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Editors

John Stone is Professor and Chair of Sociology at Boston University. He is the author of *Racial Conflict in Contemporary Society* (1986).

Rutledge Dennis is Professor of Sociology at George Mason University. He is the editor of *Race and Ethnicity Research Methods* (1993) and *Research in Race and Ethnic Relations: Racial and Ethnic Politics* (1997).

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RACE AND ETHNICITY

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Comparative and Theoretical Approaches



Edited by John Stone and Rutledge Dennis

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12 Northern Ireland and the Liabilities of Liberalism

John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary

Liberal explanations of ethnic and ethno-national conflicts and liberal prescriptions for their resolution enjoy wide currency in the academic world. In the classical liberal perspective properly-ordered states are composed of individuals who are self-interestedly rational; for instance, they establish states to provide for their security, and they join groups or political parties to advance their own interests. Society itself is conceived of as an arrangement to satisfy pre-existing individual interests, a 'co-operative venture for mutual advantage' (Rawls 1971, p. 4). In liberal ideology it is only in benighted and backward societies that individuals put an unchosen group identity – such as membership of an ethnic group or nation – ahead of their interests as individuals. Such societies are irrational, pre-modern, 'tribal' or 'primordial', outside the pale of the civilized liberal world (Ignatieff 1993). Ethnic and ethno-national identifications lead to 'mindless' conflict – characteristic of Bosnia, Rwanda, the Middle East and, of course, Northern Ireland. Communities sunk in illusory primordial identifications are seen as over-isolated from the Enlightenment; their hostilities explained by isolation and ignorance which cause negative stereotyping and the spread of disapproving myths about those outside the ethnic *laager*. Ghettoization, segregation, sectarianism and pillarization obscure the fundamental interests which humans have in common, especially those economic interests which cross-cut ethnic cleavages.

There are variations in the liberal world-view. Ethnic attachments and conflict are not always explained by underdevelopment, ignorance, isolation and unreasoning communalism. They may, on occasion, be attributed to opportunistically rational individuals pursuing their political or economic self-interest. Thus instrumental machinations of self-interested élites, eager to exacerbate (or even to create) ethno-national divisions for their own narrow ends, are often 'exposed' by liberal authors. For example, the conflict in the former Yugoslavia is held to stem from the ambitions of Tudjman and Milosevic, among other 'warlords', who saw in the collapse of Communism the opportunity to gain power by stirring up national antagonisms (p. 6). Similarly, conflict in South Africa in the run-up to the transitional constitutional deal was attributed to the scheming of Buthelezi, who, it was said, had chosen to promote Zulu nationalism as a means to power rather than accept the more progressive liberal agenda of Mandela and de Klerk. Exposing rational and amoral opportunism is not limited to individuals when liberal muck-rakers are in full flow. Entire ethnic collectivities may be seen as aggregates of individuals who have organized to ensure a greater share of scarce material

resources. In this respect they are treated as no different from other 'rent-seeking' associations, like trade unions or interest groups. The closely related argument often follows that ethno-national conflict is caused by disputes over material resources; or it is said to be determined by inequality, deprivation, or the desire to profit. Conflict, in a more broad-minded liberal view, may be rooted in injustice, the result of opportunistic ethnic élites capturing state power and using it in a discriminatory fashion. Injustice often causes material inequality, and thereby causes resentment, but can extend beyond material concerns, touching on more abstract notions of fair play. Thus discrimination along ethnic, religious or racial lines promotes what is otherwise an artificial solidarity: winners defend the status quo; losers organize to dismantle it.

Liberal prescriptions for ethno-national conflict flow from these premises. If conflict is caused by backwardness, salvation lies in the bracing free air of modernity. If the problem is segregation, liberals seek to break down the barriers, including trade barriers, which exist between groups, and to expose them to each other. They espouse measures which 'reduce differences' between groups, and believe in what Steve Bruce has termed a 'mix and fix' philosophy (1994, p. 135). If the problem is scheming élites, the solution is opening the polity to alternative liberal voices. Thus, liberals advocate the formation of liberal political parties to counter ethnic entrepreneurialism. They launch liberal newspapers to combat ethnic propaganda. A recent article in the *Economist*, entitled 'Try words, they come cheaper', put matters thus: the 'warlike tribal myth[s]' of ethnically partisan media must be countered with stories of 'inter-tribal respect, co-operation and solidarity'. This prescription is intended to help ethnic divisions in places like Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia (*Economist*, 3 September 1994). Liberals also advocate electoral systems which facilitate 'vote-pooling' to make it more difficult for ethnic entrepreneurs to win with exclusivist appeals, and to help make 'moderation pay' (e.g. Horowitz 1989; 1991).

Alternatively, populist liberals advocate the bypassing of opportunistic political élites by appealing to the fundamentally individualist (and more moderate) sentiments of the people, and therefore support referenda or other instruments of direct democracy. If ethnic conflict is caused by material deprivations or inequalities, liberals seek to remove these causes and to create material incentives for peace. They call for economic aid for conflict-zones, or, alternatively, for economic sanctions to bring warring factions to their senses. If conflict is caused by ethnic élites' discriminatory use of state power, the liberal solution is civic integration: the creation of a neutral state in which discrimination is banned. With equal citizenship guaranteed, irrespective of people's ethno-national origins, it becomes irrational for political élites to make ethnic appeals, and so ethnic bonds wither away. The key instrument in the construction of such a liberal state is an individualist Bill of Rights which bans discrimination. Some liberals go beyond neutrality and require the liberal state to redress the consequences of historic discrimination through affirmative action policies. Such 'temporary' policies will create 'a level playing field' in which the difference-blind rules of egalitarian liberalism can apply. Whatever the method employed, the goal of liberals is straightforward: the erosion of ethnic solidarities, at least in the public realm, and the promotion of a more rational state and society based on equal individual rights.

Liberal Perspectives on Northern Ireland

Liberal views have shaped analysis of and prescription for Northern Ireland in a rich variety of ways. Here we summarize five liberal theses about Northern Ireland. We label each of them fallacious, for reasons which we shall subsequently defend.

Fallacy One: The conflict is the responsibility of extremist élites

There is a popular journalistic view that the conflict can be traced to the machinations of political or religious élites rather than to differences among the people. Such thinking is prevalent in Northern Ireland's 'independent' magazine, *Fortnight*,¹ which regularly launches editorials on the need to unleash 'people power' to circumvent the politicians – as if the conflict is analogous to that which led to the downfall of the Marcos regime in the Philippines, or the communist regimes of Eastern Europe. Supporters of this view cite opinion polls which consistently appear to show overwhelming popular support for compromise and peace. The view that the political class is to be blamed for the conflict informed the establishment of the Opsahl Commission in 1992 whose self-appointed task was to bypass the stonewalling of local élites by appealing to the people directly, and by allowing them to express their views before the Commission. The report of this self-appointed liberal élitist Commission was called, with no hint of irony, 'A Citizens' Inquiry' (Pollak 1993). It argued that politicians in Northern Ireland had much more latitude for compromise than they imagined (or pretended), and that they would benefit from educational courses on democratic conduct, available from the American, Scandinavian and German governments. . . .

When local élites are not being blamed directly for the conflict, they are held responsible for the social segregation which allegedly causes it. The segregated school system is sometimes seen as the direct by-product of church élites with interests in sustaining religious and ethnic differences. Characteristically, opinion polls are invoked to show substantial parental support for integrated education (Irwin 1991). High rates of endogamy are also sometimes attributed to the Roman Catholic Church because of its traditional position that the children of 'mixed' marriages should be brought up as Catholics. One study concludes that the Church's role in fostering segregated education and endogamy 'is the most significant aspect of the role of religion in the divisions and conflicts in Ireland and goes to the heart of the matter' (Fulton 1991, p. 131; see also Jenkins 1986, pp. 6–7).

Fallacy Two: The conflict has fundamental economic and material foundations

Liberal economists and other liberals share with Marxists the temptation to suggest that ethno-national conflicts are fundamentally rooted in economic and material interests. Some claim that it is the existence of economic deprivation in Northern Ireland, particularly in working-class ghettos, which has caused conflict.

The evidence seems strong: in numerous socio-economic indicators Northern Ireland is by far the most deprived region of the United Kingdom (Smith and Chambers 1991, pp. 51–2); a considerable amount of violence originates from people who live in deprived Catholic and Protestant 'ghettos'; and the most militant political parties – Sinn Féin [SF] and the Democratic Unionist Part [DUP] – draw disproportionate support from the less well-off. The reasoning is also straightforward. Those with little stake in society have little interest in stability and are more likely to be lured into militant ethnic organizations.

These views are popular within the British labour movement and within Conservative Party circles. Northern Ireland Office minister Richard Needham claimed in 1989: 'If work can be found for 10,000 unemployed boys in West Belfast, ... that in itself will do more to impact on the political and security areas than anything else' (*Fortnight*, no. 276, 1989). The supposedly liberal prime minister of Northern Ireland put the logic a little more memorably in 1969: 'If you give Roman Catholics a good job and a good house, they will live like Protestants, because they will see neighbours with cars and television sets' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 5 May 1969). Sometimes it has been argued that the conflict is not only caused by deprivation but that the goal of those engaged in conflict is to end deprivation. In hearings held by the Opsahl Commission in the Shankill area in early 1993, some speakers attributed republican violence to the calculation that it would lead the government to transfer (financial) resources to Catholic areas. They attributed the more recent escalation in loyalist violence to the fact that Protestants had learned this lesson (*Fortnight*, no. 316, 1993, pp. 29–30). If the cause of the conflict is deprivation, then, so it seems, its resolution requires prosperity or economic growth – executed through greater governmental intervention on the left-wing view, or by the development of an 'enterprise culture' on the right-wing view.

The more cynical liberal economic perspective detects economic opportunism at the root of the conflict. Political élites, it is said, refuse to compromise because they derive material perks from continuing antagonism. ... The prescription, implicit or explicit, is for tougher anti-racketeering measures and a clamp-down by the security forces.

Fallacy Three: The conflict flows from archaic cultures

The region's cultural backwardness and lack of exposure to the forces of modernization are dominant liberal orthodoxies. Many liberals confidently assert, for example, that the conflict is pristinely religious – a rerun of struggles which more modern regions fought and resolved in previous centuries. This claim is buttressed by evidence of high levels of religiosity in the region, by the fact that the rival political parties and paramilitary organizations draw their support almost entirely from different religious groups (Catholics and Protestants), and by the high profile of certain clergymen in politics, such as the Reverend Ian Paisley.

The view that the conflict has a fundamental religious dimension is endorsed by humanist organizations, ecumenical groups, journalists, historians, psychologists, political scientists and sociologists. Four distinct variants exist. First, liberal humanists blame the peculiar, anachronistic and uncompromising devoutness of both

Catholics and Protestants. This view, endorsed by some local atheists, is especially popular with outsiders. Here is a leading moralizing English journalist: 'The passions which are shared by Mass-going Gael and Calvinist planter, which sustain them indeed in the fashion of two drunks tilted out of the horizontal into a triumphal arch, are nothing to us' (Pearce 1991). Secondly, ecumenists, inside and outside the region, blame the conflict on the churches because they stress their differences and act as sectarian apologists for the political communities in their midst (Mawhinney and Wells 1975; Gallagher and Worrall 1982). Thirdly, there is the thesis of sociologists of religion (and of liberal Irish nationalists) that it is the exclusivist and peculiar nature of the Protestantism in Northern Ireland which underlies the conflict. In this perspective unionism is Protestantism, pre-national and religiously contractarian, whereas Irish nationalism is a secular ideology in which Irish Catholics can separate their faith and politics (Rose 1971, pp. 216–17; FitzGerald 1972; O'Brien 1974; Heskin 1980, p. 47; Buckland 1981, p. 100; O'Malley 1983, p. 178; Bruce 1986). Finally, evangelical Protestants and liberal unionists blame the conflict on the authoritarian Roman Catholic Church which they claim underpins an exclusivist and culturally coercive Irish nationalism (Aughey 1989, ch. 7; Wilson 1989, pp. 213–14).

Prescriptions follow. Humanists see secularization as the best chance for peace. Ecumenists seek the promotion of common Christian values. Those who regard unionism and Protestantism as identical divide in their proposals. If they are sympathetic, they defend the status quo; if they are unsympathetic, they argue either that unionists need not be taken seriously in a modern secular world, or that unionists would have no national objections to a united Ireland provided that their religion was protected (e.g. FitzGerald 1972). Those who blame the conflict on the Roman Catholic Church (and who fear its influence within a united Ireland) seek the reconstruction of the 1688 Protestant theocracy if they are evangelicals, and a secular integrated United Kingdom if they are liberal unionists.

However, the conflict is also attributed to a general cultural backwardness, rather than to religion *per se*. There is a long-established view in Great Britain that the Irish are 'culturally' primitive and disposed towards violence. In international folklore, from the bar-rooms of Chicago to the bar-rooms of Melbourne, the Irish male can be found displaying the alleged traits of his people: aggressive and unreasoning violence, facilitated by excessive alcohol consumption. What could be more natural therefore that in the homeland of the 'fighting Irish' there should be endless violence and intransigence. In this view, the Northern Ireland conflict is a protracted 'donnybrook'...

The claim that the Northern Irish are unhealthily preoccupied with the past is, understandably, closely associated with professional historians. Oliver MacDonagh turns Oscar Wilde's witty dictum that 'Irish history is something which Irishmen should never remember, and Englishmen should never forget' into a sober cultural observation: the Irish never forget and the English never remember (MacDonagh 1983). Other historians, much less sympathetic to Irish nationalism, add that Irish republicans interpret their past through the distorting lens of Gaelic romanticism and Catholic mysticism (Dudley-Edwards 1977; Foster 1988; Elliott 1989). The thinly veiled implication is that the Provisional IRA is the current bearer of an irrational, romantic, religiously enthused communal hatred, which takes its

'cultural' polish from the Gaelic and Catholic revivals of the nineteenth century. Religious and romantic spiritualism are identified as key traits of Irish political culture, and impliedly culpable for its lack of modernization. Nationalist violence stems from this romanticism. Young people join paramilitary organizations after being schooled in histories of oppression and sacrifice or after imbibing republican songs on similar themes. In one account, even the hunger strikes of 1980–1, in which ten men died, are attributed to Gaelic and Brehon cultures, the sacrificial themes in Christian thought, and the tradition of republican protests and hunger striking stretching back to the Fenian movement founded in the 1850s (O'Malley 1990). The homily for Irish nationalists is clear: abandon the culture which caused these suicides and which still fuels mayhem and antagonism.

A leading historian of Ulster unionism, places special emphasis on the historically rooted siege mentality of the Protestant settlers and their descendants, and maintains that '... it is precisely because the most cruel and treacherous warfare has broken out over and over again, and usually after a period of relative security, as in 1641 or 1798 or 1920 or 1969, that the besieged suffer such chronic insecurity'. They fear insurrection by the natives/Catholics; betrayal from within their own ranks – the archetypal figure here being Governor Robert Lundy, the traitorous governor at the siege of Derry in 1690; and betrayal by Britain. 'The factor which distinguishes the siege of Derry from all other historic sieges in the British Isles is that it is still going on' (Stewart 1986, pp. 56–7).

Fallacy Four: The conflict is caused by segregation

Another liberal interpretation of Northern Ireland, often influenced by the history of black–white and Christian–Jewish relations in North America and Europe, is that conflict is caused (or at least exacerbated) by the isolation of the two communities from each other, an isolation more important than their alleged isolation from modernity. Numerous commentators highlight the denominational education system, in which 99 percent of pupils are segregated by their religion of origin. These voluntarily (and state-subsidized) segregated schools are seen as indoctrination camps for the rival ethno-national communities. Teaching different histories causes hostile feelings towards the other community; segregation facilitates negative stereotypes and myths of the Other, and prevents the establishment of cross-communal friendships; learning culturally specific sports inhibits mixing even after graduation; and segregated education reinforces residential segregation. The high rates of endogamy are also reinforced – research suggests that mixed marriages formed 6 percent of the total in Northern Ireland during the four decades 1943–82 (Fulton 1991, p. 199).

The liberal cure for segregation is to expose the rival groups to each other. Steve Bruce describes this 'mix and fix' mentality:

Liberals get on well with each other. In such middle-class suburbs as the Malone Road area of Belfast, in such organizations as the [moderate] Alliance Party, and in such associations as Protestant and Catholic Encounter, Protestant and Catholic liberals mix and find they have much in common. They are thus readily drawn to the idea that the

conflict is caused by misunderstanding and ignorance. If working-class people also mixed, they would learn that their stereotypes are mistaken – "they" do not have horns – and that they are just like us. End of conflict (Bruce, 1994, p. 134).

...

Fallacy Five: Individual discrimination is the primary motor of antagonism

Perhaps the most important liberal explanation of the conflict is that it is caused by discrimination – it is the one with which we have most intuitive sympathy. In the 1960s the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association [NICRA] sought equal citizenship for Catholics to end their second-class status and their exclusion from the institutions of the devolved government at Stormont. A government inquiry into the violence which flowed from the civil rights demonstrations attributed it to the absence of civil rights for Catholics (Cameron 1969). According to one distinguished political scientist had there been a Bill of Rights and judicial enforcement of its provisions against discriminations, as in the USA, there might have been no sustained political violence (Rose 1976). American civil rights leaders were able to pursue a successful strategy of non-violence because they could secure redress of black grievances through the courts. The Northern Ireland civil rights movement, denied similar opportunities, had no alternative strategy to offer militants, and the region became embroiled in violent conflict.

The British government has periodically expressed sympathy for this perspective and has introduced a range of measures to prevent discrimination against the Catholic minority. After a Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act (1976) failed miserably to achieve its objectives the British government, under pressure, eventually introduced a tougher law in 1989. It not only bans discrimination in hiring but requires employers to monitor the religious composition of their workforce and to take affirmative action if necessary. Liberal critics argue for a vigorous pursuit of this logic: they call both for explicit employment targets and a timetable for these to be achieved.

The most comprehensively researched statement that discrimination is at the centre of the conflict has been made by researchers from the Policy Studies Institute working for the Standing Commission on Human Rights (Smith and Chambers 1991). The work of Smith and Chambers is not, like that of many commentators, ahistorical. They observe that the seventeenth-century plantation of Ulster gave the best land to Protestants and relegated the Catholics to less fertile hilly land or to the status of landless labourers. Colonial disparities were reinforced by penal legislation which prevented Catholics from owning land and thereby acquiring the wealth in the period preceding industrialization (pp. 1–3, 368). Discrimination in employment and the allocation of public housing after 1921, the result of informal social practices and overt exhortations by successive unionist leaders, reinforced the legacies of colonialism. The result has been persistent and significant divergences between Catholics and Protestants in unemployment rates, quality of employment and overall living standards. For instance, Catholic men are about two and a half times more likely to be unemployed than Protestant men (pp. 161–2, 212)....

Having identified inequality as a central cause of conflict, Smith and Chambers rejected the unionist contention that this is a result of unequal abilities, or that it is a hangover from a bygone age which will gradually dissipate without corrective measures. Instead, they argued it can be accounted for significantly by continuing direct and indirect discrimination in the private and public sectors. Their prescription is for more effective policies for equal opportunity.

The Liabilities in Liberal Readings of Ethno-national Conflicts

All the foregoing liberal explanations have flaws. They either ignore or gloss over one or more of three essential facts: first, that the conflict is fundamentally rooted in ethno-national antagonism; secondly, that there is nothing pre-modern about conflicts which flow from such antagonism; and thirdly, that these antagonisms are intense because of their political and institutional setting. Liberals often make the mistake of reducing ethno-national conflicts to religious cultural or material differences between the ethno-national groups (Connor 1994). Such conflicts are better understood as socio-psychological, rooted in historically established collective identities and motivated by the desire to be governed by one's co-nationals, both for security and for collective freedom. These motivations have not been absent from liberal bastions like the United States, Great Britain or France. What distinguishes these territories from those presently embroiled in conflict are that their national questions have (largely) been settled. There is also nothing pre-modern about ethno-national conflicts. Western Europe has been embroiled in them for the best part of this century, and Canada's unity is currently threatened by nationalist separatism. Northern Ireland's ethno-national antagonisms have been intense, more like Bosnia's than Belgium's or Canada's and that must largely be explained by its political setting rather than its cultural environment. These considerations, simply asserted here, render the preceding liberal explanations and prescriptions problematic (see O'Leary and McGarry 1993; McGarry and O'Leary 1995).

Are political or religious élites to blame?

Élites play an important role in mobilizing nationalist movements. However, these movements usually have some pre-existing collective bases – the Achilles' heel in most instrumentalist readings of ethno-nationalist conflicts. What is more important is that once mobilized, and especially after protracted violence, ethno-national divisions become rooted, and are not easily dismantled without mutual collective security. In a deeply divided territory, with a long history of conflict, élites are more likely to reflect the divisions than to be responsible for them. Moreover, they respond to the incentives which they face. Leaders who underestimate the extent of those divisions and assume moderate positions often find themselves jobless or worse. Moderates in Northern Ireland have found no significant electoral niche. If moderate to begin with, they cannot compete with more chauvinistic leaders – as is evident in the electoral performances of the

moderate Northern Ireland Labour Party [NILP] in the late 1960s and the Alliance Party [APNI] since the 1970s. If politicians experience Pauline conversions to moderation, as with unionists like Brian Faulkner in 1974 and William Craig in 1975, or nationalists like Gerry Fitt in 1980, they may be abandoned by their grass roots. Contrary to the Opsahl commissioners, little in the recent history of Northern Ireland suggests that political élites can easily compromise on the national question while retaining support. If in conditions of peace it becomes evident that public opinion has changed, then political élites will be capable of greater flexibility – but this change will not suggest that conflict was sustained by unrepresentative élites.

The popular moderation that is often displayed in opinion polls must also be treated with scepticism. Polls are imperfect, especially so in deeply divided territories where respondents may be unwilling to tell the pollster what they really think. They may judge their views to be outside conventional norms, or that their real views, given to a stranger, may put them at considerable risk. The evidence from Northern Ireland is that opinion polls tend to over-emphasize moderation and downplay extremism. Consider the following facts:

- opinion-poll support for the moderate Alliance party is roughly twice what it receives in elections (Whyte 1986, p. 232);
- cross-community power-sharing has received high cross-community support in opinion polls while unionist politicians advocating it have so far floundered at elections;
- support for Sinn Féin and the DUP in elections has always exceeded their support in opinion polls;
- huge numbers of unionists vote for Ian Paisley while hesitating to admit it in public.

It therefore cannot be confidently asserted that a referendum on a constitutional settlement will produce the same moderation we sometimes see in surveys.² To put matters in another way, selling any negotiated settlement successfully in a referendum will have to offer security to both ethno-national communities and not just to their moderates....

The view that segregated education and endogamy can be blamed in any significant fashion on self-interested communal élites must also be treated with caution. Despite the existence of polls showing support for integrated education, there has been no significant public response to various government initiatives to facilitate integrated education. The high rate of endogamy, at least in urban areas, is probably caused as much by residential segregation and the lack of social interaction as it is by church policy (Whyte 1986; Whyte 1990, pp. 33–9). If Catholics do not meet Protestants, they are unlikely to want to marry them. Where there is an emphasis on ethnic solidarity and maintaining demographic numbers, and a distrust of the 'other side', endogamous practices prevail even among those who do not practise their religion. One sociologist of religion while attaching primary blame to the Catholic Church policy for endogamy, acknowledges that Catholics may have non-religious reasons for not marrying Protestants: they may consider them 'bigots, or oppressors or ethnic aliens' (Fulton 1991, p. 226). Endogamy,

after all, helps to ensure that the offspring will not only be of the same religion, but also of the same national and political persuasion. Marriage across religious lines carries more than dangers of religious censure: it can mean ostracism, accusations of treachery and, in the more extreme cases, assassination (Whyte 1990, p. 41).

Has conflict been economically rooted?

Few commentators have reduced the conflict to deprivation. This is just as well, because there are many areas of the world much more deprived than Northern Ireland yet they are free of intense national conflict. Deprivation without the mobilizing glue provided by insecure ethno-national identity is mostly associated with apathy and criminal violence rather than with the organized and goal-oriented political violence characteristic of Northern Ireland. Moreover, unionists and nationalists draw support from right across the social spectrum, and not just from the deprived. Lastly, if deprivation was an important cause of conflict, we would expect the conflict to be worse in bad economic times than in good. Conflict should have been at its most intense during the Great Famine, rather than in 1798 or 1916–21 or after 1969. The current conflict broke out during a period of rising prosperity, suggesting a political trigger rather than an economic one. Similarly, its fluctuations in intensity have been more closely related to political events, such as internment without trial or the deliberations of the Constitutional Convention for example, than to changes in the economic cycle (see McGarry and O'Leary 1995, ch. 7). These arguments suggest that giving a republican a house and a TV set is unlikely to turn that republican into a unionist, certainly not in the short to medium term (see also Rose and McAllister 1983).

Opportunistic explanations are also suspect. The view that Catholics engage in conflict because it 'pays', overlooks the destruction which violence has wrought in Catholic areas and the economic plight of the Catholic community. The claim that the pursuit of personal profit is an important motive for paramilitaries downplays their ethno-national motivations: the paramilitary groups are ethnically exclusive, and direct practically all of their violence against other ethnic groups or state officials. Unlike mobsters, they have political goals and react to political stimuli. They also receive more support from their respective communities than those significantly engaged in criminal activities, and they have been resistant to prison management that criminals normally accept without rancour. By suggesting that the paramilitaries are opportunistic criminals, analysts overlook the contributions of repression and the behaviour of the security forces to the popularity of paramilitarism...

Within the UK Northern Ireland has the lowest levels of criminal violence per capita but the highest levels of political or ethnic violence. The conflict over the last twenty-five years has also not produced the 'societal disintegration' associated with the triumph of anarchic and anomic criminality in some of the world's cities – which further underlines the national and political nature of the conflict (O'Leary and McGarry 1993, ch. 1).

Are backward cultures the problem?

Religion in Northern Ireland (or in Bosnia) is best seen as an ethnonational marker rather than as an important independent motivator of violent conflict. Religious labels distinguish the ethno-national groups, the descendants of settlers and natives, from each other. While the ethno-national groups are composed largely of 'Catholics' and 'Protestants', in many cases individuals do not practise their religion or do not allow their religion to determine their politics. It is this which occasions the well-known oxymoron of the 'Catholic (or Protestant) atheist'. Religious beliefs clearly play some role in shaping people's politics, and they may even be predominant for some, but there is significant evidence that they are less important than national identity in motivating behaviour and political dynamics.

First, the conflict started, escalated and has continued during the start of significant secularization³ which has done little to undermine ethno-national conflict, and so it is questionable whether more secularization will make a significant difference. Secondly, there is no noticeable correlation between those areas most affected by violent conflict and areas of intense religious devoutness. In West Belfast, an epicentre of conflict, there have been significant declines in church-attendance in both communities (Wilson 1989, p. 204; Whyte 1990, p. 27). The spatial and per capita distribution of violence is highly concentrated in urban sites, which are, as elsewhere in the world, less religious than rural zones. Thirdly, relations between the Churches were improving when conflict erupted in the late 1960s. The second Vatican Council had formally abandoned the Roman Catholic claim that 'outside the Church there is no salvation', and there has been considerable ecumenical activity and inter-church cooperation during the current conflict, very different from what occurred in earlier crises. Fourthly, political activists avoid religious labels and make non-religious claims. The organizations of the minority embrace secular political values in their titles: 'nationalism' or 'republicanism', 'social democracy' and 'socialism' provide their vocabularies. No minority party or paramilitary group describes itself religiously. Politically they describe themselves as 'the northern nationalist community', and have shown willingness on many occasions to support individuals who enjoyed a closer relationship with Trotsky than with the Pope...

The absence of denominational titles in political and paramilitary organizations is more remarkable given their existence in other countries which are not racked by conflict, religious or otherwise. The high profile of Protestant clerics notwithstanding, the overwhelming majority of unionist politicians are lay people. They address secular issues, calling for a strengthening of the Union and for stronger security policies. The clerics who are politicians are best known for being hard-liners on the Union and security policy. Of course, national preferences might be dictated partly by religious motivations – a united Ireland, after all, would be 80 per cent Catholic, while the UK is over 80 per cent Protestant or secular – but if most nationalist and unionist politicians are primarily interested in these religious agendas, they have done a good job of concealing it, from their followers, as well as from others. Loyalist paramilitaries generally shun overtly religious targets.

Catholic churches have remained relatively inviolate and priests have not been targets. It must be perplexing for those who believe that the paramilitaries are involved in a jihad that 'Protestant' gunmen assiduously have avoided clearly marked, accessible and unarmed priests and nuns when searching for targets. Individuals engaged in authentic religious wars – during the Inquisition, the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation – had no difficulty in dispatching heretics to hell.

The view that the Irish are culturally more disposed to be violent than other peoples is a colonial stereotype. The English, in the classic imperialist tradition, maintained that the Irish were murderous savages while murdering and savaging many of the natives. Such arguments justified conquest and expropriation in Ireland as they did in the Americas and elsewhere (Williams 1990). As for their alleged prowess with the beer glass, paramilitaries are more likely to be recruited for their disciplined, ascetic and puritanical characters. English stereotypists are best directed to the mirror of world-history, in which they will find that they (and their American cousins) have a much more widespread reputation for being an aggressive, warlike, piratical and imperial people. They are also well advised to ask themselves which nation's soccer fans are most welcome outside the islands of the North Atlantic?...

Liberals who see the Northern Irish as unusually preoccupied with the battles of their ancestors usually live in states which are reasonably homogeneous or which have reached institutional accommodations between previously antagonistic groups. Liberal Irish élites from the fabled 'Dublin 4', who now find their northern cousins embarrassing, come from an area which settled its national quarrel over seventy years ago. Rather than insulting the Northern Irish, they and others like them would be better advised to reflect on their good fortune.

Is segregation the problem and mixing the answer?

The idea of social mixing as a useful prescription faces major problems. To begin with it is impractical on a very significant scale. Residential segregation, particularly in working-class areas, is both extensive and voluntary. The desire to live among 'one's own' has been reinforced by twenty-five years of violence. Those who suffered most at the outbreak of the conflict in the late 1960s were those housed outside their respective ghettos. They experienced the Irish version of 'ethnic cleansing'. Without significant residential integration, however, there is unlikely to be support for integrated education. This would require bussing into threatening territory or at least out of the ghetto, and few parents will buy this idea. The same holds for workplace integration. There is also unlikely to be significant exogamy, because people from both communities are unlikely to meet and interact in the required fashion.

Even if social integration could be increased, it is questionable whether the consequences would necessarily be beneficial. In deeply divided territories, increased exposure to the 'other' may make group members more aware of what their group has in common and what separates them from the others. Exposure may cement group solidarity rather than diffuse it. There may, sadly, be something

in the North American folk wisdom that white liberals are those whites who do not live near blacks. Analogously, Richard Rose warns that in Northern Ireland

A Catholic in a mixed school may learn that when Protestants say 'Not an Inch' they mean it, just as a Protestant may learn that his Catholic schoolmates refuse to regard the Union Jack as the flag to which they give allegiance. (Rose 1971, p. 337)

As Connor writes, 'the idea of being friends presupposes knowledge of each other, [but] so does the idea of being rivals (1994, p. 48)...'

The alternative to regarding 'mixing and fixing' as a panacea is to encourage it where it is feasible and wanted, but also to recognize durable divisions and ensure that both groups are treated in an equal manner and that both can be sure of their collective and cultural security. Just as many blacks in the USA now realize, ironically, that an authentic version of the separate but equal doctrine in *Plessey v. Ferguson* may be more attractive than the separate means unequal doctrine of *Brown v. Bd. of Education*, so many northern nationalists insist that they want equality and autonomy rather than equality and integration. Full funding for denominational and state schools, and a fair allocation of resources for job creation and public housing, are more important for them than integration. Lest we are misinterpreted, perhaps we should spell out that we believe that sufficient provision must be made for all those who wish to be schooled, live or work with members of the other community.

Is individual discrimination the problem?

The existence of significant economic inequality between Catholics and Protestants is undeniable. It has been convincingly argued that this gap exists because of discrimination, direct or indirect, that discrimination needs to be ended to reduce minority alienation, and that British efforts have not been far-reaching enough (e.g. Smith and Chambers 1991).

However, we take issue with the implicit liberal individualist supposition that the conflict centres on individual inequality and discrimination, and the implication that treatment of these matters will lead to a settlement. The liberal assumption is that people exist primarily as individuals with a fundamental (and moral) desire to be treated equally by others, and that states act justly and enjoy stability to the extent that they satisfy this yearning. This prescription is appropriate in societies where there is a consensus on national identity – in ethnically homogeneous states or in multi-ethnic immigrant societies with a shared civic identity, that is, where citizens see their relationship with the state through individualist lenses. However, in binational or multinational states, where there is no agreement on a common national political identity, matters are rather different. When the national nature of the state is at stake, many see themselves not just as bearers of individual rights but also as members of distinct communities.

Unable to recognize the importance of national identity or argue for the equal validity of rival versions of it, conventional liberalism not only fails to grasp what is at stake but ends up accepting the nationalism of the dominant community by

default (Kymlicka 1991; 1995; Taylor 1992; 1993). In Northern Ireland, liberals characteristically prescribe that members of the nationalist minority should enjoy equality as individual citizens within the United Kingdom. However, by failing to recognize what most Catholics consider integral to their conception of the good life, i.e. the appreciation, recognition and institutional equality of their Irish national identity, this prescription falls short of authentic collective equality, including equality of individual self-esteem. Authentic collective equality requires that both groups' (national) identities be accepted as equally valid and legitimate – an argument refused by individualist liberalism. . . .

Just as 'unionist' civic integrationism downplays the national identity of the minority community, Irish nationalist civic integrationism, such as that represented by Dr Garret FitzGerald in the 1970s, downplays the British national identity of unionists. Unionists do not want to be treated as equal citizens within a united Ireland any more than Irish nationalists want to be treated equally within the United Kingdom. They want the preservation of their nation through the preservation of the UK.

Conclusion

There have been two conflicts going on in and over Northern Ireland: the conflict between the parties and paramilitaries of the ethno-nationalist communities and their respective patron-states, and the conflict about what the conflict has been about. It is this latter conflict, the meta-conflict, waged primarily by intellectuals, with which this article has been concerned. The two conflicts are intimately connected because misinterpreting the conflict has consequences for public policy. The premise of this article is that five liberal fallacies have persistently blocked a surer understanding of Northern Ireland. The conflict is primarily ethno-national and it is this dimension which must be addressed, and addressed fairly if the conflict is to be ended, and durably satisfy the nationalism of the current minority while protecting the nationalism of the current majority. The construction of such a settlement will be difficult, of course, though not impossible.

Liberalism should not be tossed away with its bath water. There is clearly independent merit in the arguments that deprivation should be targeted by public and employment policy, that discrimination should be firmly tackled and affirmative action vigorously pursued, and that obstacles to voluntary interaction between the two communities should be dismantled. There is, however, no merit, in the smug 'cosmopolitan' view that the conflict has been caused by unrepresentative and extremist élites, or by religiously or culturally retarded peoples incapable of the reasonable compromises allegedly characteristic of moderns. Analysts should always analyse themselves as a check on their interpretations of ethno-national conflicts.

Notes

This article abbreviates some of the principal arguments in McGarry and O'Leary (1995), to which interested readers are referred for defence in depth.

- 1 The independence of the magazine has become questionable since it now receives a subsidy from the British government.
- 2 When Canadians have been consulted in referenda they have always shown themselves to be more divided than their élites. Two referenda on prohibition and conscription split the country along linguistic lines. In a third referendum the political élites (the prime minister, ten provincial premiers, two territorial leaders, and four native leaders) submitted a package which they had unanimously negotiated. The package was rejected outside Quebec because it gave too much to that province, and within Quebec because it did not give enough.
- 3 Weekly church attendance among Catholics and Protestants has fallen since the 1960s. The divorce rate, while absolutely lower, has been increasing at about the same rate as in Great Britain. The rate of births outside marriage has also increased.

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Part V

Violence, Genocide, and War