

Inventions, Invasions and the Legacies of Language

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The Garden

Imagine a garden where everything grows, where the abundance of life multiplies and moves, never still, never stopping, never wholly silent. Imagine a place where the rocks, waters and soils breathe with the life they give, changing with the seasons, stirring with the shifting temperatures of sun and rain. Imagine a garden where every creature has a place and a spirit, a past and a future, a dying and a resurrection, a smallness and a largeness, a leaving and a return. Imagine this abundant garden as a place of colours: browns and brilliant blues, cardinal reds and soft fainting yellows. Imagine the smell of raindrops on dust, the scent of herbs brushed in passing or the pungent decay of vegetation. Imagine the invisible sounds: the soft pads of tree-clinging creatures, the lazy roll of large yawning cats or the simultaneous swirls of synchronised schools. Imagine a clear single call from high in the trees backed by a duet of closely-timed song . Then feel the desert's wind catching up the dunes, or the polar continents' long breath of snow or the wet wind of furious sea rains. Imagine all of this bathed in vast blue waters and angel clouds, a solitary sphere turning slowly in an infinite black sky. This is our paradise, thick with all the beings that have lived, died and nurtured this garden for millions and millions of years.

Now, imagine a new form of life – a young clever omnivore, carelessly consuming everything it finds, transforming everything to its own purpose or play. As this new being grows and multiplies, the garden turns to tidiness as myriad lives retreat and disappear. Small variable sounds sink out of hearing, while familiar scents dwindle and hide. The winds begin to change and the rains stagger in

unpredictable storms. The stones and waters no longer breathe so clearly, the heartbeat of the garden skips and misses, then skips again. But the new life keeps spreading, invasive and unstoppable, growing fat on its own vast hunger.

This is who we are today: careless omnivores consuming the garden that gave us birth, an invasive species that is out of control. Paradoxically, however, we know who we are and can see our own damage reflected in the forgotten holiness of abundant life and in deep memories of ancient time. If we continue as gluttons it is only because we do not yet know of another way to live.

Or do we? How many times has the human race transformed itself before? Have we not already remade ourselves in thousands of new images, thousands of times? Have we not repeatedly adapted ourselves to whatever new necessity has demanded our change? When mankind invented agriculture, whole social systems sprang into being. The same thing happened when modern industrial societies evolved – every facet of society changed as new skills and new perspectives were applied to new needs. What is to stop us doing this again? How do we relearn what we already know? What is the process of systemic social invention?

Foundations of Systemic Invention

Our closest lessons lie in the European invention of industrial societies – the roots of which began to develop nearly one thousand years ago. Two of the earliest foundations in this evolution were *literacy and learning*. Literacy grew slowly, spreading through the whole population as it left the monasteries and became anyone's skill. In turn, literacy was backed by the insights of great scholars – political philosophers, natural philosophers, mechanical philosophers, doctors, lawyers, plantsmen and astronomers. They looked at the world around them as if they had new eyes, listened to each other as if they had new ears. Their new concepts made us who we are. As popular literacy spread, their ideas entered

everyday talk, taking a variety of simple, familiar forms. Today, as we face the fundamental challenge of our own biological invasion, these two foundations – literacy and learning – are still crucial. However, it is likely to be the scholars of ecology, zoology, botany, climate and hydrology whose new ideas will invent a new world. Equally, just as the concepts of the mechanical philosophers spread through a literate population, so too will the new thinking of ecological philosophers need to move beyond today's monastic walls into the population at large.

Literacy and learning, however, are just a private indulgence if they lack the provocations of *accident and necessity*. When the 18th century wars of Western Europe required more iron guns than the forests and charcoal furnaces could supply, coked coal came into its own. But in the 13th century coal was just a lucrative seaside accident – a lump of combustible shingle found on the beaches of Durham and shipped to London to burn lime mortar for new buildings. Some accidents are not so profitable. Instead, they are the extreme events of natural disasters, epidemics or catastrophic wars. The Irish potato famine was such an extremity, a political, economic and ecological crisis which left Irish society profoundly traumatised and changed. Today, in Southern Africa, 25–40% of pregnant women are HIV+. Over the next twenty years, this crisis will move through society pushing old habits into new forms. An honest ecologist will tell you that such crises are normal in complex systems, but a good historian will add that not all crises create permanent social trauma. Instead, how we respond to extremity defines the future. AIDS in Southern Africa could fuel the old angers of the colonial invasions or it could stimulate the creation of a modern society that is profoundly healthier than anything before.

But what makes the difference between a traumatic catastrophe and a catastrophe of resurrection? How do necessity and accident help new concepts and learning to enter our everyday lives? They enter through *engagement and experiment*. Engagement exists wherever individuals with different beliefs, habits

and knowledge meet together to experiment with a practical project. When Isaac Newton was a school boy in the mid-17th century he watched a new windmill being built on the outskirts of town. This new source of power required the engagement of everyone: the learned men who had read of Dutch windmills, the citizens who raised the finance, and the craftsmen whose skills put the new pieces in place. It was a local, neighbourly experiment in technology, the politics of agreement and capital. It combined elite learning with new rules and the intelligence of skilled hands. Above all, it relied on the virtues of neighbourliness: good manners, respect and the recognition that useful ideas can come from anywhere. Are there comparable experiments today that contribute to the invention of ecological societies? They are legion. There is, for example, a new wetlands centre in London, just downstream of the Hammersmith Bridge. It has been created out of old filter beds belonging to the Thames Water company. Ecologists and ornithologists, property developers and the water company itself have all engaged with each other and the neighbours to create an experiment in urban ecology where new ideas and popular learning are tested in a practical setting.

Local experiments, however, do not on their own create social revolutions. They need a connection to power supported by a wider *politics of invention*. The politics of invention creates and protects experimental spaces. It recognises what succeeds by ratifying new rules and regulations as these are tested and tried. It openly recognises that we don't always know what our societies require. Experiments are essential in such conditions, but these in turn need to be supported by new agreements between people with often contrary beliefs and goals. Democracies that allow large measures of local autonomy in the shelter of strong central governments have been particularly good at creating these conditions. But when we look at pre-industrial English history to identify the precise mechanisms of such inventiveness, they are not always found in the corridors of state power. Instead, they were hidden in the customs of the law courts, the authority of local governments, and the skills of Parliament. In short, the politics of invention was

dispersed, finding its protected spaces and connections to power wherever they might be. Importantly, these formal mechanisms were also backed by complex personal networks based on education, neighbourhood, profession and friendship. When the structures could not cope with a new idea, it was old friendships and established personal trust which smoothed the way.

These, then, are the social foundations of systemic invention: literacy and learning, accident and necessity, engagement and experiment, and the politics of invention.

Encounter and Survival

Do these conditions exist now? If so, where are they? It is romantically tempting to argue that the politics of invention in England resulted from the experience of conquest and survival when the Norman conquest of 1066 brought a strong central government to England, but then relied on the survival of Anglo Saxon customs and laws in order to rule. The Common Law, based on the King's collection of local customs, the Anglo Saxon county institutions which provided 'local government at the king's command', and even Parliament itself can all be linked to pre-Conquest social and political forms.

What makes this medieval conquest and survival relevant now is the possibility that today's inventive societies do not lie in the heartlands of the industrial world – in Europe, Japan or North America, but on the periphery – in Africa, India or Latin America – wherever, in fact, the customs of conquered peoples have survived the encounter with colonial conquerors. These non-Western worlds, many still living close to the land, may have some of the knowledge, habits and ideas that will accelerate the invention of ecological societies. If so, we can no longer say that 'they' need to learn from 'us'; it is just as possible that 'we' need to learn from 'them'.

This change of perspective is hard. For much of the past fifty years – the post-colonial decades of the 20th century – we have assumed that the non-Western world needs “development” – a simple pipeline transfer of Western knowledge, technology, health care and governance. Now, however, the success of the development project so far means that more people are producing more goods and consuming more of the earth’s resources than ever before. By threatening the whole fabric of life itself this forces us to question development itself. We cannot, however, simply shut the door on the all those who have yet to achieve the development dream. Not only would that be immoral, it is an impossible project; having set the ambition in motion we cannot now simply set it aside. But can the absent-minded paternalism of development change? Might we transform the legacies of conquest into a new legacy of creative engagement and invention where the fundamental rules of industrial society might be redrawn? For that to happen, however, we need a very deep, very human change: we need to recover a mutual respect and pride.

Peripheries and Pride

One of the worst consequences of colonialism is the crippled psychology it leaves behind on all sides, a crippling based on denigrating the conquered culture while extolling the virtues of the conquerors. If we look first at those who have been colonised, we can see envy and imitation, complicated by a defensive mixture of touchy pride and self-loathing. Often this coincides with a culture of blame in which the conquering culture is never right, and the colonised culture is never wrong. These attitudes can survive a long time, shielded behind the silence of uncritical self-censorship. Such silence and its innate secrecy may once have protected the conquered culture from destruction, but in today’s world, it makes creative dialogue rare and elusive.

This prickly psychology of doubts and denigrations needs to change. Importantly, it needs to change from within; a slave master who frees his slave reinforces the idea that both freedom and slavery are the gift of the master. A slave who defines his own freedom and takes his own power, however, is a different person entirely. So, on the side of the formerly colonised, this is the first step: to reclaim one's legacy, to define that legacy honestly in one's own terms, whatever they might be, and to live with an open public pride. This is the process that a Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiongo, describes as *Decolonising the Mind*.¹

A new sense of pride on one side, however, cannot, alone, transform a colonial relationship because the once dominant power also needs to change. This is not as easy as it seems. One of the great defences of defenceless people is to tell the more powerful what they want to hear. This not only strangles the authentic voice of the speaker, it distorts the eardrums of the one who listens. So perhaps the first new skill of the former coloniser is to shut up and listen in a new way. His ears may have to hear things that are profoundly disturbing, not just the explosive angers of long frustration, but stories of different standards, priorities, beliefs and goals. These may be so different that the very premises on which the listener has founded his life and work will be called into question. And yet, the obligation to listen remains; decolonising the mind is a parallel project.

Such listening and such voices, however, do not just appear; often necessity and violence force their creation. Franz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*², argues that the only way the colonised can restore their own souls and sense of power is through the purification of violence. However, it has also happened that an extreme event – like the Black Death of the Middle Ages – has forced a new relationship to be born. The great peasant rebellion of the English Middle Ages did not occur when there were more people than jobs, but instead took place thirty years after the

¹ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: the politics of language in African literature*. James Currey & Heinemann, 1986.

² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York, 1963.

plague had wiped out 30–40% of the population in 2–3 years. It was the survivors of that extremity who found themselves able to bargain for better terms and it was their voices which forced the ears of their masters to open at that time.

Tiger Economies & the New Invasion

What does any of this have to do with “Talking Irish”? One of the joys of pub life in Dublin in the mid–1970s, was the play of language. Many people were out of work, many under–employed. Others had left Ireland to seek their fortunes elsewhere. What was left was a culture of pride in a group of highly educated people with not enough to do. They enjoyed an enforced leisure with friends they saw so frequently and knew so well, that there was really nothing new to say. It was a small incestuous society, full of ideas, bluff, secret ambition and a brilliant language of the imagination.

To an outsider, this language often seemed to be the remnant of a secret code, the last vestige of a colonial era when speaking openly was a hazardous endeavour. Such language was not a dialect that could be learned, but a coded jigsaw of double and triple meanings, a floating poetry that was unintelligible to any casual listener, but deeply informative to those in the know. At a time of colonial domination, such a secret language may have been the key to survival. At a time of openness and invention, however, the same secret language could become a trap, an excuse for insularity and suspicious distance.

What has become of this language now? In the 1970s, its myriad ambiguities pointed in several directions – towards envy and imitation, towards secrecy and revelation, towards invention and rebirth. But what is it now? Has it been replaced by the brash boastfulness of a Celtic Tiger? Has it been reduced to some narrow language of competitive prosperity that dutifully mimics conventional success? Or

does it still tease the tongue with its peculiarities, savouring the distinctions that could only have come from this place and this people at this particular time?

If that ancient imaginative language has survived another question arises: what might the idiosyncrasies of Ireland have to contribute to the next great wave of shared learning – the invention of ecological societies? None of us really knows what is required, but we do know that both cultures and ecosystems reflect the places and histories that gave them birth. So it is likely that the invention of ecological societies will build on cultural uniqueness and diversity as well as on new theoretical frameworks and popular learning.

For such diversity to matter, however, the narrow habits of post-colonial psychologies need to be outgrown. We are all invaders now, colonising the habitats of all living creatures more rapaciously than ever before. We now need to learn how to replace the destructive appetites of a gluttonous omnivore with the more moderate habits of guardianship and tolerant variety. We need, in fact, to redefine civilisation so that it can include the multiplicities of cultural and biological resilience. We may even need to become pagans again, this time with the wisdom of knowing why it is we are once again worshipping trees.