

## Strangers in our Midst

MICHEL PEILLON

In the late summer of 1998, a Tullamore doctor announced that he was offering a reward of £10,000 to trace the origin of rumours circulating about him in this small town in the Midlands. The rumours related to the unexplained disappearance of a young mother from the town. Not only was the doctor alleged to be involved in this disappearance, but all kinds of sinister crimes and practices were mentioned. The doctor's announcement hit the headlines and he was interviewed on the main television news programmes. When the image of this mild-mannered individual with his wife and children appeared on screen, the real issue in this episode became obvious. As an Eastern, Muslim family in the middle of a culturally homogeneous small town, they had been targeted by a campaign of nasty rumours. Whatever the motives or interests of those who started these rumours, a sufficient number of people were willing to believe or half-believe this story, to carry it around and spread it, to uphold its plausibility within the collectivity. For a brief time, one glimpsed the uglier side of Irish provincial life.

Only a little more than two thousand non-nationals resided in Ireland in 1939.<sup>1</sup> Now the figure has risen, according to

1 D. Keogh, *Jews in twentieth century Ireland. Refugees, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust*, Cork: Cork University Press, 1998.

very rough estimates, to close to 4 per cent of the population in the Republic of Ireland. English, Welsh and Scots staying in Ireland are numbered with difficulty, as a long-standing agreement between the UK and Ireland grants to nationals of both countries reciprocal rights of travel, residence and work. The same now applies to residents of other EU countries; a figure of 100,000 EU nationals living in Ireland has been put forward. Around 25,000 non-EU nationals are said to reside in Ireland. The first Chinese arrived in the 1960s and they now form a community of 11,000 people; most of whom work in Chinese restaurants. The door was opened in 1979 to a limited number of refugees from Vietnam. Around 600 Boat People, as they were then called, have settled here. The recent dismantling of Yugoslavia and the ensuing civil war led to another wave of refugees in 1992; more than 800 Bosnians now live in Ireland. An increasing number of Muslims reside here; officially recorded at 3,875 in the 1991 Census, their numbers have rapidly increased to 6,000. Five hundred Indian nationals are also registered in Ireland.

Concern has emerged more recently about the increasing number of people seeking political asylum in Ireland. Practically nobody looked for refuge in Ireland a few years ago. In 1992, only thirty-nine individuals applied for refugee status. In 1995, the figure remained low at 424 applications. In 1997, the number of applications rose to 4,626 and then to 7,724 in 1999. Applicants for refugee status typically come from countries such as Congo, Nigeria, Algeria and Somalia, and a high proportion of these applications have been rejected. More recently, refugees from eastern Europe have appeared on the Irish scene, most of them Romanian gypsies attracted to Ireland by rumours of prosperity and generosity.

A negative attitude has developed of late in Ireland towards 'foreigners', or rather towards some categories of foreigners. They are now perceived as a threat and they trigger mechanisms of social closure. This chapter is concerned with answering the questions of why and how this happens. Hostility towards foreigners, or even towards cultural minorities, is

conventionally explained in terms of intolerance towards those with a different culture. A rather different view is put across in this chapter. It is argued that those groups, strangers in our midst, attract hostility to the extent that they cannot balance their participation in the host society: that, for reasons which are often outside their control, what they are perceived to draw from the group is not matched by what they give to it.

### *A question of culture?*

Prejudice is usually directed at those people who do not adopt our mores or share our values. They live according to ways which deviate from those of the host country; they retain in their appearance and demeanour something of the place they came from. They are judged in the light of their distance from the cultural standards of the host country and inevitably fare badly in the exercise. Their existence is acknowledged only through their difference. For this reason, these cultural minorities attract like a magnet practices of rejection and hostility. But a culturalist account of prejudice reaches deeper than pointing out cultural differences. It would contend, for instance, that the increased hostility towards foreigners in Ireland is explained in terms of a growing threat to an Irish identity: a sense that tradition is dissolving and lifestyle eroding. 'Group boundaries may thus be generated by uncertainty', contends Richard Jenkins.<sup>2</sup> Continuous change, by itself, would trigger a process of closure, as a response to the disappearance of stable cultural points of reference.

A link is actually observed between the level of cultural differences and the degree of social distance.<sup>3</sup> Micheál MacGréil, in his study of prejudice in Ireland, has measured

2 R. Jenkins, *Social identity*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 214.

3 Social distance refers, in MacGréil's study, to a measure of how close people are prepared to admit members of various categories: as family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues, citizens, visitors to the country.

the attitudes of Irish people towards a wide range of social, ethnic and national categories.<sup>4</sup> No great social distance is recorded for English, North Americans, Scots and Welsh; their rating is explained by the author in terms of ethnic propinquity. This category includes those nationalities which, culturally very close, have been the traditional destination of Irish emigration. In any case, the otherness of this category of people is hardly registered; accent sets them apart, but they still share a language and many cultural traits. Nationals from other western European countries elicit a little more social distance. But Ireland has moved quite close to western Europe in political, economic and even cultural terms.

Irish people do not feel particularly close to a range of nationalities or ethnicities: less than half, for instance, would accept Jews, Greeks, Russians or Africans into their families. Chinese, Blacks, Indians, Israelis, Nigerians, Black Americans, Pakistanis, Muslims, Arabs and Travellers, all score high on social distance. Most contemporary nationalities and ethnicities outside the English-speaking world and western Europe are included in this category. This evidence needs to be interpreted with some caution, and it does not necessarily support an explanation exclusively in terms of cultural differences. Other criteria seem to be involved. For instance, although sharing in many ways a basic American culture, a far greater level of intolerance is directed at 'Black Americans' than at Americans in general.

A first point can be used to unsettle the culturalist account. The very idea of identity appears suspect nowadays. The assertion of an Irish identity would imply that the inhabitants of Ireland share attitudes, values, beliefs and cultural orientations. It points to a tradition, a collective experience which has moulded the very being of the people. The discourse of identity ends up relying on generalisations and it makes

4 M. MacGréil, *Prejudice in Ireland revisited*, Maynooth: St Patrick's College, 1996.

heavy use of stereotypes. Identity postulates a cultural unity, through which the diversity of Ireland is reduced to a common framework. 'Belief in a single identity, spirit or soul; belief in a unified unconscious for the group or the race; belief in the dominance of a complex of beliefs or mores or institutions; all these beliefs are vague, uncritical, misleading and even politically dangerous.'<sup>5</sup> When identity is given a fixed content, then the upholding of identity requires that group boundaries are policed: to reject everything which may dilute its tradition; to react against what risks weakening it; to contain the threat of a contagious difference. But it is not clear which features of Irishness are threatened by the presence in Ireland of people with different ways.

The second argument which militates against the culturalist account of intolerance stresses the fact that rejection and prejudice is differentiated. Many people have come to reside in Ireland and they have made their homes here. They have been, by and large, tolerated, although to very different degrees. Only specific groups of foreigners attract hostility. Coexistence has remained quite harmonious with the Chinese minority in Ireland, with the Bosnian refugees or even, perhaps to a lesser extent, with the Muslim community. Not all 'foreigners' are placed in the same category or generate the same level of rejection. The cultural account would still hold if it could be shown that the level of prejudice and intolerance is associated with the relative distance between indigenous and foreign cultures. Those who are the furthest away in cultural terms would experience most hostility and rejection. Such a demonstration is not easily made.

The third and possibly the strongest argument against the culturalist interpretation concerns the fact that the level of cultural identification is not related to the level of

5 D. Moran, 'Wandering from the path: Naviguio in the philosophy of John Scotus Eriugena', in M. P. Hederman and R. Kearney (eds.), *The Crane Bag book of Irish studies*, Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1982.

intolerance. Micheál MacGréil, in his above-mentioned study of prejudice and tolerance in Ireland, has measured what he calls the level of Irish identification (which refers to the extent to which people define themselves as Irish). He has also provided measures of 'social distance' and 'racialism' as indications of prejudice and intolerance. The culturalist argument postulates a link between identification with Irish culture and negative attitudes towards those who deviate from Irish cultural standards. In fact, a reverse relationship emerges. Those social categories which express the strongest sense of Irish identification also manifest greater tolerance towards foreigners and uphold the least racist attitudes: those living in large urban areas, those with a more formal education, those with a high occupational status and the higher social classes.

The cohabitation of different cultures produces its daily tensions, and foreign practices often deeply offend the cultural standards of a society. But the root of rejection is to be found elsewhere and another type of explanation is required.

#### *Citizenship: a balancing act*

In May 1996, the master of a Dublin maternity hospital considered it his duty to alert the nation to a problem he was encountering. Pregnant women from outside the EU were finding their way to Ireland to have their baby delivered here. Six hundred such babies had been born in that particular year. The doctor was expressing his concern about the high rate of infectious diseases such women might carry and also about the cost this practice entailed. But more was implied in this episode, for it stressed the abuse of the citizenship rule. Irish citizenship, and consequently a right of residence in any country of the EU, is automatically granted to those who are born in Ireland. The same story was revived more recently. The masters of Dublin's three main maternity hospitals reported increases in births from non-EU nationals: about 600 women from Russia, central Europe, the Middle East and Africa had come to Ireland in 1998 to have their

babies delivered. Citizenship was also on the mind of some commentators on the Romanian gypsies episode. It was reported that Romanian men were hanging around girls' secondary schools, hoping to impregnate schoolgirls, in the hope that the fathering of an Irish baby would bring a right of residence!

The idea of citizenship now possesses a long history. It emerged when members of a society ceased to be considered as subjects of the ruler. Citizenship referred to the members of the political community and implied their fundamental equality, at least in relation to public authorities. All citizens of the nation-state enjoy the same rights and face the same obligations. In that sense, citizenship renders all particular identities – such as gender, race, age, religion – irrelevant. But the concept of citizenship seems to have lost this association with universal equality. It is nowadays invoked to mark the boundaries of the political community, of society itself organised as nation-state. Citizenship identifies those who enjoy rights, to the exclusion of all others. Once supposed to institutionalise all key universal values, it is now used to exclude, reject, particularise. It becomes the wall, the barrier which protects an abstract national community. Citizenship grants privileges to those who belong at the very same time as it denies them to the non-citizen. Most expressions of prejudice and intolerance, most strategies of rejection, are based on the boundaries which have been traced around citizenship. The foreigner is, by definition, the non-citizen, even if some categories of citizens are themselves estranged and fall into a second-class citizenry.

Some anthropologists have identified a principle which underlies a great deal of social life. They have pointed to rules of reciprocity according to which individuals or groups relate to each other. Any breach in this principle of reciprocity will produce rejection, hostility and enmity. The concept of citizenship contains its own rule of reciprocity. Bryan Turner<sup>6</sup>

6 B. Turner (ed.), *Citizenship and social theory*, London: Sage, 1993.

argues that citizenship should not be defined as a set of legal rights and obligations, but in terms of practices. Citizenship involves rights and duties, entitlements and obligations, all of which are fulfilled through activity. It does not simply indicate a status, but refers to a mode of participation in the group. It demands activity and achievement. Some effort is implied by political participation: the citizen endeavours to be well informed and assumes a role in the public sphere. As autonomous and self-reliant individuals, citizens perform their economic role and contribute to the common weal, as well as ensuring an adequate living for themselves. Their rights or entitlements depend on the contribution they make to society.

The five million tourists who visit Ireland every year are not seen as a problem or a threat, however unIrish their demeanour may actually be, because the economy benefits from their presence. Neither are the numerous foreign students sojourning here to learn English. EU nationals participate in a global exchange which brings Ireland into a European political and economic framework. Many, and probably most, foreign groups have found their place: the Chinese have created an economic niche for themselves in providing exotic food, while many Muslims work as medical doctors in Irish hospitals. Most such foreigners have managed to establish a balanced relationship with the people around them. But not all: asylum seekers and Romanian gypsies are not so easily integrated.

Asylum seekers attract a great deal of hostility because they are not perceived as participating in a relation of reciprocity. Doubts are widely expressed about the claims of many of these people. Seventy per cent of Irish people think that the majority of asylum seekers, claiming a status of political refugee, simply come here for economic reasons.<sup>7</sup> They are widely decried as 'scroungers' and 'layabouts'.

7 *Sunday Independent* poll, 9 August 1998.

All refugees do not tell a story of success and integration. For instance, only one-quarter of the Vietnamese and Bosnian adults living in Ireland have attained full-time employment. Language problems and the difficulty of obtaining recognition for their qualifications continue to exclude them from mainstream Irish society.<sup>8</sup> There was, from the start, a sense that asylum seekers from Romania were doomed to join the underclass. Their poor command of the English language, their lack of relevant skills and their cultural association with nomadism bode badly for their future integration into Irish society. They could not realistically balance their claims to residence in Ireland with the promise of meaningful participation. It has been contended that many asylum seekers, particularly those from Africa and Cuba, have a great deal to offer in terms of relevant skills. But they are not allowed to use such skills.

The recent prosperity of Ireland has lured many foreigners from poorer countries. They arrive, it is perceived by some, to enjoy an affluence which has been hard won and remains precarious. They face many people who, after sacrifices and cutbacks, are still to benefit from this wealth. And feelings run deep. Mary, a street-trader, lives in a place in which many refugees are lodged and she complains bitterly about them. 'They just walk in and get everything I don't get: a medical card, free rent, £64 in the pocket. They are bad neighbours: they throw their waste on the balcony, leave their children unattended. In the evening, men arrive and keep late hours.'<sup>9</sup> Hostility is activated by the small details of daily life, by the difficulties of cohabitation, by the different rhythms according to which different cultures live. But cost constitutes the most recurrent complaint. The fact that asylum seekers in 1998 cost the Irish state more than

8 Refugee Resettlement Research Project, *Report of a survey of the Vietnamese and Bosnian communities living in Ireland*, Dublin: The Refugee Agency, 1998.

9 *The Irish Times*, 26 May 1998.

£50 million is endlessly repeated. Even the homeless resent the 'foreigners' being granted welfare and rent allowances. A near-riot developed when refugees and homeless people were required to queue in the same welfare office for their benefits. Intolerance is not only directed at non-citizens. Some Irish citizens are themselves on the receiving end of strong prejudices. This applies to cultural minorities such as the 22,000 Irish Travellers who experience extreme hostility. Their hybrid lifestyle, half sedentary and half nomadic, has marginalised them and they have been made largely dependent on the state. Their exclusion to a large extent mirrors the fate of all those who are barred from the meaningful participation which goes with citizenship, for example the long-term unemployed or those on very low pay living in disadvantaged areas. They too experience prejudice because for the time being they find themselves unable to redress the balance of citizenship.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has argued that prejudice and intolerance towards foreigners is not related, in a fundamental way, to an Irish identity which would feel under threat. The rejection of cultural minorities erupts every time the reciprocity of social relations is breached in a significant way. The refugees, and more particularly the Romanian gypsies, have triggered hostility and rejection because they would not or could not enter into reciprocal relationships with Irish people. The response towards these groups, either hostile closure or tolerance, depends to a large extent on creating for such groups the conditions of a balanced participation in Irish society.

Learning the language appears, of course, crucial in order to avoid cultural withdrawal. The open and sensitive expression of minority cultures, as well as public displays of their cultural symbols, will bring these groups nearer the mainstream (at a time when the mainstream is itself widening from within). But foremost amongst these conditions will

be their economic participation. A debate has actually opened about the interdiction of gainful employment which refugees face. Many voices have been raised, calling for the removal of such a rule. The organisations that represent small businesses have jumped at the opportunity and have suggested that such people would constitute a useful addition to the labour force at a time of potential labour shortages. Their economic participation would certainly establish a better balance between the entitlements and the contribution of such groups, and considerably ease the hostility which they attract. The danger remains that hostility towards them would intensify with the first signs of economic slowdown. They would then be perceived as taking the jobs of the Irish. In most European countries, hostility has increased dramatically when immigrants found it difficult to obtain work, when they had to depend on welfare, when they could no longer participate in a positive way to the life of the group. But the creation of the appropriate conditions for the balancing of entitlements from and participation in Irish society seems to be in the gift of state authorities.