Creative Identities: Resistance and the Public Imagination

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I've called my paper "Resistance and the Public Imagination" for reasons that will become clear. I hope my paper will be somewhat "contrary" and thus helpful in thinking about the future of this city. I wish to structure my remarks around three propositions. I don't think these propositions are contentious. Presuming these propositions are accepted, I want to unravel some of their implications as a means of clarifying current opportunities and threats.

The propositions I want to make are:

(1) In a free society such as our own, we uphold the right of an individual to form his or her own identity.
(2) Identity finds expression in space and our relationship with space (and consequently our relationship with time).
(3) Waterford is at a critical moment where the configuration of space will determine what's possible—and what's imaginable—for years even generations to come

Let me take each of these in turn and give a few minutes to each.

(i)

A free society such as our own, we uphold the right of an individual to form his or her own identity.

Let me develop this proposition in the first instance by stating what is perhaps obvious: one's sense of oneself—one's identity—is of course not fixed but rather is a plastic, mobile, shifting thing. It is liable to formation and transformation over time. Shakespeare in *As You Like It* (II.vii.140ff) puts it well, famously suggesting:

> All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players;
> They have their exits and their entrances,
> And one man in his time plays many parts,
> His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant,
> Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
> Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel
> And shining morning face, creeping like snail
> Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,

Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

One plays many roles in life; in other words, one's identity shifts and changes as one occupies these roles. Leave aside for a moment the idea that one may hold several identities at once, and that identities overlap and shift according to context. The fact is: identity is not a fixed, given thing but a plastic, mobile, flexible and transformable thing.

We make our proposition in this context: we seek, in a free society, to afford citizens the opportunity to shape their own identities as they see fit. In other words, our society should be established in such a way as to allow freedom to shape our own identities, to answer, as we see fit, the question, "I am …" Article 40 of the Irish Constitution indicates that "the State guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate the personal rights of the citizen"; surely amongst those rights is that of self-identity and, in turn, self-actualisation—"I am …" and "I want to be …".[1]

These are rights both in imagination and, I suggest, in discourse—we have a right to imagine a different life for ourselves and a right to give that different life expression in language and through other means. The free movement of the imagination in this is critical; it must be possible to imagine having another life in order to give it expression and in order to bring it into being – the machinery in other words for identity formation and transformation is the imagination, I submit. Our role in a free society is to preserve imaginative and expressive freedom in order to preserve the freedom of self-formation and transformation. Critical to this freedom is the freedom of language and expression; being able to articulate an answer to those questions "I am …" and "I want to be …" is the foundation of imaginative freedom.

George Orwell (in "Politics and the English Language") advocates that individuals take care to express themselves clearly and simply, deliberately avoiding jargon in order to the free "from the worst follies of orthodoxy." He goes on:

You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself. Political language — and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists — is designed to

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[1] See https://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Historical_Information/The_Constitution/February_2015_-_Constitution_of_Ireland_.pdf.

make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity
to pure wind.[2]

The connection Orwell makes between the language of thought and thought itself—or, in my terms, imagination—is critical: one cannot imagine if one cannot speak; limiting one's language and expression necessarily limits one's thought and imaginative possibilities.

If identity is subject to self-adjustment and formation and transformation, it is also subject to forces outside the self that may impact on it in significant ways—and, I contend, in ways that are in the interests of others. (This is surely power, the power to influence and shape who people believe they are and who they might wish to be.) Extreme theocratic and totalitarian societies of course limit imaginative possibility and expressive freedom and thus imaginative possibility and identity formation. They do this through limiting what can be said and limiting what can be thought—and, as a consequence, limiting what one can be and become.

This of course takes place in more nuanced and different ways in seemingly free societies like our own but the same truth exists: external forces shape and modify the imaginative possibilities open to us. In our society, in order to guarantee the freedom to self-actualise, we need to act so as to guarantee freedom of expression and imagination. And we need to make visible (and critique) the forces that seek to limit that freedom. In the past it was of course the Roman Catholic Church and its prescriptions. We need to ask in 2017: what forces now operate to limit imaginative possibility? What forces now act to restrain identity formation? And in whose interests do these forces operate?

Another way to say this is that identity is prefigured on and prefigures a set of social relations that it is interesting to describe and critique; in other words, who one is and who one might become is in part related to who one is and might become *in relation to others*. Examining those social relations and the extent to which those social relation enable freedom of expression and imagination is part of our task.

(ii)

Identity finds expression in space and our relationship with space (and consequently our relationship with time).

It is a commonplace to suggest that identity finds expression in (and indeed can be produced on the basis of allegiance to) place. We identity with "Waterford" or "Munster" or "Ferrybank" or a particular street– one of the keystones on which we build our sense of ourselves is the place we are "from" or, rather, the place we identify with. (That too of course shifts and changes and may play different roles in different contexts: we may identify as Irish in certain contexts, as Munster-men and –women in others, with Waterford in still others. The point is, each is a different, related expression of identity based on place.)

Place and space are of course related (though not synonymous) terms. Arguably, places are imaginative products of particular spaces: "Waterford", as place, is an imaginative, indeed perhaps

[2] George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language", *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume 4: 1945-1950*, ed. S. Orwell and I. Angus (London: Penguin, 1970), 156-170 [170].

personal, version of the physical space occupied by the artefacts that make up the city. There is a literature on this that we do not have time to examine. (Useful perhaps in the context of thinking about Waterford is Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* (1960) and ideas of "imageability" and "wayfinding" as the means by which, cognitively, citizens "produce" the place from their negotiations with and activities within the particular space.)[3]

That space (place) has a shaping influence on who we are is evident when we think of the great revolution in thought in the Renaissance and how that revolution found expression. John Donne (in "Anatomy of the World", 1611) puts it thus:

> […] new philosophy calls all in doubt,
> The element of fire is quite put out,
> The sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit
> Can well direct him where to look for it.
> And freely men confess that this world's spent,
> When in the planets and the firmament
> They seek so many new; they see that this
> Is crumbled out again to his atomies.
> 'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone,
> All just supply, and all relation;
> Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot.[4]

Donne here refers to the change in the relations between human beings and between humans and the cosmos prompted by the change in the map of the universe from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican—from one where humanity was at the universe's centre, spatially, to one where we were consigned (ever increasingly) to a periphery, spatially and of course imaginatively: Renaissance humanism was in part compelled by both the terror and liberation new imaginative possibilities created.

The social relations I spoke of earlier, and the production of individual identity in the context of those social relations, are I submit shaped in no small way by space and the imaginative possibilities space creates. Again, to refer to our first proposition, our task is to ensure that we guarantee free imaginative possibility through the spaces we create and move through.

That imaginative possibility involve of course the freedom to imagine new and different spaces—and thus new and different spatial relations. In other words, imaginative possibility necessitates a certain sense of historical contingency. This sense of possibility extends backwards as well as forwards and involves imagining a different space in the past and a different space in the future. Enlivening this sense of historical possibility is to me an essential part of the guarantee of unlimited imaginative freedom. We exist, in other words, in time and form and reform ourselves in time as well as in space. It is important we remind ourselves of this.

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[3] See Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1960).
[4] John Donne, "The First Anniversary: an Anatomy of the World", *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, ed. R. Robbins (Harlow: Longman, 2010), 815-60 [835-8]

Waterford is at a critical moment where the configuration of space will determine what's possible—and what's imaginable—for years even generations to come

The immediate policy context within which we can make this proposition is that provided for by the National Planning Framework ("Ireland 2040 Our Plan") which has a lot to say about space, place and the future of the city of Waterford.[5] The sense of future possibility described in the Framework is echoed locally in, for instance, plans for the North Quay described in various Council documents as "exciting", plans that will "enhance the attractiveness" of the city, that will "renew" not just the Quays themselves but the city overall. One hears similar about the O'Connell Street cultural quarter development, the mooted Michael Street development, the development of the Ard Ri site, the Apple Market, and so on.

What I'm interested in prompting is some consideration of the imaginative possibilities the planning framework and the discourse surrounding future development creates. Are plans likely to guarantee the freedom of imaginative possibility for Waterford's citizens? The geographer David Harvey says in the essay "The Right to the City", "the freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is […] one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights"; does the National Planning Framework and the specific expression of that Framework in Waterford guarantee those rights, which are imaginative as well as material?

I want to confine my remarks to the National Planning Framework; the discussion may take us into the specifics of examining local development. Let me quote a typical passage from the Framework (which is, I admit, still in draft form). This passage is to my mind representative of the entire document.

> Ireland's people are a critical resource and have consistently demonstrated creativity, innovation and agility in national development. We continue to capitalise on our artistic and cultural inheritance, authentic and vibrant places and internationally competitive third-level sector. This has meant that we have been able to overcome economic setbacks and succeed in a range of modern, high value-added economic spheres. (p.20)

These spheres are then named. It is perhaps to overstate the case to call on Thomas Paine who wrote: "Man has no property in man."[6] Nonetheless, we must be suspicious of a discourse that suggests that human individuals are a resource at the disposal of the State for economic ends. The "value-added" mentioned in the passage of course is particularly disturbing: value-added for whom, we ask? Citizens, one might argue, are presented here as a resource that generates profit for private and corporate interests; I suggest that the "value-added" from the resource that is the citizenry when it comes to the "high-value economic spheres" mentioned—"aviation services, aquaculture, biopharma, financial technology, agri-food and medical devices"—has not accrued, in the first instance, to the State and to the citizens who are the means of production.

The neo-liberal positioning of economic—that is, business and corporate—interests at the heart of Ireland's future spatial planning is very evident and quite shameless. And such positioning works, critically, by restricting the terms of the discourse; it is proposed as self-evident (when it is not at all)

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[5] See http://npf.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Ireland-2040-Our-Plan-Draft-NPF.pdf.
[6] See Thomas Paine, "The Rights of Man", http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/578/.

that what is good for corporate profiteers will necessarily be good for everyone and that the "value-added" generated by individual labour will necessarily be "value-added" for everyone. These assumptions it seems to me ground the National Framework; we must guard against them colouring our local expression of it.

For (to bring my thoughts to a head), the manipulation of discourse and the manipulation of space, and the imaginative possibilities determined and/or circumscribed by that manipulation, as evident in the Framework, suggest the need for a much more critical and politicized understanding of future urban planning and specifically future planning in Waterford when it comes to thinking about public space. According to Henri Lefebvre, "The city and its various installations (ports, train stations, etc.) are part of capital" and one must start one's critique of the various social relations enabled or denied within urban development with that in mind.[7] This extends to our so-called public spaces; one must examine the configuration of public space to ensure that these spaces guarantee the freedom of imaginative possibility that is necessary for identity creation, and to examine the material forces and capital forces at work in shaping that public stage. Two differing visions of public space exist, one which sees public space as "an unconstrained space within which political movements can organise and expand into wider areas" and a second which sees public space as "planned, orderly, and safe", "a controlled and orderly retreat where a properly behaved public might experience the spectacle of the city".[8] It seems to me that we must choose.

That "planned, orderly, safe" space is the Disney-fication of the city. Disneyland works by creating a timeless virtually real place (denying thus the possibility of a future and a past: Disney has always existed, will always exist, in the same manner, outside history: Baudrillard writes of Disneyworld erasing time and thus marking "the beginning of real, punctual and unidimensional time, which is also without depth"); it is a virtual reality that melds escapist entertainment (because it is de-historicised) with riskless consumption—effectively it is a giant shopping centre with entertainment thrown in but in which one is not necessarily aware of one's consumption and in which one is hyper-aware of one's own safety; it is the same the world over, meaning it denies and suppresses diversity (linguistic, ethnic) in favour of a uniform experience; it colonizes the mind and restricts imaginative possibility by representing paradise as the continuance for all time of the Disney experience.

I submit that we must guard against the Disney-fication of Waterford and, certainly when it comes to public space, guard against the positioning of our spaces as premised on the merits of consumption. (Perhaps the process has already begun. Consider how the Greenway is being presented, for instance. Consider its very existence as a public space. Perhaps the "danger" represented by the Greenway as a free public space is evident in the proposal—dismissed immediately one is happy to see—that we charge for access to it.) Shopping centres, for instance, as expressions of our sense of public possibility are in fact a denial of possibility in multiple ways: they harden into permanence a form of (political) capital relationships; they position the citizen as determinedly (and exclusively) a consumer; and they promote private, individualist experience (shopping) above genuine and authentic social engagement. And all in the interests of generating private wealth. But we guard against the Disney-fication and commodification of space not just by resisting certain approaches to how those spaces are used, but also resisting how we talk about space: we need to resist the neo-liberal discourse and introduce into the discussion notions like rights, freedom, imagination.

We do not want our future city to be a theme park celebrating consumption, profit, private interest, and the market. I leave it to the discussion to determine what we would like it to be.

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[7] Henri Levebvre, "Space: Social Product and Use Value", *State, Space, World: selected essays*, ed. N. Brenner and S Elden (Minneapolis/London: U Minnesota Press, 2009), 185-195 [187]
[8] Don Mitchell, "The End of Public Space? People's Park, Definitions of the Public, and Democracy", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 85. 1 (March 1995), 108-133 [115]