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**TRAJECTORIES OF IDENTITY CHANGE:  
EXPLAINING THE PERSISTENCE OF COLLECTIVE  
OPPOSITION**

**Jennifer Todd**

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**TRAJECTORIES OF IDENTITY CHANGE: EXPLAINING THE  
PERSISTENCE OF COLLECTIVE OPPOSITION**

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## ABSTRACT

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### **TRAJECTORIES OF IDENTITY CHANGE: EXPLAINING THE PERSISTENCE OF COLLECTIVE OPPOSITION**

This article explores the micro-level mechanisms that reproduce collective opposition. It uses a typology of identity change to compare individual narratives in two situations where there are strong incentives to change and different outcomes: religious distinction in post-conflict Northern Ireland where opposition continues and in contemporary Southern France where it is rapidly diminishing. The directions of identity change are parallel in each case, but in Northern Ireland change is experienced as crisis-ridden and prone to reversal. The mechanisms hindering change are not 'ethnic' but cultural-cognitive: the socio-symbolic context requires that change be radical if it is not to be reversible.

#### **Keywords**

Identity, ethnicity, religion, identity change, conflict, opposition, Northern Ireland, France.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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**Jennifer Todd** is Director of IBIS, School of Politics and International Relations, University College Dublin. She has published extensively on Northern Ireland politics and on comparative ethnic conflict, including *Political Transformation and National Identity Change* (co-editor Routledge, 2008)

## **TRAJECTORIES OF IDENTITY CHANGE: EXPLAINING THE PERSISTENCE OF COLLECTIVE OPPOSITION<sup>1</sup>**

Some populations understand themselves in mutually opposed ways, investing themselves with positive qualities to the same extent that others are invested with negative. Sometimes these oppositions persist over long periods. The phenomenon – in different guises – has preoccupied theorists of ethnicity, boundaries, social categorisation and conflict.<sup>1</sup> In this article I explore the micro-level mechanisms that reproduce opposition even when there are strong incentives to change. I compare individual narratives of (ethno-)religious distinction in post-conflict Northern Ireland, where opposition continues, and in contemporary Southern France, where there is weak and rapidly decreasing opposition. This allows explanation to proceed inductively, with sensitivity to individual-level patterns of change, the perceived obstacles to change and the ways they are or are not overcome. First, however, I justify my question, my approach and develop a theoretically informed model for comparing narratives of what I call ‘identity change’.

I take the question ‘why are some collective oppositions persistent?’ as a sub-part of the question ‘why are some conflicts persistent?’ not as a sub-part of the question ‘why are some identities persistent?’ Barth (1969) reframed the latter question by showing that boundaries (and the related communal identifications) may remain even while individuals regularly cross those boundaries and while the ‘cultural stuff’ which makes for distinction changes. The question tackled in this paper concerns the meanings given to the boundaries and how they may predispose towards conflict. To rephrase the point, persistence of identity categories (and distinctions) does not imply persistence of identity oppositions. For example, the categories ‘Spanish’ and ‘Catalan’ have remained salient to whole populations while the perceived opposition between the categories varies over time and between groups with major political consequences (Argelaguet, 2006; Moreno, 2007). While much analysis focuses on the institutions which allow the successful regulation or transcendence of opposition (Coakley, 2003, Safran and Máiz, 2000. Keating, 2001), in this paper I focus on individual-level processes and patterns of identification. This can reveal mechanisms hindering change away from opposition that are not evident from an institutional standpoint.

Constructivist-inspired research over the last decade has refined the tools for analysis of identification and opposition. Research has shown not just

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the debates on the character, causes and persistence of ethnic opposition (for an overview, see Smith and Hutchinson, 1996, pp. 7-10 ; also Kakar (1996), Cornell and Hartmann, 1998), and recent work on when ethnic distinction becomes closed, exclusivist, stable and prone to conflict (Wimmer, 2008, 972-3, 976-985). The literature on boundaries focusses on conditions which lead to ‘bright’ as opposed to ‘blurred’ boundaries (Alba, 2005) and on how ‘symbolic resources (eg.. conceptual distinctions, interpretative strategies, cultural traditions)’ are used ‘in creating, maintaining, contesting or even dissolving institutionalised social differences..’ (Lamont and Molnar, 2002, 168). Theorists of recurrent violence debate if it is regularly stage-managed (Brass, 1998) or if it depends in at least some part on group-perceptions of relatively long provenance (Horowitz, 2002, 178-187).

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constant fluctuation in the perceived salience of distinctions (Brubaker, Fox and Grancea, 2006) but also constant renegotiations of boundaries at the individual and also sub-group level.<sup>2</sup> Attention has moved from elite rhetoric to everyday understandings, and from discussion of the brute categories of identification to discussion of the meanings and associations of identity categories.<sup>3</sup> Rather than an appeal to an undifferentiated sense of group 'belonging' the literature has explored the varying symbolic content of distinctions and the contest over symbolic boundaries (Lamont 2000; Lamont and Molnar, 2002; Pachucki, Pendergrass and Lamont, 2008).<sup>4</sup> Whether or not any particular identities – or the related boundaries – are oppositionally defined varies over time and may be the object of considerable symbolic contention. In some situations, despite variation and contest, there is a tendency for opposition to be regenerated even after it appears to have subsided, especially at important moments of social choice (for some examples, see Ben Porat, 2008; Mulholland, 2000; Bates, de Figueiredo and Weingast, 1998; Wright, 1987, p. 141). In short, the persistent disposition (once mobilised) to highlight some collective identifications as oppositional has been noted in work from almost every theoretical perspective.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the mechanisms reproducing opposition are clear: violence, threat and intimidation exacerbate oppositional identifications at the same time as strengthening communal solidarities (Horowitz, 2002, 151-178; Kakar, 1996; Wright, 1987, pp. 17-19, 122-125; Fearon and Laitin, 457). But opposition may continue long after violence ends and groups have demobilised, when it may seem in the rational self-interest of all concerned to loosen and make permeable boundaries. Why is this? Brubaker et al's study of Cluj (2006) shows how national distinction – often bypassed in interaction – persists through the everyday choices of the population in terms of language use, schools and is intermittently highlighted and exploited by ethnic politicians. Cluj, however, is portrayed as a city where ethnic tensions are fleeting and in which there are no strong incentives to change – everyone, it might be argued, is comfortable with the existing *modus vivendi*. If interest and habit in some cases explain persistence, in other situations oppositional distinctions persist despite institutional and official incentives to move to overarching identifications (see Lamont and Molnar, 2002, p. 186; Hermann et al, 2004).

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<sup>2</sup> Barth, 1969; Jenkins, 2008a pp. 169-173; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001, pp. 124-159; Shenhav, 2003; Pollak, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Cornell 1996, Fearon, 1999; Jenkins, 2008a, pp 111-2;

<sup>4</sup> Boundaries can vary in degree of closure or permeability, in degree of exclusivity or overlap (either-or rather than both-and) and in what I call oppositionality (negative definition of other correlated to positive definition of self). Relatively closed boundaries may not be highly oppositional, while highly permeable boundaries may be; oppositional boundaries are exclusivist, but not all exclusivist boundaries (male or female) are oppositional. The term 'oppositional' which I use through this paper points directly to the understandings and symbolism associated with identity categories and related boundaries, and indirectly to the related tendencies to social avoidance and political conflict.

<sup>5</sup> Brubaker et al (2006) show the continual triggering of distinction even in peaceful Cluj, Coakley (2007) shows overtime continuities in the survey data on identity and identity opposition. Smith (1986) emphasises the centuries old provenance of some ethnic identifications, and some oppositions. Wimmer (2008, 982) argues that cases of persistent opposition are one extreme on the continuum of ethnicity. Horowitz (2002 pp. 178-187) shows how ethnic targeting relies in part on older binaries of advanced vs backward groups. See also Jenkins, 2008a, 48-9; Cornell and Hartmann, 1998, 4-14.

Explanation of the persistence of opposition has often focussed on the specific character of *ethnic* opposition, the psychologically or even socio-biologically rooted senses of group solidarity and resistance to change (Connor, 1994 ; Brubaker et al., 2004). Thus to limit the discussion to ethnicity is, in my view, mistaken. Persistence of opposition is as common a feature of religious as of ethnic relations. Recent strands of research have shown common repertoires of boundary making and change across different fields (Lamont and Molnar, 2002; Pachucki et al. 2008). In this paper I argue that some of the mechanisms that make for persistence of opposition can be discerned by a micro-level interpretative focus which compares identity and identity change across different societies and for different types of minority/majority groups. This is intended not as an explanatory prioritisation of identity or culture in social explanation, but as part of a much wider multi-levelled processual explanation of how conflict gets built (and unbuilt) from a wide range of elements, with identification processes playing a significant, but by no means a primary, role.

Andreas Wimmer (2008) calls for such a processual and multi-levelled approach to ethnic boundaries which explains their radical variation across time and space and thus his criticism of identity-approaches requires consideration. Situating interest and negotiation in an institutionally and network defined field, he shows a range of factors and mechanisms which make the difference between conflict-prone and non-conflictual ethnic divisions. In the course of this wide-ranging analysis, Wimmer rejects what he calls the Herderian approach to 'ethnic identity': identity comes into his analysis only when group boundaries are so deeply entrenched and reinforced by cultural differences that 'identities' (and emotional attachments to them) outweigh 'interests' (2008, p. 1003, 1008). I have two criticisms of this position. First, if identity is important at all, it is potentially important in defining interest as much as in combating it. Second, Wimmer's multi-levelled approach in principle opens the question of the explanatory importance of identification to empirical and comparative analysis; in practice, however, he relegates identity analysis to a form of Herderian expression. I argue that a more adequately-conceptualised identity focus provides one part of a multi-levelled analysis, a part which has too often been neglected.

In what follows, I compare processes of identity change in two presently peaceful situations where the elements of identity are comparable and where there are clear incentives to move away from opposition. The first is an area of contemporary Southern France where Protestant-Catholic religious distinction remains significant but not politically contentious. The second is post-conflict Northern Ireland, where ethno-religious opposition remains at both macro and micro levels, despite major institutional restructuring and individual efforts at change. To reiterate, my intent is not to explain conflict or its absence in these or other situations. It is to compare trajectories of identity change and to draw conclusions on how collective opposition is reproduced at the micro-level even when strong institutional incentives exist for change. How this fits into wider conflict patterns is a question that can only be touched upon in this paper.

### **Individual identity and collective opposition: justifying the approach**

The approach adopted in this paper goes against current critiques of 'identity' talk as at once too amorphous and too essentialist to allow either for analytic precision or sociological explanation (Brubaker and Cooper, 2002) Yet the starting point of my argument is precisely the constructivist critique of cultural essentialism and psychological individualism. I take as premises that (i) identity must be understood as an interactive process of identification rather than as a thing (ii) identity cannot be an element in causal patterning unless it has an inertia, a patterning of its own. (iii) identity patterning is not a matter of ideas or discourse along, nor of dominant collective narratives and ideologies: symbolic logics are situated in the practices and understandings of individuals in interaction. However I argue that social-scientifically significant patterns of identity change and of the mechanisms that stall or reverse change can be gleaned from individual narratives, in particular narratives of periods of deliberation which show shifts in the values and assumptions associated with particular identity categories: in this paper I focus on trajectories away from opposition.

The conventional objections to this approach are easily listed. Why is it necessary to look at individuals and their experience when collective identities are ascribed? Why work with the concept of identity, when opposition has typically to do with power, interests, networks of communication and of solidarity? Does this not displace responsibility from those who manipulate conflict to those who suffer from it? If it is necessary to look at the micro-level, why focus on identification rather than interaction? Why work with rich and inchoate individual narratives and self-understandings, rather than more easily accessible collective narratives and public discourse, if the object is to understand collective division?

My answer is that a focus on individual identification is necessary because it shows how collective boundaries are reproduced and renegotiated at the individual level. It reveals what Richard Jenkins (2008b, p. 40) calls the 'internal-external dialectic of identification'. Collective categories of identity become socially important only when they are given personal salience, meaning and value (Fearon, 1999). At the same time, individual identity shifts can change social boundaries and the meanings of institutionalised distinctions, whether in collective 'tipping games' which change the distinction-in-dominance for group or society, as each individual anticipates that others too will wish to change (Laitin, 1998, pp. 21-32) or through more incremental changes, as individual identity shifts create new repertoires of valuation. Incremental change can take place through generational effects: Miller (2000) shows how transmission and change of collective identity categories takes place through the convergent experiences of whole cohorts at key stages of the life cycle. It can also take place through exemplary effects, where individual or minority examples change others' sense of the permeability and place of boundaries: for example, national boundaries can expand to include minorities whose 'destiny' lies in the country as well as the majority whose 'origins' lie in it (Honohan, 2007, 77). It is because the personal and the

collective intersect, that a focus on individual identification and choice can give us insight into processes of collective change (Brewer, 2003).

There are of course social limits to individual identity change (Fearon, 1999 ; Jenkins 2000). Some 'attributes' (Chandra, 2006) are necessary for me plausibly to claim to be, say, Brazilian, or bourgeois, or white. However the list of qualifying attributes may be long and contested, so that widely varying claims can be meaningful and even plausible.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the content and value repertoires which the individual associates with the category are still more varied, and affect political debates over necessary or sufficient attributes of category membership. Wimmer (2002, pp. 26-33) usefully writes of the 'cultural compromise' that makes up national identity: I take this 'compromise' to be a type of 'social fiction' which allows the same terms to be used while being given quite different resonances and values by different subgroups, permitting a socially accepted ambiguity and bending of rules. Patterns of identity change at the individual level are collectively important as they feed into this wider social consensus or contest. Much exciting new empirical work focuses precisely on the moral repertoires and value orientations through which class and ethnic boundaries are defined and contested and their implications for conflict; for example, the sense of worth which pervades young white working class English men's unease with their contemporary world and which cannot be reduced to 'nationalism' or 'racism' (Fenton, 2007; see also Condor 2000; Condor, 2006). Precisely by taking seriously how the ordinary people who make and reproduce boundaries describe their activity, one reveals the incentives and resources – including moral ones - which are brought to bear in renegotiations of boundaries (Lamont, 2000).

An identity approach is a necessary complement to a focus on interests and power. Identity frames choice at the everyday level. Where children are sent to school, what values are emphasised in the home, what interactions are avoided, is as much to do with 'who we are' and 'our values' as it is to do with 'our interests'. These choices have a major impact on social reproduction and change, laying down networks of communication and solidarity as well as dispositions for highlighting difference and becoming sensitised to opposition.

It is sometimes argued that a focus on everyday popular identification is morally problematic because it displaces responsibility for conflict from the powerful ethnic entrepreneurs who gain from conflict and violence onto the powerless who are thrust into it. My aim, however, is to clarify some of the less apparent mechanisms by which ordinary people are thrust into conflict. Rather than placing blame on those who suffer, my argument traces a constant series of individual attempts at change, thwarted not primarily by political but by informal and structural constraints. This approach helps clarify the role and potential of agency in the reproduction and in the change of group-oppositions.

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<sup>6</sup> This is the case even with categories which are conventionally taken as paradigmatically 'ethnic' (eg 'Irish'). Conor Cruise O'Brien varies in his writings between defining genetic attributes of being Irish (blood) and radically situational attributes ('the condition of being involved in the Irish situation, and usually of being mauled by it' (1965, 98-9)).

This approach focuses on individuals' narrative accounts of what a particular collective category means to them and how this has changed. A narrative gives information on how an individual integrates and prioritises the different norms and assumptions which are implicit in different areas of their social practice. It does not provide a snapshot of boundary-making in interaction, but a more reflective account of boundary-making over a life-path. This is important since the persistence of opposition is a phenomenon involving periodic return to opposition rather than constant highlighting of it. It becomes visible only over time.

Individual narratives are indeed rich, varying, full of particular detail, and in these respects more difficult to analyse than the public and official 'collective narratives' that recount origin myths, 'collective memory' and 'cultural trauma'.<sup>7</sup> Typologies of changing nationalisms are sometimes premised on changing official rhetorics. Yet there is an evident gap between collective narratives and everyday understandings, shown elegantly in Brubaker et al's (2006) study of Cluj, Romania. Different groups 'receive' official narratives and use official concepts of nationality in unexpected ways (see variously Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003; Condor, 2000; Fenton, 2007; Todd, Muldoon, Trew, Cañas Bottos, Rougier, and McLoughlin, 2006). The individuals interviewed in my research seldom recounted collective narratives. Instead their narratives are personal and familial, showing how the collective identity category became relevant to them in their lives and experience and positioning their understanding of the category in a familial context, compared to their parents, their grandparents, their siblings. These 'personal narratives' (Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004, pp.96 call them 'collective identity stories') and 'familial narratives' show what values and moral repertoires individuals associate with the collective categories.

In the next section, I outline a concept of identification and a typology of identity change which – while itself open to empirical refutation or modification – allows schematisation and comparison of trajectories of identity change in terms of different combinations of a limited range of moves.

### **Concepts of identity and patterns of identity change**

Identity, on my usage, is a processual phenomenon (with both interactive and reflective moments) involving a highlighting and prioritising of a subset of dispositions, values and characteristics from the wide range of given elements (objective attributes, cultural repertoires, individual dispositions, values and virtues) embodied and embedded in the situated (relational) self.<sup>8</sup> Any given

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<sup>7</sup> For a recent example see Jeffrey Alexander, 2005. For classic discussions focussing on collective narratives, see A. D. Smith, 1986, and on official rhetorics, see L. Greenfeld, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> This definition grasps many of the features that have been emphasised in recent writings: the processual and project oriented character of identity (Laitin, 1998, 16-21; Fearon, 1999); its givenness *and* chosenness (Laitin, 1998, 20) and its relational and negotiated quality (Jenkins, 2008a, 169-173; Wimmer, 2002, 26-34); the role at once of social ascription (Jenkins, 2000) and concepts of self-worth (Fearon, 1999). It allows at once for reflective choice and negotiation in identity-making. It is consistent with the full range of identities from the fluctuating, fragmented and other-directed to those with value- and historical-depth, persistence and coherence.

element can within limits be made central or marginal to self-understanding and self-presentation, interpreted in different registers and imbued with different values, taken from one rather than another perspective in a contested tradition.<sup>9</sup> New elements – repertoires of discourse and action, dispositions – are made by new forms of social practice. What we call ‘identity’ is, on this perspective, an intertwined set of dispositions and perspectives which is a precondition of the recognition of one’s own interests (qua parent or qua child, qua ethnic actor, qua immigrant, qua religious minority), and which provides at once the legitimation of and the normative constraints on the pursuit of material and political interests. Identification, as thus conceived, is essentially relational but not essentially oppositional. It may predispose towards solidarity, but the level of solidarity or community-ness is never readable from the identification alone.

Identity, on this understanding, is an interrelation of different categories of identification (‘type’ categories like ethnicity, religion, class, gender and ‘role’ categories like parent, painter, pop-star (Fearon, 1999)) with values, virtues, assumptions, dispositions, perceived oppositions, in what can be called an identity-package. The combinations are neither hegemonically given nor arbitrary. Individual choice is constrained by what ‘feels right’ to the individual (ie. by the range of plausible, coherent ways to put together an identity package from the given elements<sup>10</sup>) and by what can be negotiated socially. An identity package is relatively persistent: it is what we ‘know’ when we know someone. It is changeable but at a cost in terms of the effort required to develop new dispositions, the personal cost of reinterpretation of memories and values and the knock-on effects on intimate and social relations.

Consider any particular individual identity package, and focus on one particular collective category (for example, ethnicity) and a particular element associated with that category (for example assumed opposition, or assumed superiority) which comes to be challenged in social experience. One can schematise six possible directions of identity change (Todd, 2005). An individual can react (1) by rejecting the category, either (a) ‘converting’ to another ethnic category or (b) simply ‘privatising’ from ethnicity altogether. She can instead (2) reshuffle elements of the identity package, rejecting the problematic element and associating the category with a different set of values and assumptions either (a) reflexively (‘assimilation’) or (b) in practice (‘ritual appropriation’). Alternatively (3) he can ‘reaffirm’ the category and the problematic element, either (a) explicitly in protest against social organisation and power relations, or (b) implicitly and subjectively, while ‘adapting’ in practice.

From this simple typology, we can construct more complex combinations, sequences and trajectories of identity change. For example, this model can easily be adapted to look at cases of more or less tightly interrelated combinations of categories (religion, class, ethnicity, etc). In some situations,

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<sup>9</sup> To take Fearon’s (1999) example, Alex may take the bow-tie which he consistently wears as a purely contingent aspect of his clothing, or, alternatively, he may take it as part of his ‘identity’, either just because it makes him different, or because it expresses a coherent package of values and orientations.

<sup>10</sup> What ‘feels right’, as we know from Bourdieu (1977) is structurally as well as culturally conditioned.

for example, particular judgements (and dispositions to judgement) on moral worth or rationality are linked simultaneously to all these categories. If, at the limit, change in one category has immediate knock-on effects on the others, in other situations individuals can negotiate a differentiation of categories in their own interactions by privatising on one, reaffirming another, adapting on a third. Patterned sequences of change may take place. For example interim privatisation on one category (class) may give an individual the psychological and social space to re-evaluate the way he understood it and later to return to a reshuffled, assimilated class identification. In Margaret Thatcher's England, for example, traditional class identities had to be put aside as no longer relevant to politics, work or lifestyle: recent studies show the values of hard work, local solidarities, expectations of the welfare state, which were once associated with class-identity-packages, still in process of being reshuffled (Fenton, 2007).

A simple move from a one-person to a two-person game shows how the constant movements towards change may be stalled or reversed in interaction. Even a radical reshuffling of the elements of the identity package (assimilation) by two erstwhile opponents which overcomes older oppositions can reveal new ones, the more likely when opposition is historically rooted and multiplex (see for example Ruane and Butler, 2007). Privatisation may seem a safe option for A, but it can give her one-time opponent B a strategic advantage in public life and thus can regenerate opposition in A even when B adapts or assimilates (for examples, Rural Community Network, 2002). Adaptation, which in some circumstances leads to gradual conversion or assimilation, can also recreate opposition in a two person game where both A and B adapt and each sees the other as hypocritical in this process (see below, pp. ).

Why then is collective opposition persistent? One hypothesis (drawn from theories which emphasise the psychological or socio-biological roots of ethnic identity (Connor, 1994)) is that opposition is persistent because individuals do not change the ethnic aspects of their identity packages. An alternative hypothesis (drawn from post-constructivist theory) is that opposition is persistent because individuals' trajectories of identity change lead them back to opposition. A third possibility is that identity and identity change play no causal role in producing opposition : that identity narratives are fictions (Tilly, 2002 ). Comparison of self-reported narratives of identity change in Northern Ireland (where ethno-religious opposition is persistent even after the recent settlement) and the Languedoc-Roussillon region of France (where religious opposition remains but is rapidly diminishing) in terms of the typology outlined above allows us to test these hypotheses. We would expect, on hypothesis one, that *ethno*-religious narratives in Northern Ireland would report significantly less change than religious narratives in France. If hypothesis two is correct, we should find identity change in each situation, while in Northern Ireland, but not in France, it tends to end back in opposition. This could be because there are different directions of change in each case (for example more assimilation in France, more reaffirmation in Northern Ireland), and/or in terms of the sequences of change, and/or in terms of interactional effects. The third hypothesis, presupposing that identity narratives are not causally

connected to condition or behavior, predicts only random differences between narratives in Northern Ireland and in France, and between those that do and those that don't manifest a shift away from interactional opposition.<sup>11</sup>

## Method

In what follows, I use the typology outlined above to compare self-reported narratives about (ethno)-religious identity and identity change in the Languedoc-Roussillon region of Southern France and in post-conflict Northern Ireland. Each case involves a Calvinist-Catholic distinction and opposition of historic resonance, although the French case is no longer contentious and has neither the ethnic nor the colonial dimensions of the Irish (Ruane, 2006; Ruane and Todd, 2008). In each case, the intensity of experienced opposition, the incentives and the perceived difficulty of change vary over generations, between situations and between individuals. In this article I make no attempt to explain this within-case variation, which would require a historical as well as contemporaneous account and a consideration of a wider set of respondents in France.

My case studies involve situations where the categories in question are/were socially significant and marked in significant areas of social interaction, so that episodic personal narratives around them are likely to be volunteered (Ashmore et al, 2004, p. 96) and where there are clear incentives for identity change. In Northern Ireland ethno-religious identity categories have had major social significance for life chances and remain highlighted in many areas of life: recent reforms gave incentives for identity change among both nationalists and unionists (see Mitchell and Todd, 2007). Perhaps predictably, ethno-religious identity and identity change were spoken about freely by almost all of the 80 respondents in the total sample. In France, Protestant/Catholic distinctions are only of informal and familial social significance: they are unevenly marked, even in the region where the interviews took place. A theoretically selected sub-sample of a wider research project was therefore chosen: mixed marriage respondents who were likely at once to highlight religious identity, to be reflective and volunteer episodic narrative about it and to have incentives to change oppositional elements.<sup>12</sup> These respondents exemplify how identity change away from opposition proceeds in a situation where social boundaries are no longer very closed, and when there are strong incentives to change: it will be seen that the process is complex and negotiated even in this favourable case.

In Northern Ireland, approximately eighty interviews took place in the course of two research projects between 2003-6: four interviewers (including the

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<sup>11</sup>Of course these hypotheses do not do justice to the sophistication of many theoretical positions: ethno-symbolism, for example, at once allows persistence and change over time (Hutchinson, 2008). They do, however, give a starting point for comparison and argument.

<sup>12</sup>The mixed marriage subsample in Ireland – North and South – had been found to be unusually reflective on issues of identity, although among these respondents mixed marriage was more often a result of change than an initial trigger of it. In France, mixed marriage was sometimes itself a trigger of change. On mixed marriage in Northern Ireland, see Lee, 1994, Morgan, 1996, Donnan, 2000.



author) were involved.<sup>13</sup> Almost all the interviews lasted over an hour, with an average of about one and a half hours. Where possible, several generations of the same family were interviewed, typically individually. The projects were designed to access identity construction and change in contemporary Ireland, North and South, respondents were told this beforehand, and while the actual interviews were open-ended there was a defined set of prompts and an *aide mémoire* which in both projects covered issues of ethno-religious identity and identity change. The Northern Ireland interviews took place in border areas and in a small town in eastern Northern Ireland. Respondents were accessed through a wide variety of different networks, and by snowballing. There was a good spread in terms of class, religion, gender and generation with all political views represented and only the youngest generation (16-25) and the male working class relatively underrepresented. A sub-set of individuals in mixed marriages and their families were included in the research sample and at least 9 further respondents turned out in interview to fall into this sub-category, making 19 mixed marriage respondents in all.<sup>14</sup>

In the French case, 13 interviews with 24 individuals in mixed Protestant-Catholic marriages were conducted in 2007 and two group meetings attended (accounting for an additional 7 individuals). This was a defined sub-part of a much larger study.<sup>15</sup> Most of the interviews, averaging over two hours, were conducted with couples by the author and a colleague. The respondents were predominantly in the 30-60 age range, predominantly (but by no means uniformly) religious believers, and only one was of North African familial background. In class terms they ranged from skilled workers to bourgeoisie, predominantly in the middle range. They were accessed through five different routes and limited snowballing, thus lessening selection bias. The interviews combined open-ended aspects (invitations to the respondents to introduce themselves, to tell us what 'being Protestant' meant to them, which aimed to elicit episodic narratives concerning identity and identity change) and questions about the social context outlined in an *aide mémoire*: in practice, the detailed questions often stimulated episodic narratives, while the narratives themselves answered many of the questions and invited follow-ups. It is the episodic narratives which are analysed in this article.

The mixed marriage respondents in France are most directly comparable to the sub-sample of mixed marriage respondents in Northern Ireland: each set of respondents experience very similar problems and very similar incentives to change. However, as shown below, the Northern Ireland respondents reported significantly more difficulties and obstacles to change than those in France. Those difficulties and obstacles are also reported by non-mixed-marriage respondents in Northern Ireland. I therefore use the entire Northern Ireland data set in order to show more clearly what these obstacles are. The subsequent discussion and conclusion focuses on the social obstacles to collective change in Northern Ireland. The parallel question, why opposition – even if now mild and negotiable – has persisted in this area of France is not tackled here.

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<sup>13</sup> See acknowledgements.

<sup>14</sup> The estimated percentage of mixed marriage in Northern Ireland is 11%.

<sup>15</sup> See acknowledgements.

Interviews are one of the best ways to access the meanings attributed by individuals to identity categories and the values and resonances associated with them. They give us evidence of respondents' modes of deliberation when they employ and change these categories. Individual narratives, however, may emphasise ideals and self-perceptions, which do not always match actual practice. The potential of radical disparity between narrative and reality was partially countered by interviewing other family members, and by the fact that sometimes the interviewer(s) met the respondent(s) on a number of different occasions.

All interviews were taped and transcribed. Initial analysis and coding were undertaken in the context of discussion between the author and the other interviewers.<sup>16</sup> Further analysis by the author involved identifying and comparing the directions, combinations, sequences and trajectories of change in each case. The presentation below compares and contrasts three trajectories of change, which together subsume almost all of the interviews. Each trajectory grasps the central features emphasised in some interviews. Almost all interviews also include some aspects of other trajectories.<sup>17</sup> My concern, however, is not to grasp the complexities of the individual life process but rather to indicate typical patterns and differences in the descriptions of change. In what follows, cases and quotations are chosen because they illustrate with clarity one typical trajectory of identity change. Names and details are changed to protect the anonymity of respondents

### **France: trajectories of identity change**

Protestant/Catholic religious distinction is not highlighted in most parts of France although adults, when asked, easily point to 'Protestant' towns, or to Protestant friends and acquaintances. The area in Southern France where the interviews took place is a site of historic Protestantism and it experienced intense religious violence intermittently in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Monuments and commemorations of Protestant history are pervasive: the annual *Assemblée du Désert* held at the site of the *Musée du Desert* to commemorate the period when Protestants were persecuted following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685; the *Tour de Constance* in Aigues Mortes, where Marie Durand, a Protestant who would not reject her faith, was kept a prisoner for 38 years and where her words '*Register/Resister*' are still visible on the stones. The literature on Protestant-Catholic distinction in this region is largely historical, with some scholarly and some popular local studies and no quantitative analysis, since religious status is not registered on the census.<sup>18</sup> Protestantism, although spanning the entire class range, was and is a mark of social distinction among the local bourgeoisie: the HSP (*la Haute Société Protestante*) was a term mentioned, albeit ironically, by many of the respondents. Religious distinction remains

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<sup>16</sup> Coding was manual, and repeated by the author as initial analysis raised new sets of questions

<sup>17</sup> Joanna, discussed below, focusses her narrative on individual assimilatory change because her husband's privatisation on religious matters easily resolved potential interactive problems. The narratives of Henri and Béatrice, like that of Jane in Northern Ireland, focus on negotiating a *modus vivendi*, although each also indicates at least the beginnings of assimilative change.

<sup>18</sup> See Joutard 1997, whose essay includes an extensive bibliography. See acknowledgements for ongoing social scientific research on the region.

significant in the region, a source sometimes of interpersonal tension but not a matter of ethnic or political contention. Even those respondents for whom religious distinction mattered a lot volunteered that politics, not religion, was the source of heated arguments among their family and friends (the interviews took place at the time of the 2007 presidential election campaign). In what follows, I outline three typical trajectories of identity change recounted by the respondents.

It should be reiterated that these respondents are far from typical of Protestants and Catholics, or of Protestant/Catholic relations, in the region: they live in or near cities; they are much more likely to highlight religious distinction than are other city-dwellers; they have more incentives to change than do others. One could argue that the fact that they still experience a degree of religious opposition is more remarkable than the fact that they are able to transcend it. That may be true, but it is not the topic of this article.

*Assimilative change from 'closedness' to 'openness': transmission and transformation of tradition*

Assimilation may be defined as a process of marginalizing some of the dispositions, and rejecting some of the values that were once held as central to the self, while emphasising others which were previously recessive. Assimilation retains the collective identity category while reprioritising the values and reorienting the meanings associated with it, thus transforming tradition in the process of reproducing it. It is distinct from 'conversion' which turns to a wholly different category and associated values, and from privatisation, which involves personal detachment from this type of identity category altogether. Assimilative change can follow in sequence from privatisation or even conversion, in the classic picture of adolescent rejection of parental values and later gradual return to reframe and reincorporate some of the values and dispositions which had been marginalized in early adulthood.

Joanna recounts a classic path of an individual's assimilative re-making of tradition in a way that overcomes tensions and social distance. She is hitting her forties, married, comfortable, of Protestant background with her children already approaching their teens. Her extended family of origin is large, close-knit, practicing Protestant, and she has maintained regular contact with them. In her family, there was no sense of strong opposition to Catholics: however she disliked the sense of being different, out of touch with the everyday life of her peers, that Protestantism involved. During adolescence and early adulthood, she privatised from religion... *' je disais jamais que j'étais Protestante parce que j'avais un peu .. pas 'honte' mais bon, c'est vrai que quand on est adolescent peut-être on a envie de faire pareil que les autres...'* *'I never said I was Protestant because I felt .. not exactly ashamed.. but when one is adolescent one wants to be the same as everyone else']* In recent years however *'j'assume complètement et même je suis plutôt fière maintenant d'être Protestante'* *['now I completely affirm and am even especially proud to be Protestant']*. She associates Protestantism with key values: the lack of hierarchy, the direct relationship to God, the capacity to

adapt, a progressive view of issues like divorce, womens' rights, abortion, a close relation between pastors and people. This, however, is a Protestantism that fits smoothly into her existing (bourgeois) social networks and friendships: it is progressive, private and non-extreme. She is relaxed about religious practice and belief, and she marries values and pragmatism: her eldest child has just entered the best secondary school in the area (a Catholic school) and she has decided to let him also attend Catholic religious education: the nearest Protestant church is too far away, attendance interferes with the childrens' Sunday activities. *'je me suis dit "après tout, quel est mon objectif? Est-ce que c'est qu'il ait vraiment une éducation religieuse Protestante ou est-ce que je veux qu'il ait une éducation religieuse Chrétienne?".. voilà... donc en fait je sais pas si j'ai bien fait ou pas mais je l'ai laissé aller... au catéchisme Catholique...'* [*I asked myself "after all, what is my aim? Is it that he truly has a Protestant religious education, or do I want him to have a Christian religious education"... well I don't know if I've made the right choice or not, but I let him go to Catholic religious instruction*] She presents her religious trajectory as one strand woven into a wider personal story, like the other strands constantly renegotiated in light of changing circumstances and in terms of the values and principles by which she tries to guide her choices. It involves no cultural upheavals and meets no interactional reversals. Her husband, nominally Catholic but non-practising, is happy to support her decisions.

Other respondents spoke of sharper changes and sometimes more painful journeys from 'closed' backgrounds to an 'open' (inclusive, non-oppositional) religious commitment: (the word '*cheminement*' was often used with echoes of the pilgrims' '*chemins*' [*paths*]). For them, social pressures could be strong, and processes of change were interactive. Some respondents recounted a radical questioning and refinement of values in interaction: '*one only knows oneself through others*'. Some respondents of working class Catholic backgrounds recounted re-finding of religion in evangelical/charismatic form (sometimes through the influence of their Protestant partner) after years of secularism, and it came to occupy their lives. Only one couple of those interviewed - Laure and Paul - took a radical and all-embracing path, simplifying their values, reuniting shared religious principle – egalitarian, individualist, universalist – with their politics, their social attitudes, even for Paul his work.

The personal trajectories described by these respondents are often recounted as individual responses to social incentives and opportunities. Strong social boundaries no longer divide the Christian religions, and individual change can have ripple effects on the wider society. For some respondents, there was a relatively seamless movement from individual change to network formation to organisational involvement: a growth of mixed marriage, ecumenical and evangelical-charismatic networks in which they played a leading role. For others, like Joanna, the social effects are those of familial reproduction of a minority tradition in a seemingly unpropitious environment.

*Intertwined oppositions and the negotiation of compromise: lessening the salience of distinction.*

Numerous modes of negotiating religious difference were evident among the respondents. Privatisation is a withdrawal (temporary or permanent) of any assignment of personal salience or value to a collective category. Adaptation is an uneasy compromise, an acceptance of one set of values in public while holding a different set in private: it can be a step on the way to change in personal values through the gradual testing out of the new values in practice. In general in the French interviews, when one spouse privatised or adapted on religious issues, opposition dissolved. When other categories of distinction are wound in with religious difference, however, such negotiation becomes more difficult and complex. One response is to differentiate the spheres of distinction, negotiating different combinations of privatisation and adaptation on each category.

For respondents from the local Protestant bourgeoisie, the interrelation of class distinction, social status and religion was evident. Henri, in his early thirties, describes the social context: *'Y avait des grandes familles Protestantes ici qui tenaient un peu la ville, et ces grandes familles sont toujours un peu presentes aujourd'hui, c'est un peu dilué, mais y'a toujours une composante un peu sociale du protestantisme ici. Donc en fait ..., moi j'ai baigné un peu là dedans'*. [*'There were big Protestant families here who in a way controlled the town, and they are still present today, its more diluted but there is still a social aspect of Protestantism here. I was a bit steeped in that'*] Intermarriage among the top families was very common, noted wryly by in-marriers like Béatrice, *'donc maintenant j'ai compris que tout protestant est un cousin de mon mari'*. [*'now I've understand that every Protestant is my husband's cousin'*] The Protestant economic role – once owners of local banks and industries - had changed with globalisation, and so had attitudes more generally. An extended Protestant bourgeois family group emphasised the opening-up of the Protestant world. As an example, they discussed the difficulties which mixed marriage had caused in the past and eventually agreed that it had been a problem not only for their own generation (mid-40s and older) but even for the next: one younger Protestant friend had a *'dramatic'* marriage where her husband (reversing the Catholic rule) promised to raise the children Protestant. Now, however, mixed marriage had ceased to be a problem either for themselves as parents or for their own children.

Even for the young, however, it was not always straightforward. Henri, from another bourgeois family, and Béatrice, a Catholic from another part of France, were married with young children. There was no question in Henri's mind but that the children had to be brought up Protestant: *'all the Ricards have always been Protestant'*. Béatrice adapted to these local social norms, while justifying them in terms of her own principles: she believed that young children should be brought to one church, not confused about their religious identity. For Henri, *'love opened many doors'*, and *'the world changed completely'* with each being obliged *'un peu laissé de côté sa culture'* [*'to leave to one side their own culture'*]. They married in a Catholic church and he attended mass with Béatrice. Béatrice, meanwhile, brought the children to

Protestant church with Henri, and brought to the marriage a charismatic liberal Catholicism, stronger than Henri's more generalised Christianity.

This couple circumvented the potentially problematic association of class distinction and religious difference by differentiating categories of distinction. Henri adapted on matters of religious practice, fully participating in Catholic services while maintaining his own principles and interpretations. He partially privatised in expressing religious belief – in interview and group setting, Béatrice expressed her religious views more often, more fluently, more strongly, than did Henri. Meanwhile Béatrice adapted socially and the Ricards remained Protestant for another generation. This bypassed occasions of conflict in the short term. It did not directly address their different orientations to the Protestant world. Only once in the interview did these orientations appear as a potential source of tension. When asked if there were differences in Protestant and Catholic practices of child-rearing, the couple were suddenly slow to speak, and they spoke uncharacteristically softly and carefully. They did not think the religio-cultural difference translated in this way, although Béatrice saw Protestants in previous generations as *'austere'*; they discussed Henri's grandmother who had not been very *'maternal'*. Here the question of religious distinction appeared, in a word they kept repeating, very *'personal'*.

### **From reaffirmation of identity to more general values**

Some people identify in a very immediate way with a historical tradition in which they feel rooted. This was as common among Southern French Protestants as it was among the so-called 'ethnic' groups in Ireland.<sup>19</sup> Yet these respondents also found ways of contextualising the given identity within wider shared values and principles.

For Barbara, middle class, early sixties, *'C'est vrai que moi, je me sens protestante au fond de moi-même, c'est quelque chose de très, très profond.'* [*I feel Protestant to my core, its something very very deep*] When asked what that means, she volunteers: *'.. je pense que ça répond à des valeurs qui, pour moi, ont été données par des ancêtres qui étaient protestants. Alors est-ce que j'ai assimilé ça à la religion protestante ou est-ce que c'était les valeurs de mes grands-parents en tant qu'êtres humains? Je sais pas. Mais moi, c'est comme ça que je le traduis, c'est comme ça que je le ressens'* [*I think this has to do with the values inherited from my Protestant ancestors. Have I taken this from Protestantism, or from the values of my grand-parents as human beings? I don't know. But this is how I understand and feel it*]. . The values she associates with Protestant history are above all values of *'tolerance'*. Her husband Gérard, Corsican and Catholic by background, is also attracted to Protestant values: he sees *'democracy'* as a key value. As the discussion proceeds it becomes clear that the links between history,

<sup>19</sup> One of the foremost commemorative sites in the region, the *Musée du Désert*, encourages such identification with the descent group, for example in the emphasis only on Protestant suffering, and in the prominent list of Protestants sent to the galleys, imprisoned or killed: the implicit invitation (to Protestant visitors) is to find the names of one's own ancestors on the wall (see Joutard 1997 pp. 2660, 2670).

family and identity are mediated by values: for example, their children's decisions to rear their own children as Protestants is linked, Gérard believes, to *'l'histoire de la famille. Il y a un certain nombre de points d'encrage ..... C'est l'éthique ...'* [*family history, points of anchorage ... moral principle*]. He associates those family values as much with Corsica as with Protestantism: *'je pense que c'est la relation à la minorité ... j'ai à la fois cette espèce d'attraction pour aujourd'hui ce qui est le Protestantisme... ça rentre en écho avec d'autres points qui sont importants pour moi'* [*I think it is being a minority.. I have an attraction to contemporary Protestantism... it resonates with other reference-points that are important to me*]. Barbara wonders if it was her marriage to this Corsican which let her finally assume her own identity as Protestant. By the end of the interview the discussion has moved from a particularism to a universalistic emphasis on tolerance and democracy and the rights of particular minorities to be different. For this couple, religious opposition, like ethnic, is overcome by a complementary particularist identification, one in religious and the other in ethnic terms, with strong convergence of values and sense of minority rights. In a parallel trajectory, a retired working class couple saw one spouse's Protestant values as complementary to the others' left-wing trade union values.

There were also variants on this trajectory. Daniel and Céline find overarching values not in politics but in religion itself, while Daniel continues to live Protestant history in a very rooted way. He describes very clearly his earlier 'sectarian' perspective: *'j'ai à la fois, je dirais l'identité.....bon l'identité protestante qui est forte aussi bien en terme de religion mais aussi en terme d'éthique et en terme de minorité. C'est à dire que pour moi je suis protestant comme certains juifs tiennent à leur éthique de... juive ou d'autres catégories comme les 'pieds noir' »... Voilà qui sont des racines profondes et par rapport à nos ancêtres'* [*I had at the time ... a Protestant identity, which was strong in terms of religion but also of morality (ethique) and in terms of minority belonging... I am Protestant in the same way as some Jews hold onto their ethic of .. being Jewish, or other categories like the 'pieds noirs'..... 'they are deep roots connecting back to our ancestors'.]* As a child he visited the *Tour de Constance* where Marie Durand was imprisoned, and the memory has remained with him: *'...l'histoire de Marie Durand, de résister ... les valeurs de ces personnes là qui ont voulu gardé leur identité malgré les pressions, malgré la violence, malgré tout ce qui a pu se faire et qui avait leur foi, leur conviction, et pour moi c'était quelque chose que je ressentais pleinement et pour moi c'est un respect profond par rapport à ça, par rapport à mes ancêtres.'* [*'the history of Marie Durand, of resisting, ... the values of these people who kept their identity against pressure, despite violence, despite all that could be done and who had their faith, their conviction and for me it was something that I felt very fully .. it is a deep respect for that, for my ancestors'.]* When asked if at the time he had seen Catholics as those responsible he responds *'yes, yes absolutely'*.

Céline had grown up with Protestants in her extended family and she was happy to marry and baptise her children in the Protestant church, while holding to her own liberal and charismatic Catholicism. Meanwhile Daniel 'evolved': *'moi j'ai mis un peu plus d'eau dans mon vin tout en gardant mon*

*identité et mes valeurs protestantes* [‘I added some more water to my wine, while keeping my Protestant identity and values’] Their children now move between both religions while the couple recognise, in Céline’s terms, that it is the *same* religion, the *same* God. Between this religious convergence and Daniel’s strong assertion of *Protestant* values, negotiation continues – in the interview Céline strongly contested any move by Daniel to define the values of Catholics as in any respect the opposite of those of Protestants.

### **Northern Ireland: trajectories of identity change**

Protestant/Catholic distinction is socially embedded and interactionally highlighted in Northern Ireland, even more than the interrelated (and sometimes more oppositional) national (British/Irish) and political (unionist/nationalist) distinctions. There is intense contest among actors and commentators as to how these distinctions are to be characterised (McGarry and O’Leary, 1995). The extensive survey data shows continuing opposition between Protestant and Catholic on a very wide range of issues – constitutional status, political reform, social policies, cultural perceptions (see Whyte, 1991; Hughes, 2004). It does not show how the actors define the opposition (Coakley 2007). Given the contest over the categories of identity, it was unsurprising that, out of eighty respondents, only two did not volunteer their religious background within the first few minutes of the interview. Almost all were willing and able to talk about how the significance of the distinction had changed for them over time, with almost all reporting some identity change. While the same directions of change are visible in Northern Ireland as in France, however, the trajectories are significantly more difficult to navigate and more prone to interactive reversal: this is as true of the mixed marriage respondents as of the others.

### **Assimilative change away from opposition: transmission and transformation of tradition.**

In Northern Ireland there was much evidence of assimilative change away from opposition, but it was differently sequenced than in France, with the reassessment of values, the re-evaluation of assumptions and the re-finding of continuities taking place in one movement. Unlike France, it did not occur in the normal course of the life cycle but was instead triggered by events.<sup>20</sup> It occurred in accelerated fashion over a period of weeks and months, and was typically reported as a period of crisis, even anguish, by those who describe the successful negotiation of such change.<sup>21</sup>

Denise, a mixed-marriage respondent from a lower middle class Protestant family and in her late twenties at the time of the interview, exemplifies such change. She presents herself as having changed ‘*absolutely fundamentally*’.

<sup>20</sup> Adolescent rebellion in Northern Ireland takes place within the ethno-religious oppositions, giving them a more militant form (Bell, 1990) or, in the case of some of our respondents, involving an embrace of cultural nationalism rather than the political nationalism of their parents.

<sup>21</sup> The contextual pressures, experienced problems, quest and crisis and reinvention of continuity recounted below are similar to narratives of conversion in other societies (Rambo, 1995). Conversions in Ireland, in contrast, have tended to be strategically motivated (Power, 2005, p. 75).



From teenage years, she was shocked by the evident contradiction between Protestant values and the anti-Catholic violence of the neighbourhood in which she grew up. This triggered a process of re-evaluation of practices, judgements and relationships in every sphere, leading her through cultural change (an interest in the Irish language), religious change (she now sees herself as Christian rather than Protestant, and sees much similarity in her own beliefs and those of some committed Catholics), change in national self-categorisation ( ... .. *if you did push me I would probably say I have probably more Irish leanings, probably sort of more nationalist than unionist leanings at the moment but sort of the jury's still out..*) change in political reactions (she does not agree with Sinn Féin's politics but no longer sees them, in her own terms, as '*monsters*') as well as in her personal networks and relationships. Denise, like others who undertake such change, presents it as a process of re-finding family continuities. Respondents told stories of great aunts who lived in Dublin, of repeated border-crossings in past generations, intermarriage or conversion in the familial past, distant relatives who entered mixed marriages or who wanted to and were prevented by their own parents, liberal or tolerant parents who held themselves outside of the main divisions.

Denise describes an experience of cognitive dissonance and a process of categorical and moral reconceptualisation, which in turn leads her to new forms of practice, further cognitive dissonance and an attempt, in her own terms, to '*reconcile*' her moral assumptions with her moral experience. We can read this as the familiar '*delicate*' process of reaching '*agreement*', '*mutual adjustment*' or reflective equilibrium between experience and principle (Goodman, 1965, p. 64). When the experiences are intuitions of human and social worth and when the principles define collective identity, the cognitive process is also one of identity change. In non-contentious situations, such reflection is typically entered when the individual is ready: in Joanna's narrative, it is life-cycle related and occurs when she has developed the resources to integrate Protestant values into a mainstream life-style. In Northern Ireland it is triggered unexpectedly, by unwelcome events and experiences - the murder of a neighbour, interaction with one-time murderers - or by social pressures associated with weddings and births.

Baptism is an occasion of potential conflict among mixed marriage respondents in France as much as in Ireland, and the long-term resolutions found by respondents in each society were very similar: in whichever church the child was baptised, both religious traditions remained very present in the household. In Northern Ireland, however, it could trigger an intense process of change. Brenda (a middle class mother of Protestant background) recounted her desire that her children be Protestant in terms parallel to those of Daniel in France: she '*didn't want them [the children] brought up Catholic*' and spoke of a sense of '*innate*' feeling, that was '*just there*'. In the French narratives, conflict was sidestepped and views '*evolved*'. In Northern Ireland, baptism was equally important to both partners, compromise was not possible and Brenda describes months of anguish: '*There was a part of that time that was just awful*'. Finally she resolved the crisis by deciding in light of over-arching values ('*for the greater love of John and the unity of the family*') that her first child be baptised Catholic. The decision opened unexpected opportunities, so

that child-rearing is presented – both by Brenda and by her now-adult eldest child – as a happy and unconventional everyday process of breaching boundaries. In the interview, she presents the decision about baptism as if an existential choice-point which has implications in every sphere of her life. She now points out the need to confront *'innate'* prejudices of all types, to be open to different ways of thinking rather than (in her own terms) *'eating fish and chips'* on every holiday.

Why should such ordinary events lead to crisis in Northern Ireland? It seems that the specific dilemma is quickly generalised to all the categories of identity, all the principles that have guided the respondent's life. Susan is a Catholic woman in her 50s who was in process of just such re-evaluation at the time of the interview. She describes her response to her daughter's impending mixed marriage as involving a re-evaluation of her own past choices (marriage, children), wider values (the strict rules of her own parents), assumptions about the world (the need to belong to a community and to be accepted), even her memories (dating and leaving a Protestant boy in Belfast thirty years ago): *'that is raising a lot of issues in what I believe and what I don't believe... I always felt that I would be broad minded about it... but I find I'm not... and I'm quite saddened by that, I am... because I don't want to be like that... eh maybe it's all the 30 years that's coming back... maybe I don't want her to have issues, eh being protective again...'*

These respondents describe a process of change that is not limited to a differentiated religious or familial sphere. Rather particular experiences (baptism, marriage, murder, meetings) provoke contradictions between intuitive judgements and deeply felt values which are relevant to an entire set of religious, political, moral, national categorisations, principles, assumptions and judgements, past and present. There is no fixed ground on which to stand and there are no paths marked by previous pilgrims.<sup>22</sup> Choices, changes and moral reflections which were spread out over a period of years or even decades for the French respondents are condensed into days, weeks and months for those in Northern Ireland.

When change occurs in Northern Ireland, ripple effects are limited and hard-won. Rather than gradually remaking networks and institutions by their practice, as in France, these respondents are set apart. Even if they gain government funding for integrated schools and cross-community organisations, their choices are politicised and distinguished from the 'mainstream'. Within the mainstream churches and schools, respondents spoke of difficult battles to ensure their children were not stigmatised. Time, effort and cultural capital were necessary for success. Working class respondents often privatised rather than face a battle that they were unlikely to win. The literature on mixed marriage in Northern Ireland shows the widespread extent of stigmatisation in schools and churches, the perception that there is no official support, and a disproportionate tendency for marriage break-down.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> There are mixed marriage and ecumenical associations but it took even middle class and well-educated respondents considerable time to find them.

<sup>23</sup> Morgan, 1994 ; Lee, 1996 ; Donnan, 2000.

### **Intertwined oppositions and the negotiation of compromises: interactional constraints**

Not only do the concepts and values which inform ethnic, religious, political division and moral value inter-resonate, they also coincide with interests – political, communal, local, and until the recent past, economic (Ruane and Todd, 1996, pp. 146-148, 175-177, 200-203) - thus making distinction more salient, for more people, in more spheres of life in Northern Ireland than in France. This makes negotiated combinations of privatisation and adaptation more difficult to sustain.

Because differences of judgement and value spill over between religious, political, national and moral spheres, privatisation on any one category does not resolve potential opposition. Jane and Bob are in a mixed marriage, and Bob, a Protestant, has long privatised on the category of religion, quite content for Jane to practice and to raise the children as she pleases. Neither of them are concerned about politics: otherwise *'I don't think we would have gotten together'*. Jane, however, describes continuing quite radical differences of value prioritisation and judgement: *'we kept fighting, we were opposite ends of the same continuum if you like, you know, on very similar constructs, sport or religion.... I used to think god I loved him so much and I thought will this ever work, can this work?'* Their concepts of nationality differed: Bob described Britain as the *'mainland'* which Jane *'found very strange. I thought well we are not just a rock over, you know, out in the sea'*. Their mode of moral reflection also differed: *'Bob would have always said that I had a very generous Catholic guilt whereas he would have said that because of his upbringing he doesn't feel guilty about things.'* The contrast with mixed marriage respondents in France is stark: in Joanna's narrative, her husband's lack of concern about religion dissolves away the potential for opposition; in Jane's narrative, opposition is immediately displaced onto other issues and categories.

Some privatised on all the oppositional Northern Irish type categories at once and focussed instead on neutral role categories: one man introduced himself only as *'a plumber'*. But the socially ascribed categories are almost impossible to escape. Peter is in his forties, a professional of Catholic background and a father of young children who lives in a peaceful mixed-religion locality. He explains: *'I actually don't think of myself in the cultural or traditional context as being either catholic or protestant, which creates a lot of problems for me because people that I encounter expect me to think one way or the other...'* It also makes for difficulties in child-raising, particularly when it becomes necessary to explain televised current events to his children: *'And its not enough to simply say to your children oh, oh these are catholic children going to a catholic school and they are being shouted at by protestants. It's a much more profound answer because you find yourself trying to explain the history of the conflict.'* Total escape from ascribed *'type'* categories is gained only by abjuring political participation altogether. Kim, a young single mother in a Protestant-paramilitary dominated estate, herself the daughter of a mixed marriage, describes how she and her brother mixed freely and never got into

fighters: *'We don't know the history, we don't know the religion of it and we don't really care.'* The cost is loss of political voice.

Nor is 'adaptation' a way to avoid conflict for, initially at least, it hides rather than transcends opposition, which is easily re-triggered in interaction. The most sustained reflection on this *'reactivating'* of oppositional identification was given by Josh, a middle class Protestant in his 40s. Josh developed strong unionist political views as a teenager in violent 1970s, supporting the most extreme unionist party, the Democratic Unionist Party. His views gradually moderated – he now votes for the cross-community Alliance Party, prefers to speak of himself as Northern Irish, and has a Spanish girl-friend.<sup>24</sup> His self-categorisation remains particularly sensitive to violence and perceived affront. A particularly brutal killing of British servicemen in the late 1980s threw him into *'depression'* for days and *'and yes those sort of incidents would certainly have entrenched my views at the time'*. Still today criticism of British policies and practices – he mentions criticism after police shot an innocent Brazilian in London - can bring out a strong affirmation of being British in him. *'You know I'd be fairly laissez faire in terms of religion. I just have pretty much a dislike of hard-line religion and I dislike hard line politics except when pushed into a corner when I will take a more hard-line view I suppose'*. It is significant that his girlfriend is Spanish: whatever her religious or political affiliation, it is unconnected to the Northern Ireland political and national divisions and thus she is less likely to *'push'* him *'into a corner'*.

The narratives of Northern Irish Catholic respondents, however, highlight exactly the themes that *'push'* Josh *'into a corner'*. Maggie – a Catholic in her 50s from another part of Northern Ireland – narrates a process of adaptation parallel to Josh's. She has moderated her previous strong nationalist perspective in the last decade and has begun to involve herself in cross-community activities. Yet she remains clear that the *'injustice'* and *'discrimination'* of the past caused much human suffering – she describes how badly her own father was affected. Did the fault lie in British policies or Protestant will? She refers to both factors: other Catholic respondents of moderate political views tend to blame the British state. If such criticisms of British injustice are, for Josh, *'provocative'*, his reactive defence of the British state can re-trigger opposition in Catholics of moderate nationalist views. Maggie says, referring to the injustice suffered by her father, that *'when wee things happen you know that that memory is still somewhere buried in your brain'*.

Mixed marriage respondents in Northern Ireland, like Jane and Bob, can negotiate a complex *modus vivendi* although it is significant that this couple is relatively unconcerned about politics. Others – without similar incentives to compromise and without equivalent ease of communication - have to move very far from their original stance for a stable equilibrium to be possible, and they do not agree on where that equilibrium would lie. Nor is this simply a cultural matter. It is precisely the expectation of strong reaction among the public, and politicians' fears that it will rebound against them, that sets the

<sup>24</sup> Socialised actors in Northern Ireland would be in no doubt that Spanish = Catholic by background .

parameters for political compromise in Northern Ireland.<sup>25</sup> Perceived differences in values and assumptions thus easily re-trigger political impatience and anger.

**Reaffirmation of identity: assuming a complex inheritance, generalising values, resisting change.**

Many respondents emphasised their rootedness in and identification with particular historical traditions: their family had always served in the British army, they were Protestant ‘*deep down*’, they were simply Irish. They differed from the French respondents primarily in a much greater emphasis on the complexity of their given tradition(s). Conor, a Catholic man in his forties, is particularly revealing on the mechanisms by which identity categories and contents came to be ‘inherited’. Significantly, he describes how the *elements* of future identity are transmitted, not the *identity package* itself. Conor’s mother was from a republican village, and, at the height of the violence, she would drive back home after bringing the children to visit their grandparents:

*And I do remember coming home say there would have been a [security force] checkpoint in the road, my mother would have started getting very nervous at the steering wheel of the car. And sort of saying to us in the back – one of my brothers is called Sean you see. ‘Don’t mention Sean’s name, say his name is John, when we get to this checkpoint and the man shines his torch in the window – give your name Sinclair, give your brother Paul’s name but don’t say Sean say his name is John and just say we came from Dungannon, that we are not coming from the mountains just say we were no further out the road’<sup>26</sup> ... I could actually sense the nerves from my mother and then I was very aware of it as I grew older ..... so it is something that is sort of bred in me from a young age, you know what I mean I just think that fear factor but I could see it in her – it rubbed off on us a bit as well.*

Conor, however, turns to other aspects of his background which provide alternative repertoires. He speaks of his father’s family, in particular his grandfather who volunteered for the British army in two world wars: ‘*He must have been quite open minded I think to come up and leave his roots there and to come up here and don a British uniform and go and fight, you know what I mean*’. His own father had strong Irish cultural interests and Conor develops his own self-understanding drawing on this intersection of family histories and repertoires which ‘*actually opens things up for me in a sense too*’. He is ‘*Irish and born in Ireland and .. born a Catholic*’ without needing to ‘*flaunt*’ it and open with respect to British symbolism and culture : ‘*it doesn’t bother me – I am very open minded as far as all that is concerned.*’ His children by his first marriage were brought up in a largely Protestant environment and went to state (Protestant) school (although he notes that his eldest is now more comfortable with an Irish self-definition). His present partner is Kim, daughter of a mixed marriage who lives in a Protestant estate. For Conor and many

<sup>25</sup> The history of failed initiatives in Northern Ireland is in part a history of (mis)calculations of what the public would accept and what incentives they might need to accept it.

<sup>26</sup> Sean, the Irish form of John, is a ‘Catholic’ name in Northern Ireland; Sinclair is a ‘Protestant’ name, Paul is ‘neutral’. Dungannon is a mixed town, the mountains behind highly republican.

other respondents, family history is used to legitimate and provide resources and repertoires for their own choices; it is a way of saying that they are not being untrue to their familial or their group past by blurring boundaries (cf Déchaux, 2002). Conor's neo-primordialist narrative of his complex cultural inheritance opens up for him a wide range of choice and change.

Many other respondents equally combine a strong sense of the givenness of their tradition with a familial narrative which shows its internal complexity and internal tensions: the tradition of British army service is combined with an island-wide family consciousness; the inherited Irish identity is qualified by the respondent's positioning with respect to his father in the British navy and his brother in the IRA.<sup>27</sup> Some respondents contextualised their given identity within universalist values – often phrased in terms of 'tolerance' and 'fairness'. Conor's low-keyed valuation of '*open-mindedness*', presented as a product of his complex inheritance, is however a more common mode of self-presentation than is any strong universalistic moral discourse.

There is also a cluster of respondents for whom an emphasis on inherited identity closes options.<sup>28</sup> Rather than moving from the particular to more universalisable values, they defend '*their identity*' and its specific values against those who want to '*take it away*'. They do not express any strong sense of attachment to their origins. For Zoe, a young working class woman, Protestantism is '*inured, it's just a word that has been stigmatised and given to me through birth, through a religion that I don't practice*'. Zoe describes how her own values and politics have moderated over time: she used to be more '*loyal*' (ie. extreme), but now she sees herself as '*British*' which she takes as a culturally thin, '*neutral*' category. Towards the end of the interview the following dialogue takes place:

Q. '*So now all of these categories that you talked about like your class, religion, your nationality if I was to say to you put them in order of importance which would be most important to you, to who you are as a person?*'

Z. '*Probably my identity first*'.

Q. '*Like what, and what would that be?*'

Z. '*A working class, young woman just trying to get by in life like.*'

Q: '*Right, yeah.*'

Z. '*So it would probably be identity, class and then religion and it would probably come in that order.*'

Q. '*And where would British fit in there?*'

Z. '*Em, I suppose with identity really.*'

For her neighbour, Jean, being Protestant is '*bred into me*' and '*If anybody tried to take it [being Protestant] away from me I would fight for it the same as if anybody tried to take any part of my identity away I would fight for it.*' Identity, for Jean, is not a product of her action or choice, but is given or (in

<sup>27</sup> This emphasis on complexity may be a product of thirty years of official state-certified 'revisionist' history and media coverage (emphasising multiplicity, pluralism, deconstructing nationalist ideology and origin myths) in Northern Ireland and the Irish state. Nothing of comparable scale exists in the historiography of French Protestantism.

<sup>28</sup> This was the only cluster which did not include mixed marriage respondents

the following quotation) not given: *'I'd love there to be a nationality of Northern Irish because when I go over to England they seem to be ..... pompous assholes in most things'*.

The concept of *'taking away'* identity was quite common in the interviews. For a loyalist activist from another part of Northern Ireland *'The Protestant is very, very simple, they see their culture, their identity gradually being taken away from them'*. For a young Catholic woman, *'I feel that you need to cling on to [sic] tight [to an Irish identity] because you know people want to take it away from you, just certain people just want everybody here to be British'*. Zoe uses the language of *'taking away'* (this time of the *'country'* people are living in) to describe continuing opposition from Catholics: *'I would say from my point of view yes I would say that Northern Irish Catholics and Northern Irish Protestants are all British, if you live within Northern Ireland then obviously you've got a British passport unless you've applied for a Southern one then you're British but I don't think that they view it like that, I think that they view it as in they are living in a country which has been taken away from them and they want it back and that's all there is to it like.'* The concept of identity being *'taken away'* is also a trope in contemporary loyalist political discourse.

The more one looks at these statements, the more paradoxical they become. They combine a sense of permanence (identity as *'inured'*, *'bred into me'*) with a sense of alienability (identity as something that can be *'taken away'*), and the gravity of the alienation seems to derive from the depth of the possession: for Zoe, there is the paradoxical usage of having one's country *'taken away'* even though one is still living in it. Meanwhile the respondents intersperse this discourse with a constant re-evaluation and repositioning: Zoe has already changed considerably in her self-definitions; Jean, who would fight for *'her identity'*, was one of the few respondents who would welcome a European identity; she would like rid of *'the whole lot of rubbish'* that makes for historical and national division. What then is being communicated?

First and foremost, the accounts express a sense of vulnerability: something inherited is in danger of being taken away. But *what* is in danger of being taken away? At one level, the respondents are following a reified (and inherently incoherent) official identity discourse (Gilligan, 2007). But they are also giving this discourse a sense rooted in their experience: we may begin to decipher it if we take the term *'identity'* as equivalent to *'world'* - a meaningful, historically constituted world of regularised social practices, networks, expectations, interrelations and related virtues and values. Some identity-packages, with their related assumptions and values, are dependent on the existence of such worlds: the values and virtues of the slave-holder's life, as Eugene Genovese (1988) makes clear, are as dependent on slavery as are the vices.<sup>29</sup> Such worlds are institutionally dependent. Identities can't be *'taken away'* but worlds, or at least their institutional supports, can be taken

<sup>29</sup> Genovese (1988, 135) writes that *'every attack on slavery'* was *'an attack on the morality and humanity of the slaveholders, for their self-image rested on the master-slave relationship'*. Something like this may have been true of Northern Ireland in the 1960s : by the 2000s, the cohesiveness of the social system that upheld unionism had gone ; the unionist *'world'* had become a much more local affair, dependent on state and police no longer to constitute it, but not to interfere with the informal practices which maintained it.

away, and with them goes the appropriateness of a particular identity package. This is precisely what worries some Protestants in contemporary Northern Ireland.<sup>30</sup>

When worlds change, some of their elements – meanings, memories, virtues, values – remain to be pieced together differently. Individuals adapt or assimilate, reconstituting continuities and reaffirming values. The use of the term ‘identity’ by these respondents is a way of stopping such change and stalling reconstitution and renegotiation when it becomes too challenging. Their emphasis on the given, inherited nature of their identity says nothing about their sense of historical origins or even about the personal salience of their identification: these vary individually, temperamentally and over time. A quasi-primordialist identity discourse is used by these respondents to defend against change, sometimes to mourn a lost world, rather than as a report of their own sense of historical origins or group solidarities.

### **Comparative conclusions**

Comparison reveals striking patterns of similarity and of difference between Northern Ireland and France. Respondents describe complexly negotiated processes of identity change in each situation and the directions of change are parallel. However the sequences of change are much more condensed and crisis-ridden in Northern Ireland than in France. The same interactive combinations occur, but the moves which allow negotiated compromise in France lead to further opposition in Northern Ireland. French respondents reaffirm their historical roots as much as do Northern Irish, but they also more easily find overarching values through which to contextualise them. These contrasts were evident whether the comparison was confined to mixed marriage respondents or included the whole Northern Ireland sample. They show (against hypothesis three) that individual experience and identity narratives are far from random. They reveal mechanisms at the individual level which help explain how society-wide oppositions are transcended or reproduced.

The single most significant finding of the study is that identity change is as common in Northern Ireland as in France. The persistence of opposition in Northern Ireland is a product not of unchanging identity, but of change which leads back to opposition. This finding refutes hypothesis one, that opposition is persistent in Northern Ireland and not in France because individuals do not change their ethnic identity. Indeed the comparison showed none of the expected distinguishing features of ‘ethnic’ identity in Northern Ireland. A focus on descent groups and resultant solidarity are as common among the French as the Northern Ireland respondents. Ethno-religious identity in Northern Ireland appears no more deep-rooted psychologically, nor any more associated with kin feeling, than is religious identity in Languedoc-Roussillon. If there is indeed a general human tendency to focus on categories of origin

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<sup>30</sup> Catholics, who use the discourse less often, either refer to the long-lost Gaelic world (as do traditional cultural nationalists) or to the threat to their ongoing project of building informal networks and cultural linkages (as does the young woman quoted above).



and descent, this study suggests that 'ethnic' actors are not significantly more likely to do so than are others and that those who do so focus are as likely to change the given identity package as to reaffirm it. As Déchaux (2002) argues, the contemporary mode of descent consciousness is consistent with choice and change.

The persistence of opposition in Northern Ireland is a product of mechanisms which reverse, limit or stall change in the Northern Ireland but not the French case, as predicted in hypothesis two. Some well-known social mechanisms were seen in this study. For example organisations are staffed with activists much more resistant to change in Northern Ireland than in Southern France, so preventing ripple effects. Other oft-cited mechanisms (reified identity discourses) existed in Northern Ireland in politicised form (Gilligan, 2007) and in France in ritual, commemorative form (Joutard, 1997) : their putative causal role requires more analysis. Less often discussed but equally important is the availability of alternative repertoires to guide change, which were significantly closer to hand in France than in Northern Ireland, for example in the much greater proportion of respondents who had grown up with relatives of both religions.<sup>31</sup>

The mechanisms that the actors themselves highlight are less expected : the difficulty of finding over-arching values, the web of belief which quickly unravels and which means that negotiation and change cannot be confined to one field, and the dense institutional linkages that provide multiple occasions for retriggering opposition. The French respondents describe choices within a differentiated area of life. They appeal to universalistic, overarching values to contextualize their particular religious traditions. In Northern Ireland, there is little appeal to overarching values, for particular oppositional judgements are already justified in universalistic terms. There is less differentiation, so that change on any one category quickly escalates to others, problematizing entire value-frames. This occurs even when respondents themselves attempt to differentiate spheres and concepts (as did Denise), for their boundary-breaching actions in one sphere thrust them into interactions which challenge other aspects of their self-conceptions. Whether change occurs in a 'big bang' where interrelated concepts are simultaneously challenged (as Brenda and Susan describe) or in condensed sequence (as Denise describes), the questioning of one received category leads to the questioning of others, leaving no stable ground. Change requires complex cognitive deconstructions of everyday distinctions – something more like a total paradigm shift than like the gradual evolution of values described in France. Without this, those who reaffirm their particular heritage cannot easily find universalistic values to contextualise it, and those who privatise or adapt do not gradually 'evolve' away from opposition.

It is not that people in Northern Ireland are averse to change. Rather their symbolic and institutional situation means that identity change, once it begins, has to be very radical if it is not easily to be reversed. The concern among a minority of respondents that their 'identity' would be 'taken away' is a protest

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<sup>31</sup> In Northern Ireland, but not in France, conversion in past generations typically meant cutting off contact with one's family of origin, thus there were no generational effects of mixed marriage in the past.

against institutional change, an inability to negotiate more radical individual change, rather than any expression of unchanging 'ethnic' identity.

Are the different patterns of identity change outlined above simply the product of structural differences between conflict-ridden Northern Ireland and long-peaceful religious France? Of course such factors as state structure, cleavage structure, and the proximity of violence impact on processes of identification, indirectly in the differentiation of institutional spheres and directly in the emotional charge of some habitual responses. A full explanation of the persistence of opposition and recurrence of conflict requires a multi-levelled approach which shows the interaction and (sometimes) mutual reinforcement of factors at different levels. My argument is that cognitive-cultural mechanisms are *significant* factors hindering change by affecting resources for individual deliberation and choice, not reducible to other factors. This in itself is a strong claim, and one seldom recognised in contemporary discussions of ethnic conflict. Wimmer (2008, 1003) suggests that some entrenched conflicts 'reduce the range of strategic options that actors dispose of'. I have argued that this is a matter of narrowed cognitive options, that it is an issue of (historical) epistemology rather than primarily, as he suggests, one of emotion. Of course the relative importance of cognitive-cultural understandings, communal networks and power relations/strategic interests in reproducing opposition is likely to vary between different situations and over time. Looking at a small number of cases, right down to the individual level, makes this variation starkly apparent. These results can then be fed back into comparative analysis.

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