# Class, Ethnicity and Political Identity in Northern Ireland

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*ABSTRACT: The formal purpose of this paper is to offer a critical examination of the social and political philosophy of electoral integrationism. The critique of electoral integrationism is employed as a means by which to explore the relationship between class, ethnicity and political identity in contemporary Northern Ireland. The paper tenders two principal contentions. First, I challenge the view that the ethnoreligious divisions existent within the province are aberrant and irrational. I claim instead that political sectarianism in the six counties may be more faithfully conceived as a rational and perhaps inevitable reflection of the manner in which northern society is structured and experienced. Secondly, I argue that whilst political identity in Northern Ireland may be fashioned primarily by ethnicity, it also bears the indelible impression of class sentiment and experience. It is the particular nature of the articulation between class and ethnic identity in modern Northern society which renders the present conflict so apparently intractable. The paper concludes with the suggestion that, given the material foundations of ethnoreligious sentiment, the eradication of political sectarianism in the six counties will require radical structural reform.*

## INTRODUCTION: CULTURAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND PROBLEM

In a characteristically insightful article published in 1991, Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd observed that existing interpretations of the 'Northern Ireland problem' have frequently tendered an essentially 'cultural' understanding of the origins of the current conflict in the province. Such readings seek to depict the present troubles as having arisen out of the aberrant nature of Northern Irish political culture; out of the expectations, norms, values and attitudes of the two ethnoreligious communities which cohabit within the six counties. In view of the origins of the conflict, this view implies, its resolution must necessarily be sought in the sphere of culture, through 'education, exhortation and the reconciliation of traditions' (Ruane & Todd 1991, p28).

The 'cultural' approach to the conflict in Northern Ireland has exerted an enduring appeal for a range of social commentators and assumed a bewildering variety of forms. The belief that the recognition and promotion of cultural pluralism offers the most plausible solution to the sectarian enmity which presently blights Northern society has achieved a resonance among the ranks of

revisionist historians (Foster 1989).[1] The British media have all too often proved content to cling to the ideologically convenient interpretation that the troubles simply chart the inevitable descent into atavism of a politically infantile people prone to religious fanaticism (Curtis 1984). The cultural interpretation of the Northern Ireland conflict would appear, moreover, to have proved persuasive for those individuals who formulate educational policy for the province. The recent endeavours of the Northern Ireland Office to encourage integrated schools and to stimulate cultural dialogue between those children who remain 'educated apart' have kept faith with the liberal axiom that mutual knowledge in time begets mutual tolerance (Dunn 1993, p. 27; Gallagher and Dunn 1991, pp. 15-19; Gallagher et al 1993, pp. 178-179; Hughes 1994, pp 89-90; Osborne et al 1993, pp. 5-6; Salters & McEwen 1993, p. 53).

An essentially cultural understanding of the origins of the war in Northern Ireland is also embodied in the diverse writings of those intellectuals who have gravitated toward the demand that the British political parties organise throughout the six counties. The ideologues of electoral integration adopt the position that the ethnoreligious divisions which bedevil Northern Irish society are the inevitable product of the profoundly abnormal character of the political culture which obtains within the province. In more specific terms, the citizens of Northern Ireland have been condemned to sectarianism by their exclusion from the party political life of the modern British state (Clifford 1987a, 1987b, pp. 1-3; *The Equal Citizen*, March/April 1986; Institute For Representative Government 1988a, p. 5, 1988b, pp. 6-7; McCartney 1986, p. 4; Roberts 1987, pp. 315-317). The refusal of the parties of state to admit members from Northern Ireland has denied the people of the province access to a modern, progressive political culture bounded by strictly secular ideals of social and economic management. As a consequence, the residents of the six counties have been compelled to embrace ethnoreligious identities which represent neither a rational nor a 'normal' premise for political engagement in the modern world (Hoey 1994; *The Northern Star* 16/11/91). Given the deleterious repercussions of the British parties' historic refusal to organise within Northern Ireland, the realisation of electoral integration will, its advocates insist, inexorably act to rehabilitate the social and political life of the province. Admission to the parties of state will enable the people of the six counties to cast off the fetters of communal affiliation in order to participate in public life on more rational and secular terms (Aughey 1989a, p. 24, 1989b, pp. 155-156, 1990a, p. 4; Clifford 1985, p. 13; McCartney 1986, p. 6), whether as autonomous individuals (Aughey 1992; *The Equal Citizen*, September

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[1] For a critical response to the approach adopted by Roy Foster see Liam O'Dowd's letter to *The Irish Times* (15/3/1989).

1989, p. 8; March 1992, pp. 5-8) or as members of social classes (*The Northern Star*   27/6/92, January 1993). The advent of electoral integration will, in other words, herald the emergence of a modern, secular and pluralist political culture within Northern Ireland (Roberts 1987, p. 331).

The advocates of electoral integration, therefore, tender a thoroughly distinctive and imaginative interpretation of the political malaise which besets contemporary Northern Ireland. Although by no means entirely without worth, the electoral integrationist thesis exhibits a number of significant shortcomings (Purdie 1988, 1990), two of which will be teased out for closer examination in the discussion which follows. First, the advocates of electoral integration - in league with many others who adopt an essentially cultural approach to the current conflict in the North - appear unable to appreciate the rational status which political sectarianism assumes in the context of segmented societies such as Northern Ireland. Electoral integrationists typically prove content to dismiss those political personae fashioned by ethnic or religious affiliation as aberrant or 'unreal'; modes of false consciousness which will readily evaporate once exposed to the appropriate cultural stimuli, in this case the secular counsel of the parties of state. The depiction and dismissal of political sectarianism as a mere ideological aberration scarcely, however, stands up to even the most cursory scrutiny. Whilst the influence exercised by ethnoreligious affiliation over the political affairs of Northern Ireland may very well be abhorrent, it should not be regarded as irrational or abnormal. On the contrary, the sectarianism which pervades the political life of the province may be more faithfully conceived as a rational - and indeed inevitable - reflection of the manner in which Northern society is structured and experienced. Informed by an interpretation of the conflict which is palpably idealist, the proponents of electoral integration however remain seemingly oblivious to the structural foundations of ethnoreligious enmity.

Secondly, the electoral integrationist thesis may be contested on the grounds that it embodies a misrepresentation of the political culture which actually obtains within the bounds of Northern Ireland. The ideologues of electoral integration depict the public life of the province as a realm of ideological combat shaped exclusively by the primitive concerns of ethnoreligious sentiment and impervious to the influence of other, essentially secular modes of political discourse. Such a depiction fails to grasp the diverse complexity of political identity and action in the six counties. More precisely, it conspires to overlook the significant role which strictly temporal ideological formations *actually do play* in Northern political life. The vigour and resilience of ethnoreligious affiliation within the six counties derive not from its ability to obliterate alternative sources of political identity - as the proponents of electoral integration

appear to assume - but rather from its capacity to accommodate and transmute them. In particular, the enduring appeal of sectarian sentiment to the people of the province has been underwritten by its capacity to lend voice to particular forms of *class interest and experience*. It is the specific articulation of ethnic and class identity in the context of Northern Ireland which produces and reproduces many of the divisions existent within Northern society and which renders the present troubles so apparently intractable.

## ETHNICITY AND POLITICAL IDENTITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND:

## 1. THE  MATERIAL FOUNDATIONS OF SECTARIANISM

The specific course of development followed by Northern Ireland established a society deeply stratified along ethnoreligious lines. The strategic interventions of the British state during two decades of Direct Rule have served to ameliorate some of the disparities in the economic circumstances of the two ethnoreligious blocs. Nonetheless, the material foundations of sectarian social relations remain broadly and obstinately in place (Bell 1990, p. 93). The disparities in the life chances enjoyed by the 'two communities' are evinced most graphically in terms of the incidence of unemployment (Whyte 1990, pp. 59-60). At present Catholic men are 2.2 times  more likely than their Protestant counterparts to be unemployed (Cormack et al 1993, p. 22; Gallagher et al 1994, pp. 8, 55-56). The sectarian ratio of unemployment among women is smaller but remains significant nevertheless (Osborne & Cormack 1991, pp. 57-58). Those Catholics who have secured employment also face certain disadvantages. The Catholic working class remains significantly under-represented in many skilled manual jobs (Gallagher et al 1994, pp. 7, 22). As O'Dowd (1987:205) notes, lucrative manual employment in sectors such as engineering and power generation remains very much the exclusive preserve of Protestant workers.

The underprivilege experienced by the minority ethnoreligious community within the Northern Irish labour market has not, however, been restricted solely to the Catholic working class. The era of Direct Rule has witnessed a considerable expansion of the occupational opportunities available to the Catholic middle classes. Nonetheless, middle class Catholics have continued to face certain disadvantages relative to their Protestant counterparts (Osborne & Cormack 1991, p. 62). In particular, Catholic professionals remain substantially under-represented within the upper echelons of a range of occupations. The obstacles which confront upwardly mobile nationalists find illustration in the distinctive patterns of vertical segregation which exist within the Northern Ireland Civil Service (Cormack & Osborne 1994b, pp. 70-79). At present some thirty-seven

per cent of civil servants in the six counties are drawn from Catholic backgrounds (Department of Finance & Personnel 1991). The minority community, however, provides a mere seventeen per cent of those individuals employed in the highest occupational grade of the province's civil service (ibid, pp. 13-15). It would appear, therefore, that a number of ambitious and qualified Catholic professionals have - for the time being at least - run up against a glass ceiling. The under-representation of middle class Catholics within the upper reaches of the occupational hierarchy has inevitably served to ensure that northern nationalists have remained marginal to the operation of the Northern Irish economy. The lack of strategic economic power possessed by Catholic professionals was graphically illustrated in a recent survey conducted by a local firm of management consultants (Macauley 1994). The agency concerned compiled a list of those figures considered to exercise 'control or influence' over the economic life of the province. Of the one thousand individuals identified, only eighty-five came from the Catholic community.

The unequal position which Catholics occupy within the social and economic life of Northern Ireland finds reflection - albeit a partial one - in the realm of political affairs. The abolition of Stormont in 1972 removed from the hands of northern Protestants the instruments of state power. Whilst the political authority of the Protestant community has been severely diminished by Direct Rule, it has not evaporated entirely. In more specific terms, Northern Unionists still exercise considerable control over the repressive apparatuses of the state. The security forces operating in Northern Ireland are recruited almost exclusively from the Protestant community. The reasons for the domination by Protestants of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the former Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) and its successor the Royal Irish Regiment (RIR) are of course complex and controversial. This does not, however, alter the reality that the ethnoreligious composition of the security forces has enabled the Protestant community to exercise a continued and substantial influence over the everyday lives of Northern Catholics.

Hence, the sectarianism which besets Northern Ireland should not be conceived as an expression of personal pathology, nor as a phenomenon which exists and operates purely in the realm of the ideal or the cultural. On the contrary, the ethnoreligious divisions which exist in the province should be understood as having roots in the material realities of Northern society (Bell 1990, p. 213; Whyte 1986, pp. 222-223). Sectarianism is, in other words, a matter of structure as well as superstructure. One of the most successful conceptual attempts to accommodate the materiality of ethnoreligious division in Northern Ireland is that furnished by O'Dowd, Rolston and Tomlinson (1980). Whilst writing within a

materialist framework, O'Dowd et al manage to avoid the principal deficiency of the marxist approach by refusing to reduce ethnicity to the status of a mere class phenomenon. The sectarianism which characterises Northern Ireland expresses a specific form of social relations which, the authors contend, must be acknowledged as defining a particular material reality:

> Sectarianism is not a superstructural phenomenon floating free of an abstracted economic base which in turn is divided into classes. In Northern Ireland sectarian division is a *material* reality which has been constituted and re-constituted throughout the history of capital accumulation and class struggle as a whole. It is not merely an overlay on class divisions to be seen as something which is either more or less important than class. As a material reality it has a history embedded in colonisation, industrial revolution and the emergence of new class forms under capitalism (ibid, p. 25).

Thus, the ethnoreligious divisions which characterise Northern Ireland possess clear material foundations. In view of the nature of the Northern social formation the fact that political discourse betrays the appeal of ethnic sentiment emerges as thoroughly rational. In Northern Ireland ethnoreligious origins exercise a palpable influence upon the life chances enjoyed by the individual social actor. Moreover, members of ethnic communities in the province frequently share in common particular interests and conditions. In such circumstances it is entirely logical that ethnoreligious status should act to shape the political outlook and identity of the individual, and that ethnic groupings should unite to pursue those interests or redress those grievances which they possess and experience as communities. In such circumstances, in other words, it would appear inevitable that the political culture of Northern Ireland should bear the inscription of those ethnoreligious divisions which are firmly rooted in the northern social formation.

The contention that the ethnic politics which characterise Northern Ireland are rational is lent further credence once we turn to consider the substance of political debate in the six counties. The political culture of Northern Ireland has frequently been depicted as centring upon the exotic concerns of a primitive primordialism; as being dominated by a 'romantic nationalism or sixteenth century theology' (Ruane & Todd 1991:39). Although not altogether inaccurate, these evaluations fail to grasp fully the nature of political discourse in the north of Ireland. Ethnoreligious communities assume the role of political actors in Northern Ireland in order to pursue certain rational interests and objectives. The issues which consume the energies of political actors in the province are typically those of housing, employment, physical security, social

justice and so forth. The substance of Northern Irish political life is, in other words, shaped by concerns which are the very stuff of modern liberal democratic debate (ibid, pp. 39-40). The fact that these essentially modern concerns happen to be articulated through the medium of a seemingly pre-modern political discourse detracts little from this reality.

The nature of the Northern Irish social formation has served to ensure that Northern political life has not only been fashioned by the hand of ethnicity but also has has assumed a distinctly conflictual form. The two ethnoreligious blocs in Northern Ireland are effectively caught in what Ruane and Todd (1991, p. 36) term a 'structural bind'. The demands of one community can only be secured through concessions from the other. The assertion of its demands by one ethnoreligious community is inevitably, therefore, regarded by the other community as a threat to its interests and rights (Whyte 1990, p. 53). Accordingly, the operation of political life can only serve to engender communal distrust. The manner in which the particular structural relationship which conjoins the two communities produces and reproduces conflictual political activity and values is made particularly clear in the sphere of employment. One of the central political demands of the Catholic minority has been for equitable rights of employment. Substantial elements within the Protestant community have interpreted the demand for 'fair employment' as a threat to their interests (Bruce 1994, pp. 54-62; Doyle 1994). Moreover, it would be hard to deny that they are right to do so. In an era when the notion of full employment is rarely held as a political ideal, let alone regarded as a viable policy objective, the expansion of occupational opportunities for Catholics cannot reasonably be expected to be facilitated by means of economic growth. On the contrary, in the present economic climate, such gains can only be secured at the expense of Protestant workers. As a consequence, the debate over fair employment in Northern Ireland has inevitably tended to exacerbate communal tensions within the province.

## 2. THE SOCIAL RELATIONS OF SECTARIANISM

The seemingly aberrant character of Northern Irish political culture emerges, therefore, as an essentially rational expression of the particular nature of the northern social formation. The ethnoreligious conflict which marks political life in Northern Ireland may be further viewed as a reflection of the manner in which social life is experienced in the six counties. As Ruane and Todd (1992b, pp. 75-83) observe, there exist within the two ethnoreligious blocs in the province manifold sources of division and diversity. In spite of such intracommunal divisions, however, individuals living in Northern Ireland largely experience social

reality as members of ethnic communities which operate in isolation
from one another (Ruane & Todd 1992a, p. 209; 1992b, pp. 84-95). The
ethnoreligious segregation of Northern society assumes a variety of
guises, but is manifested most clearly in the realm of education
(Whyte 1986, pp. 227-230). Virtually every child in the province is
educated in schools which are comprised exclusively of their co-
religionists. As Cormack and Osborne (1994a, p. 13; 1994b, p. 84)
reveal, a mere one per cent of pupils receive their education in
formally integrated schools which cater for children of all religious
denominations. In recent times, there has been a growing incidence of
Catholic children attending the more prestigious Protestant grammar
schools. Such pupils are, however, relatively few in number and
drawn overwhelmingly from middle-class households.

The religious segregation evident in Northern Irish schools is
echoed in patterns of residence in the province. By the late nineteen
sixties, the traditional sectarian residential mosaic in Belfast had
been modified somewhat by an underlying trend toward more
religiously mixed housing. The eruption of the troubles, however, re-
established the conditions of residential segregation, as the process
of 'territorial purification' redrew and redefined the physical
boundaries between the two ethnic communities in Belfast (McAuley
1994, pp. 42-44). The passage of time has, moreover, merely served to
consolidate the pattern of spatial segregation between the
communities. The recently published findings of the 1991 census
reveal that over half of the population of Northern Ireland
currently reside in areas in which over ninety per cent of inhabitants
are drawn from one religious community or the other (McKittrick
1993a; 1993b). The ethnoreligious apartheid which typifies
contemporary Northern society inevitably finds graphic illustration
in the province's capital city. As McKittrick (ibid) observes, thirty-
five of Belfast's fifty-one census wards have populations of whom
over ninety per cent are drawn from one community or the other. The
pattern of residential segregation is punctuated only by the existence
of two seemingly integrated areas in the north and south of the city.
The population of these predominantly middle class districts is,
however, in the midst of a prolonged process of recomposition and it
remains to be seen whether over time they will retain their
ethnoreligious 'mix'.

The various patterns of ethnoreligious segregation which
characterise Northern Ireland serve to define the totality of a set of
sectarian social relations which both constrain and fashion the
conduct of social actors. In contemporary Northern Ireland the
individual is compelled in a number of settings to act in a manner
which is - whether she or he is willing to acknowledge it or not -
essentially sectarian (Brewer 1992, p. 362). The constraints exercised
by sectarianism over social action prove especially stringent in the
case of the Belfast working classes. The distinctive mosaic of

interfaces between separate and hostile ethnoreligious communities that defines the Belfast landscape severely limits the physical mobility of working class youths, ensuring their existence within deeply restricted 'life worlds' (Jenkins 1983). Moreover, the nature of sectarian relations in Belfast ensures that the working classes possess an intimate knowledge of the sectarian geography of the city and of the ethnographic cues which reveal religious identity (Burton 1978; McAuley 1994, p. 56). The possession of these interpretive skills is indispensable both in enabling the individual to 'manage' everyday situations and as a means of self preservation. Hence, the ethnoreligious divisions which mark Northern Ireland represent a social reality which exists independently of the actions of individual social actors but which is nonetheless embodied in and reproduced through such actions. In view of the pervasiveness of sectarian social relations within the province, the nature of Northern political culture comes to appear more rational than the proponents of electoral integration allow. The individual's experience of everyday social reality in Northern Ireland is profoundly influenced by the force of sectarianism. The enduring appeal of ethnoreligious political identities in the province arises out of the fact that they address and 'make sense' of - as well of course as manipulating and amplifying - such experiences. Hence, the ethnoreligious sentiment which informs political action in Northern Ireland does not necessarily represent a distortion of social reality, a mode of false consciousness. On the contrary, sectarian political identities may in fact offer a particular representation - albeit at times a less than strictly faithful one - of the manner in which social life is experienced in the province. The ideologues of electoral integration would doubtless counter this observation with the con- tention that social reality is experienced as sectarian precisely *because* of the historical exclusion of the six counties from the party political life of the British state. Indeed, there is much of value in this argument. Nonetheless, such conjecture serves little to alter the realities of contemporary social and political life in the North. Sectarianism has deep roots in the material structures of Northern Ireland and in the everyday experiences of its people. It is this rather than - as the advocates of electoral integration would have us believe - simply the absence of an alternative political culture which has acted to underwrite the longevity of ethnicity as the author of political identity and action in Northern Ireland.

## 3. THE AFFECTIVE POWER OF ETHNICITY

The nature of Northern Irish political culture has, as we have witnessed already, its foundations in the northern social formation. Ethnic and nationalist sentiment have persisted in the province because of their facility to represent the material interests of

specific social aggregates. The ethnoreligious blocs which coexist uneasily within the six counties exhibit, therefore, many of the traits of Weberian status groups. In the words of Eugeen Roosens (1989, p.14), the two communities operate as 'pressure groups with a noble face'. The enduring appeal of ethnicity and nationalism cannot, however, be reduced simply to the material functions which these political identities and ideologies perform. As a variety of observers attest (Kellas 1991, pp. 10, 32; Mitchell 1991, p. 31; See 1986, pp. 30-31), the popularity of ethnic and nationalist sentiment has been underwritten by their ability to satisfy the demand of individuals for a sense of identity, community and worth. The affective appeal of ethnicity and nationalism is identified by Roosens (1989, p. 16) thus:

> Those who do identify with an ethnic category, network, or group can find psychological security in this identification, a feeling of belonging, a certainty that one knows one's origins, that one can live on in the younger generations of one's people who will carry on the struggle, and so on .

Whilst the affective function of ethnic nationalism has been acknowledged, the argument being advanced here is not an essentially primordialist one. The existence of substantive identities such as ethnicity or nationalism is by no means 'natural' or inevitable. The particular emotional needs upon which ethnicity and nationalism draw are, of course, produced and reproduced under certain historical conditions and within specific sets of social relations. Moreover, the resurgence of ethnic nationalism in the modern world owes at least as much to the failure of alternative philosophical projects as to its own ideological vitality.

The ability of ethnic nationalism to satiate social actors' need for a sense of community and identity is nonetheless impressive and indeed serves greatly to explain its longevity. The political identities of ethnicity and nationalism represent not only means to the end of material advancement but also ends in themselves. As a consequence, the process of social democratic reform has proved unable to barter ethnic sentiment - or, more precisely, ethnic *nationalist* sentiment - out of existence. The redistribution of political power and material wealth may erode ethnic nationalist sentiment, but cannot expect to effect its complete elimination. The resilience of ethnic nationalism as a mode of social and political identity *may have* found illustration in the course of ideological development within Northern Ireland over the period of the current conflict. The past quarter of a century has - as Ruane and Todd (1992a, pp. 203-207) observe - witnessed a significant recomposition of the northern Catholic community. The Catholic middle class has expanded and secured significant political and material gains. The increasingly

vested interest of the Northern Catholic middle classes in the constitutional status quo would appear to have rendered many of them ever more ambivalent on 'the national question' (O'Connor 1993, pp. 52-53; Cormack & Osborne 1994b, pp. 83-84). Nonetheless, Ruane and Todd (1992a, p. 205) suggest that there *may* exist a substantial number of Catholic professionals who would be willing to accept a decline in living standards in return for the psychological and emotional rewards of Irish unity. The existence of an element within the minority community which exhibits a preference for ethnic rather than class interest would be highly significant. It would suggest that ethnic nationalism has persisted in Northern Ireland not only *because* of the nature of the northern social formation, but also *in spite of* it. It would, in other words, imply that ethnicity has survived as a resonant source of political identity not merely because it represents an ideological prop employed by social aggregates in pursuit of certain material and political interests but also because it constitutes an ideological and normative absolute; an end in itself.

## CLASS, ETHNICITY AND POLITICAL IDENTITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

### 1. SECTARIAN CLASS RELATIONS

The analysis advanced thus far has of course represented a simplification. The ethnoreligious enmity which blights the political life of Northern Ireland largely owes its origins to the specific nature of the Northern social formation. Ethnoreligious identity does not, however, constitute the sole basis of social stratification within Northern Ireland. The six counties feature a series of other lines of social fissure, the most significant of which for our purposes is that defined by social class. Northern Ireland clearly exhibits those disparities of income and wealth typical of bourgeois society (Wilson 1989, p. 13). Indeed, over the period of the present conflict the divergence of the material condition of rich and poor in the province has become appreciably more pronounced (Milburn 1994). The expansion of public sector employment under Direct Rule has created an enlarged and ever more affluent northern middle class (Breen 1994; MacKinnon 1993; O'Faolain 1993; Rolston 1993). At the same time, however, the virtually unpunctuated crises which have beset global capitalism over the past two decades have condemned a substantial swathe of the working classes in the province to the hardship of long term unemployment.

The existence and operation of Northern Ireland as a class society finds lucid expression in the realm of education. The province

has retained a selective and elitist system of education which was abandoned in England and Wales almost thirty years ago. At the age of eleven, children in Northern Ireland are channelled into grammar and secondary intermediate schools on the basis of their performance in the 'eleven plus' intelligence test. The grammar schools in the province are more prestigious and better resourced than the secondary intermediates. They offer a distinctly academic education to pupils who typically attain the best external examination results in the whole of the United Kingdom. Northern grammar schools tend, however, to recruit primarily from the children of the middle classes. Approximately seven out of every ten grammar school pupils come from non-manual backgrounds (Cormack & Osborne 1994a, p. 12). Thus, the retention of a selective system of education in Northern Ireland has primarily worked to the advantage of the middle classes. The existence of grammar schools has enabled middle class children to enjoy a privileged education and to acquire those credentials which afford considerable leverage within the labour market. The nature of the schooling system in Northern Ireland has, therefore, acted to reproduce not only ethnoreligious identity and divisions, but also those patterns of inequality which are the hallmark of a class society.

The two ethnoreligious communities in Northern Ireland tend in the main, as we acknowledged previously, to live apart. Northern Irish society is of course segregated further in terms of social class. The research of the social geographer Fred Boal (1971) reveals that individuals living in the six counties inhabit restricted 'life worlds' bounded not only by ethnoreligious identity but by class also. Boal investigated two contiguous areas of South Belfast which, whilst both predominantly Protestant, differed enormously in terms of their socio-economic composition. The scale of segregation between the two districts which he discovered was striking. The residents of each area tended to socialise apart from one another, send their children to different schools and attend separate churches even if they happened to belong to the same religious denomination. The research conducted by Boal would, therefore, seem to intimate that whilst the life experiences of social actors in Northern Ireland are shaped and bounded by ethnoreligious identity, they also bear the indelible imprint of class origins.

Thus, the material condition and everyday experiences of individuals living in Northern Ireland are palpably determined both by ethnoreligious status and by socio-economic origins. It should scarcely come as a surprise, therefore, to discover that social actors in the six counties tend to identify themselves in terms not only of ethnicity but of social class also. The data furnished by the British Social Attitudes survey attests to the strength of ethnoreligious affiliation within the province. Some sixty-five per cent of respondents stated that they 'felt fairly or very close' to others of a

similar religious background (Moxon-Browne 1991, p. 27). The survey data also, however, reveals socio-economic status to be an equally salient source of social identity. An identical proportion of the sample population acknowledged an identification with those with whom they share a common class position. The British Social Attitudes survey would seem to suggest, therefore, that social identity in Northern Ireland is fashioned by the interplay of *inter alia* ethnoreligious and class affiliation. Social actors identify not merely with others who exhibit familiar ethnoreligious traits but also those with whom they share common class interests. Hence, whilst working class individuals resident in the province, for example, may feel an affinity towards people with whom they share ethnoreligious attributes, they will tend to feel closer still to those co-religionists who originate from class backgrounds similar to their own.    Northern Ireland exists, therefore, as a society characterised by what John Thompson (1983, p. 131) terms 'structural ambiguity'. The nature of the Northern social formation bears the inscription not only of ethnicity but of social class also. The hierarchies of material privilege - and indeed of political power - defined by ethnoreligious and class identity respectively should not, however, be conceived either as operating independently of one another or indeed as being coincidental. On the contrary, these structural hierarchies intersect one another in a manner which inspires and explains many of the complexities of Northern Irish political life. As a consequence, the life chances enjoyed by the individual social actor in the province are fashioned not by either ethnoreligious *or* class identity, but rather by both. One of the most persuasive endeavours to conceptualise the complex interplay of ethnicity and social class in the formation of Northern Irish society is, once again, that proffered by O'Dowd and his colleagues. Surveying the historical evolution of the six counties, the authors conclude that Northern Ireland has - and indeed continues to be - structured and characterised by what they term 'sectarian class relations':

> Class in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, is not simply a matter of an 'economic relation' - it cross-cuts politics, ideology and culture. Class relations and the material reality they express cannot be experienced in a pure or abstract form. The brief discussion of the historical background to Partition and the analysis of Northern Ireland political relations since 1921 confirms the ubiquity of sectarian division. Class relations in Northern Ireland were only experienced as *sectarian class* relations. Sectarian division is itself a particular historical division of class, or more precisely of class fractions, cemented together in Protestant and Catholic class alliances. In other words sectarian division is a class phenomenon and vice versa

(1980, 25).

Hence, the structure of Northern Irish society has been fashioned by the complex interplay of sectarian and class relations. It is both fitting and inevitable, therefore, that the political life of the province should bear the impression both of ethnoreligious and class identity. Ethnoreligious affiliation clearly represents the principal source of political identity in Northern Ireland. Religious background constitutes, for instance, the most reliable predictor of electoral choice in the six counties. Moreover, political alliances are - as McAuley (1994, p. 1) has observed - more likely to be established across the boundaries of social class than those defined by ethnoreligious affiliation. Whilst ethnoreligious status may be the *principal* author of political identity in Northern Ireland, it does not, however, represent the *only* one. Within the ideological framework constructed by ethnoreligious sentiment and interest, social class exercises an important though frequently overlooked influence (McAuley 1994, pp. 2, 52, 124-129, 181; O'Dowd 1990, p.63).

## 2. CLASS, ETHNICITY AND NORTHERN IRISH NATIONALISM

The complex interaction of ethnicity and class in the formulation of political identity in the six counties may be illustrated through a necessarily cursory examination of the evolution of modern Northern Irish nationalism. The coincidence of a series of social and political conditions during the era of devolved government at Stormont engendered a profound sense of community among northern Catholics (O'Leary & McGarry 1993, p. 130; Todd 1990; Wichert 1991, p. 100). The experience of discrimination in the labour market and virtually total dispossession in the realm of political power inevitably served to alienate large swathes of nationalist opinion. The existence of such political disaffection eventually gave rise to the emergence in the nineteen sixties of a civil rights movement which skilfully articulated nationalist demands for social democratic reform. Although initiated by representatives of a newly educated Catholic middle class, the civil rights association proved able - in the short term at least - to accommodate the political interests of the entire nationalist population, regardless of class position (Cormack & Osborne 1994b, p. 65; Mitchell 1991, pp. 109-159; O'Leary & McGarry 1993, pp. 158-161; Wichert 1991, pp 85-114). The sense of political community shared by Catholics during the lifetime of the Stormont legislature has, of course, largely survived the traumas of the past quarter century. The recent political dialogue between John Hume and Gerry Adams, for instance, represents in part an acknowledgement that there exist certain political interests which are held in common by the entire nationalist 'family' (Cunningham 1991, p. 196).

The period of the troubles has also, however, witnessed the appearance and deepening of political divisions within the ranks of Northern nationalists (Ruane & Todd 1992a, pp. 202-209). This process of ideological differentiation broadly reflects the shifts in the class composition of the Catholic population occasioned by two decades of Direct Rule from Westminster (Smyth 1991, p. 144). Perhaps the most significant effect of Direct Rule has been the creation of an enlarged and more variegated Catholic middle class (Brennock 1991; McKittrick 1991; Rolston 1993; Ryan 1994, pp. 132-135). The substantial advances secured by many Catholic professionals living in the province have been facilitated primarily by the expansion of both higher education and public sector employment (Cormack & Osborne 1994b, pp 70-73; O'Connor 1993, p. 14). The social mobility enjoyed by many Northern Catholics in recent times has, moreover, found reflection in patterns of spatial mobility (Cormack & Osborne 1994b, pp. 82-83; Gallagher et al 1994, pp. 9-10, 59-60). Over the past decade in Belfast upwardly mobile Catholics have, as Jim Smyth (1991, p. 144) observes, migrated in significant numbers 'from traditional Catholic areas to occupy what were once the residential preserves of the Protestant bourgeoisie'. The Catholic working classes' experience of Direct Rule differs dramatically from that of their bourgeois co-religionists. The enduring structural crises which have beset both the global and local economies over the period of the present conflict have condemned many Catholic workers to long-term unemployment (O'Connor 1993, p. 17; Ruane & Todd 1992a, p. 204). The Catholic working class has, moreover, borne the brunt of the repressive security measures adopted by successive Westminster administrations (O'Doherty 1993; Pollak 1993, p. 45; Smyth 1991, p. 144). Thus, whilst the British State may relate to many Catholic professionals as a generous benefactor, it relates, in contrast, to many working class nationalists as an oppressor.

The changes in the class profile of the Catholic community wrought by two decades of Direct Rule have inevitably produced ideological fissures among Northern nationalists which have been crudely indexed in patterns of electoral choice. The more affluent elements of the Catholic population have - as Irvin and Moxon-Browne (1989, pp. 7-8) intimate - tended to vote virtually *en masse* for the constitutional nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). The electoral appeal of the SDLP rests largely upon the ability of the party to accommodate the essential ambivalence of the new Catholic middle classes. The constitutional nationalist strategy of pursuing the gradual unification of Ireland through a prolonged process of dialogue has proved persuasive for many upwardly mobile Catholics who possess both an emotional attachment to the ideal of Irish unity and an instrumental commitment to the reality of the Union (Mitchell 1991, p. 346;

O'Connor 1993, pp. 35, 43, 49, 52-53; Ruane & Todd 1992a, p. 205). The political constituency upon which Sinn Fein draw contrasts sharply with that enjoyed by the SDLP (Ryan 1993, p. 66). Electoral support for Sinn Fein has been heavily concentrated - in urban areas at least - among the more disadvantaged strata within the nationalist community (Irvin & Moxon-Browne 1989, pp. 7-8). The radical endeavours of contemporary republicanism to terminate the Union by force of arms have inevitably exercised a resonance for those Catholic workers who have derived little benefit from Direct Rule.

The ideological development of modern Northern Irish nationalism has, therefore, betrayed the influence of both class and ethnic identity. Regarded in this particular light, the typification of Northern Irish political culture tendered by the ideologues of electoral integration would appear to represent strictly a partial truth. Northern Ireland quite clearly constitutes a society characterised by an absence of 'class politics' in the sense that socio-economic origins are patently not the principal architects of political interest and identity in the province. Such an acknowledgement should not, however, be allowed to obscure the salience of the role which social class actually *does* play within the particular form of political life within the six counties. In reality, class identity has exerted an influence over the political affairs of Northern Ireland which has been appreciably greater than electoral integrationists have typically been willing to acknowledge. That the influence of social class has been articulated and refracted through political ideologies primarily forged by the sentiments and interests of ethnoreligious identity serves little to diminish the veracity of this observation (O'Dowd 1991, pp. 48-49).


3. CLASS RESOURCES AND THE FORM OF POLITICAL LIFE


The evolution of Northern Irish political culture has, therefore, been deeply influenced by class interest and identity. Social class has, however, served to mould not only the substance of political life in the province but also its form. The social formation which exists in Northern Ireland has, as illustrated in the foregoing discussion, been fashioned by the complex interaction of sectarian and class relations. The material and ideological resources available to social groupings by virtue of their position within the hierarchy of sectarian class relations clearly determines the manner in which they endeavour to express and prosecute their political interests. The influence exercised by sectarian class position upon political form may be illustrated through reference to the nature of loyalism and republicanism. The Protestant working class in Northern Ireland have historically occupied a position of privilege relative to their Catholic fellow workers. Northern Protestants have tended to be

over-represented within skilled manual occupations and have traditionally enjoyed a virtual monopoly on employment in the strategically vital area of power generation (O'Dowd 1987, p. 205). The particular class resources available to Protestant workers have had a significant bearing upon the manner in which they have articulated their political interests. On a number of occasions the Protestant working classes have sought to prosecute their political objectives by exercising the appreciable power which they possess - or, more precisely, used to possess (Ryan 1994, pp. 131-132) - within the productive process. The particular form of class power available to loyalists was employed to especially dramatic effect in 1974 when the Ulster Workers' Council brought the province to a virtual standstill (Anderson 1994; Bell 1984, p. 63; McAuley 1994, p. 50; Mitchell 1991, pp. 252-291). Thus, the specific position occupied by the Protestant working class within the sectarian class formation of Northern Ireland has served to ensure that its political conduct has assumed a palpably class form. As a consequence, the engagement of loyalist workers in the conflicts of the past quarter century has tended to draw them towards a political identity which contains the kernel of an understanding of class interest, albeit one contaminated by its articulation with the ideology of sectarianism.

The nature of the material resources available to the Protestant working classes has, therefore, ensured that their political interests and power have frequently been articulated in the sphere of production. The form of political expression employed by the Catholic working class has been altogether different. Catholic workers in the province occupy a less privileged position within the hierarchy of sectarian class relations than their Protestant counterparts. The working classes among the Northern nationalist community have experienced a higher incidence of unemployment and have been largely excluded from the more lucrative and strategically important areas of manual employment. This material dispossession has indelibly shaped the form in which the political interests of the Catholic working classes have been expressed. Deprived of the class resources enjoyed by their Protestant counterparts, the Catholic working classes have been unable to pursue their political objectives through the productive process (O'Dowd et al 1980, p. 64). Insofar as the political project of republicanism has actually been expressed in material terms, it has assumed the guise of political violence rather than the withdrawal of labour power. Moreover, the economic dispossession of the Catholic working classes has meant that their political interests have been articulated in a form which is principally cultural. Thus, modern republicanism has endeavoured to advance its aims by means of the rejuvenation of cultural identity, skilful polemic and the manipulation of the symbols of injustice and oppression, most memorably during the hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981 (Mitchell

1991, pp. 328-355; O'Malley 1990).

## 4. THE ONTOLOGY OF CLASS

The analysis developed so far has conceived of social classes
principally as economic categories. Social class, however, defines
and denotes not merely a material condition but also an ontological
state (Sennett & Cobb 1972, p. 36). Classes typically construct for
themselves distinctive cultural identities which distil into
particular values, rituals, linguistic codes  and behavioural norms.
The codes of meaning tendered by these cultural personae explain to
social classes - though often in a less than accurate fashion - their
historical origins; they offer feelings of contemporary worth and
serve to demarcate the boundaries between themselves and other
social aggregates. The sense of being generated by social class
performs, in other words, functions similar to ethnic sentiment.
Indeed, according to Christopher McAll (1990:140-141, 149, 211) the
resemblance between class culture and ethnicity is sufficient to justify
the identification of an 'ethnicity of class'. In a passage worth
quoting at length McAll develops his thesis:

> It would seem to be an elementary conclusion in relation to old
> established class societies that the consciousness of class and the
> consciousness of not belonging to other classes is constructed first
> around the appearances of class as experienced, in all the
> various forms of talking, thinking, behaving, eating, working,
> and housing in which class clothes itself. The consciousness of
> class can thus exist apart from any deeper understanding of the
> structures that lie behind the symbols and practices. But if this
> is the case, the relationship between class and ethnicity becomes
> that much more problematic, since the very labels and symbols
> that come to identify different classes in the experience, and
> therefore the consciousness, of class, can also be taken to be
> constitutive of ethnic differentiation. In a sense class could be
> said to become ethnicity, or class structure could be seen as taking
> the form of ethnic differentiation in those societies where
> capitalist relations of production have been long enough in
> existence for some degree of class endogamy and
> transgenerational monopolistic closure to have been established.
> This suggests that it would be mistaken to see class and
> ethnicity as mutually exclusive ways in which agents in society
> can conceive of themselves (ibid. pp. 140-1).

Social class defines, therefore, not solely a material condition but in
addition a distinctive sense of being in the world. The particular
cultural persona fashioned by the working class, for example, is
naturally no mere arbitrary invention. On the contrary, it represents

a rational expression of the historical and contemporary experience of specific working class communities. Such experiences are in turn largely determined by the structural conditions which workers face: the structure and health of the regional economy, the nature of urban development, the relationship with the institutions of the State and so forth. The particular cultural identities assumed by working class communities should not, however, be conceived as prescriptive. There is, in other words, no single authentic way of 'being' working class. The cultural persona of the working class, rather, stands as a diverse ontological resource which individuals draw upon in a creative and selective manner. Consequently, while the cultural expressions of the working classes may be patterned, they are simultaneously complex and diverse (Brown 1987; Jenkins 1983).

Thus, social class represents an ontological state and cultural form fashioned by the literal everyday experiences of social actors. In segmented societies such as Northern Ireland, however, social reality is mediated not only by class but by ethnic identity also. As a result, the particular forms of cultural expression employed by social aggregates in the province will inevitably betray the influence of both class and ethnic sentiment. The modes of social being authored by class and ethnicity respectively should not, however, be conceived as operating independently of one another. On the contrary, they tend to interact in a manner which produces distinctive modes of cultural expression and ways of *being in the world* (Goyder 1983, pp. 73-84). In Northern Ireland, therefore, both class culture and ethnicity bear the impression of one another. Ethnicity is - to alter slightly a phrase borrowed from Stuart Hall (Bell 1990, p. 68) - the particular modality through which class relations are experienced, and of course vice versa.

The symbiosis of class and ethnic identity in the formation of cultural expression and social being has been explored by a number of authors. In an illuminating recently published work, Steven Fielding (1993) examined the experiences of Irish working class Catholic emigrants in Manchester around the turn of the century. According to Fielding, at no time was the outlook of the emigrants fashioned exclusively by either class or ethnic sentiment. On the contrary, the social and political consciousness of Irish Catholics living in England was typically framed by the interaction of both of these modes of social being:

> The juxtaposition of class with ethnicity is intended to suggest that neither one nor the other ever held exclusive sway. There was no linear progression from a 'lower' ethnic feeling to a 'higher' class consciousness: they were, in actual, lived experience, organically linked. Moreover, class and ethnic identities were continually contested and redefined. They were protean forms of consciousness, which in themselves possessed no

one anterior meaning (Fielding 1993, pp. xii-xiii).

In the more specifically relevant context of contemporary Northern Ireland, the interplay of ethnicity and class in the formation of social being has been explored most fully by Desmond Bell. In his writings, Bell (1985; 1987; 1990) seeks to examine the particular cultural forms assumed by the political identity of loyalism. The activities of loyalist marching bands, he contends, are instrumental in reproducing a sense of ethnoreligious identity among Northern Protestants. In particular, the cultural rituals which surround the marching season serve to reconstitute both in the minds and literal experience of loyalists their 'imagined community' of the 'Protestant people' (Bell 1990, p. 20). The cultural forms assumed by loyalism also, however, articulate a sense of *being* fashioned by social class. The organisation of the marching bands is characterised by a rigid gender segregation. The cultural activities in which the bandsmen engage, moreover, centre upon vibrant displays of aggression, whether symbolic or real. The rites of the loyalist marching season, therefore, lend expression to that sense of machismo which represents a dominant theme within certain strands of working class male culture (ibid, p. 26). Furthermore, one of the principal concerns of the 'kick the pope' bands is the demarcation and reproduction of spatial boundaries between the ethnoreligious communities within the province. The peculiar cultural form through which loyalism as a political identity is expressed resonates, therefore, with the sense of territoriality which informs elements of working class culture (ibid, p. 84). Hence, in the mind of Desmond Bell, the enduring appeal of loyalist political culture derives from its ability to accommodate not merely sectarianism but also a particular sense of *being* working class.

## 5. THE TANGLED FOLIAGE

The foregoing discussion would suggest, therefore, that the distinctive interpretation of Northern Irish political culture tendered by the ideologues of electoral integration proves to be only partially correct. The public life of Northern Ireland quite clearly is not characterised by 'normal' class politics in that ethnoreligious affiliation represents the principal author of political identity and action in the province. Nevertheless, the political affairs of the six counties have been fashioned by social class to an extent appreciably greater than electoral integrationists appear willing to concede. The material interests and ontological states defined by class identity exert a palpable influence over the substance of political debate within the province. Moreover, the class resources available to social aggregates within the six counties have indelibly shaped the form of Northern Irish political life.

The nature of the political culture which exists within Northern Ireland may, in some respects, serve to assist the electoral integrationist project. As the discussion developed above was intended to illustrate, social class represents an important source of political identity and action in the North of Ireland. Hence, were the parties of state to organise in the province they would not have to construct a form of class politics entirely anew. Rather, the task facing the British political parties would be to translate an existing inarticulate class awareness into a more sophisticated class consciousness. At the same time, however, the nature of the political culture which obtains within Northern Ireland will act to frustrate the political aspirations of the electoral integrationist camp. Whilst representing a salient source of political identity in the province, social class tends, however, to be distorted and contaminated by its articulation with ethnoreligious identity. Accordingly, the task with which electoral integrationists are charged is not only that of nurturing class awareness, but also of freeing class identity from the 'tangled foliage' (McAll 1990, p. 216) of ethnicity. This represents a monstrously difficult enterprise, one considerably more arduous than the ideologues of electoral integration have been willing to acknowledge.

## CONCLUSION

The social and political philosophy of electoral integrationism emerges, therefore, as a profoundly flawed ideological construct. Perhaps the essential shortcoming of the electoral integrationist thesis is that it tenders a narrowly cultural understanding of the 'Northern Ireland problem'. The advocates of electoral integration tend to regard the ethnoreligious enmity which afflicts contemporary Northern Irish society as an aberrant expression of the retarded and iniquitous character of Northern political life. The eradication of the contagion of sectarianism from the six counties can only be achieved, therefore, through the thorough transformation of the norms and values which inform the province's political culture. The solution to the ills which currently beset the social and political life of Northern Ireland must, in other words, be sought within the realm of the ideal.

The distinctive reading proffered by electoral integrationists contains, of course, a substantial kernel of truth. The sectarian poverty which characterises public discourse in Northern Ireland has in all probability acted to confirm and compound ethnoreligious division within the six counties. The eradication of sectarianism will, therefore, require a radical overhaul of the beliefs, language and expectations which cluster around political debate in the province. In more specific terms, a resolution of the present conflict will necessitate that political discourse be recast in the mould of

secular pluralism. It is perhaps with regard to this particular prerequisite of any durable settlement that the electoral integrationist project possesses greatest potential to stimulate political progress.

Although having much to commend it, the electoral integrationist thesis ultimately falls prey to a debilitating cultural reductionism. The ethnoreligious divisions existent in the North of Ireland have their origins in the realm not merely of the cultural or the ideal, but also in that of material existence. Sectarian enmity cannot, therefore, be conceived as simply the aberrant epiphenomenal expression of a retarded political culture. On the contrary, political sectarianism must be acknowledged as a thoroughly rational and perhaps inevitable ideological articulation of the specific configuration of sectarian class relations which presently obtains within the six counties. Given that communalism enjoys deep roots within the Northern social formation, the erosion of sectarian sentiment will require the transformation not only of values and beliefs but also of the material structures of Northern society. Possessed of an outlook that is essentially idealist, the ideologues of electoral integration remain seemingly oblivious, however, to the imperative - and indeed the primacy - of material reform.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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