Title

Constructing a Shared Public Identity in Ethnonationally Divided Societies: Comparing

Consociational and Transformationist Perspectives

What is an ethnonationally divided society? The main fissure in divided societies is not just

the presence of multiple ethnic group interests; [i] a violent conflict over the legitimacy of the

state itself provides the basis for division. In such societies, social identities are often

constrained by ethnic and national allegiances, which provide little room for multiple

encapsulations crosscutting the cleavages. For this reason, civic and social life and political

mobilisation tend to occur within, rather than across, 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 should be done to create a shared society. Despite citizens of

shared societies possessing different ethnic and/or national 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 (Nagle and Clancy 2010).

In Northern Ireland, an ethnonationally divided society, [ii] the premise of creating a

shared society is often a normative component of conflict transformation initiatives. The

European Union (EU 2007) funds programmes in Northern Ireland which it identifies 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 parties which represent the various communal interests in a divided society bicker among themselves as to who 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, which calls for a 'shared society based on equality for all', and from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP 2009), the largest unionist party, which argues 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 created by the Agreement were specifically meant to engender '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, a number of commentators claim there has not been a correlative weakening of divisions (e.g. Wilford and Wilson 2006, Taylor 2008, Tonge 2009). In fact, they claim that social segregation and political polarisation appear to be intensifying. The causes of this paradox, they explain, are the terms of the Agreement and the political institutions created to sustain peace. These forms, allegedly, do little to deal with the root causes of conflict and instead institutionalise and encourage conflicting ethnonational 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).

Concentrating on the case of Northern Ireland, in this article we examine what is meant by the idea of a shared society, and to what extent it is possible to create. While it is

almost a given to state that the concept of a shared society is profoundly contested, we argue that the construction of a shared, crosscutting, overarching public identity is an unrealistic aim for ethnonationally 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 be readily 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 200: 20).

By analysing the limits of constructivist techniques to engineer 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). Despite some degree of overlap between consociational and social transformationist approaches, we argue that although consociational approaches will not engender a shared identity, they are more robust at managing deep differences 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 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: 370-71) notes of sub-Saharan Africa: '[m]any of the newly defined urban ethnic groupings brought together migrants [who] 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 ethnonational identity to bolster their political authority. Gagnon (2004: 10) analyses how nationalist leaders in the former Yugoslavia, like Slobodan Milosevic, sought to construct 'ethnicity as a hard category, and ethnic groups as clearly bounded, monolithic, ambiguous units 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 sees 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 and nationalism may be constructed, some commentators argue that ethnonational identities can just as easily be disassembled and rearranged into a more progressive identity which crosscuts cleavages. For example, Farry (2009: 170-71) argues that since '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

4

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 competition.

Yet while the social constructivist approach is ostensibly reasonable, the issue of how

far ethnicity can be easily reconstructed is less clear. Varshney (2002: 34) argues that

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 mobilised, 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 are multifaceted. First,

it is rarely the case that ethnicity is invented *ex nihlio* by leaders (van den Berghe 1981), as if

by a process of political alchemy. ~~by leaders~~ for their own machinations. Mobilising groups

into ethnic units is not just a Pavlovian act ~~of~~ whereby leaders press~~ing~~ 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, although

some primordialists contend that ethnic groups are a fact of nature, rooted in biology (van den

Berghe 1981), this is a minority view. Rather, they acknowledge that although 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. 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, 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 in Northern Ireland, under the GFA's auspices. Many critics of consociationalism call for centripetal/transformative approaches to conflict which seek to deal with the root causes of conflict and which encourage moderation, intergroup cooperation and the construction of a shared public identity.

Consociational

Rather than piecing the fragments from the detritus of conflict-affected societies into a shared identity, consociational arrangements often institutionalise 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 achieved through the accommodation of the political élites representing the salient segments of society and institutionally anchored by mutual vetoes, proportionality in public appointments and some form of autonomy in areas of self-interest. This all-encompassing 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. [iii]

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. In the Bosnian Federation the three-member presidency requires one Muslim, one Croat, and one Serb representative, each possessing vetoes. Similarly, in Lebanon the president must be Christian, the prime minister must be Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament must be Si'ite Muslim.

Notably, there is little 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.

4

Centripetal/Transformative

Broadly speaking, advocates of centripetal/transformationist approaches to conflict management/resolution claim that consociationalism such as that which occurs under the GFA's auspices, '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, accordingly, 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 ethnonational 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 seek to demonstrate that ethnic identity, rather than fixed, can 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).

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 is 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, thereby having 'a beneficial impact upon societal ethnic rigidities, allowing differences to be managed peacefully and contributing to their eventual erosion' (Tonge 2009: 53).

This is an optimistic analysis. The GFA '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 incentivising communal politics, there is a strong risk that this will bolster the power of ethnic extremists, who will use ever escalating mutually exclusive ethnic claims. In this way, Rothchild and Roeder (2005: 9) have identified what they believe is a systemic problem with consociationalism. That is, while there are short-term benefits to power sharing, insofar as it entices the respective parties to end violence and enter into government, in the longer term it threatens the consolidation of peace: '[p]ower sharing may get ethnic leaders to leave the battlefield, but then after a short lull transforms the bargaining room into a new battlefield'. The use of mutual vetoes, specifically, are seen as leading to policy gridlocks and even violence, such as in Cyprus where the frequent use of

vetoes by the Turkish minority on Cyprus led the Greek majority to end power sharing resulting in civil strife, a Turkish invasion and partition

If consociationalism is accused of prohibiting the development of a shared public identity, an alternative could be to complement élite 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. This is so because 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 to majoritarian democracy with substantial safeguards for minorities. As such, Sisk and Stefes (2005) identify South Africa as a lesson for the élite-based consociationalism of Northern Ireland. Yet, the conflict in South Africa was of a different order to Northern Ireland. The basis for conflict in Northern Ireland is of mutually exclusive notions of ethnonational belonging compared to the political exclusion of the black majority in South Africa. A sense of overarching national identity was present in South Africa, underscored by the Government for National Unity in the consociational arrangements. In Northern Ireland there is no such consensus of national identity. [2]

Given the critiques of élite-led consociationalism - that it militatesfor 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) Europeanisation; (4) assimilationism; (5) centripetalism/social transformationism.

Economic Liberalism

There is a longstanding normative assumption that if the invisible hand of the free-market can be liberated it will provide the raw material to ameliorate antagonistic sectarian rivalries. As McDonald (2009: 5) claims, 'liberal economic institutions – namely, the predominance of private property and competitive market structures within domestic economies – promote peace'. Such a perspective has also been prevalent in Northern Ireland. For example, in the 1960s Northern Ireland's unionist Prime Minister, Terence O'Neill, sought to modernise 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 modernisation 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 socioeconomic 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 integral to 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 (FDI) to the region (Portland Trust 2007), which reached £1 billion in 2008.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).

Yet it is important not to ascribe too much significance regarding neoliberal solutions to sectarian divisions. Economics only plays an important role in ethnic and/or national 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 per capita have a 17 percent risk of war within 1 year.

Using the Gini coefficient estimates for 108 countries, Fearon and Laitin (2003) dismiss the idea that income inequality is a reliable predictor of violence. Instead, 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 altering 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

the IRA (Alonso 2007).

Rather than demonstrating the importance of neoliberalism to conflict resolution, the

Northern Ireland case provides little, if any, instruction in this area. Both during and after the

conflict's violent phase, the UK government poured massive amounts of public money into

the region, the result being that in 2008 public expenditure accounted for approximately 63

percent of GVA in Northern Ireland (Mellows-Facer 2010: 4). 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. 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. A degree of caution, however, should be exercised before citing the above as

evidence of the importance of public expenditure in creating peace: the UK government is

both relatively wealthy and constitutionally responsible for Northern Ireland. While

Northern Ireland may not be *sui generis,* its particularities make it difficult to readily extract

economic 'lessons' in peacemaking (Nagle 2009).

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~~ by what could be called global capitalism. 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 (cf. Ben-Porat 2006: 2). For example, Taylor (2008: 191) asks why the constitutional status of Northern Ireland is the 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' so that ethnonational identities are becoming increasingly anachronistic. Although national economic systems have increasingly become enmesh~m~ed 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 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, although perhaps tellingly, proponents of such arguments never state what the cost of enforced sharing

would be. 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 are also fierce distributive conflicts in divided societies like Northern Ireland concerning where public facilities, like universities and hospitals should be sited, contributing to further instability

Regionalism

This The 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) that could be utilised 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. In 1949 John Hewitt, a celebrated poet, 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: '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 localised Northern Irish identity transcending the fixed binary of a British/Irish affiliation. As many as 29 percent 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 self-described 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 mobilises 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 percent 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 nationalist and a unionist, 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.

Europeanisation

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 intrastate conflict, the EU's approach has been one of accommodating ethnonational differences rather than striving for their integration. The EU's position since the 1980s has been to develop legislation which formally recognises 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. 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 can be seen by how sections of unionism and nationalism in Ireland have contained a civic element that desires a neutral state to which all individuals are endowed equal rights. For instance, there has been an attempt to create a non-ethnic, 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 citizenships 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 distinct national identities formally recognized.

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 focus on élites (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 percent + 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, 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 neutralise 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 with, 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 organisations can provide the

bridging capital that can further advance peace and democratisation in post-conflict societies, these organisations alone are not constitutive of civil society; rather they coexist with 'uncivil' organisations (for example, paramilitary groups), and legal organisations that reflect the ethnonational divisions within a society. The vast majority of organisations in Northern Ireland reflect this divide.

Centripetalists' arguments are also flawed. The disparate outcomes engendered by its utilisation 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 characterised by numerous micro divisions, the latter, like Northern Ireland, is largely split into two competing blocs.

The danger of AV being brought into 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: 16) observes, 'it has proved impossible to build a syncretistic intercommunal or national identity in Northern Ireland … that could overarch and supersede ethno-national allegiance'. This is not to claim that ethnic identities are 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 viewing ethnic encapsulations existing ethnic identities as the product constructions of constructivist ethnonational political 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 recognising the saliency salience 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) have 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).

At the same time, there is little sign that the consociational Agreement will deliver a shared public identity. To assist with the formation of an overarching identity, some centripetalist commentators have requested a change to the current consociational arrangements (Wilson and Wilford 2006). 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 destabilising the polity. Moreover, would, as centripetalists allege (Wilson and Wilford 2006), a voluntary coalition of moderates have obviated the electoral rise and eventual triumph of the DUP and Sinn Féin (framed as representing the extremes of nationalism and unionism)? A careful analysis of the UK, Irish and US governments' actions throughout the post-Agreement suggests ~~not~~otherwise. Centripetalists fail to make the conceptual distinction between the peace and political processes; when one does, it is easy to see that a voluntary coalition of moderates would likely have been buffeted by the same forces that destabilised the Northern Ireland powersharing executive from 1998-2007 (see Clancy 2010). The three governments' concern for the *peace* process would still remain relevant under a voluntary coalition, and it's highly likely that they would have continued to grant paramilitary-linked parties, particularly Sinn Féin, concessions to facilitate their transition from violence to constitutional means. Whilst it's important to recognise that the GFA did force Sinn Féin and the DUP to moderate their platforms to a degree, the two parties capitalised upon their 'ethnic tribune' appeals. This transpired largely through the UK and Irish governments' willingness to provide the republican leadership continued concessions in the absence of reciprocity, thus making ~~both parties~~it appear to be the 'strongest defender' of ~~their~~ it's bloc's interests. When one acknowledges the role that exogenous actors (that is, the UK, Irish and US governments) played in allowing the DUP and Sinn Féin to capitalise upon their 'ethnic tribune' appeals, it

becomes easy to envision the parties capitalising upon these appeals under a voluntary coalition.

Endnotes

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[i] We distinguish between ethnicity and ethnonationalism. While ethnic groups, at a high level of aggregation, may share a common sense of culture and descent, they may lack a doctrine based on the right to self-rule. Ethnicity becomes transformed into ethnonationalism when it makes specific historical claims and attempts to administer the group as a political community. A key distinction between ethnic and nationalist movements is that the latter reflect claims to authority over self-determination that are currently unsatisfied (Hechter 2000).

[ii] In Northern Ireland nationalist and unionist political parties consistently gain 90 percent of the vote, only 5 percent of Northern Ireland's children attend integrated schooling, only one-in-ten marriages are mixed, and 98 percent of Belfast's public housing estates are highly segregated to the extent of belonging almost wholly to either Catholics or Protestants.

[iii] 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). Lijphart also specified several favourable features for consociationalism to flourish, including a small state size, distinct cleavages, thus inviting fewer occasions for conflict; common external threats; overarching national loyalties;

a history of élite accommodation; relative isolation of the segmented communities; socioeconomic equality; and a multiple balance of power between the segments (Lijphart 1977).

[4] There are some corporate aspects to the GFA. Specifically, Assembly rules require the 108 elected Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) are required to register as either 'nationalist', 'unionist' or 'other' (non-sectarian). The point of the designation system is to ensure that when policy votes are taken in the Assembly, nationalists and unionists possess a mutual veto. For motions to pass there needs to be a weighted majority – 40 percent support of each group and 60 percent overall – or 'parallel consent', a concurrent majority of both nationalists and unionists as well as a majority in the assembly.

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