



# Trajectories of Identity Change

## New Perspectives on Ethnicity, Nationality and Identity in Ireland

Jennifer Todd

The cultural social sciences work at the point of intersection of social structure, institutional change and change in mass public perceptions and collective identities. They look for the links between power relations, collective action and social and symbolic boundaries. Marx theorized this for class relations. The most exciting area of the cultural social sciences today, however, is ethnicity, where some of the insights developed in class analysis are used to look at the constitution of ethnic categories and collectivities and the ways the categories of ethnicity and nationality are embodied, manipulated, strategically adapted, and transmitted.<sup>1</sup>

- 1 For examples, see Michèle Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration*. (Cambridge, Mass., 2000); Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004); Andreas Wimmer, *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict: Shadows of Modernity* (Cambridge, 2002); Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity* (London, 1996).

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Ethnic and national identity change is central to this research, for once we move beyond the bare categories of national identity (to paraphrase John Hume, the French who don't stop being French and the Germans who don't stop being German), we see identity shift and identity contest as pervasive. Shifts in the ways of being national — in this context, Irish, or Northern Irish, or British — radically change national boundaries and political action. In turn, political reform, global communications and a changing power balance can shift national and ethnic identifications.<sup>2</sup>

New work in the cultural social sciences focuses on local, familial and everyday modes of interaction, showing how these interact with state institutions and economic structures to form ethnic groups in conflict. In so doing, this work replots the

conceptual landscape and provides a new set of interdisciplinary research questions, which also give us a grasp on the changes in contemporary Ireland, North and South. Four conceptual revolutions have changed the field. Provided below is an outline of the general arguments and their relevance to research on changing identities in Ireland.

### *Revolution One: Groups become the Explanandum*

The first revolution has to do with the ethnic groups and national communities that enter into conflict. Rogers Brubaker, in a seminal piece, argued that the term 'group' has to be abolished from the analytic vocabulary, that even if ordinary individuals think in terms of ethnic group belonging, analytically we have to explain rather than presuppose group solidarity.<sup>3</sup> Groups and group boundaries

are to be explained whether in terms of the benefits (material and cultural) of solidarity, or the work done by ethnic entrepreneurs in brokering alliances and redefining categories, or the internal dynamics of the population where competition is for ownership of 'group characteristics'. What sort of research does this lead to? Brubaker argues for a cognitivist approach, where the researcher looks at how and when individuals deploy the categories of ethnicity and nationality. In this research, the *when* (the interactional context) is highlighted over the *what* (the content of group identity). The picture is one of fluctuation, with ethnicity momentarily highlighted then moving out of focus. Robin Wilson has argued that we should apply this approach to Northern Ireland, believing that if we did so, we would find that ordinary people do not work with the nationalist/unionist or British/Irish categories so central to official political life.<sup>4</sup> In the South, this approach leads researchers to look at localities, immigrants, gender, youth, anything that people actually talk about among themselves, and this is usually not 'the nation'.

The Irish case, however, shows that we need to qualify the interactional approach. Breaching codes and boundaries in Ireland does not usually lead to explicit ethnic assertion, but rather to silence or a change of topic or worse. In the South, the nation, like sex, is seldom spoken of, and not because either is thought to be unimportant. In a recent set of open-ended interviews carried out as part of research into changing Irish identities, eighty individuals (from a very wide range of social backgrounds) spoke freely of their sense of locality, of class, of religion, of immigration: none volunteered a discussion of nationality or of gender.<sup>5</sup> Were they post-national? Post-gendered? Or did their silence signify that these were still important and disturbing issues? When probed, they talked about nationality, in a set of intersecting, often cross-cutting themes and narratives: national boundaries

remained for the most part salient, but complex, difficult to discuss. A general conceptual conclusion follows. The *when* of ethnicity presupposes the *what*: we need to be able to recognize the turns, the silences, the evasions and what is expressed in them. It also presupposes the *how*: the triggers that change the path of conversation, the meanings given to those triggers, and the reasons they are so powerful.

If 'communities' are the products of convergent interests, ideas and understandings, dispositions to common action, how do individuals themselves understand them? How do individuals interconnect and relate ideas of religion, nationality and community today? Do these understandings converge, and if so, what explains the convergence and the related capacity for solidaristic action? What social mechanisms create and reproduce communal solidarity? The comparative literature gives us some answers. The convergent understandings of ethnicity and nationality may be crystallized in times of trauma.<sup>6</sup> They are stabilized by their emotional hold, which filters out other interests and perceptions.<sup>7</sup> Yet they remain open to incentives for change. David Laitin theorizes the 'tipping game', whereby individuals, worried about peer pressure as well as self-interest, opt for radical change only when each expects that others will too, producing a cascade of change.<sup>8</sup> These themes are directly relevant to the question of how communal solidarity is retained and maintained in Northern Ireland, and the ways in which the 1998 Good Friday Agreement gives incentives for breaching solidarity.<sup>9</sup>

### **Revolution Two: Opening Out Ethnicity and Nationality**

How are we to understand ethnicity and the related (but state-centred) concept of nationalism? It was once clear. As Walter Connor puts it, ethnicity was understood as

- 2 Michael Keating, *Plurinational Democracy: Stateless Nations in a Post-Sovereignty Era* (Oxford, 2001); Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Oxford, 1997)
- 3 Rogers Brubaker, 'Ethnicity without Groups', *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, 43, 2 (2002), 163–89
- 4 Robin Wilson, 'The Politics of Contemporary Ethno-nationalist Conflicts', *Nations and Nationalism*, 7, 3 (2001), 365–84
- 5 The interviews were conducted in two locations in the Irish state by Theresa O'Keefe for the Identity, Diversity and Citizenship programme, Changing Irish Identities project, in 2003–05.
- 6 Sudhir Kakar, *The Colors of Violence, Cultural Identities, Religion and Conflict* (Chicago, 1996); Jacques Sémelin, *Purifier et détruire: Usages politiques des massacres et génocides* (Paris, 2005)
- 7 Roger D. Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, 2002)
- 8 David D. Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad* (Ithaca, NY, 1998)
- 9 These are the central questions in Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, *Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996) and in our recent joint work, 'The Roots of Intense Ethnic Conflict may not Themselves be Ethnic: Categories,

- Communities and Path Dependence', *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, 45, 2 (2004), 209–32, and 'Path Dependence in Settlement Processes: Explaining Settlement in Northern Ireland', *Political Studies*, 55, 2 (forthcoming 2007).
- 10 Walker Connor, *Ethno-nationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton, NJ, 1994), 197; cf. Edward Shils, 'Nation, Nationality, Nationalism and Civil Society', *Nations and Nationalism*, 1, 1 (1995), 93–118, 94–97, 101. For fuller discussion of the points in this paragraph, see Ruane and Todd, 'Roots of Intense Ethnic Conflict'.
- 11 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. edn. (London, 1991), 6; John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, eds., *Ethnicity* (Oxford, 1996), 6–7
- 12 This quasi-ethnic view has echoes in other Protestant minorities, see Joseph Ruane, 'Majority-Minority Conflicts and Their Resolution: Protestant Minorities in France and in Ireland', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 12, 3–4 (2006), 509–32.
- 13 Richard Bourke, 'Antigone and After: Ethnic Conflict in Historical Perspective', *Field Day Review*, 2 (2006), 169–94

a 'sense of kinship' that infused a nation: a 'sense of shared blood' was to be found 'at the core of ethno-psychology'.<sup>10</sup> Now the concepts have been opened out. Ethnicity — to the extent that it is a distinct category from religion, class, or other collectivities — refers to a group inherently limited in space and continuous in time, a spatially distinctive 'people', which is thought of as stretching back into the past and moving into the future, and is typically associated with a symbolism of origin and a set of origin-myths.<sup>11</sup> This sense of 'peoplehood' is, however, a thin category, presupposing not just a multiplicity of peoples, but peoples who define their specificity in different ways. It requires to be filled by other content (linguistic, genealogical, cultural, political, religious), and the set of beliefs, interests and institutional practices that comes to fill it defines the specific ethnicity in question. Ethnicity thus exists on a continuum with other categories, overlapping with religion and class, sliding into a wider sense of commonality with co-religionists abroad, or alternatively, when the ties of religion to institutional practice and theological belief are loosened, religion itself may imperceptibly become ethnicized.

Some groups may not think of themselves as 'a people' at all. And there is no specifically 'ethnic' content that can tell us whether or not they do. Research has to look at the ways in which collectivity is constructed. Free Presbyterians, for example, use an imagery of 'shared blood', which defines a group that never is quite bounded territorially or continuous in time. A favourite hymn in this denomination is 'There is Power in the Blood', which, while explicitly referring to the blood of Christ, implicitly also refers to the blood of believers, has resonances with the 'spilled blood' of Ulster Protestants in the world wars and in the more recent 'war with the IRA', and has more specific reference to the blood of the Protestant martyrs, pictures of whose suffering are prominently displayed

in Martyrs Memorial Church in Belfast. A sense of 'blood-belonging' thus links contemporary Northern Irish Protestants not just to those massacred in the twentieth century because of their loyalty to Britain, but also to those massacred in Ulster in 1641 because of their religion and settler status, as well as to those Protestants (mostly of southern French origin) massacred in Paris some seventy years earlier and in the Cévennes some sixty years later. Here the metaphor usually thought of as typical of ethnic identity is used instead to trace a religious continuity that almost ethnicizes but not quite.<sup>12</sup>

The ethnic dimension of conflict in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, is always contested and fluid, as Richard Bourke has argued.<sup>13</sup> How far unionists fight for 'their ethnic group', or for their religious values, or for a state to correspond with their idea of nationhood is decided in part by the contention between subsections of unionists, loyalists and Protestants. Is the Northern Ireland conflict an ethnic or an ethno-national conflict? It is a multi-determined one where meanings, the contents emphasized as specific to the group and thus the precise boundaries of the group, are themselves in contest.

Equally, the concept of nationality has been opened. We are still Irish, or Basque, or Ulster Protestant, but it is not possible to read off the meanings of these categories from 'official' national or ethnic discourse. There are numerous ways 'to be Irish' or 'to be Basque', or 'to be Ulster Protestant', quite different from 'official' views, pursued spontaneously by different groups and subsets of groups and individuals, combining differently regional, local, gender, age, class, religious and cultural stances. This means that identifying an 'ethnic' or 'national' identity involves going below explicit discourse, looking not at what people say about 'the nation' but at the way they construct 'peoplehood', if indeed



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they do, and the content they give it, which may diverge from official and scholarly categorizations. This phenomenon was evident in our recent research project on the Irish border.<sup>14</sup> On the basis of the scholarly literature, it had been expected that in the Southern border counties a progression from an irredentist nationalism, perhaps still held by some, through a state-centred 26-county nationalism to a new Europeanism would be found, which would have made the Irish border no different from other European borders. Over seventy in-depth interviews, hundreds of school essays and a survey indicated convincingly that the participants did not fit any of these characterizations. Neither the '26-county' state-centred attitudes so prevalent in the Irish media and 'revisionist' scholarship, nor old-fashioned

nationalist irredentism, nor a new European identity were common. What was found again and again was a set of paradoxes.

Respondents provided information about living in Louth, Monaghan, Donegal, past and present. They patiently disclosed their views about the border and the North, what being Irish meant to them and to their parents, how far they saw this changing. They volunteered countless examples of the practical importance of the border in jobs, party system, everyday activity, smuggling, and they freely recounted experiences of danger. They also denied that the border had any impact on their sense of identity and nationality. They even denied that it was close by. In towns not ten kilometres from Northern Ireland, people said they did not

14 Intergenerational Transmission and Ethno-national Identity in the (Irish) Border Area, funded by the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. Lorenzo Cañas Bottos, Nathalie Rougier and I conducted the interviews; Orla Muldoon, Karen Trew and Katrina McLoughlin conducted the school essay study and survey; see [www.ucd.ie/euiteniba](http://www.ucd.ie/euiteniba). For fuller discussion of the results summarized below, see Jennifer Todd et al., 'The Moral Boundaries of the Nation: Nation, State and Boundaries in the Southern Irish Border Counties', *Ethnopolitics*, 5, 4 (2006), 1–18.

- 15 Rawi Abdelal et al., 'Identity as a Variable' (10 May 2003 version), Weatherhead Initiative in International Affairs, Harvard University, [www.wcfia.harvard.edu/misc/initiative/identity/papers/index.htm](http://www.wcfia.harvard.edu/misc/initiative/identity/papers/index.htm), accessed January 2005; Richard D. Ashmore, Kay Deaux and Tracy McLaughlin-Volpe, 'An Organizing Framework for Collective Identity: Articulation and Significance of Multidimensionality', *Psychological Bulletin*, 130, 1 (2004), 80–114
- 16 Karen A. Cerulo, 'Identity Construction: New Issues, New Directions', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 23 (1997), 385–409; Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, 'Beyond "Identity"', *Theory and Society*, 29 (2002), 1–47; Margaret Somers, 'The Narrative Construction of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach', *Theory and Society*, 23 (1994), 605–49. For a fuller discussion of these issues and their relevance for national identity, see Jennifer Todd, 'Social Transformations, Collective Categories and Identity Change', *Theory and Society*, 34, 4 (2005), 429–63.
- 17 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London, 1990 [1959])

live on the border. They saw no symbolic significance to the border. Yet these same respondents had stated that the border had been a source of trauma in the past, for their own parents and grandparents. They had given examples of the differences of North and South: 'The troubles changed everything, everything completely ... so many people came from the North to live here, people were afraid, afraid to say what they thought, what they felt'; 'They'd even take over the whole conversation. We were placid, quiet, but they were all gun-blazing.'

These responses are only apparently contradictory. They make sense in terms of the respondents' distinctive construction of national identity and place-in-the-world. The respondents deny the significance of the border through constructing national community as a moral phenomenon and defining themselves as open and peaceful, not closed and oppositional. As one young person wrote: 'We work with each other and are friends with each other'. This everyday civil interaction which cross-cuts the border reconstitutes a different sort of national boundary, one that is founded not merely in institutions but in values and sense of self. A sense of moral values and civility is felt to pervade (Southern) Irish society and to divide the respondents from those who insist on the state boundaries, who reject their openness, deny their good will, and shout them down. This is not an ethnic nationalism — ideologies of Gaelic Catholic Ireland were treated with some irony by many of the respondents — but a moral constitution of the nation. Like other forms of nationalism, however, it is powerful, connecting the collective category of nationality with the sense of self. It defines a moral border, one which excludes Northern unionists threatened by this moral and civilizational expansiveness and Northern nationalists who can not so civilly affirm their Irishness. It is one of the moves in the North–South interactional drama.

### *Revolution Three: (Re)Building Identity*

The third revolution has to do with identity. It is a term that tends to stop thought. Is it something one *has*? Something one *does*? Something one *feels*? Something one *is*? Recent interdisciplinary scholarship has begun to order the ways in which the concept has been used and the different aspects that can be researched.<sup>15</sup> It has thus restored a pared-down concept to analytic usefulness.

For some time now, a 'soft constructivist' consensus has dominated the fields of cultural analysis. Soft constructivism highlights personal variability and new combinations of meanings in identity-categories and moments of choice or intentionality in identity formation. Its major achievement is to have broken definitively with the notion of identity-categories as fixed and defined.<sup>16</sup> This approach emphasizes the fluctuating, relational and situational quality of self-definitions. Identity is not something one *has*, it is not a *thing*. Yet of course identity politics presupposes just this; for example, it is common in the new progressive loyalist politics to hear it said: 'The only thing we have left is our identity', or 'Don't question my identity'.

Those who say this are, in a sense, right to protest that they cannot change their identity, not least their ethnic or national identity, at a whim, and that they do not want intellectuals to define it for them. They are also right to suspect an approach that is simply relational and situational. As identities become plural and open to choice, they proliferate, varying in each situation where a new aspect of self is performed. Identity becomes something one does, as one puts on or takes off different hats. Of course such 'identity-work' goes on, as Erving Goffman has shown so wonderfully.<sup>17</sup> But 'identity-language' classically referred to the

stability of the self through a succession of roles; once ‘identity’ is unmoored from such individual stability, it loses its *raison d’être*. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper cut the Gordian knot: we should dispense with the term altogether, we can do all that needs to be done talking about identification, self-definition, the preservation of core values, sense of belonging, and thereby one escapes the pitfalls of identity-politics.<sup>18</sup>

Yet there is something to be said for the older term ‘identity’ when it is seen not as something one has, or does, or feels, but as something one *is*. Being is that place between situation and choice, where we work with given elements — dispositions, values, judgements, emotions — in light of opportunities and aims. These elements are themselves made socially: participation in complex social practices develops dispositions, changes judgements, educates emotions, produces the five senses.<sup>19</sup> They are also embedded socially (in the practices, institutions, opportunities available at any given time) and anchored personally. It is precisely this social and personal anchorage that allows identity to be an independent causal factor in social life, with a different temporality of change than politics or culture, sometimes progressing social revolutions, sometimes inertial, stalling change, making new institutions function just as the old ones did.

Pierre Bourdieu’s work on social class provides a model of the anchoring of identity, of the ways in which the power relations of our environment intersect with the categories of our understanding.<sup>20</sup> He has analysed how the *habitus* — the individual’s dispositions that give bodily form to collective categories and distinctions — is formed from earliest childhood, as the child situates itself in structured, gendered and differentially pathed social space, and internalizes its objective life-chances in its own subjective expectations and interests.<sup>21</sup> The French bourgeois lady who knows

as second nature how to tie her scarf, what jumpers and make-up and modes of greeting are fine, and who educates her children to negotiate their paths through the drawing room with its small tables and fine china, is creating the materials of class identity as surely as the Kabyle family in the 1950s created the materials of Kabyle identity in the arrangement of the house which reflected the opportunities and life-chances of each gender and led children to internalize a genderized sense of direction.<sup>22</sup> The *habitus* is at the basis of the emotional power of identity, the felt immediacy by which we respond to those who recognize and respond positively to our immediate intuitive distinctions. Most important of all, for Bourdieu, power and opposition are also internalized. Those who control the most progressive parts of the economy, dominate in the academies, and have the power to assert their culture as the rational, progressive, global culture, also develop a sense of ownership of civilizing values, rationality and progress. Their evident material and cultural power provides confirmation of the ‘truth’ of their belief in their own rationality and progressiveness. In such circumstances, class (or ethnic) dominance is fought for — and against — not simply for its own sake but for the sake of the highest values. A feedback pattern results where power inequalities are internalized in dispositions and identity oppositions, which then serve to reproduce the power inequalities.<sup>23</sup>

This is not all there is to identity, or else there would be only past, no future. Each of us prioritizes the materials of identity, reshuffles them and sometimes watches them collapse, in the process redirecting our own lives and practices and (re)making the materials. To use a philosophy of science metaphor, we rebuild our identity boats while sailing in them. Social psychologists, sociologists and political scientists are beginning to converge on seeing identity as a complexly structured package where particular identity-categories (Irish)

18 Brubaker and Cooper, ‘Beyond “Identity”’

19 The point was made by Marx in the *Paris Manuscripts*. More recently, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London, 1981).

20 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, 1977); *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass., 1984); *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, 1990)

21 Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 86

22 Béatrix Le Wita, *French Bourgeois Culture*, trans. James A. Underwood (Cambridge, 1994); Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice*, 271–83

23 Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 78–79

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- 24 Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe, 'Organizing Framework'; Abdelal et al., 'Identity as a Variable'
- 25 Todd, 'Social Transformations'
- 26 Andreas Wimmer, 'The Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Boundaries: Toward a Comparative Theory', unpublished manuscript, University of California, Los Angeles, 2006; Laitin, *Identity in Formation*; Lamont, *Dignity of Working Men*

are interrelated with others (Catholic, Gaelic, working class, European, modern), imbued with more or less personally meaningful contents and values.<sup>24</sup> All identity, in this sense, is an 'identity-package' that can, at a cost, be remade. Choice points arise, there is space for reflection, even if our choices do not always form our identities as we might have hoped. Choices arise, above all, when social conditions change, when the power resources that defined a set of socially dominant identity-packages are broken. Radical change in power relations is likely to provoke cognitive dissonance, which triggers identity shift. Depending on resources and incentives, however, the direction of that shift may be extreme reaffirmation of old binaries, or movement to new categories and contents.<sup>25</sup>

This broad perspective is informing some of the most interesting work on ethnic identity today. It goes beyond the constructivist–primordialist dichotomy. It is no longer a question of opposing choice of identity to imposition of hegemonic categories, but showing the conditions under which choice and fluidity is likely, the conditions under which the lock-in of ethnic identities takes place, the conditions under which collective identity shifts may happen and the sorts of moral and cultural resources used in such shifts.<sup>26</sup>

Precisely this perspective informed recent research projects on national identity change in Ireland. Northern Ireland was a key area, because there have been radical shifts in



the communal power balance, culminating in the 1998 Agreement. Surveys showed that this had not provoked major change in identity-categories: some young Protestants apart, who are moving to a Northern Irish identity, Protestants and Catholics continue to polarize in their choice, respectively, of a British and an Irish identity.<sup>27</sup> Surely the shifts must have provoked change in the oppositional aspects of identity?<sup>28</sup> If they had, why not more political progress? Some eighty in-depth interviews in Northern Ireland helped give answers. Preliminary analysis showed no conversion from one identity package to another, and, surprisingly, relatively little reaffirmation of old dichotomies.<sup>29</sup> It suggested that three types of change are prevalent: assimilation, adaptation and privatization.

*Assimilation* is where actors reshuffle the elements of identity, retaining the national category of identity but reprioritizing the contents and their relation with other categories, differentiating the substantive cultural meanings of ethnicity from associated oppositions based on status and power hierarchies and retaining the former, while marginalizing or casting out the latter. There is evidence that sections of the business class and of evangelical Protestants in Northern Ireland have done just that.<sup>30</sup> It occurred among a minority of our respondents. Some of the most explicit examples took place through intense, if short-lived, personal crises, where individuals reassessed many of the oppositional contents of their identity-categories and dispensed with them. These

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27 Orla Muldoon et al., 'The Nature and Meaning of Identity in Northern Ireland after the Good Friday Agreement', *Political Psychology* 28, 1 (2007), 89–103

28 For discussion, see Jennifer Todd et al., 'Fluid or Frozen: Choice and Change in Ethno-national Identification in Contemporary Northern Ireland', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 12, 3–4 (2006), 323–46, and Jennifer Todd, 'Implementing the Good Friday Agreement: Civil Society, the State and Identity Change', in Guy Ben Porat, ed., *Implementing Peace Agreements in South Africa, Northern Ireland and Israel* (forthcoming, Houndsmill, 2007).

29 See Todd, 'Social Transformations' for a discussion of the typology, and Todd et al., 'Fluid or Frozen', for examples.

30 Guy Ben Porat, *Global Liberalism, Local Populism: Peace and Conflict in Israel/Palestine and Northern Ireland* (Syracuse, NY, 2006); Gladys Ganiel, 'Emerging from the Evangelical Subculture in Northern Ireland: A Case Study of the Zero28 and Ikon Community', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 6, 1 (2006), 38–48

31 Muldoon et al., 'Nature and Meaning of Identity'

32 In an interview with Nathalie Rougier, see Todd et al., 'Fluid or Frozen', 341.

33 Claire Mitchell, 'Protestant Identification and Political Change in Northern Ireland', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 26, 4 (2003), 612–31

34 In an interview with Lorenzo Cañas Bottos, see Todd et al., 'Fluid or Frozen', 332–33.

individuals reported a helter-skelter of change, with initial movement (typically within cross-community institutions) leading to new levels of cognitive dissonance — one Protestant woman reported: 'I had been brought up with a stereotype of a Sinn Féin person as an absolute monster, you know, and then on the other hand I had X who was a very friendly, amicable woman and ... I had an awful time trying to reconcile the two ...' Further change results. It is not difficult to explain why this type of identity change is infrequent. The changes are cumulative and radical, involving renegotiation of relations with family and friends. They happen through periods of crisis and involve a number of choice-points, at each of which the process could have stopped. In short, this sort of identity shift requires considerable work, strong incentives and resources (not least safety and space to reassess).

*Adaptation* is where actors adapt to the practices required in the new social order without changing the oppositional elements of their identity. They keep their own values and self-categorizations distinct from their social conformity. Plausible examples include those mainstream unionists who have given more or less grudging and partial support to the institutions of the 1998 Agreement, while retaining their older conceptual categorizations. It was found to be a common response to change, that could incrementally wear away at the oppositional categories. For example, significant numbers of respondents in a large, predominantly Catholic, border town asserted a discourse of moderation and pluralism, of acceptance of the other, a desire not to offend Protestants, at the same time as asserting uncriticized religious and national categories of identity.<sup>31</sup> This could be interpreted as a 'politically correct' adaptive discourse, covering an oppositional consciousness. However, a similar discourse of moderation and gradualist change was common to respondents who showed

abundant evidence in the interviews that they had opened to radical difference, and had come to relativize the moral contents of their own identity. Some told of journeys from a highly oppositional consciousness to a recognition of the other's viewpoint. Such gradual adaptation, when it relativizes the moral content of national identity and permits a truly liberal nationalism is of major political import. Even when it does not go so far, it can encourage political compromise, although that compromise remains prone to crisis: as one respondent eloquently put it, referring to memories of injustice and repression, 'The ceasefire is very important ... it's the biggest thing you know, it's so important that that's sustained but when wee things happen you know that that memory is still somewhere buried in your brain.'<sup>32</sup>

*Privatization* rearranges the elements of identity, marginalizing all macro-social elements, making recessive national, political, class and status categorizations, shrinking the core of identity into the private, the familial, perhaps also the religious sphere.<sup>33</sup> It was another common response in the Northern Ireland interviews. On the one hand, there was a significant minority (from both Protestant and Catholic backgrounds) who avoided oppositional identities and wanted above all to live outside of the Protestant/Catholic and unionist/nationalist categories, which they saw as essentially oppositional. One man described himself only as 'a plumber' and tried to steer a way through a sectarian society, while according the least possible recognition to its core categories.<sup>34</sup> Others avoided opposition by seeing all national identities as just official labels, 'something to tick in a box'. It also took the form of detachment from communal norms and practices, while privately espousing new modes of thinking. One woman retained a self-declared identity as British ('It's a number stamped on my passport and that's about it'), even though she would have

‘loved there to be an identity of Northern Irish’, and also spoke of her liking for Irish culture. It is as if the elements of her identity had changed, while the category of identity remained British, uncomfortably and emptily so.<sup>35</sup> Similar unexpected configurations have appeared in other qualitative research with evangelical Protestants, where Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) voters have, for example, quite radically changed their perspectives on the Irish state.<sup>36</sup> Privatization allows a radicalness of thought, while retaining communal ties. It does not, however, directly translate into politics. The urgent question is what sorts of political opportunity and incentive can translate individual movement into collective politics, what opportunities for public choice will allow ‘tipping movements’ to occur, where whole populations move to a new perspective?

**Revolution Four:  
Locking In (and Unlocking)  
Ethno-national Identities and Conflict**

Two major breakthroughs must be added to those above, which reconnect identity, ethnicity and culture to institutions and social structure. The first, pioneered by Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, places identity and identity shift as one part of sequences of mobilization and collective action.<sup>37</sup> For them, the quest is to find common mechanisms and sequences of mechanisms that are combined and recombined differently in different situations to produce more or less intense conflict, more or less oppositional identities, more or less radical mobilization. Ethnic conflict and class conflict thus have much more in common — in the mechanisms by which identities are formed and oppression resisted — than often thought.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, settlement processes are closer to other processes of radical institutional change than usually supposed.<sup>39</sup> The intellectual field is thus opened out to compare different

sorts of mobilization and conflict and transformation.

Second, the notion of lock-in or path-dependence has marked a return of history to the social sciences.<sup>40</sup> The key idea here is that a particular historical moment (the seventeenth-century plantation and its aftermath) can create a configuration of relationships — a concatenation of mechanisms — that generates strong tendencies to self-reproduction. History matters: institutions and relationships that no one would choose may continue for centuries; identities are ‘sticky’ and once formed do not change. Much of the research involved here is in showing exactly how institutions get regenerated and how they change: the mechanisms by which older repertoires keep their efficacy, and the pressures, choices and incentives that work together to generate at times continuity and at times incremental or radical change.<sup>41</sup>

The implications for the study of ethnic conflict and ethno-national identity are major. In some ethno-national conflicts — and Northern Ireland is a prime example — there are significant continuities over time, the ‘dreary steeples’ reappear after world wars, and what is required is to show the mechanisms by which seemingly dysfunctional conflict gets reproduced and by which the constant tendencies towards and attempts at change get stalled or stunted. Equally there is the question of the ways in which change occurs: the windows of opportunity given by global developments, the resources that incrementally build up (not least, resources of identity shift), and the ways in which they can be harnessed towards settlement. These perspectives, in short, give us a handle on the question: ‘If people’s identities are changeable, what then locks in conflict?’ The approach, however, involves us in refocusing our attention to the wider communal, institutional and structural-power logics in which identity and identity shift have their place.

- 35 Interviews by Theresa O’Keefe
- 36 Gladys Ganiel, ‘Ulster Says Maybe: The Restructuring of Evangelical Politics in Northern Ireland’, *Irish Political Studies*, 21, 2 (2006), 137–55; Claire Mitchell and Jennifer Todd, ‘Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Nationality, Power and Symbolic Trade-offs among Evangelical Protestants in Northern Ireland’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 13, 4 (forthcoming 2007)
- 37 Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*. Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics (Cambridge, Mass., 2000)
- 38 Michèle Lamont’s work, some of which is cited above, shows this clearly.
- 39 Ruane and Todd, ‘Path Dependence in Settlement Processes’
- 40 James Mahoney, ‘Path Dependence in Historical Sociology’, *Theory and Society*, 29 (2000), 507–48; Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time: History, Institutions and Social Analysis* (Princeton, 2004); James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, eds., *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 2003)
- 41 Andrew P. Cortell and Susan Peterson, ‘Altered States: Explaining Domestic Institutional Change’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 29 (1999) 177–200; Wolfgang Streek and Kathleen Thelen, eds., *Beyond Continuity: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies* (Oxford, 2005)

42 As well as the two projects discussed here, which produced over 250 in-depth interviews, North and South, other major funded projects were undertaken in University College Cork (on Protestant minorities) and in National University of Ireland, Maynooth (on life histories).

### *Changing Forms of Irish Identity*

For the moment, and it probably is only a momentary phase, paradigmatic constraints appear to have loosened and it is possible to investigate identity change comparatively, cumulatively and empirically, paralleling contemporary discussions on institutional change and learning from interdisciplinary debate. In this context, the beginnings of research funding for the social sciences in Ireland is creating an infrastructure for understanding identity change.<sup>42</sup> Some preliminary findings from the research mentioned in this essay are outlined below to enable further discussion and debate.

- Nationality remains important, even for the young, but how to be national is negotiable and varying.
- Occasions of choice and reflection on national identity are frequent and identity shift is common. Change is seldom radical. It is costly for individuals, socially and personally, and they do not undertake it lightly.
- Individuals combine identity-categories, and in this sense identity-hybridity is very common. Fluidity of movement between different identity packages is rare: one child of a mixed marriage whom we interviewed moved fluidly between Protestant and Catholic repertoires and was uncategorizable in terms of the Northern Ireland binaries, but he was an exception.
- Change is not provoked simply by political events, even major events like the Good Friday Agreement, nor by changing power relations alone. It is only when the events and changed relations impact on interactions and experience in everyday life that they may provoke identity shift.
- What we see is a drama of negotiation and imaginative interaction of nationality, where not only the categories but the modes of being national are in play. As people on the Southern side of the border redefine their nationality in moral terms and in effect cut off Irishness to some from the North, so some Northern Catholics shift to a Northern Irish focus of identity, thus creating a different sort of alienation between North and South: from a moral alienation and definition of difference to a national one.
- This raises a new agenda for analysis of nationalism in Ireland, requiring analysis not simply of the South but of North–South contrasts, challenges and interrelations. This drama of self–other definition takes place in context of radical economic and socio-political changes, which give new incentives for tipping movements, collective change and individual boundary breaching. ■

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