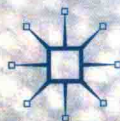


*Sam O'Brien-Olinger*

POLICE, RACE *and*  
CULTURE *in the*  
'NEW IRELAND'

*An Ethnography*



# Police, Race and Culture in the 'New Ireland': An Ethnography

Sam O'Brien-Olinger

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# Police, Race and Culture in the 'New Ireland': An Ethnography

*For Catherine O'Brien and Ken Olinger*

# Preface

There are two main ways to benefit from this book. One is to read it as a way of updating oneself on one of the most important changes to the Irish policing landscape in recent history. Nearly a century after Independence, when those being policed and those doing the policing were all Irish, this book provides new insights from the coalface into how immigration and its associated social changes have been impacting on police officers in the Republic of Ireland. In this regard, the title gives a lot away. The benefits of this book to readers on this level are obvious and immediate.

Another way to benefit from this book is to read it keeping in mind its theoretical starting point and its methodological entry point to the topic. Underpinning the desk research and ethnographic fieldwork is a particularly valuable understanding of Bourdieu's *habitus* and *field*, or 'human agency', which was responsible for producing the findings and conclusions presented here. On this level the book is basically a case-study example of employing a specific paradigm for researching social phenomena. As such it can be read by anyone interested more broadly in the relationship between theory and the implementation of methodology for researching human agency. Readers may not be particularly fascinated by social change in Ireland, nor by the minutiae of the inner workings of police subculture, but I hope they will find the book a useful demonstration of the inextricable link between theory and methodology and see the value of using the approach adopted here in trying to understand any social process.

By 'human agency' I am referring to what the frameworks of Bourdieu, Giddens, Garfinkel, and more recent thinkers such as Sewell (1991), Swidler (1986), and Weick (1995) all share and espouse. Because of their work, this book contributes new knowledge about how Gardaí on the frontlines of social change are adapting to ethnic diversity. Each of the above thinkers provides us with a similar foundational understanding of being in the world (Heidegger 1962), albeit they each use different terminology from one another. As the author understood and drew from them, at the core of their work is the idea that we humans 'are' when the semiotic, epistemological, phenomenological, and ontological dimensions of our being collapse into the one experiential activity. The means and ends of such activity result in our being-in-the-world in

this way rather than any other way. And this is never achieved in a social vacuum; it is always achieved with others. Irish police officers are just like anyone else in this regard. They act, react, adapt, create meaning, interpret, experience, and come to know their environment simultaneously as individuals and as part of a group. In 'knowing' themselves and the context they inhabit they become integral to its creation. That the process is experienced opens it up to empirical study.

With this in mind, the hope is that this book will have a broader appeal, and can benefit those not solely interested in the relationship between the police and ethnic minorities. What is presented here is a description of a fundamentally human process through which the existence of a social group is achieved; that is, the socio-cognitive innovation and subcultural production of shared meaning that is the method and outcome by which Irish police officers are such and not, say, South African social workers.

It is also worth noting here that the evolving demographics – as well as the recent and intense economic crisis, imposition of economic austerity measures, and the political climate shift towards increased accountability – has triggered an unprecedented level of outside public scrutiny of An Garda Síochána and self-reflection within Irish police subculture. When a group considers itself to be living through a time of particular crisis and acute social change (which is every group perennially), social fault lines appear to be more pronounced, and the group may feel more free to raise questions about itself, and to reveal or criticise otherwise taken-for-granted aspects of its life and routine. In this way an already fertile research field was made even more fruitful by recent events that have fundamentally altered the Irish policing landscape. Some new and emerging social phenomena could be studied alongside persisting older and fading ones.

In a way, this book's exploration of human agency just happens to be about police officers. The same theoretical starting point and methodological entry point can equally be applied to researching any social phenomena and to understanding the group of people whose practices are responsible for 'it'. Readers will benefit most from keeping both of these levels in mind as they go.

# Acknowledgements

The research for this book would not have been possible without the cooperation of An Garda Síochána and the goodwill of certain members of the force who acted as my liaisons and gatekeepers. This goodwill stemmed from their principled belief that it is in the interest of both police officers and society to make policing truly democratically accountable and human rights-based so that a more equitable standard of justice might be achieved by respecting everyone's right to be policed with dignity regardless of their social difference.

The Irish Research Council's support was vital during the fieldwork stages of the research for this book.

The following acknowledgement will be of no surprise to those who know him: Dr Aogán Mulcahy has shown me a level of friendship, kindness, support, and expertise without which this book would not be possible. Thank you, A.



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# Part I

## Context



# Introduction

Under the heading 'Phantom Pole haunts Garda at alternative Nobel Awards', the *Irish Times* newspaper (3 October 2009) stated that:

They'll be clearing space in the trophy cabinet at the Phoenix Park headquarters this weekend after An Garda Síochána gained dubious international recognition by winning an award at the annual Ig Nobel ceremony in the US.<sup>1</sup>

The Ig Nobel awards are organised by the Annals of Improbable Research, a satirical science magazine, with the aim of honouring achievements that 'first make people laugh and then make them think'. Designers of a bra that turns into a gas mask for two, and a team of scientists who found that named cows produce more milk were among the other winners at the ceremony held at Harvard University. The accolade was awarded to the force for figuring out that 'Prawo Jazdy' is actually the Polish term for 'driving licence' and not the name of a man they had been looking for with numerous entries for traffic violations on the Garda computer system. As the *Irish Times* reported on 19 February 2009 under the headline 'Dictionary helps crack case of notorious Polish serial offender'<sup>2</sup>:

So effective was *his* modus operandi of giving a different address each time he was caught that by June 2007 there were more than 50 separate entries under his name, Prawo Jazdy, in the Garda PULSE<sup>3</sup> system. And still not one conviction.<sup>4</sup>

Since members of the Garda traffic corps realised they had been taking the Polish term down in error as the actual identity of the

motorists, this mistake has been rectified and the Garda computer system has been updated with a new section advising officers of the layout of a number of foreign driving licences.

While conducting a routine interview at the early stages of fieldwork I found myself, by sheer chance, talking with the Guard who had first identified the mistake and raised the alarm.<sup>5</sup> While discussing general dealings with 'foreigners', he began to tell me about a number of issues, particularly problems Guards have with language barriers:

(Male Garda i; Newtown station; March 2009)

A prime example of it was not long ago, it was reported in the news, for the Polish driver's licences. Some fella called "Prawo Jazdy" kept getting stopped and summonses issued for him... I did it myself, I went to an accident and I looked at the licence and took down the fella's name as "Prawo Jazdy" and I phoned up his boss later that day and says "your driver, Prawo Jazdy was involved in an accident. I just need to get the insurance details" and he goes "I don't know who the hell that is!" so he goes off and asks around and he laughs, "well Guard, that's actually the Polish for driver's licence"

The Ig Nobel prize was certainly appropriate recognition of the error because, although humorous, it also makes one think. In fact, when the *Irish Times* made contact with the force about receiving the international award, a Garda spokesperson said: 'We're aware of it, but we're not in a position to comment.'<sup>6</sup> This example encapsulates the depth and breadth of the impact which the recent and rapid ethnic diversification of Irish society has had on some of the most basic facets of Irish policing. This Garda spokesperson had unwittingly captured in their comment a dominant feature of the current policing situation in Ireland which this book aims to shed light on: that the force and its members may certainly be aware that they now operate under very different circumstances, as they face a range of novel challenges related to policing a more diverse public, but they remain uncomfortably ambiguous about the major social changes they experience as they continue to negotiate their way around this unfamiliar terrain. There exists little empirical research and a dearth of information about the now topical relationship between policing immigrant ethnic minorities and the phenomenon of racism in Ireland. This book aims to address that deficit by providing new knowledge on these interconnected areas. It does so by revealing

how Irish police officers conceive of, talk about, and interact with ethnic minority communities.

In the last two decades Ireland has undergone an unprecedented level of inward migration and ethnic change. In effect, Ireland continues to represent a new test case for inter-racial relations. Given its role as a key institution of the state, with primary responsibility for the provision of public safety, national security, and immigration control, these changes have had enormous implications for An Garda Síochána. Since its inception in 1922, the force has been an emblem of an independent, Catholic, Gaelic, and ethnically homogeneous Ireland, and to this day is considered to be one of the most successful institutions of the state involved in nation-building. This historical 'success' has traditionally insulated the force from pressure to keep in step with a changing society. However, the recent and rapid demographic transformation of Irish society poses significant challenges for the force as it now engages with a multicultural public. In a relatively short space of time Ireland's national police force has found itself providing a service to approximately 145–199 different nationalities that can account for as much as 20 per cent of the local population in some Garda districts, and as much as half the population of certain Dublin housing estates and residential areas. Indeed the annual school census for 2013–14 showed that 23 per cent of schools were catering for four out of five children from an immigrant background; and that 745 primary schools had recorded that over 79 per cent of their students were not of Irish nationality.<sup>7</sup> By the mid-2000s the traditional concepts of 'nation' and understandings of 'community' that had essentially underpinned the foundation of the state, and its police force, since gaining independence from British rule had become not only temporarily disrupted but irreversibly antiquated (see Fanning 2014).<sup>8</sup> This move away from the near century-long social situation of policing within a relatively ethnically homogeneous environment therefore represents uncharted waters for members of An Garda Síochána.

The recent demographic transformation of Irish society has presented the force with a range of novel and substantial tests as its members engage with a multi-ethnic public for the first time in its history. This gives rise to a number of sociological questions regarding the impact of this fundamental alteration to the field of Irish policing. The central question addressed by this book, therefore, is how have An Garda Síochána and its members been adapting to the unprecedented challenges that immigration and ethnic diversity now presents. Consequently, the immediate goal of the research for this book was to

gather and analyse information on the daily street-level practices and experiences of officers who routinely come into contact with members of ethnic minorities. In doing so the research aimed to provide the first ever ethnographic insight into Irish policing and, more specifically, to learn about how Irish police officers as individuals and as a subculture are collectively adapting to this new social environment and to critically assess what the organisational policing response has been to this unprecedented development.

By studying the experiences of Irish police officers, and the discourses they draw on to make sense of policing an increasingly diverse public, this book examines how Guards' conceptions serve to create, alter, reproduce, justify, rationalise, legitimise, and indeed challenge the complex relationship between Irish police and ethnic minority populations that is currently unfolding. In assessing the institutional and organisational response of An Garda Síochána to this dramatic change, the book provides a sociological account of the processes by which issues surrounding national identity, the nation-state, belonging, and discourses surrounding crime and cultural difference are presently interfacing in the 'new Ireland'. The fieldwork for this book was carried out between 2006 and 2011. The result provides a snapshot of major transition for Irish policing at one of its most critical moments. In this way the book constitutes the first significant examination of issues regarding policing and race in the Irish context and provides the first case study of its kind to explore how An Garda Síochána's essential cultural role and foundational national symbolism is being reconfigured in contemporary Irish society.



# 1

## Situating the Present

### A long story short: From policing old Ireland to new

In his work on police accountability in Ireland, Manning (2012) describes An Garda Síochána as a 'Hybrid' (351):

Their obligations as a national force on the one hand resemble those of the Gendarmerie of France, combining national security and domestic policing and differ somewhat from the British model (found with modifications in Australia, Canada and the United States) of locally or state-based organisations or Constabularies with some local political and economic obligations. Like the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), they are nationally funded and police both the capital and the hinterland. They have vast regulatory functions, including issuing passports. Unlike the French, English and American systems in which the Prefecture of Paris, the London Metropolitan Police and the Metropolitan Police of Washington DC, police the national capital, there is no distinctive police serving Dublin exclusively. Ireland, as of 1937, has a written constitution which associates its practices and constraints in legal terms more with the policing in the United States than with policing in common law nations.

(ibid.)

He also tells us how contemporary Irish policing has evolved out of colonial origins with a legacy driven by the assumption 'that governance and security were obligations of the state, and their role as an organisation was unbending loyalty to the state and protection of its security' (ibid.). 'The Guards' are

a miniature representation of several themes in the history of the nation...they reflect the revolutionary 'spirit', the actions in