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**The Troubles with Identity: The Role of Identity & Its Impact on Conflict Resolution in Northern Ireland**

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**Abstract:** While open hostilities in Northern Ireland ceased with the 1998 Belfast Agreement, the agreement itself did not succeed in mitigating the antagonistic relationship between nationalist Catholics and unionist Protestants. It is the central contention of this paper that the consociational nature and scope of the agreement actually contributed to the consolidation of cleavages and the reinscription of existing identities in Northern Ireland, because of consociationalism’s emphasis on elite democracy. While many scholars thus argue for a more transformative approach, which seeks to change conflict structures and crosscut cleavages on a grassroots level, this paper will argue that the identities in Northern Ireland are so deeply entrenched and defined in contrast to each other, that such approaches are both futile and ineffective. Transformative approaches are thus hindered by the nature of the antagonistic identities in Northern Ireland and their relations to each other, as well as by the advancement of elite-driven consociational democracy.

**Keywords:** Northern Ireland, identity, social transformation, consociationalism, segmented society
Introduction

The recent history of Northern Ireland—and that of the island of Ireland in general—is a troubled one. Hence, the period between 1960 and the mid- to late-1990s became known to many on the island and its ‘Great’ counterpart as ‘The Troubles’. Attempts to mitigate the conflict beginning in the 1970s primarily applied consociational power-sharing measures. These measures were also at the heart of the Belfast Agreement, which was the result of the peace process ending the majority of open hostilities between the antagonistic groups.¹

The success of the Agreement itself, consociational in character, has been widely discussed and is seen by many as inadequate to solve the simmering tensions in the deeply divided society in Northern Ireland. Suggestions have been made that the consociational approach is insufficient and needs to be replaced with a more transformative approach.² The features of this approach are vastly different from those of consociationalism. In particular, it seeks to transform the root causes of conflicts. It follows, then, that the transformative approach would seek to affect the adversary identities at play in conflicts in deeply divided societies, including in Northern Ireland.

While identity change seems necessary and therefore has been advocated for by numerous scholars and academics, this essay will argue that the possibility of such change in Northern Ireland is unlikely. As identities are deeply entrenched in Northern Ireland, methods to affect the roots of conflict, such as reconciliation, forgiveness, and recognition, are not perceived well amongst the antagonistic groups. Alternative approaches to conflict resolution or mitigation are rendered futile, because the liberal understanding of democracy, including consociationalism, limits transcendence or transgression of segmental boundaries, thus consolidating the cleavages between the segments in Northern Ireland.

This essay will begin with a brief introduction to and definition of ethnicity, identity, and consociationalism, followed by determining the dominant and prevalent identities in Northern Ireland. The main part of this essay will then assess possibilities for identity change and transformation in Northern Ireland, including an analysis of reconciliation, forgiveness, and recognition and their potential, before turning to the intersection of identity and democratic theory.

Definitions: Ethnicity, Identity & Consociationalism

Before discussing the issues outlined above, this section will define ethnicity and identity.


² Rupert Taylor is one of the most significant advocates for this approach. This essay will make use of some of his interpretations of the conflict and its consociational solution, as well as his theoretical frameworks as to why consociationalism implemented through the Belfast agreement did not succeed in creating a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. For a definition of consociationalism, see below.
It will also define consociationalism since it has been the major approach in conflict resolution attempts in Northern Ireland and is at the heart of the Belfast Agreement. As this essay is also a critique of consociationalism—as the last part of this paper will exemplify—a definition of the term and its implications appears necessary.

Groups of people that share “a distinct set of cultural values and a shared language, who recognize their cultural kinship with one another, and engage in practices that set them apart from outsiders” are usually considered to constitute an ethnic group. Ethnicity is often viewed as “a natural boundary marker between members of different groups, defined inter alia in terms of race, language, culture, nationality, etc.” The concept of ethnicity itself, however, is said to be “socially constructed [and] a fluid ideological notion that does not exist outside of the mind.”

Identity is a highly contested concept. It can be perceived—and thus defined—in two ways. The first, what has been referred to as subjective identity, relates to one’s self-perception or self-conception. The second, objective identity, is perception of a person without consideration of the person’s self-perception—one’s identity “in light of certain biological or social facts.” The discussion about the connection between the two definitions of identity and possible asymmetries cannot be done justice and is beyond the task of this essay. However, it must be noted that some academics, particularly proponents of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT), may criticize this paper’s argument. This criticism may be grounded in conceptualizing identity objectively only. However, “intergroup boundaries are usually considered to be impermeable and social identification with the respective categories can be described as a defining feature of the conflict [in Northern Ireland].” The subjective definition—identity of the self in the private realm—is thus of diminished importance because of the primary identification of individuals “as members of a social group, with its associated religious and political implications, rather than in terms of the personal and individual components of identity.” Furthermore, identity as regarded in this essay is more homologous to national identity, which is “[based] on beliefs about certain commonalities among the members

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7 The literature on Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (CST) is vast. However, the thinking and writing of Henri Tajfel (for example “Social Identity and Intergroup Behaviour,” Social Science Information 13 (1974): 65-93) on the former, and John Charles Turner (for example Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1986)) on the latter appear to be to most referenced.
9 Ibid., 148-9.
of the groups such as a common ancestry, ethnicity, language, religion, culture and values.\textsuperscript{10} This definition treats identity as an attitude and not as cognitive categorization, as SIT and CST do.\textsuperscript{11}

Identity, defined as above, “refers to selected or inherited traits that define people or communities as certain kinds of individuals or groups.”\textsuperscript{12} It differs from ethnicity, as it is “constructed in relations to another or in dialogue with significant others” and “is often based on our concept of the other or the enemy.”\textsuperscript{13} The main tasks of identity are (1) to help individuals and communities to understand themselves, and (2) to produce unity and like-mindedness amongst members of the community.\textsuperscript{14}

Just like ethnicity, “identity is constructed through a learning process at different structural levels of society which is particular to, and continues from, individuals’ earlier days within the society into which they are born.”\textsuperscript{15} The process of identity formation in deeply segmented societies “[occurs] within well-established and separate social structures.”\textsuperscript{16}

Although not the primary focus of this essay, consociationalism plays a fundamental role in a discussion of the conflict in Northern Ireland, as the Belfast Agreement was consociational in nature and scope. The vast majority of work on consociational theory was done by Arend Lijphart, also known as Mr. Consociation.\textsuperscript{17} Consociationalism attempts to mitigate ethnic conflict by employing four characteristics: grand coalition, mutual veto, proportionality, and segmental autonomy.\textsuperscript{18} The consociational approach, as these primary characteristics exemplify, is an elite-driven approach to regulate conflict.\textsuperscript{19} The four characteristics, in particular the grand coalition, are intended to enable “all significant segments of the plural society [to] cooperate [in governing] the country,” and to prevent majority rule in deeply segmented societies by giving minority groups institutional measures to participate meaningfully in the government of a state.\textsuperscript{20}

Identity in Northern Ireland

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 5; Miller, \textit{Citizenship and National Identity}: 62.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 153.
\textsuperscript{18} Arend Lijphart, \textit{Democracy in Plural Societies} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 25; Here, again, an exhaustive analysis of consociationalism cannot be provided due to the limited scope of this paper. However, the above cited book by Lijphart offers a comprehensive introduction to consociationalism.
\textsuperscript{20} Lijphart, \textit{Democracy in Plural Societies}, 25, 36.
\end{footnotes}
The conflict in Northern Ireland is generally considered to be one between particular religious identities.21 In fact, the religious sects “are seen to constitute intractable ethno-national groups with distinctive and different cultural traditions, values and needs.”22 This sectarian divide is deeply rooted in the historical relations between Great Britain and Ireland, and therefore also Anglicanism/Protestantism and Catholicism, respectively.23 As established above, identity is a relational concept. This notion is particularly present in Northern Ireland where “Catholic identities were constituted in relation to Protestants, and Protestant ones were made in relation to Catholics.”24

While the two segments of Northern Irish society are rooted in sectarian division, over time they extended to political divisions.25 Today, identities in Northern Ireland are usually described as nationalist Catholic and unionist Protestant.26 The sectarian divide was effectively expanded into the political realm without creating any cross-segmental identities. The connection between religious affiliation and political ideology is exemplified by Rupert Taylor’s comment that:

[the] categories of ‘Protestant’ and ‘Catholic’ are taken to be synonymous with Ulster Unionist and Irish Nationalist politics in which on the one hand the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and on the other hand the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Féin, constitute the main parties locked into a power struggle.27

The political segmentation of Northern Ireland closely follows the precedent set by its religious counterparts: boundaries between the segments are static and impermeable;28 they oppose and fear (in the modern case political) domination by the Other, for which reason they

26 Other terms used to describe the segments in Northern Ireland are loyalist (for Protestants) and republican (for Catholics). These terms are not synonymous with unionist and nationalist, respectively, and neither do they embody a homogeneous ideology. Nic Craith, Culture and Identity, 26-28, 29-31; Another term used for the political ideology aligned with Protestantism is Ulster.
28 McGlynn et al., “Moving out of Conflict: The Contribution of Integrated Schools in Northern Ireland to Identity, Attitudes, Forgiveness and Reconciliation,” 148; An example for this is “the Ulster Unionists’ emphasis on cultural resources and shared memory [making] unionism inaccessible for Catholics willing to support the unionist cause for other […] reasons. McCall, Identity in Northern Ireland, 175.
seek territorial control;29 and they are suspicious of homogenization attempts by the Other.30 The persistence of these divisions has the effect that opportunities for cross-segmental interaction are restricted. As a matter of fact, “society [in Northern Ireland] is segregated at various levels, including work, education, leisure and interpersonal relationships such as friendships and marriages.”

This part of the essay illustrated the roots and impacts of identity on society in Northern Ireland and its segmentation. It not only provided a first insight into the persistence of identity, but also into its multilevel features; it is not to be understood on a cognitive level only, but also emotionally. This emotional investment in identity indicates the intrinsic identification of people in Northern Ireland with their respective social group, including its affiliation to religious and political values, beliefs, and aspirations.32 What will follow now is an investigation into how, if at all, these multiple levels of identity can be transformed.

Identity Change & Transformation

To begin this discussion, it has to be established where identities originate from temporally. Studies have shown “that beliefs, values and aspirations are formed early in life and that, once in-built—socially and psychologically—, they do not change easily.”33 This empirical evidence enables transformation attempts to target phases in which individuals are most susceptible to socialization factors in order to deconstruct the entrenched identities in deeply segmented societies that have, time and again, led to violent conflict.

In Northern Ireland, a variety of approaches attempted to transform identity by targeting early-childhood and youth socialization. As schools represent an early and constant structure for identity formation, this was one of the entry points attracting transformative approaches’ attention. The need for intervention in socialization through schools becomes obvious considering that “the education system in Northern Ireland is traditionally separated along religious lines.”34 Attempted initially through the 1977 Education Act, integrative education—teaching Catholic and Protestant school children together—did not have a widespread transformative effect. Neither was the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order implemented in 1989 a success per se. While providing another layer to the dynamic process of identity formation by enabling greater understanding and tolerance of the Other, parental socialization

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29 McCall, Identity in Northern Ireland, 110, 133, 148.
30 Ibid., 110-11, 174.
32 Ibid., 148-49.
33 Douglas, “Political Structures, Social Interaction and Identity Change in Northern Ireland,” in In Search of Ireland: 155.
occurs earlier, seemingly more thoroughly, and with greater longevity, and thereby has a greater impact on values, beliefs and aspirations. However, it is a hopeful sign that it was parents desiring the education of Protestant and Catholic children under one roof who established integrative schools. This hopefulness is grounded in the fact “that social and political change, particularly if cumulative over protracted periods of time, will lead to identity change.” Continuous and persistent intervention into early-childhood socialization through an integrative education system could, in the long term, contribute to the disintegration of the segmental barriers.

Integrative education, as this section has shown, is facing serious challenges and does not currently appear to have had any significant effect. In the next section, this essay will look into methods that do not primarily seek to affect identity in their attempts to end protracted conflicts in deeply segmented societies. However, the deep-seated character of these identities seriously restricts the effectiveness of these approaches.

Forgiveness, Reconciliation & Recognition

As mentioned above, institutional changes and guarantees—such as the integrative education system, but more importantly consociational measures—are insufficient to positively affect the roots of the conflict in Northern Ireland. The measures applied through integrative and consociational approaches cannot alter the rigid identities present in Northern Ireland.

Overcoming the inadequacies of these approaches, it has been argued, requires “[favouring] responses that are principally based in the civil society and involve making fundamental changes to the social structure and (broadly consider) the culture and psychology of the parties in the conflict.” These changes ought to be directed at social identities, in particular. Others expressed this change as a move away from ‘thin recognition’ which seeks to “[accept] the other as human being,” to ‘thick recognition’ emphasizing “having respect for the features that make a subject unique.” The aim of this measure is not homogeneity, “but rather an acceptance towards the other’s identity and history.”

Regardless of whether one chooses to call it transformation, reconciliation, or recognition, the emphasis of these alternative approaches is to encourage “protagonists in

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36 Ibid., 152.
37 Douglas, “Political Structures, Social Interaction and Identity Change in Northern Ireland,” in In Search of Ireland: 155.
40 Ibid., 13.
42 Ibid.
intractable conflicts [to] renarrate their understanding of identity [of the Other and themselves].” In doing so, it also changes individual and master narratives, alters collective memories away from (constructed) histories, and deconstructs seemingly static boundaries.

The features of identity in Northern Ireland, in particular the notion that “we cannot know who we are except by reference to others,” make narrative transformation, recognition, or a reconciliatory approach relatively unlikely. Inherent in this notion is the focus on difference and division between the segments, making the conflict in Northern Ireland a zero-sum game. Changing narratives would mean moving away from identifying in contrast to the Other, as well as perpetually referring to the dichotomies present in Northern Ireland—including Protestant and Catholic; unionist and nationalist.

There is a general consensus that any conflict needs reconciliation—and in this sense forgiveness, as “without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever.” Northern Irish realities do not allow for reconciliation or forgiveness, however. Just as there are rarely any individuals, institutions, or values that cross-cut the cleavages present in Northern Ireland, so are narratives almost entirely segregated. Reconciliation—as well as recognition and forgiveness—cannot function under the zero-sum condition present in Northern Ireland that is exemplified by incongruous ideological narratives:

Put simply, reconciliation in Northern Ireland is regarded by many people as ideological tool rather than an institutional process concerned with the amelioration of substantive social and political deferments or a means by which perpetrators of violence express contrition for their wrongdoing and victims exercise forgiveness.

The different views held by Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists regarding reconciliation illustrate the issues transformative attempts fall victim to. Unionists fear that a reconciliation process would lead to members of the IRA being considered victims of the conflict, thus “[regarding members of the IRA] as morally equivalent to civilians or policemen or part-time soldiers.” Again, a connection is being drawn to the inherent difference between the two groups. “A reading of victimhood based on moral equivalence … erodes the identity and self-understanding of unionism”—meaning the differentiation unionists (as well as nationalists)

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43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 174-77.
47 Ibid., 90.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 90.
insist on.\footnote{51} This problem is further reflected in the self-ascribed status of victimhood—particularly the unionists notion of considering only “‘innocent victims’, civilians and members of the security forces who died through no fault of their own” as worth remembering.\footnote{52}

Catholic nationalists have equally demanding (and exclusive) views regarding reconciliation. Besides seeking to establish their victims as legitimate, they—and here more radical nationalists ought to be focused on—“want to see a more stringent interpretation of reconciliation that not only reflects the culpability of the British state in some of the events that took place during the ‘Troubles’, but also … identifies collusion between the British state and loyalist paramilitaries.”\footnote{53}

As has been shown, reconciliation is being used not as a tool to cross-cut the segmental cleavages present in Northern Ireland, but to reinforce and perpetuate the prevailing identities. As such, the intended purpose of reconciliation—and in the same sense forgiveness, recognition, and in the broader sense conflict transformation—was overturned and replaced with enhanced ideological construction.\footnote{54}

Identity appears to be a rigid, impenetrable boundary between Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists in Northern Ireland. Moving forward, what ought to happen in Northern Ireland? Or, to move away from a normative argument, what role, if any, can democracy play in identity (de)construction and how, if at all, can it produce “reciprocity [and] tolerance?”\footnote{55}

\textbf{Identity in Democratic Theory}

It can generally be considered established that a democratic state can—and many do—employ measures to construct, maintain, or enforce the dominance of a certain culture.\footnote{56} The reverse can also be taken at face value: democratic states can limit, mitigate, or reverse the dominance of a particular culture.\footnote{57} Essentially, this is also a criticism of Lijphartian consociationalism, as accommodation of conflicting identities on elite level could impact these identities. However, as consociationalism’s focus is on ‘thin recognition’ and conflict regulation, it maintains the status quo in deeply segmented societies.\footnote{58}

Transformative approaches, including those incorporating reconciliation, forgiveness, and recognition, can generally be considered aligned with democratic theories critical of those

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 91.  
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 92.  
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 95.  
\textsuperscript{57} Culture, here, can be broadly defined as “the social glue that unites people into identity groups.” Gutman, \textit{Identity in Democracy}, 38.  
subscribing to liberal ideals. The latter, for example, focuses on “the (nation) state [as] the primary theatre of political activity, and appear blithely indifferent to the tensions that can exist within its boundaries.” 59 Albeit not obvious, this presents a similarity to consociational principles, as “critical factors for successful consociationalism in a modern state context include the ability of a political elite to take decisions independently of their segmental followers.” 60 While not necessarily “blithely indifferent” per se, Northern Irish leaders’ subscription to consociational principles and their inclination “to take decisions independently” points at least to an indifference to decreasing internal tensions. Rupert Taylor emphasizes this point when asserting that “consociationalism is not greatly interested in offering a theoretical understanding of social change; rather, consociationalists are primarily concerned to present a synchronic model crafted for state-sponsored planning.” 61

Alternatives to liberal democratic theory can “transform individualistic and conflicting interests into common and nonconflicting ones, in the process developing capacities of citizenship that reduce factional threats to rights and pluralism.” 62 Consociationalism disenfranchises everyone outside the elites from taking control “of their own development,” which, one could argue, includes efforts by civil society to permeate the ethno-national boundaries persistent in Northern Ireland. 63 As Carol Gould further points out, “[democracy] is primarily valuable because humans value both activities that allow them to go and develop and control processes of growing and developing.” 64 However, consociationalism significantly limits the possibility to pursue these activities.

Mark Warren’s statement regarding the consequences of liberal democratic theories’ (and, arguably, consociationalism’s) limiting effects on prospects of inter-segmental interaction while describing the acquisition of autonomy:

Autonomy is an inherently social capacity that individuals develop through their interactions with others, by coming to know others both as separate human beings with their own unique capacities, problems, and interests and as beings with whom one shares at least some experiences, problems, and interests. Ideally, everyday interactions would cultivate within individuals the capacity to distinguish the wants, desires, and commitments that lend coherence to their identity from the wants, desires, and commitments that they have, perhaps uncritically, accepted from their culture and may experience as a source of unhappiness. 65

60 McCall, Identity in Northern Ireland, 47.
61 Taylor, “Northern Ireland: Consociation or Social Transformation?,” 39.
63 Ibid., 9.
This critical assessment of how liberal democratic theories limit each person’s ability to achieve autonomy—as autonomy itself is considered a “pre-political capacity”—illustrates, again, how consociationalism as a liberal theory restricts meaningful identity transformation along with reconciliation, recognition, and forgiveness.66

Traditional democratic theory, as this last part has shown, in no respect responds to the demands of deeply segmented societies in intractable conflicts—beyond the often applied and failed consociational methods. In fact, it further limits the promise of cross cutting the (presently) impermeable boundaries existing in Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

This essay made clear the difficulties involved in attempting to transform identities that are some of the root causes for past violence and current antipathies between nationalist Catholics and unionists Protestants on Northern Ireland. As stated early on in the essay and emphasized throughout, the two segments in Northern Ireland identify themselves in relations to the Other. This makes any form of forgiveness, reconciliation or recognition impossible, as any of these methods would take away from one’s own identity.

While attempts such as an integrative school system aimed to transform the underlying issues, identity change through these socialization factors remains futile and will continue to be just that, as identities are deeply entrenched and persistent in Northern Ireland. As the last part of this essay suggested, the past and current consociational approach and its underlying assumptions based on liberal democratic theory further consolidate the antipathy present between the segments in Northern Ireland. Change is a long way off and inconceivable with the present methods that are being applied to the conflict.

66 Ibid.
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