

# Racism in Ireland: From Boom to Bust

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We are, undoubtedly, living in turbulent times. The battles being fought are not just hand and fist, gun and mortar but are also being fought in the realm of possibility as new orders and ideas take shape in and out of the battles on the streets. There is a new enthusiasm for ideas to explain the crisis we have found ourselves in and more importantly there is an appetite for ideas that offer an alternative, a way out. These ideological shifts are happening side by side with and emerging from struggle. On November 14<sup>th</sup> a general strike will have taken place simultaneously in five European countries: in Greece, Portugal, Spain, Malta and Cyprus; a mass expression of anger against austerity.

Since the first wave of massive protests in Egypt in early 2011, with millions of protestors in Tahrir Square bringing about the eventual downfall of a dictator, there has been a sense of the surreal and historic significance when watching world events. In August, over forty striking mine workers were killed by police in South Africa, reminiscent of the worst of the Apartheid exploitation and racism. One of the most powerful images was of a sea of black faces sitting on the ground at a mass meeting in the days following the shootings. Two weeks previously there was a tragedy of a different sort in Wisconsin where six people were killed by a lone gunman at a Sikh temple. And it is just over a year since white supremacist Anders Breivik murdered 77 people in Norway. As in the 1930s when Europe was gripped by recession, fascism is emerging again in many countries,

preying on the poor and the working class and the disillusionment born out of high unemployment, cuts and the dismantling of public services.

Governments have become adept at playing the multi-culturalism card where they regularly unveil reports and initiatives that appear to celebrate cultural diversity and promote so-called integration but the reality is that government policies of cutbacks and discrimination create the conditions that allow racism to take root and grow.

The media coverage and social media discussions around the Olympic Games in London last August brought prejudices out of the closet and exposed an establishment that for many years was hiding behind and paying lip service to multiculturalism.

In a new book, Marcel Perlman<sup>1</sup> argues that sport legitimises the social order and in the book he extends and amplifies George Orwells insistence that sport was 'war minus the shooting'. He argues that International competition generates chauvinism, racism and xenophobia, and the stadium is the chief forum for channelling these mass emotions<sup>2</sup>. I disagree with the belief that racism and the other aforementioned are mass emotions but as the 2012 Olympics show, the media and in particular social media, were the forum for overtly racist vitriol. Many countries expelled athletes from teams for racist tweets. A Greek athlete was expelled for tweeting, 'With so many Africans in Greece, the West Nile mosquitoes will be getting home food!!!'.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside the worst of the racist com-

<sup>1</sup> Perelman, Marc. *Barbaric Sport: A Global Plague*, Verso 2012

<sup>2</sup> Brendan Daly reviewing *Barbaric Sport: A Global Plague* in *The Sunday Business Post*, 15 July 2012.

<sup>3</sup> [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com) 25 July 2012

mentary and tweeting, important debates emerged; around racial stereotyping, the differences between black and white athletes, the difference between male and female athletes, and the difference between acceptable cultures versus the unacceptable cultures excluded from multiculturalism. This is evident in anti-Traveller bigotry, alive and kicking in Ireland and a sentiment dangerously prevalent in Europe .

The Olympic medal win for Ireland last summer highlighted the hypocrisy of official Ireland when a traveller became a national hero for winning a silver medal in boxing. The parents and family of John Joe Nevin, however, weren't allowed into any of the pubs in his hometown of Mullingar to watch their son fight for an Olympic medal; a glaring example of common anti-traveller sentiment. John Joe Nevin was hailed as 'boxing champion John Joe Nevin' whereas if he had been caught for a traffic offense or in the media for anything else it is almost certain he would have been 'Traveller John Joe Nevin'.

### **Anti-Traveller, anti-Roma racism in Europe**

The rise in racism towards Travellers including racism against the Roma people has been a worrying development right across Europe. In Hungary, in the last year alone, seven people have died violent deaths in a series of attacks on Roma homes. In France in the last few years, thousands of Roma were expelled when Sarkozy, as President, ordered police raids and mass deportations. In April, a weekly magazine in Switzerland, called *Weltwoche*, had a front cover with a picture of a Roma child wielding a gun accompanied by a headline that said 'The Roma

are coming: Plundering in Switzerland'<sup>4</sup>. This is an example of the common stereotyping of Roma as criminals.

An EU report in February 2012 found that Roma and Travellers are denied basic human rights in most countries, remaining far behind others in education, employment, access to housing and healthcare and suffering blatant racism. Over 90 percent of Roma live below national poverty lines, their average lifespan is shorter and they have higher infant mortality rates. The Council of Europe acknowledges in a Roma information leaflet that,

The Roma are the most persecuted minority in Europe. Majority populations have for centuries harboured stereotypes about them, misreading their itinerant lifestyle and traditions and seeing them as dirty, asocial thieves...Frequently scapegoated their present situation looks grim, against a backdrop of the world economic crisis, the rise of extremism, discriminatory laws on migration and inflammatory media reports of EU enlargement leading to an influx of Roma. Many communities refuse to allow Roma families to settle and pushed away to live in shanty towns and make-shift encampments, the stereotype of Roma as people who live in dirty and poorly maintained conditions is further entrenched.<sup>5</sup>

The Roma community in Ireland are an extremely vulnerable group primarily because most of Ireland's Roma are citizens of Romania and, as such, they are generally

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<sup>4</sup>[www.swissinfo.ch](http://www.swissinfo.ch)

<sup>5</sup>[www.dosta.org](http://www.dosta.org)

excluded from the labour market in Ireland and forced to live in extreme poverty, in temporary dwellings and often have to beg to make a living.

## Origins of racism

The idea that humans are innately racist, that it is somehow inbuilt into our DNA is something we all hear in various places, in various guises, in the same way we often hear that blacks, are different to whites for example and that Roma are naturally prone to crime. Historically, racism was used to justify colonialism and slavery. Rather than just a part of human nature as many would have us believe, it is a modern phenomenon. In ancient Greece and Rome for example, the crucial dividing line was between slave and free citizen. And slaves were both black and white and free citizens were both black and white. Racism emerged to justify the use of African slave labour in the plantations of the New World in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and it developed as capitalism developed. So appalling was the treatment of slaves that Europe had to come up with a justification that was palatable and that justification was to paint a picture of a savage, animal-like creature. According to CLR James:

The conception of dividing people by race begins with the slave trade. This thing [the slave trade] was so shocking, so opposed to all the conceptions of society which religion and philosophers had... that the only justification by which humanity could face it was to

divide people into races and decide that the Africans were an inferior race.<sup>6</sup>

While slavery in Greece and Rome was essential for maintaining the lavish and luxurious life-styles of the ruling class, slavery in the new world was essential for what Marx called 'the primitive accumulation of capital', in other words, generating profits by the hard labour of African negroes. As all the masters were white and all the slaves were black, racism developed as an ideology of white superiority. 'Had all the slaves been white and all the masters black, the result would have been an ideology of black superiority'<sup>7</sup>. In 1760, this ideology identified Africans as,

...proud, lazy, treacherous, thievish, hot and addicted to all kinds of lusts, and most ready to promote them in others as pimps, panders, incestuous, brutish and savage, cruel and revengeful.<sup>8</sup>

These ideas of the savage African were opposed by the Abolitionist movement and while Racism didn't go away it was forced to change its image and by the nineteenth century was being used to justify colonial expansion. Instead of being animal-like brutes they became uncivilised children that had to be taught how to behave and be disciplined for their own good by colonial benefactors. Later with the advent of a growth in scientific exploration came the skull measuring anthropologists and the idea that the white master was superior because he was mentally and physically fitter.

<sup>6</sup>CLR James, *Modern Politics*, Detroit 1973 p.124

<sup>7</sup> Peter Alexander, *Racism. Resistance & Revolution*, Bookmarks 1987 p. 11

<sup>8</sup>Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, Pluto Press, London, 1984 p. 153

As capitalism developed and expanded, society and culture was changing all the while. While colonial expansion was taking place overseas industrial production was growing at home. A new Immigrant workforce evolved out of the need for extra workers. In the early days this new generation of workers included many Irish immigrants and another form of racism emerged that was no longer colour-coded. The Irish too were deemed an inferior race. The novelist Charles Kingsley was travelling in Sligo in 1860 and wrote of his travels,

I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country... to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black one would not feel it so much.<sup>9</sup>



A nineteenth century racist illustration of the Irish.

Karl Marx was one of the first to write about this new anti-Immigrant racism. Writing in 1870 he said,

Every industrial and commercial centre in England now possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English

proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standards of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country against Ireland, thus strengthening their dominion over himself...

This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short, by all means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organisation. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it.<sup>10</sup>

## Immigration

The history of Capitalism is also a history of movement; from colonial expansion from the West to the East to the flow of spices around the globe, from the flow of money through global financial markets to the movement of information and communication on the internet. People have always moved, be it fleeing famine or war or moving in search of work. The Irish were forced to leave Ireland at different times in history and were needed to build railways in places like the US and to work in factories in Britain. However, despite the huge need for labour to build these rapidly expanding nations, the Irish were not always welcomed with open arms and the expression 'No dogs, No Irish' has become part

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Fryer p. 182

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Peter Alexander, *Racism. Resistance & Revolution*, Bookmarks 1987 P.20

of the folklore of emigration.

Likewise, people came to Ireland for many different reasons but mainly to work in the property boom fuelled construction and service industries during the boom years. In the period of the Celtic Tiger, surveys revealed significant levels of racism. A survey carried out by Amnesty in 2000 suggested that about 80 percent of respondents had experienced some form of racism or discrimination. A more recent study by the Fundamental rights agency in 2009 put Ireland in the top 5 countries in the EU for racial discrimination and abuse with over 73 percent of individuals from Sub-Saharan Africa stating they had experienced such abuse.<sup>11</sup>

As Marx noted above, migrant workers can often be pitted against indigenous workers by employers trying to keep costs low or governments looking for scapegoats and the proof of this is now a growing concern all over Europe. During the Celtic Tigers years, a two tier wage system on building sites played a huge part in fostering an Us vs. Them feeling when times got bad and low paid workers were getting more hours.

Polish cleaners, Brazilian meat packers and mushroom growers are just some examples of some of the groups that were paid appalling wages. This created a group of workers who were valuable during boom times but many of whom are now left without any rights or protections. Ireland has an estimated 30,000 undocumented migrants who have settled here, married here, are raising children here and working here but who have no legal rights or entitlements and live in constant fear.

In 2012, four years into the crisis, as the effects of the recession are being felt more deeply, immigrants are increasingly being blamed for the scarcity of jobs and

the difficulties in accessing vital services that are becoming more and more depleted from cuts and privatisation.

## The far-right in Europe

As the global economic crisis has intensified over the past number of years so too have the problems associated with the crisis such as unemployment, privatisation and cuts to wages and services. The European-wide Right , Nazi parties, street movements like the EDL (English Defence League) in Britain and populist racist electoral parties have made political gains. The starkest manifestations of racism today can be seen in the rise of anti-Muslim racism and anti-Roma or anti-Traveller racism.

In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' racist Freedom Party (PVV) now the third biggest in the Dutch parliament wants to ban Muslims from entering the country and put a tax on Muslim women wearing a headscarf. However these far-right parties dont always start by talking about Immigration and their propaganda is not even always overtly racist. They often build their base by talking about the bread and butter issues and growing inequality, often focusing on ideas of nation and national identity and then moving to racism to stir things up, to divert anger towards minority communities, religions and so on. The PVV now has a new anti-immigrant website that invites Dutch nationals to submit complaints about Eastern and Central Europeans living in the Netherlands, particularly about Immigrants committing crimes and taking jobs from Dutch citizens.

The Irish Independent had an article in March 2012 on what it called the manifestations of xenophobia. The journalists comment following an interview with Auke

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<sup>11</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2009) *European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey*, <http://fra.europa.eu/eu-midis/>

Zijlstra, a PVV MEP, was that ‘These people are extremely adept at wrapping their xenophobic views in a cloak of conviviality’ and ‘The Freedom Partys manipulative distortion of facts is a dangerous propaganda tool that preys on peoples fears and directs their anger towards strangers’.<sup>12</sup>

## Racism in Ireland

Although in Ireland there are no organised racist political movements like the BNP, EDL or the Neo-Nazi groups in Germany and recently in Greece, there is an established and deep institutional racism.

This attitude of the state is repeatedly explained and justified by reference to increased migration into the country. However, claims that ‘the country was not ready and prepared for the huge influx of immigrants and asylum seekers in the last few decades’ are baseless and only serve to excuse the state’s failure to deal with the real issues surrounding racism.

In the early years of the millennium, Irish ministers were travelling around the world and asking other countries to send workers to Ireland to supply the ever increasing demand for labour in the country. The state was fully capable of drawing labour into Ireland but when it came to establishing fair and proper working and residency conditions for migrants it failed to put in place any legal or social framework. Workers were bound by work permits, which only allowed them to work for the employer that was granted the work permit. Losing a job meant that workers were also losing the right to residency in the state. Spouses of workers were not allowed to work. Despite being resident in the country, workers and their families had no free travel rights in the EU, even if the travel was related to their work. Family members had to go through the same visa

procedures like anyone else to visit their relatives in Ireland. Many of the workers were in a temp-employment status without any guarantees of renewal of the work permit and therefore of the residency status. Doctors, engineers, nurses, IT people had to endure long queues to receive their residency stamps and travel visas. There was no real attempt by the state to protect these migrant workers and inform them about their rights and entitlements. For many years migrant workers were left to the tender mercies of the state bureaucracy. Citizenship (naturalisation) applications took as long as 2 years.

There have been some positive developments regarding work permits, residency entitlement and citizenship but thousands of migrant workers who were invited by the state to Ireland had to suffer at the hands of a completely uninterested and unresponsive state.

There is now a new form of attack on migrant workers driven by the current economic crisis in the country. Time and again migrant workers are blamed for the unemployment levels just as the are by racists and the right in virtually every country from the US to Greece.

We must defend migrant workers against these manufactured lies and diversions from the real cause of unemployment. Migrant workers did not cause the current crisis and related unemployment. They have contributed to the country’s economy as any worker does and are also suffering from the crisis as other workers do.

If all of the migrant workers in Ireland were sent back to their original countries, this would have no meaningful positive affect in eliminating unemployment. It would simply further shrink the economy. There are thousands of ‘skilled’ and ‘unskilled’ migrant workers who do necessary jobs and continue to contribute to the

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<sup>12</sup>‘As exiles celebrate lets keep our own door open’, *Irish Independent* 19 March 2012

economy. The government has wasted billions of Euros as bail-out funds instead of creating jobs and investment in the country. A racist sentiment in the country serves their purpose in diverting from the real cause of the crisis the country is in. Furthermore, racism is never about finding a solution to any crisis but is a reaction to it. A global attempt to send back migrants in any country with unemployment would probably see millions of Irish emigrants returning back from the UK, Australia and the US etc. to seek jobs in Ireland.

Immigrant workers did not cause the thousands of empty buildings in the country, or the thousands of teaching/health positions lost. They are not responsible for closure of hospital beds and wards and axing of public services.

Immigration does not have a simple one way impact on jobs and wages. As reported in the UK in January 2012, ‘the number of migrant workers coming to the UK over the past decade has had little or no impact on joblessness, with “no association” between rising immigration and an increase in Jobseeker’s Allowance claims, the study by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) found.’<sup>13</sup>

Similar research results in the US show that Immigration does not cause unemployment. There is no evidence of a direct relationship between immigrant workers and rising unemployment.

A Report by the Immigration Policy Centre states that:

- Immigrants are not the cause of low wages for minority workers.
- Immigration does not cause unemployment.

- Immigrants create jobs as consumers and entrepreneurs.
- Immigrant workers spend their wages in U.S. Businesses - buying food, clothes, appliances, cars, etc. Businesses respond to the presence of these new workers and consumers by investing in new restaurants, stores, and production facilities.<sup>14</sup>

Immigrants expand the U.S. economy’s productive capacity, stimulate investment, and promote specialization that in the long run boosts productivity. There is no evidence that these effects take place at the expense of jobs for workers born in the United States.<sup>15</sup>

There is nothing special about Ireland. Migrant workers expand the economy, help businesses to grow and contribute to the system both as tax payers and consumers of goods and services. Migrants create new jobs and contribute to the public and private pension funds in Ireland. The majority of migrant workers are of working age and contribute more to the economy in taxes and PRSI than they receive in public services or social welfare. It has been estimated that migrants contribute €3.7 billion to the economy annually through taxes and PRSI, work permit fees, immigration registration fees, higher education fees and personal consumption.<sup>16</sup>

## Asylum Seekers and Refugee Application Process

The story of the asylum seekers in Ireland is an even harsher one. The whole refugee

<sup>13</sup>Louisa Peacock, Jobs Editor, *The Telegraph*, January 10th 2012, [www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk)

<sup>14</sup>Immigration Policy Centre, [www.immigrationpolicy.org](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org)

<sup>15</sup>Economist Giovanni Peri of the University of California

<sup>16</sup>Migrant Rights Centre Ireland, ‘Facts About Migrant Workers in Ireland’, *Bulletin*

application process and the issues of asylum seekers are for over a decade blurred with official deception and political propaganda. Asylum seekers and the relatively but not extraordinarily increased numbers over the first half millennium were mostly used in the mainstream media and political right-wing circles to hype up a hysteria and fear among the people of this country. Numbers were thrown up in the air without a context and critical analysis of what they really mean. Eurostat, the EU Commission Agency numbers clearly show that historically there was nothing special about the numbers in Ireland. This little island was never going to sink under the weight of asylum seekers. The detailed databases covering the past 10 years can be downloaded from the Eurostat website.<sup>17</sup>



A recent protest against unjust treatment of asylum seekers in Galway.

The conditions for Asylum seekers in Ireland have never been humanitarian or fair. There are a number of legal condi-

tions which are designed to isolate people waiting for the completion of their refugee process, and ensuring that these people never feel at home or at ease during the years of uncertainty. These conditions are not only inhumane but also provide the political and practical basis for easy and consequence free removal and deportation by the Irish state.

- The first and foremost condition trapping the asylum seekers in the long process of refugee application is the **legal ban on taking up employment**. Many young, educated, skilled adults are banned from employment opportunities, even during the time where labour shortage was an issue in many different sectors.
- Unavailability of access to **third level education**.
- **Direct Provision and accommodation centres**: Instead of employment and education rights, as per the direct provision act, adult asylum seekers are kept in accommodation centres, fed and are given a weekly sum of €19.10. This provision was introduced in 1999 and the actual amount has not changed since then.
- The **Refugee application process** takes many years with an extremely high percentage of rejection at the first instance. '[...] over a third [of the asylum seekers] have been in this system [refugee application process] for more than three years, and waits of seven or eight years are not unheard of [] It is unsurprising that anxiety, depression and ill health are widespread'<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Eurostat, [ec.europa.eu/eurostat](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat)

<sup>18</sup>'Asylum seekers in Ireland languish in the Magdalene laundries of our time', Gavan Titley, [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)



Recently a report published by the Irish Refugee Council (*Difficult to believe: the assessment of asylum claims in Ireland* October 17 2012) has found damning facts about the refugee process and procedures in Ireland and is calling for an urgent review of the refugee application process.

The report examines the asylum process in Ireland with a systematic review of documents which form the basis of what is known as the ‘Refugee Status Determination’ procedure in Ireland, in order to get a better understanding of why the majority of applications for refugee status in this country are refused. The UK acceptance rate is four times that of the average in Ireland. The evidence obtained in this study suggests that the process itself is responsible and, particularly where the Tribunal is concerned, there are reasons to believe that there is a ‘culture of disbelief’ that informs the approach that some Tribunal Members take.<sup>19</sup>

Sue Conlan, the CEO of the Irish Refugee Council said, ‘What disturbs me about our findings is the fact that many people who appear to have legitimate claims appear not to be receiving a fair examination of their claim and are as a result being denied protection [...]’

Prof. Rosemary Byrne, Director of the Centre for Post Conflict Justice, Trinity College, Dublin said: ‘There is cause for grave concern about Ireland’s protection record for refugees. This research provides a critical insight into very straightforward

and cost effective ways the asylum system can, and should be, strengthened to ensure that those coming to Ireland with a well founded fear of persecution in their country of origin can be guaranteed a fair assessment of their claims’.

The Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner (ORAC) database shows the following results for refugee applications processed, percentage of grant vs. rejection (and other) recommendations made by ORAC.<sup>20</sup>

Table 1: 2001-2012 Refugee Status Recommendations by ORAC

Year	Total	Grant	Refuse & other non-grant	% Grant
2001	1257	467	1210	3.17
2002	1521	893	14319	5.87
2003	9552	345	9207	3.61
2004	7141	430	6711	6.02
2005	5681	455	5226	8.01
2006	4784	397	4387	8.30
2007	4152	374	3778	9.00
2008	4581	293	4288	6.40
2009	3098	77	3021	2.50
2010	2192	24	2168	1.10
2011	1834	61	1773	3.30
2012	824	31	793	3.76
Total	71628	3847	67781	5.37

2007-2012 figures are from the published total numbers and % of grant 2012 figures from January August

While initial applications for asylum are made to the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner, appeals are made to the Refugee Appeals Tribunal. Given the extremely high refusal recommendation rate by ORAC, the findings in the Irish Refugee Council become more critical and important to notice. It says 135 people were accepted as refugees last year

<sup>19</sup>Irish Refugee Council, *Difficult to believe: the assessment of asylum claims in Ireland*, October 17th 2012, <http://www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie>,

<sup>20</sup>Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner, <http://www.orac.ie>

in Ireland - five percent of the applications or appeals on which decisions were made.<sup>21</sup>

The 'culture of disbelief' among tribunal members is what the institutionalized racism generates.. Claiming refugee status in any country is not a illegal act, and the burden should not be only on the refugee to prove his/her own circumstances to the state. The Irish state as the facts and figures show has a pre-determined mindset about the applicants. The 'culture of disbelief' is not something that the asylum seekers should have to or even can - deal with so that they can get a fair process and decision. While on one hand the state claims to have a well-defined and controlled process in place, on the other hand the actual decisions with real impact on peoples lives are made based on the beliefs of 'powerful' and unquestionable people. This is exactly where the racism in institutions lies.

The institutions of ORAC and Refugee Appeal Tribunal need to be abolished to establish a humanitarian, fair and democratic process that does not 'criminalise' or 'traumatise' asylum seekers, but instead serves them in getting a new, secure and safe life in Ireland.

There are number of conclusions and recommendations made in the report by Irish Refugee Council. These will help to reform the institutions but the problem we face in this matter is political as well as bureaucratic.

None the less, many of the recommendations in the report expose the Irish state and its institutions for what they are in the case of asylum seekers and the racist attitudes.

This report must serve as one of the basis for political, anti-racist debates and anti-racism campaigns. We must demand

a fundamental change of these institutions. It is not difficult to believe what is happening in Ireland given that for over a decade we have seen political and mainstream media attacks on asylum-seekers and migrants. The treatment of asylum seekers is morally wrong, politically racist and inhuman in day-to-day dealings with the people by state institutions.

## Islamophobia

Racism towards Muslims is a particular form of racism that operates on negative imagery of Islam and Muslims. This is as a result of historical prejudices but since the US launched the so-called 'war on terror', Islamophobia has been used to justify oppression in the Middle East. Ten years on, Muslims still bear the brunt of Americas justification of invasions and occupations of other countries and Islamophobia is developing and deepening all over Europe through violence on the streets, through the propaganda and policies of fascist and far-right parties but also through mainstream parties.

In France, for example, former President Nicolas Sarkozy pushed through laws banning women from wearing the Burqa or full-face veil in public. In 2010, he declared that 'France definitely does not want halal food options in school canteens, prayers outside mosques, veils, definitely no and oh, no to minarets.'<sup>22</sup>

In Ireland there are 35 nationalities in Muslim communities in Ireland, people of different skin colour and nationality. What is common to the Irish Muslims who have experienced racism is that those that are identifiably Muslim are targeted the most women who wear the veil and men who have a full beard.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup>*Irish Times*, 'Report criticises asylum decisions', October 17, 2012, [www.irishtimes.com](http://www.irishtimes.com)

<sup>22</sup>'Full-face veils outlawed as France spells out controversial niqab ban' *Guardian* 3 March 2011

<sup>23</sup>James Carr, Dept. of Sociology, University of Limerick.

## Difference between racism and fascism

At the basis of most racism is the idea that there are fundamental differences between people, be they biological, racial or cultural. Usain Bolt, Olympic gold medalist is the fastest man on the planet and he happens to be black. An Irish Independent journalist suggested that ‘if he is ever out-sprinted by a Caucasian there’ll need to be a motorbike involved’<sup>24</sup>. Social and cultural conditions are not considered when people say ‘all black people can dance’ or ‘only a black person could run like that’. Racism by definition exists where a whole group of people are systematically discriminated against on the basis of characteristics they are believed to share. Racism is the systematic oppression of people backed by the state, the capitalist system we live in and the media. It is far more than the espousal of bigoted views.

Fascism however involves more than racism. It is a word so often used in everyday language, as an insult, or description of a type of authoritarian person its specific meaning is often obscured. Fascism is an ideology that endeavours to destroy **all democracy** and take away the rights of the whole working class. Historically fascism has grown when there has been an economic crisis, a weak working class movement and an absence of a political alternative. The Nazis had a twin-track strategy - mobilising on the streets, but also running in elections. Hitler didn’t seize power : he was elected. They used electoral politics to air fascist views and street violence to intimidate and harass. In Germany in the 1930s the Nazis were used by big business to attack working class con-

ditions. In 1933 in the midst of economic crisis the German ruling class were afraid of a workers revolt and were happy to see Hitler rise to power.

When working class struggle is winning, the middle classes identify with progressive aims. But in periods of crisis, unable to turn to the collective struggle of the workplace, they are drawn to organisations with a radical rhetoric against the system whose focus of organisation is the street. Hitler said, ‘Mass demonstrations must burn into the little man’s soul the conviction that, though a little worm, he is part of a great dragon.’<sup>25</sup>

## Sowing the seeds

Many of us know that racism has been simmering here in Ireland against a back-drop of Global recession and a rapidly changing political landscape across Europe and beyond. The tweets, virulent exchanges in the letters pages and racial jibes that abounded on the airwaves during the coverage of the Olympic Games last summer, while a shock to many, illustrate an old problem that has come out from behind the fair-trade-charitable-donation-not-in-my-backyard liberal veneer.

Also emerging with a new confidence are the rightwing commentators who believe the problem is not racism but that the same liberal politically correct brigade have gone too far and who are trying to convince readerships that what is at stake is ‘freedom of speech’ and ‘freedom of expression’.<sup>26</sup> In other words the truth of the

<sup>24</sup>Vincent Hogan: ‘Why do the Irish win in the ring, when they come over all pale on an Olympic pool-deck or track?’ *Irish Independent* August 9th

<sup>25</sup> Weyman Bennett, ‘F is for Fascism’, *Socialist Review* November 2007

<sup>26</sup>Gary Young *The Guardian* 12 July 2012

matter for these commentators has been for too long repressed. The truth in their case being that it is ok to be racist because the truth is that differences do exist and some of these differences make some people superior to others.

We live in a time of diminishing national sovereignty in Europe as technocrats take over the managing of economic affairs. During the recent fiscal treaty campaign some people were heard to say, 'we have no say any more'. As national boundaries are seen to fade with Europe becoming more and more centralised, national identity and racism are again intertwining and nationalism is on the rise.

An oft-asked question is could a far-right party emerge here in Ireland and while none of us have a crystal ball that can predict what may or may not happen, we can learn from the lessons of history and ensure we are not complacent about such a force emerging. The racism is there and the conditions for it are being created by this Labour-Fine Gael government.

More and more sections of society are feeling excluded and alienated and where far-right organisations exist they prey on this sense of abandonment, fostering a we-feeling versus a competing other. Where a vacuum is allowed to grow, far-right groups have stepped in to fill the space and the appetite for a way out. In Ireland, we have not seen an emergence of a far-right organisation. Other groups have stepped in which can be seen in the growth of republican groups in places like Derry where a whole generation of mainly young men have been left to fester in unemployment and where dissident groups are attracting growing numbers.

In the South, people abandoned Fianna Fil en masse in the last election giving the Labour Party the biggest vote in its his-

tory. Fourteen Sinn Fein TDs and Five United Left Alliance TDs were also elected; further indications of a left-ward mood in the country. Almost two years since the election and any hope that Labour was going to fight for those that elected them has long since disappeared. Instead there is a huge wave of anger swelling against the Labour party betrayal and people are looking around for an alternative.

## Conclusion

Racism has many faces. It appears in courtrooms when Judges discriminate, in racist jokes told in pubs, when the Gardaí stop and search a driver for no other reason than skin colour and when one of the biggest box office hits of the summer is a foul-mouthed racist Teddy bear.<sup>27</sup> As Marx said, the ruling class will use all means at its disposal to maintain antagonisms between people.<sup>28</sup> While much has been said about the Olympics and the divisive role of sport in society it is easy to overlook how important things like sport and music are in bringing people together.

It is essential that we foster solidarity between people by challenging racist myths when we encounter them and by being vigilant against racism. Building networks between communities, like the Anti-Racism Network and building a strong anti-racist movement if racist attacks occur, isolates the racists and gives people the confidence to stand together. Migrants and asylum seekers organising themselves is also vitally important and the newly formed Anti-Deportation Ireland is a great example of this. A fighting Trade union movement that defends all workers is also essential to prevent the Government from driving wedges between different sections of workers.

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<sup>27</sup><http://entertainment.ie/movie-review/Ted/8090.htm>

<sup>28</sup> Peter Alexander, *Racism. Resistance & Revolution*, Bookmarks 1987 p. 20

Historically, struggle has united people on a grand scale and any fight against austerity here will bring people of all communities together. A strong radical left will appeal to people who are alienated and abandoned and can play a role in pulling people together to resist. The experience in Europe has shown that where the left has failed the vacuum has often been quickly filled by far-right groups.

Italy is a stark example. Rifondazione Comunista, the far-left party, achieved 4 million votes at its high-point in 2006 and went on to lose 2.5 million votes in 2008. Its fatal mistake was to make a shift from prioritising the struggles and the movement, to prioritising government, the result of which was to hold back the struggle against the government. Consequently it enabled the racist Northern League to

divert workers' fears of economic insecurity away from the bosses to immigrants. So while the Rifondazione leaders concentrated on government, the party with a real presence on the ground made gains, and in many places that was the Northern League. One of Berlusconi's first moves after the 2008 election was to declare a national state of emergency nationwide to remove illegal immigrants from the country.<sup>29</sup>

In these unstable times, socialists say that another world is possible but this is a world we have to strive for and fight for. It is vitally important that a broad radical left fills the political space left open by the Labour party betrayal and fights alongside the movement against austerity that will emerge in this country.

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<sup>29</sup> See *International Socialism Journal* (ISJ) Issue 113, January 2007 for further reading