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## **Dance-work: Images of Organization in Irish Dance**

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### **Abstract**

The Irish economic boom, commonly known as the Celtic Tiger, provides an interesting and unique opportunity to explore the relationship between the profound shifts in the organization of working life and in the production and consumption of culture. In this paper, we confine our inquiry into the relationship with one aspect of popular culture, namely dance, focusing on the phenomenon of *Riverdance* which emerged contemporaneously with the Celtic Tiger. We argue that both are deeply immersed in larger organizing discourses, historical narratives about national identity and civilizing attempts to control the body. We identify three distinct ‘moments’ in the development of Irish dance, which we label as pre-national, ‘Traditional’ Ireland; national, ‘Modern’, Parochial Ireland; and global, ‘Post-modern’ Ireland. This provides a narrative through which we explore the transformation of working

relations in Ireland during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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## **Dance-work: Images of Organization in Irish Dance**

### **‘Round the House and Mind the Dresser!’**

“I am of Ireland; come dance with me in Ireland”. With these words, Mary Robinson ended her Presidential inaugural address in 1990. In subsequent years Ireland underwent a period of accelerated economic, social and cultural transformation so dramatic and unprecedented that it earned the moniker ‘Celtic Tiger’. This term describes dramatic changes in macro-economic data, but it also captures shifts in individual working lives and in the production and consumption of culture. As such, the Irish case provides an interesting and unique opportunity to explore the relationships between work, the economy and popular culture. Here, we confine our inquiry into the relationship with one aspect of popular culture, namely dance, focusing on the phenomenon of *Riverdance* which emerged contemporaneously with the Celtic Tiger. As we will see, both are deeply immersed in larger organizing discourses, historical narratives about national identity and civilizing attempts to control the body.

The transformation of Celtic Tiger Ireland is most starkly seen through the prism of economic data. Between 1991 and 2003 the Irish economy grew by an average of 6.8% per annum, peaking at 11.1% in 1999 (GNP grew by 7% in 2006). Unemployment fell from 18% in the late 1980s to 4.4% in 2006, while the Irish Debt/GDP ratio fell from 92% in 1993 to 25% in 2006.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the 1990s Irish living standards rose dramatically to the point where the country is now, at least by some measures, one of the richest in the world. At the same time Ireland experienced

major social and cultural change which in some ways have liberalised, cosmopolitanised and secularised Ireland: emigration was reversed which facilitated a 'new multiculturalism'; divorce and homosexuality were legalised, and the shift from rural to urban patterns of living accelerated. Ireland was effectively transformed from a pre-modern, peasant society to a postmodern, high-technology economy.

Accounts of Ireland's transformation (e.g. MacSharry and White, 2000) are usually rooted in a modernizationist or neo-classical economic paradigm that attributes the economic success to efficient markets, which have created high productivity and low costs, fuelled by a government that has re-imagined its role as primarily about ensuring that markets operate efficiently, rather than as a player in the market, buying and providing services for its citizens. This neo-liberal ideology is operationalized – in Ireland as elsewhere – in fiscal policy: reducing government expenditure and taxation (the top marginal rate of individual taxation dropped from 65% in the 1985 to 42% in 2006).<sup>2</sup> Other commentators emphasize the 'political' more than simply the 'economy' in Ireland's political economy (e.g. O'Donnell, 2000) highlighting the role of the state in facilitating the economic boom by securing social partnership agreements and global economic investment. What is notable about these dominant accounts is that they accord a minimal role to culture in the transformation of organized work, and instead construct it primarily as emerging in a causally out of the political economy.

### **Culture and Economy: A two-hand reel.**

The Irish economic transformation of the 1990s was accompanied by equally radical changes to the Irish cultural landscape, popularly known as the 'Irish Cultural

Renaissance'. The decade produced a steady flow of international culture industry exports, in music, film, theatre, literature, and the arts.<sup>3</sup> Ireland won the Eurovision Song Contest five times during the 1990s, most notably in 1994 when *Riverdance* was first performed as an exuberant interval act, the same year that the term "Celtic Tiger" appeared in a report by economic consultants Morgan-Stanley.

What then is the relationship between the cultural renaissance and the economic transformation? Within Irish political and academic debate, culture is routinely posited as a direct product of the economic boom, whereby the liberalisation of internal markets and low tax policies changed values, beliefs and identity. In turn, these are reflected in artistic endeavours. This is the historical materialist thesis, shared by both Marxist and liberal political economists, whereby the economic base determines the cultural superstructure. Other arguments are more nuanced, such as that of FitzGerald (2000) who argues that the Celtic Tiger economic boom emerged out of a new self-confidence and a 'positive, outward-looking attitude that affects business, the educational system, and politics'. In this particular and uncharacteristic instance, FitzGerald, a senior economist with Ireland's Economic and Social Research Institute, usually the strongest proponent of the materialist-empiricist and economic determinist thesis, claims that cultural change "is probably the single most important fact underlying the current Irish economic renaissance" (FitzGerald, 2000: 55). In this brief moment, perhaps inadvertently, the ESRI articulates a position analogous to the Hegelian idealist tradition, that history (or in this case the material reality of the 'economic miracle') is the materialisation of a broader, intangible but nonetheless real 'Spirit' or '*Geist*'. A third position, more dialectical and more willing and capable of

embracing the complexity and ambivalence of processes of modernization and notions of progress, a position characteristic of the communicative or reflexive turn in social theory, emphasises the multiplicity of interactions amongst the different domains of economy, society, politics and culture (Ray and Sayer 1999, DuGay and Pryke, 2001). For instance, Kirby *et al* (2002) argue that the Celtic Tiger has been inextricably bound up with a cultural discourse prioritising individualism, entrepreneurship, mobility, flexibility, innovation, competitiveness both as personal attributes and as dominant cultural values, displacing earlier discourses prioritising national development, cultural identity, family, self-sacrifice, self-sufficiency and nationalism. In turn, this displacement can itself produce new critiques, dissensions, and subversions that are routinely articulated through art and the creative industries.

The conventional argument is that the economic ‘base’ determines cultural ‘superstructure’. This is the historical materialist and realist/empiricist epistemology shared by both Marxism and classical and neo-liberalism. Our own research is informed by Weberian sociological interpretivism and is broadly in sympathy with the third, dialectical position. We approach historically particular social phenomena as representing a spirit that unites seemingly disparate and unrelated forms of action – economic and cultural – in terms of the affinities between them. Such phenomena – dance in this instance – express the *zeitgeist*, the unifying ‘spirit of the times.’ Just as inner-worldly Protestant ascetic pietism and outer-worldly political-economic liberalism, instrumentalism and rationalized acquisitiveness find their affinities and harmonic convergence in forming the spirit of capitalism, we approach the seemingly unrelated realms of work and organization on the one hand and dance on the other to



draw out the affinities and correspondences between culture and economy in the spirit of Celtic Tiger Ireland. Following Weber, we seek to clarify “a complex of elements associated in historical reality which we unite into a conceptual whole from the standpoint of their cultural significance” ([1921] 1968, 47). In other words the relationships between seemingly discrete and disparate social realms and forms of collective action are relations of affinity, or what Walter Benjamin calls ‘correspondences’ rather than causalities, and it is the analyst’s task to draw out and interpret these correspondences so as to understand the practices of our society, to illuminate ideals, to critically appraise our practices in the light of ideals, and, where necessary, to try to reform them. And again with Weber and against the hegemonic economic determinists’ accounts of the Celtic Tiger, we do not claim a totalizing monopoly on explanation and understanding. As Weber says of the object of his study: “it is by no means necessary to understand by the spirit of capitalism what it will come to mean to *us* for the purposes of our analysis. This is a necessary result of the nature of sociological concepts which attempt for their methodological purposes not to grasp historical reality in abstract general formulae, but in concrete genetic sets of relations which are inevitably of a specifically unique and individual character” (*ibid*, 48).

To highlight this perspective, we focus on a particular cultural phenomenon, namely *Riverdance*, and explore how it corresponds with the economic and social transformations of our time. We chose *Riverdance* because it is a paradigmatic instance of the de-differentiation of ‘culture’ and ‘economy’, an example of the impoverishment of culture that critical theorists perceive in late capitalism, and, as

postmodernists and liberals might have it, an illustration of the creativity that drives and is produced by the cultural economy (Ray and Sayer, 1999).

*Riverdance* is well known. It was first performed as a seven-minute interval act at the Eurovision Song Contest in 1994 which was so widely acclaimed that the producers developed the act into a full-length stage show, premiering in Dublin in February 1995, subsequently opening in London and New York, breaking box office records and becoming an international phenomenon. By 2006 it had played to a global audience of over 1.5 billion people. *Riverdance*'s global success corresponds with Ireland's successful globalization. At one level –the level of cultural signs, meanings and ideas *Riverdance* is an aesthetic representation celebrating Ireland's globalization; and at another level, in the realm of economic 'realities' *Riverdance* exemplifies forms of organization and work under conditions of postmodern globalization. And the correspondence between aesthetic image and organizational form doesn't end there. We can also find in the history of *Riverdance* – that is, in the history of Irish dance before *Riverdance* – representations of organization relations that are pre-global; cultural representations and images that correspond to forms of organization in mid-twentieth century modern Ireland characterized by moribund economic stagnation, chronic unemployment and mass-emigration. And prior to that again, if we examine the deeper history of modern Irish dance, we can identify images corresponding to pre-modern, traditional forms of economic organization and work relations.

We frame our discussion below around three distinct 'moments' in the development of Irish dance, moments wherein aesthetic representations (in this case dance)

correspond with powers, influences and ideologies circulating in the wider social field. The distinct historical categories we use to discuss the relationship between dance/ culture and various stages of Irish political economy and state formation are perhaps not as easily distinguished from one another as we suggest here. We are imposing analytic distinctions where substantial boundaries of historical periodization, forms of organization and corresponding aesthetic forms are blurred and overlapping. Nonetheless, these categories open up some interesting correspondences between culture and economy. We argue that transformations in dance can be seen as a microcosm of the transformations in Irish culture and economy in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. For us, the (sometimes subtle) changes in dance reflect, represent and dramatize but also subvert and creatively reinvent contemporaneous changes in political and philosophical ideas and corresponding organizational forms. These three moments in the development of Irish dance we identify as: pre-national, ‘Traditional’ Ireland; national, ‘Modern’, Parochial Ireland; and global ‘post-modern’ Ireland. Looking at these three moments we will use Irish dance – and *Riverdance* in particular – as a dramatization of transformations of working relations, and thus as a lens through which we can take a bead on some problems in the social relations of work, organizations and management in the context of globalization.

The development of Irish dance that we will trace is characterized by a gradual and progressive ‘refinement’; from the traditional community – where work and dance are organized as constituent elements of a unified whole; through a modern, rational, differentiation of the spheres of work and aesthetics – where the realms of ‘work’ and ‘dance’ are constituted as separate and even opposed activities that are re-combined

and unified through state-approved ‘invented tradition,’ the organizing practices of modern national society; to the current, post-modern form represented by *Riverdance* wherein dance, which previously was confined to the world of leisure and popular recreation, becomes highly specialized professional work – workdance – organized as a simulacrum of ‘Tradition’.

### **Dancing at Lughnasa: heteroclitid idiom and organizational holism in Irish traditional dance**

We begin with ‘Traditional’ Ireland (i.e. prior to independence in 1922). In this section, we will see that dance is characterized by two essential features: on the one hand by a wide variety and diversity of styles, idiolects, influences and local traditions; and on the other hand, by a holistic unity at the level of organizational form where there is little or no substantive or normative distinction between the realms of economy and culture, work and recreation. One account of what is taken to be Traditional Irish dance – step-dancing – is that as it was typically performed in the confined spaces of kitchens, which required dancing in place -vertical floor tapping- fostering the rigid and restrictive posture we now associate with Irish dance (O’Connor, 1998: 54). However, as we shall see, this stiff and formal style is in fact a modern invented tradition. A better lead is a dance form called the ‘*sean nós*’ meaning the ‘old’ (*sean*) ‘form’ or ‘way’ (*nós* – knowledge, a way of doing something) a seemingly more wild and unstructured style of solo dancing that involved vigorous arm movements and finger clicking, combining stylized movement and individual performative improvisation. In the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century when the tradition of Irish dance was being invented, ‘*sean nós*’ was a vestigial living tradition in rural

areas of the North and West such as Connemara, where four centuries previously the native Irish, reduced to a population of less than one million, had been forced by successive campaigns of conquest and plantation (Ó Cinnéide, 2002: 33). But this is not to say that '*sean nós*' was somehow an original nativist form, because in fact there are no natives or pure traditions. The history of Irish tradition is rich and varied, and its aesthetic expressions are diverse and polymorphic. Let us take 'as read' a variety of influences from Celtic, Pagan, early Christian and Viking eras, and their influences in turn – Moorish and Iberian, Roman, Germanic, Norse and Anglo-Saxon – all refracted, melded, and reciprocally intermingled to constitute an inheritance from which the repertoire of traditional Irish dance is derived. In addition to this deep history of tradition, the more recent – 'pre-modern' or early modern – history of Irish dance is also replete with diverse influences.

Anglo-Norman culture, including dance, arrived with the Normans in 1169 and was popular in Irish towns. A variety of dances were performed in Irish towns in the 1500s but it is not clear what the direction of influence was between French, Irish and English dances (Brennan, 1999). The Irish 'set dances' (as distinct from *céilí* dances and *sean-nós* step dancing) are the evolutionary descendants of the *Quadrilles* danced at the French court in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century and other related dances from Scotland, and elsewhere. The Irish words for dance, *damhsa* and *rinne*, derive from the French *danse* and the English *rink* (to skate on ice), respectively. The Statute of Kilkenny (1366, enforced in the 1500s) and the Penal Laws of the late 1600s all worked to suppress Irish culture and commerce. In addition to the English colonial authorities clamping down on Irish dancing, dancing of all forms was attacked by the

Church from the 1600s. Curtis (1994: 71) quotes a parish priest from 1670: “‘dancing...is a thing that leads to bad thoughts and evil actions. It is dancing that excites the desires of the body. In the dance are seen frenzy and woe, and with dancing thousands go to the black hell’”. Here we can detect a Puritan influence from the Reformation and the emergence of the modern Protestant Ethic: the rationalization of consciousness, the separation of realms of action, the repudiation of hedonism and its aesthetic representations, the sublimation of all into working hard within one’s vocation. This combined in the Irish case with the inheritance of monastic asceticism to produce the unique organizational form of the modern Irish Catholic Church and its characteristic puritanical stamp on modern Irish culture, including, as we shall see, its role in the development of the modern invented tradition of Irish dance.

But given this wide and deep range of influences, styles, and idiolects of Irish traditional dance, where is the point at which they converge – the point at which we can speak meaningfully of ‘Traditional Irish dance’ as a singular, unified organizational form? The point of unity is not to be found in an aesthetic principle internal to dance, of course, but in the structuring and organizing principles of the forms of the wider traditional community: a relatively undifferentiated division of labour and a strong and cohesive *conscience collective*. The structuring principle of pre-modern traditional community is that there is relatively little differentiation or division of labour. In the agrarian work of peasant subsistence, divisions of activity are made on the basis of seasonal (natural) calendars and religious criteria of sacred and profane, obligation and taboo. There are few occupational specializations, and by extension, there are few strong spatial-temporal boundaries between one type of

activity and another; between, say, work from 9 and 5, and recreation in the evenings between 8 and 10; or between a certain group of people who are performers and others who are spectators. Instead, members of a traditional community are workers and dancers: the toil of work gives way to recreation, and those who work are active participants in dance and recreation rather than passive spectators. This is evident in the characteristic commercial institution of pre-modern community, namely the market or fair. The fair involves the exacting work of buying and selling, trade and negotiation; but equally, and intrinsically, the fair is about cultural recreation – gaming, sport and competition, often involving violence (‘donnybrook’ entered the lexicon from fighting and brawling at Dublin’s Donnybrook fair), drinking and carousing, courting and matchmaking, bawdry and carnivalesque license, and of course, centrally, music and dancing. Work and dance are not alien forms of action. They find their unity in the holism of pre-modern community.

A classical formulation of this view of the holism of agrarian traditional community can be found in Marx’s theory of ‘species being’ and the emergence of the characteristic form of alienation that is associated with the division of labour in the capitalist mode of production (Marx 1961: 1-9). Relations of work and organization in a pre-capitalist pastoral idyll were such that the unalienated human being may live a fully rounded existence – a fisherman in the morning, a philosopher in the afternoon, and a dancer in the evening; a form of life that Marx contrasted to the modern one-dimensional specialist, whether a mere appendage to the machine in the case of the industrial proletariat, or the professional as ‘autistic savant,’ highly skilled, but in one narrow field only.

These themes are illustrated in Brian Friel's (1990) play *Dancing at Lughnasa*, (Dublin premier, 1990; a Tony award winning run on Broadway, subsequently a film starring Meryl Streep). Friel's title refers to dancing associated with the pagan festival of the Celtic god, Lugh. The play, set in Donegal in the 1930's, depicts the scattered and fragmented lives of an illegitimate son, his mother and her four sisters, and their returned African Missionary brother. Friel depicts the complexity of identity due to the collision of worlds: past and present, local and global –a harsh rural existence of restricted cultural and economic opportunities juxtaposed with stormy horizons of economic migration and globalization<sup>4</sup>. Where language fails to articulate unity, the sisters' wild, atavistic dance derived from Celtic pagan and African traditions represents an (unsuccessful) attempt to aesthetically reconcile the alienating social forces shaping their lives.

### **Dancing at the Crossroads: Dance, Work, and the Invented Tradition of Dance in Modern Parochial Ireland.**

Dance has long been a marker of ethnic/national identity for the Irish (Cullinane, 1997, O'Connor, 2003), and as the quintessential example of 'authentic' Irish traditional culture. Ironically however, this 'authenticity' or 'tradition' was in fact invented (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983), or at the very least, was selectively constructed, for the selection of certain dance repertoires and styles considered to be 'authentically Irish' in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were historically in keeping with the needs of the emerging nation-state. We use the term 'parochial' to characterize the modern Irish nation state not only to highlight the narrowness of the outlook (it is noteworthy that *Sinn Féin*, a political party that was very much of this era, means 'ourselves



alone’) but also because the parish, the administrative ecclesiastical division reflects the profound influence of the Roman Catholic Church during the formative period of ‘Modern’ Ireland.

Upon achieving independence in 1922, the emerging Irish nation-state set about consolidating a nationalist cultural identity. ‘Parochial Ireland’ was hence a product of this cultural/political endeavour. An important part of this project was the promotion of Irish music and dance competitions, as Irish musicians and dancers became a national resource for constructing the bases of Irish collective and national identity. By 1927, competition dancing become institutionalised and was sponsored by the Irish Dance Commission (Ó Cinnéide, 2002: 33). Like folklorists, the Commissioners were “nation-builders who ‘map’ the nation through the project of intensive folklore” (Ó Giolláin, 2000: 63). Specifically this meant the cultivation of forms of art consistent with nationalist discourses prioritising national development, cultural identity, moral (religious) integrity, family, self-sacrifice, and patriotic nationalism, which were predominant in Irish political rhetoric and popular ideology.

Modern Ireland was conceived of by the ‘Father of the Nation,’ Eamonn deValera –as ‘a parish writ large:’ a community of self-sufficient small homesteaders, an agrarian economy providing for the immediate subsistence needs of smallholders and supplying tariff-protected small brewing and agribusiness dedicated to insular import substitution. This political economy was legitimated by an official ideology, articulated most famously in deValera’s broadcast to the Nation on St Patrick’s Day 1943:

That Ireland which we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued

material wealth only as a basis of right living; of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age.

This aesthetic image of the ideal Irish character was also cultivated by the particular type of dancing that became socially sanctioned. The Gaelic League, founded in 1893 to promote Irish language and culture, actually banned set dancing because it was perceived as being of foreign origins (Breathnach, 1983), compared to *céilí* dances which were seen as authentically Gaelic. Set dancing, as performed at local crossroads and in homes, was also attacked by the Catholic Church up to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century who used the Public Dance Hall Act of 1935 to try to stamp it out (Austin, 1993). The irony is that of the nearly 150 *céilí* and set dances danced today, only four have been continuously used as social dance forms for the past century. Both the institutionalisation of competitive dance and the Public Dance Halls Act of 1935, which prohibited small unlicensed *céilí* dancing, served to promote a much more restricted version of Irish dancing than ever before. Suspicious both of the license associated with heteroclitic unregulated tradition and the license of the modern public sphere, the new Irish nation responded by proscribing *sean nós*, set dancing and contemporary ‘foreign’ dancing, and laying down strict rules in relation to teaching practices and standards. The Catholic Church played an important role, with bishops explicitly pointing out the moral dangers that modern commercial dance halls represented and valorising ‘traditional’ Irish dance (i.e. *céilí* dancing). The rationale for this was largely because dancing was, as George Bernard Shaw dryly observed,

“the vertical expression of a horizontal desire”.

An unintended consequence was that the newly built commercial dance halls gave young people, who routinely travelled many miles to dances, an anonymity and some escape from the narrow parochial ‘valley of the squinting windows.’<sup>5</sup> In contrast to the dancing associated with the dance halls, Irish *céilí* dancing was “a social event imprimatured by the Catholic Church where boys and girls met each other under close sacerdotal supervision and practiced minimal-contact dancing” (as described by Ciarán Carson, quoted in O’Toole (2003b: 147)). O’Toole continues: “In that sense, all Irish Dancing was liturgical. It was an act of piety, a homage to the holy trinity of Catholicism, Irish nationalism and sexual continence” (ibid.).

In this way, the increasing regulation of dance can be seen as one index of the cultivation of a ‘civilised’ coherent and particularly Irish national populace that was central to the church and state in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (O’Toole, 1996, 2003b, Peillon, 2003). The discourse of nationalism converged with the discourse of Catholicism in colonising the Irish body and cultivating a particular kind of *Irish* dance. Despite the shift from rigid, stiff restrictive postures required for vertical floor tapping in cottage kitchens to more use of horizontal space movements in stage competitions, 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish dance came to be characterised for the most part by rigid bodily posture and sobriety of movement, mockingly described as ‘strictly from the ankles down’. In this transition from local to national setting, costumes shifted from ordinary clothes to bright, ornate costumes with Celtic motifs, lace collars, brooches, and medals with a strong emphasis on decoration and embellishment. The presence of a stage also allowed for a greater use of horizontal space which judges

actively encouraged. Though this shift towards a distinctly 'Irish' costume could be interpreted as an attempt to create and construct a coherent Irish collective identity, it promoted a rigid group identity at the expense of any assertions of individual style. For instance, Breathnach (1983) has argued that the dress codes of competitive step dancing display "an Irishness which eludes any association with a particular locality or period" (Breathnach, 1983: 49). To O'Connor, these costumes connote an "abstract and anodyne Irishness which have the effect of hiding the body by attracting the eye to the interlaced Celtic motifs, Tara brooches, lace collars, and medals on the dancer's costumes" (O'Connor, 1998: 57). In a sense the semiotics of this dance costume illustrate the way in which the Parochial Irish body was de-sexualised and de-individualised in order for it to be subsumed or incorporated into the nationalist cause; for this form of dance was more regimented than in Traditional Ireland, but all forms of embodiment and agency were still under the scrutiny of the regulatory apparatus of the Catholic-nationalist state. As such, particular styles of dance both reflect and reproduce the social and cultural environments in which dance events occur (O'Connor, 1998: 53).

The competitive dance dress code also had the effect of hiding and, in effect, de-sexualising the body in a way that was consistent with the repressive, puritanical and patriarchal Catholic ethos of the time. This was also central to the particular way in which reproduction was curtailed in Ireland in order to achieve a particular standard of living. As many commentators have noted, Ireland in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century had a unique demographic pattern, one of postponed marriages, high rates of fertility within marriage, high rates of celibacy and low rates of extramarital births.

According to Inglis (1998), this control of reproduction, achieved through the repressive moral regulation of sexuality by the Catholic Church, was crucial to maintaining a decent standard of living in the post-Famine context, but it also left a strong legacy of sexual repression at the core of Irish culture and identity. Working within a Foucauldian framework which stresses the historicity of sexual morality and the way in which the disciplining and governance of human sexuality is constructed in specific social and historical contexts, Inglis (1998) shows us very precisely the swarming disciplinary mechanisms that have acted historically in the construction of Irish sexuality and the Irish body. According to him, the most fateful force has been the agency of the institutional apparatus of the Irish Catholic Church, its privileged relationship with the state in shaping legislation, education, and health. Despite evidence that contemporary sexual practices and mores have changed since the time when classic ethnographic studies equating Irish sexuality with sexual Puritanism (e.g. Arensberg and Kimball (1968/2001) Inglis shows how the legacy of Irish Catholic sexual morality persists in contemporary Irish culture even today.

The modern history of 'traditional' Irish dance can be interpreted as a progressive process of rationalization of spheres of action and values: from a traditional community wherein realms of work and dance are unified and integrally linked; to an increasing separation of realms, wherein work and dance become spatio-temporally distanced from one another, accompanied by a reduction in the variety and diversity of dance to a regulated uniform style, and the realms of work and dance artificially reunited in space and time and in the officially sanctioned aesthetic codes of the invented tradition of the modern nation state. The variety and complexity of

dance forms and vernacular idiolects characteristic of the pre-modern moment, through a ‘civilizing process’ (Elias, [1939] 1978) of cultural rationalization (Weber, [1921] 1968) becomes the object of formal organization and codification. The modern nation state ‘gets to work,’ as it were, on dance: dance is objectified; mapped, catalogued, analyzed and measured; critically evaluated and judged deficient in pedigree and provenance or genuine and authentic. Specialists emerge: dancing masters, dancing experts. Dancing for fun and informal recreation now becomes ‘amateur’, categorically differentiated from the stage performances of dancing ‘champions’ who hold medals and awards achieved through systematic and hierarchical competitions – local, regional and national championships, adjudicated at every stage of performance by a panel of official judges. On the basis of this system of power/knowledge dancing can be taught. Schools emerge, producing individuals and troupes who dance in a uniform and precise style. The production of modern Irish dance mirrors precisely the classical organizational form of modern economy and administration: standardized, efficient and quality controlled mass-production after the form dictated by the prevailing fashion. In this ‘labour of division’, dance becomes but a component part of recreation, categorically distinguished from work. And time itself is restructured in this project: ‘9 to 5’ is work-time; ‘5 to 9’ is play-time, which may include some time for dance.

Modern ‘traditional’ Irish dance was politically and ideologically legitimated in terms of modern nation-building, whereby the ‘tradition’ of Irish dance was ‘invented’, that is, it became codified, categorized, ‘fixed’, as part of the official modern Irish state project. The rigidities of the invented tradition are an index of the wider modern Irish

political economy, of an agrarian economy of ‘cosy homesteads’ and autarkic self-sufficiency. Modern ‘traditional’ Irish dance, the dance that is popularly taken to be ‘traditional’ Irish dance, is, ironically, an ideological misrecognition. Far from representing the holistic integrity of community underpinning and providing moral anchorage to modern Irish society, ‘traditional’ Irish dance is in fact the aesthetic representation of that particular experience of alienation associated specifically with modern organization.

### **Postmodern Global Ireland: *Riverdance* as workdance**

We now move to discuss the third moment of our triptych, post-modern global Ireland, while being mindful that both traditional Ireland and modern parochial Ireland are continually being re-cycled and re-formed. On the dance-floor, we focus on *Riverdance*, an iconic cultural product of the period.

By 1960, the flaws in the economic policies of parochial Ireland had been exposed and a policy shift sought to create an open economy. The rejection of protectionism and the disillusionment with deValera’s romantic dream is usually identified with T.K. Whitaker’s (1958) seminal paper *Economic Development*, the blueprint for the move from protectionism to free trade and the modernisation of the economy through the incentivising of multinational companies to establish manufacturing operations in Ireland. This policy change had an impact. Between 1963 and 1973 the growth rate of manufacturing employment in the south was exceeded by only four other countries in the world (Kennedy and McHugh, 1984: 246), and by the 1970s there was net immigration into Ireland for the first time. In 1980, the numbers employed in agriculture had declined to 19 per cent.

By the 1970s, Parochial Ireland had run its course, though Irish society found it difficult to unburden itself of its long tradition of pessimism, inferiority and patriarchal social control. Reflecting on the period, *Riverdance* producer Moya Doherty, whom we interviewed for this paper, begins by identifying herself with “people like U2 and Enya who, age-wise, would have grown up in the gloom of the 1970s in Ireland, where it was so *grey*; my memory of the seventies was so *grey* – there was so little colour on the landscape and little confidence and little optimism.” If Parochial Ireland was grey, then Global Ireland, as epitomised by *Riverdance*, would be *colourful*. In this sense, *Riverdance* was a symbolic and exuberant rejection of Parochial Ireland: “we went back before competitive dancing; we took our cue from when dance was much more celebratory than when it had developed in the 20s and 30s” [MD]. Part of the symbolism of *Riverdance* Moya Doherty says

[was] stripping away the embroidery of the competitive style of dance – both the embroidery of how the dance was approached and the embroidery of how they were dressed – and actually it was stripped way, way down to black, simple. But in another way it was built up in a sort of a much more elaborate theatrical fashion; it was almost like an S-shaped development; we went back to go forward to almost go back again [MD].

But for all of its success, *Riverdance* seems to have become unsustainable. There are spin-offs and knock offs of varying quality, but these are no more than variations on a theme. If *Riverdance* is a postmodern ‘original’, it seems that, unfortunately, the formula for originality is not transferable. This is true even, it seems, for the original creator, Doherty herself. Her new show, “*Pirate Queen*,” opened on Broadway in 2007, but failed critically and commercially. What might explain this?



*Riverdance* is purported to be a postmodern phenomenon, an aesthetic representation of the creative culture of globalization, a fluidity that promises the transcendence of the limitations of global capitalism as a mode of production. An essential tenet of global neo-liberalism is not just the ‘liberation’ of market forces, but equally the ‘promotion’ of entrepreneurship and innovation, which, like fossil fuels, are felt to be nearing exhaustion. Resources previously expended on balancing market forces are now poured into ‘start-ups:’ ‘priming’ encouraging and educating businesses to be more enterprising, all of which, of course, tacitly acknowledges that the spirit of free enterprise is in need of priming and pumping. If the spirit of capitalism hasn’t moved entirely from the West to China, then at least it is seen to be flagging and in need of rejuvenation. This is the real anxiety animating the discourse of sustainable development: how can we sustain our pattern of economic development? Postmodernism, as a belief in the creative potential of cultural hybridity accompanying economic globalization, seems to promise rejuvenation. The critical and commercial success of *Riverdance* is that it seemed to promise and to herald precisely such rejuvenation. But how post-modern is *Riverdance*?

Central to Moya Doherty’s account of the creation of *Riverdance* is the movement and spatial-temporal bi-location – from Ireland to England and back to Ireland; from rural to urban; from village life to metropolitan London, and back again; from the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s in Ireland, to London in the ‘80s, back to Ireland in the 1990s (which was still like the ‘70s and ‘80s!). *Riverdance* emerges from this spatial-temporal flux as a hybridized form that incorporates dramatic horizontal movement (associated with non-Irish dance) with the classical vertical movement of Irish dance.

*Riverdance* also seems to illustrate a shift towards a more liberated approach to the body, body-hugging materials, short skirts, and tight shirts designed to subtly sexualise the bodies of the dancers and subject them to the audience's gaze (O'Connor, 1998: 57). Thus, what made *Riverdance* more than another creative product "was the way it liberated locked-up elements of Irish tradition, the way it became, quite self-consciously, a parable of the modernisation of Irish culture" (O'Toole, 2003b: 153). For Brown (1998: 156), *Riverdance* is "a well-nigh perfect example of a postmodern marketing 'product'", with its eclectic juxtaposition of different ethnic traditions, its overt playing with symbols to weave a particular narrative within and without the dance, and "its evocative postmodern fusion of old and new, past and present, myth and history, east and west, north and south, here and there, us and them, rural and urban, birth and death, war and peace, feast and famine, earth and water, sea and sky, home and away".

But despite the gushing hyperbole of postmodern hybridity, *Riverdance* owes much more to the drab schematicism of the invented tradition of modern Irish dance than Doherty and the *Riverdance* commentators acknowledge. *Riverdance*, while it has the appearance of postmodern hybridity and inter-cultural improvisation, rests on restricted cultural foundations. The spatial-temporal flux moves really no further than between mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Irish diaspora communities in the UK and America. Where exactly are the Afro-Caribbean and Oriental influences that any meaningful claim to globality should be able to identify and encompass? *Riverdance* relies absolutely on a disciplined corps of uniformly precise specialized dancers, trained in the modern Irish tradition, by schools and dancing masters, whether in Ireland or in Irish diaspora

communities in English and American cities; *Riverdance* consists of professional dancers put through their paces since childhood in hierarchically organized and officially adjudicated competitions; Riverdancers' bodies appear liberated, eroticized, but these are disciplined bodies, subjectified, transformed, improved and put to work as surely as the bodies of the patient, the prisoner or the proletariat forensically described by Foucault. Riverdancers are workdancers, cut from a pattern, rigorously quality controlled. The biographies of all of the leads and stars – Michael Flatley being the exemplary figure – attest to this thoroughly modern – not post-modern – genealogy.

The globalization of the Irish economy, a process commencing some 30 years ago, but accelerated and intensified within the past 10, is marked by a decisive and systematic rejection of the older model and a declared willingness and openness to the 'new.' In the realm of the political economy the 'new' means both the EU, and foreign direct investment by US multinationals. The new dance form corresponding with this appears to break with official tradition and find renewed energy from several sources – the 'original' tradition, the 'invented tradition' and the 'post-modern tradition' of kitsch, of showbiz, of global polyphonic hybridity. In contrast to the sterile, modern invented tradition, the 'postmodern tradition' of the Cultural Renaissance seems to be lively, vibrant and multiple, and thus capable of renewing and sustaining itself, a contemporary approximation of the conditions of possibility for cultural creativity in the pre-modern vernacular tradition – a lively culture 'rescued' as it were from the straitjacket of modern rationality and bureaucratic organizational forms. But the hyper-rationalized forms of organization and work

relations characteristic of global late-capitalism (McRobbie 2001) may be the sources of its exhaustion and depletion of its own energies. This is because precisely the same organizational forms and relations are at the centre of the aesthetic representations of globalization. Just as global capitalism exhausts itself by alienating its human resources and consuming its natural resources, the postmodern global culture industry consumes its deep-seated ‘fossil’ cultural resources – the vestigial remnants of pre-modern community – which are then repackaged and sold back to the original owners (MacCannell and MacCannell 1993). Far from representing a cultural renaissance, the emergence of a rejuvenated spirit of creative enterprise animating new forms of global organization and work, *Riverdance* may in fact be an Irish wake – exuberant, but as a defence against death.

### **Last dance please!**

The history of Irish dance (and Irish culture in general) has always expressed a tension between dominant accounts and counter-discourses which provide a potential for creativity and innovation in both economy and culture. *Riverdance* and its derivatives provide interesting contemporary manifestations of these tensions. For instance, *Riverdance* and (especially) Michael Flatley’s *Celtic Tiger* draw deeply on the oppositional discourse of traditional Irish nationalism, which privileges and celebrates local Irishness over global otherness, while at the same time these dance shows are icons of, and embedded in, a late-capitalist system where ‘Irishness’ is but a commodified sign traded in a global ‘alterity industry’ (Huggan 2001). And while Flatley’s use of 1960s nationalist ballads may be anachronistic in a post-Peace Process rapprochement in Anglo-Irish relations, it does remind us that reworked

histories constantly intrude on the present and that cultures always transgress and transform one another. Likewise, while the encores and standing ovations (an integral part of the *Riverdance* phenomenon) may be a spontaneous celebration of the moment, they may also be a catharsis of nostalgia seeking to fill the gap between the simulacrum that is *Riverdance* and its unattainable yet real origins.

We have inquired into the relationship between the organization of working life and the production and consumption of culture within the context of the Celtic Tiger phenomenon. Our study of *Riverdance* has shown that this relationship is deeply immersed in larger organizing discourses, historical narratives about national identity and civilizing attempts to control the body. As a hybridised and consumable global product, *Riverdance* reflects and reproduces dominant accounts of Ireland's economic success consistent with a neo-liberal ideology, while at the same time it expresses moments of culture that are pre-global, having affinities with 'tradition,' however reinvented. Its very status as both pre- and post-modern, as a condensation of contradictory forces and tendencies, means that *Riverdance* contains moments that are potentially transgressive and creative, generative of potentials for further cultural and economic development. Like dance forms before it, *Riverdance* challenges dominant accounts of 'Irishness' – and potentially the role of the Irish state in global political economy – but it also opens up for debate our understandings of work and organization and the relationship between economy and culture.



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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Data sourced from ESRI website ([http://www.esri.ie/irish\\_economy/](http://www.esri.ie/irish_economy/)), European Economy, Statistical Annex (various issues), the Irish Central Statistics Office website (<http://www.cso.ie>) and EU economic data pocketbook - No. 3/2007 available at <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu>.

<sup>2</sup> Economic statistics mask the reality of a multinational corporation availing itself of Ireland's low corporate tax environment to post high 'profits' earned by 'buying' and 'selling' goods from and to its own corporate subsidiaries. Thus, high growth rate indicators mask a weak indigenous sector providing low-paid service jobs, a growing disparity between rich and poor, and the unwillingness of government to address social and economic inequities (O'Toole, 2003a).

<sup>3</sup> In music, U2, The Corrs, Cranberries, Enya; in film, a cadre of internationally acclaimed and award-winning actors, producers, directors, and scriptwriters -between 1989 and 1993 Irish actors were nominated for six and won two Academy Awards; Irish artists, poets and novelists achieved world-wide acclaim in the 1990s, far exceeding what might be expected based on population – Seamus Heaney won the Nobel prize for literature in 1995, while two Irish authors won the Booker prize and fifteen were short-

listed between 1989 and 2005. In sport, Irish competitors achieved unprecedented success in motor racing, golf, soccer, and horse racing.

<sup>4</sup> It was hardly accurate to even speak of an Irish economy in the 1930s. Ireland never experienced the industrial revolution and, after centuries of colonialism, had been effectively turned into a ‘granary’ for the United Kingdom which accounted for 90% of exports at that time (MacSharry and White, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> The title of a novel by Brinsley MacNamara (1918) depicting a typical Irish village where individuals are severely morally constrained by the normalizing gaze of their neighbours.