

# **Aspects of Irish Diaspora**

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Luton Irish Centre

27 June 2015

## Mary Robinson, President of Ireland, Inaugural Speech in Dublin Castle on December 3, 1990

My primary role as President will be to represent this State. But the State is not the only model of community with which Irish people can and do identify. Beyond our State there is a vast community of Irish emigrants extending not only across our neighbouring island — which has provided a home away from home for several Irish generations — but also throughout the continents of North America, Australia **and of course Europe itself**. There are over **70 million** people living on this globe who claim Irish descent. I will be proud to represent them. And I would like to see Áras an Uachtaráin, my official residence, serve on something of an annual basis — as a place where our emigrant communities could send representatives for a get-together of **the extended Irish family abroad**.

# **Richard Kearney (1990, p.111)**

It takes the migrant mind to know that the island is without frontiers, that the seas are waterways connecting us with others, that the journey to the other place harbours the truth of homecoming to our own place

# My working definition of Diaspora

Diaspora refers to a hybrid, historical social formation in process that has been produced by migration

(Hickman 2012, p. 22)

# Definition of Social Formation

- A social formation refers to the diversity and unity of the social and economic relations of a society (such as a nation, city, business, university, a family, or a diaspora) with all its complexities, as it is historically constituted.
- It is the product of human interactions
- A social formation is therefore historical, specific to time and place but also subject to transformation and change.

# Why is the Irish diaspora a hybrid social formation?

- Place
- Time
- Generation
- Class
- Gender
- Region
- Religion
- Age

It demands complexity in our thinking to ascertain how social categories overlap, interact, conflict with, and interrupt each other.

# Diaspora Consciousness

- Diaspora consciousness highlights the tensions between common bonds created by shared origins and other ties arising from the process of dispersal (Gilroy 1997)
- For migrants a sense of solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries or 'at home' can compete, though it does not necessarily, with a bond of loyalty to the country of refuge or settlement.
- For the second and third generation the possible conflict is between solidarity with family and their ties with others who've been born and brought up in the place in which their parents or grandparents settled.

# Solidarity with co-ethnics

I would feel an affinity for any other Irish person that I would meet ... which would not exist if I was at home... you ask someone for directions on the road and they turn out to be Irish and there is immediately a much ... warmer response and things like that.

You know I often recognise Irish people here... By their features and the hair and the complexion, I often do.

(Irish woman, migrated in 1980s, living in London – quoted in Gray 2004)

# Awareness of Difference

- Liam: I became really aware of how different I was from some middle class English people, I was only about 6. My best friend at school I went to his house, he lived in Stretford, he wasn't a poncey middle class at all, but he was English. I was struck by how different the environment felt in his house to mine. I remember flags and emblems and things, it felt really weird to me, his mum was very well spoken, and it was odd for me. The dad was a very Colonel character, although I was only 6 I thought this is very different, you start to realise you are different.
- Eilish: One thing I noticed where my mum lives, we were the only ones that went out on a Sunday morning by car to mass. Everyone else was washing their cars, we were the only ones that went to mass. So completely different, and they didn't see mass as an issue because it is not to them.
- (Second generation interviewees in Manchester – quoted in Hickman et. al. 2005)

# Diaspora Space & Multiple Allegiances

**Diaspora space** (a city, a locality, an institutional setting) refers to spaces of encounter of people of different origins and genealogies (Brah 1996)

**The concept** emphasises that all parties to an encounter, including those viewed and represented as indigenous, are deeply marked by it. Contact does not automatically lead to understanding and empathy, it can reinforce pre-formed views.

How the parties to an encounter are marked by it differs depending upon the specific configurations of power mobilised by the encounter, and the differential impact of asymmetries of power on different social groups.

Examples: London and Birmingham

# A Coventry Kid's Dilemma

I find I can't throw any allegiance behind England whatsoever, although I do feel I am a member of the wider community, including the Scots, English, Welsh, Irish and Asians.... for me in it's current form English is, and I'm sorry for saying it, a little bit unattractive. Because, I think the most important thing, although we don't often admit it, or look at it hard enough, or ask hard questions about what it means to be English. But, an essential component part of being English, is being white.

The lad up Friars Hill road stays an Asian, regardless of wherever he is born. If he is born in Coventry and wears a turban he is a 'Paki' or an Asian, he carries a certain Asian identity regardless of his birthplace. Afro Caribbean people remain West Indians, Jamaicans regardless of their birthplace. English for me seems caught up with being white at the moment, Cliff Richard was born and raised in India, and has no problem at all selling himself as an Englishman does he. Although it might be nice to be English in the future, I say until they want the Asian, I don't want the English.

(Second generation interviewee in Coventry – quoted in Hickman et. al. 2005)

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