

Dublin Review of Books, May 2021

ACCORDING TO JOHN

Since the early 1990s, when he first became prominent as a public intellectual, John Waters has journeyed from a conservatism that was once the Irish mainstream into alliances with unambiguously far-right figures. He has written extensively about this journey in several books, beginning with the bestselling *Living at the Crossroads* (1991) and in hundreds of *Irish Times* columns. *Living at the Crossroads* addressed a seminal moment in Irish political history, the presidential election won by Mary Robinson. It also anticipated a present-day genre of writing in the United States aimed at explaining to liberal audiences why conservatives think and feel the way that they do. Examples include *Deer Hunting with Jesus* (2007) by Joe Bagnat and *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) by J.D. Vance. I wrote about Waters in *Diverse Republic*, my book about Irish responses to immigration, because more than anyone else he has articulated the kinds of concerns and anxieties that have been politically exploited by nativist populists in other countries.

Waters stood in the 2020 general election as a candidate for Anti-Corruption Ireland on an anti-EU, anti-elite, anti-immigrant, nationalist populist platform. The slogan on his election posters and online advertisements was "It's time to take Ireland back". Ireland's far-right has become prominent on social media, where it appears to closely resemble equivalent movements in other countries that espouse conspiracy theories and seek to appeal to people who feel left behind by social change. In 2020 more than twenty candidates, including Waters, stood on behalf of far-right parties and groups. None were elected. Most received less than 2 per cent of first preferences in the constituencies where they stood. Waters received just 0.74 per cent of first preferences in the urban Dún Laoghaire constituency in which he has lived for several decades.

However, the far right apparently believe they will do better in future elections because they seek to appeal to a large constituency who have come to be ignored by mainstream political parties. In the last decade the largest political parties, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Sinn Féin, and other smaller mainstream political parties have supported constitutional referenda that legalised same-sex marriage (in 2015) and abortion (in 2018). The Irish political mainstream no longer seeks to represent conservatives. In Ireland the political centre once also catered to those who identified with essentialist nationalism. It no longer does so. From the perspective of the Irish far right, a culture war is under way in which it stands against the harbingers and consequences of liberal modernity: secularisation, globalisation and immigration.

John Waters began his career by writing about rock music and social affairs in the music magazine *Hot Press*. In 1988 he was appointed editor of the current affairs magazine *Magill*. He wrote a weekly column in *The Irish Times* from 1990 to 2014 and subsequently became a columnist and feature writer with the *Irish Independent* and the *Sunday Independent*. In his first book, *Living at the Crossroads*, he wrote about how the rural Ireland he grew up in and strongly identified with had come to be increasingly denigrated by urban commentators and the Dublin-based national media. An April 7th, 2014 article by Anthony Munnely, "In Defence of John Waters", published in the *Western People* described him as a "hate figure" for the Dublin establishment but praised him as "one of the few voices in the national media to reflect rural concerns, to speak in a recognisably rural voice and to stubbornly refuse to fit in".

In *Living at the Crossroads* Waters examined how, as he saw it, secular urban Ireland had come to look down on rural people, their ways of life, their values and even their musical tastes. He described how his neighbours perceived the state-of-the-nation debates that played out on the radio during the early 1980s as he drove a post van in Co Roscommon that also carried passengers:

Each discussion began with a specific theme – abortion, divorce, contraception – but the underlying agenda related to something more profound and fundamental; what kind of people we were, what we wanted to become, and who was standing in the way of progress and change. At some time, not long before, an invisible line had been drawn across the path between The Past and Modern Ireland. It was though a count of heads was being undertaken to establish how many people were on either side of the line. Mobility between the two appeared almost unthinkable. The two Irelands had value systems that had little or no common ground.

He shied away from acknowledging this "dissonance" in his *Hot Press* radio column. Instead he wrote the kind of articles about rural Ireland that he believed would be most likely to get published. These paraded the kinds of stock images that played well in the Dublin media. He recalled a review he wrote of a Big Tom and the Mainliners concert that acknowledged how compelling a performer the uncool singer was and what his music meant to the audience, but ended with a dismissive quip – Big Tom had "the look of a man who would be much happier behind the wheel of a muckspreader than a guitar" – that was a kind of betrayal of the society he grew up in and aimed at stroking the prejudices of his urban audience. *Living at the Crossroads* was an attempt to make amends for such bad faith.

Intellectually, his model was the Co Mayo journalist John Healy (1931-1990). Waters admired Healy's books *Nineteen Acres*, an anti-European account of a family's attempt to keep their smallholding, and *The Death of An Irish Town*, a collection of

articles Healy wrote in the late 1960s that first appeared in *The Irish Times* under the title "No-one Shouted Stop" about the decline of his home town, Charlestown. The blurb on the back cover of Waters's first anthology of newspaper columns, *Every Day Like Sunday?* (1995), highlighted this theme of rural decline: "Walk into almost any town in the West of Ireland and take a deep breath. You will inhale the stench of the decomposition of the Irish economy. This is the smell of Appalachia ... we are dying of an ideological blight that has no cure."

His preface to *The Politburo Has Decided That You Are Unwell* (2004) described some events that influenced his political views. The first had been the collapse of the Soviet Union. While covering Czechoslovakia's post-revolutionary elections for *The Irish Times* he met a taxi driver who described communist leaders as socialist murderers. Until then he had regarded himself as something of a socialist who like many of his generation "felt that the world would be a better place if run on left-wing lines". After 9/11 in 2001 he went back on his support for Irish neutrality, concluding that Ireland was part of the Western world and therefore part of what has been attacked. Broadly speaking, he identified with American neo-conservatives.

A visceral antipathy to feminism seems to have resulted from his experiences as a single father who "discovered" that he had fewer rights under Irish law than a married parent. Before the birth of his daughter he had "subscribed to a broadly liberal-feminist worldview". He had "agreed with the feminists that women in history, and right up to the present, had had a pretty bad deal at the hands of men, and that the relationship between the sexes was characterised by a gross imbalance of power and opportunity". But then he became a father and "discovered overnight" that most of what they were peddling was humbug. As an unmarried father, he claimed that he was legally blocked from having a worthwhile relationship with his own child.

His writings on fathers' rights, reprinted in *The Politburo Has Decided You Are Unwell*, empathised with male despair and anger. There was, he noted, no equivalent to the word misogynist that covered how women treated men. The "traditional family" was falling apart. Male economic power was shrinking while that of women was on the rise. A man's sense of self was almost entirely bound up with being a breadwinner. This had diminished. "Men", he wrote, were "silently attempting to redefine their roles". The problem was that they were unable to do so "within the limits of a language constructed primarily to promote the idea that women are the only sex subject to discrimination". Men, he wrote, who were no longer in relationships with the mothers of their children, had become "liabilities and superfluous". He complained about what he saw as everyday feminist rancour towards males.

Waters included several articles from 1998 and 1999 on male suicide in *The Politburo Has Decided You Are Unwell*. He blamed these suicides on the influence of feminism:

"Young men are told that they must make way for their hitherto disadvantaged sisters and, by way of compensation for the sins of their grandfathers, forgo the primal joy of fatherhood if that's what their womenfolk decide." In articles first published in July and December 2001 he claimed that it was likely that "men suffer injuries just as serious as women as a consequence of domestic violence".

In the years that followed he published a series of books in which he sought spiritual answers to problems he had come to blame on secular liberalism. In *Lapsed Agnostic* (2007) he wrote about his turn towards Christian faith. In *Beyond Consolation Or How We Became Too Clever For God ... And Our Own Good* (2010) he wrote about the consequences, as he saw them, of Ireland's abandonment of religious faith.

In 2014 he resigned from *The Irish Times*, where relationships between him and other more liberal employees of the newspaper had apparently broken down. These were pushed over the edge by a libel case that Waters won after he had been accused of homophobia on a television programme. *The Irish Times* subsequently published an apology to him stating that an opinion column published in the newspaper on January 20th, 2014 was open to the "unfounded interpretation that columnist John Waters was homophobic and held anti-equality views".

After 2014 much of what Waters wrote was no longer aimed at influencing mainstream public opinion. A majority of voters in 2015 supported same-sex marriage and in 2018 the right of a woman to obtain an abortion. The blurb on his 2018 book *Give Us Back Our Bad Roads* described the Dublin media world as a cesspit that he had escaped. Waters no longer wrote mostly for an Irish audience but for a transnational one centred on the United States, and he became a protagonist in culture wars that played out there between conservatives and progressives. Instead of playing the part of the token conservative, he now found himself feted as a thinker by conservative podcasters who had large audiences.

He wrote columns for *First Things*, An American conservative religious periodical in which he described his ever-increasing alienation from the Irish mainstream. In his May 2018 piece called "Ireland: An Obituary", he reported that two out of three of those who voted in the 2018 referendum voted to remove the right-to-life protection of the unborn child from the Irish constitution. Ireland, he advised his readers, had become a place where "the symptoms of our time are found near their furthest limits". It had become "a civilization in freefall, with every breath to deny the existence of a higher authority, a people that had now sentenced itself not to look upon the Cross of Christ less it be haunted by His rage and sorrow". Waters expressed a sense of how opponents of abortion were offended in a manner that supporters of a woman's right to choose would in turn find offensive:

Now that we have come to the end of a long and ugly battle, I can say that none of this surprises me. The tenor of the contest has been so nauseating that the deepest parts of my psyche had begun to anticipate this outcome. It was little things: the frivolity of the Yes side: 'Run for Repeal'; 'Spinning for Repeal'; 'Walk your Dog for Repeal'; 'Farmers for Yes'; 'Grandparents for Repeal', which ought to have been 'Grandparents for Not Having Grandchildren'. This, like the same-sex marriage referendum in 2015, was a carnival referendum: Yessers chanting for Repeal, drinking to Repeal, grinning for the cameras as they went door-to-door on the canvass of death. Today, Ireland dances on the graves of little children. It is a country where freedom means the right to do just about anything you please, without risk of consequences. On the day of the vote, the media gave us a picture of our Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, grinningly dropping his vote into a ballot box, over the headline: 'All the lads in the gym are voting yes.'

Waters's 2012 book *Was it for this? Why Ireland Lost the Plot* mined the writings of Patrick Pearse and the anti-modernism of Irish-Ireland for inspiration. The book set out an account of social change from a perspective that regarded this as a tale of national spiritual decline. He described, not incorrectly, Ireland's modernity project as an elitist programme enforced from the top by "Official Ireland". It was a response "to the previous and now deemed problematic ideologies of nationalism, traditionalism and Catholicism. It had no core except an artificial moralism constructed out of a repugnance for the older values and a demand that they be moved on from".

The Old Ireland that had been supplanted had been, he wrote, held together by a love of country and had "a core emotional cohesion". There had been a deep attachment to land and to faith, even though these had been damaged in the years of interference from outside. When the country was poor it had relied on its own means and resources. There was a general sense that the means of survival would have to be located within. During the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, a revolution occurred that culminated in the period referred to as the Celtic Tiger. This revolution embraced several key elements, notably the adoption of "liberal" and "pluralist" values, the repudiation of tradition and its replacement with an unthinking consumerism, and the embracing of the European "project". All this was promoted on a daily basis in the Dublin media, which became, in effect, the cultural imperium of the new Ireland.

By 2012 in *Was it for this?* Waters had come to see his first book, *Jiving at the Crossroads*, as a naive attempt to understand this revolution at its mid-point. Naive because in 1991 he imagined that the worst the revolution could inflict on the old Ireland was disrespect: now, it was clear that this was "to be the least of the injuries" to which it would be subjected.

In February 2018 Waters shared a platform with Nigel Farage at an I Brexit conference that, according to publicity for the event, was open “only to supporters of an Irish exit from the European Union”. The conference was organised by Hermann Kelly, who went on later that year to found the far-right Irish Freedom Party which stood eleven candidates in the 2020 general election. A journalist who reported on the event identified several members of Justin Barrett’s National Party in the hall. Waters was reported as declaring that Ireland was not a nation, republic or democracy. He was quoted as declaring: “We have to remove the media because they don’t permit us to have the conversation,” in response to which the crowd was described as going wild. Waters declared, to further applause, that immigrants “have no affinity or allegiance to the countries they end up in”, and that “[t]his is our fault because we don’t demand it”. He stated that “Europeans no longer have a place to call home” that Europe’s Christianity was being ebbed away by ‘metastatic cancer’ and that all this was happening because we were forbidden from saying such things. Richard Chambers, the journalist I am quoting, live-tweeted that this seemed quite unlike any other political speech he had witnessed in Ireland.

During 2019 Waters appeared on a number of podcasts and videos posted on YouTube alongside Gemma O’Doherty and Justin Barrett. One of these videos in October was advertised on Twitter by O’Doherty in an October 27th tweet that read: “John Waters on the truth about Direct Provision and why communities must be courageous enough to defend themselves without fear of malicious labels designed to break them”. In this video Waters declared that he sided with “decent people” who opposed asylum seekers being placed in their communities. On this occasion he spoke with considerably less nuance than in any of his previous writings about immigrants:

It is monstrous, monstrous beyond belief. Racism is not a factor. And any judge or any person who says so should be ashamed of themselves, horsewhipped, it’s shocking. These are decent people who have built their communities, who have contributed their sweat and blood to this society, to building it up, to preserving it, to making sure their children are safe and now they’re being told it’s all for nought. Your village has been taken. We’re taking it over. We’re requisitioning your village and you can go to Hell or Connaught. This is where we are. It’s quite frightening but now the people are waking up. This is the good news.

An indignant-looking Waters declared that the “false line that direct provision is inhumane” was nonsense. He then proclaimed (while O’Doherty nodded and smiled in agreement) that asylum seekers lived in the lap of luxury compared to the circumstances in which he grew up.

Waters shared a platform with O'Doherty in the February 2020 general election. He stood as an Anti-Corruption Ireland candidate in the Dún Laoghaire constituency while she contested the election in Fingal. In his pre-election writings and speeches he warned of the dangers of the "great replacement" of Irish people in their own country by immigrants in a context where the birth rate among the former had fallen and was projected to fall further. In some of these he cited the inspiration of Renaud Camus, a French white nationalist conspiracy theorist. He also referenced the bestselling *The Strange Death of Europe* (2017) by Douglas Murray. Europe, Murray argued, has become existentially exhausted and has allowed itself to be swept away by immigrants who are unworthy of European civilisation.

On January 28th, 2020, whilst a television debate between the leaders of the seven main political parties was under way, O'Doherty and Waters addressed an Anti-Corruption Ireland public meeting in Balbriggan in the Fingal constituency. They delivered their speeches in front of a backdrop that included an Irish tricolour and a poster of the 1916 proclamation. Waters railed against Irish politicians who "betrayed everything they stood for" when they changed their position on abortion. He spoke about "post-famine racial despair" and how Irish population decline came to be reversed. However, he lamented, "the demise of Ireland" was already assured by the 1970s when Ireland joined the European Union. He warned about falling birth rates made worse by abortion. He declared that "many of the ethnicities that are coming here" had "fertility rates that are two or three times the Irish rate" and the great replacement that Camus warned of would come about in the Irish case. Waters then criticised the Fianna Fáil election slogan "An Ireland for all". His tone was outraged: "Who were Fianna Fáil referring to? ISIS? There are two words missing. Except Paddy." His speech included a flight of fancy in which he imagined being murdered by an immigrant carer in a nursing home:

There had been a protest a few days ago in Mulhuddart about housing. Local people were protesting and asking that houses in the area be allocated to Irish people and they said 'fifty-fifty'. Fifty-fifty! [exclaimed in an indignant tone] Irish people pleading on their knees to their own government, their own authorities, for half a share in the property they own [this received applause] and the most disgusting thing is that all this is camouflaged by bogus humanitarianism. As if they cared about black people or brown people or white people or any kind of people. They don't care about them: they're using them as battering rams to destroy our country. They're using them as human shields for their own criminality. It's unthinkable.

I know the logic. 'Oh, Irish people are not reproducing.' Would it have anything to do with abortion? ...The reason there is a pension crisis coming is that the government, the last one, stole all the pensions [more applause] to pay back the gamblers who lost their shirts betting on the Irish economy ... And they tell us that we have to import, oh, God-knows-how-many foreigners to pay pensions and for that purpose they are importing people from Syria and Africa, members of ISIS. I can see those

guys nursing me in the old folks' home ... I look forward to it. It will be a short retirement. Accidents with knives and things ... Are we insane? They are not insane. They're pure evil. Evil through greed and corruption ... Are we the people insane?

The meeting in Balbriggan coincided with Holocaust Memorial Day and towards the end of his address Waters alluded to this and to the anti-racist protesters outside the venue: "We must be willing to give up our country to prove we are not Nazis. The Germans are in the driving seat ... and they have tried to leverage their own crime, the crime of their fathers – the Final Solution – against the whole of Europe." Waters also railed against the, as he saw it, dominant mindset that denied people the right to love their country, gesturing as he did at the Irish flag and the 1916 proclamation backdrop behind the podium that was flanked by photographs of Pearse and the other signatories:

We're not allowed the feelings that moved men like these. We are not allowed to remember them fondly any more ... The frightening thing is that a lot of people amongst us seem prepared to give up our country. We have to care in the way those men cared because we're up against a deeply nasty psychotic enemy.

This view of liberalism hardly resembles the self-image of progressives, who see themselves as occupying the moral high ground. But it captures the mutual incomprehension of conservatives and liberals that finds expression in the present-day culture wars. Jonathan Haidt, in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2012), highlights how prevailing understandings of public morality shifted over time in the United States with a growing rupture between the perspectives of liberals and conservatives. Liberals place considerable emphasis on individual human rights and fairness as public morality issues. Discrimination and failing to respect the bodily autonomy of women are understood as breaches in morality.

However, the moral radar of conservatives in the United States, according to Haidt, tends to be attuned to respect for Loyalty (soldiers and the flag), Authority (against subversion of the family and traditions) and Sanctity (against replacing God and a religious conception of the human person with the celebration of promiscuity). These conflicting versions of what is righteous and right have tended to play out in the culture wars that have come to define American politics. As Haidt puts it:

When I speak to liberal audiences about the three 'binding' foundations – Loyalty, Authority and Sanctity – I find that many in the audience don't just fail to resonate; they actively reject these concerns as immoral. Loyalty to a group shrinks the moral circle; it is the basis of racism and exclusion, they say. Authority is oppression.

Sanctity is religious mumbo-jumbo whose only function is to suppress female sexuality and justify homophobia.

A majority of Irish people are now social liberals, as can be seen from the comfortable margins with which the 2015 marriage equality and 2018 abortion referenda in Ireland were passed. By 2008 less than 20 per cent of Catholics attended Mass on a weekly basis, a drop from 90 per cent in 1973. Many Irish people are still religious but the hold of Catholic public morality over most of the population has greatly declined. Ireland's far right may appear to be out of step with the opinions of most citizens but it invokes nationalist and religious ideas and values that were previously seen to be integral parts of Irish identity and remain appealing to some.

Waters cuts a lonely figure in the Irish media landscape but equivalent views to his have driven the narratives of politically successful nativist populists in other English-speaking and European democratic countries.