native Catholics using selected parts of their Church's teaching to support an ideology which had been chosen for material rather than spiritual reasons.

The second question is why this ideology has persisted when so many of the material conditions which gave rise to it have changed. Ireland is no longer a rural-based agricultural society but an urban-based semi-industrial one. Yet an ideology which gives a central place to an ideal of the family, and one

which emerged from an older Ireland, still persists. As recent referenda show, it continues to be a major obstacle to the creation of a modern pluralist state.

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