

Body Politics.

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The repeal of the amendment occurred during my 16 month ethnography in a small town in North-East Ireland which I call Cuan; an ethnography concerned with ageing and smartphones. I have conducted fourteen ethnographies, but perhaps never in a place so bereft of political discussion; rugby, the weather, the local town were far more common topics than politics. At the very time when we see a huge rise of populism, in the era of Trump and Brexit, Cuan seemed remarkably sedate. This lack of debate applied to politics generally and to this referendum in particular. Ireland is governed through the alternation of two political parties, which are the legacy of a savage and traumatic civil war. It seemed as though at one time people in Cuan avoided party politics because it was too divisive in its historical resonances. Yet today the reason is the exact opposite. Most people regard these two dominant parties as very similar centrist parties that reflect a largely consensual and liberal electorate. There just isn't that much to talk about. There will always be complaints and scandals, but these don't resonate with party differences, they are just problems of governance which result in switching to the other party whenever the current government has lost credibility.

With regard to the issue of abortion many people suggested that the debate had been more lively the first time around. But by now they mostly knew each other's opinions. This is a liberal area where there was never any doubt that the vote would be overwhelmingly in favour of repeal, which proved to be the case. This meant that there simply wasn't a good enough reason to prompt divisive discussion. Just once, I recall a visiting folk singer being chided for her explicit pro-abortion song, but even that was more in case someone was

offended, rather than anyone taking issue with the stance. My work was focused on older people who were likely those who would have voted against the repeal. They dutifully attend mass and follow Catholic doctrine on this matter and others. But they can see the age profile of Catholic mass attendance and seem accepting that the next generation would fail to reproduce this adherence.

Yet I believe there was something profoundly important about this specific issue, which I hope to address in a second ethnographic monograph that would follow after our work on ageing with smartphones. This is the cosmological significance of the body. The single most important activity in Cuan is sport, and today alternative health, ranging from yoga to acupuncture, is more extensive than bio-medical health. Keeping fit and looking after the body has become the primary concern for people after retirement. I hope to try and explain this in that monograph. One factor appears to be that Irish nationalism developed around two practices: the Catholic church, as fostered by then head of government De Valera, and the rise of the GAA, that is Irish sports. As the church has faded in authority, sports and the body have subtly come to occupy that empty space. Not something talked about as cosmology, but perhaps the more significant precisely because it is not obvious or contested. The abortion debate centred on control of the body; a shift from church authority to the responsibility of individuals. As such it went to the heart of what constitutes cosmology in contemporary Cuan. But one that is found in practice, rather than as the subject of discussion. This may help explain why this amendment was so important, but also subject to so little debate in Cuan.