

# ‘The Impulse to Help’

## (Post) humanitarianism in an era of the ‘new’ development advocacy

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### **Abstract**

This paper draws on the Republic of Ireland as a case study of the ‘new’ development advocacy, i.e. government, philanthropic, and celebrity humanitarian engagement with international development and statutory efforts to deepen understanding of international development among citizens in the global North (Biccum, 2010; 2011). It outlines some of the culturally specific narratives that inform the ‘new’ development advocacy in an Irish context, with reference to a set of recurrent tropes that have come to dominate both official and popular discourses of development ‘at home’. Utilizing critical discourse analytic techniques, it illuminates the self-constituting function these public pedagogical efforts perform and highlights the function that *remembering* instances of historical trauma and suffering, and of *forgetting* or ignoring Ireland’s role in the history of imperialism, play in shaping and constituting the nation through orthodox development discourses. Rooted in a critical development education framework informed by postcolonial theory (Andreotti, 2006), the paper stresses the need for alternative development discourses that open up – rather than close down – possibilities for a deeper engagement with difficult questions of individual and collective responsibility, and with what it means to ‘take action’ in response to global problems or to engage with the suffering of Others.

**Keywords:** Global citizenship, international development, discourse analysis, development advocacy, celebrity humanitarianism

*Forgetfulness, and I would even say historical error, are essential  
in the creation of a nation.*

Ernest Renan, 1885

## Introduction

This paper critically explores some of the discursive tropes framing efforts to engage Northern publics with development in an era of the ‘new’ development advocacy – that is, an era characterized both by increased celebrity and philanthropic involvement by those in the North with the global South and government-led efforts to raise awareness and an understanding of development (Biccum, 2010). International development has come to occupy an important place in the contemporary public imagination. Yet, as Chouliaraki (2013: 22) observes, the present historical moment is characterized by ‘a paradox of public engagement’ with development, in that while donations to development organizations have increased, the *quality* of public engagement with questions of global justice has fallen to its lowest point ever. Recent research carried out in the UK suggests that public understanding of global problems is limited, nor do members of the public seem to be interested in engaging in sustained conversation about issues involving debt, trade, or aid (Darnton with Kirk, 2011).

Somewhat ironically, this public disengagement from development has been taking place against a wider backdrop of increased government support for educative efforts to raise public awareness and deepen understanding of global poverty and inequality, and of the role of countries in the global North in promoting development (Irish Aid, 2013). In the late 1990s, many governments in the global North began investing in, or significantly increased, their financial support for a range of educational initiatives and programmes variously described as Development Education, Global Learning, Global Education, or Global Citizenship Education.<sup>1</sup> Despite statutory efforts to ‘popularize’ international development and to educate citizens in the global North about global themes and issues, the wider discursive context within which these public pedagogical efforts are located remains under-theorized. It has been argued that development NGOs and the media have been implicated in promoting mere surface-level engagement or ‘cheap participation’ in development-related causes and campaigns (Darnton with Kirk, 2011: 6). While media and transnational advocacy groups are undoubtedly influential, the role that celebrities and Northern governments themselves play in shaping the global public imaginary warrants critical scrutiny as they intensify their commitment to deepening citizens’ understanding of development. Whereas much of the existing scholarship in this area has tended to focus on efforts to produce ‘active (global) citizens’ in core or metropolitan contexts such as Britain (e.g. Biccum, 2007), the present analysis highlights the importance of attending to the culturally specific dimensions of the ‘new’ development advocacy,

particularly as it relates to those geographical contexts which have a more complex and ambivalent relationship with Empire. Adopting a country case study approach, the paper presents a critical interrogation of official development discourses in the Republic of Ireland – one Northern country which has intensified its educative efforts in recent years to ensure its citizens are better informed about global poverty and empowered to take action against social and global inequality.

Unlike many of its European counterparts who have recently embarked upon efforts to popularize international development, Ireland has never been a colonizing county. It has, however, been a colonized one. As Carroll (2003: 3) remarks: 'Ireland was the first of England's colonies, the training ground for the colonists to North America, and the context of the first English discourse on why and how to conquer and colonise.' This article seeks to shed light on how Ireland's contradictory and complex positioning as a former British colony – but one which was geographically and culturally located in Europe – has informed the specific discursive shape the 'new' development advocacy has taken in the Irish Republic over the last decade or so. It explores the ways in which contemporary orthodox development discourses emanating from both official and popular iconic Irish-born sources are shaped by Ireland's histories of colonialism and state-sponsored Catholicism to produce a range of problematic 'structures of feeling' which inform its people's thinking about, and engagement with, the global South (Williams, 1977). Drawing inspiration from scholarship that highlights the roles remembering and forgetting play in the construction of the nation (e.g. Fletcher, 2012; Inayatullah and Blaney, 2012; Garner, 2004), the analysis focuses on key historical occurrences, erasures, and denials through which the Irish nation seeks to discursively reconstitute itself through international development. Specifically, it highlights the function that *remembering* instances of historical trauma and suffering and of *forgetting* or ignoring Ireland's role in the history of imperialism play in shaping and constituting the nation through orthodox development discourses. Rooted in a critical development education framework informed by postcolonial theory (Andreotti, 2006), the paper stresses the need for alternative development discourses that open up – rather than close down – possibilities for deeper engagement with difficult questions of individual and collective responsibility, and with what it means to 'take action' in response to global problems or to engage with the suffering of Others.

The paper begins by sketching the study's wider contextual backdrop with reference to the emergence of 'new' forms of development advocacy in the global North since the 1990s, and the culturally specific shape this advocacy has taken in an Irish context. It then outlines the theoretical and methodological frameworks informing the analysis of orthodox development narratives. The analysis is primarily concerned with the work these discourses perform in terms of structuring the way we think and feel

about the world and our place in it, and how we relate to so-called 'distant Others' (Jefferess, 2013). The paper concludes with some reflections on the implications of these dominant discursive tropes for critical engagement with development. Drawing inspiration from recent postcolonial development education scholarship, it problematizes the (post)humanitarian logic within which development engagement is increasingly couched (Andreotti, 2011; Cook, 2008; Heron, 2007; Jefferess, 2012; Razack, 2007), and stresses the need for alternative development discourses that open up possibilities for a deeper engagement with difficult questions of individual and collective historical and contemporary responsibility.

### **Contextual backdrop: (Post) humanitarianism in an era of the 'new' development advocacy**

Efforts to engage citizens in the global North with, and to educate them about, development have been in existence since the 1960s, and can be understood as a response on the part of development NGOs to inform donors and, more broadly, the public about elements of the wider economic, political, and social settings within which they carried out their development work (Mesa, 2005). In the 1990s, the terrain of development advocacy expanded to include government-funded development awareness, civil society-led development education, and a range of efforts to cultivate 'global citizens' in all areas of education (Biccum, 2011). The increased and more fervent support by governments in the global North for a range of educative efforts in the formal and non-formal education sectors to 'popularize' international development and 'raise awareness' and understanding about global inequality and poverty is part of a wider development advocacy project which also involves increased celebrity and philanthropic involvement (Biccum, 2011). Pedagogical efforts to raise awareness and understanding of development are varied, ranging from classroom-based lessons about global themes and issues to school-linking and cultural immersion schemes and international volunteering programmes (Diprose, 2012).

While increased statutory support for development education facilitates direct engagement with themes and issues which have historically been marginalized within mainstream education, some scholars have expressed concern about the increasing neoliberalization of global citizenship as both a discourse and a pedagogical process (e.g. Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011; Roman, 2003; Schattle, 2008; Selby and Kagawa, 2011). Biccum (2010: 105) contends that Northern governments have intensified their investment in development awareness with the goal of producing 'active (global) citizens' or 'little developers', who are equipped with the skills and know-how to endorse and/or practise a version of international development which sees free-market capitalism as the solution to increased global poverty and crises. In an Irish context, the previously marginalized discourse of global

citizenship is now central to the mission statements of institutions of higher learning (Khoo, 2011). While ostensibly committed to producing 'globally engaged citizens' who are committed to 'inclusion' and 'equality for all', these strategy documents are often more preoccupied with producing workers with the cultural fluency needed to participate in the global economy than they are with enabling students to critically engage with issues of global injustice and unequal interdependence (see, for example, University College Dublin, 2010). Critically informed research exploring development-themed curricula in schools, as well as Northern citizens' experiential engagement with development via international volunteering programmes, has raised further concerns about the *kind* of active global citizen being produced through government-supported or state-sanctioned development education initiatives. Highlighting the personal and professional development and escapist functions government-funded international volunteering programmes in the UK serve for participants from the global North, Baillie Smith and Laurie (2011: 555) argue that 'the global South is in a sense imagined as a global playground in which, but not necessarily in relation to which, citizenship can be exercised, obscuring the unequal patterns of global interdependence that define the contours of that space.' Similarly, research exploring the discursive construction of the active (global) citizen in formal educational settings suggests that solidarity is often portrayed as an individualistic endeavour through which one can simultaneously advance and empower oneself, while 'taking action' is reduced to light-touch and feel-good actions, such as signing online petitions, buying a wristband, or purchasing fair trade chocolate (Bryan and Bracken, 2011; Chouliaraki, 2013; Kennelly and Llewellyn, 2011).

### **Humanitarianism with benefits**

These educational constructions of the active global citizen cannot be considered apart from the effects of intensified celebrity engagement with development in recent decades – another central feature of the 'new' development advocacy (Biccum, 2011). While celebrity humanitarianism has existed for some time, more recently it has become 'hyper-celebritised', 'hyper-emotionalised', and entrepreneurialized (Chouliaraki, 2013). Super-celebrities such as U2 frontman Bono (Paul Hewson) and Angelina Jolie, for example, spend considerable time lobbying political elites and have established their own foundations, a fusion of politics and popular culture with numerous implications for how development is thought about and understood in the wider public domain (Biccum, 2011). Chouliaraki (2013: 178) argues that traditional humanitarian campaigns – which were centred on the plight of the Other – have been replaced by a 'post-humanitarian' politics, at the heart of which is a self-oriented morality deeply embedded in a public culture of consumption and an ethos of 'mutual benefit with minimal effort'. As Chouliaraki explains, the ethic of solidarity characteristic of the present historical moment represents 'a shift from the

idea that doing good to others without expecting a response is both desirable and possible to the idea that doing good to others is desirable when there is something to gain from the act' (2013: 179). Development engagement has thus become premised upon a form of solidarity that is expressed through one's lifestyle or consumerist habits, and justified in terms of its capacity to enhance our social conscience or to advance us personally, as opposed to a 'solidarity of conviction', wherein taking action does not need to be justified or authenticated in terms of something external to ourselves (Chouliaraki, 2013: 185). Within this context, self-interest or personal empowerment, as opposed to a belief in a better world, becomes *the* legitimate basis for social action, while distant Others remain 'shadow figures in someone else's story' (Chouliaraki, 2013: 187). In other words, this 'humanitarianism with benefits' ideology ensures that development engagement is rooted in narcissism, whereby the focus remains squarely on *our* need for personal enhancement and our own feelings about the suffering of Others. It serves to close off consideration of the conditions that make this suffering possible in the first place, or of the kinds of collective action that need to be undertaken to alleviate it.

### **The 'new' development advocacy, Irish-style**

The Republic of Ireland presents an interesting case study of Northern countries' embrace of the 'new' development advocacy for at least three discrete, yet overlapping, reasons. First, unlike some of the other liberal democracies which have embarked upon the mass marketing of development, Ireland's relationship with countries in the global South is not marked by a historical, colonial relationship. Rather, Ireland's *own* status as a former British colony has given rise to an orthodox narrative of Irish innocence in imperialist relations, rooted in its own experience of historical suffering and dispossession. Second, two of *the* most high-profile celebrity humanitarians acting 'on behalf of' the global South today, Bob Geldof and Bono, are Irish born. Bono and Geldof epitomize and embody many of the ideological qualities of the 'new' development advocate, and have been instrumental in promoting and sustaining an image of the Irish people as a nation of 'global do-gooders' (Heron, 2007: 54). Their first-hand knowledge of the global South (and of Africa in particular), combined with their celebrity status and charismatic personas, have granted them unparalleled access to Western political leaders, enabling them to 'speak truth to power' and influence development policies and decisions which affect countries in the global South (Chouliaraki, 2013; Magubane, 2008; Repo and Yrjölä, 2011; Yrjölä, 2009). Celebrity humanitarianism plays an instrumental role in the 'new' development advocacy's subjectification or identity-making project: it produces positions, imaginaries, and 'regimes of truth' about the global South (Biccum, 2010; 2011; Repo and Yrjölä, 2011; Yrjölä, 2009). As popular international cultural icons, the way Bono and Geldof discursively construct, and relate to, the

African continent in particular, has arguably had a highly significant impact on what Baillie Smith (2012: 1) refers to as 'popular imaginaries of development' 'at home' in Ireland.

Third, Ireland's engagement with the 'new' development advocacy needs to be located against the wider backdrop of the ascendancy of what became popularly known as the Celtic Tiger economy – a period of unprecedented economic boom which began in the mid-1990s and lasted until the global economic downturn in 2008.<sup>2</sup> By the late 1990s, Ireland's reported levels of economic growth had become the envy of other European states, with Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita growing 7 per cent on average in that decade alone (Coulter, 2003). Such an 'economic miracle' seemed almost incomprehensible when one considers that only a few years earlier Ireland was in the midst of an economic recession. As Coulter (2003: 3) remarks:

In the late 1980s, the twenty six counties were mired in an economic recession from which there appeared no possibility of escape. When political commentators at the time posed the question of whether the Republic of Ireland could be considered a 'third world country,' they did so with no discernible trace of irony.

During the height of the economic boom, the Irish Aid budget grew to €920 million to become the sixth largest donor per capita in the world. While this period of affluence, and the size of Ireland's Aid budget, would prove to be short-lived, the Celtic Tiger economy came to be seen as an opportunity for the Irish nation to flex its development muscle and develop a reputation as a world leader on the global development stage. The version of the 'new' development advocacy embraced in Ireland is intimately bound up with the emergence of the Celtic Tiger economy, and with a range of associated discursive practices designed to enhance the nation's reputational image as one of *the* key players in the fight against global poverty and associated injustices. During the height of the Celtic Tiger, Ireland's *own* status as a developed, advanced, and wealthy nation became central to the official Irish development narrative, so much so that its 'status' and 'wealth' were the dominant media frames in the coverage of the government's first ever White Paper on Irish Aid, published in 2006 (Barnes and Cawley, 2009). Whereas the White Paper's stated purpose was to promote public awareness of, and garner support for, development policies, programmes, and expenditures (Irish Aid, 2006), the main focus of media reportage was Ireland's identity as a developed and wealthy nation. This frame, which originated with government sources, was taken up uncritically in media coverage related to the event. As Barnes and Cawley (2009: 27) observe:

The White Paper was framed to represent Ireland as a nation with the newly acquired wealth to afford an enlarged overseas aid programme; to represent what it meant to be Irish in the 21st century; to represent a new departure in Irish



foreign policy, with the potential for the country to become a 'global leader' in bridging the divide between developed and developing nations.

The version of the 'new' development advocacy that has been embraced in Ireland cannot be conceived apart from the Celtic Tiger period of economic boom which lasted for over a decade and resulted in a transformed understanding of Ireland as a thriving, cosmopolitan, wealthy, and developed nation whose hour had finally come. The next section seeks to lay the theoretical and methodological groundwork for an analysis of the dominant representational strategies through which the Irish nation came to be constituted as wealthy and 'developed,' against the wider contextual backdrop of government efforts to cultivate active (global) citizens who are knowledgeable about, and empowered in relation to, 'global' and 'development' issues.

### **Theoretical and methodological frameworks**

The analysis draws upon a range of concepts developed by postcolonial scholars whose work critically interrogates the wider development enterprise and/or development education as a component of the wider apparatus of development (Andreotti, 2011; Cook, 2008; Heron, 2007; Jefferess, 2012; Razack, 2007). It takes further inspiration from those scholars whose goal is to make postcolonial theory 'actionable' within educational curricula and settings (see Andreotti, 2011). In other words, it seeks to illuminate the 'productive potential' of postcolonial theory, i.e. how it can be 'acted upon' to inform and enhance educational practice (Andreotti, 2011: 1).

Postcolonial theorizations of development are concerned with the production of knowledge through discourse, and with the ways in which knowledge about development is inextricably linked with the workings of power. Discourse refers to 'a group of statements which provide a language for talking about - a way of representing the knowledge about - a particular topic at a particular historical moment' (Hall, 1997: 291). Discourse - as a system of representation - governs the way a topic can be meaningfully discussed and understood, and shapes and informs how ideas are put into practice. As Hall (1997: 44) explains, 'just as discourse "rules in" certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write, or conduct oneself, so also, by definition, it "rules out," limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it.' Relatedly, postcolonial theory is centrally concerned with the ways in which subjects are produced in discourse. Discourse produces subjects, i.e. figures who embody the particular forms of knowledge the discourse produces, such that we become the subjects of a particular discourse and thus the bearers of its knowledge/power (Hall, 1997). From this vantage point, the 'new' development



advocacy is as much an identity-making project as it is a pedagogical process which seeks to 'popularize' development and raise awareness about global problems. In other words, it is a process of subjectification or self-formation that shapes how 'we' come to know and understand ourselves, as individuals and as active citizens of the 'developed' global North, and how 'we' are perceive our relationship with the inhabitants of the global South (Biccum, 2010).

Heron (2007: 6–7) persuasively argues that Northern citizens' 'desire for development' cannot be understood apart from a set of 'deeply racialised, interrelated constructs of thought [that] have been circulating from the era of empire', through which the Northern sense of self is constituted and affirmed. Heron's analysis of the construction of a white, bourgeois, female subjectivity among Canadian development workers points to the existence of 'colonial continuities,' i.e. ways of thinking about the global 'Other' that have altered over time in respect to their particular expression but which retain certain similarities with their original colonial manifestations and effects (Heron, 2007: 7). At the heart of these 'colonial continuities' is the 'helping imperative,' a sense of entitlement and obligation to intervene globally to improve the lives of 'distant Others,' which rests on racialized assumptions of difference and notions of white superiority. Similar to the Canadian context, the focus of Heron's analysis, the humanitarian 'impulse to help' (Murphy, 2012) that characterizes Irish orthodox development discourse is inseparable from a national narrative of innocence in historical global relations (Heron, 2007). The analysis which follows seeks to disrupt and complicate this discursive trope by considering Ireland's ambivalent positioning within Empire in moulding the specific form the 'helping imperative' takes in different geographical contexts.

## **Methodology**

The analysis draws on a combination of data sources derived from official development-related documents and speeches, a historical narrative account of the Irish Aid programme written by its former director general, state-sanctioned curriculum materials, and media interviews with Irish-born celebrities. Methodologically, the paper employs critical discourse analysis techniques (CDA) to interrogate key ideas and realms of development knowledge that are 'screened in' and 'screened out' in a variety of sources of information. CDA involves a multilayered process of reading, interpreting, re-reading, and re-interpreting each of the texts to derive recurring patterns and themes. As such, it involves examining various degrees of presence or absence in the texts, such as foreground information (those ideas that are present and emphasized), background information (those ideas that are explicitly mentioned but de-emphasized), presupposed information (that which is present at the level of implied or suggested meaning), and absent information (Fairclough, 2003).

Drawing on scholarship which highlights the role that remembering and forgetting play in the construction of the nation (e.g. Fletcher, 2012; Inayatullah and Blaney, 2012; Garner, 2004), the analysis focuses on key historical erasures and denials embedded within orthodox development narratives through which the Irish nation seeks to discursively (re)constitute itself through international development. The analysis of documentary materials is organized around three broad overlapping and recurring themes evident across the different data sources: (1) narratives of shared historical experience and trauma between Ireland and countries of the global South; (2) narratives about Ireland's contribution to civilization through its participation in the spread of (spiritual) Empire; and (3) narratives stressing Ireland's innocence in global historical relations.

## **Remembering the nation through shared experience and historical trauma**

### **Folk memory and experiential empathy**

Irish people's unique or at least enhanced capacity for empathy with inhabitants of the global South is one of the most prominent discursive tropes framing both official as well as popular manifestations of the 'new' development advocacy in an Irish context. These constructed narratives of shared experience and historical trauma are explicitly invoked to engage Irish people with contemporary manifestations of global poverty – typically, although not always or necessarily – to encourage them to make charitable donations in times of immediate crisis and to garner credibility and legitimacy for the country's official involvement in the development enterprise. As documented by John Horgan, Irish mainstream media accounts of the Ethiopian famine in the 1980s were dominated by narratives that drew historical parallels between the Ethiopian experience of famine and the Irish experience of famine almost a century and a half earlier. As Horgan (1987: 24) puts it:

The message was not historically complex nor particularly subtle: as we had suffered, we should be the first to understand, and to help, those who were now suffering. Whatever about the quantity of our response, the quality was to be different, because of our experience.

The evocation of 'folk memory' of the Great Famine of the 1840s is a central feature of the development-related narratives of official as well as popular cultural ambassadors of the Irish nation. At the official opening of a famine museum in Strokestown in the west of Ireland in 1995, Mary Robinson, then president of Ireland, evoked the notion of a historically informed emotional identification the Irish people have with citizens of the global South, stating that 'the past gave Ireland a moral viewpoint and a historically informed compassion on some of the events happening now' (cited in Ó'Gráda, 1999: 4). Striking a similar chord in her book, *A Voice for Somalia*, Robinson

states that 'we can honour the profound dignity of human survival best ... by taking our folk memory of this catastrophe [the Great Famine] into the present world with us, and allowing it to strengthen and deepen our identity with those who are still suffering' (Robinson, 1992: 11-12).

Ireland's *own* historical suffering is frequently evoked to demonstrate the legitimacy and, in some instances, moral superiority of the Irish Aid programme in official narratives of international development. Irish people's unique or at least enhanced capacity for experiential empathy served as a point of departure in the government's 2006 White Paper on Irish Aid. In his foreword to the White Paper, Bertie Ahern, Ireland's prime minister at the time, evoked the experiential empathy frame to justify the country's intervention in the global South, stating: 'Because of our history, Ireland can rightly claim to empathize with those who are suffering from disease, poverty and hunger every day around the globe' (Irish Aid, 2006: 3).

The equation of the Irish experience of famine with contemporary occurrences of famine, poverty, and disease in the global South is also an important reference point in the development narratives of Irish-born celebrity humanitarians. Bono, for example, identifies the historical suffering of his birthplace – through famine and the wider experience of colonial subjugation – as a key motivation for his involvement in development activism. In the context of an interview with Washington, DC-based reporter Charles Cobb Jr., about an upcoming tour of Africa with then Treasury secretary Paul O'Neill, Bono explained his 'interest in Africa' as follows:

I think it's probably – if there is such a thing as folk memory a sense that our country had a famine in the middle of the 19th century that halved our population, that two million died and two million went off to become policemen and priests in New York. I think, also, it's from a sense of having come out from under the hoof of colonialism and having recently turned around our economy. And this is the kind of good news from an Irishman that helps meeting with finance ministers in Africa. (cited in Magubane, 2008: 102.6)

As Magubane (2008: 102.6) puts it, Bono consciously engages in a discursive practice of representing both the Self and the Other, placing 'Africa and Ireland into the same analytic field by invoking their common experience with famine and disease and asserting that Africa and Ireland share a history of tragedy, death, and forced dispersal'. Yet, as Magubane astutely observes, the 'uncomfortable and messy question of race' – such as reference to the similar processes of racial subjugation to which the Irish themselves (like colonized peoples in Africa) were subjected in nineteenth-century Britain and America – is absent from Bono's comparative, historically formed analysis (2008: 102.19). The Irish question of 'race' is messy and uncomfortable, not least because the Irish – who had themselves been racialized and 'simianized' in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain and America – actively pursued

'whiteness' as a means of escaping their subaltern position within mainstream American society by disassociating themselves from non-Europeans who were oppressed and exploited (Ignatiev, 1995; Roediger, 1999). Furthermore, as outlined in more detail below, 'race' and racism played a dominant role in the construction of Irish nationhood after the Republic achieved its independence from Britain in 1921, while anti-racism and anti-Semitism were prominent discourses during the national pre-State movement (McVeigh and Lentin, 2002). The racialization of Africans through the Irish Missionary Movement, which held a prominent place in the national imaginary for over half a century following independence, is taken up in the next section.

### **'Our' contribution to civilization: The spread of (spiritual) empire**

Before Irish-born super-celebrities Bono and Geldof appeared on the global development stage in the 1980s and 1990s, popular consciousness about Ireland's role in the fight against global poverty and hunger was filtered largely through the lens of Irish missionaries' development-related activities. While the Irish missionary presence dates from the early decades of the nineteenth century (Kenny, 2004), 'the missions' gained increasing prominence in the national consciousness from the 1920s onwards, after Ireland gained its independence from Britain, and retained this status in the popular imaginary for over half a century (Fanning, 2002). The nationalistic significance of the missions can only be fully appreciated by locating them within a broader historical context involving the development of a 'special,' symbiotic relationship between Church and State which became solidified after Ireland gained its independence from Britain in 1921. In the post-independence era, the Catholic Church came to exert considerable ideological control in Irish society, playing an important role in legitimating the new state following a bitter civil war in 1922–23, and serving as an important ethnic marker distinguishing the Irish from their former colonial masters (NicGhiolle Phádraig, 1995). The expansion of Ireland's spiritual empire through the missions in the post-independence era was intimately bound up with the project of nation-building and the political project of Irish nationalism embarked upon following Ireland's independence from Britain. Catholicism had been suppressed and subordinated during centuries of colonial domination, but was actively forged as a defining feature of Irishness in the post-independence era of 'de-anglicization.' The conflation of Catholicism with Irishness was promoted by the missionary apparatus; it amplified the link between Irish freedom and Irish Catholicism forged by prominent nationalist figures who fought for Irish independence by extending it to 'freedom of a spiritual order' on the part of those who were 'fighting the battle for Christ in Africa and Asia' (Hogan, 1992: 2; cited in Fanning, 2002).

### 'A penny for the black babies'

The missions were heralded as a specifically Irish contribution to civilization. Magazines published by the various missionary organizations contained heroic tales of Irish missionaries, and the missions themselves were described as 'an Irish achievement' and 'a form of patriotism' (cited in Batemen, 2012: 58). The Irish missionaries simultaneously participated in, and actively sustained, a stereotypical and racist discourse which portrayed Africa as a 'dark', dangerous, 'benighted' continent with exotic peoples and landscapes, and sought to remind readers how fortunate Ireland was to have been delivered from the 'degradation of paganism' (cited in Bateman, 2012: 53). The so-called 'penny for the black baby' fundraising campaigns which supported the missions were imbued with racist, paternalistic, and imperialist ideologies (Fanning, 2002). These charitable efforts were bolstered by iconic cardboard images of black babies, or *daoine gorm* [literally blue people], and plastic collection boxes containing a nod-able black head which moved when a penny was put in the box.

Arguably, these paternalistic and profoundly racist images and discourses have left a very powerful legacy in terms of shaping contemporary Irish understandings of development and in terms of influencing how white Irish people perceive and interact with black people living in or outside of Ireland (Fanning, 2002). While official narratives of the history of Irish development acknowledge how 'politically incorrect' the imagery used to secure funds for the missions was (Murphy, 2012: 12), the 'extraordinary level of caring' displayed by the Irish people – their 'read[iness] to help the developing world' – is seen to have been heavily influenced by the legacy of the missions (Murphy, 2012: 8). The discursive emphasis in orthodox narratives on the benevolence of the Irish people and the gratitude of those who 'benefited' from the heroic and self-sacrificing acts of those engaged in the project of 'spiritual' imperialism (Kenny, 2004) leaves little, if any, room to ponder the detrimental effects of missionary activities in the global South or the ongoing effects of racist narratives and iconography on black people in Ireland today.

Present-day fundraising efforts on the part of some Irish-based religious development NGOs are suggestive of ideological continuities with these historical efforts to engage the Irish public with development. It is important to point out that the vast majority of messages and images used by these agencies for fundraising and educative purposes are not overtly or intentionally racist. Nevertheless, collection boxes, which sometimes contain images of black children (who are often pictured alone to connote dependency and vulnerability), continue to be distributed to school children throughout Ireland by Trócaire, the overseas development agency of the Catholic Church in Ireland. The 'Trócaire box', which the agency describes as 'an iconic fundraising tool', is distributed to over a million homes annually through

schools and parishes as part of its annual six-week Lenten appeal – the agency’s largest and most important fundraising and public awareness campaign (PRCA, 2009).<sup>3</sup> The Trócaire box ‘forms the basis of’ the agency’s school-based development education programmes, which are rolled out with the assistance of participating teachers in both primary and secondary schools (*ibid.*). For example, the development education materials produced by the agency often comprise case studies and photo packs of the individuals – typically children – depicted on the Trócaire box, which suggests a direct link between the agency’s fundraising initiatives and its educative work. Directly linking fundraising and development education in this way is problematic, not least because fundraising as a form of development activism perpetuates a particular understanding of development as being primarily about charity from the North to the global South, and reinforces, rather than challenges, learners’ stereotypes about ‘their’ dependency on ‘us’ (Smith, 2004).

The pervasiveness of development-as-charity as the dominant action in response to development problems in Irish schools has been well documented (see Bryan and Bracken, 2011; Gleeson *et al.*, 2007). The ‘three Fs’ approach to development activism – *fundraising, fasting, and having fun* in aid of specific development causes – needs to be located within a wider context of how members of the Irish public have historically engaged with development, and the racialized and racist nature of the representational practices through which relationships with the global South have been forged (Bryan, 2012: 264). While the three Fs approach as the dominant mode of engagement with development in schools is by no means unique to the Irish context, it is historically informed by a wider set of racialized discourses about Irish nationhood and what it meant to be Irish that were forged in the post-independence era. As a small, peripheral, postcolonial society lacking the status power or economic or military weight of other European nations, the ‘helping imperative’ acquired great significance as a nation-building and reputation-enhancing tool within the fledgling Free State. Moreover, racialized and racist discourses about black Africans circulated by white Irish Catholic missionaries ‘back home’ helped secure a homogenous sense of Irishness as essentially Catholic, white, and nationalistic. To this day, both Catholicism and whiteness remain integral to Irish nationalism and are seen as key markers of Irishness, such that the presence of non-white or non-Catholic minority ethnic groups within Irish society poses a fundamental threat to this racialized sense of identity (Connolly, 2006). Recent research on the present-day experiences of ethnic minority students in Irish schools suggests that the banal repetition of stereotypical representations of those living in the global South by development agencies such as Trócaire negatively impacts how young ethnic minority students are perceived and treated by their ethnic majority peers (Smyth *et al.*, 2009). Such historical and contemporary realities are obfuscated by official and popular cultural narratives about the altruism and positive influence of Irish missionaries overseas.

This discourse of national altruism is bolstered by a related narrative about the innocence of the Irish nation in historical global relations, which is taken up in more detail in the next section.

## **Narratives of imperial innocence**

### **'The absence of colonial baggage'**

The experiential empathy frame addressed earlier in the paper often co-exists alongside a related discourse of imperial innocence (Heron, 2007: 37). In his historical account of the Irish Official Development Assistance programme, titled *Inside Irish Aid: The impulse to help*, Ronan Murphy, former director general of Irish Aid, offers the following explanatory account of the 'extraordinary level of caring for the poorest' displayed by the Irish people:

The fact that the Irish can empathise with people living in the developing world is an important factor, as is the absence of colonial baggage. The ability to see things from the point of view of the poor – maybe because we come from the most part from modest backgrounds ourselves and have learned through our history what it is to be on the receiving end – made us more suitable partners than donors from rich countries who often talk down to recipient countries. (Murphy, 2012: 10)

The credibility, sincerity, and moral superiority of the Irish Aid programme – what makes 'us more suitable partners' than 'donors from rich countries' – is thus secured through 'our' perceived enhanced ability to truly relate to, and understand, what it is like to be poor and to have suffered, and through Ireland's status as a postcolonial society.

Within formal education settings – a central locus for 'new' development advocacy activity – development similarly becomes simultaneously knowable and intelligible to young people through narratives of imperial innocence in global historical relations and an emphasis on 'our' collective 'capacity to care' (Razack, 2007: 382). One textbook, which contains an interview with an Irish development worker, explicitly attributes Ireland's 'success' on the global development stage to its lack of 'colonial baggage,' among other things:

It's very easy being Irish abroad. We have a very good profile. I believe this is because we do a good job. We work hard and we're reliable. There is also a widespread knowledge in Africa that Ireland was colonised and that we were never colonisers. Among aid agencies, the Irish also have a very good reputation. While working hard in very difficult situations, we always seem to manage to have a bit of *craic* [fun]. (de Búrca and Jeffers, 1999: 117)



State-sanctioned textbooks are replete with praiseworthy accounts about the Irish people's generosity, bravery, self-sacrifice, and courage in the face of humanitarian disasters, crises, and so on. Irish virtuousness is continuously affirmed through discursive practices which position Irish people and the Irish nation as 'helping', 'concerned', and 'making a difference' to unfortunate Others in the world (Bryan, 2012). Unsurprisingly, super-celebrities Bono and Geldof feature prominently in state-sanctioned curriculum materials used to educate post-primary students about international development. In some instances, these celebrity humanitarians are also used to symbolize development itself, with one citizenship education textbook choosing to introduce students to the theme of development at the beginning of the textbook with a photograph of Bob Geldof and a caption about how he has 'worked tirelessly to bring food and medical aid to people in Africa affected by drought and famine' (Holmes and O'Dwyer, 2010: 5).

Within official development documents, the reputation-enhancing function development serves for the Irish nation is further bolstered by a dual narrative about 'our' 'responsibility to others' and the uniqueness and moral superiority of the Irish Government's programme of development cooperation. The following response to the question 'why give aid?' appeared on the front cover of the 2006 government White Paper on Irish Aid:

First and foremost, we give aid because it is right that we help those in greatest need. We are bound together by more than globalisation. We are bound together by a shared humanity. The fate of others is a matter of concern to us. From this shared humanity comes a responsibility to those in great need beyond the borders of our own state. For some, political and strategic motives may influence decisions on the allocation of development assistance. That is not the case for Ireland. For Ireland, the provision of assistance and our cooperation with developing countries is a reflection of our responsibility to others and of our vision of a fair global society. (Irish Aid, 2006: n.p.)

These representational practices of selfless nationalistic altruism are at once reliant on the existence of other self-interested development actors in the global North, whose aid programmes are driven by neo-imperialistic geo-political interests, *and* on the presence of less fortunate Others through which we come to define and understand ourselves as good and ethical human beings. Thus, the narrative serves a dual subjectification function through which the Irish Aid programme is represented as distinct and more virtuous than other self-interested countries in the global North, because only the Irish programme is motivated by purely altruistic motives and a profound sense of responsibility to those who are 'in greatest need'.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, it reinforces what David Jefferess refers to as 'a dichotomy of the fortunate and the unfortunate,' wherein the solution to the problem of global poverty is

presented in terms of benevolent obligation: 'What can we, the fortunate, do to help the unfortunate?' (Jefferess, 2012: 20). In other words, it reinforces the idea that a fortunate 'we' have a moral obligation to provide aid to an unfortunate 'them,' thereby solidifying a relationship to the Other that is primarily humanitarian (Jefferess, 2013) or indeed post-humanitarian (Chouliaraki, 2013). While affording 'us' a way of knowing and defining ourselves as 'global good guys' (Heron, 2007: 87), narratives of global humanitarianism do little if anything to counter stereotypical assumptions about the dependency of those in the global South on 'us' in the global North. Rather, these representational strategies, which present citizens of the global South as objects of pity and benevolence, serve to obscure global power relations and prevent individuals from seeing how they themselves are implicated in sustaining such relations by participating in, and deriving benefits from, harmful global economic institutions and practices (Esquith, 2010; Jefferess, 2012; 2013).

Moreover, the refrain about Ireland's 'absence of colonial baggage' forecloses a more nuanced and critical understanding of 'the "mixed" nature of the experience of Irish people as both victims and exponents of British imperialism' (Kiberd, 1995: 5) and is further undermined by the racist legacy of the Irish missions outlined above. As Kenny (2004: 119) remarks: 'the argument that Ireland's own colonial status somehow exempted it from imposing colonialism on others carries little weight historically.' Irish people's involvement in the development of the slave trade and slave plantations in the Caribbean, or their active participation in Empire as businesspeople, civil servants, and soldiers in colonial India, for example, do not sit comfortably with dominant development narratives which suggest a natural affinity for development work among Irish people and an instinctive solidarity with those who are oppressed in the global South. As outlined above, this historical amnesia is compounded by a related discursive trope about Irish people's enhanced sensitivity to injustice. This experiential empathy trope is easily called into question when one looks, for example, at the treatment of asylum seekers in contemporary Ireland, who are seeking refuge there as a direct consequence of poverty, war, violence, starvation, and famine in their countries of origin. Under a state-provided accommodation system known as 'direct provision,' these individuals and their families are forced to live in poverty and social and psychological isolation, and are under the threat of deportation and forcible removal, often having to wait over five years before a decision is reached about the eligibility of their claims for refugee status (Arnold, 2012). The implications of such discourses for critical public engagement with development are taken up in more detail in the concluding section of this paper.

## **Implications**

The foregoing analysis has sought to illuminate key development meta-narratives through which the Irish nation's sense of identity as a progressive, modern,

self-sacrificing, and humanitarian society is constituted and affirmed. In so doing, I have focused on the role that historical remembering and *dis*-remembering play in constructing the nation and its subjects, and in shaping how citizens of the nation engage with development. Focusing on a country with a complex and ambivalent relationship with Empire, I have sought to illuminate the cultural specificity of the 'new' development advocacy, and how it appeals to a historically and culturally rooted set of discursive tropes to motivate its citizens to engage with development.

These self-constituting discourses can be thought of as a set of culturally specific development myths that are used by politicians, policy-makers, and other development actors to engage citizens with development and to mobilize them into action. Hirschmann (1967) maintains that the development industry needs to create and sustain beliefs in its own myths to guide and promote action. Drawing on Hirschmann's work, Cornwall *et al.* (2008) explain how such myths work to assuage and assure their audiences by drawing on a series of familiar devices and images to encode 'truth' in narratives, and by offering the sense of purpose, direction, and political conviction that is needed to inspire action. As they are repeated and legitimized in different discursive domains, these myths perpetuate problematic structures of feeling in relation to development engagement (Williams, 1977). These habitual ways of thinking and feeling about development - which are premised upon tropes of experiential empathy and humanitarianism - position distant Others as lacking in their own agency and of being of concern to 'us' primarily insofar as they help to establish our humanity and moral superiority over 'them' and indeed other donors (Orgad, 2012). It is through the pain and suffering of distant Others who are 'in need of our help' that a national consciousness of the Irish nation as developed, caring, compassionate, and as a model for other 'developed' countries to emulate is forged (Razack, 2007). Moreover, development discourses informed by the helping imperative leave little room to consider how development might be informed by relations of reciprocity, how 'we' in the global North might learn from the Other, or how Others themselves might define and shape their own development agenda (Diprose, 2012).

Furthermore, discourses that draw overly simplistic parallels between Ireland and countries in the global South deflect attention away from Ireland's own complicity in historical and contemporary relations of harm (Dobson, 2006). Irish people's role in fuelling historical and contemporary forms of racism - both at home and abroad - and their role as agents of colonialism are obfuscated by orthodox narratives about 'our' global humanitarian 'impulse to help,' and 'our' socially constructed enhanced capacity for experiential empathy. In other words, these orthodox storylines do not prompt us to reflect on how we are 'causally responsible' or self-implicated in the structures that produce global suffering and inequality (Dobson, 2006).

The critique of experiential empathy as a basis for development engagement does not necessarily negate the role empathy can play in making global relations more ethical. As Chouliaraki (2013: 23) explains, 'empathy is a constitutive dimension of public life that enables, rather than corrupts, civic sensibilities – provided that it is combined with judgement so as not to collapse into narcissistic emotion.' But as Kaplan (2005) observes, empathy has multiple forms, and the type of empathy one experiences is influenced by the form the narrative or imagery that brings about the empathic identification takes. Kaplan explains that empathy often takes on an 'empty' quality, producing only a fragile, transitory, fleeting engagement with the Other. Both Kaplan (2005) and Boler (1999) stress the importance of 'witnessing' as a preferable ethical mode of relating to the Other, which demands much more than empathizing with their suffering. As Boler explains: 'rather than falling into easy identification, as a witness we undertake our historical responsibilities and co-implication: What are the forces that bring about this "crisis"?' (1999: 186).

Nor is the call to reject easy parallels between Ireland's own history of imperialism and colonial experiences in the global South meant to imply that national narratives have no role to play in fostering development engagement, or that one's own experiences of injustice cannot serve as a basis for action in relation to injustices imposed on Others. Inayatullah and Blaney (2012), for example, draw directly on the actions of a prominent figure in Irish history, Roger Casement, to shed light on the complex dynamics of responsibility and complicity in development-themed stories and to highlight the collusion of heroic development actors in the very forces they resist and condemn. Their 'social construction of deflection' thesis draws upon Adam Hochschild's novel *King Leopold's Ghost* (Hochschild, 1999), which reveals the story of Edmund Morel and Roger Casement's successful effort to expose Belgian atrocities in colonial Congo. Casement served as the British counsel in Boma, Congo, in the early 1900s and was commissioned by the British Government to investigate human rights abuses in the Belgian-controlled colony.<sup>5</sup> Casement and Morel established the Congo Reform Movement in 1904 to draw international attention to, and condemnation of, the extreme abuses of labour being perpetrated by representatives of King Leopold II in the Belgian-controlled Congo Free State. Exposing the limitations of their heroic efforts, Inayatullah and Blaney (2012: 173) explain that 'the Congo Reform Movement's success was premised on its ability to remain focused exclusively on Leopold, Belgium, and the Congo. The Congo served as a screen on which to project and amplify the horrors of Leopold's crimes, while the horrors of complicity with one's own governments' crimes could be minimised and ignored.' In other words, the importance of Hochschild's story lies in how it reveals the limits and ironies of the actions of heroic individuals like Morel and Casement, whose efforts to expose human rights abuses in Belgian-controlled Congo let other imperial powers such as Britain and the US off the moral hook by deflecting

attention away from the colonial atrocities being committed in their names. Stories of this nature are useful insofar as they complexify 'heroic' development narratives, illuminate the contradictory effects of development engagement, and foreground the structures of oppression and complicity on which our lives are built.

Complicity and self-implication are key considerations in critical approaches to development education. Such concepts suggest that we ought to engage with development – not because we too have suffered, or simply because it is 'right that we help those in greatest need' (Irish Aid, 2006: n.p.), but rather because we ourselves are causing harm to Others through our ordinary, everyday behaviours and actions, and our participation in a political economic order that is structurally unjust (Andreotti, 2006). The scale of this injustice is evident in the fact that in 2008, 1.18 billion people were living on between \$1.25 and \$2 per day, and it is estimated that about one billion people will still live in extreme poverty in 2015 (World Bank, 2013).

A recent illustration of how citizens in the West, through their everyday consumer practices, consciously or otherwise participate in and endorse a political economic system that immiserates and destroys lives can be seen in the collapse of the Rana Plaza complex – in which over 1,100 people died and over 3,000 were injured – in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on 24 April 2013. On the day before the building collapsed, it was announced that sales of the Irish-owned company Penneys – one of whose suppliers occupied part of this building – had risen to £2bn in the six months prior to the beginning of March, and its operating profits had increased by 56 per cent to £238m (Neville, 2013). In recent years, Penneys has achieved consistently high profits, despite (or perhaps because of) the economic recession in Europe, based on its formula of selling low-cost clothing, which it purchases in enormous quantities from suppliers based in countries like India and Bangladesh where workers are paid as little as £40 a month for their services in a global industry known for its extremely poor and often dangerous working conditions.

Further evidence of 'our' implication in a globally unjust institutional order can be seen in the indirect support the Irish Government gives to multinational corporations with a base in Ireland, whose efforts to reduce their tax burden impoverishes the taxing authority of Southern countries. Recent research examining the effects of Ireland's taxation system on countries in the global South explains how Irish tax regulations – which are intended to attract direct foreign investment in the country – are used by multinational companies to facilitate international tax evasion and capital flight (the deliberate stripping away of a country's resources and their expropriation overseas) and to divert taxable income from Southern countries (Killian, 2011). These are but two examples of the ways in which Irish people and the government which represents them are directly or indirectly implicated in the

structures that produce global suffering and inequality, realities which are foreclosed by narratives stressing 'our' humanitarian 'impulse to help' and its positioning as a defining feature of Irishness. As Jefferess (2012) observes, in addition to blinding us from seeing our self-implication in the structures that produce global suffering and inequality, invoking discourses of benevolence and humanitarianism as the basis for responding to global injustices prevents us from connecting with wider movements which seek to transform these structures and the ideologies that support them. Such criticisms highlight the need to stress different discursive framings of responsibility, premised not upon a sense of moral obligation, but rather upon an ethic that enables citizens in the global North to see how they themselves are causally responsible for the suffering experienced by Others.

The myths that inspire and motivate our engagement with development, yet simultaneously shield us from a much harsher set of realities about our complicity in relations of transnational harm, are difficult to disrupt, precisely because they are so reassuring and are normalized through discourse. As Inayatullah and Blaney (2012: 174) remark: 'perhaps, we cannot live without myth. Our myths orient us to the world and provide ethical meaning. But if myths point us to what is important, they also enable acts of forgetting.' Yet, for development to disrupt the relations of power that lie at the heart of global injustice, we need to engage with a different set of 'myths' about 'us' and our relationship with the global South (Cornwall, 2008). It is those 'myths that invoke our complicity' that we should seek to promote in our efforts to inspire action for global justice, precisely because it is these discourses that 'draw us into, not away from, deeper ethical reflection and engagement' (Inayatullah and Blaney, 2012: 174).

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## Notes

1 Development education is, of course, a complex and contested term (Diprose, 2012), informed by different ideological and theoretical lenses and comprising a diverse range of pedagogical practices, ranging from 'soft' to more explicitly critical or social justice-oriented approaches (Andreotti, 2006). Given this article's focus

on orthodox development discourses, a comprehensive exploration of the range of development education initiatives on offer in an Irish context is beyond its scope.

**2** As the effects of the global economic downturn in 2008 were felt in Ireland, and the Irish property market collapsed, the Irish Government decided to guarantee banking debt up to €400 billion and the national debt rose to around €150 billion, with at least €70 billion going to bail out failed banks. In late 2010, the Irish Government was pressurized to accept an €80 billion (\$110 billion) loan from the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), resulting in the loss of its economic sovereignty and a harshening of austerity measures. Since the onset of the recession in 2008, there have been serious reductions in the aid budget, which by 2012 had fallen by almost €300 million (Pope, 2012).

**3** Trócaire was set up by the Irish Catholic bishops in 1973 'to express the concern of the Irish Church for the suffering of the world's poorest and most oppressed people' (Trócaire, 2009).

**4** This altruistic storyline can, of course, be easily challenged. Ireland's successful election to the UN Security Council in 2000, for example – which was clearly in the country's national interest – was secured, in part, because of its commitment to increased development assistance. As part of the Irish Government's intense lobbying efforts for a seat on the United Nations Security Council for the 2001–02 term, Bertie Ahern, then prime minister, made a concrete pledge to meet the United Nations aid target of 0.7 per cent by the end of 2007, which his own government subsequently reneged upon (*Dáil Debates*, 2004).

**5** Casement's own relationship with Empire was incredibly complicated. He served as a British consulate for almost two decades and received a knighthood in 1911 for his role in exposing atrocities committed by colonial powers. He would later be stripped of this honour and was executed in 1916 on grounds of treason for his role in seeking support from Germany to help secure Ireland's independence from Britain.

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