**Leonid Kyianytsia**

PhD in Political Science, Senior Lecturer

National Aviation University

**NATIONAL IDENTITY, ANTI-COLONIALISM, AND RACE: THE CASE OF EARLY IRISH NATIONALISM**

The questions of identity still underpin the whole spectrum of social relations, quite independent of specific forms such social identity might assume. Nevertheless, throughout the modern era (from 1789 on), social identities proceeding from the interrelated but distinct notions / constructs of race and nation would often take the forefront. This may in turn be tied to the emergence of modernist political ideologies and movements striving to form their political strategy as well as the perspective on the world surrounding them in accordance with the aforementioned constructs of social identity. With this in mind, this conference paper seeks to consider the salience of the constructs of nation and race in the context of anti-colonial / national liberation struggle, with the 19th-century Ireland being chosen as a case study of the latter phenomenon [2, p.101). Having selected Ireland as a subject of the present discussion has been motivated by the specificity of Irish nationalism as an exemplary movement from the vantage point of many other anti-colonial movements since then, as well as by the controversies inherent in constructing the notions of ‘Irish nation’ and even ‘Irish race’ on the part of the British [4, p.17] – controversies that would be bound to repeat themselves in subsequent decades throughout the colonial worlds of all major European colonial powers;

The predilection for categorising specific ethnic and/or cultural groups in accordance with the pre-conceived notions of racial and/or national identity would appear to have closely followed the politics of modernity since the era of the Enlightenment. When one considers the relevant observation by Immanuel Wallerstein, the constructs of race and nation may be conceived of as embodying supposedly unchangeable and inborn traits of any human population in question, usually being complemented by behavioural and cultural features correlated with the ‘ethnic group’ construct [5, p.77]. A key implication here is that race is generally presented as associated with certain heritable traits with their basis in the population’s genetic makeup, as opposed to the nation being conceived of as coterminous with unified political community the consciousness whereof is said to be shared by all individuals belonging to it. In practice, though, it would be difficult to find the respective constructs being separated by some impenetrable wall. According to E.J. Hobsbawm (see his magisterial discussion of the peculiarities of European nationalist movements in the late 19th century), the notion of ‘national’ (or ‘racial’) character as endemic to representatives of a given ‘nation’ or ‘race’ would have made these concepts and the related political claims largely interchangeable [2, p.108]. Therefore, the constructs of nation race might have been partially interrelated while still competing with each other in the political imagination of modernity – a fact vividly demonstrated by Immanuel Wallerstein in the course of a controversial discussion regarding the so-called Coloured population of the South African Republic and the former’s national / racial identity in the late years of South Africa’s apartheid regime [5, pp.72-76].

Turning back to the issue of the origin of the idea of the Irish as representing a specific ‘nation’ and/or ‘race’, one might find it fruitful to refer to the contribution by Bruce Nelson with regard to the subject under consideration. Nelson would opine that it would have been the Cromwellian expedition against the Catholic Irish rebels in the context of the English Revolution and the Civil War of the 1640s that had paved the way to the rise of the idea of the Irish nationality as distinct from, and inimical to the English one [4, p.23]. In that period and until the end of the 18th century the key sphere for contestation would be the religious one, with the Irish represented as despicable ‘Papists’ and the English celebrating themselves as defenders of a ‘true’ Protestantism. In contrast, in the 19th century, the perceived distinctions of the Irish as a cultural group would come to be viewed as reflecting allegedly innate features of the Irish ‘racial’ character [4, p.31]. More specifically, the Irish would be presented as laden with such ‘lowly’ and ‘base’ traits as sloth (in contrast to the Englishmen’s perceived industriousness), effeminacy, and generally passive and sentimental outlook. Such moral repudiation of those inborn vices of the Irish would then be used as a staple of political writing by various English authors seeking to undermine any argument in favour of the autonomy or Ireland, or even of any Gaelic cultural renewal [4, p.31];

However, the rhetoric of the ‘Irish race’ would later be appropriated by the nascent Irish nationalism in its attempts to subvert the colonialist ideology imposed by the British Empire on its Irish subjects. In particular, Daniel O’Connell, one of the ‘founding fathers’ of Irish nationalism as a political movement would frequently refer to the notion of ‘Irish race’ in his political writings, actually viewing this term as being part and parcel of his political discourse [3, pp.58-81]. The idea of supposedly freedom-loving sons and daughters of Ireland rising against the British hegemony would thus be justified by the reference to a ‘scientific’ concept of race, while a wider idea of Gaelic identity as expressed via the construct of the ‘Celtic race’ was championed as well [3, p.65]. It should be noted that for all their anti-English vigour, the majority of proponents of the idea of the Celtic / Irish race’, as distinct from the ‘English / Saxon stock’ were overwhelmingly of the Anglo-Irish backgrounds, largely being descendants of the Norman invaders of Ireland in the 12th century having intermarried with local Gaelic aristocracy [1, p.216]. This curious fact might further confirm an artificiality of those romantic nationalists’ claims, while not leading one to question their sincerity.

Proceeding from the aforementioned, one could say that the notion of the ‘Irish race’ would be destined to become a core element of subsequent anti-colonial struggles of advocates of the independent Ireland in the early 20th century. While the proponents of Ireland’s continuing affiliation with the British Empire may have stressed the aforementioned negative stereotypes regarding the Irish’s ‘racial’ character, the independentist movement tended to emphasise the perceived common descent of the Irish as a ‘race’ as a key element behind their anti-English cause [6, p.182]. Hence, even though the notion of the ‘Irish race’ was brought forward by British colonial masters to stigmatise the Irish population as supposedly ‘inferior’, the case of early Irish nationalism might show how a seemingly discriminatory and essentialist ideological stance may be appropriated by a national liberation movement in the context of anti-colonial struggle.

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