

The Irish question and the concept 'identity' in the 1980s¹

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ABSTRACT. This article critically investigates the social construction of 'identity talk' in relation to the Irish Question in the 1980s. Our contention is that the utilisation of 'identity' imagined people as bounded groups in a particular way – as the two traditions or communities in Northern Ireland – and that this way of imagining people was deployed against 'will'-based conceptions of politics. The first part of the article places the emergence of 'identity' as a concept in its historical context and suggests four phases in the use of 'identity'. The second part focuses on 'identity' as a concept and locates its emergence within the metaconflict regarding Northern Ireland. The article concludes by reflecting on Brubaker and Cooper's (2000) analysis of 'identity' as a category of analysis in light of our case study of 'identity' as a category of practice regarding the Irish Question.

KEYWORDS: 'ethnic' conflict, identity, Northern Ireland, sovereignty.

Introduction

Since the 1970s the term 'identity' has flourished in the human sciences. 'In 1970 0.1% of all the literature indexed [by the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS)] had identity in the title. By 1990 the figure was 0.4% ... [and by 1999 it was] over 0.9%' (Gilligan 2002b: 231). The term identity – with qualifiers such as national, ethnic, religious, cultural – has taken a firm hold in the study of nations, nationalism and ethnicity. It has, for example, become commonplace to read that 'the clash of ethnic identities has led to brutal battles between neighbors in Bosnia-Herzegovina, East Timor, Kosovo, and Rwanda' (Byrne 1999: 232). This broad tendency to utilise the term identity in discussing aspects of nations, nationalism and ethnicity is also manifested in the study of, and in the discourses of, political actors in the specific context of the Northern Ireland 'problem'. Some commentators suggest that, as in Bosnia-Herzegovina and other regions of 'ethnic' conflict, violence in Northern Ireland is at root based on a clash of identities (see e.g. Bruce 1994).

Brubaker and Cooper, in their groundbreaking analysis of the concept 'identity', make a distinction between 'categories of practice' and 'categories

of analysis'. The former 'are categories of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors, as distinguished from the experience-distant categories used by social analysts' (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 4). Identity, they point out, 'is both a category of practice and a category of analysis' (*ibid.*: 4). One of its 'practical' uses, according to Brubaker and Cooper, is by political entrepreneurs: 'to persuade people that they are one; that they comprise a bounded, distinctive, solidary group; that their internal differences do not matter, at least for the purposes at hand – this is a normal and necessary part of politics, and not only of what is ordinarily characterized as "identity politics"' (*ibid.*: 34). They are, however, less sanguine about its use as a 'category of analysis' and suggest that 'the use of "identity" as an *analytical* concept . . . is riddled with ambiguity, riven with contradictory meanings, and encumbered by reifying connotations . . . Alternative analytical idioms . . . can do the necessary work without the attendant confusion' (*ibid.*: 34). Elsewhere Brubaker challenges the complacent dominance of constructivist approaches to ethnicity arguing that: 'Instead of simply asserting *that* ethnicity, race and nationhood are constructed, they [constructivist approaches] can help specify *how* they are constructed . . . They can help specify how "groupness" can "crystallize" in some situations while remaining latent and merely potential in others' (Brubaker 2002: 13). This article takes these suggestive comments as a starting point from which to critically investigate the emergence and institutionalisation of 'identity talk' in relation to the Irish Question in the 1980s.

The first part of the article provides a brief historical overview, places the emergence of 'identity' as a concept of practice in its social and political context and suggests four phases in the use of 'identity'. The second part of the article focuses on 'identity' as a concept and locates its emergence within the metaconflict – conflict about the meaning of the conflict. In this section we examine ways in which the use of the term identity involved a significant revision of the tenets of Irish nationalism, and in particular how its use displaced terms which express political will – sovereignty, self-determination, interests – with a term which emphasises belonging, and we also examine some of the resistances to the institutionalisation of 'identity talk'. The article concludes by reflecting on Brubaker and Cooper's analysis of 'identity' in light of our case study of 'identity' as a category of practice regarding the Irish Question.

Phases of identity talk

An examination of the use of the term identity as a category of practice in public political discourse about the Irish Question suggests four different phases in its use: (1) everyday, colloquial usage from the early stages of the Troubles until the early 1980s; (2) the emergence and stabilisation of 'identity talk' in public political discourse and policy documents regarding the Irish

Question, in the period from the early 1980s until 1985; (3) the institutionalisation – in the form of talking about the rights and identities of the two traditions (or communities) in Northern Ireland – of the term in the governance of Northern Ireland following the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement (Government of Ireland and the UK Government 1985); and (4) the broadening of the use of the term to refer to the recognition of the diversity of identities in Northern Ireland, and its proliferation in public policy during the peace process in the 1990s. In this section we outline these four phases as a way of helping to situate the social construction of 'identity' in its historical context.

The 1970s and colloquial use of 'identity'

There is significant disagreement about the causes, origins and nature of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Even the question of when the conflict began is disputed. Was it the killing of three civilians by the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), a pro-Union paramilitary organisation, in 1966? Or was it the civil rights street protests, begun in 1968, against discriminatory state practices which denied equal rights to Catholics which sparked the conflict? Or was it the vigorous repression of these protests by the almost entirely Protestant police force which sparked the conflict? Others suggest that it was the Irish Republican Army who were responsible, either through their use of the civil rights protests as a front for their activities, or through the military campaign of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) begun in early 1970. All of these factors, to different extents, contributed to the situation of violent crisis that characterised Northern Ireland in the early 1970s.²

In the early part of the 1970s the British government sought to work through the local devolved parliament. The British government allowed the Northern Ireland government to retain control of security (the British Army were deployed in August 1969 'in aid of the civil power') and pressurised them to make political reforms aimed at overcoming the alienation of the Catholic population from the government. Parts of Northern Ireland were effectively 'no go areas' for the British Army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the local police force. In effect they were ungovernable. In 1972, in the context of increasing violence and instability, the British government prorogued the Northern Ireland parliament and imposed Direct Rule from Westminster. Almost immediately the British government set about trying to reestablish a local parliament and in 1973 a devolved power-sharing Assembly was created. The Assembly operated through a power-sharing arrangement between pro-power-sharing Ulster Unionists and the Irish nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). The decision to share power split the Ulster Unionist Party into pro and anti power-sharing wings. The Assembly was short-lived, and collapsed amid growing opposition from Unionists, including street protests and a General Strike. Although the British government continued to rule Northern Ireland directly from Westminster, they sought to contain the Northern Ireland 'problem' and this was managed through: an

ongoing, since the 1920s, policy of bipartisanship in Westminster, in which all political parties agreed not to make a 'political' issue out of Northern Ireland; and 'Ulsterisation' and 'normalisation' of security, which saw the British Army draw back to a role largely in support of the frontline RUC (Cunningham 2001: 12–30).

The IRA, which had been winding down during the 1960s, was reinvigorated by the street violence of 1969. After a split over the question of using 'armed struggle' to pursue political objectives, the militarists formed the Provisional IRA and began a military campaign to make Northern Ireland ungovernable; to force British withdrawal from Northern Ireland; and establish a united Irish socialist Republic. In the early 1970s the IRA was in the ascendant, the instability both helped recruitment into the organisation and made their objective appear to be realisable. By the mid-1970s the IRA was suffering internal turmoil and significant tactical setbacks, and the idea that the IRA was going to bring about British withdrawal in the near future seemed doubtful. At this time the IRA developed what was to become known as the 'long war' strategy (Bew *et al.* 2002: 208).

The term identity was in the air from the early 1970s at least. In the late 1970s Mackenzie could talk of 'the proliferation of the term [political identity] in semi-popular discourse [in Britain] from about 1971' (Mackenzie 1978: 15). Richard Rose used the term national identity in one of the first major academic studies of Northern Ireland (Rose 1971). The term also enjoyed currency amongst nationalist and Unionist political actors in Northern Ireland. Denis Haughey of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), for example, stated at a party meeting in 1975 that: 'Those who ask us to abandon the Irish dimension are asking us to deny our identity; they are asking us not to be who we are' (quoted in Murray 1998: 27). The term was also employed by the New Ulster Movement, a liberal Unionist 'think tank' (New Ulster Movement 1973). In the Republic of Ireland it was employed in part of a public debate about how Ireland could best respond to the demands of a modern world (Brown 1981: 267–325). So the term was 'in the air', but it was not until the 1980s that the term began to be applied in public discussions of policy regarding Northern Ireland.

The early 1980s and the emergence of 'identity talk' in public policy

In the early 1980s there were attempts by the British government, significant political figures within Irish nationalism and Irish Republicans to regain some momentum following the containment and consolidation of the late 1970s. The British government attempted to begin a process of devolving power to politicians in Northern Ireland. The British and Irish governments initiated formal Anglo-Irish intergovernmental relations in 1981 (Arthur 2000). The SDLP, mainly in the person of party leader John Hume, sought to 'internationalise' the Northern Ireland issue through: developing links with politicians in the United States; developing influence amongst nationalist

politicians in the Republic of Ireland; and using Hume's position as Member of the European Parliament (MEP) (Murray and Tonge 2005: 83–100). The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) developed an 'integrationist' tendency – aiming to integrate Northern Ireland more fully into the rest of the United Kingdom. The British government's attempts to devolve power led to the setting up of a Northern Ireland Assembly, with provision for the devolution of powers from Westminster if the parties were able to demonstrate that they could work together. In the elections to the Assembly, held in October 1982, the SDLP stood on the basis that they would not take their seats if elected: a position which was only arrived at after a threatened split in the party. The UUP and their main Unionist rivals the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) condemned the SDLP's stance, and both parties stood in the elections and took their seats in the Assembly (O'Leary *et al.* 1988: 81–5).

In the early 1980s all of the politics of the region were overshadowed by the Republican hunger-strikes. Republicans sought to overcome their political isolation and the military stalemate through 'broadening the battlefields' beyond the military front (Clarke 1987). The setting up of the H-Blocks Committee to campaign in support of Republican prisoners who were on hunger-strike in protest at the criminalisation policy in the prisons enabled Republicans to achieve some success on this front. The campaign drew in sections of society who had previously been ambivalent towards Republicans and even acted to polarise organisations which had explicitly developed in opposition to IRA violence. As one reporter noted, the campaign 'led to a row in the Peace People and contributed to a split in the organisation. Already the H-Blocks Committee was displaying the ability to polarise non-republican organisations around itself and to become the crunch issue for them' (Clarke 1987: 102). The success of the campaign was extended further when the Committee stood Bobby Sands, the leading hunger-striker, in a Westminster by-election. The situation became even more tense and polarised when Sands, a convicted IRA 'terrorist', won the seat with over 30,000 votes, and even more polarised again when Sands died while on hunger-strike. The campaign around the hunger-strikes also showed the potential for the Northern Ireland issue to spill over the border into the Republic of Ireland when campaigners gained two seats in the Dáil, the parliament in the Republic, for hunger-striker candidates (Allen 1997: 162–3). It was this situation which provided the impetus to Fitzgerald, by now Taoiseach (Prime Minister) in the Republic of Ireland, to join forces with the SDLP and establish the New Ireland Forum (Fitzgerald 1991: 462–72).³ The electoral successes of Sands led to an organisational shift within Republicanism in which Sinn Féin became an increasingly important strand relative to the IRA. The relative importance of Sinn Féin was signalled by the development of what became known as the 'armalite and ballot box' strategy (Clarke 1987: 201–20).

In the early 1980s the term identity began to become an established feature of policy documents regarding Northern Ireland; its predominant use was in

reference to the identities of the two traditions, or two communities (Protestant/Unionist and Catholic/nationalist) in Northern Ireland. The term appears, for example, in a report produced by the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP): 'The basis of this conflict lies in the ultimate political aspirations of the two communities and in their sense of national and political identity and the allegiance that goes with it' (Ulster Unionist Council 1984: 1). The introduction to a collection of papers from a peace and reconciliation conference organised by civil society groups in 1981 states that: 'today the two communities which make up Northern Ireland are almost entirely polarised. The conflict in Northern Ireland is one between different traditions, identities and allegiances' (Rea 1982: 1). The main policy initiatives of the British government, the government of the Republic of Ireland and the European Union (then the European Community) regarding Northern Ireland in the early 1980s all employed the term 'identity'. The 1982 British government White Paper which sought to establish a devolved Assembly in Northern Ireland included a section 'The Two Identities', which stated that a 'difference in identity and aspiration lies at the heart of the "problem" of Northern Ireland' (UK Government 1982: para. 17). The Report of the New Ireland Forum states that: 'For nationalists, a central aim has been the survival and development of an Irish identity ... traditional nationalist opposition to British rule is ... seen by unionists as incompatible with the survival of their own sense of identity' (New Ireland Forum 1984: 19–21). The Report by a European Commissioner stated that: 'the conflict, deeply rooted in British – Irish history, is less one of religious strife than of conflicting national identities in Northern Ireland' (Haagerup 1984: 7). The principal impetus behind the initiatives of the two governments was to combat the challenges presented by the campaign around the hunger strikes and to bolster the position of the SDLP. As the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland put it: 'by late 1981 the Nationalist population were in no mood to co-operate: there was a flood of support for more extreme attitudes. I *had* to back support for moderation' (Prior 1986: 192).

Anglo-Irish relations and the institutionalisation of 'identity talk'

The policy document which securely established identity as a key concept in official political discourse was the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985). The Agreement affirmed the ambiguous constitutional status of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom for as long as a majority of its people wished and established an Intergovernmental Conference 'concerned with Northern Ireland and with relations between the two parts of the island of Ireland' (Government of Ireland and the UK Government 1985: Article 2a). The Conference had a remit to cover four main areas: political matters; security and related matters; legal matters, including the administration of justice; and cross-border co-operation on economic, social and cultural matters. The

explicit reference to Northern Ireland and all Ireland dimensions was a novel feature of Anglo-Irish relations. Previous bilateral Agreements between the two governments had been concerned with broader areas of common interest. Under the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council established in 1981, for example, twenty bilateral meetings were held between January 1982 and November 1983, six of which were concerned with the Kinsale gas project and only five were on matters relevant to the situation in Northern Ireland (Hadden and Boyle 1989: 5). The Conference has been described as giving the Government of the Republic of Ireland a role that is "more than consultative" though "less than executive" in the running of Northern Ireland (*ibid.*: 23). Following its formal signing, the Agreement was registered at the United Nations.

The Agreement was welcomed internationally, with the United States, Canadian and New Zealand governments providing financial support to underwrite the Agreement (Hadden and Boyle 1989: 49). The motion to approve the Agreement was passed at Westminster with '473 votes in favour and 47 against . . . the biggest majority of the Thatcher era' (Owen 1994: 43). The vote in the Dáil was much closer – 88 votes to 75 – than in Westminster. FitzGerald argued publicly that the Agreement recognised the Irish aspiration to the unity of Ireland, but that this would never come about without the consent of the majority in Northern Ireland. Political opinion in the Republic was divided. The main opposition party, Fianna Fail, voted against the Agreement on the grounds that it was 'repugnant to the Constitution of Ireland' which laid claim to Northern Ireland as part of the national territory (*ibid.*: 40). Mary Robinson resigned from the coalition government, objecting that the Agreement 'would be unacceptable to all sections of Unionist opinion' (*ibid.*: 37). 'Unacceptable' was an understatement. The Agreement led to a popular campaign of opposition amongst Unionists in Northern Ireland; dissension within the ranks of the RUC; a one-day strike by Unionist workers; the resignation of all the Unionist MPs at Westminster; and attacks on the RUC by loyalist paramilitaries (*ibid.*: 45–145). The Agreement, however, unlike the ill-fated power-sharing Assembly of 1973, was not so susceptible to collapse by these withdrawals of consent. Under the Agreement, 'Unionists are denied formal access to policy formulation unless they take advantage of the possibilities for devolution which are built into the [Agreement]' (O'Leary 1987: 14). The British government continued to make the point to Unionists that unless they accepted some form of power-sharing with nationalists in Northern Ireland they would be in no position to influence the workings of the Agreement. Republicans, perhaps surprisingly given the anti-Republican motivation for the Agreement, had a 'double-edged response' to the Agreement (Murray and Tonge 2005: 147–62). They were hostile to the security measures, but some figures within Republicanism also viewed it as a concession to Irish nationalists.

The term 'identity' appears in the preamble to the Agreement, the section establishing the terms of the Conference and the section on 'political matters'.

The term 'identity' was central to the latter section which defined political matters as 'measures to recognise and accommodate the rights and identities of the two traditions in Northern Ireland, to protect human rights and to prevent discrimination' (Government of Ireland and the UK Government 1985: Article 5a). The section elaborates by indicating that policy areas relevant to identity, human rights and discrimination 'include measures to foster the cultural heritage of both traditions, changes in electoral arrangements, the use of flags and emblems, the avoidance of economic and social discrimination and the advantages and disadvantages of a Bill of Rights' (*ibid.*: Article 5a). 'Identity' measures became institutionalised in the governance of Northern Ireland during the second half of the 1980s. In 1986 the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights, a quango established in 1973 to advise the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (the main British Government representative in Northern Ireland) on matters pertaining to discrimination and the law, commissioned a report on community relations. The Report contributed to the setting up of a Central Community Relations Unit within the Northern Ireland Civil Service; the promotion of community relations programmes within the voluntary, or not-for-profit, sector; the setting up of a Community Relations Council, in 1990; and the introduction of community relations into local government (Frazer and Fitzduff 1992; Knox and Hughes 1995). Alongside these measures the government developed a number of 'identity' orientated programmes in schools (Gallagher 1995). By the end of the 1980s 'identity' had thus become an important 'category of practice' at the heart of the governance of Northern Ireland (Nic Craith 2003).

The peace process and the proliferation of recognition

The Northern Ireland peace process was the defining feature of politics in Northern Ireland in the 1990s. The term 'identity' was central to the peace process. The term was the central theme of a keynote speech given by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in 1992 which was widely seen as an overture to Irish Republicans and helped pave the way to the IRA ceasefire in 1994 (Arthur 2000: 239–40). It was also central to every major policy initiative from the Downing Street Declaration in 1993 to the peace Agreement of 1998 and beyond (Gilligan 2002b). The peace Agreement has been criticised on the grounds that providing the two communities with 'autonomy over matters of central concern to their sense of identity ... endorses social segregation ... giving equal legitimacy to "British" and "Irish" cultural identities ... in "separate but equal" terms' (Wilford 2001: 60–1). Paradoxically, the peace process has also been accompanied by social fragmentation and a proliferation of claims for the recognition of particular identities, often on the basis of claiming victim status (Finlay 2001).

The metaconflict and the challenge to traditional Irish nationalist ideology

In this section we focus on the way in which the term identity was used to conceptualise the Irish Question. War, as Clausewitz famously declared, is politics by other means. All wars have their political as well as their military dimensions, and violent conflict in Northern Ireland is no exception. Alongside the military campaign the protagonists have fought an ideological campaign. The term 'identity' emerged, and has been deployed, as a category of practice as part of a broader ideological battle. The main object of attack in this ideological battle was Irish Republicanism, and one of the main forms that the attack took was a challenge to traditional Irish nationalist ideology. In this section we examine this ideological battle in more detail through an examination of the competing interpretations of the Irish Question; an outline of the revision of traditional Irish nationalism in the New Ireland Forum; and an outline of the revision of the British position on Northern Ireland.

Interpreting Northern Ireland

Whyte makes a distinction between accounts and analyses which emphasise factors internal to Northern Ireland – religious differences, ethnic difference, economic inequality/discrimination – as key explanatory factors for understanding the problem, and those which emphasise factors external to Northern Ireland – British colonial policy, British capitalist interests, Irish irredentism (1990). Whyte points out that prior to the emergence of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement in 1968, only one text emphasised factors internal to Northern Ireland and 'the bulk of the ... literature then available ... could be classified as traditional nationalist or traditional unionist' (*ibid.*: 202). The traditional Irish nationalist view was that: '(1) the people of Ireland form one nation; and (2) the fault for keeping Ireland divided lies with Britain' (*ibid.*: 117). The traditional Ulster Unionist view was that: '(1) there are two distinct people in Ireland, unionist and nationalist (or Protestant and Catholic); and (2) the core of the problem is the refusal of nationalists to recognize this fact, and to accord unionists the same right of self-determination as they claim for themselves ... unionists tend to see the mainland British as unreliable allies who are too prone to give in to the nationalists' (*ibid.*: 146). During the early 1970s, 'Marxist interpretations enjoyed a vogue' (*ibid.*: 202). Despite the best efforts of Marxists, traditional nationalists and traditional Unionists, however, the 'internal-conflict interpretation' has, since the emergence of the campaigns for civil rights in 1968, become 'not far from being a dominant paradigm' (Whyte 1990: 203; McGarry and OLeary 1995: 326).

While traditional nationalist, Unionist and Marxist approaches are self-evidently ideological, the internal-conflict interpretation does not immediately appear to be so. Its popularity, however, has not been as a result of its scientifically objective superiority over the 'ideologically' driven interpretations,

but has been gained through sustained and concerted efforts to promote an internal-conflict interpretation. The idea that the source of the problem lies internal to Northern Ireland is sustained by the approach of successive British governments towards Northern Ireland. The convention of bipartisanship in Westminster prevented Northern Ireland from becoming a 'political football' in parliamentary debates, thus supporting the view that Northern Ireland was a matter internal to the province and that the British government remained above the conflict as a neutral arbiter. The policy of Ulsterisation helped to sustain the idea that it was an internal conflict through placing the locally recruited mainly Protestant RUC into the frontline. The internal-conflict interpretation has also been promoted through the mass media in Britain in which 'the official view of the conflict is based on an assumption, rarely made explicit, that the state is legitimate . . . and any manifestations of unrest could only be explained as emanating from "extremists"' (Miller 1996: 209). The internal-conflict interpretation has also been bolstered by those Irish nationalists who have sought to uphold the legitimacy of British rule in Northern Ireland.

The New Ireland Forum and the revision of traditional Irish nationalism

The SDLP and Fine Gael, their party leaders in particular, sought to develop an approach to Northern Ireland which could introduce an Irish dimension to Northern Ireland without challenging the legitimacy of British rule in Northern Ireland. This involved trying to reconcile elements of the traditional nationalist, traditional Unionist and internal-conflict interpretations. There were three elements to this accommodation: challenging the traditional conception of self-determination; acknowledging the existence of two peoples on the island of Ireland; and suggesting a political framework in which unionism and nationalism could be accommodated. 'Identity' was a useful concept in helping to make this shift. It moved the referent for 'Irishness' away from territorial space and into the realms of subjective feeling. An Irish identity made the aspiration to a united Ireland an issue of self-conception and cultural recognition, rather than an issue of national self-determination.

The main institution through which this revision was achieved was the New Ireland Forum (1983–4) (New Ireland Forum 1984). The importance of the term identity to this shift is indicated by the fact that the terms 'identity' or 'identities' appeared forty-seven times in the thirty-eight pages of the Forum's final Report. The Report presents Irish nationalism as a political ideology which has been centrally concerned with identity. In the section on 'Assessment of the Present Problem', for example, it claims that for Irish 'nationalists, a *central* aim has been the survival and development of an Irish identity' (New Ireland Forum 1984: 19; emphasis added). This claim shifts the aim of nationalists from national self-determination, a concept which expresses political will and future destiny, to national identity, a concept which emphasises belonging and continuity with the past. The Report, in a section

on 'Unionist Identity and Attitudes', goes on to acknowledge the importance of a British identity to Unionists and points out that the 'traditional nationalist opposition to British rule is thus seen by Unionists as incompatible with the survival of their own sense of identity' (*ibid.*: 21). This acknowledgement of the British identity of Unionists allows the authors of the Report to shift from the traditional nationalist idea that the people of Ireland form one nation towards the Unionist view that there are two distinct peoples on the island of Ireland. The shift registers a move from an understanding of conflict which downgrades political contestation – opposition to British rule – in favour of cultural recognition. The reference to survival also registers an emphasis on the past, something which is also reflected in the document's references to the 'two traditions'.

This revision of traditional Irish nationalism, however, was not a forgone conclusion. In order for FitzGerald to establish the Forum he needed to be in a position of power to do so. FitzGerald's accession to power in the Republic of Ireland came, ironically, from an attempt by Haughey, the reining Taoiseach, to use the 'grave and tragic situation in Northern Ireland', at the height of tensions over the hunger-strikes, to call a snap election in 1981 to bolster his faltering government (Arthur 2000: 183). In a situation where national debt was approaching twenty per cent of GNP, and the rate of unemployment was approaching ten per cent, the ploy failed and FitzGerald became Taoiseach; but only for a short period. In 1982, a period described as 'revolving door' government, both party leaders' reigns were short-lived. FitzGerald returned to power in November 1982. After FitzGerald's return to power his attempt to promote the Forum met with opposition from an unexpected quarter: his own Cabinet. His own party was concerned that his energies would be deflected from the state of the economy and would become absorbed in Northern Ireland. He had to work hard behind the scenes trying to persuade his colleagues to support the initiative and eventually had to resort to using an emergency procedure in order to circumvent the opposition within his own party (Fitzgerald 1991: 464–5). On publication of the Report in May 1984 – with its three proposed options of a united Ireland; a federal/confederal state; and joint (British–Irish) authority – Haughey attempted to give the Report a traditional nationalist 'spin' when he publicly 'maintained that only a unitary state would bring peace to the North. FitzGerald . . . [and] Hume were horrified by Haughey's reaction which almost upstaged the Forum Report itself' (Collins 2000: 154). Hume too met with resistance from traditional nationalists within his own party. FitzGerald, for example, reports that SDLP deputy leader Seamus Mallon colluded with Fianna Fail leader Haughey in an attempt to scupper all but a united Ireland as an option arising from the New Ireland Forum discussions (1991: 486–7). The Forum accommodated the traditional Unionist view that there were two distinct people in Ireland. It also attempted to address the traditional Unionist concern that Irish nationalists do not accord them the same right to national self-determination, by rewriting the understanding of national self-determination and promoting the principle

of Unionist consent. Following the Anglo-Irish Agreement, some revisionist Irish nationalists have also sought to articulate a post-nationalist view of politics; a view which is focused 'principally on the question of identity' (Cunningham 1997: 16).

The British government and the revision of the internal-conflict interpretation

British government policy towards Northern Ireland since the late 1960s has often been characterised as one of containment. This policy has underpinned the internal-conflict interpretation. In order to maintain the policy in the face of its opponents, however, the British government has been forced to modify its interpretation of the conflict. The White Paper of 1982, with its utilisation of the language of 'identity', signalled a departure from a conception of the population of Northern Ireland as divided between 'ordinary decent people' and 'extremists', to a more fundamental divide between two communities characterised by ethnic difference. In this regard the emergence of the language of 'identity' was an implicit concession on the part of the British government that they were losing in the attempt to win the allegiance of the Catholic population and that 'more extreme attitudes', to use Prior's term cited earlier, enjoyed legitimacy amongst a significant section of the Catholic population.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement signed in 1985 also signalled a significant shift, away from an attempt at a purely internal solution to cooperating with a foreign power in the management of a conflict within the borders of the United Kingdom. The strand was also aimed at overcoming the alienation of significant sections of the Catholic population from British rule in Northern Ireland. While there was little resistance to the shift towards the language of the two communities or two traditions, there was significant resistance to the development of an 'Irish dimension' to the governance of Northern Ireland. The most visibly obvious resistance to this shift was the campaign by Ulster Unionists against the Agreement. Less obvious, but more fundamental, resistance came from the influential integrationist lobby within the Conservative Party, including some of Margaret Thatcher's closest allies. Prior, for example, reports that Margaret Thatcher 'insisted that the separate chapter on Anglo-Irish relations in my draft [of the 1982 White Paper] should be scrapped, and a less positive version incorporated at the end of the chapter on "The Two Identities" in Northern Ireland' (Prior 1986: 197). Integrationists, overwhelmingly 'within that section of the right whose principal concerns are, or have been, non-economic; imperial, moral, religious and national concerns being prevalent', sought to move away from an arm's length approach to containment and instead integrate Northern Ireland fully into the British state (Cunningham 1995: 35). They argued, in line with traditional Unionist thinking, that Northern Ireland's ambiguous constitutional position, which permitted secession from the state if a majority voted for it, made the position

of Unionists insecure and encouraged Irish nationalists in their ambitions to end British rule in Ireland.

Both the integrationists and devolutionists sought to contain the threat from Irish Republicanism, but they differed in the measures that they proposed in order to do so. The potential benefit of integration would be to encourage the Catholic population of Northern Ireland to identify as British and to enable all of the population of Northern Ireland to vote for British political parties. The danger was that the rest of the UK would no longer be insulated from the Irish Question and the issue of the British state's right to rule would be imported into the centre of politics.⁴ The fact that an Irish dimension won out, in the form of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, demonstrates that the arguments for the continuation of the arm's length approach, albeit in a modified form, won out over the integrationists.

Assessing 'identity'

In this section we return to Brubaker and Cooper's analysis of 'identity' and reexamine it in the light of our findings from the specific case study of the Irish Question. We focus on two of their claims: that 'identity' is encumbered by reifying connotations, and is riddled with ambiguity. And we consider the distinction between 'identity' as a category of analysis and 'identity' as a category of practice.

Reification

In the academic literature the term 'identity politics' is usually employed to distinguish 'action – individual or collective – [which is] governed by *particularistic self-understandings* rather than by *putatively universal self-interest*' (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 6: emphasis in the original). Identity politics reifies groups through attempting 'to persuade people that they are one ... a bounded, distinctive, solidary group' (*ibid.*: 34). Identity politics, however, is not the only form of politics which reifies groups in this way. In the talks between the SDLP and Sinn Fein in 1988 the SDLP posed the following question: '2. Do you accept that the Irish people are at present deeply divided on the question of how to exercise self-determination?' (Sinn Fein 1988: 11). Sinn Fein responded by saying that the SDLP was confused on the distinction between 'the question of political allegiance and the question of how to exercise self-determination' (*ibid.*: 11). The Irish people, Sinn Fein granted, were divided in their political allegiance between Unionists and Nationalists. This was not, however, the same as self-determination; which can only be decided by the Irish people as a collective whole. The focus of Sinn Fein's objection is the British government, not Ulster Unionists. As the document puts it:

It is the British government's refusal to recognize Irish national rights, nationhood, integrity of the national territory, national independence and sovereignty – which has caused the problem and maintains it. Sinn Féin recognises that unionists have democratic rights which not only can be upheld but must be upheld in an independent Ireland. That is a democratic norm. Those democratic rights, however, must not extend to a veto over the national rights of the Irish people as a whole (*ibid.*: 12).

This presentation of the issue is firmly located in the traditional nationalist interpretation of the conflict. Sinn Féin present the issue as one of national liberation, not ethnic difference. Differences are acknowledged, but these are characterised as ones of political allegiance, not 'ethnic' difference. Republicans have sought to persuade the Irish people that they are one, a bounded, distinctive solidary group, not on the basis of a particularist self-understanding but on the basis of putative universal self-interest. They employ the language of democratic rights, nationhood, integrity of the national territory, national independence and sovereignty, *not* the language of identity. They made a claim for self-determination for all the Irish people, including Protestants in Northern Ireland. This meant imagining Protestants as Irish people. This conception of politics is universal in the sense that the contemporary social world is universally divided up into sovereign nation-states. It is *putatively* universal in the sense that the existence of nation-states of necessity divides humanity up into particular groups, defined by nationality.

One route that the British and Irish governments could have taken was to answer the Irish Question by finally agreeing the sovereign status of Northern Ireland; either as part of a united Ireland or by fully integrating Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom. The opponents of Irish Republicanism choose to do neither, but instead to maintain the ambiguous constitutional position of Northern Ireland. Faced with a Republican opposition which sought to impose what it saw as the will of the Irish people, the two governments and their supporters instead employed the language of identity as a means to provide a smokescreen around the issue of sovereignty. The opponents of Irish Republicans have sought to persuade people that their actions were governed by particularistic self-understandings. Not only did they attempt to do this on an ideological front, but they developed institutions and everyday practices – CCRU, school curriculum, local government – based on the assumption of the existence of two traditions, or two communities, in Northern Ireland. These measures sought to encourage people in Northern Ireland – Unionist and nationalist – to abandon struggles for political sovereignty in return for measures which recognised their cultural identities. Both Irish Republicans and their opponents reified groups, but they did so in different ways and to different ends. Ironically, given their parties' self-conceptions as modernising and civic in orientation, Fine Gael and the SDLP ethnicised the Irish Question through encouraging an interpretation of the conflict as one between two cultural identities.

Ambiguity

Brubaker and Cooper suggest that 'the use of "identity" as an *analytical* concept . . . is riddled with ambiguity' and this is one of the reasons why they cast doubt on the utility of 'identity' as a category of analysis (2000: 34). Sir David Goodall, one of the senior British civil servants involved in drawing up the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, has acknowledged the ambiguity of the term 'identity' as a category of practice:

Terms like 'identity' and 'tradition' blur the hard edges of the real division between Nationalist and Unionist in Northern Ireland and conveniently obscure the fact that an essential element in their 'identity' is precisely the Unionists' sense of living on territory which is part and parcel of the United Kingdom and not of the Republic [of Ireland] (Goodall 1995: 37).

Goodall belatedly laments the ambiguity attendant to the concept identity. This ambiguity, however, was something which made 'identity' a useful category of practice for opponents of Irish Republicanism in the 1980s and 1990s. 'Identity' helped to move the referent for 'Irishness' away from territorial space and into the realms of subjective feeling. Liberated from its anchor in territory, national identity could become a 'post-national identity . . . based on multiple identities . . . not focused on the territorial nation-state but on more reflexive reference points' (Delanty 1996: 20). This view of identity often presents itself as 'people-centred' and pluralist, but it advances through deconstructing will-based conceptions of politics. This can be illustrated through John Hume's claim that the real border is in people's hearts and minds.

One of the first arguments that we [the SDLP] put forward, which was a challenge to traditional Nationalist thinking, was that it was people who have rights and not territory. It was not the land of Ireland that was divided, it was the people of Ireland. The line on the map was geographical, but the real border was in the minds and hearts of the people (Hume 1996: 15).

This quote, and the use of 'identity' in relation to the Irish Question, involves an intellectual sleight-of-hand. It is, of course, true that people have rights not territory. Territory, as an entity lacking agency, is unable to campaign for or exercise rights. It is people who have rights but, in a world of nation-states, it is within the territorial boundaries of the state that these rights are exercised and it is the nation-state which is the ultimate guarantor of these rights.⁵ Territory is not merely defined by a line on a map, but by a wide range of state powers and practices. The right to national self-determination to exercise sovereign power is not a right given to territories, but to the people who inhabit the territory of the state. As Bickerton, Cunliffe and Gourevich put it:

. . . what makes the power of sovereignty distinct is its rootedness in human agency; it is a force that is only sustained by conscious human will . . . The ability to direct oneself only emerges in the self-creative process of acting politically. For all its historical imperfections . . . the framework of the sovereign state remains the best means of organizing and sustaining the process of politics . . . critics of sovereignty express a

rather limited view of politics . . . [and] they reflect a politics that attempts to conceal its own existence (Bickerton *et al.* 2007: 14).

Hume and others who have promoted 'identity talk' are not hostile to the state as such, but to the popular will which gives substance to state sovereignty. In contrast to their hostility to vigorous expressions of human agency, they support measures, such as the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which attempt to circumvent the will of the people, and look favourably upon transnational institutions such as the European Union and a British – Irish Council which have only weak mechanisms for popular accountability (Cunningham 1997: 16–18).

Category of analysis versus category of practice

Brubaker and Cooper focused on identity as a category of analysis and suggested that identity was too ambiguous and loaded with reifying connotations to be useful for analytical work. This could be taken as a suggestion (not one made by Brubaker and Cooper) that analysis is best left to academics and that practice is for others to do. This suggestion, however, involves an artificial (for analytical purposes) separation between theory and practice. Analytical distinctions help us to conceptually grasp reality in order to shape that reality for our own purposes. Academic distinctions are not the preserve of academics. Irish Republicans and their opponents have deployed different concepts because they conceptualised the Irish Question in different terms. They have sought to give practical organisational expression to these conceptualisations of the Irish Question. Republicans, attempting to challenge and overturn the existing institutional structures of governance, employed will-based concepts. Their opponents, attempting to bolster the legitimacy of the existing state institutions, have employed concepts which emphasise belonging and shift from an understanding of conflict which is primarily political to one which is primarily cultural and psychological.

What our analysis suggests is that the origins of the Northern Ireland peace process in the 1990s lie in the use of 'identity' as a means to contain the Irish Republican struggle for national self-determination. The fact that Republicans embraced the language of identity in the 1990s is an indication of the success of this strategy. One of its costs, however, has been to institutionalise ambiguity at the heart of the peace process. As Dixon has noted, the peace process has been advanced through 'choreography and play-acting', 'constructive ambiguity' and 'necessary fictions' which were deployed to demobilise parties and voters from a conflict orientation and 'reeducate' them in the new realities of Northern Ireland (Dixon 2002: 733–7). This, however, has been at a cost. One of the results of these forms of deception has been to promote a diminished sense of human agency, something which undercuts the peace process itself and has contributed to its instability (Gilligan 2003).

Conclusion

This article has presented Northern Ireland as a case study in the social construction of 'identity'. We have pointed out that it was actors who view themselves as civic, revisionist and post-national who inserted 'identity' into public political discourse. We have argued that this was part of an attempt to undermine the Irish Republican campaign for national self-determination. The use of the term 'identity', however, was not guaranteed, even among those who had a common interest in undermining Republicanism. The utilisation of the term required it to have powerful advocates – FitzGerald, Hume – and for those advocates to be in positions of power, and to be able to find institutional forms through which identity talk could be embedded – the New Ireland Forum, the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Central Community Relations Unit, the school curriculum – and influence everyday practices. The journey to the institutionalisation of identity also depended to some extent on contingent factors, such as FitzGerald becoming head of state in the Republic of Ireland. The opponents of Irish Republicanism have succeeded in containing the threat posed by the campaign for national self-determination. There is a danger, however, that in the process they institutionalised a rather limited view of politics, and one which attempts to conceal its own existence.

Notes

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1 We use the term the Irish Question because it suggests a dilemma which requires resolution, rather than other terms, such as the Northern Ireland problem, which suggest that it is the inhabitants of Northern Ireland who constitute a problem; on the Irish Question in historical context see: Boyce 1996.

2 For overviews of the Northern Ireland conflict see: Arthur 2000; Bew *et al.* 2002; O'Leary and McGarry 1993; Ruane and Todd 1996.

3 The Forum was a meeting of the main 'constitutional' Irish nationalist parties on the island of Ireland which sat between 1983 and 1984 and heard invited written submissions and oral presentations from a range of individuals and organisations.

4 The 1980s, it is worth remembering, was the decade in which the government fought against Argentina (in the Falklands/Malvenas War) as the enemy without and the labour movement, the National Union of Miners in particular, as the enemy within (Thatcher 1993; Prior 1986: 131–73).

5 Critics of state sovereignty point to human rights as instruments which transcend the nation-state and guarantee rights; for a critique of this view see: Chandler 2002. For an argument that the adoption of human rights discourse by the British state has actually helped to bolster British rule in Northern Ireland see: Gilligan 2002a.

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