Abstract
The problem in capturing Irish cultural distinctiveness lies in how we measure its nature and extent. While there are key differences in language, sport, music, art and literature, these must be set against the homogenizing forces of globalisation and consumer capitalism. Certainly, there is increasing evidence that Ireland is no longer as culturally isolated, ‘holy’ and Catholic as it once was. What implications does this have for the long traditions of cultural nationalism that sought to celebrate and promote Irish distinctiveness? Does globalization signal the end of Irish difference?

Irish cultural exceptionalism has a long lineage and many manifestations, overtly nationalist and otherwise. In the 1980s, for instance, Richard Kearney and other intellectuals sought to articulate and interrogate a distinct ‘Irish mind’ that provided a link across periods and traditions in Ireland. Perhaps deriving from its colonial and hybridized history, the Irish mind was, allegedly, marked by a tendency to think laterally and creatively, to move beyond the dominant logic of Western rationalism: understanding could be based on a logic that saw the world in terms of things being both/and rather than simply either/or.

However, if we are to look for the nature of Irish cultural difference, this lecture argues that it would be better to focus on the body rather than the mind. We might begin by examining the peculiarities in the way Ireland modernised, particularly in relation to population control practices. The success of postponed marriage, permanent celibacy and emigration was founded on a Catholic culture that venerated an Augustinian disdain for sex, pleasure and desire. I will argue that it was the persistence of high birth rates that gave rise to peculiar forms of child-rearing, discipline and punishment and that led to the incarceration of those who did not conform to the dominant Catholic normative order. It may well be that the side-effects of a repressive disposition to the body and pleasure, gave rise to a greater separation of men and women, to the dominance of the pub, to peculiar forms of social relationships and to imaginative forms of thinking.

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