Constructing a Shared Identity in Deeply Divided Societies

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Title
Constructing a Shared Public Identity in Violently Divided Societies

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Abstract
In order to bolster sustainable peacebuilding in violently divided societies, a normative suggestion is that efforts should be made to construct a shared public identity that overarches ethnic divisions. A number of different centripetal/transformationist processes are identified as engendering a shared identity in comparison to consociational arrangements, which are accused of institutionalizing ethnic differences and perpetuating conflict. These transformationist approaches essentially rest on the premise that since ethnicity is constructed it can be reconstructed into new shared forms. Looking at Northern Ireland, we argue there are limits to the extent that ethnicity can be reconstructed into shared identities. By analysing consociational and centripetal/transformationist approaches to division, we conclude that although consociational arrangements will not deliver a common identity, they do provide the most robust form of conflict regulation.
What is a divided society? The main fissure in divided societies is not just the presence of multiple ethnic group interests; a violent conflict of nationality over the legitimacy of the state itself provides the basis for division. In divided societies, social identities are often constrained by ethnic communal allegiances, which provide little room for multiple encapsulations crosscutting the divisions (Nagle and Clancy 2010: 1). For this reason, civic and social life and political mobilization tends to occur within, rather than across, ethnic cleavages. This division is reinforced by historically embedded patterns of social segregation and endogamy meaning that levels of intergroup distrust and hostility are high, economic growth is low and ‘membership is clear and, with few exceptions, unchangeable’ (Lustick 1979: 325).

In order to assist with sustainable peacebuilding in violently divided societies it is often suggested that more is done to create a shared society. Despite citizens of shared societies possessing different ethnic identities, a superordinate civic and/or national belonging prevails and the public sphere is a place where conflict can be peacefully negotiated. There is, hence, a single, shared public identity to which all can claim allegiance and which facilitates the distribution of public resources. In a shared society social identity is not constrained by a single communal narrative; individual identities are numerous and they crosscut multiple cleavages.

In Northern Ireland, an archetypal divided society, the premise of creating a shared society has long been a normative component of conflict transformation initiatives. The virtues of sharing are extolled by a range of actors. The European Union (EU 2007) fund programmes in Northern Ireland which they identify as ‘reconciling communities … and contributing towards a shared society’. State agencies too actively ‘encourage and promote a shared society’ (OFMDFM 2003 np). Even the political parities which represent the various communal interests in a divided society bicker among themselves as to whom is the most
supportive of a shared society. In Northern Ireland, rhetorical support can be seen from Sinn Féin (2009: 3), currently the largest nationalist party, who call for a ‘shared society based on equality for all’, and from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP 2009), the largest unionist party, who argue that ‘If we are … to remove the divisions in our society, we need a shared strategy to achieve this’.

It was hoped by many commentators that the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) signed by British unionist and Irish nationalist parties in 1998 would create an auspicious environment for the people of Northern Ireland to ‘forge a new shared identity, transcending the insular-looking group identities of the past’ (Byrne 2000: 8). For one politician, the power sharing institutions brought about by the Agreement were specifically meant to augur ‘the transformation of rigid political identities and the fusion of Planter and Gael [unionist and nationalist] into a new political unity that retains the good in both and abandons the bad in both’ (Maginness 2009). Despite a slowly consolidating peace, however, a number of commentators claim there has not been a correlative weakening of divisions (e.g. Wilford and Wilson 2006, Taylor 2008, Tonge 2009, Wilson 2009). In fact, they claim that levels of social segregation and political polarisation even appear to be intensifying. The cause for this paradox, they explain, is the terms of the Agreement and the political institutions created to sustain peace. These forms, they argue, do little to deal with the root causes of conflict and instead institutionalize and encourage conflicting ethnic interests, thereby providing a disincentive for a shared vision of society. It is thus common to read some commentators arguing that ‘the lack of shared identity is a key aspect of Northern Ireland’s problems’ (Barton 2005).

Specifically looking at the case of Northern Ireland, in this article we examine what is meant by the idea of a shared society to replace a violently divided one, and to what extent it is possible to constitute. While it is almost a given to state that the concept of a shared society
is profoundly contested (Nagle and Clancy 2010), we argue that the construction of a shared overarching public identity superseding existing ethnic cleavages is an unrealistic aim for divided societies, at least for the short-to-medium term. In particular, we challenge the constructivist proposition that identities can be transformed and remoulded into new shared formulations. Although it is clear that, within a limited window, ethnicity can be constructed, this is not to say that ethnic identity can just as easily be reconstructed. Notably, ‘ethnic identities, while constructed, are hard to reconstruct once they form … the conditions needed for reconstruction are quite rare, especially in modern times, and especially among ethnic groups in conflict’ (Van Evera 2001: 20). However, while ‘redirecting identities is usually a Quixotic project, reflavoring identities shows great promise as a palliative to ethnic conflict’ (Van Evera 2001). Conflict regulation is achieved not by rendering ethnonationalism inconsequential, but by ‘changing perceptions of the conflict and softening out-group boundaries by redefining collective identities in ways that are empowering and yet less polarizing’ (Smithey 2009: 85).

By analysing the limits of constructivist techniques to modeling ethnic identity, we compare and contrast consociational with social transformationist approaches to the issue of ethnonational division in Northern Ireland. By seeking to equally accommodate dual or multiple public identities in the polity, consociationalism stands in contrast to social transformationist approaches which aim to forge a single all-embracing public identity through integration (McGarry and O’Leary 2009). Although there is some degree of overlap between consociational and social transformationist approaches, we argue that consociational approaches are more robust at mitigating the saliency of deep divisions in divided societies.

**Constructivism and Ethnicity**

As Fearon and Laitin (2000) note, constructivism rests on the premise that ethnic groups are social categories distinguished by two main features: (1) rules of membership that decide
who is and is not a member of the category; and (2) content – characteristics thought to be
typical by members of the category. Ethnicity is thus socially constructed because it is said
that membership rules and content ‘are the products of human action and speech, and that as
a result they can and do change over time’ (Fearon and Laitin 2000: 848). Ethnic identities,
hence, ‘are not stamped in our genes’ (Van Evera 2001: 20), but individuals have multiple
identities, and ethnic identification is malleable depending on external forces; as individuals’
identities change, so do ethnic groups.

Some commentators have argued that ethnic groups can be constructed by top-down
statist influence. As Kasfir (1979: 370-371) notes of sub-Saharan Africa: ‘[m]any of the
newly defined urban ethnic groupings brought together migrants whose traditional homes in
the countryside were close to each other and whose languages were closely related, but who
had never previously thought of each other as possessing the same ethnic identity’. In a
different way, others have looked at how ethnonational entrepreneurs actively construct
ethnic identity to bolster their political authority. Gagnon (2004: 10) analyses how nationalist
leaders in the former Yugoslavia, such as Slobodan Milosevic, utilized extreme violence to
destroy existing identifications and relationships which were fluid and overlapping. The
result was to construct ‘ethnicity as a hard category, and ethnic groups as clearly bounded,
monolithic, ambiguous unites whose members are linked through ineffable bonds of blood
and history and who thus have a single, objective common interest, which is identified with
the status quo elites’. Another constructivist perspective entails viewing ethnic groups as
essentially rent-seeking collectivities. Ethnic groups are formed because members of the
same group choose to work with each other in competition against other groups when they
are faced with limited resources (Habyarimana et al 2008).

Due to the fact that ethnicity can theoretically be constructed, some commentators
argue that ethnic identities can just as easily be disassembled and rearranged into a more
progressive identity which cross-cuts cleavages. For example, Farry (2009: 170-171) argues that ‘identity has been constructed and divisions further entrenched during different periods of history of Northern Ireland … this construction of identity holds out the prospect that communal identities can be reconstructed … as identities have been shaped by various influences in the past, they can be reshaped in the future’. Habyarimana et al (2008) look to how intercommunal trust and reciprocation can be fostered so that groups come together to work for the common good, thus transcending ethnic differences.

Yet while the social constructivist approach is ostensibly reasonable, the issue of how far ethnicity can be easily reconstructed is less clear. As Varshney (2002: 34) notes, although identities are ‘constructed does not mean that they are not deeply constructed. Often identities do not change even if interests do’ [emphasis original]. Once mobilized, ethnic identities typically show a high degree of resistance against transformation; ethnicity can become ‘inflexible, resilient, crystallized, durable, and hard’ (McGarry and O’Leary 2009: 17).

The underlying reasons why ethnicity is so resilient to change is multifaceted. First, it is rarely, if ever, the case that ethnicity is invented ex nihilo (Van den Berghe 1981), as if by process of political alchemy by leaders for their own machinations. Mobilizing groups into ethnic units is not just a Pavlovian act of leaders pressing buttons and forcing responses from the masses (Gagnon 2004: 8). Nor is the construction of ethnic identity a matter of making something brand new in the image of a nascent political project guided by élites; it is more a process of patching together various pieces, old and new, as if a mosaic, to make it appear that a whole group exists with a definable ethnic identity.

Second, for some of the reasons underscored above, though ethnicity can be constructed to some extent, it must exist as a sociological fact for bearers of that identity. In this way, Fearon and Laitin (2000: 848) use ‘everyday primordialism’ to describe how many people take for granted the naturalness and unchanging essence of their ethnicity. Such
beliefs in the primordial quality of identity make ethnicity extraordinarily resilient once formed and less prone to reinvention for any political exigency. This is not to say that, as some primordialists conceive it, that ethnic groups are a fact of nature, rooted in biology (Van den Berghe 1981). The aetiology utilized by primordialists leads them to believe that immutable ethnic differences will propagate unending violent conflict between groups in close contact.

Third, conflict hardens identities by enhancing ethnic memories, myths and a sense of common victimhood for future generations; it creates a shared sense of purpose within the group, thus reinforcing positive in-group and negative out-group narratives. The fear of group extinction can engender hostility and ultimately ethnic violence. Such an atmosphere generates heightened group solidarity, encouraging ‘the groups to perceive events in ethnic terms’ (Kaufman 2001: 26).

The issue of how deep division runs in divided societies profoundly impacts upon the type of processes that are designed to ameliorate the most deleterious consequences of divergent ethnonational claims. Two broad, but generally contrasting approaches are typically advanced: consociational and centripetal/transformationist. Since 1998, although subject to a number of hiatuses, there has been a consociational power sharing agreement in Northern Ireland, known as the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). Many critics of consociationalism call for centripetal/transformational approaches to conflict which seek to deal with the putative root causes of conflict and which encourage moderation, intergroup cooperation and the construction of a shared public identity.

Consociational

In the detritus of societies breaking down into ethnic violent conflict, rather than seeking to piece back the fragments into a shared identity, consociational arrangements often institutionalize the existence of ethnic differences. Consociationalism is typically defined as a
‘government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy’ (Lijphart 1969: 216). Consociationalism is based upon the idea that conflict resolution in divided societies is best achieved through the accommodation of the political élites representing the salient segments of society and institutionally anchored by inclusive coalitions and proportionality in public appointments. This inclusive approach to governance eschews those majoritarian political systems in which the competition for power creates a *de facto* permanent exclusion of minorities from sharing political power.

In order to ensure that the salient groups are represented in the legislature and public institutions, consociational institutions normally consist of four key elements: a grand coalition representing the main (not all) segments of society; proportionality in representation, public employment and expenditure; community autonomy on issues deemed to be vital; and constitutional vetoes for minorities (Lijphart 1977).

Normatively, proponents of consociationalism claim that ‘ethnic divisions are resilient rather than rapidly biodegradable, and that they must be recognized rather than wished away’ (McGarry and O’Leary 1995: 338). They argue that the main groups are unlikely ‘to assimilate, fuse, or dissolve into one common identity at any foreseeable point’ (McGarry and O’Leary 2009: 26). Accordingly, consociationalists are apt to portray themselves as ‘pragmatists who, in accepting existing divisions within ethnically divided societies, strive to regulate them through complex constitutional engineering’ (Kerr 2009: 209).

In order to ensure that the various group interests are secured, power sharing forms are often based on corporate rather than liberal principles. Such corporatism can be achieved through a system that deliberately obliges voters to vote only within their own segment for their own ethnic parties, and where seats are reserved to ethnic parties in advance of elections. In Cyprus (1960-1968), for instance, citizens had to opt to be either Greek Cypriot or Turkish Cypriot when they voted. Cross-community political parties hosting candidates
from numerous ethnic groups were proscribed from standing for election. Under the terms of
the 2003 power sharing agreement in Burundi, seats in the national assembly and transitional
cabinet must be allocated to a formula of 60 percent of Hutus and 40 percent to Tutsis
(Rothchild and Roeder 2005b: 32).

Notably, there is no corporate underpinning to power sharing in Northern Ireland.
Voters in Northern Ireland can select any candidates they deem fit from a common roll; there
are no seats or political positions reserved for specific ethnonational groups; executive places
are distributed among parties based on their performances in free and democratic elections
(McGarry and O’Leary 2006). Groups are self-determined rather than pre-determined. In
practical terms, this means that ethnonational blocs could disappear if voters decided to put
their support behind parties who advanced non-ethnic issues which cross-cut cleavages.

Centripetal/Transformative

Broadly speaking, advocates of centripetal/transformationist approaches to ethnicity claim
that consociational arrangements, like the GFA, inter alia, ‘reinforces and perpetuates
sectarian division’ (Taylor 2009: 320), and ‘assumes that identities are primordial and
exclusive rather than malleable and relational’ (Wilford and Wilson 2003: 6).

Consociationalism, in this conspectus has entrenched and exacerbated sectarian division
across all domains of public and even private life, thereby ensuring that group based
hostilities remain at the expense of any chance of a shared and reconciled society.

Centripetalists/transformationists deny that divisions are as embedded and resilient as
consociationalists claim. Indeed, in the context of Northern Ireland, Farry (2009: 173) claims
that ‘traditional notions of identity are breaking down’. If so, are antagonistic ethnic identities
more amenable to mitigation through the influence of different frameworks? These include
centriptetal political institutions which encourage moderation, cooperation and a shared
public identity; forms of deliberative democracy, where people ‘set aside their personal
commitments and affiliations and try to assess competing proposals in terms of shared justice and common interest’ (Miller 1999: 106); and ‘bottom up’ transformative processes located at the level of civil society and designed to encourage intergroup reconciliation. Such institutional alternatives, proposed by opponents of consociationalism, seek to demonstrate that ethnic identity, rather than pre-determined and primordial can actually be redirected into new shared forms.

Despite clear normative and methodological differences between consociational and transformationist approaches, consociationalists also want to claim, as Jarstad (2008: 12) notes, that ‘consociationalism is expected to depoliticize ethnicity and allow development of a common national identity’. Indeed, proponents argue that consociationalism will ‘provide a hospitable environment for the erosion of difference’ (Coakley 2009a: 145), and that ‘the dissolution of (undesirable) collective identities and antagonisms may be more likely to occur after a period of consociational governance’ (O’Leary (2005: 19).

As Sisk and Stefes (2005: 297) ask: ‘what are the ways in which formal power sharing can evolve into more flexible institutions that can foster crosscutting political allegiances and a cosmopolitan national identity?’ The logic of consociationalists seems to be that the building of trust at the élite level within the grand coalition would gradually descend to envelop contending communities leading to a shared public identity. This would, Tonge (2009: 53) explains, ‘have a beneficial impact upon societal ethnic rigidities, allowing differences to be managed peacefully and contributing to their eventual erosion’.

This is an optimistic analysis. The consociational Agreement ‘did not offer a model of assimilation of the ethnic identities of the two communities in Northern Ireland … co-identity rather than shared identity, was a recurring theme’ (Tonge 2004: 57). The danger of consociationalism is that through accommodating ethnicity and incentivizing communal politics, there is a strong risk that this will bolster the power of ethnic extremists, who will
use brinksmanship and ever escalating mutually exclusive ethnic claims. In this way, Rothchild and Roeder (2005a) have identified what they believe is a systemic problem with consociationalism. That is, while there are short term benefits to power sharing, in so far as it entices the respective parties to end violence and enter into government, in the longer run it threatens the consolidation of peace. ‘Power sharing’, they note (2005a: 9), ‘may get ethnic leaders to leave the battlefield, but then after a short lull transforms the bargaining room into a new battlefield.

If consociationalism is accused of prohibiting the development of a shared public identity, an alternative could be to complement elite driven power sharing with more informal power sharing and centripetal institutions. Sisk and Stefes (2005: 300) argue that consociationalism can forge a ‘sense of shared and common destiny’ in divided societies if power sharing embraces cross-cutting, integrationist civil society groupings willing to promote moderation and cooperation between various ethnic groups so that common interests can be fostered. They point to the apparent success of the interim consociational arrangements in South Africa (1993-1996), which combined formal and informal power sharing processes allowing an eventual move into majoritarian democracy with substantial safeguards for the minority population.

Given the critiques of elite driven consociationalism for militating against the development of a shared society, in the rest of this paper we examine and analyse some of the various processes that have been identified as undermining mutually exclusive notions of ethnonational identity and delivering a shared identity for Northern Ireland. In particular, we assess (1) economic liberalism; (2) regionalism; (3) Europeanization; (4) assimilationism; (5) centripetalism/social transformationism.

**Economic Liberalism**
There is a longstanding assumption that economic liberalism will improve sectarian rivalries by generating freedom and prosperity in divided societies. For example, in the 1960s Northern Ireland’s unionist Prime Minister, Terence O’Neill, sought to modernize the economy and increase prosperity. As McAllister (1979: 279) notes: ‘O’Neill’s message was that material values were worth more than non-material ones and that both religious groups could gain new benefits without undermining each other’.

Despite O’Neill’s optimism concerning the capacity of economic modernization to facilitate shared values and peace, ethnonational violence erupted in Northern Ireland in 1969 and was to last three decades. In fact, some commentators have argued that distinct socio-economic inequalities between nationalists and unionists in Northern Ireland acted to fuel nationalist grievances and enflame ethnonational conflict (Portland Trust 2007, Strong 2010). As such, conflict regulation has been framed as a matter of redressing inequality. As Strong (2010) claims in the context of Northern Ireland, ‘[a]s a more dynamic economy reduces unemployment for all, and thereby reducing the differential rates of unemployment, the perception of persecution is reduced and the rate of violence declines’.

If economic inequality was putatively at the heart of conflict in Northern Ireland, economic factors are now seen as being part of the successful solution to division. A central part of this perspective concerns wedding Northern Ireland to global, neoliberal forces. For example, in 1986 an International Fund for Ireland (IFI) was initiated with the aim of drawing in Foreign Direct Investment to the region (Portland Trust 2007). In 2008 the inflow of FDI stock in Northern Ireland reached £1 billion.

Notably, Northern Ireland has been framed as an economic success story for other divided regions. For instance, in March 2008 the Basra Development Commission toured Belfast in Northern Ireland where they were told that ‘[a]n improved economic climate, where people have a better stake in society, can play a great part in assisting with the
improvement of stability and political development’ (Stewart 2009). Similarly, a research paper by the Portland Trust (2007) seeks to export the economic model of Northern Ireland to other divided regions, particularly the Middle East. The report argues that ‘[t]he importance of economics in conflict resolution is that it sets aside the question of motive, of grievance, of historical rights and wrongs, and focuses instead on the question of economic opportunity’ (Portland Trust 2007: 5).

The normative assumption that economic liberalism goes hand in hand with sustainable peace has become a core operating nostrum of many post-conflict development initiatives. That is, if the invisible hand of the free-market can be liberated, it will provide the raw material to reinforce processes of democratisation and peacebuilding in divided societies. As McDonald (2009: 5) claims, ‘liberal economic institutions – namely, the predominance of private property and competitive market structures within domestic economies – promote peace’. In consequence, a necessary question is to what extent economic liberalism is undermining the basis of ethnonational antagonism in Northern Ireland?

There has been talk about how expanding the free-market has been a site of intercommunal cooperation between nationalist and unionist politicians, who are ‘agreeing on the same right-wing economic policies’ (Breen 2010). A visible symbol of such consensus came in 2008 with the joint appearance of the once warring factions of Irish republicanism and unionism, now wiling partners in political power sharing, led by Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness, to announce US public investment for Northern Ireland. The presence of McGuinness, a leader of Sinn Féin, once the political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), courting FDI inflows was particularly significant, because as part of their economic war against the ‘failed statelet’ of Northern Ireland, the IRA bombed businesses and financial districts and even abducted and killed business leaders, including a manager of a US owned business (Adshead and Tonge 2009: 183)
Yet it is necessary not to ascribe too much significance regarding neoliberal solutions to sectarian divisions. Economics only play an important role in ethnic conflict in societies marked by extreme poverty. According to Collier and Sambanis (2002: 3), ‘civil war … occurs disproportionately in low-income countries and, evidently, further reduces income’. Analysing data from Africa, Asia and the Middle East, Fearon and Laitin (2003) demonstrate that states with a $579 GDP per capita have a 17 percent risk of war within 1 year.

Using the Gini coefficient estimates of income inequality for 108 countries, Fearon and Laitin (2003) dismiss the idea that income inequality is an unreliable predictor of violence. If economic grievances are an insufficient metric for motivating conflict, some theorists have looked at how extreme poverty provides opportunities for insurgents to mobilise and wage war (Collier, Hoeffler and Rohner 2006: 15). Poverty sinks the costs of insurgency: insurgent leaders benefit from the low price of military hardware and cost of funding recruits, usually young males who have received little education and are unemployed.

Such a model has little practical utility for either explaining or ameliorating conflict in regions like Northern Ireland that are relatively prosperous. When violence erupted in 1969, Northern Ireland was going through a period of economic growth. Furthermore, periods of economic downturn have not been directly related to increased violence in Northern Ireland (Thompson 1989). Arguments that the conflict is a product of deprivation and/or discrimination are similarly unconvincing. Such arguments ignore that individuals respond to grievances or perceived grievances differently, and research has demonstrated that personal experiences of discrimination did not play a significant role in individuals’ decision to join IRA (Alonso 2007).

Moreover, although there may be some degree of consensus between nationalist and unionist parties regarding the introduction of neoliberal policies in Northern Ireland, there is a
high degree of acrimony over what these policies represent. For nationalist parties, neoliberal policies – such as the possible lowering of corporate tax, FDI – is seen as requiring an all-Ireland economy and thus the removal of partition. For unionist parties, the same processes are viewed as coterminal with strengthening the union.

Similarly, the theory that economic liberalism represents the withering away of nation-state political authority, thus allowing for citizenship to become re-orientated away from the nation as the predominant community, can be challenged. One argument is that state authority is being undermined from what could be called global neoliberalism. Here, nation states are tightly integrated in transnational finance networks and markets. Political decisions are primarily responses to the demands of the international economy, meaning that ‘[s]tates no longer have the capacity and policy instruments they require to contest the imperatives of global economic change’ (Held 2002: 53). A consequential argument is that if territory is the root of zero-sum intractable conflicts, then the unbundling of territoriality associated with globalisation could be the deus ex machina that resolves them (Ben-Porat 2006: 2). For example, Taylor (2008: 191) asks why the constitutional status of Northern Ireland is the major basis of conflict ‘when increasing global interconnectedness … has resulted in a declining significance of national sovereignty and national borders’.

Yet there is no evidence that globalism is engendering a ‘global ecumene’ or a cosmopolitan sensitivity so that ethnonational identities are becoming increasingly anachronistic. Although national economic systems have increasingly become enmeshed in global processes, ‘there are few grounds for thinking that a concomitant widespread pluralisation of political identities has taken place’ (Held 2002: 56). Some ethnic conflicts are even exacerbated by a backlash against globalism, especially ‘the disruptive effects of global integration, and the failure of markets to self-regulate in a way that protects the interests of the people’ (Kilcullen 2009: 8).
Another problem is that divided societies are typically overbalanced by the public sector. The reason for this is that there is often a system of resource duplication/multiplication as the respective groups, often highly segregated, demand their particularistic quota of public services. Such service duplication/multiplication can overtax a weak revenue base meaning that the government may have to enforce cutbacks on vital public services. The ‘cost of division’ in Northern Ireland, it is claimed, is £1.5 billion per annum. For the year 2005-06, public spending as a share of GDP in Northern Ireland was 71 percent compared to 43 percent for the rest of the UK (Deloitte and Touche 2007). There is also fierce distributive conflicts in divided societies concerning where public facilities, like universities and hospitals should be sited contributing to further instability.

For this reason, rather than a neoliberal success story, Northern Ireland’s private sector is relatively weak and the economy has been unfavourably compared to ‘the old communist regimes in eastern Europe’ (Ruddock 2006). Economic output is approximately 20 percent below the British average and the region’s fiscal deficit is around £7 billion, which is made up by a subvention from the Westminster Government. Furthermore, Invest Northern Ireland, the agency charged with generating FDI, has been branded a failure after only attracting 10 foreign firms to invest in Northern Ireland between 1999-2004 (Adshead and Tonge 2009: 183), and most FDI investment is in lower value added sectors such as shared services, retail and call centres.

Regionalism

This transformationist viewpoint calls for the constitution of a shared Northern Irish or regional Ulster identity. The main idea is that the two groups – nationalists and unionists – have ‘shared values rooted in a common regional culture’ (Finlay 2006: 6) which could be utilized as a fertile soil from which a shared political identity could spring.
There is a longstanding call, especially within the arts, for the notion of a shared regional identity. Two of Northern Ireland’s most celebrated poets – John Hewitt and Seamus Heaney – evoked through their verse the image of a common Northern Irish identity. In 1949 Hewitt wrote: ‘Ulster considered as a Region and not as the symbol of any particular creed, can command the loyalty of every one of its inhabitants’ (cited in Kearney 1997: 106).

Another related strand to the shared regional identity argues that the peoples of Ulster have always shared the same culture which clearly distinguishes them from both the rest of Ireland and the UK. For Evans (2005: 74), ‘the communities in the north … share an outlook on life which is different from that prevailing in the south and which bears the stamp of a common heritage’. An additional aspect is the binding agent of violence as a shared experience: ‘this sense of regional fellowship has been strengthened by the horrors the Northerners have been sharing even while they have been inflicting them on each other’s communities’ (Murphy 1978).

Concomitant with the establishment of devolved regional power sharing in Northern Ireland research has claimed to have uncovered growing popularity for a localized Northern Irish identity transcending the fixed binary of a British/Irish affiliation. As many as 29 per cent of respondents in one survey identified themselves as being ‘Northern Irish’, as opposed to British or Irish. The authors of a report claimed the research shows that people are abandoning ‘the national and religious labels that are often purported to underpin the Troubles’ (Muldoon et al 2008).

A political vision has been articulated by the Alliance Party, a purposely non-sectarian political party, which promotes ‘a common regional identity for Northern Ireland’ (Neeson 1999). They call for policies to help foster this ‘sense of shared destiny among our people’, which mobilizes political moderates. Problematically, though, there is no serious political support for parties that espouse a shared Northern Irish identity or any symbolic
dimension to imagine it. Indeed, survey evidence makes it clear that, in line with a growing Northern Irish identity, there is not a correlative rise in numbers of those who desire an independent Northern Ireland. The vast majority of those polled desire for Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK or to unify with the Republic of Ireland. Some other surveys have also indicated a relatively small figure of 18 per cent of those who describe their identity as Northern Irish, ‘a setback for those who hope to see a new cross-community Northern Ireland identity emerging’ (Gordon 2010).

Despite some support for a Northern Ireland identity, there is no evidence that these people share any sense of common political encapsulation. In fact, it is reasonable to suggest that a ‘Northern Irish’ identity may mean something completely different for a Catholic and a Protestant, as it could be seen as coterminous with their national preferences. For unionists, support for a Northern Irish identity can be seen as compatible with the idea of a regional identity within the context of UK, thereby legitimating the idea of partition and the separateness of the north from the rest of the island of Ireland. For nationalists, the same identity can be read as a declaration of regional affiliation within a united Ireland.

**Europeanization**

It has been suggested by some commentators that European integration can bring about a shared identity by eroding ethnonational divisions and even the power of nation-states. Richard Kearney (1997: 15), for example, claims that ‘in the new European dispensation, nation-states will … become increasingly anachronistic … future identities may … be less nation-statist and more local and cosmopolitan’. Kearney continues to ask whether a semi-autonomous Northern Ireland, within a federal Europe, might ‘enable both nationalist and unionist communities to put their sovereignty-quarrel behind them and work for the common good of their region under a broad European roof?’ (1997: 17) One commentator (Ramsay 2009: 317-20) has recently called for the people of Northern Ireland to change how they
define their ‘ethnicity’ by labelling themselves as one of the ‘European peoples’ within the EU – like the Basques, Catalans and those from South Tyrol. From this, it is opined, ‘a new identity will emerge, embracing both communities and superseding the former divisions’ (Ramsay 2009: 319).

When it comes to the issue of intra-state conflict, the EU’s approach has been one of accommodating ethnic differences rather than striving for their integration. The EU’s position since the 1980s has been to develop legislation which formally recognizes and nourishes the distinctiveness of an area’s ethnic groups as part of efforts to stymie violent conflict. In dealing with the conflict in Northern Ireland the EU has promoted the recognition of the two groups’ distinct identities as a potential solution (Adshead and Tonge 2009: 219). For instance, the Haagerup Report (1984: 7), produced by the European Parliament, argued for power sharing between nationalists and unionists, contending that ‘the conflict, deeply rooted in British-Irish history, is … of conflicting national identities in Northern Ireland’. Since then, as Hayward (2006: 261) notes, ‘the EU’s self-ascribed role towards a settlement in Northern Ireland … has followed this vein by supporting the peaceful expression of British and Irish identities rather than reconstructing them or creating alternatives’.

**Assimilationist**

The main thrust of assimilationism is to relegate ethnic identities to the private sphere. The public sphere of formal politics is a place where a common civic, non-ethnic realm is developed (Nagle 2009). A common sense of citizenship is nurtured by uniform, singular and equal rights, formal social equality and justice (Barry 2001: 72-76). The public sphere is also a place where citizens debate in a rational manner issues concerning the common good rather than subordinating them to particularistic ethnic demands.

Some liberals argue that an undifferentiated and singular concept of citizenship facilitates peaceful coexistence between potentially conflicting groups. This is engendered by
the maintenance of a ‘neutral public sphere’, in which the ‘state should be neutral between competing conceptions of the good life’ (Rawls 1971). In a differentiated society there are a multitude of cultures and religions, which in different ways embody diverse and sometimes incompatible ways of envisioning the meaning of the good, the just and the right moral order of society. It is not unreasonable that groups can clash by fostering ‘zero-sum ideas about the way in which a polity and a society should be organized’, especially when ‘one group seeks to impose its ideas on a territory containing other groups’ (Barry 2001: 24). The solution to this is not for the state to impose a singular concept of the ‘good life’, but to remain intrinsically neutral and leave citizens free as individuals to lead their chosen lives in the private sphere.

A major problem with the assimilative logic, however, is that it relies ‘too heavily on the ideal-type of the rational individual and the capacity of individuals to separate the methods of politics from their substantive private or non-public beliefs’ (Little 2004: 3). It is more reasonable instead to assume that in divided societies ‘interpretations of the political and liberal concepts of justice are closely bound up with “private” concerns of culture, nationality, religion and so on’ (Little 2004: 3). Moreover, no state is ethnically neutral. Although the notion of a neutral liberal state is important – enshrining religious toleration, free speech, the rule of law, formal equality, procedural legality and a universal franchise – it is argued that this neutrality only works when it is assumed that there is a broad cultural homogeneity among the governed (Hall 2000: 228). The formal promotion of a state language, symbols and rituals reflects the hegemonic dominance of one ethnonational group over any number of other minority groups.

The limits of the assimilative approach is seen by how sections of unionism and nationalism in Ireland have contained a civic element which desire a neutral state to which all individuals are endowed equal rights. For instance, in recent decades there has been a
vociferous debate to formulate a non-ethnic, non-sectarian civic brand of unionism as a means to satisfactorily incorporate Catholics into the state. One proponent of this civic unionism claims that the UK ‘is a state which, being multi-national and multi-ethnic, can be understood in terms of citizenship … all are equal callizenships under one government … it is to this intelligent unionism, which embraces both Protestants and Catholics, owes allegiance’ (Aughey 1989: 19). This ‘civic unionist’ argument has also recently gained strong political backing with the partnership of the Ulster Unionist Party and the Conservative Party. In a speech, the leader of the Conservative Party and future British Prime Minister, David Cameron (2008), called for a ‘deep commitment to the union … built around shared belonging, shared past and a shared destiny’.

The logic here is that equal citizenship rights would remove nationalists’ grievances thus facilitating their easy assimilation into the state. The problem with this analysis is that it assumes that a singular concept of citizenship ameliorates conflict. This is not so. The desire of minority ethnonational groups is not only to be treated as equal citizens, but also to have their national identities formally recognized. The limits of the assimilative approach were perhaps further exposed in the 2010 UK and Great Britain General Election, which witnessed the UUP/Conservative alliance fail to win any seats in Northern Ireland.

Centripetalism/Transformationism

Given the limitations of the approaches we have examined above to bring about a shared identity in Northern Ireland, is it possible that a common public identity could be socially engineered through centripetal social transformationist processes, which can be seen as alternatives to consociationalism?

To start, social transformationists contest that regulation through consociationalism will eventually ameliorate conflict; rather, they believe that transformation must precede any settlement. Ruane and Todd (1996: 15) advocate a process of ‘social emancipation’, whereby
the people of Northern Ireland come together to transform the social, economic and political structures that, ‘determines, distorts, and limits their potentialities’. In essence, this is a bottom-up approach to the issue of division, which contrasts with consociationalism’s élite focus (Sisk and Stefes 2005).

Another perspective is provided by centripetalists who are aiming for moderation by bolstering ‘the centre of a deeply divided spectrum’ (Sisk 1995: 19). For this, centripetalists advocate the adoption of electoral methods, such as the Alternative Vote (AV), as it is assumed that AV’s high quota (50 per cent + 1) will force parties to adopt more moderate positions in an effort to obtain votes from across the ethnonational divide (Horowitz 2001, Wilford and Wilson 2006). Unlike consociationalism then, proponents of AV argue that it does not reward extremists; rather they believe that it lays the foundation for accommodative behaviour by moderate parties, and this moderation will in turn help to neutralize extremists in all blocs and even lead to a shared public identity.

The arguments of social transformationists and centripetalists encounter difficulties when presented with empirical evidence. To begin, the failure to acknowledge the strength and depth of ethnonational identities in Northern Ireland complicates social transformationists and centripetalists’ reading of civil society. As Belloni (2008: 189-91) notes, whilst there is evidence that multiethnic civil society organizations can provide the bridging capital that can further advance peace and democratization in post-conflict societies, these organizations alone are not constitutive of civil society; rather they coexist with ‘uncivil’ organizations (for example, paramilitary groups), and legal organizations that reflect the ethnonational divisions within a society. Many organizations in Northern Ireland reflect this divide, and it has been argued that many peace and conflict resolution organizations have consciously failed to develop their analysis of the conflict lest they offend portions of their
variegated membership, and that members of cross-community groups often seek recognition of their ethnonational identity. (Belloni 2008).

Centripetalists’ arguments are also flawed. The disparate outcomes engendered by its utilization in Fiji led Horowitz (2006) to clarify that AV can, but does not necessarily, promote moderation. The point here is to closely examine a region’s socio-political context before advocating AV. Indeed, Reilly (2004: 18), while citing Papua New Guinea as an example of AV’s moderating potential, does not recommend its application in Fiji, the salient difference between the two cases being that whilst the former is characterized by numerous micro divisions, the latter, like Northern Ireland, is largely split into two competing blocs (O’Reilly 2004: 18).

The danger of AV being in Northern Ireland is that it would reintroduce a form of majoritarianism into politics, and it would lead to the under representation of minorities in some constituencies. This majoritarianism would also have a similarly pernicious effect upon the smaller so-called ‘non-sectarian’ parties in Northern Ireland. When simulations of AV have been performed, it has revealed that not only would the smaller so-called non-sectarian parties be wiped out, but that it ‘would have undermined the inclusive and equitable electoral formula required for full-fledged power sharing’ (Coakley 2009b: 272). Electoral institutions, as Reilly notes (2004: 16), ‘cannot invent moderation where none exists’.

Conclusion

The idea that a shared public identity can be forged in divided societies is normatively attractive. Such a development could perhaps help with creating a ‘normal’ polity based on a left/right cleavage and the conditions for pan-ethnic solidarity needed to sustain society-wide economic redistribution. Yet as Kerr (2006) observes, ‘it has proved impossible to build a syncretistic intercommunal or national identity in Northern Ireland, an identity that could overarch and supersede ethno-national allegiance’. This is not to claim that ethnic identities
are primordial, pre-given entities; within reason, identities can be constructed and can go through change at an individual and collective level. At the same time, it is important to note, within specific contexts, there are limits of seeing ethnic encapsulations as the product of constructivist ethnonational entrepreneurs. Indeed, politicians seeking to make cross-community appeals have typically been dispatched to the political wilderness in Northern Ireland.

Due to the deeply embedded character of ethnonationalism in Northern Ireland, consociational arrangements, by recognizing the saliency of ethnicity, provide a robust model to accommodate and regulate ethnonational antagonism. Although critics accuse consociationalism of rewarding ethnic hardliners and perpetuating further conflict between groups, this is not completely true of Northern Ireland. Despite the evisceration of the political centre ground at the hands of the hardline DUP and Sinn Féin, representing the respective constituencies of unionism and nationalism, post-Agreement politics has witnessed the moderation of these parties. In order to explain the seeming convergence between unionist and nationalist voters around more moderate policy positions vis-à-vis the Agreement whilst voting for the ‘extremes’ of their respective electoral blocs in increasing numbers, Mitchell, Evans and O’Leary (2009) developed the concept of an ‘ethnic tribune’ variable. ‘Ethnic tribune’ parties mix political pragmatism over resources with ‘robust ethnic identity mobilization’, thus explaining how extreme parties in ethnic party systems can attain electoral dominance within their blocs in the absence of the electorate’s overall polarisation (2009: 402–403). These parties are able to conduct tribune appeals insofar as they are able to successfully defend themselves against intracommunal ethnic outbidding.

At the same time there is little sign that the consociational Agreement will deliver a shared public identity, as some of its proponents claim. McGarry and O’Leary (2009), for instance, expect that consociationalism and devolution will ultimately foster a shared
Northern Irish identity in the region. It is not made precisely clear, though, how this will occur. To assist with the formation of a common public identity, some commentators have requested a change to the current consociational arrangements for the region. In particular, it is requested that the system of mandatory Executive government be replaced by a voluntary coalition in which political decisions are made collectively for the common good. However, this scenario would probably entail the exclusion of Sinn Féin, the largest nationalist party, and thus risk destabilizing the polity.

While it is clear that ethnic identities cannot easily be reconstructed into new shared encapsulations, they are amenable to forms of mitigation which seek to refavour them. In other words, ethnic identities that are expressed in antagonism to rival groups can be toned down. For instance, groups can emphasize ‘scripts’ and narratives which become models for specific behaviours, including intergroup violence. The Hutu reconstruction of the colonial myth of Tutsi foreignness, for example, creates scripts of proper or heroic action that invites young men to re-enact them in violent forms (Fearon and Laitin 2000). Similarly, paramilitary murals in Northern Ireland can articulate a view of intercommunal relations as eternally coloured by threat and fear. Such identities and narratives can be reemphasized to promote communal pride without resorting to prejudice and hostility. It is from this basis where peacebuilding can flourish.
References


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