

PROOF

8

Migrant-Led Activism and Integration from Below in Recession Ireland

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In view of changing migration patterns and the Irish state's immigration and integration policies, this chapter focuses on migrants' responses to settlement in Ireland. In particular, it focuses on the creation of migrant-led associations, the subject of the Trinity Immigration Initiative's Migrant Networks Project, evidencing migrants' creative response to migration and resettlement. The chapter begins by discussing the implications of Irish interculturalism for migrant-led activism. It then outlines three migrant-led campaigns, the campaign against the ban on the Sikh turban in police service, the Irish Hijab Campaign, and Anti Deportation Ireland. The argument is that migrant activism is bounded by the narrow space accorded to it in an inhospitable socio-political climate. This is compounded by reduced funding since the recession, the subject of the conclusion.

Introduction

According to the 2011 census, 12% of the people living in Ireland have a nationality other than Irish, compared with 10% in 2006; the overall numbers have grown by 30% from 420,000 in 2006 to just over 540,000 in 2011. Almost all migrant groups in Ireland recorded an increase in numbers between 2006 and 2011, with the largest numerical increases being among Poles, Lithuanians and Romanians (Gilmartin 2012).

As long as the economic boom lasted, the response to immigration to Ireland was a politics of interculturalism – Ireland's way of avoiding the supposed 'crises' of European multiculturalism (Lentin and Titley 2011) – followed by a politics of diversity and integration. The pretence of integrationism, however, was dropped in 2008 with the onset of the recession, as the (erroneous, as it turned out) discourse of 'migrants going home'

I am indebted to Elena Moreo, who conducted the interviews and co-edited *Migrant Activism and Integration from Below in Ireland* (2012).

replaced the discourse of Ireland as a net immigration destination. In the current recession, immigration, interculturalism and integration are absent from public discourse, as anxieties about emigration are returning to haunt Ireland.

Against the background of the changing nature of migration patterns since the early 1990s, and the Irish state's immigration and integration policies (Lenihan 2008; *Translocations* 2010), this chapter focuses on migrants' own responses to settlement in Ireland. In particular, I examine the creation of migrant-led associations, the subject of the Migrant Networks Project,¹ evidencing migrants' creative response to the transformation of migration and resettlement.

The project mapped 436 migrant-led associations,² mostly established since 2001. Through lobbying, advocacy, outreach, information, training and support, these associations provide essential services, participate in policy debates, implement strategies of cultural adaptation and resistance, create opportunities for individual and community advancement, and provide a platform for disadvantaged segments of the population to become visible (Lentin and Moreo 2012).

I am aware of the objectification of 'migrants' as research subjects and ~~regarding~~ the term 'migrant' as heterogeneous, comprising asylum seekers, old, new, economic, labour and undocumented migrants. I argue that members of these migrant-led associations are not merely objects of Irish policies of immigration and integration, but, rather, active agents of 'integration from below', enacting Foucault's 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges' (2003) in new bottom-up ways.

I develop the argument by firstly discussing the implications of Irish interculturalism for migrant-led activism. I then outline three migrant-led campaigns. The first two, the campaign against the ban on wearing the Sikh turban while on police service and the Irish Hijab Campaign, aim at greater visibility and autonomy, while the third, Anti Deportation Ireland, is more explicitly political.

This chapter argues that, against state and societal strictures, migrant activism, though impressive, is ultimately bounded by the narrow space accorded to it in an inhospitable socio-political climate. This is further compounded by reduced funding since the recession, the subject of my conclusion.

Irish interculturalism and the fantasy of integration

Ireland's integration policies derived from economic needs. Migrants were seen as vital to filling labour and skill shortages. Politicians' 'willingness to learn from other countries' mistakes' (Mac Cormaic 2008) linked the rhetoric of interculturalism and integration with elsewhere narratives of failed assimilationism and multiculturalism (Lentin and Titley 2011). Meanwhile, the

ongoing refusal to admit state racism in constructing some immigrants (particularly asylum seekers) as ‘problems’ and others as useful labour migrants (Loyal 2011), and both as requiring integration into ‘our ways’, and the caution against ‘too much diversity’, meant a transition from ‘combating racism’ to ‘accommodating cultural diversity’ (Lentin and McVeigh 2006, 178–177).

On the one hand, integration policies were enacted in the spirit of Irish interculturalism, and, on the other, of making state services impartial and universal, while excluding migrants whose cultural practices threaten ‘our’ ways of life. Integration is never the two-way process it claims to be. As Lentin and Titley (2011, 176) argue, ‘the fantasy of integration is central to the stratification and control of migrants and racialised populations’. If integration is ultimately about migrants doing things ‘our way’, migrants are never only passive ‘bare life’ incarcerated in what Giorgio Agamben (2005) calls ‘zones of exception’ as recipients of racial governmentalities, but, rather, as I now demonstrate, active instigators of their own ‘insurrection of subjugated knowledges’.

Unveiling ‘bad diversities’

In 2007, having appealed for recruits from Ireland’s ‘new communities’ for its reserve force, An Garda Síochána (the Irish police force) refused to allow a Sikh volunteer to wear his turban on duty. The Garda insisted that the force’s ‘intercultural approach’ does not advocate ‘one religious belief over another’ and that it is not ‘in any way being racist’. The Garda aimed to ‘retain an image of impartiality while providing a State service to all citizens’, but, unsurprisingly, declined to rule out the wearing of Catholic religious symbols such as crucifixes, Lenten ashes and abstinence (‘pioneer’) pins (McGarry 2008). I want to argue that the turban ban was not only a missed opportunity to demonstrate Ireland’s commitment to diversity, but also an indication of the confusion between national integrity and the perceived ‘crises of European multiculturalism’.

Though causing affront and involving racist attacks, the turban ban offered Sikh people in Ireland an opportunity for unity and visibility, and also evoked curiosity and sympathy that the Irish Sikh Council responded to by organizing an effective information and media campaign:

After that turban controversy we had lots of e-mails coming from schools... So we sent... a brief about Sikhism and the turban and the history of the turban... and why our people are participating in various forces all over the world... We received some positive feedback... and negative... Through the controversy... we got good media contacts....

(Interview with Satwinder Singh, 2007)

PROOF

Ronit Lentin 79

The turban campaign was followed by the photographic exhibition *A Sikh Face in Ireland*,³ and a series of workshops run by the Irish Sikh Council. The exhibition aimed to bring positive images of Sikh migrants to the attention of the Irish public, but Singh has no illusions about the possibility of integration:

I don't think the Minister (for Integration) is competent enough to handle **Integration**...it is just lip service...There are huge problems with the enrolment of kids in schools...there are problems with accommodation, jobs...like the turban thing...I don't think the government is doing enough for integration...things are changing so fast...and the government is just sleeping...

(Interview, 2007)

In an ironic Irish dimension to the turban debate, Jasbir Singh Puri of the Irish Sikh Council wondered whether Irish emigrants to the US who have converted to Sikhism would also be banned from serving in the Garda if they insist on wearing their turbans, negating citizenship rights accorded to second, third and fourth-generation Irish people. He also pointed out that the ban affects not only naturalized Sikhs but also their Irish-born citizen children (Kelly, 2009).

The turban campaign raises a fundamental question. On the one hand, it enabled Sikh people in Ireland to unite and politicize, and to speak publicly about their absence from the public sphere. On the other hand, the campaign brought no change in public policy, as it did not succeed in overturning the Garda's turban ban, the state ultimately having the upper hand.

Like the turban, the Muslim veil is a signifier of what Lentin and Titley call 'bad diversity'. The veil has become the universal racialized signifier par excellence, speaking above all to the Western liberal illusion of 'free choice'. According to this logic, Western attitudes towards the veil mean that women can wear it (only) if it is their free choice, not imposed by husbands, fathers, preachers or political leaders. This logic extended to the justifications for the war on Afghanistan as 'a righteous war by virtue of our concern to save the women' (Ahmed 2011, 14). In her study of the resurgence of the hijab from Egypt to the West, as an expression of post-9/11 Islamism, Leila Ahmed argues that veiled Muslim women are active agents for whom the re-emergence of the hijab is a political act and a quintessential sign 'of irresolvable tension and confrontation between Islam and the west' (Ahmed 2011, 11).

It is thus not surprising that the turban ban was followed in October 2007 by the hijab debate, following a request by a Muslim couple that their daughter be allowed to wear the hijab in class at a Wexford secondary school. The principal agreed, while also seeking directions from the Department of

Education, which decided not to issue a directive on the hijab in schools. The matter was settled amicably, but, probably due to widespread European policies banning 'the burqa', the Minister of Education insisted that, in line with the Equal Status Acts, 'no uniform policy should... exclude pupils of a particular religious background'. However, he did not recommend 'the wearing of clothing in the classroom which obscures a facial view and creates an artificial barrier' (ICCL 2010).

Like the turban ban, the hijab campaign too has an Irish twist. Lorraine O'Connor, one of the founders of the Irish Hijab Campaign, articulated her choice to veil as a feminist freedom of choice, rather than due to Islamic religious particularism.⁴ O'Connor, an Irish convert to Islam, also stressed her right to veil as 'an Irish citizen' – illustrating the according of the status of a 'body out of place' to an indigenous woman, as cultural symbols supposedly foreign to 'our own culture' blur the boundaries between immigrant and indigenous, making it necessary for state racism to intervene (Foucault 2003).

Using similar strategies to the Irish Sikh Council, the Irish Hijab Campaign aimed to explain the intricate meanings of the hijab through information events and school talks:

we did explain... to [the Minister] that we are not a campaign just for the scarf, we are a campaign for the hijab, literally covering... the media are looking at people who are wearing hijab here... and it's causing terrible racism. To [mention the] niqab now would cause worse racism....

(Interview, 2008)

There are several differences between the turban campaign and the Irish Hijab Campaign. First, while the Irish Sikh Council campaign arose from within the Dublin Sikh Gurdwara, the Irish Hijab Campaign was established outside the remit of the Dublin Mosques. It also uncovered barriers between migrant and local Muslim women. The Irish Hijab Campaign is mostly organized by Irish converts to Islam and involves few migrant women, mostly because of racial harassment. As O'Connor says: 'I am a living example of what's happening. I've had my house egged, I have had my car broken, I have had my windows [broken]... I am from Ireland and I am getting this because I put on a scarf, can you imagine what immigrants are getting?' Despite the existence of a women's group in the Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland, O'Connor says that Muslim migrant women face specific barriers to being politically involved (Interview, 2008).

These two campaigns demonstrate another point. Turban, veils and other signifiers of 'bad diversity' demonstrate that 'today's liberal tolerance towards others... is counterpointed by an obsessive fear of harassment. In short, the Other is just fine, but only insofar as his presence is not intrusive, insofar as this Other is not really other' (Žižek 2009, 35).

The 'unpeople' strike back

Like the campaigns discussed above, the third campaign, Anti Deportations Ireland (ADI), also highlights migrants speaking for themselves, making a concerted effort to reverse what members see as offensive state policies, particularly the deportation of people the state terms 'failed' asylum seekers. ADI, initiated by Luke Bhuka of Anti Racism Network Ireland, in association – crucially – with asylum seekers still resident in the state's Direct Provision hostels, is a national, multiethnic grassroots network/alliance of activists, asylum seekers, refugees, community workers, trade unionists and academics who have come together to campaign against forced deportations and for the abolition of the Direct Provision system.

Importantly, the work of Anti Deportation Ireland and Anti Racism Network Ireland, unlike that of Irish-led migrant support groups, uses unconventional bottom-up strategies. Bhuka likens the work of these two groups to what John Pilger (2008) called in a very different context 'getting the "unpeople" to speak for themselves'. As he says of ARN Ireland:

It is not a job... that is why we are getting people... because we... speak ourselves... it is not top-down, it is from the bottom... it is just people talking to people... *the unpeople talking to the unpeople*... We are trying to coordinate our anger, bring it together... I know you can have a more professional way of doing it... But the danger... is having an office and all the computers and staff and you can't even call 20 people in the street... for us the street is where it is needed....

(Interview, 2011, emphasis added)

The Sikh and hijab campaigns and the more recent anti-deportation campaign enact a Foucauldian 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges', emanating from migrants' lived experience of racialization and their determination to enable the 'unpeople' to become politically active. Each in its own way, the three campaigns enable the racialized to work towards integration from below, on their own terms, though this is becoming increasingly difficult due to the changing political and funding climate during the recession, as I now discuss.

Conclusion: Migrant activism in a cold climate

Migrant-led activism runs the risk of working within state parameters, and at times confusing the visible with the political. Activism, however, is always interventionist, aiming to change the system while at the same time involving a commitment to life (Svirsky 2011). The migrant activists we worked with definitely focus on life: a better life in their new destination for themselves, their families and their communities.

Our study demonstrates that migrants often explicitly appropriate integrationist state discourses, not always cognizant that interculturalism, diversity and integration are policy responses to the 'problem of difference' (Hall 2000). While Irish interculturalism may be a response to failed elsewhere, the post-migratory practices of migrant-led associations must be theorized as 'integration from below'. Like 'transnationalism from below', integration from below is 'embodied in specific social relations, between specific people, situated in unequivocal localities at historically determined times' (Guarnizo and Smith 1998, 11). Migrant-led groups in Ireland not only strategically appropriate state discourses to secure scarce funds and a place at the table. They also resist these discourses, which disavow power inequalities, deny migrants crucial funding and a meaningful independent voice, and which appropriate migrants' intercultural practices so as to bolster the state's embrace of alternative modes of integration.

Our data on women's migrant-led associations (De Tona 2012) indicate that formal networks, such as AkiDwA, the African and Migrant Women's Network,⁵ aim to integrate members into Ireland's changing ethnoracial and migratory realities through becoming involved in coalitions, alliances and organizations in Ireland and beyond (De Tona and Lentin 2007, 82). A perfect example of 'integration from below', AkiDwA both appropriates and resists integrationist state discourses, explicitly aiming to represent migrant women, independently of both migrant men and indigenous Irish women (De Tona and Lentin 2007, 78–82). However, they also form strategic alliances with Irish partners: see, for instance, their success in bringing about the signing into law of the Female Genital Mutilation Bill in April 2012.⁶

While campaigns such as ADI struggle for public attention, deliberately operating without state funding, strategically aiming to retain independence to be able to oppose and criticize, associations such as AkiDwA depend on public funding precisely because of their success at reaching large migrant and indigenous target audiences. However, the recession is bringing about new challenges following the gradual loss of interest in immigration and integration and the concomitant loss of funding, raising concerns in relation to the future of this lively sector. According to AkiDwA's CEO Salome Mbugua, the network's high level of activity and visibility will be jeopardized by the reduction of funding from its main funders, Atlantic Philanthropies, Dublin City Council and the Department of Justice, Equality and Defence, most of which terminated at the end of 2012:

There are many demands...we can't continue to operate the way we have been...we have women coming from Cork, Limerick, Galway...we have staff working up to seven o'clock...we also have expectations from groups wanting us to make presentations...sit in their groups and boards...and it also creates dependency because the more you allow people to come in, the more you do for people....

(Interview, 2012)

The recession means that most migrant-led groups, but also Irish migrant-support organizations, are facing substantial cuts in a cold post-integration political climate, that does not favour migrants no longer vital to Ireland's economy. Mbugua says:

Based on how the economy is doing I am not very optimistic... we know we cannot get money from the government at the moment... we know we are not a priority and also the things we are bringing up... issues of racism, everyone (saying) 'how dare you even have the guts to talk about these issues?' So they put you out of the picture, and this is what is happening.

(Interview, 2012)

In 2011 An Garda Síochána replaced its 'Racial and Intercultural Office' with a 'Diversity Strategy and Implementation Plan',⁷ no longer focusing on racial discrimination but, rather, on all the nine grounds covered by the equality legislation. Elsewhere in the Republic of Ireland, as news of bank bailouts, debt, draconian budget cuts, mortgage defaults, house repossessions and emigration fill the recession air with despair and bewilderment, there is scant mention of diversity or integration. The recession may have speeded up this trend; however, the diverse society created by over a decade of rapid immigration is not about to disappear (Mac Cormaic 2009). In recession Ireland only migrants and their supporters dare mention racism, as the discourses of diversity, interculturalism and integration are giving way to renewed xenophobic fears and dreams about a not too distant future of an Ireland green again, white again.

However, despite the changing political climate and decreased public funding, and despite the tendency to represent migrants' voices by those of the ethnic majority, something all leaders of migrant-led associations complain about, migrant associations remain resilient, providing much-needed services and support to migrant communities.

This chapter demonstrated that the possibilities of resistance are developing as fast as the methodologies of subordination. The acts of resistance discussed in this chapter leave us, at worst, with what the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls 'passionate pessimism' (personal communication) and, at best, with a deep admiration for the migrants who have permitted us to glimpse their lives and their activism.

Notes

1. This three-year ethnographic project, part of the Trinity Immigration Initiative (<http://www.tcd.ie/immigration/networks/index.php> accessed 7 July 2012) conducted 83 in-depth interviews with leaders and members of migrant-led associations, and researchers attended many events and conducted internet and documentary analysis (Lentin 2012).

2. http://www.tcd.ie/immigration/css/downloads/Mapping_final12.08.09.pdf accessed 7 July 2012.
3. <http://www.cbl.ie/Exhibitions/Past-Exhibitions/A-Sikh-Face-in-Ireland.aspx> accessed 10 July 2012.
4. Lorraine O'Connor spoke in a public seminar in the 'Migrant voices' series, Migrant Networks Project, Trinity Immigration Initiative, 30 October 2008.
5. <http://www.akidwa.ie/> accessed 10 July 2012.
6. www.akidwa.ie accessed 15 September 2013.
7. <http://garda.ie/Documents/User/DiversityStrat.pdf> accessed 10 July 2012.

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PROOF

Ronit Lentin 85

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