

# **The Politics of Conflict:**

## **A Constructivist Critique of Consociational and Civil Society Theories**

'... Theories do not simply explain or predict, they tell us what possibilities exist for human actors and intervention; they define not merely our explanatory possibilities but also our ethical and practical horizons.' (Smith 1996: 13)

'... The utopian, fixing his eyes on the future, thinks in terms of creative spontaneity: the realist, rooted in the past, in terms of causality. All healthy human action, and therefore all healthy thought, must establish a balance between utopia and reality, between free will and determinism. The complete realist, unconditionally accepting the causal sequence of events, deprives himself of the possibility of changing reality. The complete utopian, by rejecting the causal sequence, deprives himself of the possibility of understanding either the reality which he is seeking to change or the process by which it can be changed. The characteristic vice of the utopian is naivety; of the realist, sterility.' (Carr 2001 [1939]: 12)

## INTRODUCTION

Consociationalists often present the debate over conflict management in 'ethnonationally divided societies' as a sharp choice between Consociationalism (always good) and an alternative, which is caricatured and obviously bad (Zalewski 2006: 8). In this case Clancy and Nagle present a useful, concise articulation of Consociationalism and its critique of 'Transformationism'. 'Transformationism' is the latest catch-all label to describe all opponents of Consociation, in the past they have been known as 'integrationists', 'assimilationists', 'centripetalists', 'majoritarians', 'Constructivists' and advocates of the 'Civil Society' approach. I prefer to use the term 'Civil Society' to describe the 'Transformationist' approach because Civil Society is seen as the vehicle for bringing about the *transformation* of society. Clancy and Nagle criticise the 'Civil Society' approach for its naive idealism and because it rests on 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.' (Nagle and Clancy 2011: 3)

It is claimed that the Civil Society approach asserts that the creation of a shared public identity is central to conflict management and that this is possible because there are no limits to the extent that ethnicity can be reconstructed into a shared public identity in

'divided societies'. By contrast, Consociationalists 'argue there are limits to the extent that ethnicity can be reconstructed into shared identities' (Clancy and Nagle 2011: abstract). It is, therefore, more realistic because it does not insist on the creation of a shared public identity and offers a 'robust' form of conflict regulation. This is demonstrated by the case of Northern Ireland which has successfully achieved an accommodation through the application of Consociational Theory and without the creation of a shared public identity. The implication is that what has worked in one 'ethnonationally divided society' should work in all.

This article follows Ian Lustick (who follows Imre Lakatos) in arguing that Consociational theory's academic success does not depend on its value as a coherent theory but is attributable to 'the relative abilities of scientist-protagonists to mobilize economic, reputational and institutional resources, both inside and outside the academy' (Lustick 1997 p. 89). More specifically, Consociationalists are 'academic entrepreneurs' who use a range of rhetorical skills to advance their theory in a way that obscures the full range of debate on conflict management and the diversity of tools available to policy-makers in dealing with conflict. This is well illustrated by Clancy and Nagle's critique of 'Transformationism'/Civil Society.

First, Clancy and Nagle do not engage with key advocates of the Civil Society approach or the full theory and, therefore, do not establish that the creation of a shared public identity is central to that approach. The Alliance Party MLA, Stephen Farry, is criticised for his naive Civil Society approach but his position is caricatured and misrepresented. Clancy and Nagle confuse a 'shared public identity' with a 'shared society', but then go on to argue that a 'shared public identity' is desirable for Consociationalists, which means that their difference

to the Civil Society approach over the issue relates to timing – whether it is likely to be achieved in the short term or long term. This does not sit well with their assertion of a ‘contrast’ (Clancy and Nagle 2011: 1) in approaches between Consociationalism and the Civil Society approach. Paradoxically, Clancy and Nagle simultaneously polarise the debate through the use of a false dichotomy but then underestimate the differences in approach between Consociationalism (essentialist, segregationist, elitist) and the Civil Society approach (radical instrumentalist, integrationist, democratic) by reducing it to a difference over the timing of the creation of a ‘shared public identity’.

Second, the false dichotomy (Consociationalists versus Transformationists/Civil Society) categorises all critics of Consociationalism as Transformationists/Civil Society and this leads to the logical error called the ‘straw man’ fallacy. Because all of Consociationalism’s critics are forced into the ‘Civil Society’ position the range of critiques and the differences among opponents of Consociationalism are unacknowledged. This means that Clancy and Nagle fail to distinguish between the *radical instrumentalism* of the Civil Society approach (which emphasises the manipulation of identities by political elites) and Constructivism, which can be used to acknowledge the constraints on those political elites.

Third, the ‘entrepreneurialism’ of Consociational academics has led to the increasingly vague, ambiguous and contradictory definition of Consociationalism as the theory has been revised to capture apparently ‘successful’ case studies (Northern Ireland and Iraq) for Consociational Theory. While this imprecision allows Consociationalists to market their theory as ‘all things to all people’ it also undermines the coherence of their approach. This confusion conceals the normatively undesirable implications of Consociationalism (based on its essentialism, segregationism and elitism) and the very real differences in approach to

conflict management advocated by the Civil Society approach and Constructivists among others.

This article represents a (critical realist) Constructivist critique of *both* Consociational and Civil Society approaches and their crude understandings of politics and the prospects for political change. Consociationalism's primordialist or essentialist foundation leads them to a world-weary, pessimistic, conservative realism about how far 'divided societies' may be transformed. Advocates of the Civil Society approach favour a radical transformation to be achieved by mobilising the people against their 'hardline' political representatives. The Constructivist approach, it will be argued, can provide a framework in which a more complex and nuanced understanding of politics is possible and this better equips us for understanding the prospects of bringing about desirable political change. Constructivism rejects the over-generalised theories of both Consociationalists and advocates of the Civil Society approach in favour of analysing the particular contexts in which conflict arises. The concepts of structure/agency suggests that people do make their own history but that they do so within constraints. For Constructivists, identities may be fluid and malleable or they may be 'sticky' and hard to change depending on the context. This makes Constructivists distinct from both the pessimistic, 'conservative realist', essentialism of Consociationalism and the over-optimistic, 'idealism', and radical instrumentalism of the Civil Society approach. This interpretation of constructivism emphasises the importance of context and a more realistic understanding of the political process in conflict situations in order to understand pragmatically what the opportunities are for political change that would secure a more just and peaceful society.

The first part of this article is a critique of Clancy and Nagle's Consociationalism. The second part provides a brief outline of a Constructivist critique of both the Consociational and Civil Society understanding of politics.

#### CONSOCIATIONAL RHETORIC 1. FALSE DICHOTOMIES

'False dichotomies' are part of the rhetoric of Consociationalists to oversimplify the debate by failing to acknowledge the range of possible approaches to conflict management (Zalewski 2006: 8). Consociationalists pose a number of dichotomies (Consociational Democracy Vs Authoritarianism; Consociation Vs Assimilation; Consociationalism=Accommodation Vs Civil Society) in which sometimes alternative positions are recognised while at other times they are not. For example, Consociationalists have tried to capture the term 'powersharing' for their theory.

Consociationalism = Powersharing Vs Majoritarianism

The choice is presented as between either British style majoritarian democracy or Consociationalism/powersharing. This theoretical move defines out of existence alternative, integrationist approaches to powersharing such as the Civil Society approach – which on other occasions is recognised by Consociationalists as an alternative.

Consociationalists (with their preference for 'voluntary apartheid', Lijphart 1971: 11, Lijphart 1969: 219) have, in the past, defined themselves against integrationists. Recently, however, leading Consociational 'entrepreneurs' have decided that integrationists 'should not be allowed to monopolize a concept with positive connotations...' (McGarry and O'Leary

2009b: 378) and therefore have attempted to incorporate integrationism into Consociationalism.

The 'Transformation Vs Consociation' dichotomy disguises the full range of critics of Consociationalism (Van Schendelen 1984; Halpern 1986; Lustick 1997; Bogaards 2000) and the range of political positions that may be held on a conflict by collecting them into one category (Civil Society/ Transformationalist/ Constructivist/ Centripetalist/ Integrationist), caricaturing their position (or one aspect of it – a shared public identity) and then dismissing it. Consociationalists recognise and choose to engage with the Civil Society approach because they believe they can defeat it easily (see Civil Society contributions to McGarry 2001) and because it reinforces key Consociational arguments – most particularly the proposition that the Northern Ireland peace process and Good Friday Agreement are Consociational (McGarry and O'Leary 2009). Some exponents of the Civil Society approach reinforce this false dichotomy which ignores the 'real world' politics of varying shades of republican, nationalist, unionist and loyalist and 'non-sectarian' perspectives.

## CONSOCIATIONAL RHETORIC 2. THE STRAW MAN

Consociationalism's dichotomous categorisation of approaches to conflict management leads to all its critics being placed in one category, the 'straw man', and caricatured. This is achieved by seizing on one particular aspect of the Civil Society approach ('shared public identity') which is then elevated into the standard by which all Consociational critics are to be judged and damned. This false dichotomy leads Clancy and Nagle to fail to distinguish between the radical instrumentalism of the Civil Society approach, which emphasises the

manipulation of the people by political elites, and Constructivism, which can be used to demonstrate the constraints on those political elites (Ozkirimli 2005; 201).

Clancy and Nagle do not establish that 'a shared public identity' is central to the 'Civil Society' argument rather than, for example, its emphasis on democracy, civil society, integration and equality. The hope of Civil Society advocates is that a shared public identity – a Northern Irish or European identity – will lead to increased sympathy between different communal groups and this will diminish popular support for violent conflict. Identities in Northern Ireland have changed over time and continue to be made and remade. According to opinion polls, there has been an increasing tendency among people not to identify themselves as either 'nationalist' or 'unionist' but rather as 'other' (see Table 1). Advocates of the Civil Society approach may see this as holding out the prospect for the remaking of identities into less hostile forms. The establishment of a 'shared public identity' is no panacea for violent conflict. It is possible to have intense violent conflict alongside a shared public identity (for example in Iraq and the Lebanon) and a lack of violent conflict where there is no strong shared public identity (Northern Ireland).

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Unionist	40	39	43	35	38	38	39	40	36	36	37	32
Nationalist	25	29	21	27	28	24	23	22	23	24	19	24
<b>Neither</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>43</b>
Don't Know/other	2	3	1	3	2	3	2	3	1	0	1	1

**Table 1. Showing the growth in numbers classifying themselves as neither Unionist or Nationalist.**

*Question: Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a unionist, a nationalist or neither?*

*Some years there was a don't know and an other category which have been merged here*

Source. [www.ark.ac.uk](http://www.ark.ac.uk)

Clancy and Nagle's argument also confuses the creation of a 'shared public identity' with the creation of a 'shared society'. People with a range of identities can share a society together without all having a 'shared public identity'. The European Union, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein and the DUP may all favour a 'shared society' and may favour a 'shared strategy to achieve this' but that does not mean they believe that everyone should claim or emphasise a Northern Irish or European identity which they hope will become more powerful than an Irish, British or Ulster identity (Clancy and Nagle 2011: 2-3).

The non-sectarian Alliance Party are the targets of Clancy and Nagle's critique (Clancy and Nagle 2011: 4-5, 8, 16). Stephen Farry, an Alliance Party MLA, is cited as an example of a Constructivist who claims that 'ethnic identities can just as easily be disassembled and rearranged into a more progressive identity which crosscuts cleavages'. Clancy and Nagle quote Farry as arguing 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 various influences in the past, they can be reshaped in the future.' (Farry 2009: 170-71 quoted in Clancy and Nagle 2011: 5-6. *My emphasis*)

This passage makes it clear that Farry is not arguing that once they are created ethnic identities 'can just as easily be disassembled and rearranged', as Clancy and Nagle claim, but that since identities are constructed this *holds out the prospect* that they *may* be reconstructed into less antagonistic forms. Rather than being naively idealistic, Farry acknowledges the strength of communal identities and the limits to which identities can be reshaped as a fuller quote of the passage indicates:

'There is clearly a strong historical basis for these ethno-nationalist divisions. Insofar as cross-cutting cleavages exist, the traditional divide remains dominant. Yet, the situation is not this simple. Identity has been constructed and divisions further entrenched during different periods of the history of Northern Ireland, including notably, the early years of the twentieth century, the period after the creation of the Northern Ireland state, the onset of "the Troubles," and, paradoxically, the implementation phase of the Good Friday Agreement. However, this construction of

identity at least holds out the prospect that communal identities can be reconstructed to an extent. In general terms, as identities have been shaped by various influences in the past, they can be reshaped in the future.’ (Farry 2009: 170-71)

Similarly, one hopes for the positive impact of Europeanization and regionalism Richard Kearney is expressing a hope that future identities ‘*may... be less nation-statist and more local and cosmopolitan*’ (quoted in Clancy and Nagle: 18. *My emphasis*). Stephen Farry, among other opponents of antagonistic communal politics, is making a distinction between the world as it is and the world as he would like it to be (the is/ought distinction), between the empirical and the normative. This is a perfectly reasonable and even admirable position for a politician or any other actor to take.

Consociationalists appear confused as to whether or not they are opposed to or aspire to a shared public identity. Initially Clancy and Nagle identify Consociationalism in contrast to the Civil Society approach

‘... By seeking to equally accommodate dual or multiple public identities in the polity, consociationalism stands in contrast to social transformationist [Civil Society] 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.’ (Clancy and Nagle 2011: 3)

The 'reflabouring' of identities is possible but reconstruction is quite rare (Clancy and Nagle 2011: 3). Clancy and Nagle are sceptical of poll evidence arguing that 'there is no serious political support for parties that espouse a shared Northern Irish identity or any symbolic dimension to imagine it' (Clancy and Nagle 2011: 16). They also argue 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' (Clancy and Nagle 2011: 16). But this mistakes identity (Northern Irish) for political preference (independence). There may be a relationship between the two but there may not, it is perfectly possible to identify as Northern Irish and prefer devolution within the Union (or as English and favour the preservation of the United Kingdom). This distinction is implied by their further statement that a 'Northern Irish' identity may mean something completely different for a nationalist and a unionist (Clancy and Nagle 2011: 16).

Clancy and Nagle, having contrasted the Civil Society approach to Consociationalism on the issue of the pursuit of a shared public identity, then argue that Consociationalists actually favour a shared public identity. There is evidence in the Consociational oeuvre to substantiate this assertion. Arend Lijphart argued that 'overarching loyalties' were a 'favourable condition' for conflict management: 'The conflict potential of cleavages also depends on the degree to which their inherent intensities are moderated by overarching loyalties' (Lijphart 1977: 81). In terms of the future of Northern Ireland, Clancy and Nagle can only presume that

'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 quoted in Clancy and Nagle 2011: 9. *My emphasis*)

During the course of their article Clancy and Nagle shift from criticising the Civil Society approach for seeking a shared public identity and defining Consociationalism against it, to claiming that a shared public identity is the goal of Consociationalism. They now seem to agree with the Civil Society premise that ‘since ethnicity is constructed it can be reconstructed into new shared forms’ (Clancy and Nagle 2011: Abstract) but claim that the difference is that Consociationalists argue that there are ‘limits’ to reconstruction into shared identities. The difference between Consociationalism and the Civil Society approach is reduced to a disagreement over timing: whether it is possible to create this shared identity in the ‘short-to-medium term’ (Clancy and Nagle 2011: 3) or ‘long’ term. This argument contradicts the underlying essentialism of Consociationalism which places emphasises the persistence of ‘ethnic identity’ and claimed that divisions will not biodegrade. It also confuses the debate by failing to acknowledge the strong contrasts in approach between Consociationalism and Civil Society.

### CONSOCIATIONAL RHETORIC 3. VAGUE AND AMBIGUOUS

Consociationalists set up false dichotomies, straw men arguments and define themselves against a caricatured ‘other’ (where they are prepared to acknowledge an ‘other’). Yet, Consociationalists also seek to incorporate their opponents too (or at least some of them). This is a rational strategy if Consociational entrepreneurs wish to market their concept to as

many policy and academic customers as possible, but it is at the cost of the dilution of the Consociational 'brand' because it is increasingly difficult to know what the Consociational product is and what it is supposed to do.

Arend Lijphart's *Democracy in Plural Societies* (1977) is usually considered the definitive exposition of Consociationalism but McGarry and O'Leary's 'revisionist Consociationalism' has created further vagueness and ambiguity. Clancy and Nagle quote Lijphart (1977) to claim that Consociational institutions consist of four key elements:

'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).'

(Clancy and Nagle 2011: 24 footnote iii)

On the most important element, 'grand coalition' they claim that this should represent 'the *main* (not all) segments of society'. But this is inaccurate, Lijphart argues that,

'The first and most important element [of Consociational democracy] is government by a grand coalition of the political leaders of all *significant* segments of the plural society' (Lijphart, 1977, p. 25. *My emphasis*)

Lijphart's formulation is more inclusive of minorities than Clancy and Nagle's definition which is more in line with the 'revisionist' Consociationalism of McGarry and O'Leary's recent position,

'... Although Lijphart originally identified a grand coalition in which all communities are represented as the key indicator for consociation, what matters is *some element*

*of jointness in executive government* across all the most significant communities.

*Consociation does not require every community to be represented in government...'*

(McGarry, O'Leary and Simeon, 2008, 58. *My emphasis*)

McGarry and O'Leary's redefinition allows them to claim that the Iraq Constitution 2005 is Consociational, since that constitution provides for the exclusion of minorities, most notably the 'Sunnis'.

Consociationalists have traditionally favoured the institutionalisation of sectarianism or ethnonational divisions as a way of managing conflict. This has been advocated both as a desirable long-term solution to conflict and, more recently, as 'triage', an emergency and temporary measure that will 'biodegrade naturally' (although this has not been the case in Bosnia, Cyprus and Belgium). The traditional interpretation of Consociationalism is that it is about entrenching and institutionalising communal divisions in order to keep communal groups separate and prevent conflict. But this segregation, or 'voluntary apartheid', has also been seen as an ideal. McGarry and O'Leary have argued:

'The problem with Consociationalism is not its normative orientation, but rather than it has not worked.' (McGarry and O'Leary 1995: 338).

Similarly, Clancy and Nagle argue:

'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 in Clancy and Nagle 2011: 8)

More recently, Consociationalists have tended to suggest that the entrenchment of communal identities is not an ideal. Contradicting their earlier position on the non-biodegradability of communal differences, McGarry and O'Leary have argued more recently argued that '... Successful consociation can be biodegradable as the Dutch example suggests' and that 'it is best to leave consociations to decay organically (McGarry and O'Leary 2009a: 68, 69).

Consociationalism's prescriptions reinforce and entrench communal divisions as the pillars of a negotiated settlement. Critics of Consociationalism have wondered why incentivising communalism and communal politics should lead to a reduction in conflict? And whether the conflict in the 'non-ethnically divided' and non-violent Netherlands provides a model for the violent conflicts in Northern Ireland, the Lebanon and Iraq? A major problem with Consociational Theory is its failure to provide reasons why communal divisions should 'biodegrade', this may be because Consociationalism has been ambivalent about segregation in the past and has seen a 'voluntary apartheid' as normatively defensible. Consociationalists have, therefore, been relaxed about the triumph of the most hardline parties in Northern Ireland and proclaim the peace process to be over, in spite of continuing sectarian tensions and divisions. Clancy and Nagle then suggest that Consociationalism draws on the Civil Society approach and centripetal institutions which is theoretically incoherent since Consociationalism suggests that contact between groups is a bad idea – 'good fences make good neighbours' – while Civil Society favours it.

Consociational confusion is compounded by claims that it can be non-ethnic, democratic, non-democratic, regional, central, weak, ambivalent, complete, pluritarian, traditional, 'revisionist', corporate, liberal, rigid, concurrent, complete, semi, quasi, formal, informal and

'flexible'. 'Complex' consociation allows the combination of Consociationalism with 'one other additional strategy' such as partition or even integration against which Consociationalists have, in the past, defined themselves (O'Leary 2005a, p. 34). In 2001, Lijphart rejected the primordialism that had informed Consociational Theory and embraced constructivism (Lijphart 2001: 11).

## THE POLITICS OF CONFLICT

The debate between Consociationalists (essentialists) and their Civil Society and Constructivist critics is about the extent of political change that is possible in an 'ethnonationally divided society'. Consociationalists are cautious and conservative because their essentialist view of identity leads them to argue that only limited change is possible and, perhaps, that only limited change is desirable. The Civil Society approach (based on a radical instrumentalism) suggests that identities are more fluid and that a transformation of society is both possible and desirable. Constructivism is an approach to analysing politics rather than a theory of politics. This framework can account for the variability in identities, both fluid and sticky or firm, and pays attention to the constraints and opportunities that face political elites in managing conflict.

These three approaches have different positions on the 'politics of conflict':

1. *Interpretation*: what is an accurate description of conflict?
2. *Normative*: what kind of political change is desirable?
3. *Agency*: how can society be changed in more desirable directions?

The distinction between what is and what ought to be is artificial. Constructivists argue that analysts bring their values and norms to their analysis and interpretation of conflict. It is not

possible to explain what is and what ought to be without using moral concepts. As Bell argues:

‘... descriptive work in the social sciences contains within it all sorts of normative assumptions, whether its practitioners admit this or not. There are no non-value-laden choices to make. It is impossible to analyse politics, or any other aspect of human activity, without bringing value-judgements to bear, not least because the very language and concepts we use to study politics – democracy, liberty, security, and so forth – are themselves always value-laden.’ (Bell 2010a: 6)

These issues are controversial because they go against the positivist self-image of many political scientists as impartial, objective and neutral observers of politics. First, they involve the observer making contestable judgements over the accuracy of interpretations of the conflict. Second, they highlight the ethical-normative concerns of the observer. Third, it involves the observer making highly contestable judgements about the possibility of political change.

## CONSOCIATIONALISM AND POLITICS

Consociational theory was originally built on a primordialist view of national identity and this explains its preference for segregation of the communal pillars and their domination by an elite cartel drawn from ‘all significant segments’ of a divided society. Consociationalists seek to avoid conflict between primordial actors from different groups by reducing contact between them and this leads to a preference for the segregation of groups. Lijphart argues, ‘... Because good social fences may make good political neighbours, a kind of *voluntary*

*apartheid* policy may be the most appropriate solution for a divided society' (Lijphart, 1971: 11; Lijphart 1969: 219). It is this segregation-oriented theoretical disposition that influences Consociationalism's interpretation of its four prescriptions:

1. Grand coalition
2. Proportional representation
3. Mutual veto
4. Autonomy.

The controversy is not so much about Consociationalism's four prescriptions but the theoretical framework in which they are interpreted. These prescriptions can be interpreted to achieve integrationist (mixing) or Consociational (segregationist) ends. Consociationalism has drawn criticism because these prescriptions are interpreted in a way to *reinforce and institutionalise* precisely those antagonistic communal identities that policy-makers are supposed to be managing into less antagonistic forms. Lijphart argued that while consensus did not exist at the mass level, fortunately the masses were politically deferential, so the problem for political elites lay in bringing along their activist supporters (Lijphart 1977: 53).

Consociationalists operate in the positivist tradition of social science and *claim* to operate as 'objective' and 'neutral' social scientists. They therefore tend to reject the notion that their normative position affects their interpretation of conflict and prescriptions for its management. Consociational theory is constructed on a primordialist (or more recently essentialist) foundation which leads to a world-weary, pessimistic, conservative realism about how far 'divided societies' may be transformed. Indeed these 'essentialist'

approaches to 'ethnicity' place severe limits on the role of political actors to act against the elemental desires of the ethnonation which will almost inevitably break apart so-called plural societies unless they embrace Consociationalism. Political elites have to work around these social facts rather than try and rework or transform them. They are, therefore, highly pessimistic about the prospects for democracy and seem to believe that a 'voluntary' or 'benign apartheid' may be normatively preferable to 'integration'. Consociationalists derive their theory empirically from their observation of conflict and these 'facts' *determine* what is politically possible. Consociationalists claim to 'realistically' or accurately describe conflict – free from the idealistic, 'wishful thinking' of their Civil Society/transformationalist critics – and this leads them to more pessimistic conclusions about how far 'divided societies' may be transformed and shared identities created. Consociationalism has been, therefore, highly pessimistic about the prospects for democracy, it is either a highly limited Consociational democracy or no democracy at all (Lijphart 1977: 238). Prior to the peace processes, this structuralist analysis led Consociationalists to be pessimistic about the prospects for peace in Northern Ireland. For example, in 1991 Lijphart almost agreed that the problem was that there was no solution. On Northern Ireland, McGarry and O'Leary predicted that the conflict was getting worse (1993) and Consociationalism had failed (1995) just before an agreement was achieved (1998). Thus Consociational theory could not anticipate or account for the radical shift that would lead to the Good Friday Agreement 1998 and power-sharing 2007.

It is not clear what are Consociationalism's ideals. Initially, the theory was derived empirically from a case study of the Netherlands 1917-67 and other 'Consociational' democracies. Bogaards has argued that Consociationalists shifted from Consociationalism as an empirical 'discovery' to Consociationalism as a normative type highlights the

contradictions involved in this theoretical move (Bogaards 2000; Lustick 1997).

Consociationalists choose one of three normative strategies in arguing for their theory:

- a. *Pessimistic realism*. They may argue that although they largely share the idealism of their left-wing, Civil Society critics a 'hard-headed' analysis of 'the facts' leads them 'reluctantly' to the pessimistic conclusion that this idealism is unachievable. Furthermore, the Civil Society strategy for achieving this ideal outcome (more contact/integration) will actually make conflict worse rather than better (Lijphart 1977: 88, 89; McGarry and O'Leary 1995: 307). Consociationalism's elitism and segregationism is the best that can be achieved in ethnic conflicts because the alternative is 'tribal war'. The choice is between a highly limited Consociational democracy and no democracy at all (although Consociationalists also argue that Consociationalism is possible without democracy).
- b. *Conservative nationalist idealism*. Consociationalists may, on the other hand, celebrate the creation of a 'voluntary apartheid' because it actually brings about their political ideal (McGarry and O'Leary 1995: 338). The division of the world into separate, pure ethnonations – or at worst the voluntary apartheid of a 'plural state' – in which elites tend to dominate a deferential population, leads to the achievement of the conservative nationalist ideal. This is not something to regret but to celebrate because it leads to self-determination and cultural preservation. In this respect, Consociationalism is not just a descriptive theory but it is also normative, it is the way society

ought to be structured. So while Consociationalists claim to be world-weary and pessimistic because they are accurately describing reality, this may actually conceal a normative conservative nationalist idealism.

- c. *Liberal interventionism.* On Iraq, Consociationalism's pessimistic essentialism has transformed into an optimistic liberal interventionism. A primordialist Consociationalist could have predicted that an invasion of Iraq would have fragmented the country into its 'ethno-sectarian' constituents (Kurdistan, Shiastan and Sunnistan). McGarry and O'Leary, on the other hand, favoured the invasion of Iraq and argued that this 'plural society' might be preserved through a Consociational, ethno-sectarian federation prescribed in the Iraqi Constitution 2005 (even if this excludes the 'Sunni' minority). This optimism about the ability of the US/UK and Iraqi political elites to build a democracy in Iraq contradicts its essentialist assumptions which suggests that those elites are heavily, structurally constrained.

Consociationalism's essentialist theoretical foundation is not compatible with the theory's agency-oriented prescriptions. Consociationalism's assumption that identities are primordial or essentialist suggests that 'ethnonational' identity is very hard to change and that political elites will be highly circumscribed in their ability to intervene to create a more peaceful society. Yet Consociational theory places its faith in these constrained elites to remake their societies on the Consociational model, to dominate their communal blocs and achieve a consensual approach to governing 'plural societies'. Their depiction of politics lacks realism in the sense, first, they were unable to predict the success of the peace process. Second, prescribe the highly unlikely conditions of a benign political elite reaching a consensual elite

agreement and then this cartel of elites being able to simply impose any deal on their followers and the people *in all 'ethnationally divided societies'* (there may be instances in Northern Ireland, Rwanda and Yugoslavia where elites have not acted in such a benign fashion). This view of benign political elites is incompatible with the pessimistic realist view of politics where elites are not altruistic idealists. Presumably, if these conditions of elite dominance and agreement are not spontaneously present in the affected society then 'Consociational engineers' will try and create them, with all the adverse implications for democracy (Lijphart 1977: Chapter 7 'Consociational Engineering').

Consociationalists claim to be realists but their interpretation of conflict is inaccurate and, therefore, their prescriptions for managing it (strengthening and institutionalising sectarianism) could well exacerbate rather than ameliorate violent conflict. In its over-emphasis on institutional prescriptions, Consociationalism suffers from what Rogers Brubaker has called the 'architectonic illusion' '... the belief that the right 'grand architecture', the right territorial and institutional framework, can satisfy nationalist demands, quench nationalist passions and thereby resolve national conflicts.' (Brubaker 1998: 273) While institutional design matters 'a great deal' 'it has to be context-sensitive in a strong sense, that is, sensitive not only to the gross features of differing contexts but to finer details as well; it presupposes relatively 'thick' understandings of the local contexts in which it is to apply' (Brubaker 1998: 280). This institutional focus plays down the distribution of power – particularly the use of force – and the important role of politics in managing conflict.

## CIVIL SOCIETY OR TRANSFORMATION

Advocates of the Civil Society approach favour a more radical transformation of society and believe that this is a realistic proposition. They argue from a *radical* instrumentalist (rather than Constructivist) perspective that it is malign, rational, power-seeking political elites ('ethnic entrepreneurs') who manipulate 'ethnic' conflict in 'divided societies' and that the mobilisation of 'moderate' Civil Society would bring about transformation and end of conflict. In order to counter the malign influence of 'ethnic entrepreneurs' instrumentalists argue for the democratisation of society as the means by which the more moderate people are able to bring the 'extreme' elites into line with moderate, accommodating opinion. This perspective contrasts sharply with the view of Consociationalists who argue that it is the political elites who are the benign actors intent on achieving a power-sharing accommodation.

Advocates of the Civil Society approach, therefore, advocate the mobilisation of the people and Civil Society as a tool of social transformation. This is often an 'anti-political' perspective manifested in its hostility to political parties which are seen as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. These are the 'ethnosectarian entrepreneurs' who are responsible for the persistence of conflict rather than its transformation. The task is, therefore, to mobilise the people and choose new political representatives and/or create a form of direct democracy that will by-pass the 'unrepresentative' current system.

In practice, the debate between instrumentalists and their critics is not so polarised. In the classic debate between the instrumentalist, Paul Brass, and essentialist, Francis Robinson, Brass rejects the 'extreme instrumentalist' perspective and recognises that 'cultural groups differ in the strength and richness of their cultural traditions and even more importantly in

the strength of traditional institutions and social structure'. He concludes that 'it was not assumed that the pre-existing cultures or religious practices of ethnic groups are infinitely malleable by elites' (Brass 1994: 86, 89). Instrumentalists may recognise the importance of the legacy of the past while ethnonationalist critics may accept some role for elites in manipulating conflict for their own purposes. A radical instrumentalist position is defensible, as Clancy and Nagle argue, '... it is rarely the case that ethnicity is invented ex nihilo (Van den Berghe 1981)'. This implies that sometimes it is possible to invent ethnicity out of nothing, which is the radical instrumentalist argument which is the point that instrumentalists and Constructivists want to establish. Ernest Gellner, for example, argues that Estonians were invented out of a category without any ethnic self-consciousness. This does not mean that this is possible in all circumstances, but because instrumentalists and Constructivists allow for this possibility this means that their depiction of identities is more accurate than the essentialists and, therefore, provides a better basis for prescription.

Where Constructivists part company with the Civil Society approach is over the latter's idealism and because Constructivists argue that identities are not always fluid. The Civil Society's instrumentalist approach mistakes 'ought' for 'is'. Because they believe communal identities can be fluid this does not mean to say that in current conditions they are.

Constructivists recognise that identities may be more or less malleable depending on the circumstances and that realism about current circumstances and the prospects of bringing about change, is an important part of achieving feasible political change towards a more ideal society (Billig 1995). As Umut Ozkirimli argues, '... We must always remind ourselves that simply because something is socially constructed does not mean it can be deconstructed at will.' (Ozkirimli 2005: 194) Idealists fail to face 'political realities' and act as

if the world is as they would like it to be, ignoring or downplaying evidence to the contrary. Electoral and public opinion evidence as well as the perceptions of the political elites suggest that 'the people' were not 'benign' and a driving force behind the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process. Just as Consociationalists ignore the malign affects of political actors during the recent conflict in Northern Ireland, so the Civil Society approach misses the arguably more positive role played by the traditional, party political elites in negotiating and then attempting to sustain the Good Friday Agreement 1998 and power-sharing 2007 in the face of some popular opposition.

## CONSTRUCTIVISTS

A Constructivist approach (there are different types of Constructivist) can provide a framework in which a more complex and nuanced understanding of politics is possible and this will better equip us for understanding the prospects of bringing about desirable political change (see Ozkirimli 2005; 2010 for an excellent summary of constructivism, see also Hay 2002; Brubaker 2006). Constructivism is an approach rather than a theory of politics and offers no general theory of 'ethnonational' conflict or predictions. Constructivists '... confine their ambitions to providing compelling interpretations and explanations of discrete aspects of world politics, going no further than to offer heavily qualified 'contingent generalisations'' (Reus-Smit 2005: 222). There is an acknowledgement that different 'stories' can be told about politics with different implications for actions and norms, but some 'stories' are better and more convincing than others. It is also acknowledged that norms inform empirical observation as well as being the outcome of empirical analysis. For Constructivists ethical reasoning must combine both principles of action with the empirical (Reus-Smit 2008: 54). Constructivists seek to explain and understand structure/agency and the constraints/opportunities for change in a particular context in order to understand the prospects for bringing about more 'progressive' outcomes. Constructivists, therefore, argue that their framework allows them to more accurately, or realistically, describe particular conflict situations in contrast to the over-generalised assumptions of either the Consociational or Civil Society approach.

Constructivists (unlike both Consociationalists and Civil Society) allow for the possibility that in some situations group identities can be fluid and easily changed or new identities created, whereas in others they are more 'sticky' and difficult to change. Constructivists, therefore, want to try and understand the possibilities for political change in particular conflict situations and the possible role of agents in reducing violent conflict. Constructivism holds out the possibility of a more accurate and satisfying explanation of the radical changes in politics that took place in South Africa and Northern Ireland and also the subtleties and complexity of identities. This Constructivist approach also emphasises the role of politics, as the 'art of the possible', in achieving political change from realistic descriptions of 'what is' to *realistic* strategies and tactics for bringing about progress towards *idealism* and 'what ought to be'. This emphasises the importance of going beyond the 'overly-pessimistic realism' of Consociationalism (which didn't anticipate the peace process) and the 'over-optimistic idealism' of the Civil Society approach (which didn't foresee the parties coming to an agreement) to exploring the role of political and other actors in winding down violent conflicts. The integrationist Constructivist therefore considers the Good Friday Agreement a remarkable, pragmatic compromise. While it to some extent recognises (and entrenches?) the 'reality' of communal divisions and their existence at the popular level, it simultaneously represents an opportunity to reduce violence and overcome antagonistic communalism and achieve a more integrated society that consolidates the peace process. The GFA is, therefore, a milestone in an ongoing debate over the future of Northern Ireland.

The question of how far political elites and other actors can go in transforming identities is a question about power in society and the 'art of the possible'. Idealists can be a powerful motor for bringing about political change, change which has often occurred beyond human

imagination: ‘... dedicated idealists can discover possibilities and unleash potentialities that the worldly wise and weary cannot perceive. Idealistic visionaries in Britain who brought about the abolition of the slave trade had a better grasp of the realities of power and politics than the many who believed that slavery was an entrenched part of the natural order’ (Coady 2008: 62). It is easier to imagine what is because our imaginations are embedded in reality, but ‘We should never forget that imagination has been central to agency for most of human history’ (Ozkirimli 2005: 203-05).

Realists are useful in emphasising the importance of prudence and an accurate assessment of ‘the possible’ in informing strategies and tactics for achieving political change towards the ideal. Duncan Bell points out the potential of realism for providing radical critique:

‘The critical dimension in realism is generated by its ability to unmask the dynamics of existing power relations, and to expose the self-interest and hypocrisy behind the practices of political actors. Realism of this kind expresses scepticism about the scope of reason and the influence of morality in a world in which power, and the relentless pursuit of power, is a pervasive feature... It faces up to the folly and perversity of political life, without illusion or false hope.’ (Bell 2010: 104-05)

Ignoring reality and the ‘still seething reservoirs of hatred between unionists and nationalists’ is not likely to lead to the construction of a realistic and successful strategy for dealing with continuing communalism. In this respect Antonio Gramsci’s motto ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’ may be appropriate.

Constructivists, therefore, acknowledge a tension between idealism and realism. They argue, contrary to idealism, that moral dilemmas are a regular feature of political life and

deception or 'political skills' are therefore, to some extent, inevitable in politics and these cannot be judged outside the context in which they arise. They oppose the moralism and moral absolutism of some idealists who ignore the role of prudence and do not see the limits of political action. Coady warns, 'To turn everything you value into a matter 'of basic principle is not to show moral strength but moralistic inflexibility.' Compromise may be practical and also respectful of '... the conscientiously held values and the dignity of those who disagree with you.' (Coady 2008: 45) Against realism, Constructivists argue that politics cannot be analysed without making value judgements even if realists choose to deny this and reject the immorality and elitism of realism (Bell 2010: 6).

Constructivists reject a narrow, top-down view of politics and the construction of national identity that is associated with radical instrumentalism. As Ozkirimli argues,

'... the top-down view of culture, or the idea of culture constructed purposefully by national elites and imposed on a relatively passive population, is seriously misleading. *National identity is produced, reproduced and contested in the taken-for-granted details of social interaction, the habits and routines of everyday life. ...* Everyday forms of knowledge are rarely the subject of conscious reflection, because they constitute part of the arsenal of skills required to sustain social life.' (Ozkirimli 2005: 191. *My emphasis*)

The Constructivist Rogers Brubaker has criticised the radical instrumentalist perspective:

'... Elite discourse often plays an important role in the constitution of interest, but again this is not something political or cultural elites can do at will be deploying a few manipulative tricks. The identification and constitution of interests – in national

or other terms – is a complex process that cannot be reduced to elite manipulation.’

(Brubaker 1998: 292)

The peace process in Northern Ireland, for example, required choreography because there are limits to the abilities of the political elite to bring about political change and they were constrained in particular by key audiences (such as IRA activists) and public opinion. Political settlement is often the result of political pragmatism and compromise in negotiations rather than an attempt to impose abstract ideal types on widely varying conflicts. The ‘architectonic illusion’ is rejected in favour of an approach which selects the institutional *and non-institutional* tools to suit the particular conflict. As a handbook on *Democracy and Deep-Rooted Conflict* argues, ‘... It would be ludicrous to prescribe one overall single design for use across a variety of situations, each in many ways unique. ... Anyone can suggest *ideal* solutions; but only those involved can, through negotiation, discover and create the shape of a *practical* solution’ (Harris and Reilly 1998: 2, 3). Policy-makers need to look beyond institutional prescriptions and consider a more holistic approach to conflict management which considers (with a sense of modesty) how security, economic, international, politics and other factors interact. What is ideal may not be politically achievable, ‘Most conflicts feature complex interactions of different forces. Each requires the crafting of well-designed structures that are purposely oriented to the needs of the specific situation’ (Harris and Reilly 1998: 29).

	<b>Consociationalism</b>	<b>Civil Society or Transformation</b>	<b>Constructivism</b>
<b>Level of generalization</b>	High	Medium-high	Low- medium
<b>Structure or Agency oriented</b>	Structure (primordialism) but Agency (prescriptions)	Agency	Structure/Agency
<b>Identity</b>	Primordialism, essentialism	Instrumentalism	Constructivism
<b>Malleability of identity</b>	Sticky	Fluid	Sticky↔Fluid
<b>Communalist</b>	Nationalist Communalist	Sceptical of nationalism	Sceptical
<b>Mixing</b>	Segregation	Integration	Segregation/ <u>Integration</u>
<b>Role of Elites</b>	Powerful role, Agency Benign	Powerful role, Agency Malign	Structure/ agency
<b>Role of the people, Civil Society</b>	People malign, Powerful role (essentialist)	People benign, Powerful role (instrumentalist)	Benign/Malign
<b>Democracy</b>	Limited or no democracy at all	Extend democracy	Realism↔Idealism
<b>Political change</b>	Top-down, Conservative	Bottom-up, Transformation	Top ↔ Bottom and beyond, complex Theatrical metaphor
<b>Politics</b>	Pessimistic realism, Elite cartel	Optimistic idealism, Civil Society consensus	Realism/Idealism, Conflict

## CONCLUSION

Consociationalists have been effective in their use of rhetorical skills to market their theory to diverse audiences. False dichotomies have been deployed to limit choice between Consociationalism and ‘something obviously bad’. Clancy and Nagle attempt to caricature the diverse range of critics of Consociationalism into a single ‘Straw Man’. They then elevate one aspect of that critique – the creation of a shared public identity – as the key issue on which all critics of Consociationalism are to be judged. Then, by showing accommodation in Northern Ireland has been achieved without the creation of a ‘shared public identity’, they claim to have demonstrated the superiority of the Consociational approach. Civil Society critics, most notably the Alliance Party’s Stephen Farry, is misrepresented in order to suggest that Consociationalism’s critics are naïve (they also conflate ‘a shared public identity’ with a ‘shared society’).

Consociationalists confuse the debate over the management of conflict by employing vague, ambiguous and contradictory definitions of Consociationalism. These definitions continue to proliferate causing confusion among acolytes as to what Consociationalism is and what its implications are for the real world. The ambiguity of academic entrepreneurs who are ‘selling’ Consociationalism allows the theory to be marketed as all things to all people – as integrationist to advocates of the Civil Society approach and as ‘voluntary apartheid’ to traditional Consociationalists – and while this may be effective in marketing the product it is at the cost of theoretical coherence. This incoherence is apparent in Clancy and Nagle’s paradoxical reduction of the differences between Consociationalism and Civil Society/Transformation from a dichotomy to a mere difference over the timing of the

creation of a shared public identity (medium-long term for Consociationalists, as opposed to short-term for the Civil Society approach) in the course of an article. While this rhetorical move might induce some advocates of the Civil Society approach to 'buy into' Consociationalism, it disguises the contrasting theoretical assumptions and normative implications of Consociationalism and its critics.

Consociationalists and the Civil Society approach have crude analyses of the 'politics of conflict'. Consociationalism is descriptively inaccurate, politically unrealistic and normatively undesirable. Consociationalism's elite-oriented (top down) prescriptions contradict the essentialism of their theoretical approach (bottom up). It also requires the creation of the *unrealistic* political conditions of elite consensus with deferential supporters and people.

Constructivists critique Consociationalism not only for being inaccurate in their description of conflict and ill-advised in their prescriptions but also because it reinforces the antagonistic communalism that is supposed to be the source of the conflict.

Consociationalism risks being a self-fulfilling prophecy, its ideas about conflict and prescriptions for dealing with conflict creating or exacerbating the communal conflict that it predicts.

The Civil Society approach's radical instrumentalism has been similarly crude in its understanding of politics in Northern Ireland because it fails to acknowledge the constraints on political elites and the role of party politicians in bringing about power-sharing. The Civil Society approach is descriptively inaccurate, politically unrealistic but normatively preferable to Consociationalism. Constructivism should be distinguished from this radical instrumentalism because it emphasises both the constraints and opportunities facing political actors (structure/agency) and seeks explanations which account for the variability

and complexity of identities. Constructivism can provide a framework for investigating in a more nuanced and, inevitably, complex way the essential role of politics and pragmatism in achieving the successful management of conflict – beyond the dichotomy of Consociationalism (top down) and Civil Society (bottom up). It also highlights the values that the analyst brings to their analysis as well as the moral dilemmas and choices that face political actors (these are partly the result of different ontological and epistemological positions, Hay 2002).

This Constructivist approach also allows the analyst to engage in debates about ‘real world’ politics and the political and moral dilemmas that face real political actors. The public debate over Northern Ireland rarely mentions either Consociationalism or the Civil Society approach to conflict management, except occasionally where these map on to party political debates about a ‘benign apartheid’ or criticisms of political elites. While Consociational academics continue to claim Northern Ireland as a triumph of Consociationalism, there is no mention of Consociationalism in any of the memoirs or speeches of politicians themselves. A Constructivist perspective – rather than being naive about politics – can be used to analyse ‘real world’ politics and provide new insights into how political actors make peace in a dynamic and complex world.

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