

Who are the Travellers?

Patricia McCarthy

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ARE TRAVELLERS a distinct “ethnic” group with their own traditions and customs? Very few people want to accept that they are. This reflects the widespread racism towards them, a racism which insists on seeing them as “failed settled people”. They are seen as “problems” rather than a people who have been denied even the most basic rights.

Irish Travellers are a very small minority group, constituting less than 1% of the population. Their numbers currently stand at approximately 23,000 people in the 26 counties and another 1,500 in the North. There are also an estimated 15,000 Irish Travellers in Britain and 7,000 in the U.S.A.

The criteria internationally accepted as defining ethnicity are:

- A long shared history of which the group is aware.
- A cultural tradition of its own, including family and social customs.
- Descent from common ancestors.
- A common language.
- A common religion.
- Being a minority within a larger community.

Irish Travellers meet all these criteria.

Travellers are often segregated into separate classes in school. They are banned from almost every pub in the country. They are routinely refused service in shops, cafes, cinemas, laundrettes and clubs. Social contact with settled people is minimal because Travellers have been denied such contact.

The effects of this racism are not hard to find. Most Travellers lack self-esteem. Pride in their cultural identity is a very new experience and confined to the minority who have had some adult education. For others, self-destructive and even anti-social behaviour arises out of this total experience of racism. Less than 14% of Travellers currently make it into post-primary education and 80% of the adults are illiterate.

Within the EU, Travellers and Gypsies currently form a population of over one million people. Another million live in Eastern Europe. These have faced, and still face, vicious persecution and racism which reached its peak this century with the murder of over a quarter of a million Gypsies and Travellers by the Nazis. Today in Eastern Europe they are experiencing brutal racist attacks.

Over the past decade we have seen the emergence of a small number of articulate, politically active Travellers. Until fairly recently, Travellers and their supporters were essentially fighting for little more than an end to the very worst forms of discrimination.

However the situation is now very different with Traveller groups throughout the country asserting their right to be treated with respect as an ethnic and cultural minority with their own beliefs, customs and values. By adopting this strategy, Travellers are finally aligning themselves with the struggles of nomadic and Indigenous peoples everywhere. It is this new and very unacceptable demand for respect as a cultural and ethnic minority that has fuelled the latest outburst of racism against them.

In recent years, these concepts have gained acceptance from a growing number of people. Racist descriptions and abuse on TV and in the newspapers have been challenged, with the result that Travellers' rights — as a separate minority group — have begun to gain acceptance in wider circles. Once it was no longer acceptable to define them either as objects of charity or as failed settled people in need of social work and rehabilitation, the alternative was to accept them as different with all the rights and appropriate services they require to live decently in accordance with their cultural values. Such an idea really annoyed the bigots.

Ironically, settled society has always considered Travellers to be different. Now that Travellers are asserting their right to be different but not inferior, they have provoked outrage. Travellers' struggles for civil rights should be seen in the context of all the major social and political movements of the past fifty years and not as something separate or peculiar to Ireland or Irish Travellers. Their struggles bear remarkable resemblance to those of Native Americans and Indigenous peoples throughout the world.

Anarchists have no great interest in who belongs to which ethnic group, except in so far as each tradition adds to a rich cultural diversity. But we do understand that there will be no real equality until racism is uprooted, and all people are accorded the dignity they deserve. Equality is certainly not about trying to make people deny their own history and heritage.

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