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How moderates make boundaries after protracted conflict. Everyday universalists, agonists, transformists and cosmopolitans in contemporary Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This article explores how boundary making proceeds after protracted conflict has ended. Drawing on an interview and focus group study in two local areas in Northern Ireland, we identify the diverse forms of everyday boundary work amongst moderates who distance from the ethno-political blocs: everyday universalism, agonism, transformation and cosmopolitanism. Each overcomes closed exclusivist boundaries and identity oppositions, thus providing a clear contrast with the overt political contention and polarization that has followed Brexit in Northern Ireland. Our research shows the internal shape and diversity of the moderate constituency who support peace-building and a less-polarized politics. It also offers an answer to the question how such everyday openness coexists with continued political polarization. We trace the different political perspectives associated with each form of boundary making and argue that this hinders political cohesion amongst moderates.

KEYWORDS

agonism, boundary work, cosmopolitanism, Northern Ireland, peace building

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1 | INTRODUCTION

For peace and settlement to bed in after protracted conflict requires not just political but popular change (Darby & MacGinty, 2003). Everyday boundary work toward greater permeability is common even when political boundaries are stable or stuck (MacGinty, 2017; Nagle, 2008; Sion, 2014). It is likely to be widespread and socially impactful when power relations and the state change (Wimmer, 2013, pp. 89–97). We explore these dynamics inductively, using a recent qualitative study in Northern Ireland to access modes of everyday boundary making 20 years after a peace agreement which has radically changed power relations and the form of the state.

The study shows how people reposition with respect to embedded social boundaries and recast symbolic ones (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). It identifies five forms of contemporary boundary work that stand to undermine the sharp ethnic cleavages and hardened identities associated with protracted conflict and ethnic war (Bar-Tal, 2013; Sambanis & Shayo, 2013): everyday universalism, agonism, transformation and cosmopolitanism and remapping. But while the study sheds a positive light on the prospects of peace-building in Northern Ireland, it also raises the question of how such everyday inclusive and permeable boundary making interrelates with the still divisive politics of the region.

The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in Northern Ireland was a complex multi-leveled and far-reaching multi-party and intergovernmental agreement constituting Northern Ireland as an egalitarian “ethnic frontier” region open to both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, with political devolution organized in liberal consociational mode, and where the legitimacy of British sovereignty (subject to majority will) was itself a product of agreement (Coakley & Todd, 2020). It marked the end of violence, the beginning of demilitarization and decommissioning, and promised a “new beginning” for Northern Ireland. Two decades after the GFA, the population remains divided on religious, national, ethnic and political lines, with the dimensions overlapping to create composite ethno-religious-national blocs which underlie party-political division (Coakley, 2021). The main parties—the Democratic Unionist Party on the unionist side and Sinn Féin on the nationalist-republican side—still win a clear majority of votes and seats, but a slowly declining majority (Tonge, 2020; Ó Dochartaigh, 2021). Over the last decade, voting for non-bloc parties has increased to 20%, large segments of the population are now detaching from bloc identification, and a more flexible party system appears to be emerging (Ó Dochartaigh, 2021). The largest “other” party, the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI), has recently seen a modest surge of support and gained 16% of the vote in the 2019 general election (Mitchell, 2018; Tonge, 2020) and 17 of 90 seats in the May 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly election. The liberal-consociational institutions of the GFA partially embed bloc boundaries in equality legislation and in the Assembly, through parallel (bloc) consent and weighted majority voting on contentious issues. The liberal rules do not constrain party formation, policy or electoral competition, and the parties use the rules of the GFA in different ways at different times: sometimes to push aggressively for bloc interests; more usually in constrained bloc competition; sometimes in an attempt to negotiate a way forward that allows coexistence and reciprocal respect. There is ongoing debate whether the consociational institutions produce political polarization or if they simply channel changing public preferences.¹

Our focus in this paper, however, is not on institutional impact, party negotiation or voting behavior but rather on everyday boundary making and its impact on political choices and political cohesion. And, at the everyday level, bloc identification and closure are very uneven. The survey data shows that while only 5% of the population fully distances from the blocs and refuses adherence on *all* dimensions of bloc identity and belief, a much wider swathe of the population—over half—distances itself from the blocs on *some* dimensions, and refuses the assumption of closed and exclusive boundaries between them.² Yet, while it is clear that there is a very large moderate constituency, there is little systematic research on the experiences of this half of the population who distance themselves in some ways from bloc-perspectives - how they remake meanings and boundaries in their own practice, with what effect and with what impact on their political choices. This constituency is often defined as “moderate” or “middle ground” in virtue of its refusal of closed, totalizing and exclusivist bloc boundaries; this is something of a misnomer since many within it are also radical in their desire for far-reaching structural change and political transformation. We use the label not

to presuppose the character of this constituency, but to explore if these “moderates” converge in their strategies of boundary making and, if not, how they diverge, and with what political impact.

We ask three questions:

- In what respects do “moderates” distance from the blocs?
- What modes of boundary making do they choose?
- How does this impact on their political positioning and potential political cohesion?

2 | BOUNDARY MAKING

Ethnic boundary remaking and related changes in the meaning and salience of identity are most likely after major state and power changes which render old boundary- and identity-strategies inappropriate and provide incentives for new ones. Wimmer (2013, pp. 49–63) outlines basic strategies of boundary making: moving up the ethno-territorial scale toward wider more inclusive categories or down toward more local, specific categories; remapping the ethno-territorial scale; changing the values or meanings associated with the categories to allow greater closure or permeability. Logically, these can be combined in indefinitely many ways.

Comparatively and empirically, however, people gravitate toward a limited range of boundary strategies, taking different strategies in different fields - for example, gender, religion and ethnicity - where boundary making depends on different institutions and informal practices (Brubaker, 2017), and in different political contexts which make available different cultural repertoires and legal opportunities (Lamont et al., 2016), and more generally falling into a limited range of patterns.³ Patterning is especially likely in a deeply divided society where social and symbolic boundaries are deeply embedded and change, even at a personal level, requires considerable commitment and determination.

Expanding on and extrapolating from the existing theoretical and comparative literature, we outline five types of boundary making that we anticipate will be common among those moving out of conflict in deeply divided places: each involves particular combinations of categorical, value and meaning change. Two render existing boundaries less salient by moving up (cosmopolitanism) or down (everyday universalism); two change the form of existing form of boundaries by revising values (agonism) or meaning (transformation); and one bypasses existing boundaries by more radically redrawing the ethnic map (remapping). The distinctions are presented visually in Figure 1.

Cosmopolitanism (Held, 2003; Nussbaum, 1994; Skrbis et al., 2004) renders existing ethnic and cultural boundaries less, or not at all, salient by moving up toward the global-human level. In ethnically divided societies it can take the form of a super-ordinate identity that supersedes the existing bloc identities and gives moral strength and resilience against entrenched ethnic oppositions.⁴ Calls in Northern Ireland to adopt a Northern Irish identity, or a European identity, or a common feminist identity, or a global ecological identity to replace the divisive “tribal” identities can be seen as “cosmopolitan” attempts to bridge-build from above (O’Keefe, 2021). This form of boundary making promises to replace the existing divisions with a new set of “cosmopolitan” versus tribalist boundaries.

Of course cosmopolitanism is also an everyday process (Binnie et al., 2006) and a form of socialization (Cicchelli, 2019) whereby wider perspectives, openness and reflexivity become part of the way ordinary people negotiate between the particular and the universal, the local and the wider world. In divided societies, however, the existing blocs may be highly resistant to such reinterpretation and renegotiation and those who move away from them highly sensitized to any compromise with the blocs: thus they may opt for a new binary of cosmopolitanism versus (local) tribalism.

Everyday Universalism derives general human values, empathy and altruism from the everyday experience of working and suffering people (Gilligan, 2017; Lamont, 2019; Lamont et al., 2002; Vollhardt, 2009). Lamont (2019) suggests that “ordinary universalism” allows working class (“non college educated”) people to find common human values across ethnic, racial and other boundaries. This form of boundary making recognizes the continuing salience of existing boundaries, for example, in religion and family, but makes the boundaries more permeable in common

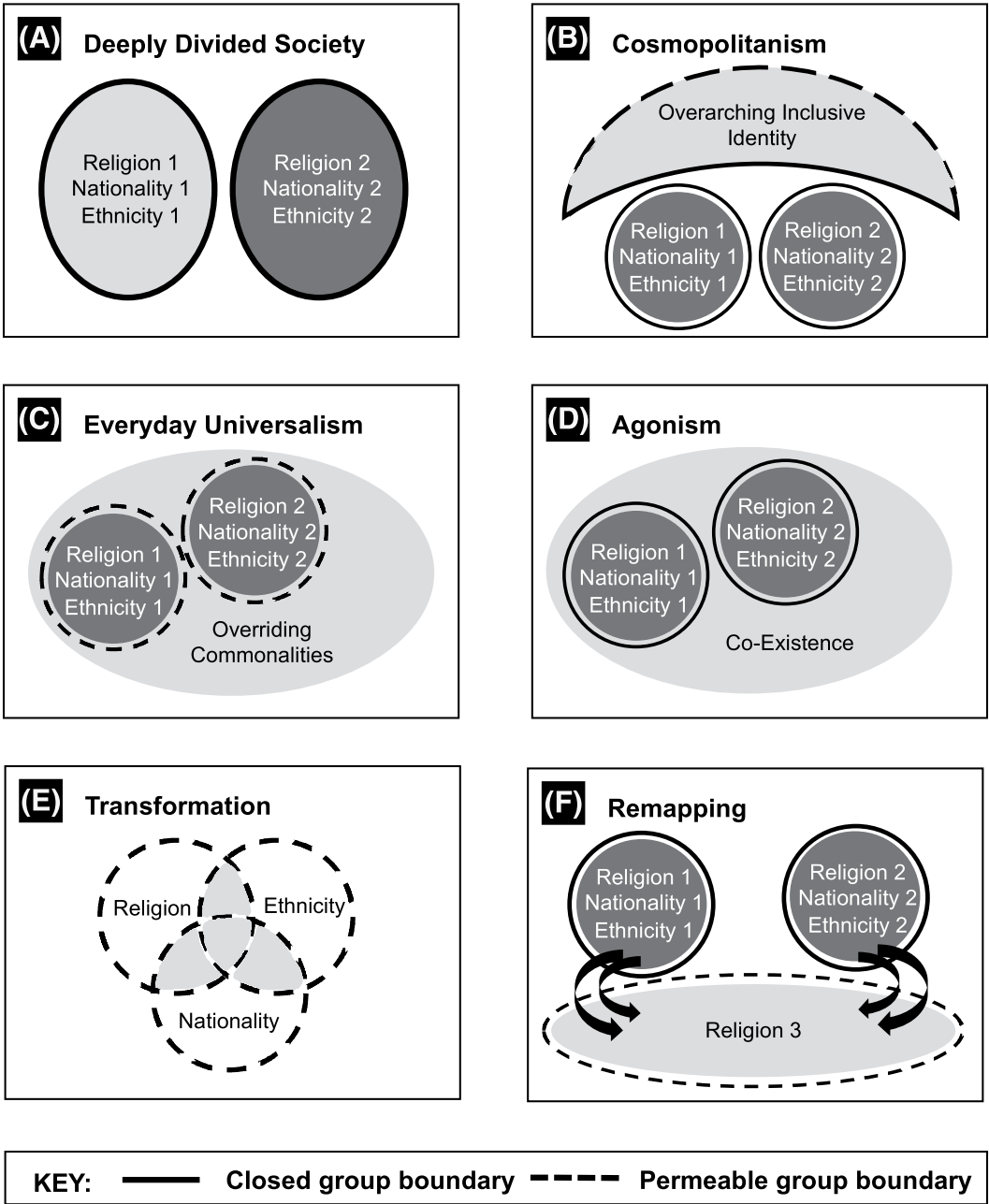


FIGURE 1 Modes of boundary making?

everyday fields like locality and work, and potentially in politics, by highlighting values of respect and equality for all (for examples from Lebanon, see MacGinty, 2017). Some have criticized this “bridgebuilding from below” as disguising inequalities and bypassing power relations (O’Keefe, 2021; Savage, 2019).

Agonism involves a retention of existing ideals, identities and boundaries in all fields within an overarching commitment to discussion and mutual coexistence, and involving typically a reevaluation of group hierarchy (Lowndes & Paxton, 2018). It has been argued to be central to peace-making and to reconciliation (Rumelili & Celik, 2017; Schaap, 2006; Strömbom, 2020) where radically oppositional perspectives have to be recognized as

legitimate and political contest and decision-making between one-time enemies accepted. It keeps the old boundaries politically salient but reframes the relationship as one of difference and political conflict rather than zero-sum threat and antagonism, thus allowing negotiation. This form of boundary making is sometimes conceived as pluralist recognition (MacBride, 2013), and it has been seen as key to accommodationist politics in Northern Ireland (Nagle & Clancy, 2012). Conceived as a form of pluralism, examples abound in the consociational literature, with at least some cases of gradual change in group opposition in light of consociational cooperation (Larin & Roggla, 2019), and in discussions of reconciliation as “mutual acceptance between conflicting groups” (Staub & Bar-Tal, 2003).

Transformation changes the group hierarchy, the permeability of boundaries and the willingness to compromise through changing the meanings, narratives and beliefs that define the form of the boundaries. It transforms meaning by a range of possible manoeuvres, from disaggregating the meanings and values involved in groupness, to interrelating local, ethnic and global categories in new narratives, to changing key beliefs and assumptions (variously Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2014; Berenskoetter, 2014; Cohen Chen et al., 2015; Todd, 2018, pp. 133–137). This form of boundary making proceeds through iterative dialog and reflexive self-change to critically reinterpret ascribed boundaries and restore a sense of agency: Lara (2020) shows how this is represented in some films. By retaining boundaries while transforming meanings and relationships, it keeps enough continuity with existing groupness to invite wider buy-in: examples range from re-readings of national narratives to open out their pre-understandings (e.g., Nicolaidis, 2019) to the everyday revisions of entwined gender, ethnic, class and caste understandings, in places as different as Chiapas, Northern Ireland and Nepal (Hoewer, 2014; Riley, 2022). Transformative boundary strategies may seldom succeed in changing the world, but they widen the vision of what is socially possible.

Remapping boundaries and alliances involves redrawing the place of the boundaries, so that they no longer resonate with a historical legacy of hierarchy and conflict (for a North African example, see Roy, 2013 who describes how conversions to “new” religions allow for a disaggregation of the fields of religion, ethnicity and politics which were previously tightly interlinked). It promises to impact on most—if not all—social fields, including forming a new basis for politics. In Northern Ireland, one example was the new ethnicization as “Ulster Scots”, although on Gardner’s (2020) analysis it functioned to restore legacies rather than liberating from them.

All are conceived as ongoing and potentially reversible processes. Each strategy can be conceived as a route to reconciliation (an outcome where once-conflictual group relations are no longer antagonistic, or perhaps no longer important).⁵ We anticipate that “moderates” will take one or other of these forms, and our questions are whether or not they do, and, if so, which they choose, in what proportions, and why.

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

Our research explores the strategies of social and symbolic boundary making in Northern Ireland since the Brexit vote of 2016, which led to renewed political conflict. It was designed to compare everyday boundary-making in two otherwise similar mixed-religion areas: one to the west of the river Bann with a rising nationalist and Catholic majority, and one to the east of the river Bann where there is a Protestant majority.⁶

We conducted interviews with 28 individuals in 2018–9.⁷ We focused on “ordinary citizens”—not political activists—and were particularly concerned to interview those of Protestant and unionist background, who at the time were deeply divided over the merits of Brexit. Table 1 shows the demographics of the sample, and Table 2 gives more detail on the occupations of respondents. In addition, we conducted a focus group with 11 senior school students in an academic stream in a mixed religion school in the Western town.

Our study was not designed to access moderates. However it turned out that almost all⁸ interview respondents and focus group participants were “moderates” in that they distanced themselves from closed, totalizing and exclusivist bloc boundaries and from at least some key bloc assumptions and expectations.⁹ They did not share political views, but they did belong to the 50%+ group of moderates in the wider population identified in the literature. Whatever the cause of this moderate bias—the mixed towns, our gatekeepers, or simply non-moderates’ resistance to being

TABLE 1 Participant demographics

Demographic variable		n	Age range
Gender	Male	14	17–89
	Female	14	16–79
Location	East of Bann	12	38–65
	West of Bann	16	16–89
Current status	Catholic	9	17–70s
	Protestant	16	16–89
	Other	3	40s
Insider/outsider	Socialized in NI	24	16–89
	Socialized outside NI	4	26–65
Age	Generation 1 65+	10	Median 70
	Generation 2 30–64	14	Median mid 40s
	Generation 3 16–29	15 (4+ focus group)	Median 17

interviewed—our sample had unintended merits for it included a very wide variety of political perspectives—voters for unionist, nationalist, other and no parties. It allows us to compare variation among “moderates” and to flesh out the differences which have been noted in the survey data (Coakley, 2021).

Interview participants were recruited through gatekeepers and snowballing, and—in a minority of cases—by asking people on the street. Questioning was open-ended around the following three themes: tell me about yourself; about your local area; about politics here. Interviews lasted between half an hour and over 3 hours, with most around 1 hour. They were conducted in respondents' homes, in a private tea-room made available to the interviewers in a local hotel, and in a few cases in cafes. The focus group session lasted for approximately 85 min. The interviews and focus groups were fully transcribed, anonymized, and coded.¹⁰

Coding followed the practice of grounded theory, using categories that were drawn from the interviews themselves (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). It was cross-checked by each author, and coding discrepancies and labels were discussed. Coding focused on group belonging and points of conflict. The extent of belonging and othering were assessed by looking at how the pronouns “we” and “they” were used. As coding continued, self-positioning was added as an important node, where the individual indicated their position with respect to the binary blocs, without using the term “we”. Positional shift was added, to indicate where the individual shifted their group-self-categorization while discussing a particular event. Points of conflict were described in some detail in the interviews, and as coding continued we grouped them in categories that included: Brexit, class, devolved executive, nationalist-unionist division, outsiders, political violence, religious divisions, symbolic contention, personal or “silent” conflicts, understanding of Northern Ireland by others, unionist politics, and a united Ireland. Participants' approaches to dealing with conflict (as narrated in interview) were coded using the theoretical concepts of bypassing, confronting, self-management (Lamont et al., 2016) and proxy-conflict.

We begin with a thematic analysis to show in what ways these respondents are moderates and *what* boundaries they make. We continue with an interpretative narrative analysis of the interviews to examine *how* and *why* the respondents re-made boundaries in everyday practices, and how far this carried into politics.¹¹

4 | MODERATES: DISTANCING FROM BLOCs

Almost all of the respondents were moderates in that they refused closed, totalizing and exclusive ethno-national bloc boundaries and questioned some of the core-views and attitudes within their own bloc.¹² Many distanced

TABLE 2 Participant profiles

Participants					
#	Pseudonym (to be added) W designates West and E East of the Bann	Gender	Age	Occupational sector (note “professional” designates 3 rd level education)	Religion
1	1W	Male	47	Service sector	Protestant
2	2W (group interview #1)	Female	18	School student	Protestant
3	3W (group interview #1)	Female	16	School student	Protestant
4	4W (group interview #1)	Female	17	School student	Catholic
5	5W	Female	26	Service sector–professional	Catholic (incomer)
6	6W Conall	Male	67	Service sector; professional	Catholic
7	7W	Female	79	Service sector	Catholic
8	8W Ken	Male	Early 50s	Service sector	Protestant
9	9W	Female	Early 50s	Public service	Catholic
10	10W	Female	66	Manual public service	Protestant
11	11W	Male	Early 70s	Farmer	Protestant
12	12W (group interview)	Male	89	Retired small business	Protestant
13	13W (group interview)	Female	79	Retired small business	Protestant
14	14W	Male	Early 70s	Small farmer	Catholic
15	15 W	Male	45	Professional	Protestant
16	16W	Male	Late 40s	Professional public services	Catholic
17	1E	Male	50s	Professional	Muslim (incomer)
18	2E	Female	40s	Professional	Protestant
19	3E	Male	40s	Service sector	Catholic
20	7E	Female	42	Professional	Other
21	8E	Male	42	Professional–service sector	Other
22	9E Jackson	Male	61	Professional–service sector	Protestant
23	10e Daniel	Male	65	Professional, public service	Protestant (incomer)
24	11E	Female	65	Professional	Catholic (incomer)
25	12E	Female	36	Service sector	Catholic
26	13E Grace	Female	38	Professional	Protestant
27	14E	Male	38	Professional public service	Protestant
28	15E	Female	65	Professional	Protestant

themselves from the main political parties; those few who voted for the more extreme parties in their bloc expressed reluctance and unease in doing so; several voted for non-bloc parties.¹³

Most of the respondents recognized that nationalist–unionist conflict and ethno-religious division are still present in Northern Ireland although not, they said, on the same scale or with the same animosity as in the past. Most self-identified as coming from Catholic or Protestant traditions and as being from unionist or nationalist backgrounds; but they placed themselves at a distance from the blocs. The conflicts of these groups belong to “them”, not “us”; “we don’t have time to stage protests and set police vans on fire”.¹⁴

Respondents valued permeable relations between people of different religious and political backgrounds. Most highlighted the value of mixed-religion schools.¹⁵ Most described routinely mixing with people from different religious

and political backgrounds in their work and social lives. Many appreciated the freedom of movement and interaction that they enjoyed, including to the Irish state and Europe, and many were “remain” rather than “leave” supporters.¹⁶ Otherwise, as discussed at more length below, there is little convergence on values or on political views.

Politicians as a group were almost universally referred to using “they” and sentiment toward politicians was generally quite negative. Respondents viewed them as directionless, and they lacked trust and confidence in the ability of politicians to address the conflicts they identified or the problems—in health, education and infrastructure—that they faced. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin were the most frequently mentioned political parties, and while participants were generally negative toward both, the DUP was more heavily criticized, including by those of Protestant background. There is only one instance in the dataset of a participant referring to a politician as “our” representative.¹⁷ As in other conflict situations, the “othering” of politicians is a trope that allows respondents to display their own moderation and to discuss issues with others of different backgrounds and beliefs (Neofostistos, 2012). It was particularly common West of the Bann.

Almost all respondents spoke of Brexit as a point of conflict. It was a divisive issue in British as well as Northern Irish politics at the time and prominent in the news. Most participants also discussed the prospect of a united Ireland, which had come onto the political agenda after Brexit. Many discussed symbolic contention—the flying of flags (see Jarman, 2019) which had been contentious in the localities where we interviewed, and the use of the Irish language. Most spoke of religious and national division. Several participants emphasized the silent pre-understanding of conflict: knowing which side of town it was safe to live on, which pubs to go to, trepidation about introducing family members to a partner from the other side of the community. The respondents often described major political conflicts (like Brexit) with a sense of powerlessness; they presented themselves as waiting to see what the outcomes would be, often bypassing rather than overtly confronting those with whom they disagreed. Active confrontation was more common in local interactions—for example, choices of school - where agency was more often asserted. Self-management was also common.

The most common foci of “we” identification were Northern Ireland and family. The Northern Ireland “we” was used in different contexts with different meanings: in the context of Brexit, to differentiate the political situation of Northern Ireland (voting, legal provisions, relation to the EU) from the rest of the United Kingdom; in the context of discussion of a united Ireland, to highlight the distinctive politics and internally conflicting interests of Northern Ireland; in relation to the specific political configuration in Northern Ireland, different from both Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland; and in discussions of the progress “we” in Northern Ireland had made since 1998. Only the latter usage is unambiguously supraordinate, encompassing all citizens in one unitary identification. The other usages are sometimes simply descriptive, and sometimes differentiate positions within Northern Ireland at the same time as differentiating Northern Ireland from elsewhere.

5 | THE YOUNGER GENERATION

It is sometimes said that the younger generation, born after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, is very different from the older generation in its lack of concern for “constitutional” issues.¹⁸ The focus group and a subsequent group interview with students allows a qualitative comparison of the views of younger and older people from the same small Western town and rural local area at the same time.

The students distanced from the main blocs, often expressing this in generational terms—*“I feel like the older generation are more involved with who's Catholic and who's Protestant. But like to like the current generation, nobody really like cares that much about really their background.”*¹⁹ They pointed out that in many of their organizations—from schools to youth clubs to sports—mixing took place. But while they highlighted changes toward more permeable boundaries and more “respectful” mutual understandings, they also noted the wider social ascriptions that constrain change: one young man told of a local Gaelic (GAA) sports club that included (unusually) a number of Protestant players and noted that it was known in GAA circles as *“the Protestant Gaelic club”* (Participant, Focus Group).

The students valued the mixedness and permeability they found in the school. They explained the process and values of mixed education in detail, they discussed the merits of different forms of mixing and swapped experiences of inter-school and intra-school mixing. They valued freedom of movement and most were against Brexit: *“we’re the generation that’s going to be stuck with the decisions that the older ones have made. And like, I know it’s cruel to say but like they’re not going to be here for as long as we are”* (Participant, Focus Group). However while they had much to say about movement across Protestant/Catholic boundaries in the locality they had less to say about movement across North/South boundaries on the island—they favored such movement, but the two examples they gave were of holidays and playing hockey. They had still less to say about crossing boundaries in Europe.

Unlike the older generation, this group rarely mentioned politicians. There was no particular “they”, other than the older generation, and occasionally people with strong or extreme views. “We” was most often generational, local, familial and school. There was a strong sense and positive valuation of diversity, and a nuanced discussion of Protestant/Catholic divisions which the students recognized in the world and resisted for themselves. While the students were expert at explaining how Protestant/Catholic boundaries worked in their area, they had very little to say about conflict beyond their own experience. They did not volunteer discussion of a united Ireland. When we mentioned “the border” in the context of Brexit, and despite the fact it was just 30 miles from the town, no one took up the discussion.

The lack of interest in constitutional issues that Shirlow (2019) found in surveys of young people was echoed in the focus group. Several themes that were repeatedly mentioned in the interviews— a united Ireland, the border, the economy, the health service, violence, pensioner bus passes - were not mentioned at all by the students. The young people were concerned primarily with issues that impinged on them and their experience, suggesting that their lack of concern with constitutional questions may be a life-cycle effect, rather than a generational effect liable to remain important as they age.

It is significant that the young people’s experiences and choices are very similar to their elders’. Cross-community mixing has increased over time, and the dominant political norms now support openness and good relations, but the young people describe segregation and groupness remaining strong in the locality. Those we interviewed from their parents’ and grandparents’ generations also described a local area where mixed schools, mixed socializing, and even mixed marriages were options.²⁰ Despite major structural and political change since 1998, everyday change in this locality has been gradual and incremental rather than radical, and poses the same sort of boundary making choices for the present generation as for past ones.

6 | MODES OF BOUNDARY MAKING

In this section, we outline how and why respondents made boundaries, by showing how they interrelate their self-positioning with their values and beliefs, and we ask if this approximates to the boundary making strategies outlined above.²¹ We found few instances of cosmopolitan boundary making: this surprised us since it is relatively common in commentary on Northern Ireland (Wilson, 2010). None of the participants attempted to “re-map” ethnic or religious boundaries, nor to define a bounded middle group between the two blocs.²² We found a considerable amount of everyday universalism, transformation, and agonism. There was a clear territorial patterning: in the west, everyday universalism amongst the non college educated and agonism amongst the college educated; in the east, transformation and cosmopolitanism amongst the college educated.

6.1 | Everyday universalism in Northern Ireland

Ken, a middle aged family man from a Protestant background, still lives close to the western town in the small largely-segregated Protestant village where he grew up.²³ He left school early and never went to college but is, he

says, “*blessed*” with a decent job, lots of friends and interests, and thriving young adult children. Many of his friends are Catholic and many of his interests—in music, sport and local history - would be considered “nationalist” in Northern Ireland.

Ken's self-positioning is almost exclusively in terms of role identities—his music, his earlier boxing career, his family, his job. He talks with enthusiasm about his boundary-crossing practices in sport, music and work, past and present, pointing out that “*religion had nothing to do with it in my eyes. We were just people connected by the same thing*”. He is strongly against the Northern Ireland practice whereby “*People are judged by their place of worship instead of who they actually are themselves like*”. He uses “we” for family, friends and work-mates, and—where it is relevant to his experience and activity—for Northern Ireland and for the island of Ireland (where he frequently travels), at times sliding between we-as-Northern-Irish and we-as-Irish. He uses “they” to refer to politicians, extremists, and those who take a binary sectarian view of religious difference—“*Orange versus Green*”. He systematically attempts to bypass situations of conflict, “*laughing*” at them. He confronts when people try to label him or criticize him for blurring and breaching boundaries. In his narrative, this works for him: “*one door shuts, another opens*”.

Ken's high local social capital—from a respected neighborhood family, with many friends and a history of sporting achievement—gives him considerable leeway to behave and think beyond groupness, and to confront those who object. This is enhanced by the fact that he remains largely apolitical: he is impatient with politics, does not vote in elections, and could not remember the name of the only Northern Ireland politician that he had any use for (after discussion, it turned out to be the leader of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, Naomi Long). He supported remaining in the EU and is interested in the question of a united Ireland although he does not have settled views on this. He would be hard to mobilize into a third political bloc, but could be mobilized to vote in a referendum, where this resonated with his own values.

Five other respondents in the Western town and one in the East share much of Ken's everyday universalism, going “down” to local and role identities (work, family) to find common human values which cross-cut the religious division: three are from Catholic and three from Protestant backgrounds, none is college-educated.²⁴ As one working class man who had been involved in violence in the past commented: “*You get older and you start to make friends on the other side, and you realise that you're not that different and you just grow up, get mature and realise that there's no differences really.*”

Work, culture and locality are key areas of commonality. There is little carry-over to party politics; they do not think much about it, or reflect on their own political intuitions, or vote strategically. However constant contacts, friendships and friction impel a certain self-criticism: the “othering” we found was of politicians and “extremists” “on both sides”. This goes together with a personalizing of politics: if they vote at all it tends to be for a local politician from their own bloc whom they know. Occasionally, their personal intuitions provoke political change: one Protestant woman who habitually voted unionist said she was disillusioned with the DUP and might vote SDLP (a nationalist party) next election, because the local candidate was a good and helpful man. For the most part, however, they are turned off party politics and often abstain in elections. They are interested in other political issues and might be mobilizable in a referendum if the arguments were focused on everyday values—jobs, decent social relations, peace—not ideology.

6.2 | Agonism in the western town

Recognition and acceptance of different and opposing political views has long been argued for by moderate nationalists: following John Hume's lead, a key principle was that each identity, culture, and tradition should be given equal respect and institutional recognition (McLoughlin, 2010). Three respondents in the Western town, all of Catholic and nationalist background, develop these pluralist principles in their boundary making, emphasizing their embeddedness within their tradition and the coexistence of traditions.²⁵ Conall is in his late 60s. He traces his Gaelic familial tradition back thousands of years, and explains how it is relevant today, even in his name. He offers respect to the

other tradition, which he variously refers to as unionist and Protestant, although he is very aware of the opposition of perspectives: he is angry that the worth of his own tradition was blocked from him for so long, unrecognized at school, downgraded by unionist attitudes to his family. He is, however, eager to offer equal recognition: *"the Unionists would be Ulster-Scots and all and they'd be very proud of their tradition and their background, the Ulster-Scots heritage and all that. So, knowing exactly where you fit into Gaelic society, you know, I think it's ... you know, it gave me more, would have given me probably more confidence in knowing who I am"*. Conall does not use a supraordinate Northern Irish "we", he only uses a familial "we". The other two pluralists use the Northern Irish "we" but simply to refer to the distinctive economy and rules that apply in Northern Ireland, not to identify with its people. All three are saddened and sometimes angered by unionist policy, but their criticism of unionism is on grounds of pluralist equality: *"And here you can wear a poppy anywhere and if I was to go into work with an Easter lily on me I would probably get the sack."*²⁶ ... *"I don't see why it's okay for someone to wear a poppy and not okay for someone to wear an Easter lily because the both of them are about memories"*.

Two other respondents in same local area, each of Protestant and unionist background, take an agonistic stance but not a pluralist one.²⁷ They recognize group division and position themselves on one side of it. One speaks of *"our side"* to mean unionists and Protestants. They do not accept a pluralist identity politics but rather find other principles of reciprocity. One ensures that this division does not become conflictual by reference to two principles: respect the state that you are in, and when it changes to Irish sovereignty, respect that too; get along with your neighbors. The problem of balancing respect for the state and ensuring equality is central to the thinking of the other.

Two incomers, one in the East and one in the West, also take a principled pluralist stance, attempting to understand and respect each community while keeping their own specific community identification.²⁸ All seven of these participants move beyond traditional divisions; they are thoughtful, politically highly reflective, sophisticated in argument, careful in their language, able to confront contentious political issues without antagonism; they engage in self-work on their own intuitions and *"pain-points"* in order to do so.

The five locals are rooted in their area, although they have also many wider interests. Each at once distances from and adheres to their own religious community and political tradition. In a more benign social world, their differences of principle, like their differences of identity, could coexist with few instances of conflict, and their reflections might have led them farther from their blocs. But in Northern Ireland there are frequent contentious issues where judgments conflict: whether the Easter lily and Irish flag should have the same institutionalization and protection as the poppy and the British flag, how the Irish language should be supported, and whether cultural equality is to be within the confines of respect for the state. The incommensurability of principles comes into view on each such issue, and keeps these respondents allied with their blocs. But even where they vote for bloc parties, they do so *"reluctantly"*, and are very capable of going against dominant bloc positions.

6.3 | Transformation in the eastern town

A cluster of respondents, all college educated, all of Protestant background, live around the Eastern town: most grew up elsewhere in the East of Northern Ireland and, after travel for education and early work beyond Northern Ireland, decided to settle in the town.²⁹ They are constantly engaged in self-work, seeing themselves as a local *"resistance"* to unionist and class dominance.³⁰ Grace, a thirty-something professional and mother, self-positions in terms of normative principles and projects *"into the future"*. She situates herself within one of the Protestant religious traditions and with an eye to wider global social, religious, and political currents: speaking of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 she says *"We were, as a generation I think really we were excited about it that we were witnessing this and that it was, it just felt like a really exciting time and like the whole world was open to you and you weren't maybe so different from everybody else."* A central value is openness not closure: *"Nationality, yeah it's like I would be quite fluid. I don't really describe my nationality, probably I am quite happy to sit with British and Irish identities that way."* She constantly shifts position between situated and universal categories. For example, while discussing her deliberation over sending her

children to a mixed school in which they might feel uncomfortable as a religious minority, she moves quickly to the general—“*we are all minorities in some ways*”—moving back and forth reflectively trying to find a generally-justified resolution of the particular familial dilemma. This is how she confronts contentious issues that arise in her familial and working life.

Four other respondents share her reflexive style of thinking and constantly question their particular situated perceptions and identities in terms of more general principles. At the same time, they attempt to situate their principles so that they speak to the real problems people face.

In each case, the respondents carry over their reflexivity and boundary breaching to politics, assessing when to confront and when to bypass conflict: occasionally they have been intimidated for their views and they find some defense in their local linkages, in their small political parties and in mobility—as professionals, even if not rich, they can move if necessary. Their political engagement, however, is highly diverse: some are socialist, some ecumenist, some ecologist. Their responses to a possible future united Ireland range from broad welcome to worried uncertainty: and they have varying understanding of the nationalist perspective. They are strategic voters, but their strategies differ: the cross-community Alliance Party is relatively strong in this part of Northern Ireland and while some of these respondents give it a high preference vote, others are highly critical of the party on class grounds.³¹

6.4 | Cosmopolitans in the East

Some respondents took a cosmopolitan stance.³² Jackson presents himself as “*a European socialist*”, an identity that provokes “*a lot of resistance*” amongst those he works with. He was a “*great supporter*” of the Good Friday Agreement. He intermittently assumes a Northern Irish identity, and switches positionality as he focusses on conflict: “*We can't expect the people in England, Scotland and Wales to continually pick up the tab and govern us. We must govern ourselves. Nor can we expect people in the Irish Republic to pick up the tab and try and govern. We have to be able to govern ourselves but if they can't ... if the two factions are currently at each other's throats over the constitutional issue well, you know, we're left in limbo yet again.*” At other times he distances from Northern Ireland taking on a wider European identity; he would like his grandchildren to learn languages so as to have “*the opportunity to escape from this dreadful place if that's what they want to do*”. He votes for a moderate unionist politician.

A second example is Daniel, from Sweden. He married into Northern Ireland and identifies with Northern Ireland as a whole. He distances himself from the political “*tribal chiefs*” whom he defines as “*they*”: “*I always try to keep neutral and in that sense I don't fit myself to one side or the other*”. With Brexit, however, he found himself repositioning as an “*outsider*” since his legal position as belonging within Northern Ireland would no longer be assured. His values include “*neutrality*”, but his distanciation from “*both sides*” leads sometimes to his falling unintentionally into one of them—he and his family take the British state and its rules as “*normal*” in the society, although they are one of the key objects of contention.

For these respondents, travel “*has widened people's horizons*”; incomers and people coming back from abroad “*adds to the diversity, you know,.... we need to keep doing that, we need to keep bringing fresh ideas and fresh perspectives in*”.³³ In all these cases, cosmopolitan boundary making brings with it an assumed higher status than the warring “*tribes*” and sometimes provokes resentment. Both Jackson and Daniel intermittently confront those they disagree with politically, sometimes at high cost—Daniel and his family have been harassed. Their “*bridgebuilding from above*” tends to reproduce the tropes of the British state sitting above conflict, alienating both critics of the state and its loyal supporters.

7 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Twenty years after the end of conflict in Northern Ireland, and even in a period of political polarization, there is a large constituency that resists closed, totalizing and exclusive ethno-national bloc boundaries, distances from many of the beliefs and practices associated with the blocs, and has a distaste for bloc politicians (Coakley, 2021; Hayward & McManus, 2019; Mitchell, 2020; Tonge, 2020). Our analysis reveals its shape and internal diversity by focusing on the patterns of everyday boundary-making.

First, most respondents at once distanced from the composite, totalizing blocs at the same time as adhering to some continuing linkages, shared beliefs and identifications in an ongoing re-negotiation of boundaries. This is also true of the students in the western town: they were clearly and vocally distanced from the blocs but not so different from their elders—either in stance or in situation - that one might confidently expect generational change alone to create a new form of politics.

Second, while these “moderates” are detached from the main political parties and don't care much about party politics (Tonge, 2020), they have deeply held political principles and values. Their presence gives a potential basis for future political negotiation of a more consensual society, as Hayward and McManus (2019) have argued.

Third, this constituency is radically diverse in its modes of boundary making and this leads to divergent political stances.

An everyday universalist perspective was, as Lamont (2019) suggested, common amongst a working class, non college educated cluster. This was newly prevalent in Northern Ireland: privatization from bloc politics and a universalistic personal moral stance were evident in past studies, but there was a distancing from all contentious politics (Todd, 2018, pp. 125–129; O'Keefe, 2021; but see; Finlay, 2011). Detachment from bloc politics remains common, but now combined with political interest in contentious single-issues -- Brexit, gender rights, a potential united Ireland. Consociational democracy has thrown into prominence single issues that it cannot itself resolve, and, after a quarter century of peace, these everyday universalists are ready to respond to them.

The expectations that a supraordinate “cosmopolitan” identity—perhaps as Northern Irish or European—would allow a way out of conflict were not confirmed (Wilson, 2010). This perspective was present but not common, even amongst educated, sophisticated, outward looking, and well-traveled respondents.³⁴

Agonism was a commonly-chosen way forward, and it moderates bloc division (Strömbom, 2020). Those who chose this form of boundary making were at once highly reflective and highly aware that their background, linkages and perspectives situated them within a conflict which they felt a responsibility to ameliorate. The heritage of past division was carried over into their different perspectives and principles; they disagreed not just in identity and political aims, but also in the moral-political principles they used to adjudicate conflicting views.

Transformation was common in a cluster of respondents East of the Bann: out of the five respondents who chose this form of boundary making there were (at least) four different political perspectives.

One might argue that all four strategies share values of openness, reflexivity, outward-lookingness and wider empathy that are central to “situated” or “everyday” cosmopolitan perspectives. But such perspectives take a distinctive form in divided places where the relationship to global plurality is mediated by the presence of two opposing dominant blocs, and openness requires first negotiating this relationship.

Fourth, forms of boundary making varied with locality and class. In small towns and rural settings west of the Bann where demography was visibly changing and nationalists now held power, there was constant interaction between those of Protestant and Catholic background and no niches of relative anonymity. Agonists re-articulated the values of their tradition in ways that would allow discussion, negotiation, and compromise. Everyday universalists tried to bypass those traditions by emphasizing their common values. In the east, where nationalists were less evident and mixing took place in a context of unionist local power, boundary making varied with the local peer group: cosmopolitans, clustered in an upper middle class locality, unquestioningly used state-centered British tropes; transformists, clustered nearby in a locality that was mixed in both class and religious make-up, took up the struggle against unionist power, without much interest in mediating nationalist and unionist perspectives.

Our analysis suggests questions for future research—for scholars on Northern Ireland, whether and how bloc party supporters differ from these moderates in their modes of boundary making, or simply in their political judgments; for comparative analysis, whether and how the prevalence of these boundary making strategies varies in different contexts; and theoretically, whether, how and why “everyday cosmopolitanism” takes specific forms in situations of social division and polarization.

Our analysis also reveals some of the obstacles to moving away from closed and exclusivist bloc division. It shows an endogenous cultural mechanism that reproduces division in the midst of change: the very processes that promote boundary-change also promote political fragmentation of those who change. Everyday boundary making has changed the social imaginary, and provided new resources for discussion and negotiation. It has also created a very diverse constituency without political cohesion or even a common political language. If it is mobilizable at all, it is likely to be on a temporary political project that gives a window toward a new politics where agonists’ different principles can coexist rather than conflict at each step, where socialists and ecologists can take a first step toward more radical transformation, and where everyday universalists can find political ideals resonating with their own experience. In this case, peace-building faces a dilemma. To capture the energy of the moderates, it has to forge an ambitious political-constitutional project. But in doing so it risks unsettling the blocs who have made the uneasy peace.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We declare that there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Approval for research and exemption from full ethical review was granted by University College Dublin Research Ethics committee. Reference: HS-E-18-103-Todd. HS-E-21-38-Todd.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ See O’Leary, 2019; Finlay, 2011; Nagle & Clancy, 2012.
- ² The Northern Ireland Life and Times survey (<https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/>) for 2018 shows that only about 5% of the population are “neither nationalist nor unionist” and Northern Irish and no religion. Well over 50% of the population are “neither/nor” or Northern Irish or no religion—a percentage that has slowly increased between 1989 and 2018. See variously Hayward & McManus, 2019; Tonge, 2020; Coakley, 2021; Hayes & McAllister, 2013.
- ³ See Lamont et al., 2016, for responses to inequality; Bonikowski, 2017 for modes of national identification; for patterns of cosmopolitanism, Woodward et al., 2008; Cichelli et al., 2021.

- ⁴ See the classic study by Gaertner et al., 1993; and comparative analysis by McKeown et al., 2016.
- ⁵ Reconciliation, as an outcome, is not a boundary-making strategy. Hamber and Kelly's (2004) working definition of reconciliation is consistent with all of the boundary making mechanisms discussed here.
- ⁶ In the western town and local area, there is a Protestant minority of about one third and relatively few incomers, and in the eastern town and local area, a Catholic minority of about one fifth and a small minority of incomers of various nationalities, according to the 2011 census.
- ⁷ Five were interviewed in groups of two and three individuals (see Table 2). Our sample size is close to the average of qualitative interview studies (31), identified by Mason (2010). In conflict studies, the sample size may be smaller (e.g., Alfarhli & Drury, 2018, interview 13 individuals; Dornschneider & Henderson, 2016, interview 27 individuals). Hammersley (2015, p. 688) notes that numbers matter less than "whether particular data segments allow a fruitful analytic argument be developed and tested". Our interviews allowed us to flesh out the composition of "moderates" noted in surveys, to elaborate analysis of four strategies of boundary change and test for territorial and class patterning.
- ⁸ The following terms are used to convey the proportions of interviewees referred to within our sample ($n = 28$): *all* (inclusive of all 28 interview participants); *almost all* (26–27 participants); *most* (19–25 participants); *many* (12–18 participants); *several* (6–12 participants); and *few* (3–5 participants).
- ⁹ Almost all distanced in some ways while remaining adherent in others; one or two of the agonists were borderline between "moderates who happened to be pro- (or anti-) union" and "on the moderate wing of the unionist (or nationalist) bloc". Since they presented themselves as "controlling" their intuitions and critically reflecting on their own traditions we take them here as moderates.
- ¹⁰ The focus group transcript was coded without differentiating between individual participants.
- ¹¹ Riessman (2008, pp. 11–12) notes that narrative analysis "shows "how" and "why" incidents are storied": we use it to show "how" and "why" boundaries are made. Individual sentences show constant movement "up" to higher categories and "down" to lower; by looking at the interview as a whole, narrative analysis explores if there is a plausible relatively coherent overall interpretation that *makes sense* of the respondents' perspective and *respects their agency* and *rationality*. We triangulated contextual knowledge and informal discussions with the interview data to ensure that our interpretations were credible (Bray, 2008).
- ¹² The exception was the wife of a respondent, who agreed to join the interview half way through. She was clear that she disagreed with most of her husband's "moderate" political views and was a "loyalist", but less clear why.
- ¹³ Thus our sample was considerably more "moderate" politically than the population as a whole.
- ¹⁴ 11E.
- ¹⁵ In 2018, according to the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey, two thirds of the population of Northern Ireland preferred mixed religion schools, although only 15% had gone to one and less than one in five had children who went to one. Our respondents were unusual in that most had either gone to one themselves or had sent their children to one, or both.
- ¹⁶ Of those of Protestant background, twice as many were remain as leave supporters, significantly more than in the Northern Ireland population as a whole, where 56% (and 40% Protestants) voted remain.
- ¹⁷ Participant 9E.
- ¹⁸ For different views, see Leonard's (2017) study of working class adolescents in Belfast; Schubotz and Devine's (2014) overview of the Young Life and Times survey; Shirlow's (2018, 2019) account of survey responses; and Tilley and Evans' (2011) discussion of generational voting patterns.
- ¹⁹ Participant in Group Interview #1.
- ²⁰ Several in the eldest generation (6W, 11W, 12W) describe everyday mixing in the 1950s and 1960s; Ken (8W) and 9W do so in the 1970s and others (15W, 16W) describe mixing in the 1980s.
- ²¹ Occasionally respondents took different boundary approaches in different spheres of life, or, like the focus group participants, said too little about their own practices to be categorizable. But mostly their discussions showed the dominance of one boundary-making strategy in relation to the existing bloc division. Dissonance was sufficiently unusual to be noticeable (e.g., 12E).
- ²² Ten years earlier, evangelicals might have attempted to re-map the field (Ganiel, 2008), but now, we were told, they had retreated from politics; and we did not interview in areas where Ulster Scots "remapping" was common.

- ²³ 8W.
- ²⁴ 1W, 7W, 9W, 10W, 12W, 3E. 12W generalizes “never get involved” [in political disputes], he focusses on working and leisure commonalities and notes “we never seen any difference” [between Protestant and Catholic] calling the residents of a local republican/Catholic town “good people”. 12E privatizes down to family, but—in the interview—sticks with the interests of her own extended family rather than generalizing more widely on universalist grounds.
- ²⁵ 9W, 16W, 14W.
- ²⁶ The poppy is a British national symbol commemorating the war dead. The Easter lily is an Irish republican symbol commemorating those who fought and died in the 1916 rebellion.
- ²⁷ 15W, 11W.
- ²⁸ 1E; 5W.
- ²⁹ The town is attractive to young professionals, within easy reach of Belfast, and house prices are not high.
- ³⁰ 7E, 8E, 13E, 14E, 15E.
- ³¹ Northern Ireland elections are conducted by PR-STV and some of these respondents vote far down the list to exclude what they see as the very worst candidates.
- ³² 9E, 10E, 11E AND 2E. 11E is also a Welsh national identifier, but cosmopolitan tropes dominate in discussion of Northern Ireland and the communities there.
- ³³ Respectively 11E and 2E.
- ³⁴ Only two of four incomers took this perspective (two others were agonists). Of the ten “locals” who had traveled extensively or lived outside of Northern Ireland, two were cosmopolitans, three agonists, four transformers and one an everyday universalist.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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