Mediating the Diaspora Space:
Charting the Changing Nature of Irish-America in an Age of Globalisation

Feargal Cochrane
Richardson Institute for Peace and Conflict Research
Lancaster University, UK
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INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on how migration trends have changed within the context of global modernity, and the way in which modern patterns of Irish migration are qualitatively different from those of the past. The paper puts forward two inter-related arguments. Firstly, that globalisation combined with economic and social changes in Ireland have changed the nature of Irish migration. Secondly, that in the Irish case, these changes have produced a new variant of pragmatic emigrants who differ substantially from the way in which diaspora communities are traditionally understood.

The paper argues that the motivations for migration from contemporary Ireland are increasingly related to choice rather than compulsion in the 21st Century and that this is changing the character of the Irish diaspora in fundamental ways. The fact that the Irish are coming to America out of preference rather than desperation is impacting upon their outlook and on their behaviour when they arrive. Unlike many of their predecessors in the 19th and 20th centuries, most of the Irish community living in America today have the economic means to return and find that decisions relating to migration only begin to creep up on them as they put down roots within the US. Thus, decisions relating to migration are taken post-hoc, long after the act of travelling itself has occurred. This obviates the need for today’s Irish to go through the process of leaving one geographical and cultural reality for another, with all the psychological trauma that accompanies such decisions.

This issue of choice rather than compulsion is crucial to understanding today’s Irish diaspora. The fact that they are more mobile and connected to ‘home’ has reduced their motivation to seek out their co-nationals and join socio-political support networks. The paper explores how the Irish community in the US has evolved beyond traditional typologies of diaspora that seem more relevant to the 19th and 20th century than they do to the 21st.

DEFINING DIASPORAS

Defining the precise limits of diaspora communities is an inexact science. Robin Cohen has provided a useful taxonomy for diaspora communities, suggesting a combination of the following features.

- Dispersal (often traumatic) from the homeland.
- Self-exiles in search of work, trade or colonial ambitions.
- A collective memory and myth concerning the homeland.
- An idealisation of the homeland.
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- A return movement.
- A strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a period of time.
- An uneasy relationship with the ‘host’ society.
- A sense of solidarity with co-members of the diaspora community in other countries.
- The possibility of a positive experience in tolerant host countries.

(Cohen, 1997, 180)

A similar typology has also been put forward by William Safran (1991, 83). Referring to the creation of transnational communities, Nicholas Van Hear suggests that the types of dispersal required for the creation of diaspora communities may emerge from a combination of cumulative processes and specific crises (Van Hear, 1998, 47). Meanwhile, Terrence Lyons (2007, 32) narrows the focus with an explicit reference to ‘conflict generated diasporas’ and their common experience of traumatic dispersal. A note of conceptual caution has been introduced by Rogers Brubaker with his observation that the term diaspora has become so diffuse that it risks being rendered irrelevant: “The dixie diaspora, the yankee diaspora, the white diaspora, the liberal diaspora, the conservative diaspora, the gay diaspora, the deaf diaspora, the queer diaspora, …The problem with this latitudinarian, ‘let-a-thousand-diasporas bloom’ approach is that the category becomes stretched to the point of uselessness” (Brubaker, 2005: 3).

While these categorisations neatly encapsulate various patterns of migration, in the Irish case such typologies are more relevant to past patterns of migration—where compulsion rather than choice was a dominant factor—than to the transnational mobility of the 21st Century. Within the Irish context, the largest waves of emigration came from traumatic experiences such as the Potato Famine of the 1840s, forced exile during periods of British administration, and economic destitution during the 20th century (caused by Irish rather than British misrule), where people left Ireland in search of employment and better opportunities. The contention here is that, while true in the past, modern migration trends in the Irish case bring very little of this baggage to bear on the behaviour or outlook of today’s Irish community in the US. Going back to Cohen’s typology:

- Contemporary patterns of Irish migration are not defined by a traumatic dispersal from the homeland;
- those who have migrated have done so on their own terms and would not define themselves as economic or political exiles;
- many of these people have been happy to immerse themselves in the cultural iconography of America rather than preserving memories and myths from their homeland;
- There is evidence that such people have a pragmatic rather than a romantic outlook and do not idealise their country of origin or necessarily cohere together along ethnic lines.

In other words, existing conceptual models relating to diaspora communities may require updating to take account of contemporary political and economic forces defined by global mobility and digital technologies. Diaspora communities today (including the Irish) are the embodiment of the processes of globalisation, where transnational links and
relationships are impacting on economies, political systems, social spaces and national cultures. In line with global trends in politics and economics, the sense of "belonging" of diaspora communities is not confined today within national borders, but is characterised by mobile and fluid forms of communication that are capable of transcending geographical boundaries. Jan Art Scholte neatly summarises this point by arguing that globalisation has encouraged a growth of hybrid identities and overlapping communities in the 21st Century, which have compelled the individual “to negotiate several national and/or non-territorial affiliations with the self” (Scholte, 2000, 161). Put simply, some diaspora communities can have their cake and eat it. They can live in the “diaspora space” (Brah, 1996, 209) and forestall the painful process of leaving home.

THE NEW IRISH MIGRANT: BEYOND DIASPORA?

The phrase ‘Irish diaspora’ is normally used in conjunction with Irish-America, and is often accompanied by stereotypical assumptions about the cultural and political outlook of what is assumed to be a relatively cohesive group of people. Officially, the United States accounts for over 43 million Irish Americans. The 1980 and 1990 census in the United States showed that 43.7 million Americans (19% of the total population) defined themselves as Irish-American. (Arthur, 2000, 136) However, while these numbers seem impressive, it is important not to overestimate their significance and to recognise that the quantity masks a lack of quality in terms of any depth of political or cultural engagement with Ireland.

The Government of the Irish Republic has recognised the importance of the Irish diaspora’s political, economic and cultural role by commissioning a report entitled, Ireland and the Irish Abroad: Report of the Task Force on Policy Regarding Emigrants. This report notes that: “Many Irish people have achieved success abroad and have contributed greatly to their adopted countries. …On the other hand, it is clear that much emigration from Ireland has been involuntary and this has caused great suffering and loss to many people” (Ireland and the Irish Abroad 2002, 6-7). Mary Robinson became Ireland’s first female President in 1990 and made the Irish diaspora a key theme of her period in office. In 1995, Robinson addressed the Irish Parliament in a speech entitled, “Cherishing the Irish Diaspora.” Mary Robinson’s election has often been seen as the starting point for a new phase of modernity in Irish politics linked to Europeanisation and economic rejuvenation through the EU, as well as FDI.

More generally, diaspora groups (including the Irish) have become emblems of multi-locality within the 21st Century, occupying what sociologists have referred to as creolized communities (Augé, 1995). Today we are more mobile than our predecessors were in the 19th or 20th Centuries. This geographical mobility is impacting on issues relating to our ethnicity and notions of nationality and belonging. It is now possible to live both at home and away from home, where issues of nationality are blurred. In the modern global era, our ethnicities and our identities are no longer solely constrained within the geographical boundaries of the state that we were born into. The point here is that due to the processes of political, economic and technological globalisation, notions of political/cultural identity are no longer defined solely by the geographical limitations of the state; rather, they have overflowed to facilitate Ulrick Beck’s ugly—but
interesting—notion of a “transnational place polygamy” (Beck, 2000, 73), where our identities are mobile rather than fixed, and where those who live outside the state inhabit a ‘diaspora space’ located between the local and the global.

Unlike patterns of forced migration in the 19th or 20th Centuries, emigration is now a lifestyle choice for most Irish migrants at the beginning of the 21st Century, rather than an economic or political necessity. Many of those who leave do not have to decide when (or even if) they will return to their homeland. Today those who travel are younger: it is cheaper and it is often done before or in between periods of employment. While travelling, people can stay in touch with home through their mobile phones, e-mail and the internet. As a consequence, the stresses and sacrifices of travelling abroad are much lower today than they were in the past. The story of Barry Doyle, who emigrated from Limerick to New Zealand in the 1950s, emphasises the finality of emigration in the past and the link between the process of migration itself and the mind-set of the individual concerned:

When I was 17 and decided to make the step [to emigrate] it was a big step but I also made a determination that I would succeed and I would not regret it. So I made a whole lot of mental steps which made it easier. …I came out on a ship. That was the mode of transport, so to go back was a very, very, big issue. I would say that for the first 20 years here, it was almost unthinkable to go back. Aircraft then started to kick in and especially with the jumbo [jet]. That made a fantastic difference. One of the greatest inventions of the 20th Century was the jumbo jet so far as the emigrant was concerned.1

Ironically, Barry Doyle found that globalisation caught up with him and has facilitated what he thought was impossible when he left Ireland in the 1950s, namely frequent contact and communication with his homeland. The arrival of cheap airfares and digital communications saw him re-connect with his Irish culture, and he now runs the Wellington St. Patrick’s Day Festival in New Zealand. Doyle’s story is typical of many tales of migration from the 20th Century and before. It was a difficult process, often undertaken with a sense of foreboding and finality. The act of leaving was preceded by a party, colloquially referred to as the “American Wake,” mimicking the death of the emigrant. These were often emotional events where families and friends said their farewells. This is markedly different from the 21st Century experience (within the Irish diaspora at least). Here, emigration has increasingly become an issue of pragmatism rather than necessity, where the decision to emigrate is often taken long after the act of travelling has occurred. Crucially, most have the means to return to Ireland if they do not like living in the U.S. Siobhan Dennehy, Director of the Emerald Isle Immigration Center in New York claimed that less Irish people were arriving and that those who did so had a pragmatic outlook: “Less people are arriving. …there is the 1-3 or 1-5 year plan in most of their minds that this is something they are absolutely doing on a temporary basis.”2 In other words, decisions relating to emigration do not have to be faced at the outset of the

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journey with all the psychological trauma that would normally accompany such a
momentous change of lifestyle. Eamonn Dornan, a lawyer originally from County Down
in Northern Ireland, now a New York based attorney specialising in Irish extradition
cases, epitomised this trend:

I’ll have been here eleven years in a couple of weeks. …We had a five
year plan that turned into a ten year plan! How that pans out is that for the
first few years when you go back [to Ireland] you feel obliged to tell
people when you are asked ‘when are you coming back?’ ‘Ah it will be
four or five years’. I’ve just given up doing that now.3

Unlike Barry Doyle, Dornan, like many others who have left Ireland in recent years, did
not give much thought to the issue of migration at the point of his departure, but has
come to terms with its reality after the fact.

The key issue here is that the nature of the Irish emigrant has changed
fundamentally at the beginning of the 21st Century from the type of people who left
Ireland in the 1850s and 1950s. To use the term emigrant to describe such people is itself
problematic. Many of the Irish who live and work abroad would not define themselves as
emigrants in the traditional sense, others would have a very clearly defined notion that
they are temporarily resident and a determination to return to Ireland in the medium term.
Others find that definitions of emigration creep up on them slowly after they begin to put
roots down in the US, while psychological decisions about whether they have emigrated
can be avoided altogether. The Irish diaspora therefore masks a complex array of
individuals who have left Ireland for a variety of reasons. The issue of transience is
important, as it affects the behaviour of the Irish community and, in particular, their
desire to seek out and join Irish political, social and cultural associations that help
provide cohesion to diaspora populations. Organisations such as the Ancient Order of
Hibernians, a mainstay of the Irish-American political lobby throughout the 1970s and
1980s, are suffering as a consequence. Their numbers are dwindling and they are losing
critical mass, particularly in urban areas where AOH Divisions with increasingly elderly
demographic profiles and a dearth of younger members are merging or disappearing. The
taxonomy for defining diaspora communities outlined by Cohen (1997) does not apply as
neatly to these 21st century patterns of Irish mobility as it did to their predecessors.

THE IMPACT OF THE CELTIC TIGER

A further point relates to the region that Irish people are leaving rather than the country
they are going to. Ireland has changed radically over the last 40 years. There are less push
factors for potential Irish migrants to leave Ireland and less pull factors to go to the US.
The tap of Irish emigration is being turned off as the Irish economy has accelerated, the
Republic of Ireland has liberalised in social terms, and the political crisis in Northern
Ireland has eased. Despite the damaging side effects of economic rejuvenation in Ireland,
many people who left in search of work, or a more socially tolerant society, are beginning
to return to Ireland in the 21st Century. The contention that less people have been

3 Eamonn Dornan, interviewed by author, 3 September 2004.
migrating from Ireland over recent years was verified by NGOs, such as the *Emerald Isle Emigration Center* in New York, and tends to be underlined by both national and international statistics, suggesting a growth in the Irish population to over 4 million and a marked reduction in migration flows between 2004 and 2005. In April 2005, the *Central Statistics Office* in Ireland stated that:

The total immigration flow into Ireland in the twelve months to April 2005 is estimated at 70,000 – the highest figure on record…. The estimated number of emigrants in the same period was 16,600, resulting in a net migration figure of 53,400, compared with 31,600 in the twelve months to April 2004 (CSO, 2005).

Meanwhile, the *2005 Human Development Report* compiled by the UNDP, suggested that Ireland had become the second wealthiest country in the world as a measure of per capita GDP, but had also become one of the most unequal economies over the same period.

At both the cultural and the economic levels, Ireland and America are less distinct from one another today than they were in the past. Ireland has caught up with the U.S. economically and fused with it at some point culturally. This fact was reflected upon with great disappointment by Martin Kelly, a former State Past President of the *Ancient Order of Hibernians* who emigrated to America from County Galway in 1964. Kelly lamented that very few of the Irish who came to the US today joined cultural organisations such as the AOH or Irish sporting groups such as the GAA.⁴ Eileen Reilly, Deputy Director of *Glucksman Ireland House* in New York, suggested that the demographic profile of the AOH was in decline to the point that its control of the St Patrick’s Day parade, New York’s showpiece event in terms of public depictions of Irishness, was under threat: “They will eventually lose their grip on the main St Patrick’s Day parade. It will change.”⁵ Professor Joe Lee, Director of *Glucksman Ireland House*, suggested that, in addition to the Irish-born being less interested in joining groups such as the AOH, those born in the US since the early 1960s, who would identify themselves as having an Irish heritage, were significantly different to older Irish-Americans.⁶ This point was underlined by Cassie Farrelly, from the Institute of Irish Studies at Fordham University in New York. Farrelly suggested that the economic mobility and transience of the Irish community was having an impact on groups such as the AOH with those from her own generation:

> In the thirties you were here to stay. You couldn’t go back. It was a one way ticket. Now that there’s more mobility, people are less married to upholding old [Irish] traditions. I wouldn’t belong to the *Ancient Order of Hibernians*, but my grandfather would have been…. [The AOH] captures a particular time in Ireland and a particular way of organising… Our

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⁴ Martin Kelly, interviewed by author, 9 September 2004
⁵ Eileen Reilly, interviewed by author, 14 September 2004.
⁶ Professor Joe Lee, interviewed by author, 14 September 2004.
Living as an Irish person in America in the 21st century is a vastly different experience than it was for past generations. Globalisation has changed the rules dramatically. It has empowered the Irish diaspora and other migrant communities seeking to communicate with their home countries. Moreover, recent developments in communications technology such as the internet, e-mail and satellite television have revolutionised life for diaspora communities in ways that would have been unimaginable to those who left their home country during the 1950s or 1960s. In the Irish case, the digital revolution has helped diaspora communities transcend geographical space, and has, in some cases (as in the above example of Barry Doyle), functioned to re-connect emigrants to a cultural past that they thought had been surrendered at the point of their emigration. Global communications have given the Irish migrant the best of both worlds and allowed many to inhabit this “diaspora space,” where they can tap into a menu of cultural options from both Ireland and America as they choose. This trend was epitomised by Pauline Turley, a native of Northern Ireland, who has lived in New York for ten years and is Director of the Irish Arts Center in Hell’s Kitchen: “I can go home and do go home every other month and my boyfriend commutes, he is in Ireland for two weeks and then he is here for two weeks and for him it is just like getting on the bus to go from Dublin to Cork! ... with the internet and with technology too [Ireland] is not as far away as it used to be.”

CURRENT TRENDS

A debate is currently taking place between Ireland and Irish-America about how the relationship should move forward. Much of this is centred round corporate funding and the desire of business interests to build entrepreneurial links between the two countries. This is taking place at a time when Irish migration has slowed to a trickle and when Irish-American political interest in Northern Ireland has declined as the peace process has progressed. Niall O’Dowd, publisher of the Irish Voice newspaper in New York, suggested that Northern Ireland had effectively disappeared as a lobbying issue within contemporary Irish-America. O’Dowd notes, “there is nothing I could point to that would energise the base. There’s peace in Ireland, relatively speaking, the issues of Sinn Fein speaking over here and raising money over here, I mean in a lot of that we were successful…. I don’t see a battle this time, I just don’t see one” (Cochrane, 2007a, 224).

The question this poses is what is Irish-America for? In terms of recent trends the answer to this question is that it is about tourism, trade and economic investment between the two countries, rather than about political lobbying over Northern Ireland. Interest in the political process in Northern Ireland has waned as the peace process has developed and as the role of the UK government in ‘security’ policies has diminished. Put bluntly, politics in Northern Ireland has become boring and Irish-America has tired of it, certainly in terms of any ability to follow current political issues there—such as water charges, the

7 Cassie Farrelly, Interviewed by author, 16 September 2005.
development of a new visitor’s centre at the Giants Causeway or recent debates in the Assembly on new dangerous dogs legislation.

The current trend in the relationship between Irish-America and Ireland revolves around developing economic and cultural connections between the two countries. The recent Irish-America Forum held in New York on November 7-8, 2007, was sponsored by the American Ireland Fund (which has raised $300 million on projects in Ireland since 1976), the Irish government and Aer Lingus, and brought together influential people from both countries to discuss the future of the relationship between them. Much of the discussion at this forum centred on opening markets and utilising the potential of the Irish diaspora to sustain a Celtic Tiger that is beginning to hobble. The general conclusion of this meeting was that the relationship between Ireland and the US had changed unalterably, both politically and economically, with Irish companies now employing as many people in the US as American businesses do in Ireland. In an ironic reflection of the change that has taken place, President Bill Clinton attended a fund-raising dinner in Dublin in November 2007 for Hillary Clinton’s Presidential campaign. Culturally, the connection between them is beginning to break as emigration has slowed markedly, with Hugh Brady, President of University College Dublin, suggesting that the time may come when “Irish-Americans run the risk of becoming an anonymous ethnic group” (ibid). Niall O’Dowd suggested that the trend in Irish emigration had actually reversed (i.e. Irish people were going in the other direction and leaving the US) due to a combination of the push and pull factors linked to migration. The strength of the Irish economy was luring the Irish back to their country of birth, the lack of emigration reform legislation in the US was making it impossible for the large undocumented Irish community to see a viable future in America, and the aftermath of 9/11 and subsequent foreign policies of the Bush administration had soured the relationship between Irish migrants and the United States:

Record numbers of undocumented Irish, an estimated 25,000 people, have left America in recent years, reversing a 200-year trend of immigration.... It has also had a severe impact on the GAA. Last year four Gaelic football teams folded because they couldn’t find enough players, and many more are expected to drop out when rosters are drawn up later this month (Cochrane, 2007b, 356).

All of these trends point to the fact that the relationship between Ireland and Irish-America is in flux in political, economic and cultural terms. The cycles of periodic Irish migration to the US that provided life-blood for the Irish-American diaspora have ended and are unlikely to recur since Ireland is firmly locked into the EU and sports a young, well-educated work force. While not impossible, it is difficult to imagine an economic crisis of such severity that it triggers a new wave of Irish migration to the US in the manner of those in the 19th or 20th centuries. Within this context, Irish-American civil society is beginning to lose critical mass, with GAA teams folding due to lack of numbers and AOH divisions merging for the same reason. This trend is likely to accelerate rather than reverse, as fewer Irish migrants enter the US and as more are squeezed out by the post-9/11 tightening of immigration controls.
CONCLUSION

It has been argued here that the nature of the Irish migrant is changing fundamentally. The ethnographic map has become more complex than it was in the 20th century. Crucially, the vast majority who travel today do not make the psychological decision to emigrate at the point of their departure from Ireland. This is having major impacts on their attitudes and behaviour within America as there is less demand for traditional support groups than was evident in the past.

In addition, the tap of Irish emigration is being turned off as Ireland’s economy has accelerated and the political crisis in Northern Ireland has declined. Going back to the beginning of this paper, the suggestion here is that traditional typologies of diaspora do not map on neatly to Irish migration patterns in the 21st Century. Today there is an absence of compulsion and an absence of decision at the point of people’s departure from Ireland. Most have a return rather than a one-way ticket to America, as well as an open-mind about how long they will remain.

Finally, returning to the figure of 43 million people in the U.S. claiming Irish ancestry, it is clear that this is a predominantly white and increasingly affluent demographic group. While Irish-America may have been a beleaguered community during the 19th Century, it is certainly not so in the 21st.

The question this poses is whether the diaspora can also be the hegemon?

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Terrence Lyons and Peter Mandaville
Center for Global Studies
Project on Global Migration and Transnational Politics
George Mason University

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