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Private sentiment and public issues – Irish medium education and complex linguistic and political identification

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Abstract

Is it possible to construct a non-essentialist politics of place? This is a central question explored in this chapter. The empirical focus of the chapter is the cultural politics of language surrounding the Irish-medium education policy of a secondary school in an Irish-speaking region of Ireland. The primary objective of the chapter is the development of a theoretical framework for thinking through the possibility of a non-essentialist politics of place. The chapter is organised around three related theoretical discussions of *space/place*, *social/political* and *public/private*. Identity (of place and politics) is seen as formed at the intersection of history, economics, culture and politics producing contingent but temporarily stable identities. Drawing on the contributions of Doreen Massey, Ash Amin and Chantal Mouffe the chapter argues that local identity is formed from the 'throwntogetherness' of place or the collision of 'micro-worlds'. The diversity of perspectives and values concerning the 'common good' that arise from such 'throwntogetherness', rather than fixed, essential identity, is seen as forming the basis for a politics of place. Therefore, it is argued that it is possible to construct a non-essentialist politics of place that holds open the possibility of overcoming oppositions between the particular and the cosmopolitan, the local and the global.

Introduction

Depiction 1

Experience the magic of the Dingle Peninsula located in the Southwest of Ireland

Once cited as 'the most beautiful place on earth' by the National Geographic; was voted among the top 100 destinations in the world by Trip Advisor; CNN recently recommended it as a very favourable winter destination; it is listed as one of the top 10 places to be on New Year's Eve - all of these accolades refer to the stunningly beautiful Dingle Peninsula.

Tá clú agus cáil bainte amach ag Leithinis Chorca Dhuibhne mar cheann scríbe de bharr a cuid litríochta, teangan agus cultúir. Ó thaobh áilleachta, saibhreas oidhreachta agus imeachtaí ní féidir Corca Dhuibhne a shárú agus tá a hainm i n-airde le lóistín, bia, ceardaíocht, ceol is tithe tábhairne.

Is Gaeltacht í Corca Dhuibhne, áit ina bhfuil an Ghaeilge nó *Gaelainn* mar theanga labhartha í dtithe áirithe, san ionad oibre agus sna scoileanna go léir.

Much of the Dingle Peninsula or Corca Dhuibhne is a *Gaeltacht* or an area where the Irish language (*Gaeilge* or *Gaelainn*) is widely spoken in the home, workplace or school.

Dingle Peninsula Tourism (2011a)ⁱ

Depiction 2

In June 2009 a case was brought to the High Court in the Republic of Ireland by a group of parents, acting for 12 childrenⁱⁱ, against the language policy adopted by the

Board of Management of the community secondary school – Pobalscoil Chorca Dhuibhne, in Dingle, on the West Kerry peninsula, south west Ireland. As claimed by the parents the central issue at stake in this case was that the civil and human rights of their children to education were being denied to them because of the school's policy of Irish-medium education. This referred to the policy of the school, in line with its statutory duties under the Education Act 1998, and by virtue of its location in one of the officially designated Irish-speaking regions (Gaeltacht) of Ireland, that the medium of education and the business of the school would be conducted through Irish. The parents maintained that the opportunity to succeed educationally, and therefore economically, was denied their children by being required to undertake their secondary school education through the medium of Irish rather than English. Pobalscoil Chorca Dhuibhne was formed as a new co-educational community secondary school, amalgamating the previous boy and girl's schools in the town. This is the only post-primary school in the area and serves both the Irish and English-speaking communities on the peninsula. The other nearest secondary school is 21 kilometres away. However, the nearest alternative Irish-medium secondary school is 40 kilometres. The new school opened in 2007 and was immediately confronted with a group calling itself the 'Concerned Parents of Corca Dhuibhne' campaigning against the school's language policy. Within the first months of the new school year the Concerned Parents group organized two public meetings, a petition, a student strike, campaigned for the Department of Education to conduct a parent and student survey, and initiated court proceedings. At both public meetings those speaking in Irish were heckled and jeered. At the first meeting one of the key protagonists likened the school's policy, and that of Irish language activists generally, to the genocidal actions of Adolf Hitler (Creedon, 2007). At the second meeting a key member of the group reportedly referred to the school's policy as 'ethnic cleansing'. This was followed by an editorial in one of the national newspapers, the Irish Examiner, comparing the schools' language policy with Islamic extremism and the London bombings in July of that year (Irish Examiner, 2007). This campaign has caused bitter divisions between people in the area. The parents who took their case to court and the school eventually made an out of court settlement. This settlement has maintained Irish as the language of instruction and business, but in addition extra supports have been put in place for those students whose competence in Irish might restrict their access to the curriculum and achievement.

These are depictions of the same place, yet they convey radically different images. The place is Dingleⁱⁱⁱ, in West Kerry on the south west coast of Ireland. The first depiction, produced by the local tourism organisation, depicts Dingle as a space of natural beauty, a place to unwind. The local language, Irish, is portrayed as a community language. Importantly, it is portrayed as a public language, the language of education and business. There is no sense of the language as troubling, of local identity as troubling. The second depiction, therefore, could not be more different. Here the language is placed at the centre of a heated dispute, and its place as a public language of education contested. The idea of Irish as a 'community' language is disrupted by this second depiction.

How are we to understand these different depictions of the same place? Doreen Massey (Massey, 1995; 2004; 2010) would suggest that both are practices of place-making, that geographical locations are constructed as particular places through discursive and material practices, out of social interaction and the collision of history, culture, economics and politics. Furthermore, she would argue that processes of place-making are never finished, rather places represent what might be termed a flux of 'stories so far' (Massey, 2010). This is not to question the placeness of place, but to emphasise that we need to examine the specific configuration of events and processes that give places their particularity. The first objective of this chapter is to formulate a framework for understanding how both depictions of Dingle can be produced simultaneously - how are we to understand what makes Dingle a particular place.

The second objective is more applied. This chapter has a history, in fact three histories. The rationale for asking the questions that structure my discussion in this chapter arose from a personal and political engagement with the cultural politics of language captured by the second depiction. As a parent I was confronted with having to take a position in relation to the Irish-medium language policy of the school in Dingle as a result of my own children attending the school. The situation forced upon me the requirement to transform private sentiments into public political acts. Eventually this took the form of me publically defending the school's language policy, making me a participant in the cultural politics that later became an object for my

sociological study. The decision to make the cultural politics of language and identity an object for academic study arose from my need to understand the nature of this cultural politics and the positions I was adopting within it. Was I supporting a parochial, backward looking and exclusive policy? Was I positioning myself against the necessary modernisation of Ireland in the face of increasing multiculturalism? These troubling questions forced me to make my own involvement an object of study. This second strand of history fed into my involvement in a series of academic seminars organised at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium and later symposia at the European Conference for Educational Research in Helsinki and Berlin^{iv}. These seminars and symposia were concerned with issues of the construction of public spaces for democratic learning. I was prompted therefore to link my reflections on the cultural politics of language and identity with issues of democratic politics and the public sphere. More specifically I was concerned that my academic reflections should feed into a practical cultural politics of language and identity that did not rely upon essentialist notions of identity but were premised upon the idea of identity as formed at the nexus of history, economy, culture and politics, and of identity as being constantly made and re-made through cultural practices.

This chapter is based on one proposition – a relational understanding of identity, and two objectives – to develop a framework for understanding how place is produced, and to link this understanding to a practical cultural politics of place. I do this through an elaboration of an analytical framework through three related discussions of *space and place*, *social and political*, and *public and private*. Although I draw upon further depictions of Dingle as a space of tourism and Dingle as a space of cultural politics, these are for illustrative purposes and help me to build up my developing argument. The choice of material is therefore highly selective and should not be misunderstood as a form of data analysis. The concluding section '*re-imagining a politics of language, place and identity*' draws the three theoretical discussions together and addresses the two objectives for this chapter. Specifically I argue that it is possible to construct a cultural politics of language and identity without relying on essentialist conceptions of identity, but, paraphrasing Stuart Hall, this is a politics without guarantees.

Thinking through a possible cultural politics of place and identity

Space and place

The two depictions of Dingle presented above seek to portray it as authentic but each involves different visions of that authenticity – authentically beautiful, authentically Irish speaking. Authenticity, in this sense, is seen as located in a particular locale. For instance, the tourist Dingle links it with a particular place on the map marked by natural features:

The peninsula is dominated by the range of mountains that form its spine, running from the Slieve Mish range to Mount Brandon, Ireland's second highest peak. The coastline consists of steep sea-cliffs, broken by sandy beaches, with two large sand spits at Inch in the south and the Maharees to the north. The Blasket Islands lie to the west of the peninsula. (Dingle Peninsula Tourism, 2011c)

The place is constructed as an escape from the modern world, a place to wind down and recharge the batteries. I have already noted above that the touristic depiction of the area defined in terms of the Irish language sits in tension with Dingle as a site of cultural antagonism. Tourist brochures, of course, are written to attract visitors to the locality, not to record the cultural politics. It is interesting, however, that Irish is invoked as a pre-modern language enabling the visitor to 'step back in time':

The Dingle Peninsula / Corca Dhuibhne is a unique storehouse of Irish cultural heritage. Until recently, the peninsula was remote from the influences of the modern world, and this meant that the language and traditions of the area have survived intact to a greater degree than in most of Ireland (Dingle Peninsula Tourism, 2011b).

This discussion of the construction of place through imagining Dingle as a particular kind of space defined by natural beauty and history as heritage helps us to grasp the complexity of place and how places are made. For the people of Dingle it is a place of work, of servicing a modern tourist economy, of generating income from the hills and the sea through farming and fishing, and home for those for whom Irish is not a

throwback to a former pre-modern time but a living culture, a central feature of their identity and their link to this place. But Dingle imagined as a tourist space involves a complex mix of social relations that relate to each other in specific ways. Fáilte Ireland (Fáilte Ireland, 2010)^v estimates that tourism generated €3,9bn in 2009. For towns such as Dingle tourism is an essential element of the economy. Dingle then is partly constituted through a particular economic imaginary that seeks to develop the place as a tourist destination, and therefore manifests itself in an infrastructure of hotels, shops, restaurants, cafes, etc. Indeed, Dingle owes its emergence as a global tourist destination to the making of David Lean's famous film 'Ryan's Daughter', which transformed Dingle from a poor fishing port to one of Ireland's major tourist centres (See McCormack, 2005).

Doreen Massey (Massey, 1995:183) argues that we need to understand that '...places, in fact, are always constructed out of articulations of social relations (trading connections, the unequal links of colonialism, thoughts of home) which are not internal to that locale but which link them to elsewhere'. Ryan's Daughter played on folk memories of Ireland's struggle for independence that circulated through worldwide Irish diasporas, including those who emigrated from Dingle, sat in (easy/uneasy) relation to contemporary nationalist sentiments in the area, created conditions that enabled Dingle to be integrated into global networks of cultural production, supply chains servicing the tourist industry, and migratory flows of seasonal workers. Place (Dingle) is constructed in conjunction with 'space' (Dingle as a space of cultural production or tourism). The concept of 'space' may be seen to refer to the interrelationship between processes of economy, culture and politics that extend beyond the material place of Dingle whereas 'place' can be conceived of as a 'throwntogetherness' (Massey, 2010), where Dingle is produced on a moment-to-moment basis, place as always in production, the collision of 'microworlds [that] find themselves on the same proximate turf' (Amin, 2004: 39). As Massey suggests places are normally made out of the unspectacular interactions between people, ideas and values born out of 'throwntogetherness' but sometimes the mundane is disrupted and the private sentiments that might animate people are forced into forms of public politics. In these circumstances the politics of place, as represented by the cultural politics of language policy, become struggles over particular constructions of place, of which histories will come to define Dingle as a particular kind of place.

Social and political

Above I have discussed how identity (of place) is constituted relationally. Now I want to consider identity in relation to the political. I am concerned in this chapter with the cultural politics of place which infers the politics of identity. I deliberately avoid the language of 'identity politics' because I want to articulate a way of thinking and acting in relation to the politics of language without invoking the essentialism of identity. I want to maintain a certain degree of radical doubt in relation to identity. Later, when discussing 'public/private' I will develop the notion of identification as preferable to identity. For the moment let me elaborate on the importance of understanding the cultural politics of language and place in terms of both its social and political dimensions and the relevance of the relationship between the 'social' and the 'political'. For this I will draw extensively on the work of Chantal Mouffe.

Chantal Mouffe has contributed to the development of a view of political identity, and of the field of politics, as constituted relationally (Mouffe, 1993; 2007). This approach to political theory resonates strongly with Massey's development of space/place. In particular Mouffe has articulated the idea of political identity as consisting of a we/they relationship. This relates to an elaboration of Derrida's idea of 'difference', in particular that all identity is constituted in and through difference; the interior of the I/we requiring an exterior you/they. I have argued (Warren 2012 forthcoming) that the nation-seeking politics of the Irish anti-colonial struggle drew upon 19th Century discourses of the nation-state that organised politics around a particular chain of equivalences – that the political boundary mapped onto a linguistic boundary and that the basis for a national polity required the assumption of a unified 'people'. The founding politics of an independent Irish state was structured around difference, the constitution of a collective identity where "...the creation of a 'we' which can exist only by the demarcation of a 'they'" (Mouffe, 2007: 15), of a 'constitutive outside'. For Mouffe politics requires this 'we/they' relation as the ground upon which political practice can operate, politics requires agonistic relations, a politics of adversaries rather than enemies. Ash Amin (2004: 39) discusses this in relation to the politics of place as an arena for struggles over different visions of the local which means "...seeing the local political arena as an arena of claims and counter-claims". Amin

terms this a 'politics of connectivity' where political actors have to choose between 'different senses of place and place attachment on the basis of agonistic engagement between different coalitions of cultural and geographical attachment' (42). The perspective developed by Mouffe, Massey and Amin involves a conception of the real as contingent, relational and performative. It is not that this implies an instability of structures or meanings, but that the stability necessary to produce a regularity in social effects requires active political work. The constitution of the Gaeltacht as a space of 'national archive' required active political and cultural work, political discourses, and bureaucratic institutions to realise this particular imagination.

The contingent nature of any political settlement arises out of the tension between the 'social' and the 'political'. In Mouffe's approach the 'social' refers to our habituated responses and interpretations of the world, similar to Bourdieu's concept of the 'habitus' (See Hillier & Rooksby 2002). The 'social' is therefore made up of sedimented practices that take on the character of 'commonsense'. Irish citizens regularly express a positive sentiment to the Irish language without translating this private sentiment into a public politics. The 'political' refers specifically to the contestation of visions of place, identity, the 'good life', the 'public good'. The historical construction of Dingle as a particular place partially organised around the politics of language, and the economic and demographic changes that have occurred create the conditions whereby the habitual orientations towards Irish can be disrupted and propelled into the domain of the 'political' where different visions of identity and place have to be contested and mobilised around.

Public and private^{vi}

The contemporary notion of the 'public sphere' as a space of democratic debate is linked with the emergence of arguments for a deliberative democracy associated with the work of political philosophers such as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. At the core of theories of deliberative democracy is the assertion that the two pillars of liberal democracy – the institutions of the rule of law defending individual human

rights and the processes and procedures of popular sovereignty are compatible. This assertion arises from a recognised tension between individual rights and the formation of collective identity through democratic participation. Deliberative democracy seeks to overcome this tension through the construction of a 'public sphere' as a space where rational debate can be exercised by citizens on the basis of equality and impartiality. The aim is the achievement of consensus on the main issues affecting society. Thomas Risse (2010) notes that this perspective is central to contemporary debates about the European Union's democratic deficit. Indeed, Jürgen Habermas has been prominent as a public intellectual on this issue. So, these are not matters of abstract reflection.

I have argued for a relational and contingent understanding of identity, including that of space/place, and that the identity of space/place involves definitional struggles. Importantly I noted Massey and Amin's argument that the 'throwntogetherness' of place, of living in diversity forms the basis of politics. This idea was further extended in the discussion of Chantal Mouffe's conceptualisation of politics defined as the necessary contest over different visions of the public good. It is this that leads Mouffe to critique notions of deliberative democracy. One of the fundamental limitations of this approach, according to Mouffe, is the central concept of 'consensus'. I argue elsewhere (Warren, forthcoming) that the dispute over the school's language policy can be understood as a conflict between individual and group claims, over different understandings of human rights. These are tensions between different notions of the public good and between different definitions of space/place. Mouffe argues that this contest between different sets of values is important and that a move towards consensus that suppresses the different values and visions at stake is unhealthy for democracy (Mouffe, 2009: 93). Another way of understanding this is that the deliberative approach conceives its central concepts as given. The alternative relational approach I am advocating here requires that these concepts themselves be the focus for debate and definition; that is politics is understood as a space of imminent contest. Drawing on Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and further developed by Rogers Brubaker (Brubaker, 1996; 2004) we would need to approach concepts such as 'human rights', 'identity', 'place' and 'history' as objects of study, as the things that need explaining rather than the terms we use to explain.

Central to this discussion is the relationship between what we might call the private and the public. The impossibility of constituting a democratic politics based on a private realm of values and public realm of rational debate is core to Mouffe's challenge to deliberative democratic theory. The interesting point here is that of how private sentiment is translated into public political positions - that is how the social is transformed into the political. The struggle over the schools' language policy is a struggle over which language – Irish or English, is the legitimate public language. This entails definitional struggles over what kind of place Dingle is. By translating private sentiments about the Irish language into public positions in relation to the school's policy involves attaching these private sentiments to different sets of values and visions about the nature of modern Ireland and Dingle's place within this (Warren, 2012 forthcoming). This is not so much a process of people with similar identities grouping together as the forging of identity around the process of identification. Rogers Brubaker (Brubaker, 1996; 2004) challenges the tendency within both political and academic discourse to view 'groups', ethnic, national or linguistic, as distinct bounded entities with agency and interests. He argues that this substantialist approach invokes a kind of primordial conception of ethnicity, suggesting that people belong to fixed ethnic or national groups that are characterised by common descent and language. Instead he argues that we need to view identity as an event, things that happen, as practices of group identification, similar to Massey's argument about place as event. Consequently we need to focus on the processes by which people come to form such identifications. Again, drawing on Brubaker's work, we need to take account of how private sentiments are translated, articulated and transformed. Brubaker discusses the role of ethno-political entrepreneurs in constructing certain issues as 'ethnic' conflicts, transforming private sentiments (about neighbours, etc.) into ethnic conflicts by constructing others as the constitutive outside, of constructing not just a 'we/them' relation around which a democratic politics could be mobilised but a 'friend/enemy' relation around which an exclusionary politics is conducted.

The role of organisations and the media in organising the translation of sentiment into public politics could be considered as significant in the struggle over the school's language policy. The 'Concerned Parents' group represented a position organised around antagonism to the school's Irish-medium education policy. However, support

for the school's policy came from a number of language-based organisations including *Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta* (Parents of the Gaeltacht) and *Todhchaí na Gaeltachta* (Defend the Gaeltacht). The media played an important role in creating a space not just for reporting on the dispute but of providing space for comments from the different organisations and individuals. This ranged from the local media such as the regional *The Kerryman* newspaper and the *Dingle News* blog to English language national newspapers such as *The Irish Times*, *The Irish Independent*, and *The Irish Examiner* as well as the Irish-language media including *Foinse* (Irish-language national newspaper), *Raidió na Gaeltachta* and *TG4* (Irish-language radio and television media). The dispute also featured in the British *Guardian* and *Times* newspapers. Sentiment and public position were organised but the range of sentiments were likely to be varied with some long-standing local families objecting to the schools' policy and new residents supporting it, from fluent and new Irish-speakers both opposing and supporting. So, the constituencies available to support one side or the other represent not only varied sentiments but also different kinds of affective attachment to place. The link between personal identity, language and place were unstable. In this sense an essentialist politics of place and identity would be unworkable when translating sentiment into public position.

Conclusion – re-imagining a politics of language, place and identity?

How are we to understand the two very different depictions of place outlined at the beginning of this chapter? And, can we conceive of a non-essentialist cultural politics of place and identity?

I have argued that in order to understand how two very different depictions of the same place can be produced simultaneously I have argued that we need to approach the constitution of place and identity through a relational framework. In particular I have argued that we can understand place and identity as being produced at the intersection of three dynamics – space/place, social/political, and public/private. We can understand places as constituted out of the interaction or collision of different trajectories of history, economics, culture and politics which are non-linear and so produce quite distinct imaginings of place that sit side by side with each other. Consequently Dingle can be imagined as a particular kind of space of natural beauty and linguistic heritage in a way that doesn't disrupt people's

sentiments towards the Irish language. I have noted how elsewhere I have analysed the way the Gaeltacht has been produced as a particular linguistic space, as an 'archive of the nation' that refuses the dynamic nature of language use and linguistic identity and has failed to engage with the economic conditions that sustain language communities. This analysis also showed how public positions around the Irish language have made it a nodal point around which politics is conducted, making it possible for the cultural politics around the school's language policy to take the forms it did. Therefore people's private sentiments towards a language may remain in the domain of the social, making place through ordinary everyday practices of interaction; not just inter-subjective interaction but interaction with dynamics that are more global. The making of Ryan's Daughter was used as an example of the complex interaction of the local and global, of place and space. But sometimes, as with the school's language policy, private sentiments are transformed into public positions; private sentiments of disregard and love, hostility and accommodation are translated into organised political positions and mobilised in the realm of politics.

In the brief depiction of the cultural politics of language that arose in Dingle I suggest that it was structured around a conflict between two opposing conceptions of rights where the achievement of one set of rights appeared to negate the other set of rights. In other words, conceptualising bilingualism without accounting for the historical production of Irish as a threatened language could relegate Irish to the private domain because of the cultural power of English. But this still leaves unresolved the relationship between Irish and how to belong in a region that has undergone demographic and cultural change and where attachment to the language as a public language has long been disputed. If identity is not fixed, and therefore the relationship between cultural identity and language and language and place is contingent, how can you construct a politics of place? Doreen Massey and Ash Amin argue that the 'throwntogetherness' of place or the sharing of territory while living in diversity constitutes the basis upon which a politics of place can be constituted. Furthermore, this non-essentialist approach to the politics of place means that politics is not mediated through such binaries as 'modern and traditional', 'particular and cosmopolitan'. Instead, concepts such as 'belonging' can be opened up to interrogation and the nature of what it is to belong in places such as Dingle can become the focus of political debate. Therefore the opposition between an Irish-

medium education and the installation of an English stream could be reconfigured into a debates over whether increased diversity necessitated the continued threat of Irish as a viable community language; how might new Irish speakers relate to the community of traditional Irish speakers; can the possession of Irish be considered a aspect of cosmopolitan identity?

If, as proposed, places are made through social practice, then the construction of a different cultural politics of place and identity can contribute to producing a different kind of place. At stake here, then, is the possibility of producing a place (Dingle) where increased diversity can sit alongside a strong and confident Irish language community.

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ⁱ Dingle Peninsula Tourism, a marketing co-operative owned and managed by its members, have produced this website to provide the visitor with the information they need to plan and enjoy their visit.

ⁱⁱ Pobalscoil Chorca Dhuibhne has approximately 465 pupils.

ⁱⁱⁱ An Daingean was the official Irish language name for the town under the Official Languages Act 2007. Subsequently a local campaign persuaded the Irish Government to amend the place names order so that the town would be officially known by a bilingual version *Dingle/Daingean Uí Chúis*. The

town is more popularly known through its English name of Dingle. For the purposes of this article I will use the English language version.

^{iv} The seminar series was organised under the auspices of 'Dealing with Difference and Otherness in Urban Environments. Emergent Learning and Democratic Citizenship' supported by the Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek – Scientific Research Foundation, Flanders. The symposia were organised by Professor Gert Biesta (who also participated in the Leuven seminars) at the ECER conferences in Helsinki (2010) and Berlin (2011).

^v Fáilte Ireland is the National Tourism Development Authority of the Republic of Ireland, providing strategic and practical support in developing and sustaining high-quality and competitive tourism in and for Ireland.

^{vi} This title plays on C Wright Mills' classic sociological work *The Sociological Imagination* where Mills discussed the iterative relationship between private concerns and public issues.