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A CULTURAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING NORTHERN IRELAND

Reading or hearing some of the news from Northern Ireland can make one shake one's head in disbelief or helpless incomprehension. Why? Under a close examination of the labyrinthine complexity of the socio-political situation in Northern Ireland, the causes and consequences of the conflict become hard to distinguish and disagreements over the best way, the *essential* way of resolving the 'Troubles', often follow. However, the most frequently recognised aspects of the conflict (political, cultural, religious, socio-economic, psychological, etc.) have proved to be so inextricably fused and entangled that any attempted *exclusive* explanation which claims a single thread in the knot as the one true cause of the 'Troubles' is necessarily a very reductive one.

In my final-year dissertation, I have tried to avoid any narrow view by presenting several rather different ways of understanding the situation in Northern Ireland, according to the amount of emphasis they put on the various aspects of the conflict. The following extract from the dissertation deals with views that focus mainly on the *cultural* aspect of the 'Troubles'.

As numerous political initiatives have not only repeatedly failed to solve the problem but some attempts at changing the political structure have fuelled the conflict and violence even more, many commentators have turned their emphasis from the political roots and solutions of the 'Troubles' to cultural ones. A whole spectrum of cultural interpretations of the conflict has emerged, ranging from those seeing Northern Ireland as essentially a place apart, in particular psychologically separate, obsessed by its past and stuck in an anachronistic religious tribalism, to those seeing the main problem in a confusion and clash of identities, or in an intense sectarianism caused by cultural and/or structural factors, as well as those pointing to an outdated ideology of ethnic nationalism unable to accept and respect cultural diversity and the rights of minorities.

The most overtly psychological explanations are discussed, for example, by John Whyte in his *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (1990:94-96). He mentions two now rather outdated theories from the 1970s: Harold Jackson's of a society suffering from a deep psychosis in which rational thought and action are, under

stress, overtaken by emotional spasms, and Morris Fraser's 'frustration-aggression theory', in which a minority functions as a scapegoat for a majority's frustrations. But the theory that can be reasonably applied to Northern Ireland and can explain 'why the intensity of group conflict appears to go beyond what the real interests of the groups would seem to require' is, Whyte argues, Henri Tajfel's 'social identity theory' (1990:97). In this theory, individuals strive for a positive self-esteem and as they also belong to social groups, they have a deep-seated urge to evaluate their own group rather positively, distinguishing it from other groups along some dimension which makes them superior (1990:97). A competition between groups is what results.

Unlike this theory, which might be applied to a society in general, the British public and that of the Republic of Ireland tend to see the *distinctive* 'northern mentality' as the major force behind the conflict. The British point out that were it not for the unionists' deep anxiety and intransigence, they would have managed to put the Province into a united Ireland as early as the 1920s, if not even earlier (Kee 1997:247, 284). It is the sectarian fears and extremism of the Protestant Orange Order and the strategy of arousing Protestants' opposition to any reforms by the notorious Ian Paisley that has been the major obstacle to change since the 1960s (Barton 1996:111, 122). The majority of the people in the South, on the other hand, think of both Northern Catholics and Northern Protestants as 'extreme and unreasonable' (Belfrage 1988:xvi), the most common Southern perception of the North being that of a regressive, backward-looking, politically archaic place, locked in a tribal past and anachronistic passions (cited in Hughes 1991:1 and Ardagh 1995:457). Dervla Murphy in her travel account of Northern Ireland, *A Place Apart*, for example, speaks of the immense mental gulf that separates the North from the rest of the British Isles, and sees it as chronically introverted and 'simmered unhealthily in its mythological juices' (1979:199).

Northern Catholics, that is, are believed to be still under the influence of the romantic 1916 Easter Rising ideal of a mythical blood sacrifice for the Nation—a mythological Mother Ireland. Although it is arguably just the militant republicanism of the Provisional IRA which has, until recent years, appeared to continue the long tradition of dying for Ireland, one only needs to recall the wide support Republican martyrdom has affected among the Catholic community, Richard Kearney (1988:210-216) argues, to realise just how deeply-rooted in the Irish national psyche is this mythological cult of sacrifice.

The Protestant 'unionist mentality', on the other hand, is said to be one of an extremely insecure, besieged minority holding anxiously to their territory and tradition, defending what they have against change. The rise of Loyalist paramilitaries, and Ian Paisley's 'apocalyptic' speeches of their Protestant heritage being under threat, reflect the Protestant fears of being culturally dominated and absorbed in a united Ireland, and the paranoia and dread that the Catholics want them to disappear, 'that the Catholics will outbreed them, and get their jobs, and perhaps marry their children and turn their grandchildren into Papists' (Murphy 1979:139).

Both nationalist and unionist intransigence, in fact, can be said to stem from feelings of being threatened, as both Catholic and Protestant communities are

seen as suffering from the insecurity and fears, if not paranoia, of being a minority—one within the province, the other within the island as a whole. It would thus be perhaps more appropriate, as many commentators acknowledge (see, e.g., Ruane and Todd 1991:27-40, Fulton 1991:77, Whyte 1990:100), to view the peculiar unionist and nationalist sensitivities as the result of a double-minority structure rather than of an abnormal Northern Irish psyche.

Nevertheless, there is also what Linda Grant (in *Guardian Weekly*, April 19, 1998:32) calls a culture of violence perceived as heroism which the thirty years of the Troubles have created, a deep-seated need for heroes which has become encoded, like DNA, into male identity. Youngsters with dead-end lives on each side have found allure and meaning in joining the paramilitaries, the Troubles making something of their lives. 'In Ireland, a prison term is a trophy,' Grant writes, 'if you're not going to set yourself up as the next Michael Collins or Bobby Sands, who will you be in the new Northern Ireland?' A guy without a job or working in a menial trade? To make peace, Grant thus argues, requires a monumental mind shift, reinventing oneself and re-mapping one's own psychology.

What Linda Grant's approach also shows is that these characteristics of the 'northern mentality', as well as the specific unionist and nationalist fears and hypersensitivity that would have to be accommodated if anything like a solution is ever to be found, can clearly be perceived not only as causes of the Troubles but as the effects of the conflict itself, and as symptoms which have become causes for continuation of the Troubles in their own right.¹

Finally, despite the fact that the phrase 'it's really crazy, you know, it's just crazy' seems a very popular way of summing up the situation among many Northern Irish people, it should be stressed that any psychological interpretation which treats the Northern Irish as abnormal, irrational people with a natural propensity to violence is bound to be very unfair and exaggerated. As other conflicts involving ethnic minorities elsewhere in Europe in the 1990s have shown, Northern Ireland deviates little from other European cultures on issues of territorial nationalism, myths or religious tribalism.

Other cultural interpretations (which might be, in a sense, implicitly psychological as well) include the view which emphasises the clash of identities as the central problem that inhibits a successful political settlement. Brian Graham's book *In Search of Ireland* (1997), in particular, argues that the political problems of contemporary Ireland are largely created by conflicts and confusions of identity, and that social and cultural transformation must accompany, if not precede, a political settlement. What Graham seems to rightly suggest, as I read it, is that no political framework can achieve legitimacy without the cultural cement of a collaborating ideology (1997:209). Any future political solution demands a renegotiation of identities, in both parts of Ireland, which would decon-

¹ It would be interesting to understand this effect in Slavoj Žižek's terms of 'enjoying one's symptoms'. For details of his theory see his *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (1992). The same psychological effect is also hinted at by Sally Belfrage (1988:298) when she wonders whether the Troubles suit the Northern Irish since, despite lamenting it, they do not, in her view, seem to really want to change the situation.

struct the hegemonic narratives of identity that have imposed cultural homogeneity in a system of binary opposition since the late nineteenth century and reinvent the cultural variety which has been ideologically suppressed (1997:xi-13). What Graham points out as a necessary precursor of political change is, in other words, the renegotiation of the monolithic representations of nationalist Irishness and unionist Britishness, in favour of an inclusive, heterogeneous and open-ended conception of Irishness which would transcend traditional sectarian polarities and include Ulster Protestants in a new, pluralist Ireland (1997:xii-13, 210, 213).

The question of identity as the fundamental cultural aspect of the conflict has, of course, been highlighted by many other commentators too. George Boyce in his essay "Northern Ireland: a place apart?" (1991:22-3), for example, speaks of Northern Ireland as being a place of identity disputes, not a place apart but rather standing at a confluence of various, and at times competing, influences and cultures. Similarly, the travel writer Dervla Murphy (1979:176) reports Northern Irish preoccupations with identity: 'it's all about identity. Who's what? If everybody in Northern Ireland could answer that question, *without* hesitation, we'd be more than half way to solution,' says one of those she interviewed. The importance of accommodating conflicts of identity and the need for a more inclusive sense of Irishness which could accept diversity is also noted by John Osmond (1988:116), Patrick J. Duffy (1997:77), Catherine Nash (1997:124), Neville Douglas (1997:172), and others. It is the recognition of cultural pluralism, in short, that the 'clash of identities' approach sees as fundamental to any future political solution.

This acceptance of multiple identities, as well as the respect for the rights of minorities, is often described as a characteristic feature of civic nationalism, which is, as opposed to ethnic nationalism, based on the criteria of inclusion. This takes us to the ethnic dimension of the Northern Ireland conflict.

Michael A. Poole, for example, argues for the interpretation of the Northern Ireland conflict in ethnic terms. In his essay "In Search of Ethnicity in Ireland" (1997:128-144), he asserts that there is an apparent ethnic cleavage in Northern Ireland between two mutually antagonistic ethno-national blocs which are reproduced from one generation to the next, and that despite the existence of some degree of de-ethnicisation among people from both communities, there is no single, 'third force', a de-ethnicised bloc in Northern Ireland. In ethnic terms, Northern Ireland thus remains a dual society with only two ethnic groups, Poole maintains, which implies 'the existence of two ethnic nations in the Province' (1997:143).

What is significant, regarding Poole's approach, in my view, is that not a single example of a concrete ethnic difference between Catholics and Protestants is given, although he quotes the view that 'obvious' religious differences were supplemented by 'fundamental political contrasts and segregated activity systems, especially in education and kinship networks, as well as by a clear consciousness of distinct and "mutually antipathetic" histories' (1997:134). However, contrasting political beliefs and segregation patterns do not necessarily

have to imply an ethnic difference, especially when they appear to be, as in the case of Northern Ireland, exact mirror-images of each other.² Rather, they may indicate simply the perception of, or belief in, some fundamental, irreconcilable cultural differences. That is exactly what Poole, in fact, implicitly concentrates on when he talks about the exclusivist ethnic *conceptualisation* of the nation which is characteristic of ethnic nationalism. His claim that Northern Ireland is a dual society of two ethnic nations thus, ironically, could become part of the problem he appears to argue against. It could be understood, that is, as if it supported the view that ethnic *conceptualisation* of the nation is the obvious result of *real* ethnic differences, of the existence of two distinct ethnic groups in the Province. But this point can be argued. Real ethnic differences do not necessarily have to lead to an ethnic conceptualisation of the nation, that is to say, to defining the borders of the nation by one's ethnic identity. Conversely, the existence of two distinct ethnic nations may be solely the result of an ethnic conceptualisation, with essential ethnic differences no more than imagined, which is also what Poole may want to imply. Disposing of this ethnic understanding of the nation, without having to de-ethnicise oneself, would thus be enough to make one move towards a civic conceptualisation of the nation, as other commentators have observed.³ However, what Poole seems to suggest is that it is the *de-ethnicisation* which automatically moves one to an inclusive civic nationalism. This completely misses the point of civic nationalism unless, of course, what Poole understands by 'de-ethnicisation' was discarding one's ethnic definition of the nation, and not one's actual ethnic identity or cultural tradition.

There do exist, nonetheless, ethnic interpretations that see the essence of the northern conflict in the supposedly irreconcilable ethnic differences, in the clash of two cultures, two traditions, two ways of life. Although one cannot deny that certain cultural differences between Protestants and Catholics may be found, it is hard to see why exactly these should be the main cause for conflict when, on the whole, the two communities are widely believed to have much more in common with each other than with either the Southern Irish or the British. In any case, ethnic interpretations of the conflict are nowadays regarded rather questionable by many observers, for they tend to exaggerate differences between the two main communities on the one hand,⁴ and suppress the intra-

² See, e.g., Sally Belfrage (1988), who observes how little difference there was between working class Protestant and Catholic households, economically or in matters of taste. Especially when it came to meals, there was 'absolute unanimity' between Catholics and Protestants (1988:160). But because of segregation, people from both sides do not know each other's worlds and thus very often do not realise how much, in fact, they resemble each other (1988:255, 272).

³ See, e.g., Kearney (1997:11, 68), Graham (1997:193, 213), or John Hume's argument against an extreme form of nationalism which puts forward a very narrow sectional view of Ireland (cited in Kee 1997:268).

⁴ George Boyce (1991:16, 23), e.g., asks why should people who look alike, speak with the same accent, live in the same kind of houses and streets, engage in often a fierce conflict, and concludes the issues at stake are not about different life-styles, 'there is no "Gaelic", "Anglican" or "Presbyterian" life-style that can be easily identified'. Similarities between the

community diversity on the other hand, depicting the Northern Irish population as if neatly divided into two homogeneous monoliths.

Finally, let us turn to the important issue of sectarianism, which can be understood as both a cultural and/or structural aspect of the Northern Irish society.

Sectarianism is undeniably a glaring feature of Northern Irish society. At the same time, there is a considerable disagreement among researchers and analysts about the true nature of this Northern Irish social characteristic. Its most clear manifestation is a continuing all-pervading segregation, and the alleged, by now hopefully decreasing, discrimination, which has been practised to a varying degree by each side against the other. But the question remains: is the structure of segregation and of discrimination a cause or an effect of sectarianism? In other words, should the problem of sectarianism be defined as *structural* (sectarian attitudes being the result of an institutionalised separation and imbalance of power), or as *cultural* (the sectarian structure being the result of prior sectarian attitudes of the people)?

It is not hard to guess that these two sides of sectarianism have become thoroughly interconnected and locked into a vicious cycle where one fuels the other, where each works both as a symptom and a cause of the other. Nevertheless, there are many who argue for one or the other being the fundamental cause of sectarianism and as such being the essential problem that has to be solved first. One should be careful not to over-generalise but interestingly, it appears to be that the cultural approach is more likely to be understood as British or unionist, while structural interpretations tend to have more anti-British, nationalist overtones.

Desmond Bell, for example, in *Acts of Union: Youth Culture and Sectarianism in Northern Ireland* (1990:203-213), accuses the British of representing the problem of sectarianism as that of irrational personal prejudice (which a dose of personal enlightenment delivered by the educational system would solve), and not as the result of an unresolved political structure bequeathed to Ireland by British imperialism. Bell, on the contrary, argues that 'sectarianism is primarily an expression of the persistence of objective social and economic divisions still underwritten by British imperialism,' and if that is so, 'then it is unlikely to be seriously tackled within the existing political order' (1990:213).

Similarly, Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd in their essay "'Why can't you get along with each other?': culture, structure and the Northern Ireland conflict" (1991:27-40), stress that the conflict has structural rather than cultural roots, the culture of sectarianism being not a product of cultural abnormality but simply the response to abnormal structural conditions. Seeking a solution in appeals to tolerance, understanding and liberal values has little effect, Ruane and Todd say, since the two communities are caught in a structural bind where neither side

communities greatly outnumber differences, despite the perception of difference by the communities themselves. Ardagh (1995:346, 424) and Belfrage (see note 2) also point to the lack of a substantial ethnic difference between Catholics and Protestants. Even regarding religion, an obvious ethnic marker, it is said that of all the differences between Catholics and Protestants, the religious one is the least important.

can yield without sacrificing its fundamental interests.⁵ This structural bind, Ruane and Todd maintain, is created by the internal structures and mutual relations of Britain and the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, if the conflict is to be resolved, 'it has to be addressed at the wider level of the structures of the two states and the relationship between them' (1991:39).

That the structure of the Republic of Ireland has been an impediment to the resolution of the conflict is discussed in another part of this dissertation, but the claim of Ruane and Todd (1991:37) that the centralised and hierarchical structure of the United Kingdom is a major obstacle to the achievement of equality between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland seems a bit far-fetched, given that the 'Stormont Regime' (1921-1972) which fostered Protestant supremacy in the Province was clearly at odds with the standards of British democracy elsewhere in the UK, and given the many attempts of the Government since 1972 to redress the structural inequality in Northern Ireland and devolve power back to a regional Northern Irish Assembly (see, e.g., Kee 1997). What the structural interpretations tend to ignore, in other words, is that the British, and later also the Irish, governments have of course tried to resolve the structural bind within Northern Ireland, and that each time any major change was to be introduced, it has invariably met with strong opposition from the northern population. If the problem could be solved simply by introducing a few government measures, regardless of whether they were implementable or not, it would be difficult to see why Britain and the Republic of Ireland would not have already introduced them over the past three decades, when resolution of the conflict is clearly what both states desire. What the structural interpretations ignore is, in fact, also the way structures come about: that is, that they are not the product of political decisions alone but are constructed to reflect and reproduce a dominant ideology, that they *are the product of the dominant ideology*. The problem in Northern Ireland might then be that there are two major ideologies struggling for dominance over the same structures—hence the appearance of a structural bind.

As both the British and Irish governments have repeatedly learnt, and those supporting a cultural approach point out, nothing can be achieved when half of the population vetoes it. Laws are not enough to foster an inclusive society. From the cultural perspective, sectarianism is clearly a problem of attitudes, which give rise to sectarian structures.⁶ These attitudes are encoded in and re-

⁵ These fundamental interests are, Ruane and Todd believe (1991:36), equality for nationalists and security for unionists. As unionists fear that full equality with nationalists would put the existence of Northern Ireland at risk and would lead to Dublin rule, equality with nationalists is incompatible with their own security.

⁶ The Government of Ireland Act (1920), for example, did introduce Proportional Representation and did contain clauses forbidding religious discrimination (Kee 1997:231). It also made provisions for a Council of Ireland. Despite this, unionist politicians made sure the Council was abandoned, the PR system soon abolished and discriminatory structures against Catholics brought about. This was largely due to the 1920s nationalist attitude of non-recognition of the right of Northern Ireland to exist and of abstentionism from the Northern Irish political structures (see, e.g., Barton 1996:37-57), and the consequent unionist fear and anxiety that

produced mainly by a sectarian upbringing, by the indoctrination of children with sectarian versions of history and stereotypical representations of themselves and the 'other side'. The way forward out of the conflict is thus in challenging sectarian socialisation and formation of identity, and questioning the validity of sectarian mythologies which serve the needs of present ideologies.⁷ The role of education in rooting out sectarianism is, of course, regarded as crucial (see, e.g., Belfrage 1988:44, 64, 298, or Murphy 1979:184, 188).

A cultural explanation, which takes sectarian attitudes as the heart of the Troubles and seeks a solution in a multicultural education of accepting cultural diversity, does not, nevertheless, always have to mean what the oppositional structural interpretations claim it to be. It does not necessarily have to understand the conflict as the result of irrational personal sectarianism, bigotry and intolerance. It might simply show that what others see as an essentially structural bind can just as much be understood as an ideological one: of two sectarian hegemonies sustaining each other, of two nation-state ideologies struggling for control over the same structures, confusing 'self-determination' with a majority-rule, and 'democracy' with a majority-dictatorship.

The perception of Northern Ireland in this light, in fact, allows one to acknowledge both the structural and cultural basis of sectarianism, for both culture and structure collaborate in the dissemination of a dominant ideology. This takes us back to the problem of a vicious cycle. Structures could be said to reflect dominant attitudes in a society, but they are also, in their turn, responsible for providing the social context in which attitudes are formed and acquired. In this way, they ensure that the existing dominant attitudes are strengthened and perpetuated.⁸ What this means in the context of Northern Ireland is that sectarianism can function at once as a cause and an effect of segregated social structures. Not surprisingly, therefore, there is no end to disagreements whether redressing the structural separation between Protestants and Catholics should precede or follow a change of heart in Northern Ireland.

Catholics would subvert the state and land Ulster under the jurisdiction of the Catholic South. Another telling example is the 1923 Education Act, which aimed to establish non-sectarian schools with Catholic and Protestant children educated together, but proved to be a still-born measure as the Catholic hierarchy 'adamantly refused to transfer its schools to public control, whilst Protestant clergy agitated ferociously and successfully for legislative amendments which were passed in 1925 and 1930' (Barton 1996:47).

7 Robert Kee, e.g., devotes his whole book *Ireland: A History* (1997) to 'ungarbling the past', in his words, trying to challenge the 'garbled accounts of the past' on which sectarian mythology thrives (1997:15). Sectarian myths and concepts of identity are similarly challenged, e.g., in Brian Graham's, ed., book *In Search of Ireland: a cultural geography* (1997): see esp. essays by William J. Smyth and S. J. Connolly.

8 As Neville Douglas, e.g., puts it in his essay "Political Structures, Social Interaction and Identity Change in Northern Ireland" (1997:151-172), divided societies are 'held in their differences by a vicious circle of cause and effect. Existing structures socialise the individual and bequeath traditional roles. In playing these roles the individual reinforces and recreates the established structure' (1997:155).

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