Nations and Nationalism: thematic section. Introduction
National identity in transition? Moving out of conflict in (Northern) Ireland[1]
Introduction
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This thematic section of *Nations and Nationalism* starts from a question of substantive political importance: How does institutional change - in particular reforms towards ethno-national equality and the opening of borders - affect national identification in divided regions? It takes the case of Northern Ireland where a radical process of institutional change is underway. It uses new approaches to national identity to map different aspects of change and continuity – in categories of identity and in their interrelations and contents, in elite and in everyday popular identifications (for useful overviews, see Abdelal et al, 2003; Ashmore et al, 2004). It examines the trajectory of the Protestant minority in the Irish state to show possible repertoires of change. The authors look respectively at self-reported categories of identity, official discourses of identity, and popular understandings of nationality. The introduction outlines the relevance of this research to current comparative and theoretical debates.

I. Northern Ireland in Comparative Perspective

The 1998 Good Friday or Belfast Agreement (hereinafter GFA) reconfigures Northern Ireland as a region open at its borders to both the United Kingdom and the Irish state, with parity of esteem for each national culture within Northern Ireland and egalitarian institutions and provisions in an Assembly and in wide-ranging equality legislation (Ruane and Todd, 2007). This political configuration has been legitimated as one appropriate for a divided society where two populations have, respectively, loyalties to the British and Irish states and identify with the 'British' and 'Irish' national communities (Agreement, paras   ). It has been praised as a balanced settlement which treats the different communities, with their different national loyalties and aspirations, with equality and justice. We are primarily concerned with the impact of the Agreement on national identity rather than its fairness of its national balance: its impact may, however, be related to perceptions of its fairness. Will national and communal justice lead to satisfied nationalisms or will it increase nationalist demands (see Guibernau, 2006, for a comparative discussion)? Will it change the very actors between whom balance is sought, reconfiguring national identities and loyalties so that equality in the political and constitutional arena, as in the economic, becomes 'a moving target'?

The questions are of direct comparative relevance. A major area of comparative research is concerned with the impact of globalisation and Europeanisation – understood as a decrease in the significance of state sovereignty and an institutional opening of borders – on the sense of nationality, in particular in 'interface' regions which have experienced ethno-national conflict (for different views, see Smith, 1995;

Keating, 2001). In such divided regions, loyalties and identities with the 'parent' state or nation may take a different form than they do in other parts of that state or nation: conflict itself makes for more urgent loyalties and more insistent claims. Does ethnic equality, with openness to each neighbouring 'parent' state/nation, normalise national identities and loyalties, so that they approximate those of the 'parent' state? Or does it produce greater divergence from the 'parents', either in the form of a radical hybridity and regionalisation, or to increased urgency to national conflict? Does communal equality – in this case consociationism - stabilise, freeze or promote shifts in the self-understandings of the blocs which it brings together in government? (for different views, see McGarry, 2001; for a defence of consociationism, see McGarry and O'Leary 2005). Northern Ireland post 1998 gives a perfect experimental arena in which to assess the impact of such changes in the form and powers of states.

The implementation of the GFA has been slow and uneven, and its impact on the mass public indirect. In institutions of the GFA are not solely, or even primarily, to do with national equality. Equality legislation is at its most developed in the economic sphere, and equality provisions are vague, not judiciable, in the cultural and national spheres. Cross-border institutions are small-scale whether measured by numbers employed, by capital base or economic subvention (see Coakley and Laffan, 2005). In fact, the most obvious impact of the GFA on daily life has come not directly from the new political institutions but from their copper-fastening of peace. In some 80 in-depth interviews in Northern Ireland conducted between 2004-6, and discussed elsewhere, the single factor most often referred to in discussions of identity-change was peace, demilitarisation, and the subsequent relaxation of inter-community relations (see Todd et al, 2006). Very few respondents spontaneously mentioned the institutions set up by the Good Friday Agreement. They did focus attention on facets of local life which, directly or indirectly, were affected by the GFA: a local EU-funded cross-community centre, feeling free to speak Irish or attend Gaelic football matches without encountering stigma or harassment, the banning of Orange marches and the changed ethos of the 'Twelfth', intimidation, the peace, economic opportunities. If the causal impact of the Agreement on the mass public is complex and indirect, even more so are the trajectories of change that it has produced. The public response to the Agreement reveals a complexity and movement in national identifications that may have been produced by the movement towards bi-national equality, but cannot adequately be described in terms of simple 'British' and 'Irish' identities.

II. Theoretical perspectives on identity shift

New theoretical perspectives on identity allow us to map the processes of change and continuity in national identification in Northern Ireland, and more generally in Ireland as a whole. This is particularly important given the multiple pressures and conflicting forces impacting on the public, and the continued indecision evident in interviews that is masked by the highly politicised identity-discourse which has accompanied the GFA (see Gilligan, this volume). On some measures, the GFA has increased oppositional attitudes and identities at the everyday level: the public has voted for the more extreme parties in each bloc, self-reported identity has remained constant, communal conflict at interface areas has increased, as has segregation (cf Wilson   ;). This, however, must be placed beside more positive trends: the moderation in the policies of the extreme parties so that, at time of writing, they are poised to enter into

government together; the proliferation of small proactive cross-community and cross-border groups; consistent interview findings that ordinary people are rethinking their politics and reshuffling the elements of their identities (Ruane and Todd, Ganiel,   ; Mitchell,   ; Todd et al,   ). Is the glass half-full or half-empty? With adequate conceptual tools, we can trace the respects in which it is full and empty (see Ashmore, ; Todd, 2005).

First, a distinction between the category of identity and the content of identity (Ashmore, pp.   ) allows us to hypothesise considerable reshuffling of content within the seemingly steady categories of identity that are reported in the survey data (see Coakley, this volume). Second, when we distinguish between the different types of content – official narratives and personal narratives (Ashmore, 200, pp.)– we see consistent mismatches between official discourse which has tended to reify homogenous British vs Irish identities (see Gilligan, this volume) and the more complex and fluid understandings of nationality in everyday life (see Mitchell and Todd this volume, Ruane and Butler, this volume). Third, this allows us to trace different popular modes of construction of ethnicity and nationality (see Ruane and Butler, this volume). To highlight the multiplicity of different possible repertoires of being national allows us, in turn, to develop hypotheses sensitive to the subtle but nonetheless politically significant aspects of change in national identity.

Hypotheses, it is often said, may be developed in the study of one case but need to be tested in large numbers of cases. Even for the purposes of hypothesis testing, however, there are important benefits to a restricted range of cases such as in this group of articles. When we look across different time periods and different groups within the same regional and cultural context, we avoid the dangers of comparing unlike with unlike (Chandra,   ). That regional context, in the Irish case, is culturally specific. British nationality and nationalism was developed in an imperial context as an addition to primary Scottish, Welsh and (more ambiguously) English nationalisms, and in the context of a wider British world where the boundaries of the domestic realm were flexible and blurred (Rose, Kearney, Kumar). The result was a multi-levelled form of identification, sharply opposed by an Irish nationalism that – in its dominant popular form – involved a superimposition and partial merging of nationality, ethnicity, place, religion. If these were the two dominant national repertoires, different groups within Northern Ireland and Ireland as a whole adapted and rearranged them in light of their resources and opportunities (see for example, Todd et al, 2006). The debates on the impact of the GFA can be reformulated in this light. How far is change in national identity re-emphasising the coincidence of national, ethnic, religious and place identities (ie. tending to crystallise opposing identities)? How far is it leading to a divergence of these dimensions and possible change in their contents? Are different tendencies dominant for different groups and sub-groups of the population? The articles that follow address different aspects of these questions.

III. The findings

John Coakley's analysis of all existing survey data on national identity in Northern Ireland since 1968 reveals more continuity than change over the past 40 years. He gives an overview and critical commentary on the major categories relevant to national identity tapped into by surveys: social background, national identity, and

political attitudes. He shows the correlations between religious-community background and self-reported categories of nationality, and the almost total correlation of Protestant community background with political support for the union. There is more divergence within the Catholic population, whose national, religious and community identities and political views come together in different permutations and combinations. Protestants, paradoxically, are closer to the classic 'Irish' than 'British' model in their superimposition of religious, community, national and political identity.

Chris Gilligan's analysis of the role of identity discourse over the same period reveals politically driven change rather than continuity. That change, driven in the 1980s by governmental reaction to a newly politicised republicanism, produced a particular (pluralist and communitarian) variant of identity discourse where the rights of each 'tradition' and each 'identity' (unionist and nationalist, British and Irish) are affirmed at the cost of a homogenisation of 'identities' and a distinct narrowing of the concept of political agency. Political stability is bought by a definitional closure of groups.

Coakley's use of survey material and Gilligan's discourse analysis are complemented by the two qualitative interview studies by Joseph Ruane and David Butler on West Cork Protestants and by Claire Mitchell and Jennifer Todd on conservative Protestant evangelicals in Northern Ireland. Of the many points of convergence between the articles, perhaps the most striking lies in the analysis of Protestant identity. Coakley shows that Protestants are much more overt and definite in their self-reported nationality (British) and in drawing clear political implications from it than are Catholics. This is paradoxical since, as Gilligan shows, official emphasis on identity politics is primarily motivated by an intra-nationalist debate. Unionists have been consistently unhappy with this identity discourse, seeing it as inappropriate to grasp their specific notions of political obligation and as blurring the distinctions between the process of settlement and institution building and the peace process (Aughey,   ; Farrington,   ). Ruane and Butler trace the problems that these seemingly homogenous identity concepts (British and Irish) pose for one group of Protestants: Irish Protestants combined a British identity with a historically deep Irish one, to the extent that after independence Southern Protestants could disengage from the British component without a loss of primary identity and without assimilation to the identity of their erst-while opponents. Mitchell and Todd trace a thinning out of British identity among some sections of Northern Protestant evangelicals. They see this as a direct response to the new political context, a symbolic trade-off where the specific religious resources of the group are highlighted and used symbolically to offset change in the content (not the category) of their national identity which allows them to take advantage of emerging cross-border opportunities. Yet, for some of them, this remains a private change that has yet to be translated into political form and that may meet a negative communal response. The two qualitative papers, both of which show Protestant transitions, suggest that the homogeneity and consistency of Protestant survey responses may tap into performative statements of political preference rather than descriptions of how they construct and change their modes of collective self-understanding.

What then are these modes of collective self-understanding? Ruane and Butler show how Protestants in West Cork have changed political loyalties but have retained their own distinct understanding of what it is to be Irish; this, rather than any British loyalty

or identity, is the locus of residual tensions with their Catholic neighbours. In some respects this confirms unionists' sense of exclusion from the Irish nation: they are not permitted to assume their own Irish past. Yet it also provides a repertoire of (Irish) national identification which is different from the dominant Irish nationalist one. The fundamentalists discussed by Mitchell and Todd develop a different repertoire again, opening to an Irish context and prioritising religious content within an overall British self-categorisation which has lost much of its content.

IV Conclusions

What conclusions may be drawn from these articles? Above all, that there are different levels of change in national identity, and that key aspects of change are sub-political, sub-ideological, affected by official ideologies, relevant to self-reported identities, but not reducible to these overt and measurable features. The everyday layers of national identity are affected by the choices that individuals make in multiple minor situations, thus forming the underlying patterns of identity change. This change may be constrained by communal solidarity, but it is also capable of underpinning collective change. One such change took place for Southern Irish Protestants. The articles here suggest that other such changes are possible: for Catholics and nationalists, perhaps, a separation of sovereignty and nationality; for Protestants, perhaps an affirmation of more levels of identification than is allowed either in unionism or in the official liberal nationalism which has justified the GFA. Identity shift, however, is a dynamic and interactive process: content change can make symbolic boundaries more permeable, but it may also, as the West Cork case illustrates, lead to continuing tensions. The research agenda has to incorporate both the possibility of significant shift in the contents and categories of national identity, and the continued interactive contest over these categories and contents.

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