

Irish Connections

Immigration and the politics of belonging

Bryan Fanning

Let me tell you about a conversation I had in Israel with a prominent political personality who was defending the (in my opinion disastrous) non-separation of religion and the state in Israel. What he said – I am not sure of the exact words anymore – ran something like this: “You will understand that, as a Socialist, I, of course, do not believe in God; I believe in the Jewish people.” I found this a shocking statement and, being too shocked, I did not reply at the time. But I could have answered: the greatness of this people was once it believed in God, and believed in Him in such a way that its trust and love towards Him was greater than its fear. And now this people believes only in itself? What good came of that? Well, in this sense I do not “love” the Jews, nor do I “believe” in them; I merely belong to them as a matter of course, beyond dispute or argument.¹

It is something of a cliché to describe the past as a foreign country. To some extent everyone can be a foreigner in their country of origin, citizenship or domicile. The nation states that emerged in the West were somewhat like the retail giants which have homogenized high streets and squeezed out many idiosyncratic small shops. Like other nation states the Republic of Ireland was preceded by the emergence of mass ideas of identity and belonging. These were sustained by mass literacy and education. It became possible to conceive of an identity that was shared with someone living on the other side of the country. People that would never meet came to define their Irishness in the same way. At the same time, they could label those ‘others’ they actually lived alongside as not really Irish. Human beings in all their diversity can become subordinated to dominant idealised formulations of national citizenship, of religious denomination, of ethnocentric tribe or of rule-bound social movement. They may be judged and found wanting by the Platonic ideals of ‘real’ nationalism, ‘real’ religion and ‘real’ cultural authenticity. Ideals of belonging encroach like the shadows in Plato’s cave on the flesh and blood world of day-to-day existence. Such ideals may well shelter some within the cave but also insist that others are not really British, not really Irish, not really a feminist or not a true believer in a particular religion. Identity imposes orthodoxies enslaved to ideals of belonging.

Phillip Larkin’s famous line about parents – “They fuck you up, your mum and dad” – can hold for fatherlands and motherlands. The Irish nation state was forged out of violence. “We may,” Patrick Pearse wrote in *The Coming Revolution*, “make mistakes and shoot the wrong people; but bloodshed is a cleaning and a sanctifying thing, and a nation which regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood.” During the late 1970s, intellectual nationalists of different shades of green interrogated what Richard Kearney influentially described (with no grasp of social science) as the Irish Mind: an atavistic collective unconscious depicted in Jungian terms as somehow intrinsically authentic and distinctive.² Identity so understood is strong stuff, if not quite monolithic; a family quarrel with no place for outsiders, intellectual or otherwise, and no room for disloyalty or dissent. Thirty years later, in the belligerent post-9/11 world of homeland security, wars of terror and wars on terror, the relationship between identity and intolerance has become everyone’s urgent business. The result of this so-called clash of civilisations has been to classify and

incarcerate people within rigid conceptual boxes, as recently noted by Amartya Sen in *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*.³

This ethnocentrism, the tendency to look at the world primarily from the perspective of one’s own tribe, is what we have to confront, along racism or sectarianism. The writers who would engage with the flaws of their own nation or ethnic group – be it Orhan Pamuk today or Sean O’Faolain in the 1940s – might find themselves censored or censored at home then readmitted, like James Joyce – posthumously, after outside recognition – as iconic proof of the greatness of the people from which he sprung. A willingness to engage with the capacity of one’s own tribe to exclude or discriminate is crucial to addressing problems such as racism and discrimination. All peoples, all nations and all societies – whatever their own histories of being oppressed – are capable of oppressing those they define as others. It is not possible to paper over the cracks by saying that your own people’s history of oppression means they cannot oppress others. Claims of mutual solidarity between different post-colonial societies with a history of oppression play well as ideological politics but when tested – say, by the presence of migrants – reveal the racism and discrimination of one’s own society.

The Republic of Ireland as a nation state can be seen to have many attributes in common with those of other nation states. Dominant ideas of social membership emerged at a cost to minorities. Those perceived as deviant from the norms of the dominant imagined community – and from the constitution and laws that institutionalised these – were required to choose between assimilation (the surrender of visible difference) or rejection. To look at the social history of the Republic of Ireland from this perspective is to challenge comfortable orthodoxies. A focus on the Republic’s specific history of excluding minorities might well be labelled as revisionist. Accounts, for instance, of the murders of Protestant and Traveller civilians in West Cork by IRA fighters during the War of Independence and Civil War pose considerable challenges to romantic myths.⁴ Studies of the experiences of Jewish refugees before, during and after the Holocaust, as distinct from the invented experiences of Joyce’s imaginary Irish Jew, demonstrate that Ireland was by no means exempt from the anti-Semitism common in other European nations. These studies suggest that ethnic nationalism, anti-colonialist or otherwise, can be at odds with anti-racist aspirations or, at the very least, will have a hard time reconciling a real Irish society in all its diversity with an imagined Ireland rooted in the past and the legacy of real sectarianism.

Joyce’s *Ulysses* contains a definition of a nation as “the same people living in the same place.” The reality is that nation states have tended to subordinate difference to national ideals of homogeneity. Small minorities might have found themselves written out of history, swallowed up in the nation-building of modernity. It is important to understand the mechanics of such exclusions in coming to terms with the challenges of integrating new immigrants. In 1904 Fr Creagh urged a boycott against the Limerick Jewish community. Creagh combined the then-prevalent secular European anti-Semitism, which depicted Jews as enemies of nation states, with religious anti-Semitism. He portrayed the Jews as oppressors

of the Irish people. Under Creagh’s Catholic nationalist formula, anti-Semitism was represented as contributing to the emancipation of the ‘Irish’. He cast the Jews as oppressors of the Irish ‘worse than Cromwell’. In post-independence Ireland Jews became officially defined as a threat to the state before, during and after the Holocaust. For instance, a Department of Justice memorandum, dated 28 February 1953, noted a policy of official anti-Semitism: “In the administration of the alien laws it has always been recognised in the Departments of Justice, Industry and Commerce and External Affairs that the question of the admission of aliens of Jewish blood presents a special problem and the alien laws have been administered less liberally in their case.”⁵

A key plank of racist politics is the proposition that vulnerable minorities somehow oppress the dominant group. Anti-Semitism within Irish nationalism drew on the language of anti-colonialism. Irish anti-colonialism no less than ‘imperialism’ can play host to nativism, ethnocentrism and racism. Overt racism is often piously despised within the political mainstream yet the old sour wine has been poured into the new bottles, labelled West versus the rest, Fortress Europe, allowing Irish distinctions between ‘nationals’ and ‘non-nationals’ – rooted in stereotypes of despised asylum-seeker mothers and their ‘non-Irish’ Irish-born children. The concern remains that anxieties about social change become exploited by populist politics which mobilise racism and ethnocentrism to offer simple answers to complex questions.

Ethnocentrism has acquired a new credibility in the wake of 9/11. Multiculturalism has been attacked from the left and right. Public intellectuals such as David Goodhart, editor of *Prospect*, tell us that ‘ethnic nepotism’ is natural and that welfare solidarities do not work in diverse societies. Multiculturalism has to some extent been supplanted by a new muscular liberalism that proposes that the big Western tribe must (again) become intolerant of the rest. An American advocate of this muscular liberalism, the philosopher Richard Rorty, in 1994 described his position as one of anti-anti-ethnocentrism.⁶ It scorned efforts by liberals to extend pluralism to include those who do not share their beliefs. Rorty argued that Western liberals should “accept the fact that we have to start from where we are, and this means that there are lots of views which we cannot take seriously.”⁷ He argued that Western liberals get themselves into a bind because their beliefs pull them in two incompatible directions. On one hand they possess no doubts about human equality. On the other, they become aware that most of the world does not share their values. They cannot, as he puts it, stick up for their beliefs without getting in a muddle or without choosing to be ethnocentric.⁸ An early definition of ethnocentrism offered by Theodor Adorno defined it as a tendency to regard one’s own group as normal and others, by comparison, as strange and inferior.⁹ It is often suggested that ethnocentrism is natural because human societies tend to be suspicious of outsiders.¹⁰ However, the stereotypes that sustain ethnocentrism are often implausible, whether they are applied by nationalists to the presumed enemies of nations or by liberals to presumed enemies of freedom.

Isaiah Berlin has offered a liberal understanding of pluralism that contrasts with Rorty’s ethnocentric solidarity. Berlin argued that it is important to acknowledge the existence of a plurality of human ideals and values. He considered that their pursuit is part of what it means to be human. Multiple, but finite, values are seen to be objective, part of the essence of humanity rather than arbitrary creations of mankind’s subjective fancies. Berlin was no relativist. He argued that we may well find a particular way of life intolerable but we must never forget to recognise it as a human pursuit: “If I am a man or a woman with sufficient imagination (and this I do need), I can enter into a value-system



Connections, film installation by Jackie Doyle at Belfast Exposed, 2006.

unwillingness ever to forget that other values are, for those who hold them, objective expressions of their humanity.¹² Solidarity is inconceivable without empathy. Empathy sometimes amounts to understanding some connection between one's own fate and those of others or, at least, perceiving others from some recognisable vantage point. Here art can have a powerful role. This article was prompted by a film installation by Jackie Doyle which was commissioned by the Belfast Film festival in 2005. *Connections* consisted of a bank of television screens typical of an airport departure lounge. Information on flight destinations gave way to short overlapping films where forced migrants told stories of torture, persecution and consequent trauma. The central device of Doyle's installation was simple. Actors with Northern Irish accents narrated the testimonies of forced migrants from other countries and visa versa. Foreknowledge of the punch-line – human stories of oppression and exclusion can be interchangeable – in no way lessened the visceral impact of the piece. At the time of writing 41 'asylum seekers' and 'failed asylum seekers' from Afghanistan had just ended a hunger strike in St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin. Their protest was timed to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the IRA hunger strikes in the North. It too could be seen as a conscious effort to create an Irish connection; to penetrate the Irish Mind, so to speak. However, making such connections is never easy for racialised groups.

This, for me, was Jackie Doyle's point and what is missed by Isaiah Berlin's liberal humanist bonhomie. The strikers' problem, one shared with the real forced migrants whose stories were presented by Doyle, is that recognition of their humanity is mediated by nation state politics of belonging. For Hannah Arendt the big practical problem with human rights was the absence of a 'right to rights'.¹³ Arendt understood that empirically (what *is*, rather than what *ought*, to be) rights spring from membership of a nation state rather than from the human condition. She argued that those exempted from citizenship, in one way or another, found no protection in the abstract nakedness of being human. As she put it, drawing on Edmund Burke in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: "The survivors of the extermination camps, the inmates of concentration and interment camps, and even the comparatively happy stateless people could see without Burke's arguments that the abstract nakedness of being nothing but human was their greater danger."¹⁴ Human rights depend, as such, upon what states (and their citizens) will or will not do about them.

The Republic of Ireland must begin the business of integrating or otherwise coming to terms with the one in 10 living in Irish society who were not born there. It must do so in the knowledge that an unwillingness or inability to integrate immigrants sets up big problems for the future. It must do so in the knowledge that the efforts of other countries have often been flawed. It must do so knowing that integration cannot be bought off the shelf, but must be grounded in local effort. Engagement with the local rules of belonging is required. Existing national ideas of belonging are a necessary starting place but so too is recognition of how past and present rules of Irishness have failed indigenous minorities.

To date, the integration of immigrants has been for the most part restricted to the economy. The grocer's republic, to borrow loosely from Yeats, now exists within a globalised economy that brings large numbers of workers with scant thought about where they will fit within Irish society. Everything we know about human migration leads us to expect that many will be here for good. Everything we know about the experiences of other immigrant societies tells us that we have a vested interest in their success. To paraphrase John Rawls, our fates are intertwined; the fates of their children and our children even more so. For this reason alone ethnic nepotism – excluding emigrants from social rights and entitlements – makes little practical sense. However, the experiences of other countries tell us that even when rights are extended to immigrants

all sorts of dangerous institutional barriers can persist. These have everything to do with culture and identity. Difference is all too often portrayed as deviance from dominant cultural norms and this in turn gives license to discrimination.

In Ireland, as elsewhere, a reckoning with dominant ideas of belonging cannot be avoided. Engagement with these seems to be crucial if projects for securing the integration of immigrants are to have any political legitimacy. Yet in the Republic of Ireland, no less than in the United Kingdom (where there has been a Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain), the precise national identity with which immigrants are required to engage is somewhat unclear. In France, a republican ideal of equal citizenship erroneously represents the state as culturally neutral. It has become all too clear that this republicanism is ethnocentric and that its project has been the assimilation rather than the integration of immigrants. In the Irish case the big question is whether republican notions of equal citizenship can transcend an ethnic nationalist past. As has been noted, Martin McGuinness has spoken of the need to persuade:

'our people' of the unionist tradition 'that they are a cherished part of the Irish nation' who 'will not have to give up anything they cherish in what will be a multicultural, multiracial, multilingual secular society.'¹⁵

The problem here is that one person's inclusionary republicanism is another person's ethnocentric monoculturalism. For the Irish there is more to the business of integrating immigrants than convincing them to get in touch with their inner Irishman or Irishwoman; and that you can have any colour of multiculturalism so long as it's green.

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Notes

- 1 Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, edited by R.H Feldman (New York: Grove Press, 1978) p.242
- 2 Kearney, R. 'Editorial' *The Crane Bag: Art and Politics*, Vol 1.1 (1977)
- 3 Sen A, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Norton, 2006), p.11
- 4 Hart P, *The IRA and its Enemies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)
- 5 Fanning B, *Racism and Social Change in the Republic of Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester university Press, 2002), p.81
- 6 R. Rorty, *Objectivism, Relativism and Truth* (New York: Cambridge, 1994), p.203
- 7 *Ibid*, p.29
- 8 B. Allen 'What Was Epistemology' in Brandom (ed.) *Rorty and His Critics* (London: Blackwell, 2000) p.224
- 9 T.S Adorno, E. Frenkel-Brunswick, D.J. Levinson and R.N Sanforo, *The Authoritarian Personality* (Harper and Row, 1950)
- 10 S. Body-Gendrot, 'Now you see it, now you don't', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21.5, 1998, p.849
- 11 Berlin, *Power of Ideas*, p.12
- 12 *Ibid*, p.13
- 13 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961), p.294
- 14 *Ibid*, p.299
- 15 Cited by Edna Longley 'Multiculturalism and Northern Ireland' in Longley E and Kilbred D, *Multiculturalism: the View From the Two Irelands* (Armagh: Centre for Cross Border Studies, 2001), p.9

which is not my own, but which is nevertheless something I can conceive of men pursuing while remaining human, while remaining creatures with whom I can communicate, with whom I have common values – for all human beings have common values or they cease to be human, and also some different values else they cease to differ, as in fact they do."¹¹

The essence of Berlin's pluralism was not a willingness to surrender one's own values but an