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Ideology, reconciliation and nationalism in Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the conceptualization of ‘reconciliation’ within modern Northern Irish nationalist discourse. I argue that the case of Northern Irish nationalism adds a new dimension to those understandings that remain currently underappreciated within the literature. The article charts how reconciliation becomes operationalized as a restrictive politics both despite and because of it being framed in a language of pluralism, restoration and openness. While this process points towards the constitution of a political and ideological community, the concept of reconciliation also precipitates contestation and competition – not simply over memory but over a moral vision of the (violent) past. As such, I argue that reconciliation is not so much about the past but about ideological reframing(s). The case of Northern Irish nationalism, then, suggests that those reframings – a closing down and an opening up of debate – take place simultaneously within the rhetoric of reconciliation.

Introduction

This article explores the conceptualization of ‘reconciliation’ within modern Northern Irish nationalist discourse. Of course, reconciliation is always open to politicization¹ and it may be expected that when it is harnessed to such a ‘slippery and self-referential’ ideology as nationalism² expedient framings will be the norm. This is, to an extent, confirmed in the analysis later but the point is more subtle, namely that reconciliation can be used to foreclose debate and/or defer consideration of deficiencies, unwelcome or unpalatable compromises, or distinctions of thought, or the placement of priorities or emphases within a political project. In so doing, reconciliation acts not simply in a constrictive fashion but facilitates a re-articulation of ideological thought. I chart how this dual process of closure and opportunity occurs within Northern Irish nationalism:

- (a) reconciliation binds nationalists to a reinvigorated teleological vision, namely that the current political dispensation – the peace process and its key constitutional document, the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement – will lead to an ‘agreed Ireland’ in which ancient ethno-religious divisions will be overcome³;

- (b) reconciliation creates a common purpose of effort and provides a means and a measure for achieving progress – in other words, reconciliation can be applied to a number of policy questions, particularly as regards to dealing with the legacies of Northern Ireland's violent past;
- (c) reconciliation separates nationalists from other groups and individuals in Northern Ireland who may espouse a more traditional juridical approach to dealing with acts of violence; it also excuses nationalists from the need to explore a potentially schismatic argument that nationalism, through its key political representatives, has compromised on its historic mission to create a unified island state.⁴

On the one hand, nationalism and reconciliation are intrinsically linked: reconciliation is often seen as restorative and as providing the basis for building institutions that will cultivate more harmonious future relations (see, for example, the framing of South Africa's transition by Archbishop Desmond Tutu),⁵ or else it can be conceived as the beginnings (to put it crudely) of the political – the process by which conflictual politics can be filtered through agonistic understandings and practices.⁶ On the other hand, the outworkings of the nationalism–reconciliation relationship, arguably, have gone underexplored and underappreciated in the literatures on both.⁷ As the case of Northern Irish nationalism demonstrates, the elision of nationalism and reconciliation can embrace a teleological and tautological vision that barely conceals the question regarding what exactly are the object and the objective of the wished-for reconciliation. I suggest that reconciliation in the Northern Irish nationalist understanding is less as a verb and more as a direct object. The effect is to undercut the relationship of reconciliation to the stated aims of peace-building.

The article proceeds through three steps: first, I situate reconciliation as a set of normative and policy issues and questions within the fields of peace-building and transitional justice; second, I describe two common approaches that apply (implicitly and demonstrably) ideological lenses to those issues – namely the set of prescriptive ideas regarding reconciliation that can be linked to liberal approaches to dealing with conflict and contention more generally and the response to those ideas from a critical studies approach. Third, the article moves to the case study of Northern Ireland and outlines how reconciliation has become a touchstone within the peace process before describing how the appropriation of the concept by Northern Irish nationalist politicians adds a new dimension to understanding some ideological ramifications that go underarticulated in existing debates about reconciliation.

Reconciliation and ideology

Andrew Rigby defines reconciliation against forgiveness and asserts that they are related but distinct processes for dealing with difficult, violent or divided pasts. Forgiveness, he argues, is a personal act that does not necessarily require the knowledge of those who (were perceived as having) inflicted the wrong that it has occurred. Reconciliation, on the other hand,

refers to the future and requires the active participation of those who were divided by enmity. At the core of any reconciliation process is the preparedness of people to anticipate a shared future. For this to occur they are required not to forget but to forgive the past, and thus be in a position to move forward together.⁸

Reconciliation, then, can be seen as a highly charged political and social act, regardless of the level at which it is performed. When related to societies that are moving beyond contentious and violent pasts it can be seen as forming part of the policy framework for facilitating peaceful and stable transitions. Within the broad peace-building and transitional

justice literatures and practices there exists a panoply of measures to facilitate and promote reconciliation by dealing with the legacies of violent, divided or authoritarian pasts. These are varied and range from juridical prosecutions to acts of symbolic acknowledgement between states to localized or interpersonal restorative storytelling measures.⁹ The policy implications of this are found within, for example, the UN's idea that building peace requires not only the reintegration of ex-combatants into society, but also that a 'right' to the truth about violent pasts exists.¹⁰ The UN acknowledges that there are 'practicable' limits to this right, for example, the need to balance truth retrieval with states' legal systems and abilities to provide full disclosure of verifiable facts about particular incidents and policies. Added to this, of course, is the policy 'Faustian bargain',¹¹ relating to where countries place their resources: in other words, do states concentrate their resources on working through and forensically examining the actions and strategies that caused unrest, and perhaps bring those accountable to justice; or do they avoid the potential instability that uncovering old wounds can create and the time and resources it requires to implement judicial redress and compensation to victims and, instead, build towards future prosperity? Within these considerations, reconciliation is often seen as future oriented, a political intervention (or, perhaps more likely, a series of interventions), that emphasizes reparation and progress rather than reworking and reliving traumatic histories. As Michael Humphrey argues:

Reconciliation can be thick or thin depending on its inclusiveness. Thick reconciliation includes accountability, acknowledgement of responsibility, victim recognition, compensation, apology and forgiveness. By contrast, thin reconciliation is restricted by a political agreement based on degrees of amnesty and amnesia in which victims are marginalized.¹²

Humphrey's framing reveals the tension between reconciliation as an outcome (a direct object) and reconciliation as a process or action of opening out (a transitive verb). In other words, reconciliation as a destination or an outcome is something towards which our action is directed: to reconcile, we need to recognize or acknowledge hurt and grievance. (I would qualify Humphrey by arguing that this is actually a 'thin' practice – we can acknowledge something and quickly 'move on'.) Reconciliation as a verb, on the other hand, is a doable activity: we reconcile by holding a person or organization to account, for example; reconciliation, in this instance, is an endpoint and more a process. The tension results from the fact that reconciliation oscillates between the two understandings because the division is not exact or exclusive. However, the importance of recognizing that division is because, as Humphrey's work demonstrates, reconciliation is bound up with considerations of power since it retains the potential to remarginalize those on the peripheries. A wide swathe of the peace-building and transitional justice literatures circles around this issue regarding the potential within reconciliation to overcome or reinforce historic power disparities. The issue can be posed in terms of whether reconciliation (in the abstract and in practice) can be fitted within or tied to liberal democracy, broadly conceived. One way of expressing this is to view reconciliation as involving certain procedural requirements. For example, the public and political nature of reconciliation as an idea that informs peace-building, Ernesto Verdeja contends, can transcend historic injustice. Reconciliation, he states, 'rests on the possibility of discussion [and] deliberation ... it falls short of deep acceptance, or wilful embrace of the "other"'. In a somewhat congruent vision outlined by Leigh Payne, reconciliation is intrinsically linked to deliberative democratic ideas about filtering contention through pre-established institutional avenues that can give rise to what she terms a 'contentious coexistence' between former antagonists.¹³ Some kind of fundamental empirical understanding about the nature and broad causes of historic division and/or violence, therefore,

seems to be necessary to this approach along with a basic agreement on key societal values and a respect for the rule of law. This may be difficult to establish; hence, Verdeja argues for flexibility in deliberation, which, he believes, ‘moves us toward achieving *respect* among citizens, since open deliberation is fundamentally inclusive of everyone who could potentially be affected by the outcome, and at the very least accepts their claims to participation’.¹⁴ A cohesive civil society seems to be fundamental to this project given that the kind of flexible and responsive political institutions for dealing with the past and promoting reconciliation can only be built on a solid bedrock of an engaged and open framework of quasi-political organizations and voluntary groups. In addition, the role of political elites must be carefully managed because through their words and actions they ‘shape political culture’ and ‘signal to the population what kinds of behaviour are proper in democratic society’.¹⁵

Procedural certainty and due process are crucial for Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson. They contend that

the goal of creating a society with commonly shared values still lacks moral content and therefore cannot justify the sacrifice of criminal justice. At minimum, the content of the new society’s shared values must be incompatible with continuing the morally abhorrent practices of the past.¹⁶

In other words, a new constitution or agreed framework of democratic principles accommodates prescribed differences about the past – alternative beliefs are acceptable, but a common ground is necessary and is created by the constitution which deems certain historical narratives and values as being beyond the pale. Gutmann and Thompson argue that that constitutional settlement should not depend on reconciliation being defined or framed in terms of ‘seeking some comprehensive social harmony, whether psychological or spiritual’. Reconciliation, they argue, is ‘an illiberal aim if it means expecting an entire society to subscribe to a single comprehensive moral perspective’.¹⁷ Reconciliation is, thus, a minimal component rather than a maximalist end goal. As such, they suggest that while democratic societies ought to strive for reconciliation on some matters (freedom of speech, non-discrimination and equality measures), the notion of consensus on any matter or of a closing down of debate is antipathetic to a healthy democracy where conflict is essential but filtered through appropriate channels.

Taking aim directly at Gutmann and Thompson, Daniel Philpott has recently argued that their ideas are too prescriptive of change. ‘Liberal skeptics’ of reconciliation practices, such as Gutmann and Thompson, he believes, ‘implicitly propose a wall that seems to divide transformations of moral outlooks into a politically legitimate sort that involves respect, reciprocity, and trust and a sort that does not belong in politics, like forgiveness, repentance, and harmony’.¹⁸ For Philpott, this conceptualization of reconciliation is too ‘thin’, or too minimalist: ‘It does not deal with the past. Each of the wounds of political injustice uniquely diminishes the human flourishing of the several parties involved in the injustice’. Here the emphasis seems (in my reading) to be not so much on liberalism vs. illiberalism (despite the framings by Gutmann and Thompson and Philpott), but more on distinctions or gradations within a liberal approach to dealing with the past: societal reformation at one end of a continuum and justice or recompense for individual victims at the other.

Writing from a critical studies approach, Andrew Schaap’s treatment of reconciliation is positioned dialectically in relation to what he views as liberal understandings. Specifically, his approach is to try to move reconciliation from a liberal framing towards what he sees as a more ‘positive account of reconciliation as *politics*’.¹⁹ For Schaap, reconciliation must be understood

as a striving for a sense of commonness that might be disclosed from the clash of perspectives we bring to bear on the world in our historical relation to each other. As such, reconciliation would not be about transcending the conflicts of the past by striving for social harmony. Rather, reconciliation would condition the possibility of politics by framing a potentially agonistic clash of world views within the context of a community that is 'not yet'.²⁰

The politics of reconciliation, then, entails overturning the urge to resolve, repair and settle through an openness to dissensus and agonism in the hope that difference and distinction will give way to plurality and democracy. Schaap is critical of what he views as the tendency within liberal thought to avert violence through institution-building. This approach to peace-building, he argues, is suspicious of individual and group motivations and resorts to a kind of benevolent paternalism in its attempts to mitigate the possibility of a recurrence of violence. Instead, tolerance for difference is framed as a pivotal and positive societal aspiration. Yet, that aspiration ought to be treated as suspect in and of itself as it retains a strong containment objective – in other words, primordial forces lie beyond the limits of tolerance and to go there is to put oneself outside of the borders, protections and indulgence of an agreed politics. Reconciliation, in a way, becomes securitized: it is framed as a societal imperative with the implicit existential threat being that beyond it lies anarchy and danger. Notions of tolerance and respect therefore delimit the kind of politics that 'would enable citizens to call into question (and so potentially discover reasons) why they should want collectively to secure the conditions that make society possible between them in the first place'.²¹

Schaap therefore frames reconciliation as involving a radical political vision and practice. He views reconciliation as ideology as falling within what Jacques Rancière calls 'the police', which is usually linked to his account of the norms and logics that are constitutive of communities.²² This account stresses the notion of *le partage du sensible*, namely, the 'distribution/partition of the sensible' or of the sensitive or the responsive, the discernible. 'Policing', then, as Samuel Chambers explains, 'is a way of dividing up and linking up, of making visible and making invisible, the various parts of the social order'.²³ 'Policing' is intrinsically and intimately ideological – the world is interpreted and subsumed within a pre-existing order; it is also pre-ideological, because, at its core, the Rancièrian notion refers not only to a framework of interpretation, but an *approach* to political reality that is itself constitutive of that reality. Schaap argues that reconciliation can be viewed as a 'mode of activity that is "antagonistic to policing"'.²⁴ The politics of reconciliation involve a revelation and a representation of that which stands outside of the police order – namely, what Rancière calls the supplement. While the police order counts and delimits the groups and the norms and the ideas that constitute what is sensible and acceptable, it can never be rid of or subsume the 'remainder' that stands without that order; instead, it works to preclude or partition that remainder, or supplement, or dissent off from the start. In Schaap's radical reimagining of reconciliation, a similar process occurs – while reconciliation works to impose an order on the past, that very practice calls attention to the trauma, injustice and grievance that is demanding of closure. Success in closing those dissenting elements off is never guaranteed because the act of foreclosure works to reveal (partially) that which it is obscuring.

For Schaap, this radical vision is contrasted with what he describes as reconciliation-as-ideology, which, he argues, works to draw from existing 'realities' (namely, the past as a notional object) but also to draw on those realities as a way of shaping the future. He,

for example, alludes to the ‘concern that reconciliation might become ideological because it invokes the common good to legitimate a particular order in which the interests of some are privileged over those of others.’²⁵ For Schaap, the ‘emancipatory’ potential of reconciliation is seen as ‘political’, while its tendency to forge and force commonality renders it an ‘ideological’ edge. Following Rancière (in language and argument), he notes that

[w]ithin the order of the sayable of the ideology of reconciliation, what registers as speech is that which would confirm the unity of the political association. In contrast, any political claim that would question the substantive unity that underlies the political order in the first place could only be perceived as noise.²⁶

What exactly constitutes ‘substantive’ is left open – which seems a logical consequence of what might be called Rancière’s methodology, which is to reverse, rather than simply unveil or invert understandings or representations of reality.²⁷ This seems important, because, if Schaap’s notion of reconciliation-as-ideology is to have any ‘real-world’ purchase, then it ought to reveal something of what works and what does not in terms of designing and implementing policy in this area.²⁸ The next section addresses that issue by taking the Northern Irish peace process and the case of Northern Irish nationalist politics as examples. I suggest that in Northern Ireland reconciliation does not simply delimit debate by requiring compliance with an ideology or historic narrative – it does this and, in so doing, constitutes but also denies community. To put it in other terms, the case of Northern Irish nationalism demonstrates how reconciliation decontests the meaning of the past in relation to the present by removing the historic rationale of reunification and the strategies of political lobbying and/or political violence from being linked to constitutional settlement (as found in the 1998 agreement and subsequent accords).²⁹ In that way, it imposes meaning³⁰ and acts as a line in the sand: the object of reconciliation is no longer the past (or the present), but the future. In short, reconciliation is placed in play by Northern Irish nationalism to offset consideration of the constitutional compromises that have been made by political representatives in, for example, agreeing since 1998 to administer a partitioned Northern Ireland.³¹ In this understanding, the ‘reality’ of constitutionality is deprioritized in favour of a political strategy that seeks to transcend the state (by focussing on Irish cultural norms or emphasizing political debates surrounding memory and human rights that can be linked to wider, globalized or transnational concerns (for instance the European Human Rights Conventions and United Nations’ accords on the right to truth)).³²

The dual movement of reconciliation within Northern Irish nationalism refines Schaap’s notion that its ambiguity can be constitutive of community.³³ That is to say, in its decontestative mode, reconciliation *can* work to constitute a future-oriented community; but through what might be called its foundational reference point – namely the past – it reopens historical and memory contestation and becomes disabling of community. This can be seen in the intra-bloc divisions within Irish nationalism: in abstract terms, even though moderates may be seen as facilitating more radical views of what binds, bonds and bounds the ‘nationalist community’, they also play a disruptive role where the memories of violence and intimidation (within the broad nationalist community) are not so easily reconciled to the new political dispensation. In part, this is linked to electoral competition between the two main nationalist parties, but it is also indicative of moral justifications and appraisals of the violence that occurred between the late 1960s and mid-1990s. As such, the oscillation of the term reconciliation between being treated as a verb or a direct object lies at the heart of that ir/resolution. In other words, reconciliation’s inherent ambiguity works to foreclose

debate about the past and the new constitutional arrangements by turning the focus towards the future; in this view, reconciliation becomes synonymous with the nationalist view of the 'new political dispensation' or of the peace process as a (albeit nebulous) outcome that is facilitating change, or, at least, considered as a vehicle that is moving towards an endpoint. However, reconciliation simultaneously *discloses* the past and returns to being a (transitive) verb – in the sense of 'we reconcile ourselves to our past'. It is here that ambiguity and contestation enter back into the debate – in the sense of who is the 'we' and what vision of 'the past' is being treated? As such, reconciliation facilitates both decision and constitutes community, but it also cultivates uncertainty and non-resolution.

Reconciliation and Northern Ireland

Reconciliation has become ubiquitous in Northern Ireland's post-conflict transition.³⁴ As with the way that reconciliation is conceptualized within the broad literature alluded to earlier, the use of the term in Northern Ireland is slippery and fluid in import and difficult to pin down and define. Nonetheless, a key tendency within broad strands of academic, elite and everyday political discourse is to treat reconciliation as synonymous with peace. A literature, for example, has emerged looking at how educational or residential division influence reconciliation between the two main communities in Northern Ireland – namely, Ulster Unionists (mainly Protestants, who identify with British cultural traditions and wish to maintain the constitutional link with the rest of Great Britain) and Irish Nationalists (mainly Catholic, who identify culturally with the Irish Republic and who aspire to reunification of the island of Ireland).³⁵ Civil society, the churches, the education system, outside actors such as the European Union or philanthropic organizations, or inter-community mediation practices, often built around Jean-Paul Lederach's ideas,³⁶ are seen as institutional ways of facilitating peace and cultivating a stable, coherent society through reconciliation.³⁷ In this understanding, reconciliation is either the first step or the culmination of a peace process. Interestingly, the recent consultation and negotiation process surrounding attempts to design a policy programme for dealing with the legacies of Northern Ireland's past (along with public symbolism) that was chaired by the US diplomat, Dr Richard Haass, and a Harvard-based academic, Professor Meghan O'Sullivan, does not so much define 'reconciliation' as posit it as a destination:

A civic vision is needed. If we are to continue to open ourselves to the emotional, social, and political vulnerabilities of engaging with the past, we will need a sense of common purpose – an agreed rationale. It is clear that the vast majority of citizens and communities wish to live free of the division and enmity that has too often defined this society. At the same time, it is also clear that people have different senses of the past's meaning and importance. This is the heart of the challenge of reconciliation – the transition from a divided society to one that is whole, from a wounded society to one that is healed.³⁸

Part of the reason for the Northern Ireland Executive commissioning Haass and O'Sullivan to facilitate a report was because the debate over dealing with the past in Northern Ireland seems to have stalled – there is no political consensus on establishing a truth and reconciliation commission. While the British Government's favoured position seems to be a commission of historical clarification, this has not proceeded; although a dedicated Commission and a Forum for Victims and Survivors has been established, recent legislative changes have seen a medicalization of victimhood and trauma care, the establishment of a new victims'

service, and, arguably, an attempt to remove victimhood as a live issue in the public realm.³⁹ A drip-drip effect has been created by the concatenation of a series of high profile juridical and coroner cases together with a chain of stories about collusion and the investigation of murders by the police's Historical Enquiries Team. However, reconciliation itself is a foundational objective of the peace process. According to the second paragraph of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998:

The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all.⁴⁰

As with the 2013 Haass/O'Sullivan document, in 1998 reconciliation was not really defined in any other way than a vague aspiration: it is something to be enacted through 'rapprochement within the framework of democratic and agreed arrangements' but also something that will facilitate that rapprochement. Again, reconciliation oscillates between a thing and an action, and it is perhaps because of that that the parties to the 1998 Agreement sidestepped having to design policy on such muddy ground by simply pledging 'their continuing support to such organisations and will positively examine the case for enhanced financial assistance for the work of reconciliation'.

What might reconciliation look like if it is so hazily defined by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and if it has become untidily linked with ideas about utilizing the past for a 'fresh start'?⁴¹ In a much cited report, Brandon Hamber and Gráinne Kelly set out a typology of reconciliation.⁴² Hamber and Kelly's 'working definition' was created for the social and economic development programme PEACE II.⁴³ Hamber and Kelly saw this as a compartmentalization of reconciliation and stated that instead they saw the 'five strands of reconciliation as being deeply interdependent ... and any reconciliation process should consider how it furthers reconciliation holistically and not based on a selection of strands'.⁴⁴ These strands are: first, that reconciliation requires the 'development of a vision of a shared future' involving 'the whole society'. More specifically, this does not mean individuals or groups giving up their opinions or beliefs, rather it entails 'the articulation of a common vision of an interdependent, just, equitable, open and diverse society'. Secondly, reconciliation involves 'acknowledging and dealing with the past'. This includes an institutional focus in the form of establishing mechanisms for dealing with 'justice, healing, restitution or reparation, and restoration'. Thirdly, relationship-building is seen as essential: this includes the fostering of trust and acceptance of difference as well as the breaking down of prejudice and intolerance. Fourthly, 'significant cultural and attitudinal change' is required. This consists in the opening up of space 'in which people can hear and be heard' and seems to imply a commitment to empathy along with popular participation in society. Finally, reconciliation entails steps towards a conception of positive peace that involves 'substantial social, economic and political change'.

The authors' suggestion that the five strands are 'interwoven' implies that none is necessarily more important than the others. It also implies that there is no causal chain and because of this the model can potentially be more harmful than is intended. In short, unless the first point is satisfied, it (and arguably points three, four and five) can be undermined by the second. In other words, it may be easily possible to espouse beliefs in pluralism, equity, openness and diversity while still holding particularistic views on the past. The logic is as

follows: violence occurred because we were denied equity, openness, fairness; now that we have proved our point, we will continue to ensure that such denials never happen again. Quite what this means to other citizens who believe that while society was or was not ideal, the resort to violence needs to meet strong criteria before it can be justified,⁴⁵ is a critical question that is not resolved by a simple evocation of pluralism. Pluralism in this case, as critics such as Verdeja or Schaap point out, might be seen to work against social cohesion and operate to marginalize voices who might also favour a fair and shared society.

As Schaap explains, reconciliation depends on shared understandings of what actually occurred or, rather, where the grievance happened. It is the agreement on facts that allows a meeting of minds over explanations. As such, Schaap may be seen as adopting a straightforward but lucid empirical standpoint on which to base his theory – namely that ‘reconciliatory politics requires respect for factual truth, of that which is simply because it was not otherwise.’⁴⁶ By not including accountability, then, the Hamber and Kelly model works to defer and displace that possible meeting. Expressed differently, while attempting to work through the politicization of the past through the construction of a comprehensive and workable definition of reconciliation, the latter elements offset the problematic relationship of reconciliation to accountability.

Reconciliation within Northern Irish nationalism

The case of Northern Irish nationalism demonstrates the limitations of the Hamber/Kelly model and reveals that even though reconciliation is figured and represented as transformative and pluralistic, the democratic, dissenting and radically political potential of reconciliation – the potential that undoubtedly Hamber and Kelly seek to unlock – becomes both quickly foreclosing and unsettling. If Schaap is correct and liberal institution-building works to constrain and police reconciliation through the imposition of norms of tolerance and restorative justice,⁴⁷ then nationalism works to circumvent and defer the unresolvable and revelatory dimensions of reconciliation. Yet, something more is happening in the case of Northern Irish nationalism where the alternative is not simply an agonistic dissensus, but rather a kind of middle ground of ongoing contestation and debate – and, importantly, that this is occurring primarily because of the emphasis that Northern nationalism has placed on reconciliation. It is not simply the case that reconciliation is imposed ideologically or interpreted according to pre-established ideological norms. This is certainly happening, and reconciliation has become a central tenet within Northern Irish nationalism, principally to rearticulate traditional goals of reunification in an extra-constitutional sphere. But reconciliation is also connotative of an ongoing debate *within* nationalism that surrounds the morality of those goals and the ways in which they were seen to be serviced by three and a half decades of conflict. ‘Substantive unity’, in other words, is avoided and the ideological/ethnic/religious community as such remains contested and in flux, due to the very openness of reconciliation as an aim and as a practice.

It is useful to focus on Northern Irish nationalism for a number of reasons. First, the peace process itself is often viewed as having originated within Northern Irish nationalism,⁴⁸ and the ideology itself has been viewed as a highly complex framework whose strategic emphases or hierarchies are constantly shifting between a set of core ideas to do with territory, community and justice: namely the cultural and geographical unity of the island of Ireland, the organic interrelationship between Catholic and Gaelic networks and

modes of belonging, and the commonality of perceived injustice at British imperialism, colonialization and the imposition of partition.⁴⁹ I also wish to concentrate on the case of Northern Irish nationalist politics because it is there, arguably, that the fluidity in definitions can be found most clearly. Within the nationalist imagination, ideas about reconciliation are filtered through an ideological lens, lending them transitional qualities. In the process, the Janus-faced dimensions of reconciliation (looking to the past as well as the future),⁵⁰ become drained and reformulated: reconciliation takes on a meaning of transcending cultural and political division. ‘Reconciliation’ then becomes harnessed to a political vision that in the end seems to mean constitutional change. In other words, as understood and as used by Northern Irish nationalism, reconciliation requires Ulster Unionists to give up their constitutional allegiances to Britain.

Northern nationalists hold that the state is illegitimate because of what they see as a spuriously constrained democracy – the island of Ireland is ultimately the unit in which questions of self-determination and societal progress should be decided. Northern Irish nationalism is represented by two political parties: Sinn Féin, the largest grouping, has in the past supported armed resistance to ending Irish partition and promotes a strong defence of Irish cultural values north and south of the border; Martin McGuinness is the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland and was in the early 1970s the leader of the Provisional Irish Republican Army – a terror group responsible for almost 60% of the 3700 deaths in the conflict – in Derry, the province’s second largest city. The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) is a more moderate grouping, traditionally linked closely to the Catholic middle class; the SDLP was seen as a key architect of the peace process, but has lost ground electorally to Sinn Féin following the ceasefires of the 1990s.

While there is much to distinguish between Sinn Féin and the SDLP, it is possible to treat their distinctive historical traditions as congruent (and, complementary) ‘*ideological systems* in which nationalist premises are used and combined with others, with some principles given priority and others seen as derivative or second-level principles.’⁵¹ As the work of Jennifer Todd has demonstrated, the SDLP’s framing of nationalism has emphasized plurality and inclusivity as a first-order principle, with tradition and community as a secondary level. Sinn Féin’s accession to becoming the majority nationalist party in Northern Ireland, and an increasingly, important organization in the Irish Republic has, in large part, been a product of its careful balancing of those ideas.⁵² The idea of reconciliation has become increasingly important for achieving that balance. For example, Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd have argued that for Northern nationalists the 1998 Agreement created ‘openness’ and ‘uncertainty’ about the future as regards British state sovereignty over Northern Ireland, the impact of European regional politics and the potential to reframe Northern Irish nationalist ideology more specifically along liberal or post-nationalist lines. The Agreement did this because it ‘postponed’ the constitutional question. It gave ‘nationalists their minimal interim aims’ of an increased presence for the Dublin government and an emphasized role for nationalist culture in the public sphere, ‘while leaving the [constitutional] future open.’⁵³

For Kevin Bean, republicans marshalled the concept of reconciliation to harness the possibilities inherent in that new openness to their own ideology. Yet, the potential inherent in reconciliation of returning in forensic detail to the past represented an ideological misstep. Thus, he explains that the ‘new language’ of reconciliation involved ‘implications’ that ‘were largely unconsidered by most Republicans at the time’: By situating the ‘problem’ for the violence within relationships between the people of Northern Ireland, Bean points

out, republicans were, in effect, implying that the 'solution' could also be internal, thereby undercutting their primary objective of Irish unity. Republicans seem to square this ideological conundrum by either ignoring it – focussing instead, for example, on the populist politics of antiausterity – or subsuming it within a teleology. In the latter instance, the use of reconciliation by Sinn Féin runs somewhat parallel to the SDLP: Whereas the former speak of 'further strengthen[ing] the process of change and reconciliation',⁵⁴ the latter have outlined its 'dream' of 'a new Ireland' characterized by 'peace, reconciliation, social justice and economic prosperity'.⁵⁵

Northern Irish nationalists exploit the openness described by Ruane and Todd and avoid the ideological dead-ends outlined by Bean by harnessing the ambiguities within the concept of reconciliation to forge a new ground on which to contest political battles. So, for example, Sinn Féin's mobilization of the past can be seen as a necessary part of its political project.⁵⁶ Linked to the main paramilitary organization in the conflict, the party's policy agenda has also taken on characteristics of path dependency: accrue gains through political leverage (the appeal that they are necessary for sustaining peace and the representation of this strategy to its supporters that the peace strategy is the new and necessary phase of the project) and move forward from the concessions that are 'banked'.⁵⁷ Inclusivity lies at the core of Sinn Féin's language of reconciliation. Thus, the party spokesperson on reconciliation and the past, Declan Kearney, has argued that there exists 'a shared obligation to ensure that future generations grow up in a better place than we did. Discussion is needed now on how to do that. There is no alternative to dialogue'. The impulse is transformative: '[we must] accept who we are, and where we are now, and focus on the future and new possibilities', which are contained in the sentiments of 'generosity, compromise and forgiveness'. Within this reconciliation rhetoric, acknowledgement works to circumvent specificities (such as the question of why adopt a peace strategy after so many years of violence, or why was such a long armed campaign necessary). It does so by referring to the 'truth' of everyone's experiences and the multiplicity of narratives and plurality of possible stories (or histories) that should and ought to be told. This logic has led Sinn Féin to call for a 'decoupling' of truth from reconciliation.⁵⁸ While this innovation may be seen as a somewhat cynical manoeuvre most likely designed to set aside debates about the morality of republicans' terror campaign in favour of a push to draw a line in the sand and move forward, it accomplishes something more than that – it introduces instability into the notion that reconciliation has to be tied to an empirical, factual and verifiable reality. This is because 'truth' is not simply being dropped in favour of a 'conservative' definition of reconciliation⁵⁹; rather, the movement is one of reprioritization: the future is being emphasized over the past – about which republicans are still rhetorically willing to have 'uncomfortable conversations'.⁶⁰

Sinn Féin's utilization of reconciliation is buttressed by a performative ritual that is perhaps consciously designed to fend off attack from its critics within 'dissident' republicanism – namely those radical or extremist groups who hold that Sinn Féin have 'sold out' and who continue through either political mobilization or violence campaigns to repudiate what they see as the illegitimacy of a British presence on the island of Ireland.⁶¹ The choreography is based around what might be termed a 'bad cop/good cop' routine. This typically takes the form of perceived 'hard men' (such as the former prisoner Gerry Kelly) making statements espousing 'traditional' republican values regarding the justification of the 'war' or the sacrifices made by IRA volunteers at commemorative events where the 'primary audience' consists of Sinn Féin supporters. The 'secondary audience' may be seen as the Ulster

unionist constituency whose abhorrence for such statements works to confirm Sinn Féin's credentials as the standard-bearers of the republican flame.⁶² The 'good cop' then follows up to present a more flexible approach – typically, this is either Declan Kearney or the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, Martin McGuinness, whose preferred framings centre around the language of acknowledgement, generosity and responsibility.⁶³

The SDLP's idea of an ethical approach might also be seen to be logically ambiguous but ideologically sound. A recent party policy document explicitly rejects what it sees as the equivalency involved in 'acknowledgement processes' and calls instead for 'robust mechanisms of truth'.⁶⁴ The SDLP places the onus of responsibility for reconciliation on the London and Dublin governments and calls for them to institute a 'comprehensive truth process'. The document goes on to claim that there

is a singular test for Sinn Féin and the IRA – will they endorse a comprehensive truth process, support robust mechanisms of accountability and agree that those who were in command and control of the IRA have a higher and a particular responsibility to account for IRA actions.

Reconciliation and dealing with the past seem to be about more than just acknowledgement of multiple experiences, which the SDLP views as not 'robust' enough. The issue at stake in its vision of working through the past and achieving reconciliation is, rather, one of accountability. However, the conceptualization of accountability, and its linking to the notion of reconciliation and dealing with the past, arguably, mirrors Sinn Féin, for the question immediately arises regarding who is to adjudicate over accountability, or, to put it another way, who is accountable, to whom and for what? In other words, the evocation of reconciliation works to re-open political contestation and the drawing of boundaries around political communities. It does so by moving the content of what is to be reconciled onto a moral plane where ethical judgements are required.

Reconciliation as accountability (reconciliation as a transitive verb) or reconciliation as acknowledgement (reconciliation as a direct object) are thus different sides of the same coin: the mediation of the concept of reconciliation contained in both is suggestive of a foreclosing of debate and a circumscribing of what constitutes 'the past' that is in need of being reconciled; but it is also creative and constitutive of a new reality of competition between visions about what is to be reconciled and where that reconciliation will go or will look like. As part of the party's own political choreography, key figures in the SDLP have chosen to focus on drawing out the links between loyalist and republican terror groups and British state agents/agencies. The SDLP has promoted the narrative that those links were systemic and directed from the top-down. Such conspiracy theorizing tends to point towards conclusions that, in the absence of causal facts, cultivate further doubts and suspicions. As one prominent SDLP politician stated, '[j]ust how deep and how high collusion ran in the security forces has for too long been a dirty secret'. The solution to this problem is that 'acknowledgement by people at the highest level of government is necessary' along with a 'robust and comprehensive mechanism' to which politicians should commit.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Arguably, academic study of Northern Irish politics predominantly revolves around three spheres. What might be called the ethnic conflict paradigm, for instance, tends to stress the primordial foundation to the 'Irish problem', research focuses on the inflexible and reified aspects of identity and proposes to regulate the conflict by mitigating the impact of those

divisions – typically through consociational institutions.⁶⁶ A second approach is what might be called the constructivist model, of which there are a number of variations – Ruane and Todd, for instance, have developed a quasi-structuralist approach that emphasizes the historic roots of division while maintaining the fluid nature of contemporary identity formation(s).⁶⁷ P.J. McLoughlin has read Northern Ireland nationalism from within this paradigm by applying Donald Horowitz's concept of ethnic outbidding as a way of explaining how identities and political projects take on concrete and resilient characteristics, moving, in the process, from what might be seen as a middle ground to a more radicalized position.⁶⁸ In policy terms, viewing identity as flexible and changeable tends to point towards what have been termed 'integrationist' proposals, namely research analysing how ethnicity comes to dominate over other forms of identity including class and gender and initiatives aimed at promoting fluidity in identity and cross-community contact.⁶⁹ A third strand, meanwhile, emphasizes the historical specificity of Northern Ireland and the Irish problem by focussing often on historical dynamics, narratives and trajectories. The work of Richard English, for example, on Irish nationalism adopts and adapts the constructivist theorizing of Rogers Brubaker to explore in great empirical detail the development of nationalist political thought and strategy.⁷⁰ This article has contributed to a fourth avenue that remains, arguably, under-explored, namely the intersection of ideology and policy.⁷¹ As such, I have suggested that the reactions of political parties to constitutional changes in Northern Ireland essentially involved ideological reframings and rearticulations. In this, the repositioning of Northern Irish nationalism might usefully be compared to how other parties and social movements try to accommodate the competing demands of change and continuity. Identity, as Steve Buckler and David Dolowitz have argued, is a critical concern in that process: 'ideological assertions of identity do matter', they argue, they 'present a reference point'.⁷²

The notion of reconciliation has provided one such reference point for Northern Irish nationalism. It acts as a trope, calling to mind, implicitly, traditional goals and values regarding the overcoming of division and achievement of self-determination as a unified island state. But because reconciliation faces both the past and the future, it also provides a means of offsetting potentially awkward questions about the present constitutional settlement by evoking the eschatology of reunification on a symbolic and emotional terrain. The concept therefore works to establish meanings and its very indistinctness helps to achieve this through what Michael Freeden terms 'simulated decontestation' – the 'semblance of decontestation' through 'ambiguity and vagueness'.⁷³ The concept, in other words, avoids making decisions on some questions but cultivates (often unconscious) choice on others and does so through ostensibly hazy rhetoric. The article has resisted the conclusion that a complete shutdown is occurring. Certainly, the contest between moderate and more radical versions of Northern Irish nationalism is ongoing, but I have suggested that that open-endedness is a reflection of the decision to import reconciliation as a pivotal idea. Paradoxically, the Rancierean/Schaapian 'substantive unity' or community cohesion is not presently occurring precisely because reconciliation perpetuates division at the intra-bloc level. And it does so because it invokes the moral battle over what the conflict was actually about and the moral legitimacy of the violent means that were used to promote the nationalist ends. In this regard, in ideological terms, reconciliation can be both and simultaneously foreclosing and destabilizing.

Disclosure statement

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