

Ethnicity and Conflict: The Northern Ireland Troubles

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Abstract This article defends the view that the Northern Ireland Troubles can usefully be described as an ethnic conflict. It critically examines two recent manifestos on this subject by Richard Bourke and Simon Prince, which rest on misrepresentations of the scholarship on Northern Ireland. The issues raised by these historians are relevant to the historiography of nationalism and the study of civil war. This article focuses on the coincidence of religious affiliation and political allegiance in Ulster and the mechanisms by which patterns of conflict have been reproduced over time, suggesting several reasons why historians and political scientists have turned to the notion of ethnicity to describe the persistence of antagonism in the North of Ireland. The conclusion focuses on the loyalist agitator John McKeague, arguing that the literature on ethnicity helps us to understand the outbreak of the Northern Ireland conflict better than the singular concentration on democratic ideas recommended by Bourke and Prince.

David Runciman's sparkling little book, *Politics: Ideas in Profile* (2014), is an introductory guide, written by a prominent professor of politics at Cambridge University and aimed at the educated public. It begins by posing the question of why life in Syria is violent, unpredictable, and impoverished, whereas life in Denmark is comfortable, prosperous, and perhaps a little bit dull. The answer is not that Danes are nicer people or that they enjoy access to greater natural resources. The real difference is that Denmark enjoys political stability, which in turn derives from its institutions of government and the relations of power within and between the groups that compose its population. Almost immediately, however, Runciman is struck by the fact that

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violence in Syria is partly generated by “religious and ethnic divisions,” whereas in Denmark “there exist none of the ethnic or cultural fissures that would provoke a civil war.”¹ Thoughtful readers might wonder whether ethnicity, religion, and culture can be bracketed together so easily.² But I suspect that most will readily assent to Runciman’s general point: internal conflicts are more likely to arise in ethnically divided societies than in those that are ethnically homogeneous.

Empirical research on civil war tends to confirm Runciman’s intuition, although this burgeoning field has generated multiple disagreements and reversals. In his 2007 book, *Nations, States and Violence*, David Laitin noted a correlation between *territorially concentrated* ethnic groups and conflict: “The more that groups are settled in a single region of the country, the more likely they will be in rebellion against the state.”³ Territorial concentration seems to be a prerequisite of ethnic competition, and the number and relative size of groups within a polity is also important.⁴ Other political scientists have argued that the likelihood of friction increases when ethnic divisions coincide with horizontal inequalities, or when a substantial ethnic group is excluded from access to political decision making.⁵ Recently, however, two scholars working on Northern Ireland have argued forcefully that the very idea of an ethnic community

¹ David Runciman, *Politics: Ideas in Profile* (London, 2014), 4–5.

² The differences between “ethnic,” “communal,” and “national” do not matter for the purposes of this article: all assume the existence of intergenerational groups distinguished from one another by recognizable cultural attributes, symbols, rituals, and/or historical narratives, the significance of which cannot be reduced to principles of political allegiance. For the relationship between cultural variation, ethnicity, and nationhood, see Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London, 1993), esp. 91–96 and chap. 6.

³ David D. Laitin, *Nations, States, and Violence* (Oxford, 2007), 19.

⁴ On political demography, see Daniel N. Posner, “The Political Salience of Cultural Difference: Why Chewas and Tumbukas Are Allies in Zambia and Adversaries in Malawi,” *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 4 (2004): 529–45.

⁵ The best study is now Lars-Erik Cederman, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Halvard Buhaug, *Inequality, Grievances, and Civil War* (Cambridge, 2013). See also Frances Stewart, ed., *Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict: Understanding Group Violence in Multi-Ethnic Societies* (Houndmills, 2008); Andreas Wimmer, Lars-Erik Cederman, and Brian Min, “Ethnic Politics and Armed Conflict: A Configurational Analysis of a New Global Data Set,” *American Sociological Review* 74, no. 2 (2009): 316–37; Lars-Erik Cederman, Andreas Wimmer, and Brian Min, “Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel? New Data and Analysis,” *World Politics* 62, no. 1 (2010): 87–119. These scholars have largely overturned the earlier findings of Fearon and Laitin, who suggested that no significant correlation existed between ethnic division and the likelihood of civil war: see Stathis N. Kalyvas and Paul D. Kenny, “Civil Wars,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, 20 November 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.3>.

is vacuous. One is Simon Prince, a political historian who has specialized in the outbreak of the violence in Derry and Belfast between 1968 and 1972. The other is Richard Bourke, an intellectual historian who has mostly focused on the Enlightenment era, and whose interest in the “Troubles” is ultimately more philosophical than historical.⁶

Pointing to the impossibility of distinguishing definitively between ethnic groups and other coalitions, both scholars conclude that the term “ethnic” has no analytical utility. Reconsidering Runciman’s question in this light, we could say only that Denmark is more politically stable than Syria because it is less *politically* divided. Bourke and Prince further contend that the essential equipment required to understand conflict is the toolkit of the intellectual historian. “In lived historical reality,” Bourke asserts, “loyalty is evoked in terms of specific norms of allegiance—imperial, monarchical, or democratic allegiance, for instance—while those norms are mobilized by political movements or represented by regimes.” Conflict in twentieth-century Ireland should be viewed as “the child of democratic ideas formulated during the period of the French Revolution out of the materials of enlightenment thought.”⁷ Prince likewise depicts the Troubles as a struggle between “rival visions of modern democracy.”⁸ Both maintain that the principle of equality underpinning our modern conception of democracy gives rise to antagonism, self-righteousness, and bloodshed.⁹

This line of argument must contend with an obvious difficulty. Northern Ireland is an anomaly. Its history deviates from that of other western democracies, including those it most closely resembles institutionally, culturally, and socially: it is a deeply divided society; it has a

⁶ The two articles considered here are Richard Bourke, “Languages of Conflict and the Northern Ireland Troubles,” *Journal of Modern History* 83, no. 3 (2011): 544–78, and Simon Prince, “Against Ethnicity: Democracy, Equality, and the Northern Irish Conflict,” *Journal of British Studies* 57, no. 4 (2018), 783–811. Neither author cites the more measured critique set out in Cillian McGrattan, “Explaining Northern Ireland? The Limitations of the Ethnic Conflict Model,” *National Identities* 12, no. 2 (2010): 181–97, and there is no space to consider it here.

⁷ Bourke, “Languages of Conflict,” 567, 577.

⁸ Prince, “Against Ethnicity,” 783 (abstract).

⁹ Prince, “Against Ethnicity,” 799; Bourke, “Languages of Conflict,” 576; see also Richard Bourke, *Peace in Ireland: The War of Ideas* (London, 2003), 302.

history of recurring violence; and during the 1970s and 1980s, its problems were widely regarded as insoluble. In these respects it provides a startling contrast with the Republic of Ireland; and yet the southern polity emerged from a civil war which was, among other things, a contest between rival claims to democratic legitimacy.¹⁰ The view that adherence to democratic norms renders human beings vulnerable to states of political arousal cannot explain what is most distinctive about the Northern Irish case. If we want to find out why political violence in the Six Counties claimed more lives during the 1970s and 1980s than in all other western European countries put together, then “democracy” appears to be part of the question rather than the whole of the answer.

The following discussion sets aside the history of democratic ideas. It has long been accepted that the principle of popular sovereignty is a condition of nationalist mobilization, in Ireland as elsewhere.¹¹ The “Ulster movement” of 1912–21 has been widely understood as a both a reaction to democratization and a product of it—more specifically of the revolution in party alignments that followed the creation of a mass franchise by the Third Reform Act of 1884.¹² But nationalism is not reducible to the claim that the people are sovereign; it is the claim that a specific people, with a unique history, a recognized homeland, and shared attributes that distinguish it from other peoples, constitute a nation—that is, a community that *thereby* qualifies for some form of self-government. Consequently, when de Valera summarized Ireland’s case for independence in the United States in 1920, the first and most fundamental claim he made was that “the people of Ireland constitute a distinct and separate nation, ethnically, historically, and tested by every standard of political science; entitled therefore, to

¹⁰ Bill Kissane, *The Politics of the Irish Civil War* (Oxford, 2007), ch. 3.

¹¹ Among many examples, see Ian McBride, ‘The Nation in the Age of Revolution’, in Len Scales and Oliver Zimmer (eds.), *Power and the Nation in European History* (Cambridge, 2005), 248–27.

¹² The most detailed examination is Brian Walker’s *Ulster Politics: The Formative Years, 1868–86* (Belfast, 1989), esp. 255–67.

self-determination.”¹³ A major theme of Sinn Féin propaganda was that the popular will had been declared in the “national plebiscite” of 1918. But the overriding argument was that Ireland satisfied the criteria of “nationality” and “Ulster” did not.¹⁴ Other key political texts at the time of partition contained discussions of racial difference, “the national idea,” “homogeneity,” the two nations theory, and “the problem of mixed populations.”¹⁵ The core disagreement was less about democracy than about the definition of nationality.¹⁶

In this article, I examine the polemic begun by Richard Bourke’s article “Languages of Conflict and the Northern Ireland Troubles” (2011) and continued by Simon Prince’s “Against Ethnicity: Democracy, Equality, and the Northern Irish Conflict” (2018). My primary aim is to establish an accurate account of what historians and political scientists have written about Northern Ireland and to trace the entry of the concept of ethnicity into this field. I hope to demonstrate that when scholars refer to the “Troubles” as an ethnic struggle, they are generally making a claim about the character of the conflict rather than about causation in any strong sense. One of the most prominent experts on the comparative study of civil war notes that the adjective “ethnic” is generally used to indicate “the type of actors and possibly what they are bargaining over” rather than to explain antagonism.¹⁷ Research on Northern Ireland conforms to that observation. In the Irish case, ethnic frameworks of interpretation are frequently reliant, explicitly or implicitly, on models of settler colonialism. I will demonstrate that scholars turned

¹³ Eamonn de Valera, *Ireland’s Request to the Government of the United States of America for Recognition as a Sovereign Independent State* (Washington, DC, 1920), 4.

¹⁴ De Valera, *Ireland’s Request to the Government of the United States*, 4. See also Laurence Ginnell, *The Irish Republic: Why? Official Statement Prepared for Submission to the Peace Conference* (New York, 1919), 6. For an unusually academic reflection, see Stephen J. Brown, “What Is a Nation?,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 1, no. 3 (1912): 496–510.

¹⁵ See, for example, P. S. O’Hegarty, *Ulster: A Brief Statement of Fact* (Dublin, 1919); Kevin O’Shiel, *Handbook of the Ulster Question* (Dublin, 1923). Among many other contemporary meditations on nationality, see Arthur Clery, *The Idea of a Nation*, ed. Patrick Maume (Dublin, 1907); and Robert Wilson Lynd, *If the Germans Conquered England, and Other Essays* (London, 1917), especially the title essay, 1–8, and “Of Nationalism and Nationality,” 147–52.

¹⁶ Ronald McNeill, *Ulster’s Stand for Union* (London, 1922), 2, 14–5. Duncan Bell’s *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, 2007) offers a model for intellectual history that encompasses not only the state, the constitution, and democracy but also race and nationality.

¹⁷ James D. Fearon, “Explanations for Ethnic Violence” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Economy*, ed. Donald A. Wittman and Barry R. Weingast (Oxford, 2006), 862.

to ethnicity to replace crude depictions of Ulster Unionism as a by-product of imperialism or capitalism, or as a specifically religious phenomenon. “Ethnicity” acquired currency for other reasons too: it promised access to lively comparative research; it gave due recognition to the institutions of communal segregation uncovered by geographers, anthropologists, and urban historians; and it provided a means of connecting structural patterns of social inequality and cultural difference with processes of state formation.

Ethnic groups are enumerated in censuses not only in the West but in China, India, and in many African countries—even though the categories can be fluid, overlapping, and sometimes arbitrary.¹⁸ Like race and other social constructs, ethnicity escapes precise definition. Most applications of the term nevertheless assume two shared features, and these are worth outlining before proceeding further. The first is that membership is inherited from one’s parents. Individuals may be assimilated over time—as a consequence of intermarriage, for example—but ethnic groups nevertheless present themselves as communities of descent. Secondly, ethnic groups are distinguishable from each other by perceived cultural attributes, such as religion, language, symbols, and historical myths, or so their members believe.¹⁹ The mechanisms by which such traits acquire social and political relevance can be uncovered only by detailed historical investigations of particular cases. But, as Thomas Hylland Eriksen has commented, ethnic identities “must have some goods to deliver”, some political, material or symbolic advantage.²⁰ It is regrettable that political scientists generally ignore anthropologists such as Eriksen, who also reminds us that ethnicity is “an aspect of a relationship, not a cultural property of a group.”²¹ One of the goals of this article is to endorse the anthropological insight

¹⁸ The problems are explored in James D. Fearon, “Ethnic and Cultural Diversity by Country,” *Journal of Economic Growth* 8 no. 2 (2003): 195–222.

¹⁹ For different approaches to defining ethnicity, see Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London, 1991), 21; James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity,” *International Organization* 54, no. 4 (2000): 845–77, at 848; Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations*, 2nd ed. (London, 2008), 10–16; Kanchan Chandra, *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics* (Oxford, 2012), chap. 2.

²⁰ Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 76.

²¹ Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 34.

that ethnic attachments are created and maintained through social practices. The rich literature on rituals of inclusion and exclusion, on practices of endogamy and social separation, and on myths of common origin and sacrifice is too valuable to be casually discarded.

II

The primary complaint made by Bourke and Prince is that academics have portrayed conflict in Northern Ireland as a collision of ethnic identities, in which cultural or sentimental ties exert a mysterious pull over the behavior of Irish people in isolation from political or ideological factors. The patterns of misrepresentation involved in this account of the existing literature point to tunnel vision rather than mere simplification or selective quotation. Take, for example, the case of Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, whose *Dynamics of Conflict* is generally recognized as one of the outstanding overviews in the field. Bourke's summary of their work, faithfully repeated in Prince's article, reads as follows: "Antagonistic communities preserve their group integrity *as they seamlessly progress through history*, transmitting their hostility down the generations."²²

Ruane and Todd must find this caricature of their work perplexing. In one of the articles cited by Bourke, they state explicitly that the feedback mechanisms sustaining ethnic communities "*are not seamless.*" On the contrary, they suggest that the wider social environment is likely to produce counterpressures, as when "the ethnic categories of distinction valued in the local field are overturned in the wider state or macro-region, or where there is a lack of fit between power relations and cognitive categories."²³ Bourke also attributes to them the crude notion that the primary actors in Irish history have been "*disembodied* cultural

²² Bourke, "Languages of Conflict," 567; Prince, "Against Ethnicity", 792. The italics here and throughout the next paragraph are mine.

²³ Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, "The Roots of Intense Ethnic Conflict May Not in Fact Be Ethnic: Categories, Communities and Path Dependence," *European Journal of Sociology/ Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 45, no. 2 (2004): 209–32, at 227.

affinities.”²⁴ But Ruane and Todd emphasize that cultural differences in Northern Ireland have fueled conflict because their meanings have been “*embodied* in the state and public institutions.”²⁵ Like a large majority of scholars, they regard ethnic sentiments as fluid, situational, and underpinned by strategic and rational calculations.²⁶ Irish nationalism, in their view, is the outcome of an evolving pattern of political exclusion and social disadvantage originating in the violent integration of Ireland into the early modern English state.²⁷ Some of these inconvenient realities are acknowledged by Simon Prince, who examines the work of Ruane and Todd in detail. Ultimately, however, Prince convinces himself that the latter treat Protestants and Catholics as “transhistorical entities” and reduce political phenomena to “fixed group identities.”²⁸

One polemical technique employed by both Bourke and Prince is to cite a proposition from academic writing on Northern Ireland and then to conflate it with arguments drawn loosely from the wider theoretical literature, in an attempt to damn by association. Here is Prince:

The political scientists John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary argue that ethnic identities are durable—which means they can be treated as if they were fixed. If they are durable, then this is a puzzle that needs to be solved rather than a fact that can be taken for granted. The answer offered by the anthropologist John Nagle and the political scientist Mary-Alice Clancy is that “conflict hardens identities.” Yet constructivism’s viability as a theory requires identities to be capable of softening, hardening, or remaining unchanged. Constructivists in principle thus end up as primordialists in practice.”²⁹

²⁴ Bourke, “Languages of Conflict,” 567.

²⁵ Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, *Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland: Power, Conflict and Emancipation* (Cambridge, 1996), 178.

²⁶ Ruane and Todd, “Categories, Communities and Path Dependence,” 209–32. This has long been the orthodoxy in anthropology, as surveyed in Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, a work cited by neither Bourke nor Prince.

²⁷ Ruane and Todd, *Dynamics of Conflict*, chap. 2.

²⁸ Prince, “Against Ethnicity,” 783 (abstract), 795.

²⁹ Prince, “Against Ethnicity,” 788.

This exercise in ventriloquism obscures several important things, the most fundamental one being that McGarry and O’Leary have consistently denied that ethnic identities are fixed.³⁰ O’Leary defines the essence of ethnicity as the conviction among the members of a group that they share a common ancestry, but this “is not to claim that such convictions are permanent, immemorial, unchanged since the Stone Age, or that groups never merge or disappear, or that there is never acculturation or inter-culturation.”³¹ Secondly, the reader might infer that McGarry and O’Leary have cited Nagle and Clancy, but this is not the case. Thirdly, it is not true that McGarry and O’Leary take the continuity of ethnic antagonism for granted. They maintain that competition between ethnic groups arises only in “specific situations”—above all, when rival nationalist aspirations confront one another.³² The historical causes of the Northern Ireland conflict, as McGarry and O’Leary present them, were the plantation of Ulster and the dispossession of the native Irish; the failure of successive attempts at English/British state-building between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries; and the democratization of the political system, which prompted the mobilization of popular nationalist and unionist movements in the electoral contests of 1886 to 1918.³³

Prince’s method conveniently frees him from engaging directly with the texts he dismisses so briskly. The model is derived from Bourke, whose genealogizing is more *recherché*:

McGarry and O’Leary deny that they are primordialists in the sense of crediting the notion of ‘immutable’ allegiance: allegiance can be durable yet neither

³⁰ See, for example, John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary, *The Northern Ireland Conflict: Consociational Engagements* (Oxford, 2004), 32.

³¹ Brendan O’Leary, “Walker Connor (1926–2017): A Tribute,” *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 45, no. 5 (2017): 725–29, at 727.

³² John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images* (Oxford, 1995), 354–55.

³³ Brendan O’Leary and John McGarry, *Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland*, 2nd ed. (London, 1996). “See also Brendan O’Leary, *A Treatise on Northern Ireland* (Oxford, 2019).

perennial nor permanent, they correctly argue. However, primordial ties were first theorized as neither original nor perpetual but as fundamental, or binding ipso facto—that is, “by virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself,” in Geertz’s words. Geertz’s thesis was explicitly indebted to arguments first formulated by the sociologist Edward Shils, who had drawn in turn on the work of Ferdinand Tönnies. Each of them share a common set of assumptions: first, that feelings of the kind are sufficient to sustain coherent behaviour independent of their political organization and, second, that they are more basic than normative conventions. In other words, such ties are seen as “natural,” in the sense of arising spontaneously, and as capable of inspiring communal action.³⁴

This conceptual lineage skips from McGarry and O’Leary back to the German sociologist Tönnies (1855–1936) as if opening a series of Russian dolls. In another dizzy sequence, Bourke detects a resemblance between F. S. L. Lyons’s ruminations on cultural conflict in *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland, 1890–1939* (1979) and John Plamenatz’s famous essay “Two Types of Nationalism” (1973), which in turn is said to depend on a misreading of Friedrich Meinecke’s *Cosmopolitanism and the National State* (1907).³⁵ As it happens, none of these theorists is cited in McGarry and O’Leary’s *Explaining Northern Ireland*. None of these theorists is cited in *any* of the works on the Troubles considered in this article. Even if they were, readers would expect to find their insights modified and supplemented. What matters is less where ideas come from than how they are put to use.

³⁴ Bourke, “Languages of Conflict,” 564–65. Prince, in “Against Ethnicity,” 788–89, likewise associates McGarry and O’Leary with Geertz. Contrast Eriksen’s *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, the most influential anthropological survey of the subject, which mentions Shils and Geertz only in passing; his account of the theoretical controversies of the late twentieth century revolves around Fredrik Barth and Abner Cohen (54–58).

³⁵ Bourke, “Languages of Conflict,” 568. Meinecke occupies twice as much space in this article as McGarry and O’Leary.

Bourke and Prince believe there is a consensus position on the Northern Ireland conflict, one centering on ethnic identities that are held to arise “spontaneously” and are thereafter “fixed” and purportedly “natural.” But this claim is based on a smokescreen composed of quotations from Clifford Geertz, John Nagle, and Mary-Alice Clancy. To quote instead from the most influential Irish political scientists and historians would be to admit that McGarry and O’Leary trace conflict in Ulster to settler colonialism and “democratic modernization,” and that they oppose “culturalist” explanations of violence more rigorously than do either Prince or Bourke.³⁶ McGarry and O’Leary portray the Northern Ireland conflict not as a clash of identities but as a contest between “the political organizations of two communities” who disagree about whether the region should become incorporated into the Irish state.³⁷

In addition to rejecting the principal interpretations of the Troubles, Bourke is frustrated with the standard authorities on nationalism, specifically Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, Ernest Gellner, and Walker Connor. At the center of their work, he finds “the notion of a shapeless community held together by a process of sentimental fusion.”³⁸ These scholars are among the most influential writers in the humanities and social sciences. Gellner’s *Nations and Nationalism* (1983) was ranked by the *Times Literary Supplement* as one of the hundred most influential books published in the half-century after the Second World War. The best-known critic of these “modernists” has been Anthony Smith, whom Bourke labels a primordialist “despite himself” (on the grounds that he stresses the role of preexisting ethnic attachments in the formation of modern nations and nationalist movements).³⁹ To varying degrees, Bourke finds that *all* theorists of nationalism have treated cultural units as “mysteriously imbued with

³⁶ See McGarry and O’Leary, *Politics of Antagonism*, at 101, and McGarry and O’Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland*, chap. 6.

³⁷ They summarize their position in *Explaining Northern Ireland*, 354–55, and in *Politics of Antagonism*, 2.

³⁸ Bourke, “Languages of Conflict,” 566.

³⁹ Bourke, 549n18. Compare Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London, 1998), 146–59, in which the author, at some length, differentiates his position from Geertz, Shils, and other “primordialist” theorists.

an agency of their own,” operating independently of political forms. For Bourke, conversely, it is the political apparatus and the principles of allegiance that underpin it that preoccupy “properly historical” scholars as opposed to those who merely “trade in . . . abstractions.”⁴⁰

Once more, Bourke sustains this critique by a highly selective reading of the literature. The established viewpoint is that nationalism is a specifically modern ideology; its appearance is linked to the emergence of the modern centralizing state, with its vastly increased infrastructural power, its demand for mass participation in industrial production and military service, and its corresponding need to mobilize public opinion in democratic elections to representative assemblies. The specific task that Hobsbawm and Gellner set themselves was to explain why “foreign” rule suddenly became intolerable to people in many parts of Europe during the nineteenth century. Why was it that membership of multinational empires, previously seen as uncontroversial, now appeared to offend a vital political principle? Hobsbawm’s answer was that the modern state governed its inhabitants and polices its borders directly rather than through local elites and largely autonomous corporations. The postman, the policeman, the schoolteacher, the railways, the regular census, and military conscription were all manifestations of an expanding state bureaucracy, bringing ordinary populations into closer contact with the machinery of government.⁴¹ The emergence of direct-rule states led to policies of cultural standardization and compulsory schooling and to the promotion of flags, national anthems, monuments and public ceremonies.⁴² While some groups embraced these opportunities to demonstrate their loyalty, others resisted. In Ireland, there was the additional complicating factor of ultra-loyalty—the determination of the settler population to reserve the

⁴⁰ Bourke, “Languages of Conflict,” 577; Richard Bourke, ‘Historiography’, in *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland*, ed. Richard Bourke and Ian McBride (Princeton, 2016), 285, 286.

⁴¹ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1992), 80, 81.

⁴² The shift from indirect to direct rule is pivotal for Michael Hechter’s theory in *Containing Nationalism* (Oxford, 2000), chap. 4.

privileges and symbols of the citizen to themselves, regarding apparent signs of assimilation among the Gaels as just another devious attempt to dislodge the planters.⁴³

State formation, the idea of popular sovereignty, and the democratization of the political system are stock components of the literature on nationalism. Democratization is a recurrent theme in Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism*.⁴⁴ The sociologist Michael Hechter has produced a sophisticated account of the nation as a product of state formation that is both historically sensitive and rationalist.⁴⁵ Anthony Smith believed that the crystallization and persistence of nations could be attributed to three main factors: "state-making, military mobilisation, and organised religion."⁴⁶ It is true, admittedly, that Gellner snubs both political and intellectual history. The state is present in Gellner's work only in a shadowy, subordinate form as a mechanism meeting the functional requirements of the industrial economy. His theory of nationalism focused on the heightened significance of linguistic difference in an age of state-sponsored, standardized school systems. But this is emphatically not to say that Gellner viewed the process of nationalist mobilization as spontaneous or straightforward. On the contrary, he believed that cultures (or rather the political actors and intellectuals claiming to represent them) must "fight it out among themselves for available populations and for the available state-space." In the process, rival claimants are absorbed, coerced, stigmatized, expelled or exterminated; in short, there is likely to be "a great deal of very forceful cultural engineering."⁴⁷ In the present context, moreover, it is surely germane that the most systematic appraisal of Gellner's work on nationalism to date is that produced by the Irish political scientist Brendan O'Leary. This incisive essay is not cited by Bourke, though it anticipates some of the latter's principal complaints. O'Leary finds that the various iterations of Gellner's

⁴³ For a particularly militant and racialized example of this approach, see Ernest W. Hamilton, *The Soul of Ulster* (London, 1917).

⁴⁴ Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 83, 85, 88, 89, 91.

⁴⁵ Hechter, *Containing Nationalism*, esp. chap. 2.

⁴⁶ Smith, *National Identity*, 26–28.

⁴⁷ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983), 51, 100–1.

theory lack “a sustained and developed sense of the political,” that in particular Gellner failed to understand “the interdependencies between nationalism and democratisation,” and that he showed no interest in the political ideas of nationalist movements, above all the principle of self-determination.⁴⁸

The misrepresentation of Troubles scholarship, as I have tried to show in this section, is a persistent feature of the two articles under consideration. There are many other examples. Prince castigates Marc Mulholland for portraying political violence in Northern Ireland as a “continuation, and intensification, of the communal struggle.”⁴⁹ But what Mulholland actually wrote is that supporters of the Civil Rights movement viewed its early successes as a ‘continuation, and intensification, of the communal struggle *for moral advantage*’—a quite different claim.⁵⁰ Contrary to the impression given by Prince, Mulholland depicts the discriminatory practices of the Stormont regime not as an inevitable consequence of sectarian prejudice but as sustained ultimately by electoral competition—more specifically, by government anxieties about the fragility of Unionist majorities both in the border constituencies and in Belfast.⁵¹ In Prince’s case, these distortions are doubly disconcerting since specimens of historiographical error might easily have been collected from his own early work on the civil rights movement:

In a country dominated by the sectarian divide, however, clashes between Catholic protesters and Protestant police officers were always more likely to lead to communal conflict than class struggle.

⁴⁸ Brendan O’Leary, “Ernest Gellner’s Diagnoses of Nationalism: A Critical Overview, or, What Is Living and What Is Dead in Ernest Gellner’s Philosophy of Nationalism?,” in *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism*, ed. John A. Hall (Cambridge, 1998), 40–88, esp. 63–71, 78–9; quotations at 63 and 78.

⁴⁹ Prince, “Against Ethnicity,” 788.

⁵⁰ Marc Mulholland, *Northern Ireland at the Crossroads: Ulster Unionism in the O’Neill Years* (Basingstoke, 2000), 162 (my italics).

⁵¹ Marc Mulholland, “Why Did Unionists Discriminate?,” in *From the United Irishmen to Twentieth-Century Unionism: Essays in Honour of A. T. Q. Stewart*, ed. Sabine Wichert (Dublin, 2004), 187–206.

But the communal divide ensured that the centre could not hold.

That there was an ethnic dimension to Northern Ireland's divided society, of course, cannot be ignored.⁵²

II

In the conclusion of his book *Peace in Ireland* (2003), Bourke raised a controversial aspect of the Good Friday Agreement that has recently become the subject of urgent debate. Nationalist acceptance of the 1998 agreement was conditional on its provision of a constitutional mechanism by which a united Ireland might one day be peacefully achieved. This pivotal clause was essentially a reformulation of the “consent principle” central to British policy since the early 1970s: the UK and Irish governments committed themselves to introducing legislation incorporating Northern Ireland into the republic in the event of 51 percent of its electorate approving that outcome in a referendum.⁵³ Bourke speculated that the higher birth rate among Catholics might produce a majority of nationalist voters within the near future, precipitating a crisis as a substantial Unionist population opposed the establishment of a thirty-two-county republic.⁵⁴ The core argument of Bourke's book, developing a distinction formulated in Immanuel Kant's *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1795), was that the majority principle was designed for mandating governments but not for authorizing the construction or dissolution of a state.⁵⁵ The issue has conventionally been construed by political theorists in terms of the “problem of the unit” or “the democratic paradox.” Robert Dahl once put it this way: “The

⁵² Simon Prince, “The Global Revolt of 1968 and Northern Ireland,” *Historical Journal* 49, no. 3 (2006): 851–75, at 851 (abstract), 854, 856.

⁵³ One novelty of the Good Friday Agreement, not relevant here, is that unification was also made explicitly dependent on majority consent in the Republic of Ireland.

⁵⁴ Bourke, *Peace in Ireland*, 308–10.

⁵⁵ Bourke, *Peace in Ireland*, xii, 4, 316n7. Bourke was read incorrectly by reviewers as restating the conventional argument that majoritarianism does not work in a divided society. The distinction between democratic sovereignties and democratic governments has since been explored at length in Richard Tuck's *The Sleeping Sovereign: The Invention of Modern Democracy* (Cambridge, 2015).

majority principle assumes the existence of a political unit, within which a body of citizens must arrive at collective decisions. But nothing in the idea of majority rule provides a rational justification for the boundaries around any specific unit. To say that a decision should be made by majority rule does not—and cannot—answer the question: a majority of what democratic unit?”⁵⁶

Now imagine a complete outsider to Irish politics, an undergraduate from Ruritania who stumbles across *Peace in Ireland* as she researches her dissertation on the ramifications of Brexit. She instantly notices that Bourke makes an assumption so commonplace that an insider might not even see it. Among the democracies of twenty-first century Europe, it is invisible to most insiders. It nevertheless signals a striking and anomalous fact. Bourke takes it for granted that political allegiance and religious affiliation are very closely connected in Northern Ireland. He assumes, moreover, that a hard boundary exists between the two populations, so that the constitutional future will be decided by their differential birth rates rather than by the defection of Unionists to the Nationalist side or vice versa. What is unusual about Northern Ireland is that fundamental political allegiances appear to be given—acquired by birth and upbringing—rather than chosen.

As she continues her research, our Ruritanian student learns that the Troubles began under the reforming Prime Minister Terence O’Neill, who once made a notorious speech about Catholics having eighteen children and living in hovels, in which he maintained, “The basic fear of Protestants in Northern Ireland is that they will be outbred by Roman Catholics.”⁵⁷ What’s more, she discovers that Catholics of that period—the late 1960s—shared the belief that higher Catholic fertility would eventually bring about a united Ireland.⁵⁸ Further reading reveals that the interlocking of religion and politics in Ireland has maintained a stable pattern

⁵⁶ Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven, 1989), 147.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Mulholland, *Northern Ireland at the Crossroads*, 1.

⁵⁸ See Campaign for Social Justice, *Northern Ireland: The Plain Truth*, 2nd ed. (Dungannon, 1969), especially the section “Population Control,” 2–4.

since the extension of the franchise and the advent of modern party structures in the 1880s.⁵⁹ At the time of partition, the mapping of Protestants and Catholics in the 1911 census was accepted by both sides as an approximate guide for the adjustment of the boundary between Northern Ireland and the Free State.⁶⁰

Religious affiliation has been a remarkably reliable predictor of voter behavior in Northern Ireland.⁶¹ Class, gender, geographical location, and educational attainment have had relatively little bearing on the Unionist/Nationalist divide.⁶² Our Ruritanian becomes fascinated by the apparent intractability of this religious cleavage. Immersing herself in the classics of the field, she quickly digests Frederick Boal's articles on patterns of micro-segregation in West Belfast. Boal conducted his initial fieldwork at the high point of community relations in 1967–68. It nevertheless revealed that working-class Protestants and Catholics around the Shankill/Falls fault line tended to read different newspapers, support different football teams, and patronize different shops. Their kinship networks were completely distinct, and they sent their children to different schools. When Protestants and Catholics made visits outside their immediate area, it was to quite different parts of the city, and when they took public transport to the city center, they walked to different bus stops in order to do so.⁶³ Our undergraduate is intrigued to learn that the Northern Irish, when they first encounter strangers, have developed a series of cues for distinguishing between coreligionists and

⁵⁹ Walker, *Ulster Politics*, 255–67. In 1968, Richard Rose found that, even when asked for their fourth choice of party, only 3 percent of Protestants could imagine voting Nationalist, and only 13 percent of Catholics could conceive of voting Unionist: Richard Rose, *Governing without Consensus: An Irish Perspective* (Boston, 1971), 235–6. See, more generally, John Coakley, "Religion, National Identity and Political Change in Modern Ireland," *Irish Political Studies* 17, no. 1 (2002): 4–28.

⁶⁰ O'Shiel, *Handbook on the Ulster Question*, 46; O'Hegarty, *Ulster: A Brief Statement of Fact*, 18–9; Kevin Matthews, *A Fatal Influence: The Impact of Ireland on British Politics, 1920–1925* (Dublin, 2004), 208; Cahir Healy [?] used the 1926 census figures for religious affiliation to calculate numbers of Unionists and Nationalists in "Appeal of the Northern Irish Nationalists to the League of Nations," ca.1932, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, D2991/E/33/1.

⁶¹ J. H. Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford, 1990), 72–76, citing Lijphart's calculations based on the index of religious voting. Whyte adds that the "uniquely high" Northern Irish figure of 81 percent actually rose to 84 percent in the 1980s, as it declined elsewhere.

⁶² Rose, *Governing without Consensus*, chap. 10.

⁶³ F. W. Boal, "Territoriality on the Shankill-Falls Divide, Belfast," *Irish Geography* 4, no. 1 (1969): 30–50.

members of “the other side,” a process anthropologists have labeled “telling”⁶⁴ But something puzzles her: although the books speak of separation between Protestant and Catholic, the hostility seems to have little to do with religion per se.⁶⁵

To discover what is really at stake in the argument over ethnicity, it pays to examine the contexts in which that term has been employed. Geographers such as Boal first applied it in their analyses of segregation and communal rioting in Belfast; they were followed by urban historians like Tony Hepburn, and the sociologists Frank Burton, Sarah Nelson, and Desmond Bell, who studied working-class republican and loyalist communities.⁶⁶ A new preoccupation with “community relations” then provided an antidote to the standard nationalist view that Ulster unionism was a superficial product of elite manipulation. Denis P. Barritt and Charles F. Carter’s classic, *The Northern Ireland Problem* (1962), was the first book to anatomize the “stable but deeply divided social structure” in the region and to highlight the social practices of boundary maintenance.⁶⁷ Simultaneously, historians impatient with Marxist models of class struggle welcomed the new terminology as a way of liberating themselves from materialist explanations of partition.⁶⁸ These trends were endorsed in John Whyte’s widely admired survey *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (1991). In retrospect, it seems curious that Whyte did not rank ethnic conflict among his list of interpretative paradigms; neither “ethnic” nor “ethnicity”

⁶⁴ Frank Burton, *The Politics of Legitimacy in a Belfast Community* (London, 1978), chap. 2.

⁶⁵ This issue was the subject of much debate between the 1960s and 1980s: see Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland*, chap. 2 and 103–11; Brian Lambkin, “The Historiography of the Conflict in Northern Ireland and the Reception of Andrew Boyd’s *Holy War in Belfast* (1969),” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 114C (2014): 327–58, esp. 341–43.

⁶⁶ Burton, *Politics of Legitimacy*; Sarah Nelson, *Ulster’s Uncertain Defenders: Protestant Paramilitary and Community Groups and the Northern Ireland Conflict* (Belfast, 1984); Desmond Bell, *Acts of Union: Youth Culture and Sectarianism in Northern Ireland* (Basingstoke, 1990).

⁶⁷ Denis P. Barritt and Charles F. Carter, *The Northern Ireland Problem* (London, 1962), 152–53. The historiographical context is described in Brian Lambkin, “The Pre-1969 Historiography of the Northern Ireland Conflict: A Reappraisal,” *Irish Historical Studies* 39, no. 156 (2015): 659–81.

⁶⁸ Steve Bruce, *The Edge of the Union* (Oxford, 1994), chap. 5, argued that the depth of ethnic competition had been obscured by Marxists, nationalists and liberals. For earlier statements, see Roy Wallis, Steve Bruce, and David Taylor, “No Surrender!” *Paisleyism and the Politics of Ethnic Identity in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1986); Steve Bruce, *God Save Ulster: The Religion and Politics of Paisleyism* (Oxford, 1986), chap. 9.

feature in his index.⁶⁹ He did, however, examine Frank Wright's *Northern Ireland: A Comparative Analysis* (1987), which he associated with the "ethnic conflict-zone" model, and he speculated that the most appropriate comparisons for Northern Ireland were other deeply divided societies such as Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Israel-Palestine, Nigeria, and Cyprus.⁷⁰ Finally, the language of ethnicity appealed to those, like our Ruritanian student, who felt the need for a more flexible concept than sectarianism.⁷¹ By 1989, influential commentators were pointing out that although religion was the shibboleth of the contenders, "the *substance* of their disagreement concerns ethnic identity and national allegiance."⁷²

The Scottish sociologist Steve Bruce was the first specialist to take the notion of ethnic conflict as an interpretive framework for Northern Ireland, in several books that vividly analyzed the political worldview of evangelicals and loyalist paramilitaries and sometimes came disconcertingly close to endorsing it. Bruce derived the concept of ethnic competition from Max Weber's classic account. It had the advantage, he thought, of underlining the modernity of the conflict, unlike vague references to "tribalism" or "irrationality."⁷³ Others likewise took up the ethnic model as a means of positioning the Troubles as something "intimately linked to modernisation and the expansion of the modern state" rather than a throwback to the European wars of religion.⁷⁴ In his studies of Ian Paisley and evangelicalism, Bruce also required a resolution to the tired dispute over the two nations theory. During the 1970s and 1980s, historians of Unionism, such as Peter Gibbon, James Loughlin, and D. W.

⁶⁹ An earlier survey by John Darby spoke of "Economic Theories," "Racial/Ethnic Theories," "Caste Theories," and "Psychiatric Theories": John Darby, *Conflict in Northern Ireland: The Development of a Polarised Community* (Dublin, 1976), 165–77.

⁷⁰ Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland*, 178–79, 201; John Whyte, "Ethnic Frontiers," *Irish Review*, no. 5 (1988): 107–9.

⁷¹ Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast*, 3; A. C. Hepburn, *A Past Apart: Studies in the History of Catholic Belfast, 1850–1950* (Belfast, 1996), 22–30.

⁷² John Bowman, *De Valera and the Ulster Question, 1917–1973* (Oxford, 1989), 19. That religion nevertheless shapes political differences is convincingly demonstrated by Claire Mitchell in *Religion, Identity and Politics in Northern Ireland: Boundaries of Belonging and Belief* (Aldershot, 2006).

⁷³ Bruce, *God Save Ulster*, 250, 258n14; Wallis, Bruce, and Taylor, "No Surrender!," 3.

⁷⁴ Niall Ó Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites: Derry and the Birth of the Irish Troubles* (Cork, 1997), 7.

Miller, had spent much time debating whether the distinctive Ulster political identity that emerged between 1900 and 1920 qualified as a “national” identity or even a form of nationalism.⁷⁵ Bruce conveniently sidestepped this ideological wrangle by classifying Ulster Protestants as an ethnic group: “They see themselves as the outcome of shared historical experiences and as the embodiment of a culture of a distinctive kind, with its shared traditions, values, beliefs, life-style, and symbols.”⁷⁶ Like Prince, in his early research, Bruce contrasted this kind of communal conflict with class struggle. He accepted that economic inequalities constituted one element in the Northern Ireland problem but felt they were insufficient to account for the depth and persistence of hostility. Protestant militancy, in his view, was fueled by reasonable fears that the British political elite was prepared to override “Protestant self-determination” in its efforts to find an accommodation with the Dublin government.⁷⁷

Neither Edward Shils nor Clifford Geertz played any discernible role in these converging strands of inquiry. Most commentators on Irish conflicts plucked concepts from neighboring fields without serious deliberation. Boal frankly admitted that he lifted the terms “ethnic enclosure” and “territoriality” from American geographers without scrutinizing them.⁷⁸ Sybil Baker, author of an influential analysis of riots in Victorian Belfast published in 1973, viewed the lethal street violence and population displacement of 1843, 1857, 1864, 1872, and 1886 as manifestations of a struggle between ethnic groups for territorial dominance, fueled partly by competition for jobs and housing and partly by the political tensions surrounding the campaigns for Repeal and Home Rule.⁷⁹ Burton, who spent eight months in Ardoyne in 1972–

⁷⁵ For a judicious summary, see Alvin Jackson, *The Ulster Party: Irish Unionists in the House of Commons, 1884–1911* (Oxford, 1989), 4–17.

⁷⁶ Bruce, *God Save Ulster*, 258; see also Bell, *Acts of Union*, 19–20.

⁷⁷ Bruce, *God Save Ulster*, 252–54.

⁷⁸ F. W. Boal, “Territoriality on the Shankill-Falls Divide: Being Wise after the Event?,” *Irish Geography* 41, no. 3 (2008): 329–35, at 330, 332–34.

⁷⁹ Sybil E. Baker, “Orange and Green: Belfast, 1832–1912,” in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, ed. H. J. Dyos and M. Wolff, 2 vols. (London, 1973), 2:789–814, 909. Catherine Hirst’s *Religion, Politics and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Belfast: The Pound and Sandy Row* (Dublin, 2002) refers to less serious disturbances in 1813, 1815, 1822, 1824, 1825, 1830, 1832, 1833, 1835, 1837, 1838, 1841, 1842, 1846, 1847, 1848, and 1849; she records riots on eighteen separate occasions between 1851 and 1886, at 156.

73, drew his inspiration from the Chicago school of urban sociology, and in particular Gerald Suttles's *The Social Order of the Slum* (1968). Hepburn, likewise, cited in his early work the models of ethnic assimilation developed by the Chicago school.⁸⁰ There were other tendencies working in favor of ethnicity. Bell's analysis of Tartan gangs and loyalist marching bands in Derry was indebted to the Birmingham school of cultural studies. The broader turn to anthropology by Marxist historians during the 1980s, and the consequent shift of focus away from industrialization and class toward culture, symbols, and rituals, were powerful factors in facilitating the rise of this new vocabulary.⁸¹

Of all the books mentioned in this section, Frank Wright's *Northern Ireland: A Comparative Analysis* (1987) contributed most directly to the landmark syntheses published in the 1990s by McGarry and O'Leary and Ruane and Todd. Much of the intellectual excitement and empirical depth of Wright's work came from highly developed comparisons, ranging across the long nineteenth century, between Ulster and two other national borderlands, Prussian Poland, and Austrian Bohemia. These three regions exhibited demographic and socioeconomic commonalities absent in the two other cases he investigated, the US South and French Algeria, and also in Cyprus and Lebanon, which he considered briefly in the book's final chapter. Theoretically, Wright's "ethnic frontier" thesis drew upon an eclectic mixture of the French anthropologist René Girard, the political theorist Hannah Arendt, and Gellner's work on nationalism, although his interest in Algeria also led him to the classic works on European colonialism by Albert Memmi and Franz Fanon. The book's most memorable conceptual tools were nevertheless of his own construction: the "defiance action," the "troublemaker veto," and "representative violence." Another central preoccupation was what Wright called "territorialism" or "expulsionism." Like other writers of longitudinal histories, he saw

⁸⁰ A. C. Hepburn, "Work, Class, and Religion in Belfast, 1871–1911," *Irish Economic and Social History* 10, no. 1 (1983): 33–50, at 35.

⁸¹ Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown, CT, 1997), esp. chaps. 7 and 10.

continuities between the communal disturbances of 1969 and the nineteenth-century faction fighting endemic in both rural and urban areas, which repeatedly involved “wrecking” (destruction of looms, homes, and other property) and the forced eviction of minorities from residential areas and from farms, factories, and shipyards.⁸² Wright seems to have believed that these terms were more or less self-explanatory. However, he specifically rejected the primordialist views of Robert Ardrey, for whom territorial behavior was rooted in animal instinct.⁸³

Wright’s books located the source of the Troubles in the failure of British state-building initiatives to defuse the settler-native antagonism created by the Ulster plantation. During the seventeenth century, the interests of the metropolitan state, the planter elite, and the settler population had been closely aligned. But the destruction of the Catholic landed class during the Williamite wars, the stabilization of Protestant Ascendancy in the era of the penal code, and the growing concern of the political class with economic improvement permitted a divergence of priorities. Any loosening of the alliance on the part of the metropolitan or local elites was likely to provoke a backlash effect or “defiance action” further down the chain. The paradigm was established when penal restrictions affecting Catholic leaseholders were repealed during the reorganization of the British state necessitated by the American Revolution. Attacks by Protestant vigilantes in County Armagh, determined to preserve their traditional monopoly over the right to bear arms, initiated a spiral of violence in which an increasingly anxious gentry reluctantly incorporated the more respectable elements among the vigilante gangs into local citizen militias in an attempt to restore order. Later state-building projects included the creation of a national school system, which sharpened hostility between the

⁸² Wright, *Northern Ireland*, 9, 10, 13, 18, 29, 35. The last term was used more generally in Wright’s *Two Lands on One Soil: Ulster Politics before Home Rule* (Dublin, 1996), esp. chaps. 1, 2, and 9.

⁸³ Wright, *Northern Ireland*, 115–18. Wright was writing before Sack’s definition of territoriality as “a primary geographical expression of social power” became widely known: Robert D. Sack, *Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History* (Cambridge, 1986), 5.

churches, and the centralization and bureaucratization of policing and the judiciary under the Union. Once again, metropolitan efforts to broaden the base of its support provoked Protestant unrest, and the authorities were compelled to reaffirm the contract that originally bound them to the settler population. As the mechanism of the defiance action suggests, Wright's explanation for conflict in Ulster depended on a pattern of domination and resistance derived from colonial settlement. Central to his account was the Orange Order, the fraternity that for two centuries enabled plebeian loyalists to tie the hands of local elites.

By the end of the 1980s, then, the appeal of "ethnicity" was linked to an emerging consensus that internal divisions within Northern Ireland were not simply the product of the British state or capitalism; nor could they be defined straightforwardly in terms of religious beliefs. Ethnic conflict was a descriptive rather than causal concept, although the dividing line was rarely clear-cut. If there was a dominant view, it was that religious affiliation, political allegiances, national identities, and "the distinction between native and settler stock" overlapped and tended to reinforce one another.⁸⁴ The appeal of ethnicity was also based on a greater appreciation of the tenacity of the patterns of social segregation in Ulster and the importance of the institutions—marriage, the family, the congregation, and the parish, and fraternal organizations such as the Orange Order—that reproduced them. Models of settler colonialism underpinned much of this work. Colonialism was pivotal in Wright's books; it was a vital part of the backstory for Bruce and Hepburn; it was an organizing principle of Conor Cruise O'Brien's classic *States of Ireland* (1972); it was the unacknowledged basis of D. W. Miller's influential theory of rebellious loyalism.⁸⁵ The settler dimensions of Ulster conflict were usually downplayed, however, because colonialism was not yet a theoretical subfield

⁸⁴ Arend Lijphart, "The Northern Ireland Problem; Cases, Theories, and Solutions," *British Journal of Political Science* 5, no. 1 (1975): 83–106, at 88.

⁸⁵ See D. W. Miller, *Queen's Rebels: Ulster Loyalism in Historical Perspective* (Dublin, 1978), 91 (MacKnight quotation); for Conor Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland* (London, 1972), 12, chaps. 2 and 4, and Stephen Howe, "The Cruiser and the Colonist: Conor Cruise O'Brien's Writings on Colonialism," *Irish Political Studies* 28, no. 4 (2013): 487–514, esp. at 496–98, 500–509.

detached from imperialism, and theories of imperialism had become discredited because of their dependence on crude varieties of Marxism and nationalism.⁸⁶

Do these studies nevertheless assume that there is something elemental about ethnic sentiment, or something inherently resistant to moderation? None of the works considered in this section emphasize such notions. Ruane and Todd specifically reject the view that ethnicity involves a deep form of emotional attachment that has “psychological roots in kinship bonds.”⁸⁷ In their view, ethnicity, religion, national allegiance, and settler/native ideologies are mutually reinforcing, but they are not autonomous forces: “Difference became conflictual and lasting because it was the basis of access to resources and power.”⁸⁸ To speak of national or ethnic antagonism, accordingly, is not to assume the existence of “pre-political” groups, as Bourke has asserted.⁸⁹ It is impossible to imagine humans outside politics just as it is impossible to imagine them outside social organization or cultural systems; there are no “pre-cultural” or “pre-social” groups either.⁹⁰ The force of the ethnic framework depends on rather more mundane assumptions. The most obvious is that our political calculations are shaped by preexisting features of our social and cultural environment.⁹¹ While political actors exploit the resources available to them—including narratives, myths of origins and sacrifice, symbols and rituals—they do not get to decide *which* resources are available for exploitation. Moreover,

⁸⁶ See also Stephen Howe, “Northern Ireland and Settler Colonialism to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998,” in *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism*, ed. Edward Cavanagh and Lorenzo Veracini (Abingdon, 2017), 83–94.

⁸⁷ Ruane and Todd, “Roots of Intense Ethnic Conflict,” 210.

⁸⁸ Ruane and Todd, *Dynamics of Conflict*, 12.

⁸⁹ Cf. Bourke, “Languages of Conflict,” 566, 567n100, 569.

⁹⁰ Even Hobbes was unable to imagine a state of nature without social formations: see S. J. Hoekstra, “The Savage, the Citizen, and the Foole: The Compulsion for Civil Society in the Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes” (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford, 1998), 17–33. We think of Hobbes’s philosophy as based on a radical individualism, but he assumed that the state of nature was populated by kinship groups and confederacies. For actual as opposed to hypothetical stateless peoples, see Allen W. Johnson and Timothy Earle, *The Evolution of Human Societies: From Foraging Group to Agrarian State*, 2nd ed. (Stanford, 2000).

⁹¹ One recent tendency in political science has been to redescribe “groups” and “identities” in the mechanistic language of rational-choice theorists (“entrepreneurs,” “coalitions,” and “coordination games”) drawing particularly on Thomas Schelling’s notion of focal points. See Laitin, *Nations, States, and Violence*, 35–36; Ashutosh Varshney, “Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Rationality,” *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 1 (2003): 85–99, at 88.

anyone who seeks to manipulate communal myths and slogans effectively will be constrained by the need to act consistently. And the more closely they identify themselves with the beliefs and activities of an ethnic community, the harder it will become to work out who is manipulating whom.⁹²

III

When, in 1921, Ulster Unionists claimed the maximum geographical area over which they could exercise effective control, they locked themselves into a political system in which the preservation of Protestant electoral majorities became the overriding imperative.⁹³ The new political entity of Northern Ireland was created to defend the Protestant community from its nationalist enemies; it continued to embody the Protestant ethos in its symbols, rituals, and public discourse. As Niall Ó Dochartaigh has pointed out, the attitude of Catholics to a state apparatus founded explicitly to protect Protestants from “Rome rule” was always bound to be regarded with suspicion.⁹⁴ Differences between the two communities were deeply entrenched. Protestantism was already intertwined with economic privilege. There was a long-established relationship between religious background and occupational status: although the majority of Belfast male workers of all denominations were semiskilled or unskilled, Catholics were severely underrepresented in the better-paid industries (shipbuilding, engineering, construction).⁹⁵ A close correspondence had existed between religious affiliation and party allegiance for many decades.

Among historically minded scholars, Ó Dochartaigh has done most to explore the structural causes of conflict in the North. One of his abiding concerns has been with the

⁹² For various objections to pure instrumentalism, see Jon Elster, *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 1989), 118; Abner Cohen, “The Lesson of Ethnicity,” in *Urban Ethnicity* (London, 1974), xiii; Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism*, 43, 45; Smith, *National Identity*, 24–25.

⁹³ Brendan O’Leary, *A Treatise on Northern Ireland*, vol. 2, *Control* (Oxford, 2019), chaps. 1 and 2, esp. 43–48.

⁹⁴ Ó Dochartaigh, *Civil Rights to Armalites*, 8–9.

⁹⁵ Hepburn, “Work, Class, and Religion,” 38–50.

“mismatch” between the Unionist state and “local spaces dominated by Catholic and nationalist majorities.”⁹⁶ The most important was the city of Derry. These enclaves posed a threat to the legitimacy and territorial integrity of the new polity, demonstrated in 1921 when two county councils and twenty-one local authorities declared allegiance to the Free State. By the 1950s and 1960s, the divergence of some of these areas in matters of policing, parades, and flags was grudgingly tolerated. Such informal accommodations were periodically challenged by right-wing Unionists, who demanded that the Protestant character of the regime be expressed evenly across its territory. In accounting for the emergence of Civil Rights movement, Ó Dochartaigh emphasizes that the expansion of the welfare state after 1945 created a new site for agitation—the allocation of public housing—which was directly related to the apparatus of Unionist dominance in Derry and other “mismatched” constituencies where local Unionist control was dependent on the manipulation of ward boundaries. Assaults on Civil Rights protestors by the Royal Ulster Constabulary quickly radicalized Derry politics, making highly visible what had always been implicit: that over large parts of its territory, the maintenance of the Stormont regime was based on coercion. Ó Dochartaigh’s work has repeatedly stressed the inextricable connections between ethnic demography, policing, territorial integrity, and sovereignty.⁹⁷

Ethnicity, territory, housing, flags and emblems, the partisan nature of the police force: these were also vital issues in the Belfast disturbances of August 1969, widely regarded as the beginning of the Troubles. In his article “Against Ethnicity,” Prince presents these communal confrontations as an example of what happens when “visions of democracy” collide. In particular, he scrutinizes the evidence given by the loyalist militant John McKeague to the Scarman Inquiry in 1971—a suitable focal point, perhaps, for a recapitulation of the critique I have been outlining above. McKeague was a particularly unsavory character. In the summer

⁹⁶ Niall Ó Dochartaigh, “Territoriality and Order in the North of Ireland,” *Irish Political Studies* 26, no. 3 (2011): 313–28, at 319.

⁹⁷ Ó Dochartaigh, *Civil Rights to Armalites*, 292–95.

months of 1969, he was the moving spirit in the Shankill Defence Association, a Protestant vigilante group that claimed to be protecting local Protestant residents from Catholic intimidation. Night after night, he toured the interfaces of West Belfast wearing a crash helmet and carrying an antique cane. He boasted that his Shankill Defence Association had two-thousand members and an arsenal of petrol bombs, stones, ball bearings, and shotguns. Prince stresses that McKeague justified loyalist street violence by reference to “the Crown and the Constitution” and to the principle that “The majority . . . always rules.” Given that Prince had sifted more than two hundred pages of McKeague’s examination for expressions of his “principles of allegiance,” this must have seemed a disappointing haul. He nevertheless reached the verdict that John McKeague’s extremism was “nothing other than an assertion of Bourke’s democratic vanity.”⁹⁸

It was, on the contrary, several other things, not least an expression of sectarian rancor. In private hearings of the Scarman tribunal, McKeague was repeatedly quizzed about the distinct meanings he attached to the abusive terms “rebels,” “Taigs,” and “Popeheads.”⁹⁹ (He was the editor of *Loyalist News*, an ephemeral publication full of sectarian diatribe and vulgar songs celebrating violence against Catholics.) He was also a member of Paisley’s Free Presbyterian Church, and there were a few vague hints in his statements of strictly theological objections to “papishers.” (It is worth recalling that the most polarizing issue in Northern Ireland in 1968, after religious discrimination, was the ecumenical movement.)¹⁰⁰ McKeague rarely used the term “Unionist.” He tended to speak of loyalists and above all of “the Protestant people” and “the Protestant cause.” Although he tried to present his politics in secular terms, he eventually conceded that he regarded the crown and the constitution as synonymous with

⁹⁸ Prince, “Against Ethnicity,” 800.

⁹⁹ Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, London, *Public Inquiry into the Acts of Violence and Civil Disorder in Northern Ireland*, unpublished transcripts (hereafter *Scarman*), F780 (Day 159), 50; (Day 162), 1–5, 26, 48–63; (Day 163), 9–10, 27.

¹⁰⁰ Rose, *Governing without Consensus*, 263.

the Protestant religion.¹⁰¹ It was when the Scarman tribunal queried his assertion that Northern Ireland was a “Protestant state” that McKeague invoked the majority principle.¹⁰² “Keep Ulster Protestant” was a contemporary slogan popular with Paisleyites, Orangemen, and others who denounced the appeasement of the disaffected during the O’Neill years.¹⁰³ But anyone who tries to elucidate what McKeague meant by a “Protestant state” will quickly realize that the label “sectarian” is not satisfactory. This is why Barritt and Carter concluded that there was no single conflict in Northern Ireland but instead “racial, religious, political, economic, and social conflicts all rolled into one.”¹⁰⁴ As we have seen, subsequent scholars embraced the term “ethnic” both as a preferable alternative to “racial” and as an umbrella term for this multidimensional quarrel.¹⁰⁵

Prince’s account of McKeague’s mindset is unnecessarily restrictive. The district in which the Shankill Defence Association fought running battles with Catholics—around Divis Street, Percy Street, and Cupar Street—was the precise area explored in Frederick Boal’s pioneering article of 1967–68. Its distinctive character derived from a combination of high levels of residential segregation between the two religions combined with “close physical juxtaposition to each other.”¹⁰⁶ Boal was initially unaware that these streets had been the scene of rioting and evictions in 1886 and again in 1921. The overriding focus of McKeague’s extremism was “rebel infiltration.”¹⁰⁷ Primarily that meant “sorties” or “incursions” by

¹⁰¹ *Scarman*, F780 (Day 162), 62.

¹⁰² *Scarman*, F780 (Day 162), 63.

¹⁰³ *Scarman*, F780 (Day 159), 81.

¹⁰⁴ Barritt and Carter, *Northern Ireland Problem*, 3.

¹⁰⁵ In 1972, Conor Cruise O’Brien regarded “ethnic” as a synonym for “racial” and consequently rejected it as a means of categorizing the Northern Ireland divide: Conor Cruise O’Brien, “Northern Ireland: Its Past and Its Future; The Future,” *Race* 14, no. 1 (1972): 11–20, at 12.

¹⁰⁶ F. W. Boal, “Segregating and Mixing: Space and Residence in Belfast,” in *Integration and Division: Geographical Perspectives on the Northern Ireland Problem*, ed. by F. W. Boal and J. N. H. Douglas (London, 1982), 249–80, at 252–53.

¹⁰⁷ *Scarman*, F780 (Day 162), 33, 58; (Day 163), 1.

Catholic combatants into “Protestant territory,” raids that must be “vigorously repulsed.”¹⁰⁸ McKeague was obsessed with Unity Flats, the largely Catholic complex abutting the lower Shankill Road. Its inhabitants had benefited from a rehousing scheme, a right allegedly denied to “the Protestant people.” Although McKeague accepted that Catholics had long lived in that area, he complained that “these have greatly increased in numbers and they have been given this territory over to them completely.”¹⁰⁹ Following violent clashes at the beginning of August, he and his followers conducted secret negotiations with representatives of the Unity Flats residents during which he demanded that the front-facing flats be reserved for Protestants, and that no flag be flown there except the Union Jack. Unsurprisingly, the inhabitants of the complex, very soon to become an Irish Republican Army stronghold, refused.¹¹⁰

Flags featured prominently in McKeague’s testimony, which exhibited an acute political intelligence as well as an ugly egotism. He complained that the tricolor was “flaunted” in pub windows on the Ardoyne side of the Crumlin Road. “On many occasions,” moreover, “it was brought up the main road and [the Catholics] danced with it and to us it was like showing a red flag to a bull.”¹¹¹ McKeague exploited an unpleasant incident on Cupar Street, when Mrs. Elizabeth Gilmour was “burned out” of her house on 26 July, having irritated her neighbors by flying the Union Jack since the Twelfth.¹¹² He began to supervise population exchanges between Protestant and Catholic families caught on the “wrong” side of the fault line.¹¹³ (In the summer of 1969, 3,570 families were displaced, almost nine-tenths of whom were Catholic.) But McKeague’s proudest moment was the repelling of an offensive on Percy

¹⁰⁸ Rosita Sweetman, *“On Our Knees”: Ireland 1972* (London, 1972), 229, 230; Scarman Inquiry, F780 (Day 159), 48, 59, 62; (Day 162), 34, 40, 41; (Day 163), 6, 28.

¹⁰⁹ Scarman, F780 (Day 162), 63.

¹¹⁰ Scarman, F780 (Day 159), 45.

¹¹¹ Scarman, F780 (Day 159), 50.

¹¹² Scarman, F780 (Day 159), 53. A local priest suspected that the arson attack was a “put-up job,” presumably orchestrated by McKeague’s men. He also described the rising tensions over the flag, including an incident when the eighty-year-old Mrs. Gilmore struck a local man on the nose with a hammer (Scarman Inquiry, F760 (Day 59), 36, 63).

¹¹³ Scarman, F780 (Day 159), 56.

Street on 14 August. A Catholic contingent from the Falls advanced along both pavements, crouching behind massive shields constructed from sheets of corrugated iron, and lobbing missiles as they went, while a bulldozer trundled along the road between them. The Shankill crowd forced the invaders back onto the Falls Road and “the Union Jack—the flag of our country—was planted in the middle of the road.”¹¹⁴

How should historians attempt to make sense of John McKeague? Bourke stipulates that “proper” historians must concern themselves solely with the dynamics of political mobilization and the legitimizing principles associated with democratic government. In his view, democratic ideas count as causal conditions of political behavior but ethnic sentiments and the social practices that underpin them do not. If we are to reconstruct the beliefs and motivations of the Shankill Defence Association it is certainly pertinent to point out that McKeague appealed to the principle of majority rule. But a more satisfying account of his mental world would also encompass local traditions of loyalism and anti-Catholicism, not to mention the blend of sectarianism and welfarism that had previously flourished on the Shankill.¹¹⁵ A fuller understanding of the conflagration of August 1969 would require a history of the sectarian topography of West and North Belfast where Catholic enclaves had for more than a century been wedged between Protestant majorities. Carrick Hill was a notorious sectarian flashpoint in the 1880s and the site of sniping and bomb attacks in 1922, decades before the slum housing there was demolished to make way for Unity Flats.¹¹⁶ It is surely relevant to examine the deadly riots of 1843, 1857, 1864, 1872, 1886, 1920–22, and 1935, and

¹¹⁴ *Scarman*, F780 (Day 159), 62.

¹¹⁵ See Colin Reid, “Protestant Challenges to the ‘Protestant State’: Ulster Unionism and Independent Unionism in Northern Ireland, 1921–1939,” *Twentieth Century British History* 19, no. 4 (2008): 419–45.

¹¹⁶ The first Carrick Hill disturbances seem to have been in 1878 and involved struggles over the display of flags and emblems. See *Belfast Newsletter*, 29 June 1878, 20 March 1879.

the “regular systematized movements” of families between Catholic and Protestant zones first observed in 1857.¹¹⁷

Prince urges historians to disregard these backstories in favor of a zoom-lens analysis of the street-fighting of 1969. His preferred technique is to divide history into tightly compressed time capsules in which political actors engage in multiple and shifting forms of competition. This instrumentalist approach to political behavior excludes mid- or long-range contexts in favor of an intense focus on synchronic action. On this view, there are no “roots” of conflict— with one startling exception, and that concerns the evolution of democratic ideas: here Prince believes we must travel back to *Leviathan* (1651), or perhaps even “all the way back to Aristotle and Thucydides.”¹¹⁸ On this view, the outbreak of the Troubles was not structured by the legacy of colonialism, patterns of segregation, or communal myths but only by the power of concepts formulated during the English Civil War. Incidentally, Prince omits to mention that specialists in the history of political thought are themselves divided over the “democratic” reading of Hobbes. Any comprehensive history of democratic thought would devote less space to Hobbes than to his enemies—the classical republicans, parliamentarians, and Presbyterians whom he disdainfully labelled “democraticall gentlemen.”¹¹⁹

Hobbes’s bracing secularism, his subversive humor, and his sheer brilliance have made him irresistible to many historians. But how many readers will find it profitable to trace the controversies over *Leviathan* in order to illuminate one short sentence among the many hundreds that make up John McKeague’s testimony? McKeague’s behavior is better understood as a product of patterns of socialization, territorial segregation, and religious and

¹¹⁷ *Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the Origin and Character of the Riots in Belfast in July and September, 1857* (Dublin, 1858), 3.

¹¹⁸ Prince, “Against Ethnicity,” 799.

¹¹⁹ See Kinch Hoekstra, “A Lion in the House: Hobbes and Democracy,” in *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, ed. Annabel Brett, James Tully, and Holly Hamilton-Bleakley (Cambridge, 2006), 191–218, and Quentin Skinner, “Surveying the *Foundations*: A Retrospect and Reassessment,” in the same volume, 236–62, esp. 249–56. The text at issue is Hobbes’s *De Cive* (1642) rather than *Leviathan*.

social division. McKeague did not invent a new political repertoire but was adapting preexisting symbols, slogans, communal loyalties, and models of “defiance action.”¹²⁰ Future studies of the Troubles will surely continue to draw on the comparative literature on ethnic conflict, where questions of demographic balance, territory, and horizontal inequalities are coming into sharper focus.¹²¹ No doubt they will also benefit from the flourishing subfield of settler colonialism.¹²² It is to be hoped that some will attend carefully to the languages of political legitimacy, as Richard Bourke has done in *Peace in Ireland*, a book that provides a persuasive corrective to facile assumptions that conflict resolution depends on all protagonists subscribing to democratic means of pursuing their goals.¹²³ But there are no compelling reasons why such an approach should invalidate the vital insight endorsed by most influential authorities in the field: the fault-line in Northern Ireland involves an interplay of religious, social, and communal elements—each one of them, as it happens, currently entering a process of belated disintegration.

¹²⁰ Wright, *Northern Ireland*, 9.

¹²¹ Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka offers suggestive parallels with Northern Ireland since it involves a colonial element (the settlement by the Sinhala-led government of Sinhalese peasants in lands where Tamils had been in a majority), territorial concentration, and the problems that arise when one ethnic group polices another: Laitin, *Nations, States, and Violence*, 20–21.

¹²² See *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century: Projects, Practices, Legacies*, ed. Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen (London, 2005); Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke, 2010).

¹²³ Colin Reid argues that the contest over home rule was *both* a dispute about democratic principles *and* an ethnic or sectarian conflict: “Democracy, Sovereignty and Unionist Political Thought during the Revolutionary Period in Ireland, c. 1912–1922,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 27 (2017): 211–32.