

Interpretations of the Northern Ireland Problem: an Appraisal

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Studies of the Northern Ireland problem have been accumulating at a prodigious rate. To some extent, the growth of interest in the province ante-dated the current troubles, and was a product of the spread of social sciences to Ireland in the nineteen-sixties. The fieldwork for the four most substantial academic studies to be discussed here (Barritt and Carter 1962, Rose 1971, Harris 1972, Budge and O'Leary 1973) was completed before the conflict erupted in 1968. But the conflict has enormously accelerated the process. One recent bibliography (Darby 1976) lists seven hundred items, and it takes no account of work published since the middle of 1975. Since that time the stream of publication has poured remorselessly on.

The most useful contribution to be made at this point, then, seems to lie not in adding to the innumerable theories in the field, but rather in assessing those theories already proposed. This paper is an attempt to fulfil that purpose. It will not be a synthesis: the divergence between theories is still too great for a synthesis to be practicable. On the other hand, it will be more than a mere inventory, in which all theories are listed as if of equal merit: for even if one cannot make a final choice between current interpretations, some are clearly more satisfactory than others. Rather, it will be an appraisal, in which the more promising interpretations are distinguished from the less adequate ones, and in which an indication is given of the work still to be done if a synthesis is to emerge in the future.

For convenience of arrangement, the interpretations will be considered under two headings: first, theories of Marxist provenance, and then, the much more heterogeneous collection of theories whose inspiration comes from other than Marxist sources.

I MARXIST INTERPRETATIONS

I.1 THE TRADITIONAL MARXIST VIEW

What might be called the traditional Marxist interpretation is heavily represented in the literature. Its origins can be traced back, before partition, to the writings of James Connolly. It was kept alive through succeeding decades by a trickle of writers of whom Jackson (1946) was perhaps the most polemical, and Strauss (1951) the most scholarly. In the late 'sixties, aided by the New Left ideology then sweeping the universities of the west, it enjoyed a vogue, being put forward by writers such as Farrell (1969), Devlin (1969), de Paor (1970), Edwards (1970), Greaves, (1972), and the *Sunday Times* Insight Team (1972). Some of its exponents have changed their views: de Paor and Edwards, for instance, have shown by their more recent journalistic writings that they no longer stand over everything they wrote in 1970. But examples of this school of thought continue to appear: for instance Boulton (1973), McCann (1974), Parker and Driver (1975), Bell (1976), and — most substantial of all — Farrell (1976).

To synthesise the views of so large a number of writers without doing injustice to any of them is not easy. But at the risk of ignoring differences which some of the authors will consider important, one can summarise their viewpoint as follows. The main point on which they agree is that the capitalist class, both British and local, has artificially fomented the conflict in Northern Ireland. The natural division in Northern Ireland, as in other capitalist societies, is between proletariat and bourgeoisie. But the bourgeoisie has craftily obscured this division, and instead has split the workers on sectarian lines. Protestant workers are allied with their bosses against Catholic workers, instead of allying with their Catholic fellow-workers against the bosses.

The question then arises: by what techniques has the bourgeoisie divided the working class? Here different authors vary in their emphasis, but two main techniques are stressed in the literature. The first is the beating of the sectarian drum. Whenever Catholic and Protestant workers have shown signs of uniting, employers (who are mostly Protestant) have riposted by stirring up Protestant fears of a Roman Catholic takeover. The second technique is differential discrimination. Though Protestant workers have been exploited by their bosses, they have been given a narrow but visible margin

over their Catholic workmates. Anxiety to maintain this privileged position has led them to ally with their bosses rather than with their fellow-workers. Some writers who stress this point would accept that the interests of many employers are changing, and that they are now embarrassed by the apparatus of discrimination (McCann 1974, Parker and Driver 1975, Farrell 1976). But they argue that it is too late: the system they built up has acquired a life of its own, and can no longer be easily dismantled.

Evidence exists to show that both these techniques have been employed. The sectarian-drum-beating policy, for instance, is well documented by McCann (1974). He cites examples from the eighteen-eighties, the first decade of the twentieth century, the period just after the First World War, and the nineteen-thirties. His picture is supported by writers who do not share all his ideological assumptions: Boyd (1969) and Budge and O'Leary (1973) provide further examples of the exploitation of sectarian fears in Belfast through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The objection to putting too much weight on this argument, however, is that Protestant fears have some objective basis. However much some Protestant leaders may have exaggerated the dangers, the fact remains that Nationalists *did* want a United Ireland, and that in a United Ireland the Catholic Church *would* be extremely powerful. Dispassionate studies are now available of the role of the Catholic Church, and the position of the Protestant minority, in the South since independence (Akenson 1975, Whyte 1971, White 1975). While these studies disprove the more extreme criticisms, they do not show that northern Protestants are without ground for concern.

Some Marxist writers accept this. In particular Edwards (1970), de Paor (1970), and McCann (1974) have been quite critical of the role of the Catholic Church in the Republic, and concede that northern Protestants have grounds for opposing union with such a state. But the danger in this admission is that it removes part of the ground for their original contention — that the division of the working class is something artificially stirred up by the bourgeoisie. For this reason, perhaps, other Marxist writers — notably Farrell (1976) — have preferred to stress the second technique, of differential discrimination, as decisive in keeping the working class divided.

The question of discrimination, then, emerges as fundamental in appraising the traditional Marxist view. It has aroused much heat in the past; but fortunately it has also called forth an increasing amount of research, and, while it would still be impossible to reach consensus on its significance, some objective points can now be made.

The existence of discrimination, especially in the period from 1921 to 1968, cannot seriously be questioned. The evidence has been surveyed by a government commission (Cameron 1969), and is dispassionately summarised

by Darby (1976, pp. 50–79). Electoral boundaries in parts of the province were gerrymandered, some local authorities discriminated in the allocation of houses and jobs, the police and particularly the Special Constabulary acted sometimes in a partisan manner. Discrimination also existed in the field of private employment. The pioneer investigators in this field produced some fairly startling examples (Barritt and Carter 1962, pp. 100–105).

The real question for examination is not whether discrimination has occurred, but how much. After all, even if one takes every complaint at its face value, only a minority of local authorities were gerrymandered, or accused of unfair practices. Not every policeman, or court, or private firm is accused of partisanship. The first dispassionate attempt to quantify the extent of discrimination was made by Rose (1971), relying on survey data collected in 1968. Rose found that, whatever may have been true in particular areas, there was no great aggregate discrimination against Catholics in the provision of either public housing or public employment (Rose 1971, pp. 294, 297). True, 74 per cent of his Catholic respondents believed that Catholics were treated unfairly in parts of Northern Ireland (*ibid.*, p. 272), but 81 per cent expected to be treated fairly in dealings with people from their local council (*ibid.*, p. 499). Only about ten per cent of Catholics mentioned religious discrimination as an obstacle to their getting a job (calculated from information given in *ibid.*, p. 299).

Since Rose wrote, more research has been done, and it is clear that the picture he painted must be revised. The 1971 census has been important here, for it was the first since 1911 to cross-tabulate by religion and occupation. Boyle (1977), using a large sample ($N = 12,669$) provided by the Census Office, has calculated that, when every other variable is allowed for, 'being a Catholic will, in itself, tend to be a disadvantage, the disadvantage increasing cumulatively throughout the individual's occupational career' (Boyle 1977, p. 99). Auger (1975), in a careful study of the census data, has discovered a striking pattern of cumulative disadvantage. Catholics are much more likely than Protestants to be unemployed. Among the employed, they are more likely than Protestants to be manual workers. Among non-manual workers, they are clustered disproportionately in the lower status occupations. Among manual workers, they are more likely to be unskilled. Holding skill constant, they are more likely to be found in lower-status industries, such as construction, than in higher-status ones, such as engineering. Auger's work has since been repeated and amplified in an official publication (Fair Employment Agency 1978). Meanwhile other scholars have been conducting ecological studies of Belfast (Boal, Doherty and Pringle 1974, Project Team 1977). They have shown that while on some indicators, such as housing, Protestants are practically as badly off as Catholics of the

same social class, on other indicators, such as unemployment and level of family income, Catholics fall well below the Protestant level.

However, though we are much better informed now than a few years ago about how seriously Catholics are deprived, it does not follow that this degree of deprivation is due to discrimination. Other explanations are possible. Catholic values may put less stress on worldly success — though a recent study (R. Miller 1978), based on an attitude survey of over two thousand males, throws doubt on this hypothesis. The fact that more Catholics come from large families may make it harder for them to defer earning while they acquire qualifications. More important may be the persisting effects of past disadvantages.

In assessing Marxist claims on discrimination, it has to be remembered just what is being asserted. A representative quotation can be found in Farrell (1976, p. 81). Writing about the early days of Northern Ireland, he says:

The Unionist leaders were not free agents: they had mobilised the Protestant masses to resist Home Rule and inclusion in the Free State, through the policy of discrimination and the ideology of Protestant supremacy. Now their followers were seeking their reward. If a lasting loyalty to the new state was to develop among the Protestant masses, they had to be given a privileged position within it.

Now this is a large claim. It is, not just that discrimination strengthened the intensity of Protestant workers' feelings, but that it altered its direction. The implication is that without discrimination, Protestant workers would have accepted Home Rule and inclusion in the Free State. To say this is to brush aside all the other reasons for Protestant attitudes — their religious fears, their feelings of identity with Britain, their feeling that the prosperity of the industries in which so many of them worked depended on retaining the British link — and to assume that, without discrimination, these would have had no weight. The amount of discrimination proved, or even alleged, is not sufficient to produce so prodigious a result.

The traditional Marxist analysis, in short, does not make sense in its own terms. The economic factors which its adherents have revealed are not adequate to bear the weight of causation that they put upon them. Their analysis holds water only if an additional element is brought in. This is Irish Nationalist sentiment — the idea that Ireland is an ancient nation which ought to be united, and that a great wrong has been done by those who keep her divided. This sentiment has great force for those who have been socialised to accept it. But it has nothing to do with Marxism. It has different roots, and is more appropriately considered in the second part of this paper, along with other non-Marxist interpretations. Those who adopt the traditional Marxist analysis in Ireland are Green before they are Red.

1.2 THE TWO-NATIONS THEORY

Considerations such as these have led one Marxist splinter group, the British and Irish Communist Organisation, to take a different line. The evolution of this group is interesting. In 1969 (then known as the Irish Communist Organisation) it substantially accepted the traditional Marxist position. But then, in a series of pamphlets issued between 1969 and 1972 it moved further and further away from this position until it adopted one almost diametrically opposed.

BICO now holds that differential economic development has produced two nations in Ireland: the Protestants of the north-east, and the Catholics of the rest of the island. In these circumstances, to claim that the Protestant bourgeoisie is dividing the working class is the reverse of the truth. It is the Catholic nationalists of the south who play this role, by stirring up the Catholic minority in the north against acceptance of the state in which they live, thus preventing the development of working-class unity in Northern Ireland (BICO 1971, p. 7).

The British and Irish Communist Organisation has done some careful research. Its historical pamphlets (BICO 1972a, 1972b, 1973, 1974a, 1974b) show that the separate identity of the northern Protestant community is too deeply-rooted to be explained away as the result of manipulation by a cunning bourgeoisie.

However, their position is not without its own weaknesses. First, it raises the question: how do you define the separate nation in the north-east of Ireland? Is it British, or a distinct Ulster nation? To do the BICO writers justice, they do not fudge this issue: they firmly proclaim that the Unionists are British, and indeed one of their pamphlets is entitled *Against Ulster Nationalism* (BICO 1975a). But the evidence is not so clear-cut as they suggest. Rose (1971, p. 208) collected survey data on this point. He found that of his Protestant respondents 39 per cent described themselves as British, 32 per cent as Ulster, 20 per cent as Irish, and 6 per cent as sometimes British, sometimes Irish. That does not sound like a group with a clear-cut national identity.

A second objection to the BICO publications is that they pay no attention to the seamy side of Unionism. If traditional Marxists exaggerate this, BICO writers seem reluctant to admit that it has any existence at all. In their more recent publications, complaints against the Stormont regime are simply ignored (BICO 1975b, p. 50). The Civil Rights movement is treated as a Republican tactic (BICO 1975a, p. 48), and the loyalist strikers of 1974 are depicted as making a 'reasonable and moderate' demand (ibid., p. 71). If the Unionists were really so pure as the BICO writers imply, it is hard to understand how they could have aroused such bitterness.

Perhaps the deepest objection to the BICO thesis is that it treats its two nations as equals. It makes no allowance for the possibility that there may be degrees of nationhood. Yet in practice there is no simple distinction between nations and not-nations. Communities are ranged on a scale, from those which show every conceivable characteristic of a nation, through those which show some, to those which show none. On such a scale, the two Irish nations are not at the same point. The mainstream, predominantly Catholic, Irish nation ranks high. It has a long history, a past of heroic struggle against odds, a line of poets and historians who have articulated its self-awareness. It even has a national language, though few of its adherents now speak it. On the same scale, the Protestant or Unionist nation ranks much lower. It is much more recent, it has not thrown up a line of poets and ideologues, its history (when every allowance is made for Nationalist exaggeration) has too often been disfigured by oppression and discrimination. It is not even agreed on how far it is a distinct community, and how far part of the wider British nation. Yet the BICO theorists treat these two very different communities as if they were moral equivalents. It is this which deters many who acknowledge the over-simplifications of the traditional Marxist school from going to the other extreme, and joining the BICO camp.

1.3 ALTERNATIVE MARXIST VIEWPOINTS

Those who favour a Marxist analysis, however, are not obliged to choose between the rival infelicities of main-line Marxism on the one hand, and the two-nations theory on the other. Over the last few years there have been signs of the emergence of alternative Marxist interpretations which seek to avoid the pitfalls of both extremes.

One such analysis is offered by Tom Nairn, in an article originally published in 1975, and reprinted in his book *The Break-up of Britain* (1977, Ch. 5). Nairn derides traditional Marxists for underestimating the differences between Ulster Protestants and other Irishmen. But he also rejects the BICO position. He is a Scottish nationalist as well as a Marxist, and he believes that the United Kingdom is disintegrating. He accordingly chides BICO for its uncritical belief in the British state. His own view is that, while Ulster Protestants are not a distinct nation in actuality, they are so potentially, and he foresees an independent Northern Ireland as the most likely outcome of the clash of nationalities.

Nairn makes some sensible criticisms of both one-nation and two-nation theorists. But his own analysis is not free from objections. The difficulties in the way of an independent Northern Ireland are even greater than he acknowledges, and in any case such an outcome seems less likely now than it did when Nairn's article was first published. But the main criticism of Nairn's

analysis may be this: that he shares too much common ground with both the one-nation and two-nation theorists whom he attacks. Like them, he pays too little attention to differences within the Unionist and Nationalist communities. It is possible that differences within the communities do as much to explain the conflict as differences between them.

This possibility is explored by the Danish socialist Anders Boserup (1972). Boserup finds it unsatisfactory to blame the trouble in Northern Ireland on either the British bourgeoisie, as the traditional Marxists do, or the southern Irish bourgeoisie, as BICO does. He prefers to stress the differences within the ruling class. In Northern Ireland he detects two kinds of capitalism: an old-established, largely locally-based capital, resting on declining industries and relying heavily on discrimination to keep its work-force loyal; and a new capital, largely international and imported since the nineteen-fifties, and without the old interest in discrimination. He argues that the real contradiction in Northern Ireland is between these two forms of capital, which is reflected in the contest between moderate and extreme unionism.

Boserup's analysis has attractive features. By stressing the importance of intra-Protestant divisions it draws attention to a point which both the traditional Marxists and the two-nations theorists underplay. For an important feature of the current crisis has been that Ulster Protestants are more deeply divided than at any time since the eighteen-eighties. This has helped to give the crisis its intractable quality: it has meant that no Protestant leader has been able to deliver the support of his community.

An earlier period of history has been studied by Peter Gibbon in his book *The Origins of Ulster Unionism* (1975). Gibbon argues, as against traditional Marxists, that Ulster Unionism was not just 'a conspiracy of landed notables and industrialists to "dupe the people"' (Gibbon 1975, p. 145). Rather it had an objective social base, resting on an alliance of social groups whose origins preceded organised Nationalism. But this does not mean that his position is identical with BICO's. His account is an explanation of Unionism; it does not carry the moral overtones of justification that BICO's does. Certainly BICO does not hail him as an ally: I have been to a meeting in Belfast called by BICO to denounce Gibbon's theories.

One feature shared by the work of Boserup and Gibbon is that they stress divisions *within* classes. Instead of operating a crude two-class model, they unravel the divergent economic interests of different groups within the working class and the bourgeoisie. The care with which they do this gives their analyses a richness that preceding Marxist interpretations did not have. They may, however, be criticised for being unduly economist — for assuming too simple a relationship between economic causes and political effects. For instance, it is by no means obvious that the political differences between dif-

ferent kinds of Unionists in recent years correspond, as Boserup assumes, to economic differences between different kinds of capital. Certainly the contenders have not stated their differences in those terms. Dr. Paisley, as the most prominent of the extreme Unionists, does not claim to be defending local capital against the multinationals. He claims to be defending the true Protestants of Ulster against their betrayers. Now it may be that 'local capital' roughly correlates with 'true Protestants'. But the point needs to be proved. Boserup assumes it.

This danger is avoided by the most recent Marxist analysis of the Northern Ireland problem. This is a history of Northern Ireland from 1921 to 1972, which Gibbon has written in conjunction with two other scholars, Paul Bew and Henry Patterson. It has not yet been published, but I have been fortunate enough to read it in draft. The authors, like Boserup and like Gibbon in his previous book, are interested in the differences between different kinds of Unionism, which they explore with sensitivity. But they do not feel obliged to equate these with differences of economic base. The authors belong to the Althusserian school of Marxism — in other words they believe in the 'relative autonomy of the superstructure'. In non-Marxist language this means that, while economics is considered to be ultimately fundamental, politics and ideology have considerable independence. Previous Marxist writers have argued about *how* economics influence politics: Bew, Gibbon and Patterson by implication argue about *how far* economics influences politics. The result is to give their work a subtlety which previous Marxist writers have not achieved.

I.4 APPRAISAL OF THE MARXIST CONTRIBUTION

Marxist study of the Ulster question appears, with gratifying appropriateness, to have developed in a dialectical manner. First came the thesis (traditional Marxism); then the antithesis (the two-nation theory); and more recently there are signs of a synthesis emerging (Nairn, Boserup, Gibbon, Bew, Patterson). In the process, the analysis of group interests has become increasingly subtle, and the explanations more convincing. To a non-Marxist like the present writer, the process has been a lesson in the strengths of the Marxist method.

Are Marxist writers correct, however, in putting so much stress on economic factors? One scholar who would say they are wrong is Richard Rose, author of *Governing without Consensus* (1971), the most massive single piece of research so far published on Northern Ireland. This book can be taken as a sustained attack on economic interpretations of the Ulster problem. The basic thesis is that the conflict is so intractable because it is *not* economic. Economic conflicts, about the share-out of material benefits, are

bargainable; conflicts about religion and nationality are non-bargainable and therefore much harder to resolve. It is Northern Ireland's misfortune that its conflicts are about religion and nationality (Rose 1971, especially pp. 300–301, 397–407).

Two other writers who take a similar line are Budge and O'Leary in their book *Belfast: Approach to Crisis* (1973). They argue that it is impossible to link the cycle of sectarian rioting in nineteenth-century Belfast to economic factors, while almost every riot can be connected with some political event. They prefer to stress non-economic factors, and particularly the rise of the Orange Order, as causes of disorder (Budge and O'Leary 1973, pp. 91–95).

This may, however, be to carry the reaction against Marxism too far. In reply to Rose, one may point out that other researchers have found a connection between economic conditions and political violence. Birrell (1972) showed that rioting was more severe in those towns which ranked highest on a number of indicators of deprivation. In Belfast, the areas of greatest social need turn out, when plotted on maps (Boal, Doherty and Pringle 1974, Project Team 1977) to coincide roughly with the areas of greatest disturbance. In reply to Budge and O'Leary, one might argue that the rise of Orangeism itself needs explanation, and if that were attempted, then economic circumstances might loom larger.

And yet — it may be that writers such as Rose, or Budge and O'Leary, have a point. It has not been proved that economics explains everything in Northern Ireland. Marxist writers assume that it does, but this is an assumption derived from their general world-view, rather than one imposed by the evidence. People who do not share their world-view may — while generally conceding that economics is very important — suspect that, when every economic motive has been explored, there remains a core of conflict, based on differences of religion or nationality, which cannot be reduced to economic terms.

Certainly many writers on Northern Ireland have thought so, for the majority of interpreters of the Northern Ireland problem are non-Marxists. To their theories we shall now turn.

II NON-MARXIST INTERPRETATIONS

II.1 THE TRADITIONAL NATIONALIST INTERPRETATION

This interpretation is as old as the Ulster problem itself. It can be traced back to the point when it became clear that the opposition of Ulster, or a part of Ulster, was going to be a major obstacle to the achievement of Home Rule. The first set-piece presentation of it after the establishment of Northern Ireland can be found in the *Handbook of the Ulster Question* (North Eastern

Boundary Bureau, 1923). The fullest statement in more recent years was made by Gallagher (1957). But these were only the most notable examples in a stream of literature which has continued until very recent times.

This interpretation can be summarised in two propositions:

(a) The people of Ireland form one nation. The Unionists of Northern Ireland do not belong to a different nation; while they have some regional peculiarities, these are no greater than are to be found within the confines of many other nations, and if foreign interference did not stir them up, they could easily adjust their differences with their fellow-Irishmen; (b) The fault for keeping Ireland divided lies with Britain. It is she who has stirred up the Unionists into making unreasonable claims. The case is summed up by Gallagher (1957, p. 88):

Britain based her partition policy on divergences she herself created and fostered among the Irish people. Other democratic nations have had similar problems to those of Ireland. These have been solved, with justice to all concerned and within the framework of the national units in question, because no powerful neighbour set out to prevent a settlement by exploiting internal differences.

The basis for this view is largely historical. Gallagher's book, for instance, is in great measure a discussion of the mischievous role played by British politicians in fomenting Irish differences during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He argues that, on the rare occasions when British politicians did not stir the pot, Irishmen of different traditions proved capable of reaching agreement. One could argue endlessly about the historical details, but it must be hard for even the most chauvinistic Briton to study the British record in Ireland without discomfort.

The weakness of the traditional Nationalist view is that it takes no account of the strength of Unionist feelings now. Even supposing that they were malevolently stirred up by Britain in the past, they now have a strength which is beyond the power of British governments to control. At three successive elections in 1974–75 the Unionist population sustained its most intransigent representatives by massive majorities. In May 1974 it destroyed a British-imposed compromise by a general strike. Violent incidents, from the Burntollet ambush of January 1969 to the latest sectarian assassination, show that some Unionists are prepared to go any lengths to maintain their position. The most recent public opinion poll (*Belfast Telegraph*, April 1976) showed that 93 per cent of Protestants found the idea of a united Ireland inadmissible, while only 4 per cent were prepared even to accept it, let alone make it their first choice.

It is not surprising, then, to find that in recent scholarly writing the traditional Nationalist view has become almost extinct. The only important author

to support it even partially has been FitzGerald (1972). FitzGerald concedes (1972, p. 91) that British interference in Irish affairs is no longer the crucial problem; but he maintains the other part of the nationalist interpretation, claiming that Ireland is still 'one nation' (ibid., p. 175) despite the existence in it of different cultures. To him, Unionist intransigence can largely be explained in religious terms: 'The Irish problem is quite simply the fruit of Northern Protestant reluctance to become part of what they regard as an authoritarian Southern Catholic state' (ibid., p. 88). He suggests various measures which might be taken in the Republic to reduce this reluctance. FitzGerald, however, wrote before events such as the Loyalist strike of 1974 or the elections of 1974-75 had shown how strong Unionist feelings could be. It is now clear that he underestimated the obstacles to reconciliation.

An elaborate critique of the traditional Nationalist view is provided by FitzGerald's colleague in the Cosgrave government of 1973-77, Conor Cruise O'Brien (1972). O'Brien and FitzGerald are sometimes linked as representatives of a common school of thought; but anyone who reads their books together will see that the differences between them are sharper than the similarities. FitzGerald still hopes for a united Ireland; O'Brien thinks that in the foreseeable future this is unrealistic. He argues that Irish Nationalists have never really believed their own dogma: by countless unguarded words and actions they have shown that they do not consider the Unionists to be one nation with themselves. Recent events have brought the contradiction into the open: 'what has been coming across to ordinary people is that our problem is *not* "how to get unity" but how to share an island in conditions of peace and reasonable fairness, and that such conditions *preclude* unity as long as the Ulster Protestants reject that' (p. 297).

To criticise the traditional Nationalist interpretation of the Irish conflict is not necessarily to reject a united-Ireland aspiration. It is possible to argue that, granted the Nationalist view fits the facts badly, and granted some other view fits them better, none the less the two Irish communities are so intertwined that the best long-term agreement would be a single bi-national Irish state rather than two separate states. But that is to put the case for a united Ireland on a different basis from the way in which it has traditionally been developed.

II.2 THE TRADITIONAL UNIONIST INTERPRETATION

Symmetry requires that a discussion of the traditional Nationalist approach should be followed by a discussion of the traditional Unionist one. This is easier said than done. Unionists have all along been less articulate than Nationalists. Their polemical literature has been scantier, both in quantity and in quality. The best statement by a native Unionist is quite old (McNeill

1922). A more recent defence of their position (Carson 1956) is much slighter in every way than Gallagher's defence of the Nationalist view which came out at about the same time. The ablest statement of their case comes from an outsider, the Dutch geographer Heslinga (1962). However, from writers such as these it is possible to identify a traditional Unionist school.

The main claim made by these writers is that in the north-east of Ireland there lives a community differing in decisive ways from the people of the rest of the island. Nationalists' claims that Ireland is one nation are therefore rejected, and their persistence in making the claim is seen as the source of the conflict. In support of their argument Unionists are able to point to important differences in religion, place of origin, economic interests, and feelings of national identity. The cumulative effect of these is impressive, and if one had to choose between two simplifications — the traditional Nationalist and the traditional Unionist — the latter might well win out.

But the Unionist case, as traditionally stated, has crucial weaknesses of its own. The biggest one is that it ignores the differences within Northern Ireland. Carson speaks (1956, p. 55) of 'Ulster's steady and oft signified determination to remain part of the United Kingdom', as if no one in 'Ulster' dissented from this view. McNeill repeatedly speaks of 'Ulster' or 'Ulstermen' when he means only Unionist Ulster or Unionist Ulstermen. One would never guess from Carson's and McNeill's books, and insufficiently appreciate even from Heslinga's, that Northern Ireland is a divided society. The main difference between the Republic and Northern Ireland is not that one is Nationalist and the other is Unionist, but that one is homogeneous and the other is mixed. Any interpretation which obscures this fact fails to explain the conflict.

This is now generally accepted. Old-style Unionism has disappeared from the literature as completely as old-style Nationalism. Even in the days of apparent peace before 1968, it was difficult to ignore the internal divisions of Northern Ireland. The endless turmoil since that date has made it impossible.

II.3 INTERNAL-CONFLICT THEORIES

Attempts to claim that the Northern Ireland problem is mainly due to outside interference, whether from Britain or from southern Ireland, are now generally abandoned by non-Marxist writers. The viewpoint they prefer is that the conflict is mainly generated within Northern Ireland. This viewpoint was surprisingly late in emerging: the first book based upon it was Barritt and Carter's *The Northern Ireland Problem* (1962). But the events of the last ten years have made it increasingly inescapable, and it is now generally accepted.

The literature treating the conflict as internally-generated has not, however, yet produced a sufficiently unified set of hypotheses to be treated as one school of thought. Rather, there has been a number of approaches, each exploring one part of the problem. None is as comprehensive as the Marxist theories reviewed in the preceding section. Each is a contribution to an explanation, rather than an attempt at a complete explanation. In the following pages, each of these approaches will be examined in turn.

(a) *The 'no-nation' theory*

One problem which any student of Northern Ireland has to face is how to describe the nationality of Protestants. As we have seen when discussing the traditional Nationalist approach, there are serious drawbacks to describing them as 'really' Irish. On the other hand, as we saw when discussing the two-nations theory, it is not easy to pick an alternative. The most promising answer to this problem has been worked out by an American historian, Professor David Miller, in a work which is as yet unpublished, but which I have had the good fortune to read in proof (D. W. Miller 1978). The label of 'no-nation' theory which I have chosen for it is my own. But it seems to sum up the thesis quite well.

Briefly, Miller argues that Ulster Protestants never fully experienced the nationalist phase of European development. They still operate on a pre-nationalist political theory. This he labels 'contractarian': its essence is that subjects owe conditional allegiance to a ruler, and are entitled to look after their own interests if their ruler fails to do so.

This is a felicitous theory. It avoids the difficulties of both the one-nation and the two-nation concepts. It helps to explain how Unionists serenely avoid the crisis of national identity which Nationalists so often predict for them. It fits in with much of the rhetoric of present-day Unionism. As a model of Unionist attitudes it is more satisfactory than claiming that Unionists are really Irish, really British, or really of Ulster nationality. It may entail taking Unionist affirmations too uncritically, without exploring whether they are a cloak for self-interest. But as a way of organising one section of the evidence, it has great merits.

(b) *The investigation of historical precedents*

This is a theme of a recent book by the well-known Ulster historian, A. T. Q. Stewart (1977). Stewart argues that what has happened in Ulster during the current crisis is shaped by deeply-etched patterns from the past. Catholics have still not got over the confiscations of the seventeenth century. Protestants still have not got over the massacres of 1641. Presbyterians still have an 'agin the government' attitude dating back to the eighteenth century

when they, as well as Catholics, were subject to penal laws. These patterns are not just general: they are inextricably linked with particular localities:

The perduring quality of local patterns of reaction almost defies a rational explanation. Why, for example, should Armagh, the most populous and prosperous of the Ulster counties, be notorious for ambush and outrage since the late eighteenth century, and why should judges in the nineteenth century find the Crossmaglen area especially notorious for murder and outrage? Why should Portadown and Lurgan have a history of sectarian rioting, like Belfast? And why should certain border villages, such as Rosslea or Garrison or Forkhill have been the scene of frequent confrontations and incidents long before there was any border? (Stewart 1977, p. 182).

To say that things happen in a particular way because they have always happened that way is not, of course, a complete explanation of the problem. One still needs to know why the pattern was reactivated at any particular time. Stewart concedes this (1977, p. 183), and does not claim to be offering a complete explanation of the Ulster conflict. What he does offer is an explanation of the form which conflict takes. He argues that in 1969:

the state had lost the capacity to safeguard life and property, and, stripped of that protection, the civil population turned instinctively to the only source of wisdom applicable to such circumstances – the inherited folk-memory of what had been done in the past, both good and bad. (Stewart 1977, p. 185.)

One might argue that Stewart overstates the inflexibility of Ulster politics. But within wide limits, his point has weight. It links up with a theme in Budge and O'Leary's study of Belfast politics (1973). They argue that quite early in the nineteenth century a Conservative hegemony was established in Belfast city politics which has endured ever since. When, in the nineteen-sixties, some of the leaders of this grouping tried to improve relations with the political minority, they failed in part through lack of precedent: they simply had no experience of how to handle such a negotiation. (Budge and O'Leary 1973, pp. 374–375). The work of Stewart and of Budge and O'Leary shows how the study of historical patterns can illuminate, if not the fundamental causes of conflict, at least its course and pattern.

(c) *The study of self-segregation*

One feature of Northern Ireland life which has intrigued a number of writers (notably Barritt and Carter 1962, and Darby 1976) is the degree of voluntary self-segregation between the two communities. Though there are variations by class and area, the two religious communities in the province, to a remarkable extent, live self-contained lives. Some aspects of this might

be ascribed to discrimination: for instance, the residential segregation in some towns may be attributed to the past policies of local councils, and differing patterns of employment may in some cases be due to refusal by employers of one colour to take on workers of another. But most of it seems to be voluntary. Not only do Catholics and Protestants go to different churches: they send their children to different schools, read different newspapers, play different sorts of games, read different history books, have different popular ballads. Protestants join the Orange Order, Catholics (less frequently) join the Ancient Order of Hibernians. Since the troubles began community groups have proliferated in Northern Ireland, but these too are largely segregated (Darby 1976, pp. 157–160).

One aspect of self-segregation has been explored with particular thoroughness by Rosemary Harris (1972). Harris is an anthropologist who studied a rural community near the border. She found that, despite a careful courtesy in everyday relations, deep mistrust and grotesque misconceptions existed on both sides of the community divide. After skilfully analysing the various mechanisms involved, she concludes that the most important factor was endogamy: the fact that Catholics and Protestants virtually never intermarry. In the community she studied, the only people with whom a person became intimate were his or her kin; all non-kin, regardless of denomination, were kept at a certain distance. Now if all one's kin belong to the same religious group as one's self, this means that the only way of becoming intimate with members of the other community is blocked off.

Harris's analysis, as she herself stresses (Harris 1972, p. vii) applies only to communities similar to the one she studied. One might guess that in urban working-class areas, the main mechanism leading to self-segregation is the physical segregation of housing, with Catholics living in one set of areas and Protestants in another, while in middle-class circles the degree of self-segregation is less. But even though the mechanism which Harris examines is only one of the instruments of self-segregation, it deserves a place in any complete interpretation of the Northern Ireland problem.

The literature on self-segregation needs much development. Analyses as careful as Harris's on endogamy need to be done on all the different mechanisms at work: the schools, the Churches, community groups, the media, and so on. In each case, one wants to know the origins of the mechanism, and the purposes it was intended to serve. For instance, we do not know whether the pattern of endogamy described by Harris has been prevalent since the plantations of the seventeenth century, or whether it is recent; and if it is recent – as some indications suggest – why it developed. Again, in the case of each mechanism, one would like to know how and why it is maintained, and what functions it now performs. Finally, one would like to know

the effects of self-segregation. One would guess that, by reducing contact, it enables prejudice to flourish and so fuels the conflict. But on the other hand, it could be argued that the communities in Ulster are not segregated enough, and that they would quarrel less if they saw less of each other.

(d) *The social-psychological approach*

If the literature on the conflict in Northern Ireland is compared with the general literature on conflict, a striking imbalance emerges. The general literature is heavily influenced by social psychology. Levine and Campbell (1972) in their inventory of theories of ethnic conflict, devote about half their space to social-psychological theories. But in the literature on Northern Ireland, this approach is largely lacking. Fields (1973, 1977) presented some empirical research: but it is on the psychological effects of the troubles rather than the psychological causes. An eminent Yale psychologist, Leonard Doob, brought members of the two communities together in a workshop where their interaction could be controlled and observed. But the experiment provoked fierce controversy (Boehringer *et al.*, 1974), and the published results add little to our knowledge (Doob and Foltz 1973, 1974; Alevy *et al.*, 1974).

Only one substantial effort to apply social psychology to the Northern Ireland conflict has so far been published: Morris Fraser's *Children in Conflict* (1973). Fraser, employing classic social-psychological theory, argues that every culture needs an out-group, especially in a period of change. The out-group's function is to act as scapegoat for the majority's frustrations. It is defined by stereotypes which are surprisingly uniform from culture to culture: fecklessness, overbreeding, and so on. Doubts about the validity of these stereotypes are stilled by imposing social distance, and discontent is explained away as the work of agitators. Meanwhile, the out-group is obeying its own laws of development. As economic conditions improve, its expectations rise, and conditions previously accepted as inevitable become intolerable. The out-group's increasing self-assertion revives the majority's hostility, and conflict ensues. Fraser believes that the development of Northern Ireland down to the end of the 'sixties fits this pattern well (Fraser 1973, especially pp. 87–104).

Fraser supports his arguments with quotations from loyalist publications such as the *Protestant Telegraph*, and from the clinical notes which he collected as a child psychiatrist in Belfast. All the same, he may have applied the theory with insufficient sensitivity to Northern Ireland conditions. Fraser assimilates Northern Ireland to racist situations elsewhere. He believes that many northern Protestants look on Catholics in the same way as white supremacists in southern Africa or the United States look on Blacks.

Other observers, who have listened to what Protestants have to say, do not report their attitudes in quite these terms. Harris (1972, p. 171) writes: 'I mixed a great deal with the poorer hill Protestants and they never gave me directly or indirectly the impression that they thought of their former neighbours as anything but their social equals'. Nelson (1975), reporting on conversations with Protestant activists in Belfast, found that most did not consider Catholics as inherently workshy, and that only a few used racist language (Nelson 1975, pp. 167–168). Leyton, an anthropologist reporting on two neighbouring rural areas, one Catholic and one Protestant, writes:

In contrast to many divided societies which deny the humanity of opposing groups or classes, the inhabitants of Aughnaboy and Blackrock regard each other as equally and fully human, only misguided and perverted by heretical doctrines and evil institutions. This recognition of the humanity of the other side — 'We're all the one blood if you go back far enough' — is apparent even in times of extreme political tension (Leyton 1974, p. 194).

None the less, Fraser has pointed to an important area for research. There does seem to be a psychological component to the Ulster problem. Outside observers have remarked on the bitterness displayed by the contending parties. Jackson (1971, p. 4) writes of 'a society suffering a deep psychosis in which rational thought and action are invariably overtaken by emotional spasms the moment it comes under stress.' Conflicts over religion, nationality and economic interests may account for the fact of division; but they hardly seem sufficient to account for its intensity.

A number of small-scale studies have been carried out in Northern Ireland, mostly unpublished, by which Fraser's view can be tested. If he is correct, one would expect to find higher levels of prejudice and rigidity among Protestants than among Catholics. Not all the findings bear this out. O'Donnell (1977), testing quota samples of Catholics and Protestants in three different locations, found that Catholics had more hostile stereotypes of Protestants than *vice versa*. Graham (1968), who tested 120 Belfast schoolchildren aged 14–15, found Catholics scoring higher than Protestants on a prejudice scale. But most of the findings are the other way. McCormack (1968), using standard psychological scales on a small sample of Belfast adolescent boys, found that Catholics were less authoritarian, and more tender-minded, than Protestants. Fairleigh (1976), using a small sample of further-education students, found that Protestants showed more social distance towards Catholics than *vice versa*. The same finding was reported by Arthur (1974), using a larger, though admittedly unsystematic, sample of children who had been away together on inter-faith holidays. The items reported by Russell and Schellenberg (1976, pp. 83–84), in a study of 569 secondary schoolboys,

show Protestants reporting somewhat more hostility towards Catholics than Catholics did towards Protestants. Jahoda and Harrison (1975, p. 17), testing a small sample of Belfast primary schoolboys, found a depressingly high level of ethnocentrism, but reported that such difference as there was showed a more charitable attitude among Catholics. Salters (1970) tested over nine hundred children in Belfast grammar and secondary schools, and found that Catholics performed better than Protestants on tests both of general tolerance and religious tolerance. Doob and Foltz found in their controversial workshop that Catholics seemed to have a somewhat better understanding of Protestants than *vice versa*. 'This', they report, 'was dramatically illustrated during a role-playing simulation when otherwise very capable Protestants taking Catholic roles performed ineptly, while Catholics playing Protestants drew cheers from real-life Protestant observers' (Doob and Foltz 1973, p. 504).

None of these studies was comprehensive enough to be conclusive. Sample size was often small, and the test instruments used in some of them are open to criticism. Furthermore, they were carried out over a period of years in a changing political climate. But when all these qualifications are made, the cumulative effect of these studies is impressive. They suggest that there is a higher degree of prejudice, social distance and authoritarianism among Protestants than among Catholics, and that this pattern goes back to the beginning of the troubles.

If true, this finding is important. For it is not what one would expect from an objective study of the situations of the two communities. On any objective assessment, Catholics have had more to complain about than Protestants (see the discussion of discrimination above). Yet it is the Protestants who feel more embittered. This can only be explained by appeal to social-psychological theory. At the very least, it suggests that the social-psychological approach is a fruitful one for development.

(e) *The search for a model*

One task which most writers on the Northern Ireland problem have undertaken, implicitly or explicitly, is to find a model whereby it may be described. The choice of such a model can be important: it places the Northern Ireland case in a group of problems, thus shaping one's whole examination of it.

The models to be found in the literature have been surveyed in a review article by Lijphart (1975). He detects no fewer than ten: the binational state; the religiously-divided society; the plural society; the biracial society; the colony; the fragment society; the arena of guerrilla warfare; the arena of class struggle; the majority dictatorship, and the besieged democracy. Of these he likes the plural-society model best, and also singles out for praise

the colony, fragment-society and majority-dictatorship models (Lijphart 1975, p. 96). Generally Lijphart's treatment is judicious, and one need not go over the ground again.

I should, however, like to draw attention to another model, which Lijphart did not mention — presumably because it did not emerge from the books which he was invited to review — but which arguably has greater merits than any of those he examined. This is the *double-minority* model. It was put forward by the English journalist Harold Jackson (1971) at an early stage of the troubles, and has since been referred to approvingly by authors of diverse views and backgrounds, such as Palley (1972, p. 372), Stewart (1977, p. 162), and Fields (1977, p. 196). As Jackson points out, Catholics are a minority in Northern Ireland, and Protestants are a minority in Ireland as a whole. The result has been bad for both. On the one side, Protestants have formed 'a ruling establishment with the reins of power irremovably in its hands but acting under the stresses of a besieged minority'. On the other side, 'fifty years of failing to get any real say in the government of the Province . . . have left the Catholics with a burning sense of grievance' (Jackson 1971, p. 4).

This model has advantages. It is simple. It takes account of both communities in Northern Ireland. It is accurate, and does not need the qualifications which some of the models discussed by Lijphart require. Above all, it helps make intelligible the psychological findings discussed above. We all know that minorities are liable to suffer stress; this model illuminates the fact that stress is found in both communities. All things considered, I find it the most satisfactory of the models so far developed.

(f) *The study of intra-ethnic tensions*

The non-Marxist approaches which we have been considering so far concentrate on the differences *between* the two communities in Northern Ireland. This is reasonable, because it is here that the overt conflict lies. Some authors, however, have preferred to look at tensions *within* the two communities. By so doing, they parallel the work done by some Marxist writers, such as Boserup, Gibbon, Bew and Patterson.

Relatively little has been done on tensions within the Catholic community. The fullest study that I know of is Carroll's (1975) work on activists in four Catholic communities. The focus of his interest lay in variations in Catholic attitudes to the regime. He has produced a very competent piece of work: but his main conclusion is, perhaps inevitably, unsurprising. It is that Catholics who felt themselves most strongly to be deprived were likely to be the most disaffected.

More, however, has been done on inter-Protestant tensions. A pioneer in the area was Boal who, in a matching pair of studies (1969, 1971) showed

that the contrasts between two Protestant areas in Belfast, one middle-class and one working-class, were in many ways as sharp as those between two working-class areas in Belfast, one Catholic and one Protestant. The implication was that, although the conflict currently appears to be between Protestant and Catholic, this need not always be so.

Some of the writers already mentioned include an analysis of inter-Protestant tensions in their work. Rose's survey data (1971) shows a deep division in the Protestant camp between 'Ultras', who would use all means necessary to maintain Northern Ireland as a Protestant state, and allegiants who would not be prepared to go outside the law. Leyton (1975, p. 11) and Harris (1972, pp. 156–165) have noted the rivalry in rural areas between different Protestant denominations. Harris (1972, pp. 187–197) laid special stress on the difficulties of the poorer Protestants, who were perhaps even more opposed to a united Ireland than their richer co-religionists, but at the same time felt deeply suspicious of their social superiors. 'The basic political problem of the poorer Protestant was that to secure his independence from the Irish Republic he had to support politically those whom he neither liked nor trusted' (*ibid.*, p. 187).

Wright (1973) explores a different line of cleavage. He examines the differences between two kinds of Protestant – those who believe it possible to achieve Catholic support, and those who believe it undesirable, impossible, or too conditional to depend on (Wright 1973, p. 221). He finds that the latter constantly fear being sold out by the former. He does not think that the difference between the two groups can be explained simply in terms of economic self-interest (*ibid.*, pp. 239–243). There is also a religious component (pp. 243–254): the more extreme Unionists have been socialised in a form of evangelical Protestantism particularly hostile to Rome.

One point which emerges from these investigations is the depth of distrust which some Protestants have for other Protestants. This may be a source for the psychological tensions among Protestants noted earlier. If so, it is an important source of conflict and worth further investigation.

III CONCLUSIONS

Let us recapitulate the different approaches to the Northern Ireland problem that we have examined. They are as follows:

I *Marxist interpretations*

1. The traditional Marxist view
2. The two-nations theory
3. Alternative Marxist viewpoints

II *Non-Marxist interpretations*

1. The traditional Nationalist view
2. The traditional Unionist view
3. Internal-conflict theories:
 - a) The 'no-nation' theory
 - b) The investigation of historical precedents
 - c) The study of self-segregation
 - d) The social-psychological approach
 - e) The search for a model
 - f) The study of intra-ethnic tensions

These approaches are not all of equal weight. The ones numbered 1 and 2 in each section seem the least satisfactory – the traditional Marxist view and the two-nations theory; the traditional Nationalist and the traditional Unionist views. They all obscure the point that the conflict is between two communities *within* Northern Ireland.

This does not mean that any of the other approaches provides the full answer. The most that any of them can provide is part of it; and there may be important elements in any complete explanation of the conflict which remain to be identified. We are still a long way from being able to synthesise all the approaches.

None the less, the outlines of a future synthesis may be beginning to appear. Harold Jackson's double-minority model may provide a useful organising principle. The study of historical precedents, and the investigation of patterns of self-segregation, may help to explain the course which the conflict has taken. For the actual causes of conflict, the analysis of group interests offered by the best Marxist writers will provide an important part of the explanation – although issues of religion and nationality will not be entirely reducible to economic bases. When dealing with problems of nationality, D. W. Miller's 'no-nation' theory may provide the best way of conceptualising Unionist attitudes. But it is the remaining two items on my list – the social-psychological approach, and the study of intra-ethnic tensions – to which I should like to draw special attention. Anyone who studies the Ulster conflict must be struck by the intensity of feeling. It seems to go beyond what is required by a rational defence of the divergent interests which undoubtedly exist. There is an irrational element here, a welling-up of deep unconscious forces, which can only be explained by an appeal to social psychology. Linked with this is the study of tensions within the two communities, and particularly the Protestant community. It is here that the reasons for the depth of feeling seem partly to lie. It is because Protestant distrusts Protestant, not just because Protestant distrusts Catholic, that the Ulster conflict is so intense.

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