

Ireland's Obdurate Nationalisms

Interviewer: What have you got against Roman Catholics?
Belfast Protestant: Are you daft? Why, their religion of course.

Things in Ireland can be even worse than that. Sectarianism from a Belfast Protestant is nothing new; but even Irish liberal pluralists can be a bitterly partisan bunch, excoriating traditional prejudices with a virulence so unremitting as to involve them in a kind of performative contradiction. In this articulate, claustrophobic, intensely combative culture, theoretical enquiry is now so locked into political doctrine, power and discourse so intimately intertwined, that even Michel Foucault might have been driven to put in a word for disinterestedness. There are commentators on Irish affairs today who would be simply incapable of giving a fair review to the work of their political opponents. And much of this is in line with a history which, given the relative absence of an industrial middle class, the depth of ethnic division and the dominance of a corporatist Catholicism in the island as a whole, never produced any very flourishing liberal tradition.

John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary's eminently judicious, splendidly level-headed study of Northern Ireland is therefore especially welcome.* McGarry and O'Leary, it should be said, are not in the least disinterested—they are, by and large, 'neo-nationalists' of the SDLP variety—but they strive to give both Unionist and traditional nationalist causes their due, before proceeding to rap them both sternly over the knuckles (the book's partisan subtext peeps through in the more sardonic, polemical tone of its endnotes). Beginning with Irish nationalism, while properly insisting that Unionism is in fact a species of nationalism too, they discriminate its exclusively ethnic and inclusively civic varieties, and acknowledge that Sinn Fein, despite its almost wholly ethnic constituency, is formally committed to the latter. They are critical, however, of Sinn Fein's majoritarian (all-Ireland) principle of self-determination: if the principle of majority self-determination within Ulster alone had been operative at the time of partition then Fermanagh and Tyrone, along with

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as well—abstractly true but historically irrelevant; British policy in Ireland has been determined by reasons other than defensive ones, and the end of the Cold War has not, yet, led to a reversal of the British commitment there. These are arguable claims; but they pass over too quickly the importance of sovereignty, for the sake of which the British ruling class was prepared to go to war over an inconsiderable South Atlantic archipelago and is currently tearing itself apart over Europe. The book risks straw-targeting all Marxism as economic reductionism; and its arguments against the analogy between the IRA and other wars of anti-colonial liberation are in general rather shaky. The fact that the IRA, unlike the Vietcong, 'do not enjoy the active military support of the contiguous state they are fighting to unite with' is hardly a knockdown case. The book is not implacably opposed to the anti-colonial model of Northern Ireland, but prefers to view the war in the North as a national rather than anti-colonial affair. Whether these dimensions can be quite so neatly distinguished is surely doubtful. The struggle in Northern Ireland has indeed been an ethno-national, partly intra-class conflict, but for it to fail in this way to conform to a 'classical' class or anti-colonial paradigm is no reason to undervalue its class or anti-colonial aspects. Is a struggle launched wholly by women against wage-cuts class warfare, or is it not? No Marxism worth the name has claimed that anti-imperialist warfare is simply inter-class conflict in exotic or exported guise. The fact that 'liberal democracies outside the British Isles have not seen the conflict as a war of national liberation' is neither here nor there; neither, strangely enough, have they tended to view commercial television as a form of cultural exploitation. No Marxist needs to argue—though some in Ireland and elsewhere certainly have—that national, ethnic and religious conflicts are the 'mere by-products of capitalism which will disappear in socialist societies'; but neither is there nothing to be said for the green Marxist case that partition has gravely weakened working-class unity and the cause of socialism in Ireland.

McGarry and O'Leary then turn to the discourse of Unionism, discriminating its devolutionist and integrationist wings, and critically inspecting its claim that the primary cause of the Northern conflict is the irredentist posture of the Irish Republic and the uncertainty of the British commitment to the region. The authors point out in response that the Unionists have never taken the nationalist minority in the North seriously; that they have consistently denied their unjust treatment of them; and that—since most UK citizens apparently do not regard the Unionists as authentically British—some of the arguments Unionist use to reject the nationalist case for a single Irish nation can be deployed just as effectively to dismiss their own case for Northern Ireland as exclusively part of the British nation-state. Unionist 'majoritarian' thinking is arguably incoherent: if it holds that the majority in the UK cannot overrule the preferences of the majority within Northern Ireland, then it has no grounds for claiming that the majority within Northern Ireland should overrule the preferences of the minority there. Unionism's hostility to the irredentist clauses of the Republic's constitution overlooks the fact that Article 29 of the same constitution binds the southern state to the pacific settlement of international disputes. A strain of revisionist Unionism views the British state as an embodiment of pluralism and liberal individualism, in contrast to an ethnically based nation-state, and thus as

about Roman Catholic ethics—they are mostly moral conservatives themselves—or lose sleep over the doctrine of papal infallibility. Catholics in the North have been discriminated against as potentially disloyal republicans, not for saying the rosary. It follows that increasing secularization, ecumenism or educational integration are unlikely in themselves to bring peace to the region. Much the same applies to the cultural panaceas beloved of some Northern middle-class liberals. There are some interesting arguments to the effect that the cultural histories of both Northern communities predispose them for different reasons to non-statist styles of thought, and so perhaps to pre-modern or unofficial forms of violence, and that in both cases a strong cultural egalitarianism inhibited the growth of disciplining, hegemonic political parties. Each community sees itself as part of a rightful majority, but also considers itself an insecure and maltreated minority, hence combining majoritarian arrogance with minoritarian grievance.

But such culturalist explanations, which locate the sources of violence within the communities themselves, offer false comfort to the colonial power, and overlook the truth that all ethnic groups nurture myths about their historical past. There is, so the authors claim, no well-established evidence of a specifically Irish obsession with history, and the cultural traits supposedly particular to the Irish situation exist elsewhere without generating armed conflict. The Northern Irish are exceptional only in that the national conflicts which have dominated Europe for over a century have with them not yet been resolved, a condition which has precious little to do with some endemic atavism or weakness of modernity. Irish nationalism flourished just at the historical point where the country was becoming thoroughly anglicized, and a survey of the 1960s suggested that Northern Catholics and Protestants differed on very few matters other than political ones. The origins of the Northern contention had a good deal more to do with the absolute expansion of the postwar Catholic middle class in the area, breeding higher social expectations, than with traditions of tribal warfare. Both Unionist and nationalist groups are happy enough to tolerate each other's religious and national culture; what they find hard to swallow is the fact that the state of the other community claims sovereignty over what they regard as their own territory. The conflict, in short, is 'rational', not 'cultural'; there is no fundamental problem of cultural misunderstanding in Northern Ireland—on the contrary, each community knows only too well what the other desires—and cultural solutions will not in themselves unlock the impasse.

Nor, for that matter, will economic ones. Some nationalists point to the ways in which the European Union has made a united Ireland more attractive from an economic perspective; the economic interests of the North and the Republic are now more similar than those of Northern Ireland and Great Britain, and in a 'Europe of the regions' the North might fare better as a sizeable chunk of Ireland than as a marginal piece of the UK. But the Northern nationalists will only be satisfied with full political recognition, not just with socio-economic reforms, as their continuing alienation from political institutions now formally committed to combating economic discrimination would suggest. Equally, Unionists are committed to a good deal more than their economic or social privileges. If economic deprivation alone were responsible for the

merely tinkering with the mechanisms of a state which is viewed as wholly illegitimate, which should never have been invented in the first place and which has no right to exist. McGarry and O'Leary would naturally reject this viewpoint as extremist and intransigent, and it has often enough been precisely that. But it need not in fact entail the slightest hostility to a generous amount of Northern Protestant self-determination. It is simply the arguable case that if those Protestants have a right to self-determination but their state has no right to exist in its present form, then the solution which might best secure both of these objectives would be a non-partitioned Ireland with a high degree of political autonomy for the Northern Protestant community. But in appearing to pitch everything upon what the Unionists of Northern Ireland will currently countenance, McGarry and O'Leary are in dire danger of transgressing their own proper insistence that the right to self-determination of the nationalist minority in the North must be accommodated too. How complete a veto over desirable solutions are the Unionists to be conceded, given that they might well be ill-persuaded even of the book's extravagantly modest proposal? Is it really an appropriate response to a deadlock which the authors themselves have supremely well demonstrated to have deep historical and structural determinants to suggest that, in a reformed Northern Ireland, 'it might be thought appropriate to invite experienced officers from the Garda Siochana (the Republic's police force) to join the NIPS (Northern Ireland Police Service)? Is it only nationalist diehards who might suspect that these proposals fail to measure up to the size of the problem which the book itself has so excellently dissected? McGarry and O'Leary are finally more successful in betraying the obduracy of the problem than in furnishing a satisfying solution; but in the process their lucidity, thoroughness and formidable powers of analysis have put every student of the topic in their debt.