

The Question of Culture, Identity and Community in Northern Ireland.

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Northern Ireland is primarily regarded as a bicultural society – as a region that is largely between two cultural identities. Although this is rather simplistic view of Northern Irish society, it does contain a kernel of truth and much political debate in the past two decades has focused on the accommodation of apparent cultural differences between British and Irish, unionists and nationalists, Protestants and Catholics. The concept of culture has acquired respectability in the region, and issues of cultural identity are frequently raised in the Northern Irish Assembly. Cultural icons have assumed a new significance and politicians grapple with questions of recognition for different cultures, and of parity of esteem for two major cultural traditions.

Divided societies are frequently characterized by tensions between communities that appear to differ from one another; yet, in many instances, these groups are simply constructing differences from inherently similar resources using comparable strategies. Where communities are remarkably alike, it is similarities, rather than differences that generate conflict as great creativity is required to construct cultural boundaries when the cultural other is very alike. 'Ethnic groups may sometimes conceive themselves as in conflict not so much because they have irreconcilably different identities, but rather because they have irreconcilable claims or aspirations to the same identities' ⁽¹⁾

Edward Lloyd Harrison, *The Northern Irish Identity*, Belfast, Hutchester Books, 1999, p.239.

¹ Edward Lloyd Harrison, *The Northern Irish Identity*, Belfast, Hutchester Books, 1999, p.239.

Sometimes groups claim special status for their cultures with reference to their minority or majority status, but such terminology is becoming increasingly unacceptable in societies such as Northern Ireland where the focus is on equality and parity of recognition for several traditions. Accommodation rather than assimilation is regarded as the primary solution to such cultural conflicts but there are different models of recognition, viz. the politics of universalism and the politics of difference. Proponents of the former argue for equal recognition of every individual citizen, whereas supporters of the latter require exceptional treatment for cultural groups in some instances. The politics of difference places great emphasis on the communal context, but the intention is to ensure that every individual has equal access to available opportunities.

Culture, identity and community.

Culture.

There are innumerable definitions of culture, most of which describe it as an idea of immense significance (for example, Parekh 2000, p. 142). Anthropologists typically define culture as a way of life: 'as simply a way of talking about collective identities' (Kuper 1999, p. 3). Culture is a matter of ideas. It is a 'pattern of meanings embedded in symbolic forms, including actions, utterances and meaningful objects of various kinds' with which people identify and through which they communicate with one another and share their beliefs (Thompson 1990, p. 132). In the Weberian sense, culture is 'the endowment of a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of events in the world with meaning and significance from the standpoint of human beings' (in Schroeder 1992, p. 6).

Although culture may appear stable, it is a fluid concept and is hardly something that individuals inherit as an undifferentiated set of customs from their ancestors. Instead it is 'a set of ideas, reactions, expectations that is always changing as people and groups themselves change' (Watson 1997, p. 8). A living culture is constantly renegotiated and redefined. It is 'an evolving thing, and different generations have different ideas as to what makes up their culture.... Culture evolves and changes. Everybody's culture is different for them' (Hall 1999b, p. 4).

Culture is a concept that encapsulates the notion of difference. If I (or others) regard myself as part of a distinct cultural group, then I assume that there are boundaries to this imagined community. Moreover, I presume the existence of a cultural other who is different. In order to invent, enhance or protect our culture, my 'imagined group' may compete with another for the construction or expansion of

our cultural capital. We may vie with one another for specific cultural icons (cf. Harrison 1995), but the specificity of cultural icons does not apply to the concept of culture itself, which remains indeterminate and fluid. It can be thought of as 'overlapping maps of criss-crossing discursive meaning which form zones of temporary coherence as shared but always contested significance in a social space' (Barker 2000, p. 383).

Some groups in Northern Ireland appreciate the vague nature of culture. 'One's culture isn't something you need to run around the streets proclaiming, or send people to the gas chambers in order to "protect" it from "contamination", but quite a soft thing, almost unspoken, that you were born with, that you live with and that you are' (Hall 1998, p. 13). This raises a challenge for those working with the question of culture. How does one define that which is unstable? 'Such a question creates an unnatural situation, because you're forced to draw a line around it almost, and define it in a very hard fashion, and be specific about something you're normally quite vague about' (Hall 1998, p. 13).

However in a Northern Irish context, some would argue that it is those without a real culture that have the definitional problems! The claim that another group's 'culture' is 'inauthentic' or 'made up', rather than 'genuine' seems to happen in ethnic politics and some nationalists in Belfast ridicule the 'Ulster-Scots language', regarding it as an invented tradition designed to compete with Irish for state funds. A similar example has occurred in France where Bretons regard Gallo as merely a dialect with linguistic pretensions.⁽¹⁾

Drawing on the theory of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Bauman (1999) proposes that culture is a process. It is the practice of structuring and restructuring rather than the structures themselves. In consequence, there is no culture without creativity. This is the oldest definition of culture, the making of social forms or community (Chaney 1994, p. 193). One's cultural actions and relationships influence the practices in terms of which one shapes and regulates one's life. Culture structures the identity of a person in a particular manner but the nature of culture is unpredictable, changing although not necessarily ephemeral. Culture can be defined as praxis or practice.⁽²⁾

A lot of the confusion around the concept of culture comes from the way that the anthropological sense, and the everyday sense

1 Ibid, p.245.

2 Devlin Chaney, *Ulster on Turmoil*, Londonderry, Quigg & Kochner, 1994, p.195. - (4) E.L Harrison, op.cit, p. 247

(or senses), of the word are quite different. In contemporary anthropology, culture is thought of as referring to a process or activity.

But to people in the street, 'my culture' tends to be a sort of objectified thing. What they mean, translated into 'anthropologese' is 'my ethnicity'. That is, ethnicity is the invoking of culture in claims about identity. The concept of culture is used in different senses. In a localized context, many groups have distinct customs, perspectives and ethos. This frequently applies to different ethnic or national groups. But the concept is also applied to groups or associations, which are not necessarily based on ethnicity such as gay groups. In a more global setting, one speaks of Western democracies as having a common culture. Here Western culture is equated with modern, urban and primarily secular civilization, which contrasts with the feudal world of our ancestors (Kymlicka 1995a, p. 18).

There are distinctions between the notions of civilization and culture and these are important in the context of any book about the politics of culture in Northern Ireland. Civilization is a term that first appeared in eighteenth-century France when it was included in the Dictionary of the French Academy in 1798. At this time French intellectuals began to think in terms of a universal history in which civilization was the ultimate stage in a model of cultural development. Although this triumphalist version of history was gradually questioned, there was generally an optimistic belief in progressive civilization.

Initially the German concept of culture differed little from the French notion of civilization, but gradually a distinction emerged 'between the external trappings of civilization and the inward, spiritual reality of culture' (Kuper 1999, p. 26). In the French tradition, civilization was regarded as a complex, integrated totality, embracing political, moral, social or technical facts. Civilization was a broad concept which 'sums up everything in which Western society of the last two or three centuries believes itself superior to earlier societies or "more primitive" contemporary ones' (Elias 1978, pp. 3-4). For the Germans, civilization was external and utilitarian, contrasting with the notion of culture, which is located in time and space and is coterminous with the concept of national identity.

The perception of culture developed in tension with the concept of civilization. The latter had a transnational application, which threatened distinctive local cultures. French and British intellectuals identified with the aspirations and civilization of the ruling class, but Germans regarded the upper class as lacking in genuine culture. Instead Germans opted to emphasize notions of spiritual growth, scientific achievements and personal identity.

What is the difference between culture and cultural identity? While the former refers to a process, the latter relates to nodal points of the process such as class, ethnicity, gender or race (Barker 2000, p. 382). Cultural identity does not pre-exist certain forms of representation, instead it is generated by them (Gibbons 1996). Culture and identity are inextricably linked, yet they are different.

Identity

Like culture, the concept of identity is sometimes enhanced to include almost every attribute of an individual or a group (Parekh 2001, p. 1). But in common usage it refers to selected or inherited traits that define people or communities as certain kinds of individuals or groups. Cultural identities come into being through the ordering of cultural symbols and rituals. Harrison (1999a, p. 13) outlines a folk theory or everyday model of identity, which imagines the constituents of identity as objectified things, although recognizing that they are not so in reality. 'Discontinuities are introduced into the unregulated flow of cultural forms and practices' (Harrison 1999a, p. 13). A sense of identity is an integral aspect of one's self-understanding and can be regarded as an opportunity simultaneously to experience continuity and congruence (Bausinger 1978, p. 14).

While identity is often spoken of as if it were an essential concept, in fact the substance of identity is continually changing in a way that is not predetermined by any ethnic structure (Chapman 1992, p. 261). Identity in Northern Ireland is often perceived in a two-dimensional framework, as Orange or Green, unionist or nationalist, Protestant or Catholic but that is false and limiting. At any moment in time, an ethnic identity 'can never be more than a snapshot, a freezing of the frame of a continuously moving process'. It is in the representation of identity that the objectification or fixation of group identity often occurs, yet any simplification of layered identity is false (Young 1995, p. 163). There are many dimensions to one's sense of identity and we all have several identities available to us. Our identities can overlap with or cross over other social identities. For example one can be Irish, working-class, female, a Londoner, a Quaker, a speaker of Gaelic, a mother, a daughter and British all at the same time.

Billig (1995, p. 69) uses the term 'pastiche personality' for the multifaceted nature of our personalities. His social identity theory places great emphasis on the contextual nature of identity where self-categorizations act as switches, which turn social identity on and off in different situations. Even apparently objective categorizations of identity such as colour can be altered by the context. For example, the significance and concept of colour changes with location. An

individual with black and white ancestry is considered black in the USA, whereas s/he is regarded as being 'of mixed race' in South Africa (Maalouf 2000, pp. 20–1). In Ghana such a mixed-race person would be classified as white!⁽¹⁾

But identity is more than a contextual concept. It is also relational and is constructed in relation to another or in dialogue with significant others, who are not necessarily physically present. At this moment in time there are several dimensions to my identity and the aspect I choose to reveal is dependent on the context. In an interview situation, I focus on my identity as a professional. With my husband I reveal what I regard as my 'real' identity and love him because he accepts 'me for what I am'. This is not the same 'me' that I present to students in a lecture theatre; yet all are variations of 'me'.⁽²⁾

Taylor (1994) offers the example of one's parents whom one never really outgrows but remains in internal dialogue with throughout one's lifetime. 'We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us. Even after we outgrow some of these others – our parents, for instance – and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live' (Taylor 1994, p. 33). In the case of Northern Ireland this has significant implications. In a society that is rapidly changing, cultural identities are being reshaped. As new significant others emerge, the dialogue is reorientated and the concept of identity re-formed.

Our identity is often based on our concept of the other or the enemy (not necessarily the same thing). As already noted, we define ourselves as different from – or even in a simplistic fashion – as the opposite of another, and our definition of ourselves depends on who the other is at any given moment. 'An Irish Catholic differentiates himself from Englishmen in the first place in terms of religion, but *vis-à-vis* the monarchy he will declare himself a republican; and while he may not know much Gaelic, at least he will speak his own form of English. A Catholic leader who spoke with an Oxford accent might seem almost a traitor' (Maalouf 2000, p. 13). This is not to imply that the construction of identity is totally contextual. 'Ethnic groups and their cultures can hardly be regarded as completely arbitrary constructs. There is always a minimum of incontestable and noninterpretable facts necessary to win something from the opponent' (Roosens 1989, p. 156).

1 Richard P. Hall, *Communitarism and Citizenship*, London, Penguin Books, 1991, p.132

2 Ibid, p.136

All of this implies that individuals are composed of a mosaic of identities that are negotiated according to the particular circumstances. Each individual constructs his or her particular world in contact with others and it is in the context of these interactions that identities are shaped. 'The unity of an individual identity, the "essence" of a person, the idea that someone seems always to be the selfsame individual; these are themselves social constructions, dramatized or otherwise presented to others in particular circumstances for particular purposes' (Buckley and Kenny 1995, pp. 211-12).

Communal identities are always in process, undergoing change and are very often defined in terms of the perceived other. For example, Abner Cohen (1993) explores the construction of a West Indian collective identity in London through the removal of ethnic and cultural others from the organization of a cultural festival in Notting Hill. Over a number of years, cultural boundaries were erected between West Indians and others. A carnival that was originally multicultural in composition and symbolically English or British in character was revised and redefined as an emblem of West Indian identity. Within a few years, the festival had become exclusively West Indian in leadership and in form (cf. Harrison 1999a, p. 12).

Some postmodernist academics argue for the absence of any 'inner core'; and reject the notion of a personality that is somehow rooted in ethnicity or nationality. They brand such identities with the 'negative characteristics of essentialism, closure and conflict' (May 2001, p. 39), but it is surely the case that there is some element of rootedness or historicity in any context. Although the concepts of culture and identity are fluid, they do have substance and are hardly entirely ephemeral.⁽¹⁾

Community

As the concept of 'two communities' is frequently applied to Northern Ireland, any book dealing with culture and identity politics here must examine the notion of community. Individuals do not live in isolation and attach a great significance to their sense of belonging in a community context, and there is a significant difference between the concepts of community (*Gemeinschaft*) and society (*Gesellschaft*). Tönnies (1955) viewed the passing from the world of traditions to that of modernity in terms of a shift from the intimate, direct and

1 D. Chaney, op.cit, p.202

reciprocal relationships of community towards those, which are more formal and objective in the society of a modern nation-state.⁽¹⁾

In the case of Northern Ireland, there are strong tensions between communities and society as a whole. Yet a sense of community is extremely important and it provides its members with a sense of belonging and stability. Members identify and feel at one with others in the group. 'Identification with a specific community is a major source of individual identity, with "community" offering an interpretative framework of imagined stability in time and space within a continuously changing social context' (Kockel 1999, p. 104). Communities are the networks that bind people together in society. They offer the 'landmarks which seem to provide an objective, a permanent, a positive delimitation of our belonging together'.

This sense of belonging together, especially in groupings with discernible badges of membership, is especially important in societies in which there are tensions and in those instances 'in which everything combines to destroy what binds human beings together into communities' (Hobsbawm 1992, p. 7).

Individuals need intermediate groups between themselves and the state in order to provide moral support and prevent lethargy, and cultural groups and networks promote a sense of solidarity and belonging. Although Northern Ireland is perceived as having two communities, this is hardly the case. In the first instance, the two main groups in Northern Ireland are hardly 'communities'. Some would argue that to apply the notion of community to Protestants, gays or nationalists is to reify and objectify them. Such 'communities' looked at closely often seem to be really made up of lots of different competing factions and interest groups. Moreover, all individuals live in multiple communities, and perceive their relevance in both a spatial and temporal context. Most individuals belong to several communities at the same time. While people have a range of belongings, 'not all these allegiances are equally strong, at least at any given moment' (Maalouf 2000, p. 10).

In geographical terms, individuals live in communal units of different sizes. The smallest of these is the family, but there are larger relevant communities at local, regional, national, and supranational levels. Those who identify themselves as Irish in Northern Ireland may live in a distinctly nationalist neighbourhood. They may also regard themselves as members of a geographic community, which extends to the 32 counties. Their sense of a European identity is significant as is their appreciation of the Irish Diaspora in the USA. In

1 Christopher Taylor, *What about Orange and the Orangemen?* Glenkirk, Jakinson Ltd, 1998, p.67

a similar fashion, unionists perceive themselves in a geographical framework, which embraces England, Scotland and Wales as well as Northern Ireland. They may have negative or positive perceptions of the European context and some revel in Scots- Irish connections in Canada.⁽¹⁾

Communities also operate in a non-geographical context. I may belong to a linguistic or a disabled community or to one of a particular religious orientation. Many nationalists are members of the Irish-speaking community whose boundaries are undefined. Some are members of the Catholic community, which operates in an international context.

Many communities have a historic relevance. I can conceive of my family, my ethnic or my linguistic group as extending backwards in time for several generations, centuries or even millennia. Historically, nationalists identify with the Celtic community although the concept of Celt is itself contested (cf. Nic Craith 2002). Many unionists conceive of themselves as members of the historic British (also Celtic!) community within which some have constructed the narrative of the Cruthin as emblematic of the other within (cf. Adamson 1991). Other groups lack a historic context such as the community of internet surfers, but should one use the term community in relation to users of the network, or to those who share a particular ecological interest?

Turner (1998) proposes a distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' communities to deal with such questions. In the traditional 'thick' community (*gemeinschaft*), individual members are linked by shared memories, a common cultural inheritance and physical proximity. In contrast, the electronic community is a 'thin' one whose members never connect physically with one another. Instead they visit one another's sites, share a computed language and constitute an association of strangers.⁽²⁾

There are other difficulties with the concept of community. To speak of the 'Irish community', the 'British community', the 'unionist community' or the 'nationalist community' is to refer to a strong sense of belonging and group solidarity that clearly does exist but it can give a false impression of closure – of a hermetically sealed group. The very use of the word 'community' serves to conceal the divisions and conflicts within these groups. Yet there is frequently a strong focus on

1 Ibid, p.71

2 Reginald Turner & Walter Bauman, *Which Way to the Peace?* Belfast, Coppermiles and Co Ltd, 1996, p.72

boundary maintenance within communities and on the interaction that takes place across those boundaries.⁽¹⁾

Barth (1969) placed tremendous emphasis on boundaries between communities and focused on relationships of cultural distinctiveness, on the symbols and processes that differentiated groups from one another. His emphasis was on differences between communities rather than the cultural characteristics that distinguished each in itself. In effect the margins become central and the terms 'central' and 'margin' are meaningless (Brah 1996, p. 226).

This is extremely relevant in a society such as Northern Ireland, where the boundaries between cultural communities can be of greater import than the characteristics of communities themselves, but how is the cultural context of a community defined and who is a member?⁽²⁾

Communal identity is dependent on ascription both by members within the community and by those outside the communal boundaries. Membership of a community is usually situationally defined. In theory, the origins of communities lie in individual choice, but in practice many community boundaries are fixed, making it difficult to leave. As communities are highly dependent on personal preference, they often can be intolerant of difference or any other characteristic, which could ultimately lead to their dissolution. 'Community, therefore, which is bound to remain endemically precarious and hence bellicose and intolerant, neurotic about matters of security and paranoid about hostility and ill intentions of environment' (Bauman 1992, p. 697).

An excessive sense of community can distort our view of the world and this is a challenge, which is highly pertinent in Northern Ireland. Sometimes internal tensions are suppressed for the sake of generating an impression of strength externally. Some group leaders resent variation and perceive innovation as disloyalty; as weakness, or a blurring of the boundaries. The protection and essentialization of cultural groups can generate many problems (cf. Harrison 1995). We regard those who belong to the same community as 'ours' and have a sense of ownership over them. 'We like to think ourselves concerned about what happens to them, but we also allow ourselves to tyrannize over them: if they are thought to be "lukewarm" we denounce them, intimidate them, punish them as "traitors" or "renegades" ' (Maalouf 2000, p. 26). Communities generate an impression of stability and coherence, which is rarely applicable to real life situations.⁽³⁾

1 Geoffrey Wolveston, *The Northern Irish Society*, Dungareth, Myerson Corner, 2001, p.53

2 Ibid, p.55

3 Turner & Bauman, op.cit, p.76