

Below is a paper delivered in Germany 2008 by Dr Feargal Mac Ionnrachtaigh (Belfast). In it you may see why some parents send their children to Irish-medium schools. You will also read some of the opinions of foreign policy makers regarding plans for the Irish language.

## **'Ón Bhun Aníos'<sup>1</sup> - Resisting and Regenerating through Language in the North of Ireland**

### **Abstract**

In introduction, this paper will explore Ireland's cultural colonialization as part of the wider British imperial project involving physical, political, cultural and economic subjugation which ultimately led to the demise of the Irish language as Ireland's spoken language in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It will contend that this antagonistic British policy towards the Irish language has continued unabated until the present, merely becoming more veiled and sophisticated in conjunction with the political expediencies of the particular era. I aim to frame this background analysis into a wider understanding of cultural shift in colonial and neo-colonial contexts and how this corresponds directly with the modern context of neo-liberal Globalisation.

The consequences of colonialization will be seen to have inspired an ideology of decolonialisation and resistance which has been a central motivating factor in the contemporary Irish language revival movement in the North of Ireland. It will view the survival and subsequent development of this movement in the North in spite of the often recalcitrant policies of a hostile six-county unionist regime as an example of resistance based language activism in practice.

The paper will also specifically focus on the transformational impact of the republican prison struggle in Long Kesh on the language revival in the North during the 1980's and it's continuing legacy of cultural resistance. The Irish language community's current struggle for

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: From The Bottom Up

language rights in the six counties and its many regenerative projects will be viewed as bottom-up grassroots activist initiatives that have the potential to radically alter power relations in Irish society while simultaneously challenging the Global linguistic hegemony.

### **Language and Power- The Cultural colonization of Ireland**

‘It hath ever been the use of the conquerors to despise the language of the conquered, and to force him by all means to learn his’ *Edmund Spenser* (quoted in Ó Fiaich 1969: 104)

‘For Cultural invasion to succeed, it is essential that those invaded become convinced of their intrinsic inferiority. Since everything has its opposite, if those who are invaded consider themselves inferior, they must necessarily recognize the superiority of the invaders. The more the invasion is accentuated and those invaded are alienated from the spirit of their own culture and from themselves, the more the latter want to be like the invaders: to walk like them, dress like them, talk like them.’ Paulo Friere (1989, 151)

Ambitions of empire would not only direct the English colonial project in Ireland and subsequently throughout the globe for centuries to come but also define an ideology of expansionism among ‘technologically superior’ western powers that shaped an often brutal ‘scramble for territories’ which would leave unparalleled poverty, death and destruction in its wake. As Said (1993: 8) lucidly states, ‘“Colonialism’, which is almost always a consequence of imperialism’ is usually a merciless process which forges a relationship ‘in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social, or cultural dependence’ (Ibid) Although the imperial approach in Ireland was multi-faceted, utilising all means at its disposal, this paper will focus on cultural colonisation<sup>2</sup> and its legacy as a motivating factor in the ideology of resistance that often set out to overturn it.

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<sup>2</sup> The centrality of this aspect of the imperial project was similarly relevant throughout the world as attested to by Kenyan anti-colonial writer and activist Ngugi wa Thiong’o, ‘The repression of the imperial power has many facets, physical subjugation is achieved by means of the bullet but language is the means of cultural and spiritual subjugation’ (1997: 9)

The linguistic shift in Ireland from Irish to English during Ireland's protracted cultural colonialisation is ineluctably bound with more general questions of language and power. In it is my contention that English and later British state policy aimed deliberately towards the tactical removal of the Irish language as a bulwark to its long-term colonial, imperial, and political ambitions which were ultimately defined by its desire for greater wealth and power. Many commentators (Curtis 1984, Ó hAdhmaill 1990, Kachuk 1994) hold the view that the English/British Imperial approach to Ireland from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards and its means of assertion varied only in accordance with the prevailing colonial strategy and the expediency of the particular era while the long-term aim necessitated the successful cultural subordination of the Irish language within the wider framework of an expansionist project based on exploitation and profit. Therefore, in this context, the rise of the Tudor monarchy and the beginning of the colonial era in the 16<sup>th</sup> century signalled the birth of a new, more determined, nationalistic and aggressive colonial *modus operandi* which envisaged the construction of a vast Empire in the future motivated partially by the flowering of capitalism with its insistence on the private ownership of property. (Crotty 1986)

Consequently, the task of colonial conquest in Ireland saw 'an outpouring of justifications for colonization and conquest' (Canny 1973, 581) which explained strategic and tactical imperatives, as a moral crusade to civilize the culturally inferior Irish. Canny successfully uncovers striking parallels between the English descriptions and characterization of Irish and Native American peoples in an all-encompassing ideology that both explained and justified conquest<sup>3</sup>. A sustained and protracted attack on the Irish social,

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<sup>3</sup> An illuminating description of this ideology was cited by Liam O'Dowd (1992: 27) as he quoted French commissaire-general Jules Harmond when referring to the British colonial project in Ireland, "*The basic legitimization of conquest over native peoples is the conviction of our superiority, not merely our mechanical, economic and military superiority, but our moral superiority. Our dignity rests on that quality, and it underlies our right to direct the rest of humanity.*" Many contemporary commentators like Chomsky (1999) and Curtis (2003) take the view that little has in fact changed and that colonialism has merely developed into 'neo-liberal', corporate Globalisation. They cite the current Anglo/American Government led 'War-on-terror' in the middle-East as a 'neo-colonial' manifestation of this age-old ideology which, in their view, uses the disguise of modernization to 'civilise the natives' according to language which assumes the superiority of so-called Western values of 'democracy'.

religious and cultural way of life was initiated during the Tudor reign where the battle for linguistic domination became a central aspect of the battle for religious and political hegemony and power with various mid-sixteenth century official documentation of the time showing that the English administration were deeply worried about the power and influence of the Irish language. According to Professor Brian Ó Cuív,

‘The State papers...show us that the extirpation of that language remained state policy. Again and again we find plans put forward for this purpose, statutes passed, or orders sent from the king himself, such as the following found in a letter from Henry VIII to the town of Galway in 1536: ‘that every inhabitant within the saide town indevor thwym selfe to speke Englyse, and to use theym selffe after the Englysh facion; and specially that you, and every of you, do put forth your childe to scole, to lerne to speke Englyse.’(Mac Síomóin 2006: 14)

This determined colonial project meant in the words of historian Edmund Curtis that the native Irish ‘language and culture, as expressed in the bards, poets and others, were forbidden or even penalized’ and according to this elaborate plan ‘Ireland was to be made a second England through the complaisant bishops and nobility, and no provision was made for the recognition of Irish and Gaelic tradition.’ (Curtis 1937: 170)

Inevitably, the process of colonisation, whereby indigenous peoples throughout the world have in May’s (2002: 17) words ‘been consistently, often violently, dispossessed of their cultures, languages and lands, not to mention their very lives’ resulted in the Irish context in a determined tradition of resistance which usually met with an intensification of brutality on the part of the English who exulted ‘the fact they were now absolved from all restraints in dealing with’ the natives.(Curtis 1984: 21) This was coupled with the stereotypical denigration of the customs, language and clothes of the ‘inferior’ Irish and was manifested most notably in the writings of English poet and colonist Edmund Spenser who declared in his *View of the present State of Ireland* (1596) that, ‘The Gaels must be redeemed from their wildness: they must cut their glibs of overhanging hair (which conceals their plotting faces); they must convert their

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mantles ...into conversational cloaks; above all, they must speak the English tongue.’(Kiberd 1995:10) Spenser’s recognised that linguistic assimilation was the crucial cog in the insatiable colonial aspirations for omnipotent power and argued that it could only be achieved through military force which could bring the Irish ‘from their delight of licentiousness and barbarism into love of goodness and civility’ (Curtis 1984: 19)

This extensive colonial practice which viewed the mere Irish with the same disdain as the Native Americans would later be seen served as a validation for the wholesale process of land confiscations and plantations which would culminate in the fateful Battle of Kinsale of 1601 which became a watershed in modern Irish history which would leave a bloody legacy and yield a reversal of fortunes for the Irish language<sup>4</sup> which would rapidly become the language of the dispossessed thus seemingly ensuring the success of the Elizabethan conquest. The acute connection between Ireland’s political defeat and the endeavour to eradicate the language was referred to by one of the leading architects of the Ulster plantation, Sir John Davies who stated in hope ‘that the next generation will in tongue and heart and in every way else become English; so as there will be no difference but the Irish sea betwixt us.’ (Ó Fiaich 1969: 105) His undue optimism underestimated the latent potential for resistance which manifested itself ferociously in the rebellion of 1641 where the natives rose in an attempt to repossess their lands in what ‘must have been in its early stages almost exclusively an insurrection of Irish speakers.’(Ibid: 106)

Military coercion was used in abundance while the arrival of Oliver Cromwell in 1649 ushered in an unparalleled campaign of death, destruction and land confiscation which would reduce the Irish population to utter destitution. Cromwell’s imperial objectives had religious,

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<sup>4</sup> Géaróid Ó Tuathaigh (2005: 42) succinctly sums up the centrality of the language to this violent transformation in Ireland in this period, ‘*Language and, even more crucially, religion, were the key elements of cultural discrimination in the great convulsion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the outcome of which was the establishment of a Protestant, overwhelmingly planter, new ruling class in Ireland, together with the triumph of the English language, law and politico-administrative institutions throughout Ireland, and the defeat of the whole institutional edifice of the Gaelic political and social order which had been sustained and mediated through the Irish language.*’

moral and racist undertones ‘not far removed from those which Nazis used about Slavs, or white South Africans use about the original inhabitants of their country. In each case the contempt rationalized the desire to exploit.’<sup>5</sup>(Hill 1970: 113) Cromwell’s campaign of genocidal devastation<sup>6</sup> had left Ireland in ruins and by 1653 the population had halved from 1.5 million people with over 616,000 dead, 40,000 conscripted to serve in European armies and a further 100,000 rounded up and transported to the new colonies of the Caribbean and America as slaves.(Curtis1984: 28)

Although the Penal Laws didn’t specifically proscribe the Irish language, the English-speaking Protestant hegemony who emerged from their tenure with complete dominance of Irish cultural, political and economic institutions, viewed it disdainfully as a language of backwardness and poverty.<sup>7</sup> Under this rationale, the impoverishment and inequality of the Irish could be blamed on their linguistic, racial and cultural inferiority as opposed to the invasion, subsequent repression and dispossession of their lands on the part of the English. (Williams 1992: 130)

Against this backdrop, a process of language shift to ‘English, the language of power and of all the avenues to advancement, soon gathered momentum among those who aspired to improve their condition or to progress and participate fully in the life of the country under the new order.’(Ó Tuathaigh 2005: 42) This was especially marked in the East of the country where the Catholic Upper and middle class aspired to avail themselves of the opportunities for personal

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<sup>5</sup> This is conveyed in his Cromwell’s notorious account of the massacre of Drogheda: ‘*It hath pleased God to bless our endeavours at Drogheda...The enemy were about 3,000 strong in the town...I do not think 30 escaped with their lives. Those that did are in safe custody for the Barbados...I wish that all honest hearts may give glory of this to God alone, to whom indeed the praise of this mercy belongs...I am persuaded that this righteous judgment of God upon these barbarous wretches...will tend to prevent the effusion of blood for the future-which are satisfactory grounds to such actions.*’(Curtis 1984: 25)

<sup>6</sup> Its worth pointing out that many historians, both British and Irish, take an opposite view of Cromwell’s reign in Ireland by attempting to ‘explain’ his campaign in the context of Irish resistance. This is evident in the work of Comerford (2003:31) who while claiming that the slaughter in Drogheda ‘provided Catholics with a myth’ stated ‘in any case Cromwell came to Ireland full of righteous indignation about the massacres of 1641.....also, there was large debt that could only be redeemed by the confiscation of land.’

<sup>7</sup> Some even went as far as Anglican Dean Jonathan Swift who feared that it channelled seditious sentiments of disloyalty, ‘I am deceived if anything has more contributed to prevent the Irish from being tamed than the encouragement of their language, which might easily be abolished and become a dead one, with little expense and trouble.’(Crowley 1996: 103)

enhancement afforded by the eventual repeal of the Penal laws (Wall 1969: 85) The unmistakable vulnerability of the language in this period is demonstrated by the fact that it had 'been banished from Parliament and from the courts of Law, from town and county Government, from the Civil service and from the upper levels of commercial life.' (Wall 1969: 82) By the end of the eighteenth century, Irish was no longer spoken by those who had achieved wealth and power or by those who aspired to uphold or expand their political, social or economic positioning. (Ibid)

Ireland was undergoing the initial side-effects of conformity to what would later become known as the classical colonial condition. The increased demand for literacy-in English- and the growing commercialisation of the rural economy contributed to the construction of the myth that traditional customs were the antithesis of modernity. Emigration should also be viewed in the context of a sustained colonial campaign to link the Irish cultural way of life with barbarism, backwardness and poverty. The economic element which was central to this campaign was epitomized by the differential pay given to Irish labourers who could speak English. (Crowley 2000: 34) Naturally, many native Irish speakers who faced stark poverty were influenced more by such necessity than personal choice as the process of cultural colonization in Ireland intensified as explained in Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1965: 151)

'The colonized's mother tongue ... is precisely the one which is least valued ... If he wants to obtain a job, make a place for himself, exist in the community and the world, he must first bow to the language of his masters. In the linguistic conflict within the colonised, his mother tongue is that which is crushed. He himself sets about discarding this infirm language, hiding it from the sight of strangers'

One such contemporary described how his loyalties were divided between his national language; 'the language of his heart' and English; 'the language of his commerce'. (Crowley 2000: 34)

In addition, it is important to recall that the Catholic Church in this period submitted to the expedient tendency towards colonial assimilation in the interests of their own survival and increased status by showing little interest in promoting the use of Irish at all with their decision

to use English at Maynooth from its opening in 1795 which was indicative of its apathetic attitude towards the language. (Crowley 2000: 84) Similar tendencies were evident in the early nineteenth century political mass movement which eventually led a successful campaign for Catholic emancipation in 1829. Its leader Daniel O’Connell, a native speaker from county Kerry, passively accepted the demise of the language; ‘the superior utility of the English tongue, as the medium of all modern communication, is so great, that I can witness without a sigh the gradual disuse of Irish.’ (Curtis 1994: 26)

This sense of cultural displacement was compounded by the formation of the National school system in 1831 which meant that the Irish language of officially unavailable in Irish schools. This enforced education system became a defining component in the British colonial policy of Anglicisation. Irish history and music were also excluded even in monoglot Irish speaking areas were requests for the teaching of Irish were always refused by an administration determined to produce ‘loyal British subjects’ (Mac Síomóin 1994: 49) Irish children were subjected to violent punishment<sup>8</sup> in school and at home in order to prevent them from speaking Irish.

This brutal imposition of quasi-educational ‘civility’ which would later be described by Pádraig Mac Piarais as ‘*The Murder Machine*’ saw the banned Irish language become a non-language and the Irish people effectively become a non-people. This is illustrated by the notorious mandatory morning assembly recitation in state classrooms;

‘I thank goodness and the grace  
Which on my birth have smiled;  
And made me in these Christian days,

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<sup>8</sup> While in Ireland the notorious tally-stick or ‘bata scoir’ was used to record and thus prevent children from speaking Irish with summary punishment being inflicted by the schoolmaster based on the amount of notches on the stick (Ó Giolláin 2000: 66), similar approaches were being used by the British regime in Kenya as late as the 1950’s. According to Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1997: 11), children caught speaking Gikúyú in school were ‘given corporal punishment- three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks- or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with the inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY.’ A button was initially given to one pupil who was supposed to hand it over to whoever was caught speaking his mother tongue. Whoever had the button at the end of the day would sing who had given it to him and the ensuing process would bring out all the culprits of the day. Thus children were turned into witch-hunters and in the process were being taught the lucrative value of being a traitor to one’s one community.’

A happy English child. (Kiberd 1991: 29)

Irish children were thus taught that learning Irish damaged the acquisition of English while also learning to associate their parents' lack of English with a lack of intelligence and civilization which internalised a sense of shame about their indigenous culture and non-literate parents. (Nic Craith 2001: 103) Despite the untold damage done by the national education system, more than half the population remained Irish speaking according to the census of 1841. (Hindley 1990: 15) However, this was rapidly overturned by the unprecedented levels of death and emigration culminating from the Great Famine of 1845 which 'decimated Irish-speaking Ireland through death and emigration.' (Ó Tuathaigh 2005: 43)

In the emerging *Drochshaoil* of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the now well-established association between the native language and illiteracy and low social status became deep-rooted when linked with individual survival. Breándán Ó Conaire (1986: 6) views this era as one characterized by 'a widespread shift to English (19<sup>th</sup> Century), a stigma of ignoble "primitiveness" and poverty – both material and intellectual – attached to Irish...and an Irish-speaking population who were unable to read or write in their own language.' Ó Conaire (1986: 7) continues by referring to the widespread acceptance on the part of the Irish of the negative colonial stereotyping which culminated in,

'An even more malign outcome was the inculcation of the seeds of shame and inferiority in the minds of Irish speakers for their own language, and the fostering of an attitude of disdain, antipathy and contempt in others towards "the barbarous tongue in which they converse".'<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Irish assimilative experience had undoubtedly set the scene for other colonial situations throughout the world in the sense that it shaped a botched perception of identity amongst the culturally colonised in terms concisely conveyed by Memmi (1965: 165); *'The crushing of the colonized is included among the colonizer's values. As soon as the colonized adopts these values, he similarly adopts his own condemnation. In order to free himself, at least so he believes, he agrees to destroy himself ... just as many people avoid showing off their poor relations, the colonized in the throes of assimilation hides his past, his traditions, in fact all his origins which have become ignominious.'*

Thus, the success of British colonial strategy in Ireland was dependent upon the destruction of the Irish language and culture as both a means and an end of cultural invasion which could create subservient and loyal subjects that could bolster the economic power and wealth of their expanding empire.

In assessing the Irish context and ‘the massive abandonment of Irish as vernacular language during the nineteenth century’ which as Ó Tuathaigh (2005: 43) points out ‘is a remarkable event in Irish cultural history’, and explaining the nature and impact of language shift in Ireland, many commentators avoid addressing the complexity of the facts and instead unquestionably and/or deliberately separate language ‘choice’ from the all-pervasive reality of cultural colonisation in Ireland. According to Edwards(1985:62-3) for example, language shift in Ireland had less to do with socio-political factors than with the fact the ‘mass of the Irish people’ had become ‘linguistically pragmatic’ and made the simple and practical choice of losing their language thus becoming ‘more or less active contributors to the spread of English’. This view is echoed by Comerford (2003:146) who believes ‘parental pressure’ on Irish children reflected a widespread ‘societal enthusiasm’ to adapt to the modern world.

This analysis both misconstrues and overestimates the element of individual responsibility involved with this ‘choice’ of language shift in Ireland while simultaneously either ignoring or consciously misinterpreting the facts surrounded the events of the period including the catastrophic consequences of the Great hunger and the coercive imposition of the national school system which had more ‘to do with cultural and mental colonisation’ as ‘one of the best ways of enslaving a people’ (Ó Ceallaigh 1994:16) than bringing modern education and literacy to the poor of Ireland. The exaggerated emphasis on the role of starving, demoralised and poverty-stricken Irish parents in this process of language shift, which even included preventing their children speaking and learning Irish at home is thus overplayed as ‘a reflection of- a popular and spontaneous re-evaluation of an ancient and bountiful culture’ (Ibid.) rather than being properly

contextualised within a critical analysis which fully examines the consequences of the both sustained and immediate effects of British colonialism in Ireland.

To underplay the historical significance of colonialism effectively obscures the fact that language loss rarely if ever occurs in communities of power, wealth and privilege, but rather to the dispossessed and disempowered. Moreover, as May (2002: 4) points out, linguistic dislocation doesn't occur in isolation from socio-cultural and socio-economic dislocation but always forms part of a wider process of social, cultural and political displacement often involving overt discrimination, suppression and subordination. As we have seen from the Irish example, the native/indigenous victims of this process of colonial dispossession and dislocation predictably began to see their social, cultural and economic advancement, or evolution, in the guise of the powerful language which they internalise to be more 'superior' or 'modern'. The fact that this situation eventually comes about will have nothing to do with linguistic merit and everything to do with the unequal exercise of social, economic and political power. (Ibid: 147)

### **Decolonisation and Resistance**

'To live, the colonized must... do away with the colonized he has become. The most urgent claim of a group about to revive is certainly the liberation and restoration of its language.'

*Frantz Fanon*

The processes of colonialism in Ireland, as in other situations throughout the world would be met with anti-colonial sentiments often posited in an ideology of decolonisation which first appeared in an Irish context in the guise of the romantic nationalism of the Young Irelanders' whose leader, an inspirational young Protestant barrister, Thomas Davis was Ireland's first 'radical decolonizing intellectual confronting head on the difficulties of constructing an Irish identity in terms made available by the imperial power he was attempting to throw off.' (Smyth 1999: 37)

Davis's decolonizing narrative, which cited the Irish language as the key to national revival<sup>10</sup>, would become most noted for its immense influence on a future generation of cultural and political activists.

Amongst those influenced by Davis was a young Douglas Hyde's whose inspirational decolonizing manifesto calling for widespread cultural revival, 'The Necessity for de-Anglicising Ireland', delivered as a speech in 1892 'opened up the revolutionary perspective that reversed traditional nationalist political logic' (Townshend 1999: 39) and provided the template for the formation of the Gaelic League a year later. The League itself when it was formed differed radically in its objectives from all other previous societies in that, as well as appealing 'to every one, whether Unionist or Nationalist' (Crowley 2000: 182), it openly aimed to proactively eradicate the sense of inferiority generated by years of Anglicisation and colonialism by advocating the revival of the language as a spoken tongue. Inevitably, early Gaelic League activists discovered 'many were ashamed to admit they knew Irish, because it was associated in their minds with illiteracy, poverty and proselytism' (Ó hAilín 1969: 92-93) In this sense, the 'deliberate project of 'decolonisation...formulated and adopted by a group of intellectuals and artists' was designed to prevent a 'rupture in cultural continuity' and ultimately undo 'the shame of defeat, dispossession, humiliation and impoverishment- the classic colonial condition.' (Ó Tuathaigh 2005: 47)

The league's radical educational policies had a two-way emphasis on instructional classes and essentially political campaigning to increase the status of the language. Thus, by 1900 the Irish language had been accepted as a mainstream optional subject within the British National School System, to be taught during school hours while in 1904, the league's bilingual policy for

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<sup>10</sup> Davis' famous article 'Our national language', emphasised the historical importance of the language to a native cultural identity, 'A people without a language of its own is only half a nation. A nation should guard its language more than its territories-'tis a surer barrier, and more important frontier, than fortress or river....To lose your native tongue, and learn that of an alien, is the worst badge of conquest- it is the chain on the soul.(Davis [no date]: 174-5)

primary schools in Irish speaking areas was accepted.<sup>11</sup> (Ibid: 99) Additionally, they're biggest achievement was when they secured Irish as a compulsory matriculation subject in the National University of Ireland after Gaelic league activists utilized its network of supporters in lobbying the university authorities with substantial political pressure. (Comerford 2003: 141)

However, any hard fought reforms must be judged in relative terms and against the backdrop of expedient Governmental flexibility in the early century era of 'killing Home Rule with Kindness'(Jackson 1999: 148) which involved appeasing Irish nationalism with minor concessions on a whole range of issues. As Ó Fearáil (1975: 30) illuminates, antagonistic British policy towards the language had merely become more veiled and sophisticated;

'An Conradh (the Gaelic League) continued to play a sort of game with the education authorities and the British treasury. The game went like this: An Conradh made certain demands for teaching of Irish. The British Government refused them. All shades of public opinion (were) brought to bear by An Conradh and the authorities gave in. However a short time later the Government introduced some new rule or measure which hit the teaching of Irish. An Conradh mobilised its forces again. There was another submission and a little later another wriggle by the government and Irish suffered again.'

Invariably, the British authorities only exceeded to the League's demands when the political pressure became unbearable and to do otherwise would have made them appear irrevocably intransigent. In its aftermath, every available avenue would be pursued vigorously by the authorities in order to neutralise the validity or implementation of the reforms. As we shall see later, this successful methodology had yielded a strategic template that the British government would use continually when dealing with, what they viewed, as the 'controversial' issue of the Irish language.

In this period, the Irish language movement naturally converged, as happened in numerous anti-colonial struggles throughout the world, with the growing forces of nationalism which ultimately led to a dramatic increase in support which saw the number of Gaelic League branches rise from 120 in 1900 to 985 in 1906, with membership peaking at 75,000 members.

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<sup>11</sup> By 1916, over half the schools in the *Gaeltachtaí* was teaching through the medium of Irish. (Hindley 1990: 14)

(Hutchinson 1987: 178-9) During this period, radical revivalists such as Patrick Pearse resolved to take innovative measures to combat the ‘mental enslavement’ of the imposed national school system, which he named ‘the Murder Machine’, by becoming the first exponent of Irish medium education.

He argued that this system perpetuated British oppression; ‘Education should foster; this education is meant to repress. Education should inspire; this education is meant to tame...The English are too wise a people to educate the Irish in any worthy sense.’ (Pearse 1976: 6) By forming *Scoil Éanna* and *Scoil Íde*, Pearse became one of the world’s first advocates of the ‘decolonizing of the mind’ thus precipitating similar Latin American and African activists and writers in later years.<sup>12</sup> The Gaelic league project itself would become the catalyst for the Irish political independence struggle and accordingly, the Irish revolution<sup>13</sup>, with few commentators disagreeing with FX Martin’s summation that ‘the Gaelic resurgence was the revivifying force which made possible the Easter Rising of 1916.’ (Rees 1998: 211) The practical extent of the linkage between the Rising and the Gaelic league is illustrated by the fact that 6 of the 7 signatories of the Proclamation<sup>14</sup> were members and all but 2 of the officers of the *Coiste Gnótha* of the League were implicated in the Rising with 16 of its members being shot, wounded, taken prisoner or disappeared. (Ó Huallacháin 1994: 72)

In this aftermath, hundreds of Gaelic league activists were subsequently interned amongst over two thousand others in Frongoch internment camp in Wales and other English prisons in the

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<sup>12</sup> For example, Kenyan activist Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1997: 3) argues that the colonised can ‘decolonise the mind’ by speaking ‘the united language of struggle contained in their languages’ while the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Friere concurs and states ‘The more the alienated culture is uncovered, the more the oppressive reality in which it originates is exposed...knowledge of the alienated culture leads to transforming action resulting in a culture which is being freed from alienation.’ (1972: 162)

<sup>13</sup> Pearse himself who wrote; ‘if one thing has become plainer than another it is that when the seven men met in O’Connell street to found the Gaelic League, they were commencing...not a revolt, but a revolution.’ (Crowley 2000: 216)

<sup>14</sup> The Proclamation of the Republic was read out outside the GPO (General Post office) in Dublin on Easter Monday, April 24 1916, by the President of the declared provisional Government of the Irish Republic, Pádraig Pearse and had seven signatories including Pearse himself, Thomas Clarke, James Connolly, Eamonn Ceannt, Seán Mac Diarmada, Thomas Mac Donagh and Joseph Plunkett.

aftermath of the Rising and thus began a pattern of armed resistance and political imprisonment which resulted in the incarceration of Irish citizens for political-related ‘offences’ in every decade of the twentieth century. The key role of cultural revival as a central tenet of the independence struggle inspired imprisoned nationalists/republicans in the post-Easter Rising period to utilize the Irish Language as both an educational expression of their identity and as a political weapon of struggle that could challenge ‘the colonial ideology of the British empire’ (Ó Croidheáin 2006: 156-157) during their imprisonment. Their decision to learn and view the language in this manner, which will be looked in greater detail later, had set an historical precedent that continually re-emerged in various prisons with new generations in future phases of history.

The British Government responded to the emergence of radical republicanism by reverting to measures of repression and imposing Martial Law which saw many democratically elected representatives being imprisoned without trial or being forced underground. All expressions of Irishness were subject to these draconian measures including the Gaelic League which was declared a ‘dangerous organisation which encourages and aids persons to commit crimes’ (Ó Fearáil 1975: 45) and ‘made illegal including its meetings and persons organising them or attending were liable to prosecution by a court under Army jurisdiction’. (Ó Huallacháin 1994: 75) Paradoxically, such persecutive measures actually strengthened the resolve of language revivalists and at the first public meeting of Dáil Éireann, held at the Mansion House in Dublin in January 1919, the order of business was published bilingually and the proceedings were conducted primarily in Irish. (Ó Gadhra 1989: 57)

However, circumstances were completely transformed when the republican movement was split down the middle, and when the British government negotiated the Treaty with the Irish independence movement in 1921 copper fastening the partitioning the six North-Eastern counties of Ulster into Unionist control. These would also irrevocably divide the language movement with

the language becoming a source of competition between both Pro-treaty and Anti-Treaty camps as to who was most genuinely wedded to the revival project.<sup>15</sup>(Mac Poilín 1997: 43) The Gaelic League itself went into sharp decline after 1922, partly because it was believed that the state would takeover the revival, but primarily due to nadir of the split and brutal Civil War which tore many branches apart. (Lyons 1973: 636)

Ideological and political divisions nullified the league's drive and impetus causing membership to drop dramatically from 700 branches in 1920 to 565 in 1922. (Ó Fearáil 1975: 45) While prominent language activists involved in the 1916 rising like Pearse, MacDonagh and Mac Diarmada were executed by British firing squads in its aftermath, ironically, it was at the hands of former comrades that many radical language activists like Liam Mellows and Cathal Brugha would meet their deaths during the Civil War. (Lyons 1973: 636) Ireland, according to Ó hÉallaithe (2004: 165), 'became a disturbing retreat into a conservative type of cultural protectionism' which subsequently alienated a whole generation of radical activists and intellectuals who might well have backed a more progressive cultural program.

Concomitantly, the decolonising project which had inspired the Irish revolution 'lost an important ally when the intellectuals turned their backs'. (Ibid) Ó hÉallaithe(2004) and Ó Croidheáin's(2006) viewpoint that a fearful and reactionary free-state administration<sup>16</sup> failed to promote the liberating aspirations of revival as a means of decolonialisation is echoed by cultural critics like Smyth(1999: 37) who states:

Despite the best efforts of its liberal and left wings, radical decolonisation was commandeered by a nationalist bourgeois elite which tried to arrest the process at the point where it assumed control of the state apparatus left vacant by an offshore power. The drive towards an essential national identity in the

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<sup>15</sup> These divisions were evidenced during the Treaty debates when Language activist and anti-treaty TD Cathal Brugha 'condescended to speak to his opponents in English, "the language of their masters"'. (Laffan 1999: 237)

<sup>16</sup> This argument is comprehensively developed and put into context by Lee (1985: 673) who posits, 'Irish, battered, bruised and humiliated, recovered some dignity through the revival efforts of the Gaelic league, and the idealism and intellect of many of the early enthusiasts. It then fell into bad company again with the founding of the state. The ethos of the official revival, despite the commitment of genuine revivalists, fostered precisely those qualities of national character that were accentuated by colonial experience, ambiguousness, furtiveness, mendacity. The manner of the revival thus contributed more to reinforcing the inherited flaws in the national personality than to adopting, however gradually, the national character to the new dignity of independence.'

years after 1922 actually reinforced social and political hierarchies even as it claimed to be an agent of liberation from such hierarchies.

Although a more detailed account of the ultimate failure of Irish Free State governments' after 1922 to rise to the challenge of reviving the language is beyond the scope of this paper, it would be my contention, as the quote above indicates, that Fanon's (Ibid: 163) analysis of how a 'nationalist bourgeoisie' can appropriate the decolonising aspirations of a liberation struggle unless it becomes imbued with a radical political and social consciousness is wholly applicable to the Irish case.

### **'Promoting sedition' - The Irish language and 'The Orange State'**

'What use is it here in this busy part of the Empire to teach our children the Irish language? What use would it have to them? Is it not leading them along a road which has not practical value? We have not stopped the teaching; we have stopped the grants, which I think amounted to £1,500 a year. We have stopped the grants simply because we do not see that these boys being taught Irish would be any better citizens.' *Stormont Prime - Minister James Craig, 1933.* (Andrews 1997: 83)

The 1920 Government of Ireland Act which partitioned Ireland laid the foundations for the formation of Europe's first exclusivist one-party state in its North-East which was designed to cement a permanent unionist majority that prevented Irish nationalists' access to political power, employment and housing thereby relegating them to a subordinate, apartheid-like status. (Farrell 1976) This tight repressive framework instituted a 'British 'effective dominant culture' through physical coercion' that left no room for any political or cultural expression of Irish nationalism or Irishness which was viewed as a 'threat to British cultural hegemony'. (Kachuk 1994: 176) Clayton (1998: 50-51) argues that this system was conditioned by a settler/colonial ideology that 'arises from the need to defend interests; the fear of change; and the intransigence of fixed positions' which necessitates the demand to exclude the 'natives' of potential power or influence.

Moreover, this hostile ideology, which undoubtedly had its roots in Ireland's protracted cultural colonization<sup>17</sup>, didn't auger well for the Irish language, which was considered a threat and by association its main promulgators, the Gaelic league who were viewed by Unionists as 'an anti-British counter-culture dominated by republican separatists' whose promotion of the Irish language was nothing than 'the promotion of sedition and disloyalty under another name'.(Andrews 1997: 56) Meanwhile, state policy and state repression had a crippling effect on non-political, non-official voluntary effort on behalf of the language in the area under the jurisdiction of the Belfast Government. Before the end of 1922 all branches of the Gaelic League in the South of Ulster had ceased to function while the province organizer had to flee from the six counties, under threat of arrest and imprisonment, in 1923 and resign later that year.<sup>18</sup> (Ó Huallacháin 1994: 108)

The unionist government seized the opportunity to vent its opposition to the Irish language with its 1923 Education Act which substantially negated the achievements of the Gaelic league over the previous twenty years, (Kachuk 1994: 155) in what effectively was the beginning of a policy of systematic neglect and legislative persecution. These measures, according to Ó Croidheáin(2006: 192), along with the successful demand to censor school textbooks relating to history, economics, citizenship and Irish conform to the 'classic colonial policy' of controlling

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<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting that there is considerable debate about whether Ireland can be viewed to actually constitute a colony following 1800 with commentators such as Aughey (1989) arguing that the Plantation was a long time ago and Ireland's colonial status effectively ended with the Act of Union of 1801. This view is challenged by Whyte (1990: 178) when he points out that 'settlers from England and Scotland did come over in 17<sup>th</sup> Century and settle in much the same manner as their compatriots were settling in America. No one has thought to call the American settlements anything other than colonies. Some of the same individuals were involved in the Irish and the American schemes of colonization. The result in Ireland at least, was to produce an enduring division of the population, as in other settler colonies such as South Africa and Algeria. The fact that Northern Ireland is legally not a colony, but part of the United Kingdom, does not destroy the analogy; Algeria was legally part of France, and Angola and Mozambique were legally part of Portugal, but that did not stop the French and Portuguese from eventually treating them as expendable, non-metropolitan parts of the state territory, and pulling out.'

<sup>18</sup> The leagues' 1926 report indicates the extent to which they had been eradicated; 'Little of the body of the Gaelic League remains after the destruction of the last 3 or 4 years. Most of the people are apathetic...older people fight shy of Irish in case it would draw the suspicion of the Government on them.'(Ó Huallacháin 1994: 108)

not only the present, but also, as we saw earlier with its colonizing historiography, the representation of the past as pointed out by Fanon, ‘Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content...it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it’. (Ibid)

Despite the fact that all special grants for the teaching of Irish in the new Northern state were terminated and its status downgraded to as low as grade 7, the Stormont regime came under increasing pressure from hard-line loyalists to stop paying fees for the Language as an extra subject. One such MP named William Grant vehemently attacked the language in Parliament in an exchange with the Parliamentary education secretary; ‘the only people interested in this language are the people who are the avowed enemies of Northern Ireland- and does he not think the time has now arrived when this grant should be cut off?’<sup>19</sup> (Andrews 1997: 77) While these extreme loyalist attitudes were motivated by an objective which was shared by the Prime Minister and his government<sup>20</sup>, they resisted calls for a complete prohibition of Irish teaching in schools in favour of a less overt and more pragmatic and gradualist form of legislative repression involving allowing it to continue as an optional subject while constantly limiting opportunities and finances for its teaching.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, Craigavon’s response to the Loyalist League demands in which he stated his Government felt it ‘better to keep a control by means of regulations over activities of this character than to drive them underground where they will undoubtedly tend to germinate and

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<sup>19</sup> These hyperbolic protestations were taken further by the Belfast secretary of the Loyalist League in a letter to Prime Minister Lord Craigavon in which he castigated the government for enabling ‘rebellious spirits to propagate sedition as an ‘extra’ subject’ before proclaiming that ‘the language is of no practical utility, but may be of much value to incipient traitors, as a means of fomenting trouble.’ (Andrews 1997: 75-6)

<sup>20</sup> In a response by Craigavon to the Loyalist league signed by one of his officials, it stated that; ‘he (the PM) is by no means convinced that repressive measures would affect the object which both you and he desire. A prohibition of Irish teaching in the schools might have a result the very opposite to that intended.’ (Andrews 1997: 76) This quite clearly shows a correlation of interests between both pragmatic and extreme loyalists with regard the Irish language, namely, its elimination.

<sup>21</sup> When the opportune moment arrived in the end of 1933 the Government voted unanimously, in a parliament that nationalists had been boycotting for the previous year in frustration, to stop payment of fees for the teaching of Irish as an extra subject, for reasons summarized by Craigavon a few years later; ‘We have stopped the grants simply because we do not see that these boys being taught Irish would be any better citizens’ (Ibid: 83)

exert a baneful influence' (Ibid) is arguably concurrent with the strategically expedient position taken up by the British Government in its more veiled early twentieth century dealings with the Gaelic league, a position, no less, which has characterised the attitude of the Northern Ireland state towards the language thereafter. While Craigavon's more pragmatic repressive methodology differed in practice from the more overt persecution being demanded by extreme loyalists, these differences were merely tactical and were ultimately defined by a settler ideology which depended exclusively on what Fanon termed 'cultural racism'. This racism undeniably had its roots in Ireland's destructive cultural colonization which necessitated the xenophobic view that its 'inferior' native culture and all its associated features were socio-economic and practical impediments to the 'progress and humanity' of the British Empire and its dominant 'civilizing' culture.

Under this rationale, those who failed to appreciate or conform to the rigours of British cultural hegemony or worse still, those who actively opposed it were not only unworthy of its so-called benefits but regarded as disloyal, sub-human and dangerous. These arguments are extrapolated in a settler-colonial context by Clayton (1998: 53-4) who believes that loyalist portrayals of nationalists as 'both inferior and dangerous' could subsequently justify their cultural, political and socio-economic exclusion.

According to this analysis, which conforms to the classic colonial stereotypes found in other settler colonies, the coloniser as articulated by Memmi will utilise 'mythical portraits' to define how the colonised were to be viewed.<sup>22</sup>

Therefore any attempts to gain legitimacy for the Irish language was viewed by the Unionist state as an attack on British cultural hegemony, thus igniting further attempts to diminish or eradicate it. One of countless examples of this was in 1948, when discriminatory legislation was

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<sup>22</sup> In the six counties, these 'mythical portraits' were manifested in institutionalised discrimination towards Catholics in employment and housing as notoriously articulated by future Prime-minister Basil Brooke MP when denouncing those who employed Catholics in a speech on July 12 1933, 'I would not have a Roman Catholic about my own place...and I would appeal to Loyalists to employ good protestant lads and lassies.' (Farrell 1976: 90)

passed in the form of an amendment to the Public health and local council Act which prohibited the erection of Irish street signs. This came as a direct response to the erection of Irish street signs by nationalist councils in Omagh and Newry which caused outrage in Unionist circles who, in the words of future Stormont Prime Minister Brian Faulkner, couldn't 'tolerate the naming of our streets in a language which is not our language.' (Maguire 1991: 11) Furthermore, this set the scene for a barrage of draconian legislation to be introduced throughout the 1950's to add specificity to the increasingly widespread application of the Special powers act. The Public Order Legislation (1951) and the Flags and Emblems Act (1954) amounted to drastic emergency measures that enabled the Stormont government to physically subdue any cultural or political expressions of Irish nationalism by the excluded catholic minority. (Kachuk 1993)

### **'A Hidden Ulster' - survival, decolonisation and resistance**

'Ná habair é, dean é/ don't say it, do it' - famous Cumann Chluain Ard dictum

Despite the official hostility and disregard towards the language displayed by the dominant unionist state following partition, voluntary language activists did their utmost to fill the void and take responsibility for providing Irish classes and promoting cultural revival thereby compensating for the dearth of Irish language instruction in the education system. Their various projects created independent bastions of cultural activity which according to De Brún (2006: 11) amounted to 'a hidden Ulster of revivalism which enjoyed hardly any relations with statutory authorities and which was entirely alienated from the culture of the state'. This provided an effective form of cultural expression that cultivated an established social, educational and recreational movement that was only tolerated because it neither openly undermined nor challenged the legitimacy of the unionist state.

The focal point for much of this activism was the Ardscoil<sup>23</sup> Gaelic league's headquarters, which was rebuilt in Belfast in 1928 becoming a mainstay for cultural revivalist activity in the decades that followed. The language movement in this era, as it had done previously, acted as an ideological umbrella for nationalists, republicans and socialists with many deriving from working-class backgrounds. It was from this subtext in 1936, during a period of mass unemployment and endemic poverty that 'two unemployed young men Seamus Maxwell and Liam Rooney, set up Cumann Chluain Ard in an old covered gateway in Kane Street beside Clonard Monastery in West Belfast.' (Mac Seáin 2006: 4)

When the club eventually took the radical decision to become an 'Irish only' club in 1953 its new philosophy had according to Mac Seáin (2006: 4) effectively 'set up an alternative Irish language movement, more outspoken than the mainstream Gaelic league, which many of them looked upon as being too mild and bourgeois.' A core of idealistic young activists who first came to the fore in the club in the late fifties with the extraordinary idea of creating an urban Gaeltacht in West Belfast, which according to Andrews (1991: 98) was motivated by the hope that they could,

'...construct a set of values and an institutional framework that could bring a modern independent Irish-speaking society into existence, using what remained intact and worthwhile of pre-colonial Gaelic Ireland. Preservation and development of the Gaeltacht and on the establishment locally of a variety of Irish-speaking institutions in the belief that they may coalesce, creating the nucleus of this new society...'

That this audacious decolonising project was conjured up by working-class people against an unfavourable socio-political and socio-economic backdrop in an area crippled by political discrimination, widespread alienation and social injustices made their task as daunting as it did admirable. (Nig Uidhir 2006: 138) Although the planning and delivery of this initiative took nine years in all eventually reaching fruition in 1969, the core group who spearheaded it 'never

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<sup>23</sup> The Ardscoil was founded in 1911 as headquarters of Belfast Gaelic League where it resided in Queens Street at the centre of language revival activity in the city before moving to Divis street in 1928 where it continued in the same vein until being accidentally burned down in 1985. (Foras na Gaeilge 2007)

wavered in their determination to realize their goal' and succeeded 'without one penny of grant aid or government subvention'.(Ibid)

In addition, the Shaws Road activists had succeeded in setting up the North's first Irish medium nursery school for their children in 1965 before subsequently following this up by meeting with the Stormont authorities to explore the possibility of setting up the an Irish primary school.(Mac Seáin 2006: 4) In its aftermath, they received a threatening letter saying 'that teaching through the medium of the Irish language would not be deemed to be proper instruction for young children' and that if the school was formed then 'the law would be allowed to take its course'. (Ibid) This threat, which according to Mac Seáin (Ibid) effectively translated as 'set up a school and you go to jail' and thus represented the imposition of settler-colonial cultural dominance through coercion, was duly ignored and the North of Ireland's first Irish medium primary school, Scoil Ghaeilge Bhéal Feirste and later Bunscoil Phobal Feirste, was established on the Shaws Road in with nine children in 1971 with the six counties in the throes of the political/military conflict. The formation of the North's first Irish medium school in 1971 against all the odds, which 'would propel the Irish language onto a dynamic and exciting course that would contribute to a language shift in Ireland during the remainder of the millennium' (Nig Uidhir 2006: 140) and beyond, was the defining aspect of the highly original Shaws Road decolonisation project that planted a seed that would flourish in the 1980's under the transformational influence of the republican prison struggle in Long Kesh.

In the cages of Long Kesh prison camp, where 'a group of dedicated language activists came through inspired by the writings of Pearse, Friere and Fanon'<sup>24</sup> (Interview by Mac Ionnrachtaigh with ex-prisoner Jake Mac Siacais, 24 October 2007), and during the Blanket protest<sup>25</sup>, the Irish

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<sup>24</sup> This same group of activists according to Mac Siacais, would be re-arrested and re-incarcerated in the H-Blocks during the Blanket protest (see below) and spearhead the Gaelicisation process amongst the prisoners.

<sup>25</sup> The Blanket protest was stage by republican prisoners in Long Kesh prison, in the new high security HMP Maze H-Blocks, between 1976-81 in opposition to the British governments' criminalization policy which removed political status from republican prisoners. Prisoners who refused to wear prison uniforms and do prison work lost all

language as it had done previously in Irish prisons like Frongoch in 1916-17 and the Curragh in the 1940's became a mainstay of republican prisoner development and resistance. During the Blanket protest, prisoners who had nothing but their bodies to use as a weapon of protest, utilized the Irish language as a symbolic means of resistance and a practical form of salvation from psychological decay. It legitimised their sense of cultural distinctiveness and gave them strength to continue their protest. The language represented a highly liberating power that transformed the prison and the prisoners, both for themselves and the outside world while also building bonds of comradeship that the authorities could not penetrate because it was incomprehensible to the English-speaking warders as a method of communication. As P.O.W Peadar Whelan (Whelan in O'Hagan 1991: 4) articulated;

'Learning and speaking Irish became a crucial part of our struggle against criminality and helped form our identity. We had to fight to learn and speaking it was a form of resistance. Every time we spoke Irish, we were telling our enemy that we were Irish republicans, protesting and struggling. We weren't going to let them silence us...Irish was a weapon we used against the screws leaving them feeling totally frustrated and excluded. Our expression of identity left them feeling totally powerless. Knowledge is power and ignorance diminished their sense of power and control.'

This would permanently change the form and success of Irish language activism in the North with a dramatic impact on the amount of children attending the first Irish medium school in the North<sup>26</sup>. People outside of prison were inspired by these developments and felt that if prisoners could suffer in unbearable conditions, without pen or paper, to learn the language, then nothing should stop them from doing it with teachers and proper facilities. (Ó hAdhmaill 1984: 9)

In the case of the blanket protest and the hunger strikes, the use of the Irish language, written and spoken, by republican prisoners such as Bobby Sands considerably enhanced its appeal for republicans and nationalists on the outside. The hunger strikes had a hugely politicising effect both North and South of Ireland and the Bilingual writings of Bobby Sand inspired widespread

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privileges and subsequently found they locked naked in their cells, 24 hours a day with only blankets as clothing. The protest culminated in the death of ten prisoners on hunger strike in 1981.( see Beresford 1986)

<sup>26</sup> Ó hAdhmaill's (1984: Ibid) study provides statistical evidence for this increase which would be precipitated by the formation of more schools throughout wider Belfast and the North of Ireland. There are currently 37 Nursery schools, 26 primary schools and 3 secondary schools in the six counties.

interest in the Irish Language and forged a strong link between cultural struggle and the wider political aspirations for national self-determination.(Sands, 1998) British policy during this period, which involved denying official recognition to Irish medium schools, had the additional and implicit implications that both aspirations of Irishness and the nationalist community in general were somehow subversive and illegitimate. The alienation of nationalist working class areas from the British state became total, and one of the places where this anger came to be channelled was the Irish language. (Ó hAdhmaill 1984)

The development and growth of the language movement in the North also saw a corresponding growth in pride and self-confidence on both a group and individual level which effectively imbued the wider Nationalist community with a greater sense of self-reliance and self-respect. There was also a powerful social dimension to these new structures which created an alternative sense of identity thus leading to personal and collective empowerment amongst those involved. The Irish language educational movement came to represent a counter-hegemonic ‘education for emancipation’, which established itself as a popular alternative education system where power lay with the community, and where a cultural and linguistic alternative to that offered by the dominant society was promoted.

During this period in the early to mid 1980’s and beyond, recently released republican prisoners, working in conjunction with others, played a role in the growth of alternative education system all over Belfast and throughout the North in Derry, Tyrone, Newry, Armagh, Fermanagh. One such ex-prisoner, Pilib Ó Ruanaí, the current CEO of Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta (Irish Medium Trust Fund) and key founder of *An Droichead* Irish medium school and Cultural centre in South Belfast, stated ‘Bhí an Gaeloideachas do mo spreagadh go hiomlán mar fhís sa treimhse sin. Muscailt consiása a bhí ionam ag an am chun an streachailt a

chuir ar aghaidh ar cheann do na bealaí eile.’<sup>27</sup>(Interview with Mac Ionnrachtaigh, 20 October 2007) (*Translated in footnote below*) The British government reaction to this was overtly obstructive and antagonistic as evidenced in their denial of official recognition<sup>28</sup> to Irish medium schools which further fostered a sense of alienation from the British state and cemented the impression that the Irish language and Irishness remained wholly illegitimate.

This inevitably created a pattern of intransigence and resistance which according to another ex-prisoner who was active in the revival in this period, Jake Mac Siacais, who is current director of Belfast Irish language development agency *Forbairt Feirste*, would provide the impetus for radical Irish language activism right up to the present,

Tá torthaí na hathbheochána sna hochtóidí le feiceáil anois i nglún úr radacach de dhíograiseoirí teanga idir na haoiseanna 24 agus 32. Tá na díograiseoirí réabhlóideacha seo ag obair san illomad dóigheanna fud fad na tíre, sná Gaeil Óga, in ACHT, sna Ceatherna Coille. Tuigeann an greasáin de dhíograiseoirí seo gur chuid í an t-athbheochán teanga do phróiseas díchóilínithe a bheireann saoirse ceart intinne do mhuintir na hÉireann.<sup>29</sup> (Interview by Mac Ionnrachtaigh, 24 October 2007) (*Translated in footnote below*)

One of these activists, Ciarán Mac Giolla Bhéin, current chairperson of Irish language campaigning group ACHT, describes how his attendance at Meánscoil Feirste, the North of Ireland’s first Irish medium secondary school, and its subsequent high-profile campaign for state recognition had a hugely radicalising impact on him personally,

Bhí rud ar leith fán mheanscoil. Bhí muidinne ag glanadh na scoile agus ár dtuismitheoirí ag bailiú airgead i rith na hoíche sa chlubanna eagsúla ar an bhóthar. Bhí achan duine tiomónta don tioncsnamh agus ag eagrú rothaíochta urraithe agus siúlóidí sleibhe srl ar ár son, agus ar mhaithe le hoideachas s’againne Bíodh is gur thuig muid gur streachailt a bhí i gcéist, thug an tacaíocht seo iomlán muiníne dúinn go n-éireoidh linn, rud a tharla sa deireadh. So nuair a d’fhág mise an scoil, mhothaigh mise go

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<sup>27</sup> ‘The vision of Irish medium education had completely inspired me as a vision during that period. It was almost like an awakening of consciousness that made me realise the importance of other ways to take forward the struggle.’

<sup>28</sup> The North’s first Irish medium primary school, Bunscoil Phobal Feirste (formerly Scoil Gaeilge Bhéal Feirste) struggled for 14 years without funding from its foundation, finally receiving recognition in 1984 after considerable political lobbying.

<sup>29</sup> The results of the 80’s revival are to be found in a new and radical generation of language activists between the age of 24 and 32. These revolutionary activists are working in a number of different vehicles throughout the country including, the Gaeil Óga, ACHT, Na Ceitherna Coille. This network of activists understands that the Irish language struggle is part of a process of decolonisation that gives proper mental emancipation to the people of Ireland.’

raibh dualgas ormsa rud éigin a chuir ar ais isteach sa streachailt.<sup>30</sup> (Interview by Mac Ionnrachtaigh, 23 October 2007) (*Translated in footnote below*)

The campaign for funding for Meánscoil Feirste eventually succeeded in 1996 following a national and international campaign where it became an issue of ‘parity of esteem’ for the nationalist community in the North during the Peace process.(O’Reilly 1999: 132-33) However, it is worth noting that the British Government, similar to the beginning of the twentieth century, arguably only ever exceeded to the demands of the Irish language community when the pressure became so great that do to otherwise would appear indefensibly intransigent.

A more recent example of this methodology in the North of Ireland has been evident in British governments’ approach to the Irish language community’s long-standing demand for an Irish language Act for the six counties which would grant Irish speakers similar legal protection to that enshrined for Irish speakers in the Irish Free State, and speakers of Welsh and Scottish Gaelic. Having agreed following the ratification of the International Agreement at St Andrews in November 2006 to enact an Irish language Act through Westminster, the British Government proceeded to delay the public consultation on the Act before announcing a second public consultation process until after the date for the restoration of devolution to the North of Ireland thereby granting intransigent Ulster unionism an effective veto over any future Irish language Act.<sup>31</sup> This intransigence continually manifests itself in an openly hostile attitude towards the Irish language that is defined by the age-old settler-colonial psyche as articulated in the DUP’s

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<sup>30</sup> ‘There was something exceptional about the Meánscoil. We, as pupils, cleaned the school and our parents went out at nights collecting money in the local clubs on the road. Everyone was totally committed to the project and organising sponsored cycles and sponsored mountain walks etc on our behalf and for the sake of our education. Although we knew that we were involved in a struggle, this help gave us the confidence that we would succeed and that’s exactly what happened in the end. Therefore, when I eventually left school, I felt it my duty to put something back in to the struggle.’

<sup>31</sup> This much was made clear in the game of brinkmanship between the British Government and the main unionist party the DUP in the lead-up to the March 26<sup>th</sup> deadline for restoring devolution in the North. A few days before, British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Hain, effectively threatened the DUP by warning them that failure to agree to devolution at the end of March would mean the enactment of an Irish language Act and the scrapping of academic selection whereas an agreement to share power with republicans would grant them a veto in both cases. (Irish news 24 March 2007)

(Democratic Unionist party), the foremost unionist party in the North of Ireland, submission to the language act consultation process, which stated, ‘The Irish language serves no communicative purpose in Northern Ireland, but simply the promotion of a political cause. An Irish language Act is divisive, would alienate the majority population in Northern Ireland and would be a complete waste of money’. (DUP Party submission see- <http://www.dcalni.gov.uk>)

The habitual oscillation between pragmatic and extremist strands of recalcitrant unionism in relation to the Irish language was again evident in submissions from more hard-line elements in the Orange Order whose submission differed merely in tone but not in content;

‘It is plain silly and wrong to give precedence to a minority language that nobody really speaks as part of a political concession to Sinn Féin/IRA. We would earnestly ask the government to reconsider this unwanted legislation which is discriminatory and not applicable to over 90% of the population.’ (Armagh Orange Lodge submission- see <http://www.dcalni.gov.uk>- March 2007)

The obstructionist basis for these unfounded, and ‘culturally racist’ arguments are countered by the Irish speaking community with rights-based arguments like those presented by Language legislation experts like Fernand de Varennes<sup>32</sup>(May 2002: 312) The compelling logic of these arguments in favour of an Irish language act, however, are constantly rejected by the British government whose ambivalent discourse often accentuates and lends credence to flagrantly inequitable unionist attitudes.

A concise example of this discourse was illustrated in the introduction to the British government DCAL (Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure) document on the proposed Irish language Act in which they comprehensively revised the role of planned cultural colonisation in the decline of the Irish language which occurred in their view, ‘due to the dominant growth of English in the fields of industry and trade’ (<http://www.dcalni.gov.uk>- March 2007) Additionally, the introduction stated that the Irish language in the North was ‘controversial’ because unionists held ‘genuine fears and concerns’ about ‘the erosion of their British identity’.(Ibid) Thus in

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<sup>32</sup> In de Varennes’ submission to DCAL on Irish language legislation for the North, he explicitly stated that, ‘It is time to end the legacy of almost 650 years of Laws restricting the use of the Irish language with legislation which promotes and protects it as part of Europe’s heritage and cultural diversity.’ (<http://www.dcalni.gov.uk>-March 2007)

emphatic terms, the classic British imperial/colonial rationale can be seen here to have clearly endorsed fundamentally discriminatory views by describing them as ‘genuine fears’ as a means of justifying the denial of rights to Irish speakers.<sup>33</sup>

When we extrapolate these obstructionist views of the Irish language in a global context they can be easily understood as a clear manifestation of a highly politicised neo-Liberal agenda which acts as a continuum and modern extension of imperialism and neo-colonisation.<sup>34</sup> Concomitantly, in arriving at an critical perspective of how Ireland’s historical cultural colonization has manifested itself in the modern world, it is imperative that we understand to quote Alexander (2004: 6) that ‘colonial conquest, imperialism and globalisation have established a hierarchy of standard languages, which mirrors the power relations on the planet’ which aim deliberately to hasten ‘the extinction of innumerable language varieties and to stigmatise and marginalize all but the most *powerful languages*.’ In addition, Phillipson (1992: 287-288) argues in his scathing critique of the international English linguistic hegemony<sup>35</sup>, that its financially motivated monopoly of film/media, science, technology and the information/Internet age allows it to create a ‘rationalisation process whereby the unequal power relations between English and other languages are explained and legitimated...in favour of the dominant language’.

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<sup>33</sup> This analogy also illuminates the key oppositional argument presented by monolinguals and stakeholders for the world’s most ‘powerful languages’ which derives from the wholly ignorant assertion that the granting or demand of minority rights somehow impinges on the rights of the majority. This is strongly and succinctly refuted by May (Ibid: 312) who argues that it isn’t the demand for rights that renders minoritised languages ‘controversial’ but their continued denial.

<sup>34</sup> The Ghanaian revolutionary leader, Nkrumah Kwame (1965: ix) describes neo-colonialism in economic terms, ‘The neo-colonialism of today represents imperialism in its final and perhaps most dangerous phase and is also the worst form of imperialism. For those who practice it, it means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress.... .....the result of neo-colonialism is that foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world.’ In addition an analysis of the cultural ramifications of Neo-colonialism can be found in the work of Edward Said. (1993)

<sup>35</sup> Phillipson (1992) argues that this linguistic hegemony is channelled through an ideology of modernisation which is far from neutral but actually politically motivated. According to Phillipson, it buttresses the dominant economic and political position of Britain and the USA in the modern world by elevating the English language as the language of International/Global capitalism.

It is my contention that Ulster unionist ‘cultural racism’ and British government intransigence in relation to the Irish language fits adequately into this wider rationalisation practice that assert ‘English Linguistic Imperialism’ or ‘Linguicism’ as termed by Phillipson (1992) and undoubtedly aim to maintain and perpetuate social, economic, political and cultural inequalities between English and other languages and their respective speakers. Statistical credence is given to these views by the findings of leading linguist Michael Krauss (1992) which state that at the current rate of language shift, the 21<sup>st</sup> century will see 90% of the world’s languages or more precisely 5,400 out of six thousand languages either lost or forced into the final stages of decline.

The commonality in each case is usually its contact with more a powerful majority language whose power is usually defined by its superior political, cultural or socio-economic power. According to Krauss, this inevitably leads to the marginalisation of both minority and minoritised languages that occurs in various different ways;

‘the circumstances which have led to the present language mortality known to us range from outright genocide, social or economic or habitat destruction, displacement, demographic submersion, language suppression, enforced assimilation or assimilatory education to electronic media bombardment especially television, an incalculably lethal new weapon, which I have called ‘cultural nerve gas’. (Krauss 1992: 8)

That this linguacide on an unprecedented scale is shaped by unequal socio-political and socio-economic power processes of neo-liberal globalisation is attested to by May (2002: 316) who warns that the ongoing disavowal of equality for minoritised cultures and languages means that they will ‘continue so patently to play a significant (even central) part in many of the political disputes in the world today’. Moreover, the damaging consequences of neo-liberal globalisation according to acclaimed sociologist Manuel Castells (1997: 69) is being met with opposition by people all over the world, who ‘with the exception of a small elite of wealthy *Globapolitans*’ completely ‘resent the erosion of their cultural identities, the loss of control over their lives, over their governments, over their countries, and ultimately, over the fate of the earth.’

Despite the all-prevalent nature of the hegemonic globalisation project, Irish language activists like Mac Siacais echo the views of Castells that many are determined to continue resisting and challenging it;

Le domhandú, tá iarracht ag dul ar aghaidh ár gcultúir ar fad a slogadh isteach in aon cultúir meiricánach, shasanach amháin, is nua-impirúlachas é a shíolraíonn ó shean mheon na himpireachta... Ach, mar sin féin, tá pobail dúchasacha ann fud fad an domhain atá reidh le troid ar ais ar son an rud atá le caillúint againn<sup>36</sup>... (Interview by Mac Ionnrachtaigh, 24 October 2007) (*Translated in footnote below*)

In an Irish context, Mac Siacais' views can be defined within an ideology of decolonialisation and resistance which not only played a pivotal role in inspiring the Irish revolution in the early twentieth century but also continues to motivate Irish language activists to the present day. This determination to resist and overturn the impact of colonisation can be seen to have inspired a transformational activism by an increasingly organised and vibrant Irish language speaking community in the North of Ireland. This commitment is best exemplified by the tremendous growth of *Gaelscoileanna* which proves that emancipatory voluntary endeavour, has continued to provide the impetus for people-centred decolonialisation.

Nevertheless, with the rapid growth and success of the language movement in the North of Ireland come the dangers of institutionalisation whereby activist groups can often be assimilated, diverted or manipulated by the state or by conservative elites intent on maintaining the status quo. (Ó Croidheáin 2006: 315) Theorists of institutionalisation, according to Hourigan (2006: 127), argue that it results 'in a loss of radical impetus within a social movement without the achievement of real gains'. This usually occurs when 'political elites' use 'social capital to divide and conquer a movement network and marginalize dissent within the public sphere.' (Ibid: 138) McCoy (2002: 213) believes that the Irish language movement in the North has already 'undergone a rapid transformation from counter-culture to officialdom' during the peace process

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<sup>36</sup> 'With Globalisation, there is a concerted effort being made to subsume all our cultures into the one Anglo-American culture; its simple neo-imperialism that derives from the same old aspirations of empire.....However, minority communities and native peoples throughout the world are ready and willing to fight back for all that is being lost.'

where state subsidies meant ‘the rhetoric of resistance was discarded’ and ‘replaced by discourses of language rights, economic regeneration and consumerism.’ McCoy credits these changes to a ‘radical transformation’ in the attitudes of the British Government towards the Irish language which he feels has shifted from ‘reactive to a pro-active’. (Ibid: 216)

In the first instance, McCoy’s conclusions on the ‘pro-active’ shift in British government policies in relation to the language can arguably be deemed grossly naïve and ahistorical considering the aforementioned patterns in colonial and neo-colonial methodology whereby overtly discriminatory practices merely become more veiled and sophisticated in conjunction with the political expediencies of the particular era, as recently demonstrable in the Irish language act at campaign. Secondly, while McCoy is undoubtedly correct to point out the changes in discourse post-peace process and the huge potential pitfalls of over-reliance on state subsidies he’s inaccurate in assuming that campaigns for ‘language rights and economic regeneration’ cannot constitute forms of resistance. As Mac Siacais illuminates,

Tá an meon céanna againn go fóill beag beann ar an dul chun cinn ata déanta againn.. Cuireann muid i gcoinne go fóill bódh is go bhfuil muid i ré difriúil agus go ndéanann muid é ar bhealach difriúil. Mar dhíograiseoir teanga, cuirim i gcoinne achan lá. Is sort continuum é an mian sin atá ag an phobal seo; ní luífaidh muid síos agus ní bheidh muid sásta leis an mhéid atá againn. Beidh muid ar ais arís agus arís eile le héileamh nua chomh luaithe is a nglactar leis an t-éileamh a chuaigh roimhe.<sup>37</sup> (Interview by Mac Ionnrachtaigh, 24 October 2007) (*Translated in footnote below*)

Whether it is the sustained close links between the language movement and grassroots communities or the continued structural manifestations of neo-colonialism within the Northern Ireland state, the language issue still retains a potent resonance for heightened socio-cultural and socio-political awareness in younger activists as evident in Mac Giolla Bhéin’s comments,

Motháim go bhfuil mé ag leanúint leis an ide-eolaíocht radacach teanga a d’fhorbair Mac Piarais, Ó Cadhain agus Ó Seachnasaigh atá mar chuid d’fhealsúnacht pholaitiúil s’agam i leith na tíre seo agus an domhain araon. Ar ndóigh, athraíonn an suíomh catha i gcónaí; deich mbliana ó shin, mar shampla, dhírigh muid ár n-áird ar fad ar an ghaelscolaíocht agus anois, bhog muid ar aghaidh chuig an suíomh

<sup>37</sup> ‘We have the same mentality now despite all the progress we have made. We are resisting be it in a different phase and in a different way. As a language activist, I’m resisting everyday of my life. The strength of this community is that it works in a continuum refusing to ever lie or be satisfied with what we’ve achieved. We’ll keep coming back again with a new demand following the one that just been exceeded to.’

cearta do ghaeil. Beidh an suíomh ag forbairt agus ag athrú i rith an ama.... I ndiaidh 40 bliana de streachilte, ta neart rudaí nach bhfuil muid sásta glacadh leis, tá bunlíne againn anois ó thaobh na Gaeilge de agus ardófar seo i gcónaí sa todhchaí chun cinntiú go leanann an réabhlóid s’againne ag dul ó neart go neart.<sup>38</sup> (Interview by Mac Ionnrachtaigh, 23 October 2007) (*Translated in footnote below*)

Within this rationale, Irish language activism in the North can still be defined in Freire’s terms as a transformative expression of ‘cultural resistance’ and a form of ‘counter-consciousness’.

(Freire 1972: 68-9)

This can facilitate a radical perspective through which individuals and activists can critically examine the nature of their culture and politics in a national and global context. Thus grassroots Irish language activism can create ‘a critical theory of knowledge’ (Ibid) which provides opportunities for active participation, empowerment and purposeful action. One topical example of this participatory activism can be found in the current campaign in the North of Ireland for an Irish language Act, which has seen thousands of people, of all ages, marching for their rights, writing and collecting submissions for the public consultation processes. These forms of activism from below can continue to imbue the language movement with that radical edge that provides succour from the dangers of complacency and institutionalisation. Furthermore, they represent, as Ó Croidheáin (2006: 18) emphasizes; ‘individuals and communities’ playing a ‘transformational...part in the revolutionary process of changing the general relations of power in Irish society’ while simultaneously challenging the current global Anglo-American cultural hegemony.

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<sup>38</sup> ‘I feel that I’m continuing with the radical decolonising ideology that was promoted by Pearse, Ó Cadhain and Sands as part of my overall political philosophy regarding this country and the entire world for that matter. Of course, the battleground and the context of struggle continually evolves and adopts to changing circumstances; ten years ago, for example, all our attention on Irish medium education while at the present time, we have moved on to the campaign of human rights for Irish speakers. This battleground will continually change and develop...After 30 years of struggle, there are many things that we are not prepared to accept; we have a bottom line now regarding the Irish language that we will continue to raise in the future to ensure that our Irish language revolution goes from strength to strength.’

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