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Sexual politics

Ireland's victory for marriage equality - how Irish was it? And how much a victory?

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I very much liked [Sinéad Kennedy's](#) piece on the yes to same-sex marriage in the Irish referendum. I share her sense that the 62% yes vote on May 22 was an impressive progressive victory. At the same time, I strongly agree with her statement, "As a political objective, same-sex marriage sits comfortable with prevailing neoliberal ideology." I would like to add a few comments about how the Irish yes was both an episode in a fast-moving international saga and a very Irish event in a very Irish story. I think this can help us understand how the outcome was both progressive and not-so-progressive at the same time.

Wherever in today's world same-sex marriage is won, it is a victory for equality "and at the same time a contribution to growing inequality. It is a victory for equality because it allows millions of same-sex partners to enjoy basic rights that cross-sex spouses take for granted, like not being thrown out of your home when your partner dies. It is a contribution to growing inequality because it allows the state to pursue the neoliberal agenda of transferring its social responsibilities for people in need to their families. In return for the rights they are granted, same-sex couples pledge to form stable, difficult-to-dissolve households that bear the burden of supporting their members when they are unemployed, disabled, or sick. And in fact, initial studies have shown that same-sex marriage helps increase inequality in LGBTIQ communities. Well-off lesbians and gay men gain from it, notably from lower inheritance taxes. Low-income LGBTIQ often lose out on average, in any event in countries (Germany and Britain, for example) where poor people's social benefits are slashed when they have an earning spouse.

This helps explain the paradox that Ireland has now defied the Catholic Church by granting marriage equality while its draconian anti-abortion laws remain stubbornly entrenched. As [Katha Pollitt](#) has pointed out with reference to the US, "Marriage equality has cross-class appeal [whereas it is] low-income women who suffer the most from abortion restrictions "and since when have their issues been at the top of the middle and upper classes' to-do list?" Furthermore, "Marriage equality costs society nothing [but] reproductive rights come with a price tag."

There's another paradox about the Irish victory: it reflects Irish people's desire to be more European after years of crisis in which the European Union's main impact on Ireland has been the imposition of (in Kennedy's words) "eye-watering austerity." Adopting same-sex marriage makes Ireland more like Scandinavia, the Benelux countries, and France (as well as England, Wales, and Scotland). It's a way to feel positive again about being part of Europe and about being linked to global trends, despite the collapse of so many illusions about the benefits of taking part in globalization as a Celtic Tiger. For Ireland's pro-EU ruling class, it's been a helpful way to conjure up once more the much-dented pride that the Irish felt when they joined the Euro zone in 2002 (while the UK stayed aloof).

Clearly the elite's support for marriage equality elicited strong support from Irish society, from almost every region of the country and almost every layer of the population. There has been an across-the-board, breathtakingly rapid shift in Irish people's sense of their national identity, comparable to what happened in Argentina with the victory for same-sex marriage there in 2010. The Argentinean victory, too, was a moment when an overwhelmingly Catholic country collectively thumbed its nose at the Church (personified by then-Cardinal Bergoglio, today Pope Francis). Today in Argentina, gay rights is a virtual civic religion. The same seems likely to happen in Ireland too, once the divisions of the referendum campaign are left behind. This is a striking contrast with the 2013 victory for marriage equality in supposedly secular France, which split the country down the middle and produced a wave of homophobia that has lastingly traumatized French LGBTIQ people.

Ireland's Catholic identity is more deeply rooted than Argentina's, as a reaction to centuries of oppression by Protestant England. But despite the role Kennedy mentions of Ireland's Catholic "founding patriarchs" in writing the Republic's Constitution, there has always been a strain of anti-clericalism in Irish nationalism. James Joyce

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highlighted it in his *Portrait of the Artist* when the protagonist's father rails against the Church for its role in bringing down 19th-century Irish leader Charles Parnell, "my dead king!" There hasn't been much love lost between the hierarchy and Sinn Fein over the decades either, and Sinn Fein's growing support for LGBT rights North and South over the past twenty years hasn't helped. With the "collapse of Catholic hegemony" that Kennedy describes, this Irish anti-clericalism now seems finally to be taking the ascendancy. Irony of ironies, Northern Ireland now only has the Protestant Unionists, obsessed for years with preventing Papist domination, to thank for the fact that it is the only remaining major part of the British Isles to take the Pope's position on marriage.

As Kennedy says, "The old is dying in Ireland but what will replace it remains up for grabs." Marriage equality could turn out to be part of neoliberalism's steady onward march. Or it could be a breakthrough for an anti-neoliberal feminist movement with a full reproductive justice agenda. Sinn Fein's relatively strong showing (with ups and downs) in recent polls ahead of the elections due in early 2016 is one promising sign. Another is the emergence of the Platform for Renewal, a loose alliance of unions, Sinn Fein, and the far left in the fight against new government water charges. A third has been the marginalized but persistent [critical commentary](#) voiced by Irish radical queers who are "sick ... of 'marriage equality' being treated as the sine qua non of progress for queer people." If this diverse and fragmented resistance manages to come together, it could be the beginning of something grand.