Sexuality and the State in Interwar Ireland: Legislative Responses in a European Age of Anxiety

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Having neutralised republican militancy and gained jurisdiction over the 26 counties comprising the new Irish Free State/Éire, the interwar governments of W.T. Cosgrave and Éamon De Valera cast an anxious inward gaze. Aggressive cultural differentiation was promoted by the state; the new Dublin administration aided cultural nationalists in their quest to cleanse the predominantly Catholic and nationalist polity of colonial cultural residue. Gaelic ideals and Catholic social thought fed into this process, which saw sexuality emerge as a major source of concern. Regulating sexuality and attempting to curtail sexual freedom was not unique to interwar Ireland. Across Europe, legislatures strove to contain troubling social forces and demographic trends in the aftermath of World War One. Apprehension centred on women; their fecundity became a concern for European governments keen to arrest a perceived moral and racial enfeeblement of the national stock. This article locates post-colonial Ireland during a European age of anxiety, where the ‘shock of modernity’ and political insecurity elicited structures of containment and interventionist strategies on the part of the state. Moral panic and conservative backlash were European phenomena, and not simply the product of Irish cultural and religious circumstances.

Introduction
During the interwar period, many European governments felt a degree of apprehension about the sexual habits of their citizens (Mazower 1998: 78). European

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legislatures felt compelled to regulate sexuality in an attempt to restore ‘respectable’ pre-war behavioural norms and promote the growth of a morally and racially healthy population. The overwhelmingly Catholic-minded parliamentarians of the newly-established Irish Free State were conscious of the need to project a distinct post-colonial Irish identity, to bind Civil War wounds and make Ireland’s cultural presence felt internationally (Hutchinson 1987: 133). In common with other European states, the regulation of female sexuality gained particular importance. ‘Sexuality’ as defined in this article encompasses births, contraception, venereal disease, abortion and prostitution – areas which governments strove (often futilely) to control. Several notable studies of the period suffer from an inability to see Ireland’s experience as merely a regional manifestation of a European zeitgeist (see Brown 2004 and Lee and Ó Tuathaigh 1982). This article places the Irish Free State in broader context by identifying points of overlap between European states in a continent fractured by ideological division, demonstrating that interwar moral conservatism was not an exclusively Irish trait deriving from the quest to build a more Catholic/Gaelic society (McGarry 2014: 661).

European governments across the political spectrum legislated extensively to uphold morality, fortify national virility and condition citizens to conform to ‘respectable’ middle class standards of socio-sexual conduct. The emergence of a “gendered state” in post-independence Ireland reflected legislative attitudes in continental Europe, and was met with widespread acquiescence on the part of the Irish population (Ferriter 2004: 327). The regulation of sexuality also involved its zealous promotion in a marital context. The pro-natal ethos of many states reflected a growing awareness of stagnating birth rates and the need to replenish and genetically strengthen the national stock following wartime losses. Notions of racial improvement were not confined to fascist states, but were underlying trains of thought extant across Europe. A comparative analysis of European sexuality reveals the extent to which attitudes in the Saorstát² echoed a pan-European chord.

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² The Gaelic name for the Free State, also known as Saorstát Éireann (Irish Free State).
Contraception and Prophylactics

Contraception was a particularly thorny issue, especially in Catholic states (Mazower 1998: 85). Prophylactics were relieved of some of their social stigma during World War One, during which condoms were quietly promoted as an effective means of controlling venereal disease among soldiers. Irish newspapers rarely breached the topic of sex, often cloaking concerns in biblical metaphors to avoid being compared with the oft-deplored “sexualised” English press (Ferriter 2009: 122). A 1930 report in the Irish Independent branded birth control “a vile crime against the creator” but also more widely as a mechanism for inciting promiscuity and shrinking population size. An unidentified priest interviewed for the article condemned the long-term impact of contraception, speculating that “by the year 2000 a child would be an event; and people would be travelling miles to see what a baby was like” (‘A Bishop’s views’: 7).

Across Europe, birth control was as much a national as a moral dilemma, stimulating fears of an inexorable slide towards “race suicide” (Overy 1994: 6). Census data was nervously scanned, eliciting widespread anxiety when statistics revealed population growth contraction. Many European countries imposed a wholesale ban on contraception advertising and sales, beginning with France in 1920 and followed by Belgium, Italy, Spain and the Irish Free State. The Oireachtas'\(^3\) decision to ban contraceptives in 1935 was informed more by Catholic moral precepts, whereas the French Parliament legislated in response to fear of a slower rate of population growth relative to Germany (Sonn 2005: 417). As Ireland relied on emigration as a safety-valve safeguarding socio-economic stability, concerns about population haemorrhage did not provoke as much disquiet as elsewhere in Europe.

Promiscuity and Concealment

Determining the extent of extra- or pre-marital sexual activity remains notoriously difficult. The citizens of the Irish Free State, however, appear to stand apart from other Europeans in terms of their sexual chastity (Ferriter 2009: 103). In rural Ireland,

\(^3\) The Irish Free State Parliament, comprising the lower house (Dáil Éireann) and the upper house (Seanad Éireann).
economic, moral and religious considerations restricted sexual autonomy. Marriage was, to a large extent, predicated on inheriting property (Whyte 1980: 32). Political independence copper-fastened what was deemed appropriate sexual conduct by legislative means. No amount of regulation, however, could stifle illicit sex. Reminiscing about the 1930s in the liberal journal The Bell, one essayist spoke of “the change [which] came in every parish and before very long the odd fellow that could get a girl to meet him had to go deeper into the wood”. The same author also recalled “plenty of had to get marrieds” that occurred as a result of pre-marital sexual adventure (Kavanagh 1954: 55). Youth promiscuity was perceived to be a new and frightening phenomenon across Europe, something which undermined the sanctity of marriage and the stability of the family unit. The Oireachtas took unusually stringent legislative steps to filter out corrupting foreign influences and protect the morals of Irish youths. The Public Dance Halls Act of 1935 attempted to introduce a degree of recreational regulation by granting the Gardai powers to shut down private gatherings.

Regulating sexuality also meant addressing its physical consequences. In the Irish Free State, figures indicating a rise in illegitimate births were used to substantiate claims of moral degeneracy and national decline. Remarking on the rise in illegitimate births in Galway in 1927, a hospital director deplored the “departure from the Gaelic tradition of purity” (‘Grave scandal revealed at hospital meeting’: 7). In interwar Ireland, a birth outside wedlock was considered un-Irish as well as immoral. Irish chastity and decency was frequently dichotomised against Anglo-Saxon decadence and moral bankruptcy, making the preference for concealment of sexual transgression in Ireland more explicable (Lee 1989: 158). Public distribution of the 1931 Carrigan Report was vetoed, influenced by a postcolonial mind-set which sought to hide evidence that would delegitimise claims of Irish moral superiority. Although a discernible altruistic impulse motivated both Church and state to provide assistance to mothers of illegitimate children, there was also a desire to quarantine

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4 The Guards, the Irish Free State police force which replaced the Royal Irish Constabulary following partition.
5 A government survey of the Irish moral character, largely based on medical, clerical and Gardai testimony.
them from the rest of the population. The Catholic Church claimed social responsibility and concealed Ireland’s ‘fallen women’ in welfare institutions. Criticised by British authorities “for being too repressive” (Davidson 1994: 281), Magdalene asylums enabled the Irish state to protect (and project) the image of a virtuous nation untainted by sexual transgression, irrespective of the social reality.

**Gendered Approaches**

Pre-independence Irish nationalists scorned the “British garrison as the source of moral and physical contagion for Irish women” (Luddy 2007: 80). This claim struggled to resonate to the same extent in independent Ireland, as evidence of sexual intemperance continued to surface. The state-building process was heavily influenced by a desire to attain a moralistic, chaste and pious ‘Gaelic Eden’ free of Anglo-Saxon influences (Gibbons 1996: 155). A citizenry devoid of sexual impropriety and immoral conduct was extolled as a trait that distinguished Ireland from the adjacent isle. In the Irish Free State (as in Europe as a whole), moral restoration reflected a patriarchal discourse which sought to control frightening new phenomenon – the independent and liberated young woman (Mazower 1998: 81). The desire to safeguard the sanctity of marriage and limit female sexual autonomy informed much interwar social legislation. In an attempt to hold back the tide of post-war permissiveness, numerous European states moved to restrict transgressive female sexuality whilst simultaneously encouraging marital fecundity for the national good.

Regulating female sexuality (by limiting access to contraception and encouraging marital pro-natalism) also encompassed criminalising abortion. Anti-abortion legislation was ratified or tightened-up by many European states in an attempt to eliminate its use as a means of birth control (Mazower 1998: 86). The availability of abortions and contraceptives, according to the Carrigan Report, was thought to encourage sexual promiscuity as it “avoided the consequences of sexual indulgence among the unmarried” (Carrigan Report 1931). For some European states (such as France) outlawing abortion formed one aspect of the drive to increase birth rates. Illegal since 1861, backstreet abortions continued unabated throughout the interwar period in Britain and Ireland (Luddy 2007a: 82). Westminster legislated in 1929 to
raise the penalty for conducting an abortion, but introduced a caveat which permitted its legal use if the mother’s life was at stake (Hug 1999: 79). Exemplifying the limited impact of governmental power in regulating sexuality, rather than eradicating abortion legislative action merely forced the practice underground, resulting in incalculable numbers of women suffering the effects of botched abortions (Rattigan 2013: 43).

**Prostitution, Race and Venereal Disease**

Aside from illegitimate births, one of the most visible signs of sexual immorality was prostitution. European states had long endeavoured to regulate prostitution and its social ill-effects by legal means, but complete eradication proved impossible (Luddy 2007b: 236). All European governments shared the view that prostitution was both distasteful and immoral, but in Nazi Germany this became intertwined with theories of racial pollution. The *quality*, as well as the *quantity*, of the race was of supreme importance in fascist states. The Nazi movement exploited distaste for prostitution to win over centre-right sceptics but was compelled by popular pressure once in power to tolerate ‘racially pure’ prostitution in state-regulated brothels (Roos 2002: 67). Eugenicist theories resulted in a policy of selective pro-natalism, whereby ‘Aryan’ couples (inspired by the French precedent) were materially rewarded for their patriotic reproductive efforts. Those outside of the German *Volksgemeinschaft,* or genetic ‘inferiors’, who sexually fraternised with the racially ‘pure’ were dealt with punitively, often involving internment and forced sterilisation (Czarnowski 1997: 126). In liberal democratic Europe, moral rather than racial hygiene considerations conditioned debates surrounding prostitution. Brothels were viewed as sinful rather than a site of racial contagion. In the Irish Free State, a consensus for punitive action existed for those deemed guilty of moral turpitude. After attempts to ‘reclaim’ ‘fallen women’ had failed, those women who were deemed unrepentant and beyond reform were incarcerated (sometimes indefinitely) in Magdalen asylums (Ferriter 2009: 127).

Across Europe — despite growing evidence to the contrary — prostitution was symbiotically equated with venereal disease (VD). Contraception provision was the

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*Nazi conception of the German racial community, or Aryan ‘master race’.*
most obvious method of VD containment, but most states were reluctant to allow greater access on the grounds that it would incite birth-rate decline and/or promiscuity among the unmarried. Although European states adopted different strategies to combat VD, there existed a shared belief that women rather than men were the source of infection (McAvo 1999: 263). Regulating interwar sexuality rested on certain gender-specific assumptions, chiefly the presumed culpability of women rather than men for the unwanted manifestations of sexual delinquency. Even in comparatively liberal Britain, there was a tendency to believe that single, sexually active women were the “major vectors of venereal disease” and where the efforts of local medical authorities should concentrate (Davidson 1994: 279). In the Irish Free State, VD was considered an urban and imported problem, a bacteriological hang-over from colonial rule. A 1926 government inquiry into VD, which exposed Ireland as a “promiscuous nation”, was quietly suppressed out of fears that it would substantiate claims of “sexual chaos” existing in the Saorstát (Luddy 2007b: 237). The 1926 inquiry comprehensively rebuked the assumption that VD was both urban and prostitute in origin, citing males as the primary carriers and disseminators of VD.

Conclusion

Legislative regulation of sexuality occurred across Europe with varying degrees of intensity, the Irish Free State was no oddity. European governments expressed a legislative willingness to impose conservative standards of behaviour on a post-war generation accused of moral laxity. Sex – and in particular female fertility – was something governments felt duty-bound to control for reasons of moral, national and even racial well-being. The crusade to purify the nation from sexual corruption was a pan-European phenomenon and involved numerous defensive strategies. In the Irish Free State, this concern meshed with the desire to protect the fiction of Irish cultural purity originally disseminated by nineteenth century cultural nationalists (Smith 2004: 231). Despite this, as Mark Finnane contends, Ireland “was not so much unique as lying at one end of a spectrum of countries concerned with the regulation of sexuality” (2001: 524). Nevertheless, the Irish Free State and Britain stand out from continental European states in that moral rather than racial concerns motivated the demand for sexual regulation. Citizens’ scope for sexual autonomy and access to
carnal knowledge was curtailed with the intention of minimising the numbers of those affected with “dangerous sexualities” (Davidson 1994: 267). Although located on the periphery of Europe, Ireland was not insulated from the social anxieties manifest on the continent. Examining other European states exposes the pitfalls of the prevailing scholarly approach, which often results in Ireland being presented as standing alone in glorious isolation, immune from transnational events and social thought.

Bibliography


‘Grave scandal revealed at hospital meeting’ (1927) Connaught Tribune. 18 June, 7.


