RACISM, EDUCATION AND THE IRISH IN BRITAIN

A. THE DEMANDS OF THE IRISH IN BRITAIN REPRESENTATION GROUP

What is required is an authority wide policy for the Irish in London as part
of an overall anti-racist strategy for education.

1. Our first priority is that the ILEA should set up a Resource and Teaching
Centre to cover all aspects of Irish Studies. Racism cuts across every level
of educational practice and a first step to challenge it requires breaking with
the strait-jacket of protective 'subject ghettos' which structures many of
those practices and largely orientates the inspectorate and back-up educational
resources. Such a centre therefore would have a brief that covered primary,
secondary and further education and also a charter to investigate beyond the
humanities subjects. Obviously, an important initial task for the centre would
be documentating via research what is actually going on in the schools and
colleges, if anything, concerning teaching on Ireland.

2. The establishment of a centre would be a significant move, but well aware
as we are of the dangers of marginalisation, it would have to be backed up by
measures to ensure its effectivity. For this we see two innovations as
essential.

    i) Part of the multi-ethnic inspectorate should be made specifically
       responsible for the implementation of the Authority's commitments
       to the Irish community. The Inspectorate should be mandated to
       work in close liaison with the centre because the actual process
       of raising the issues is a crucial part of the anti-racist struggle.

   ii) The ILEA's multi-ehtnic consultative structure and procedures must
       be established within a framework whcih gives them real access to
       the decision making process on the ILEA committees and in such a
       way that they can be representative of the demands and situation of
       all colonial minority groups, eg. two delegates from each divisional
       area will not suffice.

B. RACISM AND COLONIAL MINORITY GROUPS

The Irish have generally been ignored in the mushrooming 'race relations industry'
of the past decade. Educationalists amongst others have been responsible for
the marginalisation of the Irish in this context. Many implicitly assume that
the Irish have now assimilated. This entails some acknowledgement that the Irish
have experienced discrimination and prejudice, but this is thought to be a thing
of the past. The declining impact of religious hostility and in recent years
their white skin are cited to illustrate that the Irish are an example of
successful integration. However, the appropriate question concerning the
Irish is not 'have they or have they not assimilated' with its implicit assumption
that the answer will determine whether they are a problem or not. It is: what
can be done about the endemic racism of the British against the Irish? The
presumption must be that it is the British who are the problem.

Recently, growing recognition of the Irish has taken the form of locating them
as an 'ethnic minority'. Thus they are identified as one of a number of minority
groups with a distinctive cultural tradition and a right to perpetuate that
within a pluralist framework. The same applies equally to the Asian and Afro-
Caribbean groups and to other sizeable minorities, eg. the Vietnamese, Poles
and Italians. To categorise together in this manner the different experiences
of these minorities in British society is woefully inadequate. It reveals a
presumption that it is only uninformed British insularity that causes the hostility
and difficulties which such groups encounter.

This multi-ethnic approach has come under attack, especially from many Black
groups. We too, are opposed to it. Some educationalists have also been con-
cerned to distance themselves from its analysis. For example a paper published
by the Berkshire Department of Education 'Education for Equality', draws a clear
distinction between black groups and ethnic minorities on the basis that the
former:

> 'have a distinctive historical relationship with Europe'
>
> 'have distinct experiences and concerns in Britain at the
> present time'
>
> 'and in particular they experience racism'

The term ethnic minority is rejected as inappropriate to label black groups, because it focuses solely on cultural difference, whereas what demarcates them in Britain is the racism they experience and the colonial legacies which underlie it. The authors of the Berkshire document therefore outline that what they are concerned with is black/white relationships in British society. They, thus, reduce those aspects of the situation correctly highlighted in exposing the shortcomings of the 'ethnic minority syndrome' to a question of colour.

Racism has never absolutely required skin colour as an organising principle. It is only necessary to remember the racism of a wide range of 'colours' against Jewish people to realise it is not a pre-requisite. It is true that most racisms utilise physical characteristics to swell their power. Without question, today in Britain skin colour is a pivotal mainstay of the constant re-generation of racist practices against Asian and Afro-Caribbean groups. As such 'colour' is central to the analysis of their "distinctive experiences and concerns" but it is not the progenitor of racism.

Neither a multi-culturalist argument, nor one that equates racism with black/white relationships, can account for the Irish experience in Britain. The Irish and Black groups in Britain may not share skin colour in common, but they have the same antecedents in that British imperialism exploited and distorted the development of their respective countries. The consequent economic under-development was responsible for their forced migrations to Britain.

The Irish experience is not synonymous with that of the various Black groups, but the process of migration and induction into Britain which each has undergone can be understood by conceptualising them all as 'colonial minorities'. To grasp the similarities and dis-similarities between them necessitates examining not only the circumstances of migration and the place each group came to occupy in the division of labour in Britain, but also the origin of the migrants and the specifics of their incorporation into the British class system. The full dimensions of the institutionalised racist practices which characterize 'internal colonialism' and are the experience of all colonial minority groups will then be apparent. A prime site for such practices being the education system.

C. IRISH MIGRATION TO BRITAIN

From the sixteenth century onwards Ireland had increasingly become a provincial
adjunct of Britain, dominated economically, financially and politically. The
beginnings of the nineteenth century saw the passage of the Act of Union, 1801,
with Ireland forcibly integrated into the British body politic and it also
witnessed significantly changing economic relations. From this time the object
of Britain's Irish policy was the subordination of economic development in
Ireland, North and South, in order to strengthen the British economy and to
further increase Britain's grip on its Empire. For example, British capital
only became available for those investments which augmented existing British
industries.

Changes in both the nature of and the relationship between the agricultural
productive forces in Ireland and Britain were also occuring at this time.
These were to ensure a supply of cheap labour and food for Britain. After the
Napoleonic wars British demand shifted towards animal products. The result was
that it was frequently very difficult for tenants to pay rents which remained
unchaged, selling their cash crop, corn, while living on the potato. Eviction
and emigration followed and in the aftermath the rate of farm consolidation
increased with a consequent switch to cattle and dairy production. The years
prior to 1845 were ones of rural discontent punctuated by famines, principally
1816 and 1842, each of which was succeeded by an upsurge in emigration.

The Great Starvation of 1845-47 in effect speeded up processes that were already
underway. The Potato Blight was a disaster because it hit the peasants' sub-
sistence crop while their cash crop still had to be grown to pay the rent. The
repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 caused a fall in the price of corn and was
therefore of no benefit to the Irish peasantry. As B. Perrons states:

> "The whole process was advantageous to the British Aristocracy
> who were able to maintain their rental incomes by converting land to
> pasture while the capitalist class was able to secure meat and wool
> at the cheapest prices. the reduction in population provided 'security'
> for the capital invested in Ireland by both classes."

It was these changing economic relations which formed the context of the
massive volume of emigration from Ireland in the nineteenth century. Ireland
has a population of just over eight million in 1841 which by 1911 had been
reduced to just under four and a half million. Apart from the large number
of deaths in the wake of the famine nearly five million Irish emigrated during
this period. Of those the latest estimates are that between one fifth and one
quarter came to Britain.

Seasonal migration for agicultural work which had become established in the
eighteenth century remained a feature up until 1860. It was the Irish from
the small farms of Western Ireland, which had a growing population in the first
part of the 19th century, low productivity and no alternative forms of employ-
ment, who crossed for work in Britain where there was an agricultural revolution
underway. As a result of the introduction of labour intensive crops, accompanied
by only limited machanization, there was an increased demand for labour at
certain periods in the productive cycle. This was occuring at a time of rural
depopulation to the fast developing industrial towns so Irish labour was readily
employed.

Increasingly in the nineteenth century the Irish who migrated to Britain headed
for the towns of Northern England and Scotland. There they were employed in
semi- and un-skilled manual work: bricklaying, road making, canal cutting,
railway construction and dock labour. Work which was heavy, dangerous, seasonal
and prone to sudden termination. It was also lowly paid, although higher than
the equivalent wages would be in Ireland. They also came as handloom weavers
to the Lancashire cotton mills and the growing textile industry of West Yorkshire.
London, the other large centre of the Irish in Britain had a different labour
market. Here the Irish were engaged in the clothing, transport, food and
construction industries. Initially they were also involved in certain skilled
trades, for example, shoe making and tailoring, although these were already in
decline by mid-century.

The Irish were involved in a variety of jobs which were avoided by much of the
indigenous labour force because the work was dirty, disreputable, or undesirable:
petty trading; huckstering; keeping lodging houses and beer houses; soap-boiling;
and working in tanners yards and glue factories. It was particularly Irish

women who were employed in these occupations as well as being engaged in large numbers in domestic service and laundry work.

The relative isolation of the Irish already depicted in terms of the labour market was further emphasised by their occupation of identifiable ghetto areas in most towns where they lived. In most cases their living conditions were markedly worse than their working class English, Scottish or Welsh neighbours. They were subject, due to their position in the labour force, foreign language, political views and religious allegiance, to hostility which ranged widely in its intensity and manifestation. The Irish were thus readily distinguishable as a minority who were regarded generally as a social problem. Almost all Parliamentary Commissions of the period take some account of the Irish with reference to poverty, disease, sanitation, railway labour, police matters, housing and education and advocated measures to deal with them. The picture after 1850 is one of the Irish distanced from the rest of the working class in Britain at a number of levels. In those circumstances racism was rife and operated to regerenate these conditions of separation.

D. ANTI-IRISH RACISM

Anti-Irish racism, evidence of which can be traced back at least as far as the twelfth century, took on a specific configuration in nineteenth century Britain. Its different elements, as manifested in the articulations of the time, composed of scientific racism, anti-catholicism, hostility to Irish national politics and suspicion of the Irish role in the labour market. Racism against the Irish was a feature of all social classes.

The extent of anti-Irish sentiment in the last century still remains to be systematically documented. Even less work has focussed on anti-Irish racism as a component of institutional practices. However, sufficient details have been accumulated to enable some depiction of the extent to and manner in which racism was a constant determination of existence for Irish people living in Britain, as it remains today.

The Victorian era was marked by the development of 'scientific' theories of 'race' which illustrated the 'inferiority' of the colonised people and the 'superiority' of the colonizing nation. Anti-Irish racism from early on fuelled this process. Its outstanding characteristic compared with previous

epochs was its articulation in the terminology of racial differentiation.
L.P. Curtis in 'Apes-Angels' (1971) charts how the 'science of man' (physio-
gnomy) and the art of caricature working independently and at times together
helped to harden as well as perpetuate the stereotype of 'white negroes',
the simianized celts.

Curtis traces the transformations in the image of the Irish in the one penny
comic weeklies of the day, eg. Punch. In the 1840s the Irishman looked like
a 'prognathous garroter'. in Punch, but by the 1860s, a gorilla, 'a monster
rather than a man'. Even the serpents and pigs, utilised by W. Bowchek,
in 'Judy' to symbolise Irish political crime had similarized features. This
stereotyping is evident today in the cartoons of the past fifteen years of,
for example, Jak in The Standard and Cummings of The Express.

There is no doubt that these conceptions of the Irish as an 'inferior race'
with a fundamentally flawed character came to occupy public conciousness.
this was evident in both literate culture:

> "The English people are naturally industrious – they prefer a life
> of honest labour to one of idleness. They are a persevering, as
> well as energetic race, who for the most part comprehend their
> own interests perfectly and sedulously pursue them. Now of all
> the Celtic tubes, famous everywhere for their indolence and ficleness
> as the Celts everywhere are, the Irish are admitted to be the most
> idle and the most fickle. They will not work if they can exist
> without it. Even here in London, though ignorant disclaimers assert
> the reverse, the Irish labourers are the least satisfactory people
> in the world to deal with.
> (Frasers Magazine, 1847);

in the rabble rousing activities of the travelling Protestant preachers common
throughout the second half of the century; and in the music hall routines
of the day.

The hostility and violence experienced by the Irish in Britain was not solely
motivated or expressed in terms of 'scientific racism'. Anti-catholicism,
always a virulent force, has been cited by many as the chief reason for
anti-Irishness in Victorian Britain. In fact it was but one constituent,
but it is incontestable that anti-catholicism and anti-Irish racism overlaid
each other to their mutual reinforcement. The 'Irish Question' provided
a platform for Protestant opinion throughout the century, eg. the Murphy
riots of the late 1860s. The 'badge' of catholicism which the Irish wore
not only differentiated them from Militant Protestantism (fuelled by large
numbers of Orange Lodges) but from large sections of the working class for
whom participatory religious practices were literally 'foreign'.

The extent to which the adherences of the Irish in Britain to their national
struggle for independence conditioned the racism they experienced is barely
researched at all. There is no doubt that the periods of most widespread
and intense public expressions against the Irish coincided with heightened
phases of nationalist activity, eg. fenianism and the Land League. This
pattern has continued this century. British culture with its inherently
oppressive nationalism and chauvinism cannot be solely explained in terms
of the formulations and structures produced by colonial relations and 'the
Empire'. However, they have been crucial to the generation of that culture
and its class variants. Anti-Irish racism in the nineteenth century was
unquestionably the prototype for the racisms of later periods in this respect.

The conflicts which existed between the Irish and English, Welsh or Scottish
workers have most usually been explained by the impact of the Irish on the
labour market: lowering the price of labour and acting as a stike-breaking
force. In 1840s there were riots between English and Irish navvies and others
were recorded in 1852, Stockport, 1861, Oldham, and in 1872, Stockton.
Other incidents ocurred sporadically throughout the rest of the century.
In fact the effect of the Irish on wage levels varied considerably between
places and occupations. Evidence of their 'strike-breaking' is patchy with
many recorded instances of Irish refusal to break ranks.

We have outlined here that racism against the Irish is not only a structural
feature of British society, but has long been one of the hallmarks of popular

British culture.   However, more research is necessary for a full understanding of the processes of internal colonization that the Irish have been subject to in Britain.   In particular the policies of various state   agencies, eg. the education, legal and social security systems, need to be exposed. There is, though, sufficient here to indicate the basis upon which we categorize the Irish as a colonial minority group.

It is even more difficult to document what has been the Irish experience in Britain   during the twentieth century, a period in which Britain became the main destination of Irish migrants. Despite the continuing strength of anti-Irish racism between 1920s-1960s it received no public attention. Eg, by all but the Irish such expressions as stereotyped Irish 'characters' on television and in films were viewed as 'harmless fun'.

What we can catalogue here is the racist practices concerning the Irish which pre-dominate today. These include an avalanche of anti-Irish jokes; the Prevention of Terrorism Act; the systematic ill-treatment of Irish prisoners in British jails; the distorted accounts of both Irish history and the current war propagated within schools and through the media; and continuing discrimination in the fields of housing/employment/social security. A major priority of the I.B.R.G. in combatting this racism is to seek transformations in school and college curricula. We outline below the systematic mis-representations which make up the history of Britain's relationship with Ireland as taught in British schools.

E. TEACHING ABOUT IRELAND IN BRITISH SCHOOLS

When a wide range of history and social studies materials aimed at students aged 11-16 years were examined for their content on Ireland charges that they were biased and inadequate were confirmed. As with the histories of all Britain's other colonies the textbooks focus on Ireland only in terms of its contact with Britain. More to the point it is primarily a history of when the Irish resisted British rule and of the measures taken to deal with them. The problem for students to explain is therefore: why did the Irish rebel against British rule? The premise is never that of having to explain why the British were in Ireland

in the first place. These underlying assumptions shape the presentation of
'The Irish Question' in all the books and materials analysed and ensures that
a stereotyped image of the Irish is conveyed.

The Irish are consistently shown as 'the problem' in contrast with the 'problem
solving' British. The existence of the war in Northern Ireland is directly
attributed to the backwardness of the Irish political tradition with its
religious sectarianism and reliance on physical force methods. The comparison
of course is with the assumed rationality of British political culture with
its hallmarks of religious tolerance and democratic procedures for solving
conflict.

The upshot of all this is that the heritage of partition and the many other
relics of Britain's past total occupation of Ireland are never explained. The
whole problem is reduced to one of religious antagonisms. The many dimensions
of the current crisis and the various social forces involved are seen only in
terms of 'warring tribes' who require a British presence to keep them apart
and maintain law and order. Effectively pre-cluded is any re-examination of
Britain's current role in Northern Ireland. The echoes of this in the mass
media's accounts of Northern Ireland are easily observed. It is this general
framework of British superiority and Irish inferiority which is at the centre
of the racism which is common to all British versions of Irish history and
interpretations of the present situation.

There have been some isolated changes in the last couple of years. A few
schools have produced their own materials and the Avon Learning Development
Unit have produced packs on Ireland which attempt to deal in a different way
with eg. British economic reasons for controlling Ireland, how this was achieved and
with the setting up of the Northern Ireland state. In addition Irish studies courses
have been launched in some adult education institutes and a few schools.
However, these piecemeal measures can in no way counteract the unquestioning
transmission of the model of Anglo-Irish relations outlined above, which is
the activity of most courses. A particular case in point being the Schools
Council 13-16 Modern History Project which has been responsible for the increased
teaching of Irish history in ILEA schools in recent years and in every sense
conforms to the stereotypes we have been describing.

CONCLUSION

The analysis presented here is incomplete, eg Irish migration of the last forty years has not been dealt with. However, the purpose has not been to give a full account of the Irish cummunity but to reveal that the racism the Irish in Britain experience is rooted in their location as a 'colonial minority'. Throughout the last two hundred years specific labour shortages, for unskilled labour and certain skills eg in medicine, in the British economy have been filled by migrants from Britains colonies. Once here they have all been subject to internal colonialism. This has primarily involved racist employment, housing, education and policing practices and cultural imperialism of which racist jokes are just the most overt example. British educationalists who are anti-racist must recognise that this is the context and these are the terms in which they have to fight for changes in the education system.