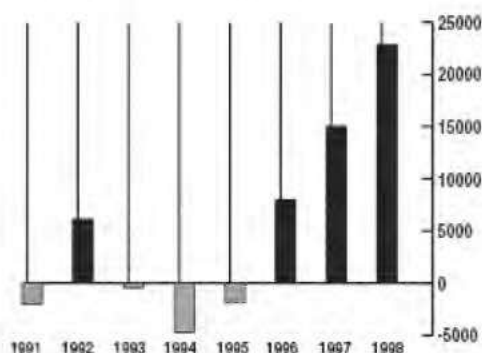


# Modernity, Identity and the Returning Irish Emigrant

BY MARY CORCORAN

Current migration trends in Ireland suggest a radical departure from the pattern that characterized the earlier years of the twentieth century in general and the 1980s in particular. In that decade, the outward migratory flow was almost twice what it is now, and the numbers returning were substantially lower. Nowadays, more people are entering Ireland than leaving, bringing our migratory profile into line with our European partners. In the closing years of the last decade of the twentieth century Ireland has experienced a sustained trend of net immigration, including a significant return migration from the New York metropolitan area.

Estimated net migration 1991–1998



Source: Irish Central Statistics Office

Between 1991 and 1998 Ireland experienced an average annual inflow of some 37,000 immigrants. In 1998, net immigration was at an historical high point of 22,800. The combined effect of this flow and the excess of births over deaths in the same period resulted in a population figure of 3.7m. in April 1998, up 1.2 per cent on the previous April. Figures from the most recent Census (1996) show that almost 80 percent of those born in 1970 (twenty-six year olds) were alive and in Ireland. Forty years previously in 1956, the equivalent figure for twenty-six year olds was about 57

percent. Half of that difference may be attributed to the fall in death rates among infants and young people, and half by reduced emigration (Fitzgerald, 1997a). The decline in emigration is mirrored by a concomitant growth in prosperity at home. As recently as the early 1970s, the last decade in which net in-migration was recorded, gross domestic product (GDP) per head of population in the Republic was half that of Britain. In 1996, Ireland produced more wealth per capita than Britain. Taking an EU average as 100, Irish GDP stood at 100.7 while the equivalent figure for Britain was 98.9. This disparity is set to widen further in the twenty first century, (O'Toole, 1996: 1). Not only has Ireland's migratory pattern changed, the entire context that has provided a framework for understanding those population flows has been transformed.

## INTERPRETING MIGRATORY FLOWS

When I explored lives of undocumented Irish emigrants in New York City in the 1980s, I called into the question the usefulness of conventional migration theory in conceptualizing their experiences. While some fell into the traditional category of economic refugees, many could be more accurately classed as adventurers, people seeking an escape route from Ireland, engaged on a quest for personal self-development, or a combination of both. A paradigm that takes account of the contingent, reflexive and often transient nature of contemporary migratory flows seemed to better express the migratory trajectory of more recent Irish emigrants. A deep ambivalence underlay their self-identification as emigrants. As transnational workers they participated in the global labor market, but their self-identity remained remarkably local. Many of those in the New York area who had left Ireland in the 1980s expressed a desire to return home (Corcoran, 1993).

In the 1990s that desire to return has changed from mere aspiration to reality for a

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—Ulrich Beck,  
Risk Society

growing number of our emigrants. Since 1997, I have been interviewing returning Irish emigrants in an attempt to deepen our understanding of their experiences. My population frame has been drawn primarily from pre-existing social and familial networks, although it has been expanded through the application of a snowball sampling technique. To date, I have conducted just over twenty in-depth interviews with returners. All of those interviewed left Ireland in the 1980s and returned during the 1990s. The majority had university level or equivalent qualifications when they left. Most have returned from either Britain or North America (including those returning from New York). This is an ongoing project, but the following analysis draws on the detailed interview material that I have accumulated to date.

#### EMIGRANTS AS REFLEXIVE AGENTS

According to Lash and Urry, the flexibilization of labor markets, the globalization of culture and the knowledge-intensive nature of modern society create the potential for individuals to act as reflexive agents, to take control in a sense of the shaping of their own lives. Similarly, Beck argues that modernity offers the individual greater opportunity “to reflect critically on those changes, and on their social conditions of existence, and potentially to change them” (Lash and Urry, 1994: 37). Giddens’ conceptualization of the reflexive individual is also infused with a sense of agency. In the era of modernity, we are not simply what we are, but what we make of ourselves, (Giddens, 1991: 196).

How far can this concept of the reflexive self assist in our interpretation of the experiences of those individuals who, having emigrated from Ireland in the 1980s, chose to return to Ireland in the 1990s? What is the precise nature of the relationship between structural constraints and individual agency in their decision-making processes? Does the decision to emigrate and then to return (a relatively new phenomenon in the history of Irish emigration) presage a period of reflexive individualization in which individuals are empowered to literally invent and reinvent their personal biographical narratives? These ideas are exploratory and have by no means a universal application, in terms of the entire panoply of Irish migratory experiences. I am interested here in the biographical nar-

ratives of a sub-group of the emigrant/ diasporic population who have closed the circle on their own migratory experience by making the decision to return home. This paper will focus on three themes in particular: structural constraint and reflexive decision-taking, the migrant’s re-invention of self, and the returner’s quest for anchorage.

#### STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINT AND REFLEXIVE DECISION-TAKING

It is clear from the reflections of my interviews that the decision to emigrate—to embark on a migrant career—was frequently a reflexive response to constraining circumstances. Contingent factors, such as the lack of opportunity in one’s chosen field, informed the decision-making of some respondents:

*“It was 1987 and Barry Desmond [then Minister for Health] instituted these huge cutbacks across the board and my temporary position [as a nurse in a Dublin hospital] disappeared. I decided it would be six months to a year before they started taking people back, so I decided to go away. It was totally job related. I would never have gone otherwise.”*

—Nurse, mid-thirties

*“There was no prospect of a job in civil engineering. I think of my class of forty-five people who graduated in 1987, forty-three went abroad. I just took it for granted that I had to go although I didn’t really want to.”*

—Wine store manager, early thirties

*“I finished College in 1986. In 1987 the lads all went to England for work. I tried everything to get fulltime work. ... After spending a year and a half in Ireland trying to get a job, I had two jobs in a week in England”*

—Civil Engineer, early thirties

For others the decision to leave Ireland was more the outcome of a generalized sense of ennui or ambivalence about their current situation. Reflecting on their social conditions of existence, they were unhappy and/or unfulfilled. For example, the catalyst for some was the realization that they had little or no interest

in pursuing a career structured around their college degree. Ironically, the credential they had obtained was viewed as a constraint rather than a resource, at least in the short term:

*"It sort of happened, I never saw myself as an emigrant but once I got to the States I*

*myself through casual work. So I thought, if I am going to do anything I better do it now. So on that basis I quickly and very rashly made the decision to go."*

—Arts Administrator, mid-thirties



**Illustration:**  
Articles in New York newspapers during the late 1990s reported a growing rate of return migration to Ireland.  
Photocollage courtesy of John Cavanagh

*didn't want to come back. I enjoyed the freedom. I was tired of Economics [degree subject] and I knew I didn't really want to work in that area. So this was kind of an escape."*

—Community Development Worker, thirty years old

*"I finished a degree in Science which I quickly realised I was not going to use. I had been out of college one year and funded*

#### THE RE-INVENTION OF SELF

The possibility offered by emigration to re-invent oneself is a clear theme which comes through in the interviews. Once embarked on the migration trail, these emigrants attempted to sustain "coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives...in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems" (Giddens, 1991: 6). The absence of structural constraint as mediated through family expectations and obligations, freed these young people from the tyrannical

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—Anthony Giddens,  
Modernity and  
Self Identity

ny of a linear career structure. Most did develop goals over the course of the period spent abroad, but crucially these goals were formed in the context of a perception of multiple choices, and the availability of alternative opportunity structures. The capacity to generate a personal biographical narrative free of structural constraint, was perceived as a form of empowerment:

*I am so embarrassed because I never really had goals. I split my time between acting and nursing. Because of the money I earned nursing I could juggle the two things successfully in New York, something I couldn't have done in either Dublin or London.* —Nurse, forty years old

*“When I went to North America first, I intended using my ethnic contacts to get a non-professional job. I just wanted time out. I was not particularly goal oriented...I didn't have professional goals but I had more personal goals which were to travel, to be able to experience North American life and be able to live there.”*

—Social Worker, early forties

*“Basically to change the situation was the goal.... Typically like a lot of Irish people, I was told by the Christian Brothers at the age of twelve that sorry, you are too intelligent to do art, you have to do Latin, Science or Commerce. So [in London] I actually did classes on everything from tailoring and pattern cutting to jewellery making set and costume design and explored that whole area that I hadn't explored before. It opened up a whole other part of myself.”*

—Arts Administrator, early thirties

Over a period of years, a career path crystallized with many emigrants ending up in jobs unrelated to the discipline in which they trained. Nevertheless, there was considerable agreement among the respondents that their general education had been a useful, indirect rather than direct resource, in developing a career path. For them, the life course had become “a passage no longer governed by tradi-

tion, but a set of passages circumscribed by risks and opportunities.” (Giddens, 1991: 79)

#### THE QUEST FOR ANCHORAGE

According to the American writer Richard Ford, community and social anchorage are not very secure: “We want to feel our community as a fixed, continuous entity...as being anchored into the rock of permanence; but we know its not, that in fact beneath the surface (or rankly all over the surface) it's anything but. We and it are anchored only to contingency like a bottle on a wave, seeking a quiet eddy. The very effort of maintenance can pull you under.” (Ford, 1995: 439)

Why are these emigrants returning home? The answer at least in part lies in a quest for authentic over in-authentic (commodified) experiences. The process of individualization that is central to capitalist development and the project of modernity confers on these emigrants a sense of agency at least in relation to their work lives. All felt that the training and experience obtained abroad had contributed to their cultural capital. For the most part, they had reached points in their career where they were in a position to make informed choices about their next move. At the same time, the cult of individualism, whose logical extension is the application of market values across non-economic spheres of life, creates a kind of “existential isolation.” Giddens defines this sense of isolation as “not so much a separation of individuals from others as a separation from the moral resources necessary to live a full and satisfactory existence” (1991: 9). Put another way “there is an increasingly felt need for some expressive relationship to the past and for attachment to particular territorial locations as nodes of association and continuity, bounding cultures and communities” (Rustin, quoted in Morley and Robins, 1993:5). As one returned emigrant from New York put it:

*“I know it's such a cliché but for me it's the fact that this is the place from which I come. I have history here. When I die I will be buried in a graveyard with my father and my grandparents. It sounds phoney but that connection is very important to me. I like that this is my country.”*

—Nurse, forty years old

Not surprisingly, the factors key to the decision to return include the provision of a better quality of life for children, having more time, the ease of Irish sociability, the quality of friendship and the slower pace of life. The phenomenon of return is best described as a quest for anchorage. These returning emigrants want to feel organically part of something real and authentic which, for want of a better word, we can call community. There is a sense in which they want to commune with their own, because it means moving out of an existence which although free of constraint, is also increasingly commodified and compartmentalized. As reflexive agents they have come to closely "monitor the conduct of the self" (Lash and Urry, 1994: 38). In many instances, they don't like the people they think they might have become, so they have returned, seeking to anchor themselves to their origins:

*"In Irish society people don't take themselves too seriously and I find that very healthy. As an individual living in New York City without family around it is easy to become neurotic and narcissistic."*

—Stockbroker, mid-thirties

*"I found London an increasingly aggressive city, and I was getting into an aggressive mind set... It was just getting me down."*

—Associate Director, Project Management firm, mid-thirties

During the sojourn abroad the question of identity, of who I am, gradually became more pressing so that for these returning emigrants, at any rate, it could no longer be ignored.

Paradoxically, the rise of the Celtic Tiger which has facilitated the return of emigrants in such significant numbers is inextricably bound up with a creeping individualism here. Ireland—the touchstone of tradition and folkways, the bastion of trust-relations between people embedded in intense social networks—still fuels the imaginations of our emigrants. But Ireland itself has been incorporated into the project of modernity. The private sector, in particular, now demands the same level of commitment among Irish employees as of employees of parent com-

panies and its international counterparts. This puts at risk precisely those characteristics that the returning emigrant covets:

*"I didn't come back here for working, I came back to chill out. If I want a buzz and frenetic lifestyle I would stay in London or go to New York. I feel there has been a big change certainly in the construction end of things. The levels of expectations and expertise are very high. I felt under more pressure back here than in London. I wanted more time, but now I am working longer hours and entitled to shorter holidays."*

—Associate Director, Project Management firm, mid-thirties

*"I have never worked so hard in my life. I would say that my productivity level is twice if not three times what it was when I worked in the States."*

—Information Technology worker, early thirties

The very aspects of Irish life that attract them back are in the process of disappearing. One couple described themselves as "ex-pats in our own country" (Engineer/Homemaker, mid thirties). Furthermore, returning emigrants find that contrary to their expectations it is difficult to acquire reasonably priced housing, commuting times are considerably longer than they anticipated and there is less time than they hoped for a social life. Indeed, as the recently returned poet, Michael O'Loughlin has pointed out, the boom in return emigration has itself become part of the problem:

*Fact is returning hurts more than leaving.  
And returners are awkward for the mother  
country. Ireland is proud of its diaspora, as  
long as it stays where it bloody well is and doesn't  
push up house prices and confuse banks.*

—Irish Times, Aug 23, 1997

The satisfaction that returning emigrants may derive from goods and services depends increasingly not only on their own consumption but on the consumption of others as well. As Fred Hirsch pointed out in his classical text, *The Social Limits*

to *Growth*, the choice facing the individual in a market type transaction in the positional sector<sup>1</sup>, in the context of material growth, always appears more attractive than it turns out to be after others have exercised their choice (1976: 52). In a booming economy, characterized by net immigration rather than net emigration, where the demands of an expanding middle class are outstripping supply, the acquisition of positional goods becomes ever more difficult. The returning emigrants find themselves caught in a bind. Ireland's exemplary economic performance makes the dream of return a reality, but the economic performance is based on the very values and practices which these emigrants are attempting to escape.

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## Notes

1. The positional economy is defined by Hirsch as all aspects of goods, services, work positions, and other social relationships that are (a) scarce in some absolute or socially imposed sense, and (b) subject to congestion or crowding through more extensive use.