

BOOK REVIEW

Christopher Alan Lewis (2013) *Ireland. Economic, political and Social Issues*. New York; Nova Publishers. 158pp ISBN 978-1-62257-924-2 (hardcover)

The loyalist wall slogan in 1970s Belfast proclaimed '*we shall not forsake the blue skies of Ulster for the grey skies of the Republic*'. How far this situation is now reversed is a testament to the legacy of the Celtic Tiger. Crossing the north/south border, it is immediately apparent that southern people are better dressed, southern shops are better stocked with a more cosmopolitan range of goods and southern roads better surfaced. Whilst the north remains a bicultural society, the cities, towns and villages of the south have become multi-cultural and ethnically diverse. Economically, the median industrial wage is fifty per cent higher in the south than the north and the southern rate of jobseeker's benefit is more than double the northern rate.

These are the positives, but what of the downside? The contributors to this collection, excellently edited by Professor Chris Lewis, include both European and Irish academics. They seek to answer this question in two ways. Firstly, by examining Eurobar and Eurostat data, Jochen Hirsche uses such statistics to argue that the impact of late capitalism in Ireland has been to secularise the society, to replace the church with the shopping centre. Secondly, by applying a local lens, Ciara Losty and Jean McArdle show evidence of emigration through the decline of GAA clubs particularly in the Munster province. What emerges is that, despite the culture shock of the rapid growth in individual wealth and the consequent rampant consumerism, the pillars of the Irish economy – emigration and foreign direct investment – remain entrenched in the social fabric. Indeed, government policy for tackling the nation's indebtedness arising from the credit explosion that fuelled the second wave of Celtic Tiger growth has been restricted to these two 'old familiars'.

It is important to remember that Ireland moved in the space of a few years from having one of the lowest levels of household and government debt in Europe to one of the highest (1). Its economic masters from the core European countries, after the temporary respite of the bailout loans, now require that the Protestant ethic of saving and repayment of these loans should be applied as the only solution to restore the country's credit-worthiness. But, whilst Irish church attendance has halved over the years of the credit bubble, the legacy of Catholic social belief remains. Being poor is seen neither as a matter of individual fault nor morally reprehensible.

Features of institutional inertia in Ireland are highlighted in this text. For example, authors Frank and Sharon Houghton provide a chapter on the inequity of the Irish two-tier health system and the authorities' failure to investigate, let alone address, health inequalities across the social classes. Staniewicz and Van Hout reflect on the marginal position of the Traveller community towards whom uniquely intolerance has actually increased during the Celtic Tiger years.

Life style and problematic behaviours in modern Irish society which are reported on in this collection include contributions firstly, on substance misuse, alcohol consumption and

psycho-active drugs and secondly, on obesity and food choice. The collection ends with a valuable overview of the body of research into bullying and the effectiveness of anti-bullying interventions in Ireland.

Within this volume, there is much frustration vented on government for its inaction and its failure to develop more radical policy alternatives. One is left wondering whether the impact of the take-off of the Celtic Tiger has been compartmentalised by a society which is essentially syndicalist and has as its primary concern the protection of the vested interests of the professions, the public sector and property and landowners.

(1) Manktelow, R. (2011) 'Community, Consumerism and Credit. The experience of an Urban Community in Northern Ireland', *Community, Work and Family*. Pp 257-75, Doi 10.1080/13668803.2010.520839

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