Crashing into the Ethnic Pentagon: Reflections on Race and Culture in the New Ireland

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Introduction[1]

Like many crude, but compelling ideas, the term 'ethnic pentagon' has its genesis in America, not, as one might expect, as a marketing device by multi-nationals, but as an originally obscure directive from the Office of Management and Budget, prosaically entitled, 'Directive 15: Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting, May 1977.' For more than two decades this directive set the visible bureaucratic-racial categories in the USA: 'White' and 'Black' (of course), Hispanic, Native American/Native Alaskan, and, my personal favourite, Asian/Pacific Islanders (a category that probably includes at least half of the world's population). Of course, various people complained about this categorization almost before the ink was dry on this document, and various learned bodies attacked it for its tendency to reify social categories as natural ones (the American Anthropological Association has a cogent, if intellectually unexciting, critique of it on its website), but as big funders fell into line, more and more scholarly projects reproduced this categorization, it became more and more difficult to do nearly anything in the absence of dealing with these divisions.

It is only recently that the ethnic pentagon, as it was routinely referred to by health services researchers whom I got to know after I got my PhD, has come undone. In fact, it looks now to be in ruins. The John Roche anti-racism pin, which was popular a few years ago amongst a certain sector in Ireland, is looking more like the fragments of this crash than anything else. After much political agitation, for example, it is now possible to officially style yourself 'multi-ethnic/multi-racial' in America, at least according to the last census.[2] Even 'Irish' can now be colour-coded, according to the Central Statistics Office (King Ó Riain n.d.), thanks to the advent of a variety of newly racialised categories in the last census. The more obvious issue impacting the understanding of otherness, however, has been the events of 11 September 2001. For the past five years, the terrifying Other in the US paranoid imaginary, 'radical Islam' is invisible in the above categorization. The Middle East, a crossroads more than a container, does not lend itself to the standard forms of American racial categorization, and, worse, Islam, even in its fanatical varieties, has an office in each part of the pentagon. To make matters weirder, 'ethnic profiling' the *bête-noire* of many African-American and Hispanic activists in the '80s and '90s, is now supported, to a greater or lesser degree, in vast swathes of the American electorate, ironically even in many Black and Brown communities, provided, of course, that it is directed at 'Middle Eastern Males'.

The temptation is to say, 'Only in America,' but clearly with the category of 'race' enjoying a renewed saliency in Europe in general and Ireland in particular, such a dismissal is at best premature. My basic point in this article is that the language of race in Ireland derives from the type of thinking

underlying the ethnic pentagon, and the ways that one might go about confronting 'racism' in Ireland will be channelled in particular directions because this borrowing is misrecognised. Probably the best way of thinking about my argument to support this position is as a series of provocations: first to me, second to progressives interested in fighting racism, and finally to anthropology. In 'Why we Fight...' I look at the life and 'prejudices' of a young addict in Cherry Orchard, whom I came to know a couple of years ago in a project in social exclusion and structural violence in West Dublin. In 'What is Racism?' I examine how language of race and tolerance both misses this young man's sense of the world, while sitting very uncomfortably in the facts of Irish history and society. Finally, in 'Why the Right is Doing Well in Europe', I look at some recent electoral successes of parties and people in Europe who are routinely labelled 'racist' and 'xenophobic' to try to draw out why they might appeal and how might anthropology think of engaging this trend.

Why We Fight ...

The spring day was bleak, despite the welcome warming of the past few days, but there is something about Cherry Orchard, at least by the old Fever Hospital, that always struck me as bleak. I had just finished my day at Fortune House, a facility for treating heroin addiction, chatting informally with the staff, running a focus groups with some underage addicts, and formally interviewing the oldest member of the two underage groups with whom I had been working for the last couple of months, a young man of just 17, named James. Like all the teenagers I had met during the past year or so in Cherry Orchard, James struck me as small and quite young looking. He is a bare 5'7" and thin, wearing what was practically the uniform of most kids of his background—expensive, loose-fitting sports clothing, showing more than a few gold pieces, with his hair cut neatly on the sides, a little longer in the back, with a fringe in the front. The oversized tracksuit on his slight frame in comparison with my own 6'3" and 230lbs made me feel as if I was in the company of a still younger individual. Only James's eyes hinted of age—if not maturity, then experience: five years on gear and four away from school, a baby on the way (with a fellow addict), several arrests, the last one in possession of a firearm. It was only some scrambling on the part of a concerned social welfare officer and some sympathy on the part of the police that James was currently in the semi-supervised position that he was then in. The indignity of having his urine checked three times a week was probably less than the indignities waiting for him in Mountjoy Jail, but he still did not take the inspections terribly well. There were also hints from the staff, and indeed occasionally from himself, of yet more serious trouble—serious abuse in the home, at least in his younger days, and an address that kept changing (meaning perhaps no address at all). In short, James, at that point, looked like another kid from a bad home in a bad neighbourhood, embarking on a bad life of substance abuse, failed responsibilities, petty criminality, and perhaps worse.

Nonetheless, James was one of the few people that I met at Fortune House who gave me the impression that he liked me, and it is hard for an ethnographer not to feel a certain gratitude for such a sentiment. He was impressed, for example, that I was born and bred in Southern California, and he could not be disabused of the notion that this accident of biography provided an innate perspective on the West Coast Rap Scene, especially the short life and fast times of Tupac Shakur. Twenty years previously, I could have given him

a pretty good sense of the LA music scene, but I had not lived there for more than ten years, and I fear that James's long-suffering mother had probably absorbed by osmosis more facts about Tupac than I was ever likely to be in possession of. His excitement about Tupac, though, again threw into the forefront of my consciousness how much of James's and his fellows' dress, and even some of their phrasings under the hard West Dublin accent, clearly owed to the popularised strain of African-American culture that developed out of the mass-marketing of Hip Hop.

In a globalised world, where various strains of Rap (along with the products of American transnationals) have become one of the main vehicles of protest from certain Arrondissements in Paris to the suburbs of Harare, such observations on their own convey little theoretical interest to ethnographers. James's next comments, though, made me think. As part of the group session that day an article from the Independent had been read out. It detailed a theme that the O'Reilly stable of papers had been harping on for the past couple of years, that is, various sorts of fraud being perpetrated by asylum-seekers/refugees. At this time, I was, frankly, trying to ingratiate myself with these kids, and, to be honest, I had not paid much attention to this part of the session. It had struck me as simply a repetition of a story that had already been beaten to death. If a ha'penny had gone astray at that time, and a refugee was responsible, then the watchdog *Independent* was on the case, but brown envelopes brimming with banknotes in the pockets of TDs and Planning Officials were seemingly protected by the latest in stealth technology. James, though, had listened to this story with interest, and the topic resurfaced as we were walking towards my bus stop.

James: Why are so many of *them* here?

Jamie: Lots of reasons… violence or oppression where they come from. Wars and poverty. Most have had to leave in fear of their lives …
James: But why Ireland? There's little enough for us here.
Jamie: Well, Ireland is getting pretty wealthy, you know. The Celtic Tiger and all. Anyway, there's also treaties that Ireland has signed. They have to take certain kinds of folks in, at least some of them.
James: I don't think we should help those Africans before our own. I think they should go. If *they* weren't here, the Government could do more for places like this.

I didn't record my response to this statement, as I scribbled notes on the bus on the way into Dublin. It really did not deserve to be recorded. It was a squishy liberal admonition, chastising a young man who was trying to conduct a dialogue across gulfs of class, education, and experience. I told him more or less that he was wrong, that he was not in competition with refugees, and, as an added conversation stopper, I mentioned again the economic boom that seemed to be raising the boats of all and sundry in the greater Dublin area, unless one happened to live in Cherry Orchard or a couple of other select addresses in the capital that were being tagged with labels like 'underclass' and 'ghetto' in the middle-class press. Something struck me at that moment, though, that has stayed with me since: if there is going to be serious racialised violence in Ireland—regular skinhead attacks, burning down hostels, or the like—I was looking at one of the potential foot-soldiers. I hope it won't be James; indeed, I pray there will be nothing like these problems in Ireland. But the sort of response I offered that day could in no way deal with James's sense that he was being shafted, nor can it deal with his halting attempts to make sense of his situation.

I will begin my extended apology to James with a simple assertion. After

a decade long project on the part of various forces in Ireland, there now exists a category 'race' on the island in the sense that this term is used in much of the English-speaking world. This category in Ireland is every bit as idiotic and contradictory as the logic of ethnic pentagon. I prefer to think of this category of race in Ireland as a channel, consciously and unconsciously being maintained by large numbers of people, practically none of whom consider themselves 'racist' and, indeed, by many who see themselves as resisting 'racism'. This channel now has an obvious flow through it, away from Ireland's elites, and given the right circumstances, it could deal with a torrent. To beat the metaphor to death, at the bottom of the channel, things are pretty messy. When I say that 'race is idiotic', I do not mean that it is not real, or, in Foucault's sense, that it does not have truth-effects. James's basic sense of a zero-sum game being waged between distressed elements in the New Ireland and Refugees, Asylum-Seekers, and now economic migrants has already been reproduced in several situations on the island over the past few years, and it is developing a script-like quality to its unfolding. It is no secret, for example, that from an early point, the Irish Government set out to make life difficult for asylum seekers coming here—refusing them the right to work, preparing to deport as many of them as possible, and at least colluding in their construction as scapegoats for various failings in Irish society. A few years ago, local people protesting the closing of the Tenacre Nursing Home in Rosslare provided a typical example of a local response to this national trend. A serious attack on housing for asylum seekers in the area was referenced to their drawing resources better spent on 'our' old people. Whether such an argument makes sense or not is highly situational. The elderly people for whom this closed facility was home—

and the many others on the waiting list for places in state-run nursing homes—deserved and deserve a much better deal from the 'Celtic Tiger'. To me it is apparent that the Government does not have the political will to adequately fund our health service, whether the asylum-seekers were there or not, but my mother was not told that she was going to have to move the week that the asylum-seekers showed up in new publicly-subsidised housing.

What is Racism?

At an logical level, it is clear that every racism is (ironically) the product of miscegenation, a strange mating of different pseudoscientific doctrines, religious and confessional beliefs, and stereotypical opinions that build up a fantastic (even if occasionally persuasive) connections between phenotypic, social, mental, symbolic, and often outright fictitious traits (for an analysis of anti-Semitism in this vein see Mitten 1992, see also Wodak and Reisigl 1999 for a good summary article). In any specific case, however, particular social and historical factors condition the nature and social effects of 'racism'. Garner's recent volume *Racism in the Irish Experience* tries to outline the modern ecology of Irish 'racism'. Garner attempts to fit the 'new' racism in Ireland in a sociological model borrowed from Durkheim and Weber, emphasising the fear of out-groups during times of rapid social change, while tracing some Irish-based attempts to come to grips with this problem. Oddly, he sees a danger that aspects of the anti-racism coalition can be sucked up into renewed nationalism (2004: 221), in part because of how aspects of the Republican struggle were internationalised during The Troubles, as well as the role of *Sinn Féin* in current ant-racist work. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to develop this point, I am suspicious that this is not the

case. It ignores the class basis of much of the new racism, not just in Ireland but in Europe more broadly (see below), it also glosses over the general distaste for Republicanism in the cosmopolitan middle classes who are the most common wearers of John Roche's anti-racism pins.

It seems to me that it is more useful, but probably politically more distasteful, to try to theorise both racism and anti-racism within the same frame. The Tenacre scenario above, for example, demonstrates a classic resource-competition model of racism, beloved by a certain breed of sociologist, and even some anthropologists (e.g. Barth 1969). In this vision, human organise themselves into groups to compete for scarce social goods, and race/ethnicity is the ideological mythic charter that solidifies in-group connections, while making socially salient the differences between such groups. As Garner (2004) has pointed out, however, the production of 'race' in Ireland has come during an economic boom, indeed one of the bigger and longer-lasting expansions in recent history. To be sure, sociologists like Weber and Durkheim have pointed out the similarity of certain social processes between times of economic contraction and expansion, but the salience of race as a category in modern Ireland still seems overwrought, perhaps especially, it seems to me from the so-called anti-racist perspective.

In particular, the disconnect between such structural explanations and the means employed to officially ameliorate them is more rarely analysed. If, for example, resource competition between social groups, or social dislocation as a consequence of structural change is the 'cause' of racism, then why do the groups committed to its eradication almost universally commit themselves to an educational programme of deracinated 'tolerance'? In particular, we might ask: in what ways do discourses about 'racism' highlight or elide other social differences that both preceded them and condition their reception in concrete social-historical circumstances.

Certainly by the late 1990s, both the newness and strangeness of 'race' should have been apparent if only in the bizarre verbal construction those 'fighting racism' routinely were making in public. Ireland we were told by these workers was newly 'multi-racial' and 'multi-cultural', as if the long convoluted history of the concept race had never happened (never mind the vicissitudes in its development on the Continent: recall that the Young Irelanders and the Gaelic Revival routinely deployed the term 'The Irish Race' in their understanding of the separateness of the island from 'Saxon' England), never mind the truly off-the-wall implication that the various diversities that have been on this island for centuries were not that real because they were not sufficiently colour-coded, and thus were somehow less visible (although see how quickly any publican in a country town recognises a Traveller by dress and *habitus*, never mind the intimate familiarity that exists between working class communities across the sectarian divide in the North). What the Irish now needed we were told by such experts in multi-racialism or multi-culturalism or interculturalism is education in 'tolerance', a familiarising of themselves with the darker strangers in their midst, their first experience of exotic plants in what had previously been a standard average Western European monoculture.

My strong feeling is that James (at least) does not need education in tolerance, and I *know* he could run a graduate seminar on visible and routinised forms of social difference that are transmitted across generations in Ireland. Indeed, one of the main means by which certain of these differences have been effaced in the past decade, at the precise historical moment that they

have worsened considerably under the aegis of the Celtic Tiger, is the insistence that there were few and trivial social differences in Ireland, at least in the Republic, although increasing in the North as well, before asylum-seekers came in larger numbers, and the Irish discovered that they were, in fact, 'racist'. There are relatively few analytical languages in which such a statement can be formulated without its counterfactual quality being immediately obvious. The language of difference coming out of the ethnic pentagon is one of these.

Now, I am not arguing for intolerance or encouraging complacency about newly racialised language and violence in Ireland. Indeed, nothing has depressed me more about this society than these developments (in what is, after all my adopted society) in recent years. I *am* saying that the largely middle-class led projects decrying such sentiments, and pointing to ill-defined education-led interventions as the way to tackle them are unlikely to make matters better, and worse, they tend to obscure how 'tolerance' and 'intolerance' are unequally distributed across social structure and the environment. There is, in short, a material basis for hate and racism, if not in a situation of absolute scarcity of resources, then in the perceived (and unnecessary injustice in their distribution). In other words, there is a material basis for consciousness as such. This is not to say that 'poverty' causes 'hate', it is to say that goods and bads are distributed unequally within social worlds. Tolerance and intolerance, then, are not conjured whole cloth out of isolated individual consciousness, they exist as situated choices in concrete social-historical circumstances. The questions that need to be asked about racism in Ireland, and the policies formulated to combat all forms of structural violence need to take this fact on board, or they will be worse than

ineffective. There are no 'No Blacks' signs in Blackrock or Ballsbridge, although there was an effective campaign to keep a facility for asylum-seekers out of the latter about 6 years ago. I am suspicious, though, that the density of John Roche anti-racism pin-wearers are pretty high in these places. Unfortunately, 'racist intolerance towards outsiders' is set to take its place next to 'irrational attachment to horses' as another atavistic feature of certain neighbourhoods and populations in Ireland. This construction is a formula for radicalising these populations rightwards.

Why the Right is Doing Well in Europe

The context for these issues in Ireland is a European-wide tide of success of the Right in Europe. Right-Wing parties are ascendant in (at least parts of) Europe for a variety of reasons, practically none of which, it seems to me, are explained by the terms 'race' and 'racism'. Very high on the list of these causes is economic anxiety: for most people, there are fewer and fewer veils between minimum notions of economic security and the juggernaut of the market. This bloc includes not just the people who are already suffering (those left behind by neo-liberal economic booms like the Celtic Tiger), crucially, it increasingly encompasses people who might be called the 'worried well-off', doing well, perhaps even very well, economically, but the first step out of their lifestyle in the form of their job moving overseas is a long, long drop.

This process has been investigated in Austria in the excellent work of Andre Gingrich who examines the often-racist appeal of politicians like Jorg Haider and his Freedom Party. Following, but building on, the work of Holmes (2000) and Grillo (1998), Gingrich ethnographically situates what he calls the *neo-nationalism* of the

Freedom Party, especially in its base in Carinthia in a dual worry: (1) of being manipulated by the agendas of technocratic elites from above, *and* (2) being threatened by the arrival of foreigners with different appearances and customs from below (2006: 199). These are, of course, the two sides of current wave of global capitalism, but they are marked in social life in concrete ways—from how dialect, to particular regional history, and, indeed, to perceived access to power exist in a particular national political arena to how personal and structural anxieties can be mobilised politically at a certain historical moment. Especially in situations of broad economic agreement between 'Left' and 'Right' (and, therefore, no democratic means to effect structural change) such anxieties can become the glue that binds generally reliable, but seemingly unsustainable, Right-wing electoral blocs together (see Frank 2004 for a discussion of this phenomenon in the United States).

Second, and as importantly, there is an almost complete lack of meaningful collectivities in the thinking and rhetoric of those in power in most Western countries, especially, oddly enough, in those on what is called the centre-left in Europe. Tony Blair, for example, for all his communitarian language and talk of stakeholders, for example, sees very little that concerted collective action can accomplish—it cannot seem to make train travel safer or more affordable, it cannot reduce waiting lists at the NHS, and it cannot seem to protect the environment effectively. About the only thing collectivities seem to do, in his thinking, at least in their instantiations as nations-states, is to step out of the way so that individuals can amass capital. Margaret Thatcher, before her dotage, recognised this aspect of Blair well before either his friends or his critics: there really is no such thing as society in this way understanding of the world—there is only an economy understood as an epiphenomenon of individuals maximising their marginal utility. This economy, if properly managed, might just generate enough tax revenue to pay someone in the private sector to tidy up the odd social problem. The current coalition in Ireland is more than passingly familiar with this way of thinking.

On the other hand, the Populist right in both Europe and the US offers, generally an exclusionary, collectivity at the core of their thinking. In the abstract at least, 'race' covers very little of this discourse and indeed, the term 'race' often blunts the ability to analyse what messages are in fact being conveyed to various electorates. 'Us and them' is a distasteful way of instantiating collectivities, but if there is no other option, it can appear compelling by default. The parties and people pointed to as 'racist', moreover, run a gambit of positions that jumble 'race' and 'culture' in a fashion that is only matched for intellectual opacity by their public critics. Aine Ní Chonnail in Ireland, for example, speaks a language of preserving Irish 'culture', but seems obsessively concerned with the amount of melanin in the collective Irish skin tone. Jorg Haider in Austria is probably the most 'American' politician in Europe in his ability to artfully play the 'race' card in public and get away with it, but ethnographic work has illuminated the subtleties of how people identify with this message (Gringich 2006). Folks like Jean LePen and the assassinated Pym Fortune in the Netherlands tend to be routinely branded as racists by their critics but are probably better describe as 'civilisationist' in the mode of Samuel Huntington. Fortune, in particular, a gay man who approached the Dutch electorate in part on the back of an appeal to 'our' collective tradition of tolerance, in opposition to what he constructed as the intolerance of Islam,

presented an enormous challenges to progressives that have only been made more urgent by the horrific murder of the film-maker Theo Van Gough and the recent riots over the Danish Cartoons depicting Mohammad in various European cities. This discussion, though, is routinely channelled into a strange game of deracinated tolerance, where the majority's 'tolerance' is weighed against that of Others and some adjustments in this tolerance balance are suggested by pundits with access to the media. Rarely is the social-political location of tolerance or its lack given much time, nor are structural connections between examples of 'intolerance' in different parts of the society, still less across the world, developed.

Conclusion

The modern European Populist Right's message is a combination of running against incumbency, often a corrupt incumbency, while offering at least an illusion of collective security to those feeling on the outside of things or (crucially) who can imagine themselves being on the outside of things. Oddly, they share many of the anxieties about globalisation that current anti-capitalist protestors display, but the bearers of globalisation are not the outlets of transnational corporations, like McDonald's, but folks who are washing around on the same the same world-tide of capital, knowledge and population shifts that is refashioning the current mode of production (who are, ironically, often staffing the McDonald's). A major ideological model in this new mode of production is a sense of difference that overlaps (perhaps better, ignores) the nature and culture divide that was obvious to the post WW-II synthesis. This cyborg sense of difference seems to exist as an operator at every level of our new social formation.

Internally, the 'social' within nation-states has been colonised by a language of 'community', entities that come complete with their own cultures that are then targets for 'development' by professional-led organisations. This symbolic re-imagination of the nation-state has occurred at the same historical moment that, materially, the economic fates of citizens within nearly all national territories have come substantially undone from one another. At the same time, 'culture' is becoming one of the most effective ways of mobilising electorates, ironically, at a time when the current regime of capitalism assumes and requires as free as possible movements of capital, goods and people. Finally, civilization, looking a lot like a sense of 'culture' writ large is becoming the basis for a new state of permanent war between polities in a world of nations-states that are ever more densely interconnected with trade links, capital flows and media technologies. In short, the modern discourse on race, racism and anti-racism fits into a more general 'communitisation' of social space, based on 'traditional' affiliations supported by 'modern' technologies, which merges only fuzzily into some idea of biological descent. This organizational principle has largely supplanted class position, or other ways of mobilising people and populations in political imaginaries in many societies.

In short, something strangely reminiscent of what we might call the classic, if we were to be uncharitable 'un-theorised', sense of culture has never been more ubiquitous outside of the discipline of Anthropology, or possessed more explanatory power in popular consciousness, in large parts of academia, or, indeed, in many policy-making circles. Sahlins's observation of a few years ago—that globalisation has largely meant 'culture' emerging as perhaps the primary structural principle of differentiation—every year looks less

like a theoretical provocation and more like a social fact. This sense of culture, however, is tinged with an earlier idea of race, the idea that it substantially defeated fifty years ago. This merging has become most evident in some of the peculiarities of Islamaphobia, which is beginning to recall some many aspects of anti-Semitism of the early part of the last century – the same term at once denotes a set of beliefs, a confessional community, shared ways of being in the world, and physical-racial characteristics. What seems apparent is that anthropologists will have to engage anew this sense of culture on the scale that it is currently used, not just in order to deconstruct it, but to understand what forms of power it facilitates and what contradictions it effaces. Part of this analysis will need to involve a discussion of Race, whose beginning may indeed be in the co-implication of race and culture as far back as Boas (Visweswaran 1998), but whose conclusions will have to be far more refined.[3] Someone like James, for example, knows his structural position subjects him to certain forms of regular violence. He is being offered a language in which to imagine his plight and its solution. I do not agree with his current synthesis of agency and action, but I would like to offer him something better than the models than are currently out there.

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Endnotes

[1] A version of this paper was presented at the Conference, *Race, Culture, and Interculturalism*, 8-9 June 2002. I would like to thank participants at this event for their helpful feedback.

[2] Despite the number of White Americans who claim Cherokee princess blood in their veins, we have yet to see a significant jump in the numbers of certain hitherto obscure categories. At the time that these proposals were being debated, however, some African-American leaders expressed unease with how this newfound racialising freedom would impact the counting of their community.

[3] A good start was made in this direction in a Special edition of *American Anthropologist* in 1998, edited by Faye Harrison (Vol. 100, No. 3). Expressly connecting these insights to discussions of multiculturalism and neo-nationalism, and moving them into more popular forms, however, has been a much slower process.