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Irish Travellers: Ethnicity, Persistence, Recognition

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It has been almost a half century since the anthropologist Fredrik Barth outlined a critical approach for the study of ethnicity in his contribution to the volume *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. In this seminal work, Barth berates scholars of ‘cultural groups’ for the uncritical application of an ideal-type definition of ethnicity.¹ This, for Barth, puts the cart before the horse, whereby ethnic boundaries are formed from group isolation rather than through interaction with other groups. To put this in its most fundamental sense, defining ethnicity requires another so that we may understand who we are.

Irish Travellers tick all the boxes for inclusion in Barth’s typological categories for ethnicity. While they are undoubtedly socially and biologically self-reproducing, Travellers are far from representing a ‘cultural isolate’, since their economic practices, kinship networks, and ethnic identity have all been formed through a detached relationality with ‘country people’. I raise this, not simply to reiterate Barth’s contention that ethnic groups are not air-tight containers for ‘culture’, but to also highlight that Travellers are an intrinsic part of Irish society and history.

This does not mean that Travellers are not distinct—their language and culture clearly demonstrate that they are. Barth’s genius was in making us attentive to the ways that ethnic boundaries are formed in a relational field with other groups. This compels us to ask why Travellers have had to erect and maintain social boundaries. For decades scholars such as Judith Okely have (contended) that Irish Travellers are, without a shadow of doubt, an ethnic group.² This raises a further question: why has the Irish government hitherto refused to recognise their ethnic identity? Perhaps the answers to these critical questions relate to the social exclusion Travellers experience from Irish society. In an era when the culture of minority ethnic groups

¹ Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organisation of Culture Difference*. (Long Grove IL: Wave Land Press: 1998 [1969]): 9-38.

² Judith Okely, ‘An Anthropological Perspective on Irish Travellers’, in *Irish Travellers: Culture and Ethnicity*, eds. May McCann, Seamus O’Siochain and Joseph Ruane, (Belfast: Queen’s University of Belfast 1994): 1-19

is celebrated in festivals, education syllabuses and television programming, Travellers' ethnic status has been denied.

The jarring fact is that, unless Travellers were being pushed from camp to camp or were being demonised in the media, they had not received recognition from the Irish state. Additionally, since a recognised ethnic identity is synonymous with having a recognised cultural heritage and a right to protection under race relations and equality policies, to deny the former is, in turn, to deny the latter. Of course, Travellers have always kept things close, looking towards the family, an institution woven from a tightly-knit tapestry of kin-relations, to provide care and ethnic continuity. In this sense, Travellers were always aware that they are a group in their own right; their persistence demonstrates this, regardless of what those in the Irish Government have had to say.

One of Barth's main concerns is the persistence of ethnic groups, which in his formulation entails certain characteristics such as a shared language, culture and biologically and socially reproductive kinship networks. Despite racist stereotyping and a host of other obstacles, Irish Travellers have certainly persisted as an ethnic group. However, this has occurred without formal recognition of their ethnic status in the Republic of Ireland. This denial has meant that Travellers had no rights to protection from anti-discrimination legislation, which, as Robbie McVeigh suggests, means that they were officially prevented from experiencing racism (McVeigh 2007). In 2017 the Irish state came to its senses and officially recognised Irish Travellers as an ethnic group. Although, we cannot be certain that this will solve all the difficulties that Travellers face, we can hope that the road ahead is not burdened by the problems of the past and that the bestowal of ethnic status will foster a more positive relationship with the non-Traveller Irish. Let us hope that this momentous victory does not fail in its potential to bring positive change as Barth long ago contended, ethnicity is concerned with interaction not isolation.

Acknowledgements

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