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‘Race’, Nation and Belonging in Ireland

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Abstract

Despite consistent efforts to counteract those attitudes and practices that give rise to it, most putatively modern Western nations continue to experience the concrete effects of racial discrimination. This essay argues that nationality is all too easily conflated with ‘race’ or ethnicity, such that a seeming essence or givenness is manifested amongst all those within a particular geographic boundary. It is suggested that on the contrary, there is nothing natural about nationality as commonly understood; this being so, it must be continually shored up and reconstituted through social, linguistic and material practices. For modern nations in the West, this has often entailed the marking or identification - *racialisation* - of non-nationals and non-white ‘Others’. A logic of inside/outside subtends the concept of nation wherein such Others are the ‘constitutive outside’ that invisibly clarifies and reinforces the status of those within. Nation, then, tacitly asserts and valorises its own putative qualities through the explicit identification and denigration of what it is *not*. It is argued that such a logic militates against the openness that might ground compassionate and empathetic relations between those ‘inside’ the nation and its new arrivals.

This article first outlines its theoretical position: that nation is a ‘fictive ethnicity’ maintained through the continual (re)inscription of unequal power relations, and that nations and their ‘people’ are hybridities without originary ontological status. It summarises thereafter the historic constitution of national identities within both Northern Ireland and Ireland. Finally, it considers the experience of three groups of ‘Others’ on the island of Ireland, namely Jews, Travellers and asylum seekers, and how such Otherness has been represented in order to bolster the identity of the nation. This idea of nation and the exclusions it instates are interrogated throughout, with the conclusion that any policies aimed at eliminating institutional and individual racism, however well-meant, will ultimately fall short until nation itself - and the identities it is involved in constituting - are rethought.

Keywords: ‘Race’, nation, nationalism, belonging, recognition, ethnicity, culture, Jewishness, Traveller, asylum seeker

The last half-century has seen a vast acceleration in the movement of peoples. Formerly relatively homogeneous nations, particularly those of Europe, are increasingly hybridised through exposure to diverse customs and values. This has not been untroubled: despite

¹ This paper was published in *The Undergraduate Journal of Ireland & Northern Ireland, Volume 3, 2011* and we are grateful to the Undergraduate Awards of Ireland and Northern Ireland for permission to reproduce a slightly amended version here.

widespread vilification and attendant policy prescriptions, the problem of 'race' remains² pertinent throughout. Northern Ireland and Ireland are not exempt from this; both have seen rising numbers of racist attacks in the last decade. Racism has variously been portrayed as a form of ignorance or as a reflection of personal insecurity (Mann-Kler, 2002), or subconscious, internalised lack of regard. Most policy has focused upon two forms of racism, *individual*, and *institutional* (McVeigh, 2006); the former denotes direct physical or verbal abuse, the latter unequal access to services due to "unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping" (MacPherson Report, 1999 in Connolly & Khaoury, 2008, p. 197). However, despite policy implementation and public recognition, there has been little substantive change regarding institutional racism; individual attacks, such as those on the Roma community in Belfast (BBC News, 2009), remain all too common. It is difficult, then, to sustain the argument that racism is simply unwitting. Thus it is crucial to consider why others become 'Others'; that is, what are the processes that allow societies fully cognisant of the wrongs of racism to continue to think of the ethnicities of others as not only irreducibly different, but moreover, fully incompatible with their own? Arguably such tensions must be considered with regards to unreflective acceptance of ways of thinking that essentialise 'race', *ethnicity* and *nation*: that ascribe to these fixed and inherent characteristics or insoluble boundaries (Anthias, 2002), thereby presenting them as natural or given. This arguably creates preconditions for, and may directly provoke, individual and institutional racisms.

The belief that humanity separates into biologically-discrete groups ('races') with essential or inherent characteristics (Garner, 2004) has been discredited by natural and social science alike; there has been concerted effort to supplant it with *ethnicity* or *culture* (Lentin, 2005), implying shared ancestry, folk practices, geographical boundaries, group consciousness, sense of belonging, or other such aspects human communities organise around. (Ratcliffe, 1996). However, 'race' remains salient inasmuch as it has social significance: individuals consider it real and act accordingly; thus, 'race' has real effects (Mason, 1995). While there may not be relations between actual biological or genetic 'races' (Haney López, 1995), there are *relations that have been racialised*. 'Racial formation' (Winant, 1994 in Kushner, 2005, p. 209) denotes such relational processes whereby a particular group becomes racialised, invested with a particular set of meanings "society invents, manipulates or retires when convenient" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001 in Connolly & Khaoury, 2008, p. 194); meanings that while fluid, are treated as though fixed. Crucially, racialisation is never neutral, but rather implicated in relations whereby one grouping asserts its identity by establishing difference or boundedness from another in a binary that is inherently hierarchical (Anthias, 2002). Theorists have thus considered "the central role played by the colonized in understanding who 'we' are, or are not" (Kushner, 2005, p. 210), that is, those Othering processes that have clarified the literal and figurative borders of (post)colonial Europe. Similarly, critical race studies reveal how whiteness provides the "central reference point by which all other groups are 'Othered'" (Connolly & Khaoury, 2008, p. 195), but does so without explicit recognition, unmarking and naturalising itself through the concomitant marking of non-white Others. Northern Ireland's ethnic minorities, for example, have historically been accorded attention only during cultural festivals, viewed through a prism of Otherness that reinforces a status of 'outsiders within' (Fawcett, 1998). Ethnicity and culture are equally subject to such processes owing to an all too easy conceptual slippage into primordialism (Mason, 1995), from "biological heredity [to] the insurmountability of cultural differences" (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991a, p. 21). It is then according to latent normative

²The convention of inverted commas denotes the contested nature of the term.

rationales of white, 'modern' Western European nations that certain groups become racialised (Lentin, 2008), and it is only owing to a belief that such groupings have a bounded, static and insoluble identity - 'race' - that racialisation may occur.

It has been claimed of both Ireland (Garner, 2004) and Northern Ireland (Hainsworth, 1998) that prior to the 1990s,³ neither had a 'race' problem, owing to insufficient numbers to engender one (Connolly & Khaoury, 2008). It should initially be noted that such arguments are inherently problematic, implying that racism is a problem of numbers rather than dispositions - laying blame, moreover, with migrants themselves (Mann-Kler, 2002) - and implying cultural proximity inevitably generates tensions. Moreover, it is simply conceptually and historically erroneous, overlooking potential for almost any ethnic grouping to be racialised (Garner, 2004), and effacing such historic experiences of Jewish and Traveller communities. Finally, it fully neglects the 'hidden' component of racialisation, the work it does to constitute majority white identities. Thus, throughout Ireland whiteness has been "a constitutive and founding element for both... overarching traditions" (Connolly & Khaoury, 2008, p. 208). While racialisation may indeed have escalated in the last twenty years, 'new', post-1997⁴ racisms are far from novel. There is rather a history of different but related practices, or "multi-racisms" (Lentin, 2000 in Guerin, 2002, p. 92). 'Old' racisms are merely one among several preconditions - including colonisation, emigration and political violence that normalises dehumanisation (Garner, 2004) - for the emergence of contemporary forms.

Despite recognising the importance of multiple determinants, emphasis here will be on relationships of identity and difference inherent to the "'fictive ethnicity' instituted by the nation-state" (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991b, p. 97). While there is nothing natural about this 'imagined community' - "imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson, 2006, p. 6) - Anderson suggests the fact that nation (along with its language, demography and culture), is *unchosen* lends it a seeming naturalness that readily collapses into 'race', giving rise to "the idea that the national character ... is immanent in the people" (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991b, p. 97). Indeed, 'race' has been foundational to the emergence of the modern state - particularly evident during nation-building (Ratcliffe, 1996) - and implicated in constituting and maintaining a boundary between 'the people' within and those Others without (Shuster, 2009). It is this notion of "national personality" (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991b, p. 87), extending back and forward through time, that creates an essentialist, non-inclusive conception of nation; an illusion of irreducible somatic difference between nationals and non-nationals that arguably grounds claims about the purported incompatibility of certain cultures and sees "minorities ... pushed away by racism, discrimination and inflexible rules of belonging" (Fanning, 2009, p. 3). One of the most problematic forms of racialising practice, then, is "modern exclusivist ethnicity with its culture of fixed boundaries" (Anthias, 2002, p. 22) that is 'homeland'.

Much of the late history of the island of Ireland has orbited around such issues as formation, contestation and reinterpretation of nation and homeland. From the nineteenth century onwards Southern nation-building has seen the development of attendant "exclusionary conceptions of identity and ... homogeneity linked to nationalism" (Fanning, 2002, p. 30). The explosive high-capitalist Celtic Tiger period would continue to appeal to nation as

³ Key to the upturn in migration since this period are increases in asylum applications, and the 2004 and 2007 enlargements of the European Union.

⁴ The summer of 1997 is an important turning point in attitudes to migration, particularly in the national media. See Fanning (2009); Garner, (2004); Guerin, (2002).

bounded territory (*land*) and pure, unchanging tradition reaching back into the past (*myth*). In the North, there has been longstanding contestation to define the legitimate Northern Irish identity through ethnonationalist conflict (O'Leary & McGarry, 1993). This has seen the ongoing re-inscription of a dichotomy between two purportedly mutually-exclusive matrices of socio-cultural identity manifested along several lines, including, but not limited to: religion (Catholic/Protestant); ethnicity (Gael-Celt/Anglo-Saxon and Scot) (Garner, 2004); colonial heritage (native/settler) (Hayes & McAllister, 1999). While in transition, this binary is nonetheless maintained by consociational politics (Tonge, 2008), appeals to collective memory (Lundy & McGovern, 2008), and residential segregation (Shirlow, 2008). Additionally, both countries are in different ways modernisers, aiming to establish strong positions within Europe and a globalised economic system more generally. Thus, both are subject to tacit naturalisation of modernist norms around efficiency, 'pure' space and the 'health' of the nation that make possible racialising narratives around 'plague', 'flood', and 'breeding'; that is, that 'unclean' outsiders will 'pollute' and quickly overwhelm the nation's people. A line is apparent through practices towards Jews, Travellers and asylum seekers, betraying intent to 'purify' nation through control of movement and practices of exclusion (Fanning, 2009). Overall, then, in both North and South there has been the formation of strong (white) national cultures, essentialist appeals to 'true' (Northern) Irishness, a connection to land, and the adoption of ethnocentric norms; each of which in different ways preclude the inclusion of racialised Others.

Jews

A comparison between the respective Jewish communities of Northern Ireland and Ireland is instructive. While the former's peak was during the 1960s - some 1500 individuals (Warm, 1998) - these numbers did not fall due to harassment or anti-Semitism; indeed, Jews in Northern Ireland have typically been well-respected. However, this relationship has not been one of reciprocity and exchange. In the first instance, religious and social values were broadly consonant with Northern Ireland's historically dominant Protestants. Moreover, Jews have maintained a distance from political structures and processes; in part to avoid 'taking sides' - a problem for all migrant communities in Northern Ireland, political parties historically lauding groups that 'keep their heads down' (Hainsworth, 1998) - and crucially, owing to deep insecurities following "literally thousands of years of persecution" (Warm, 1998, p. 237). As such, Northern Ireland's Jews have exhibited a strong inclination to maintain the status quo and only minimally affect the larger culture. As such, Jewishness has not been racialised or perceived as a threat to either of Northern Ireland's ethnonational identities.

Jewish experience in the Republic, however, has been markedly different. It has been suggested that the nineteenth century Irish nation-building project - "an authoritarian, reactionary and monocultural state apparatus [that] seeks to control entry to Ireland and movement within it according to the state's construction of external threat" (Garner, 2004, p. 25) - marked a qualitative change in attitudes towards minorities. The growth of itinerant pedlars following economic downturn and conspiracies about 'International Jewry' would cast Jews in Ireland in an altogether different light, leading to their racialisation. Thus, the 1904 pogrom against Limerick's Jewish population was no aberration, but framed by anti-Semitism at a national level (Fanning, 2002). The *United Irishman* carried illustrations aimed at reinforcing Irish cultural identity while portraying Jews as treacherous and dishonourable; the Irish government limited the number of wartime refugees in the 1930s (Mussano, 2003), justifying this on the basis of "putative cultural inability to assimilate and the threat posed by Jewish values for Catholic Ireland" (Garner, 2004, p. 143).

Travellers

However, the Traveller community have since the 1950s been the most consistently discriminated-against ethnic grouping throughout Ireland. Surveys conducted between 1972 and 2001 (Garner, 2004) - and more recently in 2009 (Jarman, 2009) - reveal consistent and overwhelmingly negative attitudes. Despite the arrival of other migrant communities, Travellers are still considered the “most socially distinct ethnic group” (Garner, 2004, p. 144), even amongst a nationalist community where one might expect solidarity deriving from similarities between Traveller ethnicity and ‘indigenous’ rural Irishness (Connolly & Khaoury, 2008). As such, Travellers have been subject to both increasing institutional racism - “de facto apartheid of barring Travellers from pubs, schools and dances” (Ní Shúinéar, 1996, p. 59) - and physical abuse. This has been inflamed by media reporting that arguably creates the very anxieties of the ‘right-thinking’, ‘concerned’ local residents it claims to represent. In the North, both the *Down Recorder* and *News Letter* have admitted only reporting Traveller behaviour when deviating from normative standards or creating disturbance (Fawcett, 1998); the former has called for a full public boycott, calling Travellers ‘a cancer’ and ‘parasites’ (Noonan, 1998). In the South, Mary Ellen Synon in the *Sunday Independent* has spoken with palpable ethnocentrism of “this tinker ‘culture’ ... without achievement, discipline, reason or intellectual ambition” (quoted in O’Connell, 2002, p. 54). These various trends reached their nadir in the death of John Ward (Fanning, 2009) who, on being discovered trespassing, was shot, beaten, then shot again at close range. Pádraig Nally successfully appealed a manslaughter conviction claiming that he lived in fear of Travellers. Nally was perceived as the victim in the case, enjoying widespread support.

Such denigration has arguably arisen following the loss of social role since the 1950s; previously, “they made and repaired tinware, dealt in horses, cleaned chimneys ... recycled scrap metal and materials” (‘Young Travellers: Many Voices, One Community’, quoted in Fanning, 2009, p. 24). This loss of role has resulted in falling living standards (Mann-Kler, 2002) and diminishing hospitality from the settled community. Again this can be related to prevailing notions of Irish identity, in particular the “blood and soil nationalism of the nation-building nineteenth century, when attachment to the land in the form of individual property relations was posited as the keystone of modernity” (Garner, 2004, p. 145). Travellers are no longer *complementary to*, but *incongruous in* ‘modern’ Ireland, Other to this newly dominant imagined community (Fanning, 2002): self-sufficient rather than profit-seeking; nomadic rather than sedentary, and thus not attached to a ‘homeland’; communal rather than individualistic. They are, in short, not readily reconcilable with a modernising tendency that prizes order, efficiency and pure urban space. Thus, Irish and Northern Irish (Noonan, 1998) state policy alike has offered two broad options: *assimilation* or *exclusion*. The former has been manifest in housing policy, and disavowal of cultural difference⁵: the Commission on Itinerancy of 1960 proposed gathering Traveller communities into camps for re-education to this end. The latter is apparent in practices such as educational segregation, or the ‘go, move, shift’ policy (Fanning, 2009) of eviction and displacement, arguably undertaken in the hope that weariness will set in, and assimilation ensue. The result has been that over half of Northern Irish people would not accept a Traveller as a neighbour (Northern Ireland Life and Times, 2009), and “four per cent of [NILT] respondents identifying a Traveller as a work colleague, one per cent as a neighbour and two per cent as a friend” (Jarman, 2009, p.3).

⁵Although attempts have been made of late to recognise Traveller culture.

Overall, Travellers have been racialised and abjected as a “deviant sub-group” (Fanning, 2009, p. 25) by processes that conflate ‘race’ and ethnicity and ironically echo anti-Irish stereotypes of the past. These processes appeal to biological difference to pathologise Travellers as dirty and violent, a degenerate ‘race apart’; they are not even ‘outsiders within’, but so radically different as to present “an ‘external threat’ to local communities” (Fawcett, 1998, p. 109). The Traveller is constructed as “unable to live a normal life in the community” (‘Report of the Assissi Fellowship 1966’, quoted in Noonan, 1998, p. 158), anathema to a putative normality that is settled, property-owning, productive, efficient and orderly. Nomadism is portrayed as anachronistic, atavistic, inherently at odds with properly ‘modern’ sedentary Irishness. Conversely, Travellers who do not conform to stereotypes are “suddenly redeemed from Traveller status... ‘a former itinerant’... a ‘settled Traveller’” (Ní Shúinéar, 1996, p. 59). Tacit throughout is the belief in a particular Irish identity, that Travellers are avowedly *not it*: assimilation assumes a norm to assimilate *to*; exclusion presumes boundaries one can exist *outside*. Thus, responses to Travellers speak as much to this Irish identity as they do to Traveller life. The perceived failure to “live within the norms of sedentary society” (Noonan, 1998, p. 177) is viewed as a problem inhering to Travellers, rather than the society that cannot accommodate difference: no account is taken of structural processes that position them unequally. Ireland’s social and economic modernisation, then, has occurred alongside a ‘modernisation of belonging’ wherein Travellers now struggle to find a place.

Asylum seekers

The asylum seeker is perhaps now the paradigmatic case of racialisation across Europe. The island of Ireland is no exception here; responses since 1997 have ranged from suspicion to hysteria (Fanning, 2009). This has been seen in political discourse, media reporting, and the ‘common sense’ attitudes these have instilled. In particular, this brings to light a disjunct between the “self-image of modern, liberal democratic European nation-states” (Shuster, 2009, p. 343) and actual practices whereby national identity is affirmed relative to supposed incompatibility of its Others. Ireland’s history of emigration and diaspora might generate a recognition of asylum seekers as “the economically and politically-persecuted Irish of other times” (Garner, 2004, p. 159). This, in concert with a self-professed “long history of refugee protection” (Mussano, 2003, p. 141), has potential to create relationships of consonance, rather than dissonance, between Irish national identity and potential Others, that might foster unconditional hospitality grounded in “national collective experience” (Garner, 2004, p. 160). This, however, has not been the case: a competing discourse of Irish exceptionalism has found traction that “collapse(s) asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants into the same category” (Garner, 2004, p. 163). Here a qualitative distinction is made between an industrious Irish diaspora that contributed positively to the receiving nation - that, as it were, ‘built America’ - and asylum seekers as opportunistic cheats or ‘spongers’⁶ come to capitalise upon an Ireland (Lentin, 2004) whose very success makes it an ‘easy target’ (Fanning, 2009). This is in spite of evidence disproving widely-held perceptions that asylum seekers can choose their country of destination (Crawley, 2010), and that ‘asylum seeker’ is a totalising concept that captures a whole constellation of cultures under one reductive term. The heterogeneity within just one grouping - the Islamic community in Dublin (Fitzgerald, 2011) - speaks to the inadequacy of the notion.

Early state responses can be seen in the policies following the 1997 elections, where an anti-asylum consensus saw tightening of border controls to the limit of international law, punitive welfare provision and widespread dispersal in unappealing holding premises (Shuster, 2009).

⁶ An argument that effaces the fact that prior to 1999 it was not legal for an asylum seeker to obtain paid work.

Implementation of a separate, discriminatory, system of Direct Provision paying adults €15 and children €7:50 weekly commenced in 2000. In general, policies appear tailored to “deter asylum seekers from coming to Ireland” (Fanning, Veale & O’Connor, 2001, p. 68), or exclude those doing so from the larger society (Fanning, 2009). These have been roundly criticised by the Irish Refugee Council, Amnesty International and Trócaire (Mussano, 2003) for failing to live up to proclamations. Indeed, the Jewish and Traveller cases above undermine the tenability of any claims to longstanding Irish hospitality and tolerance. Moreover, the response and accompanying rhetoric have arguably provoked racialising media responses portraying asylum seekers as a threat to society that have in turn shaped public perceptions (Fanning, 2002). Newspaper reporting has coalesced around several poles - *strain on resources, criminality and fraudulence* and *cultural incompatibility* amongst others – and promulgated “a cluster of beliefs which portray Ireland as currently experiencing a flood of bogus fortune-hunting refugees who are exploiting the social welfare system” (Guerin, 2002, p. 149). Thus, following growth in asylum applications,⁷ the nation is perceived as at threat from being ‘swamped’ or ‘flooded’, convenient euphemisms that avoid charges of explicit racism. Such articles commonly cite perceived housing shortages and full maternity hospitals as evidence that welfare, healthcare and judicial systems are permanently on the brink of being overwhelmed (Garner, 2004). This reflects a shift following neoliberal reform whereby welfare is no longer viewed a symbol of solidarity, but in terms of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor, that, in concert with an ethical particularism arising out of nationalism, implies nationals should have precedence regardless of actual need. As with Travellers, processes of racialisation impute *inherent* criminality and degeneracy, the physical and cultural health of the nation at risk from ‘AIDs-ridden’ ‘refugee rapist’ ‘invaders’ (Fanning, 2009), or excessively-sexual and fecund woman, “the Trojan horses of alien penetration into Ireland” (Garner, 2004, p. 181). Fawcett’s 1998 study of the Northern Irish press reveals similar tendencies, minorities portrayed only in terms of problems, with sweeping generalisations - ‘Nigerians in cash fiddle target Ulster’ - that criminalise all members. Moreover, where views expressed by minority ethnic representatives do not accord with ‘official’ accounts of police or local officials, they are often “marginalised or ignored” (Fawcett, 1998, p. 111).

The ‘cultural incompatibility’ argument in particular has prevailed, culture acting as a “stalking horse for ‘race’” (Garner, 2004, p. 169). This avoids charges of explicitly biologised racism, while maintaining a fundamental incompatibility of values that legitimates exclusion; moreover, shifting incompatibility to culture allows for the expansion of racialisation to include ‘white’ asylum seekers (Kushner, 2005), such that their less conspicuous differences may also play their part. Discourses circulate wherein ‘way of life’ - that is, national identity - is at stake from the presence of radically different others deemed at least *potentially* unassimilable, a pollutant to a purportedly ‘pure’ recipient culture. ‘Good’ migrants are those who rapidly assume the norms of the latter and disavow ethnic identity. This clearly relies upon an essentialising conception of cultures as “monolithic and static entities” (Garner, 2004, p. 170), when they are better thought of dynamic, fluctuating, and crucially, mutually-constitutive rather than mutually-incompatible. Moreover, the incompatibility argument contains an unspoken normative assumption that sees recipient culture *de*-racialised through the racialised marking of the Other; in doing so it ‘confirms’ its status as the neutral, obvious or natural way of doing things (Connolly & Khaoury, 2008), such that the onus is on the migrant to disavow supposedly inharmonious cultural practices.

⁷ Still low by EU standards; indeed, less than one fifth of all migration in 2000 comprised asylum seekers, see White (2002).

Conclusion

Recent responses to migration have at best proffered a 'weak' multiculturalism grounded in liberal rights; as such, these are ill-equipped for dealing with institutional racism, and in particular processes of racialisation emanating from nationalist identities. In North and South alike, most substantive anti-racism practice has come from minority group activists and NGOs (Fanning, 2002). Traveller groups have advocated for an *interculturalist* model that both affirms the distinctiveness and value of minority identities, and contests unequal power relations underpinning exclusion. However, this voluntary programme has enjoyed little state support, and has tended to focus on Traveller lifestyle in terms of 'novelty' without problematising the values of the dominant culture. There is a need, then, for policies that recognise *all* identities - national, ethnic, cultural - as shifting and contingent. There are no originary or unmediated 'races', let alone ethnicities or nations. While continuities obtain - language, custom, group solidarities - these too shift in meaning relative to time and place; language and practice evolves; peoples gather, interact, disperse, permanently recomposing and reconstituting the socio-cultural landscape. All notional unities are in fact *hybridities* (Anthias & Lloyd, 2002). This is however effaced by logics of nation that attempt to bolster and preserve unity and sameness. Rather than attempting to think of ways to ameliorate the effects of racism *within* such logics, Northern Ireland and Ireland would do well to denaturalise the founding limits of *their own* historic identities (Anthias, 2002); and in doing so, rethink and affirm a different, fuller and more inclusive account of belonging.

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