

ABORTION POLITICS, ARCHIPELAGICALLY

BY LEAH EADES

Correspondence: leah.eades@ed.ac.uk

Abstract: In this photo collection, I examine how notions of islandness, interconnectedness and (trans)nationalism are articulated in post-Repeal Irish abortion politics. The images, captured during doctoral fieldwork, highlight the importance of cross-border solidarities, as well as the opportunities and tensions associated with the circulation and vernacularisation of transnational activist vocabularies, imaginaries and strategies. Together, they point to the value of conceptualising abortion politics through an archipelagic lens.

Keywords: abortion politics, reproductive mobilities, transnational social movements.

From 1983 to 2018, the 8th Amendment served as a de facto abortion ban in Ireland, permitting terminations only when the life of the pregnant woman was endangered. The 8th was a marker of Irish distinctiveness, intended to discursively separate the country from its more permissive neighbours and informed by ‘fears – deeply rooted in historical experiences of colonialism and nationalism – that modernization and secularization would sully Irish womanhood and assault “traditional” Irish culture’ (Delay 2019, 313; see also Oaks 1998; Conrad 2001; Fletcher 2001; Smyth 2005).

By the time I was conducting fieldwork in 2021-22, the landscape had changed significantly. In 2018, the Irish electorate had voted by a landslide to repeal the 8th Amendment, paving the way for the enactment of more liberal legislation. Domestic abortion services had been in place since 1 January 2019. Nonetheless, its provision remains subject to contestation, both by anti-abortion groups who want to restrict access to lawful abortion and abortion rights groups who want to expand it further. It is the protest logics and materials of these movements that constitute the subject of this photo collection.

In the following photos, a picture emerges of an Ireland whose orientation to the outside world looks very different to the ‘fortress mentality’ (MacQuarrie et al. 2018, xiii) of old. Of course, Irish abortion politics have always been archipelagic – as the generations of women who ‘got the boat’ to England starkly demonstrate (Rossiter 2009). More recently, medical and technological advances have collapsed the symbolic boundedness of the nation-state even further, as ‘the growth of a trans-national and extra-territorial set of actors and flows’ (Calkin 2018, 22) carve out new political geographies of access. By ‘thinking with the archipelago’ (Pugh 2013),

these cross-border relationships and exchanges fall into particularly sharp relief, revealing a circulation of transnational activist vocabularies, imaginaries and strategies that extends far and wide. In the photos depicted here, we see Irish campaigners claim kinship with counterparts in Northern Ireland, Poland, Latin America and the USA. It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive list of the transnationalisms at play; rather, it is a mere snapshot.

If reproduction is indeed ‘a medium through which competing national origin stories that focus on Irish national identity and cultural self-determination, indeed visions of “Irishness” itself, are imagined and expressed’ (Oaks 1998, 133), then what visions are being expressed here? This is the question I invite readers to keep in mind as they engage with the following photos.



Figure 1. A National Party flyer distributed at an anti-abortion rally in Galway. Proponents of the 8th Amendment typically framed abortion as an external threat, both to fetuses and to Irish national identity. Here, however, the 'threat' comes from within.



Figure 2. Anti-abortion protestors call for reform in Northern Ireland, while also referencing the recent overturning of Roe v. Wade, at an anti-abortion march in Dublin.



Figure 3. MAGA-inspired 'Make Ireland Pro-Life Again' hats on sale at a Dublin rally.



Figure 4. An abortion rights rally outside the US Embassy in Dublin following the overturning of Roe v. Wade. In the words of one of the speakers: 'America only has to sneeze and the rest of the world grabs its tissues.'



Figure 5. A Galway vigil in memory of Agnieszka, a woman who died after being denied a life-saving termination in Poland in January 2022. Irish campaigners sometimes refer to women like Agnieszka as “Polish Savitas” – a reference to Savita Halappanavar, whose 2012 death has been credited with sparking Ireland’s Repeal movement.



Figure 6. An activist wears a green scarf, modelled on those worn by Latin American abortion rights campaigners, at March for Choice in Dublin.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my co-editors, Christina Bosbach and Cormac Cleary, for their feedback on this photo collection, as well as my supervisors, Lucy Lowe and Jessica Cooper, for their continued support. This research was funded by the University of Edinburgh and Parkes Foundation.

References

- Calkin, S., 2018. "Towards a Political Geography of Abortion." *Political Geography*, 69, 22–29.
- Conrad, K., 2001. "Fetal Ireland: National Bodies and Political Agency." *Éire-Ireland*, 36(3-4), 153-73.
- Delay, C., 2019. "Wrong for Womankind and the Nation: Anti-Abortion Discourses in 20th-Century Ireland." *Journal of Modern European History*, 17(3), 312–25.

Fletcher, R., 2001. "Post-Colonial Fragments: Representations of Abortion in Irish Law and Politics." *Journal of Law & Society*, 28(4), 568–89.

MacQuarrie, C., Bloomer, F., Pierson, C., and Stettner, S., eds. 2018. *Crossing Troubled Waters: Abortion in Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Prince Edward Island*. Charlottetown: Island Studies Press.

Oaks, L., 1998. "Irishness, Eurocitizens, and Reproductive Rights." In S. Franklin (ed.), *Reproducing Reproduction: Kinship, Power, and Technological Innovation*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 132–55.

Pugh, J., 2013. "Island Movements: Thinking with the Archipelago." *Island Studies Journal*, 8(1), 9-24.

Rossiter, A. 2009. *Ireland's Hidden Diaspora: The "Abortion Trail" and the Making of a London-Irish Underground, 1980-2000*. London: IASC Publishing.

Smyth, L., 2005. *Abortion and Nation: The Politics of Reproduction in Contemporary Ireland*. London: Routledge.