



Defeatism and Northern Protestant 'Identity'

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Introduction

Looking at the academic literature and media commentary, one can detect a shift in the identification of northern protestants. Once they were identified, and identified themselves in terms of modernity, triumph, and rationalism; increasingly they are identified and identify themselves in terms of tradition, defeat and associated emotions such as confusion, alienation, fatalism, resentment, fear and cognates such as anxiety and paranoia. More than one author has claimed to detect self-pity and a predilection for victim hood.

According to O'Halloran (1987), the image fearful protestant was invented in the early 1980s during the deliberations of the New Ireland Forum. I am not sure about that, but it is true that characterisations of northern protestants in defeatist terms became common after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 and proliferated during the peace process and in analyses of responses to the Good Friday Agreement.

Looking at this literature, I have distinguished at least four different approaches to northern protestant defeatism. Firstly, there are those who are content to describe or articulate its contours. The first, and, so far as I can ascertain, still the only, direct empirical research on the phenomenon falls into this category. Dunne and Morgan (1994) asked a group of middle class protestants what the then vogueish term 'alienation' meant to them, and what had caused them to feel alienated. For most, their alienation was from the British government. The causes included constitutional changes, especially the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which was seen as a betrayal, and legislative changes, especially fair employment legislation, which were seen as an attempt to placate nationalists. Some respondents also mentioned the rising profile of nationalist culture. Subsequent descriptions of protestant defeatism give more emphasis than Dunn and Morgan's respondents did to the demographic advance of the catholic population and associated residential shifts, particularly in Derry and North Belfast, and to the collapse of shipbuilding, engineering and textile industries that had sustained the protestant working class (see Hall 1994, McBride 1997).

Secondly, there are those who, like O'Halloran (1987), see the fearful and confused protestant as a nationalist stereotype. By emphasising irrational fear, the stereotype functions to diminish the significance of protestant opposition to a united Ireland. Others have taken this further to suggest that some protestants have internalised this stereotype. Longley worries about 'an unfortunate tendency for working class Protestants to swallow a triumphalist rhetoric which absurdly claims all the art, intellect and culture of the island for Catholic Nationalism'. (1994: 11). On another occasion she writes of protestants 'internalis[ing] charges of "incoherence"' (1997: 113). Aughey is also concerned about northern protestants allowing nationalists to define their ideological contours (1989: viii).

Thirdly, there are those who treat defeatism as the expression of a singular pathological mentality that has more to do with the past, usually a colonial past, than with any current reality. Supremacism is seen as central to protestant identity and defeatism is its flip side: protestants are suffering from a 'deflated superiority complex' (Anderson and Shuttleworth 1994). In these approaches, defeatism is conceived as irrational: a cognitive distortion or form of false consciousness according to which attempts to redress nationalist grievances are perceived as protestant loss. Worse, defeatism is



deliberately orchestrated by cynical political activists who use traditional forms of mobilisation that evoke a backs-against-the-wall siege mentality to mobilise protestants against change (In addition to Anderson and Shuttleworth, 1994, see also McKay, 2000; McVeigh, 1999; Fleischmann, 1995).

Fourthly, there are anthropologists who, in the name of the subject they profess, are critical of the latter approach. Traditionally, anthropologists recoil from the idea that social groups suffer from pathological mental processes. They argue that what seems irrational from the perspective of an outsider is often rational when located in context. This might be called the situated rationality approach, and I associate it with Ruane and Todd (1996) and Ruane (1996).

There are problems with each of these approaches, but my main concern is with the third. I would not deny the existence of defeatist currents among northern protestants or that they are to some extent orchestrated. But exponents of this approach do not give sufficient credit to other currents within the protestant community, notably those that have coalesced around David Trimble, that, initially at least, were explicitly articulated as an attempt to engage positively both with protestant fatalism and the need for change. And I share in Ruane's anxiety about any approach that rests on a notion that social groups suffer from pathological mental processes.

Whether it is a product of a traditional form of political mobilisation that evokes a siege mentality, or the product of a 'deflated superiority complex', the impression one gets from reading Anderson and Shuttleworth and the others is that mentalities, traditions, or identities forged in the seventeenth century continue to exercise a tyrannical hold over the northern protestant imagination such as to prevent them comprehending their present circumstances. Against this, I wish to suggest that contemporary protestant defeatism is less the product of a pre-existing identity than symptomatic of the absence of a northern protestant cultural identity and, perhaps, of an ongoing attempt to get one.

This suggestion or hypothesis involves a reinterpretation of protestant supremacism and a critique of the prevailing consensus that the Northern Ireland crisis is, at root, a conflict of identities. The relationship between supremacism and protestant 'identity' is not the only issue at stake, but perhaps also the relationship between the collapse of faith in modernity in the guise of progress and the growing attraction of pathetic identities in later modernity. I will begin by reviewing the relevant literature.

Defeatism as an inherited mentality or identity

Northern Ireland was established in 1920-21 as the largest area on the island of Ireland within which protestants constituted a significant majority over catholics. In this context, as Anderson and Shuttleworth (1994) note, it was not unusual for public discussion of population censuses to be dominated by 'sectarian head-counting'. Allowing for this, Anderson and Shuttleworth suggest that public discussion following the 1991 census was 'unusually sensationalist and misleading'. It was misleading in the way that 'simplistic arithmetic and crude empiricism' often is (1994: 92), but particularly in the case of census data in Northern Ireland where 'non-responses can... result in very misleading figures' (1994: 82). They conclude that the figures do not reveal 'a decisive shift in the sectarian balance of power in favour of Catholic nationalists' (1994: 74); rather public discussion of the figures reveal a, 'sectarian mind set, particularly on the unionist side. It has fed unionist paranoia and nationalist triumphalism' (1994: 74).

For Anderson and Shuttleworth the public discussion was not merely misleading, it was dangerous. They note that a tried and trusted - 'traditional' - method of unionist mobilisation is to evoke a backs-against-the-wall, 'siege mentality' and suggest that,

'the one sided and blinkered analysis characteristic of the sectarian mind set can easily fall into justification of paramilitary violence, in this case specifically loyalist violence. One factor behind its 1993-94 upsurge... might have been all the exaggerated talk of "Catholic advance" and "Protestant retreat"' (1994: 79).

If, as Anderson and Shuttleworth suggest, public discussion of censuses in Northern Ireland are usually dominated by sectarian head-counting and if interpretations of the 1991 census in terms of protestant retreat are misleading, one is left wondering why discussion of this census became 'unusually sensationalist'. Anderson and Shuttleworth do not confront this question directly, but some kind of answer can be discerned in their discussion of the movement of protestants in Derry to the Waterside from the city-side of the river Foyle and in their discussion of the effects of de-industrialisation on the Belfast's protestant working class, both of which draw heavily on the Opsahl Report (Pollak 1993). According to the report northern protestants' confusion and their sense of crisis has arisen because old identities have become fragmented, shattered by, and out of synch with, contemporary realities (Pollack 1993: 95). This is true for both catholics and protestants, but the latter's cultural identity is seen as more fragile. 'There is a defensiveness about Protestant culture, which is not helped by a certain inarticulateness', all of which renders protestants vulnerable to being 'vilified nationally and internationally'. (1993: 97).

Anderson and Shuttleworth concede that many Derry protestants have moved from the city-side to the Waterside and that many Belfast protestants have lost jobs. They imply that these changes contributed to a climate in which discussion of the 1991 census became 'unusually sensationalist'. Although they concede that population movements and job losses are real enough, they characterise the protestant interpretation of these changes as sectarian and therefore lacking in validity because the changes are the product of anonymous social and economic forces without conscious political motivation. Working class protestants in Belfast may be 'obsessed with a deeply felt sense that they are losing', they may have been affected disproportionately by industrial restructuring, but this is only because 'Protestants had more industrial jobs to lose in the first place' (1994: 89). Population shifts in Derry are presented as sub-urbanisation: not symptomatic of protestant retreat, merely moving house.

In so far as population shifts in Derry and elsewhere have any political or sectarian significance, it is not that protestants are being 'pushed-out', it is that some protestants choose to leave their neighbourhoods rather than share them with catholics. Such protestants,

'are suffering from what might be called a "deflated superiority complex". With the reduction in unionist political power since the imposition of "direct rule" from Britain, *supremacist attitudes towards Catholics which were integral to loyalist identity* are now very obviously out-of-line with reality, but many Protestants are unable or unwilling to come to terms with the changed circumstances and the resulting insecurities. This sectarian pathology, if such it is, helps explain the generally unspecified nature of "Protestant alienation" and the alleged "inarticulateness" of loyalism - the pathology is difficult to articulate and its full articulation would cast loyalism in a pathetic and very unattractive light. Maybe it



is better sometimes not to be "articulate"? And simpler to talk in terms of population and territory?' (1994: 87 my emphasis).

In short, for Anderson and Shuttleworth, talk of catholic advance and protestant retreat is exaggerated. It is not based in contemporary reality; rather it is the expression of a pathological, paranoid, sectarian and supremacist 'mindset'. This 'mindset' not only prevents 'many' protestants from coming to terms with social, economic and political change, it is also used to mobilise protestants against such change through traditional tactics such as evoking a 'siege mentality'.

McKay's book (2000) is also concerned with protestant pathology. She begins by describing two sectarian murders carried out by protestants then explains that she wishes to explore the 'influences which were capable of producing such violent hatred'. She says that she is also interested in 'the views of other Protestants exposed to the same influences, who would abhor the actions' of the murderers, but the former aim is uppermost: 'How, in some, did "proud to be Protestant", turn pathological?' (2000: 11).

The book is a collection of interviews conducted by McKay. Her questions have been edited out, and, in the absence of these, one has to divine McKay's thesis from the cumulative impact of the interviews, the interpretative comments interspersed among them and a conclusion that comes in the form of an epilogue.

McKay answers the question she poses at the start of the book with a variation on the traditional Irish Marxist explanation of why protestants were unionists. This explanation was developed by James Connolly. It turns on the argument that the protestant working class failed to recognise their true class interests because of ideological manipulation through the Orange Order (see Finlay 1989 and Bew Gibbon and Patterson 1979). McKay implies that the Orange Order and other loyalist institutions play on protestant fears that they are losing ground relative to Catholics; fear turns to hatred, which fuels anti-Catholic violence. Her analysis of the successful campaign to prevent the Orange Order marching on the Garvaghy Road in Portadown provides an apposite example (see 2000: 111). She describes a leaflet that circulated in Portadown in the weeks before Rosemary Nelson was murdered in 1999. Rosemary Nelson was a local solicitor who worked on behalf of the Garvaghy Road Resident's Association, which opposes the march. The leaflet alleged that she was part of a Jesuit conspiracy, which included members of the Residents' Association. McKay comments: 'Residual fears, fanned up, turn to hatred... Some people translate their hatred into a militaristic ethnic solidarity and into violence' (2000: 367)

By suggesting that McKay's thesis draws on a Connollyist type of analysis I would not wish to give the reader the impression that she thinks defeatism is confined to the protestant working class. For example, she quotes Malcolm, a middle-class protestant from Portadown, who complains about concessions made to nationalists in respect of fair employment legislation, constitutional arrangements and the re-routing of orange parades, then comments: 'This sentiment, that Protestants have passively responded to nationalist aggression by conceding and giving until they could give no more, was ubiquitous' (2000: 142).

According to one interpretation, McKay's book provides further evidence of what Anderson and Shuttleworth call protestants' 'deflated superiority complex'. Marianne Elliot (*Irish Times* 27 May 2000) singles-out one of McKay's respondents, a Portadown businesswoman, who described a catholic couple she met in an expensive restaurant, as 'Jumped-up taigs'. Elliot comments:

'The sight of Catholics prospering is profoundly unsettling to this frame of mind... The belief that if Catholics prosper, they can only do so at the expense of the Protestants is a common one. The perception is that Catholic culture is confident and forging ahead and there is a sense in this book of Protestants feeling deracinated'

As with Anderson and Shuttleworth, Elliot's point seems to be that protestant fears are ill founded because they mistakenly interpret redress as loss. She quotes another of McKay's respondents who says of his fellow protestants:

'Protestants see sharing as losing. They are doomed, but it is almost as if they want to be doomed'.

McKay herself is ambivalent about the foundations and validity of protestant defeatism. She describes the horrific murder of a catholic man by protestants and compares it to the murder of an African American man, which was carried out by two white men influenced by the far-right Aryan Brotherhood. This leads to a meditation on the similarities between the ideas of the Ku Klux Klan and Ulster loyalists:

'The aggressive self-pity is similar. The paranoia about government among these far-right groups is also replicated in the North' (2000: 367).

She quotes from Michael Ignatieff's account of Slobodan Milosevic's mobilisation of Serbs in which he describes 'how Serbs, who felt "a combustible mixture of genuine grievance and self-pitying paranoia" were easily ignited' (McKay, 2000: 368). In relation to Northern Protestants, McKay is unsure if the fear of loss is delusional, 'residual' (2000: 367) or part of a strategic effort by organisations such as the Orange Order to claim a victim identity for protestants (see 2000: 120, 156, 249 and 282). The final paragraph of the book refers to protestants as both victims and perpetrators.

In a paper that McKay would have done well to read, Fleischmann (1995) develops a more nuanced analysis of the slippage between the statuses of victim and perpetrator and of how political mobilisation can turn on this very ambiguity. Fleischmann's develops a close reading of three loyalist texts: Rudyard Kipling's poem *Ulster 1912*, a UDA statement issued in 1972 and a sermon by Ian Paisley.

'What these three texts have in common is that they all make use of the Loyalists' half-conscious awareness of wrongs done to the minority in order to block off any tendency towards compromise or reconciliation, and to ensure that what is defined as "Ulster" will continue to say "No!". It is hard to imagine that this is done consciously and deliberately: it is more likely to stem from a well-developed instinct for power, an intuitive sense of how it is to be obtained and maintained.' (1995:73).

The 1972 UDA statement,

'begins almost as a plea for understanding, in which the authors describe their dilemma as "second-class Englishmen and half-caste Irishmen". But a tone of maudlin self-pity soon comes in when they bewail their fate as being constantly "betrayed and maligned"... devoid of friends, and helpless, inarticulate victims of the sophisticated nationalist propaganda machine. They maintain that they are facing extinction.



'The self-pity seems to act as a valve channelling the suppressed anger over their "betrayal" into the open. The reason for their anger is given as follows: "For four hundred years we have known nothing but uprising, murder, destruction and repression."'

Fleischmann points out that one would have expected the author to use the word 'suffered' in connection with murder, uprising and repression, but that the text reads 'we have known'. She suggests that 'Grammatically speaking, the loyalists could be both perpetrators or victims of murder and repression' (1995: 68). She is inclined to the view that 'the studied blandness' (1995: 69) of the expression is deliberate. The UDA are aware that they have perpetrated murder and repression and this explains the loyalists' particularly strong sense of grievance: 'those who have committed injustices for their cause should be especially resentful about being abandoned, since they would be left to face the consequences – the resentment and possible revenge of the dispossessed and disadvantaged.' She notes that the statement concludes with,

'a venomous snarl at British politicians described as "flabby-faced men with pop-eyes and fancy accents" who send soldiers out to fight with "their hands tied behind their backs". The UDA authors then threaten to do the job themselves, using both hands: "why not send the soldiers home and leave us the weapons and we will send you the IRA wrapped-up in little boxes and little tins like baked beans.'"

On its own, Fleischmann claim that 'the viciousness of this utterance removes any ambiguity about the "knowing" of murder' (1995: 69) is not wholly convincing, but, when set alongside Kipling's poem and the Paisley sermon, her argument about the ambiguity between victim and perpetrator is more compelling.

Anderson and Shuttleworth, McKay and Fleischmann see present-day protestant defeatism as the product of an inherited mentality or identity. For Anderson and Shuttleworth it is the flip-side of a supremacist identity that is now out of synch with reality, and orchestrated according to traditional forms of political mobilisation that evoke a siege mentality. McKay and Fleischmann place more emphasis on the latter type of explanation, but reading all of these authors, the impression one gets is that seventeenth century struggles between protestant settlers and catholic natives for supremacy in Ireland have an unmediated significance so vivid that it over determines protestant perceptions of present-day realities. Fleischmann explicitly locates the texts she examines in the context of a colonial reading of Ireland's history, but this reading is also implicit in Anderson and Shuttleworth's allusions to supremacist and siege mentalities and in the glib parallels that McKay draws between Northern protestant and settler or frontier communities elsewhere.

In fact, many writers have been struck by the 'remarkable similarity' (Lowry 1996: 201) between the mentality of northern protestants and that of other colonial settler communities; these include Lowry himself, Clayton (1996), O'Dowd (1990) and J W Foster (1991). The issues are twofold for those who seek to understand northern protestants in a colonial context. One is that Ireland's colonial status is fiercely disputed. For example Walker argues that

'it is incorrect to describe Ireland's situation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and earlier, as "colonial" or "post-colonial" pure and simple... Further, this description excludes perspectives which an appreciation of the European context would allow' (1990: 38).

Kennedy (1996) suggests that the emphasis on the colonial aspects of Ireland's history is expressive of a predilection for 'victim identities' on the part of Irish nationalists, and, indeed, of some Ulster unionists.

The second issue is that those authors who suggest that present-day northern protestants bear the imprimatur of a colonial settler mentality or identity rely on a continuity that flies in the face of theoretical trends in historiography and in postcolonial theory which stress discontinuity: traditions are invented and identities are fluid and hybrid. McKay implies a key role for the Orange Order, but neither she, nor Fleischmann, nor Anderson and Shuttleworth adequately account for the continuity or durability of a supremacist identity, or a siege mentality or traditional forms of mobilisation from the seventeenth century to the present day. Let us see if Clayton (1996), J W Foster (1991) or O'Dowd (1990) do any better.

Clayton (1996: xiv) ridicules the recent discovery of protestant alienation:

'What has largely escaped notice is, first, that British policy has been perceived as unsatisfactory at least since the beginning of the twentieth century and, second, that a central feature of settler societies is the ambivalence of settlers towards their metropolis. Just as many Protestants today complain that the British do not know how to deal with rebel Catholics, so have settlers always objected to "native policy" as proposed by the imperial government.'

As Clayton makes clear, the 'remarkable similarity' between northern protestants and other colonial settler communities is not just in their relationship with the metropolitan power but with the natives.

In attempting to explain these similarities, Clayton, cites a battery of authors - Memmi (1990), Hartz (1964), Mannoni (1964) and Thornton (1965) - who characterise settler societies as resistant to change and ideologically fixed in the sense that the values developed by the original settlers are taken-on by subsequent generations and new immigrants. Thornton (1965: 43) argues that small size and close-knit relationships of settler societies tends to lead to towards cultural conformity rather than innovation and creativity. This argument about the essential conservatism and continuity of settler societies cannot accommodate settler societies such as those in North America and Australia. Nor can it accommodate Belfast Presbyterians in the latter half of the eighteenth century: one of the few examples of colonial settlers siding with the natives against the metropolitan power.

J W Foster (1991) attempts to address the difficulty posed by the United Irishmen by drawing on Tom Nairn's argument that catholic recovery and the rise of peasant nationalism in Ireland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries forced northern protestants into a more dependent relationship with their British motherland (1991: 264). Beneficial in economic terms, political and cultural dependence on Britain underwrote the persistence of a colonial mentality. At times of crisis, when doubly threatened by the Irish nationalist advance and British ambivalence, elements of the settler mentality reassert themselves. Foster argues: 'The Anglo-Irish rapprochement [of 1985] has dangerously conjoined in the consciousness' of the Ulster majority the fear of Irish irredentism and the resentment towards England they always felt... as members of a truculent frontier society' (1991: 272).

In a similar vein O'Dowd (1990: 39) argues that with the onset of the troubles in the late 1960s and 1970s, 'Loyalists, who in calmer times saw themselves as ethnic citizens



(Ulster or Irish) of a multinational UK state, now reassumed in sharper form many of the preoccupations of Memmi's settlers'. The 'preoccupations of Memmi's settlers' are too various for me to itemise here, but given the importance attached to protestant supremacism by Anderson and Shuttleworth, McKay and others, we should note O'Dowd's discussion of the 'Nero complex'.

'Memmi's characterisation of the colonizer's "usurper's role" or "Nero complex" also finds an echo in Northern Ireland... Ulster "settlers" see their improving mission as an expression of their own "eminent merits": their technical and scientific prowess, their more rational forms of religion, their greater entrepreneurial capacity, their greater sense of social discipline, their superior welfare systems, roads, hospitals... To a degree these advantages are less dependent on the Loyalist's own efforts than on their links with Britain. An awareness of this dependence merely confirms love of the motherland... Yet, these very ties and supports make loyalist question deep down their own myth of self-reliance' (1990 43-4).

Comparing protestants with white South Africans who point out the poverty and tyranny of Black African states, O'Dowd claims that loyalists emphasise the demerits of the natives, by pointing to the shortcomings of the independent Irish state. They also denigrate northern nationalists whose 'demerits' include: 'their lack of gratitude for a standard of living superior to the southern counterparts, their laziness, proclivity to have too many children, inferior education and skills, and subordination to a clergy which denies the freedom of an individual conscience' (1990: 44).

In his discussion of the 'Nero complex', O'Dowd, makes reference to the Memmi's idea that identities actively forged in the colonial encounter: 'colonizer and colonized are linked together in a reciprocal but mutually destructive relationship within which the identity of each is forged' (1990: 40). Memmi's conception of identity formation is dynamic, but when reading O'Dowd, as when reading the others, one gets the impression that a core protestant mentality was encoded and fixed in the seventeenth century, lies dormant, and mysteriously reasserts its self in times of crisis. In the contemporary crisis it has reasserted itself with such force that protestants are incapable of comprehending their circumstances¹.

The image of northern protestants constructed by Anderson and Shuttleworth, McKay and Fleischmann is, as Elliot says in her review of McKay, bleak. Northern protestants are fearful, self-pitying and susceptible to conspiracy theories. In this bleak vision, there are only a few hopeful glimmers. Fleischmann sets John Hewitt's poem *The Colony* against the ominous vision of the other three texts she examines. In this poem, the colonists respond to the decline and fall of empire by seeking 'accommodation and reconciliation' (1995: 74). Anderson and Shuttleworth concede that 'evoking a siege mentality' is not the only tactic in the unionist political lexicon. They note that in the debates around Catholic demographic advance following publication of the 1991 Census, James Molyneaux, then leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, disputed the figures. Anderson and Shuttleworth suggest:

'Mr Molyneaux's more optimistic stance may be more politically astute. The danger for Unionism is that Protestants might begin to "believe their own propaganda" and be further encouraged to retreat and emigrate.' (1994: 80).

¹ Nationalist commentators such as Tom McGurk portray northern protestants as an 'intrinsically, culturally and emotionally... genetically disordered political community permanently incapable of even saving itself' (*Sunday Business Post*: 26.03.2000).

Similarly, in her conclusion, McKay reminds herself that 'a majority of Protestants voted for the Belfast Agreement which committed them to equality and democracy' (2000: 368). Like Anderson and Shuttleworth, McKay does not offer any sustained analysis of the currents within unionism that seek to engage positively with protestant fatalism and the need for change.

Questioning the consensus that the Northern Ireland 'problem' is a conflict of identities

These analyses of defeatist currents among present-day protestants draw in various ways on theories about cultural identity. To this extent they are in line with the prevailing consensus that 'the issue of identity is at the heart of the Northern Ireland crisis' (Lundy and MacPóilin 1992: 5, see also Graham 1997). The identification of strangers through a process that has come to be known as Telling has long been a feature of routine, everyday social interaction in Northern Ireland (Harris, 1972; Burton 1978; Finlay 1999), but the theory that the Northern Ireland 'problem' is a problem of identity is of recent provenance. It became salient only in the 1980s.

To understand the significance of the rise of identity theory in Ireland one needs to look beyond the island. It is common to trace the rise of identity – both as a category of analysis and as a form of politics – to the retreat from class signalled by the emergence of the New Social Movements in the 1960s (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Calhoun (1997) and Finkelkraut (1988) take a longer view. They point out that cultural nationalism played a central role in the development of essentialist thinking that is also basic to the way race, gender, sexual orientation and other sorts of collective identities came to be constituted. Cultural nationalism draws on Herder's idea of the *Volksgeist*, which gained popularity amongst Germans following Napoleon's victory at Jena. The exaltation of collective identity and German culture compensated for military defeat and the humiliating subjugation which it entailed. Herder's ideas were taken-up not just by the Romantic Movement in Germany, but also by French conservatives who were dismayed by the terror and Napoleonic dictatorship which had followed the revolution. Both reacted against the Enlightenment ideas that had inspired the revolution.

The revolutionaries were also nationalists. In the name of the French nation they opposed the *ancien regime* based on aristocratic privilege and royal absolutism, and in which social hierarchy had been based on birth and monarchy on divine right. As Finkelkraut argues

'Misconstruing its own etymology (*nascor* means "I am born") the revolutionary nation uprooted individuals and defined them by their humanity rather than their birth. It was not a question of reinstating the collective identity of souls lacking any real bearings; rather it was a matter, on the contrary, of setting them free from all definitive ties, and asserting their radical autonomy.' (1988: 17).

The nation was a contract negotiated between free, rational individuals. Against this, the romantics and the French reactionaries followed Herder in asserting that men and women are not free-born, but situated and contextually determined by whatever language and culture and traditions they are born into. Where the revolutionaries saw history as the victory of progress and reason over tradition and prejudice, the romantics and the French reactionaries privileged tradition and emotion. Where the former espoused universal cultural values, the latter saw culture as the collective mentality or way of life of a particular people. In western Europe and North America, the romantic



critique of Enlightenment ideas was muted during the late Nineteenth century and the early Twentieth, but it gained a new purchase after World War II with the collapse in faith in Western values, particular the belief in progress.

Given the centrality of romantic ideas to the development of Irish nationalism, it is ironic that in Ireland the rise of identity-thinking was secured in the revisionist critique of traditional nationalist historiography. For traditional nationalists, the people of Ireland form one nation and the fault for keeping Ireland divided lies with Britain. Revisionists countered this by down-playing the role of the British and arguing that the problem was internal to Ireland: it was the result of a clash between two identities, Irish and Unionist. The latter was not a mere fabrication of the British, but had a historical integrity in itself. Arguably, the revisionists did not refute nationalist conceptions of identity; rather their challenge has had the effect of proliferating the number of identities in Ireland: where nationalist proclaim one Irish nation, the revisionists note a residual Anglo-Irish identity and the enduring integrity of Unionist identity. (See Whyte, 1990; cf O'Halloran, 1987; Deane 1994).

The consensus that the cause of the Northern Ireland 'problem' is a clash of identities is shared not only by analysts, it extends to politicians and policy makers. Through the efforts of Garret Fitzgerald and others, revisionist ideas about Irish identities entered the mainstream of Irish political life. The deliberations of the New Ireland Forum in 1983 seem to have been crucial. I would not suggest a continuous line of development between the New Ireland Forum and the peace process, but at the level of ideas about Irish identity, the influence of the Forum Report can be traced in the cultural policies introduced to Northern Ireland in the wake of the Anglo Irish Agreement, and ultimately in the Good Friday Agreement, which enshrines identity politics (See Farren , 2000). Cultural identity is hegemonic not only at the level of analysis, but at the level of political practice: community groups are encouraged to explore their cultural traditions, and the Good Friday Agreement is weighted against individuals and parties who do not define themselves as either unionist or nationalist (see Langhammer 2000 and McCann 2001).

In the face of the evident preoccupation of many in Northern Ireland with issues of identity, Brubaker and Cooper (2000) do well to remind us that even when lay-actors are preoccupied with identity – as seems to be the case in Northern Ireland today - this does not mean that social analysts have to accept the existence of identities. Indeed, for social analysts to do so is to risk contributing to the reification of identity. Identity is not ubiquitous; identities crystallise at specific moments and are the outcomes of human activity and historical processes:

'reification is central to the politics of "ethnicity," "race," "nation," and other putative "identities". Analysts... should seek to account for this process of reification. We should seek to explain the processes... through which... the "political fiction" of the "nation", - or of the "ethnic group", "race", or other putative "identity". - can crystallize, at certain moments, as a powerful, compelling reality. But we should avoid unintentionally reproducing or reinforcing such reification by uncritically adopting categories of practice as categories of analysis' (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 5).

Brubaker and Cooper are unimpressed by 'constructivist gestures' to the multiple, fragmented, fluid nature of identity on the part of analysts who seek to avoid essentialism: 'it is not clear why what is routinely characterized as multiple, fragmented, and fluid should be conceptualised as "identity" at all' (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 6). They suggest that, for analytic purposes, we should dispense with the concept of identity

and replace it with concepts such as identification, self-understanding and commonality or connectedness or 'groupness.'

In relation to Northern Ireland, there are few analysts who have resisted the hegemonic force of identity theory. One such analyst is Terence Brown, who notes the roots of identity theory in cultural nationalism, discusses the influence of cultural movements in Ireland during the period preceding independence, and then asks why 'there were almost no equivalent movements of any kind within... northern Protestant or unionist society or culture?' (1992: 42). He is unconvinced by those who would answer this question by suggesting that northern protestants 'were simply a colonial group, an imperial group, holding Ireland for the imperial authority.' (1992: 42). He finds Miller's suggestion more intriguing; i.e., that

'the Ulster Protestant is ... in a kind of pre-nationalist condition, that he has seen his identity, if it can be called that, as being constructed in terms of a kind of Lockean contract, with regard to the relationship between the state and the individual. This means that an Ulster Unionist, Ulster Protestant, feels no need of that kind of confirmatory identity that the Irish nationalist project seem to imply as an absolute necessity for being fully human... He is loyal in a contractual relationship. When you belong to a nation, you have no choice in the matter: you are born into it, it is your spiritual destiny. The thing about a contract is that you are a party to it and, if the contract is broken, you can be released from the contract, and therefore concepts of identity, as understood by the nationalist, have little significance.' (1992: 43).

Brown notes suggestions that during the seventeenth, eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Presbyterian church 'fulfilled the same function as a nation did for other peoples in the same period' (1992: 43). Taking this further he urges historians to

'look at the structure of mind involved in theories of Calvinist destiny...which set individuals with this background apart from the kind of culture within which nationalism can more readily develop...From my own experience, I could posit a sense within Calvinism in which history is actually rendered insignificant. History, in the nationalist sense of history, beginning in antiquity and moving through slow processes of time to reveal a historical destiny, is not something a Calvinist upbringing... induces in one at all. To adapt Ranke's famous description, everyone in Calvinism is equidistant from God; we all live at the same time, and there is not that sense of developing a cultural, social or national identity.' (1992: 44)².

Supremacism and defeatism

Brown's suggestion that - hitherto - northern protestants have not felt the need to develop a cultural identity is perceptive, all the more so in that it goes against the grain of the prevailing consensus about the centrality of identity in analyses of Northern

² There are also those who would point-out that Puritanism and Calvinism are driven by fear of social disorder and suggest that this fear has an echo in present-day Ulster Presbyterianism. This line of thought remains underdeveloped in relation to defeatist interpretations of social and political change over the last three decades, and is not explored here. Nevertheless, I should point out Brearton's (1997) discussion and Kirkland's analysis of Rhonda Paisley's book about her father, Ian. Kirkland describes the book as being pervaded with a feeling of disillusionment, betrayal, failure and despair. He claims to detect a 'messianic concept of final destruction [which] leaves the text, and the Democratic Unionist philosophy it embodies, faltering on the final precipice of history and calling sado-masochistically for the final act of humiliation which will free it' (1996: 26).



Ireland, but he is, perhaps, too hasty in his dismissal of explanations which stress protestants' roots in a colonial settler community, and his alternative hypotheses as to why protestants felt no such need are not convincing. His suggestion that historians investigate the 'structure of mind in theories of Calvinist destiny' is not likely to be fruitful. Theoretically it signals a return to the transcendent mentalities beloved of theorists of identity, and his suggestion that Calvinism is inimical to the development of cultural nationalism is, as he himself acknowledges, falsified by the example of Afrikaners. Another explanation is required, and I would suggest that the place to look for that explanation is in the struggle against Home Rule: it is widely acknowledged, not least by Brown in an earlier publication, that this was crucial to the ideological formation of unionism (see Brown 1985, McBride 1997)

Looking at the ideological development of unionism in the struggle against Home Rule is also a valuable corrective to the now common tendency to see the Orange Order as the central organising institution in unionist politics and Orangeism as the ideological cement which united the protestant population behind unionism. The emphasis on Orangeism also leads to a misunderstanding, or, at least, partial understanding, of protestant supremacism as an inheritance from the seventeenth century struggles that the loyal orders commemorate.

As Bew, Gibbon and Patterson argued, against James Connolly and latter-day Connollyists, the ideology around which the Unionist ruling class mobilised itself and the masses against Home Rule was not primarily Orange.

'In 1886 Ulster Presbyterianism, while actually retaining strong anti-establishment and anti-landlord traditions and a general hostility to Orangeism, moved en bloc to the Unionist anti-home rule alliance. Although democratic, the ideology was intensely pro-imperialistic and hostile to nationalist demands. In all three anti-Home Rule agitations this relatively secular ideology was to play a dominant role in integrating the main elements of the Protestant bloc. Its durability was a consequence of the fact that it provided a specific representation of the structural division in Irish society which Connolly failed to recognise. According to the ideology, the social and economic character of the north, and in particular its monopolisation of capitalist machine industry, was the expression of two distinct racial and religious histories (Ireland – Two nations). It centred on the backward-agrarian/progressive – industrial antithesis' (Bew et al 1979: 8).

As Ruane and Todd suggest, this ideology linking northern protestants and Unionism with modernity, progress and capitalist development could be interpreted as having evolved from earlier settler ideologies which turned on the opposition between about civility and barbarism. But the point is, as Ruane and Todd stress - and which O'Dowd and Connolly fail to recognise - 'more is involved than settler ideology': the ideology around which northern protestants united in opposition to Home Rule had a basis in material reality: the uneven development of capitalism in Ireland. In other words, this ideology is not an example of an unchanging 'settler mentality' transmitted down the generations through the Orange Order, but of the invention of a new ideology which was durable, not merely because it was congruent with contemporary conditions, but because it drew on an older ideology in specific ways.

Having grown-up in Belfast in the late 1960s and 70s, this kind of ideology, is much more familiar to me than Orangeism. My parents themselves grew-up in Belfast in the 1920s and 1930s, and my father's formative political experiences were with the Workers' Education Association in the 1930s; the Second World War, when Stalin was an ally and

the Communist Party of Ireland respectable among the Belfast protestant working class; and the post-war Labour Party victory in Britain and subsequent welfare legislation. The contrast with the south, and the rationale for remaining part of the United Kingdom was not just that we had heavy industry and they did not, but that we had a welfare state and divorce was legal; we might not have had abortion, but contraception was more readily available and we had a more enlightened approach to maternal health; even if we did not buy-into protestantism as a religion, we nevertheless thought of it as historically progressive in the sense of being less obscurantist than catholicism (cf. Hyndman 1996: 229). This was not, as O'Dowd (1990) would have us believe, an 'echo' of Memmi's 'Nero complex', it was an ideology of modernity in the guise of progress, with a material basis and a strong socialist or, at least, labourist inflection. As with other such ideologies, it was sceptical of tradition, including Orange tradition; indeed, in my father's case, especially the Orange tradition.

I do not think I was that atypical, and, if I am correct to suggest that this kind of ideology linking Protestantism and unionism with modernity and progress was a significant current, particularly among the protestant working class³, then, it seems to me that this goes some way to explaining why, amid all the other changes - constitutional, legal, political and demographic - the collapse of the traditional industries upon which the ideology was based has been such a blow. The weight of the blow is registered in discussions involving community activists in protestant areas of Belfast in the early 1990s such as those organised and documented by Hall:

'the Protestant working class has been demoralised on two fronts simultaneously. The Troubles – which forced Protestant's into cultural and political "retreat" – have coincided with the massive erosion of the industrial base which had provided them with their economic security... much communal and individual "worth" accrued to industrial skills, even to the detriment of other avenues of advancement. Further education... was seen as a second-best option to getting into a trade' (Hall 1994: 14-15).

Earlier, the discussants appear to have made a connection between the importance of machine industry to working class protestants, colonial ideologies of progress and the classic role of such ideologies in rationalising the power of the settler community, especially 'when their actions towards the native population breach the norms they observe in respect of one another' (Ruane and Todd 1996: 27):

'The "work ethic" label even had a cultural dimension, with the notion that the "Planters" were an industrious stock of people who transformed the Ulster landscape, whereas the "natives" were lazy. This had been translated in modern times into the perception that the Catholic community was quite content to live on welfare benefits while "doing the double", and that Catholic poverty was a reflection of their social and religious attitudes. One result of such perceptions was that a "blind eye" could be turned to the genuine social injustices suffered by the Catholic community' (Hall 1994: 13).

What I am suggesting is that present-day protestant supremacism, whether or not it originated in seventeenth century settler ideologies, had a material basis in the uneven

³ To add further support to my contention that the world-view communicated to me by my father and others was not atypical within the protestant working class, I should mention the enduring labour tradition in Northern Ireland. It sometimes seems that this tradition is being air-brushed out of history. It was always a subaltern tradition, and it is true that, politically at least, it was devastated with the onset of the present 'troubles', but we should recall that in the first Stormont elections held after World War II the combined vote for Communist Party of Ireland and Labour candidates in Belfast alone was nearly 80,000 (Farrell 1980: 190) and that during the early 1960s the Northern Ireland Labour Party secured four Members of Parliament at Stormont.



development of capitalism in Ireland and articulated ideas about modernity and progress that had a currency beyond Northern Ireland. By the same token, protestant defeatism, in some degree, expresses a loss of confidence in progress and the modernist project – a loss of confidence that is also evident beyond Northern Ireland. These suggestions, if valid, may illuminate other phenomena. One example is the resentment that some northern protestants feel about the economic success of the south in the last ten years (see for example Martin 1997). Another example is the effort of some writers to attach significance to the Titanic and, indeed, the Battle of the Somme, as symbols of the folly of a vainglorious belief in modernity and progress (see Brearton, 1997). More importantly, locating northern protestant supremacism and defeatism in relation to broader currents in Western thought allows us to reassess the adequacy of the notion that the Northern Ireland problem is the product of a clash of identities and to better understand some of the potential dangers of policies based on this notion.

Conclusion

As part of my argument, I have pointed out that cultural identity is not a universal phenomenon, but a specific hypothesis about the nature of humanity that has recently become central to the dominant consensus about the Northern Ireland 'problem' and solutions to it. In this context, northern protestant defeatism can be seen not so much as the expression of a crisis in some pre-existing identity, but as symptomatic of the fact that northern protestants did not develop a strong collective identity and, perhaps, of ongoing attempts to get one in a context where identity politics have, themselves become hegemonic⁴.

To agree with Terence Brown's argument that 'concepts of identity, as understood by the nationalist, have little significance' (1992: 43) for northern protestants does not necessarily imply acceptance of the nationalist claim that protestants do not have a culture. J W Foster has suggested that (1996: 91) 'the triumph of unionism in the new Northern Ireland lessened almost to nothing the need for such a thing as an intellectual rationale and vision for unionism'. This is not quite true, there was a Unionist cultural project, as Gillian McIntosh's work confirms. McIntosh uses the term 'unionist identity' freely, but she also repeatedly alludes to diversity and dissent among protestants and the ways in which 'Britain, the Irish Republic and dissident forces within their own borders constantly impinged upon unionist visions of the state.' (1999:3). The point is that the unionist cultural project did not, to use Brubaker and Cooper's (2000) term, 'crystallize' into a strong and enduring cultural identity.

That some protestants are today attempting to acquire a cultural identity is most evident in the Ulster Scots movement and in the invention of a myth of origin in the pre-Celtic Cruithin people. But there are other straws in the wind. One of the more intriguing of these is the element of pathos which many commentators claim to detect in the protestant community. Amongst the authors whose work I have reviewed, Fleischmann (1995), McKay (2000) and Liam Kennedy (1996) allude to a maudlin preoccupation with suffering or self-pity. This theme is also apparent in some attempts to explain the motives of those protesting the route taken to the Holy Cross primary school by Catholic parents and Children.

⁴ Bell (1998: 243) shows how the pluralist agenda promoted by the Northern Ireland Office can lead to the 'hypostatization of sectarian divisions' that it aims to defuse.

Pathos is part of the logic of identity politics today. As Zaretsky points out protagonists of identity politics seek 'to reclaim a stigmatised identity, to revalue the devalued pole of a dichotomised hierarchy such as black/white, male/female, or heterosexual/gay' (1994: 199). This works by collapsing the distance between the individual and the collective, and investing the latter with the dignity of the former and the pathos of his or her suffering or loss (see Michaels, 1995).

This logic is evident in publicity generated by the 'Long March' from Derry to Portadown in June and July 1999. There was a focus on the stories of some of the marchers: 'forgotten victims', individuals who had been maimed in bombs or whose relatives had been murdered. At a press conference which preceded the march in Glenavy, one of the march organisers, Mr Bell, 'said the main aim of the walk was to raise awareness of the forgotten victims'. But he also sought to link these individual stories to a much broader collective project: 'We are looking for respect for victims, for parity of esteem for Protestant culture and heritage and for support for deprived unionist communities.' (*Irish Times* 2.07.1999).

It is important to state very clearly that my suggestion that defeatism may be symptomatic of attempts to develop a protestant collective identity is not to deny that it has a basis in reality. The stories of the 'forgotten victims' who took part in the 'Long March' are harrowing. Moreover, recognising that northern protestant supremacism had a material basis also entails a sequel that some of the authors whose work I have reviewed seem reluctant to concede; i.e., that emergent defeatist identifications amongst northern protestants also have a material basis in the collapse of heavy industry, in the break-down of neighbourhoods and in constitutional, political and legal reforms implemented in Northern Ireland in the last thirty years.

In conforming to the logic of identity politics, protestant defeatism is also congruent with broader trends. Bernhard Giesen (2000) has noted that in the late twentieth century various collectivities have moved from an identification with a glorious, heroic past to an identification with a traumatic past. Others have noted that one response of white Americans to affirmative action programs and multicultural policies that were developed in response to the African American struggle in the 1960s has been to elaborate their own particularist identities based on readings of their collective pasts which stress hardship and suffering. In this analysis, the ironic nihilism of bands like Beck – 'I'm a loser baby' – or the victim-chic of celebrities like Roseanne or Curt Cobain who lay claim to white trash origins are only the most obvious, and benign, manifestation of a broader and more insidious phenomena (see Wray and Newitz 1997).

Several authors have noted the connection between the collapse of faith in modernity as progress and the rise of identity politics in late modernity (e.g., Finkelkraut 2001, and see various contributions to Werbner and Modood 1997). What is less well understood is the connection between this collapse and the political efficacy of pathetic identities. Finkelkraut provides a clue in his discussion of the futurist Polish poet Aleksander Wat. Looking-back on his experience as a member of the Communist Party in the 1920s, Wat recalled the centrality in communist circles of a culinary metaphor: 'Everyone who went over to Communism had to accept the Leninist principle that you couldn't make an omelette without breaking eggs' (quoted by Finkelkraut 2001: 81). Although Wat was speaking of communism (and indirectly of Nazism) this metaphor stands, albeit in one of its harsher forms, for the modernist idea of progress which justified social change – including expropriation, the uprooting of tradition and, indeed whole peoples together with their 'ways of life' - in terms of what was achieved or what might be achieved. Complaints from the victims of these processes could easily be set aside against the



social, cultural, economic, technical and scientific achievements of the Soviets, or of capitalism, or, indeed, of colonial regimes.

After the horrors of the twentieth century, the logic of progress has been discredited, not least among those for whom it once provided a *raison d'être* but who are now among its victims.

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