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The Irish in Multicultural London : The Fight for Recognition as the *Other*

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The Irish in England in the post-World War II period were not recognised in official discourse as an immigrant population or an ethnic minority group. This meant that the Irish were left out of policy initiatives and financing aimed at England’s recognised minorities. Taking advantage of the politicisation of ethnicity in multicultural London during the 1980s, this article shows how the Irish voluntary sector began to mobilise around the concept of ethnicity. This sector revendicated the existence and the recognition of an Irish ethnic identity in English society. Through the lobbying for the inclusion of an Irish ‘ethnic’ box under the ‘Ethnic Group’ question in the 2001 national census we will see how the Irish voluntary sector in London instrumentalised the concept of ethnicity in order to encourage the maximum amount of people to claim an Irish ethnic identity.

Keywords: cultural background, ethnicity, local authorities, minority, multicultural, white.

Introduction

Throughout the 19th century and much of the 20th century, Irish emigrants were constructed as the outcasts of British society – outcasts from British capitalism as the poorest of the poor, from mainstream British politics as separatist nationalists and republicans, from the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ race as ‘Celts’, and as Catholics from the dominant forms of British Protestantism¹. The Irish were outsiders in terms of class, nationality, race and religion and were a visible *Other* of British society at this time.

This was a position the Irish were to hold until the arrival of the New Commonwealth immigrants in the post-World War II period. The introduction of immigration controls in Britain in 1962, which excluded the Irish, played an important role in the disappearance of their difference in official discourse on immigration and their incorporation into mainstream British white society. The fact that the Irish were excluded from these immigration controls directly contributed to their subsequent ‘invisibility’ as a migrant group and later as an ethnic

¹ Roger Swift “The historiography of the Irish in nineteenth-century Britain”, in Patrick O’Sullivan (ed) *The Irish in the New Communities*, The Irish World Wide, volume 2, Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992, p.72.

minority in British society. Having been constructed as the *Other* for so long, the Irish were now constructed as the 'same' as the British.

This article is divided into two parts. Firstly, I will look at how British society evolved and discourses on immigration changed in the post-World War II period when Britain was faced with the arrival and settlement of large immigrant groups from the New Commonwealth. Secondly, I will examine how the Irish no longer considered as an immigrant group in official discourse and consequently finding themselves left out of policy initiatives aimed at improving the life of Britain's immigrants fought for recognition of their own unique ethnic identity and their distinct minority status in English society. I will concentrate my analysis on London, the epicentre of change during the 1980s, and on the rapid development of the Irish voluntary sector there which positioned itself as the porte-parole of the Irish community. I will look at how this sector took advantage of the politicisation of ethnicity in multicultural Britain instrumentalising this concept to its own advantage to claim and gain recognition of the existence of a distinct Irish ethnic identity. This led to the inclusion of an Irish ethnic category in the British national census in 2001, the Irish were the first white minority group to be included under this category marking formal recognition of Irish *Otherness* in British society.

Here to stay

In the post-World War II period Great Britain was faced with a large influx of not only Irish immigrants but also New Commonwealth immigrants who wanted to participate in the post-war reconstruction boom. West Indians, for example, who as a result of the McCarren-Walter Immigration Act of 1952 were no longer eligible to settle in the USA, were beginning to settle in England². However, the development which caused the most alarm bells to ring in the Home Office and the Commonwealth Relations Office in the late 1950s was a very sudden and 'alarming' increase in the number of immigrants arriving from Pakistan and India. By 1959 some 20,000 were entering the country each year. In 1960, the number rose to 58,100³.

² Alan Sked and Chris Cook, *Post-War Britain : A Political History*, London : Penguin Books, 1993, p. 178.

³ *Idem*.

The British government decided to discuss the possibility of introducing immigration controls to reduce this influx, the racial disturbances which took place in Nottingham and Notting Hill in London in 1958 doing nothing to appease the government's concerns. Many officials and ministers believed that 'coloured' immigration in substantial numbers was likely to lead to a range of serious social and economic problems. The government reacted in 1962 by introducing the Commonwealth Immigration Bill which became law that July. The Labour Opposition and the Liberal Party condemned the Bill as it effectively introduced a 'colour bar'.

This point of view is easy to defend when we consider that the Irish, principally a white immigrant group, were excluded from this restrictive immigration legislation. The numbers of Irish immigrants arriving in Britain from 1956 to 1959 considerably exceeded the number from the Indian Sub-continent, the Caribbean and Africa combined by some 89,000 people⁴. On average there were about 60,000 Irish emigrants entering Britain each year⁵. In addition, the Irish, no longer members of the Commonwealth, were not even British subjects and had less of a right to enter Britain than the New Commonwealth immigrants.

However, no-one in government wished to exclude the ample supply of white labour from Ireland considered to assimilate better into British society. According to the working party on immigration at this time, Irish labour added 'fit young men and women to the population'⁶. Whether from the Caribbean or South Asia, the New Commonwealth immigrants were perceived to be 'different' from the native population: people of different racial, different cultural and different linguistic stock⁷. Consequently, during this period, immigration became associated in the public mind with being non-white immigration, and an 'immigrant' in popular discourse came to mean a non-white person – usually an Afro-Caribbean or Asian.

Until the 1958 anti-Black race-riots, it had been thought that perhaps the New Commonwealth immigrants would eventually assimilate into British society but these race-riots soon put an end to any hopes of a rapprochement between the host society and the

⁴ 125,593 immigrants from the Indian Sub-continent, the Caribbean and Africa and 214,984 immigrants from Ireland, a difference of 89,391 in Ian R. G. Spencer, *British Immigration Policy Since 1939: The Making of Multi-Racial Britain*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 91.

⁵ Enda Delaney, *Demography, State and Society*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000, p. 210.

⁶ Zig Layton-Henry, *The Politics of Immigration*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992, p. 33.

⁷ Ralph Grillo, *Pluralism and the Politics of Difference*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998, p. 171.

immigrant populations⁸. It was then hoped they would integrate until it was realised that the melting pot didn't actually melt. Finally, British society moved towards multiculturalism in the 1970s with the recognition of the existence of small unmeltable minorities with their own essentially different communities. As a result, Race Relations Acts⁹ were introduced meant as positive measures to assist the integration of those immigrants already settled in Britain and to combat discrimination and racism¹⁰.

In a speech concerning the Race Relations Bill of 1976, Winston Churchill praised the way that British people had reacted faced with these very 'alien' populations. He said:

'Would the Home Secretary at the same time pay tribute to the wonderful way in which the British people have accepted for the greater part, the very substantial influx of alien culture and alien race into their midst without open conflict or prejudice'¹¹.

These 'alien' immigrant populations, considered to be of a different culture and race, along with their British-born children, became known in official discourse as Britain's 'ethnic groups'. An 'ethnic group' retained the meaning of minority status and foreign origins but most importantly 'ethnic groups' in Britain, were NOT white¹². By ignoring internal differences in Britain and the long term presence of Irish immigrants, the British state constructed the issues of ethnic minorities as relating only to post-war black immigrants and Irish immigrants found themselves in an ambivalent position in relation to discourses and policies¹³. It became commonplace in research, policy and media representations to categorise all the minorities with a common label, 'black', and to depict the new British population in terms of a black-white divide¹⁴. The Irish therefore found themselves excluded from debates concerning Britain's ethnic groups. However, this exclusion did not protect them from encountering similar kinds of problems to the recognised ethnic minorities.

⁸ Barnor Hesse, *'Un/settled Multiculturalisms' – Diasporas, Entanglements, Transruptions*, London: Zed Books, 2000, p. 4.

⁹ Race Relations Acts 1965, 1968 and 1976. The 1976 Race Relations Act made it unlawful to discriminate on the grounds of colour, 'race', ethnic or national origins in employment, housing and the provision of commercial and other services.

¹⁰ *Race Relations Act 1976*, London : TSO, p.7.

¹¹ Zig Layton-Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹² Steve Fenton, *Ethnicity*, England: Polity Press, 2003, p. 39.

¹³ M. Hickman and B. Walter, 'Deconstructing Whiteness: Irish Women in Britain', *Feminist Review*, 50, 1995, pp. 5-19.

¹⁴ T. Modood, "'Black", Racial Equality and Asian identity', *New Community*, 14, pp.397-404.

The issue of race and immigration became increasingly politicised during the 1980s in Britain and became a familiar feature of local politics at this time. As Barnor Hesse puts it the period was, ‘characterised by local political projects of anti-racism, high-profile black and Asian community struggles, prominent ethnic identifications and popular valorisations of cultural diversity’¹⁵. Local authorities played a central role in the politicisation of the debates¹⁶. Of course, responses varied from one local authority to another but the key to change in the practices of local authorities, as the Irish were soon to realise, lay in the pressure coming from both within and outside the institutions of local politics and policy making.

Black community groups, political leaders and the black voluntary sector had begun to place political pressure on local authorities and to lobby them for recognition of their particular needs. This movement in effect created a new black identity or a new black political identity and the Irish began to see the effectiveness of their organisation and lobbying.

The battle to be heard

The Irish then began to mobilise for the recognition of an Irish ethnic identity following the example of the black minority groups. In London, Irish voluntary sector organisations rapidly developed at this time in order to represent the needs of the disadvantaged sector of this community (see Annex 1). The Irish were largely absent from policy initiatives aimed at minority groups at the local level as they were not considered to be an ethnic minority. Consequently, they were also absent from all monitoring procedures concerning ethnic minority groups. This in turn meant that there were no statistics available from the local authorities to support the arguments of the Irish voluntary sector that a certain section of the Irish population was suffering from discrimination and disadvantage.

The Irish voluntary sector therefore decided to take advantage of the new multicultural discourse in British society during the 1980s and had as one of its principle demands, which it aimed primarily at the local authorities in London, the recognition of the Irish as a minority group with its own unique ethnic identity. The Irish voluntary sector in London wanted to prove that ‘Non-white’ and ‘ethnic’ were not synonymous. It was hoped that official

¹⁵ Barnor Hesse, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹⁶Section 71 of the 1976 Race Relations Act placed a particular onus on local authorities to eliminate unlawful discrimination and promote equality of opportunity between persons of different racial groups in John Solomos, *Race and Racism in Britain*, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 102.

recognition of an Irish ethnic identity would then mean the inclusion of an Irish category in ethnic monitoring systems and access to financial aid for their particular needs. Proving the existence of an Irish ethnic identity became a central element in the lobbying of Irish voluntary organisations. In the relations between the Irish voluntary sector and local government in London, a cultivated *politics of identity*¹⁷ began to change the terms of the political discourse as the Irish began, like the other minorities, to express public declarations of their ethnic identity.

They were principally effective at the local level and much lobbying was carried out in several London local authorities during this period. Their main demand was recognition – recognition of the Irish experience in Britain, recognition of Irish cultural difference, recognition of an Irish ethnic identity. A number of local authorities, traditional enclaves for Irish immigration, reacted in favour of Irish demands, employing Irish Liaison Officers, organising conferences to discuss Irish issues, consulting with the local Irish community and recognising the Irish as having a distinct ethnic identity.

The Irish voluntary sector lobbied tirelessly throughout the 1980s for Irish consciousness to be raised in London and wanted Irish people to take pride in their roots. The Irish were encouraged by the voluntary sector to express their solidarity and to organise as Irish people in mutual self-help and collective empowerment. In short, the voluntary sector hoped a new Irish political identity or a new Irish ethnic identity would be created and recognised. The Irish voluntary sector in London became essentially an interest group keen to represent a unified Irish community and to have access to the same advantages as the recognised minority groups. This is all the more true when the campaign for inclusion of an ‘Irish’ box under the ‘Ethnic Group’ category of the British national census is taken into consideration.

The first question on ethnicity was introduced into the national census in 1991 and an Irish category was not included which meant that important national statistics were not available on the Irish ethnic group. Despite having made much progress regarding recognition of Irish ethnicity in several London boroughs throughout the 1980s, and their inclusion in some ethnic monitoring practices at the local borough level, the Irish were still largely

¹⁷ Barnor Hesse, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

considered as not different enough to merit their inclusion under the 'Ethnic Group' category in the national census.

Throughout the 1990s, lobbying was carried out by the Irish voluntary sector, led by the *Federation of Irish Societies* (FIS)¹⁸, to ensure the inclusion of the Irish ethnic group in the 2001 census. FIS demonstrated through research reports written about the Irish that sections of this population were facing discrimination and disadvantage in English society and that the inclusion of an Irish category under the 'Ethnic Group' question in the national census would prove very useful to have a clearer picture of the Irish situation. This lobbying was to prove effective and the *Office for National Statistics* (ONS), following pressure from the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), decided that the Irish would be included with all the other ethnic groups in the following census in 2001. The Irish then became the first white minority group to be included under the ethnic group question of the national census.

Nevertheless, FIS feared that this category might not be taken up in sufficient numbers and it decided to launch a campaign to explain what the question on ethnicity meant and to encourage the maximum amount of people to tick the 'Irish' box. A considerable number of people of Irish cultural background, which included not only professional Irish-born but also 2nd and 3rd generation, had little or no contact with the organised Irish community. In addition, the elision between ethnicity and skin colour in English society meant publicising the Irish census campaign was going to be essential.

Meetings were organised with the member organisations of the Federation to explain to them the importance of encouraging people to tick the Irish box, a media campaign was launched on local radio stations, on the Irish television channel '*Tara TV*', in the main Irish newspaper in Britain the '*Irish Post*' and leaflets were printed encouraging people to tick the Irish ethnic box.

But just how did FIS explain what it meant to have an Irish ethnic identity? During the census campaign, on posters distributed throughout Great Britain, the following slogan could be read, 'Feel Irish? Be Irish! Census 2001'. Therefore, according to this slogan, if you felt Irish that was good enough to be Irish, you could tick the Irish ethnic box.

¹⁸ The Federation of Irish Societies is an umbrella organisation which regroups some 100 Irish voluntary organisations throughout Great Britain.

In an interview given to the Irish Post newspaper, the then head of FIS, Sean Hutton, declared that you didn't need an Irish passport to tick the Irish ethnic group box therefore stating that Irish ethnicity had nothing to do with nationality or citizenship¹⁹. He said:

'We think it should be made clear that a person does not need to hold an Irish passport or be an Irish citizen in order to mark the Irish category While we hope that all Irish citizens in England, Scotland and Wales will register themselves as Irish in the census, we hope also that the many hundreds of thousands of people who are not Irish citizens but have Irish links will do so as well'²⁰.

The term 'Irish links' is fairly ambiguous and leaves a lot of scope for differing interpretations. Do 'links' mean a real common descent? Or as Weber suggests, perhaps it does not matter if a real objective blood relation exists? Simply the 'belief' that you belong to a group, that you have more similarities with this group than another, is enough to allow ethnic membership?

In its handout on the 2001 census FIS explained in more detail, but with just as wide an interpretation of ethnicity, how to judge if you belong to the Irish ethnic group. It stated:

'Those who consider themselves Irish (whether Irish-born or of Irish cultural background) should tick the 'Irish' box in section (a) of the Ethnic Group Question. [...] Some people completing sections (c), (d), (e) of the Ethnic Group Question – those of Asian, Black, Chinese or Other ethnic group – may wish to acknowledge an Irish cultural background because, for example, of birth and/or education in Ireland. People who wish to acknowledge an Irish cultural background in this way should tick the 'Any other ...' box in the appropriate section and describe their cultural background in the write-in box below (e.g. 'Irish, Indian', 'Irish, African', 'Irish, Chinese'). The above advice is given on the basis that (a) Ethnic information is collected in the Census on the basis of your own understanding of your identity or cultural background [...]'²¹.

It is clear from these instructions that a very loose interpretation of Irish ethnicity was encouraged by FIS when we take into account that simply having studied in Ireland could give someone the right to claim Irish ethnicity! It was up to the person to decide which identity they possessed or which cultural background they wanted to choose. We can see through its campaign for the 2001 census FIS did its utmost to bring together the maximum

¹⁹ Irish Post, 3 April 2001.

²⁰ *Idem*.

²¹ Sean Hutton, *Census 2001 Strategy: Review and Proposals*, London : FIS, 2000, p.6.

amount of people under the Irish ethnic umbrella. Nevertheless, the response to the question on Irish ethnicity was not taken up in large numbers disappointing those who had lobbied for so long. However, labels created for administrative purposes may not reflect the reality of people's lives and as Frederik Barth has pointed out, cultural identities are in a constant state of flux which means that any attempt to represent them all in statistical or administrative categories is problematic or even absurd²².

Conclusion

Possessing an ethnic identity in post-war Britain meant being from a non-white minority group. The black/white dichotomy, the 'them/us' division, was one to remain prevalent in much of the post-war period. This automatically excluded the Irish as a predominantly white minority from discourses and policies concerning Britain's ethnic minorities. The multicultural climate in Britain played an important part in encouraging people to define themselves in terms of difference and gave them confidence to openly assert their individual identity. Black and Asian activists rallied round and took up the concept of ethnicity to define their difference.

The Irish voluntary sector saw an opening and an opportunity for resource mobilisation not previously available and became willing to emphasise an Irish ethnic identity as a strategy for group improvement²³. The importance of ethnicity for the Irish voluntary sector was conditional on the resources that the Irish could have access to based on their formation as an ethnic group. The Irish voluntary sector hoped that the right to use the ethnic 'label' would ensure access to financial aid for disadvantaged sectors of the Irish community. Certainly, the Irish voluntary sector exploited the situation but could not have done so if there had not been a situation to exploit.

The disappointing take-up of the Irish ethnicity category in the 2001 census raises many questions- how effective was the Irish voluntary sector's campaign? Was the ethnic 'label' 'Irish' too restrictive for more complex, hybrid identities? Or do the Irish simply not recognise or want to recognise themselves in this 'label'? The next campaign leading up to the

²² Frederik Barth cited in Michel Wieviorka, 'Is multiculturalism the solution?', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 21, no.5, septembre 1998, p. 903.

²³ John Rex and David Mason (ed), *Theories of Race and Ethnic Relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p.29

future census in 2011 and the type of category included under the question on ethnic background for the Irish may go some way towards answering these questions.

Annex 1

Irish Voluntary Group

Year Established

Irish in Britain Representation Group (IRBG)	(1981)
London Irish Women's Centre	(1983)
CARA – accommodation	(1984)
Action Group for Irish Youth (AGIY)	(1984)
Cricklewood Homeless Concern	(1984)
Irish in Greenwich	(1985)
Innisfree Housing Association	(1985)
Brent Irish Mental Health Group	(1985)
An Teach Housing Association	(1986)
Haringey Irish Community Care	(1987)
Safestart Foundation	(1989)

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