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October 24, 2013

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Céad Míle Fáilte means “A hundred thousands welcomes” in Irish and is an expression used to describe how welcoming the Irish people are. Well, as long as you are not Roma, Chinese, Nigerian, Pakistani, Somali, etc. etc. etc.

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Racial Profiling in Ireland

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Over the last couple of days we have witnessed massive media hysteria about the case of Maria, a young girl supposedly abducted by a Roma couple in Greece. DNA tests and Lombroso-style racial profiling¹ have come into action in a case that has stirred the irrational anxiety that feeds racism and bigotry. Beyond the fact that child abduction is a serious issue, the “whiteness” and “blondeness” of the alleged victim have been emphasised together with the “Roma” condition of the alleged culprits. Let us remember that this is taking place in Greece, a country where blatant racism (as expressed by Golden Dawn) is on the rise, so there are good reasons to be cautious about this whole case.

Now this hysteria has reached Irish shores. Over the last couple of days we have seen the Gardaí, the Irish police, forcefully taking away two Roma children from their parents. On Monday, a 7-year-old girl was removed for 48 hours from her family in Tallaght (Dublin), and on Tuesday the same thing happened to a 2-year-old

¹ Cesare Lombroso, 19th century Italian criminologist who theorized that criminal behaviour was an inherited trait.

boy for 24 hours in Athlone (County Westmeath). Eventually, the kids were returned to their parents after DNA tests were carried out, proving they were indeed related to their parents. What evidence did they have to proceed in the way they did? None, apart from their looks... Sure, they were too blonde to have Roma parents... suspicious, eh? Can it get any scarier than being white in a Roma household? As the dark-haired father of a young blonde, I can't help but feeling that I have become suspicious, too. The lack of evidence to proceed in such a way has prompted many to talk about the State's responsibility in the abduction of these children.

This has been justified by Minister Alan Shatter by saying that Gardaí were only attempting to protect the children. This is a most sorry excuse, indeed, not only because the government, through cuts in social services, has been at the frontline of a series of attacks against the rights of children, but also because the racial profiling at work in this case is way too evident. Romas have been singled out and the Gardaí feel like they can take the children away from their parents as long as they are Roma. No serious proof is needed, because, well, Romas are guilty until proved innocent... I wonder if they would feel they could do the same whenever they see a black or an Asian child with white Irish parents.

Don't get me wrong; I do think human trafficking is a serious matter. Every year it is estimated that the appalling figure of 250,000 people are trafficked into Europe: many of them are children; the vast majority of them are brought for sexual exploitation. When discussing this heinous crime, the nationality of those pulling the strings of these trafficking networks is never an issue. But now that we have found one possible case of a "blonde girl", victim of "dark brutes", hysteria breaks out. This hysteria and the bullying behaviour of police in the Roma children cases have nothing to do with protecting children. This is racism at its finest. Children have been traumatised and their families have been further victimised: now it is emerging that the Roma family in Tallaght has been subject to years of abuse by their neighbours,

which has included physical attacks, verbal abuse and threats, and even arson! Needless to say, the Gardaí have been nowhere nearby to protect this family and their children when racism has knocked at their door. In fact, they have only stepped in to demonstrate the institutional dimension of racism in Europe.

This is happening when thousands of desperate migrants drown, victims of "Fortress Europe", as they try to reach European shores in order to escape the mess left behind by centuries of European colonialism and neocolonialism. There is a nasty anti-immigrant hysteria, irresponsibly stoked up by the media and by politicians, which is taking a toll on the lives of actual people. Silence in the face of racial profiling is just not an option. Fair play to Pavee Point, an organisation traditionally linked to the struggle for the rights of another discriminated group, the Travellers², for demanding an independent probe into this whole affair. Travellers know best how entrenched racism is in Irish society.

There was a time in which the Jews were said to be child robbers (apart from greedy bankers and the murderers of no other than the Son of the Almighty Lord). Of course, the bigots said, they were to blame for their bad reputation, just like the Romas today. We know how that story finished. How little has Europe learnt from its own past!

² A mostly nomadic native ethnic group in Ireland.