

## **REVIEW: ETHNIC MINORITIES AND RACISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

*John Brewer*

Paul Hainsworth (ed.), **Divided Society: Ethnic Minorities and Racism in Northern Ireland**, London, Pluto Press, 1998, pb, £14.95, ISBN 0745311954, pp.xix+270

The conceptualisation of the conflict in Northern Ireland, and the nature of the groups involved in it, has proved problematic. It was once popular to see the conflict as a race relations situation and the groups as 'races', from which followed the 'game' of spotting the 'Prod' or the 'Taig' from outward appearance, although this was more popular amongst people in the streets rather than academic commentators. Equally marginal was the claim that it is a conventional class war based around the interests of a ruling class using sectarianism as a form of class domination. Others perceive the groups to be ethnically defined, based on national origin, language, tradition and custom. Others argue that the groups have more in common than divides them, and conflate ethnicity with religion, seeing the ethnic groups as socially marked and bounded by religious difference, although theology is only one of the items over which there is conflict. A few attempt to theorise the concept of sectarianism, distinguishing it from racism and ethnocentrism. A feature of all these formulations is a binary zero-sum conceptualisation in which Protestants and Catholics confront each other as monoliths in a two-sided conflict. These two

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identities subsumed all others, and permitted no neutral stance. Protagonists themselves could not conceive of someone who was neither Catholic nor Protestant, and conflicts over national identity tend to be all embracing. It was always something of a joke that outsiders, when confronted by protagonists, would supposedly be asked if they were Catholic or Protestant: Jews, Chinese, Hungarians and Hottentots, all had to make a choice and identify with one side or the other in Northern Ireland's great social cleavage. One could not be Jewish, only a Protestant or Catholic Jew.

Like humour generally, this contains an element of truth. There is only one line of differentiation in Northern Ireland that has been socially significant and sustained in its effects, and it goes back to religious differences created in plantation society in the seventeenth century; it is over-arching and has subsumed other social cleavages, enabling religion to stand for and represent in the modern period all other sorts of conflicts. It is a simple binary divide that splits society into two. All other conflicts and social identities are insignificant and marginal to the main social division. That is why Northern Ireland is represented so often in the academic literature as a 'divided society', possessing a rigid social structure and patterns of differentiation that are effortlessly reproduced by social processes. And socially reproduced to the point that they are as fixed as the lines of cleavage based around skin colour in South Africa, the society with which Ulster is often compared.

The value of this collection of essays edited by Paul Hainsworth is that it reminds us that other ethnic minority groups do exist in Northern Ireland, and some have been there for a very long time, notably the Jewish community. But given that these groups represent only 1.5 per cent of the total population (and then only if one includes 'travellers' as an ethnic minority), they hardly affect the characterisation of Northern Ireland or its patterns of differentiation and conflict. The discovery of 'race'

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(more properly, a rediscovery) in Northern Ireland, which this book extols, should not thus be exaggerated. It is therefore hardly a damning criticism to bemoan the paucity of research on ethnic minority groups in Northern Ireland given the profound effect on the social formation of its central line of differentiation.

But this does not mean that racism is not a social problem for ethnic minority groups or that it is absent from the mind set of the main group formations in Northern Ireland. The Editor is correct to challenge the view that Northern Ireland people cannot be racist because there are no 'races' there to speak of. The book shows, in excellent fashion, that racial discrimination and harassment are experienced as problems by ethnic minorities, and that Catholics and Protestants extend their hostility to each other also to ethnic and racial minorities, something they have both learnt from the British.

After the Editor's short introduction, the book divides into two, with the first section dealing with theoretical and conceptual issues, the second with case studies of particular ethnic minorities. In Part I McVeigh writes, once again, on racism in Northern Ireland, and, once again, manages to only cite himself in the development of the idea of Irish racism. We receive something new, however, in Hainsworth's examination of the place of racism and anti-racism in the usual Orange-Green political debate in the North, and interesting chapters follow on the context provided by international norms on human rights (Dickson and Bell), ethnic minority groups and policing in Ulster (White), the local news media treatment of racial issues (Fawcett), and, most interesting of all, a consideration of health issues and ethnic minority status in Northern Ireland (Mason).

I suspect that most readers will find the case studies in Part II of major interest, and they are mostly fascinating, not only for the fact they are, in most cases, the first of such accounts, but also because they permit a comparison with other societies with

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which Northern Ireland is not normally compared. There is much in these case studies to please those interested in Northern Ireland and those seeking to add the place as a comparison to their studies of 'race' and ethnic minorities generally. The case studies cover the Chinese (Watson and McKnight), traveller (Noonan), Indian (Irwin), Pakistani (Donnan and O'Brien) and Jewish (Warn) communities in Northern Ireland. They will hopefully become the focus of much more research into the experiences of ethnic minorities in a society where they are almost invisible; unseen not just because of their very low numbers but also as a result of the all-consuming nature of a social cleavage which ignores them (although, like everyone else, they are not untouched by it). The most valuable case studies are those which address the intersection between the marginal and central lines of differentiation, examining how racial and ethnic minority groups connect with the Orange-Green divide, live under it, and survive with their identity and group boundaries mostly in tact.

While the book overall is something of a Curate's egg, good in parts, one could still feel satisfied; a less than hearty meal but filling nonetheless.

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