



Sacral Nationalism

by Bernard Rorke

Conor Cruise O'Brien
*Ancestral Voices:
 Religion and Nationalism in Ireland*
 Poolbeg Press 1995

Debates over the uses of Irish history and the politics of its interpretation have run for over twenty years. Today, 'revisionist' historians are listened to more dispassionately by the Irish in Ireland than by their sundered brethren in Britain and America. However Conor Cruise O'Brien, arch-revisionist and 'top anti-nationalist', invariably causes temperatures to rise. *Ancestral Voices*, his latest work will disappoint neither friend nor foe.

O'Brien employs his unique personal position within Irish culture and politics to lay bare the conflation of nationalism and religion, which he calls 'sacral nationalism'. His relationship with nationalism, untroubled until the advent of the 'Catholic and nationalist offensive' of the PIRA, is explored in a chapter entitled "My Mother, my Aunt and James Joyce". For Joyce to tear himself away from Irish nationalism evoked feelings of dread, resentment and guilt, but *not* of contempt:

"Through Irish Ireland, as through Irish Catholicism, Joyce hears ancestral voices calling. He knows them for siren voices and, like his model Ulysses, he causes himself to be bound to the mast, lest he yield to them and drown...He resisted

them, not because he despised them as some of his modern admirers suggest, but because he feared their power over him. They were the voices of his own ancestors after all. As they are of mine."

O'Brien's resistance to those ancestral voices yields a work rich in insight, but, as a convert to the cause of Ulster Unionism, his excessive zeal is such that his grip on the past is more sure, more provocative and penetrating than his grip on our present. Behind the putatively oecumenical and genuinely Jacobin United Irishmen of 1798 emerges the spectre of the Defenders, a Roman Catholic 'luxuriantly sectarian' agrarian secret society. Protestants piked to death by them met their fate, not as Protestants as such, but as counter-revolutionaries. The progressivist rhetoric of Sinn Fein and the sectarian terrorism of the PIRA suggest, for O'Brien, a fundamental continuity rather than a rupture with the traditions of Irish nationalism. Throughout, O'Brien reiterates this theme, emphasising an essential continuity in the mystical, sacral manifestations of Irish nationalism.

From the 1860's the Catholic church began to officially inculcate religious nationalism, to keep the irreligious one in check. Catholic nationalism was simpler, more exciting and more relevant than the cumbersome and complicated doctrinal baggage inherited from the Enlightenment. O'Brien asserts the modern Irish state is the product of that ideology.

The populist newspaper *The Leader*, provides "an opportunity to look at Catholic nationalism with the lid off". What O'Brien unearths is always fascinating, most always unsavoury. The principal target of the paper's polemics, the Protestant community, is stigmatised in its columns as the 'Sourfaces'. The Protestant face was imagined "characteristic in its way as that of a Jew...these brick-complexioned and sourfaced whole and part foreigners [who] rule the country".

O'Brien has, however, more difficulty with the present. Everywhere he sees pan-Catholic and pan-nationalist conspiracies.

The recent cease-fire is curiously interpreted as a "continuation of the armed struggle, by other means, for the moment". He also fails to take cognisance of current secularist challenges, perhaps the most profound in the history of the state, to the hegemony of the Catholic Church. It suits his disposition to stubbornly continue to imagine the Republic, now and forever, as a place where theology and obstetrics go hand in hand. His gloomy conclusion that things are worse than they were before the cease-fires is absurd. Current developments within Northern Ireland call for cautious optimism and the construction of alternatives to "that flabby idle, terror which makes men's hearts sink and enervates them".

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Defining Democracy

by Claus Offe

A number of paradoxes attend the end of the Cold War and the breakdown of the Soviet system of state socialism. One concerns liberal democracy: its future has become the object of melancholy conjecture exactly at the point when it seems to have scored a definitive victory over its only competitor in the modern world.

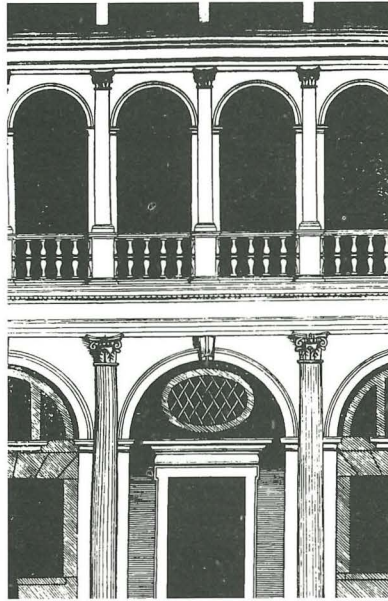
As long as state socialism was a historical reality, it provided a reference point to liberal democracies in relation to which the latter could make a strong and successful claim to be 'better', that is, superior in both economic and moral terms. Could it be that the measure of self-assurance that liberal democracies enjoyed throughout the postwar period was in fact parasitic upon the existence of state socialism - a system now almost universally considered inferior in terms of both its legitimacy and effectiveness? If so, the new legitimisation problem of liberal democracy is that it is no longer sufficient for it to be 'better'; it is now required to be 'good', as measured by a set of universally shared normative criteria.

This latter standard, of course, involves much heavier burdens of argument and proof. In addition, the normative theory supporting liberal democracy would have to come to terms with two puzzles: if liberal democracy is held to be the most civilised and morally attractive way of organising social and political life, why is it that not *all* political forces in all previously non-democratic countries appear to embrace it as the uniquely desirable institutional model? and why is it that those who do embrace it still seem to encounter severe difficulties in implementing its ideals? Like any decent and self-respecting theory, democratic theory must have a theory about itself, that is, about the conditions of its adoption and effective validity.

This consideration has led many contemporary political theorists and political sociologists to

subdivide the universe of actual or conceivable democratic regimes into three classes: minimalist, or 'realist'; maximalist, or 'utopian' (and potentially 'totalitarian'); and some intermediary 'third road' which is held to preserve the best (in terms of normative attraction and/or functional viability) of the first two classes while avoiding their deficiencies.

The aggregation of private interest and the subjective



maximisation of welfare are 'not enough', and implementing some true 'will' of the people - a 'just' or 'classless' society - through party dictatorship is clearly and dangerously 'too much'. What remains as an intermediate path therefore is a political culture that inculcates a civic commitment to procedural principles and republican virtues such as deliberation, autonomy, accountability, creative compromise, civility, loyalty to institutions, associative action, civic community, empathy, and respect for human and civil rights.

It is worth noting, as Charles Taylor has done, that not only the allegedly 'maximalist' variant of democratic institutions and practices dating back to Rousseau is susceptible to the dangers of authoritarian self-subversion: its 'minimalist' Lockean counterpart is as well. Democratic presidentialism may do away with (at least for awhile and in the name of the long-term preservation of democracy) the rights of free

expression, free association, or even the rights of parliament. But if democratic government is nothing but a machine for aggregating self-interested preferences based on the guarantee of property rights, why - if collective utility is measured in these terms - should not some form of electoral presidentialism be the most 'democratic' answer? The remaining option is a democratic order between the two extremes that is based upon demanding republican virtues or communitarian commitments of elites and masses alike. This, however, is often suspected of being just an elusive precept that has nothing to do with the political and economic realities of even the old and established democracies, to say nothing of the post-authoritarian democratic newcomers.

Such a 'realist' proposition should not simply be rejected: it must be tested. Any definition of the term democracy is, by definition, incomplete. It states minima, but it does not exhaustively describe the universe of all conceivable constitutional arrangements and collectively binding decision-making practices that would, once implemented, count as democratic. Democracies are self-defining, self-designing and self-revising political realities. Unitary versus federal, majoritarian versus consocietal, direct versus representative, elitist versus participatory, 'social' versus 'liberal', parliamentary versus presidential, and 'functional' versus territorial forms of democracy: these are just some of the most often debated alternatives, but they are by no means the only ways in which democratic regimes can design and redesign themselves. Democratic sovereignty, the accountability of elites, and the prevalence of some 'civic spirit' among non-elites are all variables that are critically affected by the choice and imaginative recombination of these and other institutional and constitutional parameters.

It thus appears that the inventive, as well as the principled, use of this virtually inexhaustible repertoire of democratic forms is itself part, as well as the condition for the future viability, of