

## Irish Relocation and Recent Immigration in New York City

Nicoleta Stanca

Ovidius University, Constanța

Faculty of Letters

Aleea Universității, Nr. 1

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### Abstract

*Until WWII, New York was an Irish city, with the “political machine” of the Tammany Hall, the heads of the church, police and fire departments and schooling, all Irish-controlled. After 1945, the Irish domination declined because of less immigration and suburbanization in the US. This article will discuss the changes in the “traditional” Irish neighbourhood, such as Washington Heights and Inwood, NYC, where the Irish have begun to define themselves in relation to the numerous blacks and Latinos moving in the area. Secondly, it will present a typology of “new” Irish immigrants in NYC, since the 1980s. In spite of the tensions between the undocumented workers and the highly skilled ones or between the first-generation and the recent Irish immigrants, the latter have helped reviving the Irish neighbourhood in NYC politically, economically and culturally.*

**Keywords:** Irish Americans, New York, immigration, relocation, identity, generations

### *I. The Relevance of New York Irish Americans’ Story*

Until WWII, New York used to be an Irish city, with Irish mayors, people in the fire and police departments and leading figures in the church hierarchy. However, the drop in the Irish population of New York, first and second generation, was substantial after 1945; in the 1980s, only 42.000 New Yorkers were Irish born of the third, fourth and fifth generation, which meant less than 10% of the city’s seven million population. With better transportation, better and more jobs and a house boom and the desire to escape the neighbourhood of Blacks and Hispanics, the more affluent and upwardly mobile Irish Americans moved to the suburbs of New York and New Jersey. According to the 1990 Census, twice as many Irish Americans lived in New York’s Rockland, Westchester and on Long Island’s Nassau and Suffolk, than in the city. And those who lived in the city moved from Lower Manhattan to Upper Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens. By the 1970s, Queens contained the largest number of Irish Americans and Brooklyn was the second. Manhattan contained less Irish population and so, in 1991, Mattie Haskins Shamrock imports on East 75 St. closed its doors after 68 years to be replaced by a Mexican restaurant (Reimers, 1997).

In spite of these declining statistics, the story of the New York Irish continues to be of relevance for the Irish people, for America and for the world. In the 1980s, 1 in 7 Americans claimed Irish ancestors (through Irish names, such as John McGraw of the *Giants*, Frank O’Hara, the writer, Mike Quill, head of the *Transport Workers Union*). In 1953, Robert F. Wagner was the last Irish American mayor of New York. In the fire departments in New York in the 1990s, there was still a solid representation. The Catholic Church in New York has left a legacy of welfare organizations (schools, charities, parishes, hospitals), carried over by Archbishop John O’Connor in 1984.

And if today there are fewer policemen in New York who have Irish names, there are more stockbrokers that do. The police commissioner is no longer Robert J. McGuire, but the chairman of New York Stock Exchange is John J. Phelan Jr. (*New York Times*, August 1, 1986, in Reimers, 1997).

The Irish in New York have historically stood for Irish America through various institutions, such as the Tammany Hall, St. Patrick’s Cathedral, the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue parade, the Irish American publishing – with magazines, such as *The Irish World*, *The Irish Echo*, the New York Irish History Roundtable, the Irish Arts Centre, the Pipes and Drums Band of the New York City Fire Department (Reimers, 1997).

New York City has also been the “overseas capital” of Irish nationalism, offering shelter and support to nationalist figures every time they needed to regain their strength and continue their fight for the Irish independence.

The story of the Irish in America has been that of the migrant in general, a story repeated today in the streets in the US and also all over the world, at the mercy of a changing economy that sends millions away onto the roads and seas to seek a better life. The story of the New York Irish has been that of people trying to make it out in a new economy: i.e. from the Irish “coffin ships” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1980s undocumented workers and from Five Points – now Chinatown - and Hell’s Kitchen, the traditional Irish slums in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to New York’s suburbia (Bayor and Meagher, 1997).

The story of the New York Irish has been the story of the problems of ethnically diverse societies since the Irish Americans have been both ins and outs, victims and victimizers. It has been the story of social and cultural identities and communities. If initially one would associate immigration to America with exile, later militant Catholicism blended with American patriotism, merging into a broad European American group characterized by an “Ellis Island whiteness”, so the idea of Irish ethnicity could have been considered an anachronism, yet, markers of contemporary Irish American identity will be discussed in this article in the following sections.

The story of the New York Irish has also been the story of the 99% Movement and Occupy Wall Street of 2011. The flyer for the meeting to discuss the September 17, 2011 occupation to come said: “We, the 99% call for an open general assembly August 9, 7:30 pm, 2011 at the Potato Famine Memorial, New York City”. Historically and symbolically, the Occupy Wall Street movement is connected to the Irish Hunger Memorial in NYC, built in 2002, close to Wall Street, to commemorate the Irish peasants who starved in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in a country that exported food and had a wealthy landed gentry. The Occupy Wall Street movement had a significance related to that of the Irish Memorial, as reminders of the forces that push people out of their farms, homes, countries. The Irish Famine was a crisis of distribution merely, just like the economic crisis leading to the 99% Movement in 2011 in New York (Van Gelder and the staff of the *Yes! Magazine*, 2011). Thus, the story of the Irish in New York is relevant from all these point of view.

## **II. The Irish “Face” in New York: An Overview**

One could mention four generations of Irish Americans in New York today: the assimilated Irish ethnics (with ancestors arriving in the middle to late 19<sup>th</sup> century), the Irish “white flighters” (who left Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s and made the “white flight” from the Bronx and Upper Manhattan to Yonkers), the Irish “newcomers” (who settled in the 1980s and 1990s in Yonkers) and the “newer Irish” (the present day Irish in South East Yonkers, called “Little Ireland”) (Duffy, 2014). Literally, the Irish Americans in America in general and in New York in particular are “many-faced”, having historically mixed with Blacks, Jews, Italians, Mexicans, Chinese. Socially, especially the first two generations, the assimilated ethnics and the “white flighters” also show multiple faces, in culture and entertainment and public service and they could be associated with stories of success.

It is chic to be Irish, said Seamus Heaney, according to whom Irishness “is the manifestation of sheer, bloody genius. Ireland is chic” (qtd. in Dolan, 2008). The transnational dimension of Irishness has definitely been enhanced by Irish America: in 1996, 26 American universities had introduced Irish Studies, the first two being New York University and Notre Dame University early in the 1990s; in 1998, 5.5 million Americans travelled to Ireland to trace family roots and in the 1990 US Census, the findings were that 18% of the American population had some Irish descent (Dolan, 2008).

In the field of culture and entertainment, there are Irish fiddle players (Bronx’s *Eileen Ivers*) and pipers, who performed at the 9/11 funerals; there are Irish strains in rock, jazz, swing and country music (e.g. *Black 47* – a New York rock band); there are Irish directors and actors, dancers and writers, most of them being internationally acclaimed, like John Houston and John Ford (McNamara 2004; Coffey, 1997).

Public service has been one of the means for surviving transitions for the Irish in America, through the aspiration to serve; from priests, police chiefs, teachers, firefighters, they have become more recently involved in finance, law, medicine, communications and fund-raising.

For example, there is the *American Ireland Fund* today; in 2004, the police commissioner of New York City was Raymond Kelly, an Irishman; in the roll call of the 9/11 dead, there were dozens of Irish American firefighters (like Steve McDonald a sergeant in the NYPD who was paralyzed because of a bullet while on patrol in Central Park); the chief medical officer of the New York Fire Department was Dr. Kerry Kelly; the leading voice on behalf of the poor in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (McNamara, 2004); the *McManus Midtown Democratic Association Club* in Hell's Kitchen, once a family political dynasty is now serving generations of immigrants (McNamara, 2004). Irish women have traditionally served the school and the convent and later on they joined organized labour movements in America, one such lady being Dorothy Day, who was head of the Catholic Workers Movement until 1980, when she died.

Success must have come from the desire to keep a culture alive and from the passion for education, denied to Irish Catholics at home. Thus, in New York, the Irish founded universities (e.g. Fordham, Manhattan College); they reached management positions (e.g. Cathleen Black of *Hearts Magazines*) and in general, they have shown their generosity (e.g. Manhattan College Library supplied by the O'Malleys; New York City schools supported by the fund-raiser Caroline Kennedy; Henry Ford, through the Ford Foundation, another example of Irish American generosity) (McNamara, 2004).

### **III. Relocation and Suburbanization of the Irish in New York City (The Ethnic and the "White Flighters")**

Since 1945, there has been a decline in the Irish domination of New York City, with less immigrants, who have moved from Lower Manhattan to Upper Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens and Brooklyn and, especially to the suburbs, a process called the "white flight", as one of the push factors was the desire to be away from the neighbourhood of Blacks and Latinos. Among the pull factors, we could mention better transportation and suburban amenities: a lawn, a garage, quiet streets, automobiles, highways and houses bought with federal subsidized mortgages.

For example, in Washington Heights and Inwood, New York City, the tensions between the Irish and the Blacks, Porto Ricans and Dominicans could be described in military terms as the classical American story of "natives" and immigrants. The 1930s and 1940s was considered a benign period, when the Irish were actually living in "parishes" in an area of a few blocks in New York, manifesting their identity through church events, family gatherings, Irish dances, Irish football matches in the Gaelic park in the Bronx: "Your whole life was your neighbourhood, your parish, your block", said Buddy McGee, and the order was kept by the cop and the watchful Irish mothers (in Snyder, 1997). The 1950s was still a decade when the area around Washington Heights and Inwood was still dominated by the Irish parishes in the context of the postwar boom, with better jobs as policemen and fire-fighters for the Irish men, with networks of stores and pubs, with boys joining gangs who fought in football and basketball games ("To go down to Times Square when I was 15 (in 1957) was an absolute mindblower- we were as green as grass", said O'Halloran (in Snyder, 1997).

Then how could one explain the exaggerated reaction of the Irish neighbourhood confronted with newcomers of other ethnic backgrounds? The Irish had shared similar racial experiences in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the Blacks because of "scientific" racialized imagery, began in the UK and imitated in the US, comparing Blacks and the Irish with apes, inferior races. Therefore, this ethnic experience could have freed the Irish from the involvement with the large white power structure in America, but by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to politics, the Irish "became white" and the apelike caricatures and comparisons with African Americans in pop culture dissipated (Noel Ignatiev in Duffy 2014; Luibheid, 1997). Thus, the Irish immigrants learnt whiteness in America and ethnic and racial tensions occurred in relation to other ethnic immigrants groups, such as in the case of the 1988 Donnelly and the 1990 Morrison visas<sup>1</sup>, called "the white lists" by racial minorities immigrants, as they granted more visa rights to the Irish (Luibheid 1997; Corcoran, 1997a).

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<sup>1</sup> In 1987, there Irish Immigration Reform Movement started a campaign for larger legalization rights for the illegal Irish people in the US. Many associations joined in a working committee under the auspices of the Irish Consulate in New York and they pushed bills in the House of Representatives and the Senate (1987-1990) in order to support the lives of numerous undocumented Irish, who thus constituted a catalyst for Irish ethnic solidarity. In between 1987 and 1990, there were 16.329 visas randomly granted to Irish people in the US and in 1990, 16.000 more visas were given for a period of three years (Corcoran, 1997a).

As Blacks and Latinos moved to the Heights, the imaginary boundary between Harlem and the Heights grew dim and from the 18.971 Irish in the 1960s Census, there were only 12.919 Irish in the 1970s Census (Snyder, 1997). What sent the Irish into the suburbs must have been the combination of push and pull factors mentioned above, the high level of crime in the area and the inability to handle ethnic diversity through the absence of ties with Blacks and Latinos. The Irish considered the areas no longer safe to live: there were more shootings, holdups, drugdealing, high rates of alcoholism; the streets were dirty and loud. “The Hibernian archipelago of the Heights and Inwood was reduced to one tiny island”, yet very densely concentrated areas in which eventually interrelationships and intermarriage occurred. So, the gain of the mixed neighbourhood was the fact that the Irish who remained in Washington Heights and Inwood had a better sense of dealing with ethnic and racial diversity.

#### ***IV. Recent Irish Immigration in NYC (the Irish “Newcomers” and the “Newer” Irish)***

According to Mary P. Corcoran in the article “Emigrants, *Eirepreneurs* and Opportunists: A Social Profile of Recent Immigration in New York City”, there have been five types of recent Irish immigrants in America (1997a): the bread and butter immigrants (economic refugees, closer to the traditional Irish immigrant to America in the past); disaffected adventurers (who sought chances for career advancement in the US, yet, often remained illegal, though they aspired to a transnational existence and hoped to use their investments back home); holiday-takers (middle-class, relatively well-to-do, with a livelihood back home to which to return to and extended holiday takers in the US); the *eirepreneurs* (highly skilled, technical and professional graduates, with careers in New York in banking, insurance, law, public relations, media and advertising, and much less ethnically bounded in terms of social interaction, the so called “invisible immigrants”) and opportunistic emigrants (lottery winners of the Donnelly and Morrison’s visas, chance emigrants often with more problems than the undocumented immigrants because they come to the US without the appropriate contacts and networks).

In the 1980s and the 1990s, as new immigrants left Ireland for the US in a context of an economy that favoured services and privatization and in an immigration context that favoured skills over national origins, many Irish entered the US as tourists and especially the American informal economy as “gap-fillers”: labourers in construction, bartenders, waiters and women working in childcare and home help in the Bronx, Queens and Manhattan (Corcoran, 1997a). The undocumented Irish workers appear as being doubly dislocated: as immigrants, away from Ireland and as undocumented, deprived of any legal status and rights.

The work in construction, commercial and residential renovations and alterations in New York has relied on independent contractors, who work with non-union labour, unlicensed firms hiring undocumented workers. Such firms, controlled by older generations Irish are the gatekeepers for the “newcomers” and “newer” Irish workers. In 1988, there were 10.000 registered construction firms in New York City and 80% of them had fewer than 10 workers. Small firms often resort to casual hiring and non-reporting of income and it is easier for them to convert into totally underground enterprises (Corcoran, 1997b).

The work in construction is dead-end, dirty, dangerous and induces alienation, leading to weekend drinking-bouts, thus the pubs in New York often act as “community centres” (Corcoran in Duffy, 2014; Corcoran, 1997b). These generations cannot organize around the Irish class and gender order to show their fitness in the US system and the Catholic faith, since they were living in overcrowded apartments, have no families, resort to casual encounters, clash with the older generations of immigrants, for instance when the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization wanted to join St. Patrick’s Day parade in the 1990s, and do not go to church, but get involved in other kinds of projects, such as the Project Irish Outreach, which deals with immigration restrictions (Duffy, 2014).

Even if illegal, newer Irish immigrants have a good command of English, high skills, close ties with Irish American power brokers in the ethnic community, so, they get jobs through clannish connections and, in time, they become highly assimilable. These undocumented Irish have, however, a middle status, being deprived in comparison with the legals (with limited access to jobs, limited mobility and opportunity). The rates of pay for their work vary, diminishing from unionized legals, through non-unionized legals, unionized illegals to non-unionized illegals. But the latter are still advantaged, earning twice as much in comparison to the legal and illegal Blacks and Hispanics, who find it even harder on the job market (Corcoran, 1997a; Corcoran, 1997b).

Sometimes there are inner tensions between “newcomers” and “newer” Irish immigrants and the “white flighters”.

The latter display an ambivalent attitude towards the former, acting as distant employers in much more heterogeneous neighbourhoods and posh suburbia, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, those who stayed in the Irish areas admitting that the most recent generations of Irish immigrants revived the Irish neighbourhood economically (taking jobs and using services), ethnically (in the competition with Asians, Latinos, Blacks) and politically (in the immigration reform movement in the 1980s and the 1990s contributing to the legalization of the undocumented workers) (Corcoran, 1997a).

Today, many “newcomers” and “newer” Irish (but not the ethnics or the white flighters) share with Blacks, Asians and Latinos the same jobs (Irish, Central American, Caribbean and Black men in constructions; Irish, Philippines, Caribbean, Black and Latin American women in childcare and Irish, Korean, Philippines and Black nurses in hospitals in New York) and social relationships or marriages, so the gap of racial miscommunication started being bridged (Luibheid, 1997).

Irish American culture, through the “newcomers” and “newer” Irish is mostly a culture of the youth today; there are people involved in rock bands, film festivals, theatrical performances in Greenwich Village and Lower East Side, addressing a wider nonethnic audience. New York is a workplace for these people, who often see themselves as transients rather than settlers, and through international goods, they often look for an Irish identification in a broader context than the one adopted by their predecessors living in Irish neighbourhoods. The psychological distance from home of these people is minimized through the mass media and cultural events: they listen to Irish bands playing variations of Celtic music; they get in touch with the local New York news, the local Irish news and national Irish news. These shifts have contributed to a transnational dimension and racial heterogeneity of the most recent Irish immigrants’ generation in New York.

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